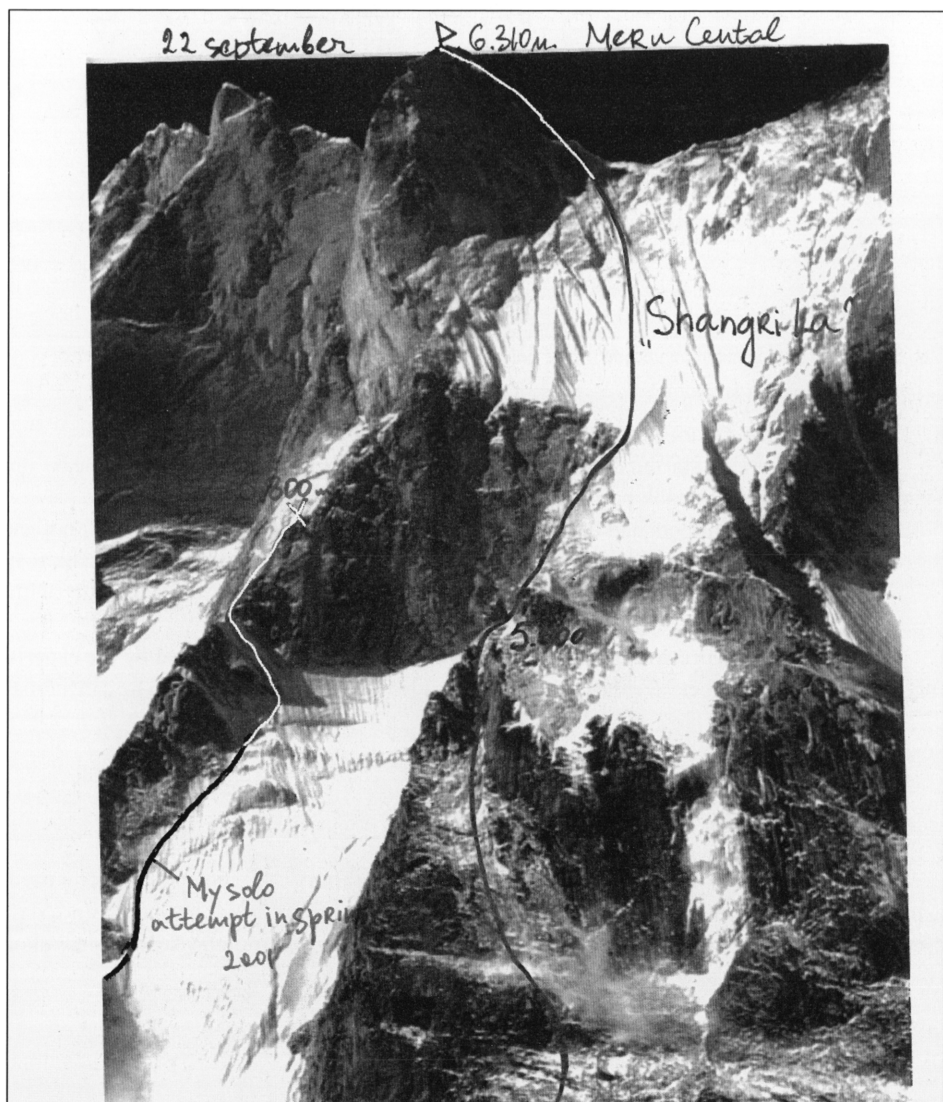


THE SHARK'S FIN

After beating back dozens of the world's best climbers, Meru's central peak finally succumbed to an unrelenting soloist. Indian Garhwal.

VALERI BABANOV



As far as I knew there had been about 15 attempts on India's Meru Central, otherwise known as the Shark's Fin. This was my second. The first had been in the spring, when there was much snow on the wall. Now, at the end of August, it was greatly changed. The snow on the glacier had thawed and the lower part of the wall was nothing but black rocks. It was obvious that the first 300 to 400 meters would be especially dangerous. Stones fell constantly from the wall.

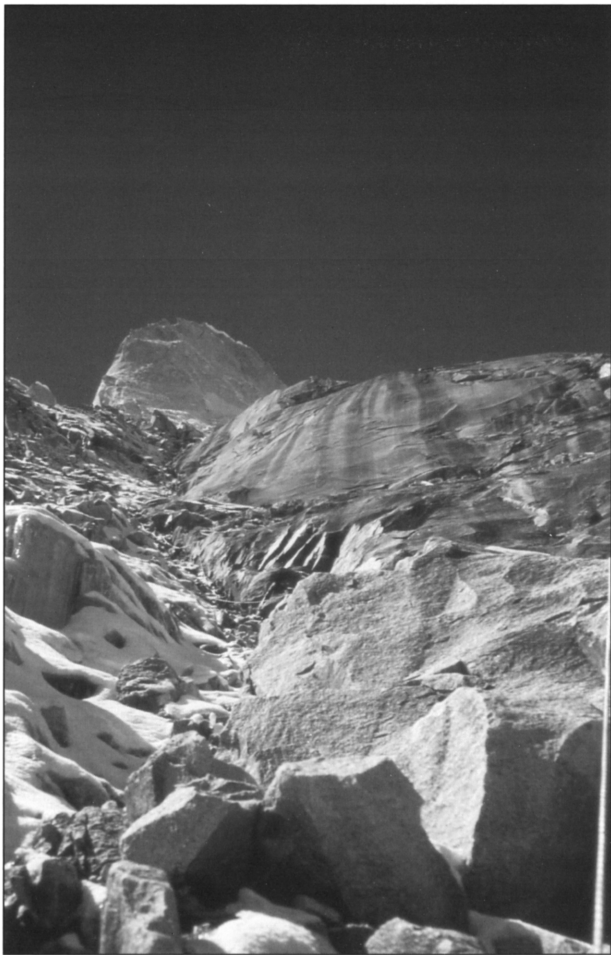
In contrast to the spring attempt, I would be following the right buttress. I thought the new route would be a little easier than the spring one, and it was also a logical line that was perfect for a solo ascent. The overall height from the glacier to the summit was a little more than 1,500 meters. The total length of the route would be closer to 2,000 meters. Taking into account all the mistakes of the spring expedition, I had brought about 500 meters of 5 mm Kevlar static and 8 mm dynamic rope. I would fix them on the lower part of the wall.

On September 1, my old friend Igor Zdhanovich and I moved onto the glacier under the wall. Igor helped me drag part of the equipment up there, but then I began to work alone. The route went up steep and shattered rock slabs covered in loose stones. The climbing was delicate. The weather was unstable, and as a rule it snowed in the afternoons. In two days, September 2 and 3, I reached a height of 5500 meters and fixed some ropes. On September 4, I came down to base camp at Tapovan to have a rest in rain and snow.

Over the next week, I went up the wall again, but unstable weather kept me from making much progress. At the end of September 9, I reached a rock shoulder at 5600m and decided to organize a high camp there in preparation for a spurt toward the summit. A rock wall more



Hauling gear at circa 5800m on Meru's Shark's Fin during the spring attempt. Valeri Babanov



At 5500m on the way up the Shark's Fin, Meru Central. *Valeri Babanov*

snow "flags" away from the crest and the wall, and I needed to wait. My instinct whispered that a radical change would come over the weather.

The next morning, September 17, held no clouds in the sky, while only a weak wind blew. That day I headed up toward 5600m, where my high-altitude camp would be.



September 21. I have had a day of rest at 5600m, as I needed to gather strength after three days of solo work fixing 250 meters of rope on the wall above.

It was 9 p.m. local time and 10:30 p.m. back in Omsk. Everybody was going to bed, but I would have to spend a long and dangerous night on the north face of Meru Peak. I couldn't fall asleep. I was getting more excited with the approach of midnight, when I would start up toward the summit.

than 100 meters high barred the way to the ice. But I would decide later how to overcome the wall. Now I had to go down to ABC for the portaledge and for extra food. I decided it would take two or three days to pass the rock band and reach the ice wall, which led in about 700 meters to the crest that joined the central and north summits.

Early on September 14, I began to climb the fixed ropes. But soon heavy clouds came crawling in and it began snowing heavily. The next day, back in ABC, it snowed from noon on. I sat and thought only about the ascent. I could not think about anything else.

