

Mount Grosvenor 6376m

Daxue Shan Range, Sichuan Province, China

Report of the British Mount Grosvenor Expedition Autumn 2003
(formerly the British Chomo Lhari Expedition 2003) MEF Reference 03/36



Supported by:

Alison Chadwick
Memorial Fund

BMC



Nick Estcourt
Award



charlet moser
équipement d'alpinisme



Expedition Members

Julie-Ann Clyma
Roger Payne
Zheng Ling Cheng (Lenny) - interpreter, guide and cook
Gill Deng Pengzhuo – horseman and cook's helper

Acknowledgements

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Finance

Alison Chadwick Memorial Fund	Approval and expedition grant.
British Mountaineering Council	Approval and expedition grant.
Mount Everest Foundation	Approval and expedition grant.
Nick Estcourt Award	Approval and expedition grant.
UK Sport	For grant support provided via the BMC.

Clothing and Equipment

Beal	Reliable high quality climbing ropes.
Charlet Moser	Reliable high performance crampons and ice tools.
HB Climbing Equipment	Lightweight high performance karabiners and climbing helmets.
Lyon Equipment	For supplying products from Beal, Charlet Moser and Petzl.
MACPAC	A lightweight and storm proof bivouac tent.
Petzl	Lightweight and reliable hands-free lighting.
RAB	Lightweight high performance down sleeping bags and jackets and a one-piece suit.
Rock Empire and Hudy Sport	Lightweight high performance camming units and climbing tapes.

Travel

Traveleads and British Airways	Flexible low cost airfares with an additional baggage allowance.
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Detail of the north face



Starting the climb



Summit day

Expedition Time Chart

October	13	Depart London, Heathrow
	14	Arrive Beijing, internal flight to Chengdu
	15	Chengdu – attempt to get military permit for Yadong County
	16	Chengdu – change of objective to Mt Grosvenor
	17	Chengdu – shopping for provisions
	18	Bus from Chengdu to Kangding. Taxi from Kangding to Laoyuling
	19	Shopping for provisions/arranging hire of horses
	20	Walk-in: Laoyuling to Intermediate camp c3900m
	21	Walk-in: Intermediate camp to Base Camp c4200m. Recce to c4500m
	22	BC – recce to 4700m
	23	BC – rest day
	24	BC to camp at 4700m
	25	4700m camp – climb Point 5200m to view face - return to 4700m
	26	4700m camp – recce and sleep at 5000m below face
	27	5000m camp back to BC
	28	BC – rest day
	29	BC – rest day
	30	BC – pack for attempt on summit
	31	BC – 5000m camp (bad weather)
November	01	Move up to 5100m onto glacier under north face (bad weather)
	02	5100m camp - wait for weather to clear
	03	5100m camp – ascend north face – bivi on W ridge at c5900m
	04	Continue ascent of W ridge to shoulder at c6100m
	05	From camp at c6100m to summit (6376m) and descend E ridge to c6200m
	06	Abseil down south flank of E ridge, then traverse to Grosvenor-Jiazi Col c5700m
	07	Down climb and abseil from Col to Jiazi Glacier. Traverse back to N side of mountain, camp at c4700m
	08	Ascend back to 5100m camp to collect gear – return to BC
	09	BC – pack for departure
	10	Walk-out to Laoyuling
	11	Recce of Yala Valley NNE of Kangding
	12	Continue recce of Yala Valley – return to Kangding
	13	Kangding – Chengdu
	14	Chengdu
	15	Chengdu – Beijing
	16	Visit CMA mountain training centre
	17	Visit CMA offices
	18	Depart Beijing

Alpine style in the 'Alps of Tibet'

At the eastern end of the Himalaya the valleys and mountain ranges turn to the south. Some of these ranges are relatively unexplored with many unclimbed 5000m and 6000m peaks. The exploration and potential for new climbs in the eastern Himalayas has been carefully recorded by Tamotsu Nakamura in several publications, and in particular in a special edition of Japanese Alpine News: 'East of the Himalayas - to the Alps of Tibet' (Vol 4, May 2003).

From the Hengduan Mountains and Tibet-Qinghai Plateau the Yangtze River flows south and east to the fertile plains of China's Sichuan Province. From Sichuan's capital city Chengdu travelling via Ya'an towards the Himalayas the first major range you reach is the Daxue Shan. This is the start of the traditional trading route from Sichuan to Lhasa, a return journey that used to take one year to complete. The Daxue Shan has the lowest altitude glaciers in Asia and the famous summit of Minya Konka 7556m (also known as Gongga Shan). This difficult peak was first climbed by a strong American team in 1932. In Japanese Alpine News Nakamura records that only 20 teams had climbed in the Daxue Shan in the 70 years between 1932 and 2002. Nakamura also highlighted six 6000m peaks near Minya Konka yet to be attempted; the most technical of these being Mount Grosvenor 6376m.



