



AAC Publications

Barnaj I, Northeast Buttress

India, Kishtwar Himalaya

Barnaj I (6,370m GPS) is a mountain that beckons to be climbed. After my 2014 attempt on the north buttress with Tim Dittmann and Jared Vilhauer, and knowing of at least one other attempt and several potential expeditions, I kept expecting to read that it had been done. [Though the higher Barnaj II had repeated attempts from the south in the 1970s and early '80s, it is not clear whether Barnaj I received a serious attempt before 2014.] However, by the end of 2016 this challenging mountain remained virgin, and Jared and I, together with Sam Hennessey, planned to return the following year. Unfortunately, Jared's Indian visa was delayed in Houston due to Hurricane Harvey. This, combined with untimely illness, saw him in India only a short time before he had to head home.

Sam and I left the village of Akshow with our LO and logistics crew, and established base camp at 4,350m above the west side of the Hagshu Glacier. After a few days of scouting and acclimatizing, we decided to attempt an unclimbed peak behind camp. The Castle, as we referred to it, is 5,760m and snow-free on its east and south aspects. On September 19 we climbed the southeast ridge and face. The route required a few hundred meters of scrambling and eight pitches of roped climbing on moderate to poor rock (IV 5.8+). We also made an attempt on Peak 6,200m, which sits above the huge, snowy basin west of base camp, but turned around at 5,850m due to unstable snow conditions.

On September 30, after a few days of unsettled weather, we moved to an advanced base near Barnaj I at 4,700m. Sam and I left this camp next morning and walked 30 minutes up the glacier before starting to climb snow aprons at the base of the impressive north face of Barnaj I. We crossed the bergschrund at 4,920m and climbed nearly continuous ice all the way to the summit. The route had very little snow, mixed climbing, or calf-burning sheet ice; its caliber was reflected in pitch after pitch of quality ice climbing. Ever engaging, yet never desperate, the route was in good condition, with many pitches containing just enough ice for reasonable protection and swift passage.

On the first day we simul-climbed up the left side of the face until belaying a thin pitch of 80° ice. After 70m the angle eased, as did the spindrift, and we climbed several pitches of low-angle ice, with occasional snow, into a deep cleft defined by a massive granite spire on the right. Our route went up this only briefly before cutting straight up through a shallow, 300m gully system. The first 100m were steep, with sustained sections of vertical ice; combined with heavy packs, this provided the greatest pump on the route. The remaining 200m were no more than 10m wide, with sticky blue ice averaging 70°, ending at the start of a transverse snow band on the northeast aspect of the peak. A short step of M4 put us at the same point where we bivouacked in 2014, and we stopped for the night.

Knowing that our next protected bivouac site was only 250m higher, we had a late morning, resting and taking advantage of the sun to dry equipment. A few hours of traversing snow, followed by a couple of ice pitches, put us at this bivouac, which sits just left of the entrance to the upper ice chimney at ca 5,700m.

We had turned around at this point in 2014 due to rockfall, a result of thin rotten ice and warm temps. To mitigate this hazard, our strategy this time was to climb through the incredible ice-filled gash in the dark. We woke at 1 a.m. and worked our way through the chimney in four long pitches of fairly sustained ice. The climbing was brilliant and the sticks were solid, with the exception of one 20m section of steep rotten ice. It had been difficult to assess the upper part of the route beforehand, so we were pleasantly surprised to find the weakness continued upward. Although the route opened up a

bit, and the angle eased slightly, the climbing was more delicate, and protection often scarce. After 10 more rope lengths of ice, averaging 75–80°, with a few vertical steps, Sam cut his way through the cornice and onto the summit ridge. A few minutes of easy snow climbing put us on the true summit, where our GPS devices read 6,370m.

We reversed the route with V-threads to our tent at 5,700m, where we brewed up and slept several hours before descending the lower half of the route the following day, returning to advanced base at 3 p.m. on the 4th. Our 1,450m route had been WI5+ M4.

There is no doubt the true north face of Barnaj I is a more impressive problem, but navigating the ephemeral smears seems unlikely without much mixed and aid. While not as difficult, our route is the line—direct, sustained, and objectively safe. We feel fortunate, as it is rare to make an alpine-style ascent of such quality directly to the summit of an unclimbed mountain. For the modern-day alpine climber it has all the elements of a world-class ice route on a spectacular peak. We would like to thank the Mugs Stump Award for helping make this expedition possible.

– Seth Timpano, USA

Images



Barnaj II and Barnaj I (6,370m GPS) seen from the east-northeast in 2014, with the 2017 route marked.



The north face of Barnaj I (6,370m GPS) in 2014. The upper section of the 2017 route, which faces almost east, is hidden in a deep icy chimney.



Seth Timpano leading an ice pitch low on the route.



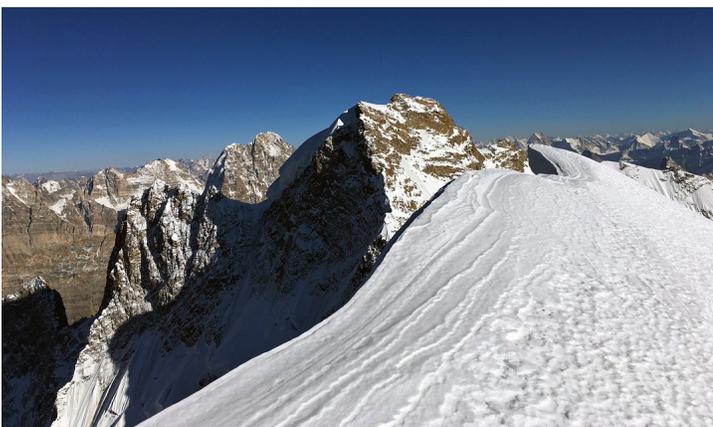
Looking into the ice chimney that defines the start of the upper east face. Sam Hennessey and Seth Timpano climbed this section during the night in four long pitches. Hennessey is standing on the biviouac platform where the pair spent two nights.



Sam Hennessey leading thin smears on day three of the first ascent of the north buttress of Barnaj I.



The Castle (5,760m) with the 2017 route of ascent up the southeast ridge and face.



Looking east at unclimbed Barnaj II (ca 6,460m). Behind and to the left is Hagshu, with the north face of the north top in profile. Left again, and in the distance, is the broad-topped summit of Hana's Men.
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The view more or less south from Barnaj I with the Barnaj Valley (on the right) running down toward Machail. (A) Blade Peak, Problem Peak, and others (ca 5,650m, climbed 1978) on the Barnaj-Chiring watershed. (B) Maguclonne (ca 5,750m, 1978). (C) Agyasol (ca 6,200m, 1981). (D) Bhala (a.k.a. Spear, 5,900m GPS, 2015). (E) Maha Dev Phobrang (5,900m GPS, 2015). x



Looking northeast from Barnaj I into the peaks of Zanskar. The broad, rocky-topped summit in left center is Doda (6,550m) above the Durung Drung Glacier. To its left, in the far distance, is the Nun-Kun massif (7,135m).

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