
TREVOR BRAHAM

Forty Years after the First Ascent of Kangchenjunga

Expeditions to the South-West Face in 1995

After an unsuccessful attempt by a joint Italian-Czech party in April, the autumn of 1995 saw six expeditions camped below the SW face of Kangchenjunga: Swiss, USA/Spanish, Italian, Japanese, and two from France. One of the two French expeditions was commercial, comprising three clients with one guide and a group of Sherpas; the other included the two Chamonix guides Benoît Chamoux and Pierre Royer, accompanied by a party of Sherpas.

Two Swiss climbers, Erhard Loretan and Jean Troillet, reached the summit in a rapid ascent on 4-5 October. They had set up their base on the Yalung glacier one month earlier, and, during long spells of bad weather, had dumped a light tent at about 7350m, twenty metres below the Great Shelf. When finally a spell of settled weather provided the right opportunity, the pair set out from base early on 4 October, reaching their tent by mid-afternoon. After a brief halt, they proceeded up the Gangway where, at about 7800m, they sheltered for a few hours under a sérac. At 2am on 5 October they set out for the final part of the climb. Their original intention had been to traverse the Main, Central and South Summits, and they made directly for the West Col. From there, they followed the West Ridge which provided a three-hour climb of 'moderate' difficulty. At about 8450m they were stopped by a prominent red rock tower on the ridge, around which they worked their way to the right by means of a delicate and exposed traverse. That turned out to be the last difficulty, and they reached the top at 2.25pm. With the air temperature at minus 35°C plus wind speed of 80kph, they decided to abandon their proposed traverse. Spending barely ten minutes on the summit, they began their descent via a couloir, avoiding the red tower, then down the ridge to the West Col and the Gangway, reaching their tent below the Great Shelf at 6.30pm. Jean Troillet, aged 47, set out from there at 8pm and, descending in bright moonlight, returned to Base Camp shortly after midnight. With this ascent, Erhard Loretan, aged 36, whose Himalayan career began in 1982, has climbed all fourteen 8000m peaks, the third climber to have done so after Reinhold Messner and the late Jerzy Kukuczka. Loretan regards his most memorable ascent as the four-day traverse, Alpine-style, of a ridge 7½ kilometres long, above 7000m, over the tops of Annapurna East, Central and I in 1984. In a two-week period in 1983 he climbed Broad Peak and Gasherbrum I and II.

On 6-7 December 1985 Loretan ascended the steep East Face of Dhaulagiri. His remarkable ascent and descent of Everest's North Face in 43 hours took place in 1986; and in 1988 he set up, with Voytek Kurtyka, an ED+ route on the East Face of the Trango Tower. In May 1995, Loretan made a solo ascent of the Main Summit of Shisha Pangma, having ascended the (lower) Central Summit in 1993. Practically all Loretan's major ascents have been carried out in Alpine style, and all of them have been made without the use of supplementary oxygen. With Loretan as his companion, Jean Troillet has climbed eight 8000m peaks.

Benoît Chamoux and Pierre Royer, accompanied by three Sherpas, had also set out on 4 October from Base Camp about two hours after the Swiss pair. One of the Sherpas, Riku, was killed in a fall after breaking through a sérac on 5 October; the two other Sherpas turned back at about 8000m. While the Swiss pair were descending from the summit, they caught a distant glimpse, at about 5pm, of Chamoux and Royer moving very slowly along the West Ridge above the Col, estimating that they had at least 2½ hours of ascent still to go. The French pair were never seen again. At dawn on 6 October Chamoux made radio contact with Troillet at Base Camp. He had been forced to bivouac on the West Ridge during the night, under extremely cold and windy conditions, somewhere below his high point of 8400m; and he had lost all contact with Royer who, he believed, had given up the climb at about 8200m. Chamoux had previously suffered from high-altitude oedema, and he was insufficiently acclimatised for the summit climb. He told Troillet that he was beginning to descend, but he did not sound fully coherent.

Benoît Chamoux had climbed twelve 8000m mountains (not including his ascent of the Central Summit of Shisha Pangma). In 1992, during a re-measurement of the height of Mount Everest conducted under the overall direction of Professor Ardito Desio, Benoît Chamoux, with Agostino da Polenza of Italy, placed on Everest's summit a metal tripod equipped with prisms, to which groups of ground survey teams, operating at heights between 5200 and 6000m north and south of the mountain, directed laser beams from distances of between 9 and 13 kilometres, enabling them to obtain measurements of a very high degree of accuracy. Pierre Royer's Himalayan experience included ascents of eight mountains above 8000m.

On 14 October Sergio Martini and Abele Blanc, members of an Italian party of four guides from Aosta, reached the summit following a similar route. On the West Ridge they discovered a walkie-talkie set, a climbing harness and an ice axe, but there was no trace of the bodies of Chamoux or Royer. On 16 October, Benoît Chamoux's wife examined the summit area of Kangchenjunga from an aircraft. No signs were seen of the lost climbers. Two climbers, members of a Japanese expedition, were spotted on the West Ridge; they reached a high point of about 8400m. No further ascents of the mountain were made by any of the other groups. By the end of the 1995 autumn season, 99 individual climbers are recorded to have made complete ascents of the Main Summit of Kangchenjunga.