

# Cho Oyu

VERA KOMARKOVA

DINA AND I MET up in Bangkok; she had arrived circuitously from Czechoslovakia and I from Antarctica, where I had been doing research, with a three-day stopover in Boulder, Colorado. In sunshine, we flew together to Kathmandu, trying to convince each other that it was not too late in the season, that we had enough money, the equipment and food was under control, and that our first climb together would go smoothly despite some preliminary mess-ups, all connected to a last-minute pull-out by a major would-be sponsor-participant.

Kathmandu was as hectic as ever but, because we were a very small group, the scope of disorganization was limited; we managed to depart, with most of the equipment and food on board, on a flight to Lukla after only five days in town. This was mainly thanks to excellent support at Mountain Travel and to our friends Zdena and Chatur Karky. Another seven days and we were approaching Base Camp at Khadjung at 17,000 feet (5180 meters) on April 5. Apart from yak herders, a few porters and helpers and a cook, there were only four climbers: we two, and our two Nepalese members: Ang Rita, who had climbed Everest without oxygen, Dhaulagiri I four times and Makalu II twice, and Nuru who reached the South Col on Everest and did some steep rock climbing on the south face of Annapurna with the Yugoslavs. Dina is one of the most experienced European women climbers; among her 7000ers she soloed Noshaq in Afghanistan, and she led an unsuccessful women's attempt on Manaslu I in 1980. Our Cho Oyu expedition had to be a joint expedition with Nepal because no Nepalese citizens had climbed the mountain previously.

The progress in the beginning was slow because we had to make three carries over interminable rolling scree on top of the glacier. The Sherpas carried much heavier loads, but we had to work very hard too, which was probably good for our acclimatization; our subsequent progress up the mountain was well paced. Of course, it was far behind the timetable of Reinhold Messner's party which climbed Cho Oyu in an 11-day round trip from the same Base Camp in the spring of 1983.

We did not realize it then, but this was to be one of the rare nearly perfect climbs. We had no fights or accidents (which was as well with no doctor and no radios); there was little objective danger because it snowed altogether only about

two feet. It was hard to believe that Dhaulagiri was having major snowstorms and Makalu fierce winds at the same time.

We made Camp I (18,050 feet/5500 meters) on April 9, Camp II (19,200 feet/5850 meters) on April 18, and Camp III (21,650 feet/6600 meters) on April 20. Starting on April 25 from Camp II where we had to wait for three days for the weather to clear, we tried to climb for the summit. Above Camp III were a few sections of steep ice where we fixed rope. On the longest one we found a rope, which along with the remains of Messner's Camp II, was another sign that we were probably following in Reinhold's footsteps, albeit much slower. Taking turns in making tracks, we reached Camp IV (23,300 feet/7100 meters) on April 28. We planned to attempt the summit the next day.

That was not a great idea, as it turned out. The vertical distance to the summit (3600 feet/1100 meters) was considerable. Without oxygen, Dina and I were probably too slow to make it safely to the top and back in one day, especially considering the rock bands up high. As it was, we had climbed the first few hundred meters by daybreak, but we were slowing down even before the start of difficulties. We reached about 7560 meters (24,800 feet). A couple of hours earlier, Ang Rita had said that we should perhaps turn back, that he did not feel right about the ascent that day. We stopped on a sloping shoulder of snow and broken scree. It was very clear, cold and windy, and we had to keep checking our faces and moving our toes. "Maybe we should go back," Ang Rita said again and we all agreed; it just did not look good. "I think that we should leave the ice hammer and the fixed rope here," I remarked just to make sure. "Are we coming back?" asked Nuru. "Sure," Dina and I answered in unison. Through-out, Dina was probably even more determined than I. And my determination was great.

In short time, we were back at Camp IV, everybody flat out on the snow in the sun. It was clear that the only way was down, what with two fuel cartridges, and a little bit of *tsampa* and freeze-dried food left. At Camp II it was somewhat better, but not much; there were probably four more cartridges, more *tsampa*, *chura*, and some freeze-dried food. Dina and I waited at Camp II while Nuru and Ang Rita went down to replenish the supplies. We all started back up again on May 8. We had some more food now, although there was not much at Base Camp to start with, but we had had to wait before starting for another two days because of intermittent snow. It began to snow again lightly when we were reaching Camp III. Dina and I were much faster and were feeling a lot better this time. We shared one of the last candy bars before handling the sloping icy shoulder; some icy spots below us were fixed, but this one was not and we could not belay because we had left the ropes up higher. More snow showers kept us waiting at Camp III for another two days, which had one advantage—they covered some of the glaring ice at lower elevations. Apparently, it had snowed very little in the Cho Oyu area in the winter and spring, as most of the mountain was glistening when we saw it first.

