
TOM LIVINGSTONE

Massive Attack

Hard Climbing and Controversy on Tengkangpoche



The lower portion of the north-east pillar of Tengkangpoche partly shrouded in cloud and a topo (opposite) illustrating where the route goes on the lower portion of the mountain. (Tom Livingstone)

October 2021. I'm hanging from a single peg in front of my face, watching it flex under my weight. Anxiously scratching the snow, I search for another placement. The key to Tengkangpoche's upper headwall is contained within this single crack. All our efforts up to this moment have been focussed on one question: could we climb through this feature? How I've wondered, worried and longed to see what was around this corner. Would it go? A gust blew ice against my numb face and stung my eyes, shaking the rope like it was useless string. Straddling the blunt arête, a thousand metres of air dropped away beneath my boots. The valley below was already dark: night was rushing in.

'Move!' I shouted at myself, trying to maintain pace whilst aid climbing. The building drumbeat of Massive Attack's 'Angel' thundered round my head, filled my ears. *You are my angel / Come from way above*. I climbed another metre and looked up, simultaneously registering the setting sun suddenly on my face – bright but without warmth – and the end of the headwall.



I could see easier névé leading to the summit ridge. I leant out above the void and glanced back at Matt Glenn, huddled in all his clothes. Punching the air, I screamed.

‘Yeah! It goes! Also, watch me.’

Six weeks earlier. I had been eager to climb in Nepal for many years. Its history and culture is intertwined with mountains and alpinism. I’d heard many stories of the kind Sherpa people, living in the shadows of the world’s highest mountains. Since I’d already visited Pakistan three times and India once, the Nepali Himalaya and Khumbu in particular made sense. In September 2021, Matt Glenn and I agreed on a last-minute climbing trip there.

Matt’s strength of mind compensated for his relatively green experience in the Greater Ranges. He is also a member of the UK’s Young Alpinist Group, the mentoring programme I set up a few years ago. The previous winter we shared a rope on the north faces of La Meije, the

Grandes Jorasses and Les Droites, quickly developing a strong partnership and mutual affinity for techno music and hedonistic parties. He speaks with a light Northern Irish accent and his eyes light up when he enthuses about ‘the sesh’. I also saw in him a familiar psyche for difficult alpine routes.

Matt and I searched for objectives that fit our requirement for a relatively short trip in October: the mountain couldn’t be too high, so as to limit the acclimatisation needed; it mustn’t be too far from civilisation, so as to limit the trekking approach; not too expensive; and either something that grabbed our attention, like an aesthetic and already climbed line, or a new route that appeared high quality. I found a couple of mountains but filed them away for another time as being either too high or too remote. Then, scrolling around Google Earth, I saw a mysterious peak. There was the tell-tale sign of a large pointed shadow jutting from its base. The altitude was good, there was a village nearby and the face looked steep. I messaged Dawa at Dream Himalaya Adventures but he replied immediately: ‘that’s Tsoboje, the Slovenians’ objective.’

I’d just spent 10 days in Slovenia with my girlfriend Christelle, seeing all my friends there. We knew of each other’s trips to Nepal but I hadn’t asked



Tom Livingstone with Sherku Sherpa, the team's trekking guide, and Matt Glenn with Everest, Lhotse and Makalu over his shoulder. *(Tom Livingstone)*

about their ideas. I called Luka Stražar and we laughed. 'You've discovered our plans,' he said, 'and you're welcome to join us.' We joked this could be a rematch between the UK and Slovenia (after teams have unexpectedly and unintentionally met in the same base camp).

'Thanks,' I replied, 'but if you're going to this mountain, Matt and I will look elsewhere.' Whilst I enjoy sociable trips, I prefer isolation.

I re-checked my list of 'amazing unclimbed peaks', noting I'd written 'Tengkangpoche'. I'd already messaged Quentin Roberts in June 2021, congratulating him on his previous attempts to climb this 6,487m mountain in Nepal's Khumbu region. He'd spent six days on the sharp and sheer north-east pillar in 2019 with Juho Knuuttila and tried it again in spring 2021 with Jesse Huey. I asked if he was planning to return and if conditions were much worse in the autumn. Quentin's reply made the peak sound better in the spring – more sun and a more pleasant-looking snow ridge – so I initially ruled it out.

