
CALLUM JOHNSON
Barnaj II East



The view from advance base camp. Barnaj II east is the right hand of the two pointy peaks. (*Callum Johnson*)

In Autumn 2022 I went with four friends to the Kishtwar region of the Indian Himalaya, a valley full of unclimbed 6,000m peaks. After getting shut down on an attempt to climb a new route on an unclimbed mountain because of heavy snowfall we rested and re-focussed. The expedition culminated in the first ascent of Barnaj II East (6303m) via the north face.

The air hostess sees my bright red rucksack with yellow climbing helmet attached and asks, 'Are you going to climb Everest?' I smile and reply that I don't have that kind of money and what we're going to attempt hasn't been

climbed before. My first expedition to the Greater Ranges has begun: the 'duffle shuffle' is in full swing. I am nervously excited for what the next month will hold in store. I meet the team in Delhi: Dave Sharpe, Will Harris, Matt Glenn and Tom Seccombe. The experience and strength of these guys gives me confidence that I will learn, be humbled and hopefully manage to climb something.

Delhi feels like a busy smelly sauna. We negotiate the chaotic roads, watching how rickshaws, bicycles and trucks don't collide as three lanes merge to one without warning. Our accommodation offers curry for breakfast, curry for lunch and curry for dinner. Love it or hate it, curry is what's on the menu. Visiting the Indian Mountaineering Federation to receive our permit to climb Barnaj II, formalities are completed with the exchange of thousands of dollars for seemingly nothing, not even a piece of paper. Yet all appears to be well and our expedition is allowed to continue.

A short flight takes us to the mountain town of Leh, the capital of Ladakh. At 3,500m the air is cool and clear and a couple of nights here feels like more useful acclimatisation than the humid heat of Delhi. Exploring the market stalls we buy dried fruit, peanut butter and pillows: base-camp comfort and mountain snacks. We bounce along dirt roads for 12 hours in the Force Traveller minibus, somehow, thankfully, maintaining contact with the road around countless switchback bends above precipitous drops. Crossing the Indus and then the Zaskar rivers, we travel south over several mountain passes to another watershed and are in the Kishtwar region. Impressive pointy peaks dominate every vista.

In the final small village of rustic houses, each with their own patch of arid land to work, we meet our horsemen. Loads are sized up and debated in what seems like a heated discussion in Ladakhi with everyone speaking at the same time until they are finally divided up for each shepherd to load onto their animal. We look on, letting them do their thing, amazed that things progress.

The procession of shepherds, yaks and donkeys is strung out along the trail. We round the hillside and get our first view up the Hagshu valley. A peak in the distance is striking: this is Chiring and it's unclimbed. Despite being at 4,400m our base camp is only a day's walk from the road: luxury for an expedition. The camp itself is tucked behind a moraine bank on a flat grassy area islanded by a small stream of clear mountain water. The train of animals with our bags trickles in and we gradually pitch camp, our home for the next three weeks.

Snow falls continuously overnight, laying 30cm at base camp by next morning, but spirits are still high. We need to acclimatise here for a day or two anyway. Gear is unpacked and checked, the expedition chess tournament kicks off and our cook, Naveen, and his helper Mangal deliver the first of many excellent feasts. Curry, of course.

Our mandatory acclimatisation – mandatory suffering – must commence, the inevitable slog uphill breathing hard with a heavy rucksack pulling you back. The warm sun is melting the snow, gradually turning it to a sticky slop.



On the approach to the face. (Matt Glenn)

We walk slowly, as a team, up to a 5,000m camp. I stay three nights, with gradual improvement in sleep each night. The weather is still good but for how long? There is a keenness and slight sense of urgency to start moving towards the main objective. On one of my days at the acclimatisation camp I manage to drag myself up to 5,600m. The views are staggering but brief before a squally afternoon snow shower comes in. I sit for a minute, head spinning, breathing heavily. I think my vision is going funny and I'm seeing stars before I realise it is snowflakes swirling on an updraft.

