



Chumbu, First Ascent (via West Face)

Nepal, Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Section

While Jaroslav Banský and I were climbing Kangchung Shar (AAJ 2022), we took a photo of a beautiful snow and ice wall that we later discovered was the west face of unclimbed Chumbu (a.k.a. Chumbi). This 6,859m peak is approximately midway between Pumori and Hungchi, just south of the Nepal-Tibet border. The broad west face rises from the Gyubanare (a.k.a. Gaunar) Glacier, and the best known attempt on the mountain took place in the middle of the last decade, when a two-man team climbed the southwest ridge, stopping on the foresummit (see editor's note below).

Radoslav Groh, Petr Kejklíček, Juraj Koreň, Banský, and I arrived in Kathmandu on October 5. After acclimatizing above Thame, Juraj and I began to feel ill, with a fever and pain behind the eyes. Juraj continued, despite being sick, while I rested a few days in Thame and then returned to Namche, from where I had requested helicopter evacuation. Fortunately, I started to feel a little better, canceled the helicopter, and slowly walked up to base camp over five days. On arrival I learnt that Juraj had been evacuated with "acute mountain sickness."

Although thin and dehydrated after the illness, I set off with the remaining three on the 26th, bivouacking below the foot of the face at around 5,700m. Next day, in two ropes of two, we climbed unpleasant unconsolidated snow alternating with good ice, following a line left of the main serac band on the face. At 2 p.m. we were too tired to continue and made one diagonal rappel to the right, where Radoslav found a superb ice cave at 6,350m, above the serac barrier.

After a cold night we continued up snow and ice. We ascended quickly, hoping to make the summit that day, but lost our direction and ended up at a dead end. In the lead, Radoslav dropped huge chunks of snow and ice on us, at one point knocking Petr and me off the belay and leaving us hanging on a horizontally buried ice axe. However, he failed to make any upward progress. He rappelled and I tried the gully to the left, which at first seemed relatively easy, but near the top presented vertically layered and unstable snow. Radoslav fought his way through this, and after another pitch we reached a small shoulder on the upper section of the south ridge, where we camped for the night.

On the 29th, after a particularly cold bivouac, where the temperature dropped to -25°C, we set off at 8:30 a.m. and quickly climbed the remaining 80 vertical meters. It was relatively warm and windless, allowing us to spend 30 minutes on top. However, the saying "reaching the summit is only half the climb" was certainly true for us.

The planned descent was the south ridge. For the first 300m we waded through knee-deep snow with a breakable crust. Then we had to go uphill to reach the start of a razor-sharp section, where we made three rappels to a glacier terrace on the east flank, the last overhanging. After crossing the terrace, we returned to the ridge, which now turned to the southeast. Vertical snow towers stopped progress and we had to bivouac on a wider section and wait for the snow to refreeze. The compensation was a superb view of the Everest massif, though at the time we would have traded it for a night anywhere in the valley.

Next morning, we tried to continue along the sharp crest. Jaroslav overcame the first tower, but the continuation appeared impossible. The night frost hadn't helped much. We threw Radoslav over the ridge and used him as a solid belay to make a rappel. He then descended to us using a buried ski pole as an anchor. With a previously taken photo on Jaroslav's camera as a guide, we rappelled the

difficult south-southwest face below. The sun quickly reached us and in no time unbearable winter had turned to sweltering heat, heightening the objective danger from large ice towers on our route down. Eventually, we reached the glacier.

Petr's toes had been numb for three days and he was now finding it hard to walk. I called for a helicopter, but despite two attempts the pilot was forced to abort the flight due to strong winds. There was no option other than the eight-hour walk to Lobuche.

Halfway down the Khangri Nup Glacier, we took a shortcut across frozen glacier lakes. Suddenly, I was knee-deep in icy water, in the dark, with the temperature rapidly plunging to -10°C . A change of plan was needed, and I ran with Jaroslav down to Lobuche, arriving at 10 p.m. Radoslav stayed behind to look after Petr, and these two didn't arrive until the following morning. Later, Petr and I, slightly frostbitten, were evacuated by air to a hospital in Kathmandu, where we discovered that Juraj's "acute mountain sickness" was actually dengue fever, widespread in Nepal that autumn.

We named our route The Last Flight of the Falcon (ca 1,150m, TD+) in memory of our friend and Polish mountain guide, Andrzej Sokolowski, who was killed with his wife in the Tatras during September.

