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Starting Over: Three Years for a New Route on Nuptse's Vast and Difficult South Face

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Section

TRYING, FAILING, AND STARTING OVER: It's the basis of any experience, the thing that pushes us forward. What would we do if everything were easy?

Nuptse was a beautiful challenge—an extremely difficult climb in every imaginable way. The technical level of the face seemed very high, given the few lines on it and the number of failed attempts, and the project we were considering appeared even steeper. To the technical difficulty we had to add sheer length—about 2,200 vertical meters on a previously untried line—as well as the altitude. Our high point would be well over 7,700 meters. And so we were facing a truly enormous challenge. Some might even say the challenge of a lifetime.

In 2015, Benjamin Guigonnnet and Hélias Millerioux made their first attempt on the south face. I chose not to go. At the time I felt the project was too ambitious for my skill level, my past experiences being too scarce. On previous expeditions I had never climbed above 6,850 meters, a difference of nearly 1,000 meters with Nuptse. I'm someone who likes to take challenges step by step, and the gap was simply too big.

I told Ben and Hélias I would have to pass, but I'd definitely be there the following year. I let them go knowing they'd gain a lot of experience, and it was clear to me they might need more than one try to reach the summit. Only Hélias had climbed at similar altitude, and only once, on easy terrain. So what I thought was, "Go ahead, get your ass kicked, and then I'll come." In the end they weren't even able to attempt the line. The heat during the fall of 2015 led to huge rockfall that made the whole south face of Nuptse impracticable.

In 2016, Le Gang des Moustaches ("The Mustache Gang") was reunited, as Robin Revest and I decided to join Ben and Hélias in Nepal. That had been our nickname since 2014, when we climbed a new route on the west face of Siulá Chicco in Peru (AAJ 2015). With the full team back together and great conditions on the face, we got up to 7,400 meters on Nuptse—perhaps one day below the top—but were forced down due to equipment and strategic mistakes, combined with a lack of experience.

Coming back down to base camp, our morale was at an all-time low, and we wondered what had gone wrong. Everyone on the team was deeply frustrated about having to turn back so close to the summit. It was clear to all of us that we wouldn't leave it at that.

When people ask me how it was on Nuptse in 2017, all I think is, "We finally did it." It's quite strange that these are the only words that come to mind, considering how much this adventure brought me. It's not every day that we make our dreams come true. Finishing the climb was like a huge weight being lifted off our shoulders, like an assignment we'd taken too long to do. To me, going back to Nuptse was an obligation, because it had been within our grasp, because the mistakes we had made the year before were easily avoidable. We knew we could do it.

In retrospect, I believe the only thing we lacked was experience under our belts. We were impatient, arrogant even, when instead Nuptse should have commanded more respect. Our mistake was to see it as just another mountain. This one was different in its magnitude, its altitude, its physical and mental commitment, and the risks involved. We had to review our whole game plan.

As soon as we got back to France, Ben sealed our fate when he announced that he would try the line again in the fall of 2017. Robin wanted to wait a year, but I definitely wanted to go back. The difference was that I didn't feel the excitement that usually comes with new expeditions. I knew where we were going, and I also knew pretty much everything that would happen, including the the discomfort, the stress, the commitment, and the opinion of our family and friends who knew the risks we were taking yet again. However, the thought of making the first ascent, getting up that face and standing on the summit, eclipsed everything else. That one thought allowed me, perhaps subconsciously, to disregard every argument against going back. In the end no one could have reasoned with me or stopped me because that one thought, that selfish desire, was simply too strong. In my opinion, it is this ability to disregard harsh reality and only focus on possibilities that allows us to undertake this type of challenge.

Now that our project is over, I realize how this process is essential to me but also extremely dangerous. I recognize that undertaking a number of projects with this level of commitment considerably decreases your life expectancy. Yes, there is an element of chance, but we do make our own luck, or at least part of it.