The search continued, Matt and I stressing about our departure date looming in just two weeks. Eventually, I suggested the Thame valley. It fitted our requirements and had a host of mountains nearby: Kwande, Kongde Ri, Tengkangpoche, Tengi Ragu Tau and several things we couldn't name but liked the look of. I figured we'd find something when we arrived and saw the peaks first hand. We'd keep our options open. Or more accurately, as I often do, we just postponed the decision. I messaged Quentin again on 17 September: 'we're going exploring but I feel it's important to be honest – Tengkangpoche is something we're interested in! Reading about your first attempt makes me think it was a really good effort and there doesn't seem to be a feasible way up it ... but then if you went back for a second time you think it'll go ...?!'

Quentin replied, 'I appreciate the honesty!! It is a beautiful mountain! Yes I hope so but sadly wasn't able to find out. Keep in touch when you're in the Khumbu. I'm excited to hear how things go for you guys. Especially [with regards to] weather and conditions. If you've got any questions hit me

up of course. Jesse and I are planning to go back in the spring. Would you be keen? Or going back to Pakistan?’

Over the next two days we exchanged dozens of messages about Teng Kangpoche. Quentin kindly offered lots of beta about route choice, gear and logistics. Much of it was stuff I’d already figured out from my own experience in the mountains but I was grateful to Quentin for sharing his first-hand experience. In fact, there was plenty of information from Quentin’s two previous attempts on the mountain: articles, reports, photos, a kit list, a podcast interview and videos. This publicity had certainly generated interest within the alpine community, and I wondered if we’d meet other teams in Nepal with more concrete ideas of trying Teng Kangpoche.

I asked Dawa for a permit to the Thame valley. My experience in Pakistan and India has been that permits are a pointlessly bureaucratic and occasionally expensive process. On three of my trips the agent has essentially ‘fudged’ the permit, either ignoring it or combining it with another team. I’ve also heard of permits being issued after the route has been climbed. Dawa explained the easiest method was to apply for Teng Kangpoche. Being under 6,500m meant minimal paperwork. With flights hurriedly booked and only days to go, Matt and I agreed: put Teng Kangpoche on the form and we can sort it out later, if and when we climbed anything. The permit was not a binding obligation.

When Matt saw the gear explosion in my garage, he laughed. I kept stuffing gear into duffels.

‘You rocket.’ He often used this phrase to mean someone or something that was a bit crazy of or wild. Although after 10 trips to the Greater Ranges I’m boring enough to have a spreadsheet to remind me what to bring. I still forget things though.

We threw a going-away party. Amongst the guests were Gabriel and his girlfriend. Gab was also going to Nepal, with the French young alpinist team. We chatted and planned to meet in Kathmandu after our trips. I said goodbye to Christelle at the airport. ‘Come back safe,’ she replied.

Our teahouse base camp was a mud-lined building dug into into the hillside of the Thengbo valley. Low clouds scudded over juniper bushes slowly browning with autumn. A stream bubbled past some excellent bouldering. If it weren’t for the yaks grazing nearby and the occasional glimpse of snow-covered summits high above, it could’ve been the Scottish Highlands. This sense of familiarity, of home, relaxed me only for the distant mountains to emerge from the clouds, reigniting my nerves.

Matt and I stooped through the door and blinked in the darkness. Tsongee Sherpa greeted us with her wide smile. A stove smoked with yak shit. We sipped sweet masala tea. ‘This’ll do nicely for the next month!’ we agreed.

Just before we left Thame village and our last connection to wifi, Quentin messaged me saying he was upset we might try Teng Kangpoche. He’d seen a post by our agent with the caption ‘Teng Kangpoche Expd’. I explained about putting the mountain on our permit because it was easiest (and cheapest) and how it was just one of many options we had in mind, including the



Climbing the lower slabs. (*Tom Livingstone*)

mountain's north face, rather than its pillar. I respected the fact he had put in a lot of effort. I suggested it was better to talk again at the end of our trip.