We went to Camp IV on May 11 in a windy white-out. Learning from experience, we decided to put in another camp and take along what little oxygen

we had. Originally, we had intended to use it only in an emergency, but the half-full bottles which we bought at Namche for a steep price would not have helped much. Our packs were pretty heavy this time. We did not get to Camp IV until late in the afternoon when the weather deteriorated somewhat further; the tents were still standing, even though we had to dig them out. Then it was our usual fare of *tsampa* and freeze-dried cottage cheese for dinner, with fond remembrance of potatoes and onions which Nuru and Ang Rita brought from Base Camp a few days ago. Dina and I used some oxygen during the night but only briefly—there was very little left.

We started out early in lovely weather. Despite fairly heavy packs, Dina and I did well, keeping up behind the Sherpas (particularly Nuru) until the last 100 meters or so. We must have offered a pretty pitiful or rather humorous sight when we finally put our packs down at 24,600 feet (7500 meters) by the small rocky platform that the Sherpas picked out; they were laughing. The platform was near where we had left the fixed rope and ice hammer; Ang Rita had already retrieved them. Since it was still fairly early, we spent a beautiful evening perched next to the tent, looking out over Tibet and seeing the small peaks disappear into the dark shadows in the valleys. A localized storm cloud passed from Tibet to Nepal way below us. The *nieves penitentes* on the glaciers, large cushion plants in a desert of stones and this kind of cloud seemed to indicate that this side of Cho Oyu is subject to the strongly continental climate of the Tibetan Plateau.

On May 13, we started out around three A.M. and in the dark stumbled over broken rocks and snow. In the early light we reached the first very prominent, 30-meter-high rock band. We tried to climb straight up it, but it very soon became clear that serious protection would be called for because the rock was at least 5.7. Instead, we traversed to the ridge on the right and followed Ang Rita up a steep, narrow snow gully which was hidden around a corner. For the first time, all four of us were on the same rope, climbing at the same time with no protection. Near the top of the gully, a sharp crack announced a small avalanche, which swept over us. I clung to my deeply planted ice axe, breathing hard. Ang Rita in front of me and Nuru behind also clasped their axes, and Dina was grasping a protruding rock below. After a quick recovery, we climbed out of the treacherous gully to the left.

More rocks and snow, and we were above the first rock bank and could for the first time see what was still above us. We continued up over broken rocks and snow. The snowfields were in good shape. We finally made it to a small col on the ridge at about 8000 meters. Dina had tried to use oxygen earlier on, but even with the only regular mask we had, it produced such poor results that she had stopped trying it. She put on the oxygen again now and so did I. Her bottle lasted only a short time. Instead of a proper mask, I was using a plastic tube from a sleeping mask which had the advantage that one was getting used to the altitude at the same time. The difference was slight, but it did feel better. Off and on, I shared this with Dina, but the total amount of oxygen was probably a quarter of the bottle and particularly Dina had only very little. We reached the summit

PLATE 33

*Photo by Vera Komarkova*

**Dina Sterbova, Nuru and Ang Rita  
on the Summit of CHO OYU.**



snowfield; now in a cloud, we could not see where the gently sloping summit was. We wandered on upward for an eternity until there was no doubt. We were on the large summit, a convergence of three ridges. The only way from here was down.

It was two P.M., cloudy, calm and relatively warm. We spent about an hour, waiting for the cloud to go away, but we had no such luck. We ate lunch, drank some water and walked around. There were no rock outcrops, but we did find a few thin rock flakes lying on the snow, apparently blown here during windstorms. We left the empty oxygen bottle half buried in the snow, with a *khada* tied to it, a white scarf which Nuru's wife had given him for good luck on his departure from Kathmandu. Dina buried in the snow a few momentos from friends, including a small pig figurine, also for good luck. The pictures with flags occupied us for quite a while, as this was the first American, Czechoslovakian and Nepalese ascent; unfortunately there was no flag to celebrate the first women's ascent. While we did see some blue sky above us, the cloud cap stayed where it was. Finally it dawned on us that it would be wise to start descending, especially because we had not fixed anything on the way up.

We were still in the cloud when we reached the uppermost rock band, but the small col was cloud-free. We did belay some on the steepest snowfield, and it was getting dark when we reached the lowest rock band and found our gully. Ang Rita fixed the rope he had left there earlier and we rappelled down. That accomplished, we stumbled to Camp V in the growing darkness.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Nepal Himalaya.

ASCENT: Cho Oyu, 8201 meters, 26,906 feet, via a variant of Messner's route from the southwest, May 13, 1984.

PERSONNEL: Vera Komarkova, leader, USA; Dina Sterbova, Czechoslovakia; Ang Rita Sherpa, Nuru Sherpa, Nepal.

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