

Zeitschrift: Jahresbericht / Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich
Herausgeber: Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich
Band: 126-127 (2021-2022)

Artikel: A tale of two beasts : a personal account of the La-sum climb
Autor: Popov, Ven
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1056095>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 11.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

den Abstieg. Das Abklettern ging zügig. Das Couloir mit Eis haben wir abgeseilt, dann sind wir weiter abgeklettert und haben noch zweimal über die schwereren Seillängen abgeseilt. Die letzte Abseilerei machten wir bereits im Dunkeln, wie auch der Weiterweg durch das Zustiegscouloir. Die Spur war aber leicht zu verfolgen, und die Stimmung in der Kälte unter den Sternen nach der wilden Tour einfach unbeschreiblich. So erreichten wir unser Lager gegen 20 Uhr und sind nach einer kleinen Verstärkung in unsere Schlafsäcke gekrochen.

Inzwischen war klar geworden, dass wir in der verbleibenden Zeit keine weiteren Gipfel mehr erreichen konnten. Auch die Lust, uns noch weiter mit dem tiefgefrorenen «Adventure Food» mit 600 Kalorien zu ernähren, war stark reduziert. So haben wir unsere Sachen zusammengepackt und sind zurück ins Basislager abgestiegen. Es war spannend, beim Abstieg den Wechsel in der Landschaft an-

zusehen, wie der Schnee langsam dreckig wurde und dann ganz verschwand, sowie die zahlreichen Lawinen, die heruntergegangen waren. Im Basislager wurden wir dann von unserem Küchenteam himmlisch verköstigt.

Unseren Gipfel haben wir «La-Sum» benannt. Wir waren auf dem ersten Gipfel hinter unserem Lager (6045m), dem zwei weitere Gipfel folgten. Daher wollten wir den Berg «Drei Gipfel» nennen. Auf Nepalesisch heisst das «Tiinta Tauko», auf Tibetisch «La-Sum». Wir wissen nicht, ob unser Gipfel auch der höchste von den drei Gipfeln war, aber aufgrund des fortgeschrittenen Zeitpunkts sind wir nicht mehr weitergestiegen. Die Route war trotzdem eine unvergessliche Erfahrung für uns alle. Als Schwierigkeit für die Route schlagen wir S vor, mit zwei SL max. 5a und viel kombiniertem Gelände von M2-M3.

Ulla Heikkilä und Yoann Trellu

A TALE OF TWO BEASTS – A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE LA-SUM CLIMB

While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

William Wordsworth

During quiet moments of my life, whenever the excitement of a day stolen away in the mountains had waned, I often wondered if I had simply arrived on Earth too late. I was born too late, I thought, to sail the seas, to explore the ocean and to discover new land. I was born too late to unearth the secrets of the atom or

to chart the stars. I was born too late to map new caverns or to be the first to stand atop the world's tallest mountains. The first ascents of today, it seemed, were reserved for the world's top climbers, whose skill and fitness I could never hope to match. I had resigned myself to far less loftier goals, happy to find some solitude and avoid the crowds, even if I was following someone else's footsteps.

But in my heart, I have long felt the scarlet allure of the unknown. Parts of it have sneaked



up on me in the otherwise well-trodden paths of my home mountains of Bulgaria; in the oft repeated summer climbing routes on striking granite pillars in Wyoming; in multi-day autumn trail runs across the lake-splattered valleys of Tessin; in the small joys of finding powder snow couloirs in spring-time Graubünden. Hiking, climbing, and skiing have always felt exciting because the process of discovery is a personal one – no two climbers will ever share the same journey, despite following the same description to the top. When you wake up in a mountain hut in summer, only to find that cold-loving Ullr, Norse God of Snow, Patron Saint of Skiers, had in his infinite wisdom decided to drop 10 cm of fresh snow on your aspirations, suddenly the route that hundreds climb each year becomes a creature of a rarer nature. And yet, a quiet voice inside me often whispered that something was missing. That another gear could be found to elevate my experience to that of the adventure novels I admired as a child. Such were the thoughts that usurped my mind while I belayed my friends Ulla Heikkilä, Manuel Bonnet, and Yoann Trelle after the first pitch of what would become the first ascent of La-sum, a beautiful, 6045m high, three-pronged peak, hidden deep in the remote Changla Himal region of western Nepal.

