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ED DOUGLAS

## Xiashe North Face

At the mess tent, Lenny is fussing around the stove, dressed in his bright red duvet. He looks up and smiles, his whole face crinkling with amusement.

'Hello, Eddy! Wan-som-teeeee?' His voice rises with each superfluous vowel.

'Bless you, Lenny,' I say, and sit down at the table. Expedition life is so exhausting.

Lenny is a puckish figure, neat, energetic and full of surprises. As the sun dips from view, we cram into our mess tent to keep warm. The looming north face of Xiashe is zipped out of view for another evening and Lenny starts work on the evening meal. I ask him: 'What do you do in the winter, Lenny, when there are no expeditions?'

'I go swimming, in Chengdu. Is outdoor pool, yeah! I swim three kilometres every day. I do butterfly.' And his girlish laugh spills out, an octave higher.

'Butterfly?'

'Yeah, yeah, butterfly, I learn in a book.'

'You learned butterfly from a *book*?'

'Yeah, yeah, and I practise in my apart-a-ment, and then I go to pool, and I swim butterfly.'

'Show me.'

In front of us, Lenny transforms into a kind of vertical sea snake, writhing sinuously through imaginary green water. We applaud. (Later we make the mistake of teaching him our card game. He is expert at that rather quickly too.)

It was Lenny who brought Tamotsu Nakamura to the Zophu Pasture. They stayed at the old Nyingmapa monastery set above a turquoise lake filled with fat trout, beneath a series of granite towers. In the morning, Nakamura rose early and climbed a hill to view the mountains on the far side of the valley. Looking through his telephoto, he framed the north face of Xiashe, several miles distant, its bottom third lost behind an intervening ridge. Several weeks later, the image landed on my desk. I was editing the *Alpine Journal* at the time, and getting close to deadline. Most of Nakamura's shots were captivating, but this one was not. He simply hadn't got close enough. However, I had a half-page space to fill, and so Xiashe made the cut, tucked in at the last moment. After that, I completely forgot about it.

Towards the end of 2003 my friend Duncan Tunstall called me.

'Do you want to go to China?'

'Sure.'

'There's this peak in Sichuan, it's called Xiashe. Hasn't been climbed.'

'Never heard of it.'

'It's in the latest *Alpine Journal*.'

'Really? Are you sure?' Tosh, I think. Doesn't he know who I am?

'Have a look.'

Blow me, there it was. Looked quite a trip. And so we sent in an application.

At Litang, we tilted our faces to the sun and kept a watchful eye on the fabulous crowd swarming around us. It had taken five days to get to this point from closing my front door, a journey of seamless monotony spiced only by surly encounters with officialdom, much of it French. The Khambas who swagger around Litang do not seem men to waste much time with men in peaked caps, despite the heavy presence of the People's Liberation Army.

Glancing along the street, I saw bow-legged men fresh off their horses rolling down the street, cowboy hats pushed back on their heads, gold teeth flashing in the sunlight. I had a sudden memory of being in the Barkhor in Lhasa watching a group of Khambas newly arrived from the east on pilgrimage, dressed in their finest clothes and polished leather boots, their hair freshly washed. The girl I was with let out a deep-felt sigh: 'Men to die for,' she announced. I could see what she meant, and didn't take it personally.

The seventh Dalai Lama was born in Litang, the reincarnation of Tsangyang Gyatso, the 'ocean of pure melody'. He was famous in Lhasa for living a double life, meditating by day and descending from his apartments at night to sing songs and chase women in the alleys of Shol at the foot of the Potala. He grew his hair, a shocking thing on a Tibetan monk, and wrote poetry, often erotic poetry, of great beauty. Shortly before being murdered by the Mongols, he predicted, according to legend, his own reincarnation in verse. ('White crane/Lend me your wings/I will not go far/Only to Litang, and then I shall return.') He did return, but only under the protection of the Ch'ing Emperor, beginning Tibet's long slide into obscurity.