Once in Thengbo, the quietness allowed us to focus. We switched off our phones and began to feel the rhythm of the mountains. We scoped our surroundings through our budget binoculars. Down valley, Kwande appeared like a fortress: a bulk of rock and ice. Kongde Ri rose in a jumble of walls, like a double Grandes Jorasses. At the head of the cirque, Tengi Ragu Tau stood tall and imposing. And straight in front of us, Tengkangpoche soared. It reminded me of Les Drus in Chamonix, a pointed spire ready to blast off, almost ripping the fabric of the sky.

We stood outside our teahouse in the cool of the morning, coffees in hand. 'Angel' by Massive Attack was pounding darkly through the speaker, a storm of energy.

'Belter,' Matt commented.

Our fingers traced imaginary lines up the mountains but our uncertainty left them hanging in the air to float with our unfinished sentences.

'If you go up that ramp system, maybe you can ...?'

Eventually we drifted back to earth, not yet daring to believe. Instead, shouldering packs, we trudged up the valley to acclimatise. Then, with more red-blood cells, we returned to Thame village for internet and hot showers. A weather window appeared on our forecasts. Tengkangpoche's north-east pillar seemed the most suitable objective. It was in the best condition, with dry rock and little snow; it also looked like the most impressive and obvious. We were slightly intimidated, since Quentin and Juho had found a lot of hard free and aid climbing. We were also somewhat hesitant. Quentin had tried it twice before and invested a lot of effort, but we reasoned we'd just 'have a look.' Matt and I packed our bags with quiet apprehension, minimising gear as much as possible. I was optimistic; we had a good partnership. But I was also apprehensive. Could we climb so many hard pitches, day after day?



Livingstone described the climbing as split equally between hard aid and free climbing and mixed climbing. Although they didn't offer a grade, they agreed with previous assessments of around 5.11, A3 and M7. *(Tom Livingstone)*

At first light the following day we stood at the base of the pillar. Our trekking guide Sherku had kindly carried a bag up the grassy slopes too. Now, with everything inside, our packs weighed about 17kg each. I worried we had too much junk but reasoned that big routes need big bags.

We scrambled up easy slabs until steeper ground called for the rope. It was strangely reminiscent of Idwal Slabs in north Wales. That was a comfort. Matt led, stretched out on smooth ripples of stone, double boots clunking against the granite.

'Shit!' he shouted, skidding and tumbling down the rock. Thankfully his fall was stopped by his last piece of gear. 'Sorry man,' he said as he dusted himself off. He was fine.

'You rocket!' I said.

Moving together along ledge systems and zigzagging up the face, the terrain grew steeper and the walls began to loom. Transitioning to crampons and axes, we raced up snow and ice through a feature we'd nicknamed 'the smiles': two upward arcs of snow we spotted from base camp. Above, impressive rock walls were cut with large snow terraces, like thin layers within a cake. We hoped to find comfortable bivys at these terraces.

Around noon, we reached a snow terrace where previous teams had camped.

'We can't stop here. It's only noon.' Matt and I were agreed. I'm all for taking it slow and stopping early on these Himalayan marathons but sleeping there seemed counter-productive. We shrugged on our giant red backpacks again and weaved back left. Just before the next snow terrace, one long mixed pitch had me hot and pumped, cursing the strangely compact-yet-loose granite. I left my backpack on a piece of gear about 15m from the belay so Matt had to second the pitch whilst dragging it.



A fall on their first two-day attempt left Livingstone with a damaged little finger that spelled descent and recovery.
(Tom Livingstone)



Despite injuring his finger, the pair fixed their ropes and returned to their previous night's bivy before jumaring back up, still hopeful they could make progress. With only Glenn able to lead, they decided to retreat.
(Tom Livingstone)

‘You rocket.’

Stomping out our first bivy in the snow, the sun painted the surroundings in gold. Everest, Makalu, Cho Oyu and hundreds of other impressive peaks smouldered.

