



AAC Publications

The Wrong Valley

Climbing a Hidden Wall on a 7,000-Meter Peak in Tibet

THE STRANGE THING about climbing new routes in China and Tibet is that once you're lucky enough to complete a few successful expeditions you suddenly start receiving the Japanese Alpine News. One day it pops through the letterbox and then just keeps on coming. It's a great record of the peaks of this region and the limited climbing there. The JAN also acts as a chronicle of the activities of the great Tibet explorer Tamotsu "Tom" Nakamura.

While perusing the latest edition in the loo/research office several years ago, I was struck by Tom's photos of the four 7,000-meter Nyanchen Tanglha peaks. About 90 kilometers to the northwest of Lhasa, these are the highest peaks in the mountain chain of the same name (also spelled Nyainqentanglha and other variations), running west to east, in parallel with the Himalaya. From the nearby road, the potential looks minimal, but Tom's pictures from the northeast showed a large north wall falling from the 7,000-meter summits, with a particularly striking arête at the northwest end. A plan started to formulate!

Wanting to go to Tibet is very different from actually getting there. First of all, the China Tibet Mountaineering Association (CTMA) is not easy to contact. Email addresses exist, but getting a response is a different matter. Once in contact, the granting of permits is based on the local political situation. If the locals in that area have been kicking off against the authorities, then you will never get a permit. If you do get a permit, the situation may change weekly, leading to last-minute cancellations. Ever since Mick Fowler and I made the first ascent of Manamcho in the East Nyanchen Tanglha Range, in 2007, we'd been applying for permits for other peaks in Tibet for eight years, to no avail. Suddenly the CTMA agreed that a permit would be possible. A week before we were to fly to Lhasa, the CTMA announced they couldn't email the entry pass, so we would have to collect it in China before proceeding to Tibet. More hassle and expensive flight changes. On the subject of Tibet, lets just say it's not cheap.

I had been climbing with Mick Fowler off and on for the last 15 years—and for my last four expeditions—but this new objective was over 7,000 meters, a bit high for the now-sexagenarian Fowler, so I had to shop around for a new partner. Now, this is not an easy decision, as a climbing partner for such routes needs to be just the right person, yet the pool of people interested in technical climbing on Himalayan peaks is actually not that big, for some reason.

I'd first met Nick Bullock in Namche Bazaar, many years ago. At the time he seemed like a wild, intense, scary character, but when I popped over to visit him in North Wales last year, he was cat-sitting while writing his second book, an altogether calmer person. Clearly the last 12 years of living out of the back of his van had been good for him. In the end, we got on really well, never a cross word between us, just a steady stream of mild mutual verbal abuse, just the way I like a team to behave.

Tibet had changed a lot since my last visit, nine years earlier. Lhasa was about five times bigger, with high-rise buildings everywhere. The Tibetans have been swamped with ethnic Chinese settlers. The road network is totally overloaded with vehicles, though I was pleased to see that many of them are now electric, which improves the air quality a lot.

Outside of Lhasa, all the small towns have grown considerably, with extensive Chinese development everywhere. It's only when you get into the remote villages and farms that things look pretty much as they always have, except for the satellite dishes and mobile phones. It's quite a surprise when a yak herder whips out his iPhone 6 and demonstrates that he has a 3G signal, just an hour's walk from base camp. Acclimatization requirements meant we'd have to spend a long time on the very short journey to base camp. Lhasa is at 3,700 meters, and we spent two nights there after flying in. We then drove for half a day to Damshung, at 4,200 meters, and spent two nights there. Then we drove for one hour and spent a night at the road head, at 4,700 meters, in the local headman's house, then walked for four hours to base camp with packhorses. In all, it took us six days to travel to base camp—a journey that required only six hours on our way out.

WE ARRIVED in the mountains in bad weather, and there was much confusion over which valley we should walk into. The maps of the area are quite poor and location names very confused. The locals warned us that we were approaching the mountain from the wrong side, as it was too steep to climb from that valley—that sounded brilliant!

They also warned us the area was infested with bears that would “bite you in the face.” Nick's reaction to this news was a real picture—he and Greg Boswell had famously been attacked by a grizzly in Canada one year before. I thought he might refuse to go on. In the end, we saw nothing bigger than a mouse.

At base camp we didn't have the usual cook and tea boy (we couldn't afford them in Tibet), so it was just the two of us for a month—pretty intense with someone you don't know that well. At this stage we still didn't even know if we were in the right valley, so there was a bit of tension in the air. But camp was in a pretty location, and we soon felt right at home and ready to explore. It's likely we were the first Westerners ever to enter this valley.

