
GINETTE HARRISON

Kangchenjunga: The First Female Ascent

(Plates 1–5, 59)

The alarm went off at 2.30am and I could finally give up all pretence of sleep and fire up the stove for the morning brew. It had been a long night. I spent an hour melting snow, heating water and forcing down oatmeal, only to vomit and have to start all over. I was tired and my stomach was churning. The last thing I felt like doing was going climbing.

It was bitterly cold and seemed to take an eternity to struggle into boots and crampons and deal with the call of nature. Once outside the tent I began to appreciate my surroundings. I was at 7800m on the north face of Kangchenjunga. It was 5am and the sun was just rising with stunning views of Everest, Lhotse and Makalu glowing pink-orange in the morning light. It was summit day. The weather was perfect and I wasn't about to turn around now.

It seemed like a lifetime ago that we had first started planning this expedition. My husband, Gary Pfisterer, had attempted 'Kanch' in Spring '97 but turned around on his summit bid to assist an injured climber down to base camp. Jonathan Pratt (UK) and Chris Shaw (USA) had been in the same rescue party. Subsequent bad weather prevented any of them from having another shot at the summit. On his return home, Gary and I decided to lead our own expedition to Kangchenjunga, and it wasn't difficult to convince Jonathan and Chris to join us. Paul Malo (Canada) and Tim Horvath (USA) made up the team.

We decided on a lightweight approach to the mountain, using no porters above base camp and no supplementary oxygen. We chose the Czech line on the North Face (see route photo) as this seemed to be a feasible route with the minimum of objective danger. We planned on fixing permanent camps at 5800m and 6800m with temporary acclimatisation camps between, and climbing alpine style above 7000m after fixing rope on the Ice Building and the Rock Band.

The team met up in Kathmandu, endured a 20-hour bus ride to Basantapur and then trekked through beautiful unspoilt countryside to base at Pang Pema (5000m). En route, the roof of our mess tent split during a thunderstorm on our first night out, the porters went on strike, the Liaison Officer went home at the first sight of snow, porter prices doubled in Ghunsa and our loads got lighter as the nimble-fingered Ghunsa porters helped themselves to our hill-food. It was quite a relief finally to reach base camp on 4 April.



1. Ginette Harrison below the Ice Building at 6000m during the first female ascent of Kangchenjunga. (*Gary Pfisterer*) (p18)

After two nights at 5000m Paul became ill with serious altitude sickness and had to descend. Mindu, our sirdar, and I accompanied him. Meanwhile the rest of the team started work on the mountain. A Japanese team climbing Messner's route on the North Face had arrived a few days earlier. We shared the same route as far as 6800m. From base camp the route descends over rocky moraine onto the glacier. We put in a temporary acclimatisation camp at 5400m just beyond the ridge of Gimmigela. Here the route turns left and ascends steeply up broken ground onto a moderately-angled snow slope, threatened by avalanche, to 5600m, where the Japanese placed their Camp 1. We continued on up easier-angled snow slopes, crossing crevasses and winding in and out of séracs to emerge on a large plateau and the site of our Camp 1 (5800m).

There were fantastic views of Wedge Peak and Ramtang from Camp 1 and we could clearly see Everest, Lhotse and Makalu from just above our camp. Conditions on the glacier and on the lower slopes of Kangchenjunga changed dramatically during the course of the expedition. Towards the end of the expedition most of the glacier had melted out and it was only feasible to travel on it in the early morning to avoid sinking thigh deep in slush. The marker wands had fallen over and route-finding became quite difficult. There was also a lot of rockfall on the slope above C once the sun hit.

Above Camp 1 we crossed the gradually rising and heavily crevassed snow plateau (approx 1km) to the first of the technical difficulties – the 'Ice Building' at 6000m. This consists of approximately 150m of 40° blue ice which we fixed. There is a bergschrund at the base of the icefall which can be awkward to cross. There were also a lot of objective dangers with falling ice and rocks this season, and frequent avalanches from séracs overhanging the Ice Building. A Sherpa was killed here in 1930 when a sérac collapsed. Our fixed ropes were cut and buried many times. Above the Ice Building the route follows a rising traverse right on easy but exposed snow slopes and then turns left and continues more steeply straight up staying to the right of a series of large séracs. We set up a temporary Camp (C1) beneath one of the séracs at 6600m while we worked on digging a snow cave big enough to house the entire team at the base of the 'Rock Band' (6800m).

This was to be our permanent Camp 2. We decided on a snow cave because there are a lot of spindrift avalanches coming down the Rock Band that tend to bury any tents pitched here. It took two full days to dig out the cave and then it was time to start work on the Rock Band – the crux of the climb. Gary led the first pitch across a bergschrund and up a steep grade V ice pitch to gain the rock. I followed with the fixed rope. Over the next four days Jonathan did most of the leading, with Chris and Tim following with fixed rope, up a series of vertical and traversing rock pitches up to 5.9 in difficulty. Climbing technically difficult rock and ice at 7000m is incredibly exhausting. It took around five days to fix a total of 400m of rope.

