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Rungofarka: The First Ascent of a Difficult 6,500-Meter Peak

India, Zaskar, Suru Valley

EVEN AS A CHILD, knowing very little about the world, I remember conjuring images of India. These mental snapshots were total Indiana Jones fantasies: chaotic scenes filled with noisy, swirling crowds of people. Decades later, as the time for my first expedition to India approached, I wondered what chaos we might actually find, especially since we were hoping to climb in Kashmir, an area with a recent history of war and terrorism. My anxiety oscillated between the unknowns of traveling to such a place and the unknown climbing we would face. In the end, we found the travel easy to navigate. The rest, well, we will get into that.

Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has a past as dramatic as its mountains. The zone has been subject to intense conflict since the British withdrew from Asia in 1947 and Pakistan separated from India. Showing up only as a dotted line on maps, the India-Pakistan border in this area has been disputed ever since and is referred to as the "Line of Control." The largely peaceful population of Kashmir has been victimized by this conflict for generations.

Having fought three wars and endured frequent terrorist attacks in Kashmir, the Indian government long restricted tourist access to the area's valleys and mountains. With the election of Asif Ali Zardari as Pakistan's leader in 2008, however, the conflict seemed to calm. In 2010, India opened more than 100 peaks to expeditions in Kashmir. To attract tourism and climbers, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) streamlined the permit process and instated affordable peak fees.

My climbing partner, Tino Villanueva, and I hoped to attempt one of these newly opened peaks. We scanned the IMF list and typed the names and coordinates into Google and the AAJ database. I was looking for peaks that were aesthetic, had big technical features, and had no record of exploration. We found several photos taken near Gulmatongo, in the Suru Valley, showing a striking, steep peak in the Zaskar Range, which is smack in the middle of J&K, west of the city of Leh. But the photos were all from the same vantage and quickly went blurry as we enlarged them and looked for possible lines. Although each aspect of the mountain obviously dropped well over 1,000 meters, on Google Earth the peak appeared as barely a blip on a ridgeline. We were able to find low-resolution maps on iPhone apps, but these had a datum shift on the mountain, making elevation lines difficult to follow.

The information about this area was so incomplete, in fact, that as I write this I'm still not sure of the name of the peak we ended up climbing. Captions from the few photos called it Rungofarka. The IMF lists the peak at this latitude and longitude as Techafarka (6,495m). We asked locals of the Suru Valley, who shepherd in the area, what they called it. One person said Kun (a well-known 7,000-meter peak nearby), while others told us they had no name for our mountain.

Despite the lack of information, Tino and I decided the north aspect of Whatever-farka was worthy of an expedition. Fortunately, the Mugs Stump Award and Copp-Dash Inspire Award committees agreed, making our expedition possible. After Tino and I wrapped up our summer guiding seasons in Chamonix, we took off for India on September 6.

Rungofarka (6,495m) from the north, showing the first attempt in 2017 (center), the north ridge route (left), and the descent (right).

ALTHOUGH violence in the area has decreased over the last decade, the wounds are still fresh in

Kashmir. Our journey to the Suru Valley began by driving along the Indus River, which flows into Pakistan and is a major water source. The Indus Waters Treaty, signed in 1960, ensures the river will not be dammed or diverted. India has threatened to break this treaty, and Pakistan has responded that it will not hesitate to retaliate with nuclear action.

Later that day we drove by a pass that Pakistani militants had flooded over in 1999, igniting the Kargil War. The next day, as we drove into the Suru Valley, frequent military checkpoints required us to show our visas and other documentation. That night we reached an outpost where we would start our short trek to base camp. This checkpoint was established in the mid-2000s in response to a terrorist attack on a busload of German tourists and the killing of several monks from the nearby Rangdum monastery. Loud trucks occasionally bounced down the rough road as I struggled to sleep in my tent, and each time I was relieved to hear them continue past.

With the help of local horsemen, we established an idyllic grassy base camp at 3,900 meters, just one day from the road. We spent the following days acclimatizing, exploring nearby boulders, scouting our approach, and establishing a cache at 4,900 meters. The north face of Whatever-farka rose directly to our south, about five kilometers away. Hidden behind it was Pinnacle Peak (now usually called Lingsarmo), a nearly 7,000-meter peak where American Fanny Bullock Workman set an early altitude record for women in 1906. Though we did not sleep above base camp, we hiked and bouldered to nearly 5,500 meters. Twelve days after arriving at BC, when we got word of an approaching high-pressure system via our InReach device, we decided it was time to get face-to-face with our objective.

On September 24 we spent the night in the bergschrund below the north face at 5,300 meters. The next morning the climb was on us as soon as we stepped out of the tent door. The aerated, overhanging wall of the 'schrund required extensive chopping and excavating just to find the marginal protection that allowed us to aid through it. Above, deep snow lay on the access ramp where we'd hoped to find névé, and the effort required to wallow up the 50° slopes at this altitude was as mentally crushing as it was physical. The true angle of the face above soon revealed itself—it was much steeper than it had let on.

