

**Seasonal Stories
for
the Nepalese Himalaya**

2009

by Elizabeth Hawley

Spring 2009: Climbers Again Frustrated by Tibetan Visa Delays

Successes on Seldom-Climbed Everest and Cho Oyu Routes

Uncertainty about Tibet's being open to climbers—indeed, to any foreigners—led many to go to the Nepalese side of Everest rather than to wait, hoping for permission to enter Tibet, and would-be Cho Oyu climbers and their expedition organizers to switch to Manaslu or Baruntse inside Nepal. March 10th marked the 50th anniversary of Tibetans' uprising against the Beijing authorities and not long afterwards the flight of the Dalai Lama across the Himalaya into India. The important Buddhist holiday of Losar fell this year in late February, but the Tibetan community in Kathmandu did not hold their usual celebrations in order to mourn Tibetans who suffered during clashes last year.

By 24 February, the few foreigners already in Tibet were told to leave, and all tour organizers and other tourism operators were instructed not to accept bookings for the month of March; visas valid for travel to Tibet were no longer being issued. By early March, as the International Herald Tribune reported, the authorities had imposed an unofficial state of martial law on the Tibetan-inhabited highlands, with thousands of troops occupying areas they feared could erupt in rioting on the scale of 2008 in the largest deployment since the Sichuan earthquake in the previous spring. Even a curfew was imposed on Lhasa.

One Kathmandu trekking agent with climbers eager to go to Cho Oyu was told by the Chinese visa office that no permits could be granted until 11 April. Then the date was 14 April. With this kind of uncertainty, a Danish climber became upset and decided to go home instead, just as foreigners were being given permits.

Denis Urubko of Kazakhstan completed his campaign to summit all 8000-meter mountains in dramatic style by scaling Cho Oyu by its avalanche-prone southeast face in Nepal, which is very seldom attempted and by which precisely two climbers had ever been successful: two Austrians nearly 31 years ago. It had defeated Reinhold Messner in a winter attempt in December 1982 and most recently a pair of South Korean teams in November 2000 on which three Sherpas were killed in an avalanche.

Now, after about four weeks spent acclimatizing and Urubko recovering from a chest problem with difficulty breathing and frequent coughing, he and compatriot Boris Dedesko, taking no bottled oxygen along and climbing roped together throughout the expedition, started their assault on Cho Oyu which Urubko said afterwards proved to be the most dangerous climb of his extensive career. Big avalanches were coming down throughout the last three days, but they were not carried down with this snow "because we are strong" and could hang on at the spots where the snow came avalanching down over them.

Their alpine-style ascent began at midnight on 6 May from their camp at 5300m to move to the base of the southeast face at 5600m. From here they climbed difficult rocks on a slope averaging 50 degrees of steepness to 5800m, where the

grade became 90 degrees and sometimes overhanging. There were many snow avalanches and rocks falling that missed them by only two or three meters on either side. They stopped at 3:30-4:00 p.m. of 7 May at 6000m to bivouac on a ledge the size of the seats of two straight-backed chairs. They slept here sitting up inside their small tent while blasts of wind from snow and ice shook their tent.

The weather pattern had been good weather in the morning, clouds coming over them and some snow falling from about 2:00 p.m. On the 8th, they climbed to 6600m up a wall and from there up an ice slope that was mostly at 45-50 degrees, but sometimes 70 degrees. At about 4:00 p.m. they bivouacked on the slope under the protection of a stable serac.

But three days after the start of their climb, the weather deteriorated. On the 9th, bad weather set in at 7:00 a.m. as they resumed their ascent up the ice slope. Now for five days of low clouds and snowfall, they had no direct sunshine despite the fact that they were on the south side of the mountain. They bivouacked at 4:00 p.m. at 7100m at a bergschrund and discussed their situation.

They decided to continue their ascent. For them to go down to base camp now would mean that piling-up snow would seriously delay their resuming the climb to the summit. So up they went on the 10th. They encountered a rock band from 7300m to 7500m, and then climbed on rock, ice and a mixture. They stopped at 5:00 p.m. to bivouac at 7600m in another bergschrund.

