



AAC Publications

Kusum Kanguru (6,370m), southwest face

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Section

Vyacheslav (Slava) Ivanov and I were really surprised to find such a beautiful mountain with an unclimbed face so close to Lukla. What a stroke of luck! However, at that time we knew nothing of its history. We planned a quick, three- to four-day ascent before moving on to Lobuche Peak. Life makes its own plans.

Three couloirs penetrate the lower wall. The left, leading to the center of the face, is the most dangerous, with the St. Petersburg to Moscow train rumbling down at frequent intervals. We chose the right couloir, which rises toward the south ridge. The trains here only started at 1 or 2 p.m.

We started on October 10 and for the first two days were only troubled by small avalanches and a little rockfall. After lunchtime we would hide beneath rocks. Eighty percent of the terrain was covered with 5 to 7cm of snow. There was no ice, and both protection and belays were hard to find in the largely crackless granite. If we placed three pieces of protection a pitch, that was pure joy. Sometimes we didn't place any, even though we wanted to, badly.

The first day I led 10 pitches. On the second Slava took over and added another 10. We belayed where it was possible, not at the end of the rope, so sometimes our pitches were as short as 35m. We also stopped in plenty of time to construct a tent site for the night, in order to save strength. By the end of the second day we had moved left out of the couloir and onto the bordering rock buttress. On the third day we climbed seven pitches in thick mist, stopping beneath an overhang at ca 5,800m. One hour of work and we had a nice, safe spot—if we had known then about the coming storm, we would surely have stayed there.

Next morning we traversed right to find a way through the rock barrier above. Snowfall accelerated rapidly, and Slava was hit by heavy spindrift. I followed the horizontal traverse with two sacks, and in the cacophony of roaring avalanches performed 10m pendulums, testing my bone strength against the rock. We had to hide as fast as possible, and managed to build a hasty, concave platform, the size of a bathtub. It would be our resting place for the next three days. Those days were terrible. Every three hours we had to get out and clear large amounts of snow between wall and tent—it threatened to tear us off the face.

Eventually we were able to continue. Slava climbed a hard, vertical pitch of dry-tooling, the only time his monopoints came in handy. (When the sun came out and the névé began to melt, they were useless.) Several times he took 5m to 7m falls, when snow over rock collapsed. The visions of Slava's falls are still in my mind. Once, he flew 7m and landed on his back, fortunately protected by his rucksack. He immediately got up as if nothing had happened and with a slight moan resumed climbing.

We had planned to climb fast, so had taken only a few days of food that did not need cooking, and only two 250g gas canisters. On the 19th, at an altitude of 6,145m, we ran out of both food and gas. The three-day storm had not only taken our supplies, but also our strength.

On the morning of the 20th we climbed 45–50° snow ridges to the summit—these were 45–50m pitches without protection. Our main belays were bags filled with snow and deeply buried, like

deadmen. We continued along the crest toward the northeast summit (6,350m). Large snow mushrooms had formed on the ridge, and Sasha found it difficult in his monopoints and often flew, head down, into space. To belay him I had to dig a deep hole, like a mole, and sit in it. Finally, we reached the last summit and could see the descent onto the plateau. We had to make two rappels to reach it. The first was fine, but on the second I guess we were in too much of a hurry—it was extremely cold in a northerly wind. Our anchor was not buried deep enough and pulled. Riding a layer of snow, we both slid 20–30m onto the plateau. It was now dark, and we were fed up. We erected the tent and for the first time in five days we could lie flat.

Next morning we continued our journey down the north face in knee-deep, or sometimes waist-deep, snow. We rappelled many times, and near the base narrowly missed being engulfed by a large avalanche.

We had now been without water for three days, just eating snow, but as we descended toward the valley the snow turned to small rivulets and we drank deeply. Unfortunately, crossing one of the bigger rivers, I slipped and plunged into the substance I'd dreamed of for so many days. I was immersed up to the neck, drowning my cameras.

We finally reached a cairned trail that led to a clearing at 4,300m, which we presumed was the site of the north-side base camp. We had arranged for our sirdar to meet us here with food, but either due to a misunderstanding or the fact that we were lost, we never saw him. One trail led away from the clearing and we followed it for one hour until realizing it was definitely going uphill and not down. Slava, who has less fat to lose than me, was very tired, falling behind constantly. We were unsuccessful in finding another trail down.

Next morning we spotted Monjo in the main Dudh Kosi valley, like a mirage 700m below. How were we supposed to get there? I suggested we try to rappel the steep, grassy slopes toward the village, but Slava, now nearing his limit, did not like the idea. We found later that he had lost 15kg, compared to my 12kg. We had one more option: a helicopter. Although we'd tried to the end, we phoned in our coordinates and a request to be rescued. We were evacuated to Lukla on the 22nd.