Once the Ice Building and Rock Band were fixed, Gary and I made the first summit attempt in late April but were turned back by unstable snow



2. Self-portrait of Ginette Harrison on the summit of Kangchenjunga.
(*Ginette Harrison*) (p18)



3. Ginette Harrison's ice axe buried in the summit of Kangchenjunga,
looking north-eastwards. (*Ginette Harrison*) (p18)

just above the Rock Band. We made a temporary camp at 7100m but, being unable to push on, cached the tent, stove and other gear at the top of the fixed ropes before returning to base camp.

In early May Paul decided to return home primarily because he judged the risks on Kangchenjunga to be greater than he had at first anticipated. The remaining five of us climbed together on a second summit bid. Above the Rock Band there was deep powder snow but we pressed on, traversing up and right towards a second rock band and setting up a temporary camp at 7400m. The next day we broke trail through thigh-deep snow to the far right of the second rock band and then up a snow gully rising back towards the left. A few metres higher the weather clouded in and we were forced to set up another temporary camp at only 7600m.

Numerous slab avalanches hit the tents in the early hours of the morning, but after striking camp we pressed on in the hope that snow conditions on the upper plateau would be better – they weren't. We reached 7700m with no improvement in snow conditions and elected to retreat, as it was unlikely that we would have enough energy to summit in those conditions. We returned to base for five days of rest.

On 14 May we set out again feeling optimistic. The weather was fine and the Japanese team had already set out for their summit bid two days earlier. But on arrival at Camp 1 our spirits plummeted – one of our tents was missing! After much searching we found it, still upright, down a crevasse about 400 metres from camp. It appeared that it had been blown down the glacier by the wind blast created by a large avalanche in the Ice Building. It was still serviceable and our summit bid was still on.

The following day we climbed the Ice Building again. The fixed lines were broken and had to be cobbled together. That night at Camp 2 the wind was howling and spindrift avalanches poured down the Rock Band blocking the entrance to our cave. We had to get up and dig out three times in the night to avoid being snowed in and suffocating. We heard on our evening radio call that the Japanese team had summited that day. We were happy for them and optimistic that conditions must have improved.

Above the Rock Band we made good progress pitching camps alpine style at 7400m and finally a high camp at 7800m next to a large boulder approximately 50m below the 'Croissant', a large rock named for its crescent shape. Last year's tents were still visible, although badly torn and buried in snow. Snow conditions were much improved after high winds had scoured the upper mountain. We were ready for summit day. We could see the Japanese tent above us pitched immediately below the Croissant but strangely there was no sign of the Japanese. We expected to see their second summit team descending today. We had left our radios at the snow cave to save weight so had no idea of the drama that had been unfolding above us.

The next morning, 18 May, Chris and Jonathan set off at 4.30am with Tim a little way behind. Gary and I followed at 5am. As we traversed below the Croissant we realised that what had looked like a rock in the snow the



4. Three of the team moving through the bottom left of the Ice Building on the North Face of Kangchenjunga at 6000m. (*Ginette Harrison*) (p18)



5. Ginette Harrison and husband Gary Pfisterer in the snow cave at Camp 2 at 6800m. (*Tim Horvath*) (p18)

day before was in fact a body – a pair of boots with crampons was clearly visible poking out of the snow. I tried to convince myself that it was a climber from years ago, but as we climbed the gully to the right of the Croissant it became apparent that it was one of the Japanese climbers when we stumbled across a second body sitting in the snow and still clipped into the rope, his hat pulled over his face. As we climbed higher we heard the sound of a helicopter below us. My emotions and thoughts were whirling – how many more dead bodies would we find? Were there injured climbers higher up? What on earth had gone wrong? Was there anything we could do to help? But I knew there was nothing that we could do. This was our summit day; the weather was perfect: we pressed on.

At the top of the Croissant gully we traversed right into the sunshine. It was 10am and my feet had been numb for five hours. We stopped for a drink and a rest in the sun. Chris and Jon were already most of the way across the traverse heading for the col to the left of the pinnacles on the summit ridge. It took us another two hours to make this traverse and as I looked down the exposed icy slopes I thought of the dead Japanese and wondered if I could stop myself if I slipped. We were soloing having left harnesses and helmets at the top of the Rock Band to save weight.

Gary was moving more and more slowly having to stop for breath every two steps. At 12.15pm having reached a height of 8450m he was exhausted and concerned that he would be unable to get down before nightfall if he continued. He turned around. I still felt strong and decided to continue, although I had no idea how much farther it was to the summit. I worried about Gary descending alone although as we were soloing I knew that I could be no more than a psychological help to him. He was equally worried about me continuing up alone.

Just under an hour later I met Jonathan below the col – he had summited at 12 noon and thought that I still had time to summit and be down before dark. I passed Chris and Tim a little higher – they had reached the summit at 12.15 and 12.45pm respectively. I continued on up the summit ridge feeling small and vulnerable. The route stays to the south side of the ridge. The Japanese had fixed rope along the ridge and my left hand gripped it firmly whilst my mind knew full well that without a harness it was nothing more than a psychological boost. About three quarters of the way along the ridge there is a steep ice-filled chimney that one has to descend, followed by a gap to step across. I tried not to think about the thousands of metres of South Face below, and concentrated on planting my feet and axe firmly.