They had planned to make one more bivouac before reaching the top, but now they wanted to complete their ascent in one day; they had also thought of descending the north side or the southeast face by the line east of theirs followed by the Austrians in the autumn of 1978, but they instead chose to come down the line they had gone up.

At last they were on the top. They set out for the summit at 4:30 a.m. of the 11th, went up through deep snow in a small couloir where snow avalanching was frequent, onto the slope covered in deep snow to the summit, where they arrived well after dark at 8:00 p.m.; they were back in the bergschrund at 7600m at midnight. They finally returned to base camp on 15 May, having eaten nothing on the final two days. They had fixed a total of 1200m of rope but they removed the rope from each section they fixed and used the same rope over and over again. They left none on the mountain.

Nine days after Urubko “conquered” his last 8000-meter mountain, a German accomplished the same feat: Ralf Dujmovits summited Lhotse via its standard west-face route. And on 26 July the Finnish climber Viekka Gustafsson reportedly summited his last one, Gasherbrum I. That brings the total number of climbers who have finished them all to 17. All are men, but several women are getting close. One of them is Dujmovits’ Austrian wife, Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner, who summited her 12th when she accompanied him atop Lhotse.

Following his team’s failure to summit Everest via the southwest face two years ago, South Korean veteran mountaineer Park Young-Seok came back with four teammates to try again—and this time he was successful. The Koreans’ line of ascent on the face had never been successfully climbed to the top; it was a new line

to the left of that of the Soviet expedition of spring 1982, up to where Park's camp 5 site was the same as that of the 1982 team (the Koreans found Soviet oxygen bottles there.)

Park's team began their climb on 18 April, when all five members moved up from BC. Jin Tae-Chang, Kang Ki-Seok, and Park established camp 1, while Lee, Shin, four Sherpas and a cook carried on up and established camp 2 in the Western Cwm.

Park's strategy was for two or three members or a few Sherpas to carry loads, fix ropes or establish camps, then descend and other members or Sherpas to move still higher before they also went down and were in turn replaced to continue the work. Helped by the use of oxygen by everyone above 7800m, they made steady progress until strong wind forced all members and Sherpas to retreat to base camp; the wind plus snowfall kept the team pinned down from the 10th to the 14th. But finally they began to move up once again on the 15th, and on the 18th their final camp 5 was established at 8250m on the face.

Success came on 20 May. Four members, Jin, Kang, Park and Shin left camp 5 for the top at 0:30 hours on 20 May. They fixed 500 meters of rope as they climbed to 8600m and all were on the summit together at 3:00 p.m. They descended via the southeast ridge to the South Col, where they arrived at 7:55 p.m. and slept in two tents belonging to another Korean team. They were safely back in base camp on the 22nd.

The first reports of bolting the climbing route on Everest's Nepalese side surfaced this season. The west face of Lhotse, the gateway to the South Col and final southeast ridge, was very dry during part of the climbing period—although during another period, teams were paralysed by nearly a weeklong snowstorm—and some commercial expeditions had come prepared. The leader of a Swiss party brought the drill that was used by a British assistant leader of a huge expedition and by the American leader of a much smaller one. They placed perhaps as many as ten large bolts at the Yellow Band on the Lhotse face at around 7700m.

The fitness of many people who sign up with expeditions seems open to question considering high rates of dropouts and at least some fatalities. Take this spring's fatalities first: one died of chronic heart disease and one from intracerebral hemorrhage, both surely not in fit condition to tackle 8000-meter mountains. Another collapsed from exhaustion after summiting Everest. One disappeared, presumably fell, and five are known to have fallen for unrecorded reasons; some of these could well have been caused by weariness.

Then there were numerous dropouts: one ten-member team lost half its manpower to breathing difficulty, complete loss of energy, torn knee ligaments, a fractured rib and a violent stomach "bug." The ligaments and rib were injured while climbing through the Khumbu Icefall, again perhaps from a lack of strength.

Or consider this group amongst a team with 17 clients:

(1) reached C3, descended with chest pains, left BC on 8 May.

- (2) reached C4 at the South Col (7900m), left early because of crushed ribs from a fall.
- (3) reached BC but never got higher; was sick and tired, and left in the first part of April.
- (4) got to C3 but lost motivation and left 12 May.
- (5) got to C2 but became sick and left early.
- (6) also reached C2 but lost motivation and left in late April.
- (7) developed chest pains in C3 and left 20 May.

