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Nepal 2008

I would like to thank Elizabeth Hawley and Lindsay Griffin, in addition to many of the climbers named below, for information in these notes.

Stability seems to have returned to Nepal, at least for the moment, as the former Maoist rebels came out in front in the national elections in April 2008, and have had the doubtlessly interesting experience of forming a government and actually running the country. Trekkers are back in large numbers and the government has reduced peak fees in an effort to keep the climbers coming. All peak fees have been discounted in autumn, winter and 'summer', though not in the main spring season, and peaks west of the Dhaulagiri range (e.g Kanjiroba, Saipal, Api and Nampa) are exempt from peak fees altogether.

The **Everest** scene in spring 2008 was dominated by the Chinese project to carry the Olympic Torch to the summit by the north ridge route. This was achieved on 8 May by no less than 26 people, following an ascent by seven others the day before. Unfortunately, perhaps, the arrangements for this great deed, and the unrest in Lhasa and elsewhere in the Tibetan regions of China, severely disrupted the economic growth engine of commercial expeditioning. At least 65 parties were booked to climb Everest and Cho Oyu from Tibet in the pre-monsoon season, and all were forced to cancel. The Chinese authorities also leaned heavily on the Nepalese government, basically preventing movement high up the mountain on the south side until the torch show was over. Permits were delayed and Nepalese security forces limited rope fixing in the Khumbu icefall until mid-April. Nevertheless 391 people reached the summit from the Nepal side, including 76-year-old Min Bahadur Sherchan, a Nepali from the western part of the country, who beat the previous age record, held by a Japanese climber, by a good five years. An American carrying a Tibetan flag on his pack above the base camp was arrested, deported and banned from Nepal for two years, which seems a bit hard given the number of Dalai Lama images and Free Tibet slogans one sees in Kathmandu.

In the post-monsoon season permit delays and problems continued in Tibet, in part because decision-making had been pulled back from the provincial authorities in Lhasa to the central government in Beijing. Around 30 groups switched from Cho Oyu to Manaslu due to permit difficulties. In the end 35 expeditions attempted Manaslu and 11 were successful, all by the standard north-east face route. 17 parties eventually got permits for Cho Oyu and 11, including three Chinese groups, reached the summit by

the north-west face. Six parties went to Everest from Nepal in the post-monsoon season but none were successful.

In the 2007/8 winter **Annapurna II** (7937m) had its first winter ascent, by the German climber Philipp Kunz with three Sherpas, following the original British route from the north side over the shoulder of Annapurna IV. Two winter attempts on Makalu, the only 8000m peak in Nepal not to have had a winter ascent, were unsuccessful in 2007/8, though the 'indestructible Himalayan strong man' (according to Planetmountain.com) Kazak Denis Urubko returned a year later with the Italian Simone Moro, and succeeded on the standard route in January 2009.

Also in winter the Russians Vladimir Belousov and Alexander Novikov made a difficult 1200m mixed route on the north face of **Kwangde Lho** (6187m) with two bivouacs on the ascent. Their line seems to have been to the right of previous routes established here in the eighties, and reached the ridge between Kwangde Lho and Kwangde Nup very close to the summit of the former. The standard was M4, WI4, and they reached the summit on 10 January after a very cold bivouac on the summit ridge. They descended the original route on the mountain, into the Lumding valley on the south side, and had a long walk home over the Lumding La.

In the spring season a large international expedition was on the south face of **Annapurna**, attempting a line far to the east of the main summit, and close to the route climbed solo by Tomas Humar in 2007. A good deal of fixed rope was used and the Russian climber Alexei Bolotov reached the middle summit (8061m) alone, where he reportedly dedicated his ascent to the new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Sadly the Spaniard Iñaki Ochoa de Olza died of cerebral and pulmonary oedema at 7400m on the east ridge despite heroic efforts by his teammates and also by the Swiss climbers Ueli Steck and Simon Anthamatten, who had been attempting a different line on the face, and Denis Urubko, who came out by helicopter from Kathmandu, to get him down. Annapurna would have been Inaki's 13th 8000m peak, all climbed without oxygen, which seems to show that however extensive your past experience you are not necessarily safe from serious altitude illness (article *The Spirit of Mountaineering* p83).

Kangchenjunga had one ascent in the spring, by an Indian expedition on the south-west face route. **Makalu** had at least 19 ascents by its standard north-west face route.