“We made a mistake leaving the rope and gear behind” said Ulla thirty minutes earlier, her feet straddling the snow-covered rock walls of the “hero dihedral” on the South Ridge of Lasum.

“Ugh... you might be right. Fuck, I’m stuck.” I cursed a couple of meters above her, my voice trembling. “I can’t reverse this move.” I looked down at the section we had just climbed, and a tinge of fear colored my mind. Such

moments often stamp a question mark on one’s sanity. The terrain below was easy, but the last few steps had been treacherous and above awaited us even trickier rock speckled with snow and ice. I tried to slot my only ice tool in a crack, but the secure jam I was hoping for never came. What we thought might be a trivial acclimatization ridge scramble was proving to be a technical 5a climb in sub-freezing temperatures at nearly 6000m elevation.

As part of a five-week-long expedition with the Academic Alpine Club of Zürich (AACZ) to Changla Himal organized by Bruce Normand to celebrate the 125 anniversary of the club, the four of us had set out ten days ago from our shared basecamp into what we called “the South valley”. The most recognizable feature of the region is the impressive summit of Gave Ding (6571m). Gave Ding, whose North Face first ascent by Paul Ramdsen and Mick Fowler in 2015 earned them a Piolet d’Or, the most coveted prize in all of alpinism, is flanked by two distinct valleys on its North and South sides, and our original group of nineteen people had split its climbing efforts into two.

What we originally had planned as a short excursion into the South valley ended up consuming all of our time. Assured that snowfall is but a rare occurrence during the post Monsoon season in the Himalayas, none of us had brought snowshoes or skis: a decision we imminently regretted. The more than one meter of new snow during the first few days of the expedition would have been a feast for the eyes had it not forced the four of us to painstakingly build a fresh trail through the valley, step by postholing step, going back and forth between basecamp, a gear depot, and eventually two new advanced camps. Our final camp at 5300m – a mere 10km away

and 900m higher from basecamp – took five days to reach. It lay in the basin directly south of Gave Ding, which we hoped to climb via a new route. But first, we wanted to warm up and acclimatize on La-sum, whose rocky South Ridge we could approach from the same spot. The Unknown, however, would have its way and would present us with a challenge.

Our first attempt to climb La-sum two days earlier had failed – the full South Ridge integral proved to be incredibly long, requiring multiple rappels over several towers. Halfway through we gave up and escaped back to camp. Mountains have a way of ruining even the best-laid of plans and it became clear that we needed to make a difficult choice. With the time we had left it was simply not possible to climb both summits. Gave Ding or an unnamed as of yet summit, which seemed too easy to satisfy our climbing ambitions? The unnamed won over, if only because we felt like we had unfinished business, and the mind rarely tolerates such nonsense.

