

ARWA SPIRE

Spicy granite on pointed peaks—two amazing routes on the stunning north faces of Arwa Spire's main and west peaks, in India's Garhwal Himalaya.

BY STEPHAN HARVEY



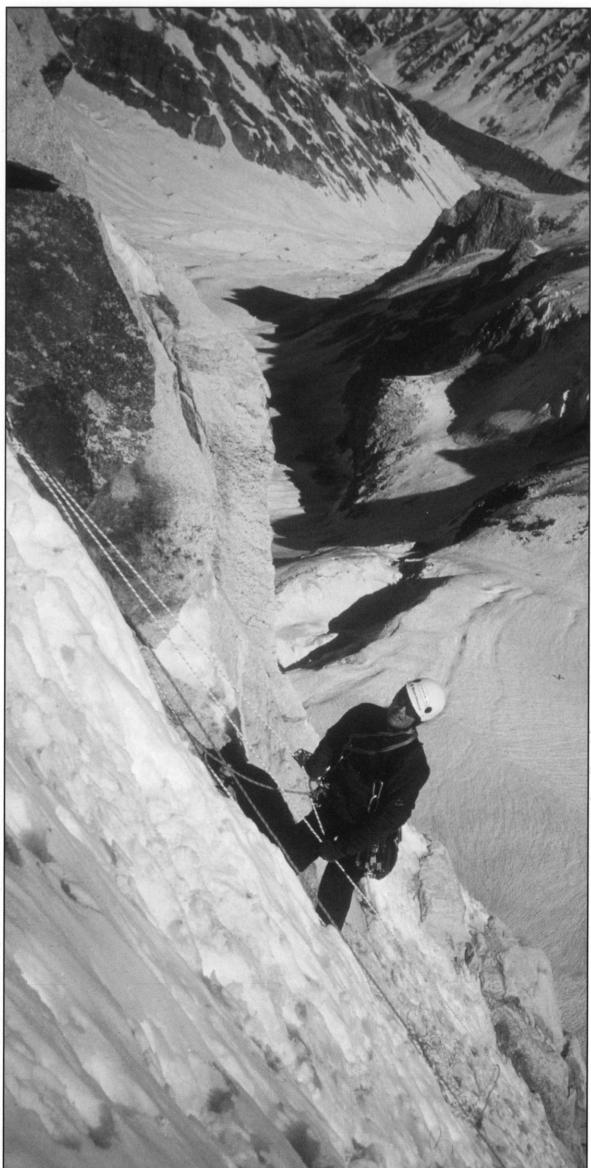
The stunning north faces of Arwa Spire, showing the central and west summits from the north. The English Route (2000) follows the east (left) ridge, while the two Swiss routes are shown, with Fior di Vite heading toward the main summit and Capsico leading to the west summit. Bruno Hasler

The graceful, sky-scraping granite monoliths known as Arwa Tower and Arwa Spire have excited every climber who has seen their photographs, like the one on the cover of the *American Alpine Journal* (2000). That picture was taken during the 1999 first ascent of Arwa Tower, by Mick Fowler and Steve Sustad. The same year, another team tried to climb Arwa Spire, and the next year, British climbers Andy and Pete Benson climbed the slightly lower east peak, following two attempts on the north face.

The beauty of these peaks and the unclimbed north face of Arwa Spire lured Bruno Hasler, Roger Schäli, and me to the Garhwal Himalaya in May, 2002. We began with a three-day bus trip from Delhi to Badrinath. We finally reached base camp, at 4,660 meters, after two more days on foot. But problems with the porters—only half of them showed up, then they went on strike, and loads were lost along the way—cost us some time and energy. Then, after a hard last day of trekking, Roger seemed to be suffering from pulmonary edema. So we went back to Joshimath for four days of rest. Bruno stayed at base camp with our cook, Suraj, hoping we would show up soon, because the weather stayed sunny and warm the whole time.

One week later, Roger had recovered, and we returned to make another approach to Arwa Spire. Thus far, we hadn't even seen it yet.

Finally, after 16 days, Arwa Spire appeared: the granite monolith seemed to rise up out of a moraine as we walked closer, revealing more of its huge size with each advancing step through the rubble. The three pillars on the north face looked impressive, to put it mildly. After another



Stephan Harvey in the couloir on Fior di Vite. The couloir divides the east from the central pillars on Arwa Spire. Bruno Hasler



The bivouac on Fior di Vite. Two people slept in the portaledge, while one person used a hidden snow cave. Bruno Harvey

three hours of dragging loads, we reached a perfect place for advanced base camp (ABC), at 5,400 meters, on a rock island opposite the north face of the Spire. The rest of the day we just ogled the wall, looking for the best line. We settled on the central pillar, where a potential line followed a snow and ice gully, then went to the right across a rock shield, to reach a snowfield. From the snowfield, it looked like it would be easy to reach the pillar, where 250 meters of hard rock climbing awaited us. But first, we had to return to base camp for more loads. It only took us a fun 30-minutes to ski back down the glacier that it had taken six hours to climb. After all the loads had been brought up to ABC, we started climbing the snow and ice gully. We had intended to drop gear at the top of the gully, but of course the sunny weather began to deteriorate just as we began to climb (Murphy's Law?). So we returned to base and waited for three days, enjoying Suraj's delicious meals.

Finally, the weather improved and we walked back up to ABC. The next day, we climbed the snow and ice gully, again, to our first real challenge: the rock shield. The rock was so wet that we had to climb it on aid (A2). Then we reached the snowfield, and found a safe place for our bivouac. While Bruno and Roger fixed ropes for the following day, I prepared our "suite" for the night. The next day, we followed the fixed ropes and began climbing the central pillar. The cracks were often filled with snow, and we had to clean them out before they were any good for jamming or placing pro. The climbing on the pillar was exposed, and mostly aid. After four pitches of hard work, we reached a snow ledge. Then we made an easy traverse to the right, and at 6 p.m. became the first to stand on the summit of the main peak of Arwa Spire. One after another, we mounted the summit needle—there was only room on top for one at a time. After



Reporting for the morning shift. Roger Schäli jumaring past a granite flake on Capsico, on Arwa's west summit.
Bruno Harvey



Dinner time. Roger Schäli headed back to camp on Capsico. Bruno Harvey

enjoying the twilight, we rappelled down to our bivouac. Back at base camp, we celebrated our success with some Italian grappa, "Fior di vite," and somehow, that became the name of our new route.

Three days of rest and fantastic meals stoked us for yet another climb: the west peak of Arwa Spire. We spied some fine looking cracks that we thought might be a workable line. But since it looked much more difficult than our previous route, we concocted a new plan: two of us would climb and fix ropes, while the third man would enjoy a rest day at ABC and be responsible for providing a hot meal each evening for the returning "workers." It turned out that two days of climbing to one of rest was perfect. And climbing the fixed ropes was much less strenuous than hauling gear and sleeping on portaledges, under all sorts of weather conditions. But getting up in the cold morning was sometimes a little hard, especially when it was snowing. Luckily, it never snowed for the whole day, and we managed to stay motivated to keep going back up onto the wall.

On the last pitch of the second day, I was squeezed into a tight groove, clearing out snow and hoping to find some good placements. But I couldn't find anything useful; up above, it looked just as bad. Then I recalled seeing a chimney to the left, so I backed down to the belay, climbed a little nose to a spot where I could look around a corner, and peered into the chimney. It looked overhanging, and huge, and I thought that our cams would probably be too small. Disappointed, I placed a sling and rappelled back to the belay. Bruno and I returned to camp, with no idea how we'd carry on the next day.

But in the morning, after thinking about the problem all night, Roger and I started out with renewed enthusiasm. For some reason, I thought the first way I had tried might yet go. Powered by newfound energy, I managed to get up the first difficult bit, which gave us even more incentive to push on.

The next day, it was Bruno and Roger's turn again. They managed to ascend some fine cracks in a steep rock face, reaching a ledge, while I followed their progress from ABC through binoculars. Suddenly, I heard shouting from the wall—Roger had fallen. Fortunately, a well-placed hook held, and the fall was not serious. The two came back at sunset, just as snow began falling again.

After six days of climbing and rappelling, we were ready for the final push. We clipped jumars onto the ropes for the last time. After three hours of jugging, we were warmed up for the last four pitches of the route. At 2 p.m., we reached the unclimbed west summit of Arwa Spire.

In honor of the spicy meals we enjoyed back at base camp, we named our route Capsico (like Indian Tabasco).

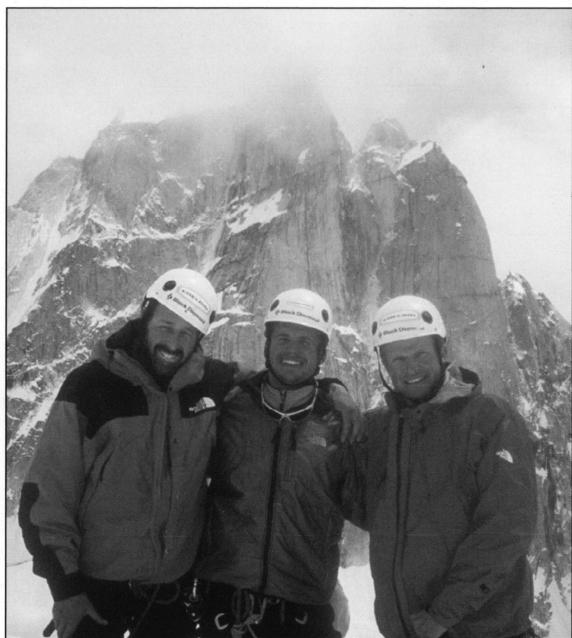
SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: India, Uttarakhand, Garhwal Himalaya.

ASCENTS: Fior di Vite (780m, 6+ A2 80°), summit reached on May 24, 2002
Capsico (850m, M6+ A3), summit reached on June 5, 2002. Both climbs were made by Stephan Harvey, Bruno Hasler, and Roger Schäli.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Stephan Harvey, 34 years old, was born and brought up in Switzerland, though his last name comes from an English father. He has a degree in geography from the University of Zurich, and has been a mountain guide since 1998 when he is not working as an avalanche forecaster for the Swiss Avalanche Warning Service in Davos. A climber since the age of 16, he participates in many mountain sports. Most of his climbing takes place in the Alps, though a few expeditions have taken him to Alaska, Yosemite, Nepal, Pakistan, and India. His favorite climbs are long steep walls with fantastic lines.



Bruno Hasler, Roger Schäli, and Stephan Harvey enjoying the afterglow from Fior di Vite.