New Routes, Cho Oyu and Shisha Pangma

WOJCIECH KURTYKA, Klub Wysokogórski, Kraków, Poland

The Virgin Southwest Face of Cho Oyu and the central couloir of the south face of Shisha Pangma were the objectives of Swiss Jean Troillet, Erhard Loretan and me. Both rise 2000 meters from their bases and 2500 meters from their Base Camps.

On August 24, we entered Tibet from Nepal via Kodari and on the 25th arrived by jeep and truck at the place the Chinese call Base Camp near the abandoned village of Kyetrak. On August 27, we started our short, two-day approach to the usual Base Camp with yaks carrying 16 loads. The southwest face of Cho Oyu is easily accessible from the traditional Base Camp on the Tibetan side, but it is hidden from view there by the Polish west ridge. On the 28th, we set up our Base Camp to the south at 5700 meters just opposite the Nangpa La and across the Gyabrak Glacier. These four days from Kathmandu were the most dangerous part of the trip. At Base Camp, we discovered some of our loads had been smartly and professionally looted by the Tibetan yak drivers, who pretended to be our best friends. Worse, Jean fell ill for a short time, but luckily his strong body recovered quickly.

The weather for the first month was still affected by the monsoon with afternoon snowstorms and occasional night or morning clearing. We hardly had a chance to locate our wall and inspect it visually. On September 7, we made a poor-weather, rapid, one-day acclimatization trip to 7000 meters on the normal route. After spending the night there, we descended to Base Camp. We planned to climb the face in a non-stop, single-night-and-day ascent, hoping for a night clearing and not too dangerous snowfall the next day.

On September 19, all three of us set out from Base Camp at eleven A.M. and in three hours reached the base of the wall. There we stopped in the expected snow shower for a couple of hours to have a meal and to rest. We carried only 30 meters of double 7mm rope, a couple of pitons and nuts, and a gas stove. Aside from ice tools, personal gear included small bivouac sacks, 200 or 300 grams of sweets, head lamps and spare socks and gloves. During the night hours, we climbed the easy lower gully. In the middle we faced a dangerous snow slide against which it was hard to stand, hanging onto our ice tools. Toward midnight, the snow flurries stopped and the moonless sky cleared. Just before dawn, we
got to the first serious obstacle, a very steep snow-and-rock barrier, furrowed by 60° snow gullies. In the early morning, after traversing an airy knife-edge and attacking another short rock barrier (UIAA IV), we ascended connected snowfields, locked in by rock. Toward midday, we climbed the last major obstacle, a rock band (UIAA IV) that gave access to a slanting snowfield that finally emerged on the southwest ridge 100 meters below the summit. Below the summit ridge in the evening light lay all the Khumbu and Base Camp areas carpeted with thick black clouds.

At dusk, still 50 meters from the top, we decided to bivouac in a cozy nest under a boulder at 8150 meters rather than to roam in the dark around the huge summit plateau in search of the descent route. The night was surprisingly warm; or was it that I was sandwiched between Erhard and Jean? The next morning, September 21, it took us a half an hour to reach the top at 8:30. At six P.M., we had descended the normal route to Base Camp for dinner with a friendly Italian-Spanish expedition. They had had 15 centimeters of fresh snow and were distressed by endless waiting for good weather.

Cho Oyu had presented many obstacles, but when we turned to Shisha Pangma we felt we were in a friendly land. We arrived at Nyalam on September 27 just as the rain stopped. On the 28th, we set out with three yaks toward the south Base Camp, a region I knew well from my visit there with my wife Halinka in October of 1987 and from Doug Scott’s photographs. In the morning hours of September 29, we set up Base Camp at a peaceful lake at 5400 meters. The weather was perfect and the moon was about to be full. Moss and dry grass gave comfort and big boulders sheltered us from the wind. The face appeared to be in perfect condition.

After a rest day, at nine A.M. on October 2 we set out for the foot of the face, which we reached at 2:30 P.M. We decided to reduce even more our scanty equipment, leaving behind all bivouac gear and even our harnesses. We took only 30 meters of 7mm rope and 4 pitons. We had no food except four candy bars and a bottle of drink apiece. We started at six o’clock when the last rays of the sun were striking the upper wall. Shortly after midnight, we took a wrong branch of the couloir but quickly regained the proper line. In the morning hours, we approached the summit ridge. The two Swiss reached the central summit at ten A.M. on October 3 after 16 hours of climbing, but I made some miscalculations. I had lagged behind and could not see the way they went. I abandoned the couloir and took what looked like a risky shortcut through the rock wall to the right. This proved too difficult and I got only a few tens of meters before I headed back into the couloir, having wasted two more hours. There I met Jean and Erhard descending. I climbed lonely and sad and reached the central summit in a strong wind only at four P.M. At dusk, I had descended to 7800 meters, though the Swiss had reached the bottom of the couloir before dark.

I planned to rest for two or three hours till the moon came out, but I was very sleepy and the night was pleasantly warm. I slept well all the night long sitting comfortably in my snow armchair. The next day, extremely dehydrated, I descended to the foot of the wall. This couloir, which lies to the left of the
Yugoslav line, is the shortest and quickest line to an 8000er. It goes directly to the central summit on snow which is usually about 45° and rarely exceeds 50°.

Summary of Statistics:

Area: Tibet.

New Routes: Cho Oyu, 8201 meters, 26,906 feet, via Southwest Face, September 20, 1990 (whole party).

Shisha Pangma, Central Summit, 8008 meters, 26,274 feet, via South Face to the left of the Yugoslav route, October 3, 1990 (whole party).

Personnel: Wojciech Kurtyka, Polish, Erhard Loretan and Jean Troillet, Swiss.