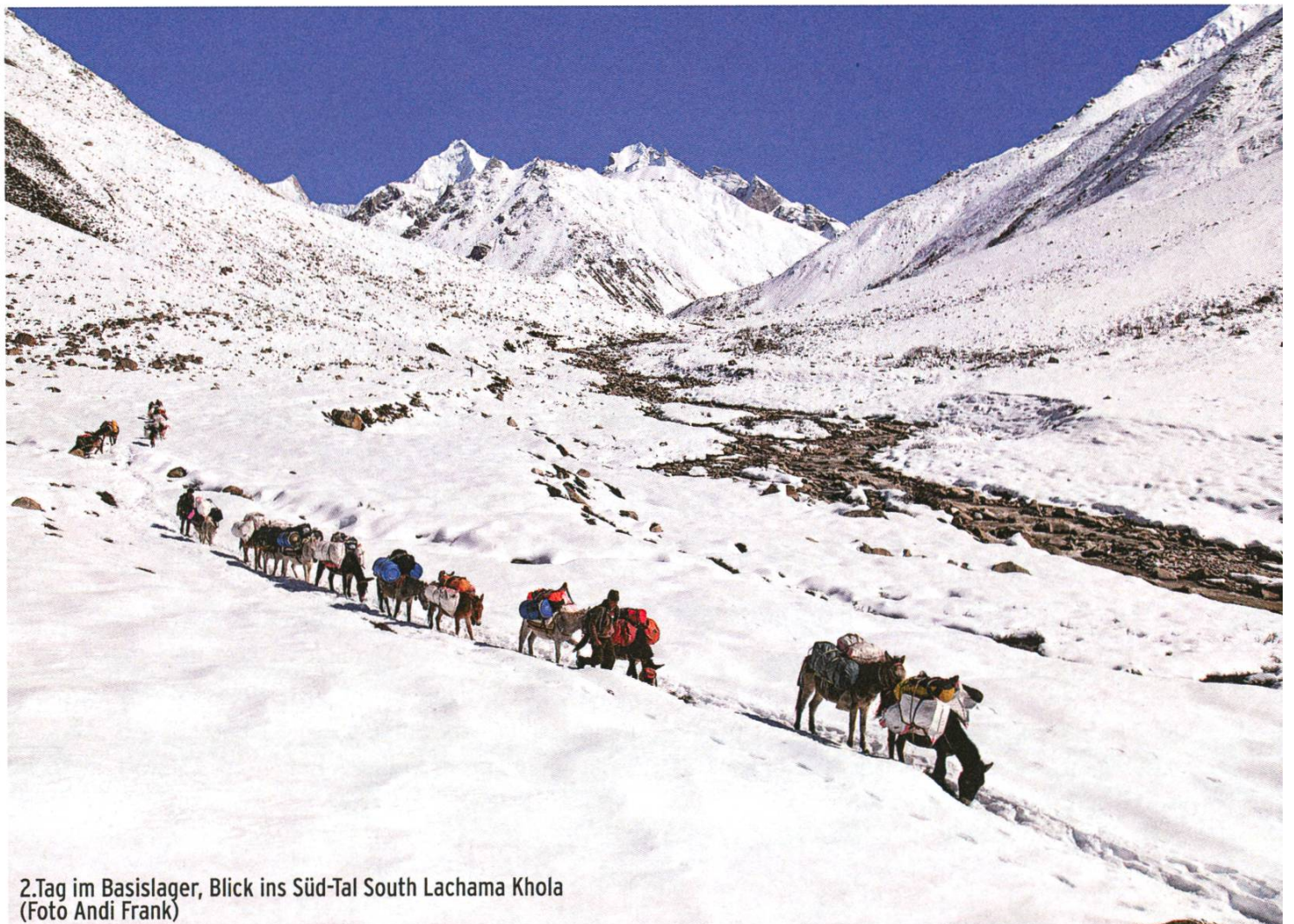
This morning we set out with another strategy – we found a long moderately steep east facing couloir that cut the ridge in half. The fresh snow, despite more than a week of sunny days and clear cold nights, had not consolidated well – every step we took up the 50° slope punched through a thick ice crust into soft and unstable powder. We needed nearly three hours to ascend just 500 m to an opening in the main ridge, which in a fine alpine tradition we named the “Frühstücksplatz” – a spot offering a respite and a change of scenery; an opportunity to regroup and plan the next stage of the climb. A spot where Ulla and I, propelled by overconfidence and the deceptively easy-looking terrain ahead, decided to drop all climbing gear, except for our harnesses. “It

looks easy,” we agreed, “scrambling would be so much more pleasant without having to carry all of this on our backs.”

Our plan had been to climb in two teams of two, each pair sharing a rope and a small alpine rack. Thankfully, Manu and Yoann had more sense and had roped up behind us. As my calf started shaking and cramping from the uncomfortable stance I found myself at, I saw them approaching under us and I breathed a sigh of relief. Manu reached Ulla first, who then threw the sharp end of his rope up at me. A stack of his slings, cams, and nuts, securely hung on a knot in the rope, followed. I quickly placed a bomber nut and suddenly my whole body relaxed. I was safe. Now, with protection at hand, what had previously looked like a frightening set of moves up a snow-covered dihedral, invited the kind of excitement dear to every climber performing near their limit. Turns out, for me, with rigid double boots, no crampons, 1 ice tool and at 6000m elevation, that limit was an unassuming but delightful 5a. After a few straightforward moves and a couple of pieces of pro, I came to the crux: a slabby section of the dihedral with good feet far apart and seemingly no handholds lay before me. A streak of snow split the slab in two, hinting that a crack might be hiding behind it. I cleaned the snow and to my relief discovered the would-be crack running across the slab – just wide enough to jam the pick of my ice tool. I took a deep breath, pulled on the tool, and managed to get my feet slightly higher, stemming on each side of the dihedral. Unfortunately, I only had one axe, so I had to give up my landline to the rock to gain a higher hold. “Watch me” I shouted, a phrase familiar to all climbers, aiming not to inspire but to betray fear. My minor panic was unfounded – I passed the test – and with newfound confidence enjoyed



Basislager, Blick ins N-Tal, in der Bildmitte der erste Akklimatisierungs-Gipfel P5500 (Foto Andi Frank)



2.Tag im Basislager, Blick ins Süd-Tal South Lachama Khola (Foto Andi Frank)

Im Chuwa Khola-Tal
(Foto Andi Frank)



Rückweg im Chuwa Khola-Tal
(Foto Andi Frank)



the next few moves. The rope became taut. Ulla's head peaked through the rock five body lengths below. Until this point we were planning to simulclimb, a technique that is efficient but questionable in such difficult terrain. My better angels took control, and I started looking for a good belay spot. Perched above me I saw a promising block, and I shouted down: "I need two more meters, keep climbing then I belay." The block was loose. "Never mind, I need two more!" As I topped out of the "Hero dihedral", which we mockingly named such because two "heroes" tried to solo it and had to be rescued by their friends, I felt exhilarated – hell yeah! That's what I came here to climb. What a pleasant surprise that our scramble proved to be the real deal.

I belayed the other three up and to my surprise Ulla did not share my excitement. "This is too difficult," she said, frowning, "we are too slow, and we shouldn't be climbing this." "Oh, come on," I grumbled, "isn't this so much more fun than we expected?" "If it remains this difficult, we should turn back. We'll never be able to finish." I was confused because Ulla is a very capable and experienced climber. Certainly more experienced than I was. At the same time, I knew that her experiences had forged a kind of conservatism that I sometimes found too smothering. Maybe the problem was me – was I being too reckless? Weeks later when I came back to Zürich, Tim Aiken, a close friend and AACZ vice president, told me he was very glad my partner was Ulla: "I think there is a yin and yang aspect to you two," said Tim, "a balance in the partnership. Ulla could probably as easily write something about you always pushing her farther than she wants to go."

Turning one's own eye inwards often reveals things unpleasant and unkind, for admitting faults is always difficult. And Tim had a point. A smarter me would have tried to understand what drove Ulla's concerns, and not dismiss them out of hand. But the me that was there was in the thralls of summit fever and could see no further than the next exciting step. Justifications abound in transfixed minds, and I thought that so long we felt in control, there was no reason to give up quite yet. In any case, we agreed to keep going.

"Nice lead" said Manu with a sheepish grin. Now it was his turn to lead. All four of us looked up at the road ahead and then stared at each other. I could see incredulity on their faces: the furrowed brows, the doubting eyes, the tightening of sun-burnt lips. It was the same incredulity that I felt. 50 meters above us rose a massive steep shark-fin tower of beautiful fire brick rock. "Is that the summit? We can't climb that." A notch on the right of the tower gave us hope. "Let's go up there and see if there is an easier way on the back of this monster." I'm not sure who said it, but we all agreed, and Manu lead us on a running rope through a series of exposed, loose snow ledges, and a few technical rock steps on the west side of the ridge. When we arrived at the notch, we marvelled at the imposing tower above us. The easiest route to its top seemed at least 6a and none of us felt ready to tackle this difficulty in these conditions at this elevation. Thankfully, a weakness through the rock at the notch let us bypass the tower on its east. Ulla's conservatism crept up again, and she suggested that we should just turn back. It was getting late, and she reasonably did not want to get stuck descending in the cold of night. While none of the rest of us wanted to turn back just yet, the discussion led to a fine

decision – to set a turnaround time at 3pm, an hour from now. In retrospect, choosing when to turn back is something we should have done before we ever set foot on the mountain.

