
Expeditions

ALAN HINKES

Challenge 8000

A progress report

(Plates 20–22)

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena; whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again; who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement; and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt

Challenge 8000 is my endeavour to climb all fourteen 8000-metre peaks. Five people have succeeded, but no Briton. So far I have climbed nine, which has taken me ten years. In 1987 I climbed a new route on the north face of Shisha Pangma, 8046m, in a two-person lightweight, Alpine-style push. My partner was Steve Untch, an American. On the ascent we bivouacked at around 7800m with no tent – a tactic I have not been eager to repeat. Steve suffered frostbite to his feet and had several toes amputated. Sadly, he was killed on K2 in 1994.

My ascent of Shisha Pangma – my first ascent of an eight-thousander – coincided with Jerzy Kukuczka's fourteenth. Jurek, as he was known to his friends, was the leader of the Polish International Shisha Pangma Expedition. In addition to Steve and myself, several other nationalities were represented, such as Christine Colombel of France, Carlos Carsolio and Elsa Avila (now his wife) from Mexico, Ramiro Navarrete from Ecuador and Wanda Rutkiewicz from Poland. Jurek, along with Arthur Hazer, nicknamed Slon (elephant), also climbed a new route. Overall, it was a successful expedition and a good introduction for me to the tribulations, danger and suffering involved in climbing 8000-metre peaks. There were many problems, such as Tibetan yak herders stealing equipment and Chinese cooks who couldn't cook. Once on the mountain I began to understand why extreme altitude is called 'the death zone'. We survived avalanches,

we were pinned down by fierce storms and heavy snowfalls, and I saw the savage toll that extreme cold and frostbite can exact on the human body. None of this deterred me and instead of returning to Britain, I went straight on to join Krzysztof Wielicki on the then unclimbed South Face of Lhotse. That expedition was hit by even worse weather, accidents and fatalities.

Since then I have been on twenty expeditions to 8000m peaks and have climbed nine of the fourteen eight-thousanders:

1987	Shisha Pangma, 8046m	1996	Everest, 8848m
1989	Manaslu, 8163m	1996	Gasherbrum I, 8068
1990	Cho Oyu, 8201m	1996	Gasherbrum II, 8035m
1991	Broad Peak, 8047m	1997	Lhotse, 8516m
1995	K2, 8611m		

At the time of writing, in November 1997, with only five 8000-metre mountains left to climb – Annapurna, Dhaulagiri, Nanga Parbat, Makalu and Kangchenjunga – the final goal looks more achievable, yet the nearer I get to it, the more daunting seems the challenge.

In the 1930s Ernest Hemingway wrote, 'There are only three true sports: bullfighting, mountain climbing and motor racing – the rest are merely games.' Traditional mountaineers have never thought of mountaineering as a sport – perhaps more as a way of life or a passion. Although there are similarities in the calculated risks taken in the three activities, there is no similarity in the income that they generate. Climbing eight-thousanders is expensive and, unlike motor racing, sponsorship is hard to come by. Despite this, I have managed to climb five eight-thousanders in the last two years: K2, Everest, Gasherbrum I (Hidden Peak), Gasherbrum II and Lhotse.

K2

I never really hatched a master plan to climb all fourteen eight-thousanders until I had summited eight and had only six to go. K2 took me three years to crack. I attempted the South-East (Abruzzi) Ridge in 1993, the North Face in 1994 and finally climbed the South-East Ridge in 1995. Although initially climbing with Alison Hargreaves, I made a rapid ascent, summiting on 17 July, three weeks after arriving at Base Camp. Leaving Alison at K2 Base Camp with the American expedition, I returned home with an uneasy feeling, almost a premonition, that a disaster was going to happen. However, I was shocked and unprepared for the magnitude of the tragedy which followed a few days later, when a ferocious storm left seven dead, including Alison.

Back in Britain after climbing K2, I was invited by Benoît Chamoux to join him on Kangchenjunga. I had been on several expeditions with Benoît but I felt in need of a rest, so I declined his offer. Sadly, Benoît and his climbing partner Pierre Royer were killed on Kangchenjunga.

Everest, Gasherbrum I (Hidden Peak) and Gasherbrum II

The deaths of Alison and Benoît affected me greatly and I had seriously to consider my feelings for dangerous, high-altitude mountaineering. However, the passion I felt won through, and in the pre-monsoon of 1996 I went to the north side of Everest to make a documentary about Brian Blessed's attempt on the mountain. I reached the summit on 19 May, a week after nine people were killed on the mountain, six on the south side and three on the north side, by a vicious storm. I only had time for a few days' rest in Britain before heading out to the Karakoram again.

In July I climbed Gasherbrum I and Gasherbrum II, alone and unsupported, although of course there were other expeditions on both mountains.