From Litang we drove further west, almost to where the Sichuan-Tibet Highway swings south to the frontier town of Batang, still the haunt of bandits outside even China's law. A colossal upgrade of the road was underway. Tunnels had been blasted through the narrow gorge and tall flyovers were being pieced together. Such is progress, and it will end this corner of Sichuan's reputation as China's Wild West.

We swung north, up a dirt road driven through an exquisite valley of yellowing birches and conifers combed through with epiphytes. An opaque, turquoise stream rushed around granite boulders and plunged into pools. The road had been built to service the silver mine in the Zophu valley, and there are plans for a tourist village too, which will require another upgrade. My heart flinched at the idea of what this place will look like when the diggers have finished.



25. The north face of Xiashe (5833m). (*Tom Prentice*)

At the head of the valley, we could see the Jarjinja massif, fronted by impressive granite towers. A Japanese team climbed on these at the turn of the century, and since then two American expeditions have added several routes. Apart from that, little has been done in this valley. We had heard rumours of an illegal attempt on Xiashe, which Lenny confirmed, which he said had been unsuccessful.

The flat pasture of the Zophu Valley allowed us to drive into base camp, where we were met by Karen McNeill and Pat Deavoll, two New Zealand alpinists who were also planning to climb Xiashe. They had explored the south side of the mountain and had identified a safe and mostly straightforward approach to the summit. They are both highly experienced and talented climbers, so I was a bit alarmed when I asked Pat about the north face, and she wrinkled her nose.

'Looks a bit like unconsolidated snow on loose rock,' she said. How right she was.

Being males, and pigheaded ones at that, we stuck with it, rambling up hills above base camp, and stuffing our faces with Lenny's excellent food. (The Sheffield-based climber Anne Arran, who also used Lenny's services as agent and factotum, had the good sense to ask him for recipes. Sharp girl.) Meanwhile the New Zealanders were making the first ascent of the peak.

When it came to our turn, we could barely lift our packs.

The first five minutes are the worst. In the name of sweet Jesus, I thought, what do you imagine you're playing at? You are a grown man.



26. Day one, ascending the shallow gully on the face. (*Ed Douglas*)

But we'd come all this way, and so five minutes became ten, and the familiar landmarks started slipping behind us. Suddenly we'd turned right into the exquisite valley below the north face, forested with juniper and studded with flowers, even now, in late autumn.

By evening, we were putting up the tent on a precarious ridge of moraine beneath the long snow slope leading up to what we hoped was a straight-forward gully. Then it was noodles, tea and wedging two farty old bodies into a very narrow single-skinned tent. Duncan set his alarm, and we fell asleep so successfully that its piercing beep was ignored utterly at five and we woke naturally at around 7am.

Luckily, the gully really was straightforward, rarely more than 50 degrees in fact, and for the rest of the day we made rapid progress on this expressway to the heart of the face. True, the snow was loose and often crappy, and the rubble beneath was often precariously close to the surface. But by 4pm we had turned the base of a spur that climbs towards the summit still 500m above our heads. On the other side of this spur was the steep continuation of our gully, and at its base we started hacking out a ledge for the tent.

It sounds impressive, writing it now, like something from a book, but then I remember getting out of breath and while moving a foot to improve my balance caught my front points on the tent fabric. I pitched forward, squashing the tent-poles almost flat. Hyperventilating wildly, I managed to save myself from plunging back down the gully. There was now a two-inch slit in the tent – Tom's tent, of course, who was, unknown to me, climbing along the ridge opposite Xiashe's north face, attempting a first ascent of his own. All night, spindrift hissed down the gully, slipping over and around the tent, squirting through the hole freshly made by my crampon points. Oh joy.

