



AAC Publications

Chaukhamba I and Deo Dakhni, Variations

India, Western Garhwal, Gangotri

The north face of Chaukhamba in spring 2022 showing the line of ascent. Photo by Boris Textor.

It took us five days to get to a base camp for Chaukhamba at 4,627m (30.793025°N, 79.299557°E) at the fork in the Bhagirathi Kharak (Glacier). Chaukhamba I (7,138m), the highest summit in the Gangotri region, lay immediately to the south-southwest.

Objectively, the north flank of Chaukhamba is very dangerous, with plenty of serac fall. Every day we witnessed several avalanches, and most of the slope is around 30°, making it prime for slab avalanches. The glacier below the face is changing dramatically, and the original route, climbed by a French expedition in 1952, is no longer practicable.

Our expedition had come to make a film about one of the members of the 1952 team. Marie-Louis Plovier-Chapelle (born 1909) was a middle-class housewife with four children when she visited the Alps in 1942. There, she met the celebrated guide Edouard Frendo, a climbing partner of Gaston Rébuffat and innovator of climbing technology, best known today for the eponymous spur on the north face of the Aiguille du Midi, of which he made the first ascent in 1941 with Rene Rionda.

A decade later, she joined Frendo and several other alpinists, including the notable Lucien Georges and Victor Russenberger, for an expedition to the unclimbed Chaukhamba. Reportedly, Plovier-Chapelle was strong, and might have made it to the summit had she been given a chance. Unfortunately, the attitudes of the day meant that she was denied a summit attempt. Only Georges and Russenberger reached the top, on June 13 from a high camp at around 5,950m.

With Theresa Bischofen and Jef Verstraeten, I decided that our best route would be to climb directly onto the northeast ridge via the left flank of the north face. We climbed a snow face of 45° to 5,150m, then a 50m ice couloir of 60° with a 4m section of 80° to gain an upper snow slope, which we followed (45°) to a point above the seracs at 5,250m. The snow was well frozen, and we were able to continue to 5,700m (30.766897°N, 79.298910°E), where we camped below a big ice wall, now on the line of the 1952 route.

To reach our second camp at 6,010m, we made a traverse right and then back left through 35cm powder. The tent was again pitched in the shelter of an ice wall. On the third day, May 10, we planned to camp again at 6,400m, but the snow was still deep, and my two companions decided to turn around at 6,350m and descend to base camp. I opted to make a solo attempt, and so descended to 6,300m and then traversed to the northeast ridge, which I followed to 6,600m where it merged into a 30° snow slope. Although this slope now had a crust, I still broke through to a depth of 30cm.

Near Camp 1 on Deo Dakhni during the 1952 first ascent. The three climbers are likely to be Edouard Frendo, Lucien George, and Victor Russenberger. Photo by Marie-Louise Plovier-Chapelle.

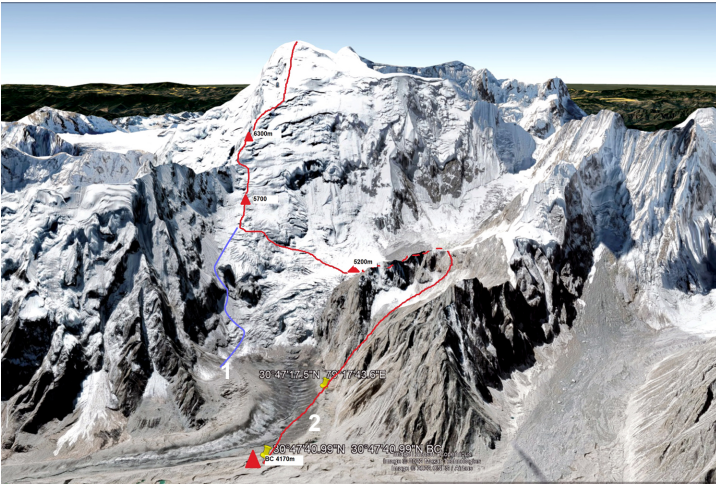
At 6,700m I decided to leave my pack and carry on with a down jacket, down mitts, and some food and drink. At 6,920m the slope steepened to 55° and became beautifully solid, like perfect Styrofoam. I was able to move much faster and at 2:36 p.m. was at the summit, a flat plateau (7,136m GPS, 30.749818°N, 79.289150°E). I descended to our first camp the same day, and the next day returned to base camp. We rappelled the 50m pitch and left only three one-meter slings on the mountain.

