



## Successful expedition in the fascinating Miyar Valley

by Gerhard Schaar and Ines Peschel

From August until the end of September 2011 my girlfriend Ines and I undertook an expedition to the Miyar Valley in Northern India (Himachal Pradesh). Thanks to good weather we succeeded in seven ascents, three of them being first ascents of unclimbed peaks up to 5.900m, two new routes and two first repetitions.

We want to dedicate the highest peak we have climbed, to a great climbing pioneer, and name it "Kurt Albert Peak".

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### Not just any expedition – but a life expedition

Climbing is something beautiful for me and my girlfriend, it simply makes us happy. Doing trips through the Alps for alpine climbing in the last year, we have often talked about how great it would be, to embark together on an expedition into one of the worlds great mountain ranges. How great it would be, to be able to see how far we could go as a couple climbing wise, experience a great adventure for our very own.

An undertaking free of pressure, free of a defined expectation and free of "we have to". We were more thinking of a "life expedition", an adventure, where we would try to give our best, where we would reach our personal mental and physical limits and maybe have to go beyond them.

Some when we knew that there was no going on for us in our lives, if we were not to find out, make this desire become a real event.

So we went into the process of finding an expedition destination.

What we were thinking of was a country "far" away, with "higher" peaks, granite rock, not too cold, and with an opportunity to climb various mountains and walls. After we had put together our requirements, and compared it with potential areas, it became clear that the Miyar Valley in Northern India was "our" destination.

Located around 36 degrees north, various peaks up to 6.300m, lots of first ascent possibilities on amazing granite towers and ridges and relatively uncomplicated access. Just what we were thinking of.

Despite our motivation to leave our mark, we saw the expedition as an end in itself from the beginning on. It was to be something that we, Ines and I would share, whatever the outcome would be. We wanted to put ourselves in a position, so extraordinary events could happen, enrich us for the rest of our lives, let us experience a thrilling time, about which we would maybe tell our children or grandchildren: "A long time ago, when we had been high up in the mountains in India..."



## The „Miyar Valley“ - location and alpine history

The Miyar Valley is located in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, at the border to the region of "Zaskar". It starts north of the small city "Udaipur" and winds itself up for about 100km towards the "Kang La Pass" (5.350m), where you can get to "Padum".

In the lower Miyar Valley two well known 6000m peaks are located, „Phabrang“ 6172m and „Menthosa“ 6443m. These peaks have been climbed by Japanese expeditions in the 60s and 70s. The upper Miyar Valley was discovered 1991 by the Italian Paolo Vitali. He had no practical information but a small picture of a geographical expedition, showing a small rock tower. In the course of this expedition he discovered the amazing side valleys, Takdung Valley, Chhudong Valley and Dali Valley with its amazing climbing possibilities<sup>1</sup>.

In the following years more Italian expeditions follow. Massimo Marcheggiani, Mario Manica and Bruno Moretti, all of them providing us with useful information about the area.

From 2000 on one or two expeditions come into the region every year, achieving remarkable first ascents.<sup>2</sup> We have benefited a lot from the information which were provided by Igor Koller and Vlado Linek, and also by Andrej Grmovsek. In particular Andrej's first ascent "Shangrila Ridge" was a line, we desperately wanted to repeat, because it is such a beautiful, obvious line, that immediately draws your attention when you see a picture of the main Miyar Valley.

## The Miyar Valley, a beautiful place

Before we reach the Miyar Valley itself, we are stuck with heavy rainfall in Manali. When we can finally leave, a big landslide occurs on the "Rotang La Pass" and we are forced to wait another three days right on the pass. After we personally inspected the extremely dangerous road work of the Indian Army, we realize that this is going to take another couple of days. So we organize a bunch of horses with "Baghwan", who is the "checker" of our trekking agency, and shuttle all our equipment around the landslide. On the other side we soon find another minibus we can hire and off we are. Ten tiring and "bumpy" hours later, we arrive in "Urgos", the last village about 30 km into the Miyar Valley and start of the trek to base camp.

I could write a lot now, about my impressions about this valley. But I rather want to quote Igor Koller here, who found beautiful words for this truly amazing place, which I have nothing to add<sup>3</sup>:

*"In the forty years I've spent roaming round mountains and cliffs, I have seen many beautiful areas, corners and valleys. I've seen even more in magazines, books and films. Nevertheless, I would call mountain valley of Miyar in Northern India a „Mountain Paradise". Maybe because it is the most recent place for me to have climbed in. However, from many aspects it seems*

<sup>1</sup> "Miyar Valley – Guide and History", Igor Koller

<sup>2</sup> American Alpine Journal: <http://www.americanalpineclub.org/p/aaaj>, and „Climb“ Magazine, Issues „March 2009“ und „April 2009“

<sup>3</sup> Miyar Valley - Mountain Paradise in the Indian Himalayas , Igor Koller



*not to be only a subjective feeling. This valley has such manifold of natural features strongly influencing men. From the smallest detail to a complex whole, from lifeless nature through flora, fauna and people, from tourism and trekking to climbing possibilities. A valley with small red pebbles at the river bank, with exciting boulders resting on green meadows, with 1000 metre obelisks of red-yellow granite, with enormous ice walls and a number of unclimbed five and six thousand meter peaks. A valley where beautiful wild horses scud through the unspoiled nature, where one does not meet a man for weeks in some lost corners. A valley with a mystique of Buddhist atmosphere, that caresses and calms human souls. That's Miyar Valley. A Mountain Paradise in the Indian Himalayas."*

The serenity of the mountains has been conveyed to the people of this valley, they are calm and express a lot of pride. Their religion is also coherent with the natural rhythm up here, they are Buddhists.

The people live of agriculture here, mainly potatoes and peas are cultivated up to a height of 3.800m. All work is manual, and the faces and bodies of the locals give clear evidence of that circumstance.

Life is simple up here, although the cell phone era has already arrived a couple of years ago. In comparison to other parts of India, mere poverty can not be found here. Even the smallest villages have a school and the old people seem to be integrated in daily life, everyone lives in great dignity here I found.

The villages are small accumulations of houses and small animal stalls, whereby many of the buildings are surprisingly new and relatively modern. You can see huge wood piles everywhere, and the roofs are covered with tall hay piles too. Winter is long up here, very long, usually from November until April the landscape is covered under a layer of meter high snow. All villages are isolated during that time.

In comparison to the touristy places, like Manali, one is seen as a guest here, not as a customer. We realize the difference, when our hearty "Namaste" is replied with an even more hearty voice and a respectful bow and the folding of the hands.

### Trek to Base Camp

With our trekking agency and the horse men we agree to trek to base camp within three days from the village „Urgos“. On the one hand the horse men want to get paid as many days as possible, and on the other hand we wanted to acclimatize slowly and enjoy the beautiful valley. The trek however can be done in one day easily as well, being 35 km long you gain just 300 meters in height, there are just two short steeper sections.

So we have a lot of time to soak up the beauty of the place and undertake acclimatization hikes every evening. We set up camp on beautiful meadows, which are run through by small, crystal clear streams. In the middle of August you meet a lot of sheep and goat herds, some of them being 500 animals strong. Then we do regularly pass by small herds of free grazing cows, yaks and horses. They spent all summer in the upper Miyar Valley all on their own, and when it gets too cold and the snow keeps falling repeatedly, they hike down the valley to their homes we have been told.



## Base Camp

On the first two days of the trek you already see a lot of nice mountains. But there are no real "rocky" peaks to be honest. So we are already very, very excited, when the "real" peaks are coming into view. On the third day the valley starts to bend westwards, and coming around this turn, we see the sun shining on the top of marvelous granite peaks. What a special moment for us, because it is now that the whole undertaking becomes reality as far as the climbing goes. Ines and I look each other deep in the eyes, start to smile and just say: "Now we are really here!"

The base camp is located at a picturesque spot, a lush and green meadow with two ice cold springs, and is surrounded by jagged peaks.

We unload the horses, put up our tents and celebrate the arrival with a real feat, made by our cook „Ram" and his helper „Balu". We gobble down the tasty Indian food, because when we see all the peaks around us, it becomes clear that we are going to need a lot of energy in the next couple of weeks.

