



AAC Publications

Aal Izz Well: The Northeast Face of Cerro Kishtwar

India, Kishtwar Himalaya

I GOT A MESSAGE from Hiroki Yamamoto: “I’m going to India with Yusuke Sato this fall, and I’m wondering if you wanna join us?” Five months before, I had become a father and was on parental leave, spending all my time with my wife and daughter. I didn’t think I’d be going on an expedition in 2018, but the photo Hiroki sent was just too beautiful to ignore.

On August 25 we landed in Delhi, just a week after the IMF had granted us a permit for Cerro Kishtwar (6,173m) in Jammu and Kashmir. We drove the notoriously exposed road from Manali to Gulabgarh, and then took a low-cost helicopter to Machail, skipping a day and a half of walking. Three more days on foot took us to base camp at 3,900m, where we arrived on September 2.

Our goal was the unclimbed northeast face, where it appeared there were very few options for a line free from objective danger. Our planned route had an easy but dangerous lower section, where speed would be the key. The middle section was steeper, with a skinny ice pillar and mixed terrain. The headwall was a thinly iced slab.

After six days of acclimatizing and watching movies in base camp under blue skies, we set out for advanced base. The forecast had changed: a 40 percent chance of snow and more than 20cm of snow per night starting in two days. *Dude, should we pretend we didn’t see it?* We decided to try to reach the summit in just two days. After all, it was just a forecast—it might be wrong.

Next morning we climbed unroped up a 500m snow gully. Yusuke then led the first ice pillar and then another 250m before handing the lead to Hiroki. The ice got thin and the angle steepened, but we climbed simultaneously, and after 15 hours we chopped a three-out-of-five-star ledge for our bivouac. (Around 70 percent of the tent floor fit on the ledge.) I led another pitch and fixed a rope. We had covered 1,000m that first day.

We awoke before 3 a.m. The forecast was still bad, and we needed to get to the top quickly. We left our tent and sleeping bags and started climbing. Fragile ice, increasingly steep terrain, and a tricky mixed pitch led to the headwall. I was relieved to hand the lead to Yusuke, who embarked on some bold climbing up the thinly iced slab covered with soft snow.

The sun went down. As I was jumaring, I tried to shout to the pair above, “Why don’t we stop and have tea and sleep?” But Yusuke was focused on the summit.

A short offwidth, a cornice, and then we were on the summit, around 10 p.m. Between the clouds we could see the lower south summit, so knew we were on top. We immediately started down. The summit is only halfway, and our final goal was to meet our families. Yusuke and Hiroki had a preschool event for their sons right after the expedition.

The descent and return to base camp was an ordeal, taking more than three days. We paused after a few rappels to brew tea and doze, but falling snow covered us so quickly that we had to excavate ourselves every 20 minutes. We moved again before dawn. The snowfall stopped for a while, but it was still misty. We reached the site of our bivouac at noon, stopped for an hour, then set off on the first of 20 rappels to the bottom of the face. Snowfall was now heavy and spindrift turned to full

avalanches. Around 11 p.m. on our third day on the mountain, we found a relatively safe spot to pitch the tent. It was the first time in 41 hours when we could lie down and sleep.

Next morning we made three more rappels along a relatively safe ridge, reached the glacier, and swam through snow to our completely collapsed advanced base. We rebuilt the camp so we could eat and drink. However, the blast from avalanches reached the tent a few times, and when a particularly large one shook the tent at 8 p.m., we decided it was time to go. The snow was now waist deep. We tried cutting sleeping pads to make snowshoes, but this didn't work so we had to crawl. It took four hours to travel only 200m. We found a rock cave in which we could squeeze the tent and stopped again.

Next day the storm abated, but Yusuke had vision problems, probably caused by altitude, and we still sank to our hips in the soft snow, so we waited a whole day for the snow to consolidate. On our sixth day out from base camp, the sky finally cleared and we were able to walk easily down to camp.

We named our route Aal Izz Well after a song from an Indian movie, *Three Idiots*, that we had watched during acclimatization at base camp. We'd watched movies through a long period of perfect weather and then climbed through a storm. Who could be more idiotic than us?

Summary: First ascent of the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar (Aal Izz Well, 1,500m, VI WI5 M6) by Genki Narumi, Yasuke Sato, and Hiroki Yamamoto from Japan, September 19–25, 2018.

Images



Aal Izz Well on the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar.



Yusuke Sato on an icefall during one of Aal Izz Well on the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar.



Yusuke Sato on the headwall of Cerro Kishtwar during day two of the ascent of the northeast face.



Yusuke Sato on the headwall of Cerro Kishtwar during day two of the ascent of the northeast face.



The rock cave shelter on the way out to base camp from the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar, and the line of Aal Izz Well.



Hiroki Yamamoto on the lower part of the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar during the first day of the ascent.



Yusuke Kato below the headwall of Cerro Kishtwar northeast face. The high peak background right is Kishtwar Kailash (6,451m, summit in cloud), first climbed in 2013 by Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden.



Genki Narumi approaching a difficult mixed pitch on the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar.



Genki Narumi makes the long wade out to base camp after the first ascent of the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar.



New Cerro Kishtwar Route

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