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# Climbs & Expeditions

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VUE DU JUNGFRAU HORN (*PIC DE LA VIERGE*)

fameufe Montagne neigée de la Vallée de Lauterbrunnen au Canton de Berne, ainsi nommée des tentatives infructueufes faites jusques à présent pour parvenir à sa cime.

*Cette Vue prise aux environs d'Unterseen est gravée d'après le Dessin original du célèbre J.L. Aberli. Publié par Chr: de Mechel Graveur, et se trouve chez lui à Basle.*

'Jungfrau from near Unterseen', print after Johann Ludwig Aberli, made and published by Christian von Mechel, Basel, 1768, etching and aquatint with hand-colouring, 39cm x 29.2cm (*British Museum*)

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MAREK HOLOČEK

## The Gods Are Kind on Sura Peak



Sura Peak in Nepal's Hongu valley, close to Makalu. The first ascent was likely made in 1983 by Austrians Sepp Egarter and Volker Klammer via the south-west ridge, decades before the Nepali government put the peak on the approved list. In 2019, Pemba Ongchu Sherpa and the Japanese alpinist Hiroki Nakayama added a route up the north-east face. (All photos courtesy of Marek Holeček)

*Matěj Bernát and Marek Holeček made the first ascent of the north-west face of Sura Peak (6764m) between 19 and 23 May 2023. They called their route Simply Beautiful and proposed a grade of M6 with an average slope of 70°, reaching 90° in some places. The route was 1,500m long with an elevation gain of 1,300m.*

The Sura Peak story began with my expedition in 2021. That spring, the west face of Baruntse was the goal and after all kinds of setbacks the mountain finally gave way via the tough and tricky *Heavenly Trap* (see 'Heaven's Trap', *AJ* 2021 pp3-14). After a hard struggle, one of my dreams came true. One might think that the eyes can embrace only one beauty and



A foreshortened view of the north-west face of Sura Peak from the first bivouac.

focus on one goal at a time. Unfortunately, this is not the case because the eyes are restless and unfaithful. Even while acclimatising for Baruntse, I was eagerly observing the wider surroundings; the space was being created for something more.

For the past two years, the image of a nameless pyramid rising steeply above a glacier had been returning to me every now and then when I closed my eyes. In my mind I was picturing the possible line leading to the top. Nothing could be done about it. The thought had sprung to life and I burdened



A view of the face from base camp with the line of ascent and four bivouacs marked.

it with the reality of questions. And so I searched my archive for photos, browsed the internet and magazines, sent these questions to others. Then I processed all the information and subjected that to more questions. 'Who has already climbed there? When? Which route did they take?'

Is it possible to complete an idea that has been sketched out then fully realised without me taking a single actual step? And anyway, what's this pointy hill called? Here, I can see it: Sura Peak, an almost 7,000m-tall rascal. Well, I'm going for it. No wonder our return to the Baruntse region and the sandy shore that surrounds its glacial lake at more than 5,000m did not take long. This is the location of base camp. Behind it a wall of mountains rises. It is a fairy-tale corner of the Himalaya: terrifying and desolate.

However, before my path could lead me to that familiar place again, I had to cross off more items on my list. I had a clear idea of where I wanted to climb, and what, but there was still a question hanging in the air: with whom? I sent signals into the airwaves, addressing my fellow climbers but for whatever reasons, after two months of searching, the column headed 'Climbing Partner' remained empty. It was necessary to change the scope of my search. If there are no mature fish at the bottom of the pond, the fisherman must wade in shallower waters for young fry. And let's see, right at the very first attempt and after a few formal phone phrases, a young fish called Matěj Bernát is flipping about in the net.

Don't think I chose my climbing partner randomly or according to some alphabetical list. It was based on performance. That's how it's always been. At some point, your well-functioning machine seizes up and one has to try a different set of gear wheels. During almost 50 expeditions, I have shared my journey with many friends, each of them a bit crazy in their own way and focused on some goal of their own but it's always enriching, determined and great.



The afternoon of the first day's proper climbing, approaching the ice barrier.

The beauty of youth lies in the ability to make quick decisions. Youth gushes with energy and is not weighed down by bad experience or bound by the shackles of obligation.

'Okay, Matěj, we are leaving in May and we'll fine tune the rest in the meantime,' I told him before hanging up.

Originally, I intended to describe the entire course of events in a strictly technical way, devoid of feelings and romance. I wanted to keep myself in check. However, to cut down the whole concept of mountain climbing and moving in the mountains to a mere athletic-gymnastic 'positional change', i.e. from valley to summit, would be highly disrespectful, if not barbaric, to my philosophy of life. Mountain climbing is not a classically measurable sport and its purpose is not primarily to reach the top but to live the experience. I don't remember the summits but the strong, hard and beautiful moments along with my climbing partners who helped me look down from the peaks.

