



AAC Publications

The Sparrow and the Pigeon

Two New Routes in Eastern Kishtwar, India

The 1,200-meter east face of Cerro Kishtwar is bathed in morning sun and plastered with ice and snow. As we approach the base, the wall grows and grows. It looks steep. It looks hard. Even though we had all agreed to try an inspiring line through the middle of the face, it's hard to keep our focus. Just to the left, another line appears to offer a higher probability of success. In Slovenia we have a saying: "It's better to have a sparrow in the hands than a pigeon on the roof." It's hard not to think of the sparrow to our left.

Marko senses our hesitation. He knows this is a turning point. He understands the pressure of potential failure—but what kind of failure are we hoping to avoid? Choosing the alternate route might increase our chances standing on the summit we've dreamed about for more than a year. But it also might mean we'd failed to give the mountain our best. Marko steps to the front and starts breaking trail directly toward the face. Straight toward the pigeon. The rest of us follow in his tracks.

In the fall of 2014, during an ascent of Hagshu in eastern Kishtwar, Marko Prezelj looked to the southeast and took a picture of an exceptional group of mountains. Among them, the black pyramid of Cerro Kishtwar (6,173 meters) stood out: a stunning fang of icy granite.

Before Kashmir was officially closed to foreigners, in 1993, British mountaineers were most active in the area. Before they gathered the courage and tried to climb Cerro Kishtwar, they summited the nearby peaks. In 1983, Stephen Venables and Dick Renshaw climbed the north face of Kishtwar Shivling (5,935 meters) in pure alpine style. In 1988, Roger Everett and Simon Richardson made the first ascent of Chomochior (6,278 meters) along the west ridge.

The first to stand below the northwest face of Cerro Kishtwar were Mick Fowler and Mike Morrison. In 1989, however, they could only inspect possible routes of ascent. The first real attempt to climb this mountain was made in 1991 by Brendan Murphy and Andy Perkins. They chose a visionary route up the middle of the northwest face and managed to climb to within 100 meters of the summit. They were climbing in capsule style and spent 17 days on the wall.

In 1993, Fowler returned to the mountain with Stephen Sustad. They chose a system of ice runnels in the left part of the northwest face. Their route leads to a notch on the north ridge, and from there the British continued along the northeast face to the north peak. The neighboring south peak appeared to higher, and so of course they traversed to that summit as well.

No other climbers obtained a permit to visit eastern Kashmir until 2011. That year, the Swiss Denis Burdet and Stephan Siegrist, the Austrian David Lama, and the American Robert Frost climbed a new mixed route on the right side of the northwest face of Cerro Kishtwar, leading to the south peak.

All of these ascents and attempts on Cerro Kishtwar were made from the Haptal Glacier, on the west side of the mountain. The eastern sides of these peaks have not seen a lot of visits from alpinists. However, in 2013, Fowler and Paul Ramsden entered the Chomochior Valley and did the first ascent of Kishtwar Kailash (6,451m) by its southwest face. Mick's striking photo of Cerro Kishtwar and the neighboring Chomochior, taken from high on Kishtwar Kailash, added to Marko's enthusiasm about

the region, and convinced four of us to meet in Delhi on October 10: Marko and I from Slovenia, Hayden Kennedy from the USA, and Manu Pellissier from France.

Starting in Manali, we spend two days driving along a picturesque but extremely exposed road to the town of Gulabgarh, where we start a four-day trek to base camp. The first two days follow a quite populated trail toward the village of Machail, where a famous Hindu temple stands. The rest of the hike to base camp leads through the exceptionally colorful Darlang Nullah valley, where there are no permanent settlements, only occasional huts used by shepherds during the summer months. In addition to outstanding natural scenery, the eastern Kishtwar region is also interesting from a cultural point of view, since three religions interweave here: Buddhism from the north, Hinduism from the east, and Muslim culture from the west.

