

# Cholatse from the West

ANDREW SELTERS



OUR CHOLATSE CLIMB proved to me the value of setting ambitions high enough to make life interesting but modest enough to let life in general remain the truer goal. We had no illusions about an ultimate climb, but we knew that Cholatse was a beautiful mountain with an unclimbed face—a face with some steepness, but one that rises to modest heights by Himalayan standards. It seemed to be one we could have fun on. Surprisingly, we were right. I think we found something a bit unusual in the ambition-dominated world of Himalayan climbing, because the adventure, camaraderie and exhilaration recalled for us why we ever started climbing.

We were Greg Collins, Robert Parker (S.P.), Tom Walter and I. With S.P.'s wife, Sue Irwin, and a cook, helper and sirdar, we set up Base Camp on October 3 at 15,500 feet below Cholatse's west face. Two days later, a snowstorm ushered in the chilly but perfect weather of the early winter season. In the afternoon of October 7, the four of us took off for the prominent rib just right of the center of the west face.

On the 8th, we worked across the broken glacier below the mountain proper. Cutting over to the glacier's west edge and then back to the face, we found an approach that was surprisingly safe and moderate. Below an ice wall at 17,700 feet, we scoured out a bivouac and readied four days' supplies. The next morning, we cruised up 50° styrofoam, although bands of fairly good gneiss caused us to do some belaying. As the rib narrowed, we came to a few pitches of hard 65° ice, and then a bench. We were happy with our good clip, but apparently there was a price. S.P. collapsed in a heap and started retching. We had all felt strong at Base Camp, but it was only a week since we had reached 14,000 feet and now we were working hard at nearly 19,000 feet. Tom and Greg had no appetite either.

So, we took a rest day. Thankfully, S.P. stabilized but still couldn't climb on. Greg, Tom and I started up confidently for the top, carrying almost no bivy gear. We climbed more steep ice. Then we struggled with rotten snow mushrooms along the rib's narrowest backbone. More ice and another vertical step led us to easy ground southeast below the summit. Unfortunately, heavy snow lay a couple of feet deep here. We gasped heavily. After dumping some gear, we gave a mighty posthole effort to reach what we thought would be the final ice headwall.

Tom led onto the summit ridge, but our euphoria popped when we saw our goal lurking what seemed a good distance and at least two steep pitches higher.



PLATE II

*Photo by Andrew Sellers*

**CHOLATSE from the West.**  
Northwest Ridge on left. Western Rib  
diagonals up from the right.

PLATE 12

*Photo by Andrew Selters*

**On the final sections of CHOLATSE's  
Northwest Ridge.**



It was late. With only one rope, no bivy gear and only partially acclimatized, we couldn't risk a high, open bivouac. We turned around. Later, Tom and I found out that our sense of scale was askew; a 10-minute walk and a 60-foot pitch of steep snow would have gotten us to the top.

Back in Base Camp, our unquestioned unity fell apart. Greg wasn't sure if he wanted to go up again. S.P. would go down to make sure he was fully recovered. I wanted to climb back up the same route, feeling that a more conservative strategy would certainly get us to the top. Tom wanted to go up the wild-looking northwest ridge, a long, spiny stegosaur. Tom was one of my first climbing companions. I will always remember his anxiously grabbing the 5.9 leads twelve years ago while I was still getting used to exposure. After many years apart, we still had a respect for each other and fond memories of climbing together. By suggesting the northeast ridge, he held to taking the energetic, optimistic initiative.

After four days of eyeing the ridge, I had carefully sized up Tom's plans and ended up going with them. On the 16th, we loaded four or five days of supplies and scrambled up to the 18,000-foot notch at the base of the spine. There, we could clear away only a tiny sleeping ledge.

The first taste of the ridge disappointed us with splintered, unstable rock. On every lead we cleared away blocks and shards, some of which set off rock slides that must have alarmed Base Camp. Sometimes we could opt for snow, but this was usually sugary powder that somehow managed to cling to the atrociously steep north-facing rock. Just as we'd get fed up with sustained awful climbing, we would come across firm, Teton-like rock, bathed in the sun, and we would look across to Everest or Menlungtse and giggle with assurance that the world is magical beyond belief.

Before we knew it we were in alpenglow. Luckily, we found the first conceivable bivouac, a tiny mushroom which we could level out. After a good sleep and with improved rock the next day, we rappelled off the last crag into a notch where we could start up the snow-and-ice headwall of the stegosaur's middle vertebrae. The perfect 65° ice was a joy, and the steep powder sections were taxing but not overwhelming. When at sunset we flopped onto a low-angle snowfield, we eyed the summit in excited confidence. The worrisome gargoyles along the final cervical spine looked reasonable.

Late the next morning, I ran out the last headwall pitch. On the first gargoyle, I probed and plowed but found nothing but fluff—nothing worth setting an anchor in. Hovering above the knife-edge loomed tiers of bulging, nightmarish mushrooms, doubtless of the same airy foam—an Alaskan-style terror worse than our worst expectations. Could we get over it? But how desperately tedious it would be to reverse our two-and-a-half days of ridge climbing! Our only security came by climbing on the opposite side of the ridge from the belayer. We often stabbed into our armpits with our tools, clambering our way up vertical to overhanging powder. Was there really any ridge there?

After a couple of pitches, we came to a huge flat spot. Though it was only one o'clock, we discussed a bivouac. I wanted to dig a womb, curl into fetal rest



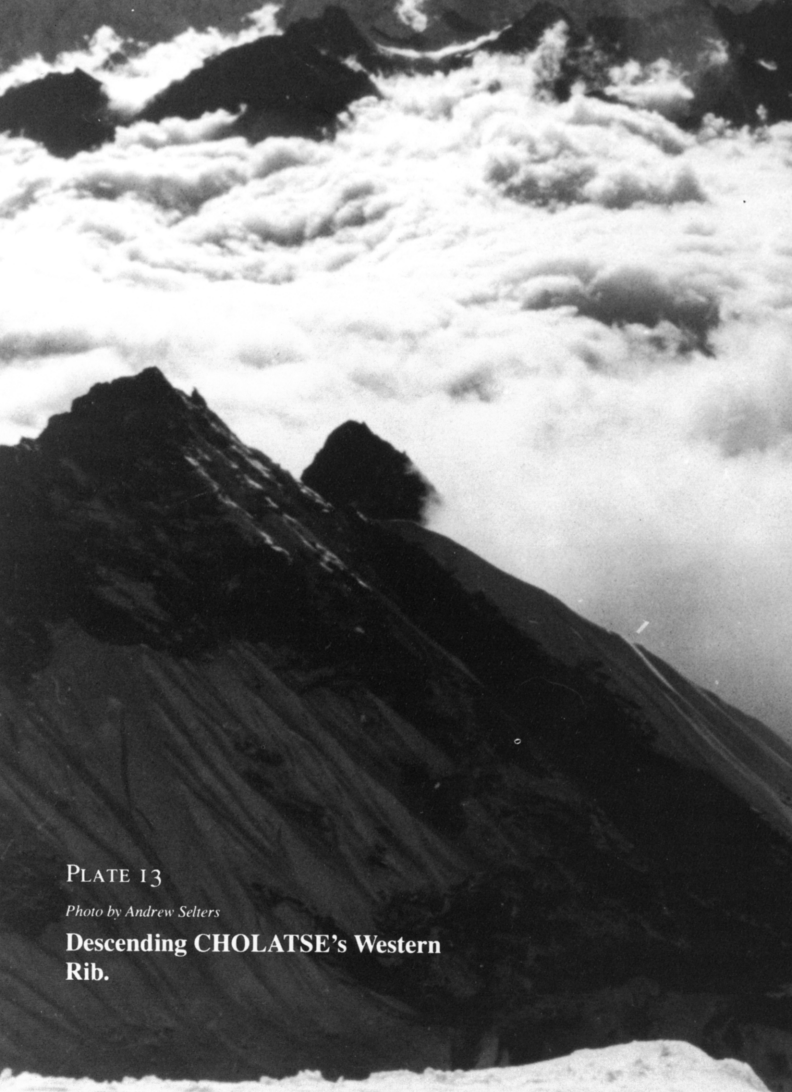


PLATE 13

*Photo by Andrew Selters*

**Descending CHOLATSE's Western  
Rib.**



and put off what was left of the nerve-wracking mushrooms for another day. Tom was tempted but wisely voiced that our steady one-step-at-a-time caution would get us through. Let nightfall bring us our rest, not fear over what still was to be done.

Tom agreed to lead all the last few pitches, but I ended up taking my share. As we reached the last, steepest vertebra, we struck ice, wonderful styrofoam ice! Tom plunked up this gently overhanging bulge. Then, I reached the most terrifying mushrooms yet. With my butt perched well over the sheer 6000-foot-high northwest face on the last bulge, the rope ran out. Tom and I swam with our bodies and fates inexorably linked until we flopped onto the expansive summit plateau.

We snoozed barely warm through our fourth open bivouac and waited for the late morning sun before climbing our 37th pitch to the summit.

Only minutes after descending toward our west-rib route, we came to the picket that nine days before we had rappelled off with Greg. Suddenly life was familiar and we made our way to Base Camp, savoring a delicious fatigue.

Greg and S.P. decided they would try to flash the west rib. On October 22, they left Base Camp and by the afternoon they reached a perfect bivouac at 19,500 feet, right below the narrow mushroom section. But S.P. again felt his stomach rebel. Because of his unexplained nausea, they retreated, disappointed but satisfied in knowing they'd done what they could and having experienced most of the climb.

What do I remember about climbing Cholatse? I think it is mostly that we trusted our wits on a beautiful mountain, stuck with them through confidence and despair, and found new realms of the magic that mountains can bring to our lives.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Khumbu Subsection, Mahalangur Himal, Nepal.

NEW ROUTES: Cholatse, 6440 meters, 21,128 feet, West Rib attempt to within 30 meters from the summit, October 7 to 10, 1988 (Collins, Selters, Walter).

Cholatse, Northwest Ridge to the Summit, October 16 to 19, 1988 (Selters, Walter).

PERSONNEL: Andrew Selters, leader, Greg Collins, Robert Staveley-Parker, Thomas Walter.