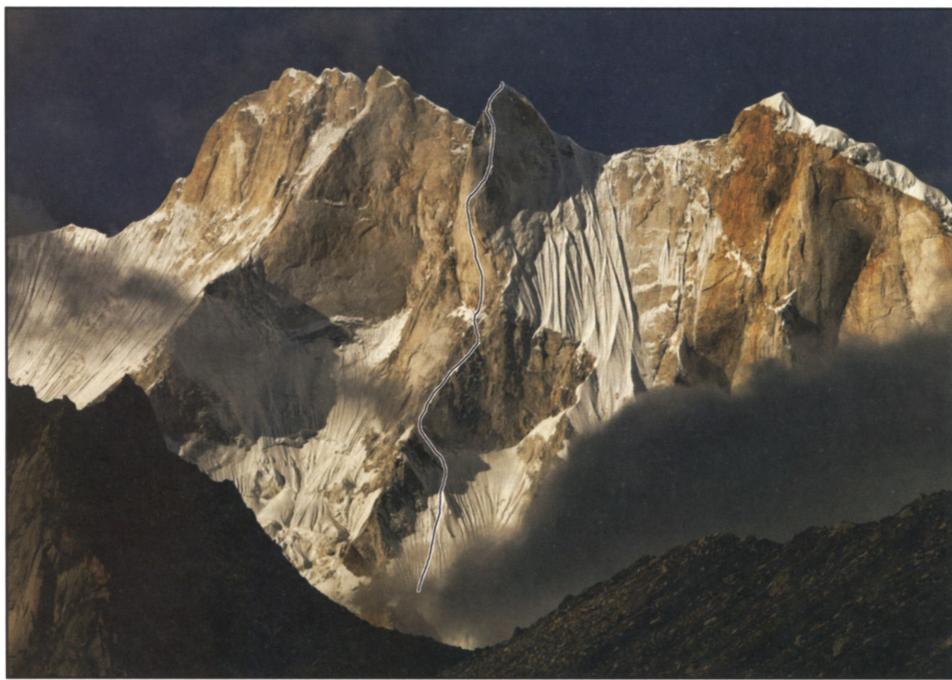


THE SHARK'S FIN REDUX

Success at last on Meru Central's spectacular Shark's Fin, India.

JIMMY CHIN



Meru from Tapovan basecamp, showing the long-attempted and finally completed route on the eastern prow on Meru Central, a.k.a. The Shark's Fin. *Jimmy Chin*

The last move was merely a mantle: hands on the edge of a sharp granite ledge, a heel hook, and a press. When I pulled over the lip, I looked around, momentarily confused that there was nothing more to climb. I was sure there had to be one more obstacle, one more aid seam, one more mixed pitch, but there was only sky and swirling clouds. I stared in disbelief.

October 2 is Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, an auspicious day in India. Last year it was the day that Conrad Anker, Renan Ozturk, and I finally reached the 6,310-meter summit of the Shark's Fin, otherwise known as Meru Central. This was Conrad's third attempt on the Shark's Fin's infamous northeast buttress, and Renan's and my second.



Renan Ozturk leading on the alpine ridge. *Jimmy Chin*

Three years earlier the three of us battled for 19 days on the same route. The iconic mountain seemed intent to haze us. We were constantly humbled by the sustained nature and the diversity of its hard climbing. We also grossly underestimated how cold it would be on the northeast-facing wall. Despite weathering a weeklong storm low on the route and rationing eight days of food into 19, we pushed to within two pitches of the summit. We could see it, yet it felt far away. To push on would have required us to spend the night out, and we had already stepped far over the line. We knew that in our state we would not make it. We felt shattered, physically and emotionally, as we rappelled through the night to our hanging high camp.

Conrad's personal history with the Shark's Fin—the climber's nickname for Meru Central's blade of granite, deep in the Indian Garhwal—goes back decades. Of the peak's 25-plus attempts over the last 25 years, two were by Mugs Stump, Conrad's mentor as a climber and as a person. Mugs showed Conrad the ropes, literally and metaphorically, and this was his dream climb. Mugs died in a crevasse fall in 1992 in Alaska. Conrad wanted nothing more than to finish the route for his friend.

The Russian soloist Valery Babanov became the first to summit, in September of 2001. Babanov estimated that 15 attempts had failed before his success, including one of his own the previous spring. During his aborted attempt he'd been following the same line we climbed, up the prominent northeastern prow, but he turned back at 5,800m. In September he chose a completely different line, far to the right on the ice face (see his feature article in the 2002 *AAJ*).

Conrad's first attempt on the northeast prow came in 2003, with Doug Chabot and Bruce Miller. They attempted it in alpine style, climbing the bottom portion of the prow proper before exiting into ice flutings right of the main wall. Unconsolidated snow turned them back halfway up.

Five years later Conrad recruited Renan and me for his next attempt. The main formation, he told me, featured a long alpine climb capped by an overhanging big wall that was steep enough to BASE jump.



