



AAC Publications

Flat Top and Kishtwar Eiger, Attempts

India, Kishtwar Himalaya

Flat Top (6,100m) and Kishtwar Eiger (ca 6,000m) are situated above the Brammah Glacier on the southwestern side of the Kishtwar region, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Due to military conflict in recent decades, this area has not been popular with foreign visitors, though since 2012 several expeditions a year have visited, with the numbers increasing each year.

Richard (Reg) Measures (New Zealand) and I approached via a very circuitous route from Manali, over the Rhotang pass to Udaipur, onto Gulabgarh (where we registered with the police), and onto Kishtwar itself. Kishtwar seem like a busy and reasonably safe big town. However, after our trip, in November, there were assassinations of two local politicians, after which a curfew was imposed, which would have prevented us getting to the mountains.

From Kishtwar we drove toward the Marau Valley and the first of many delays at the seven military checkpoints we encountered, each of which took one to two hours to get through—everyone was very friendly, just unused to having any foreign visitors.

There is a project to dam the Marau Valley, and the road head is situated where the dam is going to be constructed. A two-day walk with mules, via Sondar and then up the Nanth Nullah (valley), got us and our equipment to base camp. The Nanth Nullah is populated with over 100 families, and there is a Hindu temple an hour's walk from base camp that receives 3,000 to 5,000 pilgrims in the summer. There is a police station at the temple staffed by six police, who were regular visitors to our base camp.

Our base camp was located at Sattarchin, a lovely meadow with a freshwater spring at 3,400m at the end of the Brammah Glacier—and where at the height of the conflict terrorists would play cricket. We arrived on September 20, just before a few days of torrential rain that covered the high peaks in snow. We then spent some time acclimatizing and scoping objectives. The mornings were fine, but by midday the high peaks would cloud up, and sometime between midday and 3 p.m. it would start snowing/raining (depending on altitude) until around 6.30 p.m.

Reg and I set out on October 1 for the north spur of Flat Top, left of the 1980 first ascent route up the north ridge. It is a long day from base camp to the base of the spur, where we had stashed a tent and gear. On October 2 we set off with five days food, on the first day climbing the gully to the west of the spur, before angling onto the spur itself. A lot of the climbing was very time-consuming due to the meter of powder snow that was stuck to everything less than vertical, and which required a climb-and-trench approach. The harder pitches (up to Scottish VI) were a relief in many ways, as not so much digging was required. After the first day we were pretty happy having ascended the first 600m of the route, from 4,500m to 5,100m, to a reasonably comfy and safe bivouac ledge.

Day two was spent climbing the crest of the spur, digging upward again on technical mixed ground covered in a one meter of powder snow. We only climbed four 60m pitches in seven hours, then it started dumping wet snow. Reg and I were quickly completely soaked—it was like Scotland in winter on a bad day. After attempting to dig into several non-ledges, and with the weather deteriorating

further, we decided to bail back to the previous night's ledge. By the time we got there it had a foot of fresh snow on it. On the third day we retreated back to base camp, and it then snowed for two days, so we were glad to have retreated.

On October 7 we returned to our high camp, planning to make a second attempt on the north spur, however we received a very poor weather forecast, giving ourselves only a one-day weather window, so we changed plans to a single-push attempt on the easier east ridge of Flat Top. Setting off at 2 a.m. on October 8, we made good height initially, but our hopes of better snow conditions on a different aspect were dashed as upward progress slowed. By 8 a.m. we were at 5,400m, but it was obvious that we were not going to make it to the summit and back safely, due to the time-consuming climbing ahead and the increasing avalanche risk. At 9 a.m. we started to descend, and by 3 p.m. a fierce storm was underway—thankfully we were on our way back to base camp by this time.

It snowed again at base camp for the next three days, and we decided to change our focus to Kishtwar Eiger, as it was nearer to camp and had a south-facing gully where the snow conditions might be better than encountered on Flat Top. The Kishtwar Eiger is given three different heights on three different maps: 5,600m, 5,800m, and 6,000m. We estimated it was around the 5,800m mark, but this later proved to be incorrect.

On October 12 we started up the south face. The first day brought an easy 1,000m snow gully with a very short steep section at the top, leading to a pleasant and safe tent site at 5,000m. The next morning we started in the dark in a wide snow couloir before simul-climbing mixed ground into the main couloir. This was fun to climb, a bit like several classic Scottish gully climbs in a row, before we had to start pitching properly. A stiff Scottish V pitch got us into the upper couloir, where we came to a bifurcation and we chose to go right. Reg led a serious pitch of thin ice to a hanging belay and then I led off above that. After trying three different ways, we realized we had dead-ended and abseiled back to the bifurcation. I led a pitch left, but the weather was turning nasty again, so we reluctantly decided to start retreating. We had reached 5,700m, and we think we had climbed the main difficulties of the route, but still had around 300m of climbing to make the summit.

We abseiled the line of ascent, and as the snowfall increased we started to be hit by bigger and bigger spindrift avalanches, scaring us somewhat until we were out of the main gully. We reached the tent again at 8 p.m., thoroughly spent, and descended to base camp the next day, very disappointed not to make the summit.

The journey back via the Kishtwar-Killar-Udaipur road was just as terrifying as on the way in, but the checkpoints were not as trying, with the military generally welcoming us back and wanting to see our photos.

– Timothy Elson, Alpine Club, U.K.

Images



Looking south from Kishtwar Eiger. On the left is Brammah II, Flat Top is in the center, and the shapely Brammah I on the right.



Timothy Elson leading steep ice on the second day of the 2018 attempt on the south face of Kishtwar Eiger.



The south face of Kishitwar Eiger (ca 6,000m) showing the 2018 attempt, reaching about 5,700 meters.



On the east ridge of Flat Top, attempted in 2018 to 5,400 meters.



Flat Top (6,100m) showing the two routes attempted in 2018: the east ridge on the left and the north spur.

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