

Raising the Rula flag to new heights

Sandwiched between the Himalayas to the south and the Karakorum to the north, the Zaskar region of northern India is a mountaineer's paradise. Close to the Pakistani border, Zaskar had a troubled history and has therefore only recently been opened up to tourists and foreigners. So when his Indian friend Rushad hatched a plan to go and climb new peaks in the region, our Mr Hector Pringle couldn't say no. A team of 6 climbers (4 South Africans, 1 Zimbabwean and 1 Indian) established base camp at c4000m, amidst a playground of unclimbed, soaring peaks.

After acclimatizing, Rushad and Hector tackled an aesthetic alpine ridge. Starting with a c600m near-vertical granite wall to an overnight camp on an exposed ridge, then winding their way up a long snow ridge interspersed with steep rock bands and some snow mixed with rock the following day. Higher up they had to leave their boots, crampons and axes on a ledge to climb the final three granite pitches in rock shoes. They finally reached a high point of c5100m on a subsidiary peak of the ridge. The main summit loomed ahead but the climbing looked dangerous and they had passed their turn-around time. Satisfied with the new Namoon Ridge route, they descended to their ridge camp and then abseiled down to base camp the following day.

While Namoon Ridge gave them an elegant line up a natural feature of the mountain, their second route blasted straight up the flank of a scary snow and black-rock peak. In a continuous 17 hour push they climbed up 85degree snow slopes, made difficult by mixed snow and rock as well as some pure rock pitches to finally reach an exposed summit (c5000m) with spectacular views. The elation at the summit was tempered by anticipation of the descent to come. On the second abseil the rope got damaged and Rushad had to down-climb steep snow instead of abseiling. They chopped up the rope and continued down 6 technical abseils to reach a scree gully in the dark. By the light of their headlamps they scrambled down while being bombarded by falling stones. Exhausted, and using the altimeter to guide them, they finally found their bivouac cave in the dark.

They spent the rest of the trip climbing smaller rock walls near base camp, and exploring the contrasts that India had to offer. One thing's for certain - they only scratched the surface of the climbing in the region and will have to go back!



**Summit shot - 5100m on a new route called Namoon Ridge
Rula Engineer - Hector Pringle**