

---

# Expeditions

---



'South side of Mont Blanc: the Brenva Glacier', Hilda Hechle, 1905, watercolour, 71cm x 49.5cm. (Courtesy of Henry Adams, Fine Art Auctioneers)

---

MÁREK HOLOČEK

## Heaven's Trap



Márek Holoček on the lower section of the north-west face of Baruntse.  
*(All photos courtesy of Márek Holoček).*

A special time: and a strange one. The future suddenly seemed a little drunk: fuzzy and a bit dull. Anxieties emerged like worms from holes. It was not the year I'd been expecting, and one that swept away all our plans. I'm not complaining about it at all because a certain amount of social chaos suits my nature. I like uncertainty. It's an environment where I thrive.

What's more, my little girl was kicked out of school, and since online attendance could be managed from anywhere with an Internet connection, we were not tied to home, free to cross the viral map of Europe. As a result, our family was all together and on parade. That's something that won't be offered in the future. So we enjoyed the time that circumstance brought us. I was able to spend many months in the famous rocky areas of Italy and Spain that are normally overwhelmed with people. Suddenly there was peace, interrupted only by the wind rubbing against the rocks. The only flowers in my garden not blooming were my expeditions to the big hills. And in that respect I began to feel great uneasiness. Fortunately, with the coming spring, snow began to melt not only on the slopes of the Himalaya, but all the bans and regulations for visiting Nepal began to dissolve.

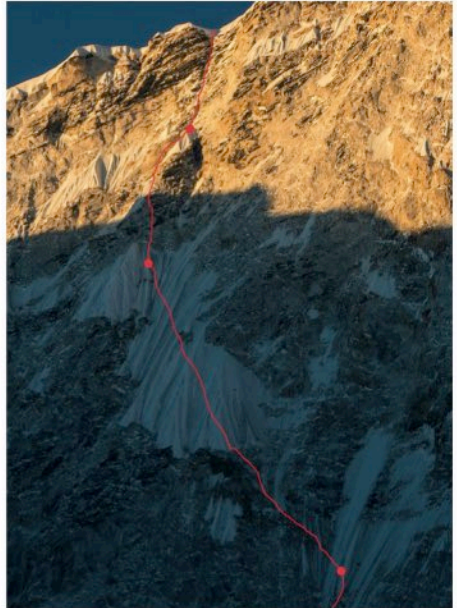
At the moment the door to Nepal opened, I went for it. I quickly became familiar with official obstructions and embarked on the uncertain game of



The line of *Heavenly Trap* with the descent in blue, ending at the point where the two Czechs were evacuated by helicopter. A closer view of the route shows the dry conditions the climbers experienced and detail of the wall's upper portion shows the route's steep crux.

the lottery, where the chances of a cancelled flight significantly exceeded the chances of departure. One thing is for sure, I do not suffer from a fear of uncertainty, and if there is a chance for a meaningful attempt, I go for it. In the end, I was greeted by the familiar sweet stench so typical of the Nepali metropolis of Kathmandu. Except the pulse and vibrancy of the city had disappeared completely inside people's houses, with Covid-19 restrictions. This peace couldn't last. We had to hurry, so I quickly sent Radoslav 'Radek' Groh, my climbing partner, and other friends trekking with us to Lukla.

I had to go through inconveniences in Kathmandu: a date at the ministry of tourism, where officials graciously gave me a permit for the hill and I paid thousands of dollars to the establishment. As soon as that happened,





Above: Holoček on the first day.



Left: A similar view of the same wall from 2013 illustrates the impact recent dry years is having in this part of the Himalaya.

the door behind me closed and the whole of Nepal went into a hard lockdown. I left Kathmandu on the brink of legality with small financial incentives offered in certain places. I ran quickly to my friends in the mountains. A group of friends and porters were still waiting for me in Lukla. I knew I would be free there and that my fate would be in my hands again. Even here, at the gate to paradise, I couldn't shake the feeling that these constrictions could still thwart our departure to the mountains. As soon as the plane landed, I drank two beers at the Paradise Hotel and then we all ran further into the heart of the Himalaya.

Next day we met a bunch of friends travelling in the opposite direction: Honza Trávníček, mountain killers Zdeněk 'Háček' Hák and Jaroslav 'Banan' Banský, who were brandishing a first-ascent scalp from Kangchung Shar.<sup>1</sup> They were returning to Mordor and we were ascending to Rivendell. We felt it necessary to celebrate both our chance meeting and a successful ascent, so we sat in a lodge, where the *didi* was soon rushed off her feet as we relieved her of a significant proportion of her beer supplies. Luckily for her, all of us still had commitments to move that day and a farewell was inevitable. One half of the drunken party continued in the direction of Lukla, and we climbed the slope over the cable bridges to Namche Bazaar.

