



1. Abseiling a gendarme on day six of the first ascent of the NW Ridge of Ama Dablam (6828m). (*Jules Cartwright*) (p18)

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JULES CARTWRIGHT

## Ama Dablam

*(Frontispiece, Plates 2-7)*

You wouldn't think of the Solu Khumbu region of Nepal as an area of the Himalaya still dripping with unclimbed lines. It's one of the most heavily trekked mountain regions in Asia and most expeditions to Nepal, especially in recent years, have concentrated on this one small area. But having worked in Khumbu seasonally over the past three years it became obvious to me that even on the most popular affordable peaks – Lobuche, Kongde, Tawoche and Ama Dablam for example – there were still plenty of new climbs to inspire.

Although plenty of nationalities have added routes and history to Ama Dablam (6856m), it has intriguing British connections. Alf Gregory's unsuccessful attempt on the South-West Ridge in 1958 opened the flood-gates to what is now the most popular non-trekking-peak route in the Khumbu. It was by this ridge that the mountain was first climbed in 1961 by members of a scientific expedition led by Edmund Hillary. The summit party was made up of a Briton, Michael Ward, New Zealanders Wally Romanes and Michael Gill and the American Barry Bishop. But this was not the only British connection.

In 1959 a strong British team arrived in the pre-monsoon season to attempt the North Ridge. On 18 May, George Fraser and Mike Harris set out from their top camp at 19,800ft, planning to climb alpine style to the summit and back over four days. Expedition member Ted Wrangham, writing in the Climbers' Club Journal, watched the tragic climax of their attempt unfold on 21 May. 'George and Mike were last seen at the top of the pyramid at 8am. They were climbing fast, obviously all out for the summit.' The 'pyramid' marks the end of the technical difficulties at about 21,700ft, leaving just 800ft of easy ridge to the summit. They were never seen again as the monsoon set in.

The consensus of expedition members, combined with Fraser and Harris' experience and strength, suggests that they may well have reached the summit, but had an accident descending in deteriorating weather. We are unlikely to know if they did make the first ascent by this route. Hopefully, the mystery will endure.

Perhaps one of the most tragic events took place in 1979 when Peter Hillary, with Ken Hyslop and others, followed in his father's footsteps with an attempt on Ama Dablam, on the sérac-threatened West Face. While a French team was succeeding on the North Ridge, Hillary, Hyslop and others

were hit by a large sérac fall from high on the face. Hyslop was killed and Hillary badly injured. With the rest of the party in a bad way, the outlook must have been grim. Somehow, though, Reinhold Messner, a member of another expedition, managed to effect a tenuous and risky rescue. Later, this face was climbed solo by the talented Czech climber, Miri Smid.

The last of the faces to be climbed was the North-East in 1985. This is characterised by steep snow flutings bounded by rock walls and threatened by cornices on the North Ridge. To minimise the risks, Carlos Buhler and Mike Kennedy climbed it in the very cold months of winter, taking eight days to reach the summit.

Since then, several outstanding climbs have been added and there are now more than fifteen routes and variations on all aspects of the mountain. Ama Dablam receives well over 150 ascents of just the South-West Ridge in a busy year, and by 2000 there had been a total of 4,356 ascents. The North-West Ridge, forming the left skyline when viewed from Tengboche Monastery, was the last of the major lines but this 'longest ridge' seemed to have a penchant for repelling all suitors.

Accompanied by good friend Rich Cross, I went back to Solu Khumbu in the post-monsoon season of 2001. Rich had been taken in by my ramblings in a Sheffield pub one night about the last and longest ridge on Ama Dablam, or it could have been talk of tea houses for base camp, yak steak, chips and beer every night, a mere two-day walk-in and perfect weather that attracted him. It was all true – mostly – and throughout the trip comparisons with scuzzy glacial base camps of the past became increasingly frequent.

The appeal of the fabulous natural line of the North-West Ridge was not the sheer technicality, of which there was plenty, but more its lure as a true mountaineer's climb. Threading a route between, round and over the many gendarmes, perching tents above huge precipices, the need to negotiate snow, rock and ice in equal quantities, and the potential difficulty of retreat if anything were to go wrong – the climb had all the hallmarks of a thrilling adventure.

We had no idea how long a project like this might keep us entertained. With over 2,300 metres of height to be gained, together with a long mid-route horizontal section, we came to the conclusion that we would just have to pack as much food and gas as our bodies could carry. Committed as always to climbing alpine style, I took strength from the fact that Rich was built like a second-row forward and would be able to make up any physical shortcomings that my fast-withering frame might have. With eight days' food and gas we were sure we had a good chance. I mean, how hard can a ridge be?

In honour of the ancient weight gods, we took knives to our mountain tent, discarded clothing, pared down our ice rack to two ice screws and a snow stake – 'Hold on, doesn't our line finish up 800 metres of ice climbing?' 'Don't worry, think MacIntyre' – and selected two anorexic ropes. To top it



2. Rich Cross approaching the headwall of Ama Dablam on day eight of the first ascent of the NW Ridge of Ama Dablam, one of the most obvious last great problems in the Khumbu. (*Jules Cartwright*) (p18)

all off, people kept asking how many Sherpas we had, forcing us finally to lie rather than be lectured again on the insanity of our venture. Who says the perception of alpine climbing is evolving?

