
TIMOTHY ELSON

India 2019



Climbing on the granite shield of the west face of Bhagirathi IV.
(Matteo Della Bordella)

The 2019 Indian climbing season was much quieter than normal with 74 Indian expeditions and 41 foreign expeditions registered with the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, a decrease of around 25% from 2018. The major event was the dissolution of the state of Jammu and Kashmir by the Indian parliament in August 2019; this led to the effective curtailment of all expeditions to all parts of Kashmir from then on. It is understood that former Kashmir is now re-open for climbing expeditions notwithstanding the current nationwide shutdown due to the Covid-19 outbreak. There appears to have been no expeditions to the Indian East Karakoram.

The major climbing event in the Indian Himalaya in 2019 was the first ascent of the west face of Bhagirathi IV (6193m) in the Garhwal by an Italian team led by Matteo Della Bordella at an impressive 7b A0. Another major ascent was the six-day first ascent of the south ridge of Menthosa (6443m)

The topo of the Italian route on the west face of Bhagirathi IV. (*Matteo Della Bordella*)

and traverse of the mountain by the US team of Spencer Grey and Rushad Nanavatty.

In May 2019 there was the very sad news of the passing of well known British guide Martin Moran and seven clients in an avalanche on the unclimbed peak 6477m south-east of Nanda Devi. This led to an extensive and well-publicised search-and-rescue effort by the Indian Disaster Relief Force.

The Indian government 'opened' 123 new peaks in 2019; previously one had to apply to the home ministry and ministry of defence for permission for these peaks, whereas now a permit can be obtained from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation directly. Peaks fees for the 123 newly opened mountains had a 50% discount in 2019. The list includes 51 peaks in Uttarakhand, 10 peaks in Sikkim, 15 peaks in the former state of Jammu and Kashmir, and 47 peaks located in Himachal Pradesh, ranging from above 7,000m to trekking peaks. See the IMF website (www.indmount.org) for more details. For peaks lower than 6,000m only trekking permits are required, an example being the Kullu Eiger (5646m).

In other news the Atal, or Rohtang tunnel was still on course to open in September 2020. The 8.8km tunnel will give all-year access to Keylong (Kyelang), the administrative headquarters of Lahaul and Spiti, from Manali, and significantly reduce travel times on the Leh-Manali highway. First conceived in 1983, current prime minister Narendra Modi announced in late 2019 that the tunnel would be named in honour of the former BJP prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who initiated the project in 2000. The tunnel is somewhat west of the Rohtang pass and had been plagued with contractual difficulties as well as engineering ones. Forty-two labourers were killed in a flash flood during construction of an access road in 2003.

Bhagirathi IV

The major ascent of the 2019 season in India was the first ascent of the west face of Bhagirathi IV (6193m) by the Italian Ragni de Lecco team of Matteo Della Bordella, Luca Schiera and Matteo De Zaiacom. The team had attempted the face in 2015 and reached the shale band at 5,900m but could





Approaching Kishtwar Shivling during the hastily rearranged Swiss-French expedition. (Caro North)

not find a way through and retreated. Slovenians Matjaž Jamnik and Silvo Karo first attempted the wall in 1995, reaching 5,500m before retreating and again in 1996 by a Spanish team. The face is characterised by 400m of easier angled rock to a 700m shield of vertical to overhanging granite with a 100m high shale band at the top. Mixed-ice routes either side of the face had been climbed by Slovenians Rok Blagus, Luka Lindič and Marko Prezelj in 2009 and French climbers Thomas Arfi and Simon Duverney in 2010.

The Italians first acclimatised on the normal route on Bhagirathi II (6512m), then set to work on the west face of Bhagirathi IV. They intended to climb the low part of the same route they tried in 2015 but traverse left below the shale band. However, on 3 September while at their ABC they saw two large rock-falls down their proposed route and changed plans for a



Nanda Devi East with Nanda Devi sunlit behind and left. Longstaff's Col is on the bottom left of the picture, with the south-east ridge to Nanda Devi East dividing sun and shade coming up from the col. (John Crook)



The team of Caro North, Maud Vanpouille and Lise Billon on Kishtwar Shivling. (Caro North)

more direct steeper route. Yet after three days of fixing ropes they retreated having been blanked out. They removed their equipment from the wall and headed down to base camp but once regrouped decided to have a single-push attempt at their original line, reasoning that the temperatures were now much lower and they would not spend too much time on the climbing. They set off at 3am on 15 September, finding the cracks clogged with dust and debris from rock-falls where in 2015 they found clean 6c/7a cracks. They reached the summit at 11pm having climbed the last couple of pitches in the dark and then descended the east face (normal route). They named the route *Cavalli Bardati* and graded it 7b A0.



