



AAC Publications

Starikatchan, Attempts on East and West Side

India, Zaskar

In August 2019, Alan Goldbetter (Finland/USA) and I attempted Starikatchan (H7 on the Sakamoto sketch maps, 5,904m, 33°30'45.81"N, 76°43'29.58"E), an unclimbed peak above the Shimling Tokpo.

From Tungri, a village at 3,500m in the main Zaskar (Doda River) Valley, we approached the peak from the northeast, up an unnamed valley to climber's right of the old monastery that can be seen from the village. We made our base camp at 4,760m.

After a few days' rest, we ascended the glacier to reach the toe of the peak's east buttress. Four good pitches, with difficulties to 5.6, brought us to the east ridge, where the rock quality deteriorated. After a couple of hundred meters on the ridge, we decided to do a short rappel leftward into a large snow-filled gully. (Zaskar had a big snowpack that year, and sources told us snow in this section was uncharacteristic.) We bivouacked for the night, hoping to climb the snow early the following morning, but it proved too warm and unstable. Thus we continued weaving our way up rock slabs to the left for another few pitches. The weather was deteriorating, along with the number of reasonable upward paths. When the storm set in properly, it made our decision to head down easy. After approximately 10 rappels, we returned to the glacier.

In 2022, with the help of the McNeill-Nott Award, we returned to the mountain. Our friends in Tungri informed us that Zaskar had received much less snow this year, and we were pleased to find Starikatchan's east face generally snow-free upon arrival. Our plan was to repeat, more or less, our line from 2019, hoping to find easier passage.

In mid-July, we re-established our base camp and were soon back on the east buttress. After the initial pitches we found easy passage into the gully, which proved to have rock solid enough to climb but not quite solid enough to be fun. A few hours of third- through low-fifth-class climbing brought us to the base of a short, steep headwall. There was easier terrain to the left, but it would involve crossing under a section of the mountain that seemed subject to heavy rockfall at all times of the day and night (a trend that we also observed in 2019). Instead, we chose to continue straight up. A short A2 pitch, followed by steep and loose 5.8, brought us into yet another gully like the one below. We followed this until finding a bivouac spot.

The following morning, we climbed another pitch or two, landing at the base of a third-or fourth-class section. It felt like stacked shale. After climbing a short way, we decided it was too risky for our tastes and called it quits. We returned the way we had come and made it back to base camp just before dark.

We now felt we had exhausted our options on the east side of Starikatchan. I believe that one could find reasonably safe routes from this side, but they would likely be on the peak's steep, clean east face, which was well outside our skill level. We decided to move our camp up the Shimling Valley, which Dave Anderson and Szu-ting Yi had visited in 2019; they tipped us off to some good possibilities on that side of the mountain. We established a camp at 4,600m and decided our best ascent option would be to use a gully on the west side of the peak to gain access to the south ridge.

We left camp at 3 a.m. The gully proved to be reasonably pleasant second- and easy third-class terrain. Unfortunately, by the time we reached the base of the south ridge at 9 a.m., a storm had moved in. Not having access to weather forecasts at base camp, we were limited to the forecast we

had received just before leaving the village several days earlier (a cell phone tower was constructed there two years ago). Based on that, clear skies were expected for the next two days, so we decided to dig in under a boulder and see what happened.

Fortunately, the forecast proved correct, and next morning we began working up the south ridge. We climbed eight pitches on moderate slabs (5.7) until reaching a large gendarme. We followed a ramp system down and to the left, bypassing the gendarme, then climbed two pitches back up to the ridge proper. From there, we found the ridge convoluted and time consuming, but by 4 p.m. we were at a point less than 100 vertical meters below the summit. However, we were still many hours away along the sharp, gendarmed ridge. We had made the fateful mistake of leaving our stove and sleeping bag at the base of the ridge, and after some consideration decided to be conservative and forego an open bivouac.

The descent was time consuming. We reached our bivouac at the top of the gully at 10 p.m. and the next day returned to base camp. We waited as long as we could, hoping for one more weather window, but the next week proved rainy. We packed up camp and returned to Tungri in time to journey back to Leh and fly home.

As it turns out, the bottom 90 percent of Starikatchan can be climbed relatively quickly and with little technical difficulty, and I'm sure by more routes than we tried. However, the last bit to the summit seems time consuming no matter which way you approach. A big thanks to our friends at Skitpo Travel for making our trips to Zaskar so much fun.

— Tess Smith, USA

Images



A view into the east gully of Starikatchan in 2022.