It was getting colder every day.

On the night of September 15, hurricane winds shook the tent. It seemed the weather was getting worse. What would it be tomorrow?

On the morning of September 16, the sun shone. But high winds blew huge

I cooked soup and sweet tea. I analyzed my actions so far—waiting at basecamp for better weather, finding a good high camp, fixing ropes on the rock wall—and came to the conclusion that they were correct, based upon my knowledge, skills, and instinct. The day of rest had come to an end, and the time of consideration was over.

It was absolutely dark, with a weak wind blowing, as I crawled out of my sleeping bag. I breathed the cold air and began to put on all the necessary things: warm fleece jacket, windproof suit, and light down coat. My motions were quick and confident, the result of many years of climbing. I left my crampons off because the first 150 meters of the ascent would be through rocks.

It took me a little time to pack up my rucksack. My equipment consisted of two 60-meter ropes, a Gore-Tex bivouac sack, two pairs of Polartec gloves, some rock pitons, 10 ice screws, Friends, half a liter of hot tea, and little loaves of chocolate. The rucksack weighed a little more than 10 kg. I tried to imagine the ascent above 5800m step by step in order to make sure that I had everything I needed.

At midnight I radioed Igor at ABC telling him I was ready to go up in two minutes. We had agreed that he would be on the radio all the time so I could get in touch with him in case of need. Then I snapped jumars on the rope, which led from the tent straight into the darkness, and began the ascent. My light jumped all over the rocks. The night world surrounded me. Everything outside this spot of light seemed to me a different world. I tried not to be afraid. I did my work and went slowly up, stopping often to keep my strength for the coming day.

Soon I put on my crampons because the next part of the way would be covered with ice. It took me much time and physical effort to pass this part.

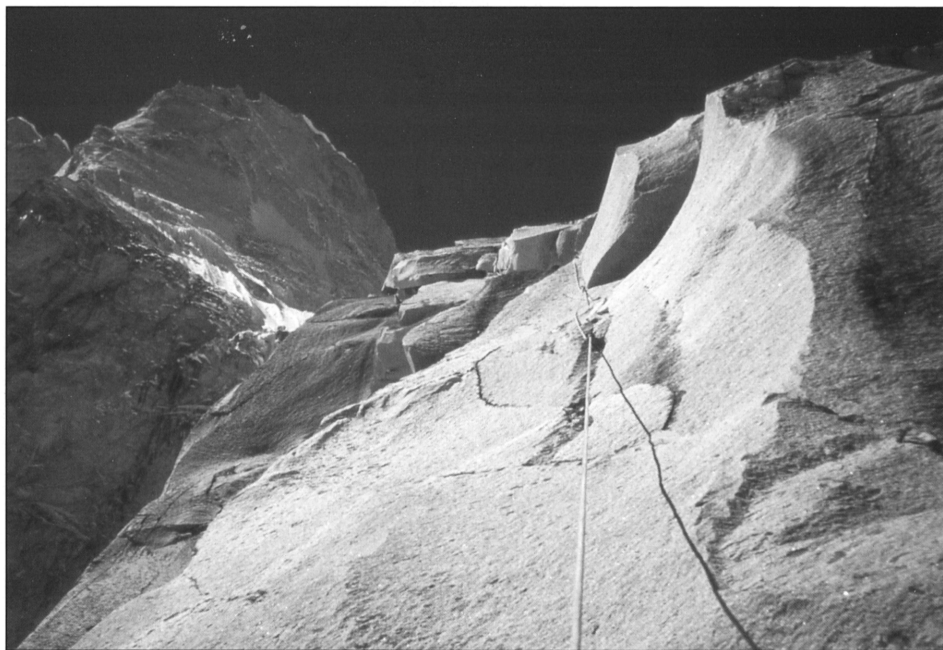
At about 2 a.m. I reached the end of the fixed ropes. It was getting colder. I had to keep my toes moving to keep them from freezing. I went on with the ascent with the help of ice axes and without rope for the first 100 meters. As it got steeper, I wanted to use the rope because it was getting too dangerous. The darkness and soundlessness of night increased my fear. The black sky looked like a dense material decorated with silver stars. It seemed that I was in the middle of an alien world, and I felt my loneliness and isolation so heavily that I had to ask Igor to hold up a light for me to see. Soon a little luminous spot appeared far below. Oh, my God! How far from me it was! Like the light of a distant planet!

