



## AAC Publications

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### Alone on Lunag

Three Years and Finally Success on a High Peak in Nepal

**IT'S EITHER the lung or the heart," Conrad Anker said between gasps.** He was suffering from severe pain in his chest. The temperature of around  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  wasn't helping. It was November 2016, and we were about 450 meters up on our second attempt on Lunag Ri, an unclimbed summit on the Nepal-Tibet frontier, southwest of Cho Oyu. The line we had picked was demanding. In our discussions, Conrad had prevailed with his preferred alternative, which might have been objectively safer but also was harder than a line through the icefield to our right. He wasn't having a great day and had asked me to lead. The higher we climbed, the more his condition worsened, to the point where it could only be described as alarming. But he didn't want to give up. It was time to make a decision—if necessary, against his wishes. Was the summit of Lunag Ri really that rock tooth sticking out from the wall like a diving board high overhead? We probably weren't going to find out this time either.

"We need to turn around," I told Conrad. He asked me to wait a few more minutes to see if his condition improved. "Maybe we can build a little platform for our tent up on that icy rib over there and see how things go tomorrow," he said. "You've got five minutes," I told him. In reality, I don't think I granted him more than three minutes. I started to build the first rap anchor, and when it was ready, Conrad finally gave in without protest. I had tried to convince him to call a helicopter that could pick him up as soon as we got to the base of the wall, but he refused. At least we were heading down. The steep, difficult terrain was now to our advantage, and we descended without incident.

In our advanced base camp, Conrad still didn't want a helicopter, but he wasn't doing any better. Where is the line between respecting a friend's wish and assuming responsibility for his survival? I took a decision and called our agency in Kathmandu. They immediately arranged to send a chopper our way. We didn't talk much while waiting for the rescue, but I vividly remember this one sentence, which Conrad half panted, half murmured: "It's on you now, David!"

Finally, the clattering chuf-chuf of the helicopter drew nearer, and they quickly loaded Conrad aboard and flew off down the valley. Soon we received news from Kathmandu: Conrad had suffered a heart attack. Thanks to his great physical condition, he was doing well after emergency surgery. He was in good hands; his condition was stable. However, he wouldn't return to Lunag Ri. There was nothing I would rather have done than finish the climb with him, but that wasn't going to happen. I sat in base camp, almost not daring to tell anyone: I was going to try alone. The chances were slimmer, the risk was bigger. Well, so be it.

Lunag Ri from the southwest. (A) Summit (ca 6,907m). (B) Southeast top, reached by French climbers in 2010, via the southeast face. (1) Line followed in 2015 and 2016. (2) Line of Lama's solo ascents. (H1) High point with Anker in 2016. (H2) High point of 2015 attempt and 2016 solo attempt. Photo by David Lama

**CONRAD AND I already had tried Lunag Ri in 2015, and we reached a point about 300 meters below the summit,** starting on the same vertical pillar on the lower wall. It was extremely cold. Even though we had rigorously packed, taking only the utmost necessities, I had to remove my pack on the very first pitch, as leading the steep, icy rock just seemed impossible with it. Every pitch cost us precious time.

We reached a saddle and veered right to climb along the knife-edge northwest ridge. The climbing

was exposed, right on the border of Tibet and Nepal, and also right on the fine line between bold and stupid. On several sections, the snow was so unstable that the only protection was for each of us to stay on opposite sides of the ridge. Sometimes we'd have to traverse down as much as 20 meters off the ridge to find solid snow to support our crampons. When it was time to set up our bivy, the summit was still so far away that we kept going into the night to have a shot at the top the next day. We had underestimated this ridge.

Under a boulder, we found a little crevasse that we dug out until our tent somehow fit inside. We melted some snow, cooked, ate, and left at two in the morning for the summit push, without our tent and sleeping bags. The terrain stayed difficult, and gradually it dawned on us that, although we might have a chance to reach the summit, it would come at a price: We would have to bivouac on the descent, without any bivy gear. At temperatures between  $-20^{\circ}$  and  $-30^{\circ}$ , coupled with strong winds, losing fingers or toes was not just a theoretical worst-case scenario but the certain toll of a high-stakes game—one that we were both unwilling to play. My friend Peter Ortner, who was my partner on Cerro Torre and on Masherbrum in 2013 and 2014, had lost several toes while climbing and paragliding in Alaska, and I was acutely aware of the danger. We turned around and decided we'd return the next year. In fact the conditions were much better in 2016 and we were having a great time. Then came Conrad's heart attack.

