



Chamlang, North Pillar Attempt and Northeast Couloir to Point 7,240m

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal – Barun Section

The unclimbed north pillar of Chamlang rising to Point 7,240m. The main summit, and the 2019 Czech route on the northwest face, are out of picture to the right. Photo by: Benjamin Védrières

Chamlang has a certain aestheticism. Its shape produces an irresistible urge in the Himalayan mountaineer to visualize pure lines on its various flanks. In the 1980s, Reinhold Messner and Doug Scott were aware of this potential and climbed a line on the northeast face, but in the '90s the mountain was all but forgotten. However, in recent years strong alpinists have again been looking at this summit—even in the 21st century there are still ambitious projects.

In the spring of 2018, some friends from France attempted the north pillar of Chamlang, retreating at 6,500m (AAJ 2019). This feature, which really jumps out at you, separates the northeast side of this broad mountain wall from the larger northwest face, and leads directly to a small top of 7,240m, east of the main summit. In the autumn of 2019, this pillar was the goal for Nicolas Jean and me.

On our arrival in the Hongu Valley, we could see immediately that the west flank of the pillar was far snowier than it had been during the spring 2018 attempt. Autumn had been the right choice.

We first acclimatized on Meru Peak (6,470m), spending a night just below the summit. As our expedition tactics were dictated by minimal finances, we didn't have an official base camp; Khare, a village with lodges at 5,045m in the Hinku Valley, served the purpose. It had the advantage of being comfortable but was located on the wrong side of the Meru La, making it way too far from our objective to react quickly to a good weather window.

On our first attempt we stopped at Setho Pokhari teahouse (5,050m), the closest bed and breakfast to Chamlang, and then an advanced base at 5,400m in the cirque south of Hongu Chuli. From here, on October 10, we climbed the 300m north slope (M3/4) of Col 6,070m, which gives access to the wide, flat upper Chamlang Glacier, flowing northeast toward the Lower Barun below the various Chamlang summits. There we camped for the night at 6,050m.

Next day we reached the crest of the north pillar via the east flank, the same way our friends had in 2018. This is a much easier method than the full north ridge, which was attempted in 2016 by Jon Griffith and Andy Houseman, and avoids the very rotten rock they reported. We encountered superb pitches of very steep snow with limited protection, 90° ice, and fortunately few sections of sugar snow.

Nicolas Jean during the attempt on the north pillar of Chamlang with the south faces of Nuptse and Lhotse behind. Photo by: Benjamin Védrières

After passing our friends' high point, and on the west flank of the crest, we could see above a succession of rock barriers separated by very steep snow. At first it seemed impossible to find a way through this vertical labyrinth. We followed ramps down to the right to avoid a scary overhanging scoop directly above and then continued upward, linking hard passages until sunset, at around 6,700m, a new high point on the pillar. Nicolas had begun to feel weaker earlier in the day, and now his condition had deteriorated markedly. Leaving one of our ropes fixed for the following day, we rappelled to a bivouac site at 6,630m, hoping things would improve during the night. But they did not. Despite fine weather and the terrain above giving us the impression we might make the summit, we had no option but to descend.

Back in Khare village, where our “base camp” was in a lodge, Nicolas recovered quickly at the lower altitude and we both felt the need for revenge. We had come with the goal of climbing above 7,000m. We had an official permit for Chamlang—very expensive—so it was obvious we had to climb on this mountain. But where?

Rodolphe Popier of the Himalayan Database helped us by sending more information on previous attempts, and this allowed us to see that the obvious couloir to the left of the north pillar, running directly to Point 7,240m, remained unclimbed.

On the 17th we received a forecast for a short but good weather window. We retraced our steps from Khare to a campsite at 5,540m, closer to the start of the north face of Col 6,070m. Next morning, we gained the upper Chamlang Glacier, where the cloud ceiling was much lower than expected. We erected the tent and rested until noon. Finally, keeping our fingers crossed that the snowfall forecasted for the coming night would not arrive until later, we set off just before 2 p.m. in a race against the clock.

The snow in the couloir was firm and allowed for fast progress, climbing unroped on 50–65° slopes. Gusty wind and the cold prevented us from stopping much. At around 7,000m we roped up to pass an icy section. Nicolas, in front, was now in great shape, but at this altitude we both knew we didn't control all the elements. We kept going, and at 7:10 p.m. reached the top—at least the top we wanted to climb.

Our headlamps lit grains of snow torn by the westerly wind. They also lit tired faces from a long day of physical and mental effort. After a hug, we descended the entire route without a rappel, reaching our tent on the Chamlang Glacier a little after 10 p.m. We are proud to have lived this moment, but also to have climbed a new route in this style, typical of the Himalaya, where the effort and concentration needed for unroped climbing is greater than with the reassuring belays of more technical ascents.

During our time in the area we wondered why so few had tried this pillar. The probable reasons are the proximity of the Khumbu and its multitude of attractive peaks; the lure of nearby 8,000ers; and the cold temperature and frequent westerly wind experienced on this side of the mountain. We noted that the northwest face, left of the 2019 Czech route, offers a very technical line with seemingly no objective danger, oriented more to the north, and a full 2,000m in height. Then there is the full east-west crossing of the Chamlang massif, tried by Scott in 1984—6km of adventure at more than 7,000m. A word to the wise!

– Benjamin Védrières, France

Images



Looking northeast at Makalu, the summit capped by lenticular clouds and illuminated by the setting sun. The pyramid in foreground left, with its summit also illuminated, is Hongu Chuli (6,833m). To the right, the Chamlang Glacier flows northeast below the peaks of the Chamlang massif into the Lower Barun Glacier.



Looking down on the summit of Hongu Chuli (6,833m) from high on the northeast face of Chamlang. The southwest ridge points toward the camera, while the ridge to the left connects to Hongu (6,764m).



The unclimbed southwest face of Chamlang with the south ridge on the right (Japanese, 1962) and the west-southwest ridge (Japanese, 1986) left.



On the upper Chamlang Glacier. The uncompleted north pillar of Chamlang is the right skyline, while the 2019 French route climbs the obvious, wide, curving ice slopes on the left to reach the top of the pillar. The route gained around 1,200 meters.



Nicolas Jean during the attempt on the north pillar of Chamlang with the south faces of Nuptse and Lhotse behind.



Nicolas Jean following an ice pitch during the attempt on the north pillar of Chamlang.



The northeast face of Chamlang. The 2019 French route to 7,240m climbs snow and ice slopes between the rock walls on the left and the jumbled seracs.



Nicolas Jean on the second pitch of the east flank approach to the north pillar of Chamlang.



On the upper Chamlang Glacier. The tracks lead to the 6,070m col used to access this glacier from the Hongu Valley. Ahead is the probably unclimbed southwest ridge of Hongu Chuli. On the right is the twin-summitted Peak 3 (6,736m). In the distance, between the two, lies the right side of Makalu's south face.



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