
MARK JENKINS

Adventure is not Dead

We are moving through a mystery. Whiteness envelopes us, as if we were high inside the clouds. And, in fact, we are. We cannot see where we are going. We cannot see what lies to our left or right. Our only guide is ascent: we follow the fall line upward, our boots skittering on the ice-glazed talus.

We're in a cirque with no name in the Daxue Shan range on the far eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau. Other than perhaps a Tibetan boy tracking down a lost yak, the last visitors to penetrate the high reaches of this amphitheatre were two Harvard mountaineers back in 1932. Even though we can't see them, from the map we know there are four unclimbed 20,000ft summits looming above us. Ross Lynn and I have come to attempt just one: the east face of Nyambo Konka.

The slope steepens and scree changes to stove-size blocks teetering on black glacier ice at the angle of repose. We move cautiously, almost tiptoeing. A parsimonious expedition, our med kit consists of a few pills of oxycodone. There are no rescue choppers or Sherpas here; the nearest hospital is days away. We are on our own and without back-up.

'Can't see a damn thing,' shouts Ross, just a hint of his Louisiana boyhood in his speech. He stops to breathe. 'What's the elevation?' I peer at my altimeter through the murky gauze: '15,309. Two thousand feet above camp.'

Even in a whiteout, by cross-referencing our Russian 1:200,000 topo with altimeter readings and GPS satellite-beamed lat/longs, we can pinpoint where we are. But these are just numbers. They can establish positions, but not conditions – the rottenness or reliability of the rock, the hollowness or hardness of the ice, the depth and danger of the snow. (Let alone your own fatigue or fear.) All these, the actual exigencies of a mountain, can only be ascertained, thank God, the old-fashioned way: from the ground.

A squall swoops in, graupel rattling upon our helmets like gravel, then vanishes. We follow a spine of rock angling leftward up to a serpentine snow gully; clip on crampons, exchange trekking poles for ice axes, upward through layers of diminishing opacity. The higher we go the more light breaks through. Our depth of field expands from a mere ten feet to a hundred, to a thousand. In minutes the 4000ft east face of Nyambo is staring down on us.

The sinister visage stops us in our tracks. Not being able to see what was above us, we've managed to climb ourselves right up beneath a deeply fractured, quarter-mile-long hanging glacier, akin to wandering into a

building that is about to be dynamited. Ross and I make an abrupt right-angled turn, nervously hightail it across a vast, telltale fan of hardened avalanche debris, drop our loads in a bergschrund and descend via a much safer route on the far right-hand side of the cirque.

'Let's not do that again,' says Ross on the way down.

'Scratch Plan A.'

In the morning we move camp up to the bergschrund. Plan B is to climb the central couloir. With the monocular, we discover it to be constantly running with avalanches. On to Plan C: ascend yet another couloir farther right. This is what happens when you enter terra incognita: you make it up as you go. There's no rule book. First-hand experience rather than second-hand advice dictates decisions. Improvisation is imperative.

Further along the base of the face, we dig out a tent platform inside a bergschrund we believe to be safe from the peril of avalanche. Erect the tent, eat cubes of yak gristle, drink Chinese tea; load our packs for the morning attempt, scooch into our sleeping bags. Ross is regaling me with an ascent of *Lurking Fear*, a notorious route in Yosemite, when the roar of an avalanche begins to drown out his voice. Usually the rumble fades, but in this case the volume increases. Suddenly our tent is being pummelled and bashed-in and Ross and I are screaming, tearing at the tent zippers and diving out into the darkness, clawing bare-handed and sock-footed along the sheer ice. After the avalanche passes we find our tent partially flattened, a softball-sized rock having sliced right down through the fly.

'Perhaps we should move,' says Ross in a calm Southern drawl. We spend the next two hours digging out a new tent platform by head lamp, only to have an avalanche sweep by on the opposite side the moment we're back in our bags.

