

## Annual Leave — Ganesh II South Face

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Standing on a large boulder below Base Camp we gazed out and up at the vast face before us. 'Looks hard, much longer than I expected' Rick said. The face must have been all of 3000m high and looked very sustained. I nodded, too taken aback to actually say anything. I was worried and the nagging fears from a previous trip crossed my mind. I did not hold out much hope for success, 'What the hell!' I thought, 'we must give it a go'. We stood in silence taking in the vastness and beauty of the S face of Ganesh II, each trying privately to work out the logical route to take.

We had just arrived at Base Camp (28 September) the previous evening. No rest day to follow though; we were on a tight schedule — six weeks of Rick's annual leave before returning to the UK.

Surveying the approach to the glacier we spotted a potential site for our Advanced Base Camp on its far side. This site proved excellent, but had an awkward rock pitch to gain the small grass pasture. This necessitated a fixed rope for ease of access. Due to the unusual geography of the area we found our Advanced Base Camp was in fact 300m lower than Base Camp which was perched on an exposed ridge below Ganesh IV (Pabil).

We were not alone at Base Camp, for 200m away a large Swiss expedition were occupying a sheltered and more suitable site. The Swiss, due to an unfortunate mix-up by the Ministry of Tourism also had permission for the S face. But fortunately for us they had proposed a line on its left-hand side. Having been at Base Camp one week already, the Swiss were well on with their route, trying to establish Camp 2 on the W ridge. Being Swiss they had a large purse to match their large team and seemed to dismiss the arrival of two Brits. They could not take our attempt on a rather more outrageous route at all seriously. We got on very well however; it is amazing what a bottle of whisky does for 'entente cordiale'.

Our climbing plan was a little bit vague, but we intended to climb in 'Alpine Style'. First however it was necessary to acclimatize. No suitable alternative objectives were within easy reach so we were forced to concede to go on to the face to achieve this. Deciding also that it would be useful to have a cache on the face we would in fact kill two birds with one stone.

On 2 October we set off, following the route taken by the Polish attempt of 1983. The Polish expedition had made a bold attempt in the post-monsoon, but were hampered by soft snow and were drawn mistakenly to the SE ridge. They reached a high point of about 6300m, finding the ridge had impossible gendarmes. The tragic accident on their subsequent retreat prevented further attempts. In two days we climbed to the site of the Polish Camp 2 (5400m), leaving the cache, and returning to Base Camp to rest and prepare for the ascent.

On 7 October we left Base Camp going straight on to the face. The amount of food taken was, as always, a compromise between weight and time, so we took enough for seven days, hoping that would last. We followed the route up to the cache as before. It was no easier than on first acquaintance; loose rock and scree led to a dangerous ice couloir, which had to be climbed early in the morning for peace of mind.

By the third day we were on to new ground. An early start avoided stonefall in the ever steepening couloir. After six pitches we took its left branch, looking for a way left, which we hoped would lead us into the upper part of the face. Stupidly I tackled the steep rock band at the top of the gully direct. After struggling up this VS pitch I noticed an easy ice runnel to my right which led to the same place. Beyond, the way looked more feasible and in two pitches we found a traverse line taking us through the rock band. This awkward and loose traverse we aptly named the 'Hinterstoisser Traverse'. At its far end we found a three-star ledge for our little tent. Before settling in for the night Rick checked out the route ahead, confirming we had found the secret to the upper part of the face. We slept well that night, confident about our progress.

Next day we were in for a shock: a single steep ice pitch blocked the way. Rick took his sack off and proceeded, climbing the slight, open groove and icy slabs in excellent style, 'Just like the Dubh Loch' he called on reaching the top. I struggled up with my sack leaving Rick to descend and retrieve his. Beyond, we climbed a narrowing band between ice runnels. As it narrowed it became steep, culminating in a knife edge. I moved on to it cautiously *au cheval* as it crumbled under my weight. That obstacle out of the way, we continued more quickly on easier terrain. Time however was short and we searched in vain for a bivouac site. As the next rock band drew closer, it seemed to offer possibilities above. Climbing the final pitch to its base Rick found a narrow snow ledge under an overhang of rock. A little chopping and there we had it, our airy perch for the night.