At this point we couldn't see how much of the ridge was left. An hour? Or five? "I'd like to go" said Ulla suddenly, four times in a row, while I was preparing to lead the next section. It took me embarrassingly long to understand that instead of a frustrated plea to turn back, it was her way of saying she wanted to lead. Happy to share the excitement of leading, I started handing her the gear and the end of the rope. "I wasn't against the summit attempt," she said weeks later as we reflected on the experience, "I was sceptical, yes, but all too happy to be proven wrong." I retied myself ten meters behind her and followed as she led through a gripping climb over the notch, then past the bone-shivering, exposed "shit traverse" – a proper name, we thought, for its loose mixture of sand, mud, melting inch of snow and crumbling rock. The rock would not take any protection, and every step over the 10m-long traverse felt like an exercise of faith. Thankfully, the traverse soon gave way to a solid but tricky boulder problem over slabby rock, the second 5a section of the day. Ulla dispatched it with grace and began kicking steps on the steep snow slope above. I don't remember if she had managed to protect the slabby boulder problem, but I remember the horror I felt when, after I was already above it, I heard Yoann behind us yell "Take!" "Shit, he must be on the traverse." I thought, "Is there any gear below us?" But even if such a piece of protection existed, at best it would have arrested a fall but would not have helped Yoann's desire for security. If he had fallen, he would have pulled both me and Ulla from the snow slope above, and all

three of us would have ended up hanging in the air on one cam. The loose snow wouldn't accept either an axe belay or a seating belay, so I screamed down "NO!", "No belay!", and "2 more meters!", which was the distance to the closest rock wall capable of taking protection. In all honesty, with the rope cutting through the snow and tensioning its way around the corner, we would have likely been able to hold a fall. Still, I wanted to leave no doubt in Yoann's mind that security was but a mirage.

We heard no further comments from below, although after spending weeks with Yoann I am certain that an obligatory "Oh, putain!" – a delightfully sounding French curse (O pew-tah!) – must have followed. We inched our way up to the rock as the rope tension became almost unbearable. "Oh pew-tah indeed," I thought. Ulla finally reached the rock, quickly plugged a cam in a small solid crack, assumed a good stance and yelled down "On belay!" Soon enough we were all together again.

"What a wonderful pitch!" exclaimed Ulla, finally catching my excitement. I smiled. I also enjoy climbs much more on lead. It was now 3pm, however, and we had to decide. The way up looked technical but superb – a narrow snow gully, flanked by steep rock walls, forming a corridor with two icy rock steps breaking the uniformity of the snow line. Rays of sunlight broke through the top of the gully, hinting that in some 20 to 30 meters we might reach the summit ridge proper. But how long after that to the summit? It felt tantalizingly close.

At this elevation, upon sunset the temperature usually plummeted down to -20C, and we wanted to be done with all rappelling and technical downclimbing before that happened.

Ankunft im Basislager
(Foto Andi Frank)



Rückweg im Lachama Khola-Tal
(Foto Andi Frank)





Rückweg im Chuwa Khola-Tal
(Foto Andi Frank)



Rückweg im Chuwa Khola-Tal
(Foto Andi Frank)

Shivering at a rappel station in the dark is no fun business, I thought, as I recalled one 27-hour type-II-fun adventure on the North Face of Aiguille Verte. After a brief discussion we sent Manu on a reconnaissance lead – when he was to reach the sunbathed ridge, he was to decide whether to keep going or to turn back.

We followed Manu up the pleasant snow and ice gully. We soon lost sight of him as he turned a corner towards the ridge and suddenly a joyous voice boomed “There it is! The summit. Ten minutes!” It was 3:30pm. “Let’s do it, keep going” I roared, and I felt the thrill bubbling inside me.

Soft afternoon glow streamed down from the near-setting sun, over the summit and down the snow ridge, it reached my face, and then my hands, my boots. It wrapped me in a blanket warmer than what I would have thought this meagre setting sun could provide. Easy but exposed snow gave way to a couple of boulder problems; the second one led us directly to the tiny summit platform. As Ulla, the last on the rope five meters behind me, made it on the summit boulder, a wave of excitement and gratitude flowed over us. We hugged each other, our smiles warmer than our bodies. No words were necessary – the relaxed faces of the others told their own story, one that I recognized within myself. All was well and in stunned silence we took in the sights around us; sights that no other human had ever laid eyes upon.

