

Shisha Pangma— First American Ascent

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FOR YEARS SHISHA PANGMA (Xixabangma)* was possibly the most remote of the world's fourteen 8000-meter peaks. As the only 8000er located entirely within Tibet, it was the last of this select group of mountains to be ascended when it was climbed in 1964 by the Chinese. More importantly to our group, it was one of the seven remaining 8000ers still unclimbed by Americans.

Yet with the recent opening of China and Tibet, a reliable air transport system between Beijing and Lhasa, and an excellent road west of Lhasa toward the Nepalese border, Shisha Pangma is now perhaps the most accessible of the Himalayan giants. As a testament to this accessibility, less than eleven days after leaving the United States, on September 1 we were on the southern fringe of the Tibetan plateau at the mountain's 5000-meter high Base Camp. Located next to the Nakedola River, Base Camp was at the foot of a broad, flat alluvial plain extending northwards from the Shisha Pangma massif. Given the absence of any intervening foothills, the view of Phola Gangchen (Molamenqing), Shisha Pangma, its pyramidal west peak Risum, and the massive Gang Benchen (Kangpengqin) is nothing short of spectacular.

Since Base Camp was a good two days' walk over fine hiking terrain from the point where the peak's northern glacier, the Yabukangala, was crossed and the climbing began, yaks were employed to shuttle gear to Camp II (Advance Base Camp) at 5700 meters. From Base Camp we moved along the Nakedola River over grass and gravel slopes which led to Camp I at 5300 meters near the terminus of the Yabukangala. Advancing further over the moraine on the west side of the glacier, a five-hour trek brought us to Camp II.

At this time two setbacks befell our expedition. First, Marion Read, who was to have been Base Camp manager, developed an inflammation of the heart lining. As a result, she was forced to descend to lower altitude and eventually return to the United States, accompanied by her husband, our deputy leader

*The traditional names and spellings are sometimes followed in parentheses by the spellings now preferred for transliteration by the Chinese.

Verne Read. Second, John Cooley developed severe cerebral edema. He made a full recovery under the excellent care of our doctor, David Graber, but had to remain at the lower camps where he graciously took on the role of deputy leader and Base Camp manager. The loss of three of our eleven members was a severe blow. It was clear that the rapid and relatively easy vehicular access to Shisha Pangma can be a real acclimatization problem. One of the two prior American expeditions to the mountain had similar altitude-related problems. Future expeditions should take note!

In superb weather from September 9 to 16, we made rapid progress in establishing and stocking Camp III at 6250 meters. The route to Camp III first traverses the benign icefall of the Yabukangala Glacier and then ascends a heavily crevassed 25° to 30° slope leading to a broad plateau. Camp III was in the center of this plateau, between the west peak and the massive headwall to the south which provides access to the central part of the mountain. While an extremely safe site, it was soon detested as a natural wind tunnel.

During the same period of good weather, we also climbed the massive 30° to 40° headwall above Camp III and established a cache at the foot of an ice and snow corridor, a two-hour snow slog east from the top of the headwall. This corridor, a kind of mini Everest Western Cwm, is enclosed on the south (right) by the main peak and by the north peak on the left. The steep headwall at the eastern end gives access to the summit slopes of Shisha Pangma. The cache at 6700 meters ultimately became the site of Camp IV A.

On September 17 a storm moved in and for the next ten days it remained cold, windy and overcast. Above Camp II over two-and-a-half feet of snow fell. As we had to leave Base Camp by October 7 at the latest, we continued to move in all but the worst conditions. The cache became a temporary camp and in a true team effort we continued to haul supplies up to that site from the lower camps. While engaged in this effort, we had to be extremely cautious of the potential avalanche conditions on the headwall above Camp III. At least one enormous avalanche swept its lower slopes. Moreover, in the new snow it took even the fastest members over seven hours to go from Camp III to Camp IV A, a distance we had covered before in 4½ hours. Once Camp IV A was established, we could not continue up the corridor without fetching the snowshoes we had originally left in Camp II.

