# Xixabangma 1987

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*(Translated by Ingeborga Doubrawa-Cochlin)*

The first Polish expedition to the Tibetan Himalaya was organized by the Polish Alpine Association and the High Mountain Club in Katowice. Its main goal was to put a new route on Xixabangma (8046m) and to give Jerzy Kukuczka his fourteenth 8000m peak. (A short note on this expedition appeared in *AJ93*, 241, 1988/89. In the present article the height of Xixabangma has been left uncorrected at 8046m.)

Late in 1986, Kukuczka had talks with the President of the Association of Sport and Tourism of the Chinese People's Republic and a government minister, Mr Li Menghua. These were followed, in May 1987, by a week in Beijing during which Kukuczka and Majer had talks with the Chinese Mountaineering Association, led by its president Mr Zhanchua. Finally, in July of the same year, a delegation from the CMA, led by the general secretary Mr Wang Feng Tonga, visited Poland. As a result of all this activity, permission was eventually received to climb the W ridge of Xixabangma and the N wall.

The members of the expedition were: Jerzy Kukuczka (leader), Wanda Rutkiewicz, Artur Hajzer, Lech Korniszewski (expedition doctor), Janusz Majer and Ryszard Warecki, all from Poland; and from abroad: Elsa Avila and Carlos Carsolio (Mexico), Christine De Colombel and Malgorzata Bilczewska-Fromenty (France), Alan Hinkes (GB), Ramiro Navarrete (Ecuador) and Steve Untch (USA). The Chinese personnel were the liaison officer, the interpreter and the cook.

The expedition left Kathmandu on 16 August 1987 and by the evening of the following day we had reached Col Kodari on the Nepal-China border. Because of the condition of the road between Kathmandu, Kodari and Khasa (Zhangmu), parts of which had been destroyed, we were compelled to hire porters on both sides of the border. Transport was organized for us by the Chinese and, thanks to that, we were able to travel from Khasa via Nyalam and reach, very quickly, the point at about 5000m where the first conquerors of the peak had set up Base Camp in 1964.

Unfortunately, our speed in reaching such a high altitude so quickly had a bad effect on the health of some of the members of the expedition. On 20 August only part of the team was able to proceed with the yak caravan; Alan Hinkes and the two Mexicans had to be left behind at the Chinese Base Camp, looked after by the doctor. On 22 August, after three days' marching, we set up our Base Camp at about 5900m. On the same day, Janusz Majer developed symptoms of high-altitude sickness. During the night he became so ill that it was absolutely essential to get him down to Base Camp early the following morning.

He was given oxygen and was carried on a makeshift stretcher made from skis strapped together with pieces of rope. The transport team consisted of Kukuczka, Hajzer, Navarrete and Untch. Rutkiewicz and some Tibetan porters carried down all the necessary bivouac gear. At the same time, Christine De Colombel hurried down to the Chinese Base Camp to report to the doctor. The next day, the transport team with their patient met Korniszewski at a place which we called 'sanatorium camp'. Thanks to this speedy and efficient rescue operation, Majer was soon out of danger, but his condition was still serious because of thrombosis in his leg.

During the next few days the expedition reassembled and on 28 August we started the climb. Hinkes, Warecki and Untch set up Camp 1 on the normal route at 6400m. The following day Kukuczka and Hajzer left Base Camp and, after bivouacking at 6400m, established Camp 2, also by the normal route, at 7000m, at the end of the so-called 'corridor'. On 31 August the same team reached the summit of a hitherto unclimbed peak, Yebokangal Ri (7365m) by way of the 'corridor' on the N side of the summit. Kukuczka and Hajzer then ski'd down to Base Camp.

Meanwhile, the other climbers were acclimatizing by spending the nights at either Camp 1A at 6800m or at Camp 2 at 7000m. On 5 September several teams left Base Camp aiming for the summit, but the weather deteriorated and by 7 September everyone had returned to Base Camp. Severe wind and snow prevented further action until 14 September, but on 15 September some further attempts were made on the summit. Several different teams set out at the same time. Hajzer and Kukuczka intended to climb the virgin W ridge. Avila, Colombel and Rutkiewicz, who were joined by Navarrete and Warecki, wanted to reach the summit by the normal route. Hinkes and Untch chose a more ambitious route – the unclimbed couloir of the N wall.

Hajzer, Kukuczka, Navarrete, Warecki, Avila and Rutkiewicz spent the night at Camp 1A (6800m) and Hinkes, Untch and Colombel at Camp 1 (6400m). The following day Hajzer and Kukuczka, accompanied by Warecki, reached the first pinnacle on the W ridge and spent the night at 7300m. Warecki returned to Camp 1A. Navarrete joined the ladies' team, Christine De Colombel having decided to give up her attempt on the summit. At Camp 2 they met Carsolio who had just come up from Base Camp. Hinkes and Untch reached Camp 1A. Majer and Korniszewski spent a few nights at Camps 1 and 1A and returned to Base Camp on 18 September.

By 17 September the final assault on the summit was taking place. Hajzer and Kukuczka bivouacked at 7900m after climbing the long W ridge; they had climbed all day on the S side of the W ridge in extremely strong winds blowing from the S of Nepal. Even after sunset, the winds did not stop and the temperature dropped to −35°C. The team on the normal route set up Camp 3 at 7400m. Warecki joined them in the evening, carrying one extra tent. Meanwhile Hinkes and Untch reached Camp 2.

On 18 September, at about 4pm, both teams (one coming from the W ridge and one from the normal route) met on the middle summit at about 8030m. Kukuczka and Hajzer had climbed that day on the W ridge, scaling rocky pinnacles of IV and V and sometimes abseiling off them. On their way,

they reached the unclimbed W summit at 7980m. Between 5pm and 6pm all seven climbers reached the main summit of Xixabangma (8046m). Warecki carried Kukuczka's skis up the normal route and gave them to him on the summit. Both the weather and the views were superb and everyone filmed and photographed for a long time. Hajzer and Kukuczka bivouacked on the ridge between the summits while the 'normal route' team went down to Camp 3 (7400m) without any lights. The following morning Kukuczka started his descent on skis from the main summit and it took him all day to reach Base Camp. By the evening of 19 September everyone had returned except for Hinkes and Untch. They reached the summit on 19 September at about 6pm and very late that same evening they reached the tent at Camp 2 (7000m) which had been left for them. Their route through the couloir of the N wall had taken them two days to negotiate, with one bivouac at 7500m without a tent. The route traversed mixed terrain and a 50° snow and ice slope, joining that of Hajzer and Kukuczka on the ridge before the pinnacle of the W summit. During their climb through the couloir Steve Untch suffered frostbitten toes. He was wearing Koflach boots especially made for him but, unfortunately, they were too small.

On 24 September we left Base Camp and, soon afterwards, reached the Chinese Base Camp. Our caravan of yaks arrived on 26 September and by 28 September we were back in Kathmandu.

Despite the large number of members on our expedition – 13 in all – we climbed in 'alpine style' and were far from being a typical heavy Himalayan expedition. Each group within the team achieved its goals independently of the others, according to individual ambitions and potential. In this way, we achieved several notable successes: Kukuczka climbed, via a new route, his fourteenth 8000m peak; Kukuczka and Hajzer climbed two virgin peaks, Yebokangal Ri (7365m) and Xixabangma West (7980m). Hinkes and Untch made a first ascent of the central couloir of the N wall; and Hajzer and Kukuczka also made a new route up the W ridge. Avila became the first Latin-American woman to reach the summit of an 8000m peak – and at 23 one of the youngest women to do so. Ramiro Navarrete established a new altitude record for his country, Ecuador. (He died on Annapurna in 1988; see *AJ94*, 249, 1989/90, and Henry Todd's article in this volume.)

Out of the 13 members of our expedition, nine reached the summit of Xixabangma. What helped us to achieve such a successful outcome was the very pleasant atmosphere of cooperation which extended right through our international team.