

Shivling's Direct North Buttress

The quest for the magic line

THOMAS HUBER, *Germany*

If I continued climbing, I wouldn't be able to calculate the risk anymore. I was standing on a tiny ledge in the middle of an overhanging wall. Iwan Wolf, ten meters below, was belaying, and frozen. I, however, was dripping with sweat. Above me was a brittle area, a fragile network of meter-sized flakes loosely wedged into the wall. Even compact-looking sections echoed like a bell when hit with a hammer. My common sense was paralyzed with fear. I could not make a decision. A bit farther above, an overhanging crack disappeared in the mist. Damn, only 20 more meters and we would make it, but in those 20 meters no gear would be good enough to hold a fall. Should I risk climbing this overhanging pile of rubble despite that fact? And if at some stage the rock began to fall apart on me, would I be able to get back? Or would I be brought down with a giant flake that crashed onto Iwan like a guillotine? Even if we survived, we were still at more than 6000 meters in a mountain region where nobody would be able to help us.

I was fighting against myself. The desire to do it was there, but the frightening image of defeat kept me from committing.

Meanwhile, it started to snow. Everything was shit—this mountain, this route, this unbearable situation. I couldn't take it any longer.

Iwan agreed with my decision, because he fancied leading this pitch even less than I did. Apart from that, he was completely frozen. So then, head back....

But I searched the route above us one more time. We were here because of this wall, we had carried heavy rucksacks up the couloir, waited at Base Camp for the bad weather to clear and now I was frightened to death... because of these few, silly meters....

Shivling, at 6543 meters, is not an extremely high peak, but it is one of the most beautiful mountains in the Himalaya, nonetheless. Light and shade outline a dream route as they separate the north buttress into eastern and western halves. This magic central line was climbed in part by the Tyrolean team of Hans Kammerlander and Christoph Hainz in 1993*. However, at the base of the headwall at ca. 6150 meters, they veered to

*According to information given to us by Christoph Hainz—information that differs slightly from that found on pages 231-2 of the 1994 *AAJ*—he and Kammerlander climbed from a base camp at 4200 meters up to 5500 meters on May 22. They cached gear at this bivvy site, then returned to Base Camp for one rest day. On May 24, they returned to bivvy at 5500 meters, then continued the next day to 5900 meters, encountering climbing up to UIAA VII (5.10d) before returning to Base Camp the same day. May 26-29 was spent resting in Base Camp during bad weather. On May 30, the pair climbed once more to 5500 meters, bivvied, then, at 4 a.m. on May 31, started for the top. They climbed 1000 meters before ending their ascent in a violent snowstorm at 4 p.m. Noted Hainz, the pair climbed to “about 40 meters below the summit.... Reaching the highest point on Shivling appeared dangerous and seemed to make little sense in light of the snowstorm. The route had been climbed; even the missing steps in the almost level summit region did not, nor do they now, diminish our ascent.” They descended the line of ascent, reaching base camp at 4:30 a.m. on June 1. Hainz further notes that “the only fixed ropes that we installed were in the crux pitch, and [we] only [fixed] 15 to 20 meters [of rope]. We did this because we had to climb this same pitch in the dark and cold of early morning on the day of the summit attempt. We did not install any other fixed ropes.”



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the right and climbed to the summit via the 1980 Japanese route*. The "icing on the cake," the headwall buttress, remained untouched. In 1998 and 1999, German, Austrian, and Spanish expeditions tried to straighten the right turn of this outstanding line—and not without reason, because the direct north buttress is surely one of the biggest challenges of the Himalaya. Climbing this line was my dream as well, though I did not know when I would try it.

My brother, Alexander, and I decided on the project only three months before the start of the expedition. For a long time I wasn't sure whether I could even build up the right attitude for an expedition of this category. Only when we were leaving the air-conditioned Arrivals terminal in Delhi did reality hit us.

After two days of a wild bus journey, we reached the first peaks of the Garhwal Himal, land of holy mountains, rivers, and lakes. At an altitude of 3000 meters lies Gangotri, the start-off point of our two-day trek to Tapovan Base Camp, which lies at 4300 meters, directly at the foot of Shivling.

The weather could not have been better, and the day after we arrived, we carried two heavy rucksacks toward the start-off point. The sooner, the better: the sooner we finished, the sooner I would be back at home with my girlfriend, Marion, and son, Elias. But our initial optimism was slowed one day later by 15 centimeters of fresh snow. Luckily, after two days of bad weather, Swiss and French expeditions who also wanted to climb Shivling arrived, and their presence made for a more enjoyable time.

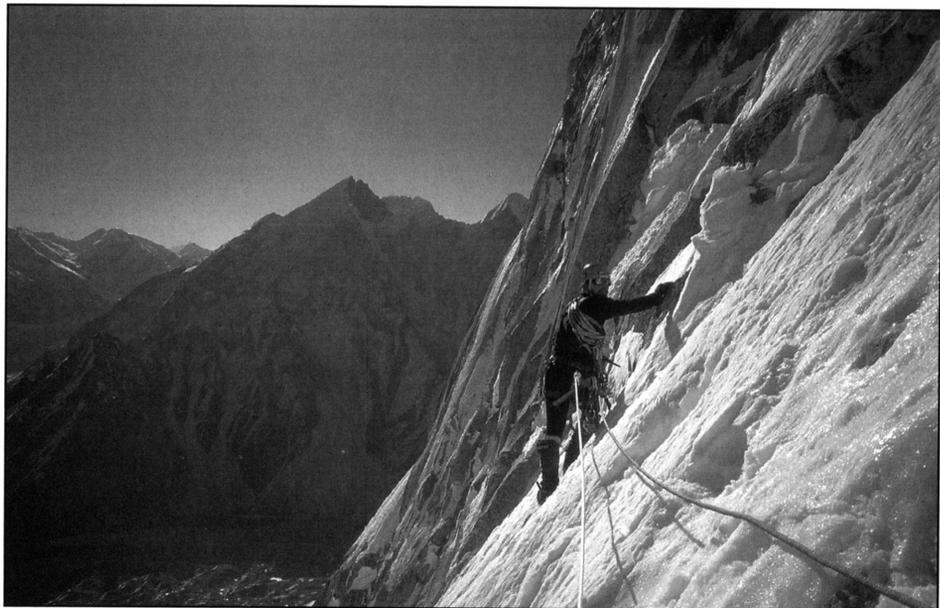
We were tied to base camp for three more days by the miserable weather. The Swiss expedition—Bruno Hasler, Iwan Wolf, and Irma Wolf—got ready to climb Bhagirathi II for acclimatization, and the French prepared to shuttle loads for Shivling's normal route, the West Ridge. I had talked to Hans Kammerlander; he told me that there was a good bivy site for a small tent somewhere near 6000 meters. Alexander and I wanted to establish a camp there to be in a position for a three-day climb to the summit.

The route we wanted to climb begins at 5100 meters with a couloir. From BC, we would cache gear and bivy beneath a big boulder at 5000 meters. At 5400 meters on the right-hand side of the couloir there was another good site sheltered from rockfall where we could pitch a tent. From there, ice up to 60 degrees leads to the beginning of the real climb at 5600 meters. Ten or 11 pitches of free and mixed climbing would then bring us to the site at 5900 meters that Kammerlander had mentioned. Five more pitches, including some complicated route-finding around gendarmes, lead to the best campsite on the entire route at 6000 meters, the place of the so-called "Bend" where the Kammerlander and Japanese routes connected. Seven or eight more pitches would bring us to the base of the headwall at 6150 meters. It was from this point that the Japanese and Kammerlander-Hainz routes climbed to the right to the summit.

Before sunrise on May 10, loaded with heavy rucksacks, we climbed the couloir to the good campsite sheltered from rock fall on the couloir's right-hand edge, only 200 meters below the start of the rock buttress.

The next day we became martyrs once more, climbing the 400-meter couloir with 30 kilos on our backs until all of the equipment, tents, stove, sleeping bags, ropes, and climbing gear

*Fujita-Kubo-Yamamoto, 1980; the route was climbed expedition style, with ABC established on July 28 and the summit achieved on September 4. BC was reached on September 6. See *AAJ* 1981, pp. 277-8.



