

**Xiashe North Face (5833m)**  
**Zophu Valley, Sichuan, China**

**Report of the British Xiashe Expedition Autumn 2005**  
**(MEF Reference 05/36)**



*Photo and diagram: Tom Prentice*

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*Late on Day 3, still 500ft short of the summit ridge. Photo: Ed Douglas*

## **Summary**

A report from the British Xiashe Expedition 2005, which made the first ascent of the mountain's north face, and the second ascent of the mountain overall. The route was predominantly snow and ice with some mixed climbing, completed in pure alpine style.

## **Route summary**

'Don't Cook Yak in Anger', Xiashe North Face (5833m). First ascent 13/10/05 to 17/10/05. Length: 1300m. Grade: TD+/75°/ Scottish IV/V. Descent: Via West Ridge, crossing West Col to reach Base Camp. First ascensionists: Ed Douglas and Duncan Tunstall.

## **Expedition Members**

Ed Douglas – climber

Tom Prentice – climber

Duncan Tunstall – climber

Zheng Ling Cheng – also known as Lenny – interpreter, agent and cook

Chiang Ji Jiang – guide

Dorje Tseung – base camp manager

## **Acknowledgements**

The expedition would like to thank the following for making the expedition possible:

### *Finance*

Mountain Everest Foundation

British Mountaineering Council

UK Sport

Approval and expedition grant

Approval and expedition grant

Grant support via the BMC

### *Clothing and Equipment*

Berghaus

Grivel

Shell gear, expedition rucksack, underwear

Subsidised ice tools and crampons



*The view north from base camp. Photo: Ed Douglas*

### **Expedition Diary**

- 3 October      Leave UK. Tunstall delayed en route LHR to Paris and misses connection.
- 4 October      Prentice and Douglas arrive Beijing and transfer. Arrive Chengdu at 4pm.
- 5 October      Buy base camp tents, and visit supermarket for hill food. Tunstall arrives.
- 6 October      Landcruiser via Kangding to Yajiang County.
- 7 October      Landcruiser via Litang to Chalu Junction
- 8 October      Landcruiser to Base Camp, Zhopu Pasture, 4200m.
- 9 October      Walked to 4300m at base of Xiashe
- 10 October     Walked up hill above Base Camp to 5000m for acclimatisation.
- 11 October     Colder and sunnier. Walked up valley beneath face to 4300m.
- 12 October     Rest day.
- 13 October     Leave Base Camp at 12.30pm to ABC at 4500m.
- 14 October     ABC to Camp 1 at c5200m.
- 15 October     Technical climbing to c5600m. Bivouac.
- 16 October     Reach summit at c11am. Descend W Ridge.
- 17 October     Cross W Col and descend below N Face to Base at 5pm.
- 18 October     Rest day.
- 19 October     Working out expedition accounts, etc.
- 20 October     Visit Jarjinjabo Massif, Zopu Monastery and lake.
- 21 October     Landcruiser to Litang.
- 22 October     Landcruiser to Kangding.
- 23 October     Landcruiser to Chengdu.
- 24 October     Fly Beijing.
- 25 October     Interview with Radio Beijing about expedition.
- 26 October     Depart Beijing.



*Tunstall leading early on day two, Photo: Ed Douglas*

## **Expedition Summary**

In May 2000, the Japanese traveller Tamotsu Nakamura visited Western Sichuan to explore an area of mountains north of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway in the Shaluli Shan which includes the Jarjinjabo and Xiashe Massifs. He then published his photographs in the Alpine and American Alpine Journals, prompting an American expedition to visit the granite towers of Jarjinjabo which Nakamura had explored and photographed at close range.

Nakamura explained how he had risen early following his one night at Zophu Monastery to photograph the North Face of Xiashe with a telephoto and it was this photograph that persuaded us to visit. We were looking for an objective that wouldn't require much acclimatisation, was accessible and not too difficult, and Xiashe's North Face seemed to fit these criteria. We had heard rumours, later confirmed, of a previous 'illegal' expedition to this face, and it transpires that a Korean team had indeed been to Xiashe in the late 1990s but was unsuccessful.

It had been our original intention to climb in Sichuan in 2004, but family issues intervened and we delayed until October 2005. Luckily, the authorities were happy to postpone our permit and so we didn't forfeit our peak fee. But it did mean that when we arrived at Base Camp, another team were already ensconced and we had to accept that our hoped-for first ascent would not now be realised. The expedition comprised two New Zealand women, Karen McNeill and Patricia Deavoll, who had decided against the North



*Tunstall leading on mixed ground, late on day two. Photo: Ed Douglas*

Face, opting for the West Ridge. Soon after we arrived, they left for their attempt after ten days' acclimatisation.

The weather had been snowy prior to our arrival, and on our first night it snowed heavily, threatening our bargain basement Chinese tents with abject failure. However, during the day, this snow cleared quickly and although temperatures were never high, in the sunshine life was pleasantly warm. The good weather continued more or less for the duration of our climb, ending during the night of 16/17 October with a big storm and a dump of fresh snow.

After three days' acclimatisation, and two days of driving at altitude to reach the Zhopu Valley, Douglas and Tunstall left Base Camp on 13 October with three gas canisters, and sufficient food for three evening meals. Prentice opted not to go on the North Face, and instead made a determined solo effort on the neighbouring peak (Pt5690m) via its long North-East Ridge.

First – also on 13 October – Prentice decided to explore the east side of Xiashe, hoping to gain the large glacier seen from Pt4958m above Base Camp, by crossing the base of the North Ridge and contouring the hillside into the upper glacial basin. Unfortunately, dense forest on the East Face below the North Ridge prevented this and Prentice was forced to descend into the east valley. The head of the valley was a steep rocky hillside cut by a stream and waterfall and covered with dense rhododendron.

He took a line up the left-hand side towards the North Ridge of Pt5328m, the small peak facing Xiashe, but lack of time prevented Prentice from gaining the glacier and he returned to Base Camp. From his highpoint it appeared that a line up the right-hand side, at the base of the North Ridge, might be easier. Crossing the base of the North Ridge gave Prentice a view of Pt5690m, which faces Xiashe and, with it, encloses the west valley in a horseshoe. The peak is well seen from the silver mine and road to Zhopu Monastery. A solo attempt looked possible via its North-East Ridge. On 14 October, Prentice moved a camp to c4600m in the hanging corrie on the west side of the west valley, clearly marked on Nakamura's map.

Next morning, deep snow over boulders and scree made for a very time-consuming and tiring ascent to gain the ridge. Prentice followed this snow-crested ridge round various towers until stopped by a large prominent gendarme, where a western spur marked on Nakamura's map meets the main ridge at c5300m. Loose and unstable ground covered with unconsolidated snow, lack of a rope and diminishing daylight forced a retreat.

The route gives an excellent view of Xiashe's North face and should be relatively straightforward for two climbers, although a long snow ridge remains before the summit can be gained. Rather than return along the ridge Tom descended north then east to the col above the hanging valley containing his camp. The following day he returned to Base Camp where he met Pat and Karen, down from their ascent.

At 5pm in the afternoon of 13 October, Douglas and Tunstall reached a flat area on a ridge of moraine below the North Face at an altitude of c4500m. Alarm clock issues meant they didn't start until 8am the following morning. An easy snow slope led to 30ft of Grade III, and a long, rightwards leading ramp that led into the gully running the length of the face at around 5200m. Reaching this point took most of the day and involved punching up consolidated snow slopes lying on loose rock.

Stopping at 4.30pm, they dug a ledge for the tent and brewed and cooked until 8pm. Next morning, after a surprisingly bad night, made worse by spindrift avalanches, they started again at around 8am, trailing the rope. The angle of the face steepened from 45°/50° to something more like 70°, and the climbing consequently became harder. They climbed a lot of Grade III/IV, but the snow became less consolidated, and there was less of it.

Opting to break left onto the spur that forms the gully's left edge, Douglas led half a pitch of V on mixed ground before the rock became too rotten and he lowered off a wire. Tunstall then headed up and left from the belay on more amenable ground, with Douglas' runners, to belay at a large block. Douglas then followed direct, leaving Tunstall to lead another pitch of IV while he recovered.

Above this, Douglas tried a direct line up the spur, but torquing in loose rock forced him to retreat, and instead Tunstall broke left across a steep slope of snow, rock and ice at around V. Belaying on a rock outcrop, Douglas followed and led through and at the end of a steep, loose pitch of snow on rock, excavated a tiny spike for the belay. Tunstall's next belay was an axe buried in the snow.





*The West Ridge of Xiashe, with the gendarmes that blocked the descent, forcing the climbers down and back up the West Col. This is taken early in the morning of the fourth day. Pt5690 attempted by Prentice, is in the background. Photo: Ed Douglas*

By now it was getting dark, and while Douglas warmed his hands, Tunstall headed towards the summit ridge, still some 500ft above them. Stopping on the right edge of a serac band that extends from the summit, they dig out the loose snow to find ice below and placed ice screws. Sitting on half a ledge, the night passed very slowly.

Next morning was cloudy and a little snow had fallen. After a brew, Tunstall led a steep pitch of IV/V on good ice and neve. Douglas led one more pitch on less solid ground, before belaying a few feet below the cornice. Tunstall cut through this on solid ice, reaching the crest of the West Ridge and the steps of the two New Zealanders.

Less than five minutes later, Douglas and Tunstall reached the summit. After reconnoitring the East Ridge as a possible descent, they chose instead to descend the West Ridge, following the two women's steps to its base and pitching the tent at around 4pm. During the night there was thunder and lightning and heavy snow. Next morning they made the long climb back up to the West Col, which was blocked to the east by huge loose gendarmes.

After reaching the West Col at 11am, it was simply a question of slogging down the other side. New snow made the going arduous and sometimes dangerous, and with fuel and water exhausted, the team were rather tired. Prentice met the climbers about an hour from Base Camp.



*Young Tibetan monk from the Gelupka monastery at Litang, visiting Base Camp Photo: Ed Douglas*

This region is as interesting for the strong Tibetan nomadic culture as it is for the climbing. A new village is planned for the grassland, which will undermine this culture. Also, the presence of a silver mine and plans to upgrade the road servicing it will also undermine both the Tibetan culture and the area's considerable natural appeal.

## **Appendices**

### **1 Research materials and maps**

There are few worthwhile maps of the region, but a Russian military map of scale 1:100000 is available. The expedition, however, relied exclusively on the article Untrodden Mountains of West Sichuan, by Tamotsu Nakamura, published in the Alpine Journal for 2001. The article includes competent topo maps, including one of the Xiashe region based on a Chinese military map of 1:100000, which is less readily available than the Russian equivalent. Heights, the expedition felt, were unreliable, and the whole area could do with a jolly good survey.

### **2 Permits**

This was issued by the Mountaineering Association of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Region of Sichuan Province (MAGTARSP) and cost \$1500. It was awarded on the basis that Xiashe was unclimbed, but no refund was forthcoming when the peak was climbed by another group before we could get there! Our capable agent Lenny is a member of MAGTARSP, and thus in the happy position of being able to offer permits in the field,



which he did for the New Zealanders attempting another peak. There were no permit difficulties, and no encounters with any kind of authority in the field.

### **3 Insurance**

BMC insurance is expensive in comparison to the alternatives and so each individual made his own arrangements, paying around £50 each.

### **4 Travel**

Return flights to Chengdu via Paris and Beijing cost £633, and without any extra baggage allowance we were hard-pressed to get away without paying excess. Chinese airports seem more modern and better organised than their British equivalent. Because of a bus failure, we were forced to hire Landcruisers all the way from Chengdu, and because it was a national holiday, the price was \$130 a day, rather than the usual \$90. However, given the state of the roads beyond Kangding, we were all secretly relieved to be travelling in our own vehicle. Taxis in Chengdu use meters, but given the system of writing in China, and the fact that many cab drivers can't read, it's worth having someone on board who can speak Mandarin for more awkward journeys.

### **5 Food and accommodation**

We brought some hill food with us from the UK, but this proved unnecessary. Chinese supermarkets are fine, and Chengdu now has a Carrefour. Tesco won't be far behind. Hill food cost around ¥350 for three. We ate superbly in China, not least because Lenny is an excellent Base Camp cook, and the Chinese take food seriously. Accommodation in Chengdu was at the reasonably priced but noisy Traffic Hotel which charges ¥160 a night for a triple without bathroom. It has everything needed, however, including good plumbing, and was of a higher standard than any other budget hotel we experienced in China. Hotels travelling to Base Camp were at best rudimentary, and at worst memorable.

### **6 Equipment**

The expedition took a lot of rock gear, with an eye on the granite climbing at Jarjinjabo, but in retrospect this was a mistake and brought us close to our baggage limit. We bought reasonable Base Camp tents in Chengdu for \$40 each, and left them behind at the end of the trip. Given that we would have paid £25 per kilo in excess baggage charges, this seemed a fair compromise. Lenny procured limitless supplies of Propane-Butane cartridges. The expedition would recommend climbers do not rely on the burgeoning outdoor shops in Chengdu for very much else.

### **7 Agent**

Zhengling Cheng or Lenny is a former CITS travel guide now operating independently. He is a shrewd man, a good cook and cheerful. Although he is interested in maximising his profit, he negotiates through what is essentially a deeply corrupt system seamlessly. He told us we needed a local man at Base Camp as part of the permit. We had no way of checking whether this was true, but given Lenny is interested in Tibetan welfare and wants to spread the advantages of foreign tourists to local people, we didn't mind either way. He is highly recommended, but climbers need to be clear with him about how much things will cost.

## **8 Finances**

### *Expenditure*

Flights	£1899
Peak fee	£857
Agent's fee	£2495
(This included all hotels, Landcruiser hire, all food bar altitude treats, gas, airport transfers at Chengdu, travel permits and staff fees.)	
Tips	£126
Visas	£90
Insurance	£180
Equipment	£69
Food for altitude	£40
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5756</b>

### *Income*

MEF Grant	£675
BMC Grant	£1000
Member contributions	£4081
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5756</b>

## **9 Address List**

Zheng Ling Cheng or Lenny the Agent  
#17, Entrance 5, Building 5  
#15, Qing Xi Nan Jie, Fu Nan Xin Qu  
Western Section 2, Ring Road 2  
Chengdu, Sichuan,  
China  
+86 (0)28 8733 0041  
[lenny9529@sina.com.cn](mailto:lenny9529@sina.com.cn)  
[lenny9529@yahoo.com.cn](mailto:lenny9529@yahoo.com.cn)



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