



AAC Publications

Chola II, North Face

China, Sichuan, Chola Shan

Marcos Costa (Brazil), Kyle Dempster (USA), and I traveled to Sichuan and Yunnan in February in search of more first ascents and new routes above 6,000m in the alpine country of the eastern Himalayan uplift. After an abortive effort to access the north side of the Siguniang Range via the Bipeng Valley, which fell afoul of the park authorities, we continued to the far northwest of Sichuan, where the Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Region poses few official barriers to alpine activity in the Chola, Shaluli, and Gongkala ranges.

Our target was the north face of Chola II (6,119m), which is accessible directly from 4,000m on the paved road between Ganzi and Dege, and was reached by a hike up a drainage along an amazingly continuous frozen alpine river, gaining 500m over 4km. While Chola I (6,168m) is often ascended by climbing schools and guided parties, Chola II is thought to have been climbed only once, by Charlie Fowler, solo, in May 1997. Fowler's route took the northeast face from the main Chola Glacier; formerly a 50° snow slope, it was now a serac-threatened and dangerous face, unsuitable as an ascent or descent route.

Our first attempt on the north face coincided with a passing weather front, bringing high winds and light snow to accompany the bitterly cold temperatures of the Tibetan winter (well below -20°C all day). We moved quickly on the easiest slopes we could find, stopping to belay only as we approached the summit ridge, where Kyle became dangerously chilled at a notch around 6,000m. As Marcos moved above him, Kyle was hit in the jaw by rockfall, causing an impact and injury serious enough for us to call a retreat. We rappelled a deep gully below the summit, crossing through the icefall low on the face to regain our high camp, and marched out the same day for rest and recovery in Ganzi.

Although all of us had numbness in our toes from the low temperatures, none of us was to be deterred, least of all Kyle. Returning to our high camp two days later, we retraced our steps below the upper northwest ridge and then traversed into the true north face, where Kyle led two absorbing mixed pitches to put us on the summit of Chola II. The face is ca 800m, and all but five pitches were climbed unroped.

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Images



Looking southeast from Chola II to the summit of Chola I. This peak was first climbed in 1988 by a Chinese-Japanese joint expedition from the glacier on the far side.



The new route on the north face of Chola II; the main technical difficulties were passing through the steep rock barrier to gain the summit snow slopes. The 1997 Fowler route is hidden behind.



The new route on the north face of Chola II. The X marks the vicinity of the notch where Kyle Dempster was injured during the first attempt. During both ascents, the team rappelled the hidden gully descending left from this point. The 1997 Fowler route takes the serac-laden face in left profile.



Exit pitches on the north face of Chola II. Halfway up the steep, narrow runnel below the ridge, the climbers took the obvious right-hand line to the crest.



The approach valley to the north face of Chola II, following solid ice in the riverbed.

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