Patience: The Stunning Southeast Ridge of Annapurna III Is Finally Climbed

Nepal, Annapurna Himal

"Our plane is approaching Kathmandu airport. Please fasten your seatbelts." Rubbing my eyes and looking out the window of the plane, I saw the familiar but still exciting view of the Himalaya in morning light. A beautiful mountain with a clearly discernible buttress drew my attention. I quickly snapped a photo, and after landing I showed it to Nikitos as a cool future objective, and he, accustomed to my sieve-like memory, calmly informed me that in a few weeks we would be climbing that very ridge. Half-asleep, I hadn't recognized our planned route up Annapurna III.

At that moment, the inner feeling that this would be the year we would summit Annapurna III by the unclimbed southeast ridge—a feeling that had been quietly ripening inside for a long time—suddenly strengthened, and that positive feeling did not disappear until we made it to the very top and back again.

Two years before, in the autumn of 2019, Nikita Balabanov, Viacheslav Polezhaiko, and I had descended to the base of the southeast ridge from around 6,300 meters. Various strong teams had been trying to climb this soaring buttress since 1981, and none had gotten much higher.

As we prepared to leave base camp in 2019, the three of us agreed this route definitely deserved another try. But we all understood that life is unpredictable. As it turned out, 2020 shattered all expectations with its unpredictability, but in 2021 a miracle occurred, and for the first time in our climbing careers, we returned to the same objective. with the exact same team.

THE APPROACH

The helicopter, skillfully piloted by Sobit Gauchan, maneuvered through the cloudy Seti Khola gorge, trying to reach our base camp below Annapurna III. At 4,200 meters we ran into dense clouds, and after a quick discussion, we landed on the first available flat spot on the glacier, said good-bye to Sobit, and in a minute the roar of the engines was replaced with the silence of the mountains. Slava had kept the coordinates of base camp on his watch since 2019, and we knew it was still quite a distance away. It would take two days to shuttle gear along the glacier, but every- one reacted philosophically—after all, it was a great way to acclimatize. And, as Nikita correctly noted, in all of our previous successful expeditions together, our plans had never worked the way we laid them out in the city, so this was a great sign.

The ethical issues surrounding an approach by helicopter had bothered us since the 2019 expedition, since we try to use the minimum of external assistance on our trips and to finance them with a minimal budget. However, the most obvious option for an approach to the south side of Annapurna III on foot is now impossible—in 2003, Nick Bullock and Matt Helliker from the U.K. were the last to try that option. A landslide destroyed part of the trail, and there was a high risk that porters might be killed if they slipped on the steep slopes. Therefore, the British returned to Pokhara, chartered a helicopter to reach base camp, and recommended in their report that subsequent expeditions approach base camp the same way.

Nevertheless, before our 2021 expedition, we seriously considered another option: approach- ing Annapurna III from the opposite direction, starting from the Manang Gorge to the north and crossing a pass at an altitude of 5,500 meters. The descent from the pass to base camp at 4,600 meters is simple. But the ascent from Manang is an alpine climb of moderate difficulty, and there were no photos available to study the terrain. Plus, it was assumed the three of us would play the role of porters, making shuttle runs up and down the slope until we had brought up all the expe- dition gear. In the end we were forced to reject this option, since it would add at least eight to ten days to the schedule, which we did not have.

So, we chose to fly as far as we could, and we set up base camp in exactly the same place as in 2019. Even the stones we'd used for rigging our base camp tent still lay in a circle where we'd left them two years before.

ACCLIMATIZATION

To acclimatize, we followed the same program we had developed during the 2019 expedition, first climbing south-facing slopes to the ridge running between Annapurna III and Annapurna IV and later climbing up Annapurna IV (7,525 meters). Few of our predecessors had considered Annapurna IV as an objective for acclimatization, most likely because of a short but difficult rock barrier that has to be cleared at 6,200 meters. We reasoned that if we could not climb these rocks on Annapurna IV, then there would be no sense in even trying to climb Annapurna III.

We arrived at base camp two weeks earlier than in 2019, and the monsoon was still blowing at full force. After we'd spent a night at 5,800 meters on the ridge between Annapurna III and IV, the weather turned really bad, and we sat for five days at camp.

