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Chamlang: A Coveted Face Is Finally Climbed

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Barun Section

The Czech line on the northwest face of Chamlang (7,321 meters). The climb and descent took seven nights away from base camp; the seventh bivy site is hidden. (H) marks the high point of the 2019 French attempt on Chamlang's north pillar. The photo is from autumn of 2012. Photo by: Andy Houseman

After an expedition to Nepal in the spring of 2018 to climb a new route on Kyajo Ri, Marek Holeček and I laid plans to return to the Himalaya the following year. It would be our third high-altitude expedition together, having spent six days climbing the direct southwest face of Gasherbrum I in the summer of 2017. Our goal for 2019 was the giant unclimbed northwest face of Chamlang (7,321 meters), rising above the Hunku Valley, ten kilometers south of Baruntse.

Chamlang was first climbed in 1962 by its south ridge. The mountain's north side spans more than eight kilometers, with numerous subpeaks. Various routes had reached the ridgeline from the north, but despite attempts, no one had reached the main summit via the great northwest face or central northern spur. Marek had dreamed of climbing this face since he first saw it in 2001.

Marek and I are good friends, but back home in Europe we do not climb together at all. I have other climbing partners at home. But in the high mountains of Asia, something seems to click for us. Both of us are at about the same level, and when one of us is OK with climbing solo, the other one is too. When one of us needs a belay, the other wants a belay too. We also have similar fitness levels and acclimatization. As a result, we are able to climb fast, not having to wait for each other.

We left the Czech Republic on April 24 and spent several days waiting for all the formalities to be completed in Kathmandu. Finally, on April 29, we flew to Lukla to start our acclimatization trek. To save money, we had decided to carry the majority of our gear and food ourselves. In Lukla, we hired a Sherpa assistant to carry 20 kilograms directly to Chamlang base camp while Marek and I took a longer route for acclimatization. He and I divided the remaining 40 kilograms (88 pounds), hoisted our big packs, and started walking.

We hiked through Namche Bazaar and Tengboche to Chukhung and then crossed over the Amphu Lapsa Pass (5,845 meters) to enter the Hunku Valley. Here we finally saw the northwest face of Chamlang. There was much less snow than we had expected. At base camp below Chamlang we met a Slovenian expedition who had spent a month here, climbing various routes and hoping to climb Chamlang, and they confirmed our observations: not much snow and a lot of hard water ice. Well, we would have to see....

The Slovenians were packing up to leave, and they offered us a lot of their extra expedition food. We took a little and headed to Mera Peak to continue acclimatizing. After climbing Mera (6,476 meters), we spent two days in Khare village, where we met our Sherpa and returned to base camp with the rest of our supplies. At that point I realized that my down mittens had gotten lost somewhere on the way. But at Kongma Dingma, where there is a popular campsite, I was able to borrow a pair of mittens, promising to leave an ice axe in exchange on my way home.

Marek and I spent about a week alone at base camp (elevation 4,800 meters), each of us in our own tiny bivouac tent. There was a teahouse an hour away, and we walked over there every second night for dinner. The weather was the same every day, exactly as the Slovenians had told us: beautiful in the morning and fog and drizzle in the afternoon. One day we hiked under the face of Chamlang and

explored the possibilities for the first section. The face was quite “lively”—a climber would be under pressure due to falling rocks and ice from seracs in the middle of the face. We figured out that by diagonalizing up to the right at the bottom, an overhang should protect us from rockfall and avalanches. We start to be optimistic and returned to base camp in a good mood.

Soon we were running out of food, so there was no more reason to wait. On May 16 we headed up toward the face again and camped at 5,300 meters, with 2,000 meters of steep mixed terrain above us. We carried a bivouac tent, one 80-meter 7mm rope, six ice screws, five pitons, five cams, food for five days, and three gas cartridges. As always, the last night before the climb was a little bit restless, with thoughts about the days to come filling our minds. We watched a massive avalanche from a collapsed serac fall in the direction of our intended climb. The wall did not sleep even at night, as we could hear the rattle of falling rocks or ice from time to time. Well, hopefully we would not be too exposed in the bottom section.