From our acclimatisation highpoint there was a view of the upper north face of Barnaj II, which gets Dave and Matt psyched. Will, Tom and myself have our sights set on the east face of Chiring, a mountain that caught my eye, intrigued and inspired me. Being visible from a long way down the valley I couldn't take my eyes off it so I was almost tripping over my own feet on the walk in. Being unclimbed and impressively steep, it has all the right ingredients. Setting off from base camp late in the morning, with bags packed for six days out, we stopped by the advance base that Tom and Matt had established the day before to pick up a few bits of gear, leave our trainers and put on our double boots.

The approach to Chiring, although fairly flat, seems to take forever as a team of three roped together to walk up the glacier, following a set of bear tracks. This was an unexpected novelty. I have heard stories of there being a Himalayan brown bear in the valley and it is still here, each paw print bigger than my size 43 boot. The tracks in the soft snow weave around impressive crevasses: this is one glacier-savvy bear. We continue until below what we called the Chiring icefall: a significant steepening in the glacier a few hundred metres below the east face. We make camp here and plan to tackle the icefall in the morning. The views of the east and north face of the mountain



Setting off up the ice runnel. (*Callum Johnson*)

from our camp are both inspiring and intimidating. Three of us top and tailing in a two-person mountain tent is a cramped sleeping arrangement. I end up in the middle which has the advantage of being warm but the disadvantage of being kicked or nudged whenever Will or Tom turn over.

Next morning we weave our way cautiously up the icefall, along the glacier and up the lower snow slopes of Chiring's east face. We spend a long time deliberating over what line to aim for and settle on a series of (hopefully) icy corners and snow ramps and ledges to gain the north-east arête higher



Topo of Barnaj II's north face with route *Seracnaphobia* (ED, M5, AI4, 1600m) shown. (Matt Glenn)

up where it is snowy. We cut a comfortable ledge for the tent; it's only 1pm but we are content that we have put ourselves in a good position for starting early tomorrow morning.

The afternoon turns cloudy, as it often has done, snow starts to fall and does not cease; we keep an eye on it and on the snow accumulating on the slope outside our tent. After dinner and nightfall we check the snow again, not happy with how much has fallen and with the angle of the slopes above us. We make the decision to move our camp down 200m to a col. It is a windy night in the tent, with snow being blown in through the air vents as it swirls around outside. We get a good soaking all round. The morning is bright and clear again but the east face of Chiring has been transformed. It looks to be in good Scottish winter nick but these are not 6,000m-peak conditions. There is another 30cm of fresh snow. The return to base camp with our bags still heavy is draining. Tom does an excellent job leading us back down the icefall, with our tracks and the crevasses now hidden under fresh snow. These are a nervy few hours. Matt and Dave have also turned around on their attempt to climb Barnaj II. Dave has been feeling unwell and struggling to breathe. So the whole team is back at base camp.

Whilst resting at base camp waiting for the latest snowfall to consolidate, I explore the huge granite boulders in the glacial moraine. The rock quality is excellent. This is some of the most idyllic bouldering I have ever done. It is a good escape from the head games of the mountains, and brought back a feeling of succeeding at something. It is nice to remind the fingers



Settling in at the bivy. (Matt Glenn)

how to pull on small holds too. I convince the others to go for a morning's bouldering the next day. We focus on hard moves close to the ground. With only a couple of sleeping mats in place of a bouldering mat, it's best not to fall awkwardly.

After much deliberation we decide that Matt, Tom and myself will attempt Barnaj II from the north while Will and Dave attempt it from the south. I welcome Matt's critique of what I'm packing. I hope to cut back on what I took on our Chiring attempt where my bag felt impossibly heavy. I had taken too much food and too many clothes. With all the gear laid out on a tarpaulin, each piece is questioned before being packed into the rucksack. Again we walk round to our advance base by the moraine-trapped lake, an idyllic location with intimidating views. This time our eyes are fixed on the north face of Barnaj II and its complex ridgeline.

