

# Cholatse

GALEN A. ROWELL

IN APRIL 1982 while the first Russian expedition was climbing Mount Everest from Nepal with a cast of nearly a thousand climbers and porters, five of us attempted Cholatse, the last named, unclimbed peak in the Everest region. We felt almost smugly certain of success. Our team was strong and our motives were fitting and proper. We had avoided preclimb publicity, funded cash costs entirely out of members' pockets, planned not to use Sherpas above Base Camp, and brought the latest equipment, courtesy of several manufacturers. The mountain—however hard it might prove to be—was only 21,130 feet. Furthermore, all five members had previously seen Cholatse and believed it could be rushed up and down in two to three days with good weather.

We were unanimous in our underestimation of the mountain. The white coating that appeared to be snow on our chosen southwest arête turned out to be brittle ice for thousands of feet. To complicate matters, unseasonal pre-monsoon storms brought wind and snow every afternoon.

Before the climb I led a two-week photography trek in the same region for Mountain Travel, passing countless yak caravans loaded with bright-colored duffels, trekkers in even more vivid hues, and Sherpas decked out in boots, jackets, and specialty items that were only just hitting the shelves in stores in the United States. It was hard to keep in mind that thirty-two years earlier no Westerner had ever visited the Khumbu homeland of the Sherpas. In that short span, the Khumbu had become the Mecca of the Himalaya, visited by far more people than any other region so close to a great peak. More than 8000 trekkers and climbers from every major nation were to come in 1982, mostly bound for Everest Base Camp. The finely shaped lower peaks—Ama Dablam, Thamserku, Kantega—were climbed legally or illegally by the middle sixties. Why Cholatse had gone untouched was something of a mystery. It was a bit too hard to climb illegally without attracting attention, but no one knew for certain why it had been kept off the permitted list.

Cholatse, sometimes spelled Tsolatse or given the Tibetan name, Jobo Lhaptshan, became the "last virgin of the Khumbu" not by way of virtue, but by paternal restrictions of the Ministry of Tourism begun when the mountains of Nepal first opened in 1950. Cholatse's continued closure was more a quirk of Asian bureaucracy than a clear rationale. It was not worth a large peak fee,

and it was hidden up the Gokyo Valley, lacking the obvious appeal of mountains closer to the classic route to Everest Base Camp. Another consideration was that some Sherpas considered Cholatse a very sacred mountain, one of five goddesses surrounding Everest. Others said the peak had no special significance. The Rimpoche of Thyangboche Monastery told me simply, "All mountains are sacred."

Four years earlier, Al Read, director of Mountain Travel Nepal, asked me to join his prospective Cholatse climb. He kept after the government until they finally gave him a permit late in 1981. As late as six weeks before departure, the expedition had no funding, no equipment, and just two certain climbers: Peter Hackett and me. Read had a busy trekking season, and he decided to "godfather" the expedition rather than actively climb himself. He had also invited Bill O'Connor, a British mountaineer with considerable Himalayan experience, but was unsure if Bill was coming until he arrived in Nepal for the expedition. Peter and I decided on a minimum of four climbers for an alpine-style bid on what appeared to be a safe but steep ridge. We invited Vern Clevenger and John Roskelley to round out the team.

We met in Kathmandu and sent our gear ahead on porters, saving some of the cost of flying it to Lukla. The others took off on a two-week acclimatizing trek together while I was with my photography trek. On the morning of April 15 I left that group in a village not far from Lukla, from where they would fly home, and took off toward Cholatse with one strong porter. We covered five normal trekking days in one, reaching a point half an hour below Base Camp at dusk in clouds so thick that we couldn't find our way up the remaining trailless hill. The next morning I arrived to spot the other four heading out of Base Camp for the peak. I stayed back to rest while they spent the day establishing a route through a long icefall to a col at 18,600 feet where an advanced camp could be placed. Fixed line was placed on the final 600-foot headwall to help haul loads on the final bid. They returned to Base Camp late in the day.

For the next four days it stormed; not all the time but just enough to quell our enthusiasm. The morning of April 20 was clear. We regained the col with food for two more days, and fixed three ropes on the hard ice above. In the afternoon it snowed yet again.