We finally started for Annapurna IV very early on October 6. After spending a full day and night at 5,800 meters, we set out early again, and by 8 a.m. were starting to climb the rock barrier. Nothing had changed in two years—it was the same awful rock; fortunately, you're climbing diagonally the entire time, or else you would bombard the ropes and the other guys with stones. Atop the northwest ridge of Annapurna IV, our route converged with the 1955 first ascent, which started from the north in Manang Gorge; to this point, prior to 2019, our route may have been unclimbed. [Editor's Note: After the 2022 edition went to press, the editors learned that Conrad Anker and Alex Lowe (USA) climbed a similar line in 1996, while acclimatizing for a planned attempt on Annapurna III. They reached around 7,200 meters on Annapurna IV.]

All next day we tramped along the gentle and endless snow of the northwest ridge. We spent a restless night at 6,900 meters and woke at 4 a.m. (or, more precisely, we stopped lying down). We hadn't gone any higher than this in 2019, and we weren't set on reaching the top this time— the main goal was acclimatization. In addition, the weather wasn't conducive to "taking a walk" to the summit—by lunchtime the wind had begun to knock us off our feet. Since the terrain and conditions did not permit us to rest or talk, we just continued without discussion until, as we contoured around the north side of the mountain, the wind suddenly died. After another hour and a half, the three of us were at the summit.

Back in base camp, we anticipated resting for three days and then starting the main climb. But when we asked Slava's wife, Lena, for the forecast, the news wasn't good: five days of excellent weather and then a two-day storm with a meter of new snow. In practice, this meant we'd need ten days in base camp to sit out the storm and wait for the fresh snow to stabilize. At that moment, my hopes that I'd make it to Turkey to vacation with my family at the end of October collapsed, because we all agreed that we'd only go home after we climbed the mountain.

There was, however, a problem with the food and fuel. When we realized we would have to extend our expedition by two weeks, the first thing we did was separate out 12 days of food and gas for Annapurna III as an untouchable supply. Everything else would have to be rationed while we waited.

As a result, when we finally set out for the climb, one month after leaving Pokhara, the only supplies left at base camp were a handful of crackers, 100 grams of bacon, and not a single gas cylinder. We joked that our trip was in the best tradition of Soviet climbers, who climbed mountains because they had better food up high than at base camp.

THE ASCENT

At 8 p.m. on October 22, we finally set out for the Annapurna III. Each of our packs weighed 22 to 24 kilograms as we left camp. There was a full moon and firm snow on the glacier, so we walked quickly, sometimes even without headlamps. By 10 p.m., at an altitude of 4,600 meters, we left the glacier and began to climb—first along a grassy slope and then firn, quickly gaining altitude.

Our progress soon slowed, however, because there was much less snow on the route than in 2019; steep mixed steps of five to ten meters interrupted the ice gullies, and these had to be climbed with a belay. As a result, we reached the snow ridge at 5,600 meters at 4 p.m., not at daybreak as planned—a 20-hour day of work. And despite the forecast for 12 days of perfect weather, it had started snowing at midday. We dug a site and set up the tent in a real blizzard, which left about 20 centimeters of fresh snow. Surprised, we messaged Lena for an updated weather report, and almost instantly received confirmation from her: “Twelve days of ideal weather!”

Because the snow was quickly becom- ing slushy once the sun appeared, we always moved at night on the lower part of the route and rested during the day. The next night, I climbed a rock barrier of about 30 meters and entered a steep gully, which on the last attempt had been completely filled with névé; we had gained 150 meters of altitude there in half an hour. This year, all the snow had melted, and the gully was a heap of unstable rock flakes and blades, covered with the previous day’s fresh snow. It took me five minutes just to leave the belay station, because every rock I weighted with my feet shifted ominously or fell off immediately. I moved a little to the side and started up tensely, like a sapper clearing a minefield, tapping all the holds and pushing away everything unreliable. Dealing with such terrain, it took us another two nights to climb 400 meters and reach the snowy “pillow” at 6,000 meters, the most comfortable campsite of the route.

