

# THE ANTI-EVEREST

There's nothing better than being the first to summit a peak – even for someone who has climbed the world's highest – with every mountain bringing its own trials

Story and photography by Paul Niel



IT IS EARLY MORNING IN A REMOTE MOUNTAIN RANGE in Western Sichuan. Having slipped out of my cozy sleeping bag, I am adjusting my headlamp in the cold and dark. Behind me, my tentmates are putting together their last bits of kit. From the other tent nearby I can also hear the sounds that come with final preparations. As usual ahead of summit day it was a short night, three adults packed sardine-like, nose-to-tail-to-nose, in a two-man tent, short intervals of dreamy sleep followed by staring at the ceiling, thoughts focused on the big day ahead.

The cold is biting, my hands already stiff after tying on my crampons. Tension is in the air: the tension created when uncertainty mixes with intensity. A kilometre above in the darkness is our target.

Our group of six climbers from Spain and Austria is here to explore an as-yet unclimbed mountain range. This particular peak, on which we aim to make a first ascent, has no official name. Our permit, a small sheet of paper bearing faint Chinese characters, calls it Mt Wuming, but that's just a generic name. Local Tibetan monks told us days ago that this impressive mass of rock, snow and ice is called the 'Temple of the Highest Bliss' – Dechok Phedrong.

It is time to go. I shoulder my pack, grab my ice axe and start walking. Respecting the altitude and with no idea how long a day lies ahead, we make our strides short. Crampons crunching in the snow, we venture further out onto unexplored ground.

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Back in 2013, fresh back from climbing Everest and Lhotse back-to-back, I was desperately searching for a new adventure.



CROWNING GLORIES  
Clockwise: Simon Elias closes  
in on the summit; Ganze  
monastery and the old town;  
a doorway shows Western  
Sichuan's Tibetan heritage.





#### HARD-WON METRES

Breaking trail through deep drifts is immensely tiring and the duty is shared around the team.

Climbing high, iconic peaks around the world had been fun, but it most often involved following an established route with increasingly bigger crowds. What I was searching for was something far from the beaten path – I was looking for the anti-Everest.

First ascents weren't new to me. In 2011, while stuck on Union Glacier in Antarctica after summiting Mt Vinson, I had set out with my climbing partner to scale some of the still untouched mountains around the base camp. It was fun and I wanted more of it. I wanted to set up an expedition that would venture into virgin territory with all the challenges that come with it.

A place that had fascinated me for a while was the mountainous region in the Chinese province of Sichuan, known historically as Eastern Tibet. Renowned Japanese explorer and mountaineer, Tomatsu Nakamura, described this area as the 'Alps of Tibet', and it is widely seen as one of the last frontiers of alpinism. In 1930 Joseph Rock, the legendary Austrian-born botanist and adventurer, had famously cabled back from his adventures in Eastern Tibet: "Today the map has no more secrets. Idle minds repeat that parrot phrase. But who knows all Tibet, or its far-away frontier on western China? Even its own prayer-muttering tribes know only their own bleak, wind-swept valleys."

More than 80 years his words still ring true. The regions around Minya Konka and Amne Machin are well known, but there are hundreds if not thousands of peaks still waiting to be

#### FINDING YOUR OWN VIRGIN PEAK

The world still abounds with virgin peaks. In Antarctica, Alaska, Greenland, Pakistan, China and many other places, many thousands of unclimbed mountains remain. Some, like the highest unclimbed peak anywhere – Gangkar Puensum in Bhutan – have been declared off-limits for cultural or religious reasons, but conversely, in 2014 Nepal opened 104 new peaks up for climbing.

The problem is most often determining whether a specific mountain has been climbed and then obtaining a permit to climb it. There is no central database of ascents but a good starting point is the database of the American Alpine Journal (<http://publications.americanalpineclub.org>).

The acknowledged expert on the Alps of Tibet is Tomatsu Nakamura who published, in February 2016, a reference guide, "East of the Himalaya Mountain Peak Maps – Alps of Tibet and Beyond", which can be obtained through [www.nakanishiya.co.jp](http://www.nakanishiya.co.jp)

In China, climbing permits are issued by the Chinese Mountaineering Authority (CMA) and the respective provincial body – in this case, Sichuan Mountaineering Authority. Permits in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces are not too difficult to obtain, unless a mountain is considered holy. Working with a local operator often helps smooth the process.

explored between the Himalayas in the west, the gorges in the south and the eastern fringe of the Tibetan plateau. Due to the Chinese Government's massive infrastructure buildout, some of these mountain areas are becoming increasingly accessible, one such being the Gangga massif in the Shaluli Shan range, just south of the Northern Sichuan-Tibetan highway near the small township of Garzi. Its rock and snow peaks are estimated to be up to 5,600m high and other than a lone exploratory expedition by Japanese climbers in the early 2000s, had not seen any climbers.