Darkness engulfed us after climbing about 40 percent of the north face, including a seven-pitch runnel with difficulties to AI5+ M5. The high pressure was not as high as predicted—we climbed through light snowfall all day. Finally, with destroyed calves and no bivy ledge in sight, too many factors seemed against us and we pulled the plug. We rappelled through the night to get back to our 'schrund bivy.

DURING THE WALK down to base camp we started to craft a new plan. We had carried a small bivy tent for the mountain, but it seemed as though we would have needed hammocks to succeed on our north face line. The north ridge, to the left, however, appeared to have better options for bivy sites. In the few photos we'd seen before the trip, the north ridge had seemed less appealing than the main face—we thought it might even be a walk-up, linking snow slopes on the hidden east side. Now that we'd seen it in person, we realized the ridge was more like a prow—the central facet in the diamond-shaped north wall. It looked like it had plenty of difficult climbing. By the time we stepped off the glacier on our way back to camp, Tino and I had set our sights on the north ridge for our next attempt on Whatever-farka.

After a few days of needed rest, a huge high-pressure window opened. It was perfect timing because our porters were scheduled to arrive back at base camp just six days later. We only would get one more attempt—and we might not have time for that.

On September 30, Tino and I packed up and headed to an ABC at 4,900 meters for the night. Walking across the glacier the following morning, I was feeling nauseous and experiencing general malaise. Why am I trying this again? If Tino had expressed similar feelings, I'm sure I would have suggested bailing. Thankfully, he was fine and my lethargy faded as we crossed the 'schrund. The meditative

mantra of swing-kick-kick-swing took over as we climbed nine rope lengths of AI3 to a prominent col below the north ridge. We quickly stomped out a platform and had a restful first night on the route (5,700 meters).

While our bodies rested, our minds raced. The next morning we would have to negotiate 200 to 300 meters of near-vertical mixed terrain.

"It's dry up there—the rock better be solid."

"Real steep, too, and it looks like some shale bands."

"Maybe there is a more moderate terrain on the east side?"

It was hard to find something positive to say about the terrain ahead, other than, "Well, we came here to climb something hard."

Heading up on October 2 with open minds, we found the climbing to be slow, thought-provoking, at times loose, and mostly in the M5 or M6 range. The pitches often traversed, and the anchors were marginal to the point that jugging never seemed like a great option. We both free climbed all but one short tension traverse on this section.

One pitch remains vividly seared into my mind: a long, ever-steepening, styrofoam-like strip of névé that narrowed to around a foot wide and a couple of inches thick. The nearly vertical névé line ended at a 15-foot-tall overhanging block that was somehow pasted to the mountain. From the top of this block, we traversed left, frontpoints nestled into coarse-grained igneous horizontals, then balanced up to gain a four-inch-wide ledge with little more for an anchor than highly fractured shale blocks frozen in place.

After 10 pitches, we were above the first big question marks of our route, searching for a bivy ledge. But the terrain above only steepened, so we decided to rappel back to some lower-angle terrain. Poking our heads behind an ice pillar, we discovered a cave that was 15 feet long and wide enough for the tent, with a flat floor. Surrounded by otherwise unrelenting terrain, at just under 6,000 meters, it was paradise.

In the morning, as we loaded our packs, Tino verbalized a harsh reality about our progress: "You know, we've only climbed 19 pitches in two days. We've got a long way to go. And the porters are going to be here three days from now."

"Yeah, I know. And that upper headwall looks complicated, for sure."

"If we only get up another ten pitches again today, we're going to have to bail."

"For sure, but let's give it everything we have today and see what happens."

Fortunately, the day started with some easier terrain. The pitches fell away, along with some of the mental weight.

Halfway through the day, the ridge steepened into more M6 cruxes. An ice runnel to nowhere and a featureless steep slab both required tension traverses off knifeblades to access more climbable terrain.

All afternoon, as we neared our planned high bivy at 6,200 meters, we could see above us an obvious dead-vertical wide crack. It stared us down for hours. When we got there, we realized with dismay

there was no way around this six-inch crack. It was our 19th pitch of the day. I'd put in some serious time on wide cracks at Indian Creek and elsewhere, so I took the lead, but I had to laugh at the contrast with those sun-soaked sandstone walls, climbing in tape gloves and sticky-soled shoes—here I was chicken-winging with a puffy jacket and heel-toe camming in crampons. Fortunately the techniques transferred to this inhospitable locale, and though Tino later pulled out the protection pitons with his fingers, another piece of the puzzle soon had fallen into place.

