
ALAN HINKES

Fourth Time Lucky on Makalu

(Plate 13)

The readout showed an altitude of 26,000ft and a temperature of minus 45°C, which was rather exciting, so I took another sip of champagne and relaxed into my seat as the Qatar Airways Airbus cruised over the British coastline towards Heathrow. Only two weeks before, I had been outside at well over 26,000ft – 8470m to be fairly exact – on the summit of Makalu, my eleventh 8000er.

The temperature had been a balmy minus 35°C back then, minus a bit of windchill, but the contrast with the comfort on board the aircraft couldn't have been starker. I stretched out further in my seat and the memories of the trip began to thaw. Normally, on topping out on an 8000er, I don't manage to celebrate or even feel relieved. A climb is not over for me until I'm safely back down in base camp, then sipping champagne on the plane, then back in England with a pint. But on Makalu I felt relief, almost jubilation, on getting to the summit. It had been an arduous two months since I had left England, with a few setbacks. Indeed, the summit had almost been lost to me.

I first tried Makalu in 1988 and nearly made it to the top when, only a few hours from the summit, my climbing partner Rick Allen was avalanched 500 metres, from 8200m to 7700m, eventually coming to a halt on the huge snow-bowl saddle which separates Makalu from Makalu 2. He survived the avalanche by a miracle, with head wounds and his nose half ripped off. In 1995 I fell off the path on the trek into Base Camp and speared my leg on a tree branch. The branch narrowly missed my femoral artery, otherwise I would have bled to death beside the trail, and I ended up in a Bangkok hospital for surgery to save my leg. In 1997, after climbing Lhotse, I flew directly to Makalu Base Camp, acclimatised and ready for a quick ascent. The weather and snow conditions stopped me. Makalu was becoming my bogey mountain but this time I was determined to bag it.

However, on the trek to Base Camp I became ill with a nasty strain of giardia and was helicoptered back to Kathmandu. Recovering in the city, too weak to continue, I felt sick with disappointment. I knew that even if I was lucky enough to recover in a week, getting back to Base Camp would take so long that I would run out of time for an attempt before the monsoon hit. But my luck changed: Britannia Movers International offered to cover the cost of a helicopter to take me part way back to Base Camp. After eight

days recuperating in Kathmandu I set off again and went straight to 3500m. For a fit and acclimatised person it is a long day's trek to lower Base Camp at 5000m but I took three days to make sure that I acclimatised properly. I was intending to solo Makalu and all my equipment and my Base Camp cook were waiting for me. It was now late April and I only had four weeks left to acclimatise, get fit and knock the mountain off before my permit expired on 31 May and the monsoon moved up from the Bay of Bengal. Originally I had hoped to summit by 10-15 May. Now I knew that it would be a lot later in May. I was not too worried – from years of experience I knew that there was usually a very good weather window at the end of May, around the 23rd to the 29th.

During April the weather had been superb and after a dry winter there was little snow. Makalu was in good condition with little avalanche danger. I expected that to change as the pre-monsoon snowfalls built up during May. Despite my intention to solo Makalu, Dawa Chirring, my Nepalese sirdar and friend, kept hinting that he too wanted to have a go at the mountain. He had never climbed an 8000er before but had been high on Everest. I had known him since 1996 and knew that he was strong and competent and we got on well together. So I changed my plans to make a two-man ascent with Dawa.

I decided to leave a mess tent and kitchen tent at the 'Hillary Base Camp', which is at around 5000m in an ablation valley across the glacier from the 3000m SE Face. I then set up an advanced base camp but in reality a true base camp at around 5700m on a rognon of granite below the penitents which guard the way onto the upper glacier. Using this high camp Dawa and I pushed higher in lightweight semi-alpine style to acclimatise. Normally there are four camps fixed above 5700m but Dawa and I planned to place only two tents on the mountain. We moved up to 6400m and set up a Terra Nova Quasar below the slopes leading up to the Makalu La. I made a couple of round-trips up to here as well as spending several nights acclimatising.

By 5 May we had pushed up to the Makalu La at 7400m, pitched another Quasar and spent a fitful night because of the altitude. I had to descend to Base Camp on 6 May to recover, but I was optimistic about returning and bagging the summit by the 10th. However, as is often the case on a big mountain, it was not to be that simple or easy. The weather socked in and the jet-stream winds tore into the mountain. We were pinned down in Base Camp. The roaring winds above sounded like a squadron of jumbo jets and I expected the Quasar tent at the Makalu La to be ripped to shreds and blown away. Inside it was all my gear for a summit bid: another smaller bivouac tent, my down suit, sleeping bag, food, gas and video camera. I tried not to worry but knew if the tent was destroyed that my Makalu climb would be over. The bad weather continued for two weeks. I knew that the slopes would be more dangerous now with fresh snow on the old hard ice; Makalu was really testing and trying me again.

Climbing an 8000er is a waiting game, a game of patience. Set off too soon and you will get burned out thrashing around in the deep snow or fighting bad weather or, worse still, swept away in an avalanche. Set off too late and you miss a good weather window. I descended to my lower base camp at 5000m for a couple of nights and tried to clear my head and prepare my body for the summit push. An attempt around the 23 May should be okay, but if not there would still be a week left before the permit expired on 31 May. Just enough time for a brief rest and another last ditch attempt.

On 21 May, Dawa and I pushed back up to the Makalu La. Our Quasar tent had survived the battering winds and we thankfully sheltered in it and melted snow for tea. There was still a little cloud around and some gentle gusts of wind at times. My instincts told me that we had a chance. I felt ready and the mountain seemed to have settled down somewhat, as the cloud scudded away, revealing the last 1000m of Makalu. Next day we moved up another 400m of technically easy snow and ice slopes to bivouac at around 7800m. This is normally Camp 4 for most expeditions and the final camp before the top. There are no ledges and the tiny tent was dug into the slope. We squashed uncomfortably together and tried to rest, preparing ourselves for the summit push. Sleep was not really possible, only fitful, frustrating dozing in the -40°C air temperature. Melting snow for water and tea was essential but tiresome and arduous.

At about 05.30 hours on 23 May we set off. We were perhaps a little later than I would have liked but I was trying to get a feel for the day and the weather. Setting out unroped on the final 600m to the top we took 40 metres of rope for any steep sections. The first part zigzagged through séracs and we gradually made our way onto the broad gully which led up to the summit headwall. I knew that if it snowed heavily then this would become an avalanche death trap and that the route through the séracs would be almost impossible to find.

It was a committing final day which needed a good spell of weather. There was quite a lot of windslab in the gully and we took turns to break trail. At around 8100m we traversed left to the rock rib which leads to the summit arête, and here we passed the body of a Danish climber still frozen to the slope. He had fallen from near the summit three weeks previously. It reminded me of my own mortality and to take care on the descent. The rock rib is about 200m long and proved fairly tricky with some steep sections of easy rock climbing. At well over 8000m, pulling up on even big granite holds is not easy. On one of the ledges I came across a large steel oxygen bottle engraved 'CAF Himalayan Expedition Makalu 1955'. As a souvenir it was just too heavy.

I could see Everest and Lhotse ten to fifteen miles away starting to disappear in a huge mushroom and anvil-shaped cloud. We were now only 50 to 80 metres away from the top of Makalu. Fingers of cloud and snow were stretching away from Everest towards Makalu, the wind started to gust, spindrift blasted my face and the oh-so-close summit of Makalu

disappeared for a time in the cloud. I felt sick, so near to the top and I would have to turn back as the weather closed in. I could not believe my bad luck. It was around midday and I slumped down on a rocky snow-covered ledge for a sip of water to assess the situation. Everest was engulfed in a maelstrom of a storm but it looked like it was tracking NE away from us on Makalu. After half an hour the wind was still gusting but the cloud and spindrift had died down somewhat. We still had a chance, I felt, and I urged Dawa on up the mountain.

The final 30m climb to the east summit was steep and I roped up using the 40m of polypro fixed rope that we carried. Dawa joined me on the east top and we set off across the 60m stretch of knife-edged ridge to the main summit. A 3000m drop on my left and a 1000m drop on my right led to the table-top sized summit. I could see the tiny dots of the Base Camp tents 3000m below. Beyond Everest and Lhotse, just poking out of the cloud again, I could see Gaurisankar and Menlungtse on the far horizon. I had made the first ascent of Menlungtse West (7014m) via the steep West Face with Andy Fanshawe in 1988 on an expedition led by Chris Bonington. In the other direction, on the far eastern horizon and the border with India, I could make out Kangchenjunga, one of the three 8000ers left for me to climb. Eventually, I hope to be looking back at Makalu from its summit. Standing on the top of Makalu felt significant. Eleven down, three to go.



13. Dawa Chirring on the summit ridge of Makalu. (Alan Hinkes) (p59)