The next day, October 27, was Slava’s birthday. In the morning, the birthday boy was given an off-the-books pack of kissel fruit drink, and was informed that a special holiday snow ridge was waiting for him to lead. However, our hopes that he would find firm névé leading up to the first rock band on the route came to nothing. The snow would not hold his weight as he walked, so Slava had to straddle the ridge as if on horseback or else squat, lop off the top of the ridge with a shovel, and tamp down the snow in front of him until it seemed possible to weight it. Then he would crawl forward less than a meter and start over. He would definitely remember this birthday!

As on all previous days, it started snowing in the afternoon and stopped an hour after we had dug out a campsite and pitched our tent. We didn’t bother Lena, but simply accepted that what- ever was happening around us was “ideal weather.” The next day we started up the biggest rock buttress of the southeast ridge and, well after midnight, climbed onto the familiar ledge beneath the crux rock chimney.

We woke late the next morning and decided not to move the tent that day but just fix ropes on the chimney. For me, this pitch was like déjà vu: Despite the two years that had passed, the chimney felt as familiar as a training climb at home. The first time I led this pitch, the sharp, flaky rock had shredded my shell pants and jacket, and it looked like I had been fighting with a bull terrier. This time all my clothes remained intact. Slava aptly said the rock was like the Middle Eastern sweet called halva—it looked like a puff pastry, crumbling wherever it was touched. One dubious plus: Sometimes I could drive my crampons into that halva for a foothold.

The next morning we jumared the two ropes I’d fixed, and then Nikita continued up mixed ground along the ridge—probably the only place on the route where the rocks were more or less monolithic.

We prepared for the night as usual, rappelling onto a drift of snow to the right of the ridge and building a tent site there. Ahead was a series of snowy ridges and very steep rock walls that were impossible to bypass—we had to climb them head on.

On October 31, we climbed on top of a giant snow pinnacle at 6,500 meters with the last rays of the sun. There was no way to install anchors on the snow mushroom, so we simply dug the tent deeper into the snow, hoping that the entire structure was stable. This was the highest point anyone had reached on the southeast ridge before us, and it was easy to see why. To continue from the tent site, we would have to crawl across a 50- to 70-meter ridge of snow that was sharp as a knife. In the middle of this section, the ridge dropped sharply, and what the snow was like there we could only guess. The whole picture did not bode well, and everyone's spirits fell a bit.

Our snow specialist was Slava. No one, including Slava, knows where he got this skill. He just somehow feels the whole spectrum of snow conditions, knows how to position himself correctly on snow and interact with it. Plus, he really likes to use a shovel, and in this form of climbing, the shovel is the main tool.

Slava moved quickly across the first 15 meters of the ridge, but when it abruptly dropped, he looked beyond...looked harder... thought...stood...turned to us...and threw up his hands in confusion.

There was a long pause as each of us wres- tled with his inner thoughts. If Slava couldn't get past this spot, we didn't see any other options—to the right and left, below the knife- edge, it looked even worse. Then, apparently, something occurred to Slava. He asked me to take the rope tight and gradually lower him beyond the bulge. My belay anchor was just me, sitting on a backpack where we'd set up the tent, but I carried out Slava's instructions, and he gradually disappeared from sight.

Over the next hour, unseen to us, an inspired Slava threw down several cubic meters of snow, descended and ascended the vertical snow wall a couple of times, and slowly constructed a set of seven broad and well-packed steps, so that Nikita and I could descend the steep snow with our heavy packs without the benefit of a top-rope. We couldn't see any of this, and tension lingered in the air. I remember telling Nikita that if Slava managed to reach the rocks beyond the knife-edge, we would descend only via the summit, and he agreed.

Satisfied with the result of his labors, Slava started moving forward again. He crossed another 15 meters of horizontal ridge, and then climbed another 20 meters to the rocks, where he shoveled off another few cubic meters of snow, built a belay anchor in the rock, and yelled the much-desired "belay on." Everyone exhaled happily. Looking back from that station, our previous night's bivouac looked even more magical than we could have imagined.

Above Slava's belay, I climbed a pitch of steep ice, which seemed like a reward for previous troubles—just straightforward and fun terrain! But like all good things, it quickly ended. It was already our tenth day on the route, and we had realized long before that we would need to stretch our rations, which had been calculated for a total of 12 days. Our meals thus became briefer and less and less varied.

