



AAC Publications

Hongku, West Face

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Barun Section

When in the high mountains, you might think your eyes could embrace only one beauty and focus on one goal. My eyes are restless and unfaithful, and even while acclimatizing in 2021 for an ascent of Baruntse's west face (AAJ 2022), I was eagerly scanning the surrounding area.

Over the next two years, the image of a fine pyramid rising steeply above a glacier would return to my mind. I eventually searched my photo archive, browsed magazines and the internet, and asked questions, and I found that the rascal was called Sura Peak (better known as Hongku or HongkuChuli Nup, 6,764m).

Before my steps could take me back to that familiar valley, I had to cross off more items on my list. While I now had a clear idea of what I wanted to climb, the question was, "With whom?" After a few months, that check box remained empty, and I realized that if there are no mature fish at the bottom of the pond, the fisherman must wade in shallower waters for young fry. The beauty of youth lies in the ability to make quick decisions. It is not weighed down by bad experiences or bounded by the shackles of obligation. Matěj Bernát was just such a person.

Before reaching base camp in the Hinku Valley on May 13, Matej and I roamed the central Himalaya for two weeks to train our lungs and legs. It was quickly obvious there was little snow this season. The flanks of surrounding peaks looked like a herd of starving horses with every bone sticking out of their skin and ribs that could be played like harp strings. There was also another difference compared with previous springs: perceptible all-day cold. Whether it would be good for the climb remained to be seen. However, once we fully accepted the existing conditions, all we had to do was wait for the auspicious moment, forecast by the satellite phone.

Our ascent of the west face of Hongku began on May 20, after spending the previous night in a comfortable camp below the face at around 5,500m. Taking a line toward the left side, almost directly below the summit, we were able to move together, gaining height quickly. The sun hit us at around 10 a.m., and shortly after midday we arrived at the big serac barrier that guards the upper half of the face. We passed through this via steep blue ice, with a few vertical sections. Progress slowed, and the afternoon sun was drifting quickly westward when I stumbled upon a natural ice cave. At 6,000m, it was a bivouac sent from heaven.

Up to this point the weather had been fine, and the next morning the sun smiled for a short, joyful moment before clouds moved in. We climbed 150m of ice flutes to the rock barrier crossing the upper face. Here was predictable trouble, confirmed by the first few meters where the rock was like gingerbread sprinkled with loose sugar snow. After a lot of effort, I climbed only two rope lengths, with psychological protection, before deteriorating weather indicated we should quickly find a place to sleep. On the 70° slope, we were unable to create a platform and were forced to hang the tent from the belay and then shelter inside. We were two marionettes tied by strings to an inhospitable mountain face, and the awful night took much of our waning strength.

The next day would be key. Descending the terrain we had climbed over the past two days was hard to imagine, and the 80m rock band above us looked like one big overhang. However, every time I feel indecisive, my inner voice whispers, "Just give it a try." The next two pitches took many hours, with feet digging into terrain that resembled a quarry. It was snowing when we eventually cleared the rock

barrier and Matej took over the lead. After two icy pitches, he found a slot in the face, allowing us to pitch our tent in the middle of a 70° slope.

Next morning, we climbed the remaining 140m of elevation in two hours. We forced our faces to squeeze out smiles, expressing the relief that we no longer had to climb. Baruntse and Chamlang appeared close by, provoking an unstoppable wave of emotion as I recalled previous ascents, a nostalgic old fool. Perhaps I was most moved by the realization that my train was approaching its destination, and in the coming years I would be retiring from Himalayan journeys.

Moving together, we descended the southwest ridge, only reaching the snowline just before dark. Stumbling across rocky ground, we reached Seto Pokhari at 11 p.m., finding our porters already waiting for the homeward journey. We named our route Simply Beautiful (about 900m from the bergschrund, M6 90°). It gave us an adventure in minimalist style on a beautiful untouched face. Thank you, Matej.

– **Marek Holeček, Czech Republic**

Images



Marek Holecek climbing toward the serac barrier on the first day of the ascent of Hongku's west face.



Marek Holecek in the rock barrier high on the west face of Hongku.



Marek Holec ek climbing steep ice through the serac barrier on the first day on Hongku's west face.



Marek Holec ek descending the southwest ridge of Hongku. This was the route of the first recorded ascent of the mountain in 1983.



Matěj Bernát leaving the bivouac on day three of the first ascent of the west face of Hongku. He is heading for the rock barrier that proved to be the crux of the route.



The west face of Hongku and the line of Simply Beautiful. The skyline dropping right from the summit is the long southwest ridge.



Simply Beautiful (and bivouac sites) on the west face of Hongku, as seen from base camp.



The upper part of Simply Beautiful (with the three bivouacs marked), showing the line taken through the crux rock barrier.

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