



AAC Publications

Tomorrow Is Another Day: The North Face of Flat Top in Kishtwar

India, Jammu and Kashmir, Kishtwar Himalaya

Flat Top (6,100m) from the north. (1) Start of the 1980 first ascent by the northeast and east ridges; a hidden couloir led to a col, above which the team climbed the ridge and left flank. (2) Tomorrow Is Another Day, the first ascent of the 1,400-meter north face (2023). The climbers descended the west face, hidden beyond the right skyline, then crossed over the ridgeline at right to return to their starting point. (3) Attempt on north spur (2017). Photo by Timothy Elson.

"So, why not try Flat Top's north face next year?" I don't remember who said it first, but that's how it all started. My friend Hugo Béguin, an aspirant mountain guide, and I were leaving the mountains of Kishtwar, India, after a climb of Chomochior in 2022. The climb was the culmination of three years of training with the Expedition Team from the Swiss Alpine Club, a group of six young alpinists—including Hugo and me—selected from across the country.

To be honest, Chomochior (6,278m) wasn't our first goal. We had hoped to make one or more first ascents in the Nanth Nullah, a valley in Jammu and Kashmir that is surrounded by impressive peaks. We had read Tim Elson's 2019 AAJ article about his and Reg Measures' attempts on Flat Top and Kishtwar Eiger, and the photos of Flat Top's north face and other possibilities were very exciting. The Nanth Nullah seemed to have exactly what we were looking for: the opportunity to open mixed routes up virgin faces on rarely visited 6,000-meter peaks.

Unfortunately, we couldn't get the necessary permits in 2022. The Nanth Nullah is near the border with Pakistan, and there is a lot of tension here between the Indian Army and Pakistani armed groups. All of Kishtwar was closed to foreigners until 2012. Moreover, none of the Nanth Nullah peaks are on the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's Open Peaks list, detailing mountains for which it's easier to get permits. So we changed plans and went instead to the eastern Kishtwar, where, despite poor weather and conditions, we succeeded in repeating the southwest ridge of Chomochior, first climbed in 1988 by Roger Everett and Simon Richardson from the United Kingdom.

As Hugo and I hiked down from base camp, we started talking about a new project, and we quickly agreed that it would still be nice to get a closer look at Flat Top's north face. Tim Elson had sent additional pictures that showed the face was clearly a great objective. It was 1,400 meters high but had some weaknesses, so perhaps it was possible to find a line. The climbing seemed steep and technical, but not as much as on peaks like Jannu or other Himalayan monsters.

Back home, we started planning with our agency in India (IndMassif.com). The first goal was to find a third teammate. Hugo suggested Nathan Monard, a friend of his who works as a mountain guide and ski instructor in Zermatt. I didn't know Nathan, but from the first time we met, I was sure we would form a good team. He is a strong alpinist, calm and determined— all the qualities we would need for this kind of project. He'd never been to the Himalaya, but he too was amazed by the photos of Flat Top's north face.

Now understanding the inherent delays with permits for mountains that aren't on India's Open Peaks list, we applied almost a year in advance. Our planning went perfectly, save for Nathan's visa, which was issued only one day before our departure.

We drove into the mountains by a similar route to the one we had taken in 2022, passing through Jammu and Kishtwar town. By September 18 we were trekking to base camp from the village of

Sonder with our team: a cook, a helper, and our liaison officer, “Happy,” with 17 ponies carrying our gear.

We reached base camp at 3,800 meters on September 20, three hours on foot from the Hudh Mata temple, in a perfect sandy spot. From there, we hiked up to start acclimatizing and to survey our main objective. The first look at Flat Top’s 1,400-meter face was not encouraging. It was full of fresh snow, bigger and steeper than expected, and the approach crossed a treacherous moraine. At that moment, we were more scared than happy.

After a day of rest, we set off to climb an easy 6,013-meter peak above camp. We spent a night at 5,000 meters, enduring headaches and nausea, and the next day, after I had puked from altitude sickness, we gave up 200 meters below the summit.

We rested for two days, then headed up to establish an advanced base camp (ABC) below Flat Top. We hiked for seven hours over sliding talus, sand, and tortured glacier to reach a flat stretch of ice near an enormous boulder and a small tarn at 4,500 meters. The face was directly above us, less than a kilometer distant, though still two hours away in this complex terrain.

Now we could see that, while a few lines seemed possible, there was one that was most obvious. It followed a line of ice up the middle of the face for the first 600 meters, then traversed rightward on mixed terrain that was hard to inspect from below. That stretch seemed to be the crux, with steep rock and no visible weakness. But it would be the key to reach and then follow a 600-meter spur directly to the summit snow slopes. A descent via the west face seemed to be the best option—more direct and shorter than the east ridge, up which Flat Top’s British first ascensionists had climbed in 1980 ([see story here](#)).