Alexander Huber on the first pitch of the Buttress. THOMAS HUBER

were deposited at the site. By dawn on May 12, we reached the start of the buttress. Because of the snowfall of the last few days, everything seemed very wintry, everywhere; the slabs and dihedrals were still covered with fresh snow. It looked quite cold, dangerous, and difficult.

Alexander immediately volunteered to lead the first pitch. Alongside the torn remains of rope from previous expeditions, he fought his way higher up across the snow-covered slabs. He wedged the ends of his picks into fine cracks, climbed up a snow-filled crack, and scraped millimeter-wide ledges with his crampons, a mixture of modern dry tooling, free climbing and classic mixed climbing.

The same day, we climbed 100 meters in four similarly difficult pitches, fixing ropes to 5700 meters before we abseiled into the couloir and shortly thereafter reached camp. We hoped to reach our envisaged campsite between 5900 and 6000 meters the next day—a challenging goal, but one we thought we could make.

Instead of climbing, however, the next day found us sitting at BC at 7 a.m. with good coffee and pancakes while the last snow clouds disappeared.

After acclimatizing without problems, the Swiss successfully returned from Bhagirathi II in the early evening. Iwan and Bruno now hoped to repeat the Japanese Route on Shivling's north face. Their planned ascent also started in the couloir and followed our route between 6000 and 6200 meters. From there, they wanted to climb to the right across a striking system of platforms just below the top of the wall. We appreciated their objective, because if anyone needed any help, we could assist one another. But the weather was too unpredictable to climb all the way in one go, and the altimeter did not give hope for improvement.

Despite the bad forecast, Alexander and I still wanted to climb to the site Kammerlander had told me about in a one-day push, jugging our fixed lines and fixing further ropes to this site.

Thus, on May 17, four of us were climbing in the couloir. Iwan and Bruno wanted to deposit their rucksacks at our camp at 5400 meters and then descend to BC in order to be ready for an alpine-style summit push. But the only one descending to BC that morning was me. My "engine" did not want to start, and I forced myself until I threw up. Now I was lying on my insulated mat, completely exhausted, with an empty stomach and fever as I followed the action on the buttress with binoculars.

In the afternoon, Alexander, Iwan and Bruno were forced down from the wall by a thunderstorm, but before they returned they managed to climb and fix five additional pitches and secure everything at approximately 5900 meters. From this point, we thought it would be possible to reach the summit in three days.

The next day, I felt a bit better, and the continuously unstable weather allowed enough time to recover completely from my bad stomach.

Meanwhile, the French group called off their expedition.

The barometer had risen. A good sign: we could start on the morrow.

The four of us left BC at midnight on May 21. Iwan and Bruno waved goodbye in the light of their headlamps, while we continued to pack our tents into rucksacks at the 5400-meter camp. Soon after, we juggled the fixed ropes with heavy loads, working our way up pitch by pitch. At the end of the fixed lines, an easier pitch brought us up to the site Kammerlander had mentioned. On this day, it was Alexander who felt weak; he fought to his limit. Under such conditions, we had no chance to reach the summit.

Storm clouds coming in from the west made our decision easier. We quickly deposited all our climbing and bivouac gear behind a block and started to abseil. Bruno and Iwan carried on, reaching the Bend at 6000 meters the same day.

Early the next day, the weather was good again, and I was disappointed and worried that we had missed our chance. But it was only a theoretical chance, because Alexander would not have had the strength. Shivling cannot be conquered with a 38°C fever and infected tonsils (as Alexander was diagnosed as having by the French expedition doctor). The chances for his imminent recovery were small, and therefore the success of our expedition was more and more unlikely.

Via radio, we heard from the Swiss that a storm accompanied by 100 kilometer-per-hour-plus winds was blowing around the crest, pinning them to their camp. Now that we could see the kilometer-long snow plumes blowing from Shivling and the surrounding summits, we were happy with our retreat. At least we have not missed out on anything up on the mountain today, I told myself, and I hoped for a little miracle.

Iwan and Bruno were stuck. Though there were hardly any clouds in the sky, the wind had been blowing with biting cold for two days. It was absurd: the weather was stable and sunny, but still they were nearly blown off the mountain by the wind.

