

A Different Way on Dhaulagiri

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THIS IS A PERSONAL VIEW OF CLIMBING with Russian friends while making a new route on the north face of Dhaulagiri.

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An invitation to join a group of Russian climbers in the Tien Shan Mountains of Central Asia in 1991 opened new horizons: not only skylines filled with snow-capped peaks but friendships with very talented climbers. After acclimatizing on their home ground, these friends went on to make the first ascent of the east ridge of Cho Oyu in the autumn of that year. A year later, my wife Alison and I joined the Russians again, this time in the remote alpine region of the Fansky Mountains (Fanskiye Gory) of Tadjikistan. By then I was sure that I wanted to share a serious undertaking with this team, an undertaking like the north face of Dhaulagiri.

International expeditions have a mixed history. Some, conceived with the loftiest ideals have descended into the bitterest recriminations. Often, national groups or pairs stick together, functioning loosely within the expedition framework but never really adapting to unfamiliar techniques, equipment, food and language. Ours was going to be different, largely because I was the only Brit. After two seasons of climbing with Sergei Yefimov and his companions, I was prepared to embrace a new expedition ethos, but two years of evening classes had barely touched on Russian vocabulary of any practical use.

I was to be joint leader, an invention designed more for the United Kingdom media and the public-relations men. My efforts in this direction were more thorough but less rewarding than ever before, achieving no press coverage, no grants, almost no gear and no sponsorship! Fortunately, the Russians are masters at making a little convertible currency go a very long way, and in the spring of 1993 we were on Dhaulagiri.

It is May 10. My alarm clock rings at 4:30 A.M. I speak to Sergei Bogomolov in English and in Russian to make sure that *he* is awake and then relapse into a doze. Bogomolov preheats the petrol stove from a gas cylinder and the machine roars into life. Alexei Lebedikhin, lying next to me in a thin sleeping bag piled high with extra clothing, rummages in the food bag. My co-leader, Sergei Yefimov, starts to prepare breakfast in the pressure cooker. When a drop of water on the lid sizzles, the cooker has reached pressure and is bundled

inside felt mittens and a down jacket to keep its heat. Four of us are not cramped in this hooped tent, made at home in Yekaterinburg by Yefimov's wife, but the floor slopes uncomfortably. We are at 7600 meters on a ledge scraped out of gravel and rocks near the top of the wall on the north face of Dhaulagiri.

Bogomolov brews up tea and passes it around with a few biscuits. The "autoclave" is handed to me to be depressurized in the snow outside and hot rice porridge is served. At this altitude, the ingestion of food is not always an attractive idea, but the rice is OK. Then begins my daily struggle for extra liquid. For at least a decade, Western mountaineers and physiologists have accepted that a large liquid intake is highly beneficial at altitude. Yefimov dismisses this as a Western fad, pointing out (correctly) that all that melting, absorbing and excreting in one day is problematic. I persist and gain an extra half mug of precious fluid.

Yefimov already has one boot on and is berating Lebedikhin and me for still being in our bags. My Russian is not good enough to argue and I let it wash over me. Once out of the tent, we are rewarded with the earliest rays of the sun whilst fumbling with crampons and tent poles. North faces aren't all bad.

For Lebedikhin, a metallurgist, the fumbling takes longer. His crampons—like all his gear except his boots—are home made. His early model Koflachs are worn into a smooth ovoid without a trace of a welt and he ties his crampons on with meticulous care. The other tent is moving now and soon seven of us are folding tents and coiling ropes on the narrow ledge.

To our left and slightly upward, we can see the start of the sérac walls which threaten most of the north face and which have hitherto deterred others. Our line of ascent has taken us through a crucial weakness in the rock band just to the right of the fall line of the séracs and has proved to be remarkably safe. Yesterday, we encountered the hardest climbing so far on the steep, mixed ramp which forms the characteristic 7 shape where it meets a snow ledge. This morning, Yefimov is already leading out, traversing tentatively in the direction of the séracs. He fixes the rope at the far end of the pitch and I follow with the help of a Jümar, trailing another rope. When I reach him, he leads on the new rope, fixing that one in turn. The last pair recovers the ropes, passes them forward in the chain. We are climbing as a team of seven on a continuously advancing conveyor belt of four ropes, leaving the crucial anchors behind for the descent.