On the fifth day we were immediately in at the deep end again. Rick led off up the 'ice hose' giving the hardest ice climbing of the route, good grade 4. Above, the angle eased and we continued up the 50° slopes in promising weather conditions. That day could almost be called comfortable. Yes, but the night was far from it. As we gained another area of steep ground below the final rock band, we searched for a bivouac. It is amazing how time flies. With failing light we became desperate. A short rappel brought us to a sloping ledge. Darkness suddenly hit us. 'This is no good', 'Oh Bloody Hell'. It was impossible to pitch the tent, so the tent became a bivvy sac. Sliding and swinging around, we managed shelter — that was all. Powder poured in. Shelter? The sack filled; it was impossible to cook; impossible to sleep. By the morning we were exhausted.

We decided to have a rest day, desperately needing food and drink. We managed to move up one pitch finding a much needed spot to spend the next night.

It was a relief to start moving again on the seventh day. The mixed terrain was tricky and belays poor. An exposed traverse on steep powder broke through the final rock band. Above were more relentless snow ribs and runnels, hard ice, soft snow alternating at random. The day seemed awfully long. We found a bivouac before dark, more confident of success. I managed to lose a mitt as I shuffled about the tent with the door open wide. I got annoyed — 'Wouldn't have minded

but I paid £18 for them just before leaving the UK. I must be fatigued or is it the altitude? Feel OK? Yes, tired, that's what it is'.

The weather was bad the next morning and became worse through the day. We made slow progress, the terrain quite easy, but patches of soft unstable snow made us feel insecure. Visibility was poor, but we knew we could not be far from the summit ridge. Our food was nearly all finished but we decided, so long as we still had some, to continue upwards. The thought of a descent down the route appalled us, all that steep down-climbing — no thanks. We decided the W ridge would offer the best way off the mountain, being under the impression that the Swiss had succeeded, 'they must have. All that man-power, all that money'.

Summit day, and a pretty poor one at that. The wind was very strong at 7000m and climbing was tedious in deep powder. We staggered on to the summit ridge. Immediately falling over, I found it easier to crawl. We just could not cope with a flat ridge. Soon it got steep again and we were back in our element. I was very slow, feeling ill, so Rick led the way.

Suddenly the ground ahead was flat, I crawled to meet Rick. 'This must be it', both of us were unimpressed, a broad snow drift formed the summit. Exhausted, but relieved, we took the necessary photographs. There were no beautiful views as we had hoped, no reason to stay long. We descended a short way on to the West ridge finding another snow drift in which we dug a snow-hole.

Descents are always terrible, the climb over, we just wanted to get down and go home, but we could not switch off. The ridge was broad and mostly easy. The wind was horrendous. We both had to stop regularly to warm our hands, and our feet were numb. Rick took a fall, misjudging the angle of the slope in the swirling cloud. 'We must be careful now'. The ridge was a death trap, we were both very much weakened by the constant struggle against the wind. Deciding to get off the ridge we plunged blindly down on to the South face. Immediately the wind eased and we could move more easily. The terrain became steeper and soon we were rappelling. Six or seven rappels later Rick vanished again into the mist. Half an hour went by and no call. 'What's happening?' I shouted down trying to make contact. A muffled voice clarified the situation as he informed me of his predicament — hanging in space on an overhanging wall. Eventually he jumared up a short way and swung into the wall and belayed. Below, the angle eased and we made for a flat area of seracs. Surveying where we had just come I could see that we had chosen the most overhanging piece of rock on the whole face.

The bivouac on top of the flat seracs gave a comfortable night. But we experienced great difficulty in keeping warm. The descent continued for two further days, much of it steep down-climbing on unstable snow slopes, softened by the intense sun. The final day we plunged down the central gully line, our priority was to get down quickly rather than by a safer but time consuming descent. Near the bottom we regained the line of ascent and reached Advanced Base Camp before dark. It was 18 October, we had been on the mountain 12 days.

Reaching Base Camp next morning, we found that our sirdar had done his job; the porters arranged for that day were warming themselves by the kitchen fire. It was great to be in the company of many people again. The next day we started the walk out; half a day's rest is all these working men will allow you. I wonder what Rick is planning for his holidays next year.