

Dhaulagiri's East Face

Nick Estcourt Memorial Expedition

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IN THE FIRST WEEK of November of 1979 Wojciech Kurtyka, a member of the Polish expedition to the north side of Dhaulagiri, struggled through waist-deep snow and inclement weather to check on an idea that had grown in his mind over the past few years. On reaching the northeast col, he began to descend into the basin that lies between the northeast and southeast ridges. A temporary break in the weather confirmed his notion. The east face of Dhaulagiri was indeed a very appealing, classically beautiful face, unclimbed, indeed unattempted. The first Nick Estcourt Memorial Expedition* was born.

Our team comprised the Polish climbers Wojciech Kurtyka and Ludwik Wilczyczynski, the young French guide René Ghilini and me from the United Kingdom. We were basically the third Anglo-Polish expedition of this nature, excepting that my traditional partner, John Porter, was unable to come and René had readily accepted my invitation during a "wee" winter epic on the Grandes Jorasses North Wall at Christmas of 1979.

The east face of Dhaulagiri is bounded by the northeast and southeast ridges. We chose to approach it via the traditional 15,500-foot Base Camp on the Mayangdi Glacier and an Advanced Base at 19,275 feet on the northeast col, below the classic northeast ridge, the line of the 1960 first ascent. From there we would descend slightly into the basin that lies below the face and above the icefalls of the southeast glacier. The basin was almost reached by the 1969 American expedition via that glacier, but

* Nick Estcourt, one of Britain's most outstanding climbers, was killed on K2 in 1978. The Nick Estcourt Memorial Fund was founded to commemorate Nick. Each year an expedition which is felt to comprise outstanding, up-and-coming climbers with a particularly outstanding challenging objective will receive the award. It is administered by the Mount Everest Foundation. We dedicated the climb to his memory.

PLATE 19

Photo by Alex MacIntyre

**Kurtyka leaving the bivouac on Day 2
on DHAULAGIRI's East Face.**





PLATE 20
Photo by Alex MacIntyre

Day 3 on DHAULAGIRI's East Face.

an avalanche caused by a collapsing ice cliff on the eastern flank of the southeastern ridge caused the loss of the lives of seven men.

We left Kathmandu on March 17, drove to Pokhara and walked, following the Kali Gandaki, to Tukuhe. We then approached via the Dambush and French Passes. The alternate route would have been to follow the Mayangdi River, and though longer and less pleasant, it is to be recommended in the pre-monsoon season. We had quite an epic and very expensive struggle over the two storm-exposed, snow-covered passes. The whole escapade took us eight days in all, rather more than the traditional three, possible for post-monsoon trips.

In order to facilitate a reasonable chance of climbing the east face alpine-style, we obviously needed to acclimatize as well as possible. The northeast ridge was being attempted by a very large Swiss expedition, and we had obtained permission from the Nepalese authorities to approach the Swiss and ask for their agreement for our ideas. After initial reluctance, the Swiss said we could climb on the ridge, provided we did not interfere with them. We extend warm thanks to the Swiss for their understanding. First we would climb to 6500 meters (21,326 feet) and return to our tents on the col on the same day. On the second occasion we would bivouac at 6500 meters, climb to 7000 meters (22,966 feet) and return to the 6500-meter bivouac. On the third we would bivouac at 6500 and 7000 meters and climb to 7500 meters (24,607 feet) to establish a cache of food and fuel for our descent after the east-face climb. As it turned out, only Wojciech Kurtyka fulfilled the complete plan, but it is an example of the sort of approach we adopt to get in shape for a major alpine-style climb. The usual "wizened old man" photographs of super-fit athletes who have rushed too fast to their objective would have no place on this trip. These forays went on from April 13 to 28.

