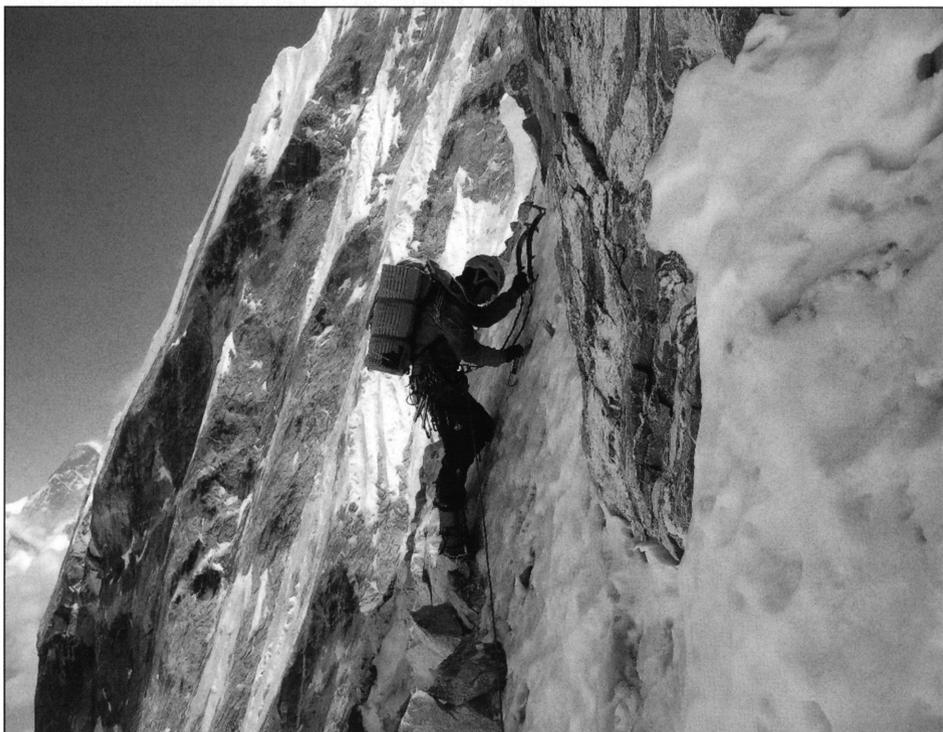


CHECKMATE

A change in strategy brings success on the northwest face of Tengkangpoche in Nepal.

UELI STECK



Simon Anthamatten leads steep ice at around 6,000m on the northwest face of Tengkangpoche. *Ueli Steck*

We had climbed light and fast, but not fast enough. On April 10, we started up Tengkangpoche's northwest face. With our meagre rack—three Camelots, six nuts, 14 pitons, and four ice screws—it was a struggle to protect the often-difficult passages of rock and mixed climbing. Each pitch was an adventure to lead. But the second climber's effort was much greater. He had to belay up to 45 minutes in the cold, and then jumar with a backpack weighing 25 kilograms—and he had to move as fast as possible to make up the lost time the leader had “wasted.”

Now, after a bivouac at 5,600 meters, we had passed 6,000 meters and we were just 250 meters below the west ridge. But the weather had changed, and we knew it would only get

worse. A storm had reached us half a day earlier than forecasted. The wind and snowfall increased, and spindrift soon grew into avalanches. Below us: a 1,400-meter wall. The choice was suddenly very simple: We had to descend. We rappelled as fast as possible, but we had to pause many times as avalanches flew overhead. The cold was hard to bear, and we had to struggle to maintain our concentration. We felt close to our limits. Finally, at 8 p.m. on April 11, we made it back to base camp.

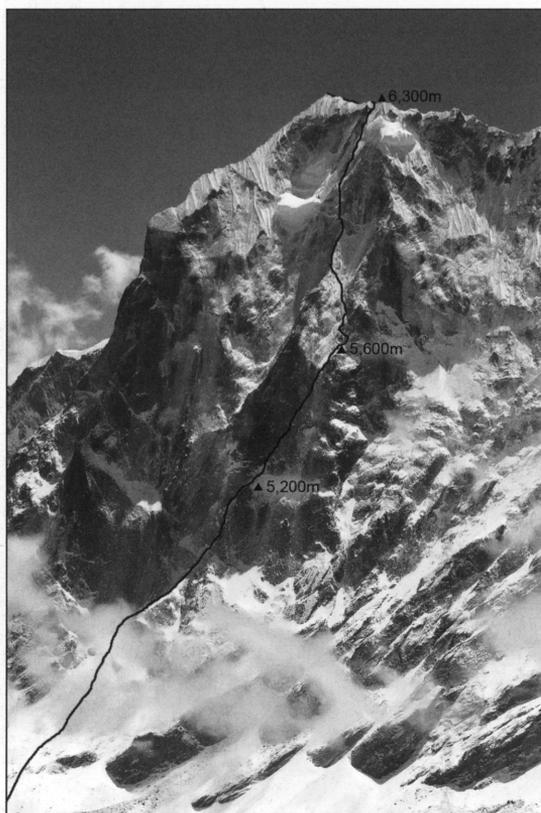


That first attempt cost us a lot of energy, and we knew we would have to change our strategy if we wanted to summit Tengkangpoche. As we recovered at base camp, checking the weather forecast and eating big meals, we carefully strategized our next moves. We decided that each of us would climb exactly the same pitches as we did during our first attempt, so we would know what to expect and would be fast and efficient. Once again, the second climber would carry the heavy backpack. But this time the pack would be even heavier: Our plan was to move a little slower and save as much energy as possible during the first two days of climbing. We would stay longer on the wall, but we would have greater reserves for the upper part.

We feasted on yak steak during a two-day holiday in Namche Bazaar, and then returned to base camp full of energy and motivation.

On April 21, we got a leisurely start at 8 a.m., after a rich breakfast and a last cup from my coffee machine. Simon led the first block up to a platform at 5,200 meters, below a large rock buttress about 1,000 meters above base camp. A small ledge offered a place to put up our single-wall tent. This would be the only good campsite on the 2,000-meter wall—an incredible luxury, as we would find in the following days.

After having something to eat, I still had work to do. It was 4:15 in the afternoon, and the first pitch above the platform was waiting for me. I had remembered this as an easy pitch, but I was wrong. I had to give it everything I had. After 50 meters the crack system came to an end, and I had to climb a blank face to reach the next crack, three meters higher, where we had left an anchor piton from the first attempt. This time the slab and its minuscule holds defied me. I



The line of Schachmatt ("Checkmate") on the northwest face of Tengkangpoche. Anthamatten and Steck climbed the ca 2,000m face in three days, and then traversed to the summit and rappelled the face on the fourth day. *Ueli Steck*

stood on the front points of my crampons and tried to hold the tiny edges with my ice tools. But as I twisted one tool the pick slipped and I fell four or five meters. I was quite angry with myself, and when I started again, although the moves weren't any easier, I concentrated fully and climbed the passage without any further accidents. I banged in another piton and fixed our rope. Simon was already back in the tent as I started to rappel.



We spent a more or less comfortable night in our tent, and the following day started at 5:30 a.m. After breakfast we put on our frozen boots, filled our backpacks, and off we went. After climbing 60 meters up the fixed rope with ascenders, Simon belayed as I continued up steep and technically demanding ground. On the third pitch I had to aid-climb eight meters with pitons before continuing with free climbing. After 240 meters it was Simon's turn. He shouldered the light backpack and all the gear, and I took over the big, heavy pack.

Simon had to fight with his pitches too, especially the last lead in his 120-meter block, a 40-meter squeeze chimney. During our first attempt, I had belayed him on this pitch for an hour and a half. From my stance, the pitch hadn't looked difficult, but because of an overhang I couldn't see what Simon was doing. He barely moved; every once in a while I fed him a little rope. It was worrisome, but I knew Simon was a very strong climber. This time I was not nervous while belaying. We were in no hurry and it didn't matter if Simon needed one or two hours to complete this tricky pitch—we would definitely reach our bivouac in daylight. I sat and relaxed at the belay while Simon climbed. It was a nice pitch to second!

At about 3 p.m. we reached our bivouac at 5,600 meters. We built a balcony of snow and ice approximately 60 centimeters wide and four meters long, and after melting snow for water to drink, we lay in a row, head to foot, in our sleeping bags and bivy sacks. We stayed tied in to the belay anchor all night. The wind howled terribly.

Luckily, I was not cold—but this is exactly what concerned me. We had intended to leave our sleeping bags at 5,600 meters and climb with lighter packs during the following days; we planned to sleep with only our bivy sacks and Primaloft-insulated pants. But the thought of bivying without a sleeping bag above 6,000 meters had me worried. I started to do the math:



Steck leads the short section of aid during the second day of climbing on the face. *Simon Anthamatten*



Steck on mixed terrain at ca 5,700m during the third day of climbing. The camera was tilted for this image and the photo on the first page of this story ("We are not very good photographers," Anthamatten apologized), but the terrain is still steep. *Simon Anthamatten*

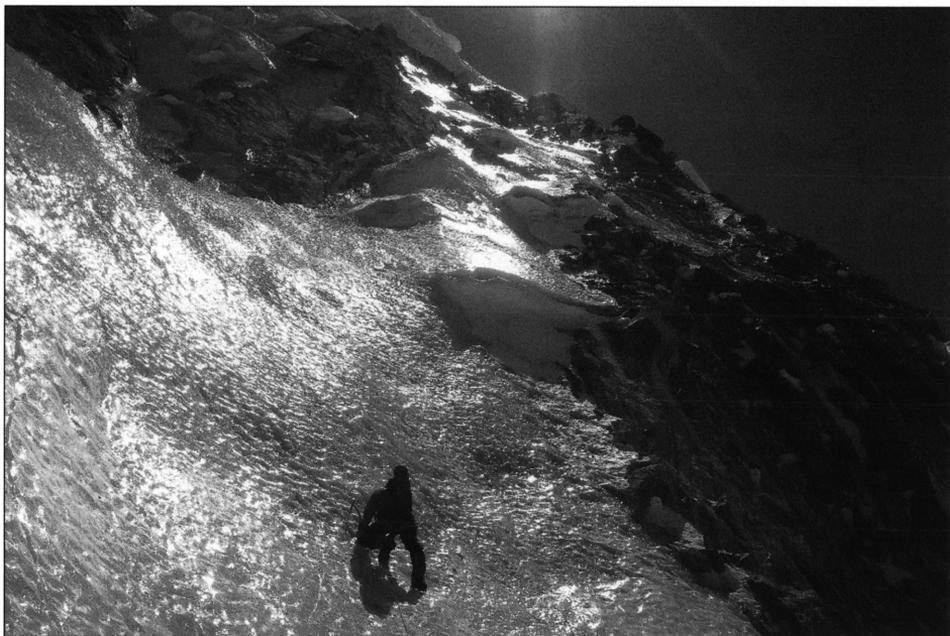
bivouac sack, 300 grams; insulated pants, approximately 450 grams; a total of 750 grams. Our Phantom 0°F sleeping bags each weighed 1,150 grams. If we left behind the bivy sacks and pants, we could each carry a sleeping bag at a cost of only 400 grams. The forecast called for just a few snowflakes. As long as we climbed until no snow was falling, we could spend a reasonably comfortable night in dry bags.

At 4:30 a.m. the alarm rang. Once more the whole ordeal with snow melting and cooking. Our breakfast was meager: Simon ate a Bounty chocolate bar; I had a muesli bar. I described my nighttime calculations to Simon. Like me, he does not like to freeze. So we packed our sleeping bags into our 30-liter backpacks, cached our bivy sacks and insulated pants, and began a long day of climbing.



It was my turn to lead. Once more we found steep and very difficult rock climbing before we reached an ice gully where we could move together with a few pieces between us, connected by a 40 meters of rope. Since we were very well acclimatized and our equipment was light, we moved fast. I ran out of gear at a big shield of ice, and Simon took over the lead. We reached the point at 6,000 meters where we had stopped almost two weeks earlier, but this time we were lucky and the weather was okay. Simon led fragile rock through a 120-meter rockband, and after one more pitch of ice we changed leads once more.

We had been climbing 10 hours, and it had started to snow. The ice was as hard as stone, and it splintered with every blow of my picks. Each placement took maximum aggressiveness and strength. This time I did not want to fail—it was our last chance, and this thought gave me the necessary energy. Blow by blow, we moved toward the ridge. My calves were burning from standing on the front points of my crampons, and I hung from my tools to rest and relieve the



Steck battles stone-hard ice at 6,250m, just below the west ridge of Teng Kangpoche. *Simon Anthamatten*

pain in my legs. The fog lifted and it stopped snowing. I looked up and saw the ridge only 30 meters higher. I belayed one last time from an ice screw, and Simon led the last pitch. At 6:30 p.m. we stood on the west ridge. What a feeling! For a complete ascent we still had to continue across the ridge to the summit, but this would have to wait for the next day. We installed our final bivouac, very happy with our decision to carry sleeping bags to 6,300 meters.

On April 24 we traversed a broken ridge of snow to reach the summit of Teng Kangpoche at 7:15 a.m. We spent the rest of the day rappelling, and we reached base camp late that evening.

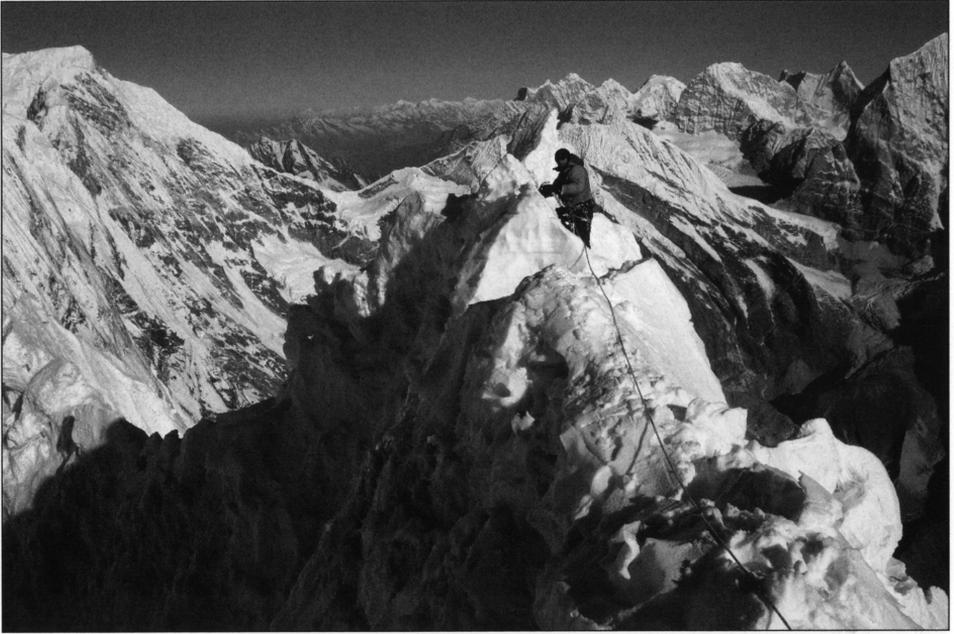
Like a chess board, the mountain's alternating patches of black rock and white ice had demanded good tactics and a touch of boldness. Our careful strategy had paid off: Checkmate!

SUMMARY:

AREA: Rolwaling Himal, Nepal

ASCENT: First complete ascent of the northwest face of 6,500m Teng Kangpoche, by the route Schachmatt or "Checkmate" (2,000m, VI A0 M7+ 85°), Simon Anthamatten and Ueli Steck, April 21-24, 2008. After a two-day attempt to 6,000m, the two climbed the wall over three days in alpine style, with no pre-established camps or caches, and no bolts. Although Teng Kangpoche had been climbed several times, the two Swiss were the first to reach the summit via its steep northern walls.

A different version of this story appeared previously in *Montagnes* No. 337.



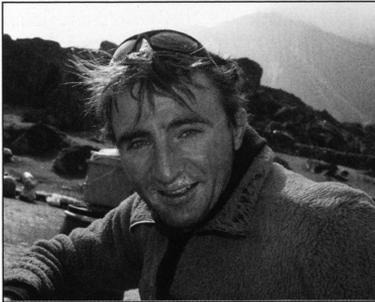
After three days on the face, Steck and Anthamatten had to climb only 200m along the west ridge to reach the 6,500m summit at 7:15 a.m. on April 24. *Simon Anthamatten*



A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ueli Steck was born in 1976 and lives near Interlaken, Switzerland. He has completed new routes in Pakistan, Nepal, Alaska, and the Alps, and during 2008 and 2009 he set speed records on the north faces of the Eiger, Grandes Jorasses, and Matterhorn.

Following their ascent of Tengkangpoche, Steck and Simon Anthamatten had planned to attempt the south face of Annapurna. However, they gave up their bid when they received a distress call from 7,400 meters on Annapurna, where Spanish climber Iñaki Ochoa de Olza was severely ill. The two responded despite inadequate equipment, deep snow, and very poor weather, and ultimately Steck climbed alone above Camp 3. Near Camp 4 he met Romanian Horia Colibasanu and helped him begin a safe descent, and then he treated the gravely sick Ochoa overnight but could not save his life. Steck then endured a dangerous descent in more than two feet of freshly fallen snow.



Simon Anthamatten (top) and Ueli Steck back at base camp. *Ueli Steck, Simon Anthamatten*