The sun caresses the highest peaks in a fat orange light, and we are – without seeing most of the peaks hidden in the side valleys – already enchanted from this landscape and the amazing possibilities.

Now we are in the middle of our adventure. The here and now, which we made possible through our preparations and our efforts, fills us already with a wide range and depth of emotions. We are thankful and curious at the same time, because until now, we have not climbed a single meter yet!

## **Miyar Valley expedition – part 2**

Let's go!

Already on the first day we embark base camp to climb a new line on the 4800m high Torro Peak. The south side has a nice 350 m wall, and we consider it to be perfect for getting used to the rock and the climbing here, and to further acclimatize.

Leaving base camp at 5 a.m., we still feel a little bit sleepy. But when we have to cross the rumbling stream barefeet, that flows down from the Chhudong Valley, we are soon hyper awake due to the ice cold water that make our feet numb after a few steps.

As we were just about to gear up, something strange happens. We hear a loud "rumble" approaching from far away, and first think of a massive rockfall in any of the valleys nearby. But then suddenly the earth shakes for a second or two, and we realize that there is an earthquake! The tremendous energy that could be felt, the kind of "push" that made the whole mountain range shake, leaves a distinct feeling deep down in our guts, of how little we humans are in comparison to the forces of nature.

Our first climb turns out to be nice, especially the rock is partly superb, slabs, cracks, dihedrals and surprisingly a lot of chicken heads. We can not believe how warm it is, we climb just in a t-shirt. After a couple of pitches we have to traverse through two big gullies unfortunately, a fact that was hidden to us when we scoped out the wall from a frontal perspective. Therefore the "headwall" is a consistent nice stretch of good rock, and at around 2 p.m. we reach the summit. We call our first route "The best of both sides", 5.9, 350m.



On the top of "Torro Peak" we stand in great awe, as the first 360° view of the area takes our breath away. To the east we can see a long way into the Chhudong Valley, and to the west we see the first part of the Dali Valley, with the amazing Korklum Gou Peak (5.650m) and Andrej Grmovseks first ascent "Shangrila Ridge" (650m, 5.10d R). When we see this unique line, with it's tower with a big hole on its top, we instantly know that this is a "must do" for us.

Being inspired by this great peak we want to stay realistic though. We have a hard time breathing and know that further acclimatization is necessary, so we try to pinpoint down "smaller" objectives for the next 10 days in the Chhudong Valley. A task seemingly easy, but practically being very hard. There are so many possible lines, so many peaks, you just do not know what to try, where to go next. So we take our time to figure out what could be within our reach, and soon find a nice looking, unclimbed peak north of the Castle Peak massive, in the Chhudong Valley.

### Chhudong Valley

The Chhudong Valley, aka "Tawa Valley" or "Thunder Valley" is about 15 km long. From base camp, as I mentioned above, you need to climb up a steep and grassy slope for about 700m in height on the north side of the Miyar Valley. Then the terrain flattens and you walk into the valley, right next to the stream that flows out of it, for about an hour before you get on a block glacier.

Here the walking becomes strenuous, a sort of three steps forward – one step back odyssey. On our first visit to the Chhudong Valley we try to carry up all gear and provisions in a single hike, a decision we quickly regret. The bags are just too heavy, and the air getting too thin, so I have to start shuttling a part of our gear, and do the hike twice.

The block glacier is deceiving, because at first it seems to be a static mass, a firm construct that stands still. But it is just the opposite. It is moving, slow but steadily! And in this lies a big danger and we soon learn that we must not get separated on this terrain, under any circumstances. It is a simple but important rule!

Huge boulders can topple over in an instant without a warning, small rock avalanches can occur on the small but steep ice faces that peer out under the gravel everywhere, and big blocks can shift when you step on them, causing you to fall over and possibly getting stuck.

Walking into Chhudong Valley the first time, we realize that finding a nice spot for our advanced camp will be not so easy. Where to find a small flat spot, water not far away, safe from rockfall and from glacier parts breaking off as well?