In September 2014, I ventured into the area together with fellow Austrian climbers Gerald Boess and Judith Fall. Other than a few photos which Nakamura had shared with us and some satellite pictures, we had very little information. The challenges started when we ran into a gold mining operation at the bottom of the massif. Its owner told us in no uncertain terms that we should find somewhere else to climb and declared our permit invalid as far as he was concerned (*tiān gāo, huángdì yuǎn* – 'heaven is high and the emperor is far away'). Things got still worse when the weather took an ugly turn, with several days lost to snow and rain that coated the peaks in a beautiful blanket of

white but made them more dangerous to climb. All our subsequent attempts were thwarted, the last just 200m below the summit, when our team hit a dead-end in an ice couloir and within minutes were engulfed by a thunderstorm. It was a frustrating trip but also a great learning exercise and I promised myself I would return.

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There are hundreds if not thousands of peaks still waiting to be explored between the Himalayas . . . and the eastern fringe of the Tibetan plateau

Thirteen months later we are back with a bigger team that we hope will turn the previous year's failure into success. With us are Spanish mountaineers Simon and Martin Elias, as well as Austrian filmmakers Lothar Hofer and Martin Sochor. Making our way into the Gangga area, we are united in our appreciation of the local scenery and Tibetan culture: monasteries far from the tourist trail beg to be explored, sat in serene beauty amid rock spires, empty valleys and legions of unclimbed peaks. Most impressive

of all the peaks is Dechok Phedrong, looming over its surroundings, topped by a crown of snow similar to that on Mt Blanc. Its northeast face is a labyrinth of rock faces, snowy ledges and seracs.

We set out for our attempt on this monster under a piercingly blue winter sky. Our decision to come later in the year – arriving



'MOUNTAIN OF THE HIGHEST BLISS'  
Dechok Phedrong, at 5,620m, the dominant peak of the eastern Gangga range.



### PEAK PIONEER: TOMATSU NAKAMURA

*Renowned Japanese explorer and acknowledged expert on East Tibet, Tomatsu Nakamura has spent 25 years exploring, mapping and documenting the region. Paul Niel used Nakamura's invaluable information in planning his Gangga trip and later caught up with the great man in Tokyo.*

#### How did your fascination with Eastern Tibet start?

It was a coincidence. In 1989 I was assigned a job in Hong Kong. As a young man I had enjoyed climbing and mountaineering. I also had read a lot of reports about the exploration of Tibet, like the books by Sven Hedin. But I had always been too busy. When I moved to Hong Kong I made a trip to Lijiang in Yunnan. I was so fascinated by the snowy peaks and culture of the local people that I wanted to see more. Slowly over the years I explored Yunnan, Sichuan and then also the Eastern part of Tibet.

#### How many expeditions have you undertaken, and to what regions of China?

I did my first expedition in 1990, when I was 55. In the last 25 years I have done 37 expeditions. I first started in Yunnan province, then explored Minya Konka in Sichuan, and then moved further westwards to explore its unknown mountains. Then I entered the Gorge Country in Yunnan and Southeast Tibet and then to Eastern Tibet. There I came close to a lot of unclimbed peaks in Kangri Garpo and Nyainqentanglha East. It was very surprising to see so many untouched and unclimbed mountains remain. In Kangri Garpo there are at least 40 unclimbed peaks higher than 6,000m. In Nyainqentanglha East there are more than 200 mountains higher than 6,000m and only four have been climbed. So many peaks! But I am too old to climb them, I am now 81.

#### What has changed in the time that you have been exploring?

There has been a lot of development in the region. Many newly constructed roads have made it easier to access the far-flung

borderlands. Motorbikes are now used increasingly and have replaced horses as mode of transportation. However at the same time this has made it harder to access very remote corners. Due to relocation and the push to resettle nomads to towns, there are less people that truly know the remote valleys and can help you travel there.