‘I guess that’s Everest!’ I said, pointing to the highest peak.

‘You think?!’ Matt teased. ‘It looks strangely close ... funny to see it in reality, and to think it’s made of snow and rock, just like everything else.’

We also saw Quentin’s backpack from his attempt in the spring. He and Jesse had put in a good effort but had had bad luck with the weather. We looked inside then left it alone. Diving into the tent, we tried not to think about the 300m headwall looming above.

Next day we aimed to fix our single and tagline ropes up the lower headwall but after an hour of glorious sunshine, we shuddered in fridge-like temperatures again.

‘It looks like the Dawn Wall,’ I thought. I started aid climbing up sporadic crack systems and patches of ice, my limited aid experience making things slow. On the second pitch, after about 20m, I saw an in-situ copperhead and gingerly weighted it. Using my axe to pull up, I suddenly felt a crunch. The axe had ripped and I slumped onto the copperhead, which immediately ripped. I was caught by a good cam some way down the wall but scraped my little finger on the rock on the way down. Blood dripped out of a deep cut. I found I could wiggle the nail around.

Back at the bivy, we bandaged the wound. ‘You rocket,’ Matt said. ‘Let’s keep climbing for now.’ We jumared back to my pitiful high point. I couldn’t believe I’d fallen off and scraped my little finger – of all things. It was my ego

that was most bruised but we were concerned the finger might get infected.

Matt led three more pitches until, late in the afternoon, we had the inevitable conversation.

‘What do you think?’ Matt asked.

Climbers always start an awkward conversation like this; the words are heavy, loaded with subtext.

‘I can only jumar with a giant mitt and my finger hurts but it’s okay. I guess it really needs a doctor. Sorry mate. Shit. Maybe we could keep going but you’d have to lead a lot?’

‘I think it needs medical attention. You don’t want it to get infected and we have about five more days to go.’

We rapped down to our bivy, pulling the ropes. The following day we descended, taking all our gear with us. With heavy legs and quiet thoughts, we walked to Thame in search of a doctor. Of all the reasons to bail, this seemed the most pathetic. The doctor in Thame valley winced when he saw my finger. ‘Hmm... that needs cleaning,’ he said, squirting iodine into the wound. He slowly dressed it and gave me antibiotics.

Five days later, the clouds cleared. Matt and I could finally see the mountaintops. The peaks had been transformed, now completely plastered with snow. I nursed my bandaged finger and swore. I was pissed off about my injury and the poor weather but glad the forecast showed another opportunity for us to try something. I was grateful Matt was still psyched and not outwardly annoyed at me for blowing our best opportunity. We walked back up to our teahouse in Thengbo, lost in our thoughts. What should we try? Would conditions be good enough? The weather stable? Would my finger be healed enough?

After the bad weather, we decided Tengkangpoche’s north-east pillar was again our most logical option. The surrounding peaks of Kongde Ri, Kwande and Tengi Ragu Tau remained buried in powder snow which cleared slowly due to their northerly aspect; they also avalanched often and remained dangerous. Tengkangpoche’s pillar was steep and thus mostly devoid of snow; it was also cleaning the quickest and received some sun. The pillar had a low avalanche danger and would be slightly sheltered from the strong westerly winds. Plus, we had gained knowledge of the first section.

We also decided to use some bars, gas and a few items of equipment we’d seen in Quentin’s stashed pack. In hindsight, we shouldn’t have taken this ‘lazy’ option; it wasn’t the best decision. At the time, we reasoned we would each save a kilo or two on the first day of climbing. It wouldn’t make the difference between climbing the mountain or not, since the pack was low on the pillar, but the weight-saving was useful. In my messages with Quentin, he’d said the gear ‘might be bad by now already.’ Matt and I also agreed that if we bailed from the pillar, we’d replace everything we had used with our excess food and gas, thus leaving the stash in its original condition. We had the necessary food, gas and gear in base camp, but the rapid change of conditions, the failure of our first attempt and the knowledge of what to expect on that first day meant we made the easier choice.



