



Bhandar Lek, North-Northeast Spur

Nepal, Far West Nepal, Humla Region

Having only soared around the unclimbed mountain on Google Earth, it felt wild to cross a river into the winter-shadowed valley beneath its north face. The mountain was what I called Bhandar Lek (6,024m), what some locals call Dhaule, after the name of the river flowing from it, and what most people in Far West Nepal have given no name. The north face is split up the middle by one long ridge, rising about 2,000m from base to summit: the north-northeast spur. On maps it is the highest of a small cluster of mountains named the Bhandar Lek.

Carrying a 30kg pack, in mid-December I walked for 10 days along the Great Himalayan Trail, from Simikot over Margor Lek Bhanjyang Pass (4,037m) to Mathillo Pali, and then along a local trail to Nepka, through villages that rarely, if ever, have seen foreigners. Each village offered full welcome, everyone running to meet me and tick-tick-ticking in disapproval at my shredded trail runners. They were astonished that I was alone and spoke semi-fluent Nepali. (I had been living in the eastern part of the country for four months, researching environmental peace-building.) Each day on the trail I would meet a new friend, who would often laugh at me, foolish bideshi, for not hiring a porter. Each evening I would set camp on a new friend's roof in the village and eat with them by their fire, explain each piece of ice climbing gear, and growl-laugh with the children circling my tent after dark, sing-singing the only English they knew: "What is your name?"

From Nepka I walked up the Take Khola. This valley is believed to have been accessed only once before by foreigners, the 2015 British Gorakh Himal expedition, which turned back in heavy spring snow. I turned southeast into the Dhual Khola, leading to Bhandar Lek, and set up camp at 3,500m.

After two days of rest, I started up the spur with a 14kg pack, scrambling up 700m of rock to the snow line. I watched the first winter storms tumble by without ever obscuring the blue above. That night I perched the tent on a large, freestanding boulder. I so wished for wings to take me back to base camp. Through the whole climb I was chanting connection, connection, connection and picture-wheeling through the people I call home.

Day two brought technical rock and a 300m traverse on steep snow to switch ridges. I rope-soloed two rock and mixed pitches at the end of the traverse. Seracs avalanched on either side of the knife-edge, but the ridge itself was safe. I pitched my tent on a body-width section of crest, overhanging free air for 30cm on each side. In the morning, wrecked, I repeatedly counted 15 steps and five-minute rests through the last of the technical ridge, in and out of a bergschrund, and up to a dug-in camp at ca 5,950m, dead-tired.

That night I watched the mountain's shadow stretch across the valley. I could see north into Tibet and southwest toward Saipal. The \$50 sleeping bag from Thamel was holding up after all. After two more troublesome bergschrunds, on December 20, I sat on top saying my mountain prayer for the thousandth time that trip: mother mountain, father mountain, brother mountain, sister mountain, genderless mountain, I come to you in loving kindness, humility, and respect, and ask for your safe passage.

I guessed and headed down the west-southwest face into an unknown valley. Downclimbing and rappelling 2,000m of often objectively dangerous rock and ice with a 40m rope, through a wall of chaos, brought me safely and gratefully to the bottom. After six days on the mountain, and two days

with almost no water due to lack of fuel, I slurped in a snowmelt stream for a long time, preparing for a six-day walk out to Gamgadhi and a five-day bus ride back to Kathmandu.

Far West Nepal is still full of opportunity for first ascents of 5,000m to 6,000m peaks. Hopefully, future parties will opt for light, self-sufficient, and culturally aware adventures that support the local communities they visit, on their way into the wild and epic mountains of their dreams. I am grateful to the AAC Mountaineering Fellowship Grant for support. [Download the Mountaineering Fellowship trip report.]

Summary: Solo first ascent of Bhandar Lek (6,024m, 29°49'26.95"N 82°17'50.16"E) in the Humla region of Far West Nepal, by the north-northeast spur (ca 2,000m, 5.7 M3 65° snow), with descent by the west-southwest face.

Images



Bhandar Lek (6,024m) from the Dhaule Khola, showing the north-northeast spur (ca 2,000m, 5.7 M3 65° snow).



A foreshortened view of the west-southwest face of Bhandar Lek and the line of descent followed by Jack Bynum.



Looking westward from the summit of Bhandar Lek. The peak at far left is Saipal (7,030m), and the far distant peak in center is Gurla Mandhata (7,694m).



Approaching a narrow section of ridge on the north-northeast spur of Bhandar Lek.



The north face of Bhandar Lek (6,024m) in very snowy conditions, seen from the 5,400m Kang La, a frontier pass between the Gorakh and Kangla Himal that was formerly used as part of a trade route between Nepal and Tibet. Jack Bynum's 2016 first ascent took the central spur on this face.

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