Alongside the séracs, we ascend to a tongue of ice which eases back onto the enormous summit snowfields. We leave our helmets behind at this point with my ice hammer and some spare hardware. The snow is deep at first and we stop to brew up some tea. Soon it is my turn to break trail.

I tie onto one end of our rope and Yefimov onto the other, but our two companions just clip on at ten-meter intervals. At first encounter, this rope management practice on glaciers and snow slopes tends to alarm Western alpinists. The "beads on the string" in the middle appear to be unable to play any part in arresting a fall by the leader. With care it can, however, be a useful technique in certain circumstances. Besides, I had resolved to follow Russian

PLATE 7

Photo by Sergei Yefimov

**Rick Allen on Difficult Slabs beneath
the Rock Wall on DHAULAGIRI.**



practices. Copied, unfamiliar rope techniques and imperfect communication skills sometimes leave me with nothing but a combination of my own bad habits and theirs, but most of the time things go remarkably smoothly.

The surface of the snow is extraordinarily variegated, knee-deep powder changing abruptly into crusty windslab and then a few tantalizing steps of firm névé. I slow my pace right down and settle into a breathing rhythm that I can sustain, zigzagging methodically up the slope.

By mid-afternoon we are at 7850 meters and Yefimov and I confer about a tent site. I suggest heading for the lee of some rocks to the right, but Sergei is keen to avoid having the tents crushed by windblown snow packing in behind them and chooses a fairly exposed spot.

There is no uncertainty in the direction of this expedition. Yefimov will listen to advice and opinion, then form his own judgment. That is policy. His strength and technical skills enable him to lead from the front and he is outspoken in his criticism of those who fail to live up to his own high standards. However, his high-mountain record is less impressive than it could be because he has often allowed others priority in making summit bids. Warts and all, he is the most outstanding expedition leader with whom I have ever climbed.

Six days earlier when nine of us set out from Base Camp on the Myagdi Glacier, there was no question but that we were all part of the summit team. At 7300 meters, one of the two Georgian climbers had a bad night, and the following morning he was helped down by his companion. They had clearly been more comfortable with the tradition of climbing as a pair. If I had a Western companion with me, I would inevitably be less of the team and one of a pair. However, I had deliberately chosen the total interdependence of the large team. This is a different way of mountaineering.

In this context, the big tents, petrol stoves, bags of potatoes and pressure cookers all play an effective part, and the rope techniques are unquestionably efficient. Deficiencies in items of clothing and equipment or individual weakness or setbacks of any kind can be accommodated more easily in this situation than amongst a pair of climbers who have pared weight down to the last gram. The ethos tends to run counter to our own highly prized individualism. It explains the powerful record of Soviet teams in the Himalaya in the last decade which typically has enabled a large number of climbers to summit. It probably also contributed to the occasional massive tragedies which have overtaken parties in the Pamirs.

Back in our tents at 7850 meters, the pressure cooker is full of potatoes, onions, cabbage and garlic, and we open a couple of cans of tuna fish. There is no distinction between high-altitude food and base-camp food, except that the climbing team gets priority when supplies run low! At the prearranged time of eight P.M., we call the doctor and my wife at Base Camp and reset the alarm for an early start in the morning.

The following day, May 11, the summit of Dhaulagiri was reached by Sergei Yefimov, Valeri Pershin, Sergei Bogomolov, Alexei Lebedikhin, Boris Sedusov, Ivan Plotnikov and the author, completing the first ascent of the north face.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Dhaulagiri Himal, Nepal.

NEW ROUTE: Dhaulagiri, 8167 meters, 26,795 feet, via the Direct North Face, May 11, 1993 (Sergei Yefimov, leader, Valeri Pershin, Sergei Bogomolov, Alexei Lebedikhin, Boris Sedusov, Ivan Plotnikov, *Russians*, and Rick Allen, *British*.)

PLATE 8

Photo by Sergei Yefimov

North Face of DHAULAGIRI.