Matt Glenn aid climbing on the second attempt. *(Tom Livingstone)*

We packed our bags, feeling a sense of déjà vu from our first attempt. I threw the same items into the same rucksack, bouncing to electronic music blasting from the speaker.

‘Are you going for more acclimatisation?’ Sherku asked.

‘We’re going up there!’ I said excitedly, pointing to the pillar.

‘Oh!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’ll watch for you.’

Next morning, beneath a thousand soft stars, we launched. Sherku again helped us by carrying some of our gear to the base of the mountain. By dawn, we were climbing. Instead of soloing dry rock, this time we donned crampons and waded slowly through unconsolidated powder, taking turns to dig. Finally reaching steeper ground and the feature we’d dubbed ‘the smiles’, we moved faster, weaving through the lower section of the pillar. On the harder mixed pitch below the first bivy, I was prepared; I hauled my pack and knew what pieces of gear to place. I’d been dreading this section but it actually went smoothly: it’s always better to expect the climbing to be difficult.

We reached the first bivy, satisfied the ascent had gone smoothly so far. Early on the second day, we quested onto the lower headwall. I felt anxious about the upcoming climbing but through experience and many sleepless nights, I’ve learnt not to think too much about what may – or may not – happen on an alpine route. Time will tell, and the best way to find out was to start.

By sunrise, now only touching our wall for 45 minutes, I was aiding again. I reached the second pitch, dubbed ‘the Livingstone lob’, and this time climbed without incident. The cracks were more choked with ice than our previous attempt and the temperatures noticeably cooler.

‘Not much point in using the rock shoes,’ I joked. Matt juggled the single rope wearing his down jacket then took over. He aided another two pitches, steadily inching higher. The long silence was broken with warnings to watch



Glenn tucking in at the alcove bivouac. (Tom Livingstone)

him and then: 'Is it legit to aid on your ice axes?' We rappelled back down to our bivy late in the afternoon, fixing our tagline and single rope in order to re-ascend them next morning. This would give us a fast start through the lower headwall and then we could gun for the next snow terrace above.

On day three we again woke early, apprehensive about the 300m of hard aid climbing above. Rubbing our fuzzy eyes, we robotically heated water, racked up and packed the tent. In the soft pastel colours of dawn, we took turns to jug the ropes. I tried to switch off my brain as I slid the jumars methodically up the 6mm tagline, dubiously eyeing the furry orange cord. I was glad to be moving upwards efficiently but disliked both the act and the risk involved. I suppose in this instance jugging made sense.

Matt steadily led several pitches then I took over. We followed the only cracks on this otherwise compact wall, always chasing the arc of the sun as it slipped away, just out of reach. The tempo of aid climbing gave the belayer plenty of time to think, whilst the leader's heart hammered out of their chest as they stared at the bendy half-in peg in front of their face, gingerly stepping higher in the etrier.

'I almost enjoy aid,' I shouted down to Matt during one particularly long pitch. 'It's engaging and hard and while it's not as fun as climbing, you can get into a good rhythm.' Our Nomic ice axes were now battered, the constant placing of pegs and peckers taking its toll. I was impressed at the steepness of the wall. Only occasional foot ledges offered the slightest relief.

At sunset, I started up slabbier ground. We were relieved to have made it through the steepest section of the lower headwall and eager to reach the next snow terrace. With slow dread, we realised it was still far away.

'This is relentless; it just goes on and on.' In the darkness I climbed into a dead-end, eventually went the correct way, tried to excavate a one-seat bivy then finally found a small alcove that must've been occupied by Quentin and Juho in 2019.



Livingstone aids steep terrain on the third day of their second attempt. (Matt Glenn)

As Matt's headtorch lit up the ledge something tumbled from his harness and he swore. 'That's my second crampon heel bail.'

'What?' I looked at his crampons hanging from his harness. The heel bails were obviously missing.

'I think I can make some out of cord later,' he replied. 'Let's get some food first.'

