

**Seasonal Stories  
for  
the Nepalese Himalaya**

**2008**

**by Elizabeth Hawley**



## **Spring 2008: International Bid Failed to Save Inaki Ochoa's Life**

### **Olympic Torch Everest Restrictions Slashed Total on Top**

This spring the famous Spanish mountaineer, 41-years-old Ignacio Ochoa de Olza, known to the climbing world as Inaki Ochoa, had the summits of only Annapurna I and Kangchenjunga left in his personal campaign to reach the tops of all 8000m mountains, and to continue doing this without bottled oxygen and on routes that are not standard ones.

He came to Annapurna I's seldom-attempted south face to gain the east ridge for the main summit. Tragically, he died before he could finish the climb, and his body is still high on mountain outside the tent at 7400m in which he died on 23 May despite the best rescue efforts of Romanian teammate Horia Colibasanu, the Swiss climber Ueli Steck, Steck's Swiss teammate, a Kazakhstani, a Russian, and a Canadian.

Ochoa and Colibasanu on 19 May were at 7850m, near the east summit's north ridge, when they ran out of rope and had to turn back. Now began the sudden onset of Ochoa's acute cerebral edema and the struggle by others to keep him alive.

Steck and Simon Anthamatten had retreated from their south-face route west of Ochoa's line on 16 May when heavy snowfall and wind higher on the mountain sent them down to their own base camp. They were waiting there for good weather and avalanching to stop when Steck received a telephone call from Colibasanu on the 19th saying that both of them were in trouble high on the east ridge and asking for help. Colibasanu was extremely tired and his voice was not clear on the satellite phone, but Steck could make out that Ochoa had frostbitten fingers and maybe cerebral edema.

The two Swiss had no high-altitude equipment at their base. Nevertheless by 9:00 o'clock that evening they had packed up some medicine (Ochoa and Colibasanu had none with them) and started up via Ochoa's route. Two Sherpas from Ochoa's base camp showed them the way up the face from camp 1. At 4:00 a.m. on the 20th on their way to camp 2, they had to stop because they could not see the route in the dark and the Sherpas had gone back to base camp. At 6:00 a.m. in daylight they started up again and reached Ochoa's camp 2 at 5800m at 1:00 p.m. But now they were in cloud and snow was falling. All of the route from camp 2 to camp 3 had been fixed, but there was avalanching in the afternoons, and they slept in camp 2 that night.

On the 21st they got to camp 3 at 6800m at about noon, and then stopped again because of new snowfall that was avalanching. They would be unable to reach Ochoa in camp 4 that day. Furthermore, they did not have the proper shoes for higher altitudes. But Alexei Bolotov, Russian member of another expedition on much the same route as Ochoa's, who had already summited and descended to his camp 3 at 6800m on the 21st, gave his boots to Steck in exchange for Steck's lighter shoes.

So on the 22nd Steck climbed alone to camp 4 at 7400m on the east ridge. He took eight hours to reach it because a lot of new snow had fallen, and Colibasanu had to break trail for Steck on the ridge. They met on the ridge, and now Steck learned that Colibasanu also had cerebral edema. Steck gave him some medication, Colibasanu got better and continued alone down to camp 3, where he met Anthamatten, while Steck continued to camp 4. When he got there at about 4:00 p.m., he found Ochoa seriously ill with both cerebral and pulmonary edema.

Ochoa immediately recognized Steck and spoke to him, but his speech was not clear. His mind “came and went,” and he was not moving. Steck spent the night of the 22nd/23rd with him, gave him injections and sips of water. On the 23rd Ochoa was a little better and asked for coffee; coffee was not available but Steck gave him an energy bar and water. However, Ochoa’s condition deteriorated: he became unable to speak or move at all. When he stopped breathing, Steck pressed his chest and got him breathing again, but at 12:10 p.m. his head snapped back: Ochoa was dead.

