



AAC Publications

K2 in Winter

Ten Nepalese climbers make history

Right from the beginning, I have been saying this expedition was for the pride of the nation, for the Nepalese climbing community, and for future generations of Nepalese climbers. The Nepalese Sherpa are regarded as the backbone of climbing on 8,000ers, and Nepal is the home of eight 8,000ers. When I realized there were no Nepalese on the list of first winter ascents of the 8,000ers, I felt ashamed. K2 was the last one in the world remaining without a winter ascent, and if we didn't succeed in 2021, we might never have another chance. This is the reason that made me go to K2 with full preparation this time.

Many climbing friends were interested in my project, but nobody wanted to spend such a huge amount of money for climbing, and the reason was COVID-19, which created an economic crisis and unemployment in Nepal. We have been jobless since November 2019, and there was very little hope in 2021 as well, so it was understandable that climbers didn't want to spend their money in such a difficult time. I decided to raise and spend all my own money and take three Sherpa who have worked with me and whom I've known from birth, as we were all from Rolwaling. I needed to be sure my partners were strong, technically skilled, courageous, and most importantly they should think like me. I wanted to see the Nepalese flag on the 8,000-meter winter first ascent list, so it was important that someone from my team make it to the summit—it didn't matter if I made it.

In 2019, when I was on Everest, I got sick, and in 2019–'20, on my first winter attempt on K2, I was sick too. [The author led a team of seven—four Sherpa and three clients—that struggled with poor conditions, injury, and illness; they made it only to 6,600 meters.] **This made me think over and over about this project and how to improve our chances.** Since March 2020, we were under lock-down because of COVID-19, but one of my family members is very conscious of exercising and training, and, following her, I started running, cycling, and climbing, which helped me lose lots of weight and get back in shape. As a result, this time on K2, I was physically fit and not sick at all.

A few days before our departure for Pakistan, one of my Sherpa partners decided not to come. He worried he might lose fingers or feet to frostbite or might not return at all, and his family pressured him not to join. His disappointing decision put my other partners, Dawa Tenjin Sherpa and Kilu Pemba Sherpa, in a dilemma, because their wives also were pressuring them not to go K2. Both Dawa and Kilu work in Norway in the summertime, and Dawa's wife kept telling me that his Norwegian boss also didn't want him to go. This filled me with worry, because it takes four to six weeks to get a climbing permit in Pakistan, and I couldn't change my climbing members at the last minute. If getting a permit were easier, I could have found new partners, because there were many interested in my project, and I was not only covering all the expenses but also paying them for their hard work, plus some climbing gear sponsorship. Fortunately, I convinced Dawa and Kilu's wives, and we three traveled quickly to Pakistan before they changed their minds.

We reached Skardu on December 10. Sirbaz Khan from Imagine Climb Tours had made all the arrangements for trekking to base camp. We left Askole on December 13 in falling snow.

All of our porters were from Baltistan, and they were very strong. Though we had better food to eat and carried light loads, they were happier and faster than us in the snow. They slept on thin mattresses, most of them sharing a single sleeping bag between two persons, and they did not carry

any extra clothes to avoid adding weight to their loads, and still they did not complain. Starting on the second day, we had to find and break the trail in deep snow, which was tiring work; we all lost some weight before we reached base camp after six days of trekking. I gave each of the porters extra tips and fresh meat to eat on their way back home. They prayed and asked blessing for our success in return. And they are the ones who made our expedition successful from the beginning.

Expedition co-leader Mingma Gyalje Sherpa.

We took a complete rest on December 19 and 20, and the reason was the never-ending debate on what season to follow for winter ascents: the meteorological season (December 1 to February 28 or 29) or the astronomical season (December 20 to March 20). We didn't want any controversy, so we chose to start our climb on the 21st of December. We believed we could finish the expedition within three weeks if the weather remained stable. The route to Camp 1 had been completed the day we arrived in base camp by Muhammad Ali Sadpara, Sajid Ali Sadpara, and John Snorri Sigurjónsson. We were climbing without clients, which means we had lighter loads and didn't have to climb up and down repeatedly for acclimatization. Above Camp 1, we were not expecting any help from other climbers—we had that much confidence in our team. [In addition to the Sadpara-Snorri team, a very large commercial group organized by Seven Summits Treks and a smaller all-Nepalese team led by Nirmal (Nimsdai) Purja soon would arrive at base camp.]

