

REJUVENATION

An invigorating trio of new routes in India's Bhagirathi group.

MARKO PREZELJ



Rok Blagus and Luka Lindic make their way toward the eastern summit of Bhagirathi III (6,454m), the second of three peaks climbed by the Slovenian expedition in 2009. In the background: Satopanth (7,075m), on the left, and Bhagirathi I (6,856m). Marko Prezelj

After my expedition to Makalu in the fall of 2008, a big project that demanded lots of time and energy—and ultimately was frustrated by poor conditions—I felt the need to recharge my motivation. That winter I went to the Lofoten Islands of Norway, where we climbed lots of interesting ground in good company. In late spring I went to Alaska, where I met many motivated climbers. In the summer I guided in Europe and began to build a new house for my family. My life was intense from many perspectives, and I began to feel a fresh enthusiasm for climbing.

In the fall I joined forces with Rok Blagus and Luka Lindic, who belong to the young generation of Slovenian alpinists—the generation that is upgrading “old school” alpinism with a sport approach. Luka is just 22, a student, and Rok is 28, finishing a doctoral degree in statistics. I was 44, and last autumn I was surprised (again) by the fact that I could still push my limits. Once again I found that alpinism has the power to stop time and refresh one’s perspective.

Our original goal for the fall expedition was Rimo III, which borders the Siachen area in the eastern Karakoram. However, at the last minute, one month before our departure, the Indi-



Base camp and Shivling in moonlight. After this photo was taken, it rained and snowed for a week. The tent in the photograph, which served as our eating quarters, collapsed in the middle of the night under the weight of the wet snow. We made emergency repairs, but two days later the tent gave way completely. Here, Luka looks through the new “window” in our dining tent. *Marko Prezelj*



an army refused to give us permission to climb there—*after* we had made all the logistical arrangements and bought our plane tickets. We quickly shifted plans to visit the Bhagirathi group. We knew only a little about the Bhagirathis or what routes had been done. With this “onsight trip,” we didn’t have any specific expectations besides having fun climbing big mountains. The seeds of spontaneity were sown.

When we left home our idea was to attempt to free climb the Catalan route on Bhagirathi III’s west pillar. But after we set up base camp it snowed and rained for a week. We knew we’d have to be very patient and lucky to do any rock climbing. As a result, we looked for lines that were less technical and would be useful for acclimatization; for that reason, and not because of any greedy ambitions for an unclimbed summit, we chose the route on Bhagirathi IV. During the approach to that climb, we spotted a logical line on Bhagirathi II, but we knew we’d need very good acclimatization for that serious route. So, for our second climb, we chose Bhagirathi III, which we hoped would be climbable even though the rock was still snowy; we followed mixed ground at the beginning and just looked for the most logical line up wet rock in the middle. In general we just followed our intuition: “Look, that is a logical and interesting line. Let’s try to free climb it.”

The most intense part of this experience was juggling all the options. It’s a great feeling when you see that you’ve made the right decisions and you are able to realize your ideas despite a lot of uncertainty. On this expedition my motivation for climbing was fully reinvigorated, and I proved to myself that I’m not yet ready for retirement, even in the company of young, strong climbers. I felt the same joy as I had when I was much younger and more naïve.



With the steepest faces inaccessible because of new snow, we decide to attempt the easiest and lowest of the three summits, Bhagirathi IV (center). *Marko Prezeli*



Luka leads an ice pitch on the upper third of Bhagirathi IV. Our route follows the most logical line up the peak from the west. The week of snowfall had covered the hard ice and loose rock, and there was just enough fresh ice where water might run normally. In warmer conditions this route might be risky due to rockfall. We had to break trail through deep snow near the top, and it took us a long time to cross the ridge from the saddle to the summit. We were lucky with the weather: In the morning it was clear; at noon it started to snow (good for preventing rockfall); and in the evening it cleared again as we were descending. In short, it was perfect. *Marko Prezeli*



On the southwest face of Bhagirathi III, Luka made a decisive start on a strip of snow and ice, but he soon realized that this way wasn't safe. After descending to the foot, he started again on this variation from the right. Behind, Bhagirathi III and IV. *Marko Prezelj*



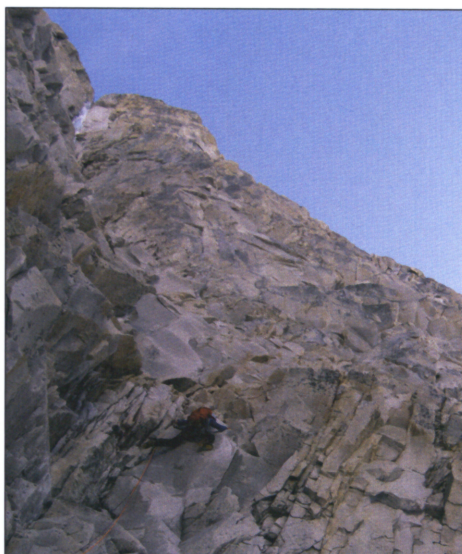
Here I'm climbing the second pitch on the rocky part of the face. After another pitch in the dark we found a short, narrow ledge where we spent the night. The rock above us was very icy, and in the morning we decided to make a diagonal rappel to another ledge, from which we were able to continue climbing. *Rok Blagus*



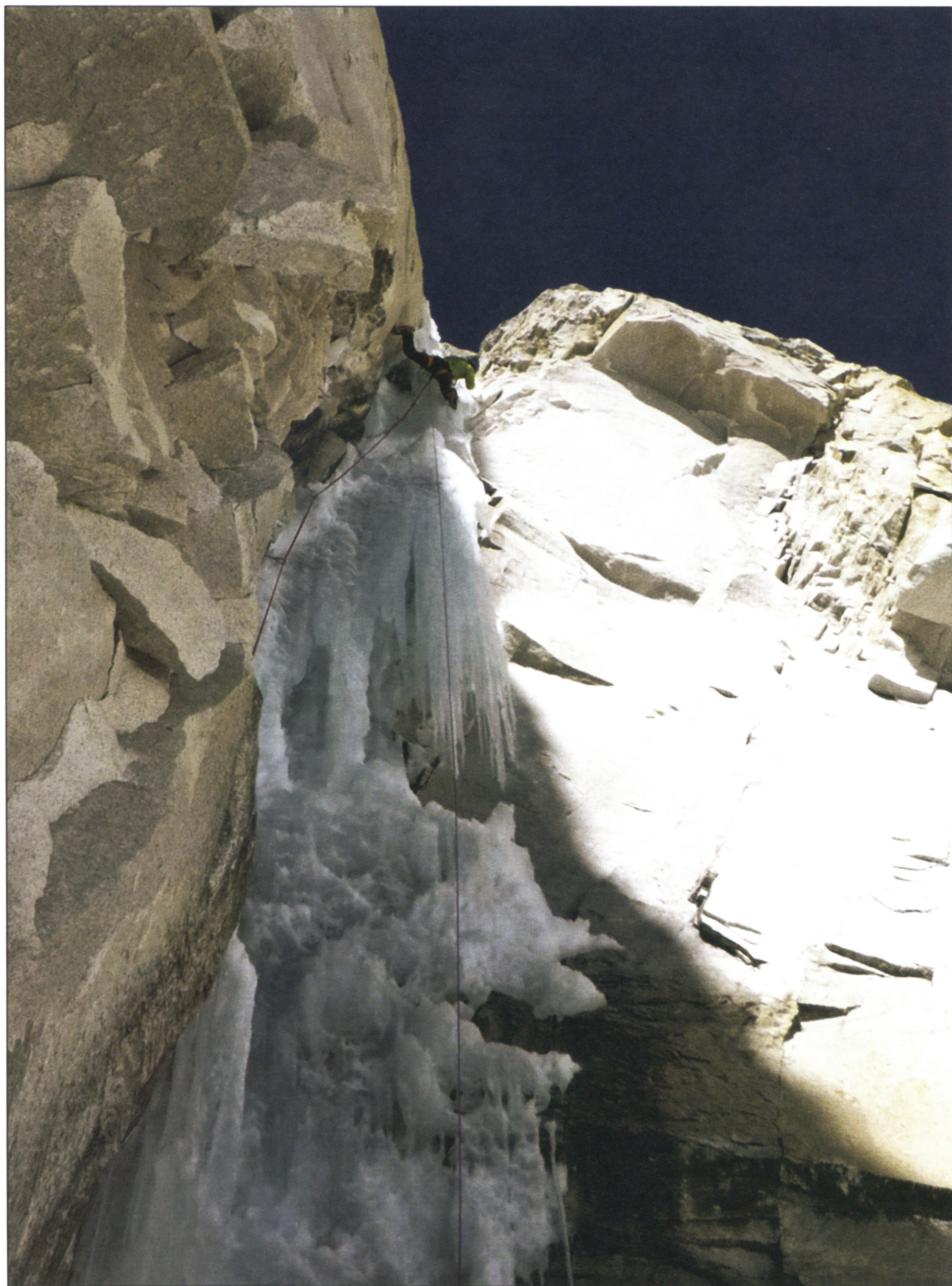
We weren't sure which of Bhagirathi III's summits was the highest, so we climbed them both; now we think the western peak is slightly higher. Here Rok and Luka are starting the descent. All the exultation of the summit was swiftly smothered by anxiety. After five long rappels we found a suitable place for a bivouac, and the next day we continued down the southeast ridge and northeast face. *Marko Prezelj*



