



AAC Publications

Kullu Speed Ascents

Himachal Pradesh, Kullu

Influenced by performance ascents made by international mountaineers, certain Indian athletes are now making impressive speed ascents on their own peaks. In 2016, Indian ultra-marathon runner Kieren D'Souza moved to Manali in order to concentrate on trail running. That same year, aged 23, he became the first Indian to qualify for and then successfully complete the 246km Spartathlon in Greece, often described as the most grueling organized race in the world. But when COVID-19 put an end to global competition in 2020, D'Souza turned to his own backyard. Although not a trained mountaineer, in the summer and autumn of 2020, he decided to attempt a speed ascent of a 6,000m peak. This would be a three-stage process.

The first stage was to attempt the popular Friendship Peak (5,287m, 32.39589°N, 77.10956°E) in the Beas Kund area north-northwest of Manali. On June 16, after reconnaissance of the route and establishing support teams on both the approach road and the mountain, D'Souza left Mall Road, the main street in Manali (2,050m), a little after 1 a.m., and in two hours had reached the road head in the Solang Valley. From here the route continues past the normal base camp for Friendship Peak and then up the south-southwest face of the mountain. Three hours from the road head, D'Souza changed into mountain boots and crampons. Snow conditions were excellent, and at 8:18 a.m. he was on the summit. Eleven hours and 45 minutes after leaving Manali, he was back on the Mall Road again, having run 53.4km and ascended 3,657m.

In September he set out again from Manali on a 126km circuit, crossing Hamta Pass (4,270m) from Kullu to Lahaul, then back over the Rohtang Pass (3,980m), returning to his start point in 18 hours 55 minutes.

On October 1 it was time for his 6,000-meter peak. At 3:20 a.m., D'Souza left the road head at the Allain Duhangan Hydroelectric Plant, just south of Manali, and began running east up the beautiful Jagatsukh Valley toward Deo Tibba (6,001m, 32°11'51.62"N, 77°22'56.43"E). He reached the normal base camp at 7 a.m., after making a freezing, knee-deep river crossing. He wore running clothing up to Duhangan Col (5,200m), southeast of the summit, then changed to warmer gear, boots, and crampons. At a top camp set up by a support team and film crew, he roped up with a climber to negotiate a steep ice wall—this was the first time D'Souza had experienced crevassed terrain and steep ice slopes. He reached the summit at 2:50 p.m. and was back at the Hydroelectric Plant in a round trip of 19 hours 38 minutes. No fixed ropes were used, and at the time of his ascent no other parties were moving up or down the mountain.

— Lindsay Griffin

Images



High on Manali Peak (5,669m) at dawn, looking east toward the summit of Friendship Peak (5,287m, the apex of the broad, shaded, triangular snow slope left of center). Foreground right is the pyramid of Shitidar (5,290m). Above the latter, on the horizon, are two high peaks: Indrasan (6,220m, left) and Deo Tibba (6,001m).

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