



AAC Publications

Tengi Ragi Tau, West Face, Release the Kraken

Nepal, Rolwaling Himal

The west face of Tengri Ragi Tau (6,938 meters). (1) Trinité. (2) Release the Kraken. Both routes were climbed in October 2019. Release the Kraken, the American route, was the first ascent of the west face and reached the summit of the peak. Photo by Tino Villanueva

In August, one week before departing for an expedition to India's Zaskar Range, Alan Rousseau and I were notified that our climbing permit had been canceled by the Indian government due to the volatile political situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Given the difficulty of finding a new objective in less than a week, it made sense to go somewhere familiar. In 2012 and 2014, Alan and I had embarked on expeditions to the Rolwaling Valley, with the ultimate goal of climbing Tengri Ragi Tau (6,938m). It was our first Himalayan objective, and over two expeditions to the mountain, we fell short of the summit.

In 2012, after a month of climbing in the Rolwaling, we made an eight-day, self-supported push to the summit of Langmoche Ri, a previously unclimbed peak that marks the start of the north ridge of Tengri Ragi Tau (see AAJ 2013). Returning to the village of Beding, we were struck by the west face of Tengri Ragi Tau, with its runnels through beautiful granite leading directly to the summit. In 2014, we returned with the west face in our sights, again spending nearly two months in Nepal and not seeing another climber in the Rolwaling. We retreated from the face only 400m from the summit and decided we would leave it be (AAJ 2015).

Now, however, we were fired up by the idea. Our familiarity with the Rolwaling, combined with experience gained in the five years since our last attempt, gave us a high level of confidence that we could not only plan a last-minute expedition to the area but also have a good chance of success. As it turned out, our unfinished route up Tengri Ragi Tau's west face had also garnered interest from other strong teams. In the autumn of 2019, teams from France and Spain, as well as our own, would descend upon the mountain. It was nerve-wracking knowing that others would be vying for the same objective, especially given the relative isolation we had enjoyed on our last attempts.

After a three-day approach up the classic Everest Base Camp trail, a four-day acclimatization and conditions scouting foray, and a 16km, 2,000m vertical approach over Tesi Lapcha Pass, we were ready to go to work. However, before launching into the climbing, we tried to spend a restful day and night below the face. Just as the sun was setting, we took a rock through the tent wall. The night, which was spent patching the tent with Band-Aids and athletic tape, was decidedly not restful.

Our first day on the route, October 13, covered familiar terrain, albeit drier than our previous attempt. We had a few fun pitches of true M5 dry-tooling to get onto the snowy face, and then continued on steadily steepening snow and ice. Our bivouac ledge from 2014 was utilized again: protected, flat, and big enough to untie.

Alan Rousseau toward the end of day two on the first ascent of the west face of Tengri Ragi Tau. Photo by Tino Villanueva

Day two continued into ever-steepening terrain, again with a smattering of steeper ice pitches, mixed moves, and snow flutings. It was on this ground that we had reached our high point in 2014, and had

struggled to find a bivouac spot while battling high winds, falling debris, and fatigue. This time we managed to find a tight ledge, barely big enough for the tent. It was necessary to clip everything into a nine-piece anchor.

On day three, the high crux of the route, characterized by a multi-pitch ice hose at 6,700m, rose directly overhead. The climbing started with a huge sheet and then pinched to a hanging, chandeliered hose, giving incredible AI5 climbing at such a high altitude. After five pitches of ice, the route pulled into the upper reaches of the mountain, with terribly steep flutings of unprotectable snow. It was arduous, physical work questing up a maze of flutings, hoping the route would connect and that somewhere we would be able to find an anchor. After a handful of these pitches, the day was getting late, and while digging deeper and deeper for an anchor (which we never did get), we eventually created a bivouac platform. It was in such steep snow that the fluting overhung the tent and our feet overhung the edge on one side.

Summit morning was brutally cold: Our violently swinging appendages were comical, with both of us vigorously trying to pump blood into our frozen hands and feet. After five more pitches, we emerged onto the summit ridge, the end of the north ridge we had hoped to climb in 2012. The summit pinnacle was a short walk away. After tagging the top, we basked in the glory of the warm sunlight, soaking in an experience eight years in the making.

Soon, though, we began rappelling back down the face, stopping for one more night at 6,300m when it got too warm. The next day we rappelled to the glacier, climbed back over Tesi Lapcha Pass, and returned to Thame after a 14-hour day, our eighth day on the move. Our route, Release the Kraken (1,600m, AI5 M5+), was the first alpine-style climb of the peak, and only the second ascent of the mountain. Our route, Release the Kraken (1,600m, AI5 M5+), was the first alpine-style climb of the peak, and only the second ascent of the mountain.

– Tino Villanueva, USA

Images



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Alan Rousseau on pitch two of Release the Kraken, dry-tooling through the initial rock band on the west face of Tengi Ragi Tau.



Alan Rousseau toward the end of day two on the first ascent of the west face of Tengi Ragi Tau.



Alan Rousseau on the high crux of Release the Kraken, the ice hose at 6,700m on the west face of Tengi Ragi Tau.



Alan Rousseau high on the west face of Tengi Ragi Tau.

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