And there I was, knowing that I would try alone, knowing that my chances had not exactly increased, but also that it wasn't impossible. I had to adapt my plan to the fact that I was soloing: Our original line was too hard to climb without a belay, and self-belaying all those pitches would take too long. I thus chose to climb the icefield to the right of the pillar, getting an early start to reach its top before sunrise and the inevitable falling rock and ice that would come with it. After the icefield, I planned to angle left to reach the ridge on our original line. I anticipated two bivies on the way up and hoped to descend without needing a third bivouac. That was the plan.

Conditions were good on the icefield, but on the ridge the climbing was too hard for ropeless soloing while carrying the backpack. Leading, self-belaying, rappelling, and climbing back up with the pack took so much effort; the cold bit my bronchi, and a painful and worrisome cough was the result. I climbed a bit past the previous year's high point and somewhat precariously pitched my tent on a small, icy balcony right on the ridge. I spent the night psyching myself up for the next day's task of descending safely. The summit was far out of reach. All that counted was getting back down.

### **BACK IN AUSTRIA, I stayed in touch with Conrad, monitoring his recovery at home in Montana.**

When he boarded that helicopter at the base of Lunag Ri, he had said good-bye to extreme alpinism. He'd had enough; it was a dignified decision. At the same time, it felt odd: Conrad had always been there, kind of like the mountains themselves. He had done first ascents long before I was born. When he climbed the amazing west face of Latok II with the Huber brothers and Toni Gutsch in 1997, I was busy with learning multiplication in second grade. Of all his first ascents around the globe, the one that stuck out for me was Badlands on Torre Egger. This climb rings a bell only to a few connoisseurs, but there aren't many lines like it.

Jimmy Chin, a close friend of Conrad's, had connected us after a film festival in Spain around 2014. After completing a couple of smaller climbing projects together, we set our sights on unclimbed Lunag Ri. [In 2010, a French team climbed the southeast face of Lunag; they finished on a point atop the face and descended without traversing to the higher main summit as planned.] Then came our two expeditions to the mountain, the heart attack, and my solo attempt. Conrad recovered well, and in the summer of 2018, he and I climbed a couple of nice routes in the Dolomites. Those days meant a lot to me, but he had taken his decision. He was done with climbs like Lunag Ri. A few strong climbers asked if I wanted to try the mountain with them. Sorry guys, but no way. It wasn't that I wanted to make it harder or more spectacular—it was just that, given Conrad wasn't joining me, the second-most beautiful option I could imagine was to complete the project by myself. And so I declined all offers and returned to make an attempt alone in October 2018.

“The third time is the charm,” Conrad had said to me in the Dolomites. But once in Nepal, a few long, nerve-racking weeks went by before I could set off. Weather windows came and went, each too short for a promising attempt. I was focused and ready. Ready in a way I had rarely been before. Time after time, Charly Gabl, a world-renowned mountain meteorologist from Innsbruck, warned me the good weather wouldn’t last long enough to descend, that the wind would be too strong. Twice I went to advanced base camp, backpack ready. Both times I turned around because of Charly’s warnings. I trusted him.

Still, the back and forth tormented me. Soon, some friends from Tirol would turn up in base camp. I had promised them and my cameraman friend, Martin “Mungo” Hanslmayr, that we all would climb Cholatse together. I felt committed to this promise. Then, at the last moment, I got a forecast that would at least provide a real chance. Finally!

Just after midnight on the morning of October 23, I set off. I climbed through the night as the temperature plummeted to 30 below. There were wind squalls, but they didn’t hit me quite as hard as they would if I’d already been up on the ridge. At 8 a.m., I put my tent on a small, flat platform and rested. Inside the tent, the cold was less biting. The ice between my two socks, which had frozen solid inside my boots, began to melt. My airways got some relief as I drank a few sips of warm water. I rested all day and the following night. Had I continued that day, I might have gotten past the Toblerone, a prominent rock tower on the ridge, but I could not have made the summit, and the bivy options higher up were not as good. And so I stayed in the tent for about 24 hours before starting again.