I was heading for a peculiar jutting-out rock on the ridge and as I stepped left around the rock I realised I had made it – there were the summit prayer flags. But it took a full minute for my hypoxic brain to register that there were still footsteps upwards and it was another 20 feet or so to the summit. I followed the steps to the top and stood there with mixed emotions: a great sense of relief that there was no more up, but very disappointed that I was not sharing this summit with Gary. I planted my ice axe on the summit

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The Czech route on the North Face of Kangchenjunga, the route taken by Ginette Harrison on the first female ascent.

2 = Camp 2 at 6800m

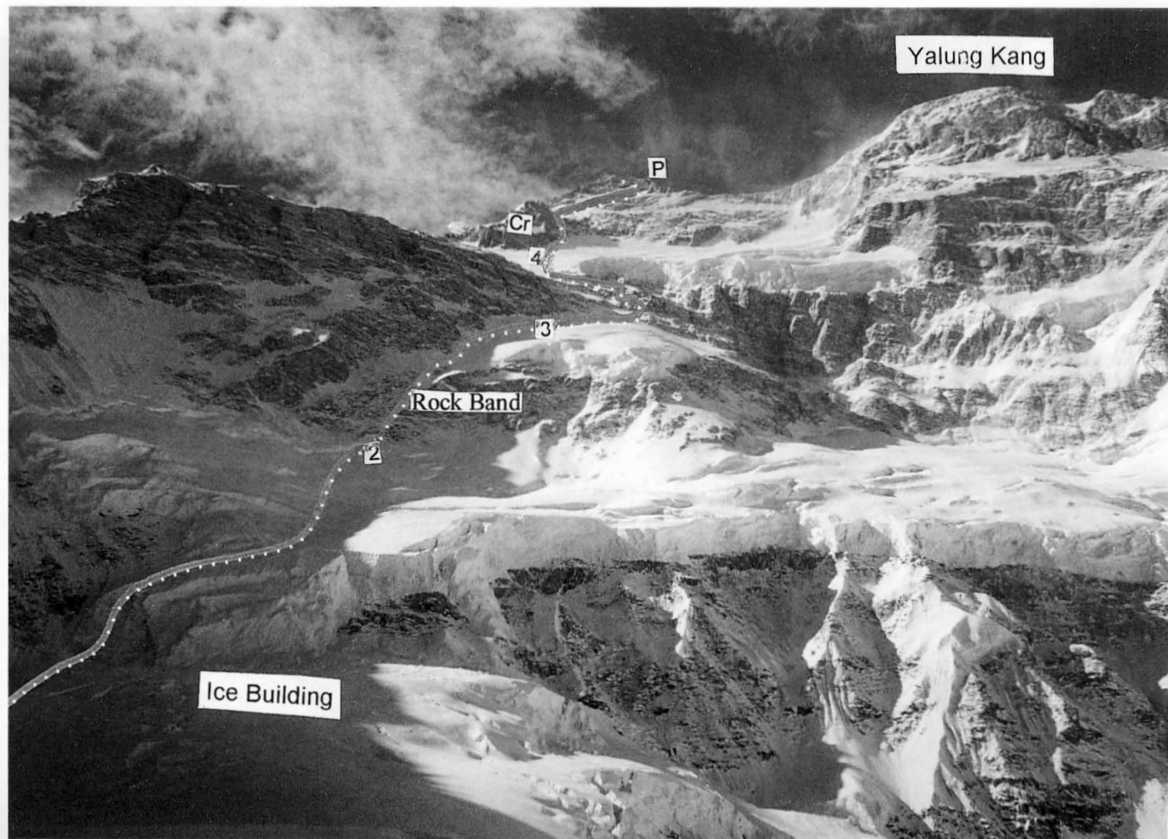
3 = Camp 3 at 7400m

4 = Camp 4 at 7800m

Cr = Croissant Rock

P = Pinnacles

(Ginette Harrison) (p18)



and took a photo of it. Then I held my camera at arm's length and took a shot of myself. I took photos in all directions but was very conscious that it was getting late. It was 2.20pm and the clouds were coming in. At one point Yalung Kang, one of Kangchenjunga's subsidiary summits clouded in completely and then cleared. I took this as a warning from the mountain that it was time to head down.

After a few steps I was suddenly incredibly hungry – I had eaten only one muesli bar since breakfast, so sat down to drink water and force down a few calories and then headed down concentrating on every step. I got back to Camp 4 at 5.15pm – only half an hour after Gary as he was so exhausted that it had taken him a long time to descend. The following day the team descended to Camp 2. We reached base camp safely two days later, removing all our gear as we went, and learned that the two Japanese had died on descent from the summit. Three survivors of that summit team had been helicoptered out with severe frostbite.

Ours was a happy and successful expedition with four of our six members summiting. We were saddened by the death of the two Japanese, a tragic end to what was an extremely well organised expedition. Their deaths plus the knowledge that over the years four women had died while attempting to climb Kangchenjunga made me appreciate all the more how lucky I was to make the first female ascent and return safely.