The following days were filled with a trek with friends, which was also good acclimatisation for Radek and me. It led through 5,000m passes around Gokyo and then over the highest of them all, the Amphu Labsta (5845m) to the Hunku valley. The whole process took a great 15 days right across the heart of the Himalaya. We didn't have very good weather, yet every day we'd see something miraculous. From the last col, we reached base camp at Baruntse. Here, we were enveloped in complete peace and freedom. For far and wide, there was no living soul, only silence occasionally interrupted by the crack of a serac, the rumble of rolling moraine, or a falling avalanche.

Whatever we did, our goal was in sight, whether I opened the tent a little in the morning, or went to the lake to brush my teeth, or in the early evening when we watched the setting sun bathing in the bloody bath of the west wall. Unique, sculptural Baruntse (7129m) filled the entire horizon and left no doubt as to who was in charge here. I'd had the relentless look of this giantess in my memory for a few years now. It is a steep wall roughly rendered with a bit of snow and ice and it inspires fear. It's horribly compelling. You lower your eyes to the ground even as you feel an irresistible desire to keep looking at it: a mixture of monstrosity, wonder, beauty and admiration.

Right from our first encounter, when my eyes were exploring Baruntse's shape bit by bit, I was looking for her weaker points, and a clear idea of a new line stuck in my head. Then I pushed the idea away. Some ideas need time for awareness and courage to grow. I did not revive this one until 2019, when my steps led me once again into the Hunku where Baruntse smiled at me in her full beauty, with that Mona Lisa laziness. I was caught in my own nets and knew that look would haunt me in my dreams and determine my future: just one damn look. However, at that time there was another top of the list a little further along the same valley where Háček and I now went to climb a new route: the north-west face of Chamlang. Now it is May 2021 and I'm standing under Baruntse again. We arrived in base camp on 13 May. We are already well acclimatised and are just waiting for four days of continuous good weather to go to the west face. It's been a waiting game as that window refuses to open but it's no hardship because the weather allows us to run among the surrounding hills and thus shorten our sentence.

1. Hák and Banský made the first traverse of Kangchung Shar (6030m), climbing the north face to the saddle between Kangchung Shar and Cholo, then following the north-west ridge to the top, returning to the saddle and descending the south face.



Márek Holoček digging out the first bivouac.



Thin ice and crumbly rock as the wall steepens.



Márek Holoček higher on the same pitch.

21 May. A message arrives via the satellite phone that immediately increases our blood pressure. Our moment has come. We pack our gear and food for six days and immediately run to the glacier. Our first bivouac is just below the start of difficulties, hidden under a serac that protects us from stone fall. At the same time, it must be admitted that the glacier is just a frozen river that is still rolling, albeit at the speed of a snail. We simply hope it won't move at the precise moment we are under it.

22 May. We start cutting our way up the first metres of this two-kilometre wall and immediately encounter unpleasant and difficult ground. The lower section is hard ice, often turning into mixed sections. The axes and tips of our crampons creak as though someone were scratching their nails down a board. Even at the slightest swing, did not penetrate deeper and only pinched a thousand-year-old mountain coat into a million tiny fragments that fell directly onto Radek's head.

No wonder, as the west wall has undergone a major change in the last dry years, when lots of snow and ice have disappeared from the cliffs. Only the hardest skin remained, which withstood temperature fluctuations. An ascent like the Russian expedition from 1995 led by Sergei Efimov, which climbed the pillar of the western wall, significantly to the right of our line, is unrepeatable under current conditions. Change must come again and perhaps a richer period of snowfall as well.

The difficult terrain did not allow us to accelerate; more and more difficult sections were encountered, which slowed down the way up. It was still cool, below zero, but the sun's rays managed to loosen stones in the upper section, and humming projectiles begin to fall around us. After 10 hours on the tips of our crampons and pounding axes, which bounce off ice as hard as glass, all we have to do is dig a platform into a glued-on snow ridge, reminiscent of an organ pipe. A bivouac is waiting for us, sitting all night and hanging on the rope. We use the tent without the poles to sit in. From a distance, it looks like a garbage bag with two puppets on a string. It's a desperate place, barely room for two buttocks, our legs hanging over the abyss. In addition, it's a hundred metres lower than we had originally planned: a glitch in the plan and our psyche right at the start.

'Radek, we have to catch up tomorrow,' I say, as much to myself. Calm words emerge from the twisted knot next to me. 'Márek, we'll make it.'

23 May. The weather is good. We climb to the ice field, which leads us diagonally left over more snow pipes towards the rock section. We thrash our ice axes into hard ice all day, climb from one groove, which is always bounded by a rib of loose snow, to the next. The climbing is monotonous, tiring and dangerous. My calves are on fire and with each new axe placement my hands lose a little more. This day's section costs us a lot of energy again but in the late afternoon we finish with a pleasant surprise. As light from the reddening west licks the wall, we find a space for the tent: a snow rib shaped by wind and frost, like a swallow's nest stuck to a wall. After a small adjustment, we have an excellent bivouac, where we can stretch our bodies and catch up on last night's missed sleep. I realise we have hardly exchanged a word. There has been no time to eat or even drink. We are tortured and hungry. But the place where we sleep is comfortable and in less than an hour our dry throats are moistened with the first tea.

24 May. In the morning we reach the most difficult section of the ascent. Above our head we have a 250m barrier of broken rock. It takes us a while to decide where our steps should lead. The process slows us down and the weather begins to deteriorate.



The early arrival of bad weather caught the climbers before they'd escaped the wall.

'Radek,' I say, 'the section above my head can't be protected much, and it's this crumbly layered rock, which I'll peel off like gingerbread in climbing it. I'll put one more screw into the ice so there's something between us and go to Russian roulette mode.'

'I'll be careful, but try to get a cam or peg in that pig, Márek.'

'Sure, but there'll be flying rocks, so duck and just hope I don't fly with them. I really wouldn't like that.'

In the end, using everything we've got, we climb to within 70m of the ridge. Already, it's snowing heavily. Climbing is difficult, unpleasant even, and in the end we are stopped by the weather. The rivers of snow resemble white snakes, slithering down the wall, showering us with flurries. Once more we have to find somewhere to spend a night that wasn't planned. Fortunately, we find a rocky promontory protruding above the valley, exactly large enough for our tent. We build an airy bivouac on this spot, which does not have a spare centimetre on any side before the kilometre void beyond.

This eagle's nest has one beneficial effect. Except for a narrow neck connecting us to the wall, the stream of snow goes round us. In the tent, we pull out sleeping bags, which, thanks to previous nights attracting moisture, have frozen into icy rubble. Even so, it is better to climb into them and steam. I quickly pull out the satellite phone to find a message from Alena (our friend the meteorologist) who is our guardian angel and sends me weather reports.



Above and opposite: Strong winds and heavy snow intensified as the climbers topped out turning the descent into a protracted nightmare lasting 80 hours and stretching the two Czechs to the limit.

'Damn, the weather wasn't supposed to change today, and it's going to get worse tomorrow afternoon.'

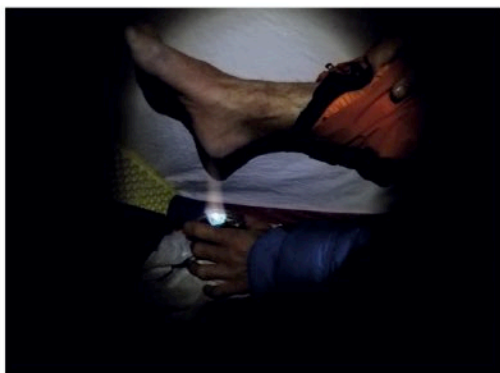
I read the message again and quickly write back with the current situation. Nature can readily invent its own story, without taking into account mathematical models and years of knowledge in weather forecasting. Nothing is ever that firm, clear or unchanging. And we cannot anticipate all variables in advance in order to prepare for them. In the mountains, it is necessary to learn to accept change and respond to it. It is true that we are half a day slower than planned, but the dramatic deterioration in weather has accelerated by a day and a half. This brought us closer to the trouble we were expecting.

I form a picture of the morning that has yet to come. As long as we're still hanging under the top of the route, we're vulnerable. We can't go down and the only way is up. We have to hope that the weather will allow us to climb those few tens of metres tomorrow and then we will descend down the ridge to safety. Another dream that does not come true. Suddenly, the satellite phone beeps with an SMS. It's Alena again.

'Tomorrow the weather will be like today and in the evening there will be a significant deterioration. And the next day, Saigon will come.'

'That means, Radek, we have to be extra fast, get to the ridge and immediately run to the top and continue down. If bad weather catches us up there, we have a big problem.'

'Tomorrow, we'll leave as fast as the martins; I don't want to be here



another minute, Márek.' We fall asleep in a fighting mood.

25 May. It's cloudy in the morning with poor visibility, but there is no choice. We have to climb to the ridge, get up and over the summit and down. Easy to say, but the falling snow, the wind and the last mixed sections take all day again. On one pitch, Radek climbs up to me and says through clenched teeth: 'Let it fucking end.' I try not to make the situation worse and calmly answer: 'It will be good, it will only be good.' I don't know I am lying to myself.

We reach the summit around 4pm, completely frozen, covered with hoarfrost and we can't see a step thanks to the fog. All that remains is to set up the tent with the knowledge that Wednesday with its hurricane winds and snowfall will not pass us by. As a small consolation, I keep repeating to myself, at least we have left that wall of terror behind us.

