

## CHECKMATE

Ueli Steck

I have a small set of equipment at my disposal: 14 normal pitons, three Camelots, six nuts, five ice-screws and eight quickdraws. Each of the pitches is an adventure in itself, but that is exactly what we are looking for in the mountains. With this minimal equipment I have to protect difficult rock and mixed passages. Meanwhile Simon has to belay for up to 45 minutes in the cold and then jumar up with a backpack weighing 25kg, moving as fast as possible in order to catch up on the time I have 'wasted' leading the pitch.

Such was our first attempt to climb the north face of Teng Kangpoche (6487m) in the Khumbu region of Nepal, a face attempted by many well-known alpinists without success. We began the climb on 10 April 2008 and reached almost 6000 metres. Then the weather changed – half a day earlier than forecast – and grew worse and worse. All of a sudden the wind and snowfall increased and spindrifts turned to avalanches. Below us lay a 1600-metre steep wall. We were quite exposed and the situation was getting uncomfortable. What to do was clear and simple. We had to retreat; abseiling off as fast as possible, however with avalanches falling over us, we frequently had to wait before being able to move on. We were close to our limits. The cold was hard to bear yet we had always to maintain concentration. At 8pm on 11 April we made it back to our base camp.

This first attempt had cost us a lot of energy. We knew that we had to change our strategy if we were to summit Teng Kangpoche. We recovered at base camp, eating well and checking the weather forecast. After a two-day 'holiday' in Namche Bazar, fuelling up on 'yaksteak', we returned to base camp highly motivated and ready to go for it once more.

We started out from base camp at 8am on 21 April after a sumptuous breakfast and a last good coffee from my great coffee machine. Our plan was to conserve as much as energy as possible over the first two days so as to have sufficient reserves for the upper part of the wall. This easier pace meant we would be longer on the climb; on the other hand we should become less exhausted. We were each going to climb exactly the same pitches as on our first attempt. In this way we would know what to expect and so should be faster and more efficient. Once again, the second climber would have to carry the heavy backpack.

That first day we reached a small platform at c5200m with enough space



50. North face of Teng Kangpoche showing line and camps of first ascent by Ueli Steck and Simon Anthamatten.



51& 52. Simon Anthamatten  
on the north face of Teng  
Kangpoche. *(Ueli Steck)*

to erect our single skin tent. We had climbed about 1000m from base camp. This proved to be the only place to camp on the whole of the 2000m face. It was an incredible luxury, as we were to appreciate over the following days. After having had something to eat I still had some work to do. It was 4.15pm and the first pitch after the platform was waiting for me.

I seemed to remember that it was going to be an easy pitch, but far from it. I had to give my





utmost. After 50m the crack system I was following came to an end. Now I had to go over a ledged zone without adequate handholds to gain the next crack, some 3 metres further up, where we had placed a belay piton on the previous attempt. But the slabby move defied me. I climbed with my crampons and tried to get a purchase with my ice tools on tiny edges of only a few millimetres. Then the inevitable happened; I twisted an axe, it slipped off and I fell. Simon was watching very carefully and held the fall. I had dropped about 5 metres and was pretty angry with myself. Now I had to

53 & 54.  
'Ice as hard as  
stone.' Ueli Steck on  
the north face of Teng  
Kangpoche.  
(Simon Anthamatten)



start all over again. It was no easier but this time I concentrated fully and completed the passage without further mishap. I banged in a second piton and fixed our rope. Simon was already in the tent as I abseiled. Tomorrow morning we would just climb up at the rope and start into the next pitch.

22 April: After a more or less comfortable night, the day started early at 5.30am. We breakfasted, put on our frozen shoes, packed and jumared up the first 60 metres. Here our day definitively started. Simon belayed me. The climbing was still steep and technically very demanding. On the third pitch I had to use pitons on the first 8 metres before resuming free climbing. After 240 metres it was Simon's turn. He shouldered the light backpack with all the climbing gear and I took over the big heavy one with our supplies.

Leading for the next 120 metres, Simon also had a fight on his hands. And as on our first try, he needed a lot of time for the last pitch. I was glad to be sitting at the belay; it was a nice pitch to be following as a second! An overhang prevented me from seeing what Simon was doing. For long periods he didn't seem to be moving, just once in a while I had to pay out a little bit of rope. I sat at the belay for more than an hour. However, I didn't have a



difficult rock-climbing before entering an ice funnel leading to a big icefield. In the funnel we climbed together, linked by a 40m rope and always with a running belay, so-called 'simul climbing'. We moved fast as we were well acclimatized and our equipment was light to carry. At the icefield my belaying equipment ran out and Simon took over the lead. Another 120m of rock lay ahead of us.

We reached the point at 6000m where we had been forced to retreat. This time we were luckier and the weather was OK. Simon continued up the fragile rock and then one more ice pitch before we changed again. We had been climbing for 10 hours and it had started to snow. We became slower. The ice was as hard as stone and kept splintering. It required a great deal of strength-sapping aggression to plant the tool into the ice. This time I really wanted to get up there. It was our very last chance. And this thought gave me the necessary energy. Hit by hit we moved up to the summit edge. My calves were burning from standing on the front points of my crampons. Again and again I needed a rest, hanging fully on my ice tools to relieve my feet.

The cloud lifted and it stopped snowing. I looked up and I saw that the edge was only about 30m above me. I belayed myself one last time on an ice-screw and let Simon go through. At 6.30pm we stood on the summit ridge. We had just climbed the north face of Teng Kangpoche. What a feeling! To complete the ascent we had still to go over the ridge to the summit. But this would have to wait until tomorrow. We settled into our last bivouac, glad of our decision to carry that extra bit of weight up to 6300m.

24 April: We walked up the snow crest to the summit. It was 7.15am and the rest of the day would be spent abseiling. Late in the evening we arrived back in base camp and celebrated our success with a beer. Checkmate!

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of the north face of Teng Kangpoche (6487m), Khumbu region, Nepal, by the Swiss Ueli Steck and Simon Anthamatten, 21-24 April 2008. *Checkmate*, 2000m, VI, M7+ or M6 A0, 85 degrees.



57.  
Sanctuary of base camp. Steck and Anthamatten's 'home' beneath Teng Kangpoche.