In the morning, an exceptionally chossy section awaited me. Slava and Nikita were right below, and there were no ways to climb to either side. The face was piled with large, trembling spikes. You had to climb with an ear for the music of the rock—you tap all the handholds and footholds, and when you find those that emit the highest-frequency sound, you make a move, simultaneously trying to ensure the rope below does not shift any low-frequency stones.

After another short but wicked overhang- ing wall, I climbed onto the ice slopes of the upper buttress, leading toward the ridge top. It started snowing as usual, and after a couple of pitches we built a platform under a huge snow mushroom and spent the night. The next day was much the same. By

evening we were still not off the buttress, and through the blowing snow and darkness, we could see a vertical ice step that looked to be about 100 meters high and too difficult to climb at night.

It was time to deploy our “secret weapon”—a snow hammock, which up to then had been traveling in a backpack. We were in a steep icy gully covered with 20 centimeters of snow that had just fallen that day. We hung the hammock from ice screws, shoveled in all the snow we could reach, then chopped at the 50° ice slope for another hour or so. The result was a shelf about 50 to 60 centimeters wide—just enough space to crawl inside our tent and sit up throughout the night, trying not to slide off.

In the light of the morning sun, the ice wall turned out to be only 20 meters high, not 100 meters, but alas it was still just as vertical. Still, we were at 6,900 meters and we could see the finish line. After a couple more vertical stretches, it was already dark when I led the final verti- cal rock band. I climbed to the very top of this section, decided to have a little rest, hammered an ice axe into low-angle ice, and clipped in to it. I inhaled, exhaled, and then began to fall! Ten meters down, I hung from the rope next to a very surprised Slava. Under my weight, the spike had pulled out of the shaft of my ice tool.

Slava took over and finished the lead, and then we simul-climbed up an ice gully, before climbing a vertical ice tunnel formed by two snow and ice ridges, back-and-footing as if in a rock chimney. Sometime after midnight, we popped onto the ridge top at an altitude of 7,100 meters. The lights of Pokhara were visible far below. It was very beautiful and terribly windy and cold, and we immediately began to dig a site for the tent.

We huddled inside and sat silently for about 10 minutes, warming up and recovering after such a crazy day. Then came the realization: We had climbed the southeast ridge of Annapurna III! From here, it should be just a walk to the top. And then somehow we had to get down.

THE SUMMIT AND DESCENT

We slept late and then, putting on everything we had, set out at around 11 a.m. to climb up the south ridge toward the top. The forecast was for wind of 90 to 110 km/h and bitter cold of -35°C to -38°C. Though we were really freezing, we’d say the gusts were a maximum of 70 km/h. But that was still enough to greatly slow our already slow pace, and at times the gusts forced us down onto all fours, driving ice tools into the firm snow so we wouldn’t be blown away. By evening we were still about 150 meters below the top. We found a small boulder sheltering us a bit from the wind, and after an hour of work with a shovel, the tent site was ready. Despite the high altitude, everyone slept like babies.

Early in the morning, we left everything at the campsite and headed for the top. The wind had not weakened, and although the ridge was not steep, it took us three hours to gain the remaining 150 meters. But everything ends, and this ridge too. The time was around 11 a.m., November 6, 2021. We had started climbing 15 days earlier. We yelled something into the camera, shot a couple of pictures, sent short messages to Lena and to Thaneswar Guragai, our expedition organizer, hugged each other, took a few more glances around, and started back down.

Initially, we had planned to descend along the route we climbed, and for this we had carried an extra 15 pound-in hooks and five titanium pitons for rappel anchors—that is, a total of 30 hooks and 10 pitons. But the higher we climbed, the more we understood how risky this would be, with all the loose flakes to snag a rope or pull down on your head.

Plan B was to traverse over the summit and along the eastern ridge and then descend into the Manang Valley (generally the route followed for the first ascent of Annapurna III in 1961). However, during the day that we struggled through the wind to reach our final bivouac, we aban- doned this option as well. With such a headwind, we simply did not have enough strength to traverse 3.5 kilometers along a ridge at 7,300 meters. At that moment, one of us glanced down and to the left,

toward the western slope, and voiced a new idea: Why not go down this way? We had no description or photo of this face. The terrain that we could see did not cause particular concern: It was mostly snow, with ice in some places, and though there might be surprises, we reasoned that we had a lot of gear and would deal with them. [The west face of Annapurna III was climbed in 1979, far to the north (climber's left) of the 2021 descent route. The southwest ridge was climbed by an Anglo-American team in 2003, but from what they could see, the Ukrainians felt their proposed descent appeared easier.]

