



AAC Publications

Menthosa, South Ridge and Traverse

India, Himachal Pradesh

During the descent of the east ridge of Menthosa after making the first traverse. The ridge drops to a wide col, the Urgus Pass, then rises again to a triangular rocky peak on the left (Urgus Pharbrang). Photo: Spencer Gray

Rushad Nanavatty, Alex Marine, and I (all from the USA) had come to India to climb an objective in Ladakh, within the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The day we landed in Delhi, the Indian government scrapped the state's special constitutional status, imposed a lockdown, and revoked our climbing permit. We were directed to find a new objective in another state. On the strength of a photograph of its impressive southeast pillar, a location near the outer limit of the monsoon, and a bedrock map that suggested the presence of granite along a large fault, we picked Menthosa (6,443m) in Himachal Pradesh.

Menthosa is downstream of the well-known granite walls of the Miyar Valley, which have received sustained attention from climbers for over 25 years. It was first climbed in 1970 via the east-northeast ridge, by a British military team, and is regularly guided via a variation of the first-ascent route. Our base camp (4,470m) was in an alluvial side valley full of pink stalks of fleecflower and mats of rock jasmine, blue forget-me-nots, and occasional spiny blue and violet poppies.

Upon arriving, we faced a week of unusually heavy monsoon storms that deposited a meter of wet snow on the upper mountain and snapped the poles of our cook tent. The Indian meteorology agency reported that, at lower elevations, this storm caused the highest recorded rainfall (36cm in one location) for a 24-hour period in the state of Himachal Pradesh. Landslides and floods killed scores of people and washed out hundreds of roads. Dorje, our cook, who comes from a long line of local farmers, spoke of how a changing climate had made Lahaul's summer weather increasingly wet and unpredictable. Throughout our expedition, snow stability and rockfall associated with snowmelt remained our biggest concerns.

Rushad and I left base camp in the dark on August 22, reaching the base of the south ridge at dawn. (Unfortunately, Alex had experienced symptoms of serious altitude sickness and had already left the area.) A hot morning of wallowing uphill through deep snow and a jumbled icefall led to a campsite on a roomy saddle on the south ridge (5,600m). Three days of tricky pitched-out mixed climbing followed, first on the east face under a series of prominent gendarmes, then traversing along the western aspect of the south ridge. On our third night we had one open, hanging bivouac at 6,220m, when fog obscured the way forward. The following evening, as we climbed perfect névé and ice to a bivouac spot just below the summit, a lightning storm in the foothills illuminated the glacier beneath us, flashing neon white between the Milky Way above and a cloud inversion below.

We summited on the morning of August 26, then spent another day on the summit ridge waiting for a white-out to clear. Next morning, the sunlit peaks of Zanskar and Kishtwar shone along the rim of a steely overcast sky as we started our descent, spending one long day navigating the glaciated east-northeast ridge route back to base camp.

As far as we know, this was the first ascent of the south ridge and the first traverse (more than 8km) of the mountain. The height from the base of the icefall used to access the ridge is 1,350m, and the grade of our route was ED2 WI4 M6.

Future parties may be drawn, like we were, to Menthosa's unclimbed southeast pillar, jutting out slightly east of the south ridge proper. This feature is cleaved diagonally by a dike across its south face, but this attractive, prominent weakness can only be accessed after crossing about 300 vertical meters of loose rock at its base. In the center of the pillar, the dike also crosses several sections of overhung flakes arranged like guillotines. The combination of heavy snowfall and variable rock quality eliminated the southeast pillar as a reasonable objective for us, but it likely has sections of worthwhile granitic rock.

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– Spencer Gray, USA

Menthosa from the east-southeast showing the American route up the south ridge. Their descent, and the standard route up the mountain, follows the snow slopes on the right side of the image. Photo by Spencer Gray

Images



Menthosa from the east-southeast showing the American route up the south ridge. Their descent, and the standard route up the mountain, follows the snow slopes on the right side of the image.



Menthosa from base camp to the southeast, with the prominent triangular southeast pillar on the left.



Rushad Nanavatty climbing across the east flank of the south ridge on day two of the traverse of Menthosa.



Rushad Nanavatty traversing the west flank of Menthosa's south ridge during the first ascent.



Rushad Nanavatty traversing the west flank of Menthosa's upper south ridge during the first ascent.



During the descent of the east-northeast ridge of Menthosa after making the first traverse. The ridge drops to a wide col, the Urgus Pass, then rises again to a triangular rocky peak on the left (Urgus Pharbrang).



Looking west at sunset to the Baihali Jot group from high on the south ridge of Menthosa.

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