#### What makes climbing in China so difficult?

There is always the problem of permits. In Sichuan and Yunnan province one can obtain them, as long as the mountain is not holy. But in Eastern Tibet it can be very, very difficult. Usually four different permits have to be obtained: from the Public Security Bureau, the tourist bureau, the foreign affairs department and the local army base. Since 2008, when the Beijing Olympics and the Tibetan turmoil happened, the Chinese government has made controls very tight – year-by-year it is getting more and more difficult to enter the region. This poses a lot of risk to guides and operators. However, as complicated it is to get a permit from the Chinese government, it is always most difficult to get a permit from my wife.



#### MONUMENTS AND MANTRAS

A chorten stands proudly against the late afternoon sky. Above: A yak skull ornaments a pile of rock slabs inscribed with *om mani padme hum*.



The only rational decision is to turn around. In a place beyond any rescue helicopter, where the closest hospital is several hundred miles away, it is important to know which risks can be taken.

in the middle of October – is rewarded by a stable high pressure system, providing clear, sunny but ultimately cold days for several weeks. As we start out from high camp, which we have set up in a huge, icicle-flanked cave, our progress is slow. Himalayan vultures, majestic birds with wingspans of two metres and more are circling above us. The deep snow makes every metre torture, its top crust treacherous: looking like it will support our weight, but ultimately breaking on contact, to sink us more than hip-deep into the snow. It is a hard slog and despite our early start the hours slip away.

Then we reach a rock pinnacle and behind it a surprise: a wide emptiness bars our way to the main summit, now not far off. There is a gap in the final summit ridge, an overhanging drop of more than a hundred metres. A tough decision looms. While we could rapel down into the abyss, it is very unlikely we could climb back up on our return. To go on would put us way beyond the limit of risk we have set ourselves. An emotional discussion breaks out. For Judith, Gerald and I, all part of the previous failed attempt, it's an intensely frustrating moment. But ultimately the only rational decision is to turn around. In a place beyond any rescue helicopter, where the closest hospital is several hundred miles away, it is important to know which risks can be taken. And this one cannot.

Heavy-hearted, we climb the highest pinnacle close to us – Dechok's north summit. It is a victory, but not a complete one. We got most of what we came for: a real adventure and the unpredictability of challenge that comes with climbing an as-yet unknown mountain. But we aren't finished yet.

The well-earned rest days are spent searching for a new route to

the main peak. A few days later we are back. With the clock ticking we give it another go, following a new approach along an old yak herder's trail, waypointed by abandoned fireplaces from the warmer months. The plan is to attack the huge mountain on a more direct route. Rather than playing a game of snakes and ladders along narrow snow ledges running across the huge face, we aim for a wide couloir that should bring us at least halfway up the face. What we will encounter thereafter we don't know. The snow is deep and crusty again and quite frequently I find myself on all fours trying to balance on the snow. It's tough going again, but the knowledge that this is the last chance for a summit keeps us pushing.

Then it seems we face another dead-end – a 70-m serac towering above us, the only reasonable way to the summit an imposing and overhanging wall of ice.

"The Gangga always has a little surprise for us," I say, not without sarcasm. But today not even this obstacle can stop us. Impatience and bloody-mindedness push us on – Simon leads two pitches of brittle ice and soon we find ourselves on the home stretch, a steep but firm snow ridge that leads to the top. I make the last steps as though in a trance. On Everest I had tears in my eyes. This time it is a feeling of pure satisfaction. Great planning, teamwork and luck has come together. All around us are the other peaks of the Gangga range and the Shaluli Shan – as yet unclimbed but for how much longer? The GPS shows 5,620m. Dechok might not have been the most prominent peak I've climbed, or the most difficult, but it was the ultimate finishing point on a personal journey into virgin territory. Summits don't get any more satisfying than that. **AA**

#### PRACTICALITIES

##### When to go

The post-monsoon period of October and November is best for trekking and mountaineering as the weather is relatively stable although temperatures can be quite cold. For ice climbing, January and February would be optimum.

##### How to get there

Chengdu is the best port of entry with flights from many Chinese cities and Asian hubs. The ranges of Western Sichuan are then most easily reached by car or bus, with Kanding, a day's drive west, a useful base. The Gangga range is a further 10-hr drive northwest.

##### What to bring

There are a few outdoor shops in Chengdu, but you are better off bringing all your equipment with you. Warm clothes – preferably down or Primaloft – and shell clothing are essential, as winds at 5,000m or above can be fierce and temperatures reach -15C or less. Pack light, as there are no porters for hire.

##### Useful contacts

Reliable operators to help with logistics can be hard to come by, but Sichuan Earth Expeditions are one company that can organize transport, permits and local support. Contact Jiyue Zhang on [info@earthexpeditions.cn](mailto:info@earthexpeditions.cn)