We excavated the alcove and slumped into an uncomfortable semi-spooning position. It was 1am by the time we half-pulled our double sleeping bag over us. Doubts drifted through my head. Are we too tired and too slow? Can we climb this thing? We joked darkly that we'd fixed ropes on the lower part of the headwall specifically to avoid this alcove bivy, yet here we were. At least the night was calm.

On the fourth day, I climbed several mixed pitches of névé, enjoying the quicker style of movement. Some sections were only 20cm wide and required delicate, considered swings. I welcomed the good cam placements and supportive crunch

of my crampons, enjoying the more familiar feel of free climbing. I finally reached the snow terrace but frowned as the sun immediately left my belay.

Finding a good bivy site and being both tired, we decided to stop early. The 'marathon pace' of Himalayan climbing had finally been beaten into us. We were really psyched to have made it through the lower headwall, which was demanding but we knew it had already been climbed. The real crux lay above. The upper headwall was the biggest 'unknown' of the route and we didn't know if it was even possible. We might find blank slabs too, we mused. However, we'd seen a right-trending ramp system from the valley and now camped below it, were pleased to see cracks split the rock.

I took stock of our food, counting out bars and my favourite peanut butter sachets. 'We'll run out after lunch on day seven,' I said, wishing anyway that this be our last. We'd already begun sharing our meals. Yet we went to sleep optimistic and hopeful, daring to believe we could make it through the wall and onto the snow ridge above.

The glorious, warming, life-giving sunshine hit us as we aided on the fifth day. Our rhythm was now familiar: Matt started leading then I took over.



Livingstone climbing thin ice runnels on day four, which he described as 'a nice change after all the aid climbing on the previous day'. (Matt Glenn)

'Take as long as you like,' I joked as he pegged upwards. 'I'm just happy to be warm.' He steadily progressed up the cracks we'd seen from the bivy, laughing in the sun. The gear was often small or fiddly but never too desperate; there weren't lots of 'bodyweight only' placements in a row. Still, Matt took a small fall when a micro cam blew, grunting with surprise then resuming with determination. I took over, desperately hoping for easy ground leading out of the headwall. We could see Quentin and Juho's highpoint just below our ramp system and really felt for them; they had come so close.

Finally I reached the exposed arête with the single crack running through it, battering in pegs and wires as hard as I could. Hammered by the wind, I could still see the final lock was opened. Matt seconded the pitch with wild, wide eyes, but he cracked a grin when he saw we'd made it through the headwall. Another perfect bivy, sheltered by a cliff band, appeared in the flash of my headtorch a few metres away. Happiness spread through me at the prospect of comfort. We put up the tent and collapsed inside. Exchanging messages with friends via our Garmin InReach, they reassured us about the forecast. 'Keep safe!' they said.

There was a final question mark in our minds. Could we find a way through the cliff band that we'd stopped under? On our sixth day, Matt searched for a passage through, both of us hoping for an easy way out. We'd been tried and tested and pushed for days. Now, all we wanted was respite; our slim bodies were like tired engines, burning more energy than they consumed. Instead, we found an overhanging step that looked hard. Tired and buffeted by the bitter wind, I willed Matt to climb fast. He backed off, unsure if he could free it.

'I'm not sure if it's possible,' he said. I swore to myself, not wanting to bail from here.

'Can you switch to aid?' I suggested, grateful he was leading. In his fatigue, he hadn't even considered aid climbing but with renewed energy he tried again.



The purgatory of the summit ridge on day seven. (*Matt Glenn*)

Wearing every item of his clothing, the wind whistling, Matt methodically aided through the cliff band and belayed on its lip.

‘This is totally wild!’ he shouted. He was right: the belay seemingly hung straight over the valley in an outrageous, adrenaline-pulsing position. Using my axes and crampons, I then tried to mantle onto the *névé* slope above, picks dragging through the soft snow. Stepping onto the top piece of the belay and trying not to stab Matt, I leant into the slope and delicately pull on my axes, expecting everything to rip and for me to crash onto the anchor. With heart thumping and my breath stolen by the wind, I inched higher, face hovering above the snow until I could swing into solid *névé* and breathe again.

