

PLAN B FIRST ASCENT



The four mountaineers on the summit of Bhagirathi III, Himalayas, India. ©Hugo Beguin

On October 8, 2024, Mammut athletes Jonas Schild and Stephan Siegrist, together with their climbing partners Kaspar Grossniklaus and Hugo Beguin, mastered what was probably the first ascent of the southwest ridge of the six-thousand-meter peak Bhagirathi III in India. Their report shows how a Plan B became an outstanding mountaineering achievement.

Jonas Schild reports from the realistic everyday life of an expedition—from fateful setbacks and unplanned successes.

Last September, Stephan Siegrist, Kaspar Grossniklaus, Hugo Beguin and I (Jonas Schild) traveled to the Garhwal Himalayas in India. For Stef and me, it was the third attempt to do a first ascent of the south face of Shivling (6543 m above sea level). Our first attempt in 2021 had to be aborted when one team member developed altitude sickness at 6100 m above sea level, and our second attempt in 2022 was thwarted by persistently poor weather conditions that did not allow us to make an attempt. So, we were hopeful that this time would be different.

The journey begins

The two-day bus journey from Delhi to Gangotri was delayed by one day due to heavy monsoon rains. Once in Gangotri, we had to wait another day to get the final permit for the national park. Then we could finally get started. We had a leisurely three-day hike to our base camp below the south face of Shivling at 4600 m above sea level, giving ourselves enough time to acclimatize to the altitude. On the third day, we set up base camp in a snowstorm and

with 30 cm of fresh snow—not an ideal start. But as it turned out, this was the last snowfall for almost a month.

Acclimatization

After a few days of acclimatization and settling in at base camp, we brought the first load of material to the ABC (Advanced Base Camp) at 5400 m above sea level. For the first time, we had a view of the wall and our planned route. The conditions seemed sensational. After two more rounds of acclimatization—one night in a col above base camp and one night in the ABC—we felt ready to start our attempt. Due to rockfall, the ascent to the ABC was only safe at night or early in the morning, which is why we decided on the first day of our attempt to climb from base camp to Camp 1 at 5700 m above sea level.

A familiar route, shocking conditions

We started the next day with the first rays of sunshine. We climbed this steep pillar over seven beautiful pitches to Camp 2 at 6000 m above sea level. The climbing was perfect, the cracks ideal; this time, I free climbed the crux section, which I had only managed with aid in 2021. Pure climbing fun at around 6000 meters! Despite this successful day, however, the fact that the mountain had changed significantly in the last three years weighed on us. A whole pitch was no longer available and had fallen. Cracks, in which we had set pitons in 2021, had spread several centimeters apart. The entire lower section of the pillar was sandy—a clear sign of rock movement. We also observed several rockfalls in the area of Camp 1, where we had spent the whole afternoon the previous day. It was clear to us that we would stop by there exactly once more —on the way down.



2021 in the dihedral that doesn't exist anymore.
©Stephan Siegrist



Jonas Schild climbing where there still was a dihedral back in 2021. ©Stephan Siegrist

Retreat

Then came the shock at dinner: Kaspar suddenly started vomiting and showed first signs of altitude sickness. Stef and I looked at each other in disbelief—it was the same story, the same place, and the same elevation as our first attempt in 2021. We weren't ready to think about giving up just yet. We advised Kaspar to try to get some sleep. When we woke him at midnight, he told us he wasn't feeling any better. No debate—we had to turn back. We retrieved the 100 meters of rope we'd fixed the evening before and began rappelling. The descent went smoothly, and we agreed we'd aim to be below the advanced base camp (ABC)



by sunrise to avoid rockfall. By breakfast, we were back at base camp, enjoying a cup of coffee. Despite the relief of everyone making it back safely, Stef and I quickly realized how demoralizing it was to turn back at the same point for the same reasons.

Plan B

Instead of getting discouraged, we remembered our spontaneous Plan B, which had emerged during the second Shivling expedition: a fantastic crack climb on the Kirti Nose, right next to our base camp. That successful first ascent had been a consolation after our unsuccessful Shivling attempt. It was anything but easy for us to open our minds to new possibilities and let go of a goal that had accompanied us so intensely for a long time. However, we realized that we were still mentally and physically within our comfort zone, and that the expedition was far from over.

Only four days after returning to base camp, we decided to make an attempt on Bhagirathi III (6454 meters above sea level) via the southwest ridge—with Kaspar fully recovered. We set out from base camp, crossing the rugged Gangotri Glacier and climbing to Camp 1 at 5600 meters above sea level. After a long night, we set off at 6:00 a.m., initially crossing snowfields until we reached the start of the ridge. Here, the dark rock band that makes up the upper part of the Bhagirathi Group began—an area notorious for its loose rock.

Gaining altitude through moderate but extremely loose climbing, we faced grades 4 and 5, with the main challenge being to find handholds and footholds solid enough to support us. The loose rock made route-finding through this maze particularly demanding. Moving cautiously but steadily, we made good progress, reaching two pre-summits that required short descents before we finally embraced each other on the main summit around noon.

We navigated the descent over some rappelling sections quickly and without any problems, so that we could toast to our summit success that same evening at base camp. Since we found no gear on the ridge from previous ascents and couldn't find any information on prior climbs from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) or online, we believe we may have achieved a first ascent of the Bhagirathi III Southwest Ridge.

More importantly, though, the climb on Bhagirathi III gave us a fitting end to the expedition. Despite the renewed disappointment on Shivling, we can look back on a successful trip, blessed with good weather and a fantastic team. India remains an adventure all of itself—both on and off the mountains.

Ascent details: *Bhagirathi III, Southwest Ridge, Grade 5 difficulty in alpine style, 1,900 meters from base camp to summit, with the summit reached on October 8.*



About Mammut

Founded in 1862, Mammut is a Swiss outdoor company that provides high-quality products and unique brand experiences for fans of mountain sports around the world. This leading international premium brand has stood for safety and pioneering innovation for 160 years. Mammut products combine functionality and performance with contemporary design. With its combination of hardware, footwear, and clothing, Mammut is one of the most complete suppliers in the outdoor market. Mammut Sports Group AG operates in around 40 countries and employs approx. 850 people.

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