On December 21, we climbed to Camp 1 carrying 1,200 meters of rope, snow pickets, a tent, food, and our personal gear. The next day, we fixed the rope from Camp 1 to Camp 2 in a single day, and on December 23 we carried up 800 meters of rope and a tent and deposited them at Camp 2, returning to base camp the same day. The forecast for the next three days was bad. By then, the other all-Nepalese team, led by Nimsdai, had arrived.

With a forecast for perfect weather from December 28 to 30, we started back up the mountain on the 27th. On the 28th, we moved up to Camp 2, and on the same day, after setting up our camp at 6,800 meters, Kilu and I went ahead and fixed rope to 7,000 meters. On the 29th of December, we moved our camp up to 7,000 meters, so we could sleep higher. There, we realized we had only 900 meters of rope, of which 600 meters were very lightweight, high-quality 6mm rope, which we wanted to save for summit day. The remaining 300 meters was not enough to fix to Camp 3, so I decided to ask Nimsdai to collaborate.

Nims knew about me and I knew about Nims, but we never had met or talked before. I made radio contact with Chhang Dawa Sherpa, Seven Summits' manager, at base camp, since he was coordinating Nims' expedition, and I asked if Nimsdai's team could help us carry rope to 7,000 meters. Nims and his team were in the lower Camp 2 (6,700 meters). In a few minutes, Dawa radioed that Nims and team would move up and help us fix the line.

The next day, December 30, we started fixing the rope we had, plus some old ropes from previous climbs. We continued above the Black Pyramid to just below the icy section at Camp 3. Near this point, Mingma Tenzi from Nims' team arrived and helped us fix another 90 meters to the icy section, where we deposited the remaining ropes and gear and started back down.

About 200 meters below, we met Nims, who was carrying 200 meters of heavy 10mm rope. It was great to see Nims and Mingma Tenzi, who had not acclimatized but still came almost all the way to Camp 3, bringing rope to help us. The five of us descended to our camp at 7,000 meters, where we made formal introductions over some tea and discussed our plans. We only spoke for a few minutes, but that was the moment in which Nims' team and my team became one team on one mission. We both were climbing, not guiding, and we were climbing for our nation.

On the way down to base camp on December 31, Nims invited us to a New Year's Eve party at his camp. After dinner that night, we started walking toward their camp, which was about 10 minutes away, and we met two guys who had been sent by Nims because he wanted to be sure we were still coming. It gave us a warm feeling. The party continued until 3 a.m., and the hang-over we had the

next day was awful. It was a good environment to get to know each other, and it created a very strong bond between our two teams.

Since we had already fixed lines to Camp 3, our next plan would be for a summit push. We would need very good weather, but the forecast showed high wind until January 8, so we had to spend a week inside the tents doing nothing. On the 10th, some climbers from Nims' team headed back to Camp 2 to deposit some loads, but when they reached Camp 2, they discovered that all of their gear had blown away. Nothing remained. They returned to base camp late that night.

Next day, I walked down to Nims' camp and we discussed what to do. Given the current forecast, the best day to go to K2's summit would be January 15. Nims decided he would have to leave a day earlier than us for Camp 2, because they would be carrying replacement gear for everything that had disappeared in the storm, as well as food and oxygen for the upper mountain. My team would start on the 13th and meet Nims the next day at Camp 3. Since we already had most of our gear at 7,000 meters, plus 600 meters of rope, ice screws, and four bottles of oxygen at 7,300 meters, we had light packs, so I told Nims we would carry more rope to Camp 3. At this meeting, Nimsdai surprised me by saying that everyone should climb without supplemental oxygen. I had hoped to summit K2 without oxygen, and so did Kilu and Dawa from my team. But I didn't want to let them try, because I had promised their wives to bring them home safely.

As per plan, Nimsdai's team went to Camp 2 on the 12th, and we started on the 13th to reach our camp at 7,000 meters, below the Black Pyramid. On the 13th, Nims' team couldn't make it all the way to Camp 3, so they set up camp just above the Black Pyramid. That night, our camps were quite close, about an hour and a half apart. They were planning to stay there for two nights because they had received a weather report showing extremely high wind on January 14.

