



AAC Publications

Threading the Needle

Skiing Lhotse's Dream Line

ON SEPTEMBER 30, at about 2 p.m., Jim Morrison and I pulled off our overboots, clicked into our ski bindings, and laboriously buckled our boots. Our oxygen masks were off, making every action at 27,940 feet, on the summit of Lhotse, extremely slow and difficult. I reached for my backpack, so much lighter now that my skis were on my feet, and swung it over my right shoulder, then slowly buckled the waist and chest straps. I slid my oxygen mask back over my face, stuck my right hand on the summit cornice, and soaked up the view one last time.

Exactly four weeks earlier, on August 31, our team of four—Jim and I, along with photographers Dutch Simpson and Nick Kalisz—left the U.S. from various points and convened at the Kathmandu airport. Jim and I went straight from the hotel to the Nepal Ministry of Tourism to register for our expedition, pay garbage fees, meet our liaison officer, and finalize the two necessary permits for Lhotse: one for climbing and one for skiing back down. We took another full day to organize in Kathmandu before heading to the airport to fly into the Khumbu and begin our trek to base camp.

Our goal for this expedition was simple: Jim and I wanted to ski the Lhotse Couloir from the summit in as pure a fashion as we could muster. Forming a super-direct narrow line from the upper Lhotse Face to the summit, the couloir was a dream line for skiing and the complete descent had been attempted several times. Jamie Laidlaw came closest in the spring of 2007, when he climbed solo to just 200 meters below the top before his oxygen regulator failed and he was forced to turn around and descend from there.

Jim and I had chosen the autumn for our attempt, knowing there would be more snow on the mountain in the post-monsoon season and that it was unlikely there would be other climbers on the Lhotse Face (also a crucial part of the South Col route on Everest). If other climbers were on the mountain, we risked endangering them by sending down avalanches or rocks as we skied, and their tracks and fixed ropes might adversely affect our ski descent. However, our decision to climb in the post-monsoon also made the objective much more challenging. Having climbed Everest and Lhotse in the spring of 2012, during one of the busiest seasons on record, it felt very strange to be alone at base camp. Each day we were reminded of what it meant to have no help from other expeditions, whether it be building a trail through the moraine, breaking trail in deep snow, or fixing all the rope for our route.

Our puja ceremony was held on September 11, five days after we arrived at base camp. The next day, all five of the Sherpa climbers we had hired—our sirdar Palden Namgje, his brother Fu Tashi, his son Ila Nuru, Urken Lendu, and Phura Chettin—along with icefall doctors Yangda Sherpa and Nim Dorchi Sherpa, started into the dangerous maze of the Khumbu Icefall, the gateway to the upper reaches of the Western Cwm. Jim and I did our best to help, carrying loads of rope and pickets to drop for the Sherpa, but they are so strong and efficient that we mostly drafted on their work. The conditions were optimal, and it took them only four days to put in the route, including one rest day. We followed the route from the previous spring, on the climber's right of the icefall, and the route to Camp 1 at 19,000 feet required only one ladder to bridge a crevasse. In 2012, on a route more to the climber's left, I had crossed 15 to 20 ladders.

With such a small team and no one else on the mountain, we took many measures to ensure a lightweight approach to this objective, knowing that we wanted to limit our passes through the icefall and simultaneously be poised for a summit attempt in a very short timeframe of two weeks. Compared with the usual team in the Western Cwm, we carried a minimal setup, with only one set of sleeping bags and pads for Camp 2 and beyond and a super-lightweight single-wall tent for Camp 3. To save weight and time, we planned to skip Camp 4 altogether. Jim and I decided not to wear down suits but chose a layering system that was less bulky and more versatile. On our final push from base camp, we wore our ski boots the whole way to avoid carrying any excess gear.

We reached Camp 2 for the first time on September 16 just as darkness descended. This was the most surreal experience of the entire expedition. There were dozens of ghost camps where Everest outfitters had left behind huge bundles of colorful and messy gear from the spring season—I spent the first night there having zombie nightmares.

Lhotse (8,516m) seen from the southeast ridge of Everest. The slender Lhotse Couloir drops directly from the summit down the shadowed northwest face. The ski descent then continued another vertical mile down the vast Lhotse Face (lower right) to Camp 2 in the Western Cwm. Photo by Paul Pottinger
On September 18 we descended to base camp, passing the Sherpa climbers and our Camp 2 cook on their way up to drop loads. We hoped we'd have good news at base camp about our ski equipment. Due to the complications of the heavy monsoon season, none of our ski gear had reached base camp yet, so it was a huge relief to learn that the porters had just arrived with the missing equipment. We were now green-lighted to don our ski boots and begin our final push toward the fourth-highest peak in the world.