With darkness comes a strong wind, which, with the brutality of gunfire, drives snow against the thin walls of our house. At any moment, it seems, the tent will collapse and tear under this onslaught. Just before morning, it stops shaking. The wind is still shrieking, but the whole tent has been completely covered and turned into an igloo. The interior has shrunk to the barest minimum; it's impossible to move without pushing against each other. The air is heavy and it's difficult to breathe. Neither of us wants to go



Top: Climbing the last steep pitches to the ridge.

Left: Holoček packs up following the last night on the wall.

Opposite: After the punishing multi-day storm, the morning of 29 May was clear, allowing the pair to descend 1,100m before camping again. At the limit of their endurance and with deep new snow, they summoned a helicopter.

to hell yet. So there is nothing for it but to move, otherwise this place will become our grave. Here we go.

26 May. In the morning, we move the whole tent a few metres further. We perform this operation blind. I can't see the tip of my nose, let alone whether we are already too close to the edge of the overhanging ridge, beneath which is a void all the way down to the glacier. This white blankness prevents any attempt to descend. And those few minutes outside the tent seem like an eternity. The cold and wind chill us; we're shivering in our damp clothes in an instant. It takes us hours in the sleeping bag for the shivering to stop and a feeling of warmth to return. We lie side by side all day without speaking, heavy thoughts tramping through our heads, each keeping to themselves. At the same time, we know very well that this is wrong. There will be no chance of better weather for the next three days. On the



contrary, it will worsen on Friday. Before us lies the prospect of 72 hours lying in wet sleeping bags, without taking a step. We are stuck on a ridge 7,000m high, in places as sharp as a knife and with slopes falling more than a kilometre either side. At night the wind comes again and strengthens to a hurricane, completely covering our tent with more new snow.

27 May. Snooping around in the morning, it's clear nothing has changed. We lie around all day.

28 May. Around ten o'clock, the wind begins to calm down. Even the thick fog melts at times. We quickly pack the tent hoping to get at least a little lower today. The light is diffused, which induces a drunken effect. We have nothing with which to contrast the view in front of us; we can't judge what it is we're stepping on. The ambient light is shimmering white and we flounder around like tangled noodles.

'Radek, we can't go on, we can't see anything.'

'But we have to keep going, or we'll die here, Márek.'

'I know it's hard to accept, but there's nothing we can do, we have to wait. We don't know if we're going to fall into the valley with the next step.'

'Come,' Radek's voice insists. 'Try again.'

'Shit, we don't even know if we're descending the ridge or just branching off on a lateral rib.'

This heated discussion continues for a moment, soaked in tension. In the end, pragmatic reason prevails. A few tens of metres below, we set up the tent and climb into it again. This time we're there for two days and two nights. The weather remains devilish, and even ordinary basic tasks, such as boiling water or going to urinate, are difficult tasks for us, costing a lot of effort. We free the tent again from the grip of the snow. We wait and pray. There is nothing more we can do. Meanwhile, our wet things freeze and the cold bites into us. Food supplies disappear. There is still a stove for boiling snow, but our tea and soluble tablets are finished.

30 May. It's a beautiful morning that promises a nice day. Yesterday we managed to descend a significant distance but now we're exhausted. We immediately take advantage of the opportunity offered to use our satellite phone and send our coordinates to our helicopter pilot. There is no desire to suffer more and risk avalanches. Last night was too much. My feet are frozen and two fingers tingle like hell.

'How are you, Radek?'

'I don't know yet. But please God, let the helicopter pick us up, I don't want to go any further.'

Fortunately, our call is heard and at 7am, a helicopter frees us from this icy hell. We fly along the western wall, which has been our home for 10 days. I stare at places already deeply etched in my memory, while at the same time glad that we're moving away with every passing second. I'm alive and can finally afford to let the rein on my emotions drop. I feel the joy of a completed dream, a rush of fatigue, the onset of pain that shoots in spasms through my frozen fingers. The machine floats like a dragonfly right in the heart of the Himalaya, around Ama Dablam, Lhotse, Everest, Pumori, Kusum Kanguru and beautiful peaks all around the horizon. The pilot moves through them in minutes and we are soon landing in Lukla, where the whole thing started. Just before landing, I turn to my friend and try to compete with the noise of the rotors.

'Thanks Radek, you were great again.'

**Summary:** First ascent of *Heavenly Trap* (ABO+, VI+, M6+, 80°, 1300m) on the north-west face of Baruntse (7129m), leaving base camp on 20 May and evacuated by helicopter on 30 May. The climbers dedicated their route to Petr Machold and Kuba Vanek, who disappeared attempting a similar line in 2013. The route goes to the left of the line taken by Sergei Efimov's Russian team in 1995.