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Gamlang Razi

A first ascent in Myanmar's mysterious mountains.

"Until one is committed there is hesitancy.... The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred."
—W.H. Murray

Nineteen-thousand-foot glaciated peaks in a super-remote region of an exotic Southeast Asian country? Unsurprisingly, I was not alone in my interest in the northern reaches of Myanmar (Burma). I first thought of visiting the area back in the early 1990s. I was interested in "unexplored" mountains, and through that lens eastern India, south-eastern Tibet, and northern Burma could not be overlooked.

In 1997 I read of the late Takashi Ozaki and Namar Jonsain's success on Hkakabo Razi, believed to be the highest mountain in Myanmar at ca 5,881 meters (AAJ 1998 and 2003). The mountain sounded mysterious and enticing, with immense difficulties even during the approach, requiring old-school Shipton and Tilman-style expedition tactics. In the following years I journeyed and climbed in many remote regions of India, Tibet, and China, and now and then I revisited the idea of exploring northern Myanmar. But the difficulties of permits, politics, and geography kept pushing me away.

More recently, however, I read with interest about positive shifts in Myanmar's politics. The country held elections in 2010, and opposition party members were granted seats in the government. Due to the more open government, spending tourism dollars in Myanmar is no longer viewed as supporting an oppressive regime. Travel warnings and advisories have eased. In the spring of 2012 I recalled Ozaki's expedition and zoomed in to view the area around Hkakabo Razi on Google Earth. It felt a bit anticlimactic to sit in my living room and retrace Ozaki's journey with the latest 3D maps and satellite imagery. But, ironically, that day I discovered my own mystery of maps and geography.

On Google Earth, several peaks surrounding Hkakabo appeared to be similar to Hkakabo's height, if not higher. Answers about this part of the world don't come easily, so it took some time to identify one peak that was rapidly gaining my interest: Gamlang Razi. (Due to the local geography, the peak does not stand out prominently from any direction. The name likely came from a nearby river or pass, named Gamlang Wang and Gamlang La, respectively; Razi means "mountain" in the local Rawang language.) My research was just beginning. I accessed maps and survey reports, and spent time in Harvard University's map library. A British survey in 1925, the first in the area, had presented Hkakabo as the highest peak, and many subsequent sources maintained Gamlang Razi was lower, even after later surveys pegged Gamlang as the higher peak. "A bit of a mystery" was the eventual conclusion. This element of uncertainty and the improving political situation provided plenty of motivation to put together an expedition to attempt Gamlang and ascertain its actual height.

My wife, Molly Loomis Tyson, a couple of local friends, and I started discussing our dream trip, which would involve good friends and partnering with locals. Eventually, Eric Daft, Mark Fisher, and Chris Nance joined us as the team members from the United States.

MYANMAR PARTNERS

Exploring remote corners of the world requires venturing into politics, values, cultures, history, and relationships. Given the quickly evolving political and social landscape in Myanmar, we did our best to make sure we were safe, informed, and that our choices and actions were contributing to a positive direction for the people and country.

The Technical Mountaineering Club of Myanmar (TCCM) was founded in 2010 with the help of Seattle climber Steve Davis, who spent four years working in Myanmar and teaching some of the locals how to rock climb in his spare time. TCCM is a loose club of young folk who had become disenchanted with the only historical option: the Myanmar Hiking and Mountaineering Federation (MHMF) and its university affiliates. Finding little support or inspiration for technical climbing in the MHMF, and with fewer government restrictions on interactions with climbers from other countries, this enthusiastic group formed a separate club. Now, providing guidance from back in Seattle, Steve saw an opportunity for TCCM members to be part of a Western expedition to their own high peaks, and thus gain technical mountaineering skills and experience.

Steve and TCCM approached the Htoo Foundation for support with permits and funding. This charitable organization, funded by a Burmese natural resources conglomerate, “assists in health, education, culture, regional development and preservation of national habitat.” In our case the goal was to highlight opportunities in the Putao area of northern Myanmar for environmentally responsible tourism, while also providing health care to villagers and creating awareness about Hkakabo Razi National Park and its conservation efforts. Partnering with TCCM and Htoo cleared a path for traveling and climbing in the area.

In late March 2013, I flew to China, having volunteered to take nine TCCM members on a training climb of Haba Xue Shan (5,396m) in Yunnan Province. I then traveled to steamy Yangon, Myanmar, to work on expedition logistics with TCCM and the Htoo Foundation. Despite the 109°F temperatures and 80 percent humidity, we tried bouldering in nearby Hpa An. (There are better months than April for climbing in Myanmar!) In China and Yangon, I climbed with Win Ko Ko and Pyae Phyo Aung, who would be the TCCM climbers on our team.