Only four days later, we were back on the move. The weather had been very unsettled, and there was nearly four feet of new snow between 18,000 feet and 19,000 feet. The Sherpa carried monstrous loads, Jim and I were both carrying our skis, and we all did our best to take turns breaking trail. Just before reaching Camp 1, we were relieved to see Urken and Ang Karma Sherpa (our Camp 2 cook) descending to help us break trail and uncover the fixed lines. Still, it was a crushing day, taking us more than 12 hours from BC to C2. Fortunately, the monsoon storm had brought very little snow and only light winds above Camp 2, which meant the upper mountain, particularly the Lhotse Face, would still be safe to climb.

After a full rest day, Jim and I started pushing higher. We set the route to the bergschrund at the base of the Lhotse Face, carrying our skis and making our first turns of the expedition. I was astonished to see enough snow filling the bergschrund that we would be able to ski across it with no rappel—the schrund often requires up to 15 meters of vertical climbing in the spring season. The conditions on the lower Lhotse Face appeared to be a mix of hard snow and ice. This would be a huge bonus because it meant the climbing would be straightforward and the avalanche danger significantly low, yet we would still be able to ski.

Over the next two days the Sherpa moved through the bergschrund and all the way to Camp 3 at 23,800 feet with ropes, pickets, and oxygen bottles. On the second day, we followed with tents and everything needed to spend a night at C3. This is one of the more incredible spots in the Himalaya, and we were the only climbers on the face. In the morning, we waited for the sun to hit our tents at around 9:30 a.m. before gearing up to ski the 2,700 feet back to Camp 2. Skiing this section so close to our summit push was risky, because it meant we would tire ourselves and that we'd have to carry our skis all the way back up. But other than the relatively easy terrain we'd skied below the 'schrund, I hadn't been on skis in more than three months. We knew the lower Lhotse Face would be one of the toughest sections of the whole descent, and I needed to feel confident about skiing a 50°-plus slope in exposed terrain on very firm and variable snow.

Back at Camp 2 on the afternoon of the 27th, we received a weather report confirming that the jet stream was going to drop in elevation on the afternoon of September 30. This is typically an indicator that the fall climbing season is coming to an end. The wind would be increasing to as high as 50kph

(31mph) above 26,000 feet and even more in the following days, reaching highs over 100kph—conditions too challenging for a summit attempt. Moreover, the high winds could blow away the snow we needed for skiing. As a result, we'd have time for only one rest day before moving back up to Camp 3 and then on to the summit.

We hatched a plan that left very little room for error and relied heavily on the hard work of our Sherpa team and our two cinematographers, both of whom were new to climbing above 20,000 feet. On the morning of September 29, all five Sherpa headed up the Lhotse Face at about 3 a.m. The four of us followed a few hours later. The plan was for the Sherpa to climb past Camp 3 as a group of five and fix lines through the Yellow Band. At that point, Tashi and Ila would descend to C3, spend the night, and then climb back up with the four of us the following morning. Meanwhile, Palden, Urken, and Phura would continue fixing the more difficult stretches above the Yellow Band and through the Lhotse Couloir, and then descend to Camp 3 for the night, break down that camp the following morning, and carry much of the gear down to Camp 2.

From Camp 3 we watched as the Sherpa above us moved up. Beyond the Yellow Band, it was painfully obvious that conditions had become more difficult, as their pace slowed dramatically. Tashi and Ila turned around at this point, as planned, while the others continued upward. Urken was the only one of the three that had not summited Lhotse before and, because the weather was good, they pushed hard to get him to the top. Through our radios, we heard that Urken had summited at about 6 p.m., just before sunset. By 8 p.m., every one was back at C3 in high spirits, ready to take on the next day.

Our alarms went off at 12:30 on the morning of September 30. By 2 a.m., the six of us—Tashi, Ila, Dutch, Nick, Jim, and I—were geared up and ready to head out. The tracks above Camp 3 that the Sherpa had left only hours before were completely filled in, and we all had to break trail again. After eight hours of climbing, we moved from the top of the face into the Lhotse Couloir. At this point, the conditions became increasingly difficult, with deep snow and a breakable wind crust that slowed Jim and me to a crawl. The two of us were climbing without oxygen, but at this point it became pretty obvious that we wouldn't reach the summit at this pace. We decided that skiing was more important than a no-O's ascent, so we donned masks and tapped into the oxygen bottles that Ila had been carrying to this point.

Though the oxygen helped, it still took another four hours to reach the summit. We climbed through the choke of the couloir and were relieved to see that it would be wide enough to ski without a rappel. In 2012, on my first climb of Lhotse, this section of the route was entirely rock and only about 80cm (31 inches) wide. Before continuing up, we pulled the rope that had been fixed through the choke so it wouldn't be in our way during the descent. (Some fixed ropes were left on the mountain at the end of the expedition.) The last 100 feet of the summit block steepened to 60°, and we wallowed in waist- to chest-deep snow. Again, this section had been mostly rock in 2012 and required climbing a 20-foot cliff. Now, seeing the mountain with this much snow, I knew we would be able to make our ski descent from the very top.

