Brilliant Blue: A New Route up White Sapphire in Kishtwar

India, Jammu and Kashmir, Kishtwar Himalaya

Approaching advanced base camp for White Sapphire (6,040m), the sharp peak in the center. The team had hoped to climb the big wall facing the camera, but an early winter storm prompted them to switch to the northwest couloir, left of the wall. From the prominent notch, they climbed the north face to the top. Photo by Vitaliy Musiyenko.

In early September, Vitaliy Musiyenko, Hayden Wyatt, and I set off from the Salt Lake City airport with 400 pounds of gear and a crippling curiosity. I had forfeited my season of field-biology work for another international trip, an increasingly common event that continued to sabotage my personal finances. Vitaliy, shortly after his honeymoon, had packed his bags and taken time off from his job as an ER nurse to commence his second long expedition in one calendar year. And Hayden, having never even met Vitaliy, took a semester off law school in Portland to join us. These were all significant sacrifices, considering that our inspiration had been sparked solely by two blurry photos of an unclimbed line on a peak in India's Kishtwar region. The Himalaya was a place where Vitaliy had dabbled, but that Hayden and I had only dreamt of. As the plane took off from Vitaliy's and my home base in Salt Lake, I contemplated the absurdity of the events that had brought us here.

A climbing trip to Mexico years ago had led to a fruitful connection with new friends, through whom I met Pete Takeda, an alpinist who was rediscovering his love of sport climbing. Pete and I linked up for another sport climbing trip to Spain the following year, during which he offhandedly probed my interest in a potential new route on a 6,040-meter (19,816-foot) Indian mountain called White Sapphire, a gem he'd been keeping in his back pocket for years. When prodded, Pete produced a few blurry photos of a diamond-shaped peak hosting a stunning, 2,700-foot unclimbed northwest face. Happy to pass the torch on this climb, Pete offered to mentor on logistics, and he helped with the ins and outs of submitting a proposal for the American Alpine Club's Cutting Edge Grant. Months later, I received notice that we'd been awarded $8,000, and I phoned Hayden to tell him to change his fall plans. Now we were buckling our seat belts to fly to India.

After a 28-hour blur of travel, we were at the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in chaotic Delhi, receiving our peak permit and meeting Anant Singh, our liaison officer. Only 21, he was bright-eyed and energetic, and he exuded an excitement for the mountains that resonated with us. Within five minutes of our meeting him, Anant was showing us photos of beautiful peaks from previous expeditions, his aspirations for the high alpine impossible to miss.

The following day, road-weary after another 18 hours of trains and taxis, we began our three-day trek to base camp from the town of Gulabgarh. As the valleys deepened and we distanced ourselves from the roadhead, so finally did our minds begin to settle. The roar of the river accompanied the soundscape of pack mules slowly ascending. Halfway through our day, the deep greens, blues, and grays of the valley were suddenly replaced by vibrant pinks, oranges, and yellows. We were at the famously colorful Chandi Mata temple in the village of Machail, where, each summer, thousands of Hindus come during the Machail Yatra holy pilgrimage. Following the lead of our logistics organizer, we too bowed before the temple to ask for blessings and safe passage.

The next morning, we reached a prominent split in the valley, demarcated by the towering peak of Kishtwar Shivling, named for the three rock spires on its shoulder resembling Lord Shiva's trident. The valley south of Shivling hosted the home village of one of our base camp cooks, Stenzing. The valley just north was our route to the Haptal Glacier and our base camp below White Sapphire. Farther north

yet was a valley where the famously blue Kashmiri sapphires are mined.

We rounded a bend and came upon a skyline familiar to us from Pete's two blurred photos. The centerpiece, Cerro Kishtwar, looked like a dorsal fin penetrating the sky. Just to the south, at the farthest end of the valley, was White Sapphire, aptly named for its gemlike shape and angular features. The peak had only had two ascents to date. The first was in 2011 by Denis Burdet and Stefan Siegrist, who climbed the west face via La Virée des Contemporains (850m, WI6 M6 A2). The second ascent, in 2015, also by a Swiss team, accessed the southeastern aspect, climbing mostly moderate ice and mixed terrain along the south ridge to the summit. Our aspirations lay in the 2,700-foot unclimbed big wall on the northwest face, but we knew we would have to be flexible.

