Tawoche, Northeast Buttress, Into the Light

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal – Khumbu Section

My most recent expedition to Nepal was filled with great joy and success, but also with immense sorrow and tragedy. When we dance with the extremes of nature we feel incredibly alive, close to the divine. It's these moments I hold dearest in my heart. Sadly, after one such dance my partner and good friend Justin Griffin fell to his death, on November 14, while descending from our climb.

We arrived in Kathmandu on October 19 with the generous support of a Lyman Spitzer grant from the AAC. In conjunction with our climbing ambitions, we had volunteered for two weeks with the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation to further the construction of the Khumbu Climbing Center's new building in Phortse. The village sits at 3,800m, giving us a great chance to acclimate. We made substantial progress on the building, and were also lucky to make some new friends in the Sherpa community and get a glimpse into their magical lives.

On November 5 we left the village to set up base camp in a small lodge at Thugla (4,620m), below the massive north faces of Cholatse and Tawoche (6,495m, a.k.a. Taboche or Taweche). [While Tawoche is the usual spelling, the author notes that during his two weeks in Phortse the locals only referred to the mountain as Taboche and rejected any other name. We have retained the traditional spelling for consistency.] The forecast looked promising, and we established an advanced base at 4,800m. On the 8th we made a reconnaissance climb to 5,100m and found solid ice, good névé, and quality rock. We also made a final decision about which route we would attempt—there were many potential new and inspiring lines.

On the 9th we regained our high point, chopped a tent platform, and rested. The following day we climbed four technical pitches of AI4 M6 and were treated to spectacular views of the south faces of Nuptse and Everest. On the morning of the 11th we were slow to start and morale was low. The summit seemed miles away, and with difficult and unknown terrain ahead we were battling tremendous internal fears. But the first two pitches were spectacular and steep AI4 M6, and we were delighted to be in such technical terrain. The rock continued to be solid and the névé perfect. We next opted to follow a sparsely protected AI3 R gully for 250m. Thankfully, we found a bivouac site at 5,725m on a sheer ridge at the top of the gully and got to sleep by 2:30 a.m.

On our fourth day we were gifted with three hours of sunlight, the only time we saw it on the route. We lounged until 11 a.m. and then climbed four intricate traversing pitches, feeling very committed and exposed. Amazingly, the pitches kept connecting. Our final bivouac, like the others, required hours to construct.

At this juncture we opted to leave most of the kit behind and push for the summit. While this left our asses hanging in the breeze, we felt we would move much faster, and we reasoned we could collect the gear during our rappel descent of the route.

On the 13th we were moving by 5 a.m., and after three awesomely exposed and technical traversing pitches we reached the crux at 6,100m. From the ground we had spotted an ice seam through the final headwall, but would it go? We both led exhilarating 70m pitches of thin ice, rock, and névé at AI5 M5 R, coining the name "Five Star Hot Chinese Mustard" for the feature we climbed. Fear melted away and we moved with confidence and grace—the higher we climbed, the more we were able to let

go.

Darkness began to settle and the temperature dropped. We were both exhausted, but Justin found a hidden level of motivation and took the sharp end for hour after hour. We reached the summit plateau at 6 a.m. on November 14, having completed Into the Light (1,500m, AI5 M6 R). What we thought would be a quick jaunt to the true summit now looked involved and time- consuming. Standing in the warm sunshine, looking at a possible descent by the easy southeast ridge, we made the decision: Let's get the hell out of here!

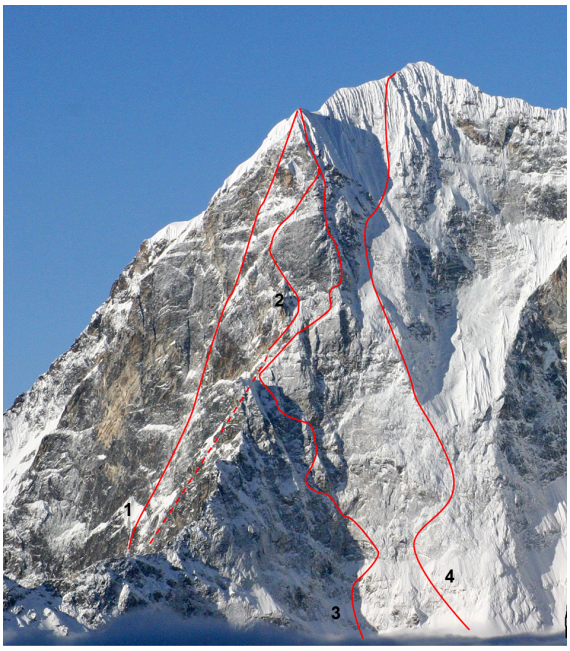
We set off down the ridge and after two hours dropped into the east couloir. We downclimbed the easy terrain unroped. Several hours later, and no more than 100m from the base of the mountain and safety, I saw Justin turn around to downclimb a low-angle section of ice. He slipped, and with our ice tools dulled to nubs from thousands of feet of dry-tooling, he was unable to gain purchase. He fell over a final 60m vertical icefall. I rushed to his aid and administered CPR until I was choking on my tears. I descended the rest of the mountain alone in complete disbelief. Upon arriving in Pheriche, I contacted Global Rescue. Amazingly, six Sherpas hiked through the night from Phortse to assist in any way they could, proving that Justin had touched many in that village. A helicopter was called and a skillful recovery was performed.

Not a day passes when I don't think about Justin or of the accident, and I know that I will be forever haunted by this climb. But I know if Justin were here, he would look me squarely in the eyes and say, "Get over it, bro! This is what we do. We take chances. We train like athletes to stack the odds in our favor. We go to the mountains to push our personal limits, to get closer to nature, to get closer to our friends." I can only hope his memory will inspire future generations of alpinists to dream big and try hard. [See the In Memoriam section of this edition for more about Justin Griffin.]

Summary: New route Into the Light (1,500m, AI5 M6 R, not to summit) on the northeast buttress of Tawoche in the Khumbu, by Justin Griffin and Skiy DeTray (USA), November 8–14, 2015.

– Skiy DeTray, USA

Images



Tawoche from the north. (1) East face direct (Lowe-Roskelley, 1989). (2) Northeast buttress, British Route (Fowler- Littlejohn, 1995). (3) Northeast buttress, Into the Light, not to summit (DeTray- Griffin, 2015). (4) North face direct, not to summit (Ichimura-Narumi, 2009).

Justin Griffin on an awkward traverse on day two of the northeast buttress of Tawoche.

Justin Griffin in Kathmandu.

The line of Into the Light on Tawoche.

Justin Griffin leading hard mixed ground on day two of Into the Light on the northeast buttress of Tawoche.

Justin Griffin on steep névé during the third day of the 2015 ascent of the northeast buttress of Tawoche.

Skiy DeTray leading intricate mixed terrain on day five of the new route on Tawoche’s northeast

buttress.

Skiy DeTray leading the initial mixed ground on the north flank of Tawoche’s northeast buttress.

Article Details

Author	Skiy DeTray
Publication	AAJ
Volume	58
Issue	90
Page	344
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions