
MALCOLM BASS

Haizi Shan - A lot to be grateful for

It was late evening as we turned off the metalled road onto a bumpy, rutted track. All through the afternoon we had been travelling across the high, rolling, Tagong grasslands, their ochre colours accentuated by warm autumnal light. As the afternoon had turned to evening the grasslands had given way to larch and birch forests, and now we were following a winding river valley up through patches of trees interspersed with grassy meadows. The jeep was comfortable, our driver appeared quite sane, and we were neither exhausted, famished, nor prostrate in the heat. All in all it really didn't feel much like a 'Greater Ranges' trip.

There was some weak evidence that we were engaged in something that might interest the readers of this journal. I had a fairly severe gastric complaint, always suggestive of impending glacial terrain, and we had actually spotted a snowy mountain. Indeed we had spotted our intended mountain, Haizi Shan, standing in splendid isolation over the rolling dun hills. But that had been many miles and many hours ago and since then it felt like we'd been driving away from the mountain. More definitive and up to date proof was required.

Then suddenly, as the road swung round, away from a low larch covered ridge, there it was; the long, north flank of Haizi Shan, hovering ethereally above the darkening valley. It seemed to be glowing, catching the last of the sun in that strange way north faces do, so that all its spurs and ribs and séracs stood out.

Pat Deavoll and I had decided, from the comfort of our respective New Zealand and North Yorkshire homes, that we would attempt a direct line up the north face. Haizi Shan had been attempted many times; mostly it seemed by the long, undulating north-east ridge over the north summit. In 2004 an Alpine Club team had made a strong attempt on this line, with Geoff Cohen and Dick Isherwood reaching about 5800m before turning back late in the day with about five pitches of corniced ridge between them and the summit. Another strong attempt was made in 2005 on the steep, rocky, west-south-west ridge by John Otto, Chen Cheng, Su Rongqin, and Ma Yihua. They reached about 5600m during five days of snowed-up rock climbing bedevilled by constant wind. Bad weather was reported to have been a feature of many of the previous trips: Haizi Shan is an isolated peak and sits in the Daxue Shan range at the very eastern edge of the

Himalaya, making it rather a weather magnet. A direct, and hopefully short, line had seemed worth trying as an alternative to the time consuming north-east ridge. But now we were here beneath the mountain it looked imposingly steep.



27. The north face of Haizi Shan. (*Malcolm Bass*)

Life at base camp was idyllic. The weather was good; Lenny (Chen Zheng Lin), cooked superb Sichuan food, and the woods around camp were full of colours, berries and flowers. A small river ran nearby, reportedly containing fish, but while there were good hatches of aquatic flies, I wasn't able to elicit any reaction to my limited range of trout flies. Local people from semi nomadic yak herding families visited us most days; and on one day so did armed police, bandits having stolen six yaks from a local family at gunpoint. A base camp with trees? Berries? Fishing? People? What kind of expedition was this turning into?

Over the next eight days we found a way up from the base camp valley (the Tai Zhan valley) to the basin beneath the north face, and spent a few days below the face (at around 4500m) acclimatising and face watching. The route up into the basin followed a 400m-snow gully through the steep lower cliffs. This route was rather fraught as it drained the whole basin and the north face above. We narrowly escaped obliteration when a sérac fell on the north face 10 minutes after we'd descended the gully. A bit of random death potential tipped the scales back in favour of this being proper



28. The last pitch before the west ridge. (*Malcolm Bass*)



Left

29. Pat Deavoll on the west ridge. (*Malcolm Bass*)

expeditionary alpinism, but the good news was that from the upper basin the angle of the face looked more amenable, and we could trace an objectively safe line. We dropped back to the Tai Zhan valley for a bath in the hot springs then returned to base camp for a brief rest before our attempt. The night before we were due to go back up it snowed, the only really bad weather of the trip. It kept on snowing throughout the next day, but then obligingly stopped. We allowed a day for the face to clear, then went back up into the basin and camped about 200m below the face.

The most prominent feature on the north face is an arête or nose dropping from just west of the main summit. Gully systems drop to the foot of the face from either side of this nose. We decided that we'd climb a rib between these two gullies, then drop into the right-hand gully and follow it to the west ridge near the summit. On the next day we climbed 800m onto and then up the rib as planned. Snow conditions varied from firm to knee deep. The climbing was straightforward, we took turns breaking trail and didn't rope up. There was a shallow couloir on the rib and we mostly stayed in this, finding snow conditions better here. At 5200m we moved back onto the rib proper and hacked out a tent platform. This was a fine, safe bivvi site, with a good view over the more sérac threatened face to the east. The early part of the evening was worrying as thunderstorms played over the surrounding lower hills, and the odd shower of graupel blew in on gusty winds, but the weather passed around and below us, and the night was quiet. With just over 600m to go the next day we left the tent pitched and set off into the darkness with light sacks. We made a rising traverse into the right-hand couloir, which we reached as the light came. Snow conditions in the couloir were good, and again we were able to climb unroped, until we encountered loose snow over granite slabs at about 5500m. We roped up here as it got a bit scratchy, and climbed two belayed pitches. The best of these was a fine groove in the gully wall that skirted some particularly blank slabs in the gully bed at about Scottish IV. We stopped belaying above here and trailed the ropes, leaving the gully and moving left above the nose. The cornice at the top of the face took a while to break through, and I asked Pat for a body belay as I became convinced that having surmounted it I'd fall straight down the south face. The views from the west ridge were superb, all the better for being seen intermittently through veils of cloud. The ridge was corniced and spectacular, dropping steeply for over 1000m on either side; we stayed roped up and focused.

Pat reached the summit as Haizi was having a Scottish moment, enveloped in thick cloud so we'd had no idea that we were nearly there. As I followed her up the final step the clouds cleared, and we were treated to a glorious vista of mountains and endless rolling grasslands. The final section of the north-east ridge looked like a corniced roller coaster track, and we were glad to be returning the way we had come.

From our hole in the cornice we abseiled a few rope lengths on ice threads and nuts down the upper half of the couloir. The warm autumnal light, the



30. The west ridge of Haizi Shan from the top of the north face route.
(*Malcolm Bass*)



31. Malcolm Bass on the west ridge approaching the summit. (*Pat Deavoll*)

leitmotif of the trip, bathed the basin below the face as the couloir sank into darkness. We climbed steadily down towards the glow.

It was fully dark by the time we reached the tent. We bundled inside, fired up the stove for the first of an endless round of brews, and scatted through our pockets and rucksacks for the remaining few edibles. We talked of our gratitude, for the weather, for the line, for the snow conditions, for Lenny and An Ping down at base camp, and for each other's contribution to our partnership. Unknown to us, more memorable moments were yet to come: a superb day spent descending to base camp, the party reunited, Great Wall red wine and mournful Tibetan songs of longing around the fire, the lake of prayer flags. But that night, with the summit, safety, and sleep, we had all we needed.

Summary: The first ascent of Haizi Shan (in Tibetan, Yala or Zhara), 5833m, Daxue Shan range, Western Sichuan. Malcolm Bass and Pat Deavoll via the 1100m north face (IV,3 in Damilano system). October 2007.