Our original plan had been to climb the north buttress of Nyanchen Tanglha's main summit, the farthest up the valley, which looked just brilliant in Tom's pictures. However, as we walked below the face of the lowest and easternmost 7,000-meter peak along the ridge, Nyanchen Tanglha Southeast (7,046m, a.k.a. Nyanchen Tanglha IV), we realized it had a recessed north face whose steep lower half was not visible from anywhere other than directly beneath it. I'd seen a hint of this on Google Earth, but as we edged into position the clouds cleared to reveal the sort of route you always dream about finding. We were speechless.

The 1,600-meter face was very steep in the first half before giving way a bit and forming an impressive arête. The lower headwall looked problematic: steep rock with what appeared to be a thin veneer of ice—it looked like it might go, but only just. If that veneer turned out to be just a bit of powder snow from the last storm, then we would have big problems. Hardly able to contain our excitement, we headed back down to base camp to prepare ourselves for the main event.

OUR FIRST attempt on the route is best forgotten. We camped under the face, it dumped snow, the tent nearly blew away, and we retreated. We needed to let the mountain slough some snow for a few days, so returned to base camp and waited. Reading, making bread, eating enormous meals, debates on whether to take a toothbrush—all the usual stuff. Soon bored, I insisted conditions must be suitable, or as good as they were going to get, so we set off for our second attempt.

Camped once again under the face in perfect weather, we saw a lot less snow on the face than before. We decided the direct start looked a bit thin in the first rock band, and there is nothing more dispiriting than failing on the first pitch of a 1,600-meter wall. A gully to the left offered more ice, and we could see a traverse back into the center of the face a bit higher up. Avoiding the regular spindrift sloughs coming down the center would be an added bonus.

I always enjoy the walk up to the foot of a big climb. As the perspective changes, the face rears up

alarmingly, but as the lower pitches become visible in more detail, suddenly the whole thing looks more manageable. I suppose it's burying your head in the sand, but I really try to think about such a big route as one pitch at a time. Deal with what's in front of you and worry about the rest later. It's just as well the first pitches appeared manageable, because, amazingly, the foot of the face was the first time that Nick and I had ever tied on a rope together.

We soon discovered we were unlikely to find any easy-going névé on this trip. The snow was deep, really deep, and the only ice was found when things steepened up and the powder had sloughed off. That first day, working our way up the lower slopes, was really hard work, with seemingly never-ending post-holing as we climbed toward our planned bivy ledge, below the steepening rock bands.

Before the climb I'd stipulated to Nick that "slow and heavy," not light and fast, was the way to succeed on big new routes in the Himalaya, and that we'd stop whenever we got to a really good camp spot, even early in the day. But the snow arête I'd been aiming for turned out to be knife-sharp, with rocks just below the surface. It eventually produced two semi-reclining sitting ledges—grim! With us perched on separate ledges, there was no way to put up the tent, so I just wrapped myself in the fabric, pulled on the duvet jacket, and tried to melt some water with the wind constantly blowing the stove out. Nick was not impressed with the promised Ramsden Five-Star Bivy.

As the sun came up, we could see the good weather had vanished and we were back to the usual Nyanchen Tanglha cloud and precipitation. But the night really had not been that bad. After some breakfast, we were ready to get stuck into the technical ground above. A very steep rock band crossed the full width of the face, and in most places it was too steep for ice. But in the center was a thin veneer of white covering the rock. Today we would find out if this was unclimbable powder snow or reasonable ice.

We traversed diagonally up and rightward, aiming for steep runnels and the elusive ice. Indeed, much of what had looked like ice from below turned out to be powder snow stuck under overhangs, with a thin, delaminated snow crust on the vertical rock. Luckily, a series of shallow runnels did hold some goodish ice. It often wasn't thick enough to take a full ice screw, but if you dug around on the adjacent rock, bits of rock gear were available.

Slowly we worked up some very absorbing pitches, occasionally hauling sacks. The climbing was excellent; Nick thought it reminded him of the upper part of the Colton-MacIntyre on the Grandes Jorasses. When the groove line ended, Nick was forced to climb a steep rock wall, uncovering a series of flakes beneath the snowy veneer that allowed for good but scary hooking, a fine lead.

Then we were through the rock band and looking for somewhere to camp. Determined to have better night's sleep, I announced it was time to test my latest version of the snow hammock, a large rectangle of sturdy fabric that you attach to the face with ice screws and fill with snow to create a ledge. My mother-in-law had sewn a new, stronger version than the one I'd tried before; it worked brilliantly and we ended up with a nearly flat tent site in a truly ridiculous position. It had been a tough day, though, and we woke pretty exhausted. From this point we had two options: either follow the crest of the buttress or the more mixed ground on the right. Concerns about avalanche potential on some of the snowfields and the feasibility of the rock bands to the right meant the crest of the buttress was clearly the best option.

