

# ENCOUNTERS WITH JANAK

*A seven-year itch for a 7,000-meter Himalayan beauty.*

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ANDREJ STREMFELJ



The southwest pillar of Janak Chuli (7,041m), climbed by Andrej Stremfelj and Rok Zalokar in 2006, forms the left skyline. Stremfelj and Miha Habjan climbed the prominent, diagonal ice line on the right side of the face in 2005 but could not continue to the summit. *Andrej Stremfelj*

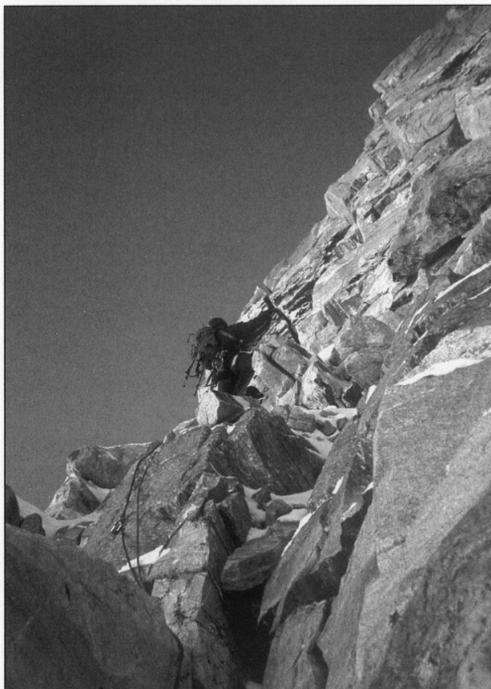
I first saw Janak in 2000, when I led an expedition of 10 young alpinists to the Himalaya. One of our goals was Janak Chuli, but, having arrived in Nepal, we discovered the mountain was still not on the list of allowed peaks. After Andrej Markovic was killed on Jongsang, we unanimously decided to halt the expedition. However, while everyone else was eager to get home and heal their wounds, I was in no hurry. My wife, Marija, and daughter Katarina were already on their way to base camp, and besides I would never miss an opportunity to discover another hidden part of the Himalaya.

Janak rose at the end of the Broken Glacier. The south face glowed in the afternoon sun, and a route up its southwest pillar, leading straight to the top, was plain to see. I was immediately captivated by the mountain, in part because its 7,000-meter-plus summit was still unclimbed. In the following years, Andrej's father, Marjan, asked me to accompany him to his son's grave, and I agreed. Unfortunately our expedition in the autumn of 2005 was cancelled shortly before leaving. But I had intended to take advantage of this journey for a quick side trip to Janak and had made arrangements with a young climber, Miha Habjan, who had proved himself on Dhaulagiri. Since we both had our minds completely set on Janak, we decided to go anyway.

After succeeding on an unclimbed peak, 6,842-meter-high Lashar I, we were well-acclimatized and we headed for Janak. I was eager to climb the pillar, but Miha was battling a throat infection and favored an easier line leading up the gully on the right side of the face. We would need our full strength for a route like the pillar on Janak, so we decided for the gully.

We climbed the face in a day, belaying only the last five pitches. On top of the wall the wind was blowing so hard and the cloud cover was so thick that we had to abandon our plan to continue to the summit during the night. Since we had neither a tent nor sleeping bags, we had to protect ourselves from the wind as quickly as possible. We spent half of the night digging and the other half snoozing and shivering in a shallow hole. The early-morning sun filled my heart with hope. However, clouds arriving from the south put my feet back on the ground.

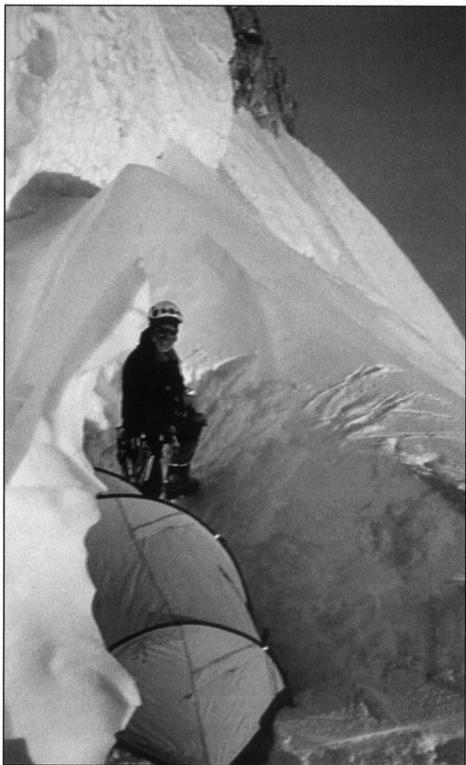
Suddenly, the only important thing was getting down as fast as possible. It started snowing after the first rappel, and soon avalanches began to sweep down the wall. Fifteen anchors, 15 rappels—we just hoped it would eventually end. Hell lasted until we reached the bottom of the face.