Meanwhile Ochoa’s Kathmandu trekking agent, Nima Nuru Sherpa of Cho Oyu Trekking, and Inaki’s brother Pablo back in Spain, had made hectic efforts to get more rescuers to Inaki. A highly-experienced Kazakhstani mountaineer, Denis Urubko, was leaving Nepal on the 21st, but he abandoned his flight home and agreed to go by helicopter to base camp. Bolotov’s team leader Sergei Bogomolov, who had come back to Kathmandu with minor frostbite, joined Urubko. Their helicopter flew first to Pokhara; a Canadian, Don Bowie, who had been with Ochoa’s team in its early stages before they had a falling out, was enjoying a leisurely visit to Pokhara when he heard Ochoa was in trouble, and he volunteered to return in the helicopter with them. Unfortunately bad weather intervened, and they arrived too late: they reached 7200m the day Ochoa died.

Meanwhile a different sort of drama took place farther east. In early March, expedition organizers who had signed up at least 65 teams for this spring’s attempts on Everest and Cho Oyu from Tibet, plus more for Xixabangma, started to receive a series of unwelcome messages from the authorities in Beijing. First, they were told of a ban on trekkers going to base camp, then no groups intending to climb up to the North Col only, then no traverses from north to south or south to north, then Everest and Cho Oyu were completely off limits until 10 May, then Xixabangma was also unavailable before 10 May, then the Tibet-Nepal border was closed and all flights to Lhasa suspended following protest demonstrations in Tibet resulting in a complete travel ban to Tibet and nearby areas.

The commercial organizers now had the serious problem of what alternatives to propose to their clients at this late date. They offered the options of postponing their climbs, switching to other mountains in Nepal or cancelling. About a dozen Everest teams opted for the more expensive Nepalese side of the mountain while a few chose to come to Lhotse or Makalu; the rest wanted to wait till next year. A handful of Cho Oyu clients decided to climb Makalu, Manaslu or even the low 7000er Baruntse.

But Makalu is 300 meters higher than Cho Oyu and technically much more difficult above 7500m. There were perhaps more cases of frostbite amongst Makalu climbers than the many more people on Everest this spring.

Manaslu, although slightly lower than Cho Oyu, still is not a good mountain for inexperienced climbers who sign up for commercial expeditions, in the view of one such leader. Although his company does not normally take clients to it, Manaslu was offered as a substitute this season. But Cho Oyu from Tibet is considered to be the least difficult route on any 8000er. This leader found that just one of his six clients was a strong enough climber to get very high; the team did not succeed.

In any case, the closure of the Tibetan side of Everest and Cho Oyu and the complete ban on Xixabangma meant serious financial losses for the organizers, who had to stop accepting bookings and make refunds to some already signed up. And they looked to an uncertain future: one perennial organizer of autumn Cho Oyu expeditions in Tibet was taking bookings but not accepting payments until he was sure that his clients and Sherpas can be in place with fully adequate time to climb safely and successfully. In early July the authorities in Lhasa announced that “the peaks in China Tibet will be open from autumn,” but they gave no indication of exactly when.

As to next spring, he notes that 17 March, 2009 will be the 50th anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s escape from Lhasa. Who can predict what will be happening at that time in Tibet and the neighboring provinces inhabited by large numbers of Tibetans?

The Nepalese authorities, who were being leaned on by the Chinese government to supervise the behavior of climbers on Everest, most unusually issued no Everest permits until 31 March. The Chinese were obsessed by a fear of anti-Chinese or pro-Tibetan incidents anywhere on or near Everest; their worst nightmare was the sight of “Free Tibet” banners flying from the summit when the Olympic torch arrived there in May. Nepalese villagers living close to Everest reported groups of Chinese moving around with communications equipment, and officials from the military attache’s staff in the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu visited base camp to look at security arrangements—and to have their pictures taken at the foot of the Icefall.

Finally, when permits were being granted for Everest and its attached neighbor, Lhotse, expedition leaders had to sign a written pledge to abide by new conditions. The main provisions restricted movements in the first eight days of May. Very few climbers nowadays plan to get very high during this period, but many would normally acclimatize by climbing to the site for camp 3 and returning to lower camps.

Everest teams arriving at base camp in the first half of April found that the Khumbu Icefall route was not yet open. Sherpas assigned to fix and maintain the Icefall, known as Icefall doctors, had been asked on about 13 April not to complete the job they had started (they had fixed it almost to the top of the Icefall) until Nepalese security forces arrived.