That night, Nims, Dawa, and I discussed the plans by walkie-talkie. Nims said he now wanted to summit on January 16, as the forecast showed better weather then. In the meantime, I received my own weather report, which showed good weather on the 14th and bad weather on the 15th. I told them about this report, but they didn't believe it—my weather forecast was from Nepal, and theirs were from foreign experts. I thought it would be a mistake to spend two nights without moving up. We ended the discussion by saying we would reconsider the situation in the morning and make a decision.

The next morning, my forecaster again predicted better weather for that day, the 14th, than for the following day. We both could see there was sun and no wind above us, which meant my report must be right. Nims and I agreed that we all could move up to Camp 3 and use the next day for fixing line to Camp 4 and checking the condition of the upper mountain. When we got to Camp 3 at about 7,350 meters, some of Nims' Sherpa already were setting up the camp, and Nims and two others had continued fixing rope above.

The next morning, on the 15th, the weather at Camp 3 and above turned out to be fine. [Other teams had stayed lower on the mountain, at Camp 2, and were unable to move up in time to take advantage of the good weather on the upper mountain.] Kilu and Dawa Tenjin went down to retrieve the gear and supplies at our deposit and carry them up to Camp 3. Mingma Tenzi, Mingma David, and I, along with Sona Sherpa, who had joined our combined teams from the Seven Summits expedition, started fixing more ropes toward Camp 4.

At this point, we were still following the normal summer route, but when we started up the wall below Camp 4, we discovered a big crevasse that was impossible to cross. We tried on the right, but the crevasse was still impassable. Then we descended a little and tried to find a way on the left side, but again it was the same. We had to drop all the way back to just above Camp 3 and move farther left, toward the C esen Route, before we finally found a narrow spot in the crevasse, partially filled with fallen ice. I was afraid I might fall in, but with Mingma Tenzi belaying me from behind, I took courage and crossed the crevasse. Afterward, the climbing was very steep, with deep, soft snow, and I worried

it might slide off in an avalanche. Ice axes were useless, so I plunged snow pickets into the deep snow and climbed up about 20 meters, and then the way above was easier.

It had been a very tiring day, and I asked Mingma Tenzi to lead the last few meters to the site of Camp 4. The way from Camp 3 to Camp 4 usually takes two to three hours in summer, but it took us more than eight hours. At around 4 p.m. we finally made it. Our first reaction was: *Winter K2 will be ours!* We knew we would make the summit the next day.

By the time we got back to Camp 3, it was already getting dark. Summit day would begin in just a few hours, and we needed some rest. Instead of leaving for the summit at 11 p.m., we decided to start at 1 a.m. on January 16. We woke at around midnight and started gearing up inside the frost-filled tents. I was still feeling tired from the previous day, and I gave up my plan to climb without oxygen. Kilu, Dawa Tenjin, Sona, and Mingma Tenzi left first. I couldn't get my oxygen regulator to fit, and I had to get a spare from friends. By then my hands were very cold, so I went back inside to warm up. Nims and Dawa Temba started climbing around 2 a.m. By the time I got ready, some of the climbers were already nearing Camp 4. I started up with Mingma David, Pem Chhiri, and Gelje. We had very good fixing teams ahead, so I was not worried and didn't try to catch them.

When we started climbing there was no wind, but as I got closer to Camp 4, a high wind started blowing. We did not have a thermometer, but the forecast had called for -50°C (-58°F) at this altitude, and the wind made it feel colder. My body was OK, but my left foot was so cold that I started losing hope—I worried about losing it to frostbite. I also worried I might put my teammates in difficulty, so I wasn't sure whether to continue or abort. I tried to call Dawa Tenjin, but his radio was off. I kept kicking the ice to make my feet warmer, which actually worked.

Around 6 a.m., above the site of Camp 4, we got our first sunshine, which was enough to warm my feet and body and keep me going. The wind also dropped as the day brightened. We could see our friends climbing above us. Mingma David, Pem Chhiri, Gelje, and I met the rest of the team right at the traverse after the Bottleneck. Mingma Tenzi was leading the way, and we climbed behind him, carrying the rope and other gear.

Nirmal Purja was the only member of the party to summit without using supplemental oxygen. Until about 300 meters below the summit, I hadn't realized Nimsdai was climbing without oxygen. When I saw him with no mask, I asked if his oxygen was finished and Kilu replied that Nims had not used oxygen all the way from Camp 3. It was almost unbelievable. He was not well acclimatized at all; the summit push was just their second rotation on mountain, and still he took the risk. Later, I checked my pictures from the Bottleneck and above until the summit. In all the pictures, Nimsdai was without oxygen. I told myself, *This guy can do anything in the mountains.*

When we reached the small plateau 200 meters below the summit, we had a tea party and deposited the extra rope. Everyone took a rest for a while, and then again Mingma Tenzi started fixing ahead. From there to the summit, we took almost four hours.