In the end, our descent was a whole other chapter of this story, its level of uncertainty prob- ably higher than that of the ascent itself, and it's an experience we hope to never repeat.

At first, the slope was simple and we walked down to 6,800 meters, alongside the south ridge. Below this point, the route would turn to the west on steeper ground; there were obvious icefalls below us, and, so late at night, we decided to put up the tent. In the morning we continued, some- times moving together, sometimes rappelling off Abalakov anchors. By evening we were at 6,400 meters, but now we were at the top of an icefall with a vertical drop of about 100 meters. It became clear we'd need to spend another night here. We built a good ledge under a serac, which gave us excellent protection from the very strong wind. Still, this was possibly the coldest night of the expedition. The accumulated fatigue was having its effect, as was the fact that, two days earlier, before climbing to the summit, we had eaten our last real meal. Now we were each subsisting on one and a half bars a day plus a few cups of cold water and a pinch of electrolytes.

Intuition prompted us to look to the right in the morning, and it was not mistaken—we were able to rappel around the icefall. However, we soon got another surprise: a vertical rock wall with a drop of 80 meters. Well, we still had plenty of gear, so we set up a rappel and started down. At the end of the ropes, we all hung from an anchor in the middle of the rock face. Then, as dictated by Murphy's law, the ropes would not budge when we tried to pull them. Shit. We could have aided back up the face, but it might have taken a full day. We even discussed abandoning the two ropes and continuing down with just our 50-meter static rope. Thank God we didn't make that decision.

In general, what does not yield to brute force often yields to brute force plus technique. I snapped ascenders onto the rope we were trying to pull and began to jumar upward as Slava and Nikita hung onto me. It took five steps, but finally the rope, now as taut as a violin string, shifted half a meter. After another half an hour, the ropes were ours. We exhaled and rappelled down the remaining 25 meters to escape the rock. There we sat on gently sloping ice for a while, recovering and waiting for darkness—the slope below obviously was raked with ice falling from the upper serac.

In the gathering twilight, the slope quickly froze, the pelting from above stopped, and we continued our descent. The last rappel was 55 meters of vertical ice. If we had left the stuck ropes above, we'd have had to make two rappels here, with a spicy hanging stance in the middle of the vertical ice. Finally reaching the icefall below the face, we saw the landscape around us littered with pieces of broken transparent ice, ranging in size from peas to a two-story house—we called it the "cocktail party," but it was definitely not a place you wanted to linger for a drink. We quickly stashed the extra rope in our packs and moved away from the ice cliffs, trying to escape this party where we were not welcome.

Once we were 200 or 300 meters away from the face, we decided to wait for dawn under the protection of a high serac. The altitude was 5,400 meters. While I melted ice with the remnants of our gas, the guys fell asleep. I woke them up, and we drank cold water and ate a handful of crackers, the absolute last bit of our food. I melted another half a liter of water, and the stove went out for good. Then I too closed my eyes. If we weren't eating, at least we'd sleep a bit.

Our preparations the next morning were lightning fast—just get dressed, put on the boots, and go. After a couple of hours we escaped the icefall and reached a flat glacier without crevasses. This was it, we realized—we were safe. We stopped, hugged, and sat down to wait for warm sunlight. Nikita called Thaneswar, told him our coordinates and also that we were a little hungry, and that his and

Slava's fingers were slightly frostbitten. We agreed we would descend to 4,500 meters and a helicopter would pick us up there. No matter which side we had descended from the summit, we eventually would have needed a helicopter to collect base camp and get back to town. With no money or documents in our packs—and only 8,000-meter boots on our feet—it just made sense to ask for our ride here and now, rather than attempt to trek all the way down to Pokhara.