The Guinness Book of Records has bestowed their coveted award for being the oldest summiter of Everest on last spring's younger of two contenders. Yuichiro Miura of Japan, 75 years old, formally received the accolade because the Nepalese summiter, Min Bahadur Sherchan, 16 months his senior according to his citizenship certificate, had "not submitted satisfactory documents."

At the much younger age of 57, the Frenchman Marc Batard, returned to Everest this spring to discover whether he was still capable of a speed ascent of Everest. In 1988 he became famous for making the fastest ascent of Everest in 22.5 hours from BC to summit via the South Col without using any bottled oxygen. As a mountain guide, he summited five other 8000ers between 1975 and 1990; in 1990 he reached the top of Everest for the second time. Then he dropped out of the climbing scene; he became a painter (of pictures) and hadn't climbed for the past ten years.

His speed record has been greatly improved on in the last 21 years. Indeed, in the spring of 2003, Lhakpa Gelu Sherpa went the same distance in half the time, in ten hours 56 minutes, but he did use oxygen. Now Batard has returned to the mountains, and this spring he came to Everest's north side to see whether at the age of 57 he could still climb fast. His plan was to go from advance base camp at 6400m to the summit in 20-22 hours.

On 18 May, he left ABC at 3:00 p.m. (Nepal time). But the shoes he was wearing were too light, and his feet were cold when he arrived at the North Col (7050m) at 5:00 p.m. He stopped for 45 minutes to warm them and resumed his ascent, but at 9:00 p.m., when he had reached 7700m, they were cold again. He abandoned his attempt for the top.

But he now knew that he was capable of making a very rapid ascent: he had climbed much faster than he had expected. He hoped to be able to raise enough sponsorship funds to return in 2010 and go all the way to the top, fast.

Autumn 2009: A Towering Figure in Himalayan Face-Climbing Perishes

Tibetan Side of Gaurishankar Continues to Defeat All Attempts

No one knows what caused the death of Tomaz Humar, the 40-year-old Slovenian expert in ascending the great mountain faces solo. He was soloing the south face of Langtang Lirung, a 7234m peak on Nepal's Tibetan border west of Kathmandu.

On 7 November, Humar started up a wide couloir leading leftwards and then diagonally up towards the southwest ridge, and bivouacked there at 6100m. The weather forecast predicted strong wind. On the 9th he told his base camp cook by walkie-talkie, "I'm here at 6300 meters and not possible [to continued the climb?]. I come down." Later that day he spoke again to his cook, who understood him to say that he had broken his leg and his back. Before this second call, he had told his girlfriend in Slovenia by satellite phone, "I've had an accident. I'm dying." Finally the next morning, he spoke once more to the cook and simply said "This is my last call" and switched off, or the walkie-talkie broke the connection. He was not heard from again.

Swiss rescue experts searched for him by helicopter four days later on the 14th, and spotted him at about 6100m. They lifted him off the mountain and landed at base camp.

Humar was now dead—literally frozen stiff. He had been plucked from the south side of the southwest ridge. The camera in his pocket showed an extremely steep wide couloir in both directions, up and down. In his body's frozen condition, it was impossible to tell whether he had, in fact, broken any bones, and the Nepalese doctors who perform autopsies said they were incapable of examining such a body, but his clothing and the camera and other gadgets in his pockets were undamaged. His Slovenian doctor and good friend, Anda Perdan, who had come to Nepal with the Swiss, speculated that he had managed to get down 200m to where he was found and then froze to death. His body was cremated in Kathmandu and his ashes scattered over the Langtang Lirung base campsite.

Humar's remarkable ability to solo Himalayan faces was first demonstrated in the spring of 1996, when he and compatriot Vanja Furlan made a quick continuous push up a new route on the northwest face of Ama Dablam, They had accidentally dropped all their ice screws from their second bivouac at about 5950m and had no choice but to continue their ascent of the face, solo-climbing ice angled at 70 to 90 degrees from 5680m to 6010m altitude.

