Higher Powered

The first ascent of Talung's coveted northern pillar.

Ever since we first saw photos of Talung's north wall, this mountain had been very much on our minds. There is no doubt the north-northwest pillar of Talung (7,349 meters) was one of the most aesthetic and logical unclimbed lines anywhere in the Himalaya. The spur's pure beauty, technical difficulty, and relatively safe appearance inspired every climber who saw it. But despite several attempts, starting in 2002, no one had climbed the direct route.

After completing a difficult new line on the northwest face of Langshisa Ri (6,412 meters) in Nepal, in the fall of 2014, both of us felt confident we could climb more technical terrain at a higher altitude. We hoped to return to Nepal in the following post-monsoon season. After the earthquakes in April, we decided to look for an objective in the Indian Himalaya instead. We soon realized, however, that we didn't have enough time to navigate the Indian bureaucracy and get a permit, and so our attention switched back to Nepal. Quick research showed the Kangchenjunga region hadn't been impacted much by the earthquakes. Now there was no doubt which mountain we would try to climb.

Once in Nepal, our motivation for Talung only grew—in part because we had to spend so many days without climbing! After we'd finally prepared everything in Kathmandu, our bus was blocked by strikes for 24 hours on the way to Taplejung, where our trek would begin. During the approach, we were bogged down in the late-monsoon rains and we fed numerous leeches. Finally, on September 28, we established base camp at Oktang, above Ramche, and began two weeks of acclimatization. We climbed Boktoh and slept on its 6,114-meter summit. Then we headed up the western slopes of Talung (our planned descent route), but it took a long time to find a safe and non-technical route above 7,000 meters. Eventually we reached 7,100 meters and bivouacked there.

During these first two weeks in the area, we made three round trips up the 15-kilometer length of the Yalung Glacier. Each way required a day and a half of trekking through wild moraine and rough ice in high-altitude boots. (The nine days of glacier trekking nearly destroyed our boots.) When we were ready at last to climb, a month after our departure from Ukraine, it was like a New Year's gift for the kids.

Advanced base was right under Talung's north-northwest spur. We had already checked out the line at the start of our acclimatization phase, and it looked impressive—like mixed climbing in Chamonix, but mostly above 6,000 meters, and we would have heavy packs. We planned to carry food for seven days and fuel for nine.

The very first pitch above the bergschrund, at 5,600 meters, is one of the cruxes of the route. It is really impressive: You begin climbing a thin snow and ice pillar that stands like a stalagmite above the 'schrund. From this you step onto the face and climb hard, vertical mixed terrain (M6). This leads to a rock overhang dripping with icicles. You have to switch to tough aid climbing (about 10 meters of A3) using beaks and thin pitons—the only crack is so thin you can't fit the picks of your ice tools into it. Above the overhang you have to climb about eight meters on thin ice over rock slabs without any chance of protection, until you reach a hanging belay on beaks in thin cracks on the right wall of the chimney.

After such a start, we understood the mountain wouldn't be giving us a rest anywhere on the lower

buttress.

The next three days were full of hard mixed and ice climbing, mainly M5 but with some pitches up to M6 and AI6. Often we had thin, super-delicate ice with long runouts. Some pitches were rock slabs covered with steep, unconsolidated snow, which sometimes took more time than the hard mixed terrain. Although the granite on the route was nearly always good, it was very compact with few cracks for protection. Beaks and Peckers (three or four per pitch) were our primary pro. We were the only climbers in the area that autumn, and knowing that we were completely alone made all our actions more deliberate and all our emotions much more memorable.

Yet despite the technical and psychological difficulties, each of us got great pleasure from the climbing. We changed leaders each day, and the one seconding with the heavy pack was always looking forward to his turn to lead. The unexpected pleasure of high-quality technical climbing overshadowed our anxieties.

We ended each day in darkness, building a site for our small Firstlight tent. It took us nearly two hours every evening to chop a ledge big enough to get in the tent without a chance of slipping off during the night.

On the third day we reached the crest of the north-northwest spur. We had hoped to outflank a huge gendarme on its left side, but that was not possible, and therefore we were forced to climb two more pitches on the right side of the spur. Horrible vertical, unconsolidated snow led up rock slabs to a totally dry corner. Here we found another crux, with 10 to 15 meters of aid climbing (A3) and hard mixed. The middle of the corner was full of loose blocks, and the top was overhanging.

The corner continued with another pitch of hard mixed. We didn't have big enough cams to protect the wide crack in the back of the corner, so sometimes we had to stretch far to either side to find pro. The upper corner was covered with unconsolidated powder snow, also without good protection. At the top of this 100-meter corner, the door was open to the upper spur.

Now the angle was easier, but protection remained difficult to find in the unconsolidated snow. We simul-climbed several ice and névé pitches, and we found several more mixed sections with quite demanding climbing (mainly M4 but also one pitch up to M6), thankfully with good cracks.

On the fifth day we climbed the upper rock band, which had been the main question mark of the whole route—from the glacier it's impossible to see what waits for you there. What awaited was quite difficult mixed climbing and more thin ice on rocky slabs. But anticipating the end of the technical climbing gave us new power and speed, and in the evening we finally reached the ice ramp leading up and right to the summit ridge. Here we chopped a ledge for our fifth night on the wall.