The moment the sun arrived, we remembered how hot it can be at 5,200 meters. Everyone's tongue instantly stuck to the roof of his mouth. The backpacks became heavier, the snow became slushy. As we started to move again, we spread far apart. I noted a large boulder below and walked in its direction. Even going downhill, I had to stop and rest every few steps. At an altitude of 5,000 meters, I sat in cool shade by the boulder and furiously nibbled icicles for a bit of moisture.

And then—at first I could not believe my ears—the sound of a helicopter. A couple of seconds later, a bright yellow Seven Summits Treks helicopter popped up from behind the nearest slope. I jumped out, waved my arms, and the helicopter circled and landed, about 50 meters above me. Where the strength came from I don't know, but I turned on my Ueli Steck and ran up to the heli- copter. The doors opened and the smiling magician Mingma Sherpa, owner of Seven Summits, tossed a bag of Coca-Colas into my hands and told me to stay put while they flew up to get Slava. This suited me completely, because while he was finishing his sentence, I was already opening a second bottle. Five minutes later, Nikitos appeared and I handed him a bottle of the precious liquid.

Seemingly in no time, we were all at the Pokhara airport. It was hard for us to get used to the speed of events, but even if it was all just a dream, it was a good one. Nikita and I warmed ourselves on the grass of the airfield while Slava and Sobit flew off to base camp to retrieve our equipment and trash. An hour later they were back, and—another miracle!—Mingma said we would refuel and fly to Kathmandu. That evening, the very same day, having showered and shaved, we were drinking beer and eating steaks in Thamel.

AFTERWARD

According to the weigh-in at the hotel, Slava lost 16 kilograms during the expedition, Nikita lost 13 kilograms, and I lost 12. One of our friends joked we had lost the equivalent of one (skinny) member of the team. As we prepared to travel home, the true meaning of the past two and a half weeks hadn't really sunk in. But after some time, I recognized that, in terms of experience, our objective had hit the bull's-eye.

For the first time, we didn't just climb a mountain, we learned to survive on it: 15 days up, three days down, a whole lifetime. We learned that we could endure uncertainty, cold, wind, and malnutrition, and at the same time continue to climb, belay, joke, share the day's last Snickers with a partner, give him a more comfortable spot at a belay or in the tent, offer to take over a lead or cook food when it wasn't your turn. The worse the conditions and the higher the level of uncertainty, the more we cared for each other. In the end, we felt we would not have climbed this route with a different team—each of us found his place, and each had a vital and irreplaceable role.

It did not take us long to come up with a name for the route: Patience. We all consider patience (with the mountain, with partners, with the weather and all other things that happen up there) to be one of the main qualities for a high-altitude climber. During each of those 18 days, we felt like the mountain was presenting us with intricate new puzzles that had to be solved, one by one. And each fresh puzzle extended the journey, so each time you had to be patient and find the inner resources to move on.

I am also sure that a large part of our strength came from the invisible support of spouses, relatives, and friends at home. Almost every day there was a situation in which each of us silently weighed the odds—could we continue to push or was it time to start rappelling back down our tattered ropes? I won't speak for everyone, but for me the scales were often tipped by text messages from my wife and family—by the understanding that they are waiting for you, that they believe you can do anything, and,

if you can't, well, good job anyway, now come home and let's go to Turkey for a nice vacation together.

Summary: First ascent of the southeast ridge of Annapurna III (7,555 meters) by Nikita Balabanov, Mikhail Fomin, and Viacheslav Polezhaiko (all from Ukraine). The trio summited by the upper south ridge and descended previously untraveled terrain on the southwest face. They left base camp in the evening of October 22, 2021, reached the summit on November 6, and were picked up by helicopter below the southwest face on November 9. The route was named Patience (2,950 meters, 6a A3 M6 80° ice and 90° snow). Balabanov and Fomin spoke about this climb on the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast (see below).

About the Author: Mikhail "Misha" Fomin was born in 1981 in Nikolaev, a small city in the south of Ukraine. Married, with two children, he lived in Kiev and headed the business analysis department for an information technologies company until the start of the war in Ukraine. As of press time in late April, the three climbers in this story and their families had survived the initial stages of the war.

This story was translated from Russian by Karen Freund.