The southwest face is 1,400m, and our route had ca 1,600m of climbing (40 pitches). We named it **Falling into the Void (Russian 6A, TD/ED WI5 M5)**.

Provided by Anna Piunova, Mountain.ru, translated by Ekaterina Vorotnikova

Editor's note: New Zealanders Peter Hillary and Murray Jones were the first to have designs on the southwest face. They reconnoitered the Kusum Khola in spring of 1979, before deciding it was too difficult to penetrate with porters. They made an attempt from the north instead. Several teams subsequently used their northerly approach, getting as far as the northeast summit but not the main top, before the arrival in Nepal of New Zealand's Bill Denz in October 1981. In what is now acknowledged to be one of the most remarkable first ascents of the lower Himalayan peaks, Denz, climbing alone, spent one and a half days ascending a mixed buttress to the left of the southwest face to reach the west ridge. He followed this to a second bivouac on the west top, and the next day he made a trying ascent to the main (southwest) summit, bivouacked, and then traversed the narrow connecting ridge to the ca 6,350m northeast summit. From here he descended the northwest flank and spent a further two days bushwhacking down valley to Monjo.

Denz's ascent remained largely unknown for many years, and the southwest face did not come to the attention of most climbers until after 1991. In autumn of that year, Brian Davison, Dick Renshaw, and Stephen Venables bushwhacked to the head of the Kusum Khola with their eyes on the face, only to find it regularly bombarded by rockfall. Instead they climbed 26 pitches up the right flank of a 900m buttress

on the right, reaching the unclimbed south ridge. Davison was stricken with altitude sickness, and the team descended from this point. While Davison recovered at base camp, Renshaw and Venables finished the route via a magnificent rock pillar to the main summit. The 1,250m route was graded TD+.

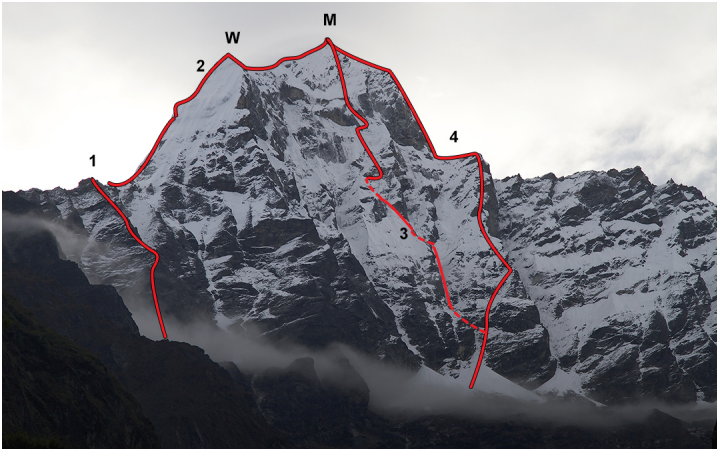
In 2000, Bart Paull and Freddie Wilkinson also had designs on the southwest face, but like their predecessors saw it raked by incessant stonefall. Instead, they climbed an independent line up the center of the Renshaw-Venables buttress before following the 1991 route (pitches of 5.9) to 6,100m, at the start of the summit ridge. Here they were forced down by the onset of very high winds.

In 2001, Slovenians Jernej Bevk and Uros Samec were also put off the southwest face by stonefall, reaching ca 5,500m on the Renshaw-Venables. Also in the valley at around the same time were Pavel Chiznak, Ivan Foltyn, and Petr Strnadel, who completed Birthday Cake (5.8 M5 80°) to a 5,805m point on the south ridge, while fellow Czechs Roman Kamler and Slavek Vomacko put up West Buttress (5.9 90°), which leads to a 5,579m point on the west ridge.

In 2004 heavy stonefall stopped two unpermitted young Alaskans from trying either the southwest face or Renshaw-Venables, so they moved well right and climbed a rightward-slanting line almost to the crest of the south ridge.

Finally, in 2011, three New Zealanders, unable to get established on the face, climbed a rib to the left that they believe to be left of the line followed by Denz (but well right of the Czech line). This gave 1,000m of mixed ground (M5) to the west ridge, from where they descended (AAJ 2012).

Images



The southwest face of Kusum Kanguru. (W) West top. (M) Main (southwest) top. (1) New Zealand (2011, to west ridge). (2) Denz (1981). (3) Falling into the Void (2013). (4) Renshaw-Venables (1991).



Vyacheslav Ivanov on a thin traverse at around half height



Vyacheslav Ivanov on belay mid-height on the southwest face



Emerging from the southwest face onto the summit ridge

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