On October 23 we climbed the ramp and simul-climbed up the ridge, and at 2 p.m. we were standing on the summit of Talung. We had climbed to the top in thick fog, but after 10 minutes on the summit a strong wind blew it all away, and the views were like a dream—the east face of Jannu and the south side of Kangchenjunga were close at hand. We made some photos and a video panorama, ate some traditional summit chocolate (and non-traditional ice creams of totally frozen energy gels), and in half an hour started our descent. That day we went down the western slopes to 6,700 meters and bivied there, and on the seventh day we descended all the way to the glacier.

For both of us, this route showed not only how much we still have to learn in the Himalaya but also how much we can do. Each of us lost 10 to 15 kilograms during the ascent, but the experience and huge motivational charge at the end were totally worth it. We named our route Daddy Higher Power [Папа Высшая Сила, also translated as Daddy Magnum Force]. Every time we ran into trouble on our way to base camp and during acclimatization, we recalled a favorite phrase of one of our friends: "Guys, Daddy Higher Power always takes care of his Jedis—this is just a little test to see

whether you are persistent enough for the main objective." On the summit we felt like we'd earned a reward from Daddy Higher Power. We had definitely been quite persistent.

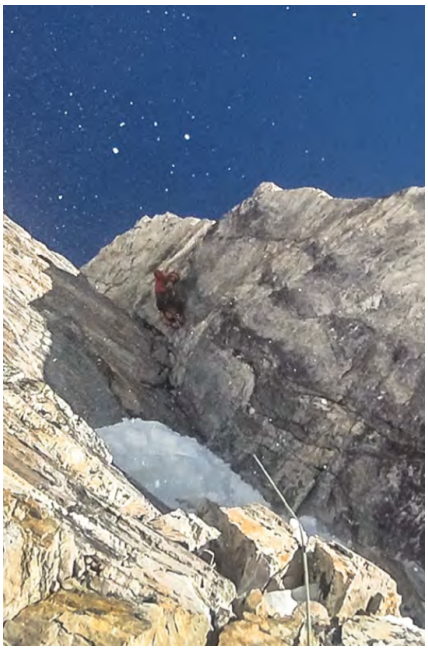
Summary: First ascent of the north-northwest spur of Talung (7,349 meters) by Nikita Balabanov and Mikhail Fomin (Ukraine), October 18–24, 2015. The 1,700- meter route was graded ED2 AI6 M6 A3. The two men spent five and a half days on the route and a day and a half descending the western slopes.

Download the pitch-by-pitch topo diagram of the route.

About the Authors: Nikita Balabanov, 26, works in an outdoor shop, and Mikhail Fomin, 34, works in information technology, both in Kiev, Ukraine. The two men did their first Himalayan climb in 2014, completing a new route on Langshisha Ri with Viacheslav Pole- zhaiko (AAJ 2015).

Translated from Russian by Anna Piunova / Mountain.ru.

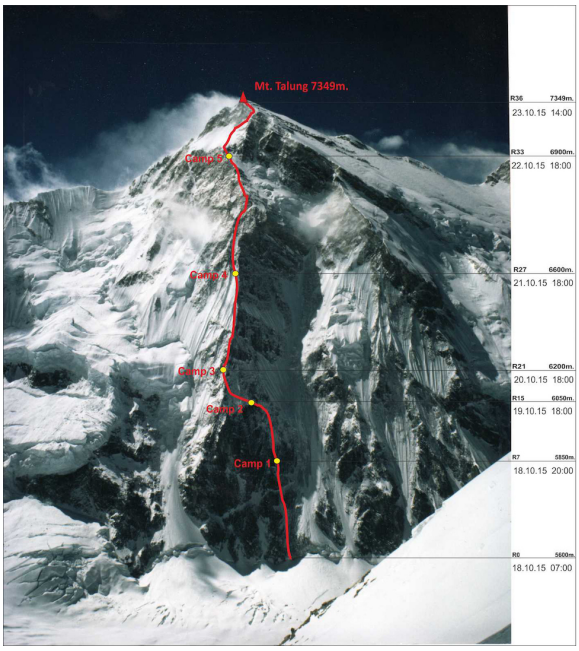
Images



Pitch 21, at 6,200 meters, above the third bivy site: A3 and hard mixed.

Steep ice on the lower buttress, headed for the first bivy on the face.

The route starts with a bang: VI+ A3 M6 straight off the bergschrund.



The Ukrainian Route (2016) on the north-northwest buttress of Talung, with bivouacs marked.

Talung climbing chronology.

Talung from the northwest. (1) Holecek- Hruby (2013). (2) Italian attempt (2014, arrow marks high point. (3) Balabanov-Fomin (2015). (4) Unclimbed northwest buttress. (5) Linder- Nindra (1964, first ascent and standard descent route). Photo taken in spring 2014. The face had more snow coverage during the successful post-monsoon ascents in 2013 and 2015.

The north-northwest pillar of Talung in profile.

Looking up from near the fourth bivouac at the second rock band. Post-monsoon snow and ice coverage made it possible to climb these mixed pitches, up to ca. 6,900m, in one day.

Challenging mixed climbing on the spur on the fourth day.

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