



## AAC Publications

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### **Baruntse, West Face, Historical Ascent**

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal Makalu-Barun Section

The first ascent of the west face of Baruntse, by a Russian team in 1995, was reported in the AAJ only with a brief note. This account has been adapted from a longer article published in the 1997 Alpine Journal (U.K.), with permission; the complete article is available online (PDF).

Until now, no attempt had been made to climb the beautiful west face of Baruntse, despite the great popularity of this peak. Starting in 1954, when the first ascent of the mountain was made by a New Zealand team, a number of expeditions had reached the summit, but they had all ascended by ridge routes.

Suddenly the links in a chain of ideas came together in my mind, leading up to the possibility of an ascent of Makalu by the west face. A first ascent of the west face of Baruntse would offer our young high-altitude climbers some excellent preparatory experience. Such an expedition also would prepare us for a technically difficult route on an 8,000m peak such as Annapurna. Only then would we attempt the west face of Makalu. The expedition to Baruntse thus was the first stage of a three-year program.

On September 14, a helicopter transported the whole party and all our gear to the mountain village of Lukla. Eight climbers, the sirdar, and Nepali staff set off for base camp, while the three remaining members of the expedition were responsible for transferring the rest of the luggage by helicopter to base camp. The journey on foot took us eight days. Dense cloud in the gorges made flying impossible, and only on September 23, the day after we reached base camp on the moraine of the Hunku Glacier, at 5,400m, was it possible for the helicopter to land near camp.

In order to gain acclimatization and to mark the descent route with wands, all ten climbers ascended the southeast ridge twice to an altitude of 6,200m. It took three more days to find a way through the many-tiered icefall under the west face and transfer equipment to the base of the route at 5,900m. Then it was time to embark on the face.

The composition of the assault team was Valeri Pershin (climbing leader), Evgeni Vinogradski, Salavat Habibulin, Nikolai Zhilin, and Yuri Ermachek. The central buttress of the west face was chosen for the ascent; the projecting part of the buttress gave some hope of protection from [the] rock and ice that fell unceasingly on the face between 11 a.m. and 8 p.m. This kilometer-high face [had not appeared] as impregnable and dangerous in photos as it proved to be in reality.

On October 5 [after the team had fixed seven rope lengths to the site of the first camp on the face], the five members of the assault team embarked, taking with them provisions for seven days. The remaining expedition members crossed the West Col to the southeast ridge once more, planning to climb to 6,800m, fixing rope at difficult points and setting up wands to help the assault team to find the descent.

The ascent of almost 1.5km [climbing distance] took seven days—days of constant physical and psychological tension. Snow merged into rock pitches, often plastered with ice. Steep, fluted slopes collapsed under your feet and would not consolidate. Every step demanded great physical and nervous outlay. In order to arrange protection, the leader literally had to dig into the snow to a depth of about a meter in order to reach ice or rock where it was possible to place an ice screw or piton.

There were no good bivouac sites. Every day, two and a half to three hours were spent organizing tent sites.

Only on the ninth day did the climbers get down to base camp. Dirty and unshaven, with faces blackened by the sun, they smiled as they slowly took off their heavy boots, pulled off their clothes, exposed their thinner bodies to the sun, and shared their impressions, which had not yet had time to fade.

– **Sergei Efimov, Russia**

## Images



A topo of the 1995 Russian route on the west face of Baruntse in Nepal.



The west face of Baruntse (7,152m) showing (1) Heavenly Trap (2021) and (2) Russian Route (1995). The descent is near the right skyline.

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