Meanwhile, Alexander's state of health had improved over the last few days, and he thought he had recovered from the infection.

We were on our way again: we wanted to climb all the way through to the summit, the weather was still perfect, and the wind seemed to have settled a bit. Iwan and Bruno, who had moved camp 150 meters higher, hoped to climb to the summit.

At 6 a.m. on May 25, I was at the start of the fixed ropes, waiting for Alexander. One hour later he reached the belay station without any energy. For him this was the final straw, and at the same time the end of our expedition. Alexander had done his best, but

the infection breeding in his body weakened him too much. He didn't stand a chance. He was disappointed, sad, and angry all at once, but we both knew that now there was only one decision to make.

Head down, Alexander descended through the sun-flooded couloir, while I climbed up the fixed ropes in order to collect our gear.

On arrival at the camp, I talked to the Swiss via radio.

"Thomas calling Iwan: Are you near the summit? Over and out?"

"Iwan calling Thomas: no, it is freezing cold; I cannot feel part of my toes any longer. We are just below the headwall, and it still is very windy up here. We don't have a chance, we are abseiling. Thomas, where are you? Over and out."

"Thomas calling Iwan: Alexander has descended to BC; he is ill. I am at our camp at 5900 meters collecting the gear; we are calling off the expedition. Over and out."

"Iwan calling Thomas, please wait with the descent, we are going to abseil via your buttress and will be with you in three hours, then we'll see. Over and out."

"Thomas calling Iwan, OK, I'll wait. Over and out."

Did they want to...? I didn't dare push the thought any further.

Hours later, they reached me at camp, tired but happy, and firmly committed to supporting me for the rest of the expedition—but only after a few days of relaxation at BC. Alexander was happy that our expedition still had the chance to climb the direct north buttress in one go. He left BC the following day.

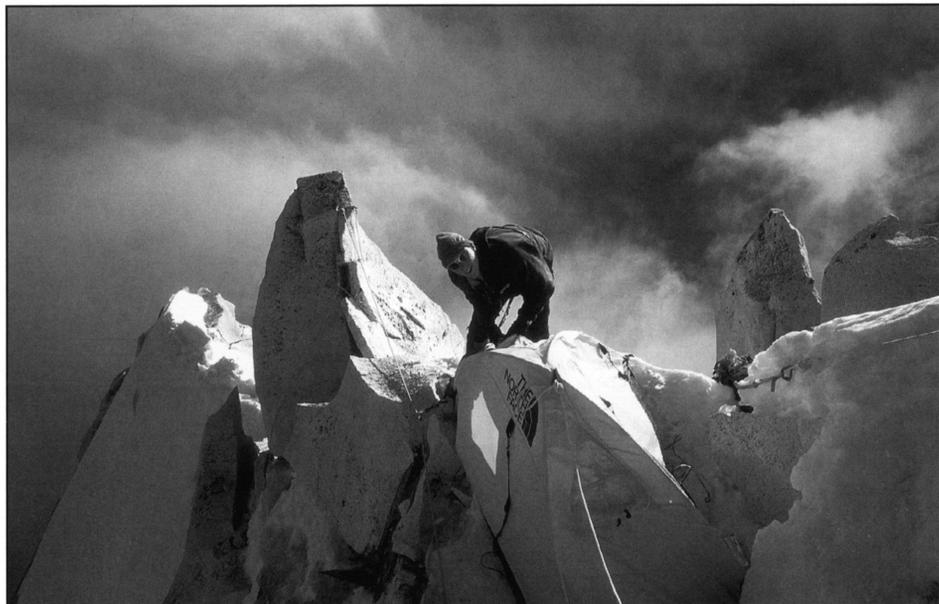
We discussed our approach and the formation of the team. The Swiss decided that Irma and Iwan would try to reach the summit via the West Ridge, and Bruno would climb the direct north buttress with me. Shortly thereafter, Bruno injured his finger; it was nearly impossible for him to support me. After Bruno's small but weighty injury, the Swiss changed their team once more. Now, Iwan would try to climb the direct north buttress with me, and Bruno and Irma would climb via the challenging West Ridge.