The next morning was clear, but Hackett was too sick to climb. A world expert in mountain medicine, he was quite sure that his ailment was short-lived and not due to altitude. We faced a triangle of awful decisions: wait a day or two and not have enough food to attempt the climb; leave a sick man alone, a man whose desire for Cholatse and efforts on behalf of the expedition exceeded any of our own; or make multiple trips through the icefall, which, due to hanging glaciers above, Hackett felt was as dangerous as the Khumbu Icefall on Everest. We trusted his judgment. Just six months before he had gone through that icefall on his way to the top of Everest.

After considerable discussion Hackett volunteered to stay at the col camp until we returned from the attempt. To fail so indignantly on a lower peak after

success so recently on Everest was hard to swallow. He said goodbye, then crawled into his bag as we jumared slowly up the ropes above the col.

Hackett's wasn't the only failure. On previous light expeditions where we had brought our own time-worn gear, I had rarely witnessed an equipment failure. That day Vern's crampons sheared a front screw. A new superwide strap tore off my crampon at the rivet. John's "Lifetime" ice tool broke off clean at the adze. By noon my digital watch was in pieces, and I had hacked big chunks of foam out of the new Alveolite inners of my plastic boots to try to make them fit something other than a ballet dancer's heel. To top things off we came to the only feasible campsite far too early in the day. At just 19,000 feet it seemed far too low for a round-trip to the top the next day.

In the afternoon Clevenger and O'Connor cut a tent platform out of hard ice while Roskelley and I fixed our four climbing ropes on the steep ridge above. On the last lead I stopped to place two ice screws for protection across a traverse of an 80° bulge. After Roskelley followed, he said, "Any one of us can climb anything on this mountain, but we're going to have to get up this fast, or we're not going to make it. I'm the fastest, and I can lead most of this without protection if it's okay with everybody."

It was. One day's food remained after two days of climbing. We were up at 3:30 A.M., the tents were left in place, and Roskelley led off. Pitch after pitch of steep ice went by without the placing of a single point of protection. "Ready?" Roskelley would say with two ice tools stuck in the wall. I would pay out rope continuously for ten minutes as he climbed with thirty pounds on his back until the rope ran out. Then he would place ice screws for a belay, and I would follow. Clevenger and O'Connor would follow later, pulling out the ropes and screws for use above.

Fifteen rope-lengths of steep ice—2,250 feet—brought us to the summit plateau by noon. We cached some gear and headed on with O'Connor in the lead. When a massive crevasse blocked the route, Roskelley did an end-run up yet another ice pitch. There we found not the summit, but a hidden 300-foot ice headwall. After twelve long hours of climbing, Roskelley and Clevenger reached the top in a full blizzard with their hair on end from electricity in the air. O'Connor and I joined them minutes later, and we all beat a hasty retreat.

It was too late to attempt a descent to the high camp, so we stomped out a platform at the top of the ridge and camped without a tent or bivvy sacks in a mild snowstorm. Lightning flashed in the southern sky over India as we heated water for one freeze-dried dinner between us. The others were testing Quallofil bags that would hold their loft when wet. Mine had torn a seam before the climb, so I had brought a down bag instead. Knowing that it would collapse like a wet sock as soon as my body heat melted the falling snow, I wore boots, overboots, and one-piece Gore-tex/Sontique climbing suit to bed.

In the morning the temperature was  $-19^{\circ}\text{C}$ ., my bag felt like a giant Coke bottle, but I was warm inside my waterproof garments, as were the others in their fluffy bags. As the first light hit Makalu, Everest, and Ama Dablam, we packed up to begin twenty frightening diagonal rappels back down the ridge,



PLATE 7

*Aerial Photo by Al Read*

**CHOLATSE.**

which overhung to the south most of the way down. Our loads grew lighter as we consumed almost all of our ice hardware for anchors every 150 feet.

At the col Peter greeted us, recovered from a short bout with the flu, but still a bit weak. He joined us, and we continued our descent toward Base Camp. Just below the glacier we were met by a welcoming committee that included Al Read, his family, several friends, and our Sherpas. A “Welcome Home Cholatse Expedition” sign graced an arch of willow branches over a gate in the stone yak corral at the entrance to camp. The Sherpas were preparing a victory dinner and baking a cake for us.