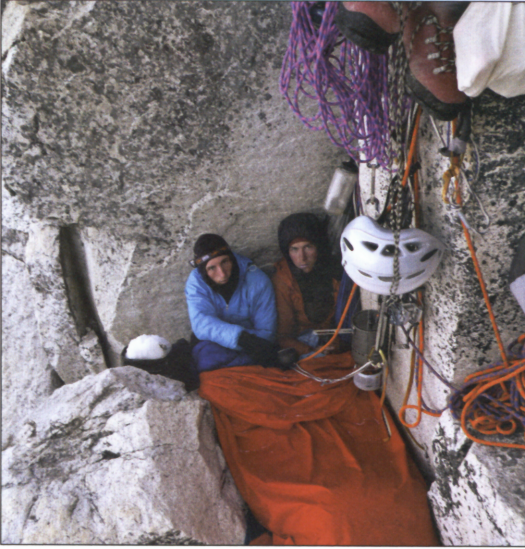
Luka breaks trail through crusty snow toward the dry Vasuki Valley, along which we trekked back to base camp. We used some of the same track while descending from Bhagirathi II about a week later, and that time we made it from the summit to base camp in just three and a half hours. *Marko Prezelj*



Luka on the crux move of the second ropelength of Bhagirathi II's south-southwest face. We were aiming for the ice line on the upper left of the picture. The climbing took more time than we expected, and the sun reached the ice before we did, which resulted in challenging conditions. *Marko Prezelj*



A line of waterfall ice had attracted us from our first view of the face. Before leaving for the climb, we drew lots with pieces of dry spaghetti to decide who would start leading the next morning and who would continue on the next block. When Luka, the youngest, drew the longest piece and so led the first four pitches, I was rather envious, since leading is more interesting than going second. But my envy soon evaporated. My pitches began with demanding climbing over ice-covered rock and continued with vertical and overhanging ice, where, after a time, I was truly pumped. *Luka Lindic*



Rok and Luka like two ravens at the first bivy. This was our third climb and the first bivy spot where we could find a "comfortable" place for only two of us. Rok rushed to settle in at the ledge before we even started cooking, and I had to jokingly remind him that we were a party of three. While they were building their nest, I cooked and sorted the gear. After dinner I climbed 10 meters higher to a sloping ledge where I fought with gravity all night. In the morning I rappelled down and found a young couple waiting for breakfast. *Marko Prezeli*



