Shisha Pangma, My Fourteenth 8000er

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SHISHA PANGMA was the last 8000-meter peak to be climbed. In 1964, it was ascended by a huge Chinese expedition with 60 members. For many years, Shisha Pangma remained only a dream for foreigners, principally for political reasons. Paradoxically, this mountain is the 8000er closest in a straight airline to Kathmandu, the town from which most Himalayan expeditions set out for the mountains. The Shisha Pangma massif would be the easiest to reach if there were no political frontier. Europeans were active here finally in 1980. The first expedition was led by Dr. Manfred Abelein and the summit was reached on May 7, 1980 by Michael Dacher, Wolfgang Schaffert, Günter Sturm and Fritz Zintl and on May 12 by Manfred Sturm and Sigi Hupfauer. It seems that the expedition achieved not only the summit, its sports goal, but also scored a considerable diplomatic and organizational success. Then, a great number of expeditions set out for Shisha Pangma, but surprisingly, the peak was attacked only by the first-ascent route. Doug Scott was the only one who broke this rule when in 1982 he climbed a new route on the south face with a small team. For Poles, this mountain was out of reach for a much longer time, first for political reasons and then due to cost barriers.

Shisha Pangma attracted me because of its aura of the unknown. In 1983, I had already planned with Wojciech Kurtyka to make an illegal excursion across the border to climb the northwest ridge. But climbing seasons passed and many events took place in my life when other dreams could be realized. When in 1987, I finally came to the foot of the mountain, I stood below the goal that had drawn me for so long. At the same time, I was exceptionally nervous, facing my last 8000er.

A whole year had passed since I began to struggle for permission to organize the expedition to Shisha Pangma. At first, the Chinese Mountaineering Association granted me the period from November 10 to December 15, 1986. What a date! Neither summer nor winter! I took this proposal simply as a diplomatic refusal. I expressed deep thanks for their goodwill and asked them to change the
Plate 9

Photo by Jerzy Kukuczka

The North Face of SHISHA PANGMA. Yebokangal is in front of peak. ——— = West Ridge; ——— = Central Couloir; --- = normal route.
date for the period before the monsoon. Successive answers were unfortunately negative. It was necessary to visit Beijing. Janusz Majer and I prepared for the visit. I packed my jacket, necktie, white shirt and some arguments. We arrived on May 26, 1987. The talks lasted for one week. On our departure, the President of the Chinese Mountaineering Association, Shi Zhan-Chun, said to us, “You are the first expedition from a Communist country to which a permission has been granted.” We did not know how to interpret this favoritism.

At the beginning of August, 1987, all members came to Kathmandu. The expedition was really international. Its participants were Poles Wanda Rutkiewicz, Artur Hajzer, Dr. Lech Korniszewski, Janusz Majer, Ryszard Warecki and I as leader, Mexicans Elsa Avila and Carlos Carsolio, Frenchwomen Christine de Colombel and Małgorzata Bilczewska-Fromenty, Englishman Alan Hinkes, Ecuadorian Ramiro Navarrete and American Steve Untch. With 13 persons, I worried a bit. I didn’t know if the number would be lucky or unlucky for us, all the more as we had already encountered unexpectedly serious obstacles. Miraculously, we had been given permission to transport our gear through Nepal. Then we discovered that the usually convenient road through the pass at Kodari to Tibet had been cut in many places by monsoon rains. Also, the porters’ fees were exceptionally high. The unexpected expense considerably reduced the funds of the expedition. And then, having arrived at Base Camp, Janusz Majer suffered acute symptoms of high-altitude sickness. Carrying him on a stretcher, hastily improvised from a pair of skis, and supplying him with bottled oxygen, we moved down.