Matt seconded, his crampons now attached with thin cord. I was impressed he’d fashioned a solution to his missing heel bails. Then we slugged up the snow ridge, the occasional ice screw offering a little safety in the soft sugar. The *arête* felt ‘classically Himalayan’, a beautiful white arc rising towards the still-distant summit. Soon, there was basically no gear or belays. We plunged our axes into the unsupportive snow, sinking up to our elbows as we overcame tricky steps in the ridge.

I took stock at sunset. ‘We’re still miles from the top. I think we’re going to have to bivy again. This thing is a monster,’ I said, feeling cold. Matt nodded;

words were now expensive and tiring. Flecks of ice pelted our face and we huddled against the wind cutting into the ridge. Then we hunkered inside the tent, occasional gusts punching and shaking the fabric. We both agreed that we had to be finished next day, or we'd be very hungry.

Matt did a brilliant job leading on the final, seventh morning, sticking to the crest and breaking trail. I followed, drained. I was hypnotised by loose snow whipping from the ridge and flying into the distance. Then, having eaten an entire sachet of peanut butter, I took over with new energy.

Eventually, finally, I belly-flopped onto the summit at around noon, screaming down to Matt. 'I can't believe it. I can't believe we've actually done it!' Then I looked around in case there was a higher point. With so many unknown variables and so much difficult climbing, we'd been half-expecting to bail. There were so many times when we wanted an easy pass, a break from the hard or bold pitches, but the route was relentless. We'd wondered, sometimes aloud, about the cruxes: could we find a passage through the upper wall? Would we be able to protect the snow ridge? At each moment, at each test, we were lucky to make it through. And here we were: tired, elated and at the top.

Our descent down the east ridge was thankfully quick and straightforward. From a col, we then rappelled and down-climbed about 1,500m back to the Thame valley. Wasted, covered in white sun cream, but deeply satisfied, we staggered back into our teahouse as night fell on our seventh day. Sherku hugged us tightly, his smile flashing brightly in the light of our headtorches. We texted our friends: 'Back safe.'

Next morning Matt and I lay on a huge boulder outside the teahouse, soaking in the warm sunshine. We both thought the climb was finished, that we'd weathered the storm. However, there was another one gathering on the horizon. 'The yaks have already taken your bags to the village,' Sherku said, so we shouldered our climbing packs again and staggered down the valley, double boots clumping around our shoulders.

'Mmm, food,' I said, stopping to lie in the grass after only a kilometre. We looked back at Teng Kangpoche, its snowy spine proudly showing. It felt surreal to think we were on the summit only yesterday, our lives distilled into climbing and survival. The route had been relentless, each day our bodies weaker and thinner.

Connecting to wifi in Thame village, I messaged Quentin Roberts. I felt it was important he learnt of our ascent from us rather than finding out online. I also contacted my parents and girlfriend Christelle, learning the tragic news that Gabriel Miloché, Louis Pachoud and Thomas Arfi had died on the nearby peak Mingbo Eiger. Gab and Louis had been great friends and I'd hoped to meet them in Kathmandu. My mind reeled. Suddenly, our ascent felt empty and meaningless.

Posting on Instagram about our route, I was surprised at the storm I generated. Quentin was upset I hadn't immediately acknowledged using gear from his backpack. I intended to publish a full account at a later date, with due credit, but I underestimated how necessary it would be to immediately