Humar quickly topped this feat in the autumn of the same year by soloing Bobaye, at the time believed to be about 6800 meters high (Humar's highest bivouac was reckoned to be at 6500m). Bobaye had never been attempted before by any route; Humar ascended via its west face to northwest ridge to northwest face, and came down by a more direct line on the west pillar to the west face.

He had begun his attack on Bobaye on his hands and knees while crossing a crevasse-ridden glacier at the foot of the west face. Most of this ascent was on terrain slanting at 60 to 90 degrees, part of which was an 80-degree small couloir acting as a dangerous chute for pieces of ice from a frozen waterfall.

By the autumn of 1999, Humar had been described as “just a little bit more crazy” than other alpinists in his stubbornness and powers of concentration on the routes he has committed himself to. Now he made perhaps his most outstanding climb, his attack on the huge uncharted south face of the world’s seventh highest mountain, Dhaulagiri I. He had already scaled three unclimbed Himalayan walls, the 1900-meters-high northwest face of Ama Dablam, Bobaye’s 2500-meters-high northwest face in 1996, and the west face of Nuptse, a feature few people even knew existed, which is also 2500 meters high, in autumn 1997. Now, at the age of 30, he ventured to attempt his highest wall of all, Dhaulagiri I’s south face, more than 4000 meters high, at much greater altitudes than his earlier ones, and to do it completely alone.

This time he did not manage to climb the complete distance to his summit, but he did make most of his ascent to an altitude of 7900 meters (25,920 feet) on a wall whose steepness he estimated was between 50 and 80 degrees its entire height. He made his climb in one continuous eight-day push.

Despite frequently falling rock and ice, which left him bruised in many places, especially badly on his back, an arm and a leg, and despite occasional extremely strong winds, several rock barriers and a difficult patch of a soft mixture of snow, ice and water, Humar stubbornly persevered in a dramatic direct line up the middle of the face to 7100 meters. Here, on his sixth day, he saw a great horizontal rock band above him. He said he realized that it would take him two or three days to make the extremely difficult climb over this formidable barrier, so he traversed to his right (eastward) around it to the southeast ridge. Then back onto the face above the band and straight up it to meet the sloping southeast ridge again.

At the ridge on his eighth day, he said, he knew he would die if he tried to go all the way to the summit. There could be no exit for him down the face he had just ascended, so instead he returned the ridge, then crossed the narrow east face to the normal route on the northeast ridge for his descent.

His last great climb in Nepal was his autumn 2007 ascent of the south face of another 8000er, Annapurna I. Climbing entirely alone, he pioneered a new line up the eastern end of its huge south face to its very long east ridge and climbed and crawled to the east summit, 8026 meters high. Humar selected the far eastern end of the face because there are not so many falling stones here as elsewhere.

His first major problem was to find a feasible way to get to the face among very confusing rock towers and wide crevasses. It took him five days to find the key. At first the face was bare rock, then covered with snow, then rock, again snow. He bivouacked for two nights in a large snow hole he dug out of deep snow while rocks fell down the face beside his snug hole; he was not hit.

On his fifth day on the mountain, he gained the east ridge and began to move along it to the east summit; most of the way there, he actually traversed a few

meters below the ridge on the north face, moving carefully, very conscious of the danger of cornices breaking under his weight. Furthermore, he had very strong cold wind to contend with: while moving from the point where he gained the ridge to the east summit, he often had to lie down on the snow and crawl forward on his hands and knees between the gusts.

He turned back from the east summit: it was late in the day. He had successfully scaled the face, and he was, after all, a face climber, not a ridge man. A great face climber.

The Tibetan side of Gaurishankar, a 7134m border mountain east of Kathmandu and south-southwest of Cho Oyu, has still not been successfully climbed despite four teams' efforts. One team did not even reach the mountain because the approach road in Tibet was impassable, and this season's party of two Japanese, Kazuya Hiraide and Ms. Kei Taniguchi, was warned in advance by the mountaineering authority in Lhasa that they might not be able to get away from it.

They did get in and out, but no higher than 6850m on 10 November on the east face because of a 500-meters-high vertical rock band, entirely bare of ice or snow. They are snow and ice climbers, not rock climbers, and they had no equipment or great talent with which to scale the rock band. Their climb was finished.

