Completing a dream, two climbers finally reach the summit of the “secret mountain” of East Tibet.

CARLOS BUHLER

To begin with it was a dream: a season, a place, a mountain, and a team. We were lucky climbers: those whose privilege it would be to attempt to scale this peak lost in the vastness of the Eastern Tibet highlands. The Nyainqentanglha Mountains, a range I couldn’t even pronounce, lay somewhere north of the main Himalaya, somewhere very few Tibetans had been to, to say nothing of foreigners. This was an area so cut off from Lhasa that no one in the capital even knew if the roads to reach it were passable. The mountain itself had likely been seen by less than 20 climbers in all history. To our knowledge, only Christian Bonington and Charlie Clarke’s 1996, 1997, and 1998 teams had ever attempted to climb the mysterious peak named Sepu Kangri.

We chose the season: autumn, 2002—four years since Bonington’s last attempt. Obviously, this was not a very popular place. Not even for Tibetans. Only seven families live permanently

The then-virgin 6,956-meter summit of Sepu Kangri, as viewed from Sepu lake. Carlos Buhler
on the exquisitely beautiful shores of Sam Tso Taring, the lake beneath the mountain’s daunting north face. Seven families and a hermit, Sam Ten Tsokpu. High above Sam Tso Taring, perched on the crest of an ancient terminal moraine with a magnificent view of Sepu’s lake-filled valley and the stunning peaks to the west and north, this Tibetan monk lives in physical isolation from the world. As far as we know, he never comes down, not even to the shores of the lake.

TO LHASA

What a change since I first experienced the calm and spiritual city of Lhasa in 1983! Then I had been part of the American team on the Kangshung Face of Everest. Now it’s 2002, and before me is a modern city. I am overwhelmed by bustling streets full of business people in suits, phone booths packed with families in traditional Tibetan costume, cars careening through tight passageways not intended for automobiles, and fancy cosmetics sold by pretty girls in modern department stores to Chinese newcomers trying to save their pale skin from the high-altitude sun’s intense rays. It is too much for me at first; I can’t accept these cataclysmic changes. The Potala Palace has become to Lhasa what Disneyland is to San Diego, or the Eiffel Tower is to Paris: a tourist attraction engulfed in a modern city. It is a tribute to the Tibetans that any semblance of a once powerful and graceful religion known as Tibetan Buddhism can still be seen in Lhasa.

Still, such a modern city enables us to assemble an expedition kitchen not so different from one in Alaska. Though there are some unfamiliar squirmy, slimy things in the covered
food markets of Lhasa, generally speaking, the assortment of tempting products is enormous and fresh. How sadly simple it is under the modern Chinese mandate.

TO SAM TSO TARING BASE CAMP

On September 9, we (Mark Newcomb, expedition leader, from Jackson Hole, Wyoming; Carina Ostberg, Mark’s wife; Jordan Campbell, from Moab, Utah; Ace Kvale and Kate Clayton, both from Ophir, Colorado; and myself from Bozeman, Montana) climb into two modern Toyota SUV’s and a large Chinese truck for three days of transport across continuously worsening roads into the heart of Eastern Tibet. This grinding, bumpy, bone-bruising drive defines our entry into an almost lost Tibetan culture; it’s a time machine of distance from Chinese influence that takes us back through the tragic events of the last 50 years. We pass through the wild west towns of Nakchu, Diru, and Khinda, then endure a 20-kilometer “4-wheel-drive only” track into the heart of the Nyainqentanglha range to the village of Samda, about 14,000 feet above sea level.

An enjoyable seven-hour hike brings us to the spot, at about 15,500 feet, where Clarke and Bonington’s team based their two serious attempts on Sepu Kangri, in 1997 and 1998. We are within shouting distance from four family homes we recognize from photographs in Bonington and Clarke’s book, Tibet’s Secret Mountain: The Triumph of Sepu Kangri. Somewhat shy at first, the inhabitants turn out to be warm-hearted and friendly. It’s been four years since they’ve seen a Westerner here (the British groups were likely the only Westerners they’d encountered unless on pilgrimage to Lhasa), and not much appears to have changed. Within a few days of our arrival we are invited for tea, chapattis, and a most delicious cup of thick, fresh yogurt with sugar. At first we are wary of this completely raw food served out of hand-hewn wooden buckets with yak hairs pasted on the rim. But soon our defenses relax, and we set up a good bartering system that supplies us with daily deliveries of creamy yogurt.

