

Dhaulagiri III

Klaus Schreckenbach and Peter von Gizycki

The German Himalayan Expedition of the Munich Section of the German Alpine Club made the first ascent of Dhaulagiri III (7715 m) on 20 and 23 October 1973. This was the highest unclimbed peak of the Dhaul Himal in NW Nepal and at the same time the highest mountain ever climbed by a German expedition.

Leader of the expedition was Dr Klaus Schreckenbach and the team consisted of: Peter von Gizycki, Dr Gerhard Haberl, Konrad Hiller, Hans Saler, and Bernd Schreckenbach. In addition to these were the Nepalese Liaison Officer, Capt Rimal, the Sirdar, Dawa Norbu Chaumaka, the Sherpas Tensing and Pasang as well as a cook and two runners.

We started off from Munich on 2 August with a five-ton Mercedes and a Volkswagen bus, arriving at Pokhara, our starting point in Nepal, on 4 September. We then set off on 9 September with 61 porters, reaching Jomson on the 16th via the Kali Gandaki where we transhipped our loads to mules and yaks. After crossing the passes of Sangda-la (5300 m) and Mu-la (5850 m), we established Base Camp near the village of Mukut at 4000 m. The most technically difficult part of the entire climb, the Chorten Ridge, preceded the peaks of Dhaulagiri II to V. It consisted of steep, slippery grass slopes and rock traverses to which we attached fixed ropes, leading up to Camp 1 at 5000 m, N of the Chorten Ridge, which was reached on 24 September. This part was only free from snow during the first week, after which it was rendered difficult and dangerous by the heavy falls. From Camp 1, the route ascends over steep rocks and ice couloirs up to a gap in the Chorten Ridge at 5650 m and descends 350 m on the other side to Camp 2 at 5300 m, S of the Chorten Ridge, which we reached on 27 September. Fixed ropes were again employed here. Except for a few minor reconnaissances, all further progress was suspended for 12 days owing to heavy snowfall and the three climbers were entirely cut off from Camp 1. On 12 October, Camp 3 was sited in a snow cave at 5850 m, after a further descent of 200 m and a long traverse below Dhaulagiri II and III under constant threat of ice avalanches. On 17 October after a bivouac, Camp 4 was established at 6950 m, once again in a snow cave. G. Haberl, H. Saler and K. Schreckenbach succeeded in making the first ascent of Dhaulagiri III on 20 October, via the SW face. A storm was raging on the summit but the sky was cloudless. Three days later, P. v. Gizycki, K. Hiller, K. Süssmilch and Sirdar Norbu also reached the summit in calm and fine weather.

All camps were evacuated on 1 November and, employing 30 porters, Pokhara, our point of departure, was reached in 25 days after a westerly trek round the Dhaul Himal, via Tarang, Tarakot, the snow-covered pass of Jangla Bhanjyang (4300 m), Dhopatan, Beni and Kusma. During the march out we

heard from a runner of the English expedition to Dhaulagiri IV from the S led by Anthony Johnson that radio contact with the top camp had broken down. Memories of the catastrophe to the Austrian expedition of 1969 on the same route came flooding back. We set off to see if we could be of assistance, but in the long run it turned out that the report was based on error. The accident to Alan Dewison and the Sherpa happened later on.

First appraisals

Seven Munich climbers were enamoured of a mountain, Dhaulagiri III, but there was a modicum of anxiety mixed in with the enthusiasm. Were we taking on too much? Several expeditions had tried and failed. Either the difficult and dangerous crossing of the Chorten Ridge on the lower portion of the climb was beyond their powers or the weather and the snow conditions were against them. The difficulties encountered on this high mountain are spread over the whole operation and not just concentrated in the last few metres leading to the summit: 2 weeks' laborious march-in over passes ranging up to 5800 m, 6 weeks' battle with the mountain including a descent and re-ascent of 600 m, and then 3 weeks' march-out.

We were captivated by the idea of breaking with the prevalent trend towards large expeditions by having small numbers in our party. We wanted to take full advantage of the opportunity afforded us by the use of modern light equipment in order to accomplish the ascent efficiently with the minimum of expen-

72 Dhaulagiri II left and III right. Photo: P von Gizycki



diture. The firm basis of friendship which for years had united the members of the expedition increased our self-confidence. If one tries to determine the factors which led to our success in the autumn of 1973, the following account will recall them to mind.