The Nepalese army major in charge of security, Sunil Singh Rathor, himself an Everest summiter in May 2003, came to base camp on 15 April and authorized the resumption of Icefall work. The route was completed the next day, the 16th, and now anyone could go up the mountain at will until 30 April, when everyone must be down in base except cooks, who were allowed to sleep in camps 1 and 2 to guard their teams' belongings. No one was allowed above the Icefall on 1 and 2 May. From 3 May teams could go up to camp 1 and camp 2 but not above there. On 8 May, when the torch had reached the summit in the early morning, all restrictions were removed and Major Rathor departed.

An American, Brant Holland, climbed from base camp to camp 1 on 18 April carrying a Tibetan flag in his backpack. He professed ignorance of any ban on such items and apparently thought it would be "cool" to take one along. But he told some Sherpas he met on the way that he had it, they reported this to security personnel, he was summoned to present himself to Major Rathor and told to go immediately to the tourism ministry. He arrived in Kathmandu on the 24th and was deported four days later with a ban on his climbing in Nepal for two years.

The Chinese torch expedition put a total of 35 people on the summit. Eight of them were rope-fixers who did their job to the top on 7 May. The next day there were 27 summiters carrying the torch to the summit or filming it. No one else was on their side of the mountain all spring, which, as well as Cho Oyu from Tibet and Xixabangma, remained closed the rest of the season.

From the Nepalese side, once the ban on moving up and down freely had been lifted, there was the expected crowding at the usual bottlenecks: the Icefall, the limited area for camp 3 tents, and the Hillary Step. This was partly alleviated by the unprecedented installation of two lines of fixed ropes up the steep face leading to camp 3, but nevertheless there were complaints about having to wait for others to move up even here.

The first person up from Nepal was a Sherpa fixing rope who carried on to the top twelve days after the torch had been there. He helped pave the way for 91 summiters the next day, the 21st, and 108 on the 22nd, the two busiest days of the season. Still, 108 were not a record-setting total for a single day: 112 people were on the top on 16 May last year. And the total for this spring, a meager 387 ascents from Nepal plus the Chinese side's 35 making 422, was only 67 percent last year's 632 despite a better success rate this year. Too many people were absent.

One in the multitude of summiters on the 22nd was Apa Sherpa making his 18th ascent at the age of 46. His home village is Thame near Everest, but nowadays he also lives in Salt Lake City, USA. He was stuck at the top of the Hillary Step above 8000m for one hour while waiting for the queue ahead of him to slowly wind its way down the single line of fixed rope.

Forty-six is considered amongst Sherpas as approaching old age, but three days after Apa's ascent, a 76-year-old Nepali from the Thakali tribe, a people who live in the area between the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges, Min Bahadur Sherchan, summited with five Nepalese helpers. And the day after that, on the 26th of May, the Japanese who is known as "the man who skied down Everest," Yuichiro

Miura, fifteen and a half months younger than Sherchan, arrived at the summit with two Japanese members and eight Sherpas.

Miura had been publicizing his training for this ascent via the Tibetan side for several years and last autumn went to the north side to test himself. Now, when Tibet was closed to foreigners, Miura had deliberated on whether to climb in Nepal this year or wait. He decided not to wait and was successful, but Sherchan had snatched his hoped-for title of oldest summiter. Said Miura, "If he's 76 years old and he climbed it, that's wonderful," but he had some doubt about the claim.

People who try to scale Everest present a variety of reasons for not getting all the way to the top. This spring an American and a German physiologist specializing in the effects of high altitude presented a novel explanation. They came to Everest to learn what happens to genes in mice when taken to the highest point on earth. They had eight mice with them, and when one mouse died at about 8500m they retreated with the seven survivors and abandoned their climb.

The leader, Dr. Tejvir Khurana of the University of Pennsylvania, explained, "Our goal was to analyze gene changes from blood [and] one needs to take a blood sample while animals are alive as blood will clot after death. Hence when one mouse died probably from the cold and the rest didn't look too good just below the Balcony [8500m], we believed it was just a matter of time before all of them would be dead of hypothermia."

So why go up Everest? Why not stay home and use a pressure chamber? "The kind of hypoxia [deficiency of oxygen in body tissues] you get using a chamber simulation is not the same as in the real world. Additionally, the real world conditions such as cold/dehydration due to loss of water from mouth breathing, etc. probably also contribute to the body's responses to hypoxia." They hope to return next year for more experiments.

