

Feature Articles

The Long Way In

Uncertainty and Perseverance in the Western Dhaulagiri Range

by Pete Dronkers

I called this expedition Himalayan Exposure 2008, carrying on the tradition of exploratory-type endeavors in remote places. Curtis Gray, Blue Eisele, and I were to explore the northwestern Dhaulagiri Range, and we arrived in Kathmandu on April 3 after months of planning. We knew virtually nothing about the area, and after picking through countless journals and Internet resources, we had discovered only a handful of reports from northern ascents on the two main peaks of the western Dhaulagiri Range: Churen Himal (24,185 ft), and Putha Hiunchuli (23,750 ft). We expected to encounter no other teams.



Pete Dronkers treks into town, solar panel attached to his pack. *Photo by Blue Eisele*

After we met our agent, sirdar and two porters, we received our permit for Churen Himal and a briefing about the remoteness and uncertainties of that region. Our liaison officer—barely capable of such an endeavor—kindly stole \$2,000 dollars from us (more than twice the pay of our sirdar) for his “duty” and then proceeded to take a two-month vacation.

We chose to take the long way in. In terms of distance from road heads, this is the most remote portion of Nepal, and our approach was to take 15 days to reach base camp within the Kaya Khola river valley. It would involve crossing the Himalayas from south to north and into the arid, Tibet-like region that lies within the rain shadow of the Dhaulagiri

Range (Dolpo region). That was, of course, if everything went as planned. We left Pokhara for Beni by chartered bus to meet our donkeys, but the road continued to Darban (3,000 ft). On April 7, we hit the trail with six donkeys and a donkey “driver,” three climbers, and our staff: Lakpa “Junior,” Lakpa “Senior” and our trusty sirdar, Lakpa Gilje (LG). Our group’s gear and food kit weighed half a ton.

For days we traveled through villages that rarely see westerners. Children crowded our camps, which often used public school yards. Our staff cooked three meals each day, most often dal bhat and whatever canned “meats” we brought with us, plus a “local vegetable,” which LG sometimes had never seen before and in one case, simply picked from the ground without knowing what it was. Our bulky kitchen tent doubled as the sleeping quarters for the staff, all of whom traveled with marginal clothing

and equipment. They’d be up at 5 a.m. to serve tea to us at 6 a.m. sharp—no matter what.

The scale of the landscape began to register in our brains. Our first pass was 11,100 feet, and already we encountered traces of snow above rhododendron and oak forests. Tales of heavy snowpack that had blocked access for trekkers elsewhere were proving true. We left Dhorpatan three days later, uncertain if we could cross the next pass. Locals said it was impossible.

We ascended to 13,000 feet with ankle-deep snow and nothing worse. But it was becoming obvious just how demanding this approach would be. The trail would climb thousands of feet only to lose it again, and we seemed to be heading in all sorts of directions. But temporarily, at least, the

pressure was off as we strolled through forests for a few days until the next passes.

We had acquired new donkeys because the ones we hired in Darban were borderline hypothermic. LG negotiated with a family living in a stray house at 11,000 feet to hire a new driver and their donkeys, which were larger and more adapted to the cold. It was difficult to imagine that we'd be climbing mountains at some point, as it was becoming an expedition in itself to move a half ton of food and equipment and seven people across 150 miles of mountainous terrain.

Then I became seriously ill and vomited my way up the trails, but the train had to keep moving. A day later we hit the real difficulties, with 2 to 3 feet of snow leading up to a 14,500-foot pass. The donkeys struggled to keep from falling over, as they were fully loaded and punched through to their abdomen constantly. When they did, we'd run to them, unhitch the load, get them back to their feet and re-load them, but it grew late and conditions worsened. We hacked out trails to avoid a catastrophic accident on the steep slopes. From an overlook we could see our campsite, but the donkeys were beat, so we dragged our bags down one by one. It was here that we saw the only westerners we'd see in a month: two European blue sheep hunters with a staff of 20. They had covered only a few miles from the point where the helicopter dropped them off.

We left for our final pass at 15,000 feet and had more of the same problems experienced the previous day. But finally we arrived at the Barbung Khola at 8,000 feet and knew we'd have only another 6,000 to 7,000 feet before base camp. Here, things were much drier, as we were now in the rain shadow. Instead of lush forests, there were junipers, desert scrub brushes, and virtually no grass—domestic animals had eaten most of it, leaving a desperate environment.

Two days of gorgeous eastward trekking through this deep canyon brought us to the last town, called Kakkotgaon (11,500 ft), where our yaks dropped our load and turned back. It had already taken two weeks of trekking to get there. Villagers wanted us to pay for yaks and porters to go toward base camp, but we didn't, and felt we could manage with our two porters if we lightened the load. They pointed to a rocky pass as the way in, not the Kaya Khola valley we expected to follow, which turned out to be impassable. (Google Earth isn't always right.) The next day we all hauled 70-pound loads to the pass (estimated at 15,000 ft), only to find it surrounded by loose ridges and cliffs. Ahead was what we believed to be Putha Hiunchuli.