It will be a while before I reconsider projects of this size (even if we all tend to forget the bad parts and only keep the great memories). Many people ask us, "So what's next?" as if they expect us to always aim higher, to always try harder. In reality, I don't have to do anything. What I do is only decided by me and my selfishness. Of course, I will always look for new challenges, because that's what motivates me. But I'll try as much as possible to pick less risky ones

Anyway, we climbed Nuptse....

THE CLIMB

After acclimatizing by climbing Cholatse, we moved up to advanced base camp at 5,400 meters on October 13. Our plan for the first day was to climb an obvious crux ice pitch and leave a rope fixed for the next day. As it turned out, we didn't use the rope, but it seemed essential to have this option, because we knew the following day would be very long.

After three hours of approach from ABC, we started the face with five pitches up moderate snow (65°) to reach the WI6 pitch, right above our first bivy site. One of us dug out a campsite at 5,950 meters, at the base of a steep rock wall, while the other two climbed this crux pitch.

We started the second day at midnight. The whole team climbed the pitch that had been fixed the previous day, without using the fixed rope. Then we simul-climbed up and left across a huge 45° ice field to reach more difficult terrain. Four tough pitches followed (WI4+ to WI5+), followed by three easier pitches to reach a snowfield shaped like a flying bird, where we began to work on our next bivy site at 6,580 meters.

It took two and a half hours to dig a good site for the tent—we dug deep into the snow slope to create a high wall behind the tent and hopefully protect it from rockfall. The previous year, at this same site, a rock had ripped through the tent wall and landed close to Ben. Despite our efforts, the tent was still threatened, so we had to sit up all night with our backs against the snow.

The wind blew hard throughout the night, ending only at 8 a.m., and we did not start climbing until 10 a.m. That day, October 16, was short but tough: six pitches at WI5, gaining only 220 meters. There

was less snow at the site we'd used for Camp 3 the previous year, and we had to traverse off-route to the right to find a better site, leaving a 60-meter rope fixed horizontally across the snowfield. We chopped a ledge into a snowy spur protected from rockfall at 6,800 meters.

Day four on the route was again packed with difficult climbing: seven pitches up to WI5+ M5+ along a ramp-like *goulotte*. At 3:30 p.m. we began the daily routine of digging a ledge in steep snow, a reasonably protected site at 7,013 meters.

Now we were in the grand couloir angling directly toward the northwest summit. After 120 meters of solo climbing up a snow slope, we climbed seven pitches at 55° to 60°. The crux came at the end of this day: two pitches in a very steep snow flute, with loose, insecure climbing. We arrived at our bivy site at 7,443 meters after climbing eight and a half hours. And our sleep was not easy that night: Camp 5 was perched precariously on a snow mushroom—safe from rockfall, but we were not 100 percent convinced of its stability.

Summit day, October 19, began with three steep mixed pitches (WI4 M4) up *la Virgule* ("The Comma") to reach a 55° snow slope, which we simul-climbed for 200 meters to reach the ridgeline. A final 100-meter traverse along the ridge gained the top of Nuptse Nup II (7,742 meters) at 3 p.m. in perfect weather. [This peak was first climbed in 1977 by the northwest ridge.] Downclimbing and rappelling, we were back at Camp 5 on the snow mushroom by 6 p.m.

The descent began smoothly the next day, rappelling from pickets and Abalakov anchors, but at 7,100 meters, as Hélias was standing at a belay anchor, he was hit on the back of his shoulder by a big block of ice or rock. (Back in France, he learned that he had broken three ribs and parts of two vertebrae.) We had hoped to reach the safer bivy that we'd used on the third night of our ascent, but Hélias could only use one of his arms and was unable to climb back across the traverse to this site, so we had to continue down toward Camp 2. As the day warmed, a lot of rock began falling and we had to cross a dangerous couloir very quickly, helping Hélias as much as we could. At noon, after a total of about 15 rappels, we finally reached the site of Camp 2.

Without bothering to set up the tent, we sat in our sleeping bags on the ice ledge we had dug five days earlier, waiting for the face to go into shadow and the temperature to drop. We called a doctor in France on a sat phone and treated Hélias with painkillers and anti-inflammatory medicine.