Still, we were optimistic in the morning. As the gully steepened, patches of ice and névé became more frequent. After a couple of hundred feet soloing on 60-degree ice, I took a belay and Duncan moved through into the lead. Close to the end of the rope he ground to a halt, and started rummaging around among the rocks on the left side of the gully. Duncan has developed an enthusiasm for difficult mixed climbing, so I found myself getting tetchy. Why couldn't he just keep ploughing up the white stuff?

When I follow, I understand why not. The snow and ice was now perilously thin and the rocks beneath worse than ever. I've never seen anything like it, some kind of red metamorphic crud that shattered and flaked at the slightest provocation. Duncan was hanging off a spike of this stuff, and suggested I continue up a short side gully that will bring us to the crest of the spur.

Almost immediately I find myself on desperate ground, scratching through the snow and fiddling in wires with shot nerves. The rucksack sags heavily as I thrash around, getting progressively more anxious and grumpy. I try to break back right into the main gully up the steep right bank, slotting my



27. Duncan Tunstall just above Camp 1. (*Ed Douglas*)



28. Duncan Tunstall leading on serious mixed ground on the evening of the second day. (*Ed Douglas*)

axe into a crack and torquing myself upwards, before talking myself down. This is insane. I lower off a wire tapped hard into a flaky crack with my fingers crossed. Duncan now launches straight up, and finds the going easier. Soon he has brushed clean a sequence of large holds to the spur's crest. I am required to follow the line of my original attempt to recover our precious and limited hardware. I find myself hooking blindly through the snow on ground more difficult than anything I've done for years. Oh God, I moan, I'm not sure I like this.

The crest proves reasonable for a pitch, but then I find myself torquing again on steepening, shattered rock, and this time without any solid gear. As far as I'm concerned, I want out and I say so. Duncan seems to have entered a world of beatific calm, however, and points out that as far as he's concerned it will be a lot easier to keep going than go back.

Suddenly, I realise, I've entered one of those stretched moments in time when you realise you are faced with a big and imminent decision that could affect you in ways that might be unexpected and painful. We are looking back at a closing door. I want to be on the other side of it, but I can see that Duncan doesn't. He really does want this climb more than I do, and for all kinds of reasons that I can fully understand. I guess he is just not seeing the world as I do right now.



29. Approaching the west ridge of Xiashe on the third day. (*Ed Douglas*)



30. Tunstall and Douglas relax in a thermal bath after the climb. (*Ed Douglas*)



31. Girls with a motorcycle, Xiashe base camp visitors. (*Ed Douglas*)



I realise that simply by not moving down I am now moving up again. I think very clearly about my family, and about being somewhere warm and safe, and then just shut them off. Duncan is stabbing his way across a steep, loose slope, and I am following, leading through, reaching a half-buried rognon of crumbling rock. I hack and chop away the loose stuff, and drape a sling over a flat spike. I can feel that rising bubble of fear in my chest, like heartburn.

'Just don't fall off,' I call down, but he just grunts and keeps slogging away. Two pitches later and we're climbing in the dark. And I am weeping with pain as frozen fingers suddenly recover sensation. It feels, I imagine, much like thrusting your hands into a tank of acid.

We are just three pitches short of the summit ridge, level with a huge sérac band that threatens the left-hand side of the face. Without discussion we start chopping a ledge in the cruddy snow and are rewarded by hard grey ice just below the surface. Feeling much happier, we bury every ice screw we have up to their hilts in the stuff and clip in. And then we sit, half on, half off the ledge, the stove propped between us, rubbing our knees and moaning occasionally in the cold.

Far below, leaving the mess tent for a piss, Lenny looks up and sees our headtorches. He smiles to himself and then shivers inside his duvet. Looks like they should make it. Climbers get up, or climbers don't get up – no matter, they still pay. But in the sunshine of early morning, I'm glad, for once, that it's me up there.

**Summary:** *Don't Cook Yak in Anger*, Xiashe north face (5833m). First ascent 13-17 October 2005 by Ed Douglas and Duncan Tunstall. Length: 1300m. Grade: TD+/75°/ Scottish IV/V.

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