



AAC Publications

Lalsura, Northwest Ridge; Shigrila, Southeast Face

India, Himachal Pradesh, Kullu

While probably better known these days to vacationers and trekkers than to climbers, the Kullu region once was popular with mountaineers seeking easy access to its abundant, unclimbed, moderately technical peaks. By the end of the 1970s, predominantly British expeditions had climbed most of the region's major summits, including the highest, Dharamsura (White Sail, 6,420m) and Papsura (Black Sail, 6,451m), the so-called peaks of Good and Evil. The Shigrilas were two notable exceptions, and the reason we went to Kullu.

As far as we know, only the higher Shigrila (6,247m, 32°10'31.6"N, 77°35'03.2"E) had ever been attempted, and then only twice. The first time was in 1961, when a duo of fantastically tough-sounding British women, Jo Scarr and Barbara Spark, approached from the Bara Shigri Glacier to the northeast but were turned back quite close to the summit. Their effort and their entire expedition were remarkable for the era (see [historical note](#) below). The second attempt, in 1990 and again by a British expedition, climbed to almost 5,800m on the south-southwest ridge.

On September 18, after a three-day trek, Tico Gangulee and I reached a base camp at the junction of the Tos and East Tos glaciers, southwest of the Shigrilas. We spent the next week acclimatizing, establishing an advanced base camp in the upper East Tos at around 4,600m and a high camp at about 5,200m on the edge of the small glacier (which we referred to as the Shigrila Glacier) below the peaks. The travel between base and advanced base camps was continuously unpleasant and one of the major cruxes of the expedition. Luckily, travel higher on the glaciers was better, making for easier going and considerably less swearing.

By late September we were ready to go climbing and decided to start with the lower of the two Shigrilas, which we dubbed Lalsura ("Red Sail;" the 1961 expedition referred to this as Snow Dome) after its composition of handsome red rock. Opting for the relatively easy-looking northwest ridge, we left camp at 5:30 a.m. on the 28th and climbed unroped for the entire ascent. A few short mixed sections were negotiated as we bypassed gendarmes, but steep snow made up the bulk of the climbing, and we reached the top at 9:15 a.m. The peak had been reported as 6,187m, but we measured 6,004m. We returned the same way and were back at advanced base by midafternoon, naming the route Love and Biscuits (700m, M3 85°) in tribute to Tico's recently deceased cat.

We felt due for a rest, but fearing the weather was about to change, we trudged back to high camp the following day, got to bed early, and left at 2:30 a.m. on September 30. Half an hour later, we were crossing the bergschrund on Shigrila's southeast face and feeling our way through the dark up the snow and ice leading to the first rock band. We roped up, climbed a traversing rock pitch to a ledge, and then headed straight up via another fun rope length in a corner. We then simul-climbed for at least a dozen pitches, weaving through short sections of ice, mixed, and a considerable amount of steep névé as we made our way up to and then across a broad stripe of snow that cuts across the face. At its terminus, a few pitches of excellent climbing (WI4 M5) led to the eastern shoulder of the mountain. One more enjoyable pitch brought us to a ledge where we pulled out the bivouac gear and stove, ate, drank, and lazed in the sun for an hour.

When we left, it was, as I can now recognize, at comical speed, as we stopped frequently to rest our heads in our hands. Another few pitches of mixed led to the summit ridge, where my heart suddenly

dropped. Above lay a smooth tower and, as Steve House once described it, that classic alpinists' folly of dry snow over steep rock. Having left our one pair of rock shoes in the tent, we tried to bypass the tower by rappelling onto the snowfield below, but we found more powder on slab, and as darkness fell we retreated to our ledge.

After a fitful night we awoke late and coaxed ourselves out of the tent somewhere near noon, reaching the summit ridge under clear blue skies in half the previous time. I led out toward the tower and tried not to drop anything as I straddled the ridge, pried off my boots and crampons, pulled on the rock shoes, and removed my gloves. I climbed far away from my gear onto the smooth whaleback, until my hands were on top and I could mantel the crest. At a notch I reversed the procedure and headed back into the snow, and after another short pitch we were on top, laughing and hugging in the sun. The rock crux had been mercifully short, but Tico confirmed that following in boots was as hateful as I'd guessed. We descended almost directly from the summit in a series of rappels and traverses to regain the bivouac site, where we crawled into our sleeping bags and dozed for a few hours. We rappelled through the night, reaching high camp close to sunrise. Our nearly 1,000m route was 5.9 A0 AI4 M5.