Our bivy was perched on top of a rock feature that was a dead ringer for the Prow on the Moonflower Buttress of Mt. Hunter. We were relieved to reach this spot, but it was less than ideal. After two hours of chopping into a 50° snow arête in the dark, with winds gusting 40 to 50 mph, we had created a ledge about three-quarters the width of our tent. Despite our best attempts to be delicate with the platform, it quickly deteriorated to half a tent width. We spent that night bracing the tent from the wind and sharing the uphill side of our ever-shrinking ledge. I slept a few hours, which was a couple more than Tino did. I guess my bony backside didn't make for a great pillow!

In the morning we were gifted with clear, calm skies. The chimney line directly above us was choked with loose blocks, and it seemed our only option was to rappel about 45 meters off the prow to the right and try to reach the ice runnel we believed to be there. Even from the lower anchor, after the rappel, we couldn't quite see into the heart of this runnel and verify if it held ice or cracks. All we knew was that if we could make it through the next 15 or 20 meters of unknown, only one pitch of WI3 would remain before the summit ice slopes. If it didn't go, we weren't sure we could go back the way we'd came, but after 40-plus pitches it seemed like a good gamble. Both of us were breathing hard as we pulled the ropes.

"Man, I hope this goes," I said as Tino put me on belay.

Tino replied in his usual steady tone: "Dude, with how you have been climbing, one way or another it's going to happen."

The trust and confidence of an old friend filled me with calm, as if, after nearly a dozen serious trips together, Tino knew exactly what I needed to hear. I purposefully unclipped from the belay and moved toward the hidden runnel.

Thin, emaciated ice and committing M6 moves linked one icy seam to the next. The pitch turned out to be one of the most challenging—and elegant—of the route. Clove-hitching into the anchor was more of a highlight for me than standing on the summit a few hours later.

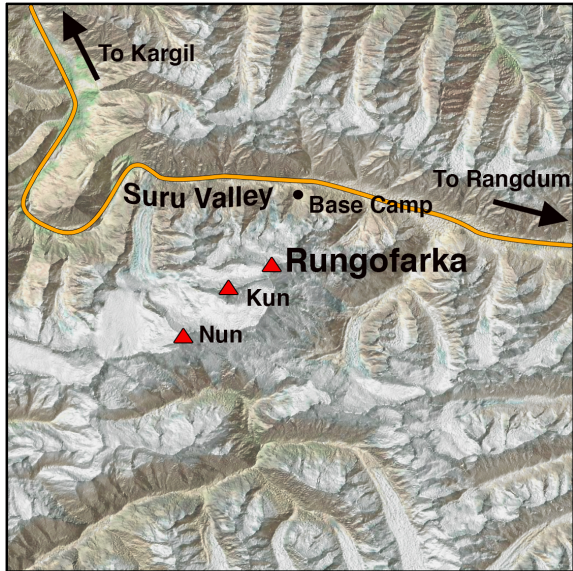
After a short stay on top, we began our descent by the lower-angle west face. We'd hoped this might be a walk, but instead it involved around 20 rappels, threatened at times by seracs, coupled with breaking trail through shin-crushing snow crust. We trudged on into the night, descending 2,700 vertical meters in around nine hours, and arrived in base camp just 12 hours before our porters.

It was a privilege to climb in such a spectacular range, and visiting these areas and hiring locals can only help the situation in Kashmir. The people of the Suru Valley that we encountered were friendly and hard-working. For their sake, I hope these peaks remain open to climbers and tourism continues to be encouraged. There's no shortage of unclimbed objectives!

Summary: First ascent of Rungofarka (a.k.a. Techafarka, 6,495m or 21,309', GPS 6,485m), by the north ridge, by Alan Rousseau and Tino Villanueva, October 1–4, 2017. Their route, the T&A Show, was 1,200m, ca 50 pitches, and rated VI M6 WI4+ A0. The pair descended glacial slopes to the west.

About the Author: Alan Rousseau is an IFMGA/UIAGM mountain guide living in Salt Lake City, Utah, and working primarily in Utah, Alaska, and Chamonix, France. He loves developing new routes, whether it's short bolted lines near home or virgin peaks in the greater ranges.

Images



Though access to the region has been difficult in the past because of security concerns, the base camp for Rungofarka itself is just one day's walk from the Kargil–Padum road.



Tino Villanueva (left) and Alan Rousseau at base camp with Rungofarka behind.



Tino Villanueva heading toward the summit, finally on good névé. In back is a partial view of Lingsarmo (a.k.a. Pinnacle Peak, 6,955m).



Looking down the key pitch on day four of the route.



Pitch 11 on the north ridge of Rungofarka.



Looking down the difficult wide crack at nearly 6,200 meters, the 19th pitch on the third day on the climb.



Rungofarka (6,495m) from the north, showing the first attempt (center), the north ridge route (left), and the descent (right).



Alan Rousseau heading into the crux (the spotty ice smears to his right) on day four of the first ascent of Rungofarka. Finishing this challenging lead “was more of a highlight than standing on the summit a few hours later.”



Sustained mixed ground on the third day on the north ridge of Rungofarka.

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