I continued up and up. Why was I on this huge ice-covered wall? Was it an aspiration to prove something, or some kind of obsession? I couldn't find an answer.

My axes broke through a thin crust of ice and I tried to hook the safe ice under it. I moved mechanically, losing track of time. Driving ice axes and crampons became my existence. Strong blows, short stops, and breathing were the means of survival. Little by little, the ice grew steeper. At one point, I climbed a short vertical "neck." To the left and right, the ice ran up even steeper. I felt as if I was in a subway tunnel made of ice, while 1,000 meters of air strained at my feet. The only safety among this danger and tiredness was the knowledge of relief ahead.

Only the rustle of snow flowing away from the wall broke the silence. All other sounds seemed to be frozen. From time to time I switched my headlamp to a longer beam, but it didn't reveal any more of the chaos of the ice couloir. It was very difficult to guess the distance to the summit or to orient myself among the huge ice fences that crossed the wall many times. During daylight they had seemed lower. The night changed everything.

Dawn drew near. I had worked almost eight hours, and the altimeter showed a height of more than 6000m. Behind me the two-headed massif of Shivling was visible in weak morning



The climbing between 5600m and 5800m, with the Shark's Fin keeping company above. Valeri Babanov

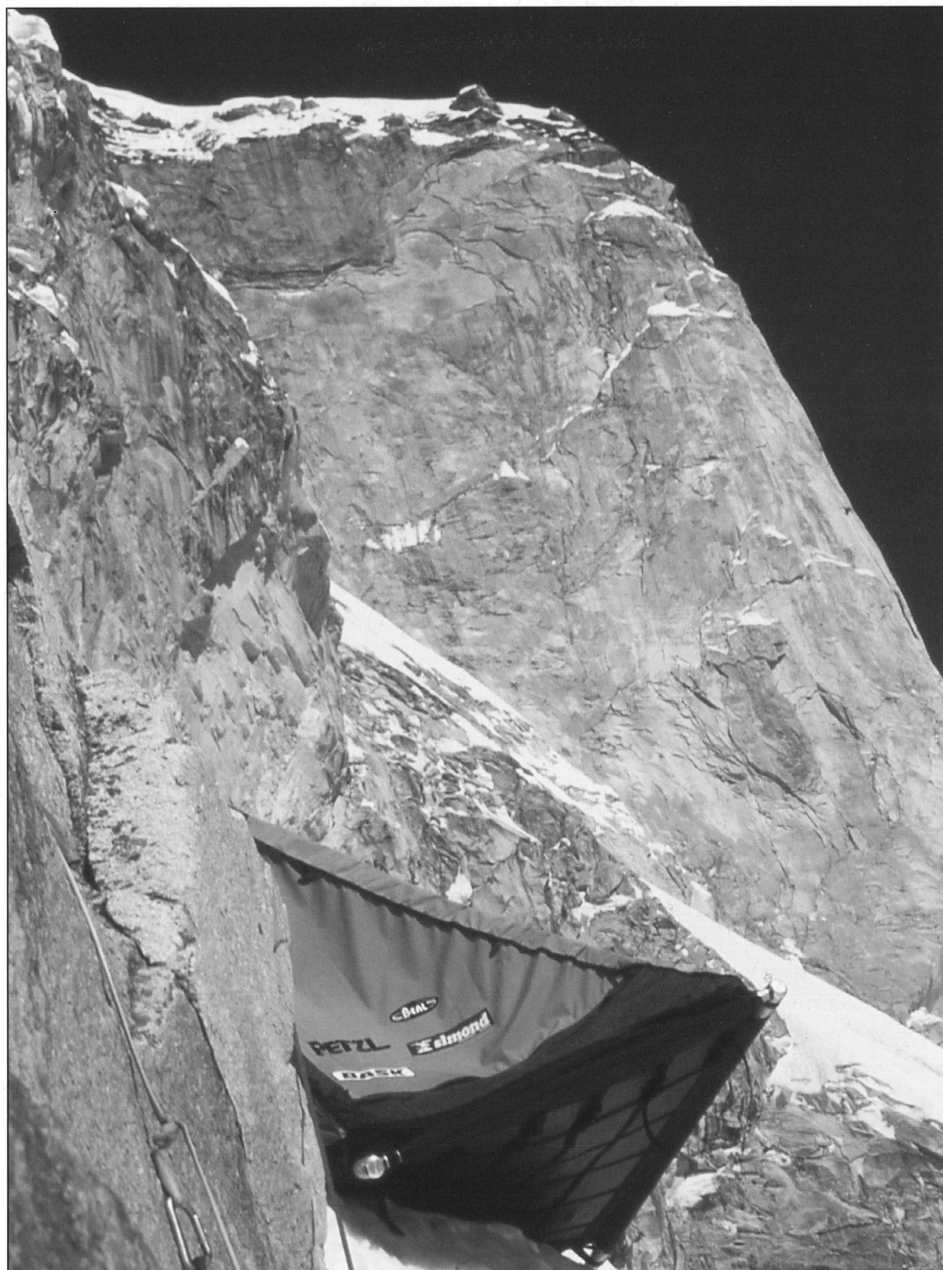
light. It seemed I could touch it. Here, in the Himalaya, it felt like I did not belong to myself. There were other laws that I could explain only with the help of intuition or instinct. These laws of the mountains ruled me and I had no opportunity to change them.