We put base camp at 3,900 meters, at the mouth of the Chomochior Valley, directly below a beautiful granite crag. Unfortunately our mules—or more precisely their guides—cannot find a way over the last moraine. Thus our first acclimatization effort is doing the work of mules and carrying equipment for the final half an hour to base camp.

After a day of rest we begin to explore access through the eastern foothills of Cerro Kishtwar and Chomochior. A three-hour, fairly unpleasant hike up the valley brings us to a site for ABC on a small sand dune in the middle of a rock-covered glacier. Before an expected deterioration in the weather, we examine the possible lines on Chomochior and Cerro Kishtwar. There is very little snow and ice on the faces, especially the lower halves, which are completely dry. In anticipation of an improvement in snow conditions after the predicted storm, we return to camp, where it rains and snows for three days. The deluge floods our camp, and Manu is soon homeless. We dig drains and build dikes to protect the rest of our camp from the worst of the flooding.

By September 26 the situation in the mountains and in our heads has stabilized to the extent that we are ready to attempt Chomochior. We head back up to ABC, where we are greeted by a broken tent and wet equipment. With a little improvisation, following the example of MacGyver, the idol from my youth, we manage to reconstruct the tent's broken poles and dry our wet equipment. Unfortunately, due to chest pain, Manu decides to descend to base camp, accompanied by our guide Bagwal and cook's assistant Betoo, who had helped to carry the equipment to the ABC that day.

Our ascent of Chomochior will not be merely for acclimatization. In addition to acquiring a sufficient number of red blood cells, we aim to prepare psychologically for the greater difficulties we anticipate on Cerro Kishtwar. The mind that is prepared to deal with the current circumstances and environment will—when this is significant and necessary—push a tired body forward. Anxiously awaiting what the next day would bring, we go to bed that evening under a gentle snowfall and wake to a quiet, clear morning.

From ABC we break trail through deep snow, moving slower than expected, and establish our first bivouac after excavating a flat spot on the broad saddle between Cerro Kishtwar and Chomochior. Once again we go to sleep in falling snow and wake to a cold, lovely sunrise—some photography from this impressive vantage delays our departure. From the saddle we move together along the south ridge of Chomochior. Higher, the ridge becomes exposed and in places technically demanding, requiring occasional belays and three short abseils to bypass sharp gendarmes.

By evening we have climbed to the end of the snow-covered rocky ridge, and we set up a second bivouac at a height of about 5,900 meters. The next morning we set off toward the peak without any bivy equipment, reaching the top around 11 a.m. Throughout the climb, we excitedly admire the outstanding views of nearby peaks, dominated by nearby Cerro Kishtwar. The mountain's spectacular shape ripens our powerful desire to climb it.

During our days on Chomochior, we all wondered how our friend Manu was doing, and we are extremely happy when he hikes out from base camp to meet us. His chest pain had disappeared after

two days, and while we were climbing Manu did not just sit in camp; together with Bagwal and Betoo, he made acclimatization ascents on two 5,000ers above base camp. Now, he too is ready for our main goal—in fact, since he had been deprived of climbing Chomochior, his motivation is even greater. He describes himself as a bullet eager to be shot.

Initially, we had quite seriously examined the northeast face of Cerro Kishtwar, which appeared to offer a number of possible lines. But the view from Chomochior had revealed fresh deep snow covering this shadowy face. The alternative was the east face, steeper and sunnier than its neighbor.

Following three days of rest, on October 4 we head back to ABC, where we prepare our equipment. In the afternoon we continue the approach under the east face of Cerro Kishtwar in cloudy weather and a light whirl of snowflakes. We set up two small tents under the face, and during the night the snowfall subsides.