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In spring 2003 Mick Fowler organised a team of four British climbers to make the first attempt on the north west face of Mount Grosvenor. Fowler and Andy Cave attempted a couloir in the centre of the face leading directly towards the summit; while Neil McAdie and Simon Nadin attempted a couloir to the right and leading towards the west ridge (this aspect is the north face of Grosvenor). Cave and Fowler turned back from mid height when friable and loose rock stopped their progress; McAdie and Nadin were also stopped at mid height because of strong winds and powder snow avalanches. In the Autumn of 2003 Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne were in China to attempt Chomo Lhari 7314m in Tibet's Yadong County; but they could not get the necessary special military permit to enter Yadong. So, the pair diverted to the Daxue Shan to attempt Mount Grosvenor.

The following is an account of the first ascent of Mount Grosvenor 6376m in the Daxue Shan Range, Sichuan Province, China:

We arrived in Chengdu on 14 October with an official endorsement from the Chinese Mountaineering Association to attempt Chomo Lhari 7314m which is a border peak between Tibet and Bhutan. To help us obtain the other 3 permits that we needed to reach Chomo Lhari we had

recruited Zheng Ling Cheng (or 'Lenny'). Lenny is a well known interpreter and guide with considerable experience of Tibet and tremendous enthusiasm for Tibetan culture and exploration. However, he discovered that because of military manoeuvres near the border between China and Bhutan that we would not be granted the military permit to enter Yadong County. Hence, we switched our objective to the highly accessible Daxue Shan Range.

The main gateway to the Daxue Shan Range is the town of Kangding which is easily reached in a day by bus from Chengdu. A short 30 minute drive from Kangding is Laoyuling which is the final village before entering the northern end of the Daxue Shan. From Laoyuling an easy two day walk leads to camping areas below the glacial moraine descending from Grosvenor. On 21 October we arrived at a site for our base camp at around 4200m. Although the dry season starts in October we had rain on the approach, then daily snow at base camp. The regular snowfall made reconnaissance and acclimatisation difficult.

On 31 October we set off from base camp to attempt Grosvenor. It should have been a 6 hour ascent to a camp at around 5100m at the foot of the face, but because of the fresh snow the approach took 2 days of trail breaking. 1 November was very stormy with strong winds and snowfall, so we decided to rest below the face on 2 November. This rest day marked the start of a period of clear cold weather with very strong winds particularly at night.

In November the north face does not get any sun, and we encountered strong winds blowing up the face. Just after sunrise on the 3 November we crossed the bergschrund at around 5300m and climbed a diagonal couloir line (just to the right of the line attempted by McAdie and Nadin). The climbing on this line was mostly on very thin ice and neve with several blank rock sections requiring dry-tooling. Ice screw placements were virtually non-existent because of the thin and gravel filled ice; and rock protection was poor because the rock was very flaky and there were few cracks. On the first day we climbed 15 pitches of mostly Scottish grade 4-5 with some grade 6 (that also coincided with blasts of chilling spindrift avalanches). The last 3 pitches were climbed in darkness because we wanted to reach the crest of the west ridge for the first bivouac. However, the west ridge was much more exposed than expected, and had very loose rock on the first pinnacle we reached. The loose rock resulted in serious damage to the sheaths of both climbing ropes. The first bivouac was on a small exposed and crumbling ledge at around 5850m.

After overnight winds and snowfall the 4 November dawned calm, clear and sunny. After the long day spent in the shadows and unrelenting cold of the north face the warmth of the sun allowed for some much needed re-hydration and warming before resuming the ascent. The west ridge was fairly straightforward climbing on snow covered slabs with loose rock and occasional short steeper steps (UIAA grade III and IV). To try and reach a level area for the tent we continued the ascent into darkness for a second time. A very windy and cold camp was possible on a prominent snow shoulder at around 6100m.

Next day after daybreak the wind dropped again. Then deep and crusty snow led towards the final summit dome. Some tiring trail breaking and avalanche hazard finally led to the 6376m summit of Grosvenor at around 14:00 on 5 November. Because of the damage to the ropes and the poor anchors on the north face route we had decided to look at the possibility of traversing the summit to descend by the east ridge. The first part of the ridge was quite straightforward and soon led to a good tent platform at around 6200m. Once again after sunset we were battered by very strong winds which continued until just after daybreak.