Zdeněk Hák on the icefield at about 6,600 meters on Chamlang. The two climbers ascended 800 vertical meters on this third day of the climb and bivouacked sitting on a small ledge with their tent hanging from a cam. Photo by: Marek Holeček

We started climbing early on May 17, and on the first pitch Chamlang proved it would give us absolutely nothing for free. Under a thin layer of sugary snow there was only bad rock—very tough climbing, not to mention the lack of belay opportunities. We climbed to the right along a steep ramp that ended by a vertical rock wall, where we set up our first bivouac. It was only noon, but rock and snow avalanches were starting to fall. There was no chance to continue that day. We had done a lot of climbing and still only got to about 5,600 meters.

The second day we aimed to climb above a significant row of seracs shedding big chunks of ice. The first three pitches offered beautiful mixed climbing on high-quality ice and rock (M4). We got to a long icefield where both of us could climb simultaneously most of the time until we reached the difficult mixed section that would bring us to the level of the serac wall. These next two pitches were beautiful and exposed M5/6 with steep sections in ice. Our second bivouac, at 6,100 meters, was partially protected by a stable serac and situated on a pleasant flat spot with stunning views towards Everest and Lhotse. It was just a bit cold!

We woke to a beautiful morning and continued climbing. Above was a giant icefield, a real test of our physical and moral power. We often climbed together, trying to stay on the backs of the snake-like snow ridges between runnels, wriggling upward into the unknown. The climb felt never-ending, but slowly the next rock band seemed to get closer. The day was almost gone, however, and we still hadn't found any suitable place to bivouac.

After another three or four pitches of difficult mixed terrain, we found a small ledge where we could at least sit down. We had managed about 800 vertical meters that day! We hung the tent from a cam and spent the third night half sitting, half lying at close to 7,000 meters. We were lucky it was not as cold as the previous night. As usual, I melted snow and cooked while Marek checked the weather forecast by satellite phone. Eventually I even managed to fall asleep, considering it a little miracle, given our position.

Our goal for the fourth day was to finish the face, reach the summit, and descend at least a little down the classic route to the south. However, as the altitude was getting higher, our speed was getting slower. Our calves were on fire as the points of our crampons only just held in the hard ice, while our hands were terribly frozen. After several hours the angle eased a little and hard ice was replaced with snow. We reached the ridge about 80 meters below the main peak, late in the afternoon. Blasts of wind hit us here, so we quickly searched for a bivouac spot and set up the tent. The summit would have to wait. We checked our supplies and realized we did not have much food left, despite packing nearly everything we had at base camp. We would have to try to get down the next day!

On May 21 we woke to a beautiful cold morning. Fortunately, the wind had calmed a bit. We packed

up and climbed slowly up the ridge, imperious Makalu at our backs. We stopped frequently, the altitude over 7,300 meters and overall exhaustion starting to be apparent, and didn't reach the main peak until 10 a.m.

It's not over until it's over: an off-route bivouac on the southeast face during the descent off Chamlang. "We had nothing to eat, so we just boiled water. We thought we were going down the next day, but we were wrong—we had to make a seventh bivouac." Photo from Hák Collection

We took a few photos and made a short video, but after a while we were so frozen that we started to descend as quickly as possible over the south shoulder. The ridge was exposed but not too steep, so we lost altitude quickly. It started to get warmer and we were getting tired. Clouds rose gradually from the valley, and we had to wait several times for better visibility. The terrain became steeper and steeper, and we had to abseil over several vertical rock faces. Then we strayed too far onto the southeast face. The visibility was too poor to continue. We would have to bivouac again above 7,000 meters. We had almost nothing to eat, so we just boiled water. In the evening the fog disappeared and I tried to memorize the contours of the glacier far below. It was the only possible way out.