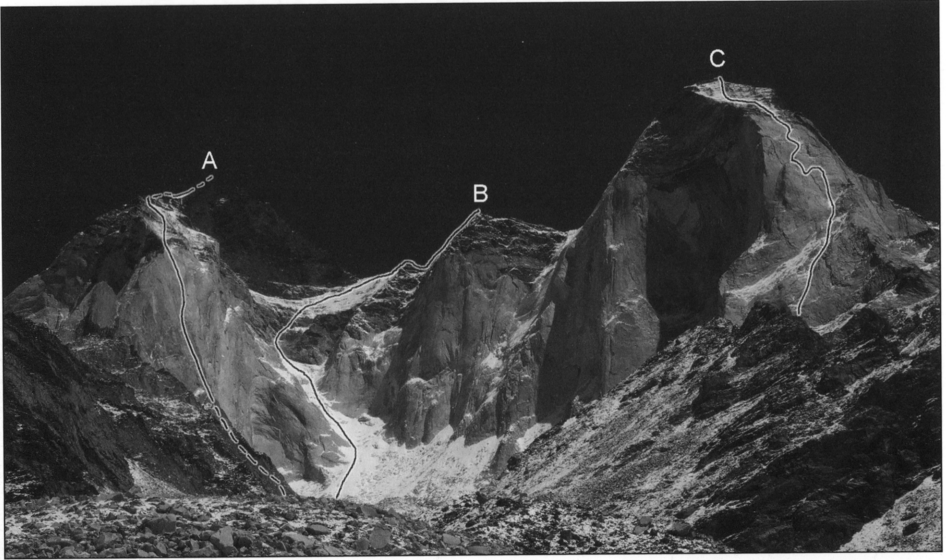
Luka reaching high for a hold on the upper wall. We were lucky to find very good rock on our line, and we managed to free climb all but a five-meter tension traverse 50 meters below this point. *Marko Prezeli*



In the afternoon we climbed along the upper southwest ridge (Ravascietto-Sarchi, 1984), which surprised us with its exposure. Luka, climbing last, was bent double under the weight of the haul bag. After three pitches we found a good place for a bivouac. The next morning we threw the bag with the equipment we didn't need over the face. The jubilation over this move was accompanied by anxiety over the climb to the summit and descent down the far side of the mountain. After returning to base camp, we collected the haul bag from below the face. Only one ice screw was missing. *Marko Prezeli*

On top of Bhagirathi II: Marko Prezeli, Rok Blagus, and Luka Lindic (from left). We had similar smiles, but my missing hair reveals the difference in years. For me it was a privilege to observe the honest, joyful enthusiasm of two young friends on this expedition. In their eyes I could clearly see why I like alpinism. *Marko Prezeli*





The new Slovenian routes on the southwest flanks of (A) Bhagirathi II, 6,512m; (B) Bhagirathi IV, 6,193m; and (C) Bhagirathi III, 6,454m. Marko Prezelj

AREA: GARHWAL HIMALAYA, INDIA

Ascents: Southwest couloir and north ridge of Bhagirathi IV (1,000m, D+), September 15, 2009, possibly the first ascent of the peak. The climbers descended the same route with four rappels and downclimbing. New route on the southwest face of Bhagirathi III (1,300m, ED 6b M5 WI5, two rappels), September 21–22, 2009. The route lies between the 1982 Scottish Route and the 1993 Czech Route, and it shares a few pitches with the former. The climbers descended by the southeast ridge and northeast face, with another bivouac en route. New route on the south-southwest face of Bhagirathi II (1,300m, ED+/ABO- 6b+ WI6+ M8, one tension traverse), September 29–October 1, 2009. The climbers descended by the east face. All ascents by Slovenian climbers Rok Blagus, Luka Lindic, and Marko Prezelj. See *Climbs and Expeditions* for more details and a route photo from Bhagirathi II.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in 1965, Marko Prezelj lives in Kamnik, Slovenia. His first ascent of the northwest pillar of Chomolhari, with Boris Lorencic, was featured in the 2007 American Alpine Journal.