A more idyllic return from a climb is hard to imagine. We were far off any trekking route, camped in a meadow eye-to-eye with peaks on the other side of the Gokyo Valley, sharing our joy with a few friends.

The next morning I walked over the hill to watch the clouds. Below me two figures were sitting by a rock—our Sherpas watching the same movements of land and sky. On the next hill were three more figures; local herdsman also just looking at the scene. Each group was separate, yet motivated by similar emotions. None of us would have come here and shared this experience without our particular ulterior motives. Our Sherpas were hired hands on an expedition, the herdsman were tending family yaks, and our objective was to climb a mountain. Trekkers on a trail might have snapped a picture or two, but invariably they would have kept on walking instead of sitting down to silently soak in the world around them.

I saw how little the essential values of the Khumbu have changed with the recent onslaught of tourists. We were able to share the essence of these mountains with those who lived in them, just as the first Khumbu travelers had done thirty years before.

One of the reasons Sherpas integrate so well with Westerners is that unlike hill farmers or merchants, they have no single life purpose. They herd, they farm, they trade, they work for trekkers and climbers. Remove the specifics of Third World life from their scenario, and they have it made even by our highest jet-set standards.

A typical Sherpa family lives on an acre of land in a town within sight of the mountains. Their children walk to school with no fear of trouble on the way or in class. They raise their own livestock, grow their own vegetables. For part of the year the husband travels, making a better salary than in town. He brings things back from exotic places and tells exciting stories around the fireplace. While he was gone his wife managed the land, the animals, and represented the family in frequent community affairs. Together they travel to other villages and visit their summer home in a high meadow.

An hour below our Cholatse Base Camp was a cluster of fields and stone buildings that comprise the summer settlement of Na. Called *yersas*, these Sherpa summer homes are set in high-altitude pastures where yaks and goats graze during the warmest parts of the year. In one building I had tea with Sonam Dorje, eighteen-year-old son of a Sherpa from Phortse who had been on eleven Everest expeditions. All the Na *yersas* were owned by Phortse