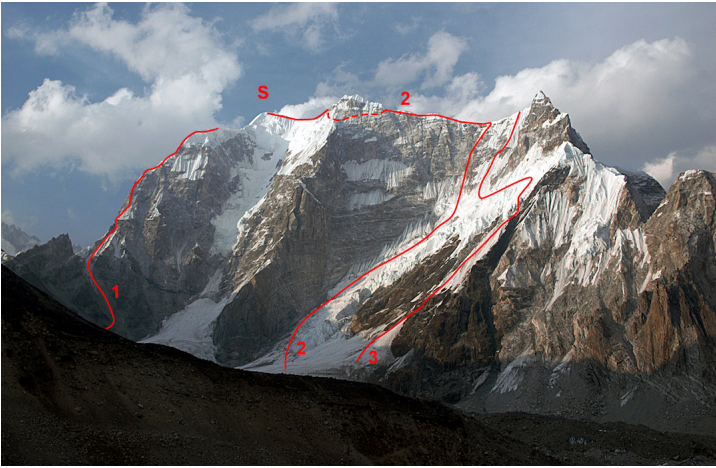
– Zdenek Háek, Czech Republic

Prior Attempts on Chumbu: Two lines are known to have been climbed previously on Chumbu, though neither reached the summit. During the early years of the last decade, in the meteorological winter, a two-man team climbed the right side of the south face, finishing their route on the southeast ridge at around 6,500m. They bivouacked at 6,100m on both the ascent and descent. The 1,100m line was D+.

In a pre-monsoon season in the middle of the last decade, a two-man team attempted the steep southwest pillar to the right of The Last Flight of the Falcon, approaching the crest from the east. On the first attempt, from the base of the route at 5,500m, the pair bivouacked at 6,100m, 6,450m, and 6,550m, but were forced to retreat from the top camp in bad weather, taking everything down with them. They returned, bivouacked again at 6,100m, skipped the 6,450m site, and climbed straight to the 6,550m bivouac before reaching the foresummit at 6,730m on the following day. The technical climbing had begun at around 6,200m and continued all the way to the foresummit.

Between this point and a gentle snow slope rising to the summit lay a horizontal ridge that was loaded with unstable cornices and serac formations. The two were unable to pass this dangerous section and retreated, rappelling their route. The overall grade was TD or TD+ with a two-pitch crux at around 6,600m: 85–90° ice and then a steep, rocky pitch with a tricky traverse over slabs followed by a short, slightly overhanging section (A2). Between 6,450m and 6,550m, there was 70° snow that was hard to protect.

Images



Chumbu from the south. (S) Main summit. (1) An attempt in the middle of the last decade to the foresummit at 6,730m. (2) The approximate descent followed by the 2022 team that climbed the west face to the summit. (3) A winter climb to the southeast ridge in the early years of the last decade.



The Last Flight of the Falcon on the west face of Chumbu (6,859m), with bivouacs marked. The route gains around 1,150m.



View from Chumbu to the southwest and peaks of the Rolwaling Himal. The highest summit, toward the right side of the picture, is Menlungtse, hiding most of Gaurishankar.



The bivouac on the south ridge of Chumbu during the descent, with the Everest massif behind.



During the descent of the south ridge after the first ascent of Chumbu.



Near the point where the descent ridge on Chombu turned from south to southeast, with the 2022 team's camp on the wider section marked. (R) marks the start of a series of rappels on the right flank of the ridge, leading toward the Khangri Nup Glacier. The view includes (A) Baruntse, (B) Chamlang, (C) Ama Dablam, and (D) Melanphulan.



Runnel climbing on the first day of the ascent of the west face of Chombu.



Radoslav Groh climbing through fluted terrain on the west face of Chumbu.



In the runnels on the first day of the ascent of Chumbu. Radoslav Groh belays Jaroslav Banský.



Radoslav Groh, Petr Kejklíček, and Juroslav Banský on the west face of Chumbu during the first ascent of the mountain.



The line of descent to the Khangri Nup Glacier from the crest of the southeast ridge of Chumbu.



On the glacier terrace during the descent of Chumbu. Above is the south ridge, and the arrow marks the line of the three rappels made to reach the terrace. (S) is the summit.

Article Details

Author	Zdenek Hák
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	97
Page	337
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions