

The Himalaya

Observations from the roof of the world

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translated by Ana Perčič

From its inception, alpinism has gone through different periods of development. Various factors influenced that development; in the beginning, they were knowledge about mountains, equipment, and the accessibility of an area. An essential element of alpinism has always been exploration. From the first, mountains have been explored, but at almost the same time exploration became a discovery of human boundaries. Furthermore, alpinism has always been, at least in its extreme realizations, an adventure; taking up an ascent is to some extent still a risk. That being said, situations in alpinism are unpredictable, and having to deal with uncertainties as they arise remains its basic allure. Economic factors have also been important, as is particularly the case today.

Reviewing climbs that took place in distinct periods, one is able to define a central course of development from which some events inevitably deviate. The more remote in time the events, the easier it is to analyze and classify them. Consequently, though they may be of the same importance, some events bear more emphasis and some less in each review. In the last few years, with media globalization, it has become evident that the importance of single events may be strongly influenced by media notoriety. Without sufficient media support, an ascent might pass quite unnoticed, regardless of how good or important it is.

I have been active in the Himalaya for a quarter of a century. Before I look back, I would like to describe the current state of affairs in alpinism. The most distinctive characteristic of the present time is the proliferation of commercial expeditions. Lately, among the phenomena that restrain the development of alpinism, this encumbrance has replaced the "collecting" of 8000ers at any price. Most commercial ascents aim for Mt. Everest and other, easily approachable peaks, spending a lion's share of money earmarked for alpinism in the process. In addition, there are a handful of individuals who try to make some money with their fame and media-supported ascents in the Himalaya. Mostly carried out in alpine style, these ascents are often not as good as presented by the press. Since they cannot afford to fail in their attempts, the climbers find different ways to facilitate the ascents. (Examples of this phenomenon are two of the ascents nominated for the 2001 Piolet d'Or. On Kangtega, Valeri Babanov equipped the first part of his route with fixed ropes and did not reach the summit. The winners, Thomas Huber and Iwan Wolf, fixed extensive ropes on a route on Shivling that was climbed alpine-style in 1981. However, the media can present these achievements ignoring such stylistic compromises.)

Next, there are some alpinists in the classical sense of the word. Having a high technical knowledge and true adventurous spirit, they discover less-explored areas and faces, where they accomplish quality ascents that are important for the development of alpinism. Teams coalesce on the basis of friendship, with less sponsorship money and larger self-imposed contributions. They have responsibility to no one but themselves; therefore, their way of climbing is often purer and open to the inspiration of momentary circumstances.

Expeditions of national character, climbing in the classical Himalayan style, have become extremely rare. Fortunately, there are many alpinists with an investigative spirit who believe that exploring unfamiliar mountain areas is more important than the technical difficulty of ascents. Every year, some expeditions are devoted to this sort of exploration, but all one can learn about them are a few details from the specialized alpinist magazines. In this field, the British and the Japanese definitely have done the best. From World War II on, brave individuals who seized the opportunity during explorations have made many ascents in the Himalaya in an enviably pure, almost completely alpine style.

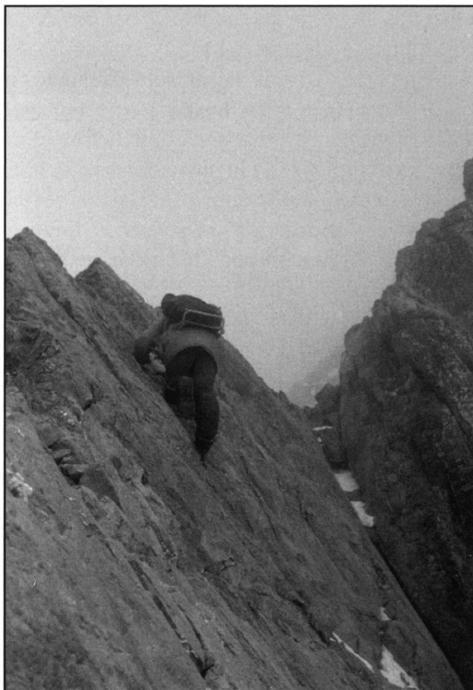
When the competition for the first ascents of the highest peaks of the world began, it was strongly nationally colored and as a result appropriately supported financially. The expeditions had to be successful at any cost; any technical means were provided to achieve the goals.

In the 1970s, similar nationalism happened on the first great Himalayan faces. In 1975, I missed the first successful Slovenian expedition to the south face of Makalu. (Though it would be accurate to say "Yugoslav" until 1990, when the former Yugoslavia broke up, I use the term

"Slovenian," as all expedition members until 1990 were almost exclusively Slovenian; the only important exception was Stipe Božić, a Croat.) The same year, the British climbed the southwest face of Everest; five years earlier, they had climbed the south face of Annapurna. All ascents were carried out in classic expedition style and almost all with the help of supplementary oxygen. These expeditions set an example for many that followed in the next few years.

Slovenians climbed the west ridge of Everest in 1979, and we were one good-weather day short of the summit on the south face of Lhotse in 1981. On this same face, Soviet alpinists succeeded in a similar style in 1990, but via a much more demanding route; the collective spirit imparted to them by the Soviet political system enabled them to deal with quite a number of difficult Himalayan faces. Nevertheless, all these ascents required an individual approach to the very top, so that the success of an expedition actually depended on the success of a single rope party.

I remember the ascent from Camp V (8150m) to the top of Everest in 1979, as well as the descent down the Hornbein Couloir to Camp IV, as one of my hardest Himalayan ascents. A completely unknown west ridge toward the top, great technical difficulties, heavy rucksacks



Nejc Zaplotnik at 8700 meters on the last step beneath the summit on the first ascent of Everest's West Ridge in 1979. The last pitch of fixed rope was in the chimney at ca. 8250 meters. Two other pitches (in the so-called "gray step") were belayed at ca. 8400 meters.

ANDREJ ŠTREMELJ

(14 kilos alone for the two steel oxygen containers), bad weather, and complete uncertainty regarding the descent: all these were characteristics of the most difficult alpine ascent. Nejc Zaplotnik and I were alone from Camp V on; nobody could have helped us. The Messner brothers must have felt the same on Nanga Parbat in 1970, or Scott and Haston on Everest in 1975. It was only a matter of time before climbers from such a rope party would dare to risk an ascent of an 8000er in pure alpine style, climbing independently from the bottom to the top.

It is no wonder Reinhold Messner was the pioneer of this style, since he had numerous experiences with living on the edge. Innovation and a delicate feeling for the mountains, which he acquired through his extensive mountain activity, led him to the famous 1975 ascent of Hidden Peak with Peter Habeler via the Northwest Face, the first time an 8000er was climbed alpine style. He and Habeler had set an example of pure alpine style for summits 8000 meters and below, and in so doing established the cornerstone for alpine style in the Himalaya. Later, many alpinists tried to imitate them, but only a few ascents were executed so purely.

By pure, I also refer to purity in the psychological sense. To execute such a pure ascent on Hidden Peak is now practically impossible during the high season, because the presence of other expeditions on the mountain deprives the experience of the sense of loneliness and of uncertainty. Another mitigating factor is the amount of fixed rope present on some routes (for example, the Abruzzi Ridge route on K2), or abandoned camps, which can be found on frequently visited mountains.

When I matured as an alpinist in the Himalaya, I did not lean on Messner's cornerstone. The conditions in Slovenia were specific to Slovenia. In the 1970s it was almost impossible to organize an expedition consisting of friends to an 8000er, and to get a chance to participate in the well-organized state expeditions required too much effort. I climbed my first 8000er (Hidden Peak) with Nejc Zaplotnik, who at the time had some experience from the south face of Makalu, in a semi-alpine style. From Camp III (7200m), we kept ascending in a world completely unknown to us. We pitched a tent at 7500 meters, and the next day proceeded toward the top. Later my energy was stymied by two big expeditions to Everest and Lhotse, but I also gained valuable experience at great altitude in a safe manner on these trips.

The idea of purer climbing came again after some time, while I was visiting the Pamir in 1983. Because of an international camp, the mountains around Peak Communism were more intensely besieged than any in the Himalaya. In a rope of three (with Iztok Tomazin and Srečo Rehberger), I managed to climb the Bezzubkin Pillar on the north face of Peak Communism in a "pure" alpine style—"pure" because we were truly alone only for two days on the steepest part of the face, and we had radio contact with the leaders in Base Camp, where the rescue team and helicopter were on alert. I also tried to acclimatize by ascending the neighboring peaks, first a 5000er, then a 6000er, and last a quick ascent of Korzhnevskaya Peak (7150m)—a "multipeak expedition," as Doug Scott would call it.

In the 1980s, many excellent alpinists tried each in their own way to climb in the Himalaya in a pure style. The generation of alpinists that distinguished themselves by "big-wall climbing" on the faces of the lower (ca. 6000m) Himalayan peaks and who gained experience at altitude in a relatively safe way had done a number of good ascents of 8000ers. Unfortunately, moving the limits higher and higher took its death toll among the very best (Alex MacIntyre, Pierre Beghin, Miroslav Svetičič, Jerzy Kukuczka). The seriousness of alpine-style climbing on the highest summits was revealed. This generation climbed in the Himalaya incessantly until the end of the century and so brought alpine style to such extremes that the future will require a twist in psychology in order to enable even greater deeds and



Robert Schauer in deteriorating weather on day 3 (ca. 7400m) of the alpine-style ascent of the west face of Gasherbrum IV. The weather continued to worsen, eventually becoming a two-day storm. VOYTEK KURTYKA

more difficult routes to be done.

On the other hand, the 1980s also brought a competition for the 8000ers. Messner was the first to clearly and loudly express this idea. It was not bad in the beginning, although later it became a great impediment to the development of alpinism. The collectors, especially those after Messner and Kukuczka, chose the normal routes (there are exceptions, such as Poland's Kryztof Wielicki). With great media support, they created an atmosphere wherein sponsors were not at all interested in peaks lower than 8000 meters, regardless of how demanding the routes were. Clearly, any ascent of an 8000er is a great feat, but using a normal route has not been considered a supreme achievement for a long time. "Collecting" oriented alpinism more toward quantity, persistence, and the determination to take part in expeditions two to three times a year than toward quality.

Frequent visits to the Himalaya require a lot of perseverance, while at the same time they enable quicker acclimatization and better knowledge of one's body at great heights. In between frequent visits to the Himalaya, one cannot prepare well enough for a difficult ascent, which nowadays requires specific physical preparation, more and more similar to the training of a sport climber.

A consistent characteristic of daring alpine-style ascents is an intense psychological pressure that exhausts the climber completely. After such an ascent, climbers are often not capable of performing an ascent of that difficulty again for several years, or perhaps ever.

The most beautiful example of such a daring ascent is that of Robert Schauer and Voytek Kurtyka on the west face of Gasherbrum IV in 1985. This jewel among alpine-style ascents was carried out ahead of its time. Great problems, bad protection, the high altitude of the mountain, a descent via an unfamiliar route—all this contributes to the climb's outstanding

value. Its only flaw is that the main peak was not reached. One of the important features of the ascent was the near impossibility of an escape after a certain point in the climbing, which must have been very stressful. If a team wants to survive on such an ascent, it simply has to climb all the way up and return down by a different route. This can be a very strong motivation, but it can also quickly turn into insurmountable troubles in the case of bad weather or health problems (as happened to Miroslav Svetičič, who disappeared while trying to solo a new route on the same face in 1995). In the ten years that the Piolet d'Or has been awarded, Schauer and Kurtyka probably could have won the award on many occasions had their climb been one of the nominees. To contemporary climbers, such a demanding ascent represents an obstacle rather than encouragement, as there is little chance of anybody exceeding it.

Another issue is that only a few prominent objectives are known to the public. In the 1990s, many ascents involved technically more demanding faces and lower peaks; nevertheless, they have in a way been safer. They have the advantages of better protection, a possibility of descent in the event of sudden difficulties, typically shorter routes or at least with difficulties concentrated in shorter parts, larger teams, and a modified alpine style (capsule-style, or the route partially fixed in the lower part).

The exceptional nature of GIV and similar ascents is also proved by the fact that such a level of achievement is hard to repeat even for the performers themselves. Schauer, for instance, has done no other significant ascents since, whereas Kurtyka has made no ascents as remarkable or important. Something similar happened to the Catalanian party of Nil Bohigas and Enric Lucas who managed a new route in alpine style on the south face of Annapurna in 1984. An interesting sidelight: both of these ascents did not draw media attention, but were noticed only by a narrow circle of alpinists.

In order to list the cases where alpinists exhausted themselves completely after an extraordinary ascent, I would probably need to know some of the greatest alpinists in person. One alpinist who did not exhaust himself is Doug Scott, whose series of ascents is truly fantastic. Even after a bad accident on the Ogre, he returned almost immediately to the Himalayan scene and has continued ever since to make great ascents in alpine and semi-alpine style with little equipment and no altitude porters.

In my own Himalayan career, I managed my first truly alpine-style ascent in 1989, when, with Pavle Kozjek, I climbed the south face of Shishapangma in three days. Prior to this, Kozjek, Stane Belak, Srauf, Filip Bence, and I had made the first ascent of Nyanang Ri in the same way. Well acclimatized, Pavle and I had no major problems on Shishapangma apart from very strong wind and deep cold on the first day. Base Camp was rather far, so we started from ABC beneath the face. ABC had been established because, as an expedition of several teams, we had planned some other ascents on this face. But we were alone on the face and we descended down an obscure ridge to the saddle below Pung Ri. Climbing this route, I acquired useful experience for later ascents.

Agility is crucial with alpine-style climbing. Sometimes it is better to sacrifice some safety in exchange for speed. Therefore, how difficult an ascent a rope party is capable of climbing in alpine style depends on the extent to which they are in command of the situation without belaying. I think that alpine-style climbing in this regard has not yet reached its extreme.

I consider our Shishapangma ascent a pure alpine-style ascent. Still, it was not an ascent that would stand out in its time, nor an ascent that would deprive me of energy for the next few years. It was simply a very successful ascent. Pavle and I were members of a larger expedition, which is important. Loneliness during such an ascent, like that experienced by Kurtyka and Kukuczka on the Gasherbrums in 1983, for instance, results in greater stress.

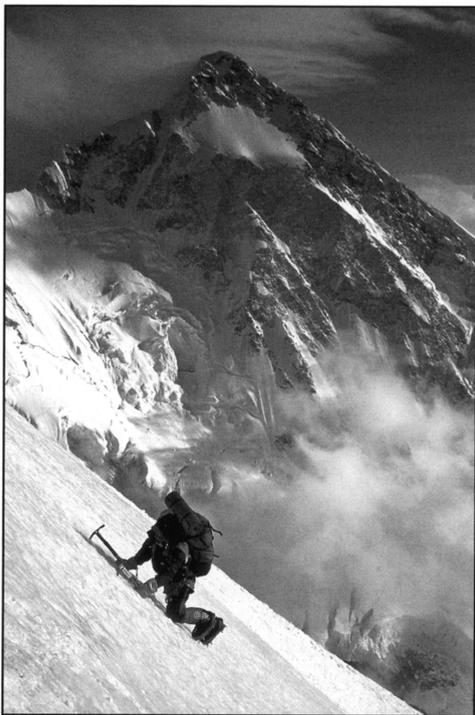
Later, I experienced loneliness myself on Menlungtse in 1992. Together with Marko Prezelj and our doctor, we were isolated, four days' walk from the nearest people, without radio contact, and in every aspect dependent on ourselves alone. There are many other climbs at the same level as ours of Shishapangma, including two more routes on the same face (Jones-MacIntyre-Scott, 1982, and Kurtyka-Loretan-Troillet, 1990). These were done in the same style, as was the 1990 Kurtyka-Loretan-Troillet ascent of the west face of Cho Oyu. These ascents resemble that of Hidden Peak in 1975, the only difference being that Messner and Habeler were the first and had to face additional psychological pressure.

Something completely different was my 1991 ascent with Marko Prezelj of the South Summit of Kangchenjunga*. The idea occurred during the Shishapangma expedition two years before. I lived for this idea for two years. I wished for the ascent and throughout the expedition was determined to make it. Such strong motivation is very important for success.

We began the ascent alone from BC. In the morning, the leader and the expedition doctor helped us carry some equipment to the base of the climb. In the first part we belayed only three pitches. I could compare the difficulties with those of the *Supercouloir* on Mont Blanc de Tacul. A storm during the night dropped 15 centimeters of snow. The third day we left the south ridge due to fierce wind and avoided a part of the ridge by climbing up the southwest face. The last part of the route, in proximity to the Russian Route, was very demanding. When ascending, the Russians used fixed ropes, the remains of which we found on the face. We climbed mostly unroped, except for a short passage where we symbolically belayed with a piece of their fixed rope.

Though we climbed in an area that had been climbed in before, we did not know it. Also, we did not expect such difficulties. Having surmounted them, we realized that the ascent route was too demanding to descend without a rope. We had to descend a different route. We lost our rucksack, sleeping bags, and the cooker, as we had left them below the summit on our way up. Descending, we found old Polish ropes, but the second part of the descent led us across unexplored ground to the plateau. Here a friend, who happened to be in a camp that night on Kangch's normal route, helped us, giving us directions over the radio until the batteries finally died.

That we were members of a large Slovenian expedition, that from this point the route was



Marko Prezelj at 7000 meters on day 2 of Kangchenjunga's southwest ridge in 1991.

ANDREJ ŠTREMFLJ

*This climb won the inaugural Piolet d'Or award in 1991.—Ed.

marked, and that in an emergency help was available, were the only—and not unimportant—deviations from the pure alpine style as embodied by Kurtyka and Schauer on GIV. I believe that we would have managed the ascent without all this, but the psychological relief it provided cannot be denied. On the other hand, the ascent stands out as exceptional due to the high altitude of the peak.

How strong was my motivation for that climb becomes clear if I compare it with my second ascent of Everest, which I did with my wife, Marija, the year before, via the normal South Col-Southeast Ridge route. I wanted to climb without supplementary oxygen. In the morning of our summit bid, however, I worried about frostbite because of the strong wind, so I started using oxygen. The motivation was gone, and I reached the peak of Everest with much more difficulty than I would a year later on Kangch after five days of arduous climbing without the use of supplementary oxygen. At the end of that climb, I found myself wondering why the top was not another 100 meters higher, since I walked with such “ease”!

After the Kangchenjunga ascent, neither Marko nor I were capable of doing anything similar. We had an opportunity to go to the west face of K2 two years later, but we had no real zeal. Such an ascent as ours of Kangchenjunga simply exhausts you for a couple of years. Our first ascent of Menlungtse the following year cannot compare with it, although I remember the Menlungtse climb as one of the most beautiful Himalayan ascents executed in pure alpine style. Together with our 1999 ascent of the north face of Gyachung Kang, it belongs to the category of ascents where choosing the objective plays an important role. It is not easy to find a face that has not been climbed yet, a “hidden” or forgotten peak that offers a good alpine ascent.

Here I would like to bring up the phenomenon of Tomo Česen. Whether people believe him or not, Česen was very influential in the early 1990s. Before the discussion about the evidence concerning his ascents, the majority of climbers believed his words, and the series of his achievements powerfully influenced the development of alpinism. He had gained high altitude experience by participating in great expeditions. Technically, he grew up in Slovenia in the Julian Alps, and matured in the Dolomites and on the high faces of the Alps. All the time he knew exactly what he wanted, and directed all his forces toward the final goal. With his success on the north face of Kumbhakarna (Jannu) in 1989, he shocked the alpine world. He prepared well for the effort, physically and mentally, and was able to stake everything on his speed. Only his friends, especially those from the first period when he was not yet climbing alone, can attest to the strength of his character. He had imitators in Slovenia and must have had them abroad, too.

Slavko Svetičič followed Česen most closely. Svetičič’s 1990 ascent of the west face of Annapurna is one that is hardly remembered. In three days, he climbed the majestic face alone in pure alpine style; his route was partly original. The weather prevented him from going to the top after he had already climbed the major problems. He descended along the unfamiliar north face. The primary difference between Svetičič and Česen was that Česen knew when to cease the dangerous game of solo ascents and Svetičič did not. Česen was aware that Lhotse had exhausted him and that he would not be able to do another ascent of its kind. So he stopped, because he has never been satisfied with little things in life.

What happened after the notorious Lhotse affair is not important here. It does, though, highlight the question of trust: When do we still credit someone’s words? Big sponsor money and ascents of extreme difficulty require reliable evidence. In the future, climbers whose achievements reach ahead of their time will have to be careful about such evidence.