The south pillar of Ali Ratni Tibba. (DAV/Expedkader)

Menthosa

The US-based team of Spencer Grey and Rushad Nanavatty made the first ascent of the 8km long south ridge of Menthosa (6443m), located on the west side of the Miyar valley in Himachal Pradesh. Menthosa was first climbed by a British military team in 1970 via the east ridge and this is now a very popular route, and the only route on the mountain until last year. The US team arrived in India to find that they could not travel to Ladakh where they had originally planned to climb due to the dissolution of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. So they changed objectives to Menthosa's impressive south pillar, based on a single photo and that it seemed to be made from granite. On arriving at base camp in August they had a heavy monsoon storm that deposited a metre of snow and took some time to thaw. On viewing the south pillar, they realised that it had several hundred metres of loose rock threatened by overhanging guillotine flakes to overcome and then gain the main pillar, which appeared to be granite. So they changed plans for the south ridge. Grey and Nanavatty set off up the ridge on 22 August, climbing up a jumbled icefall to a col at 5,600m. The next three days were spent climbing mixed pitches, first on the east side of the ridge and then on the west with a hanging bivy at 6,220m at the end of day four. The next day they climbed perfect névé to a bivy just below the summit topping out on 26 August. They descended the east ridge.

Kishtwar

The Swiss Caro North and the French climbers Maud Vanpouille and Lise Billon headed to Kishtwar in the spring climbing season to travel up the Kijai Nala to attempt Arjuna (6220m). However, reaching Gulabgarh they were told they could not visit the valley, as officials thought there may be



The DAV women's expedition from left to right: Veronika Hofmann, Jana Möhrer, Raphaela Haug, Laura Tiefenthaler, with Ali Ratni Tibba behind them. (DAV/Expedkader)

terrorists in the valley. It is unclear how much this had to do with this being an all-female team, a prelude to the dissolution of the state of Kashmir in August 2019 or genuine safety concerns. Whatever the reason, the team had to come up with a new objective. North had made the first ascent of Monte Iñaki next to the Kishtwar Shivling in 2016, so with this in mind they changed plans to attempt Kishtwar Shivling

(c6000m). They travelled from Gulabgarh to the Sumchan valley and set up base camp. Having lost a lot of time with logistical challenges, on their summit attempt they reached 5,700m having climbed lovely compact granite only to be turned around by a snowstorm that signalled the start of the monsoon and the effective end of their trip.

Himachal Pradesh

The German Alpine Club (DAV) female cadre team of Dörte Pietron (team coach), Franziska Dünßer (expedition doctor), Raphaela Haug, Jana Möhrer, Veronika Hofmann and Laura Tiefenthaler visited the Manala valley, south east of Manali in October 2019. Their original aim had been a trip to Zaskar but the dissolution of Jammu and Kashmir and tensions with Pakistan stopped them visiting this area. Haug, Möhrer and Tiefenthaler made the first ascent of the south-west pillar of Ali Ratni Tibba (5490m) at F6a in a long day from their advance base camp on the same day Pietron and Hofmann climbed an unnamed 5,000m peak via a glacial route. A few days later, Haug, Möhrer, Hofmann and Tiefenthaler climbed a peak to the south of Ali Ratni Tibba, via a prominent pillar at 6b+ in a day from their advance base camp. They had hoped to attempt the north-west pillar of Ali Ratni Tibba but did not get another weather window.

Bapsa Valley

Iker Pou, Eneko Pou, Jacopo Larcher, Sieve Vanhee, Matty Hong, Matteo Mocellin and Alex Faedda visited the Bapsa valley in October 2019 and established three new multi-pitch rock climbs on 4,000m peaks. The first was F7c+ on 4670m, which they dubbed Midi d'Ossau; they called their route *The Latin Brother* (560m) in memory of Hansjörg Auer who was meant to be on the trip with them. They then climbed a 4,900m peak by a F6c route

Miguelink (600m) named in memory of Miquel Riera, who kicked off deep water soloing in Mallorca. Finally, they climbed a route they called *Beti Alavés* on Peak 4560m at 6b+.

Uttarakhand

In Uttarakhand the main news of the season, other than Bhagirathi IV (see above), was concentrated on Nanda Devi East (7424m). There were three expeditions to this peak in 2019, the 80th anniversary of its first ascent, but in May there was the tragedy on Peak 6477m when eight climbers died. In June a Polish team summited and in September an Indian team also summited. All teams were attempting the south-east ridge, which rises from Longstaff's Col and was the first ascent route.