We had done it. The thing I had long thought inaccessible to weekend warriors like us – to venture into the unknown and return not only with a first ascent, but with a much more intimate understanding of what it means

to pursue such an adventure. To have met the mountain as equals, not conquering, but becoming friends with it, answering the challenge it posed to us. This climb – a climb that would be an instant classic were it found in the Alps – followed a series of logistical and health challenges, which weeks ago made me question if any ascent would be possible, let alone one as exciting as this. Challenges that made me question who I was and what I wanted my life to be.

During the early days of the expedition, when I was suffering from Covid in my tent at base camp, sometimes waking up feeling like I was drowning, listening to the howling winds, and admiring the snowstorm that was brewing around us, I spent a long time reflecting on two questions that stubbornly refused to leave me alone: What motivates me to climb? And if I don’t recover enough from the sickness, would I be at peace with what many would have considered a failed 5-week long expedition?

The words of John Krakauer in *Eiger Dreams*, describing what him and Marc Twight wanted to achieve on their 1985 attempt on the Eiger Nordwand, came to my mind: “One of the differences between us was that Marc wanted very badly to climb the Eiger, while I only wanted very badly to have climbed the Eiger.” Quotes such as these tend to take on a life of their own, and while I cannot be quite sure what meaning Krakauer imbued these words with, they resonated with the two beasts within my soul that have throughout my life vied for control of my own dreams.

The first beast had always been the quiet one. It craved solitude and urged me to pursue a life that would bring me private joy, unsullied

by thoughts of what others might think of me. It wanted “to climb”: a personal drive that comes from a line almost inviting you to its lair; the experience is merely a potential and it’s up to you to meet its requirements and bring it into existence. To embrace this experience like a long-lost friend; an experience that would be as dear and as precious even if there was no one to whom you could boast about it. This was the beast that furtively enjoyed any quiet moment it managed to steal away from my frequent social media-induced daze.

The second beast, much louder and more aggressive, often won over. It craved attention and admiration; it would do anything to see the look of others when they heard of my latest, most daring excursion. It wanted “to have climbed”: for it the goal was outside of both myself and the climb. For it what mattered was not so much the experience I might have, but what it would mean to have done it – how I would be perceived by my friends, colleagues, and peers. This was the beast that, prior to my quitting social media last year, spent hours on every train ride back home from the mountains curating photos and drafting profound-sounding bywords to post on Instagram. This was the beast that then waited eagerly for the likes and comments to feed its hunger for approval.

Throughout my life I have often given in to the second beast and have fallen into the trap of “wanting to have climbed”. This past year, through heartbreak and depression, has brought profound changes in my approach to life, and I had grown tired of feeding that beast. Yet, although weakened, prior to the expedition it was still struggling for survival. Something needed to change.

The ironies of fate would bear fruit: my sickness, the five-week-long internet detox, and many quiet moments trenching laboriously through the unexpected snow, brought me not frustration, but a clear mind. One morning, after I had had to wake up our expedition doctor in the middle of the night because I couldn’t breathe, with a hand shaking from exhaustion I wrote the following in my journal: “I need to accept the fact that I might not be able to climb anything at all. I should not despair – we all must work with the cards we are dealt. This is still an adventure, albeit not the one I bargained for – if there were no surprises, it would be no adventure at all. We accept the risks precisely because we seek the unfamiliar; when it doesn’t match our expectations, we are handed down a learning opportunity – to learn something about the world, about others and perhaps above all – about ourselves.”

I told myself that to succeed, this time around, meant something much more intimate and dearer than simply bagging another summit – it was to find peace in the simple joys of an excellent adventure. Everything else was but a bonus.

Standing on top of La-sum, a name which in Tibetan means the “Triple Mountain”, a name we chose because while perched on the summit boulder we saw another two summits lining up the ridge ahead, I couldn’t help but hear what David Roberts eloquently described as “the siren song of the unknown”. The second beast was dead, and, in its ashes, I found a clarity of purpose. I did not arrive too late on Earth. And it was not too late for the quiet beast to flourish.

Ven Popov