Alpine-style ascents do have some limitations. With 8000ers, especially the highest ones, the greatest disadvantage is the limited possibility of staying for a long time at high altitude



Marko Prezelj on the summit of Menlungtse on the first ascent. In the background left is Cho Oyu; to the right is Everest. ANDREJ ŠTREMFEJ

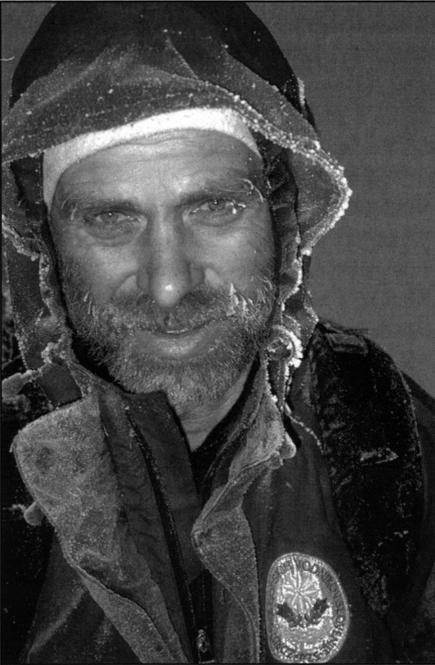
without supplementary oxygen. Another disadvantage is the difficulty of climbing, particularly on rock, because in severe cold it is barely possible to climb long rock sections without gloves. You cannot get far climbing in gloves. Some very demanding faces were for this reason climbed in a brilliant semi-alpine style (for example, the 1997 Russian ascent of the west face of Makalu) with partial fixing of the lower part of the route, little gear, and no altitude porters. These ascents may be a step closer to pure, even more demanding alpine ascents. The future generations will push the limits of difficulty even higher. Usually the limits are first expanded on the lower peaks, and then transferred to the higher mountains. Improvements in training and changes in climbers' minds are the necessary companions of development.

In the end, I would like to mention the last great alpine-style ascent. Tomaž Humar climbed the south face of Dhaulagiri in 1999 alone. Undoubtedly, this was an exceptional act of an exceptional alpinist. The occasion seems to give rise to two questions. To what degree is an ascent worth the risk? Let me rephrase: To what extent does risk in the form of exposure to greater and greater objective danger seemingly increase the difficulty of ascent—and in this way also increase its market value? The second question regards the objectivity of the reporting of an ascent when it is under pressure from the media and sponsors. Tomaž proclaimed his climb to be the first ascent of the face, although the first ascent was performed almost 18 years before by his Himalayan mentor, Stane Belak Šrauf. Both routes end at the same spot, and at this spot, right below the top, the same decision was made due to the necessity of circumstances. Both Humar and the Slovenian team relinquished the summit in exchange for their lives.

The 1981 ascent is another example of a climb known only to the narrow circle of experts. Viewing them in time, the ascent of Belak and his friends on one hand, and the ascent of

Tomaž on the other, carry approximately the same weight on the scales of history.

Each ascent in the Himalaya influences ascents that follow. Each ascent is something that the ascensionists themselves and then other climbers learn from. The best ascents are a cause for radical changes, above all in mentality, which is from my point of view the basis for progress in alpinism. The influence of an individual ascent depends largely on media attention or support. Most outstanding ascents have been done by alpinists who gradually discovered their true selves in the Himalaya and performed their ascents based mostly on their experience. There is no recipe to follow. One can only imitate the basic principle, the frame. But each climber alone adds the important details, usually on the spot when they make crucial decisions. The higher the decisions are made, the more affected they are by the lack of oxygen, the more they can turn out to be fatal. Therefore, those who can adjust to high altitude well have an advantage. This cannot be learned or imparted; this is something with which you are born.



Andrej Štremfelj. MARKO PREZELJ

Andrej Štremfelj was born in Kranj in the former Yugoslavia in 1956, where he has lived all his life, and where he has worked for the last 16 years as a physical education teacher. He and his wife, Marija, have three children, Katarina (21), Anže (18) and Neza (3). He started to climb in 1972 and in 1982 he became a mountain guide. All together, he has done over 1,500 climbing tours around the world. He has climbed several new routes in the Slovenian Alps and made many important ascents there, especially in winter. Among his 13 expeditions to the Himalaya were new routes climbed in expedition style on Hidden Peak (West Ridge, 1977) and Mt. Everest (West Ridge, 1979), and alpine-style new routes on Dhaulagiri (East Face, 1985), Shishapangma (South Face, 1989), Kangchenjunga (Southwest Ridge to South Summit, 1991), and Gyachung Kang (North Face, 1999). He also made the first ascent of Menlungtse alpine-style with Marko Prezelj in 1992.