The Nepalese authorities keep trying to spread out geographically and seasonally the expeditions that come to Nepal's Himalaya. "Keeping in mind the fact that mountaineering tourism is the backbone of tourism in Nepal," a tourism ministry official stated on 30 April, "to make royalty fees competitive with [those of] other, neighboring nations, to promote the mountains of backward regions, and to create an environment to operate season-based mountaineering activities throughout the year (Nepal for All Seasons)," the cabinet decided to:

- \* completely waive for five years royalties for peaks in the third of the country that is west of the Dhaulagiri massif, and
- \* give a 50% discount on royalties for teams climbing in the autumn (September to November) and 75% off during summer (June to August) and winter (December to February).

Also effective from the end of April 2008 were other adjustments in the royalty fee structure, which combined with these changes were expected to "lead to a substantial increase in the number of climbers in the Nepalese mountaineering tourism sector."

## **Autumn 2008: Climbs in Tibet Continued to Face Uncertain Future**

### **Manaslu Mobbed When Cho Oyu Seemed Off Limits**

Plans for expeditions in Tibet continued to face uncertainty despite the end of the Olympic Games, which caused total cancellations last spring. Most organizers this autumn decided not to wait for Beijing to give a green light for Cho Oyu and substituted Manaslu or, in some cases, Baruntse. Some organizers were seriously considering to forget about sending climbers to Tibet in the foreseeable future. They knew that Everest most likely will be closed next March: the 17th will mark the 50th anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight from Lhasa, and demonstrations by citizens of the Tibet Autonomous Region and Tibetan-populated adjoining provinces can surely be expected.

The teams that had planned for Cho Oyu but went to Nepal's Manaslu instead greatly swelled the numbers on the mountain. This autumn 34 teams crowded Manaslu's slopes, while 16 patiently waiting parties got to Cho Oyu. In the autumn of 2007, there were only three Manaslu expeditions and 70 on Cho Oyu.

Cho Oyu from the Tibetan side was attractive to climbers who wanted to prepare themselves for future Everest attempts. But perhaps Cho Oyu, the least difficult of the 8000ers when climbed from Tibet, is not the best proving ground. One leader who took his clients to Cho Oyu every year but this time organized his first Manaslu climb, found that Manaslu is better. It has more technical problems than Cho Oyu and is nearly as high.

In both of the last two years, about 75 percent of all of the autumn season's teams went to Ama Dablam and Cho Oyu. This autumn, the proportions were reversed: slightly less than 25 percent were on the two mountains combined. Increasing numbers of climbers are finding other mountains. In the autumn of 2006, only 22 peaks were attempted; in 2007 the number increased to 34; this year it grew to 42, nearly double the total two years ago.

Well off the beaten track, literally, west of the region of Ama Dablam and Cho Oyu, in the Rolwaling Himal, a small team made the first ascent in the first attempt on an obscure mountain called Kang Nachugo. Two Americans, Joe Puryear and David Gottlieb, climbed alpine style, no Sherpas, no fixed lines, no fixed camps, no accounts of earlier attempts to help determine their route.

They first tried to scale their 6735m peak by a direct line up its south-southwest face, but snow fell every afternoon and formed small avalanches, which were "uncomfortable and mildly dangerous." They retreated and decided to try again on a different line.

They traversed off the avalanche-prone face to the west ridge. This time they succeeded. With three bivouacs and a final quick dash without tent or sleeping bags, they climbed the ridge to the summit—in fact, to two summits about 10 meters apart. The western summit, two or three meters higher than the eastern one, was covered by deep snow.

Next came the problem of their descent. On the third day of their ascent, the ridge had become very narrow and there was a small overhang of soft snow; they jumped over this, but they knew they could not return this way. So coming down the ridge, they picked a place where they thought they could rappel down the face. But they discovered they had made a poor choice: at three rappels down, they came to a vertical, sometimes overhanging, rock cliff about 300 meters high. However they found an alternative way and were able to continue down to deep snow and good ice below the cliff, and then they were on their way.

Ama Dablam has kept producing large falling blocks of ice since November 2006, when six climbers were killed by a huge mass of ice that broke away above camp 3, swept them hundreds of meters down the mountainside and buried them in a big mound of avalanche debris. The source of dangerous falling ice is the feature known as the dablam, above the traditional site for camp 3, which shatters from time to time and sometimes sweeps sections of the standard southwest-ridge route.