On the evening of May 28, we once again discussed our tactics. Iwan and Bruno had found a good campsite at ca. 6000 meters at the Bend. We would start shortly after midnight, jug our fixed lines and continue to this point, putting up our tents. On the second day, we would climb and fix a pitch of the headwall, while on the third, we would climb through to the summit... if everything went well, the weather stayed stable, and our energy reserves lasted. For us, it would be our last chance to reach the summit, because the porters were to arrive on June 4. If we were surprised by weather, we would wait at the 6000-meter camp, only returning to BC as a last resort. Tonight would be a short night.

May 29. After three hours of dozing, sleeping and crazy dreams, I was roused out of my sleeping bag with our cook's cheerful "Good morning!" What is this that you call morning? It was midnight, pitch black, and not a star in sight. The air pressure on the altimeter was not too bad, however—so, let's go. Waiting another day at BC would endanger success, purely in terms of time.

Two cups of coffee in order to pep up circulation, and off we went. We stumbled along by the light of our headlamps, up the steep moraine that led to the entrance of the couloir. "We'll manage," Iwan said. He is an optimist. With any luck, he would be right.

Slowly, the body adjusted to the regular exercise. Breathe in: one step; breathe out: one step—nothing would change this rhythm for the next two hours. We climbed into the



Iwan Wolf at the 6050-meter bivouac. THOMAS HUBER

couloir, the slopes steepening to 50 degrees in front of us, dreamscapes giving way to a constant state of alertness. At 5 a.m., we reached the start of our fixed ropes. We were doing well in terms of time; the weather also seemed to turn for the better.

“Maybe you are right with your ‘we’ll manage,’ Iwan.” His cunning smile told me everything. I attached my ascenders and we jugged the first 300 meters of the route.

At 9 a.m., we reached our cache at 5900 meters and sorted our equipment: one tent, two sleeping bags, one stove, gas and supplies for three days, cams, nuts, hammer, hand drill, five bolts, and just in case, if everything failed, lots of pitons and beaks and heads for the smallest cracks. In the meantime, the weather had turned out perfectly: blue sky above us and no sign of a storm. Under such circumstances, we had a good chance to erect our camp 100 meters higher at the Bend.

We wanted to climb light and fast to the Bend, fixing our three ropes so we could then haul the bivouac gear in the afternoon. Iwan left the leads to me. After a short pitch, the buttress steepened to vertical. A short, very scary slab that was difficult to protect required all of my climbing skills, and I needed several attempts before I could progress. A fall here would not be a very good idea. After four meters, a solid cam calmed my nerves and the way up became easier.

The compact granite of the ridge relented in angle, but the route finding through the gendarmes became more complex. Still, we managed to progress quickly. At 1 p.m., we reached the exposed campsite—a crazy site, just big enough for our tent.

Four hours later, we sat, tired and worn out from carrying. Melting snow, eating, drinking: everything happened with the usual routine. The same applied to the weather: hours ago, it was sunny and warm, but now a freezing wind blew, it was snowing and our tent was swallowed by dark clouds. When it also started to thunder, our



Iwan Wolf below the headwall, with the high winds evident above. THOMAS HUBER

adrenaline level rose. Thunder in the mountains, at our exposed camp! We were trapped in a small cage and could only hope and wait.

The next day, no traces of the previous day's thunderstorm remained; the weather had completely normalized again. We waited until the rays of the sun reached the camp, then Iwan began up the first pitch of the ridge.

Unfortunately, the sun did not have the warming strength of the day before and a cold, cutting wind blew around the crest. Below the headwall, near the summit, the wind whipped snow clouds into the blue sky again. Iwan hated this weather; he knew it very well.

We carried on climbing. Iwan reached the base of the headwall. The old, rotten fixed ropes of the Japanese route ran over to the right. Above us was unknown territory—the unknown, and adventure, the crack systems of the Magic Line. I sorted the gear on my harness and climbed up above the belay via an overhanging crack.

Which brings us back to the beginning of this story.