Fortunately we discover a huge stable boulder, with an almost flat surface along the way. We set up our tent, and enjoy our Indian instant noodle soup. Our first night is a kind of a restless one, due to the ongoing rockfall on the north side of the Castle Peak massive. It is warm, even in the night the temperatures are right now a few degrees above 0°C!

The next day we have a very hard time climbing higher in altitude, and are pretty happy to just move the tent 2 hours forward in order to establish the ABC where we wanted it to be. After some hours of rest, we leave ABC to scope out the approach and climb for the next day. After reaching the top of a huge moraine, we have a good view of the mountain and its south ridge. How different everything looks from here in comparison to the top of Torro Peak! We have to make major changes to our original plan, and approach this mountain completely different than expected at first.

I guess this the nature of an expedition, a constant change of plans and assumptions, based on pictures or topos (studied at home), or on the view from nearby peaks. The more you are willing to adopt to a new plan and strategy, the higher the chances of success are.



In our case we make the right decisions fortunately. We leave at 3.30 a.m. to avoid possible rockfall on steep ice slopes at the approach, and are at the beginning of the climb by around 5.30. After two or three pitches with the headlamp on, it gets brighter, and we cruise up easy slabs, which are seldomly interrupted by a few 5.8 moves. At around noon we reach a first small fore-summit, from which some downclimbing leads us into a gnarly, shady and cold notch. Here the rock is quite rotten, and I have to be super careful on a 5.9 R pitch. The next pitch in this section is a cool crack and a tricky narrow ledge, full of snow. I am pretty happy when I reach the top of the section and can get to the south side again, where sun and warmth greets me.

Ines and I then simul-climb up easy terrain to the last steep section, before we stand on the summit of what we were calling "Gutzele Peak" (ca. 5.300m, South Ridge, 500m, 5.9R). It is hard to describe the feelings we had. We set out as a couple, as "rookies" you might say and stood now on a mountain no one had been before. We looked deep in our eyes, and felt an intense quality in the awareness, that we realized a dream we had together. We simply understood, that we just got what we came here for, the gift of an experience, that would stay with us all our life!

So consequently the first ascent of "Gutzele Peak" ("Gutzele" is the nick name I use for my girlfriend by the way) is a milestone for us. Had there been doubts about how we would perform as a team, well they had been overcome by now. This ascent gave us good self confidence, and the pressure "to have to achieve something" was off us.

Back at ABC we moved our stuff back down the valley to our prior position, in order to be in a good spot for our next goals, the first repetition of the "Trident Ridge" 1000m, 5.9 up to "Preamsingh Peak" 5.300m and a summit to the south of it, which we wanted to tackle on a nice ridge as well.

The next day brings rain, and so we are forced to do nothing. Checking our food supplies we realize, that we have planned too small rations on the one hand, and on the other hand that we might burn more energy than expected. So when we wake up with rain again the next day, all food is gone after breakfast and we are forced to leave ABC and go down to BC. On the way down I realize, that my pants keep sliding down my waist all the time, and I wonder what happened. Being back in BC I realize by the shocked look of our cook that I must have lost some kilos. I am aware that I can lose weight rapidly when I am in the mountains and doing a lot of hiking and climbing. But when I undress to enjoy the "shower" out of our biggest aluminum cooking pot, I am pretty shocked myself how thin I have become. No way that I am going to survive the upcoming tasks, if I do not start to eat heaps right away. Fortunately our cook Ram and his helper Balu provide us with tasty Indian food, and do ask them to make extra greasy tomato - cheese omelets for me, which I gobble down one after another to their big surprise.

So after two days of being stuffed, we hike up to the Chhudong Valley again, where we had left all our gear and tent. And we are lucky again, as the weather on the first day in ABC allows us already to tackle the nice ridge we scoped out before. After some slabby pitches at the beginning, the climb becomes interesting. We have to maneuver around some towers, overcome a steep crack section to get to a traverse on a narrow ridge and continue up easy slabs in the end again. Due to the strange plant we find along the headwall, we name this peak "Gou Gou Peak" (5.200m), and rate its "South Ridge" 5.8.

