
IAN PARNELL

Saf Minal North-west Face

I tried to time my bouts of shivering with those of the form crushed next to me. I doubted that its Gore-Tex clad bulk could actually be sleeping but, just in case it had managed a brief moment of escape, how cruel to wrench it back to this cold dark place. Maybe if I could just find a glimmer of comfort I too might step sideways from the refrigerator into a warm golden room... I shifted my hips to release a blood-starved limb... the room would be filled with heat radiating from a huge fire... my arm was coming back to life and I could now wiggle the fingers... in front of the fire she was there welcoming me down onto the soft rug... I moved my arm round and pulled close to snuggle up. 'Dude!' John's voice dragged me back to reality, the golden fire was gone and I was back in our tiny frozen tent five days up Saf Minal's north-west face. 'You know what you need?' She was gone too. And in her place I was squeezing my irate climbing partner closer to me. 'You need a girlfriend. Big time!'

It's a popular theory that today's self-styled über-mountaineers are merely emotionally retarded lonely men still playing at being boys. And that the attentions of a good woman would deflect their misguided energies back to normality. But such simple theories always have flaws. Take John Varco, the rather disturbed American alpinist I was now mistakenly clutching in my arms in search of solace. He had found Sue who catered for his every bizarre whim, even tolerating his rather narrow taste in music. (John disputes it is 'bizarre', claiming he likes both kinds of music, Ozzy Osbourne and Black Sabbath.) Anyway what better picture of domestic bliss could there be for the alpine male than Sue cooking up a lumberjack slam breakfast, a weight-watcher's favourite involving lots of steak, as the strains of *Iron Man* mingle with the morning bird song?

Unfortunately Sue shared John's unusual taste in holidays; in fact her own high-altitude perversions more than matched his own. In 2003 she dragged the poor man away from the fireside on to Kalanka, a rarely ascended beast of a north Indian mountain with a beauty of an unclimbed spur on its north face. They spent over two weeks romancing the thing until, 300m below the summit, the dream slowly turned to nightmare. Trapped by the weather within a day of success, the pair cut meagre rations to a mere 400 calories a day. After four days even these starvation supplies ran out and they spent another four with no food before stumbling back to civilisation.

John lost 20 pounds in weight, but at least the eight days marooned high on his Kalanka honeymoon had given him plenty of opportunity to spy on the beautiful pile of ice and rubble where I now clung to him. Saf Minal (6911m) dominates the approach to the north side of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Surprisingly, despite this prominent position it had only been climbed once, from its softer southern side. Its untouched north face presents a dramatic sweep, almost 2500m of gradually steepening snow and ice topped by a rocky summit headwall. And here lay the reason for the peak's unpopularity; for while its glamorous sisters Kalanka and Changabang are dressed in fine white granite, Saf Minal broods under dark shale. But beauty is a subjective thing and while the sisters were undeniably pretty, it was Saf Minal's perfect outline, sheer scale and dark mystery that set my heart racing.

Lifting the veil on such a mystery was not easy. The mountain was not on the Indian Mountaineering Federation's list of climbable peaks, and then there was the issue of the Sanctuary and the elusive Inner Line. We knew that despite being home to India's highest and arguably most coveted peak, the Nanda Devi Sanctuary had been closed for years. Officially, access is restricted for conservation reasons. However, there is also said to be radiation leaking from a spying device 'lost' on Nanda Devi following a series of CIA-sponsored expeditions in the 1960s. The abortive mission to spy on the Chinese with a nuclear-powered monitor became one of the agency's least well-kept secrets. Maybe Indian irritation over this poisoning of a source of the Ganges lay behind the bureaucrat's reluctance to grant Varco the special X permit needed to approach even the outer edge of the Sanctuary. I had managed to acquire the said papers the day before departure, but for the American it became an ill-tempered five-day struggle in Delhi. Finally the mandarin relented and hand wrote the precious document. We ran from the government buildings before officialdom changed its mind, knowing we'd cracked the crux of the route.

For me, alpinism has a lot in common with 'drum and bass', that Anglo take on hip-hop music distinctive for its frantic 'edge of chaos' beats and dark, driving bass lines. For a start there is the relentless rhythm and unforgiving pace. Couple that with the apocalyptic atmospherics; there is nothing that gets the heart racing more than teetering on the edge of the storm, sonically or geographically. And then there is that darkness, the willingness to stray from the beaten path, to explore difficult landscapes, fractured and insecure; and crucially the ability to discover beauty where others only see noise and discomfort.

Most drum and bass tunes start with a lengthy intro, building anticipation. Ours had been building throughout the X visa debacle and now, with precious time lost, the tick of the clock rang loud over our trek to advanced base camp as we rushed through 10 days of acclimatisation. Frequent snow and lethargy meant we only managed to stagger up the slopes of the smallest of fore peaks, spending barely 30 minutes at 5500m, hardly textbook preparation for a near-7000m mountain. But it would need a lot more than



Left

35. Saf Minal. John Varco starting the rock band on day 3. (*Ian Parnell*)



Right

36. Ian Parnell on day 4 above the rock band. (*John Varco*)

this to put us off. We had been thinking about this ascent for the past year, momentum building as we rehearsed each step of the climb in our dreams; acclimatised or not, now was the time to act.

We packed light and fast for something we both knew could take us much longer than our planned five days' rations. But if both of us were good at anything, it was the ability to keep going no matter how low the fuel. After goodbyes to Razzu, our liaison officer, and Chander, our cook, we managed three days of steady progress over moderate ground, plodding through thigh-deep snow, cresting ridges and weaving through mixed terrain as the rock changed from light, sound granite to dark, disintegrating shale. It was the kind of climbing that non-mountaineers dismiss as boring and uninvolved, but it is exactly this ground that makes mountains such a challenge, ratcheting up the commitment many notches above that of, say, the Alps.