Earlier in the spring, as acclimatization for their planned Annapurna climb, Ueli Steck and Simon Anthamatten climbed a very impressive and direct line on the 2000m north face of **Teng Kangpoche** (6487m) in Khumbu. Their route required three bivouacs and they graded it VI, M7+. It was climbed in Alpine style with the second jumaring with both packs on some steep pitches, and finished with a bivouac on the knife edged summit ridge. They reached the summit on 24 April. (article *Checkmate* p56) Their route is well to the left of the 2004 British Bullock-Carter route. A Spanish party also made an ascent on this face that seems to share much ground with the British route. Like them they reached a point well west of the



196. High on Teng Kangpoche – Ueli Steck and Simon Anthamatten's successful ascent of the coveted north face of this Khumbu peak. (Steck coll)

summit and were unable to continue along the ridge to the summit of Teng Kangpoche.

A Japanese pair (Kenro Nakajima and Hiroki Yamamoto) made what may have been the first ascent of **Dingjung Ri** (6196m) in the Rolwaling valley by its east ridge. They reached the summit on 15 March, after fixing rope on a loose rock section. Also in the upper Rolwaling, Pete Athans and Theodore Hessler made an apparent first ascent of **Kang Kuru** (6320m) on 16 April by its west ridge.

On **Ama Dablam** the Italian Francesco Fazzi and Spaniard Santiago Padros climbed a line on the west face that started up, or very close to, the Japanese 1985 route but then went left and up unclimbed ground to the summit at grade V+, M5+ with 80 degree ice. They bivouacked on the summit and descended by the standard south-west ridge route. They named their route, perhaps provocatively, *Free Tibet*. The standard south-west ridge route had numerous ascents in the autumn, despite continuing icefall danger in the area of the 'dablam', the high hanging glacier which now seems to be falling down altogether.

In the post-monsoon season two notable new routes were climbed on high mountains. The American climber Vince Anderson and the Slovenian Marko Preseelj climbed the west face of **Kangchungtse** (Makalu II, 7678m),

mainly on ice with some mixed climbing high up, at a standard of M4-5, in a 16-hour round trip from a camp at 6700m. Their subsequent attempt on the west face of Makalu itself was defeated by bad weather.

On **Nuptse** two French climbers, Patrice Glairon-Rappaz and Stéphane Benoist climbed a direct route on the south face, starting left of the original British route, and climbing very steep ground (M4-5, and some vertical ice) before joining the original route in the snow couloir below the summit ridge. They reached the ridge at around 7700m at 7pm on 28 October and were forced by extreme cold to descend without going to the 7864m main summit. (article *Are you Experienced?* p51) The whole climb took four days and Benoist needed helicopter evacuation from their base camp with frost-bitten feet. Glairon-Rappaz had attempted this route solo in 2006 but retreated in bad weather. They commented that it was a bit harder than the north face of Les Droites.

Another route was climbed on **Teng Kangpoche** in the autumn, on the north-east face, by Japanese climbers Yasushi Okada and Hiroyoshi Manome. Their 1900m route was climbed in Alpine style on rock and steep ice, and required three bivouacs. They reached the summit on 15 November and descended in 12 hours using an 80m abseil rope. They graded it ED in the traditional system. En route they found an old piton at 5750m, probably left during a French attempt in 2002. Around the same time another Japanese pair attempted a line further left on the same face, reaching 6250m on very steep mixed ground before being forced to retreat. Both these routes are to the left of the impressive central pillar of Teng Kangpoche's north face, whereas the Steck/Anthamatten and Bullock/Carter routes are to its right.

American climbers David Gottlieb and Joe Puryear made an ascent of **Kang Nachugo** (6735 m) in the Rolwaling Himal, which they believe was the first ascent of the mountain. They first attempted a direct line on the south face but were forced to retreat around 150m below the summit in bad weather. They then climbed the long and very narrow west ridge over five days in alpine style, summiting on 17 October. The *Himalayan Index* records two previous ascents of Kang Nachugo in 1980 and 1995, but they appear to refer to a peak considerably further west.

Also in the autumn Nick Bullock attempted the west face of **Peak 41** (6623m) north of the Mera La, with Andy Houseman. They were required by the Tourist Ministry to pay for a liaison officer, who never even left Kathmandu. All their gear was stolen from their unguarded base camp above the village of Thangnag, and by the time they could replace it Andy had to go home. Nick found a new companion, who had little experience, and finally made a solo attempt, reaching 6200m on steep mixed ground (Scottish V-VI) and some very loose rock.