But to the point. Before Matěj and I reached base camp, we had been roaming in the central Himalaya for two weeks to train our lungs and legs. In other words, we had been strengthening the internal overload protection so we could face those moments when the body struggles with the lack of oxygen. We reached the cool place by the mountain lake on 13 May. Immediately after the porter dropped off the baggage I happily sent him back to Khare. It is a small village over 10 hours away in another valley, separated by a pass lying at an altitude of 5,500m. We were left all alone in a beautiful place surrounded by the mountains, waiting for the starting gun.

This was the right moment to take a closer look at what lay ahead. There was only a little snow and the reliefs of dark rock and deep blue ice peeked out from the surrounding mountain walls, as though I was looking at a herd



The second bivouac in a welcome ice cave.

of starving horses whose every bone was sticking out of their skin and whose ribs could be played like the strings of a harp. This year's monsoon didn't bring any salvation in the form of snow. There was another difference compared to previous years: perceptible all-day cold. Whether this was good for our climb or not remained to be seen. Reconciling with what you can't control is key and then trying to turn what you have into a miracle. With the help of the stars above, human imagination, skill and desire are gifted with such ability. You don't need anything else. All we had to do then was to wait for the auspicious moment foretold by our 'weather girl' Alena who delivered our daily portion of her meteorological news via satellite.

The launch date day didn't arrive until Friday 19 May. Matěj and I prepared our packs with gear and everything we might need for the following five days. Those five days should be enough for our way up and a safe return.

### Day One

Our camp was located directly under the face on the glacier at 5,500m: a comfortable place to sleep, except for the view above us. From the foot of the mountain an icy slope rises at an angle of  $50^\circ$  in its lower part. This slope then steepens and in the upper part changes to vertical where a forked



Approaching the rock barrier during the morning after the ice cave.

serac grinned at us. Above the serac loomed an ominously overhanging and impenetrably dark rock face. So. Good night, sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs or dark nightmares bite.

### Day Two

Conditions on the first section corresponded to our expectations. We didn't belay each other at the start; the rope served only as a silent connection of our destinies. We gained height quickly with every hour. Around 10am in the morning the sun's rays finally reached us. They were not aggressive but strong enough to slowly loosen the morning stiffness caused by frost. Shortly after noon we managed to reach the steepest part of the icy slide that breached the serac. The slope reached  $80^\circ$  and only in a few places steepened into a vertical wall of blue ice.

With the increasing strain our progress slowed and the afternoon sun quickly drifted westwards. We started feeling pain in the neck and shoulders as we constantly looked up, swinging axes into the ice. Our lungs could still catch up but they would have certainly voted for a break. During one diagonal traverse leading through a system of grooves that linked sections on our line, I chanced upon a cave. It must have been formed some time ago



Holeček in the rock barrier, where the rock was unreliable and rotten. The weather began to worsen during this section, forcing the climbers into a harsh bivouac.



The party's over. Matěj Bernát waking up after their hard night out.

when one part of the ice slid downwards, creating a terrain fault with a one-metre crack. Yay. It was the perfect place for a bivouac, just a bit above 6,000m. The cave must have been sent from heaven.

### Day Three

The weather hadn't bothered us too much with wind and snow but now there was an unwelcome change. In the morning, the sun smiled at us but after that short joyful moment the clouds took over. We climbed another 150m of ice flutes leading from the bivouac to the point where a continuous rock barrier grew out of them. This was a long anticipated challenge. The very first metres proved the rock was like gingerbread sprinkled with loose snow sugar. We started to dance on our crampons and swing our ice axes barely able to find traction. It reminded me of cartoon characters trying to support themselves over an abyss with legs and arms spinning like propellers in the air.

After a lot of effort I climbed 70m up this manure pit. Belays were for psychological effect only. We couldn't rely on anything. Although Matěj fell off twice following and the belay stopped us flying down to the valley. I knew we wouldn't move an inch further that day. The weather was giving us strong hints we should find a place to sleep, and quickly. Icy falls of spindrift began sliding from above and the wind bit our bones through our clothes. Yet there was no platform in sight that would offer space for even a buttock. The terrain all around was hostilely slanted. We had no choice but to dig into the 70° slope but after 20 minutes of wild scrabbling we couldn't

celebrate victory. Under the few centimetres of ice there was rock at the same angle. We were, to put it bluntly, in deep shit.

It was quite clear what to do next. We fixed the fabric of the tent to our hanging belay. It evoked a big garbage bag hung on a nail. We had to cram ourselves inside with our sleeping bags and all our gear and make sure that nothing fell down. There was no support from the tent so our bodies kept sliding down the slope. We were two marionettes tied by strings to the middle of an inhospitable mountain face. A night full of suffering unmatched by anything I'd experienced before took more than enough of our waning strength.

