

Trip Report - First Ascents in the Himalaya

by Seth Hobby



Heading to the summit of Kyazo Ri.

After a few weeks in Kathmandu living with my Nepali family, catching up with friends and working on a few projects, I met up with my climbing partner John Kear and we headed out for the Gokyo Valley. A few days of culturally rich trekking up from the village of Lukla brought us to the village of Machhermo which was not far from our goal, Kyazo Ri. Our basecamp for the climb was just a hour and a half walk up from the village into the steep cirque formed by Machhermo Peak and Kyazo Ri.

Route: Kyazo Ri (6120m) South Ridge, V 5.9 AI 3, New Route

We approached the mountain thinking we would climb the mixed Northeast Buttress of the North Ridge. We established a high camp and then scouted our intended route by climbing a sub-peak of Machhermo which stands directly across the cirque from the Northeast Buttress. What we saw changed our minds: we recognized the route to be too contrived and in poor shape.

Kyazo Ri had only one previous ascent, and that was via the Southwest Ridge. We knew we would use this as our descent, and we wanted something different and untried. We decided to climb the South Ridge. It wasn't a big debate since John wanted to be in the sun and the rock quality looked, well, OK I guess.

We made a start on it the next day, and down low on the ridge we enjoyed climbing beautiful pitches of moderate rock. There was one large rotten rock band of shale, but once we were through that the climbing steepened-up and the rock was sharp and solid. A few aesthetic pitches of moderate mixed climbing and alpine ice brought us to a long summit ridge. That ridge was a huge pay off, with unreal views and the type of climbing that is my favorite: steep snow and ice on a sharp and exposed Himalayan Ridge.

We reached the summit after four pitches and some simul-climbing. The days are short in November in the Himalaya, so it was getting pretty close to dark when we found ourselves on the summit at around 5pm. It was great to be there, but after a very brief rest we started the never-ending descent back to camp. The prospect wasn't very exciting. We had to make a 4,500-foot steep descent to the valley floor, climb up 2,000 feet of steep, frozen "kitty litter" to the South Ridge (this was scary), then descend and traverse around to our camp which we had not so conveniently placed on the northeast side of the mountain.

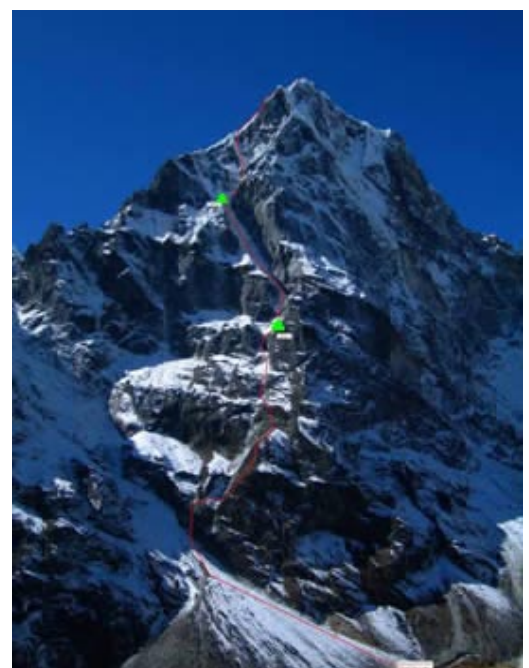
The descent was almost as much of a workout as the climb to the summit, but the whole thing was worth it without a doubt. The quality of most of the climbing was great and enjoyable, we got the second ascent of the most beautiful mountain in the upper Gokyo, and we climbed a new route up a classic Himalayan ridge.

Route: Cholatse (6440 m), "Saphire Dragon" VI M6 WI5+ New Route

Once we had Kyazo Ri in the bag, we felt like the trip was already a success, and to a large degree, the pressure was off. We took a rest day and then cruised over the Chola Pass and dropped into our base camp for Cholatse. When we arrived and gazed up at the 5000-foot wall directly above us, we both felt a clear sense of intimidation.

Our intended route was Cholatse's East-Northeast Face, an elegant line that I have scouted every year for the past three years. Having looked at it so much I felt like I knew the route's features very well, but of course this year, for the first time, it looked different than ever. We were not sure if the lower section of the route would go, so we packed up one day and climbed the first six pitches to see if we could connect up with the shiny blue ice of the upper route.

The climbing was great and the approach to the first pitch was just an hour long. We left one turf and rock pitch unclimbed between us and the blue serpent of ice that ran down the entire upper face from the Southeast Ridge and decided we could make this route go.



Our route on the E-NE Face of Cholatse.