Lhotse

The first of my 'last six' eight-thousanders was Lhotse which, at 8511m, is only 100 metres lower than K2. Lhotse, which means 'South Peak', is the fourth highest eight-thousander. It is on the opposite side of the South Col from Everest and shares the same route through the Khumbu Icefall and Western Cwm. I planned to ascend Lhotse alone. Of course, the Icefall would be fixed for the Everest expeditions and there would be plenty of other people around for company. Tyne Tees TV were sending a two-man crew to Base Camp for a week; then it was up to me to film myself. Most people at Everest/Lhotse Base Camp were attempting Everest. The area was a vast mêlée of nationalities, literally hundreds of people. There were a few others attempting Lhotse, notably a Russian expedition which hoped to traverse to Lhotse Middle, still the highest unclimbed summit in the world.

I had bought a place on the Mal Duff permit and shared Mal's Base Camp facilities. I had known Mal for twenty years and it was an unexpected and grievous blow when he died in Base Camp of a heart attack on 23 April 1997.

My master plan was to climb Lhotse in late April or early May, transfer from Lhotse Base Camp to Makalu Base Camp by helicopter, climb Makalu in mid-May and transfer to Kangchenjunga by helicopter to climb it in late May. I would then move to Pakistan and Nanga Parbat before returning to Nepal for Dhaulagiri and Annapurna in September/October.

I arrived in Lhotse Base Camp in mid-April; all the other expeditions were already well under way. There was a route through the Icefall, a track up the Western Cwm and fixed ropes on the Lhotse Face. All that I had to do was acclimatise and bear off right from the fixed ropes up the final 600m summit gully on Lhotse. My master plan went well until early May and I was on line for a quick summit attempt. Unfortunately, the weather window did not materialise, and the wind was too strong for a summit bid. I ended up hanging about in Base Camp at 5300m. Some people went off trekking for a few days, others went home – they had had enough and were worn

out. I was acutely aware that my time for climbing three eight-thousanders in one season was running out. I was also losing my fitness and becoming debilitated. Although 'high-altitude rot' was creeping in, trekking down to a lower altitude might have meant missing a weather window. I thus chose to linger in Base Camp, playing the Himalayan waiting game.

Towards the end of May the weather started to improve and I felt that the time was right to make an ascent. I moved up to the Western Cwm on 20 May, rested and got a 'feel' for the mountain and conditions. On 22 May I set off for my tent at 7400m, the usual Camp 3 for Everest. I intended to leave before midnight and push straight to the top, ignoring the usual Camp 4 at 7800m. In the bitter cold Himalayan night my tent, sleeping-bag and warm brews of tea and coffee were hard to leave and I didn't set off until around 2am or later. It was a clear, calm, bright, moonlit night. Once I had got going it felt warm, despite being -20°C , and I stripped off my hat as I plodded up the Lhotse Face and pulled over the Yellow Band.

It was well after dawn when I reached the gully. Five climbers – three Russians, a Dane and a Canadian – were ahead of me. The Russian team had already fixed rope up the lower part of the gully. It was now bitterly cold, as the west face of Lhotse doesn't get the sun until late afternoon. I could see the wind picking up on the ridge crest above but the sky was clear and my instinct was to push on. At around midday I caught up with the five climbers ahead of me. They had stopped fixing with 200m still to go.

I took over and forged ahead. The rock on either side was black shale, shattered and sloping downwards. Finding a solid anchor on which to fix the rope was difficult and time-consuming and it was past 2pm when I reached the col at the top of the gully. Below me the three Russians and the Dane continued, but the Canadian chose to descend. At the col I went left up the ridge to the summit, discovering on the descent that it would have been easier to zigzag up the broken wall and avoid a difficult and exposed move on the ridge. I relished the unique and spectacular view to the South Col and the last 900m of Everest. In the opposite direction the fluted narrow Lhotse Ridge disappeared towards Nuptse. Two of the three Russians and the Dane followed me to the top.

From the summit I chatted on my radio to a friend who had just climbed Everest and was safely back at the South Col. It was now 3pm, the weather was fine and the wind not too strong. I filmed for Tyne Tees TV and took some stills before bailing out back down the fixed ropes to the relative safety of Camp 3 at 7400m on the Lhotse Face. A lot of people summited on Everest on 23 May 1997; it was a good mountain day.

An attempt on Makalu

Back down in Base Camp on 24 May I had the problem of trying to get a helicopter in to take me to Makalu, climb the mountain and get to Kangchenjunga before 31 May. I now realised that Kangchenjunga was off and that even Makalu was an unlikely prospect. On 27 May a small, four-seater

helicopter eventually made Base Camp and took me as far as Lukla. The next day, 28 May, a big Russian helicopter took me to Makalu. It was getting late in the season now and the monsoon was beginning to encroach into the Himalaya, engulfing the mountains in cloud, rain and snow.