There were three notable successes on Nepal's medium-high peaks and one near-success, all achieved in alpine style—no Sherpas, no fixed ropes, no bottled oxygen, just their own skills, experience and stamina—from the far northeastern Kangchenjunga region westwards to the vicinity of Everest and farther west to an area north-northwest of Manaslu.

In the northeast, two Britons, Nick Bullock and Andy Houseman, scaled the unclimbed north face of the 6750m mountain that was called Wedge Peak by early British climbers but is now officially named Ramtang Chang. They needed three bivouacs on the face's 1850 meters of varied terrain: a snowfield above a rock formation, very steep bare rock averaging 80 degrees which in parts was vertical and even slightly over-hanging, then very loose snow "with little bits of rock as well," as Bullock described it, and snow fluting which took them to the snow-covered west ridge to the top. On the ridge they enjoyed the first direct sunshine they had had since the start of their north-face climb as they went to summit on 1 November.

A traverse of Tawoche, not far from Everest, up the north face (new route) to the top, down the south face and traverse to the east face and down this face to Pheriche—all from 25 to 28 (on top) to Pheriche on 29 November—was accomplished by a Japanese pair. Fumitaka Ichimura and Genki Narumi carried all their gear with them since they would not return to the point from which they started, the village of Dugla. They needed three bivouacs in their pioneer ascent of the north face, but only one in their south-face-to-east face descent to Pheriche village.

Also in the Everest area, close to the Tibetan border crossing point, the Nangpa La, three Swiss made a quick ascent of the 7351-meter mountain known as Jasamba or Pasang Lhamu Chuli. With three bivouacs, they surmounted their snow-covered ridge on the south-southeast face that presented them with snow

mushrooms and became increasingly steeper and technically more difficult. On their third day, they found some sections were covered with ice and were 90-degrees steep, and there were a 200-meter rock wall, numerous cornices, and more mushrooms. They managed to overcome all obstacles and reached the summit on the 29th of October.

The notable near-success in alpine style was the effort of two Frenchmen, Christian Trommsdorff and Yannick Graziani, on another 7000er, Nemjung (7139m), in the area of a better known mid-western peak, Himlung. They forged a new route to the top of Nemjung's south face at 7000m on 15 October. They failed to carry on up the summit ridge because Trommsdorff felt too weak to keep going after he had been hit on his helmet by a big chunk of ice that had left him in "a kind of shocked state" the previous day.

Trommsdorff briefly summarized their climb on "a route of around 2400m, 45 pitches ... mostly ice/mixed and snow, a few pitches with just rock. Many very delicate snow ridges, walls, flutes to climb or traverse, fantastic gullies and mixed climbing, many vertical sections; a very committing route, complicated abseils during the descent and also we had to climb from a gully back onto the base of the first tower, which we avoided by a 60-meter abseil on the way up. ... A great six-day climb of the south spur, maybe the most beautiful we have ever done, certainly the most continuously steep, sustained and constantly exposed, although no pitches were as hard as the hardest ones on Chomolongo or Pumari Chhish. Always uncertainty about the key passages; on the last day there was a miraculous hole in the very corniced ridge to cross to the other side."

The unpredictability of Nepal-Tibet border closures by Chinese authorities was a problem once again this season. Because of celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic in China, the Chinese government without prior notice ordered it to be shut for eight days from the end of August into early September. This forced Cho Oyu climbers who had arrived in Kathmandu to wait a while until they could travel to base camp. The Italian mountaineer, Simone Moro, and his team made an acclimatization trek in Nepal's Everest area and then returned to Kathmandu on 30 September, ready to go to Tibet. But Tibet was not ready for them; they went home instead. A Belgian, Leopold Goven, who was due to leave by road on 5 September, was uninterested in waiting and he, too, cancelled his Cho Oyu plans.

However, later in September, the authorities in Tibet were very helpful. When a large landslide was blocking the road between base camp and the border on 28 September, and was keeping several teams stuck in base camp, the Chinese army not only permitted an American leader, Marty Schmidt, to cross the landslide the area, but helped him over the debris and carried the body of his client with him. It doubtless helped that the body was that of the husband of a Congresswoman from New York, the state where Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton lives and which she represented in the U.S. Senate before joining the Obama cabinet.