On Oct 7th we left our base camp and began the climb. The first pitch was 200 feet of amazing blue ice - it's the kind of ice you expect to find in the Canadian Rockies (WI5). Then we jumped into three "Turf Warfare" pitches, the last being a 200-foot proud lead by John, fully trusting the frozen turf sticks with his tools and crampons (M6 R). After these grueling pitches we made it up and into sustained mixed and hard ice climbing.



Climbing shiny, bullet-hard, blue ice on Cholatse.

We climbed a few more pitches including one I led called "The Belly Crawl" which required a desperate crawl under a shallow roof then a wild step out onto thin rotten vertical ice (M5 WI5). After kicking and swinging the adze of our tools into frozen dirt and rock we prepared a small tent platform and perched our tent on a rock outcrop that gave us an amazing view of Makalu, Ama Dablam, and the entire Everest group. The next day was very difficult from the beginning, starting with a scary lead out of a cave and onto thin rotten WI5 climbing.

We ascended some 2,000 feet of pure water ice as we moved through our second day. It was really strenuous, and with the altitude added, the packs began to feel heavier with each pitch. There were a few close calls with rock fall, and I ended up getting hit in the right hand with a rock that split the skin just below the thick leather glove. Luckily it missed the bones and instead just got all meat, allowing us to continue up.

We reached our high camp around 5pm as the sun was nearing the skyline. After an hour or two of stomping and kicking a platform into the 50-degree snow slope, we jumped into our tiny tent, happy to have a safe although exposed high camp.

Our summit day proved to be very challenging! The climb was relentless. After numerous WI3 pitches and one scary vertical snow pitch, we reached what proved to be the crux of the route. The rock band separating us from the East Ridge unveiled a 140-foot M6 pitch and a 190-foot WI5+ pitch all above 20,000 feet. I somehow pulled through and made it up the M6 lead and John styled the water ice pitch, taking us up onto the East Ridge. From there we climbed six more AI 4+ "Mushroom Ridge" pitches, escaping out onto the Southeast Face when necessary.

We enjoyed a colorful sunset during the last few pitches and made the summit just as it got dark. Sitting on the top of Cholatse in the dark was a feeling I could never have imaged. It was inspiring and really scary at the same time. The voice in the back of my head was saying, "Look at what you got yourself into now."

We descended though the night and returned to our high camp after 16 difficult rappels. My feet were cold that night in the snow, but though I was aware of that, when we finally got back to the tent I was surprised to find that I had frostbite on my big toes. They felt like wood. We did all the proper rewarming that night, and by the morning the feet were back in boots and we were rappelling down to the base of the route.



Leaving high camp on day three, Cholatse.

Pasang, our cook, met us at the base of the wall with warm cheese bread and hot tea. After gorging, we schlepped our gear past the lake and back up to our base camp. My feet are OK, and I won't lose my toes, but they sure didn't look that good with blisters and black and blue as the predominant colors.



John climbing a snow mushroom on the grueling east ridge.

We hiked to the rescue clinic in the nearby village of Pheriche and got a medical evacuation request from a great doctor from Colorado. After a few days of waddling around high Sherpa villages and drinking Chang (Rice Beer), we got a quick heli flight (thank god for American Alpine Club rescue insurance) from Pangboche to Lukla where we made it a point to focus on pastries and tea as part of the initial recovery before flying on to Kathmandu.

That concludes the story of my Himalayan journey this fall. Now I'm looking forward to spending time with friends and possibly taking a break in Thailand before returning here to teach for the Khumbu Climbing School (KCS). The KCS is based out of the village of Phortse, and we train on the nearby water ice climbs that form in the winter months. I'm really looking forward to ice climbing in the Khumbu with my students. We'll be working on technical climbing skills as well as judging objective hazards as we help young Sherpas better prepare for the roles they play in the mountains here. We'd like to them to have the skills to be safer whatever the role they are taking on.

One of our main goals is to help them develop good judgment of mountain conditions and hazards so that when an expedition that is employing them asks them to do something dangerous, they will have enough background to tactfully but confidently decline or accept depending on the conditions. Asking Sherpas to do things that expedition climbers wouldn't do themselves because of the danger has been a problem over the years, and it would be great if our training can play at least a small role in changing that. At any rate, it's been a great season of climbing and I'm looking forward to a couple of winter months here working with the Sherpas before returning to Ouray, Colorado to guide and teach for AAI. Come and join me for some Ice in the Park this February! Namaste!



Seth and John on the summit of Kyazo Ri after completing the 2nd ascent of the peak via a new route.