After a rest day, it was back to the grind and one more carry up to the pass. We were told that if we followed the ridge, it would end up in the river valley we were aiming for. Still unconvinced, we had no choice but to carry the rest of the kit up to the pass and put in a camp, which involved hours of stacking shale. By then, Curtis had developed a similar illness as that which churned my guts a week before. We reassured him that we'd carry loads and establish base camp without him if he needed more rest.

Earlier, Curtis explained that he had been apprehen-

sive and was struggling to keep up his psyche. I told him that I too had times when I was annoyed and wanted to be elsewhere. But I also explained that this was an adventure, and that true adventures not only are difficult physically and emotionally, but also require uncertain outcomes. I said we'd all need to build emotional (and intestinal) fortitude to keep moving ahead, but that's exactly what makes us stronger and more resilient, and what we appreciate years later. Being no stranger to big mountains or long expeditions, I knew Curtis would persevere. But the next morning he declared he was out for good, and we couldn't change his mind. When LG and Lakpa Junior arrived with more supplies and to say farewell, we let Curtis explain his wish to fly from the airstrip a few days away. We wished him luck and that was that.

Blue and I were alone now, which meant more weight for us to carry, as our porters explained they wouldn't be returning until more snow had melted, and by then we'd have already established base camp. We looked at the ridge and realized it would take a triple carry and three days to get ahead. We took a load up and cached it with nothing promising in sight. But through the patches of snow we could see a trail that the villagers had built, so there must be something beyond.

On the second carry, I pushed on a bit further than the

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A stupa in Kathmandu.

Photo by Blue Eisele

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first, and the heavenly gates opened. I yelled to Blue, but he couldn't hear me. I was finally in direct view of the northwest face of Churen Himal, with grassy, rolling foothills rather than the loose ridge we had walked twice with death-fall potential in a few places. We dropped the load where we'd pitch base camp the following day and returned to the pass.

When we returned, we had 18 days of supplies and a small assortment of climbing gear, plus one tent each and our solar array for the gadgets. We calculated the days and realized that this was the longest Himalayan approach either of us had ever heard about in modern times. It had taken 21 days to get here, and we had covered about 150 miles and perhaps 35,000 feet of ascent, encountering westerners only once.

From the pass we believed we were looking at Putha Hiunchuli, and from our new camp we could see its lower flanks. The following day we headed up some slopes to gain a better view of the east and north ridges. It was like the photos, with a long, gently sloping east ridge, and we figured we could climb it relatively quickly.

Our permit, however, was for Churen, and we decided to hold off until we had a better view of its west ridge (gained from Putha, as the two peaks are separated by a saddle at 20,500 feet). We ruled out the northwest face of Churen for its sheer difficulty, lack of a well-stocked base camp, lack of a full climbing team and ropes for fixing, lack of courage, and objective hazards such as catastrophic rock fall seen the previous day. When planning the trip, we had only marginal photos of the face and thought it might be possible.

Churen would be a mighty accomplishment, as people in Kakkotgaon later told us that only one expedition had tried it from the Kaya Khola. The 1996 Japanese Expedition lost two members on the west ridge, and the northwest face has never

been attempted. They told us we were messing around with an evil force to even consider those routes. I'll be reading the journals until I'm old and gray to see what happens...

With no liaison officer and the likelihood that we would see no others, we decided to go for Putha Hiunchuli. Since our base camp was assumed to be around 17,000 feet and we felt well-acclimatized, we packed for a four-day push and left a note in the tent. We followed hollow snow on loose rock until we gained a talus gulley, which led us to the start of the glacier that forms the east ridge. It had been a long day, but we figured we could summit the next day. We hiked around to gain a view of the summit cone. It looked less than a thousand feet above. No problem!

I led out the next morning, crested the east ridge, and could finally see peaks to the south. The previous night, while interviewing for the documentary, we told the camera how this expedition had been defined by uncertainties, and how every time we thought something was going right, something else would compromise it.

I stared into the distance, partly overwhelmed and partly embarrassed. Here was the first view of Putha Hiunchuli, and the mountain we were climbing was surely not it. The defining characteristics—long, sloping east ridges—were identical on both peaks, but the one beyond was much larger. On the summit, we realized we were probably no higher than 19,000 feet. Using maps with 500-foot contour intervals, having uncalibrated altimeters and no reliable trip reports for the area, it was tough to blame us for bad judgment. We rarely knew our altitudes, so we just used our best guesses. I suppose that's what happens when you set off for an adventure. You might actually get one.

We stood on our first Himalayan summit, disappointed and bitter, with no idea how we'd get to the real mountain. I exclaimed that this expedition was becoming a big joke. Now I realize it may well have been the first ascent of a 19,000-foot peak (later found to be called Turka Himal), but at that moment, we were devastated and I didn't know if it would be the end of the expedition. After all, we still didn't know how to get to Putha Hiunchuli, as the route was not obvious and was complicated by ridges and valleys.

After some discussion, we cached gear on the descent to save effort when we returned. It was a critical point; by caching we would be obligated to return, and it was a good way to force ourselves to stay motivated. We returned to base camp to find that Blue's rock patio had been demolished, and our trash pile was torn apart. Apparently someone had a message for us. The next day we saw the perpetrators: a group of ten youngsters from Kakkotgaon. With their limited English, they said they had taken loads to Putha Hiunchuli base camp (the same location for Churen Himal base camp?). We had no idea what was going on. We



A spectacular campsite after 21 days on foot.

Photo by Pete Dronkers

never authorized the expenditure of additional porters, and at that point we didn't need them. Everything was confusing. They said they'd be back the next day and perhaps, we thought, LG would be there.

This was also the high season for the cash crop in Dolpo—the Yarchu Gombu fungus. The Japanese believe it to be an aphrodisiac, and it was worth enough for the people of Dolpo to drop everything to find it in the alpine soils. The kids from Kakkotgaon believed we were camped at our location to harvest the fungus, acting as mountaineers to hide our real purpose. It didn't help that, unbeknownst to us, we weren't camped at the base camp previously used for Putha Hiunchuli (ascents we knew little about). Nor did it help that, as we found out later, those same kids found our note and reported it to the village leader, who knew our permit was for Churen.

We took another two rest days and decided that no one else was coming. It was time to head out for a real alpine-style attempt on Putha Hiunchuli. We packed for eight days and pared down the loads even more—no ice axes, only self-arrest grips on the poles, two ice screws, two pickets, one thin rope, and one tiny tent.

Ten minutes from camp, we encountered another small group coming from Putha Hiunchuli base camp. This time, it was an agent who spoke some English. He said something about a French expedition on Putha, so we assumed that he and his porters were securing the approach for them. We were in denial that another expedition had chosen to come here.

When we entered the valley that appeared to lead to Putha, we saw a blue kitchen tent like ours. We were beyond confused and still didn't know if we'd find our staff there. We had been climbing the wrong peak for some time, during which they could have passed. But it was not our tent, and no one was in sight. It contained hundreds of pounds of supplies, and we walked by with simply the packs on our backs. It was a great feeling.

We assumed that the French team would come later, and that they'd be fresh after only a three-day approach from the Juphal Airstrip. We set up Camp I a few miles from their kitchen tent and the next morning proceeded to get seriously lost. The mountain's lower flanks seemed to be inaccessible from our valley, so I convinced Blue it would be wise to exit up some talus slopes to gain the start of the glacier. We spent half the day wrangling through dangerous loose blocks and cliffs until we could see that we had wasted extraordinary effort and had to descend 1,000 feet to access the glacier. Shaken, we headed up the terminal moraine until placing Camp II somewhere around 18,000 feet, where we saw footprints.

The next morning we followed the footprints and within two hours met up with the French group while they were descending from a carry to their Camp II (our Camp III). The French team comprised five clients, one mountain guide, one organizer, and their two high-altitude Nepali porters. They must have passed near our base camp while we were on Turka Himal. The group of 10 porters we saw earlier was working for



Loaded donkeys.

Photo by Blue Eisele

the team, which was climbing in siege style and had already made several carries above their base camp. Their kit probably weighed 30 times what Blue and I carried on our backs.

They had heard about us in Kakkotgaon, so they knew we were intending to climb an unauthorized peak. We kindly explained that we were potentially interested in the west ridge of Churen Himal, which we would access from the saddle that separates the two mountains. The French climbers were very kind, but we had a bad feeling about their main high-altitude porter and their organizer. We left on good terms and continued to their cache location for our third camp at about 20,000 feet (confirmed by their better maps), where we were engulfed by snow and forced to stop.

Camp IV was only a thousand feet higher because it may have been the last good flat place and because, once again, the daily snow hit us. I took a crevasse fall on the way in, but we were breaking trail and I was on lead, so what would I expect? It was my first time camping above 21,000 feet, and I definitely felt the altitude. Later that night, the guide came up for a reconnaissance... unroped. No big deal for him, I guess.

