



## Lobuche East, Southwest Pillar, Hiding in Plain Sight

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Section

**Lobuche East (6,090m) is easily overlooked as a target for serious climbs. In fact, we did exactly that.** Daniel Joll and I (New Zealand), and Kim Ladiges and Matt Scholes (Australia), traveled to Nepal in November 2017 to climb the north face of Cholatse. Wanting an easy acclimatization peak nearby, we also got a permit for Lobuche East. The southeast ridge is an easy snow climb, guided commercially, with fixed ropes on the snow section. We used this route as a simple way to get to 6,000m, have a high sleep, and prepare ourselves for more interesting things, as many people have done.

However, traveling up valley on the trekking route to Cho La, the eye cannot help but be drawn to the striking pillar of granite coming down from Lobuche East's main summit toward the town of Dzongla. At the time we weren't aware of ascents, but we suspected such a striking line must have attracted some attention. Our first impression was "no way"—that looks too steep, too hard. Overhanging granite walls at altitude in a light and fast style did not seem to match up. However, closer inspection with binoculars and camera zooms showed the right side of the upper face could be reached by a series of ledges, and above that a series of corners was visible.

We planned for a single bivouac, took food and gas for two days, and climbed as two pairs with a single half rope and light rack for each team. Above the upper wall was an ice arête, so we carried two tools each, along with a snow stake and screws, as the difficulty of this section was a big unknown. Some light single boots would have been nice, but we didn't have them, and we ended up climbing the lower rock in heavy and sweaty double boots.

We left our camp in a dark moonless night, making quick time to the base of the pillar and then up the first easy scrambling portion, having previously scouted this section. We came in from the left, starting on a moraine ridge, then kept more or less to the crest of the pillar; the easier gully to the right was filled with rubble and topped by looming seracs. The climbing was pleasant and solid, but the slabs were trickier than expected in double boots. There were three gendarmes, each requiring a rappel on the far side. None had any existing tat, making us think no one had come this way before.

Before the large, obvious detached tower, the crest steepened dramatically and we traversed rightward, then rappelled to the orange, chossier gully on the right of the ridge. Here we found an old piton. We followed the left side of the gully back to the crest, then crossed the gully and eventually reached a saddle below the steep upper pillar. A rubbly ledge system led rightward to a couple of steeper bulges, which we surmounted to gain steep snow. We climbed this in the dark, before finding a lower-angled section at around 5,700m that we could level for a bivouac site.

The next morning we waited for the sun to hit the rock before climbing the lovely granite wall above. This was the hardest and also the nicest rock climbing, with a section of steep flakes and corners. We hauled the leader's pack on this section (two short pitches), then climbed a number of easier pitches on the righthand side of the pillar, just left of the serac band. This gained the top of the pillar, where we switched from rock shoes to boots and crampons for the ice above. Moderate ice led to the summit, which we reached in dwindling light and visibility. We traversed the crest to the false summit at the top of the southeast ridge, from which fixed ropes and a well-marked trail allowed a rapid descent. In a few hours we were at base camp.

Once back with good Internet connection, we researched the pillar to find who had been there before. Eric Brand and Pemba Norbu Sherpa first climbed it in 1991 at 5.10 A3. We would have shared very little terrain with them, as they climbed to the right of the lower pillar up what is now a chossy gully, then a proud line up the crest of the upper pillar involving aid and fixed ropes. It was also reported that Spaniards Manolo Miranda, Carlos Miguel, and Eduard Sanchez climbed a line on the pillar in 1995. They climbed to the left of the original line on the lower section and then right on the upper wall (6b+ with one pitch of aid), so it is more likely we shared similar terrain with them. I thought it was a fantastic climb, well worth considering. Harder free climbing possibilities exist on the buttress—our line was the one of least resistance, but still involved fine technical climbing. We named the route Hiding in Plain Sight (1,100m, 17 AI3).

Later, we repeated the French route on the north face of Cholatse and again had a quick and convenient descent. The standard route via the southwest ridge is now commonly guided, and fixed ropes had been installed earlier in the season.

– Steve Fortune, New Zealand Alpine Club

## Images



Daniel Joll climbing the headwall a little left of the seracs on the southwest pillar of Lobuche East.



Kim Ladiges acclimatizing on the southeast ridge of Lobuche East with, from left to right, the north faces of Tawoche, unclimbed Tawoche North, and Cholatse behind.



The southwest pillar of Lobuche East (6,090m), showing (1) Hiding in Plain Sight (2017), probably

similar to the 1995 Spanish route; (2) 2018 French route, Le Quatuor à Cordes. (3) 1991 American-Nepalese Route. The normal route up the southeast ridge follows the right skyline, though most parties stop at the foresummit (first confirmed ascent in 1984 by American-Nepalese team, though possibly Japanese in 1979).

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