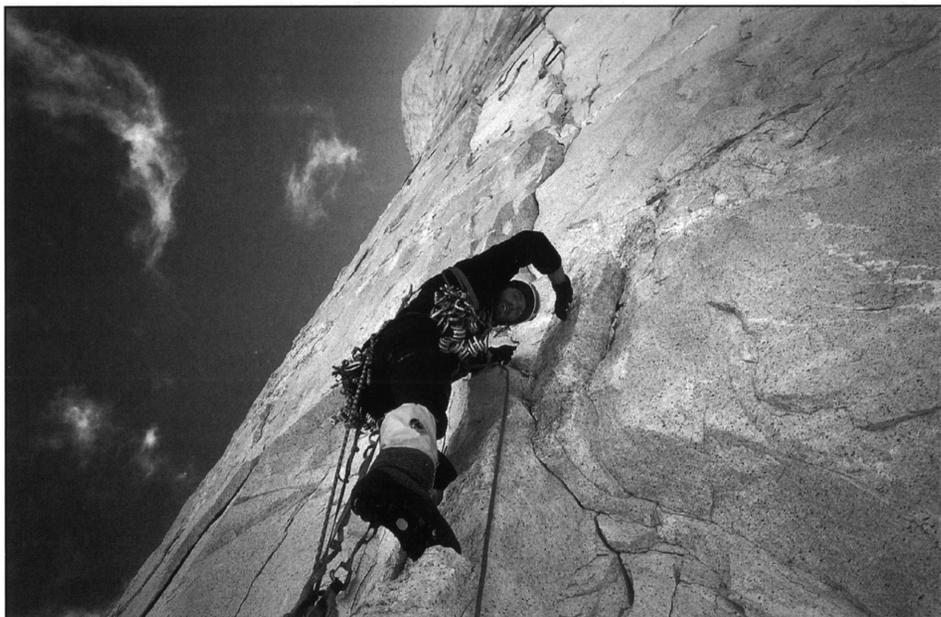
Iwan, just hold on a second....”

I could not just give up like that, without having tried. It would always be on my mind. I had to put an end to this story, even if after ten meters I found that it is not possible for me.

“Iwan, I will try. Watch out and duck in case anything falls down.”

From now on, there could not be any more doubts. I could, and I wanted to, live this adventure here and now.

I was careful, I tapped every meter of rock with my hammer, questioned every piece, and slowly climbed higher. But none of the gear would hold a fall, because all of it was placed behind loose flakes. With the help of hooks, equalized cams, and a mix of aid and



Thomas Huber on the first pitch of the headwall. IWAN WOLF

free climbing, I traversed three meters via a detached flake, hoping to find more compact rock in a fine crack to the left.

My movements were slow; I was very careful with everything I did. I persuaded myself of a safety that no longer existed. I had crossed the Deadline. Everything was in my hands now.

“At this moment, trust only in your actions, and not in a cam that might save your life if you fall,” I told myself.

The quality of the rock did not improve; it was the same rubbish over here as it was on the right. It was sickening. I fumbled and extracted two little stones from a crack that was finger-width to begin with, and carefully wedged in a 0 TCU. It looked like it would hold—or, I should say, it had to hold. Slowly I shifted my body weight to the TCU and observed it for the smallest movement, always ready to react, to step back to the hook below. It did not move a millimeter. It might have even held a small fall, although the rock still sounded terribly hollow.

“Only trust your actions,” I thought; the risk of depending on an allegedly good TCU was too high. Only two more meters, and the unstable rock might lay behind me. I put my total energy and concentration into the last meters, hammered a long knifeblade into the rotten rock and slowly shifted my body weight. It held.... Shit, it did not...! The piton slipped down two centimeters, then wedged again. I nearly.... Fuuck, I felt sick.

“Iwan, watch out, the piton will not hold, I need to go back....” I had to remain cool, otherwise I would have no other choice. Once again, I hammered the piton completely into the rock and tried once more to slowly shift my weight to the suspect piece. Deep breath: avoid all sudden movements, place another knifeblade a meter higher, hammering it in with careful blows. It too was not good, sliding into the rotten rock with disconcerting ease. One meter higher the rock appeared to improve, changing from the

white broken consistency to a more solid orange granite. Deep breath.

