

# Scottish Khumbu Expedition 2006

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## Summary

Area: Khumbu region of the Nepal Himalaya.

Objective: Attempts on Lobuche East (6119m) and Cholatse (6440m) failed due to key personnel dropping out and insufficient experience and ill health in the remaining team members. A period of poor weather and escalating avalanche danger forced retreat from the West Ridge of Cholatse. Lobuche East was climbed by Dave Chadwick and Tristan Hamade.

## Mountains

The original objective was to attempt routes on the north faces of Cholatse or Taweche (6367m) after acclimatisation on Lobuche East.



North faces of Cholatse (right) and Taweche from Lobuche East base camp

The north face of Cholatse has an interesting history. First climbed by the French with some use of fixed rope and more recently attempted by a Korean team it seemed a logical objective for an alpine style ascent. A very strong American team

climbed the more mixed NE face soon after the first ascent of the peak and despite a number of attempts their line has not been repeated. We believed there was potential for a new, technical route up the pillar separating the N and NE faces as well as space for a direct finish to the N face. Ueli Steck proved our reasoning correct in stunning style by completing a solo ascent of the face in Autumn 2005 adding a direct finish into the bargain. This feat unfortunately only came to our attention after his nomination for the Piolet d'Or in early 2006.

We identified a second possibility on the adjacent mountain of Taweche. Its very steep north face remained unclimbed and Mick Fowler was kind enough to send us photographs to whet our appetites. On close inspection the face would potentially be technically straightforward (assuming snow and ice conditions were consistently favourable) but serious and requiring excellent acclimatisation and conditioning.

Lobuche is a popular trekking peak to its East fore summit (6119m). We ambitiously envisioned climbing its 1000m East ridge which according to the first ascensionists, Bibler and Freer, would involve 5.8 climbing on good rock. We observed a helpful snow patch at half height but were not well enough acclimatised to attempt a technical route at the start of our trip. Dave and Tristan climbed its East fore summit and I retreated to Namche Bazaar.

Given the changes in personnel and limitations placed upon us by climbing as a rope of three, our attention turned to the previously climbed but undoubtedly challenging West Ridge of Cholatse as our main objective. The somewhat easier approach (although with a complicated icefall to negotiate), fewer objective dangers and a clearer itinerary for success made it a more realistic proposition within our timeframe and experience.

## Personnel

The original plan was to climb in teams of two. Unfortunately my established climbing partner discovered in late spring 2006 that, due to work commitments, he would not be able to commit to the expedition. Despite an exhaustive search of my address book, a suitable replacement with the time and money available could not be found. We had distant hopes up until the last moment and in hindsight a decision should have been taken earlier to re-orientate the trip's objectives to suit the team assembled.

Tristan Hamade's and Dave Chadwick's plans were to experience the Himalaya and climb mountains. Despite extensive experience in the UK, French Alps, New Zealand and South America, neither had the conditioning or recent experience necessary to attempt technical, high altitude routes.

Mountaineers are well catered for in Kathmandu by a frenetic and competitive adventure tourism industry. We decided to acclimatise on Lobuche and reconnoitre the north faces of Cholatse and Taweche and attempt the West Ridge of Cholatse.

We were fortunate to secure the services of Sherpa Ang Dawa from Dole, a superb and caring Sirdar with extensive high altitude experience. He assembled an excellent team of porters from the Solo Khumbu region and explained that generally

only the inhabitants of this particular area are ethnically Sherpas and enjoy the remarkable high altitude physiology. He may be contactable through [www.greatadventuretreks.com](http://www.greatadventuretreks.com).



The full team during the approach. From left to right, David Chadwick, Tristan Hamade, Alasdair Buchanan, Sherpa Ang Dawa, Sherpa Pasang Temba, Sherpa Puri Nawang, Sherpa Gilbu Dawa and Sherpa Nouri Pemba.

With his advice we established an itinerary from Namche Bazzar (3440m) to Lobuche village (4930m) following the well established Everest Base Camp trail. We then planned to return to Namche for a recharge and ascend the Goyko valley to a camp below the West Face of Cholatse.

