



Langtang Lirung, East Face and Northeast Ridge, Using Paragliders to Attempt High Peaks in Nepal's Langtang Himal

Nepal, Langtang Himal

There are a number of attractive unclimbed faces in the Himalaya that have not even been attempted because the approach is considered too difficult or dangerous. On paper, our concept was simple: We would use paragliders to catch thermals and fly over the danger zone, landing at a safe site on the face. From there we would hope to climb in alpine style to the summit and back, and then descend by paraglider.

After extensive research on the mountains of Nepal, Julien Dusserre and I found that Langtang Lirung (7,227m) met all the criteria. Relatively few have reached the summit, and the peak is deemed highly dangerous due to constant avalanches. [There are 14 known ascents, nearly all by the southeast or southwest ridges. However, unauthorized ascents are rumored.] The east face remains virgin, and toward the right side there was a potential safe landing between 5,700m and 6,000m. Above lie snowfields that lead, seemingly easily, to the upper crest of the unrepeatable northeast ridge, the route of the first known ascent (Japanese, 1978). Below the proposed landing site is a chaos of ice, where seracs fall almost constantly. And in this part of the world it is quite easy to find thermals up to 6,000m.

We trekked from Kathmandu through Helambu in poor weather. We each carried 37-kilogram (82-pound) packs, and we used no porters. We were completely autonomous. When the weather improved and we had gained enough altitude and acclimatization, we launched our paragliders and flew to the Langtang Valley, eliminating three days of walking with two hours of flight.

To finalize our acclimatization for Langtang Lirung, we decided to attempt a similar climb with two nights spent at altitude. Choosing a peak that had characteristics closest to our main objective, we settled for Shalbachum (6,707m), where there are several possible landing sites between 5,000m and 6,200m. The remaining ascent did not look too difficult. [This peak was first climbed in 1959 by Japanese via the southwest face. Italians claimed to have climbed it in 1963, but there are no details, and since then there are no known ascents.]

On April 30 we packed 18-kilogram (40-pound) rucksacks and flew from a height of 4,200m to a snow terrace on the southwest face of the mountain at 5,800m. Unfortunately, we were now in cloud. Moving through deep snow, we reached a higher terrace at 6,200m, where we decided to sleep. It was clear and cold that night, but the next morning large, dark clouds gathered in the west. It began to snow. In the middle of the afternoon we took advantage of a lull to downclimb, not without difficulty, to 5,800m, where we camped for our second night. Next day we descended another 250m, and after digging a takeoff runway and waiting for the wind to subside, we managed to fly down to the main valley.

After a couple of days of rest, we felt sufficiently acclimatized to take a shot at Langtang Lirung. Unfortunately, the weather remained unstable. From May 5 to 11, we made multiple attempts to fly up to Langtang Lirung carrying 12-kilogram packs, including food for three days. Sadly, the weather was such that air currents formed a flying ceiling of little more than 4,600m. With no change in the forecast until June, we abandoned the expedition.

On the positive side, we now know that this system will work, and given the right weather conditions it is certain that paragliding will make it possible to discover new routes that were hitherto deemed inaccessible.

– Antoine Girard, France

Images



The 5,800m camp on the southwest face of Shalbachum, which French climbers Julien Dusserre and Antoine Girard reached by paraglider. A storm forced them to retreat to this spot from 6,200m, one day after landing. Dragpoche (a.k.a. Yansa Tsenji, 6,567m) is behind.



During the French climbers' "trek" to the Langtang Valley. The paraglider is a little east of the village of Sherpangau. The French bypassed three days of trekking with two hours of flying, albeit not without difficulty: On their first launch attempt they landed 400 meters lower than they had started. The conspicuous pointed rock and snow peak on the left is Peak 5,857m. The rocky foreground ridge culminates in unnamed Peak 5,613m.



Above the Langtang Valley, with peaks of the Jugal Himal in the distance. (A) Dorje Lakpa (6,966m). (B) Peak 6,563m. (C) Gangchempo (6,387m). (D) Ponggen Dokpu ridge (5,930m).



The unclimbed east face of Langtang Lirung. The “standard route” is the left skyline, the southeast ridge (Japanese, 1980), with around nine ascents to date).



Langtang Lirung from the east. The original route, climbed in 1978 by a Japanese team, followed the right skyline (northeast) ridge after a difficult and dangerous glacier approach. Most subsequent ascents have followed the left skyline (southeast) ridge. (X) marks the spot of the climbers' proposed landing site above the icefall. From there, Dusserre and Girard hoped to climb snow slopes diagonally left before heading up to the northeast ridge.



Above the Lirung Glacier. Behind is the lower right side of the east face of Langtang Lirung. Dusserre and Girard hoped to land above the icefall visible in the center.



Descending from 5,800m after two nights on Shalbachum. Later this day, Dusserre and Girard were able to stamp out a runway and escape the face by paraglider

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