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Latok I: The Second Ascent

A Clever Workaround Yields the First Summit Route from the Choktoi Glacier

SLOVENIAN ALPINISTS have a strong reputation. Straight-talking, quiet, and solid climbers, they regularly climb hard alpine routes without any fuss. When Luka Stražar attended a BMC International Winter Meet in Scotland a few years ago, I shared a couple of beers and belays with him. We never tied in together, but we crossed paths in Europe and Alaska over the following years, and in early 2018 he approached me with the idea of a trip to Pakistan. Along with Aleš Česen, we'd travel to the Choktoi Glacier in the Karakoram, with the infamous Latok I (7,145m) in mind. I met the two of them in Slovenia in February for some bitterly cold days of climbing on the dark walls of the Julian Alps, and there they set the hook: "We think there is a better way than the full north ridge," Aleš said.

Latok's most famous feature, the north ridge, runs nearly straight from the glacier to the summit, about 2,500 meters higher. Its reputation was cemented in 1978, when four Americans spent 26 days on the ridge, climbing higher and higher, battling storms, only to retreat a few hundred meters below the summit. In the following 40 years, dozens of teams had tried to better their impressive effort, but without success. A Japanese team summited the mountain from the south in 1979, but their route remains unrepeatable. In fact, Latok I hadn't been climbed by any route in nearly 40 years.

Just one year earlier, in 2017, a team of three Russian climbers had a 15-day epic on Latok's north ridge, enduring several storms and poor conditions. They reached the highest point on the ridge since 1978. Afterward, two of the climbers had digits amputated due to frostbite. I knew my Slovenian friends were tough, but thankfully we all agreed we didn't want to risk any epics.

I joined them en route to Pakistan in July. After four days of walking through the barren, dusty Karakoram mountains, we finally rounded a corner of the glacier and glimpsed the biggest mountain objectives I'd ever seen. "Oh shit, this is the real deal!" I exclaimed. Luka and Aleš have climbed many times in the Greater Ranges, but this was my first time in the Karakoram, where routes were measured in days, not pitches. I could stack two of the mountains I'd previously climbed into one of these—it was two Grandes Jorasses or two Cerro Fitz Roys. The impressive mountains around our base camp—the Latok group and Ogre I and II—needed little introduction.

In mid-July, just as we arrived in base camp, two Russian teams started separate attempts on the north face and north ridge. We wished them luck but tried not to think about them as we acclimatized on a nearby peak. We didn't want to be pressured into starting before we were fully prepared. One team bailed in the face of severe rockfall, but two other climbers, Alexander Gukov, a veteran of the 2017 attempt, and Sergey Glazunov, continued for 10 days, battling storms and deep snow up to around 7,000 meters. We tried to watch from base camp as they made several attempts from their high camp. Once they began to retreat, Sergey fell to his death in a rappelling accident, leaving Alexander stranded at nearly 6,300 meters, with no means to descend. Impressively, Alexander survived a six-day storm before he was rescued by a Pakistani helicopter on his 19th day on the mountain.

(A) Latok I (7,145 meters) from the north. (B) Latok II. (1) Russian attempt in 2018 to the top of the north ridge at approximately 7,050 meters. (R) Approximate site where Alexander Gukov was stranded and eventually rescued by helicopter in 2018. (2) Slovenian-British Route (second ascent of Latok I), passing through the col between Latok I and II to finish by the southern slopes. Photo by Sergey Glazunov

Aleš summed up our feelings: "You wouldn't be human if you didn't feel something about this accident." But, after a brief discussion, we confirmed our intentions. We were still motivated to attempt Latok, but via a different style and route to the Russians. "Let's keep an open mind," I said. "We can start climbing without too much commitment." We all agreed and anxiously watched the weather forecast. A stable window looked to be arriving in a couple of days.

On August 5 we left base camp at 1 a.m., the bright stars creating a patchwork of light above. The north side of Latok stood in total darkness, tall and ominous. As we soloed over the berg-schrund, I was absorbed by the white circle of light from my headlamp, my pack pulling against my shoulders. We carried a small tent and a snow hammock for bivouacs, a double sleeping bag and one single bag for the team, and food and fuel for about seven days. Our rack felt small for such a huge face: eight screws, a set of cams, a few pins, and six wires.

We started to the right of the true north ridge and stayed on that side for most of the climb. I swung and kicked into chewy, soft ice, trying to be as efficient as possible, trying to ignore the enormous amount of climbing towering above my head. We stopped to bivy in midmorning, finding a small flat section in a notch on the ridge, about 800 meters up, safe from rockfall as the sun moved onto the face.

The alarm chimed merrily at around 3 a.m. on the second day, and we collectively started the motions of getting ready. The stove burst into life, then porridge, water, pack our bivy. I led us up and right, over ridges of snow and through deep runnels of ice. We took turns leading simul-climbing blocks for a hundred meters or more, then quickly pitching harder steps. Warily, we weaved and ducked under cornices and snow mushrooms along one section of the ridge. In late afternoon we found a poor bivy on a snow mushroom at around 6,000 meters, barely big enough for the three of us to lie down.

The third day took us higher up the north ridge, threading couloirs of ice. At each corner or bulge, I peered round in anticipation of a dead-end. Where would this path lead? Luck remained with us, and we flowed through sections of white névé and concrete, pick-blunting ice. At about 6,300 meters, we saw snow slopes leading out right toward our goal, the west col, between Latok I and II. From there we planned to continue up the south side of the peak to reach the summit. [Josh Wharton (U.S.), who traveled to the Choktoi Glacier four times to attempt Latok I, had envisioned the west col crossover and hoped to attempt it in 2012; however he was unable to make an attempt that summer and eventually joined Kyle Dempster and Hayden Kennedy for a new route up the Ogre.] We started moving away from the north ridge, and at 1 p.m. we chopped a spacious bivy beneath a small serac, halfway between the ridge and the col.

We crested the western col, at over 6,700 meters, around noon on August 7. I slumped headfirst into the snow, gasping for breath; it felt like I had a plastic bag over my head. We all had studied countless photos of the north side of Latok I, but the far side of the col was much less known; sections of the upper mountain were hidden in the few photos we'd found. Fortunately, there were no nasty surprises. Aleš led as we sidestepped across easy-angled snow until we all began to bonk, hanging from the single ice screw belays and breathing heavily. Now only 300 meters below the summit, we were so close but felt emptied of energy. A bergschrund gave us enough flat ground to pitch the tent, and we collapsed inside.

As the fifth day began to brighten, I turned to Luka. "I haven't slept," he said, wide eyes staring at the ceiling. Heavy spindrift and gusts had rocked our single-skin tent all night, and we constantly hit the walls to shed the new snow. By morning, about eight inches had fallen. Luka had nearly been trapped on Phola Gangchen in Tibet a few years earlier, and was worried we'd have a repeat experience. All thoughts of the summit had gone, and we simply debated, between heavy breaths, how we might get down safely in the storm.

By midmorning, however, the clouds had thinned and the summit looked to be within reach again. In

silence, Luka began re-racking and then started kicking steps away from the tent, ignoring the heavy spindrift avalanches that tumbled down snow grooves on either side of him. Aleš and I followed on the other end of the rope, exhausted but determined. Wind-blown snow and clouds crashed over the summit. It looked like a stormy day in the Scottish Highlands, I thought grimly, except we were above 7000 meters in the Karakoram.

When I took my turn on the summit cornice, I couldn't see the view because of the racing clouds. But the satisfaction of being here was all I needed, and the relief was absolute. Up until a few hours earlier, I still hadn't dared to believe we could climb this mountain—the biggest route I'd ever tried. I knew this point only marked halfway, and that arriving safely back in base camp was our true goal. But right then, on the summit, I was totally content.

After another uncomfortable night in our high camp, our fifth on the mountain, we reversed our route back to the west col and then angled back down toward the north ridge. Only with the safety of colder temperatures at night did we then plunge down into the darkness, abseiling again and again from V-threads in the ice. I weighted each anchor with caution, watching it carefully, before sliding down the ropes, over and over and over again. Eventually, the sky began to brighten and we reached our first bivy site at the notch of the north ridge.

We slumped on the bivy platform, facing the imminent sunrise, waiting for warmth and light and relief. Aleš fell straight to sleep, but Luka and I lay awake despite our exhaustion and laughed as our brains exaggerated the shapes and colors, the snow looking brighter and faces appearing in the lichenous patterns in the granite. Finally the morning sun burst over the horizon, flooding us with heat. I felt the sunlight prickle my cheeks, and I wriggled my cold toes. We slipped into a deep, satisfied sleep for a few hours, dreaming of base camp and of home.

Summary: New route and second ascent of Latok I (7,145m), by Ales Česen and Luka Stražar (Slovenia) and Tom Livingstone (U.K.), August 5–12, 2018. The climbers started from the Chok- toi Glacier on the north side of the mountain, generally followed the right side of the north ridge to around 6,400m, then traversed to the west col (ca 6,700m), between Latok I and II, followed by a traverse up the southern slopes to the summit (2,500m, ED+). They descended approximately the same line. Livingstone and Stražar discussed this climb in depth in episode 11 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast (see below).

About the Author: Born in southern England in 1990, Tom Livingstone now lives in North Wales and enjoys climbing in all its forms.

Images



Luka Stražar pauses during the ascent of Latok I. The high peak in back left is Bobisghir (6,414m).



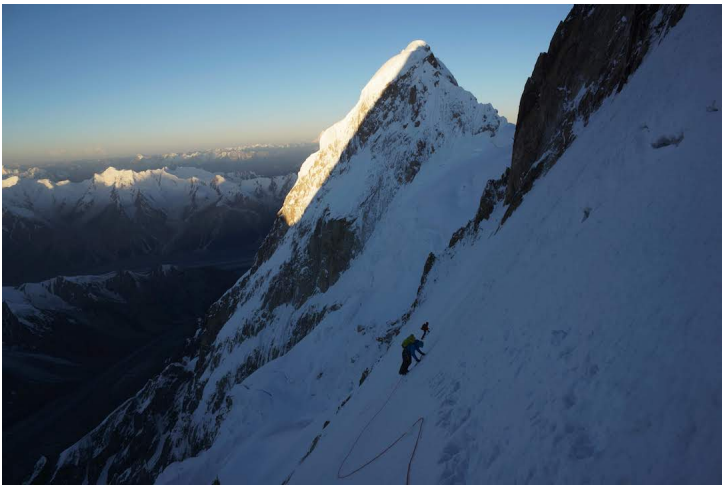
Ales Česen searching for the line on Latok I's north side.



Luka Stražar climbing steep ice during the ascent of Latok I.



Alex Česen and Luka Stražar reaching the summit of Latok I in blowing snow.



Traversing the upper south side of Latok I, with Latok II behind.



(A) Latok I (7,145 meters) from the north. (B) Latok II. (1) Russian attempt in 2018 to the top of the north ridge at approximately 7,050 meters. (R) Approximate site where Alexander Gukov was stranded and eventually rescued by helicopter in 2018. (2) Slovenian-British Route (second ascent of Latok I, also in 2018), passing through the col between Latok I and II to finish by the southern slopes.



Tom Livingstone feeling the altitude at around 6,400 meters, headed toward the west col.



Tom Livingstone digging out on the fifth morning of the climb. "All thoughts of the summit had gone."

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