



AAC Publications

Sersank, North Buttress

India, Himachal Pradesh, Lahaul, Pangi Region

Sometime in the final decades of the last century, I used to have a battered climbing guidebook to someplace in Scotland. I cannot remember exactly which book it was, but I do recall the frontispiece, which displayed a quote from Colin Kirkus: "Going to the right place, at the right time, with the right people is all that really matters. What one does is purely incidental."

This is the incidental story of rediscovering an old partnership. It had been 29 years since Mick Fowler and I last climbed together. In 1987 we managed to find a route up the Golden Pillar of Spantik, and although we were to share one more expedition in Pakistan, we had not climbed anything else major together. Mick built a successful twin career in the tax office and remote Himalayan mountains, while I became a mountain guide, working across the globe. We had barely spoken to each other in the intervening years.

Then, in 2015, came Frenchman Eric Vola with the idea of combining chapters from our books, a sort of literary version of a mash-up, translated into French. The book did well, winning the main prize at the Passy book fair that year. Working on this volume, *Himalaya: Les Tribulations de Mick et Vic*, and probably aided by some of Eric's excellent Sauvignon Blanc, we agreed to try one more mountain together. We were now much older, of course: In 2016, Mick was 60 and I was 66 years old.

Mick had built an extensive intelligence network, and a report from Martin Moran of a "tremendous north face of linked White Spiders" led us to Shib Shankar or Sersank or the "unnamed mountain," depending on which expedition reports we read. Two Italian and one British expedition had failed to make much impression on the 6,050m peak, while a Japanese team was told by the authorities that they could climb the mountain if they could find it, because it did not exist. This team turned back at the base of the steep summit block because, according to their timorous porters, Sersank was sacred. Fortunately for us, the nearest villagers held no such beliefs.

Much has changed in the world since the 1980s. Cell phones replaced telephone boxes, and in turn were displaced by smartphones. Back then, expeditions were booked by post, and we often beat our letters home. Climbers spent days in customhouses releasing freighted supplies, and most of us had no idea about local agents. Now, with an email or two, all is fixed. Our excellent local agent, Kaushal Desai from Manali, had us collected in Delhi, briefed by the IMF, and on the bus to Manali with our liaison officer, Sanju, within the space of a few hours. Only 48 hours later we were trekking up the Sural Valley.

Much of the logistical slickness was due to Mick's predilection for organization. And so it continued at base camp. Day One: unpack and setting up. Day Two: begin acclimatizing and reconnaissance. Day Three: reach the Sersank La (where we would get our first wondrous glimpse of the "north face of linked White Spiders." Days Four and Five: acclimatize on a minor summit in front of Sersank. Then back to base for exactly two days of R&R.

The reconnaissance showed that our proposed route was threatened by a line of seracs, whereas a longer but safer line from the toe of a buttress on the left side of the face looked good to both of us. It seemed our ideas of what is safe in the mountains were still in harmony. Armed with six days of food and gas, we headed back across the Sersank La and on to the face. Mick later wrote about the climb:

"The buttress was steep with powdery snow stuck to all but the very steepest rock. What looked to be straightforward from a distance was terribly precarious and painfully slow, involving clearing perhaps 15cm of snow, hooking crampon points over rugosities in the rock, and teetering upward. It was not until early on our second day that the ground changed as we reached the knife-edge crest of the buttress.... The way forward now was to traverse the sharp crest toward the face. It wasn't the kind of ground that was conducive to rappelling, and if we should fail higher on the face it was clear that we would have to reverse these pitches, followed by a climb back over the Sersank La. That would be horrendous. I very much hoped we were good enough to get up. The conditions on this upper part of the face were indeed much better than lower down. It felt as if every pitch looked uncertain to begin with but turned out to be just about within our limits. Progress was slow but steady...."

On Sersank most things were highly reminiscent of our former climbs. We recognized each other's climbing style. We re-enjoyed the discomfort of tiny bivouac ledges and spindrift showers, the miserably small portions of food (not being strong enough to carry more), and we chatted aimlessly to pass the cold nights away. I think the one big change was the conversation: Where before it was the usual boys' blather, food and sex, now it was pensioners' talk. The conversation could have been overheard on a golf course: arthritic limbs, rheumatic joints, what to do about the children, the failing eyesight, and other interesting topics that filled the resting hours.