Finally, on September 27 we occupied Camp IV B at the head of the corridor at 6900 meters at the base of the 40° to 45° upper headwall. That evening Tom Read, who had performed brilliantly, began to exhibit early symptoms of pulmonary edema. He was forced to descend and someone had to accompany him down. His brother, Sandy Read, one of our strongest and most popular climbers, insisted that it was his responsibility to take Tom down. Unselfishly he did this, knowing full well that it would eliminate him from any summit try. We were down to six members and a final assault camp had yet to be located.

On September 28 we reconnoitered the upper headwall while final supplies were brought up from Camp IV A to IV B. That evening the six remaining

PLATE 8

Photo by Glenn Porzak

SHISHA PANGMA from Camp I.



members occupied Camp IV B and decided to try to establish Camp V the following day, simultaneously moving the first assault team into that camp for a summit bid on the ensuing day. Two groups of three were chosen by secret vote. Brent Manning, Dave Graber and Ed Ramey would carry group equipment to Camp V, return to Camp IV B and then take up their position as the second summit team. Chris Pizzo, Mike Browning and I were to break trail to Camp V, carrying personal gear, and then make the first summit bid.

The following day was cold but clear. We climbed the steep headwall slowly but without problems. At the top of the headwall at 7300 meters the real difficulties began. For 2½ hours we postholed through knee-deep snow until at 5:30 P.M. the second summit team had to head down to Camp IV B. We all knew that because of their heroic and self-sacrificing efforts, a summit bid was now possible.

Those of us remaining at Camp V worked into the evening, hacking out a platform on the 30° slope where we were forced to camp, and erected our lone tent just as total darkness enveloped us. The altimeter read 7400 meters. We were still 60 meters below where the Chinese had placed their Camp V in 1964 and 350 meters below where they had put their final assault camp.

On September 30 we awoke at five A.M. and set off in perfect weather two hours later. On the initial 40° slopes we sank in on every step up to our knees. For nearly four hours we continued along the western edge of the summit block to where, just below the site of the Chinese Camp VI, we encountered a 45° slope of thigh-deep snow. Above this obstacle, we traversed steeply across the upper face; to continue straight up would have led us away from the peak's main summit. It took us two hours to wade 200 meters on this waist- and even chest-deep traverse. The only consolation was the spectacular view of Everest, Lhotse and Cho Oyu to the east, Manaslu to the west, and Molamenqing now below us.

The traverse was followed by the crux pitch, a 50° slope where we had to thrash up to our knees before finding relatively rotten ice. At the top of this pitch clouds enveloped us and visibility was less than 30 meters. It was 2:45 P.M. Moreover, unbeknownst to us our altimeter was off by some 150 meters and indicated that we were still over 250 meters from the summit.

Nevertheless, we continued on and forty-five minutes later, still slogging through knee-deep snow, we broke through the clouds. There, less than 50 meters above, stood the summit! Twenty minutes later Chris Pizzo, Mike Browning and I stood embracing each other on the top. For the entire expedition, it was the culmination of an incredible team effort.

No sooner had we descended to Camp V when the high winds returned. Early the next morning we descended to Camp IV B in a growing storm. Fortunately we all descended to Camp II that same day before a serious snowstorm engulfed the mountain. For the next four days the peak was totally enshrouded in storm to emerge only on the evening of October 5, the night before we left Base Camp for our journey home.

By October 12 we were back in Beijing being toasted by the Chinese as the first Americans to climb not only Shisha Pangma, but an 8000-meter peak via an approach through China and Tibet.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Tibetan Himalaya.

ASCENT: Shisha Pangma, 8013 or 8046 meters*, 26,290 or 26,398 feet, via the Northeast Face, on September 30, 1983 (Browning, Pizzo, Porzak).

PERSONNEL: Glenn Porzak, leader; Mike Browning, John Cooley, David Graber, Brent Manning, Chris Pizzo, Ed Ramey and Marion, Sandy, Tom and Verne Read.

*The higher figure is from a recent, very accurate new survey by the Survey of India.

