

BUSHIDO

The complete north face of Kalanka in India's Garhwal.

YUSUKE SATO



The Japanese route on the north face of Kalanka (6,931m). The three climbers spent nine days on the face, with four nights at their high camp at 6,600m. At right: the north face of Changabang (6,864m). Yusuke Sato

Lying in our wet sleeping bags, we have just finished brunch—20 grams of instant mashed potatoes apiece. Our tent site, squeezed under a rock, is so narrow that the three of us cannot even turn over in our bags. Suffering from high altitude, cold, exhaustion, cramped quarters, and lack of food, we feel miserable. We have reached 6,600 meters on the unclimbed direct north face of Kalanka, only 300 meters from our goal, but we are worked. We have been pinned here by a storm for three days, unable to go up or go down.

Last night we saw clear skies and got excited, hoping we'd be able to climb today. But when we woke it was lightly snowing. We are tired of waiting, and after eating our meager rations we decide to climb despite the storm. In our exhausted state, progress is slow. After four

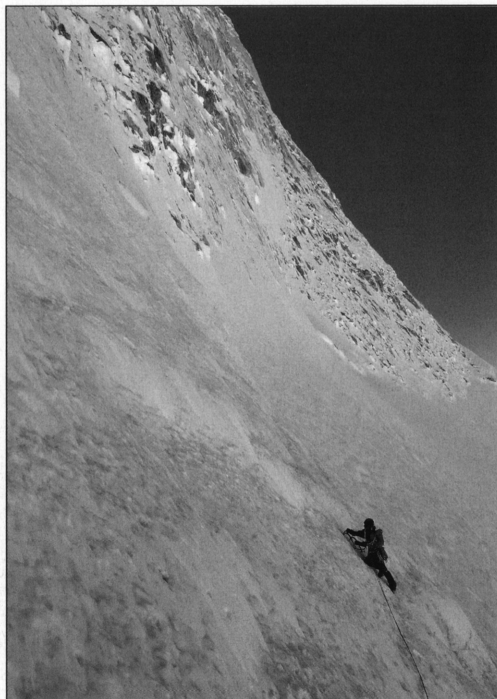
hours of dangerous slogging up avalanche slopes, we have only gained 150 meters in altitude. It is still snowing. Go forward or retreat—the discussion begins. Luckily, we believe in each other, and we decide to press on. We stash some gear and make an all-out push for the summit.



Kalanka (6,931m) lies on the outer rim of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, just to the east of Changabang. Ikuo Tanabe's four-member expedition from Japan made the first ascent in 1975. They approached by the Rishi Ganga gorge, crossed over Shipton's Col to gain the col between Changabang and Kalanka, and climbed the west ridge.

Two years later, a 14-member Czechoslovakian expedition, led by Frantisek Grunt, climbed to the col from the north and repeated the west ridge. The direct route on the north face had been tried several times, by several different lines, starting in 2001. Most recently, in 2007, Nick Bullock and Kenton Cool from the United Kingdom had climbed the snow and ice slopes on the left side of the face to reach the east ridge, but had been unable to continue to the summit. *[Editor's note: See Climbs and Expeditions for more history of attempts on the north face.]*

Three of us traveled to the Garhwal in late August to attempt Kalanka and Changabang: Kazuaki Amano, Fumitaka Ichimura, and me, all members of the Giri-Giri Boys, or "Just Barely Boys." Our goal on Kalanka was to start on the line climbed by Bullock and Cool and then climb directly through the upper headwall. But this section would prove too steep and difficult, and in the end we climbed a much longer route, traversing far to the right to reach the central spur. Our plan was to climb for three or four days and descend during one final day, but the round trip from base camp would stretch to 11 days.



After climbing the initial ice slopes, the climbers traversed right for a full day to reach the central buttress. *Kazuaki Amano*

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On September 14, after acclimatizing by climbing to 5,800 meters near Saf Minal, we leave for advanced base camp at 5,100 meters on a beautiful day. Carrying 30-kilogram backpacks up the moraine is hard work, but after eight hours we arrive at ABC. Kalanka's north face is right in front of us. As expected, the climbing looks challenging, but it appears possible. We are psyched to get on the wall.

We wake at 2:30 a.m., and after eating a good breakfast we depart by headlamp. With two heavy packs between the three of us, the going is slow, but we are able to gain some altitude without roping up. Finally we tie in at the first rockband. Although the weather has been clear



Yusuke Sato at Camp 2, 6,100m. Finding no tent sites, the climbers chopped narrow ledges for open bivouacs during their first two nights on the face. *Kazuaki Amano*

for more than 24 hours, spindrift avalanches intermittently come down the wall. Ichimura cautiously stretches the rope over mixed ground. Protection is hard to come by, and even finding belay anchors becomes a challenge. We eventually push the route to the base of a large ice and snow face. The sun is shining right on the impressive wall, making it appear extremely beautiful.