On day four things got particularly interesting. A poorly protected traverse picked its way through stacked useless blocks of yellow decaying shale. The rope ran out with nothing worth belaying on so we continued simul-climbing. Deflected away from the safety of the ridge we were forced into the open of the great ice bowl that forms the north-west face. Here the pitches flew by but there would now be few places to hide and a direct retreat looked horrific. We had little choice if we wanted to climb the thing, but I couldn't banish the thought that we were being drawn into a trap of our own making. As if to confirm my suspicions, snowflakes began to fall and by the time we skirted the edge of the ice to reach the upper rock band spindrift avalanches were pouring down the face. We frantically searched for some kind of tent site, any spot that would hold our tiny two-person shelter. All we could manage was a patch of 50-degree black ice that took three hours of hard labour to chop into a two-foot wide sloping scoop. It would have to do; John and I only had to shiver through one night here.

Well that was how it was supposed to work, but we were not the ones driving. That night, the following day and through another interminable night we clung on as snow continued to fall. Avalanches darkened the air and spindrift accumulated inexorably behind our little tent. We gradually slipped off the edge of the ledge where we hung, two damp fish squashed together at the bottom of the net, until the inevitable happened and the poles began to give.

The key point in any drum and bass tune is the drop. Often preceded by a moody build-up, the drop is a moment of sudden silence at the top of a gathering crescendo of beats before the track is finally fully let loose. This second of silence represents a pause for breath, a brief space to gather your wits, anticipating the onslaught about to be unleashed. It's an emotional pressure point, the moment of commitment.

Squashed in our tent, one pole broken and the other threatening to snap at any minute, we were faced with our moment. A decision had to be made. Racked with cramps, low on gas and almost out of food, staying put wasn't on the menu. It was either down (at 1700m up the face, not a trivial option)

or bite the bullet, zip up our hoods and head up into the storm. We chose the latter. I guess that's the thing about the drop. You're poised at the top of the roller coaster and theoretically you could inch your way back down. But I can rarely resist when the big adventure calls. We are humans after all and a driven species if ever there was one. John and I had talked through this scenario continuously during our 36-hour confinement and now, faced with our call to action, momentum took us and we burst out into the maelstrom.

To describe the crux of a route as 45-degree snow might sound a little tame. But factor in that rotting dark shale lies six inches below the slush, that night has fallen on a 14-hour push and you're about to ask your partner to unclip from his belay and start simul-climbing with no protection worth talking about, then you begin to get the measure of it. In terms of numbers this might have been the technically easiest climbing either of us had done but it was definitely the most committing. Strangely, despite the obvious consequences of a mistake, this type of situation is panic free. Instead, the intense concentration brings detachment. It was what I call 'calm clawing', dragging axes through the slush until they snag on unseen placements, equalising four minimal points of contact and improvising with anything that gains upward movement. I dragged John further into the darkness; I knew the ridge was close. The bivvi prospects so far amounted to little more than standing where we were with the tent fly draped over our heads, but if we could make it to the ridge there was a good chance of deep enough snow to dig a tent platform.

The light blinded me and I realised I'd just woken from a deep sleep. I remembered the battle with the storm to get the tent up at 1 o'clock this morning when we had finally made it to the ridge. It had been worth it though – a chance to lie down properly and my first shut-eye for three days. The light really was bright, it couldn't mean... could it? We whooped for joy as John ripped open the tent to prove the storm really had blown itself out. Not only that, but blue sky topped the most flawless alpine vista either of us had seen. We peered out incredulously. Our gamble had paid off and, as if in confirmation, the incredible face of Nanda Devi reared up in front of us; perhaps the least-sighted aspect of India's highest mountain.

Much of top-flight alpinism is spent heads down, struggling for progress. Despite the fact that the high mountains offer some of the most incredible sights in the world, you get little time to take it in. It is only later, leafing through your holiday snaps, that you can really comprehend the sheer beauty. Now John and I had been given the perfect summit day and what looked to be only a few hours of moderate plodding to our summit. The fact that we were now out of food, isolated beyond rescue and with only a day's gas left, just added to our sense of appreciation. We were like gawping tourists stopping at every rise and false summit to snap ourselves against the dream backdrop. We dallied for half an hour on the summit, John producing a small frog given to him by Sue to take there. As he held it out,



37. Ian Parnell on the summit ridge of Saf Minal. (John Varco)

beaming with pride, Kalanka's north face was there behind him, their high point painfully close from this vantage. Saf Minal's summit seemed only fair consolation.

Writing this, I look back on those beautiful, frantic days and feel a warm glow inside. I have to restrain the urge to laugh out loud in celebration of what we did, what we got away with. I also smile because I've had a good go at proving that theory right. Four weeks after my return from India I met a beautiful Texan lady who swept me off my feet. She's not an alpinist and I'm not going on a big Himalayan trip this year. Instead I'm going to enjoy the simple things in life. So the theorists were right? Well, maybe. On my office wall just left of the computer screen a creased postcard winks back at me. I trace imaginary lines on the west face of Gasherbrum IV and feel my heart race with plans for next year.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the north-west face of Saf Minal (6911m) in the Garhwal Himalaya, India, by Ian Parnell and John Varco, in October 2004.

(What was that about no big Himalayan trips this year? A likely story! Shortly after this article was edited, Ian was on his way east for 10 weeks filming on Everest. Of course it is not the first such expedition-denying resolution to crumble. SG)