From Namche we took 4 days to reach Lobuche 4930m village with a rest at Dingboche where we walked to a beautiful viewpoint at about 5100m on Pokalde. We also climbed the very popular Kala Patar 5545m above Everest base camp. I did not acclimatise as well as Tristan and Dave and after 24 hours rest at Lobuche with no improvement I returned to Namche to recharge. Tristan and Dave camped at 5250m and climbed the East fore summit of Lobuche in less than ideal weather.



Lobuche East from base camp. Unfortunately this was the day before the ascent.

We consolidated ourselves, repacked our equipment and resupplied our “kitchen” at Namche. Staples of rice, lentils, yak cheese and root vegetables are plentiful. Imported chocolate bars, cereal bars, Pringles and sweets are available though comparatively pricy. The available kerosene burns in an MSR Dragonfly and plentiful propane / butane gas cylinders are available. At low temperature the lighter part of the mixture burnt first and the power output was noticeably less in the second half of the burn time.

The approach to Cholatse’s West ridge follows the Goyko valley in which we were accompanied by many trekking groups as far as Machermo. Two days walk up the Goyko valley brought us to Na village above which a beautiful hanging valley provided a base camp at 4800m.



West face of Cholatse. The West Ridge is in the centre of the photograph with our route and high point indicated.

After scouting out an approach to the glacier we nervously negotiated the active icefall and made an advance base camp below steep headwall leading to the Taweche - Cholatse col at 5250m. There had been a very heavy, unusually late snow fall in August across the area and campsite selection became straightforward when we identified the only avalanche debris free, 10m square spot.



Tristan at the top of the ice fall with the West Ridge above

The weather had become gently but progressively worse in the preceding 3 or four days. Cloud habitually gathered by 11am and by 2pm, when we had established our camp, 3 inches of snow had already accumulated. It snowed through the night and was cloudy the next morning. We had food for 4 days and a similar amount of fuel. We decided to spend the first day of this provision scouting a safe route to the base of the ridge across the glacier in the hope that the weather would improve.

| We reached the ridge and moved together across mixed ground up its less defined lower section. We eventually reached the ice crest and completed several pitches

before the deterioration of snow conditions, thick cloud and further snowfall encouraged our descent.

The accumulation of soft, very dry snow on a firm base was troubling and we decided to abandon our climb as it covered far too much 30 – 45 degree ground and required good route finding which 3 hours of cloud free daylight a day would make difficult.



Bad weather at Cholatse ABC

We lingered another night hoping for a change in the weather and a chance on the ordinary route on the SW ridge but descended the following morning in accumulating mist.

Three days camped at 5250m left us exhausted and in no state to attempt the fast and very light ascent that our time remaining allowed us. Therefore we trekked to the head of the Goyko valley, crossed the Renjo La pass at 5417m and returned to Namche via Lungare. We observed enough avalanche activity and bad weather in the next 3 days to for our decision making not to disappoint us in hindsight.



Al and Cholatse (and a yak) from the upper Gokyo valley. The West Ridge can be clearly seen to the right of centre

## Lessons from the expedition

We visited a well documented area and I have not dwelt on details that are easily accessible elsewhere, but here are some pointers for aspiring ascensionists:

We got hold of Nepal-Kartenwerk der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Khumbu Himal 1:50000 maps which are by far the best of the area.

The Scottish National Library on George the IV Bridge has a superb mountaineering collection second only to the alpine club library.

A two objective trip is not a good plan.

1 hanging gas stove between 3 is good, 2 would be better. We probably weren't getting enough fluid for a sustained period at altitude.

Decision making on equipment must be ruthless, we tried to accommodate two plans and carried too much to our glacier camp.

Physical conditioning is paramount. Despite a preceding summer season in the Alps and general good fitness, we all struggled carrying loads at altitude.

Please feel free to copy and disseminate this information in whatever form. If you have any questions please feel free to email me at [alasdair19@yahoo.com](mailto:alasdair19@yahoo.com).

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