In the morning we begin the two-hour final approach to the face. The days of uncertainty ahead and the technically challenging wall above weigh upon us—at least on the somewhat younger and less experienced members of the team. We start to shift our gaze toward the left, where a prominent couloir suggests a more feasible route—the sparrow in our hands. In these moments of doubt and hesitation, Marko showcases why he is what he is in alpinism. Some positive provocation and motivational insults are enough to erase our doubts, and we redirect our attention solely on our intended route, the fat pigeon on the roof.

The first day is mainly rock climbing. The difficult terrain and evening snowfall do not allow us to progress quickly, but we are not concerned with speed. We climb one pitch at a time, unburdened by the final result. In the evening, a couple of us complete another two rocky pitches while the others dig a narrow ledge in the snow for our two little tents. The night is “comfortable” and the sky is clear.

After warming up by ascending the two ropes we’d fixed the previous evening, we begin the most uncertain part of the route. Steep ice softened and corroded by sun brings us to a four-pitch ramp of hard ice. The ramp runs into a branched system of corners. About halfway up these, amid steep ice and mixed terrain, we are caught by nightfall. In the darkness we were utterly unable to find a suitable place for a bivouac, so we keep climbing long into the night. At 2 a.m., after gaining about 600 meters of elevation, we crawl into our sleeping bags on a small ledge chopped into steep snow. It’s impossible to set up the tents, so this night is a little less comfortable, but at least it is short. Manu is the happiest when the day dawns clear, because he has brought only a super-light sleeping bag, best suited for summer camping by the seashore.

A wide crack and a chimney with steep ice bring us to a point where the route becomes less clear. The exit chimney on the left is not what we’d hoped: It appears to involve two difficult pitches, where we probably would need to employ some aid. We are not thrilled by this possibility. A diagonal traverse toward the right would lead onto the northeast face, where we know there is a lot of unpacked snow. In the end it’s Hayden’s call—he is in the lead at the time. Soon he is building an anchor on the snow-covered northeast face. When we climb into view, he shrugs and says, “I don’t know if this goes.”

“Give me the gear!” Marko responds. After 30 meters of complex slabs, covered with piles of fresh snow, Marko looks back and gives us a thumbs-up. We just laugh. The way ahead is still not easy—powder snow covers the steep rock at the top of the face, ensuring the climbing will continue far into the night. But at least there is a way. Our last anchor is in rock just below the cornice, about 20 meters from the summit of Cerro Kishtwar. Manu and Marko set up their tent on the very top, and Hayden and I sleep just a meter below.

We descend along a couloir to the left of the east face—the same line we had considered attempting. In the upper section we are surprised to find no snow or ice after three days of clear weather. In the lower part it is like canyoning. In 1,200 meters, we can find only one Abalakov and one screw anchor;

all of the others are placed in rock. "We would have fucked ourselves if we had pooped our pants and chosen this line," someone says. There's no doubt the sparrow would have been a hollow prize. When we reach the bottom of the east face, we see the ice we'd climbed there has disappeared as well. We caught the wall at the perfect time.

Two days later we start a rapid descent into the "synthetic" world. Over two days we walk 60 kilometers to the road in Gulabgarh, and the next night, after 18 hours of driving, we arrive in Manali, and soon Delhi and then home. We leave the mountains so quickly that it seems our thoughts and feelings are still there.

