
JULIE-ANN CLYMA & ROGER PAYNE

Chomolhari – One Perfect Day

The magnificent Chomolhari (7326m) was first climbed in 1937 by Freddy Spencer Chapman and Sherpa Pasang Dawa Lama. Chapman's team of five set off from Gangtok in Sikkim and in seven days walked to Phari on the plains of Tibet from where they carried out a reconnaissance of the south ridge. They found that the glacier and icefall that led to the ridge was impassable, so spent another four days making a detour into Bhutan and then continued on directly to make an alpine-style ascent of the mountain in just seven more days. The line of ascent started on the broad south-east spur and for the last few hundred metres merged with the exposed upper part of the south ridge.

Chomolhari received its second ascent in 1970 by a joint Bhutan-Indian military expedition led by Col 'Bull' Kumar. This team started in Bhutan and followed Chapman's route. The third ascent was in 1996 by a joint Japan-China expedition. This team climbed Chapman's impassable icefall to a col and then followed the south ridge to join the original route below the sharp crest of the summit ridge. The lack of activity on this notable summit is due to access restrictions on the Bhutanese side and the difficulty of access into Yadong County on the Tibetan side.

We first sought permission for an expedition to the north-west ridge of Chomolhari in 2002. After discussions with the Chinese Mountaineering Association, we got the necessary endorsement letter in 2003. However, at the last minute it was not possible to get the military permit to enter Yadong County. One year later, permission for the expedition was granted with the able assistance of Bikrum Pandey and Himalaya Expeditions in Nepal working with the China Tibet Mountaineering Association in Lhasa. Based on weather records and our experience of climbing in the east of Tibet the previous year, we decided to attempt the mountain in the spring when temperatures would be warmer, there would be more sun on the north-west ridge, and the winds (in theory) not so strong. We arrived in Lhasa on 6 April and spent three days there, meeting with CTMA staff, buying provisions, sightseeing, and waiting for local travel permits.

From Lhasa we travelled with Dawa Tsering, our Liaison Officer, by Land Cruiser to Gyantse (3950m) on 9 April. The route crossed the Kamba La (4794m), contoured around the massive Yamdrok Tso, and then crossed the Karo La (5045m) before dropping down to Gyantse. Much of the road was being improved, and the journey took nine hours. At Gyantse we met up with our cook Pemba who had travelled overland from Nepal, and the following day the whole team continued on to base camp.



32. Heading south from Gala you get a jaw-dropping view of the north face and north-west ridge of Chomolhari. The skyline ridge on the left marks the border with Bhutan. (Roger Payne)

On the map the distance from Gyantse to Chomolhari looked almost as long as the distance from Lhasa to Gyantse, but the time taken was much shorter (5 hours). From Gyantse it was only one hour to the town of Kangma (4175m), soon after which we passed through an army checkpoint without problems. The road continued past the small town of Gala to the Gala Tso from where we had our first sight of Chomolhari. After a photo stop we continued to the village of Tuna, finally turning off the highway near a road-workers' shelter, about two kilometres before the Tang La (c4760m). Exactly 100 years earlier, this was the route taken by Francis Younghusband during the 'Lhasa Mission'. We were surprised to hear that Tibetans were celebrating Younghusband's 'mission'. More than once, we heard Tibetans regret that Younghusband had not stayed in Lhasa and developed a stronger British presence as a counterbalance to 'other interests'.

Despite the relative comfort, excellent cooking and friendly company at base camp the almost constant strong wind was an incentive to go exploring. The first reconnaissance was made directly above base camp in a valley leading towards the west face of Chomolhari. In bad weather, but mercifully out of the wind, we spent three days under the west face looking for prospective lines of ascent. The west face is directly above the glacier basin and is an imposing rock wall, but any prospective routes are threatened by the large, continuous band of ice cliffs that girdles the top third of the wall.



33. At the end of a long night of ascent Julie-Ann Clyma enjoys the first rays of a new day. The full moon above had lit the ascent of the south ridge. (*Roger Payne*)

On the right side of the face a ridge descends through the sérac band, and this would offer a feasible and challenging route to the summit. On the left side of the face is the north-west ridge, and from our vantage point a line of open gullies appeared to allow access onto the ridge at a distinctive boss of ice. However, closer inspection revealed that it was a series of stepped rock chimneys with a lot of very loose rock. We explored possible starts to the line, and concluded it would probably go, but it definitely would not be fun climbing the various wet and verglassed chockstones; and knocking rocks off would be inevitable.

Hoping that there might be more amenable access on the other side of the north-west ridge, we set out to explore the northern aspect of the mountain on 16 April. The face drops directly below the summit as a huge, slabby, granite wall covered in smears of ice. To the left are two spurs exiting onto the north ridge – either would give hard mixed climbs, but both have approaches threatened by séracs. One striking line is a huge ice couloir dropping from the summit beside the first spur. This is highly polished though, due to its being a major drainage line for spindrift whenever snow falls. On the main face the areas of ice are rather disjointed, but it is conceivable that the various ice smears and slabs could be linked together. Further left again and below the north ridge, the face is pure ice with many séracs, and any climbing there looked to be a combination of tedium and extreme danger.

Turning to the north-west ridge, our hopes of gaining the ice boss we had seen from the other side were dashed. Access to the boss was a steep hanging glacier covered in more impassable séracs. Scanning the bottom of the ridge through binoculars, a small fan of snow was seen at the base of the wall. Above was a slanting rock rib, which led to a snow basin that in turn led onto the north-west ridge. It seemed that there might be a hidden couloir that would give us access. Scrambling further up the ridge we were able to see into the bottom half of the couloir where there appeared to be good ice – but the middle section was blocked from view. We were encouraged that this looked much more feasible and appealing than the approach from the west side. Over the next two days we tried to climb a small peak (marked 5900m on the map) for acclimatisation, but were stopped by persistent snowfall and returned to base camp.

Having spent time looking at the north-west ridge from different vantage points (and assuming we could get onto it) it was clear that the crux of the route would be climbing a series of rock buttresses between 6500m and the summit. Once on this ground there looked to be little chance of tent platforms, and exposed bivouacs seemed likely. We estimated that the ridge would be likely to take 5-7 days to climb, and then there was a question of the descent. It would be possible to abseil back down the line of ascent, but an appealing alternative was to traverse the mountain and descend the south ridge by the route climbed in 1996. From a very brief description of this route by the Japan-China team, there was obviously a significant barrier in

the form of the icefall near the start of the route. Having seen the ice conditions on the rest of the mountain we decided to go around to the south side to look at the descent and check whether the icefall was still passable.

We left base camp on 22 April and in three hours reached the valley where the Japan-China team had placed their base camp. We continued upward on moraine, and contoured around the left side of another enormous, frozen lake to reach the edge of the glacier and a camp at c5150m. The day had been cloudy and cold, and as we set up camp snow began to fall. It continued all night and through the next day, but we pressed on up the glacier until we could see the icefall. This was about 200m high, steep and very broken, and with very large séracs to either side. It was impossible to see a way through from our vantage point, but what was obvious was the threat posed by the séracs on both sides of the icefall and the frequent avalanches we were witnessing. Not wanting to proceed in such poor conditions and visibility we camped at c5300m, hoping for a better view the next day. Unfortunately the bad weather continued, so we left a small amount of food and returned to base camp.

Having looked at all the options we decided to try the north-west ridge from the north side, and set out from base camp on the 27 April. It was not an auspicious start as there had been snowfall overnight and the day remained cloudy and cold with the occasional snow flurry. We camped beside the holy lake at c5100m and hoped for an improvement. The following day we had a late start, first drying out the tent and sleeping bags before setting off at midday to traverse around the right side of the lake. From the lake we struck up a grassy ramp running under a rock wall, which took us easily into the moraine at the edge of the glacier. The first section of the glacier was straightforward, but by late afternoon we had reached a very broken section. With the sun now beating down we decided to stop and camp at c5430m.

Next morning we had expected to be starting the couloir, but waking at 4am we had more snow and no visibility, so went back to sleep. The bad weather continued, so we decided to finish the route across the glacier and camp again to the side of the start of the couloir. In the odd clearing and between spindrift avalanches we could see good névé leading into the first part of the couloir, although this seemed to run out among huge rock walls at the top.

The next day, 30 April, dawned clear and cold. We set off moving together in the first part of the couloir for around three rope lengths and then pitched another four rope lengths on good snow and ice, with occasional rock runners in the sidewalls. We were completely sheltered in the couloir, but strong winds were evidently blowing up high. We could see great plumes of spindrift streaming off the ridge and periodically great cascades would pour down the sidewalls and into the gully. The couloir petered out, and we were forced to traverse rightwards onto a mixed buttress. Two awkward



34. The north face and north-west ridge of Chomolhari. The crest of the ridge was very exposed to strong winds. (*Roger Payne*)



35. Roger Payne looks towards the 'impassable' icefall and the threatening séracs that have to be passed to reach the col at the start of the south ridge. (*Roger Payne*)



36. Julie-Ann Clyma crossing Spencer Chapman's knife-edge ridge. (*Roger Payne*)

pitches took us around the nose of the buttress, but then to our great relief we could see the route to the crest of the north-west ridge. Two more excellent pitches on easy mixed ground led to a shallow snow spur dropping from the ridge. This was the perfect campsite (c5900m) – flat enough to dig a platform for the tent and completely sheltered from the prevailing wind. Feeling really pleased with our route-finding, and amazed at the good climbing conditions, we settled in for the night.