In the morning of October 24, I continued along the fabulous ridge, passing some incredible pitches on which I could hear the lovely sound of my crampons’ teeth grating against the granite, finding a hold, and coming to halt. I saved time and energy by belaying only on the trickiest sections. Some 200 meters below the top, I stopped again and set up my tent on a wildly overhanging cornice.

The third day could have started better. I hadn’t even gotten out of my sleeping bag yet when I threw up my entire breakfast. Even before setting off on the first pitch, my feet were completely numb. I self-belayed more frequently, not only because the headwall was so steep, but also because I could rest in my harness at the belay, which briefly brought some warm blood back into my toes. It took four hours of painstakingly slow climbing to crest the headwall. Gradually I could see the summit ridge ahead, and my thoughts shifted from *I am so, so slow* to a more confident *I am moving up, slowly but surely*. The rock tooth that Conrad and I had guessed might be the summit was indeed the highest point, sticking into the abyss. Around 10 a.m., I carefully strode out to the tip. I would have loved to share this moment with Conrad.

Less than two weeks after standing on top of Lunag Ri, my friends and I reached the summit of Cholatse. Even though the two ascents were very different, they each had their own appeal. While Lunag Ri will be engraved in my memory for the exposure, the difficulty, the cold and the loneliness, and for a successful conclusion to a personal project, sharing my friends’ joy on their first Himalayan 6000er and seeing the happiness in their eyes made the ascent of Cholatse a great pleasure.

**Summary:** First ascent of Lunag Ri (Lunag I) in the Rolwaling Himal of Nepal, by the southwest face and northwest ridge (approximately 1,500m vertical gain), by David Lama, October 23–25, 2018. Lama descended by rappel, mostly along the route of ascent, and returned to advanced base camp late on October 25. Lunag Ri’s elevation is variously quoted at 6,895m and 6,907m; however, based on his mobile phone’s GPS and his climbing distance, Lama believes the peak is closer to 7,000m.

**About the Author:** Born in 1990, David Lama lived in Innsbruck, Austria. In January 2012, Lama and Peter Ortner made the first free ascent of Cerro Torre’s southeast ridge.

## Images



David Lama climbing the northwest ridge of Lunag Ri during the first ascent. The photo was taken by a drone piloted from advanced base camp.



The summit of Lunag Ri is the high point at far left on the central massif.



During his climb of Lunag Ri, Lama rested for 24 hours at the first bivouac before heading toward the summit.



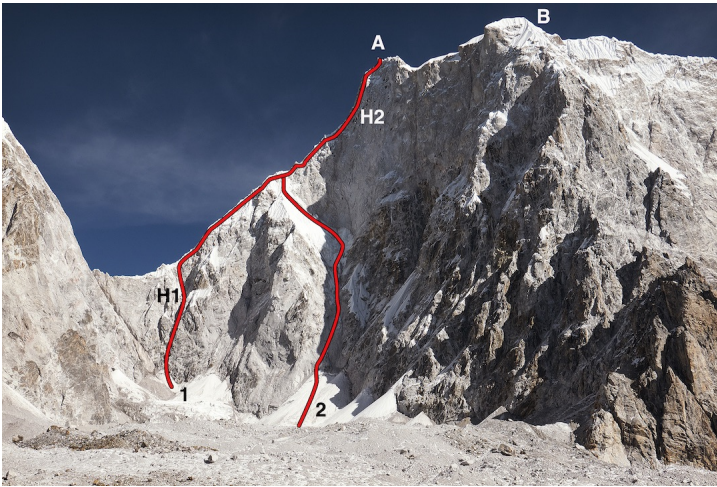
Lama alone on the frontier between Nepal and Tibet. A drone operated from advanced base captured images of his solo ascent.



David Lama approaches the summit of Lunag Ri. An image similar to this, captured by drone, was featured on the cover of AAJ 2019.



Self-portrait on the summit of Lunag Ri.



Lunag Ri from the southwest. (A) Summit (ca 6,907m). (B) Southeast top, reached by French climbers in 2010, via the southeast face. (1) Line followed in 2015 and 2016. (2) Line of Lama's solo ascents. (H1) High point with Anker in 2016. (H2) High point of 2015 attempt and 2016 solo attempt.



Looking to the southwest past Conrad Anker during the 2015 attempt on Lunag Ri. The high peaks in the center background are Menlungtse (left) and Gaurishankar. Directly behind the climber is Little Lunag.

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