



## AAC Publications

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### **Kijai Nala: Peak 6,038m, North Ridge; Arjuna, West Face**

India, Kishtwar Himalaya

**Visiting the Kijai Nala had been on the bucket list for Hayden Kennedy, Marko Prezelj, and me since 2015, when we climbed together above the Chomochior Glacier in eastern Kishtwar (AAJ 2016). We had planned to head into this western Kishtwar valley at the end of that expedition, since there was so little information: Who knows what interesting climbing objectives might lie in untraveled corners?**

However, the climbing on Cerro Kishtwar kept us busy for longer than expected that autumn, so we postponed our planned visit to the Kijai Nala for the fall of 2016. Then, a week before our departure, we were shocked by the disappearance of our dear friend Kyle Dempster and his climbing partner, Scott Adamson, in the Karakoram. We canceled the climbing part of the expedition; instead, Marko and I traveled to India simply to check out potentially interesting climbing objectives.

We visited Kijai Nala and were most impressed by the magnificent west face of Arjuna (6,230m, map height). This valley had been visited a few times in the late 1970s and early '80s, and then possibly not again until 2016, when Chris Gibisch and Jeff Shapiro climbed the south face of Brammah II (AAJ 2017). The American pair had planned to attempt the west face of Arjuna, but poor conditions on the wall prevented this.

Opposite Arjuna, on the west rim of the valley, stands Peak 6,013m (map height), which was climbed by a Polish team in September 1979 via the southeast ridge, passing over peaks 5,450m and 5,800m (AAJ 1981). Two other members attempted unclimbed Arjuna but disappeared during their climb. Polish climbers returned in 1981 and, after making the second ascent of Peak 5,800m, they climbed Arjuna's south summit (ca 6,100m) via the southeast ridge (AAJ 1982). In 1983 another Polish expedition climbed the west face of Arjuna's south summit in alpine-style, while Jerzy Barszczewski, Mirosław Dąsal, and Zbigniew Skierski climbed the central pillar of the west face to reach Arjuna's main summit, fixing the lower 120m of the climb (AAJ 1984).

Until this trip we had visited Kishtwar in the fall, but in 2017 we decided to go in spring, mainly because we expected to find much better conditions for mixed climbing. On May 29, Ales Cesen, Marko, and I established base camp on the west side of the glacier at 4,008m. Our first impression was that surrounding peaks were covered with much more snow than we'd seen the previous fall. For acclimatization, we decided to try Peak 6,013m, which offers a fine view of Arjuna's west face.

We climbed via the glacier to the west of our base camp, south of the mountain. We made our first bivouac at 5,000m and our second, at the top of the glacier, at 5,500m. From this point we ascended a dome-like side peak (5,700m), from which we got a good look at a possible route to the summit of Peak 6,013m.

Approaching the ca 5,700m dome-like summit south of Peak 6,038m. From this top, the Slovenian team descended to the saddle on the right and downclimbed to their tent. Next morning they climbed back to the saddle, traversed to the left skyline ridge, and climbed the sharp summit.

On June 4 we climbed up to a plateau on the west side of 6,013m and traversed under the summit—below the northwest face—to reach the north ridge. In variable snow we climbed this ridge to

the top. Our GPS device measured the altitude as 6,038m (with +/- 4m accuracy). The overall grade was D. From the top, we had a clear view of Arjuna, and the line that really stood out was a gully to the right of the Polish central pillar. Highly motivated and full of expectation for the days to come, we descended to base camp that same day.

On the 10th, in variable weather, we carried part of our gear and food to the glacier under the west face of Arjuna, where we planned to establish advanced base. We descended to base camp the same day through a heavy snowstorm and were not back again until the 15th, when we were able to erect a tent and break trail to the base of the route. Unfortunately, it started snowing again that evening and we postponed our departure until 8 a.m. the next day, by which time the mist had lifted and the northerly winds had calmed.

We found good snow and ice conditions in the lower section of the gully and climbed most of this unroped. We then climbed six pitches of mixed, where we had problems with occasional wet-snow avalanches. We bivouacked below what we expected to be the crux of the route.

Next day it took us eight hours to climb three hard mixed pitches. After this we climbed a steep ice pitch and then seven snow pitches, before bivouacking late at night about three rope lengths below the summit ridge.

We reached the main summit of Arjuna around noon next day. The GPS device read 6,250m. The same day we rappelled our ascent route. Apart from the lower face, where the rappelling was more like canyoning, this went well, and we reached advanced base at midnight. We named the 1,400m route All or Nothing (ED+ M7+ WI5+ A0). It was the second ascent of the summit and the first in alpine style.

On the 19th we started down toward base camp. After half an hour it started to rain, and it didn't stop for the next three days. We left base camp on June 24 with huge smiles on our faces: Rarely do you get to connect perfectly all the dots of conditions, weather, and personal feelings during an expedition. We very easily could have left the valley without an opportunity to attempt our main objective, but we left with heads held high.

**For Marko, the expedition was** "very intensive from an adventurous point of view. Urban and I knew the ascent to base camp and the area itself, and this gave not only some kind of relief but also pressure, both at the same time. We knew there is no consolation objective when it comes to the west face of Arjuna. It's steep and high, with one characteristic mixed line from base to top. In fact the climb was longer and steeper than expected, and serious until we returned to base camp. The biggest difference between my two other expeditions to this area was that we came to base camp with really defined expectations, which did not favor our wanted casualness. Due to poor weather we were forced to wait for the appropriate climbing opportunity until the very last hour."

Line 2 marks the 2017 Slovenian route. See the full caption below for all route info. Photo by Marko Prezelj

**For Ales,** "only when we were walking back from base camp, among blooming flowers and herbs in perfect sunny weather, did we slowly start to realize just how lucky and well-rewarded we had been for our persistence. There were only six days of precipitation-free weather during our stay at and above base camp. On the first two we climbed Peak 6,013m, where we acclimatized really well for further climbing goals. In the next three days of precipitation-free weather, we managed to climb a hard new route on Arjuna. The additional fine day was before our return to the valley. We were able to dry out all our soaking wet gear and clothes before packing for departure. They say that luck favors the brave. I don't know how brave we were, but I can definitely say we had luck—lots of it."

The Kijai Nala is an exceptional playground for modern-style climbing in all disciplines of rock, mixed, and snow/ice terrain. We believe it will get many visits in the future and is an "upgrade" of the popular

Charakusa Valley in Pakistan.

– Urban Novak, Slovenia

## Images



Marko Prezelj in the afternoon of the first day on the west face of Arjuna, climbing the first steep pitch of the route. At first the steeper ground was fun to climb—the sun was warm and the ice soft. In the afternoon the wall changed its mood. Several “melodic” avalanches of wet snow from above augmented their doubts. Prezelj noted that “four or five times, after hearing a distant hiss, the blue sky above turned white, then black. Holding my tools tight sharpened my survival senses. Steepness was our patron. Most of the snow shipment went through the air. Doubts about the outcome were strong.”



Marko Prezelj starting the third pitch on the second day of All or Nothing. Here the snow became wet and the climbing very interesting, reminding Prezelj of mixed climbing in Alaska or Scotland.





Marko Prezelj on the fifth pitch on day one of All or Nothing. The rock was wet from avalanches triggered by warm sun after several days of snowfall. The Slovenian team had a bivouac on the sloping ledge to the right. Above is the crux section. The main snow line in the gully was overhanging, so they climbed just to the right of it.



Starting the second pitch on the second day of All or Nothing. Marko Prezelj spent much time cleaning snow to find placements for tools and protection. "The mixed climbing game was as enjoyable as it can get on such terrain."



The Arjuna Group seen from the southwest. (1) Polish route (Barszczewski-Dąsal-Skierski, 1983) up



the central pillar of the west face. (2) All or Nothing (Cesen-Novak-Prezelj, 2017). Both the 1983 and 2017 routes lead to the main summit. (3) The west face of the south summit (Bender-Piasecki, 1983). This summit was first climbed by Poles in 1981 (Bartos-Otreba-Puzyrewski) up the broad couloir to the right of the west face and then the southeast ridge (approximately the right skyline) to the summit.



Urban Novak starting the fourth steep pitch on the second day of All or Nothing. Above this the team entered the upper couloir, where they were forced to climb and search for a bivouac spot until midnight.



Urban Novak following the second pitch on the second day of All or Nothing. It proved steeper than expected, and climbing with sacks was an extra challenge for the two followers, less fun than leading.



Approaching the ca 5,700m dome-like summit south of Peak 6,038m. From this top, the Slovenian team descended to the saddle on the right and downclimbed to their tent. Next morning they climbed back to the saddle, traversed to the left skyline ridge, and climbed the sharp summit.



Peak 6,038m from the summit of Arjuna. (1) The 2017 Slovenian route, which climbs behind the summit on a plateau before finishing up the north ridge. (2) Presumed line of the 1979 Polish first ascent along the southeast ridge, passing over (A) Peak 5,450m and (B) Peak 5,800m.

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