Prior to this, on May 2, a group of nine (four Indians, three Belgians, one Austrian, and I) climbed Deo Dakhni (a.k.a. Deo Dekhni, 6,075m, 30.828853°N, 79.339029°E). This peak lies immediately northeast of base camp on the opposite side of the Bhagirathi Kharak, and is just 2.5 km west along the watershed ridge from Arwa Spire. After the ascent of Chaukhamba in 1952, Frenco and Plovier-Chapelle made the first ascent by the south flank and west-northwest ridge, Plovier-Chapelle thus becoming the first Frenchwoman to climb a mountain in the Himalaya.

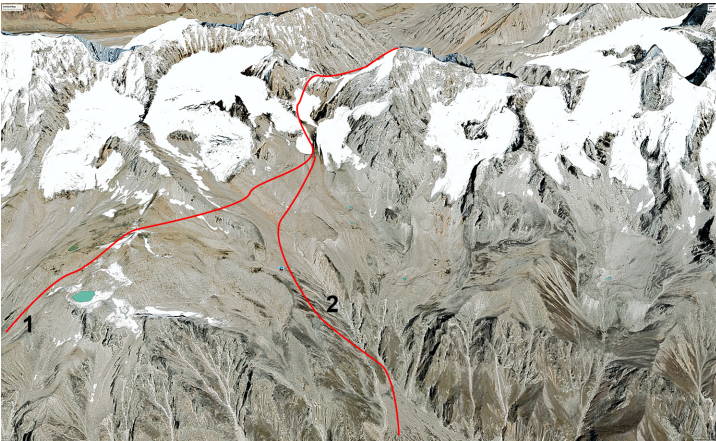
We made our first camp at 5,250m (30.810539°N, 79.312403°E) by a moraine lake. On day two we slanted northeast over rocky terrain to join the 1952 route. From there we crossed a moraine ridge and dropped down onto a small glacier, which we climbed to 5,458m and made Camp 2 (30.826075°N, 79.328755°E). Next day we climbed a snow couloir up to the col on the watershed ridge and the start of Deo Dakhni's west-northwest ridge. We followed this easy snow ridge (40° maximum) to the top. [The film about Plovier-Chapelle, by Ellen Vermeulen (Belgium), is due to be released in 2023.]

— **Boris Textor, The Netherlands**

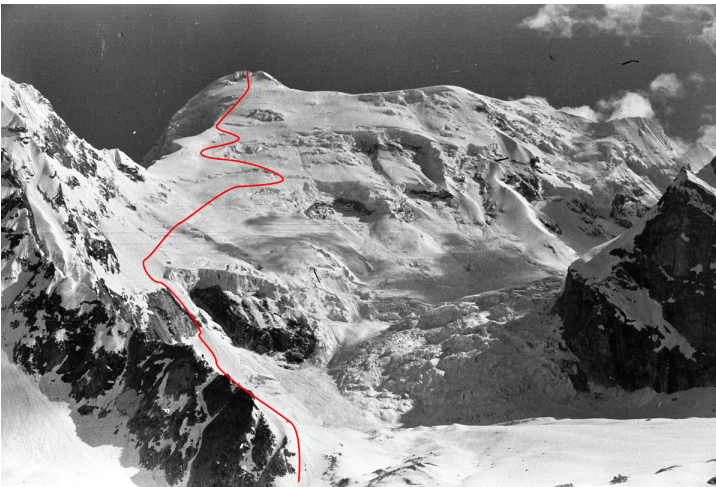
Images



The north face of Chaukhamba. Red marks the original route, while blue marks the line followed in 2022.



Peaks on the north side of the Bhagirathi Kharak. (1) the 2022 route to Deo Dakhni. (2) the original 1952 route. The rocky pyramid on the ridge to the right is Arwa Spire.



Chaukhamba's north face as photographed by Marie-Louise Plovier-Chapelle in 1952. Marked is the line followed in 2022.



The north face of Chaukhamba in spring 2022 showing the line of ascent.



Looking down the north face of Chaukhamba with the largely dry Bhagirathi Kharak glacier far below. The northeast ridge is on the right, and the 2022 route of ascent huddled close to the rocks on the right in the lower section. The 1952 route came across the rocky buttress on the far left. High on the distant right is the rocky pyramid of Arwa Spire.



Near Camp 1 on Deo Dakhni during the 1952 first ascent. The three climbers are likely to be Edouard Frenod, Lucien George, and Victor Russenberger.



A lower camp on Chaukhamba in 1952.



Edouard Frendo approaching the summit of Deo Dakhni in 1952.

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