Rok Zalokar leads the crux pitch during the second day of climbing on Janak, aiming for the crucial ice traverse.  
*Andrej Stremfelj*



The decision to return in the spring was easy. I had promised to help a group of alpinists and mountaineers from Novo Mesto with an ascent of 7,140-meter Pathibhara Chuli (a.k.a. Pyramid Peak). Of course, I also wanted to attempt Janak again, this time via the southwest pillar. Miha and I had learned enough about the mountain to know the pillar was climbable. Unfortunately, Miha had already made other plans. In fact, all the alpinists with whom I would want to share a tent on Janak already had named their objectives for the year.



A splendid bivy site: Unfortunately, the two climbers had no sleeping bags or insulated pads inside their tent. *Rok Zalokar*

All of a sudden I thought of Rok Zalokar. As the head of the commission for alpinism within the Alpine Association of Slovenia, I had shaken his hand earlier that year and presented him with an award for the previous year's most promising young alpinist. After the ceremony I approached him and asked about his plans. He said he had nothing special in mind; in fact it was time for him to start studying. Now, just as I had almost despaired of finding a partner for Janak, I dialed Rok's number. He was a bit surprised and started talking—to himself more than to me—about his studies and the shortage of time to raise money. I said he could continue his studies after we returned, but opportunities for a good ascent like this were rare. The finances would be my concern. He promised to let me know in an hour or two. It did not take long for him to call, and Janak once again moved to the front of my mind.

The members of our expedition were mainly older alpinists who hadn't climbed anything remarkable for a long time, if ever. They all focused on climbing the easier European 4,000-meter peaks, Kilimanjaro, and Aconcagua. At the airport, when they met Rok, a colorful and powerful 23-year-old, they kept their thoughts to themselves. After we had become friends, Rok and I exchanged our impressions of this meeting and had a good laugh. As the leader of the expedition, I expected turbulent days over the next month and a half.

Our common objective was Pathibhara, a peak on the Indian-Nepalese border, north of Kangchenjunga, that had been climbed only once, in 1993. It seemed that climbing the mountain via the northeast ridge over the Sphinx (a 6,825-meter foresummit) would be an appropriate route for most of the expedition members. Some problems could appear in the upper part, but Rok and I would fix ropes to prepare the route for the others. We were going to climb with camps and fixed ropes in classical Himalayan style, which would enable Rok and I to thoroughly acclimatize.

In eight days we got from Suketar to Pangpema, where we set up base camp under majestic Kangchenjunga. Despite my warnings about the vastness of the glaciers, most expedition members were mentally unprepared for the dimensions of the Himalaya. It quickly became clear that the summit would be difficult to achieve for this team. The first to attempt it, the most experienced member of the expedition, stopped somewhere before the saddle between the Sphinx and Pathibhara. Next it was Rok's and my turn.

Early in the morning we crested the Sphinx. The view was breathtaking. All four peaks of Kangchenjunga greeted us, together with the mighty guardians Siniolchu on the left and Jannu

on the right. Kirat Chuli rose like a powerful guard right in front of us, the mountain chain of Jongsang behind. The approach to the saddle before Pathibhara was demanding, and we fixed all 200 meters of our extra rope. The ridge ascended gently for a while, but soon it turned into a saw with sharp ice teeth. I organized protection so the rope would zigzag among the tines. From Pathibhara's northeast summit, we could see that the ridge descended steeply into a deep notch and continued a long way to the top.

It was late afternoon. We had to consider the facts and decide quickly. The rest of the team might reach the main summit if the route were completely equipped with ropes, but this would require material, power, and time we didn't have. Rok and I could continue to the top, but we would have to bivvy during the descent and we had neither equipment nor food. We would survive, but we would have to forget Janak. The summit was so close and making a decision so hard. We took the risk and decided to sacrifice Pathibhara for our attempt on Janak. If only success on Janak were guaranteed....

The next day I stood atop the Sphinx again with Marjan, Andrej's father, and Borut Novak. Both were grateful for an ascent to a high summit with such a heavenly view.



Our rest at base camp lasted only a day, and soon we were gathering equipment and food on a canvas tarp in front of the tent. We didn't know how Janak would look that season; we



This spectacular leftward ice traverse was the key to breaching the upper headwall. During the descent, the climbers were forced to painstakingly reverse these pitches. *Andrej Stremfelj*



The 1,100-meter southwest pillar of Janak Chuli. The two climbers bivouacked once, by a large crevasse visible beneath the upper headwall. *Andrej Stremfelj*

had been too busy with Pathibhara. But judging by the other faces in the area, we expected to find lots of ice and bare rock, and therefore harder climbing. We had exactly four days to move from Pangpema base to advanced base camp below Janak, climb the face, and descend at least half of it. The weather forecast after that was bad, and we didn't want to endure a storm like I had experienced the previous year.