As we were packing our sacks, Nima, our sirdar, burst into the room shouting: 'Jules! Jules! Duncan on radio. Top camp!' Duncan was an Australian guide we had met earlier and who we knew should have topped out that morning on the South-West Ridge with two clients.

'Hi, Duncan, what's up?' We were in line of sight and the answer bounced back clear as the air.

'Er, good mate. On the summit at 10am, beautiful day.'

'Congratulations! I think we'll be pretty hungry if we get that far!'

'You after some beta on the flat section? Had a bird's eye view of it all day.'

'That may be OK in Oz, but where we come from that's cheating.'

Nima grabbed the radio back off me. The next day was a new month and time for a new attitude.

Scrambling up the lower ridge would have reminded me of a pleasant day out on the Glyders had it not been for the shoulder straps of my pack doing a good job of sawing my arms off. Unusually, I was looking forward to getting halfway up the climb so I could jettison some ballast. I was having real problems balancing, even on simple ground. How the hell did people climb with this sort of weight when it got steeper?

We knew the route we were trying had been attempted at least ten times over the past twenty years. Some had climbed alpine style and some with traditional siege tactics. We were therefore surprised – and disappointed – to find only one short length of fixed line on the lower 3,000m of climbing. Even this was of no use, as it disappeared into a powder cornice on the wrong side of the ridge.

Having planned our food and gas ration on the basis of three days to the start of the horizontal section of the ridge, I had more than a tinge of uneasiness as I joined Rich at the apex of the gable end on the evening of the fifth day. We had taken almost double the planned time. It was make or break. We had reached that pivotal point in the climb when to continue meant total commitment to reach the top. Retreat, although possible, would be problematical, and accompanied by a level of risk that we both wanted to avoid. We were beginning to understand why the previous attempts on the ridge had been unsuccessful.

The decision was taken without discussion. After all, we still had gas and food for a lean and mean five days and even from this point, descent would be awkward. I made a comment about the route being good training for the Peuterey on Mont Blanc, bringing a smile to Rich's face as he waved me on to the next pitch – on to stage two of the climb, the crenellated, not so flat 'flat' section of the ridge. In the valley we had written off large sections of the climb as being easy.



3. Jules Cartwright mixed climbing on the fourth day with the villages of Dingboche and Periche visible in the top right corner. (*Rich Cross*) (p18)

'No problem, two days for that bit.'

'We'll be thinner by then so should be climbing like demons.'

Having so badly misjudged the time needed to climb the lower section we were reluctant to assess the day's climbing target. One day later, as we were threading our way through the gendarmes of the horizontal section, we both commented that the usual afternoon cloud build-up was a little heavier than normal. Nothing to get worked up about, though, at this stage.

Every three or four years this area is hit by the remnants of one of the regular large storms that originate in the Bay of Bengal. The result is usually a two or three-day storm that deposits a couple of metres of snow at valley height. When it started to snow hard on the seventh day, my promise to Rich of perfect weather started to sound hollow. The easiest way off from this point was via the summit. Finishing the day's climbing a little early, we cut a platform for the tent in a partially-stable snow mushroom, sheltered by a small tombstone of rock. Miraculously, up to this point, we had managed to dig a passable platform every night with only a little work.

Waking up every half-hour through the night, I listened for the tell-tale sound of snow sloughing off the tent. Early in the morning I poked my head through the door. Darkness still gripped the landscape, but a strong moon was sending sabres of light through occasional small gaps in the cloud cover. A strong wind was changing the balance of play back in our favour.

Where the ridge abutted against the headwall, a large sérac band barred the way. This being the last major obstacle, it was going to have to fight hard if it wanted to stop us. Even with our less-than-adequate snow and ice rack, we were confident. Our packs were mere shadows of their previous selves, making us feel stronger than our rations should have allowed. Only forty metres above was what we referred to as the 'football field' – the roof of the sérac – and access to the more straightforward headwall and summit ridge.

Nothing is ever that easy. A direct line proved impossible, so we were forced into a long traverse under séracs – a real sting in the tail. At one point there was a half-hour battle to hammer an ice stake into blue ice for protection. Almost a full day had been spent overcoming a horizontal distance of sixty metres.

Standing on top of the sérac, looking down on the many twists and turns of the ridge, my eye was drawn to our line of tiny footprints threading over and around the many obstacles. Not for the first time, I swore that I would never climb another ridge in my life. Of course, by the time Rich arrived, the strength of the emotion had left me.

Sitting on the summit two days later in perfect weather, neither of us spoke; we just gazed out at the myriad of peaks stretching away in every direction. After looking north across the shoulders of Everest into the high pastures of Tibet, I turned ninety degrees to view the pastel shades of the Sikkim foothills highlighting the silhouette of Kangchenjunga 150km to



4. Jules Cartwright at the start of the horizontal section on day six of the first ascent of the NW Ridge of Ama Dablam. (*Rich Cross*) (p18)



5. Rich Cross preparing an enormous last supper before setting out on the ten-day climb. (*Jules Cartwright*) (p18)

the east. Those images are with me still. Neither of us is obsessed with summits, but we'd both been looking forward to this one for a long time.

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of the North-West Ridge of Ama Dablam (6,856m) by Jules Cartwright and Rich Cross; and some of the mountain's history.

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6. Jules Cartwright poised on the NW Ridge of Ama Dablam on day seven of the first ascent.  
(*Rich Cross*) (p18)



7. Technical climbing to overcome a gendarme on day four. Jules Cartwright climbing.  
(*Rich Cross*) (p18)