We owe the AAC our thanks for a Lyman Spitzer Award, the Mazamas for an Alpine Adventure Grant, and our agents, Ibex Expeditions, for their excellent service and for helping us secure an effective permit workaround with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, as our peaks were not on the permitted list. Despite our fine outing, I would not strongly encourage future parties to explore the area unless they're after heinous approaches and either very moderate or extremely difficult and/or dangerous climbing. This is not the India of 20-pitch splitters above grassy fields, but what the area does have going for it is solitude, and I'm very glad that we went.

– Chris Wright, AAC

Notes on the Scarr-Spark Expedition: In 1961 two women in their early 20s bought a Land Rover and drove it from the U.K. to India to make their first expedition to the Himalaya. With the help of two locals, Jigmet and Wangyal, Jo Scarr and Barbara Spark defied bureaucratic difficulties to reach the Bara Shigri Glacier, from which they ascended two previously unclimbed 6,000m peaks above a subsidiary glacier to the north: Central and Lion peaks.

All four then attempted Shigri. From a camp on the glacier below the steep rock and mixed ground of the east face, the party followed an intricate line to gain the upper north-northeast ridge, which they followed until, at 3:30 p.m., and after Wangyal had led an awkward section of soft snow over ice-covered rock, they decided that, with only three hours of daylight left and no equipment for a night out, they should retreat. "Fifty yards away and fifty feet above us I could see the summit, with ridges dropping away on the other side," wrote Scarr. They felt the mountain was as good as climbed, "after all, what's fifty feet in 20,000." However, it would appear they were looking at the intersection of the southeast and north-northeast ridges, and the start of what the Americans refer to as the summit ridge. Feeling their way down through the blackness, they reached their tents at 10:30 p.m., 16 hours after leaving.

Scarr and Spark were among the best British female climbers of their era, Scarr notably making the first female lead of the famous North Wales route Cenotaph Corner (E1 5c today).

Images



Chris Wright on the northwest ridge of Lalsura (6,004m GPS) with Shigrila (6,247m) behind. (1) Southeast face (2016). (2) East face and 1961 high point on the north-northeast ridge. The left skyline ridge was attempted to around 5,800m in 1990.



Tico Gangulee on the mixed pitch (M5 A0) below the bivouac site on Shigrila.



Chris Wright about to don rock shoes for the compact granite of the summit pinnacles during the successful ascent of Shigrila.



Tico Gangulee topping out the lower mixed pitches above the bivouac and about to gain the snowfield below the summit ridge of Shigrila. The Shigrila and East Tos glaciers are below.



Tico Gangulee on the compact summit ridge pinnacles, close to the top of Shigrila. The high, distant, pointed summit to the right is Central Peak (6,285m), climbed from the far side by the 1961 British expedition. The valley visible far left (which has a road) is the Chandra.



Lalsura (6,004m GPS) and the American route Love and Biscuits on the northwest ridge.



The upper southeast face of Shigrila (6,247m) and the 2016 American route.



Tico Gangulee exiting a quality mixed section in the middle of the southeast Face of Shigrila. The East Tos Glacier is behind, along with a handsome line of mostly unclimbed 5,500–5,800m peaks. Advanced base is out of view to the left, while base camp is well out of view to the right.



Barbara Spark in the icefall with the upper left side of the east face of Shigrila just visible above.



Shigrila (the dominant peak right of center) seen in 1961 from the summit of Central Peak on the north side of the Bara Shigri Glacier. There was considerably more snow and glaciation than in 2016. Lalsura (the 1961 "Snow Dome") is the round-topped peak immediately left.



The east face of Shigrila as seen in 1961. The approximate route of the attempt is marked.



Tico Gangulee in the middle of the southeast face of Shigrila, with sub-6,000m peaks on the south side of the East Tos Glacier behind.

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