#### Day Four

This was the key day of the entire ascent. Although we didn't know if we could succeed in climbing the following 80m of rock, it was crystal clear that if we didn't, we would be in big trouble. Descending the climbing we'd already done in the two previous days was hard to imagine. On the other hand, the rock section above our heads looked like one huge overhang.

Each time I am indecisive my inner voice whispers to me. 'Just give it a try. Give it a focused valid attempt. Then you'll see.' It took me long hours before I was able to overcome these two rope lengths, with my feet digging in the biscuity terrain. The abyss below our feet down to the foot of the glacier was about a kilometre. Yet the fear was gone. There wasn't any more space for fear. I only felt muscle fatigue that started an alarm buzzing in my head to warn me I was running out of gas. Our bodies were shivering from hypothermia and then it started snowing. Yet at last that damn rock was behind us and the way to the top opened up.

At that moment Matěj replaced me on lead and with great precision started to climb the next two icy pitches. At the end of the second rope length he found a crack I had picked out at our start. I had thought there might be a place for a bivy and so it was. In the middle of the 70° slope another kiss of luck. We set up the tent and boiled water to refresh our frozen and dried intestines. Then we hit the sack, which felt like a four-poster compared to our bed the previous evening.



Now fully committed the team wove their way through the rock barrier.



A close-up topo of the route's critical section through the rock barrier.

### Day Five

We were now heading for the cherry on top. Easy to say, but it proved harder to do. The ice resembled blue glass and every time my toes kicked into the unyielding slope, my nervous system lit up with shooting pain. We could feel the same spasms in our hands caused by thousands of blows of our ice axes. I was losing feeling in my shoulders from the straps of my backpack cutting painfully into my armpits. Yet less than two hours after leaving the bivouac we had climbed the last 140m of elevation to the top. There was nowhere further to climb. No applause, no standing ovation. We forced our faces to squeeze out smiles that expressed the relieved joy that we no longer had to take another step higher. We hugged each other with a pat on the back. We quickly took out our cameras.

I felt relieved but the day was far from over. I took one last look at the spiky world all around us, at that rigid frozen beauty, once again trying to inscribe it indelibly on my memory. The image never lasts long before it starts to fade and finally disappears completely. The only thing that remains captured in the colourful memories is the hardship, hard work and the climbing partner with whom you underwent the martyrdom. Our gaze falls on the nearest giants: Baruntse is within reach, directly connected by a ridge; Chamlang juts out from the other side. Suddenly, I feel a strong emotional impulse that overwhelms me. You are a nostalgic old fool, I tell myself as I wipe away the tears welling up in my eyes. Sure, you managed to make a great first ascent on this and that hill some years ago. Pull yourself together because this is no time to reminisce. Maybe it was also the realisation that my train was approaching its destination and I'd be disembarking in the coming years. 'Okay, thank you Himalaya.' My last boohoo and I go to hell.



The final bivouac, another hole in the ice but much welcomed.

Matěj took the lead on descent down the sharp ridge resembling the spine of the Loch Ness monster. I was glad because the footsteps in the snow indicate that someone has passed here and it is feasible. It's kind of a placebo effect and a connection with life. It doesn't matter that Matěj and I are tied to a rope 20m apart. We are moving in the same rhythm, leaving our protection in the hands of the Almighty. There's a kilometre of space on both sides and we have to drive in our ice axes and crampons with every



Holeček and Bernát on the summit. Holeček said: 'I was horrified at how old I am compared to Matěj.' The west face of Baruntse with Holeček's route Heavenly Trap appears behind.

step. Both of us are pretending we are secure. Our hands and legs slip a little each time before gaining stability in the loose snow. Hours pass and the valley approaches only reluctantly. We leave the snow cover behind us just before it gets dark. We look like rag dolls whose soft feet tread clumsily in a sea of stones. Every now and then the rocks come loose and roll down with a rumble into the approaching darkness.

The story of Sura Peak is coming to an end. Before 11pm we reach the 'teahouse' at Seto Pokhari, a stone enclosure covered with a rubberized fabric instead of a roof. Here, the porters and our friend Pavel are waiting for us. This is the peak of luxury and centre of civilisation for our exhausted bodies.

To sum up: the climb we called *Simply Beautiful* was pure alpinism. A beautiful untouched face. No posh base camp with staff. Only a few backup meals before we started, one battle tent, a pack full of gear, a rope like a umbilical cord, our plan and determination. Nothing useless. Then a battle for each step up the north-west face all the way up to the top and a rush back down to life.

My last words belong to Matěj. Thank you. And I wish also to thank the one or those up there for keeping a protective hand over us.