This October, the leader of a British commercial expedition to Ama Dablam, Dave Kenyon, was near Ama Dablam before his team was due to arrive, and on the basis of his observations, Adventure Peaks switched from Ama Dablam to Pumori only two days before the members were due to arrive in Kathmandu. This was such a last-minute decision that only by clicking on Ama Dablam could access their website's entry about the Pumori climb. The posted explanation for the change was "due to the unacceptable levels of objective danger on Ama Dablam this year."

No one on Ama Dablam was battered by falling debris this autumn, but during the night of 17 November a part of the dablam fell off, and next day another huge section dropped, setting off an avalanche that cleaned the snow from its path, which was the climbers' path also, and left the mountain's surface hard blue ice. The dablam was now about half the size it had been when the team had first arrived.

In late November the route above camp 3, scoured by avalanching ice from the dablam so it was all hard ice, was plagued by many more crevasses above the dablam than before, making the route more difficult and much more time-consuming to surmount than in previous years when it was covered by snow and the crevasses had not opened. It continued to be more dangerous with more peeling off the dablam. All of the dablam is going to come down, the Canadian leader of another commercial expedition predicted. He had been on Ama Dablam twice before; because of the current avalanching, "I really don't want to go back again," he said.

However where should commercial organizers send expeditions instead? Pumori is not ideal. Its normal route in past years, the southeast face, is notorious for fatal snow avalanches. Its ridges are technically more difficult, and although Adventure Peaks' team had no avalanche problems on the south ridge, they encountered unstable snow conditions that kept them from the summit. Ama Dablam is much better known and many climbers admire its beauty. Perhaps the solution is to wait for all of the dablam to come down—but how long will the waiting period be?

Few climbers venture onto Everest in the cold and windy autumn season, but this year there were six teams. Five of them went to the normal route via the South Col, and all of them abandoned their climbs in the face of frequent avalanching.

One team consisted of a Frenchman, Francois Bon, and his Sherpa, Pasang. Bon described their encounter with one avalanche: when they had descended about 100 meters below the proposed site of their third high camp at 7200m, they were hit by a mass of mixed snow and ice. It carried them about 500 linear meters down the west face of Lhotse to the bergschrund at the bottom of the face. A big chunk of ice struck Bon's right knee; a ligament in his knee was broken, and his chest was battered, preventing him from being able to breath deeply. Pasang also was no longer able to breath deeply, and his knees and chest were painful.

In camp 2 that night Bon got no sleep. He spent the whole time trying to hold the tent together against the wind that was blowing at 160-170 km/hr, he estimated. The winds that night shredded other teams' tents in camp 2: Korean tents were completely destroyed. The weather forecast said the fierce winds would continue for three more days.

There was a lot of avalanching from all sides of camp 2's area. In addition to Bon's avalanche, a cloud of avalanche snow from Nuptse covered base camp one day; another day, the tents at camp 1 were crushed by 10 meters of snow which came off the southwest face of Everest, and their contents were lost. Furthermore, the Icefall was moving every day. Two minutes after Bon went through it, a huge serac collapsed, and these collapses occurred frequently.

As for the sixth Everest expedition, it had no complaint about avalanching, although they were climbing the southwest face, which can produce some dangerous avalanches. The leader, Park Young-Seok, and several of his team of South Koreans knew the face well from having been there before.

The old saying that "man proposes and God disposes" in their case should be worded as "man proposes and other men dispose." The Koreans arrived at base camp in good time to scale the face before the onset of the fierce blasts of jet stream winds. But the Sherpas deployed by the semi-official organization authorized by the Nepalese government to install the route through the treacherous Khumbu Icefall, through which teams must pass to reach the foot of the mountain, had not yet turned up to do their work. The Koreans had to wait nineteen days before they could get to the bottom of their face—and even then they had provided substantial manpower and rope to get the job done.

This delay in starting their climb cost the expedition the summit, Park claimed. If the route had been ready just one week earlier, his team would have summited, but by the time they were in position for a summit bid, the winds had blown up. Tents were blown to pieces and men could barely stand up. They were defeated at 8400m.