On 26 May, the well-known British guide Martin Moran was leading a group of seven up 6477m to the south of Longstaff's Col. At some point on that day an avalanche broke away on the face they were climbing, sweeping them all off the mountain. The deceased climbers were Martin Moran (UK), Ronald Beimel (USA), Anthony Sudekum (USA), John McLaren (UK), Richard Payne (UK), Rupert Whewell (UK), Ruth McCance (AUS) and Chetan Pandey (India). On 29 May the rest of the team, who had been preparing the route on the south-east ridge of Nanda Devi East, returned to base camp where they were expecting the other team. Unable to contact them via radio, Mark Thomas, the co-leader, went up to the 6477m team's high camp and found evidence of the avalanche and from there a rescue was summoned. Following this, the Indian Air Force conducted a helicopter search and on 23 June an Indo-Tibetan Border Police search party located seven of the bodies, which were recovered by helicopter on 3 July. Martin Moran had led over 40 treks and expeditions in India, often climbing new routes and unclimbed peaks with clients, was highly respected and will be greatly missed.

Nanda Devi East was first climbed in 1939 by Jakub Bujak and Janusz Klarner, members of the first Polish Himalayan expedition. It is considered one of the most technically difficult pre-war Himalayan climbs. To mark the 80th anniversary of the first ascent a Polish team aimed to repeat their route, the south-east ridge. The team consisted of 10 members: Rafal Fronia, Dariusz Zaluski, Wojtek Flaczyński, Bartłomiej Szeliga, Jan Lenczowski, Marcin Galus, Stanislaw Pisarek, Filip Babicz, Oswald Rodrigo Perira and Jaroslaw Gawrysiak. Gawrysiak and Flaczyński summited on 27 June during a 21-hour summit push.

On 26 August a four-member Indian team from South Calcutta Trekkers Association of Kolkata arrived at Nanda Devi East base camp with five support Sherpas. On 15 September Pradip Bar, along with Phurba Sherpa, Lopsang Sherpa, Chongwa Dawa and Palchen Sherpa summited, the first civilian Indian ascent of Nanda Devi East.

Sikkim

Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders attempted Chombu (6362m) the 'Matterhorn' of Sikkim both before and after the monsoon in 2019. Chombu



Chombu with the north face on the left and the west face on the right. The line attempted by Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders climbs the gully bottom left of the picture then up the north face. (*Mick Fowler*)

is unclimbed and had been attempted four times prior to 2019. The pair overcame various issues even to get to the mountain. They first planned an attempt in the post-monsoon season of 2017 but their permits were withdrawn. Then in 2018 Mick was diagnosed with cancer and had radiotherapy and then surgery. So it was only in pre-monsoon 2019 that they were able to visit. On arrival at the start of April it transpired the winter had been the heaviest seen 1995, snowing seven feet in a day at one point, leaving the approaches and mountains covered in snow. After an initial acclimatisation period when they climbed a 5,500m peak near the Sebu La, they turned their attention to Chombu itself. However, from this point on in their trip it snowed every night around 10cm and did not freeze, leaving an old wet snowpack covered in more and more fresh snow. After a week of these conditions they realised Chombu was not on, so climbed Chungukang North (5322m) via the moderate south ridge.

Mick and Victor returned post monsoon for a second attempt on Chombu, intending to climb a line on the west face. They acclimatised on the col below the south-west ridge, observing that their intended route was not safely climbable. So they switched objectives to the north face and ridge. During their acclimatisation they encountered 14 days of solid bad weather with precipitation each day. On 10 October the weather improved, and they set out for Chombu, via a couloir and glacier plateau below the north face. On 13 October they set off up a face buried in deep snow, burrowing upwards for two days with Saunders taking his first Himalayan fall when the snow gave way beneath him. They had 250m of easier ground to go to gain they

summit when they bivouacked. However, that night their dehydrated meal was off and they soon had diarrhoea and were vomiting. By morning both felt weak and were unable to eat for the next two days. They made the decision to descend and abseiled down the line of ascent. They have not ruled out trying the mountain again.

Correction

In the *Alpine Journal* 2019, it was reported in the Sikkim notes that a British team went to try the first ascent of Brumkhangshe (5635m). However, this peak was first climbed in 2006 by Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma via the north ridge and again in 2018 by an expedition run by Martin Moran. This team was attempting to repeat the north ridge.