Jumaring with the heavy packs is so difficult it makes us want to throw up, but to this point we have been climbing pretty much on schedule. However, as we had feared, we are unable to find

anyplace to set up our tent as night approaches. We get out the headlights and climb in the dark until around 9:30 p.m., when we finally find a small stance just big enough for the three of us to sit down with no tent. It is about 2 a.m. by the time we finish eating and melting ice for water, and start trying to sleep.

We wake up sore from nearly 24 hours of effort on the first day. After one pitch of ice and snow climbing, we come to mixed ground. The wall's weaknesses lead to the right, and we spend all day continuously traversing. We mostly simul-climb, which makes for a very strenuous day. It is impossible to find a place or time to rest, and we do not eat or drink at all. In the evening, we once again cannot find a place to pitch our tent. Bright stars finally reveal our second bivouac site, at 6,100 meters—just a 50-centimeter-wide terrace to sit on.



We have finally made it to the mixed section on the central buttress, where we expect to find the crux of the route. The climbing is getting progressively more difficult, and at the same time the weather deteriorates; soon it starts snowing from an ever-darkening sky. Still, we keep climbing. As I'm climbing a thin-ice section, the snow comes down so hard that I cannot see the points of my ice axes or crampons, but I am able to keep calm because of having extensive experience in similar situations. I just keep going by trusting the sensations I feel through the axes in my hands.

Eventually, climbing by headlamp, Amano leads up an unstable snow gully to a point where several narrow, complex ridges come together. With our exhausted bodies feeling like mud, we are able to dig out a 1.5-square-meter terrace at 6,550 meters. Another open bivouac in such a strong snowstorm would surely steal our will to climb, but we are spared an all-night snow shower by improvising a way to set up our tent on the small terrace. Our tent can be opened from the bottom, which allows us to drape it over the small, humped stance. It is past 1 a.m. by the time we finish eating and melting water. The three of us go to sleep crunched so tightly together we have to hug each other's legs.

We are awake by 4 a.m., and we start breakfast hoping to escape this uncomfortable situation quickly, but continuous snow forces us to wait. At 8:30 we give up on good weather and break camp, continuing up an unstable gully filled with loose rocks and snow. Amano climbs slowly and carefully in the heavy snowfall. In the middle of the second pitch he finds a decent stance for the tent, much better protected than our miserable perch the night before.

With the snow still coming down hard, we drop our packs and try to scout the route above. Despite very poor visibility, after climbing over a small ridge we catch a glimpse of what appears to be Kalanka's summit. It seems very close, only about 300 meters higher, but it is already too late in the day to go for it. We return to our packs and dig out a platform for the tent under the shelter of a rock overhang. Our new home is smaller than our terrace from the night before, but much safer. Although the tent is tightly squeezed between rocks, it's the best site we have found on the whole route. We decide to call it Hotel Kalanka.

We sleep with our heads facing away from the gully we climbed up; on that side the tent is so compressed by the overhang that we wouldn't even be able to sleep facing up. We all face to the right, and we are packed in so tight that we cannot turn over. This makes the tent warm, but it is uncomfortable and our circulation is not good. In the middle of the night avalanches crash down the mountain, and some are just barely deflected by the overhang and skim over our tent. The mountain seems determined not to let us have a comfortable night.



For the next three days we cannot move. There is heavy snow throughout the fifth day of the climb, and the tent is continuously getting buried. Avalanches pound the walls all around us, making horrible, scary sounds. We packed food for five days, and it is almost gone, so we start strictly rationing.

When we wake the next morning there is so much snow covering the tent that it takes a long time just to get outside. With heavy snow still falling, we take about three hours to dig out the tent, but at least we are able to improve the site a little.

On the following day, our seventh on the wall, the snow does not stop, but it gets lighter throughout the day. By the evening we even see a little bit of sunshine, which raises our hopes for climbing the next day. Each person's ration of food for the day is 20 grams of mashed potatoes for breakfast and one cookie for lunch. In the evening we eat some cookies and candy bars. The total for the day is about 500 calories apiece, and we probably have less than two liters of water each. However, inside the five-star Hotel Kalanka, we still have good psyche. We feel like we could make it through anything.