'Busy place,' I say. The beam of Ross's headlamp responds by bobbing on the tent wall. Neither of us sleep. We listen, like infantry soldiers in a trench, ears straining to interpret the portent of each explosion. We don't talk much; we wait. We wait to see if we survive. We wait for dawn and Plan D.

In May 1932 four young men set sail for China from the docks of New York: Harvard students Arthur Emmons and Terris Moore, New York University student Jack Young, and Dick Burdsall, a graduate from Swarthmore. This exuberant, indefatigable team had ambitious goals. First, to measure the height of Minya Konka, an unexplored peak in western China rumoured to be higher than Everest; second, to climb it; third, to collect plants and animals from the region. They called their project the Sikong Expedition.

After a month at sea, the team arrived in Shanghai. They took a boat up the Yangtze River for 1500 miles, then went by car, rickshaw, horse and finally on foot to the base of the mountain, arriving early in August. They dedicated two months to reconnoitring the region, mapping and measuring

not only Minya Konka, which turned out to be just shy of 25,000ft, but a dozen other peaks in the Daxue Shan, including Nyambo Konka.

Objective one completed, the mountaineers spent the month of October tackling Minya Konka. Entire camps were buried in snowstorms. They bivouacked on ridges, cramming three men into one sleeping bag while playing chess. And, almost unbelievably, they summited. Moore and Burdsall planted an American flag on Minya Konka on 28 October 1932. It was the highest mountain yet climbed by Americans, and the second highest mountain ever climbed by anyone, done without bottled oxygen or Sherpa support. The team even managed to fulfil their third aim, presenting the Metropolitan Museum of the Academia Sinica in Nanking with five blue sheep, three gorals, two wild boars, a grizzly bear, a black bear, a musk-deer ...and a partridge in a pear tree.

Moore, Young and Burdsall arrived back in the US after nine months on expedition. Unfortunately, Emmons had severe frostbite and was forced to stay behind in a small Chinese village. 'Yachow was destined to be my home for seven months while my feet underwent renovation and my toes were removed,' he wrote. 'One could have gone much farther and fared far worse in the matter of cheerful and sincere friendship than with these fine men and women.'

The Sikong Expedition was a bold success and the book Emmons and Burdsall subsequently wrote, *Men Against the Clouds*, is a cornerstone of American mountaineering literature. Here are lines from the last page: 'Ours had been some of the finest adventures imaginable. We had sweated and frozen, starved and feasted, faced hardship and danger, together.'

Of course that was three-quarters of century ago, back when the world was still fresh and real adventure could still be had. You could never do such an expedition today. Right?

Although he now lives in Livingston, Montana, Ross Lynn, 26, grew up on a farm in northern Louisiana barely above sea level. He's a fifth generation cotton farmer, returning every spring and fall to help his Dad with planting and harvesting. Sometime around 3am, clinging to the east face of Nyambo Konka, he began explaining modern tractors to me.

They're entirely computerized. The control panel is like the cockpit of an aeroplane, numbers and gauges everywhere. Seed count, seed spacing, planting depth – it's all measured and monitored. 'Thing is,' Ross paused for a moment listening to the foreboding whistle of a falling rock, 'in the end, you still have to know your dirt and your field. You still have to sit on the tractor and go up and down the rows. And you can still lose it all in one bad storm.'

Ross talked tractors and Louisiana cooking until a faint ribbon of orange appeared in the east. If we'd had any information about the east face, we would have started climbing in the dark. As it was, we had to wait until daybreak to determine which couloirs were safe.



44. Ross Lynn at our 13,000ft cirque camp at the base of the east face of Nyambo Konka. (*Mark Jenkins*)



45. Ross Lynn soloing at 17,000ft on the east face of Nyambo Konka. (*Mark Jenkins*)



46. Ross Lynn at 18,000ft on the east face of Nyambo Konka. (*Mark Jenkins*)



47. Two Tibetan pilgrims circumambulating the stupa outside the Litang Monastery in Eastern Tibet. (*Mark Jenkins*)

'I'd say none,' said Ross handing me the monocular. 'Take a look.'