We began our attempt on the face in the early hours of May 6, by moonlight. The snow was hard and we took little more than an hour from the col to the foot of the face. The morning dawned fine and saw us established on the bottom of the face, tackling a compact rock band which held us up for nearly three hours. We then moved out onto the face, seeking an easy line on snow and ice through the compact rock. The rock in this area is notorious for its roof-tile formation, which gives little protection and few good holds. The veneer of snow and ice on the face was surprisingly thin, being typically powdery snow over thin ice over the compact rock.

We halted for a brew towards midday on the first reasonable stopping place, a small knoll of rock out of character with the smoother surroundings. The weather was deteriorating and by mid-afternoon our progress had been brought to a halt by fierce spindrift. We took belated shelter under a short rock wall and opted to try to bivouac there. It was obvious that the face was deficient of bivouac spots and we did not wish to get totally caught in the open with nightfall and spindrift. The bivouac was

poor. The ledges we were able to cut ourselves were decidedly on the narrow side and the protection offered by the rock against the spindrift was minimal. Cooking was awkward.

The following two days and bivouacs to the top of the face were much the same, tracing the line through compact, snowed-over rock and avoiding areas of deep soft snow. The ice grew increasingly harder and more watery, of a nature that would have one cursing even in an alpine winter. We used the rope on only two pitches throughout the route, belays being difficult to impossible in general and all members of the party being content to solo. The climb compared with the Swiss route on the Courtes North Face and presented the same order of difficulty. Everyone in the team was at home with snow and ice and our main safety lay in speed. Retreat from the face in the conditions we encountered would have been problematical.

The second bivouac on the face was an absolute horror. The weather had been poor all day, the thunder which had begun the previous evening persisted and the spindrift had become torrential. As one point Ludwik and I found ourselves stranded on front points in an all-engulfing stream of the stuff unable to move or even reseal our gear for fear of being pushed off the face. The bivouac spot was non-existent. One minor ledge was excavated and three members got in the bivouac sac at that point. Wojciech slumped in slings, half sat on a minute crumbling ledge of snow, unable to get in his sleeping bag and with bivouac sac upside down over his head. Cooking for either party was well nigh impossible.

The northeast ridge was reached by nightfall of the third day and a poor bivouac was made in the teeth of a bitter, howling wind, snow and thunder. Preparations for the climb to the summit began soon after midnight in order that enough water could be melted to give the members a chance of success after the depleting experiences on the face below. However, the morning dawned to reveal continued bad weather and extreme avalanche danger on the way to the summit. It was this later point which persuaded us to descend the ridge and await better conditions.

The descent off the ridge to the col was avalanche threatened but fast. On May 10 we were back in Base Camp. The Swiss had moved little in this period and assured us it was the worst weather they had encountered on the mountain.

On May 15 we returned to the col. The conditions on the glacier between Base Camp and the col were deteriorating and the passage through the icefall becoming increasingly dangerous.

On May 16 the Poles moved up to the snow hole at 6500 meters, though René and I got waylaid at the Swiss camp at 6400 meters and spent the night in one of their tents which had been collapsed by a snow slide. As it snowed during much of the night, we slept with open knives in our hands in case they were needed to cut our way out of the tent if

it should be avalanched again. On the 17th we moved up the ridge to bivouac at 7200 meters.

We reached the summit at 12:40 on May 18 on a good and fairly calm day by Dhaulagiri's standards, having overhauled a team of two Swiss (on oxygen) and two Sherpas at about 8:30. We approached the summit via the large north-facing snow slope which would be a dangerous proposition to a slow party caught out by snowfall. A short couloir 100 meters to the right of the summit led to the plateau.

On May 20 the whole team was back in Base Camp. From there it was all steam for Kathmandu and the last man back bought the beers!

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Central Nepal.

ASCENT: Dhaulagiri, 8167 meters, 26,795 feet, East Face climbed to a point about 7500 meters on the southeast ridge, May 6 to 8, 1980; summit reached via southeast ridge, May 18.

PERSONNEL: René Ghilini, *French*; Alex MacIntyre, *British*; Wojciech Kurtyka and Ludwik Wilczyzyski, *Polish*.

