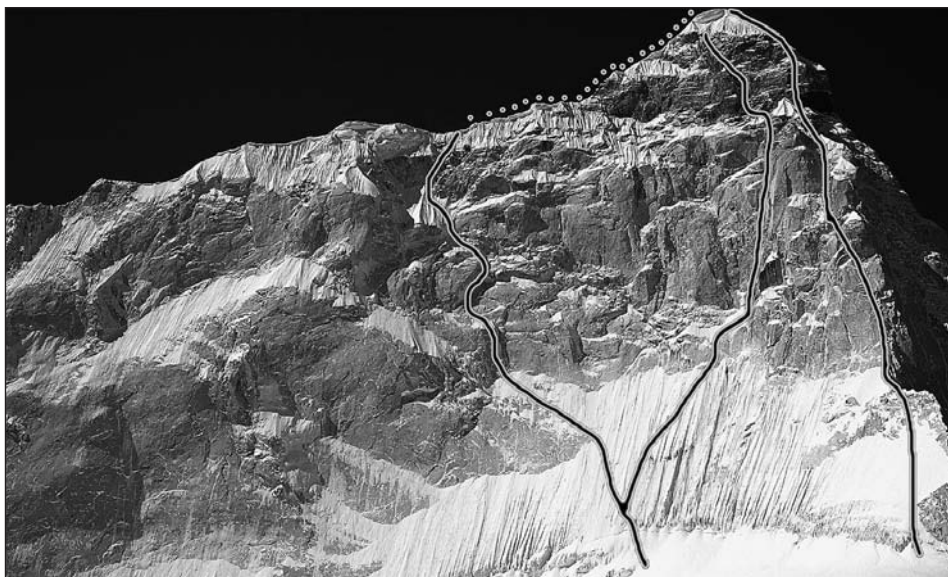


THE DUTCH ROUTE

The northeastern, sunnier side of Thalay Sagar yields its first complete route

MIKE VAN BERKEL



Thalay Sagar's northeast face. This photo was taken in 2001, when the Dutch team made an alpine style attempt. The face is in dry conditions compared to 2003. The Dutch route is on the left (800m, ED-, VI 5.8 A1 A15, 2003). In the middle is the Polish attempt that failed due to a fall 150m below the summit (650m, 5.9 A1 55°, Kpys-Skierski, 1987). On the right is the Northeast Ridge (1,000m, VI 5.9 A1, Czok-Doseth-Guldal-Nesheim-Skorek, 1983). Further right on the arête above the north face is the Italian attempt, which reached the schist band (1,000m, ED, 5.11 80°, Rosso-Ruffino-Vanetti, 1994). *Melvin Redeker, www.melvinredeker.com*

The northeast face of Thalay Sagar had been on our minds since our 2001 trip to the Garhwal. We had climbed the south side of Bhrigupanth alpine style on October 12. By that time it was way too cold to consider climbing the northeast face of Thalay Sagar, where we had spotted a nice line going to the southeast ridge. In August 2003 Cas van de Gevel, Melvin Redeker, and I were back, well prepared, well trained, and with a plan. Inspired by the 1997 climb on the north face by Athol Whimp and Andrew Lindblade, we were carrying portaledges and some static rope. Our plan was simple: establish a camp near the glacier, fix the couloir leading to a col at 6,000 meters, bring all the gear to the foot of the face, bring up the rope, and start the climb. All of this took about three weeks, so by the time we actually started the climb we were well acclimatized and familiar with the approach.

The northeast face is about 1,500 meters wide and 800 meters high, with perfect granite smeared with ice. Amazingly, only the northeast pillar had been climbed to the summit, leaving a superb face open for exploration. One attempt had been made by a Polish team in 1987 to climb a direct route just left of the northeast pillar. They got high but missed the summit when their lead climber fell 150 meters short of the top.

On September 17 our portaledge hung under the bergschrund and we were ready for the ascent. Three days were spent fixing half of the face. The first day we climbed primarily 50-degree snow and ice. The advantage of the face's eastern aspect became clear, with sunshine all morning. This was also its downside since the sun would warm the face, allowing ice to come crashing down. Nothing too bad, but still quite painful when experienced head on.