Like "Torro Peak", "Gou Gou Peak" stands on a ridge, separating the Chhudong and the Dali Valley. But since it is located much further north on this ridge, the view from here is very different, and we can see all the Dali Valley and its adjacent peaks for the first time. Above a relatively flat glacier, spotted with tiny, azure blue ponds, throne a bunch of pyramid shaped peaks. And at the north end, the shape of Mount Mahindra comes into view. What an amazing



feature. Above a massive cube shaped basis, throne three distinctive towers of shiny orange granite!

Our attention though is drawn by the peak just North of Korklum Gou. It is an almost free standing pyramid, with an amazing looking ridge on its east side. As far as we checked our topos it should be unclimbed, and so we decide to give this summit a go for sure as soon as possible.

The descent from "Gou Gou" Peak turned out to be quite easy, downclimbing and hiking all the way through a gully again. At the base we stash our gear underneath a boulder, as the start of the "Trident Ridge", which we wanted to try the following day, was lying on the way.

This climb, as the name implies, leads over three distinctive "dents", formations that really look like sharp teeth of an animal. After a steep start with 5.9 crack climbing, the route becomes much easier, following a beautiful slab up to a nice ridge. Then we had to take off the ropes and hike up to the last part of the climb, where the summit seemed to be just shortly away. To our surprise the climbing then went on and on, leading around and over small towers, before a steep wall awaited us on the very top. Having the choice between a short rap and traverse, or a runout over a hard looking bulge, I opted for the latter. Our possible variation turned out to be a worthy finish (5.9 R) for a beautiful line.

Being back in ABC we decided to hike further into the Chhudong Valley, to see the amazing "Neverseen Tower" and his adjacent peaks. There, so was our plan, we would like to climb a neighboring summit, called Grandfather Enzo Peak, 5.750m high.

The hike turned out to be very monotonous, walking on boulders and rubble all along the way. Observing this glacial environment closely, I realize that this glacier must have lost a lot of mass during the recent past. My guess is, that the glacier lost maybe 100 m in height (!!!) during the last 10 - 15 years. The bare and instable side moraines on the one hand, and the beginning of vegetation on the other hand as well as the finding of pioneer plants at the same horizontal lines above the current glacier surface, are clear indicators.

It takes us tiring four hours to overcome the block glacier before we set foot on the flat, icy part of the glacier. From there on it felt like "Autobahn", did we make fast progress due to the flat terrain with no more obstacles in the way.

Another hour later we had crossed glacier bridges with roaring streams deep underneath our feet, searched for a flat boulder to set up our tent and found a small pond to get water from. And what a setting it was, with the amazing "Neverseen Tower" right behind our camp.

But unfortunately weather turned bad the next day, and it also got considerably colder, about 10° C.. For the first time we had about -5° in the night, and the first snow appeared on the summits. On the second day of waiting we thought the weather could turn around, and left ABC at around 7 a.m. to give the "Grandfather Enzo Peak" a try. Since we had no satellite phone with us, we had no means of information about the weather, and could only go by our personal interpretation of clouds moving and the air pressure on our Suuntos.

Just as we were about to climb up a couloir to the beginning of the south ridge of the mountain, the weather turned bad once again. We kept going for about an hour, but then the granite slabs above us started to be covered in a heavy layer of snow, and it became obvious that proceeding was senseless. Our first bitter defeat! So much had we desired to stand upon one of these beautiful granite peaks in the "inner" Chhudung Valley.



But all we can do is to get back to ABC, and after another day of bad weather pack our things, and leave the valley for this trip, leaving the desire behind to return again one day in order to realize this part of our dream.

The hike back to Base Camp takes out a lot of us, five hours stumbling over the block glacier in heavy rain. We often slip on the wet rocks, falling over with all of our equipment on the back, let's just not get hurt. Some when in the late afternoon we reach BC and enjoy another "shower" and feast provided by our caring crew.

The last two weeks have allowed us to reach our main goals, to do the first ascent of a mountain, do a new route and repeat one of the most appealing lines (from our perspective). So during the next couple of days, where weather stayed bad, we had the chance of gathering new energies and new motivation, for we still had the firm believe that there were more things to come in the remaining last ten days!