The Cutting Edge · First Ascent of the Southeast Ridge of Annapurna III

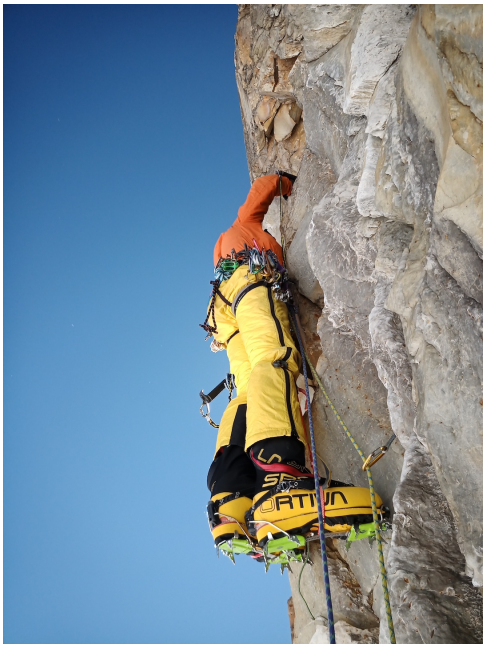
Images

Seen from about 6,000 meters on the southeast ridge, Annapurna IV (7,525 meters) is the main peak in the background, with Annapurna II partly visible behind. The 2021 team acclimatized with an ascent of Annapurna IV, completing a route they had started in 2019.

Viacheslav Polezhaiko crossing the snow ridge at 6,100 meters.

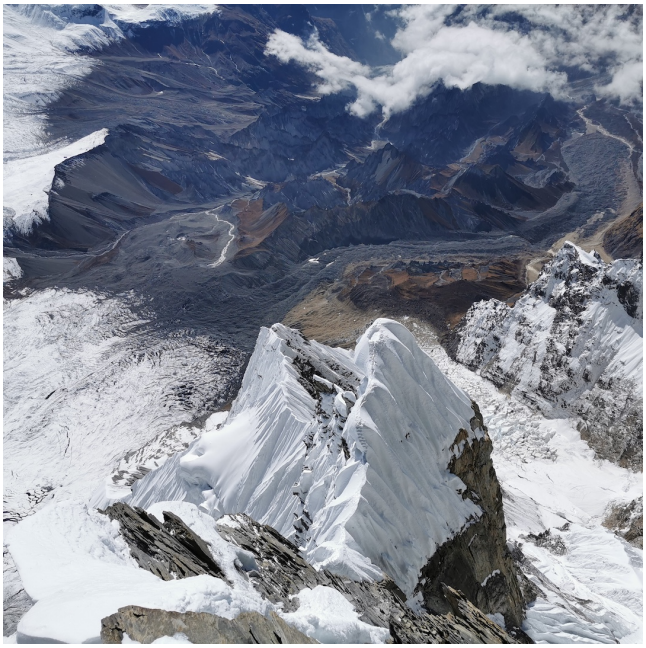
Mikhail Fomin leading the difficult chimney.

Mikhail Fomin on the chimney pitch at 6,250 meters, a crux of the steepest rock band. During the 2019 attempt, the rough rock had shredded his clothes.



Overhanging terrain at about 6,500 meters on the southeast ridge of Annapurna III.

The snow pinnacle bivouac and crux traverse at 6,500 meters on Annapurna III’s southeast ridge.



Looking back at the 6,500-meter bivouac site and the crux snow traverse on Annapurna III's southeast ridge.

Climbing above 6,500 meters on the southeast ridge of Annapurna III.

Polezhaiko's torn-up mittens after many days of work on difficult snow and mixed terrain.

Steep ice at 6,900 meters, one of the last barriers before the upper ridge atop the southeast buttress.

The southeast ridge, seen from Annapurna IV. The steep buttress ends at 7,100 meters, leaving a 450-

meter climb to the summit. The descent was to the southwest (behind and left).

The key section of the descent route on Annapurna III. The steep rock where the rappel rope got stuck is in center. Portions of the southwest ridge, climbed in 2003, are visible at left.

Slava Polezhaiko, Nikita Balabanov, and Misha Fomin, just off the helicopter in Pokhara.

The Annapurna III team after their descent. Each climber lost 12 kilograms or more during the climb and descent.

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