In another second, light enveloped the very top of Meru Peak. I could distinctly see every rock on the sharp crest leading to the summit. The dark blue sky contrasted with blinding white summits under the morning sun. The great snow cornices were scarlet, the ice slope was gold and crimson. Huge mountain chains melted away in the distance. I stood on steep ice and couldn't tear myself away from the magnificent view and magical colors.

The air warmed quickly. It didn't seem so terrible as at night. My eyes began to close as I climbed again, and the tiredness rolled like an ocean's wave. Almost in despair I realized that I could do nothing about it. It was so far to the summit. I had to gather all my strength to go on. As I climbed my organism mobilized. I wondered where the energy and self-control came from.

Finally I grew excited. My summit was not far off. The slope going to the right was not steep, but it met a seemingly impassable obstacle: the crest that joined the central and the north summits of Meru Peak. Around me was the first world—the real world. Then there was the second world over the crest—the invisible world, the world that had existed only in my imagination for many months. The world I was aiming for.

I climbed under the crest as high as possible. There were only two meters of overhanging snow above my head separating me from the exit on the crest. The last ice screw was about four meters down. If I fell I would fly down for eight or nine meters. So I tried to consolidate my position with the ice axes: I dug at the ice about my head and caught on some at waist level. Suddenly the snow gave way, and I barely had time to catch onto something with the ice axe—the



The yellow portaledge high camp at 5600m. Valeri Babanov

sensation was very unpleasant.

It became clear that I would not get through this cornice directly, so I began gingerly traversing to the right. I did not know what my feet stood on, and my ice axes held onto emptiness.

I felt like a tightrope walker struggling to keep in balance. As I twisted an ice screw into the hard snow with my left hand at waist level, I realized that it would not bear even my own weight, but at least I could hold onto it. My stretching right hand managed to turn in a second ice screw. I changed hands. The rope was not clipped into the ice screws because they were of no use. Now I struggled to make a breach in the snow cornice with the ice axe in my right hand. The bright sunlight dazzled me. Then I swung my axe on the other side of the cornice and pulled very carefully. I felt that the ice axe would hold me. I tucked my legs under and drew myself up. The entire load was on my right hand. I drew the left hand up so I could lean on both hands, then pulled up and crossed onto the other side.



In this extreme telephoto, Valeri Babanov is visible in the shadowed snowfields in the upper right. *Igor Zhdanovich*

Freedom! I couldn't believe it. Overcoming the crest had taken greater mental and physical effort than had climbing half the wall. I lifted my head. The north summit of Meru was guarded by almost 100 meters of rocky wall, but a crest led toward Meru Central's nearby summit, just 100 or 200 meters away. I called Igor on the radio. He told me that he had seen everything with the help of high-powered binoculars.