The climbing activity finally began on August 28. A day before setting out for the mountain, we held a serious council of war. We were a large enough group to field a football team, but too big to climb the mountain alpine-style. My proposal was to divide into small teams that could work independently. The mountain was, of course, very big and wide enough to climb by a number of different routes, depending on the skills and wishes of the members. Our ladies, Wanda Rutkiewicz, Christine de Colombel, Małgorzata Bilczewska-Fromenty and Elsa Avila, and also Ramiro Navarrete, Ryszard Warecki and Carlos Carsolio, chose the normal route. Alan Hinkes and Steve Untch wanted to climb the central couloir of the north face. Artur Hajzer and I decided to climb the northwest ridge.

The next morning, we left Base Camp, ascending on skis. Never before had I done that in the high mountains, but at once I liked it. Our first bivouac was at the site of traditional Camp I at 6400 meters. This trip was made mainly for acclimatization. We wanted to go as far as possible this time and to attack the summit during a second assault. The massif of Yebokangal (7365 meters, 24,163 feet), parallel to the north face of Shisha Pangma and divided from it by a corridor on the north, seemed a good goal.

The next morning, as I was heating water, I suddenly heard an ominous murmur and then a noisy bang. Artur and I looked at each other and burst out of the tent. I grabbed a single boot and in socks began to sprint. A huge white cloud, an avalanche, was headed for us. Within seconds we were far away, but
we halted for lack of breath. The white monster had stopped a hundred meters above the tent.

After breakfast, we set out. In the afternoon, we placed a second camp on the normal route at the end of the corridor. From here we studied the route to Yebokangal. It is strange that this easily accessible summit had not yet been climbed. Doubtless its gigantic neighbor was guilty for that. All climbers look so intently at Shisha Pangma that they see nothing else. Fortunately, the peak was not too far. What pleasure to know that nothing could stop us from setting foot on the untrammeled snow of the virgin summit. It was an excellent spot to scan Shisha Pangma. For a long time we studied the formations on the northwest ridge, our main goal. That same day we skied back down to Base Camp. We planned a two-day rest there.

Let me describe normal Base Camp life. Every day someone different was cook. One day French dishes were served. The next day Mexican food was sampled. Also Polish specialties were cooked. Every chef wished to prepare his or her finest national course. But wishes were not always accompanied by the skills.

While we rested at Base Camp, the weather began to change. A characteristic halo formed around the sun, foretelling bad weather, but the sky was still cloudless. Artur Hajzer and I decided to set out up the mountain the next morning. Our rucksacks were packed and the alarm clock set for four A.M. That night, as is usual before an assault, I was anxious, but at last I fell asleep. I dreamed of Tadek Piotrowski and once again relived the tragedy on K2. After the alarm went off, I peeped out of the tent. The halo around the sun was even greater than the day before. To go or not to go—that is the question! Artur’s reaction was to go. “The weather has been the same for several days and I hope it won’t change. And it’s not snowing.”

We set out. At 6400 meters we met Steve Unch and Alan Hinkes, returning. They had ascended 200 meters higher but decided to go back, not feeling properly prepared. They descended to Base Camp. That same day we reached 6800 meters to the bottom of the ridge and pitched the tent. Clouds and fog followed us in. It began to snow when supper was ready and in the night a strong wind arose. In the morning it was more of the same. We saw that we should have stayed at Base Camp. If the idea had occurred to me that Steve and Alan had quit for lack of determination, I was doubtless wrong; they were the wise old foxes. We waited all day to see what the morrow would bring, but the next day the fog was thick. We ate dinner that night in Base Camp: my favorite Polish dish, knuckle.

The days passed. It snowed every day. No one talked of anything but weather. After three weeks, the planned date for the end of the expedition came closer and closer. Most of the food had been eaten. We also knew that there was not enough kerosene. Moreover, the Frenchwomen had taken possession of the kitchen and I was forced to eat a snail salad! Finally, we decided to ask for a week’s extension. A letter was written and sent to our liaison officer, who had
Plate 10.

Photo by Jerzy Kukuczka

SHISHA PANGMA from Yebokangal. Main Summit lies on skyline left of black pyramid. Central Couloir rise straight up from left center to between Central and West Summits, which here appear higher. Upper West Ridge on right skyline.
stayed at the old Chinese Base Camp at 4900 meters, together with our official cook.

The sun shone again on September 14. In the afternoon, we rushed to prepare our packs. I was worried that if we all set out at one time, Camp I would be terribly overcrowded. Only Janusz Majer and Małgorzata Bilczewska-Fromenty, who were sick, were staying with the doctor at Base Camp. Artur Hajzer and I climbed past Camp I to our bivouac site at 6800 meters. It took us a lot of time to dig out the tent from under heavy snow. Before completing our job, we caught sight of two tiny silhouettes climbing steadily up the corridor toward Camp II. They were our ladies, but not all of them, only Elsa Avila and Wanda Rutkiewicz. They were worried that the weather could change and that they might lack one day to climb the mountain. But why was Christine de Colombel left in Camp I?

The next day, Artur roused me with breakfast prepared. In a short time we were ready to set out. Before us was a long, rugged ridge. The skis had to be left. At first, the route was fairly easy, but because of deep snow, the climbing became unpleasant, especially with a 25-kilogram rucksack at high altitude. Fortunately, the tedious post-holing gave way to the first difficult rock band, where pitons and nuts had to be used. Soon, we again wallowed through knee-deep snow. Slowly, step by step, we moved up to a very steep part of the ridge. Just below it, we pitched our bivouac tent. As we dug the tent platform, Artur muttered, “Damn the climbing where the best tool is a shovel!”

The day after, we argued about the route. I favored the ridge crest directly upward. Artur was aghast and added, “The first hundred meters will take two days. I can see snowfields on the southern side of the ridge.”

“But where will they end? And what about avalanches?” I finally agreed to try Artur’s route if he would lead where we had to plow through bottomless powder snow. If his route failed, I would have to lead the difficult rock bands on the ridge. We did make it through the snowfields. Our bivouac was at 7900 meters.

The next part of the route looked very difficult. Above our heads, we saw rugged and extremely steep rock covered with a thick layer of fresh snow. We started up risky climbing, balancing between cornices, making exposed traverses, doing hard mixed climbing, crossing steep deep snow that threatened to avalanche and climbing rock slabs covered with deep snow without good bite for our crampons. We crossed over the west summit, which had never been reached before.

Suddenly, from the sky above, came a cry, “Jurek!” Was it an hallucination? Artur was at least fifty meters below me. On the central summit, I saw three silhouettes. They were Carlos Carsolio, Elsa Avila and Wanda Rutkiewicz, who had climbed there by the normal route. We reached easier terrain covered with deep, loose snow. Once again we had to plow on. With fresh strength, Artur led on and the proximity of the top drew us upward. Nothing could have stopped us. The middle summit was quickly reached. There was hardly room for us all. Aside from the three we had already seen, Ramiro Navarrete and Ryszard
Warecki greeted us. There were also Swiss Alfred Meyer and Germans Otto Huber, Klaus Solbach and Peter Blank from Stefan Wörner’s expedition. I had never seen so many people at such an altitude. Only several hundred meters of easy ridge were left to reach the main (eastern) summit. But the Germans and Swiss turned back from there, not continuing to the main peak. It was late. They were worried about an unplanned bivouac.

The members of our expedition hurried toward the main summit. Following our friends, I took two steps and, suddenly, a cornice broke under my legs. My ice axe worked like a parachute but luckily at the last minute I managed to jam it into hard snow. My guardian angel had saved me once again. When I got to the summit, the others had started to run down. Artur and I were not in a hurry. We had our tent. From the top, we admired the sunset. Below, the lower mountains lay in the dark. In the west, we could see Manaslu, to whose summit we had so recently climbed, and its prominent west ridge. In spite of extreme fatigue, it dawned on me that I had climbed my fourteenth 8000er at the end of eight years of wandering in the Himalaya. I couldn’t jump for joy. I sat motionless, gasping like a fish out of water, looking intently at the sunset. The next day I descended down the normal route on skis brought here by Rysiek Warecki.