There was a 100ft-deep cornice hanging over the breadth of the face. Our best choice was to angle rightward, crossing avalanche chutes, trying to climb largely on the rock ribs. The first few hundred feet were a scamper, then the face steepened and we were confronted with the appalling insecurity of the rock – thousands of feet of sharp, irregular blocks stacked precariously one on top of the other. Only the mortar of ice held the wall together. Pulling out any one block might bring down a million tons of rock.

Plan E: Fuck the cornice. Climb a couloir.

Unroped, each kicking fanged feet and swinging ice tools, we gradually ascended a web of interconnected couloirs. It wasn't until we found ourselves on a 70° fin of ice that Ross laconically suggested we rope up. Both of us were ticklishly balanced on front-points with 2000ft of space between our legs. I pulled the rope from my pack while Ross dug out the ice screws. He seemed lethargic. I suspected altitude sickness, but said nothing. Removing the screws he accidentally dropped his harness. It bounced down the face catching on a ledge. We managed to retrieve it, but lost time and momentum. From then on we moved at a snail's pace.

It was afternoon sometime when we stopped at a ridiculously insecure belay. Spindrift was flying around our faces.

'We're moving too slow,' I shouted over the roar. Ross nodded. Yelling back and forth, we discussed our options. Continuing upward, whether we reached the summit or not, would guarantee an exposed, bagless bivouac. Hypothermia certain, frostbite probable. We had no idea of our descent route. We didn't have enough gear to rap what we'd come up.

Ross stabbed his finger downward, and we turned around.

We rapped off several disconcertingly small rock fragments frozen into the wall before finding a gully we could down-climb. It was a long haul back to the tent, where we both collapsed.

'Hardest day of my life,' Ross croaked. 'I've never been so exhausted.'

In the past decade, a *fin de siècle*, everything's-been-done jadedness has become trendy in certain outdoor circles. Everest has been climbed a thousand times, the Eiger a hundred times, Denali, Kili', Aconcagua, the other 8000ers, all have seen countless ascents. The world's mountains have been climbed, its rivers run, its ice caps crossed. Time to play Dragon Quest VIII. Even messianic Reinhold Messner, who should know better, declared in the *Guardian* last year: 'Mountaineering is over. Alpinism is dead. Maybe its spirit is still alive a little in Britain and America, but it will soon die out.'

Excuse me, but horseshit. I acknowledge that the age of geographical exploration, with the enormous exceptions of deep space and the deep sea, is over. There are no seas left unsailed and there will never be another Magellan. Every large village in Africa has the internet – Livingstone must be turning in his grave. For a price, you can fly to either pole and drink champagne on ice, blaspheming the achievements of Amundsen and Peary.

The Silk Road is an asphalt two-lane highway, the Inca Trail a tourist trap, the Oregon Trail an Interstate.

So grand exploration is over, but, the age of adventure, micro-exploration, I suggest, has only just begun. Take mountaineering: OK, all the biggies have been climbed – the fourteen 8000-metre peaks, the seven summits, Mont Blanc, Mount Cook etc. However, this list represents only a fraction of the world's tallest mountains. According to the International Union of Alpine Associations (UIAA) there are 146 unclimbed 7000-metre peaks! At the 2005 Alpine Club symposium at the Rheged Centre near Penrith, Tomatsu Nakamura, the leading authority on the mountains of eastern Tibet, estimated that there are 200 to 250 unclimbed 6000-metre (20,000ft) peaks in this region alone. Worldwide, there are thousands upon thousands of virgin 5000 and 6000-metre mountains.

As for cragging, there are unclimbed walls from Baffin Island to the Baltoro.