Bit by bit we linked the ice fields, the White Spiders. But in spite of the steady progress, the outcome was never quite certain. Every pitch we climbed made retreat less inviting and increased our commitment to traversing the mountain. In steep face climbing the best line is far from evident, and again it was modern technology that helped. In 1987, on Spantik, I had drawn a detailed route diagram while studying the face to help us find the way. Three decades later, we could examine the photographs on our digital cameras. But we couldn't quite work out from the reconnaissance what the finish would be like. The headwall loomed over our heads and in our imagination. Would it be that final sting in the tail? Mick again:

"We were high on the face and it was clear that finishing the climb and descending the far side would be considerably easier than retreating and re-crossing the Sersank La.... [But] by day five we had solved the difficulties of the headwall and had the cornice in sight.... The cornice provided an acrobatic finale before, at 6:30 p.m., we flopped out to a new panorama and the relatively amenable slopes of the southwest side of the mountain...."

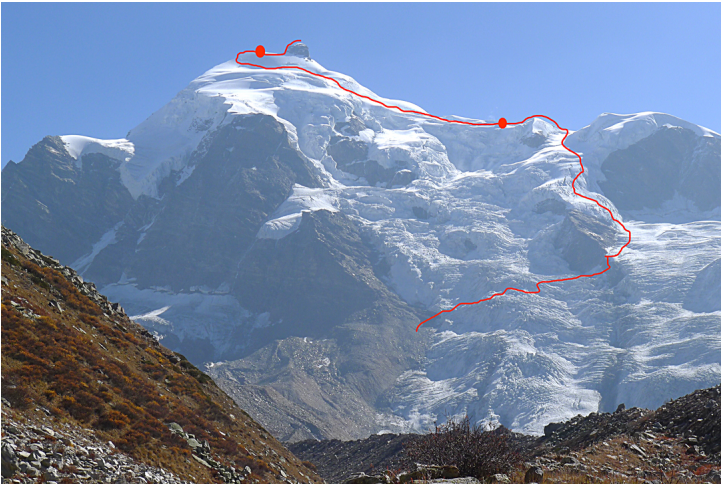
The next day brought a straightforward summit, a descent to a comfortable tent platform, and a cold night, followed in the morning by a complex descent through the steep and excessively crevassed and seraced South Sersank Glacier. We finally reached the home comforts of base camp, where we wallowed in a pleasant recovery haze as we ate our first real cooked food for nine days, dozed in comfort on flat ground without being tied into the mountain, and generally enjoyed the warmth and oxygen of the lower altitude.

Mick was content to lie in his tent in a bubble of happiness, having ticked the adventure climbing boxes: new route; substantial length (1,100m), sufficiently challenging (ED), previously unclimbed summit, and descent by a different route. Meanwhile, I was in my own bubble, happy to have discovered that the old friendship had been redeemed. I lay in the dining tent, trying to force my old brain to remember exactly which guidebook it was that quoted Colin Kirkus: "Going to the right place, at the right time, with the right people is all that really matters...."

– Victor Saunders, Alpine Club, France

A complete trip report can be downloaded [here](#).

Images



The descent of the South Sersank Glacier from the summit of Sersank.



Mick Fowler on pitch three of day five on the first ascent of the north buttress of Sersank.



Mick Fowler near the top of the face on day six of the first ascent of the north buttress of Sersank.



Sersank from Gupta in Kishtwar. As this photo was taken, in 2016, during the first ascent of Gupta, Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders were on the north buttress of Sersank, here seen in profile.



Victor Saunders starting out on day four, with the crest crossed on day three behind, during the first ascent of the north buttress of Sersank.



Victor Saunders responding to a call of nature at the fifth bivouac site during the first ascent of the north buttress of Sersank.



Victor Saunders during the complex descent of the South Sersank Glacier, eight days into the climb and descent.



The 1,100m north buttress of Sersank.

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