May Day dawned clear and sunny, and, at our campsite, quite calm. Unfortunately, strong winds were still very evident above. We climbed onto the ridge and immediately felt its full force. From 6000m to around 6500m the ridge is a gradually steepening ice crest. The climbing initially was straightforward, but the ropes blew in a great arc and it was almost impossible to stay upright in the gusts. While the wind speed was strong at our altitude, it was clearly even stronger above. Faced with difficult climbing above, and the likelihood of an open bivouac, it did not seem wise to continue in such winds. After only about 100m we decided to return to our campsite. We woke on the 2nd to another perfectly clear day, but the same strong winds. Technical climbing on the ridge would simply be impossible and exposed bivouacs extremely perilous, so there was no point trying to go up. We had already lost time to bad weather and sitting out another day would mean that we were beyond the point of having enough food and fuel to complete the climb. Feeling very despondent we abseiled back down the buttress and returned to base camp where we took a rest day and considered our options. We had only five days left before our transport was due to collect us, so we did not have enough time for another attempt on the north-west ridge. However, the sun continued to shine, and finding it impossible to sit at base camp to wait for the jeeps to arrive, we decided to try another quick foray to the south side of the mountain to take a closer look at the icefall and séracs below the south ridge.

On 4 May we retraced our steps to the glacier under the icefall and on the 5th spent a fraught morning working our way up the centre of the icefall. We were forced out to the left to make a quick dash up the slopes under the smaller sérac barrier. This led to long but easy slopes to the south col at around 5800m. Our luck was no better here though, as the snow started to fall in the afternoon and a ferocious storm blew up in the night. In the early hours of the 6th we abandoned attempts to sleep and got fully dressed fearing that the tent could not withstand the constant battering. It did, thankfully, and a tedious day was spent until the storm abated in the late afternoon.

By now we were resigned to descending the icefall the next morning to arrive at base camp one day before the transport. But at nightfall a much-needed miracle occurred – the noise of the wind on the ridges died, at the col it was a gentle breeze, the skies had cleared, and the full moon was up illuminating our side of the mountain. This was not just our last chance for the summit, but also our last chance to do anything. We set off at 1.30am on 7 May.



37. Julie-Ann Clyma approaching the final summit dome. The road to Pagri and beyond can be clearly seen on the distinct 'tongue' of the Tibetan plateau heading south; to the left is Bhutan, to the right Sikkim. (Roger Payne)

The sérac band above the col was the first obstacle. It was not particularly difficult, but finding a way through in the darkness was quite uncertain. However, once through we were on the ridge and the route above was obvious. Moving together we covered ground quickly. It was bitterly cold, and some large sections on the lower slopes were hollow windslab that echoed scarily under our feet. By sunrise we were on safer ground, the ridge narrowing to a most spectacular knife-edge (Chapman and Pasang Dawa had crossed this ridge without crampons). Looking down into Bhutan we could clearly see the line of the first ascent up a broad south-east spur. The knife-edge ran out into final gentler slopes where we took a good rest, then reached the summit just before midday. In contrast to all other days on the expedition, it was totally calm.

We spent half an hour on the top taking photos of peaks in Bhutan, Sikkim and Tibet, and left a small tribute with a prayer flag to honour the Buddhist faith and the mountain gods. Descending, we took an easier line in the upper section, following a large glacial shelf, then picked up our tracks to go back through the sérac barrier and down to the south col, reaching there at 5pm. Having been up and down the south ridge we now realised that our plan to make an on-sight descent after attempting the north-west ridge was extremely optimistic. Finding the route down to the south col was complex and we would have been likely to descend too low on the Bhutan side.

Next morning (8 April) we left the south col at 5am, bypassed most of the icefall by a nerve-racking descent of a large avalanche cone below the séracs and arrived back at base camp at 10.30 just after the Land Cruisers arrived. Everything was quickly thrown into duffels for an immediate departure and by early evening we found ourselves back in a hotel in Gyantse. The rapid transition in just over 24 hours from being on a summit at more than 7000m, to sitting in a restaurant drinking beer, was most bizarre but extremely satisfying. We had been very lucky.

Summary: An account of the exploration of the west and north aspects of Chomolhari, Yadong County, Tibet, and the first attempt on the north-west ridge by Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne. The ridge was exposed to near constant strong winds, making technical climbing impossible and forcing a retreat from around 6000m. With a few days remaining, the pair moved around to the south ridge, which they climbed in one day from a camp at 5800m. The only previous ascent of the south ridge was by a China-Japan team in 1996 using fixed ropes and camps. At around 7000m the south ridge connects with the historic Spencer Chapman route of 1937.

Acknowledgements: Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation, BMC and UK Sport for their support. Equipment was kindly provided by Lyon Equipment (Beal, Petzl-Charlet), Macpac, Outdoor Designs, Rab, HB and Kayland.