The morning was again beautiful, and after eating our last energy bar we headed back toward the ridge we had left the day before. It was hard work, unfortunately, as we had to climb about one hundred vertical meters. Finally back on the ridge, the terrain below was very steep and we had to descend carefully, using ice screws for belays. Finally we reached the saddle and turned right onto the glacier, heading west toward the Hunku Valley again. Yet once again the afternoon clouds rose and forced us to stop. The fog was so thick that we set up the tent and waited inside until around 7 p.m., when the visibility seemed a little better and we decided to continue. The glacier was incredibly broken, and in the dark we blindly abseiled over crevasses and ice walls. Several times we had to backtrack through the maze, losing precious energy. When the fog returned we took the opportunity to bivouac yet again under a massive ice wall. It was our sixth night on the mountain and our seventh away from base camp.

I had completely wet boots and socks, and I was afraid of frostbite, as we were very weak and dehydrated. So I used an old trick, pouring hot water into two small plastic Coke bottles we had emptied on the route. I put them into my socks and they were dry within a few minutes, then I put them into my boot liners and left them overnight in my sleeping bag. It works well! Everything was dry in the morning.

Clouds were approaching from the valley as in the previous days, so we set off early. I was glad I had studied the glacier from above during our unplanned bivouac. After a few more abseils we were able to start walking and soon reached the moraine. At a small lake we were finally able to drink all the water we wanted and shed the clothes that had imprisoned us for a week. An incredible feeling. As we started to descend through a meadow toward the valley, it felt like being reborn.

We reached our base camp around lunchtime, and I cooked the two dehydrated meals we had left there, the very last of our food. Marek packed his gear and began the trip back toward civilization after lunch. I preferred to stay one more night and enjoy the views of the northwest face, where we had so much adventure.

Summary: First ascent of the complete northwest face of Chamlang (7,321 meters) in the Mahalangur Himal of Nepal, by Zdeněk Hák and Marek Holeček, May 17–23, 2019. The two summited on the fifth day of their climb and spent two more nights out during their descent of the south ridge. They called the route UFO Line (2,000m, ABO) in honor of Doug Scott and Reinhold Messner, who saw a "box-like object, shining magnificently in the midday sun," hovering over them as they neared their high point on a climb of Chamlang's north side in 1981.

About the Author: Born in 1980, Zdeněk Hák is an alpinist and UIAGM mountain guide from the Czech Republic. Translated by Zuzka Háková.

Images



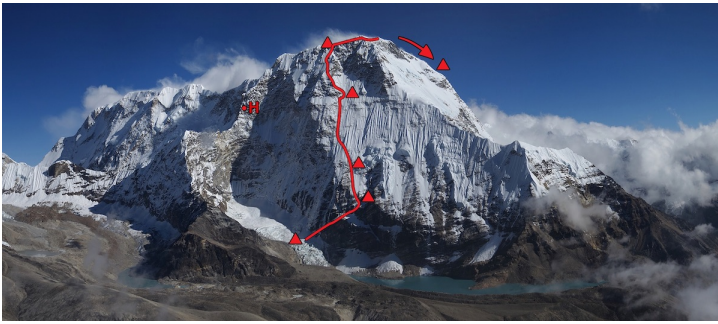
It's not over until it's over: an off-route bivouac on the southeast face during the descent off Chamlang. "We had nothing to eat, so we just boiled water. We thought we were going down the next day, but we were wrong—we had to make a seventh bivouac."



Zdeněk Hák on the icefield at about 6,600 meters on Chamlang. The two climbers ascended 800 vertical meters on this third day of the climb and bivouacked sitting on a small ledge with their tent hanging from a cam.



Zdeněk Hák leading mixed ground above the first bivouac on Chamlang's northwest face.



The Czech line on the northwest face of Chamlang (7,321 meters). The climb and descent took seven nights away from base camp; the seventh bivy site is hidden. (H) marks the high point of the 2019 French attempt on Chamlang's north pillar. The photo is from autumn of 2012.



Descending the south ridge of Chamlang was more difficult than expected.

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