The weather deteriorated during the third day of climbing, and new snow funneled onto Kazuaki Amano and his partners as they climbed the crux headwall on the central buttress. *Yusuke Sato*

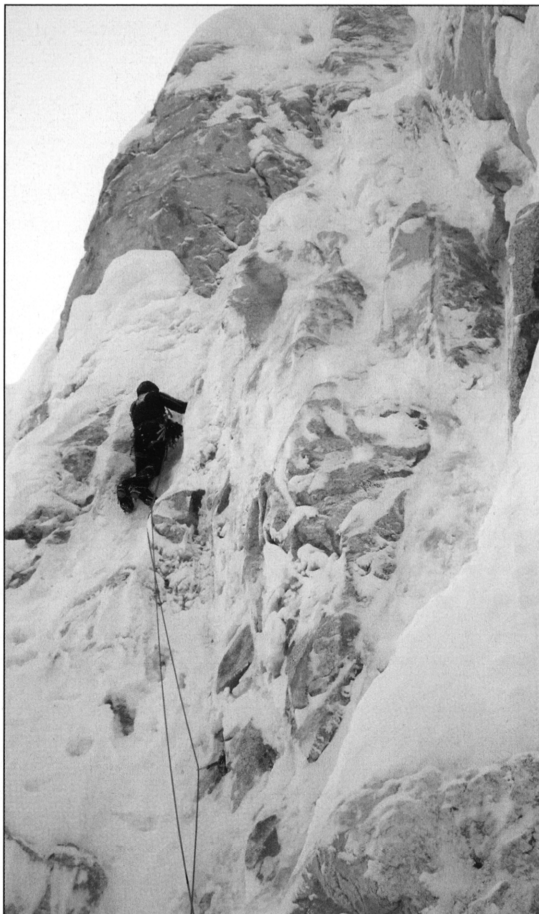


We wake early in the morning only to find out that it has resumed snowing. In our disappointment, we fall back asleep. By the time we wake again, it is very quiet. When we look outside we see blue sky! We hurry to prepare for climbing, but by the time we are finally ready a light snow has started to fall yet again. Nevertheless, the visibility has improved compared to the last few days, so we decide to climb anyway. The avalanches from the preceding days have formed a one-meter-thick slab right above our tent platform, and the snow conditions are horrific.

As carefully as possible, we climb through the deep snow, mixing belays with simul-climbing. Our hands and feet feel like lead. A 70-meter-wide couloir seems ready to avalanche at any time. After four hours we gain only 150 meters. Now we realize how much our bodies have suffered from staying so many nights at altitude in our cramped bivouac.

After some discussion, we decide this is our only chance, and we leave our packs and fix one of our two ropes for a rappel, and then head for the summit, simul-climbing on one 60-meter rope. All we take is a small waist pack containing our headlamps and a one-liter thermos. The summit is only about 150 meters higher, but we can tell there will be a lot of traversing, so we don't expect it to be quick or easy. Our routefinding skills pay off on this complicated and difficult ground, and at the head of a snow gully we catch a glimpse of the summit. "Almost there," we think, but it is another three hours before we finally cut through the cornice and stand on the summit, around 6 p.m. Even the sky wants to celebrate—it stops snowing and we have blue skies just for that moment.

No time to linger—we soon start our descent, carefully downclimbing and rappelling by headlamp. It is after 9 p.m. by the time we check back into the Hotel Kalanka. I don't even know what time it is when we finally get into our damp sleeping bags.



Amano leads steep mixed ground through the headwall on the fourth day, desperately seeking a sheltered bivouac site to sit out the growing storm. After one and a half pitches, Amano discovered a relatively safe haven. *Yusuke Sato*



In light snow showers we rappel and downclimb all the next day, until finally we reach flat ground at the top of the glacier. Our food depot at advanced base camp should be close by, but as the sun sets we are unable to find it in the fog and dark. We end up spending the night beside a deep, dark crevasse. All we've had to eat that day are a few pieces of hard candy; all we have left are two or three cubes of bouillon.

One and a half meters of snow have fallen on the glacier. In the morning we posthole around for an hour until finally we find ABC. Our food cache is buried under more than a meter of new snow. Finally we are able to eat until we are full.

It's downhill to base camp, but we move very slowly. To lighten our packs, we cache our climbing gear and most of our camping equipment; we don't want to have to come back for it, but we we'll simply have to. We have no injuries or altitude sickness, but we are completely exhausted. Probably because I ate too much too quickly at ABC, I throw up three times on the way down.

We spot base camp as the sun sets, but we won't reach it until midnight. It seems like so long ago that we departed.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Eastern Garhwal, India

ASCENT: Alpine-style first ascent of the complete north face of Kalanka (6,931m) by the route Bushido (1,800m, AI5 M5+), Kazuaki Amano, Fumitaka Ichimura, and Yusuke Sato, September 15-24, 2008. The team descended by the line of ascent to ca 6,100m, and then followed a ramp to the west to the glacier.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Yusuke Sato, born in 1979, is an environmental engineer who lives in Yamanashi, Japan. Earlier in 2008, Sato completed the enchainment of two Alaskan Grade 6 routes on Denali, described earlier in this Journal.

Translated from the Japanese by Leif Faber.



Fumitaka Ichimura at the Hotel Kalanka, at 6,600m, where the three climbers waited three days while avalanches pounded the face. After their third night here, they went to the summit and then returned for one more night at this bivy before descending. Yusuke Sato