The next part of the ridge looked very corniced and broken with seracs. So, on 6 November we decided to abseil down the southern flank of the east ridge. The snow and ice on this face was in excellent condition allowing for abalakov abseil anchors between occasional rock spikes. We used surgical tape to tape over the damaged rope sheathes, and left a karabiner on each of the 12 abseil anchors to allow the taped ropes to pull through. At the foot of the face a traverse along crusty snow slopes led to the col at around 5700m between Mount Grosvenor and Jiazi 6540m.

The descent from the col to the north is steep and loose, so a windy night was spent at the col before making the descent.

Next day started with some easy down climbing, then 3 abseils down a thin line of ice between very loose and sandy rock to reach easy soft snow slopes and the glacier below the west face of Jiazi. The first part of the glacier was easy, and then lower down trail breaking through deep wind-blown snow was slow. Eventually we reached our ascent route to the north face of Grosvenor. A further camp was taken just after darkness and in deteriorating weather (now more humid and warmer with snowfall). Next day the trail breaking continued with a slow re-ascent to 5100m to collect some rubbish, spare food and equipment. Strong winds blew in our ascent tracks, so we had to break trail again to make the final descent to base camp, which was reached in darkness at around 20:00 on 8 November.

Since arriving in the Daxue Shan mountains the only people we had met were Tibetan yak herders. But next morning we had a chance meeting with a group of officials from Kangding and the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA) who were making a reconnaissance for a mountaineering camp in 2004. They understood the problems that we had experienced concerning access to Yadong County, and why it was we were in the Daxue Shan without a climbing permit. They were extremely hospitable, and we were able to quickly deal with the formalities on our return to Kangding.

After returning from the mountains we had other meetings with officials from the local government in Kangding, Sichuan Mountaineering Association, Siguniang Mountain National Park and CMA. They were all very interested to discuss ways to make the mountains of Sichuan more accessible and attractive for climbers and mountaineers from outside China; and they were very pleased to welcome us as guests to China and Sichuan.

One of the great things about alpine climbing is flexibility. You can easily change objectives to take account of the conditions and weather. However, one of the bad things about climbing in the Himalayas is that most of the high mountains are still subject to peak permits and inflexible access regulations. Of course in some cases there is a need to control access to sensitive mountain borders; but mostly the peak permits and control systems are no longer necessary. Peak permits and inflexible access regulations easily deter visitors; and this restricts development that could bring valuable benefits to remote mountain communities. There are many unclimbed 5000m and 6000m peaks in the Alps of Tibet. Hopefully the authorities in China will liberalise the regulations and make access easier to ranges like the Daxue Shan; the peaks will become better known and explored by mountaineers from China and from outside China; and local people will benefit by providing more support services to visiting climbers and trekkers.

Appendices

1. Mountaineering Associations and Permissions

Our letter of endorsement for peak Chomo Lhari was issued by the Chinese Mountaineering Association, and CMA tried to help us gain military permission to enter Yadong County in Tibet. When this was unsuccessful and our objective changed to Mt Grosvenor in Sichuan Province, we had to obtain another letter of endorsement from the Sichuan Mountaineering Association (cost \$US700) which we did in person. Recently there has been some uncertainty about the need for permits in Sichuan Province and also the Siguniang Mountain National Park. Officials in Beijing, Chengdu and Kangding all confirmed that permission is required for ascents of any peak above 5000m and a letter of endorsement must be obtained from either the CMA or SMA. This regulation also applies to Chinese mountaineers.

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Siguniang Mountain National Park (Aba)
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2. Local Staff

Lenny (Zheng Ling Cheng) is a Chinese free-lance guide based in Chengdu. He acted as our interpreter, guide and cook, and we recommend him very highly. He is fluent in English and Tibetan, very knowledgeable about the climbing areas in Tibet and Sichuan (having travelled extensively with Tamotsu Nakamura), and a fantastic raconteur and cook. His fee is by negotiation depending on the services provided. We engaged him on the basis of needing expert help to enter Yadong County to reach Chomo Lhari, but even in the accessible Daxue Shan Range we found having a guide/interpreter invaluable in making the arrangements to get to base camp (particularly for hiring horses, sorting out peak fee, etc). Having a cook at base camp was expensive for just two people, but it did mean tents and supplies were protected from inquisitive yaks while we were climbing, and also that we got a good rest at base camp during periods of very bad weather.