I groan as the 1am alarm sounds but we shoulder our bags and stumble over the moraine bank and onto the glacier, the stars shining brightly and cold air nipping exposed skin. Matt breaks trail up the initial snow slope, following vague remnants of tracks from his previous attempt. The snow ramp steepens to a broad icy gully; we move together and get established on the north face.

As I reach the belay, Matt and Tom are already looking up at the next pitch. Clipping in, I slump onto the sling and breathe deeply, trying to suck some oxygen out of the thin air at 5,800m. My head falls forward against the ice and Tom puts a comforting hand on my shoulder whilst Matt racks the ice screws. We are nearing the end of our first day on the north face of Barnaj II and I'm knackered already: multiple bad nights of sleep, the altitude and a diet of oily carb-heavy curries is catching up on me. We finally find a suitable bivy spot for the night at 5,900m and after 15 hours on the go, the small icy ledge looks more inviting than it has any right to. In an attempt to make the ledge slope slightly less towards the precipitous drop, Tom chips



In the upper mixed section. (*Callum Johnson*)



Tom Seccombe arriving at the summit of Barnaj II East. (*Matt Glenn*)

away at the ice with the adze of his axe. I am determined to try and make up for my lack of leading during the day and contribute to the team, so I get the stove on quick and start melting snow. I fill water bottles and then cook freeze-dried meals for everyone.

The upper couloir yields slightly trickier climbing that we pitch with some short sections of moving together. Good icy steps of around Scottish V, before some mixed sections and then the the ridgeline at 6,100m. We decide to camp here, tired after yesterday's long day and keen to enjoy the morning sun from this position. Although a desirable location, the notable lack of any ledge bigger than one bum cheeks is concerning. We manage to dig out the most promising area slightly more and support the edge with some flakes of rock that had broken off. It's just enough but we regret not taking the snow hammock. We face a night sitting, three of us wrapped in the tent fabric, trying not to slide off the edge. I fill a dry bag with snow and it becomes a team effort to melt this without melting the tent and setting our sleeping bags on fire. Water doesn't boil so hot at 6,100m so our evening meals have a certain crunch to them.

The first rays of morning sun bring a comforting warmth that melts the verglas the cold moist wind whipped onto us in the night. We spend more time warming up and rehydrating, slowly tidying up our camp, but conscious of our weather window we keep it efficient. Matt takes on the breakfast pitches, several rope lengths of technical mixed climbing up the ridgeline, a refreshing change of styles from the previous couple of days. We traverse the ridgeline to a 6,303m forepeak that gives us a view of the north summit of Barnaj II and the complex ridgeline that separates us. We stop in our tracks. With the incoming bad weather, poor snow conditions and the commitment of the ridge ahead (we calculate two days climbing over the



Looking across to the summit of Barnaj II North. A poor forecast, snow conditions and committing ground dissuaded the team from continuing. *(Tom Seccombe)*

north and south summits of Barnaj II and one day descent down the south side) we decide to retrace our steps and descend the way we have climbed. We call our high point (the 6,303m peak) Barnaj II East as it's the highest peak on the east ridgeline leading towards the north summit.

We reverse the ridgeline and then descend entirely on abalakov threads. I cleverly manage to drop my belay plate on the second of 25 abseils, so descend the rest of the way using a fatty biner block. On the lower snow slopes we can rope up and down climb. Being the lightest in the team I move through to the sharp end to lead us through the icfall, weaving in the darkness through crevasses that could hide a house. We stumble back into advance base just before midnight. I'll spare you the details but my bowels are through with oily curries and half-cooked freeze-dried meals. Yet while I feel empty and drained of energy, I'm content to have climbed a new route up a big north face to an unclimbed peak with a strong team. I couldn't have done it without Matt and Tom. Thanks guys.

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Left to right: Johnson, Seccombe and Glenn on the summit. *(Callum Johnson)*



Glenn on the descent. Advance base is near the top of the image photo on the opposite side of the glacier, some 1,000m below. *(Callum Johnson)*