A number 2 angle penetrated the compact crack with a singing sound. It was my hymn of victory. We had made it. Ten minutes later I reached the anchor. Behind was a 40-meter psycho thriller that I had never experienced before. Tension slowly subsided and I recognized my surroundings again. I was on Shivling, we were at 6250 meters, climbing our route; it was snowing, and cold. Iwan followed with the ascenders, then aided and freed 25 meters of the next pitch as well. After that, we abseiled in a snow-storm back to our camp, leaving our ropes behind.

The wind changed to hurricane force, and we started to have doubts. A thunderstorm with lightning made the situation very exciting....

May 31: We were both skeptical whether this day would lead to success. Again and again, we were swallowed by thick cloud; it was snowing, and an uncomfortably cold wind blew. But despite that, we were on our way. We had been on the overhanging head-wall for hours, fighting our way up pitch by pitch. It was possibly our last chance to reach the summit, and we wanted to make use of it in spite of the hostile weather conditions.

After finishing Iwan's pitch from the day before, I set up an anchor. Iwan juggled up the line, cleaning. The blank rock above overhung so much I could not see what came next. I pulled the bolt kit with the rivets and bolts out of the rucksack, just in case—but when I went to switch it from one side of my harness to the other, it fell. Our only lifeline, should a passage of compact granite stop us from progressing farther, was gone. But today I was lucky. At the last minute, again and again, I found a way to place a piton, wedge a birdbeak into the smallest seam, or place a talon behind a flake.

It was 4 p.m., and we had only to conquer 25 meters of overhanging rock, then we should reach the summit icefields. We were still in the race. Our 200-meter headwall ended in a small roof. Above it, 200 more meters of 50-degree ice led to the summit—but overcoming the roof would be another challenge. I put all my hopes into one Camelot, the cams of which had more contact with ice than rock. Another one of many suspicious pieces—but luck was by my side again.

“Iwan, we have managed it!”

Once more, I enjoyed the view and the exposure on this steep wall.

Then I placed two pitons at the beginning of the ice and fixed the rope for Iwan. Ten minutes later he was standing next to me. Without a break, he took over the lead for the next five pitches up the icy terrain, finally climbing up a 70-degree cornice. At 6 p.m. on the dot, we reached the highest point of Shivling—and again, we were completely stuck in mist. The summit was a flat, snow-covered plateau. Completely unspectacular. We shook hands, congratulated each other on the success, and, after a short rest, started the descent.

There was not enough time for emotions; the feeling of having achieved the summit was dampened by the thought of abseiling via the overhanging summit wall in the dark.

At around 11 p.m., we reached our top camp completely exhausted, and crawled into our humid sleeping bags. We were too tired to be aware of the day's success, and minutes later fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, we were awakened by the sun rising in the blue Garhwal sky. Our wrecked and swollen fingers reminded us of our big adventure. Only now did we realize our achievement, which, the day before, due to exhaustion, we could only take in automatically. We had managed to climb this magic line all the way through to the summit. We called the route *Shiva's Line*. At 7 A4, it was one of the most difficult routes I have ever climbed.

Via radio, we learned that Irma and Bruno had reached the summit one day before us, in extreme weather. Perfect!

We dismantled our camp and started to abseil. We really deserved the Swiss cheese fondue tonight....

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Garhwal Himalaya, India

VARIATION: *Shiva's Line* (7 A4 70°, 400 meters), a direct finish via the headwall of a line climbed in part by the Japanese (1980) and Kammerlander-Hainz (1993). The entire route is graded 7 A4 M6, 1443 meters. On Shivling (6543m), May 29-June 1, 2000, Thomas Huber and Iwan Wolf

PERSONNEL: Alexander Huber, Thomas Huber, Bruno Hasler, Iwan Wolf

Thomas Huber discovered the fascination of climbing at the age of 12, a fascination that would lead to first ascents of top-end sport climbs, free ascents of *El Niño*, *Golden Gate* and the *Salathé* on El Capitan, and the first ascent of Latok III's west face. He is a mountain guide and has been a professional mountaineer since 1995. He lives in Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, together with his girlfriend, Marion, and their son, Elias.



Thomas Huber and Iwan Wolf. THOMAS HUBER