On the second day the interesting climbing began: some hollow ice at the start, then two pitches of near-vertical ice in a Chamonix-like couloir, and then excellent ice higher up. On our third day a traverse to the left gave way to two more steep ice pitches underneath an overhanging corner. At the top of these pitches our nice line of ice was cut by a belt of overhanging granite.

After three days of climbing we were ready for a rest day, and we would have to decide if we would take the portaledge up the face or just make an early start, get up to the high point, and climb alpine style from there on. Not wanting to lose a good-weather day carrying portaledge, we opted for the latter option, although this meant getting up at two in the morning.

Doing just that, we were at our high point at sunrise, carrying sleeping bags and two days of food. As none of us were really into artificial climbing, it was left to Melvin to try the overhang, basically because he'd read a book about it. Getting better at it with every move, he moved upward and we were soon united on the ice above the overhang. That afternoon we climbed three more pitches on snow and ice with some steep bits, but also lower-angled terrain with icy flutes. As it began to get dark, we approached the steep mixed section that gave access to the southeast ridge.

We spent the night on a little ledge, looking at the moon and the reflections of lightning from the other side of the mountain. Harried by constant spindrift, we were happy to greet the



Cas van de Gevel just below the northeast face of Thalay Sagar. The Dutch team fixed rope up to 6,500 meters before launching for the summit. *Melvin Redeker*



Melvin Redeker aiding the small roof because someone had to do it. *Cas van de Gevel*

sunshine the next morning. After we did two difficult mixed pitches, the granite gave way to metamorphic slate. Set at a slightly lower angle, this section was covered with powder snow and gave Cas two powder-burrowing pitches. As we arrived at the ridge the weather deteriorated, and so, hoping for better weather the next day, we decided to sleep a little lower in a cave we'd passed. This turned out to be much smaller than we had remembered and didn't give much protection from the snow that fell all night. Cas somehow managed to drop his sleeping bag, giving him a really miserable night.

Next day the snow was still falling but there was no wind. Not wanting to wait a day hoping for better weather and running out of food, we had to get to the summit. On the ridge a full-blown storm welcomed us, solving the wind riddle. Luckily the ridge was just wide enough between the cornices and the abyss of the south face. One pitch of slate—not as loose as we had expected—gave way to a nearly horizontal section leading to the summit cone. This we climbed by a 60-meter couloir, at the top of which the cornices from the left and right met. So, on September 23 at 11:30 a.m., we reached the top. Not in the mood to linger at the highest point in these stormy, white-out conditions, we radioed base camp of our success and took our summit pictures.

Conditions on the descent were dangerous, as the snow built up at a rapid pace, dislodging small avalanches on the ridge and covering us with spindrift while rappelling. Our descent picked up speed as we reached the upper fixed rope, and in the last light we searched for our camp under the bergschrund. Eventually we found it buried under a meter of fresh snow. We took the platforms and that night slept in a makeshift tent on the col a little lower down, away from the avalanches. Another long day finally took us to base camp, 10 days after setting out.



Cas van de Gevel just below the rock belt on the northeast face. *Melvin Redeker*

Our route is very interesting, with 17 pitches of vertical ice, artificial climbing, mixed V+, and a nice ridge as dessert, in some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in the Himalaya. We are grateful for the help we received from our cook, Heera, who besides providing us with wonderful meals also helped carry supplies. Completing the team was our liaison officer, Yogi, always helpful and with the latest weather data.

The post-monsoon season of 2003 on Thalay Sagar was a good one. A week after our climb two French climbers, Stéphane Benoist and Patrice Glairon-Rappaz, reached the summit after climbing a new route on the north face, left of the 1997 line. Later in October, a Bulgarian team climbed the couloir on the right side of the north face. Stable, but very cold weather at the end of September and beginning of October, together with excellent ice conditions, contributed to our successes.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: India, Garhwal Himalaya

ASCENT: East face of Thalay Sagar, The Dutch Route (800m + 400m approach, ED-, VI 5.8 A1 AI5). Mike van Berkel, Cas van de Gevel, and Melvin Redeker. September 17-23, 2003.