Whereas on Lhotse I had climbed alone, on Makalu I had intended to climb with an American friend, Fabrizio Zangrilli. He was already at Base Camp when I arrived and had acclimatised up to 6500m or so. Whereas on Lhotse I had over 200 people for company, most of them climbing Everest, here on Makalu there were no other expeditions. A large Russian team, led by an old friend of mine, Sergei Efimov, had just left in the helicopter that had brought me in. This team had climbed a superb new route on the right side of the West Face, joining the West Pillar near the top. When the Russians left there was no one else on the mountain. We were alone. It was a stark contrast with the hundreds of people at Lhotse/ Everest Base Camp.

There is no serious icefall on Makalu comparable with the Khumbu Icefall on Everest. It is possible to climb completely alone, without a support team to fix ladders up séracs and across crevasses. However, there is a long and extremely arduous approach to the mountain. Fabrizio had already made several lengthy trips up the glacier and lower slopes before I arrived. Food levels had become precariously low but I had brought with me, just in time, fresh supplies of potatoes, oil for chips, eggs, coke, beer, bananas and lots more. Fabrizio was raring to go, but he is no gung-ho, do-or-die merchant. He could also see that conditions were far from perfect, that it was late in the season, temperatures were rising and rockfall was an increasing risk, as were monsoon storms. We were pushing our luck, but we still made a concerted effort up to around 7300m.

Then Fabrizio was struck on the side of his face by a lump of ice which knocked him out for a while. At this point we decided that the risk was becoming too great. It was time that we left Makalu. We stripped the slopes of all that we could and descended to Base Camp to wait for the helicopter to take us out to Kathmandu. We waited on tenterhooks for a few days before it finally arrived in a break in the monsoon clouds. It had cost a few thousand dollars, but it would have taken over a week to walk out with porters through leech-infested monsoon-soaked foothills.

This was my second attempt at Makalu – my third, if you count the trek to Makalu Base Camp in 1996 when I met with an accident in the foothills – but I could accept this temporary retreat. No mountain is worth a life, returning is part of the achievement, and the summit is only a bonus.

A bizarre accident on Nanga Parbat

I met up with Fabrizio again in Islamabad for the usual round of Ministry meetings and briefings. We intended to climb the Kinshofer Route on the Diamir Face. The trek to Base Camp up the Daimir valley is very short – only 2½ days. The lower valley was extremely hot – the whole of Pakistan

had been experiencing high humidity, with temperatures over 40°C, and scores of locals had died. Dehydration and heat-stroke were a serious threat and by the time we reached Base Camp on 17 July we were drained. The campsite is on a pleasant grassy area at 4000m, which is low for an eight-thousander. It was a splendid spot, providing a welcome respite from the usual discomfort of camping on ice and moraine. The route ahead was in full view, just as the Eigerwand is from Alpiglen. A few ascents had already been made and there were three expeditions at Base Camp still attempting it. A couple of days' rest were necessary before an acclimatisation foray to 7500m. A dump of essential equipment, such as ropes, food, stove, tent, and down suits, was left on the lower snow slopes. All this was stolen, which meant that an ascent was not possible until we had either tracked it down or replaced it. Some of the gear was eventually returned damaged and unusable.

The event which finally brought our attempt to an end was more bizarre even than the theft. On 22 July I sneezed on some flour or dust from a burnt crust on a chapati – and prolapsed a disc in my back. I rolled on the ground in extreme agony and could not even crawl. Earlier, I had strained my back a little, but I had no previous history of back problems. It was an extraordinary and salutary accident. With few anti-inflammatory drugs or painkillers with me, I was stranded for ten days at 4000m. After struggling down 700m, a helicopter eventually managed to reach me and I was flown to Islamabad for treatment. I had lost 10kg.

Challenge 8000 is still on and I will be returning to the Himalaya to climb my remaining five 8000m peaks: Annapurna, Dhaulagiri, Nanga Parbat, Makalu and Kangchenjunga.

Summary: Yorkshireman Alan Hinkes aims to become the first Briton to climb the fourteen eight-thousanders. This is his 'Challenge 8000'. He climbed his first 8000-metre peak – Shisha Pangma – in 1987. Between 1987 and 1997 he climbed a further eight. In November 1997 five eight-thousanders remain to be climbed before he achieves his goal.



20. The South-East Ridge of Everest seen from Lhotse. The last 900m: South Col (note tent village), South Summit, Hillary Step and Summit. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p83)



21. Alan Hinkes on the summit of Gasherbrum II in 1996. Mustagh Tower on the left, K2 to the right. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p83)



22. Lhotse – South Col – Everest seen from Makalu at 6400m. (*Alan Hinkes*) (p83)