We left a tent and climbing gear at ABC and returned to base camp. For a few days we rested, waiting for a weather window and stuffing ourselves with chapatis, dal, and rice. When a good forecast arrived from our weather connection, Yann Giezendanner (a famous Météo-France forecaster who has been connected to many expeditions), we set off for ABC. That night, however, 30 centimeters of snow fell, and so we descended again.

A few days later, Yann messaged us that a four-day weather window was headed our way. To take full advantage, we left base camp on October 2 under falling snow, then slept up at ABC for the third time on our expedition.

We woke at 4 a.m. on October 3. The weather was perfect, and we started hiking toward the north face, hoping to reach the top of the ice wall, 600 meters up, in one day. However, first light revealed strong wind and enormous spindrift avalanches raking the wall. We were obliged to wait a few hours for the wind to calm and the sun to leave the face.

We sat on our backpacks, looking up at the impressive wall. Usually, people choose a vacation destination with warm water, sun, beaches, and palm trees. We had chosen a gloomy, shaded 1,400-meter face of rock, snow, and ice. What the hell! We were quite intimidated, actually. At noon, the avalanches stopped and we started climbing.

We were surprised to find perfect conditions on the initial pitches. The 70° ice was so well formed and easy to climb that we decided not to use the rope, in order to move faster. We set up our first bivy at a snow patch 200 meters above the start, where we could excavate a perfect tent platform. The night was good—three people in a two-person tent means not having much space, but you also stay warm.

We started again early the next morning. Unfortunately, the ice now was thin and fragile, making it difficult for Nathan in the lead. Our progress was slow, and we considered giving up a few times. At one point, Hugo, now in the lead, got stuck on thin ice, so he downclimbed and tried out left—where

the ice turned out to be only powder snow. He stopped a moment to reflect and then returned to try again in the same spot as before. Nathan and I encouraged him and prayed he'd make it, and he did, bringing us to the top of the ice line. Well done!

Night was coming as I took the lead for the mystery traverse—which, as expected, turned out to be the route's crux, halfway up the wall. The first two mixed pitches were not so hard but loaded with fresh snow, making for slow going. Then, after passing a snow patch, I ground to a halt at a 30-meter rocky traverse that looked steep and unprotectable.

After a bit of reflection in the light of my headlamp, I decided to try aiding. I was able to find body-weight placements—cams, nuts, Peckers, and one piton we left fixed—though nothing seemed solid enough to hold a fall. It was surreal to fight so hard in the dark amid a sea of rock, gripped by fear, for an hour and a half, in the tiny world enclosed by the halo of my headlamp. Finally, I reached a snow slope, about 100 meters below the spur, exhausted but relieved. Nathan took the lead for the last few meters, and we set up the tent on another perfect platform.

On our third day on the wall—October 5—the weather was still great. We really hoped this day would be easier, letting us reach the summit snow slopes. From below, the spur seemed to be not so steep, and we figured we could climb quickly.

What a joke! Initially, the ridgeline was impossible to climb, so Hugo had to traverse left and then back up to regain the spur. These three pitches were sketchy, steep slabs covered by 50 centimeters of snow, the kind of terrain that's difficult to protect and on which you take one step back for every two steps forward. Down at our anchor, we could hear Hugo exclaim "What a hell!" now and then. We were once again very slow.

Back on the ridge crest, we hoped for easier progress. However, as Nathan took the lead, it became clear that we were once again mistaken, as a succession of steep, technical, sustained pitches followed. Nathan did an incredible job by leading almost ten difficult pitches in a row, but soon the sun was going down.

We were only halfway on the upper spur—perhaps 1,000 or 1,100 meters up the 1,400-meter face—and with nowhere to set up the tent. Even finding a place to sit was difficult. Hugo found a tiny ledge where he could scoop out a narrow platform that was just long enough for us to sit down next to each other. We put our feet in our sleeping bags and tried to sleep, toes dangling over the void. It was not our best night—but at least the air temperature wasn't too low.

We stood up on our little ledge at 4 a.m., got ready to go, and ascended the rope Nathan had fixed the evening before while he was searching for a bivvy site. After a bad night, the sunshine felt so welcome. (The north face would get about an hour of morning sun, from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m.) I led a few pitches, and the terrain remained sustained and technical. Here and there, I took off my gloves to be faster and more precise on the small holds. The rock wasn't very good, but the protection was okay.