Despite the 17 years since Ozaki’s expeditions, we heard constant remembrances of the Japanese climber’s expedition to Hkakabo. At every turn we were advised to do something because that is what Ozaki did, or we’d meet someone who had been touched by his expedition. Every school kid learns the name of the highest peak in the country, Hkakabo Razi, and with that they learn the name of the persons who climbed it, making Namar and Ozaki the Tenzing and Hillary of Myanmar.

Namar Jonsain (a.k.a. Aung Tse or Nyima Gyaltsen), an ethnic Tibetan from northern Myanmar, was no less fit at 42 than he was when he climbed Hkakabo, and would host us in his village home and guide us to base camp and above. We also would be accompanied by Ko Thet Tun, regarded as the most experienced guide for journeys in northern Kachin state, where Gamlang and Hkakabo are located. He is a veteran of nine trips to the area and was one of the original members of Ozaki’s Hkakabo team. We would be privileged to be following in Ozaki’s steps, interacting with his friends and teammates, years after his journey but still very fresh in their minds.

INTO THE JUNGLE

We all arrived in Yangon by August 10. Though our instincts were to go later in the fall, our local contacts and a friend and meteorologist, Marc De Keyser (Weather4expeditions.com), had advised us that the end of August and beginning of September might, for a variety of reasons, be the best window for summit attempts. So we dove into the heart of the monsoon.

From Yangon we flew to Putao, the northernmost commercial airport in the country. A couple of days later, we drove 14 miles to the town of Machanbaw and started hiking. The trail distance from

Machanbaw to Tahawndam is 150 miles. We planned to average just over 13 miles a day, taking 11 days to reach Tahawndam, the “Last Village” in Myanmar, and Namar’s home. After the Last Village we would travel another four days to reach base camp. In all, we would spend 16 days just to get near our objective. We all were as excited about this part of the trip and the locals we would meet as we were about the climb itself

As I stepped onto the Machanbaw bridge, I looked back on a gaggle of porters waiting to be chosen to carry a load and join our expedition. A line of team members trotted past me: seven climbers, ten on the Htoo support trekking team, the ten-person cook crew, and two military escorts. Somehow this dream of mine, hatched in my living room 18 months earlier, had turned into an expedition of 70 people—more than I had ever imagined—heading into the remote northern tip of Myanmar.

Quickly the jungle took over, villages appearing like oases in the middle of overwhelming vegetation. The frightening novelty of the leeches wore off quickly, once we learned they did not hurt or itch much. The sand flies, bees, spiders, and mosquitos were much more annoying. The bug life at least kept us distracted from the potential consequences of an encounter with the vipers that occasionally crossed our path. The footpath was rugged, overgrown, and surprisingly difficult for being the only artery of connection between villages.

The travel was hot, wet, and dirty, but a bathing spot at the end of each day rejuvenated us. We were able to purge just enough heat, mud, itchiness, and stress at each swimming hole to wake up and do it again the next day. The villagers were a wonderful constant: welcoming and friendly, but not overly curious or solicitous. To them we were a passing curiosity, not an opportunity. They watched us come and watched us go, graciously inviting us to stay with them again on our return.

After 11 days and as many villages, the vegetation relaxed its grip slightly as we climbed to 7,000 feet, and we noticed an upswing in the crops, goods, and general health of the local people. The improved climate and foot trade with China gave the northernmost villages in Myanmar a somewhat stable and confident air, despite their exceptionally remote location.

After an amazing reception in Tahawndam, which we were told had not seen foreign visitors in seven years, we spent a day organizing our stuff and paying the porters that had traveled with us from Putao. From here we would employ local Tibetans (mostly), Rawang, and Taron for the last leg of the journey. After four more days, ascending to the edges of the jungle at 3,650 meters (ca 12,000’), we arrived at base camp, soaking wet and itching to climb—not to mention itching from incessant bug bites.

UP THE PEAK

The jungle journey had been like a multi-night train ride in India: long, uncomfortable, repetitive, yet full of adventure. Eventually you just need to get off the train, no matter where you are. In our case, base camp was not exactly where I’d expected, but it was close enough.

Hopes of comfortable camping on alpine vegetation were unmet. The jungle, while friendlier than below, was like the mid-elevation forests in the North Cascades of Washington: lots of tall, dripping vegetation and uneven ground. The bright side was we were close to our objective and finally on our own as a climbing team. With a summit still more than 2,000 meters above us, we needed to figure out which way we were going, acclimatize, and move gear.

Above base camp we ascended a super-steep rhododendron slope before finally gaining open, high-alpine vegetation around 4,600 meters. The exposed rock was poor-quality schist, which soured our interest in the ridge we had hoped to ascend. We refocused our energy toward a glacial snow and ice route. (Higher, at about 5,500 meters, the rock was nice granite.) The weather was foggy and

rainy much of the time, but in the morning we would get just enough of a view to keep us moving on a good path. A ridge, a pass, and three camps put us in position for a summit bid from our high camp at around 4,725 meters (ca 15,500'). Marc De Keyser texted a favorable forecast for September 7, adding that it would be the nicest weather we were going to get. We burned a day to rest and wait for the "better" weather.

