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Thajiwas, Second Ascent in 78 Years

India, Kashmir, Sonamarg Valley

Located 80km by road northeast of Srinagar, the hill station of Sonamarg (2,730m) has long been a popular tourist destination, with picturesque alpine meadows and lakes. To the south and east of Sonamarg lies a collection of attractive alpine peaks, culminating in Kolahoi (5,427m). But for many years, this has been a no-go area for foreign visitors due to the Kashmir conflict, and at the time of writing the American and British governments still advise against all travel to the Jammu and Kashmir region (except for Leh).

Some climbing took place in the area before the Second World War, notably the first ascent of the highest summit, in 1912, by Kenneth Mason and Ernest Neve. During the war, when Sonamarg was the base for the Royal Air Force Mountain Training Centre and was staffed by notable British mountaineers such as John Jackson and Wilfred Noyce, many ascents were made, but there little subsequent activity has been recorded.

Immediately south of Sonamarg lies the Thajiwas Valley and its range of volcanic peaks, rising to a summit of 4,854m: Thajiwas (formerly Greater Thajiwas, 34°15'40.8"N, 75°15'37.4"E). This mountain has only two recorded ascents. On June 2, 1937, James Waller along with Pasang Ghekkedi and Mapchi Topgay climbed the Great Couloir that splits the north side of the mountain, finding an average angle of 50° and reaching the summit from the col at its top by an easy rock scramble. This couloir was attempted unsuccessfully a couple of times toward the end of the WWII, but the second ascent of the peak was achieved by a different route, when, in September 1945, John Buzzard and John Jackson reversed the Waller party's descent route on the east flank of the mountain.

The third recorded ascent of Thajiwas was not achieved until July 2023, when the Great Couloir route was repeated by Indian mountaineer Zeeshan Mushtaq. On July 2, with Faisal Wani, Mushtaq climbed partway up the 300m couloir before his partner became fatigued. From that point, Mushtaq continued alone to the top of the couloir, then west up the final rock pyramid to the summit. He returned to his partner and the two began their descent of the couloir.

Conditions had deteriorated, and in slushy snow they lost their footing and fell. Wani sustained a leg injury and was unable to continue. He also began to get hypothermic. They asked for a rescue, which came four hours later in the form of a team from the Jawahar Institute of Mountaineering and Winter Sports, along with other locals from the area. Wani was carried to base camp on a stretcher, but as his condition deteriorated, Mushtaq decided to call for a helicopter. A team from the Indian Air Force evacuated the patient to a medical facility, where he recovered fully.

There is much scope in this area for alpine climbing, as indicated in John Jackson's 1976 guidebook to the area (available [here](#)). However, turmoil since the late 1980s has had significant impact on adventure sports in this area, and there are no immediate signs of a resolution. Although political protests appear to be subsiding, there have been increasing targeted attacks on civilians in the last few years.

— Lindsay Griffin, with information from Zeeshan Mushtaq, India

Images



Looking south in October 2021 at the Great Couloir on twin-summitted Thajiwas (4,854m, in back).



The Great Couloir on the north face of Thajiwas in 2023 showing the route of ascent to Thajiwas main summit.



James Waller's picture of the Great Couloir of Thajiwas, taken from his camp below the north face in 1937.



Looking southeast from the summit of Thajiwas to the distant (rocky) pyramid of Kolahoi (center).

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