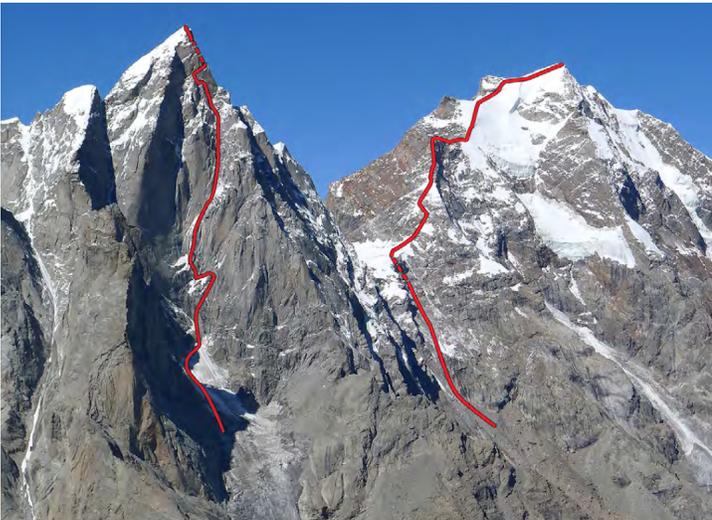
Summary: First ascent of the south ridge (1,400m, D+) of 6,278-meter Chomochior in eastern Kishtwar, India, by Hayden Kennedy (USA), Urban Novak, and Marko Prezelj (Slovenia), September 27–29, 2015. The same three men and Manu Pellissier (France) then made the first ascent of the east face of Cerro Kishtwar (6,173 meters): Light Before Wisdom (1,200m, ED+ 5.11 A2 W16 M6), October 5–8, 2015, descending the southern slopes to the eastern couloir. Summit heights were measured by GPS.

About the Author: Urban Novak, 30, lives in Prikrnica, Slovenia. When he's not working on his Ph.D. at the National Institute of Chemistry, he helps his dad on their small family farm.

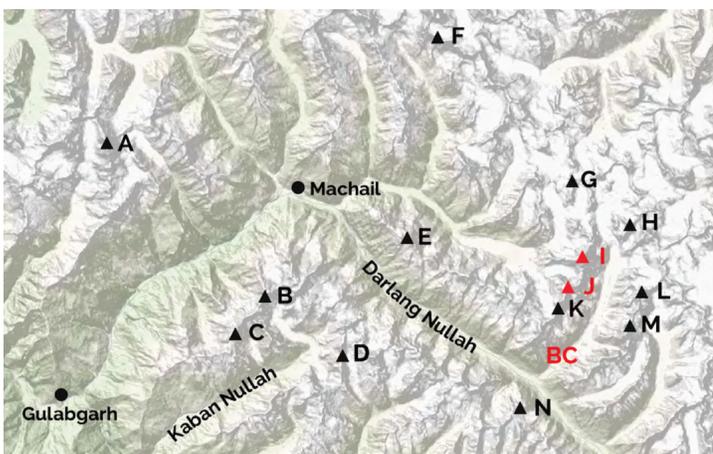
Images



The author greets the dawn at the summit of Cerro Kishtwar after three long days of climbing. Behind is Kishtwar Kailash (6,451m), first climbed in 2013.



Cerro Kishtwar (6,173m, left) and Chomochior (6,278m), showing the 2015 climbs.



Eastern Kishtwar mountains. (A) Arjuna. (B) Spear. (C) Maha Dev Phobrang. (D) Tupendeo. (E) Kishtwar Shivling. (F) Hagshu. (G) Shiepra. (H) Lahara. (I) Chomochior. (J) Cerro Kishtwar. (K) White Sapphire. (BC) Base camp. (L) Manasuna. (M) Kishtwar Kailash. (N) Gupta



The scary drive to Gulabgarh, start of the approach trek.



Base camp at 3,900m.



Traversing the south ridge of Chomochior during the second day of the ascent.



Approaching the awe-inspiring east face of Cerro Kishtwar. Near the foot of the 1,200-meter wall the team vacillated, wondering whether to try an easier-looking line to the left, but eventually they forged directly up the rock wall.



Hayden Kennedy leads steep rock during the first day on Cerro Kishtwar. “We climb one pitch at a time, unburdened by the final result.”



Morning at the open bivouac on the third day of the climb. The climbers didn't get into their sleeping bags until 2 a.m. the previous night.



Steep ice on day three.



"Give me the gear," commanded Prezelj, who led the way across the snowy slabs.



Cerro Kishtwar

Article Details

Author	Urban Novak
Publication	AAJ
Volume	58
Issue	90
Page	18
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Feature article