ONTO THE MOUNTAIN

We see immediately how humid post monsoon weather behaves in our area—and why the glaciers are so large. The mountain is uncovered from cloud on very few complete days. With full winter cold expected near the middle of October, I find myself constantly calculating the time we have remaining, knowing that a storm could easily take a week out of our climbing schedule.

On Sept 18, we establish a camp at about 17,700 feet on the ridge where the British have obviously toiled to build tent platforms. We bring up ski touring boots, skis and skins, and the gear we’ll need above. For now, the snow conditions above seem reasonable. After ascending 1,000 feet of snow slopes, Mark, Carina, and I manage to fix 200 feet of rope up a steep corner formed between the glacier serac on the left and rock on the right. This tricky access past the serac solves the problem of how to reach the upper Thong Wuk Glacier. The next day, all seven of us climb back to this point with skis on our rucksacks. From here, we don our skis and for 40 minutes cut across some unnerving side slopes above ice cliffs until we reach the 19,200-foot crest of this ridge, just before it drops 300 feet and joins the upper Thong Wuk Glacier.
By mid day, nasty storm clouds are closing in on us from the south. We bury our gear in the snow and descend to BC. For the next six days we wait for this storm cycle to end, spending many enjoyable hours interacting with our Tibetan friends and reading.

TO HIGH CAMP

On the 29th of September, five of us make the climb back up to Camp One. Mark and Carina, anxious to climb, have gone up two days before. The deep, fresh snow slows us significantly. The idea that is gathering in popularity is to attempt to summit on this, our second reconnaissance. On September 30, we carry more gear and food to the little cache we have buried on the ridge crest. Skiing down to where our ridge links with the upper Thong Wuk, we place our tents at about 19,000 feet, below a 40-foot serac in a sheltered snow bowl out of the wind.

During the afternoon, while others are organizing the camp, Mark and I ski up into the ice fall. Aware that this obstacle is difficult to calculate from below, we test its defenses repeatedly but are always stopped by crevasses. In the late afternoon we make an end run completely around the right of the icefall and find a way through to 20,100 feet. We are rewarded with our first view of Sepu’s final slopes. Fantastic! We eagerly study the mountain’s final defenses. Great walls of ice seracs and dreadfully prone avalanche slopes meet our eyes. When I return to our camp I am wary of the days ahead. Both tired and hungry, I must replenish my reserves. In camp, however, our morale is high. Our first glimpse of the final route is energizing. Though the last 2,000 feet is clearly dangerous, we agree that it is surmountable.

Unfortunately, Carina becomes sick the following night, and by morning of Oct 1, she is dehydrated and depleted. Mark would like to take her all the way to BC, but we need him for the summit attempt. Finally, he decides to accompany her down as far as the fixed rope and will remain in contact with her via walkie talkie. He’ll then catch up as we ski the three kilometers to our top camp, at almost 21,000 feet. What a blessing the skis are! We quickly cover terrain that without skis would consume exhausting hours in knee-deep snow. True to the weather patterns, however, threatening clouds fill the skies to the west. With unwelcome thoughts of the frustration of the two Brits who turned back in a storm, we pray to have 24 hours before another blizzard rolls in.

By late afternoon Mark has rejoined us and we six reach the snowy walls of the final cirque. Huge piles of avalanche debris lie scattered across the glacier beneath the steep summit mass of
snow and ice. Staying in the right side of the cwm and as near to the ridge on our right as we dare, we pitch our two small tents at 20,700 feet. Ace is feeling the altitude and crawls into his bag.

**Summit Day**

At 2 a.m. we are already lighting the stove. I’m groggy and lethargic, having been anxious all night. I’m preoccupied with weighing alternatives for the climb. In the night we learn from the other tent that, while Ace is feeling slightly better, Kate’s feet are not warming up. And with me, I see that Frank cannot finish his hot chocolate this morning, a bad sign. By 5:30 a.m. Mark, Jordan, and I set off up the avalanche-prone slopes toward the ridge on our right. We ascend the debris of huge slides, relieved that the slopes above us have already released. Still, I feel anxious climbing around two-foot crown-fractures revealed by the light of our headlamps.

We kick steps up easy slopes for about 600 feet until the wind pummels us, unobstructed from the south side of the ridge. Jordan is nervous about what lies above. Knowing that a third person will slow us down if we have to belay, he turns around. Before his retreat, he kindly lends me his insulated Marmot overpants, something of a life-savior in this teeth-rattling cold. Mark and I continue up in the dark, third-classing an exposed, 55-degree slope that hangs over the west face. Rays of morning light gently caress the mountain summits to our north.

We crampon up the steep bed of another huge slide path. Crossing the entire slope above us, a crown fracture looms eight or ten feet tall. We front point up the 35-degree slope beneath this behemoth of a crown, “knowing” that it could not slide again until the next significant snowfall. Mark bravely mantles onto the first level and traverses leftward to where he can just pull over the second, steeply inclined crown. I ask for the rope as clouds engulf Sepu’s summit.

By 9 a.m., as we reach a steeply guarded ridge, a blizzard has engulfed the Sepu Kangri massif. Again, I sense the frustration that Bonington’s teammates must have felt when they were turned back just 500 feet shy of their objective in 1998. Mark and I are not yet ready to call it off. We climb another steep snow slope and I belay Mark up a 20-foot near-vertical wall of unconsolidated, wind-packed snow feathers many inches thick. There is little purchase on this tense terrain, but Mark climbs confidently. I haul myself up the rope suspended from nothing more than Mark’s harness. Wind and snow sweep across the mountain, cutting visibility to 60 feet, but we’ve reached the ridge crest and the route is obvious.

We follow the narrow ridge upward about 150 feet to where it merges with open snow fields. The terrain scares us in these white-out conditions. Our rapidly filling tracks and the
compass on my Suunto wrist computer will be our only guides for the return to the ridge. The wind whips snow at our faces, stinging and blinding us. After another 300 feet of lightly ascending slope, Mark stops and waits for me. There is no more up. Are we on the summit? We brace ourselves in the wind and try to look around. The plateau appears to fall away in front of us, but we are hesitant to go poking around. A few clouds blow by, leaving a slight clearing. We glimpse shadowy drop-offs all around us. It is 10 a.m. when Mark takes out the radio and calls to Carina down in Camp One. Yes, we are on the summit; no, we can’t see a thing. Yes, we’ll be down by evening; with any luck, all the way to Camp One.

With haste, we’re retracing our steps to the ridge and descending the steep wall. Burying a small padded stove sack jammed with snow for an anchor, we rappel the steep step. Cautiously front pointing and down climbing, we strain to retrace our nearly-filled-in tracks.

The rope comes out as I front point down the exposed 55-degree slope and nearly step off an ice cliff in the whiteout. At one point we are separated and I leave my ice axe to rappel another step. It takes us four hours to reach the high camp. When we arrive at the tents, the four others are immediately ready to descend. But I need a half hour’s respite from the wind and snow before packing up.

We ski down the three-kilometer, wanded glacier, barely able see from one fluttering orange tape to the next. Yet we are eternally grateful for the skis on our feet. In an hour we glide around the giant crevasses of the ice fall. In two hours we are back in Camp 2, where we’ve left a tent and supplies. We drink hot fluids and set off toward the top of the fixed ropes. My mind is fixed on “downwards.”

By nightfall we reach our sturdy Marmot tents at Camp One. My body craves a rest, and I flop down in our tent, exhausted and dehydrated. Jordan throws a pot of snow on the stove, and a sense of happiness begins to glide over me. I’ll sleep soundly this night.

The vast Nyainqentanglha mountains stretch out for miles, both east and west of us. We have only visited the summit of one in a sea of peaks. With Sepu unclimbed, it was hard to focus much energy in the direction of the stunning adjacent peaks that just beg to be explored. But now the true gems of the range lure me toward their aura. I know we will return to this immensely beautiful landscape of endless vertical opportunities.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Nyainqentanglha Range (also spelled Nyanchen Tangla), East Tibet

ASCENT: The first ascent of Sepu Kangri, 6,956m, October 2, 2002. Summit team: Carlos Buhler and Mark Newcomb. Other team members: Jordan Campbell, Kate Clayton, Ace Kvale, and Carina Ostberg.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carlos Buhler’s climbing career spans 30 years, with major ascents on five continents, including summits of Mt. Everest via a new route on the Kangshung (east) face, K2 via the north ridge, Nanga Parbat, and a new big-wall route on the north face of Changabang. Buhler works with a number of partners in the outdoor industry, especially Marmot, Outdoor Research, Tecnica, and Tubbs.