Renan Ozturk at the new "Center of the Universe" high camp. *Jimmy Chin*

The route was perversely stacked against alpinists, since the most technical climbing, which required the heaviest gear, was near the top. All alpine-style attempts on this line up the main face had failed at nearly the same spot, the base of the overhanging headwall that starts at roughly 5,900 meters. Conrad knew the climb would require the skills of a big wall climber as well as those of an alpinist.

After failing in 2008, we returned to our normal lives haunted by those two unclimbed pitches. Yet they were a blessing. They provided motivation, and despite telling ourselves that climbing 98 percent of the route should be good enough, we obsessed privately about the unfinished pitches.

In 2009 Silvo Karo contacted Conrad about the climb. Conrad shared everything he knew, including beta on the best style to climb it in. We hoped Silvo's team would succeed. But when Silvo didn't make it, Conrad called with the news. It was clear that we all wanted to return.

Conrad, the consummate professional, had really good notes from his first two attempts. We pored over them in preparation for the next expedition, strategizing every detail down to who would lead what pitches, how we could do it faster, lighter, and in better style. In the end we chose a hybrid alpine/capsule style. We took four ropes (two lead, two static); two haul bags; a portaledge; one stove; alpine, mixed, and aid gear; sleeping bags; and food for eight days.

Back on the route, we climbed in 48 hours what had taken us six days in 2008. Over the following few days we took advantage of an ideal cold-and-dry high pressure system. At the overhanging wall (we dubbed it the Indian Ocean Wall), which we reached after four more days of climbing, we saved time by linking aid pitches we'd done separately on our first attempt. We had a fright when one of the portaledge's bars snapped in half, but creative splinting with ice screws saved the day. Reflecting on how prior knowledge had helped our planning, we joked about our alpine redpoint attempt, how we'd fallen right at the chains but were going to send on this go. Despite the humor, doubt clouded us every day as we reclimbed tenuous A4 and hard mixed.



Renan Ozturk on mixed ground. Jimmy Chin

On the eve of our summit bid, our charmed weather broke, and it blew hard and snowed. The wind bounced our portaledge against the wall, reminding us of the days we spent stuck on the wall in 2008. We hunkered down hoping for the best. At midnight we looked out and saw stars. It was time. Launching at 2 a.m., we flew up our two fixed lines, from which Conrad led the poorly protected mixed pitch below the summit ridgeline. The force of Conrad's will had carried us in 2008, and it carried us again in 2011.

When we pulled over the ridge, we were blessed by the sun. At last we could face the final two pitches. The Gangotri Glacier shone far below. It was my lead, and I scrapped my way up, literally humping the knife-edge ridge to gain ground. After mixed climbing and 50 feet of aid, I built an anchor. Conrad came up and belayed me as Renan juggled the line below. Another 5.8 pitch, a simple mantle, and we were there.

We embraced on the summit, humbly accepting that this time Meru had allowed us passage. Our dream, Mug's dream, had been realized.



A note from Renan Ozturk: Our 2008 near-miss was the most trying expedition of our lives. We understood that if we returned it would be with the same team. But five months before our 2011 departure, on a ski-mountaineering shoot with Jimmy, I caught an edge and tumbled off a cliff in the Jackson, Wyoming, side-country. My injuries included an open skull fracture, two fractured vertebra in my neck, as well as a severed vertebral artery. Jimmy responded fast and probably saved my life. Conrad arrived in the intensive care unit shortly after. Despite the odds, and to the horror of friends and family, I returned to Meru with the team. Having lost half the blood supply to my brain, I wasn't sure how I would do at altitude. It would have been easy for Conrad and Jimmy to find a strong partner to replace me, but they stuck with me. I really wanted to go back to be part of Conrad's two-decade dream and Jimmy and Conrad's 10-year partnership. The expedition had moved beyond climbing a mountain; it became the epitome of loyalty and trust between friends, partners, and mentors.



Renan Ozturk belaying Conrad on the "Mugs Stump Pitch," three pitches from the summit. *Jimmy Chin*

SUMMARY:

Area: Garhwal Himalaya, India.

Ascent: *The Shark's Fin* on 6,310m Meru Central (VII, 5.10 A4 M6 WI5) by Conrad Anker, Jimmy Chin, and Renan Ozturk. They reached the summit on October 2, 2011, during a 12-day push. An estimated 25 attempts have been made on this wall since the early 1980s, including three by this expedition's members in the previous seven years. Reports on Anker and team's previous attempts can be read in *AAJ 2004* (pg 378) and *AAJ 2009* (pg 309). The 1993 British expedition led by Paul Pritchard coined the name *The Shark Fin* (no apostrophe) for the east pillar of then-unclimbed Meru Central.



Jimmy Chin, Renan Ozturk, and Conrad Anker on the summit at last. *Jimmy Chin*

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jimmy Chin, from Victor, Idaho, is one of today's most successful expedition photographers. His skills as a cameraman, climber, and explorer have won him numerous awards, including National Geographic's Emerging Explorers Grant. He has made first ascents and difficult crossings on most continents and has skied Mt. Everest from the summit.