On September 7, we rose at 3:30 a.m. It was lightly raining, but we suited up and started climbing. After traveling over bare and crevassed glacial ice, we transitioned onto the snow-covered glacier and the falling rain turned to snow. At the transition, Win Ko Ko, who had been moving slowly and having difficulty on the technical terrain, descended to high camp, while the rest of us continued. We still hoped to achieve a joint Myanmar-American ascent, and Pyae Phyo Aung seemed excited to continue, but he was a novice compared with the rest of the team. We hoped we'd find a route that would permit us to summit together.

Clouds swirled around us throughout the ascent, closing in and obscuring the route, then breaking just enough for us to push ahead. At one point the whiteout was so thick we tried three different paths before finding a good line. We used pickets on the steep slopes. The weather started improving and we could see the top ahead. At 2 p.m. six of us stood on the snowy summit. We hugged and shouted, relieving the stress that had built during the first 32 days of the expedition, not to mention the years of planning leading up to it. It truly felt like a Myanmar-American expedition from start to summit.

On top we used a Juniper Archer sub-meter GPS receiver to record position and elevation data for 30 minutes. After the trip, the data was processed and reviewed by Juniper Archer and Canada-based Effigis, and it showed the summit to be 19,258 feet (5,870m +/- 2m).

Pyae Phyo Aung was tired on the way down. He fell a number of times, requiring teammates to arrest him. The fifth time, due to the angle and soft snow, his team was unable to stop the fall. The rope team fell down the steep slope and across a bergschrund, eventually stopping on the glacier below, where the angle decreased. Luckily all were fine, and the descent continued uneventfully. Arriving in camp after dark, we met with Win Ko Ko. There was joy for our success and sadness that the whole team had not made it to the top.

So, could Gamlang be higher than Hkakabo? Maybe. Hkakabo has never been measured with an accurate recording instrument on the summit (as we did on Gamlang.) During the 1925 survey, the British/Indian team sighted the mountains from distant jungle ridges. Since that time, maps not based on the British survey have shown a wide variety for peak heights, mostly depicting Gamlang higher than Hkakabo. Current satellite-generated data also depicts Gamlang as higher. Our summit GPS record showed Gamlang Razi to be 11 meters (36') lower than the highest published height of Hkakabo Razi (the 1925 Survey of India height). But it's also possible that the British measurement of Hkakabo was too high. A summit measurement on Hkakabo should settle the question.

The mystery of Gamlang Razi's elevation, our international team, the villagers, the landscape, the mountains, and the jungle—all these elements fused into an unforgettable journey. Luckily for us, the mountains of Myanmar have been slow to reveal their secrets. There are plenty more yet to discover.

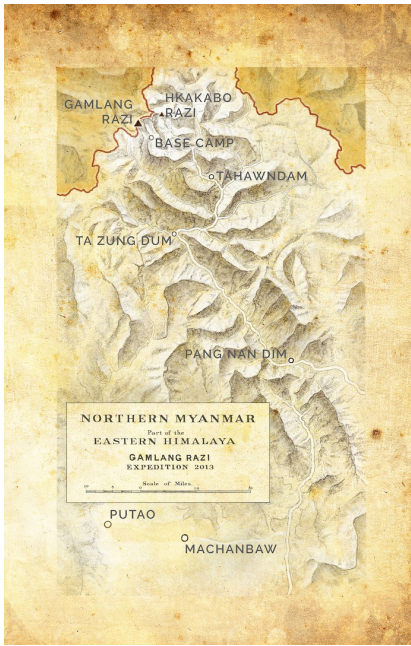
Summary

First ascent of Gamlang Razi (5,870m) in northern Myanmar by the southwest glacier and west ridge, by Eric Daft, Mark Fisher, Chris Nance, Andy Tyson, Molly Loomis Tyson (all U.S.) and Pyae Phyo Aung (Myanmar), September 7, 2013.

About the Author

Andy Tyson, 44 has been climbing, guiding, and adventuring around the world for more than 26 years. When not in the mountains, he manages Creative Energies, a solar company he founded 14 years ago. He lives in Victor, Idaho, with his wife, Molly.

Images



Map of approach and location of Gamlang Razi, northern Myanmar.



Nearing base camp.



Gamlang Razi. The route followed the glacier and roughly the left skyline.



The jungle approach took 15 days.



Unclimbed granite needles to the north.



Difficult terrain during the approach.



Molly Loomis Tyson high on the west ridge.



Climbers Win Ko Ko and Pyae Phyo Aung.



The team on top: Mark Fisher, Eric Daft, Chris Nance, Andy Tyson, Molly Loomis Tyson (all U.S.) and Pyae Phyoe Aung (Myanmar).



Andy Tyson with Namar Jonsain, who joined Takashi Ozaki for the first ascent of Hkakabo Razi in 1996.

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