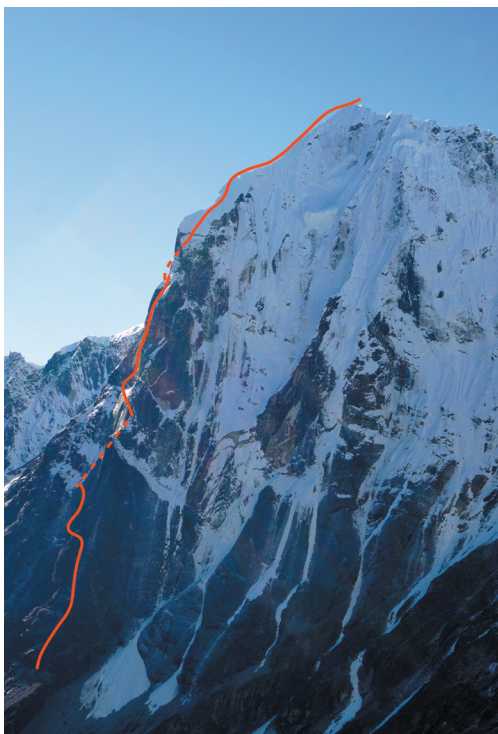
specify publicly each piece of gear we had borrowed or used. Instead of Quentin contacting me so I could fully credit him, an article appeared on an American climbing blog that threw a metaphorical Molotov cocktail at Matt and me, sparking an on-line backlash. We were called 'scum' and critics promised to contact our sponsors, which was amusing as far as Matt was concerned since he doesn't have any. My sponsors I'm grateful to say were supportive. At no stage were we asked to comment and the errors in the piece weren't corrected. We could only look on in horror as controversy raged. The blog author Andrew Bisharat appealed for calm but it was too little too late as far as we were concerned.

Thankfully, I was speaking with the alpinist Rolo Garibotti throughout this maelstrom: he offered support and good advice. 'If aggressive behaviour is all they can muster in response, it does not much matter. Over the Cerro Torre bolt affair

someone cut my car tires, and I recall being relieved, because it was not the kind of reasoned analysis that would make me question myself and lose sleep.'

Traditionally, climbing news was subject to scrutiny by an editor (of a magazine, for example). Responses were equally examined, and published if they represented a legitimate or sensible opinion. Nowadays, the role of the editor has been removed. News and comments can be published by anyone with an online platform, to anyone. The distance and effortlessness of typing on a screen desensitises people. It's easier to write something you would never say to someone's face, and easier to add a comment online than write a letter or email. And climbers like their echo chambers just as much as everyone else. Suffice to say I was grateful that Colin Haley wrote a more measured piece on his Facebook page that changed the views of many of our critics.

For a while I felt hounded and apologetic. But on reflection, I would attempt Teng Kangpoche's north-east pillar again. I don't believe anyone owns an alpine route or mountain. I did have some reservations before our attempts because I know Quentin and that he had invested time, energy and money in this mountain. However, Teng Kangpoche's pillar was the





Topos illustrating the completed line of *Massive Attack*, climbed between 24 and 30 October. (Tom Livingstone)

most obvious, attractive and safest choice for us. Also, we weren't at all confident we would climb it.

With hindsight, we wouldn't have used anything from Quentin and Jesse's backpack, which was stashed low on the mountain. We made the wrong decision given what followed. We should have brought all the gear necessary from our base camp, rather than choosing the lazier option by taking gear from their pack. I told Quentin that 'we didn't have loads of food and gas to start with,' but we certainly had all we needed. Matt and I apologised for using Quentin and Jesse's gear without their permission.

Others pointed out that equipment left on a mountain over seasons might be seen as garbage, as Colin Haley wrote: 'I definitely don't think it was unethical of them [Tom and Matt] to do so [take their gear].' Rolo Garibotti made similar comments, saying our actions were the right thing to do and understandable. The gear in the backpack was 'wall garbage' and therefore 'fair game'. Of course, a stash can be a good tactic if you intend to return, but this is never guaranteed. I know of stashes that have been subsequently abandoned in the mountains. Unfortunately, some peaks in Nepal have thousands of metres of fixed ropes littering them, those who fixed them being either too tired or not bothered to clean up.

Yet I have learned lessons. It's important to clearly state the full story, and not to rush into publicising it. Social media is a potentially dangerous place, and not always conducive to constructive, well-thought-out debate. I wouldn't wish my experience of a social-media pile-on on anybody. Overall, though, I found the climbing community to be incredibly supportive. I think 'spraying' about not climbing a route and then getting upset when someone climbs 'your' project is a little sad. Nobody owns projects in the mountains.

Summary

First ascent of *Massive Attack*, the north-east pillar of Tengkangpoche (6487m), Khumbu region, Nepal, 24-30 October 2021.

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