I tried to find safe ice in the crest with my ice axe and eventually found something like ice, so I placed an ice screw there and fixed the rope for my descent. I would go up without luggage. I had left my rucksack about 10 to 15 meters below and had no wish to go down to get it.

Slowly I began moving toward Meru Central. There were huge snow cornices to the left,



The cornices under the summit ridge, at 6225m. Valeri Babanov



The ridge between Central and North Meru. *Valeri Babanov*

and the average angle was about 45 degrees. The crampons held splendidly in the hard snow, leaving hardly a track. All my attention was concentrated on my feet. The snow slope below impressed me greatly. I saw how smoothly it fell away, then it dropped steeply to the right toward the Kirti Bamak Glacier. The glacier, rounding the Meru Massif from the south, seemed less big because of its remoteness.

My lungs heaved from lack of oxygen. Besides the view, I couldn't think about anything except breathing, my sore throat, and the fact that every swallow hurt terribly. I was very tired and had to stop every 30 or 40 steps. So that I wouldn't fall while resting, I drove the ice axes as deeply as possible, then sat on my knees and took a firm stance with my front points in the hard, steep névé. Each time, I didn't want to move again. Only occasionally did I glance toward the summit.

What would I find up there? A mysterious entrance to another world?

There was one more stop on my knees, and at last I got up. But there was nothing above my head. I realized that I was standing on the central summit of Meru, at the top of the Shark's Fin. The altimeter showed 6310m. It was 1:40 p.m. My strength felt restored because the work had been done and it would not be necessary to go up any more.

I turned and looked about. There were mountains and only mountains across the horizon. I wished I could stamp this magic world in my memory forever. But the window of favor-

able weather would close very soon. Clouds already were running toward the summit of Meru from the south, and from time to time the summit was covered with gray, impenetrable mist.

It was time to go down. I began the descent toward the rope I had fixed. The opposite end of the rope disappeared into the deep, dark face. It would be a long and dangerous descent.

For the last time, I feasted my eyes on the country that spread out below. There was something unreal in the colors. I tried to take a detached view of myself from the height of this world, but it was in vain—something prevented from it. Maybe I was not yet ready to fully feel the mountain world. Maybe I needed to return.

I reached the 5600m bivouac at about 7 p.m., worn out to my limit. I wished only to drink, lie down, and not move. Because I had had no time to stop, I had eaten only one chocolate loaf and taken only a few sips of water during the whole day.

Now I needed to cook and drink, but I got into the portaledge and fell asleep. I napped about 20 minutes, enough to restore a little of my strength. I got up, gathered some snow, and began to cook. At last I had enough to drink and subsided into sleep. My sleep was the sleep of the man whose dream has come true.

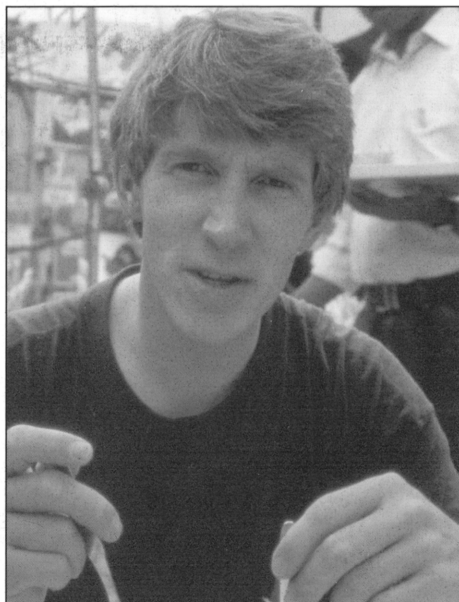
SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Garhwal, Indian Himalaya

FIRST ASCENT: Shangri La (2,000 meters, ED—5C/6A A1/A2 M5 75 degrees), Central Meru Peak, Shark's Fin, 6310m. September 17-22, 2001. Valeri Babanov, solo.

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Thanks to Lidia Fedorova for translating from the Russian.



Valeri Babanov in Kathmandu. Babanov collection