Approach march

We had walked for about 2 weeks and were already on the Tibetan Plateau to the N of the main chain of the Himalayas. We camped for the night at 5000 m with our caravan of mules and yaks. The ground was dry and stony and only a few yaks were grazing off the sparse vegetation. An icy wind swept over the enormous plateau, bearing hail showers in its wake. The weather looked dreadful and the yak drovers seemed uneasy. Next day however was glorious. On the Mu-la (5800 m) the highest point of the approach march, prayer flags were fluttering in the wind. We threw some stones on to the cairn as an offering of thanks for having reached the pass, then descended 1800 m to the little village of Mukut and our Base Camp.

The yak drovers were in a hurry to get back across the passes. The weather was threatening to get worse. Four days later it began to snow heavily; the Mu-la would be closed until the spring, if we had started our march-in a few days later . . . ! We now had to envisage a march-out of 25 days by another route.

The great snowfall

This snowfall was a baptism of fire for our expedition. It would soon become evident whether the most important condition for success, namely the team spirit and endurance of the party, would stand up. Hans Saler, Gerhard Haberl and Klaus Schreckenbach in particular were put to the test.

All three were snowed up in Camp 2, since it snowed for 10 days without a break and the threat of avalanches was imminent. The difficult and dangerous Chorten Ridge cut off the retreat to Camp 1. The depth of snow on the hitherto bare moraines was increasing in an alarming manner and the tents had repeatedly to be shovelled clear. Every step outside the tents was a nightmare and one sank immediately into bottomless snow. The ceremony of dressing up before one left the tent became an endless and unrewarding chore. The sole link with the outside world was by radio and it was this contact, which makes modern expeditions so mobile and efficacious, that helped us to while away the time.

Even their patience wore out; they had been on siege rations for 10 days and at all costs they were determined to risk the dangerous trip back to Camp 1. However on Gerhard's birthday, it stopped and a beautiful day dawned. They had held out, stayed where they were and next day tracked through waist-deep snow towards the summit. Reinforcements also arrived from below.

The summit

We were pressed for time, although, after 6 weeks on the mountain, this may seem curious. The weather still held, though it became colder and more windy. Now was the time to show our team spirit. Hans Saler, Konrad Hiller and our Sirdar Norbu tracked on upwards from Camp 3. The snow was harder on the gigantic and steep W face of Dhaulagiri III. They made the most of their opportunities and ascended 1100 m in one day. They were unable to find a suitable place for a camp at 7000 m and were forced to bivouac. Only Hans stayed up here and made Camp 4 in a snow cave. Two days later he was joined by Gerhard and Klaus Schreckenbach. Hans was rather weak after the long and arduous time spent at this altitude. The cooker was out of action and the food was running out. They resolved to make a dash for the summit.

On 20 October 1973, they encountered an icy wind as they left the snow cave at 7am. Huge snow plumes streamed from the summit. Today, the W ridge which they planned to climb, was impracticable. According to the official photos, the SW face was precipitous, but the wind had pressed the snow hard into the cracks and with the wind in their backs they were able to make rapid progress straight up the summit fall line. They could hardly believe it when they all stood on the summit at 12.30. Ten minutes on top was enough and they staggered about as if drunk in the swirling snow and storm which deprived them of any view. Only the drifted snow on the top enabled them to stand up at all. They were bewildered by the storm and the exertion. They were barely conscious of victory but sensed that feeling of emptiness which one experiences after an accomplished achievement. They crawled back down the SW face and at night in Camp 4 were able to melt a few drops of water by the heat of their bodies. It was not until next day when they got something to drink from their friends in Camp 3, that they really appreciated their victory.

Our success was consummated on 23 October when Peter von Gizycki, Konrad Hiller, Klaus Süssmilch and Sirdar Norbu, reached the summit in their turn. It was a beautiful cloudless day and they were able to follow the W ridge. Unfortunately Bernd Schreckenbach could not participate in the success as he had spent the last night in the tent instead of in the snow cave owing to lack of room. He had a bad night and was wet through by driven snow and therefore did not go up with them to Camp 4. We unwound ourselves after these strenuous weeks by a communal dance at the village of Mukut. Our dream had come true. We had proved that small but efficient expeditions had a good chance of success even on the highest mountains.