The summit snow slopes still seemed far away—and the spur even steeper. It was increasingly stressful, as we weren't sure if we would make it to the top, and retreat would have been very complicated. "It seems like we've reached the point of no return," Hugo said solemnly. On the last pitch that I led, at a sharp section of ridge, I tried on the right without success, so Hugo belayed me down a few meters on the other side, where I reached a good crack that brought us to the final headwall.

Hugo took the lead again and found a way up four pitches on a kind of steep, frozen soil that was neither rock nor ice, and was both tiring and hard to protect. Finally, we reached the snow slopes. Nathan brought us to the summit, in the dark, at 7 p.m. on October 6. What a feeling! No view, no lights, nothing but a sense of happiness we'd rarely—maybe never—experienced.

We took pictures and checked in with base camp via the radio. Then we started rappelling the steep (and unclimbed) west face. After 15 rappels from Abalakov ice anchors, we set up the tent on the glacier below the west face and collapsed into our sleeping bags at 2 a.m., exhausted but so happy.

The next day, we climbed easily to reach the long ridge that eventually connects with Brammah I and then made a few rappels to return to the north side of the mountain and our ABC, where we found Happy waiting.

Happy loves to party, and we told him how psyched we were to celebrate our ascent when we got back to Delhi. His answer? “No, first you have to climb the Kishtwar Eiger, then we can make a party.” We had just come back from the hardest route of our lives, and climbing Kishtwar Eiger from here would have meant opening another new route on a 1,200-meter face. We just laughed and started hiking down to base camp.

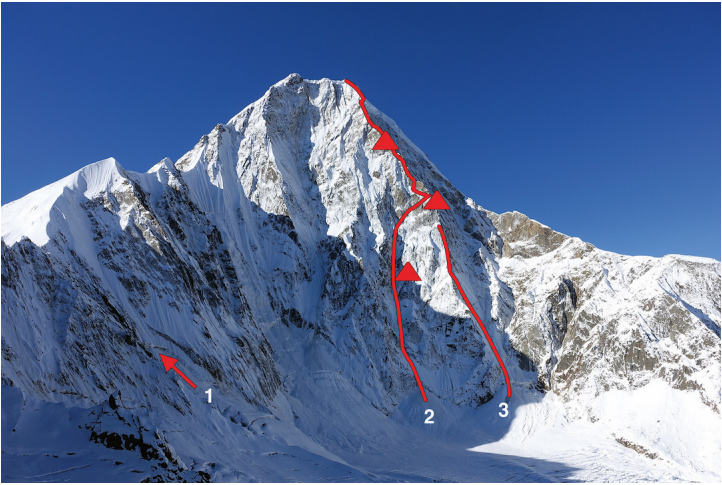
As we still had a week at base camp before heading for home, we decided to attempt another climb after resting during a snowstorm. Not sure about our energy levels, we chose a rocky peak of about 4,900 meters near camp (33.569483N, 76.088285E). On the south face, we opened a nice nine-pitch route, around 6a or 6b. A few days later, the three of us and Happy were sitting in a bar in Sector 29, a famous area for nightlife in Delhi, drinking and dancing with hundreds of people. The contrast with the mountains was huge.

We called our Flat Top route *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, for two reasons. First, every day, Happy would sing a song with the lyrics “Tomorrow is another day,” and this became our expedition anthem. Second, the name seemed to sum up the way we dealt with the route’s deceptively difficult terrain: one day at a time. We thought about giving up many times, but thanks to our strength as a team and as individuals—and our stubbornness—we were able to keep going. Our dream became real. Thank you, life.

SUMMARY: First ascent of the north face of Flat Top (6,100m) by *Tomorrow Is Another Day* (1,400m, ED 5c A2 WI4 M6), Kishtwar Himalaya, India, by Hugo Béguin, Nathan Monard, and Matthias Gribi, all from Switzerland, October 2–7, 2023. The three descended by the west face. After this climb, the trio climbed the south face of an unnamed 4,900-meter rock peak near base camp.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthias Gribi, 23, from Geneva, is studying to become a mountain guide and a helicopter pilot. He works as a helicopter flight assistant in the Swiss Alps, which helps him stay up to date on local climbing conditions.

Images



Flat Top (6,100m) from the north. (1) Start of the 1980 first ascent by the northeast and east ridges; a hidden couloir led to a col, above which the team climbed the ridge and left flank. (2) Tomorrow Is Another Day, the first ascent of the 1,400-meter north face (2023). The climbers descended the west face, hidden beyond the right skyline, then crossed over the ridgeline at right to return to their starting point. (3) Attempt on north spur (2017).

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