Pantzo (Gill Deng Peng Zhuo), a Tibetan friend of Lenny's, provided horses and acted as our horseman for the walk-in, and then stayed as Lenny's assistant at base camp. It cost 35 Yuan for each horse per day (we used 6 horses), and the walk-in took two (short) days. For Pantzo's service it also cost 35 Yuan per day. He was also extremely helpful and friendly and is highly recommended. Pantzo speaks Tibetan and Chinese but no English. His home is in the village marked as Laoyuling on Nakamura's sketch maps, which is about 20 mins by taxi from the town of Kangding, on the road towards Moxi.

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3. Transport

Flights were booked through Traveleads at a reduced rate 'sports fare' with an extra baggage allowance of 50 kgs per person. The flight from Geneva-London-Beijing was with British Airways and cost £738 per person. The flight from Beijing-Chengdu was with China Airlines and cost £240 per person. There are a number of connections each day. We arrived in Beijing at 9.30am, collected our baggage and then transferred to the domestic terminal to catch the 12.30pm Chengdu flight which landed at 3pm.

Taxis were used to travel around Chengdu. They operate on a meter system at a very reasonable rate. There is a regular bus service from Chengdu to Kangding (one-way 112 Yuan/£8 per person). At the time of our trip there was extensive road construction being carried out, so only one lane of the highway was open and there were long delays at the Erlang Shan Tunnel. To accommodate all the traffic, the out-bound buses departed on even-number days, with the return services on odd-number days. The journey for us took nearly 14 hours, but with the roadworks due to be completed by the end of 2003, the journey should only take 6 hours.

4. Accommodation

Chengdu has a good selection of low-priced hotels. A good reference is the Lonely Planet Guide. We stayed in Sam's Guesthouse (120 yuan/£8 per night for 2 people). Banks, shops and good restaurants only a short walk away. Also popular with travellers is the Traffic Hotel, which is slightly more expensive and noisy. It is situated right beside the main bus station and a climbing shop, and there are a couple of 'western' café/bars where you can get full english breakfast, pizza, chips, beer, etc.

5. Provisions

From home we took a small selection of chocolate and muesli bars, instant soups, oatcakes and cheese for the mountain rations which was good for adding variety. The supermarkets in Chengdu were excellent with a good range of instant noodles, quick cook soups, crackers, biscuits and cakes, instant coffee, etc. There was a limited selection of chocolate bars, and a very limited selection of cheese, but a very wide range of excellent snack foods. The cost for the high altitude rations bought in Chengdu (18 days) was only around 600 Yuan (£40). There are also good supermarkets in Kangding, but with a more limited selection of items. We bought all our 'specialty' items for base camp in Chengdu (jams, pickles, oil, stoves etc), and bought the fresh meat and vegetables in Kangding.

We managed to buy gas cartridges for our high altitude stove at the camping shop next to the Traffic Hotel in Chengdu. We could only get one cartridge of propane/butane mix for 60 Yuan (£4.40), but cartridges of butane-only gas were plentiful, and cheap at 19 Yuan (£1.50) each. The butane-only cartridges were sometimes difficult to light when they were full, but apart from that worked well.

6. Weather and Climbing Conditions

There was snow almost every day for the first 10 days at base camp, but at the beginning of November the weather settled into a clear spell for eight days when the ascent of Mt Grosvenor was made. Climbing on the shady, north side of the mountain was extremely cold and both climbers suffered from some 'frost-numb'. Minimum temperatures at base camp (c4200m) were measured below -10°C during that time. While there were a lot of ice and mixed lines on the north and northwest faces, the one we ascended was very thin. From comparing experiences with the Fowler/McAdie team who attempted the face in April-May 2003, it appears that the ice build-up and the temperatures may be better in early spring.

As a rough guide to the hours of daylight, temperature and precipitation for the area, we found useful monthly and daily data on the website www.weather.co.uk. At the field for 'local forecast' type in Kangding, and then select 'climate statistics'.

7. Reference Material

Lonely Planet Guide to South West China: useful for information on where to stay and eat, transport links, etc

Japanese Alpine News, Vol 4. May 2003 Special Submission – "East of the Himalayas – To the Alps of Tibet" by Tamotsu Nakamura. A fantastic summary of unclimbed objectives in eastern Tibet and western China, with pictures and sketch maps.

American Alpine Journal 2004 – "East of the Himalaya" by Tamotsu Nakamura. As above, but with extra maps.

8. Maps: Daxue Shan Range (T Nakamura and PLA)