'As technical standards continue to grow, people look at things with different eyes and see new possibilities,' explains Kelly Cordes, assistant editor of the *American Alpine Journal*. 'Combine modern ice, rock and alpine skills with old-school vision and spirit, and lines previously believed to be utterly impossible go.' Cordes, 37, certainly walks the talk. He has put up unrepeated first ascents in Alaska, Peru and Pakistan, most recently ascending the south-west ridge of Great Trango Tower with Josh Wharton in a stunning four-day sufferfest. 'The potential for adventure is limited by your imagination, not by geography,' says Cordes.

The mere thought of all these unclimbed walls and peaks can send me to Google Earth (an internet mountain porn site) where I'll lose hours lasciviously zooming in and out on peaks photographed from space, but never touched. Sceptics quiz me about my passion for first ascents. There are so many proper classic lines, what's the point? Is it ego?

Yes. But here's the thing. Once a route has been climbed, you don't have to find your own way. If you get confused, check the guidebook. This is like looking at the answers to a crossword puzzle. You've missed the satisfying chance of figuring it out on your own. Well then, you say, don't take the guidebook. Fair enough, if contrived, and yet, if somebody's climbed it, you already know something elemental. You know it can be done, and therefore some of the magnetism of the mystery is lost.

If you know no one has been there, the mystery seduces you. Can it be done? No one knows. The reason to go is to find out. The reason to go is to find out whether *you* can do it; whether you have the nerve and craft, resilience and resourcefulness to overcome whatever the mystery might be. It is, if you like, to think on your feet and dance on your fears.

Ross and I back off all the way to base camp. While he rests, I recon' the south side of Nyambo Konka, finding four enormous south-facing ridges. They each begin along the Basong River and rise a staggering 10,000ft to

the summit – more vertical than the north face of Everest. Because they start at such a low elevation, the first 2000ft consist of an almost impenetrable barrier of thorn bushes and brambles.

Ross and I choose the central south ridge for our second go and are practically skinned alive trying to breach the ‘briar patch’. Imagine Jack’s beanstalk spiked with thorns or a jungle gym of cactus reaching into the sky, then imagine climbing up it with a 50lb pack on your back. When we finally emerge onto the grassy alpine slopes above, we’re so scratched and bloodied we will be pulling spines out of our hands for the next month. We dig camp into the rocks at 15,000ft. The wind is so fierce we resort to lining the inside of the tent with brick-sized stones to keep it, and us, from being blown into the sky like the house in the Wizard of Oz.

On our second summit bid we encounter a series of intricate, thoroughly unsafe gendarmes – castle-like towers of friable rock guarding the snowy ridge to the top. We are often cliffed-out and forced to find another route. We knock off boulders that careen frightfully through space. We climb sideways and down and over and sometimes, when we were lucky, up. The arête is a spectacular rock maze that no one before us has ever entered. I am thoroughly entranced. The weather is splendid, despite a spectacular wind. I think we have it made.

Unpropitiously, Ross is again moving slowly. It has nothing to do with his technical skills; he climbs hard rock and even harder ice, notably a 10-hour ascent of 2000ft Losar in Nepal, the highest frozen waterfall in the world. Altitude is just a frustratingly fickle fellow.

Somewhere above 17,000ft, Ross’s legs simply refuse to go any further. And there’s nothing he can do about it. ‘This makes climbing in Yosemite seem like child’s play,’ he whispers. It’s the end of our expedition. But we’ll be back.

It took the 1932 Sikong Expedition three months to get to the Daxue Shan from the US. It took Ross and I less than a week. The Sikong Expedition exchanged formal letters with the government of China for over a year to obtain permits; I simply emailed my contact in Chengdu.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but 21st century communication and transportation have increased, rather than decreased, opportunities for micro-exploration. Aeroplanes and the internet have democratised adventure. You no longer need special contacts, huge sponsors or stacks of money to pull off a world-class trip. You need only a good partner, a few weeks, an airline ticket and a fistful of desire.