We awoke to clear skies and bitter cold and by 7 a.m. were ready to leave camp for the summit. The conditions were not ideal. We postholed to our ankles and occasionally deeper, but we had no idea of the scale of the upper mountain. By noon, after we could gauge our progress by a serac band, we understood that we had a long way to go. It was absolutely exhausting. Each step was followed by two to three inhalations, and every 100 vertical feet required a five-minute break. Blue and I swapped leads every hour, and he moved faster on lead than I. But I knew that the summit was quite distant, and I wanted to reserve my strength for what might take all day. I was determined, as I didn't want to attempt this twice.

Clouds swirled around, obscuring the view, and we wondered if we'd be able to find our way back in a whiteout or

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Self-portrait at 15,000 feet.

Photo by Pete Dronkers

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darkness, with no wands to mark the route. By 2 p.m. we felt weak, dehydrated, hungry, and low on motivation. Blue said we wouldn't make it. I said we might. He set a turnaround time of 3:30, but by then the summit wasn't even close. I was moving progressively slower, but Blue was remaining negative. In some respects, his bursts of power kept me pushing to follow faster, and my determination and persistence kept him going. The turnaround time became 4:30.

By then it seemed possible. The blue-ice summit cone would make for faster travel, and I said I'd summit no matter what time it was. I set off on a lead much faster than I could handle and my heart accelerated to a speed I've never experienced anywhere. My crampons finally had something to bite into, and the feeling of solidity brought on an adrenaline rush. The last few kicks were barely tolerable and I collapsed onto the summit chest first, lungs heaving. I took a minute until I could pick myself up onto my feet, and when I did, Blue was just emerging into view.

I'm not sure why it happened that way. Maybe it was the culmination of all the emotions of the last few months that caused that summit surge. It had been six months in planning, tons of work to afford the trip, six potential partners, five committed partners, two pre-departure dropouts, and one bailout during the trip. A week before leaving the states, I nearly died of anaphylactic shock from a severe allergy-induced asthma attack that landed me in an ambulance, struggling for consciousness. It had been a 21-day approach to base camp, entailing one of the most tedious voyages I've ever attempted, with uncertainties emerging daily. It had involved getting our hopes up high, climbing the wrong mountain and nearly calling off the expedition, and then ascending a huge peak, barely known to us, in alpine style while another team employed a dozen people to accomplish the same thing.

It had been wild. And that's how we wanted our first Himalayan expedition to be. We had little interest in going to a place with dozens of teams and every detail of the mountain known—even if that meant a steep, technical objective.

We wanted an experience with all the craziness and uncertainties that the Himalayas could offer, and we wanted to enter one of the most remote and culturally interesting mountain environments anywhere in the world. Perhaps we underestimated things a bit, but in the end it proved possible. I'll never forget when LG declared one week into our trip that it had already become the most physically and mentally demanding of the dozen expeditions he's served. It would be another 32 days until things would come to an end—the longest expedition of our lives.

Three days later we met up with LG and Lakpa Junior at base camp. They hiked up from Kakkotgaon and brought peanut butter, a satellite phone, and the desire to leave for the Juphal airstrip ASAP. The next day we descended and hired semi-nomadic porters (who possessed almost nothing) to carry our things for two long days to the airstrip. We could have flown there to begin with, just as the French

did, but we knew it wouldn't have been the same. We had crossed the Himalayas and spent weeks within a vastly different culture to climb our peak. This was not just mountaineering for mountaineering's sake. It was a humbling experience where the people we met displayed toughness greater than ours just by living their daily lives. Our staff worked tirelessly but never realized it, and although we arrived thinking we were elite mountaineers, we left with an understanding of the vanity of so many westerners, including climbers. When we boarded our plane to Kathmandu, Lakpa Senior chose to keep the airfare money by walking another 65 miles to the road head to take a bus home—as if it was nothing on top of the 40 days he'd already spent walking.

Once back to the hotel, our liaison officer showed up to complete the debriefing paperwork. He noticed that we actually told the truth where it asked us what dates he was present: none. He made us write that he was present during the entire expedition, and with the sway of a pen, we changed history. Two months later our agent e-mailed to let us know that someone had snitched on us, and that he was forced to pay a bribe to avoid fines and an investigation. Our officer got away with thievery, and our staff made pennies on his dollar. The separation of those in power from those who actually work for a living made me furious. But the next time I think that dynamic exists here, I'll think of Nepal and realize just how fortunate we are.

And so it was a life-changing experience. I can't say I've hung on tools on a 5,000-foot, 80-degree ice face at 23,000 feet, but I will never let that fact devalue the experience we did have. Hopefully it won't be long until I climb a face like that on Churen's northwest side, or summit Everest. But if I can make it through such climbs, I won't be changed any more than Nepal has already changed me. In some respects, I think it took an expedition like this to make me more humble and appreciative. Perhaps that is what lies at the center of alpinism. In between the numbers and grades, somewhere beyond the hype, there's another reason why people climb mountains in distant lands. ▲