



AAC Publications

Surma Sarovar, First Ascent via Northwest Face, and Other Exploration

Nepal, Api Himal

For me, adventure in the high mountains can only be found by climbing alpine style, ideally somewhere remote and rarely visited. These were the ingredients that drew four of us to the rarely visited Salimor Khola (valley), in Far Western Nepal.

Although expeditions have been trying to visit this area for 50 years, information is hard to come by. In 1974, a British team approached up the Seti Khola, then tried to follow the Salimor Khola, but soon were stopped by an “impassable gorge.” At that point they headed up a side valley and unsuccessfully attempted a peak they called Nampa South, later misidentifying it as Rokapi (Kap Chuli, 6,468m), a summit not accessible from that valley.

We also understood that in 1978 a Japanese expedition had passed the “impassable gorge” before making the first ascent of Jethi Bahurani (6,850m). However, though pictures exist from this expedition, we were not able to ascertain how they passed the gorge section of the approach.

Since the Japanese visit, several British and American teams had entered the valley: All failed to pass the gorge guarding the lower section of the Salimor Khola. Google Earth indicated there were interesting peaks hidden beyond the gorge, particularly Bobaye Chuli (6,808m, first climbed by Tomaz Humar from the opposite side) and Surma Sarovar (6,564m, 29°51'1.88"N, 81°5'17.14"E). There seemed to be only one way to find out more, and that was to go and have a look.

In September, Hamish Frost, Matt Glenn, Tim Miller, and I (all from the U.K.) arrived in Kathmandu. After obtaining permits, we made one internal flight, drove several days, and trekked through jungle and alpine terrain, negotiating river crossings, several earthquakes, and detention by police. Eventually, the porters declared they weren't going any further. We could not argue with them, as the next section of the valley was the “impassable gorge.” We decided to make base camp and explore from that point on our own.

The gorge blocking access to the upper Salimor Khola indeed looked formidable, but after careful exploration we discovered a wild and exposed shepherds' track that climbed along the gorge's east side. (It was not a path suitable for porters.) Packing a week's food, we set off to explore and, hopefully, find suitable climbing objectives.

After many days of moraine traversing, epic river crossings, and storms, we fully understood the size and wildness of this area. Located on the divide between desert-like terrain and areas of dense forest, there was a great variety of climates and terrain within one valley. Nonetheless, Tim and I had found an objective: the northwest face of Surma Sarovar. Matt and Hamish also explored the upper valley, with a view to attempting Bobaye, but the hoped-for route on the north face looked exposed to seracs, so they decided to go back and look at some interesting peaks directly above our base camp, below the gorge.

The northwest face of unclimbed Surma Sarovar looked huge—over 2,000m high— but there seemed to be a safe descent via the northeast ridge. Our main concern was a steep rock band that appeared to block the upper part of the northwest face, with no obvious way through.

After a short rest at base camp, Tim and I left on October 21 and walked for two full days, with two river crossings, to reach the start of our route. Once on the face, the first day was mostly on snow, but one steep mixed step might have been the hardest pitch of the route. The second day was again moderately angled but predominantly on exhausting, bulletproof ice. We bivouacked for the second night of the climb at the foot of the big rock band at a little over 6,000m. Our bivouacs were all on ledges cut into the ice or using a snow hammock.

We now discovered that a steep corner cut through the upper part of the rock band to reach the peak's upper slopes. We spent the next day climbing about 300m of mixed terrain and steep rock, then bivouacked again just above the exit. The next day, October 26, we climbed to the summit, where our GPS recorded an altitude of 6,605m.

Sadly, after many days of good weather, the top was in a whiteout, so we were forced to bivouac there, hoping for improved visibility on the descent which we could see was going to be longer and more complex than expected. That night it snowed heavily. With the fresh snow, our descent to the northeast was slow and worrying. We threaded a line between seracs and avalanche-prone slopes, abseiling most of the way before downclimbing a long rock ridge that led us to the valley. Exhausted, on day eight we arrived at base camp late in the evening.

Matt and Hamish were freshly back too, though unfortunately had failed to summit on their projects. The two had explored the Gaisar Khola (as named on the HMG-Finn map), southwest of base camp, and had initially tried the very impressive northwest face of Point 6,054m (29°49'33.94"N, 81°8'14.06"E). Bad weather, thin ice, and poor protection resulted in a retreat to base camp after just a few days.

Still keen to climb something, they attempted the south ridge of Peak 6,390m in the same valley (29°49'48.38"N, 81°5'20.74"E). After crossing a subsidiary top of 6,290m, they found avalanche-prone slopes up high, leading to a retreat about 300m below the summit. Interestingly, on this route they found evidence of very old fixed rope, which we presumed was left behind by the 1974 British Expedition, on what they believed to be Rokapi.

The porters had arrived the same day as we did for our return journey, and a tight schedule meant we had to leave for home early the following morning. Over the six-week trip, we had almost no rest days.

— **Paul Ramsden, U.K.**

Images



Peak 6,390m from the east showing the route up the south ridge attempted in 2023.



Matt Glenn on the south ridge of Peak 6,390m, 300m below the summit and shortly before the point where he and Hamish Frost retreated due to avalanche hazard.



On the exposed section of path on the east side of the gorge guarding entry to the Salimor Khola.



The unclimbed northwest face of Peak 6,054m. Hamish Frost and Matt Glenn reached a point at around one-quarter height before turning around due to lack of ice.



Surmo Sarovar from the north. On the right is the line of ascent up the northwest face; the line of descent falls to the left.



Paul Ramsden in the upper section of the northwest face of Surma Sarovar.



Tim Miller at the last bivouac site below the summit of Surma Sarovar. Behind are (A) Jethi Baharuni (6,850m), (B) Api (7,132m), and (C) Bobaye (6,808m).



Tim Miller above 6,000m on the northwest face of Surma Sarovar, climbing through the rock band that formed the crux of the route.



Seen to the northwest from Surma Sarovar are, from left to right, the pyramid of Rokapi (6,468m, a.k.a Kap Chuli, climbed in 1977 from the far side), Peak 6,300m, and Jethi Bahurani (6,850m, climbed from the far side in 1978).



The northwest face of Surma Sarovar.

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