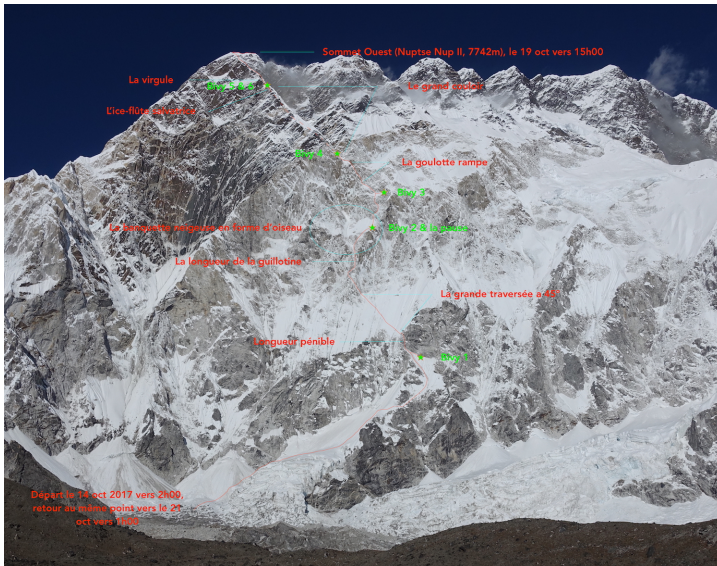
Finally, at 6 p.m., we started down again. There was no moonlight, making it difficult to find the right way. But after 16 more rappels and three hours of walking down the glacier and moraine, we safely reached advanced base camp at 3 a.m. on October 21, having descended about 2,000 meters in less than 20 hours, the last 1,700 meters with an injured partner. When we finally returned to the lodge at Chukhung, we were like zombies. Our friends who run the lodge welcomed us with a full bottle of Nepali liquor—an excellent recovery drink. The next day, with Hélias urgently needing medical attention, the full team was evacuated by helicopter.

Summary: Alpine-style new route on the south face of Nuptse, reaching the northwest summit (Nuptse Nup II, 7,742 meters), by Frédéric Degoulet, Benjamin Guigonnet, and Hélias Millerioux (all from France), October 14–21, 2017. They summited on October 19 and descended the same route.

About the Author: Frédéric Degoulet, 35, lives below the Massif des Écrins, near Briançon, France, and works as a mountain guide. This was his tenth foreign expedition.

Translated from the French by Guillaume Lavigueur.

Images



Annotated photo-topo of the new route on Nuptse's south face.



Hélias Millerioux leading WI5 ice below the second bivouac. Millerioux would be badly injured by rockfall during the team's descent from the summit.



Guignonnet on day three on the south face.



Looking up the cruxy ramp on day four.



Ben Guignonnet heading into the difficulties on day four on the south face of Nuptse.



Degoulet on a WI5+ M6 pitch on day four.



Leaving the third bivouac site on the south face of Nuptse.



Following a crux pitch on the fourth day.



On the summit (left to right): Hélias Millerioux, Benjamin Guignonnet, and Frédéric Degoulet, with the southwest face of Mt. Everest behind.



Waiting for cooler temperatures during the descent at the site of camp 2.



Benjamin Guignonnet leads a very steep ice and mixed pitch on the ramp-like goulotte that brought the team to the upper couloir.



A magnificent view over Camp 5, perched on a mushroomed snow ridge on Nuptse's south face, looking down beyond advanced base camp and the Nuptse Glacier toward the village of Chukkung, Ama Dablam, Kangtega, and other peaks high in the Khumbu.



Le Gang des Moustaches after the climb. Their route is the first to ascend the south face of Nuptse's northwest summit: (A) Nuptse Nup II (7,742m). The trio bivouacked five times during the ascent and once on the way down, plus a six-hour stop at Camp 2 to wait for nightfall before descending to advanced base camp. One year earlier, the same trio, plus Robin Revest, reached 7,400 meters (near Camp 5) on the same line. (B) Nuptse Main (7,861m), first climbed in 1961.

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