Tess Smith on the south ridge of Starikatchan.



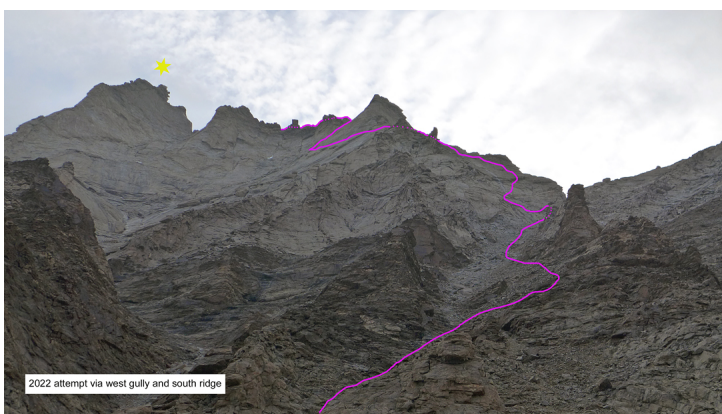
Tess Smith leading the A2 pitch, east face of Starikatchan.



The approach up the Shimling Valley, showing the unclimbed northwest ridge of Starikatchan in profile.



Alan Goldbetter descending the south ridge of Starikatchan. In the background on the left is Remalaye (H5, 6,278m), while to the right is Peak 6,110m.



The attempted line up the west gully and south ridge of Starikatchan. The star marks the summit.



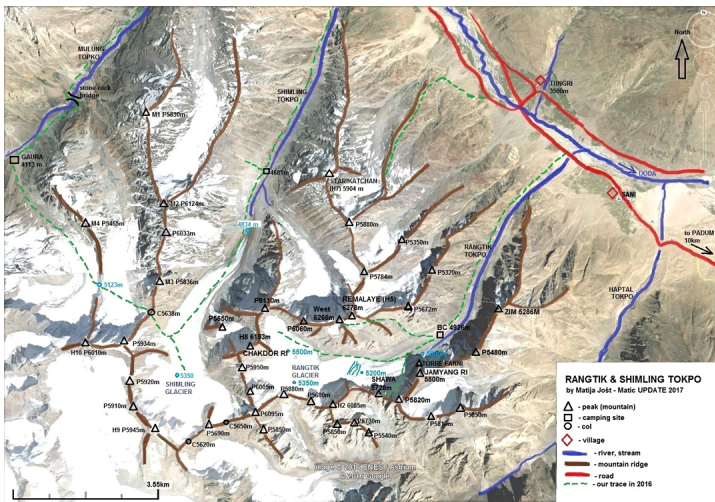
The east face of Starikatchan with (1) the 2022 attempt and (2) the 2019 attempt. The star marks the summit of the peak.



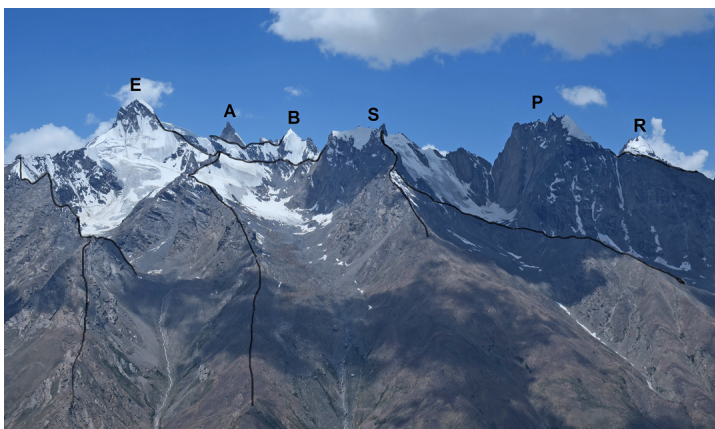
Tess Smith on the initial pitches of the east buttress of Starikatchan.



Starikatchan (P) from the Shimling Glacier to the southwest. The 2022 attempt climbed the southwest face to gain the south (right skyline) ridge and then followed it to a point 100 vertical meters below the summit.



A map of the Shimling Valley and neighboring areas, with Starikatchan in the top center.



Looking southwest over the main Zaskar Valley from the slopes above Tungri Village. (E) Remalaye (H5, 6,278m). (A) H8 (6,193m). (B) Peak 6,110m. (S) Peak 5,880m. (P) Starikatchan (H7, 5,904m). (R) M2 (6,124m).

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