Hayden Wyatt in the northwest couloir on White Sapphire. Photo by Christian Black.

Fast-forward one week to mid-September. We were already conducting our first bit of alpinism—sitting stormbound in a bivy tent through 48 hours of rain at 14,500 feet, on our way to establish an advanced base camp (ABC). Our efforts of hiking loads had been put on pause, replaced by the softer skills of alpinism: reading, eating chocolate butter, and having horizontal dance parties to whatever music we'd downloaded on our phones. When we finally emerged from our nylon coffins, a quick look to the skyline jarred our vision. Winter had arrived, killing our dream of wearing rock shoes on a big-wall climb, a reality we accepted as we donned our ice boots and continued hiking loads up to ABC at 15,800 feet.

One of the few benefits of hiking heavy backpacks up large hills is the ample time for conversation and reflection. As we wobbled up loose talus and weaved through crevasse fields, we couldn't help but feel the juxtaposition of our current environment against each of our pasts.

The Himalaya is about as far as you can get from the flat ranchlands of my North Texas upbringing or the University of Texas rock gym where I'd begun my journey as a climber a decade earlier. Vitaliy was a city-raised immigrant to the United States from the Chernobyl area of Ukraine, and a former 300 pound high school linebacker and Domino's pizza delivery boy. He'd escaped the box of his childhood via a slow boil of increasingly epic feats in the mountains, including the solo first ascent of the 32-mile Goliath Traverse in the Sierra Nevada. Hayden, on the other hand, took joy in finally participating in the high-alpine lore of his own childhood. He had grown up to heroic tales told by his legendary, Tetons-based mountain-guide parents, Evelyn Lees and Rick Wyatt, who had ventured on expeditions to Nanga Parbat and the north face of Everest, to name a few. We reminisced about the absurdity of it all as we distracted our heaving lungs and anxious minds from the task at hand.

To be present in these mountains was a privilege not lost on any of us. With each memory we shared of our pasts and each concern we voiced about our near future, we cultivated the bonds between the members of a new team and the partnerships we'd need to rely on, high on the wall.

"I'm 9/10 fucked right now. I can't do it, Hayden. You gotta do it," I said, handing Hayden the rack as I turned on my headlamp at our hanging belay above 19,000 feet. We had left ABC early on September 21 on two hours of poor sleep and ascended the glacier to the start of the technical climbing at 17,200 feet. Due to the wintry conditions, we'd bailed on our original plan of climbing the northwest face's big wall. Instead, we'd picked a logical unclimbed line that followed a weakness of ever-steepening snow and ice cutting left of the main northwest face; after 2,000 feet, the ice and snow gully ended at a notch in a ridge, above which 650 feet of steep rock along the north face would lead to the summit.

While only 50 feet of mixed climbing remained until our prospective bivy spot at 19,200 feet in the notch, the previous 15 hours of simul-climbing and the huge jump in elevation had left me fatigued on a whole new level. Vitaliy, with his ultra-marathoner fitness, had set the pace for the day as he and Hayden swung leads through the first 1,500 feet of steep snow and ice, all of us frequently pausing to wait out torrents of spindrift. After fighting through fatigue, I had taken over for two tricky mixed pitches nearing the notch, but as the sun disappeared below the horizon, so did my remaining energy.

As 10:30 p.m. rolled around, we were finally sitting on a chopped-out snow bench at the notch. Our bivy site had turned out to be much smaller than we'd hoped—it was a tiny cornice just barely large enough for us to pitch our tent. With Vitaliy and me out of commission from semi-frozen hands and exhaustion, Hayden stepped in to start organizing our gear and melting water. As I sat there, almost useless, I recognized that my entire life's purpose had boiled down to a hilariously simple task—hold the stove upright—which I did for the next four hours as we ate and rehydrated. At 2:30 a.m., we settled into the tent, grateful to Hayden for keeping morale afloat throughout our evening.

Looking down the first pitch of the north face headwall on White Sapphire to the bivy site in the notch at the top of the northwest couloir. After two nights here and climbing to within 300 feet of the summit, the team had to retreat because of a broken stove. They returned to the notch about two weeks later and completed the ascent. Photo by Christian Black.

Sunrise woke us five hours later from our cramped slumber, our splitting headaches softened by our first eye-level view of the high Himalaya. No longer were the surrounding peaks towering giants—we had climbed up the beanstalk and were now among them. Cerro Kishtwar's shark fin of rock reared up to the north, now seeming larger than ever. To the west lay Dandagoporum, a similarly prominent peak with a razor-sharp northeast ridge ascending over 5,000 feet to its summit. And to the northwest were the 3,000-foot walls of Kishtwar Shivling's southeast face.

From our position in the notch, the only possibility of continuing up our giant was via the steep headwall of the north face. The rock here was not granite, as we'd previously thought, but instead very compact gneiss with few cracks. We looked up with uncertainty. A featureless slab blocked the way to the cracks above, which, while steep and sustained, appeared as if they would take good gear. This was more like a pure rock climb than we'd imagined, and would be difficult in boots and crampons. After a slow morning of good coffee and a concoction of altitude meds, my curiosity finally overcame my doubt and I volunteered to take the first lead.

In an effort to block out the crippling exposure, I let my childlike mind take over and began to tinker with the pointy bits of alpinism on the puzzle of rock in front me. I eventually found upward progress through a creative blend of aid and free climbing, linking shallow pins and thin edges. In that vein we proceeded upward, never certain of progress but never failing to find it either. By the end of the day, only 300 or so feet of headwall remained. As we fixed our ropes to descend to our bivy, we felt the tantalizing possibility of success.

The next morning, we awoke eager to complete our climb. Our daily coffee routine, however, was interrupted. Chhhk, chhhk, chhhk—Vitaliy flicked the lighter against the stove, but to no avail. The stove had slowly weakened during the climb, and now we could no longer even hear gas coming out, despite a full canister. We suspected it was related to the different fuel mix of canisters in India causing our stove to overheat and a safety mechanism to melt and block the fuel lines. All attempts at stove surgery were thwarted by not having the right tools, and inReach advice from the outside world proved fruitless as well. With less than one liter of melted water between us, we accepted the crushing conclusion that continuing would be irresponsible and unsafe. We retrieved our ropes and, frustrated, rappelled 2,000 feet back to the glacier.

Christian Black leads the long, delicate pitch out of the notch, starting up the north face of White Sapphire. Photo by Vitaliy Musiyenko.

After three days' rest in base camp, we hiked back up to ABC with more food—and a backup stove. We waited a full week at ABC for a weather window before finally starting back up the steep snow and ice toward the cornice bivy on October 5. It was much colder this time, and, despite the constant movement of simul-climbing, my layering failed to keep me warm. Fatigue and dehydration manifested as light nausea and uncontrollable shivering, forcing a pause midway through our day for hot fluids and forced calories. Back on the move, we continued at a good pace and arrived at our notch bivy just before sunset.

We awoke next morning to perfect weather, the cloudless skies blanketing the high peaks around us

in rich blue. More acclimatized this time, we set off with the intent to free climb as a team and forgo any jumaring. We entered a high-alpine dance up the technical slabs and cracks, freeing sections we'd aided on the previous attempt. Once again, I led the first pitch out of the notch, a delicate, 50-meter M7+ through a slab and thin cracks to a small roof traverse up high. Vitaliy took over for the second pitch, another 50-meter M7+, this one consisting of delicate laybacking on poor feet and an improbable traverse to gain a section of ice.

We were now back at our high point. From our perspective in the middle of the face, the summit continued to seem far away, our perception of distances squashed by the magnitude of our surroundings. Pitch after pitch, the angle remained steep and the climbing proved harder than it looked. We wove through another five pitches of M4–M6, swapping out leaders naturally as our individual motivations waxed and waned. The hours were catching up to us, but there was no rush. The sky was clear, the air gentle, and our minds certain. We were going to the top.

Near the summit, the blanket of blue sky shifted to reveal a horizon of golden yellows and oranges, as if the setting sun itself were wishing us well. At 7:30 p.m., under the cover of night, I climbed a final five-inch crack to a starkly flat, 50-foot swath of horizontal ridge leading to the summit. There, on a perch the size of a compact car, Vitaliy, Hayden, and I smiled, embraced, and took a moment to reflect on our journey.

The previous three and a half weeks of labor had finally borne fruit. We had ferried hundreds of pounds of gear to ABC and climbed through the most fatigued moments of our lives only to retreat not far from the summit. Then we'd mustered up the energy to try again, and over two days had free climbed over 2,700 feet of technical terrain up to M7+, the most difficult pitches of which were above 19,000 feet. Had you told us that this would be the story of our climb, we all would have thought it impossible that we'd be the central characters in the narrative. From the countryside of Texas, the traumas of Ukraine and inner-city San Francisco, and an adventure-centered childhood in the Tetons, we'd each chosen to navigate our lives with synonymous purpose. What joined us on the summit was more than the climbing—it was a culmination of becoming who we'd each wanted to be.

We were certainly proud of our climb. More so, however, we were proud of each other. With each new difficulty, one of us stepped in to lead a hard pitch, volunteer for chores, or care for a tired teammate. The environmental stresses were only the final forging of our bonds as a team, bonds that were ultimately strong enough to bring us to the top of White Sapphire.

Sapphire, the second-hardest gem on Earth, is forged in a similar process. What begins as an unassuming bit of ancient seafloor is transformed into a resilient gem through the deep heat and pressure of a journey below the continents. Only when the gems are finally exhumed is their beauty evident. Much like those minerals, we'd endured our own metamorphic transformation, deep in the heart of the Indian Himalaya. The richness of our new friendship was now exhumed, emanating like the light through a Kashmiri sapphire: Brilliant Blue.

SUMMARY: New route and third ascent of White Sapphire (6,040m), above the Haptal Glacier in the Kishtwar Himalaya, by Christian Black, Vitaliy Musiyenko, and Hayden Wyatt (all USA), October 5–7, 2023. The trio climbed the northwest couloir and north face: Brilliant Blue (850m, AI3 M7+ 80°). They descended by the same route.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Christian Black, originally from northern Texas, began working for the National Park Service soon after college, eventually landing in Yosemite as a YOSAR member and climbing ranger. He now lives in Salt Lake City, funding new travels through his work as a field biologist and freelance writer.

Images

Approaching White Sapphire above the Haptal Glacier. White Sapphire is the high peak on the right, with the prominent sunlit rock buttress leading to the top. To its left is Cerro Kishtwar. Farther left is Chomochior.

Approaching advanced base camp for White Sapphire (6,040m), the sharp peak in the center. The team had hoped to climb the big wall facing the camera, but an early winter storm prompted them to switch to the northwest couloir, left of the wall. From the prominent notch, they climbed the north face to the top.

Blue-collar ice climbing en route to advanced base camp for White Sapphire.

Hayden Wyatt starting a simul-climbing block in the northwest couloir of White Sapphire.

Looking down the first pitch of the north face headwall on White Sapphire to the bivy site in the notch at the top of the couloir. Some aid was used during the first attempt, but all three climbers freed the headwall pitches during the final ascent.

Christian Black leads the long, delicate pitch out of the notch, starting up the north face of White Sapphire.

Vitaliy Musiyenko finishing a pitch on the north face of White Sapphire.

Hayden Wyatt in the northwest couloir on White Sapphire.

Vitaliy Musiyenko leads the crack at the start of the second M7+ pitch on the north face.

Christian Black, Hayden Wyatt, and Vitaliy Musiyenko (left to right) celebrate a safe descent from White Sapphire.

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