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DUNCAN WILSON  
**Kyajo Ri, Khumbu**

(Plates 6-9)

The alarm went off at midnight. We had hardly even dozed, too tired or excited by the prospect of finally reaching the summit of this beautiful unclimbed mountain that had eluded us at the first attempt and was beginning to wear us down. A quick look at our remaining provisions as I prepared our morning tea confirmed that this would be the last day of food. Dinner would be waiting for us at base camp in the evening, or else we would spend a hungry night in Camp 2 at 5500m before heading down tomorrow morning.

At 1am the weather was perfect. A full moon lit up brilliantly the icy peaks, which soared above us on three sides, and in the monochromatic light the Kyajo glacier extended majestically to the south like a huge frozen lake. A delicate route across a steep loose boulder field led us to a glacier we planned to traverse in order to gain access to the mixed South-west Ridge. From there the summit looked accessible. At the far side of the glacier we were turned back by a compact, overhanging, 40-metre rock wall. With no other feasible routes from here, we turned back and returned to Camp 2 at 5am. Day was breaking and the pressure was now on.

Sure, we had left it late and not sufficiently reconnoitred the previous day but if we wanted to try for the summit, it was now or never. Exhausted and demoralized by the night's efforts, my wife Véronique, along with our friends Julien and Laurent, pulled out. A bitter blow for the team, harder still for the individuals concerned, knowing they had sacrificed their last chance. As Véronique's brother Vincent and I headed off, they offered us their last chocolate bars, as if handing us their remaining resolve and courage.

No time to lose. Vincent raced off and I hoped he would have something left for later when the going gets tougher. The sun was already licking the summits around us, and by the time we had to negotiate the first delicate passage, beneath an unstable sérac, the ice was glistening with the sun's heat. The biting  $-15^{\circ}\text{C}$  cold of the night had gone and the climbing was pleasant in the warm sunshine. By 8am we were established on the south-west col, and roping up we got our first proper view of the difficulties ahead. The ridge was fairly uniform in slope, steepening here and there between rock outcrops, threatened by a few small séracs higher up, but apparently leading all the way to the summit. Old avalanche debris at the col reminded us chillingly of the advancing hour, and we were soon moving together up the ridge.

We swapped leads as the terrain varied between 55° and 60° snow and ice to a compact rock outcrop, sharing the difficulties according to our respective strengths. The 6000m threshold was now below us, but the excitement of reaching this altitude for the first time brought little relief to our breathless fatigue. Our hope of reaching the summit by 11am had receded, and each rope length seemed to take an age. Only one more chocolate bar each, and the water bottles were almost empty. But the promise of my altimeter reading kept us focused on our goal. As Vincent joined me on what we expected to be the last belay before the summit, he looked tired and dizzy.

'Are you OK?'

'Yeah, I think so, just feel like I'm hearing things through a fog, a bit like what the high-altitude boys describe in those books we've been reading.'

At once my mind flooded with unpleasant recollections of *Into Thin Air* and *Touching the Void* that have been circulating at Base Camp. 'If you're in a bad way we'd better head down right now,' I offered, not really believing my own words.

'No, let's do one more length and see how things are then, hey?'

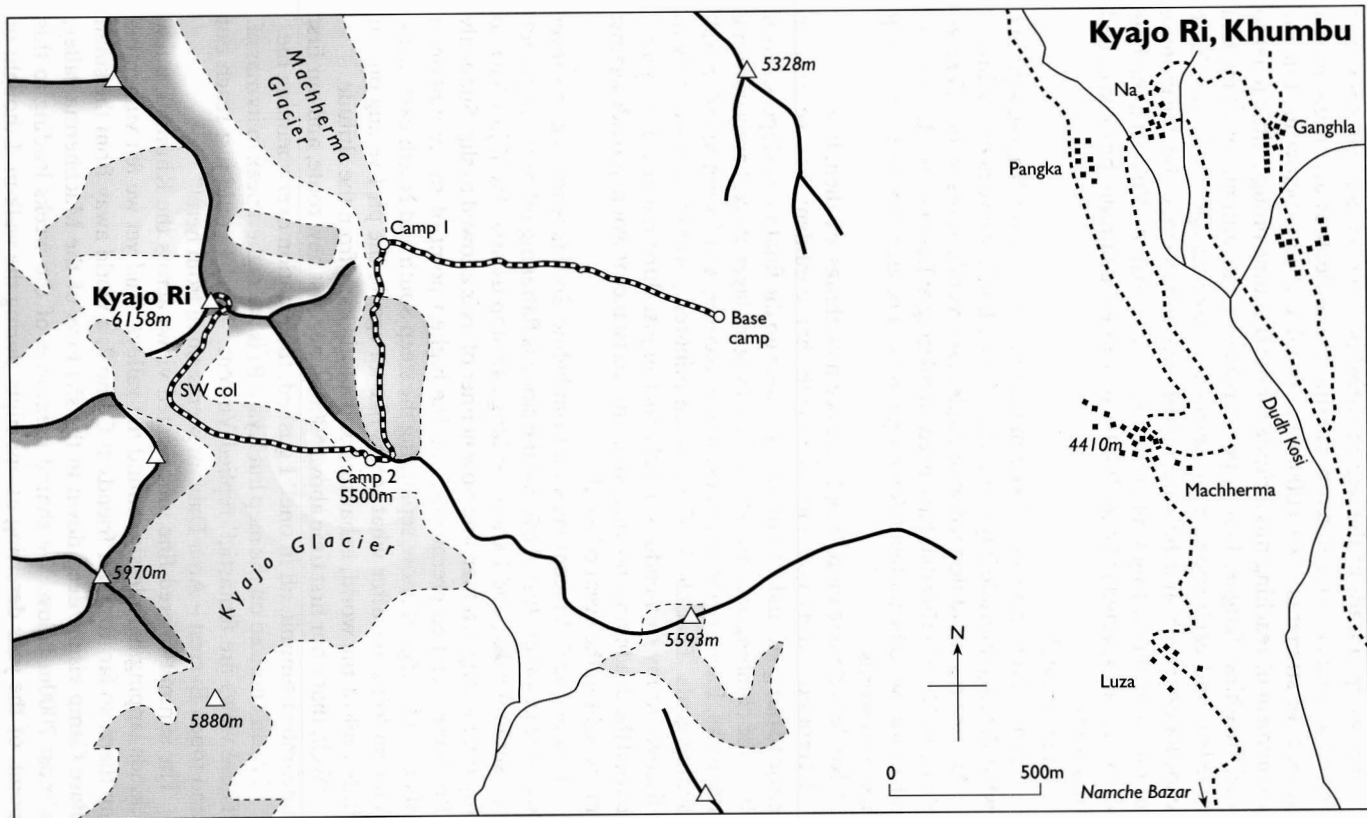
I certainly wasn't going to argue with that, confident that we were so close to our goal, and I set off immediately up the final snow slope, steep at first, the climbing delicate on a soft and sugary layer of ice, barely covering the rocks. Each step took ten breaths to recover, and I soon found myself setting goals. That block of ice in ten minutes, I would promise, only to discover to my tremendous delight that in just three minutes I'm there. I buried the deadman, knowing what little resistance it would provide against my weight in the event of a fall.

'End of rope!' Vincent yells up from below. So this is the summit fever we've read about. Just above me the slope is flattening off as we approach the summit ridge, and I know nothing can stop us now. We'll just have to top out moving together, and now neither of us is allowed to slip. Suddenly I'm there, perched precariously on the highest point of the mountain, a 40cm-wide ridge of snow, separating the steep South and North-east Faces. Vincent joins me, after what seems like an age, in the pit I've dug on our little roof of the world, exhausted and a little hazy from the altitude.

'Well, that's our first time above 6000m, our first new route, and our first unclimbed summit, all in one!' I gushed, the emotion overwhelming me.

'I hadn't noticed on the map but Kyajo Ri is the highest peak in its massif. These views are fantastic!' replied Vincent. 'I feel I could just reach out and touch Everest – Ama Dablam seems small from here!'

The summit offered fine unrestricted views across the Khumbu, a few clouds lapping harmlessly around the valleys. And yet we felt vulnerable up there, so far from our friends at Camp 2, a world away from the small Base Camp visible deep down in the shadows of the Machherma valley, almost 2000m below. We shared memories of the weeks leading to this point, of the yaks deserting us one night during the walk-in. I thought of



the beautiful puja ceremony at Base Camp when Dawa our sirdar had presided over the blessing of our expedition, throwing rice to the gods through the thick smoke of burning juniper. Then we had set to work, forging a technical route from Camp 1 to Camp 2 with the rest of the team, all three of them now in the safety of Camp 2 anxiously awaiting our return from the summit.

We stayed on the summit for an hour celebrating. We ate and drank our remaining provisions, took no end of photos, unrolled and partially buried a string of prayer flags and then sat back and took in the fantastic landscape. Impossibly steep ice faces extended in all directions: Everest, Cho Oyu, Makalu, Shishapangma, even the Annapurnas and Manaslu visible in the distance. The wind blew lightly, although never enough to cool the sun's heat, lifting the prayer flags in short breaths, carrying those Buddhist chants to the far corners of the world. For a while a thin misty veil covered the summit but five minutes later it had evaporated. By 3pm we were off, down-climbing in 100m lengths between precarious belays on the few rocky outcrops, wary of making errors after 14 hours of climbing and three days above 5500m. Each pitch seemed to last forever as the sun raced towards the western horizon. With the coming night the temperatures plummeted to below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and my toes lost some feeling that they failed to recover even after painful rewarming. That worried me. Fatigue and lack of sleep, nutrition or water were taking their toll.

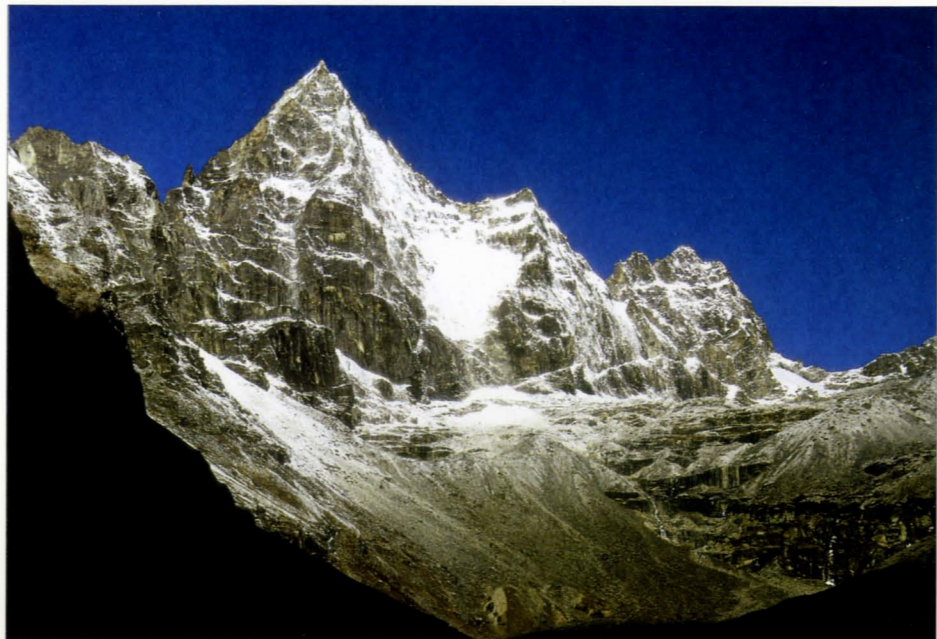
'Vincent,' I forced myself to say, as we headed to the top of the steep rock wall that had barred our way during the previous night, 'be careful – I'm very tired – you're going to have to make decisions for both of us from now on.' Fortunately Vincent had recovered from his difficulties near the summit, and we abseiled safely down the overhanging rock face that had rebuffed us 15 hours earlier on the way up.

The final hour's walk back to Camp 2 was made more comfortable by the sight of three bobbing headlamps coming to meet us. What a welcome sight! The reunion with the others was tearful, joyful, hot and cold all in one. It was now past 9pm and we shared rapidly our impressions and experiences of the long day while swallowing whole pieces of *comté* cheese and dried sausage, secretly brought all this way by Laurent, before heading for the warmth of our sleeping bags. We still had over 1100m of descent tomorrow, some of it over technical ground, before reaching Base Camp and rest. Falling into a fitful sleep, buffeted by a violent snowstorm, my mind wandered over our achievement, mixed with the regret of not getting everyone to the summit. At least tomorrow we would all enjoy a good *dahl bhat*, and be awoken the following morning with a piping hot mug of sweet tea, served in the warmth of our sleeping bags! There was just time to think of a name for the route. A Franco-British team, lying now in harmony in our little tents, after a historic – for us at least – first ascent. '*En Tente Cordiale!*'

**Summary:** The first ascent of Kyajo Ri (6186m) in the Khumbu, Nepal by Duncan Wilson (UK) and Vincent Marché on 20 October, 2002 in lightweight style with no Sherpa support, with climbing up to Difficile/60°. Other team members were Laurent Beurel, Julien Ferrera and Véronique Marché-Wilson.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank our friends and family for their moral support, apologise to those who suffered in the absence of news, and express our gratitude to those who helped us financially, namely [www.Expé.fr](http://www.Expé.fr), Au Vieux Campeur and Murmur.



6. The E face of Kyajo Ri (6158m) seen from the village of Machherma in Khumbu. Base camp was established on the valley floor, Camp 1 on snowfields at the foot of the face, below the hanging glacier. (*Duncan Wilson*) (p52)



7. Looking East towards Camp 2, nestled below the SE Col of Kyajo Ri, with Everest and the Nuptse-Lhotse wall appearing beyond. (*Duncan Wilson*) (p52)



8. Vincent Marché climbing the rock outcrop 100m below the summit, on the SW Ridge, the SW Col below. (*Duncan Wilson*) (p52)



9. Also on 20 October, Vincent Marché sits astride the summit of Kyajo Ri with Everest, Nuptse and Lhotse beyond to the North-east and Ama Dablam to the East. (*Duncan Wilson*) (p52)