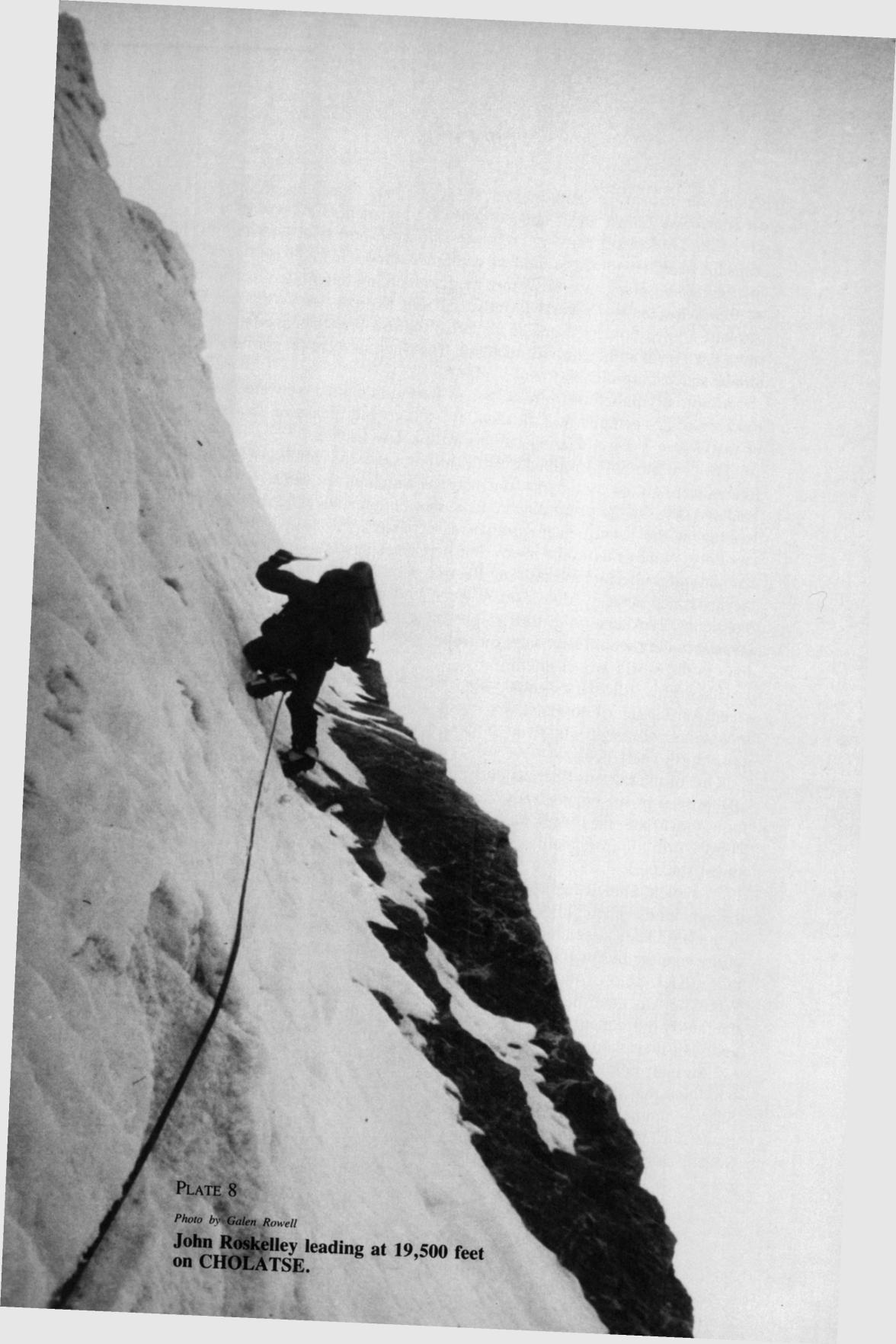


PLATE 8

*Photo by Galen Rowell*

**John Roskelley leading at 19,500 feet  
on CHOLATSE.**

families. Sonam had worked on several Mountain Travel treks, but he told me he would not be doing such work for two more years. "I'll be staying here from March to August. Sometimes my father comes; sometimes I'm alone. When one of my four brothers is old enough to stay here, I'll go back to work as a trekking Sherpa."

With his previous earnings from trekking he could have easily bought a transistor radio, like many of the lowland Nepalese who now violate the quiet air space of their villages. Instead, Sonam bought a pressure cooker to save precious fuel cooking potatoes and vegetables at his 14,500-foot summer home. On the wall he has hung art paper with Tibetan characters which he learned to draw at school. Next to his work hang a Marlboro ad and a *Time* cover.

The juxtaposition is not as disturbing as it seems. On another family's wall I spotted a picture from *Time* of the musician, Rostropovich, and his wife. I learned that the family had put it up simply because it captured an expression of love between husband and wife. They had no idea who the people were.

After a rest day, several of us decided to extend our trek home by crossing the Cho La, a 17,800-foot pass connecting the Gokyo Valley with Pheriche on the Everest trekking route. Our intent was simply to see more of the region around the peak we had climbed, but in a larger sense our urge to circle around a mountain meaningful to us was exactly what reverent Tibetan Buddhists do with landmarks that have special meanings in their lives.

How different our Khumbu experience was from that of the Russians on Everest. Their memories would be weighted toward months in a sterile world, while only four days of our month were actually on the heights. Those four intense days, however, had paid us top dividends for an extremely low investment. By cutting corners in every way, our month's lightweight expedition and trek with a Sherpa crew and government-required liaison officer (kept warm and content in a Namche Bazar guesthouse at our expense) ended up costing less than half the tariff of most commercial Khumbu treks. The entire expedition except for Peter reached the summit of an unclimbed peak, and more importantly, returned healthy and happy—the true bottom line of a successful expedition.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Khumbu Region, Nepal

FIRST ASCENT: Cholatse (Jobo Lhaptshan). 21,130 feet, via the southwest arête, summit reached on April 22, 1982 (Clevenger, O'Connor, Roskelley, Rowell).

PERSONNEL: Vern Clevenger, Peter Hackett, Bill O'Connor, Al Read, John Roskelley, Galen Rowell