After 12 hours and 4,300 feet of climbing, our entire group was planted on the summit. We had a clear view of the southeast ridge of Everest and over to Makalu and Cho Oyu. The north-facing Lhotse Couloir had been in full shade, but the summit was sunny and we soaked up the warmish rays, trying to muster the energy to gear up for our descent. Exactly as forecasted, the wind began to pick up in early afternoon and we knew it was time to start down.

I was relieved to feel energized and excited once I put on my skis. The massive descent ahead was daunting, but knowing that we would be able to keep our skis on the entire time simplified things and made Jim and I eager to get started. That deep sugar snow that covered the summit block, which had been so strenuous to climb, now proved to be a blessing. Jim made the first move from the summit, sinking into waist-deep snow with each turn. Because it was so steep, he would fall some 10 to 15 feet between each turn, taking them meticulously slow, one hop at a time. I chose to arm-wrap a rope

for extra security for the first 100 feet off the top before kick- turning around a small cliff band and skiing the final turns off the bottom of the summit pyramid.

At this point the skiing eased up and we were able to lean into the slope and wait for the rest of our team to descend to us. The next section would be the most challenging, as the slope narrowed into the choke of the couloir. The snow was a crazy mixture of bulletproof wind slab, breakable crust, and sugar snow, and each turn had to be calculated and controlled. The choke lasted about 100 feet and was just barely wide enough for us to side-slip through, our skis' tips and tails scraping the rock on either side. Jim and I were still using oxygen at this point, but even with this help we could only make two or three turns at a time, and then we would have to stop and catch our breath, doubling over our poles and gasping.

Once out of the couloir, we skied a long traverse into the vast Lhotse Face, leaving the main route and the rest of our team behind to continue their descent. More consistent snow allowed us to ski a little faster and link more turns. Zigzagging back and forth across the massive expanse of the face, we laughed and enjoyed the simple freedom of skiing.

At Camp 3, Palden was waiting with hot water. We loaded up our packs with the remainder of the camp and pressed on to the final challenge, the lower 1,500 feet of the Lhotse Face, with the steepest pitch toward the bottom. The sun had left the face, making it much harder to discern skiable snow from ice. Jim and I took our time, and because we'd already skied this section a few days earlier, we were pretty comfortable with the descent despite the flat light.

Our full descent took about four hours. In total, we skied 1,800 feet of the Lhotse Couloir, about 4,200 feet on the Lhotse Face, and another 1,000 feet below the bergschrund. When we ran out of snow, we popped off our skis and fell onto the ground, too tired to talk. Eventually we pulled ourselves together, strapped our skis to our packs, and walked back into Camp 2 around 6 p.m., in total a 16-hour day. The others made it to camp soon after, and the next day we all hiked down through the icefall with huge loads and massive grins.

Summary: First ski descent of Lhotse (8,516m/27,940') by Jim Morrison and Hilaree Nelson, September 30, 2018. Supported on summit day by two Sherpa climbers and two cameramen, and using fixed ropes and supplemental oxygen to climb and descend the upper mountain, the two skied the Lhotse Couloir and Lhotse Face to Camp 2 (ca 6,400m), a descent of more than 2,100 meters.

About the Author: Born and raised in Seattle, Hilaree Nelson began her career as a professional ski mountaineer in 1999, as an athlete for the North Face and Clif Bar. She has lived in Telluride, Colorado, for almost 20 years and is the mom of two wild little boys, Quinn and Grayden, ages 9 and 11.

Images



Skinning up the Western Cwm, en route to Camp 3.



Hilaree Nelson exiting the Lhotse Couloir during the first ski descent, with Everest behind.



Deep post-monsoon snow mostly covered the summit cliffs on Lhotse, allowing a ski descent from the very top.



Jim Morrison drops off the summit of Lhotse. Deep snow allowed careful hop turns until a small cliff band, which he shot directly over to reach easier terrain.



Lining up for the choke of the couloir, where the skiers' tips and tails scraped rock on both sides.



Jim Morrison (front) and teammates on top of Lhotse.



Lhotse (8,516m) seen from the southeast ridge of Everest. The slender Lhotse Couloir drops directly from the summit down the shadowed northwest face. The ski descent then continued another vertical mile down the vast Lhotse Face (lower right) to Camp 2 in the Western Cwm.

Article Details

Author	Hilaree Nelson
Publication	AAJ
Volume	61
Issue	93
Page	24
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Feature article