After moving our camp to a site below Janak, at the end of the Broken Glacier, we rested for a day and then set the alarm for very early, overslept, and then raced to leave in half an hour. We were at the base of the face an hour later. We had expected to advance quickly on the lower slopes, but instead sank into the snow, scratched the ice beneath it, and occasionally found hidden crevasses. Higher we found steps of water ice, which soon turned into a steep ice slope, where we tied in to the rope. After a long pitch that we climbed simultane-

ously, protected by two or three pitons, we reached the top of a prominent serac band and took a break.

Steep gullies with a difficult passage over a small rock band followed. I placed a belay at the foot of a bigger rock step. Rok masterfully surmounted the first smooth section of the granite barrier, while I tackled the second part, full of steep mixed climbing all the way to the beginning of the central ice slope on the face. We climbed simultaneously up the seemingly endless slope until we finally reached a huge crevasse below the final rock wall. Our moods cleared as we discovered a wide and completely flat ledge, where we put up a tent.

It was a beautiful evening. Lower peaks right in front of us and the higher ones far on the horizon lost the red glow of the setting sun one after another. The cold night came and colored the sky metal-blue. Our stove filled the tent with pleasantly scented steam. We made ourselves modest beds without foam pads and sleeping bags. The night was bearable as long as we cooked. We took turns, snoozing and cooking. Soon after we turned the cooker off, frost began to bite. It would not let us sleep in peace. We shivered and shifted from one side to our backs, from our backs to the other side. Soon we were moving more than sleeping, so we returned to cooking, trying to warm ourselves up. Eventually a gray morning was born.

Veils of humidity dimmed the horizon, but we quickly got ready to leave, and by 6 a.m. I was leading the steep, hard ice slope above the tent. I finished the pitch in rocks under a steep crack. Before starting this pitch, Rok took a look around the corner to see whether it looked any nicer from the other side, but soon he was back. Liebacking, fully exposed, he overcame the

crux of the route and pushed on to a belay at the right side of the crucial ice traverse that we had seen from below. This long, narrow ice slope was surprisingly steep at the beginning, with poor ice. Two pitches of traversing and downclimbing took a lot of time and power.

Beyond the traverse we expected some kind of a gully that would lead us behind the headwall to the ridge. What a disappointment! Instead we faced a steep rock wall. But after three pitches of difficult mixed climbing, the face finally gave up. We left the rope under a rock overhang and reached the ridge unbelayed, covered by clouds that had come rolling over from the Tibetan side of the peak. Light snow fell, and the summit seemed far away. The closer we got, the harder it snowed. We both quietly pondered how we would descend in such weather, and so we made our utmost effort to hurry. In fog and heavy snowfall, the sharp ridge suddenly flattened and we waded onto a rather large summit.

My seven-year dream had come true. A tear of joy may have been shed behind my goggles as I hugged Rok. One climber just beginning his career, the other nearing the end of his own. We were the first people on this summit, alone in the middle of the vast Himalaya, yet alone only physically—in fact we were in the thoughts and hearts of many people thousands of miles away. We used the GPS on our satellite phone to determine our position and took a few snapshots. We couldn't see much. I reminded both of us out loud that the story was not yet over, not until we had dropped a thousand meters to the broad plateau of the Broken Glacier.

By evening we had descended as far as our bivouac site. The rope got stuck during the second rappel, but we managed to solve the problem quickly. Again we spent a long time on the traverse, even though we simul-climbed it. We took down the tent and descended into the night. I drilled the last rappel holes into the ice in the morning light. A huge cloud that had appeared somewhere above the Indian plain lifted itself high into the sky and slowly grew toward Jannu, as if attracted by an invisible force from the Himalayan giants. We were so impressed by this play of nature that we forgot where we were for a while.

The first rays of the sun caught us in the middle of the glacial plateau. Janak's face was still in shadow, but the sun brought our phone's batteries back to life. For the first time we could send home the news of our safe return. This was deliverance for our families and the beginning of a new period of suffering for us. Our concentration, so intense for the last two days, slackened fast. Weariness overtook our bodies. The final ascent to our tent at advanced base camp seemed longer and more exhausting than the entire face.

#### SUMMARY

AREA: Janak Himal, Nepal

ASCENT: Alpine-style first ascent of Janak Chuli (7,041m), by the southwest pillar (1,150m, IV-V, 60°-70° / III 45°-55°), Andrej Stremfelj and Rok Zalokar, May 5-6, 2006. Descent via the route (19 rappels and down-climbing).



Zalokar (left) and Stremfelj take a break during the walk out. Courtesy of Andrej Stremfelj.

*Translated from the Slovenian by Ana Korenjak.*