## **Winter 2008: How to Succeed on Makalu Despite Fierce Winter Winds**

The way to succeed on Makalu in winter is to hide from its fierce winds as much as possible even when that means sacrificing the warmth of direct sunlight.

Six expeditions went climbing in Nepal this winter on mountains ranging in altitude from 6151m (Urkinmang) to 8163m (Manaslu) and 8485m (Makalu). Not one of them reached their summits except the Makalu team; the Czechs on Manaslu got only as high as 5850m. Even Koreans on 6814m Ama Dablam cited very strong winds as the reason they stopped their ascent at 6540m.

On Makalu, the successful expedition was composed of just two members primarily on the standard northwest ridge climbing route but with no Sherpa helpers, no oxygen, no fixed ropes and only one fixed camp above base camp, at 7600m. They were Simone Moro, 41 years old from Italy, and 35-years-old Denis Urubko from Kazakhstan.

Thirteen teams had previously attempted Makalu in winter. Eleven of them specifically blamed their lack of success on the strong winds above 7000m. One attributed it to altitude sickness and exhaustion. The 13th was a solo attempt by the French climber, Jean Christophe Lafaille, who disappeared high on the mountain; there is speculation that he was blown off.

Both Moro and Urubko had considerable experience on 8000m mountains. In fact, Urubko had only Makalu and Cho Oyu to “conquer;” Moro had already successfully climbed six of them including Everest three times. Normally they prefer to try new routes, but in the case of this winter, they apparently decided that their attempt in the winter season was novelty enough. Each had been on Makalu once before. In the autumn of 1993, Moro reached 8200m; and in the winter of 2007, Urubko got to 7487m. Both were defeated by the wind.

First they did some acclimatization trekking in the Everest area. Then from Kathmandu on 16 January, they flew by helicopter to what climbers nowadays call the Hillary base camp. Actually it is not the site of Hillary’s base in 1961; helicopters can’t land there but set down instead at a better landing place at 4800m, slightly below Hillary’s camp site.

From their arrival at their own base camp at 5680m on 20 January, they kept out of the wind as often as possible. Their camp was near the sites of numerous previous Makalu teams not far above the start of the Chago Glacier, but it was in a different place. They put it in a gully that protected them from the wind.

They began acclimatizing on Makalu immediately: on the 21st they bivouacked at 6100m on a level area of the glacier and on the 22nd they established a camp (which they called CII) at 6800m in a steep sections of the glacier. The day after that, they went on up to 7050m, then descended to BC.

On 29 January they returned to 6800m, and on the 30th they climbed one of the technically most difficult sections. Most Makalu expeditions climb to the Makalu La for their next high camp by a slightly circuitous route in an area of large rocks where they are in the sun and can find fixed ropes left by previous teams. Moro and Urubko instead used a couloir on a direct line; this is out of the sunlight,

but it gives protection from the wind and can be climbed much faster. The two lines diverge at 7000m.

Most teams put their next high camp on the Makalu La at 7400m. But these two men bivouacked at 7350m, 50m below the Makalu La in order to stay out of the strong cold winds that sweeps across the La. This day's climb was a recce to make sure that, as they had thought, the couloir was the better choice.

It was. They returned to BC on the 31st. On 4 February they ran from BC to the 6800m bivy site in one hour and nine minutes, and they ran back to BC in just 28 minutes.

Finally they made their push to the summit. This time they took three and a half hours to reach 6800m and bivouac with their gear on 7 February. On the 8th they took the tent and all gear to 7600m and bivouacked there.

On the 9th they left the bivouac at 5:30 a.m., were on the summit at 1:53 p.m.—where the wind speed was 90-100 km per hour with gusts up to 120 km/hr—and back at the bivouac at 5:34 p.m. On the 10th they were in BC with all their gear and rubbish, plus some Korean rubbish; they had left the bivouac at 8:15 a.m. and returned to BC at 1:00 p.m.

They descended so quickly because the weather forecaster told them by satellite phone from Salzburg, Austria that a hurricane was headed their way. It came on the afternoon of the 10th and the next day there was heavy snowfall.

They were in the Hillary BC on the 12th and Kathmandu on the 13th.

“We have been lucky and brave,” said Moro. And they knew well what they should be doing.