Traversing leftward, we hit the crest and climbed an arête in a wild position. We decided to make day three a short one and stopped as soon as we could find another good spot for the snow hammock. In the evening we had great views of huge Nam Tso Lake to the north—we literally could see moisture being sucked off the surface, ready to dump on us. The lake is so big (about half the size of Rhode Island) that even though it was roughly 20 kilometers away, our route felt a bit like a sea cliff.

AS THE CREST of the buttress became less technical, the snow just got deeper and deeper, which,

combined with the altitude, made for some lung-busting pitches. Our fourth camp was good, but that night it started to dump snow, and at 6,700 meters you suddenly start to realize the seriousness of your position. Retreat down the line would be difficult, due to lack of ice for V-thread anchors, and we didn't have enough of a rack to abseil on rock all the way. Upward to the summit and, hopefully, down an easier ridge was the best option, but we worried about avalanches with all the new snow.

Dawn brought more snow and cloud. Post-holing upward, we made the summit about midday. It was the third ascent of the peak—the first was in 1995, from the south—and my first time over 7,000 meters. We both were knackered. The clouds blocked any view, so after a quick selfie I was keen to get off.

I was pretty sure our best option was to descend the east ridge until it terminated in a huge cliff, at which point we could abseil the north side on Abalakov ice anchors before regaining the ridge at a col. From there it looked like an easy walk down to the valley and base camp. Dense fog turned the relatively easy but quite complicated east ridge into a real navigational challenge. After falling into three bergschrunds, I decided to call it quits for the day. The tent fit quite nicely into the last hole I had made.

There was little food left, it dumped snow all night, and we didn't actually know where we were, due to the dense cloud, so it wasn't the best night ever. In the morning, we stayed put for a few hours until visibility improved. At this stage avalanches were our main concern, but there wasn't actually anything we could do about it. There was no Plan B at this stage.

Fortunately, the cloud cleared and let us identify our precise location, allowing us to continue. The east ridge terminated in a large vertical face, but I was able to find a rappel line down the north side to a point where we could get back onto the ridge. We continued to the col without incident. From here we had planned to descend to the north, toward our base camp. However, now it was clear that the southern slope was easier and safer, even if it did descend into an unknown valley. We had no map, but it was a no-brainer, really, and it got us safely down to the moraine without incident.

The next day we stumbled down over a purgatory of loose boulders and soft, muddy moraine. No tracks, no sign that anyone had ever been there before. Not a day I'd care to repeat. To our great and pleasant surprise, however, the valley opened onto grassy slopes just above the small hamlet where our liaison officer was staying with the village headman. They were somewhat amazed to see us—even more amazed to hear that we had summited. After all, we had gone up the wrong valley.

Summary: First ascent of the north buttress of Nyanchen Tanglha Southeast (7,046m), by Nick Bullock and Paul Ramsden (both U.K.), October 2–9, 2016. The route gained 1,600m and was graded ED+; they descended by the east ridge and south face. This was the third ascent of the peak and the first climb on the north side of the Nyanchen Tanglha group.

About the Author: Paul Ramsden, 47, is based in Nottingham, England. He wrote about the first ascent of Gave Ding in Nepal, with Mick Fowler, in AAJ 2016.

Images



Nick Bullock headed toward the steepest section of the north buttress of Nyanchen Tanglha Southeast.



The Nyanchen Tanglha group from the north. The 2016 Bullock-Ramsden route (1,600m) climbed the shaded face of the left-most summit, Nyanchen Tanglha Southeast (7,046m). No other routes have been climbed from this side on these 7,000-meter peaks.



The line on the north buttress of Nyanchen Tanglha Southeast.



The climbers descended by the east ridge (left skyline), rappelled the steepest cliff to the saddle, and then dropped down the south side (opposite) into an unfamiliar valley.



Nick Bullock (left) and Paul Ramsden.



Paul Ramsden engaged in the crux runnels of “goodish” ice, the key to breaching the steepest rock band on the north buttress of Nyanchen Tanglha Southeast.



Paul Ramsden leads the way down the east ridge. The two had hoped to continue down to the north, back to their high camp, but after a day and a half on the ridge, with significant avalanche risk, they realized their only option was to head down the opposite side of the mountain.



The author looks pleased with his mother-in-law's sewing.



Working left to the crest of the buttress on day three of the climb.



The Nyanchen Tanglha peaks, 90 kilometers northwest of Lhasa, are the high points of the 750-kilometer range of the same name.

Article Details

Author	Paul Ramsden
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	10
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Feature article