That same day, Steve Untch and Alan Hinkes got to the summit, climbing another new route, the central couloir of the north face. I will let Steve Untch tell their story: “Alan Hinkes and I had previously placed our highest tent at 6850 meters. When the weather finally broke, we were in luck as it improved to perfect and up we went. Al and I stayed at Camp I to dig the tents out after everyone else took off for their Camp II because they were afraid the weather would deteriorate again. The following day, we moved up to our highest tent. The next morning, we were up early, but after only a short distance I suffered severely from cold feet and so returned and hung out all day, eating and drinking. Everyone else had moved up on their prospective routes. No one knew for sure that we were going to attempt the north-face couloir.

“The following morning, the third back on the mountain, we took off and climbed to 7620 meters. We spent the day postholing in snow over rock up to the knees in places. We chose to follow the extreme right of the gully to avoid the possibility of an avalanche. In bivy sacks, we spent a relatively comfortable night except for the constant spindrift. It is easy to smother in a bivy sack when you can hardly breathe anyway. The next morning we were under way at nine o’clock. I was feeling very strong and so I led most of the day, wallowing in 50° to 55° snow and up short sections of hard pack. At 4:30 P.M., we arrived at the summit ridge between the west and central summits. We melted snow for tea. We discovered Jerzy’s and Artur’s footprints leading to the central summit. We then had to climb using the “if you fall south, I’ll jump north” belay system as the ridge was narrow. The crux was a section of rock that had to be traversed under a cornice. After a few rope-lengths of this, we came upon easy ground with spectacular views of the north as well as the south wall. The central summit is 60 feet (19 meters) shy of the true top and so after a kilometer and a half of easy
ridge walking, we arrived on the main summit at 6:15 P.M. The sun was setting for great photos of the Himalaya.

“We took our glory and sponsor shots and started down the Chinese route. We slogged down roped for 3000 feet. Our last thousand feet were glissading in total darkness down the footprints of the normal-route climbers. We discovered at Camp II a tent left for us by the others and a radio. That was when I found I had frostbite. I had felt no pain transition and left my feet frozen so as not to incur further damage when I trundled down to Base Camp the next day. We packed up the entire camp and carried enormous loads down to Camp I, which to our surprise was still up. We collapsed three tents, rolled up all remaining equipment in a rainfly and dragged it down Denali-style between us to the edge of the glacier. Upon arrival at Base Camp, Jerzy Kukuczka gave us a warm welcome before the night’s celebration.”

Our expedition pioneered two new routes. Nine members had reached the summit. Elsa Avila was the first from Latin America to climb Shisha Pangma and at 23 years, she was the youngest woman. Ramiro Navarrete made an altitude record for his country. Wanda Rutkiewicz had climbed her fourth 8000er, the most for any woman. Furthermore, we had ascended virgin Yebokangal and the unclimbed west summit of Shisha Pangma (7966 meters, 26,136 feet). All members of the expedition returned home safely and in good health. Could it be better?

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Jugal Himal, Tibet.

ASCENTS: Yebokangal, 7365 meters, 24,163 feet, First Ascent, from the corridor north of Shisha Pangma, August 29, 1987 (Hajzer, Kukuczka).

Shisha Pangma, 8027 meters, 26,336 feet, New Route via the Northwest Ridge over the virgin West Summit, September 18, 1987 (Hajzer, Kukuczka); New Route via the couloir on the North Face, September 19, 1987 (Hinkes, Untch); via the Normal Route, September 18, 1987 (Avila, Carso­lio, Navarrete, Rutkiewicz, Warecki).

PERSONNEL: Jerzy Kukuczka, leader; Artur Hajzer, Dr. Lech Korniszewski, Janusz Majer, Wanda Rutkiewicz, Ryszard Warecki, Polish; Elsa Avila, Carlos Carso­lio, Mexicans; Christine de Colombel, Małgorzata Bilczewska-Froment, French; Alan Hinkes, British; Steven Untch, American; Ramiro Navarrete, Ecuadorian.

(Editor’s Note. The altitudes given are different from those previously used. They are from the latest Chinese map published in 1987.)