Before leaving base camp, we had made a plan to stop ten meters before the top and wait for everyone to arrive. Then, all the Nepalese brothers joined shoulder to shoulder and we walked together to the summit, singing the national anthem. At 4:43 p.m., we stood on top of K2. This was an historical ascent, and every member in the team had worked equally, so we wanted everyone in the team to feel equal. There were no individual agendas, only solidarity and a shared vision. When we unite, nothing is impossible, and that is the way it was on K2.

Summary: First winter ascent of K2 (8,611 meters) by Dawa Temba Sherpa, Dawa Tenjin Sherpa, Kilu (Kili) Pemba Sherpa, Gelje Sherpa, Mingma David Sherpa, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, Mingma Tenzi Sherpa, Nirmal Purja, Pem Chhiri Sherpa, and Sona Sherpa; the ten were members of three separate expeditions who joined forces to complete the route. They followed the Abruzzi Spur (southeast ridge), with a small variation above Camp 3, using new or existing fixed ropes all the way to the top.

All ten climbers went from Camp 3 (ca 7,350 meters) to the summit on January 16, 2021. Nirmal Purja reached the summit without supplementary oxygen; all other climbers used oxygen on summit day.

About the Author: Born in Rolwaling, Nepal, in 1987, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa is an IFMGA guide and operates the Imagine Nepal guide service. He wrote about the solo first ascent of the west face of Chobutse in AAJ 2016.

Editor's Note: The 2020–'21 winter season was marked not only by the Nepalese success on January 16, but also by several tragedies. Sergi Mingote (Spain) died in a fall low on the mountain the same day the Nepalese summited, and Atanas Skatov (Bulgaria) died in a fall on February 5. That same day, Muhammad Ali Sadpara and Sajid Ali Sadpara (Pakistan), Juan Pablo Mohr Prieto (Chile), and John Snorri Sigurjónsson (Iceland) began their push from Camp 3. After his oxygen regulator failed, Sajid descended from the Bottleneck while the other three continued up. They did not return, and search efforts—severely constrained by the altitude and winter conditions—turned up no evidence of the men.

K2 WINTER ATTEMPTS: A BRIEF HISTORY

In February 1983, Jacques Olek and Andrzej Zawada made a spirited reconnaissance of winter conditions on the Baltoro, confirming that K2 and the nearby mountains were likely to be much harsher in winter than the Nepal 8,000ers. The Pakistan government was reluctant to give anyone a permit to attempt K2 in winter, and the first real attempt did not come until 1987-'88. Since then, and before 2020-'21, six more expeditions had attempted K2 in the “cold” season (versus strict calendar winter): 2002-'03, 2011-'12, 2017-'18, 2018-'19 (two expeditions), and 2019-'20.

Prior to the 2021 success, no one had climbed above 7,650m, an altitude reached first by Piotr Morawski and Denis Urubko on the north ridge (Japanese Route) on February 12, 2003, then again two weeks later by Marin Kaczkan and Urubko. These two were making a summit push but retreated when Kaczkan came down with cerebral edema. — Lindsay Griffin

Images



Expedition co-leader Mingma Gyalje Sherpa.



In the Bottleneck, high on K2.



Moving up toward the Bottleneck, above the usual Camp 4 site on K2's southeast ridge.



Mingma Gyalje Sherpa and Dawa Tenjin Sherpa on top of K2, January 16, 2021.



Displaying the Nepali flag on K2's summit.



Clockwise from top left: Pem Chhiri Sherpa, Mingma David Sherpa, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa (center), Gelje Sherpa, Dawa Temba Sherpa, Kilu Pemba Sherpa, Sona Sherpa, Mingma Tenzi Sherpa (front), Nirmal Purja, and Dawa Tenjin Sherpa celebrate at base camp after the first winter ascent of K2 in January 2021.



Nirmal "Nims" Purja on summit day during the first winter ascent of K2.



Moving up on K2 in January 2021.

Article Details

Author	Mingma Gyalje Sherpa
Publication	AAJ
Volume	63
Issue	95
Page	12
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Feature article