

3 The Tibet route

3-7 High Camp to the summit

Altitude gained	600m (1970ft), and descend as far as possible
Time up	6-12 hours
Time down	3-7 hours (to High Camp)
Summary	The longest, toughest day so far, with steep snow, exposed ledges and technical rock-climbing in extreme cold; keep reserves for the dangerous descent

Get up at least two hours before the agreed departure time (which is usually around midnight, Tibet time) in order to melt snow or heat water for breakfast and to dress fully. Use a fresh pair of socks and make sure your feet are warm and dry and that your inner boots have dried and warmed up in your sleeping bag. Check your gear (including battery level of radio and headtorch) and other contents of your summit pack. Re-check your oxygen bottles. Just before you leave, replace the one you used to get to camp (and for resting so as to start with a full bottle).

If applicable, communicate with your team mates by radio about the exact moment you will set off. Stay inside your tent until everybody is fully ready, drinking more. Waiting outside without moving would rapidly cause frostbite. When all are ready, go outside, clip into the fixed rope and start climbing with your team.

The fixed rope continues straight on to a steepening snowfield. At the end of the snowfield you will hit a 6m/20ft wall, which will take a lot of effort to surmount and which is scratched with crampon marks. If you cannot recover from this easily, turn back now as the 'Steps' ahead are much more demanding.

This is the entrance to the 'Exit Cracks', a series of gullies and rock ledges, leading quite naturally to the summit ridge at 8500m/27,900ft. The Cracks are never really steep and the biggest problem may be the old, frayed fixed ropes from previous years. If there is any moonlight, you will be able to see right down the apparently vertical 3600m Kangchung Face of Everest.



The 2000m vertical drop of the North Face is not that steep, but the exposure is extreme and the ropes and anchors may be worn or loose. Try to keep your balance on the narrow traverse without testing their strength. The entire section leading to the Second Step has many small rock ledges where you need to down-step and up-step many times. In the pitch dark it can be unnerving to step down on to scratched downwards-sloping ledges leading to nowhere.

Check your oxygen and timing on the ridge. If you've used more than half a bottle, or taken more than 2½ hours to get here, *seriously* consider turning around. To continue, turn right and follow the fixed ropes, traversing along the summit ridge. You pass a small overhang, almost a cave, where the lower legs of an Indian climber may still be sticking out of the snow. He has become a landmark known as 'Green Boots'.

The route continues fairly level while the ridge steepens. The dark rocky shape emerging in front of you is the First Step. This isn't very steep, and the main part is only about 12m high. At sea level, it would be an easy scramble, but in the dark at 8550m it is very tough. Usually the main track ascends on the left side of the gully, depending on the snow. Once you pass the big boulders at the start, it gets easier. Don't go too fast lest you get dizzy and lose your footing.

Once on top of the First Step, you are on the summit ridge again. Traverse carefully just below it (always on its north side) until you reach, and perhaps rest at, the 'Mushroom Rock' formation. Many climbers change their oxygen bottle here, leaving the half-empty bottle to be picked up on the way down. This saves weight and makes sense if you have two further full bottles left for your summit bid. If you have only one, you are gambling with high stakes. From here it can take more than 8 hours to reach the summit and return, but 8 hours is all you can expect from one full 4-litre bottle at 2 l/min flow.

The infamous Second Step

The track traverses just below the ridge, ending at the foot of the Second Step. Reaching the ladder is difficult because climbing the lower part of this Step takes so much physical and mental strength. Stow your ice axe so you can use both hands, but stay attached to the newest fixed rope with your jumar. All the ropes are heavily used, and none are reliable. Try to avoid pulling hard on the ropes, using good technique instead.





The 1.5m pile of smaller rocks can be surmounted easily as it has many cracks for your crampon points. Don't go straight into the chimney, but turn right instead and work your way up and around the smooth rocks. At first some tiny ledges on the right side help you to get up. When going down, abseiling is usually the easiest option, if a good, untangled fixed rope is available.

Slowly step up the rungs as high as possible and then step off the ladder, placing your crampon tips on the tiny ledges to your right. One more carefully placed left-foot step, combined with a pull on the ropes, should take you quickly over the slight overhang. It's harder when descending: you step backwards over the edge, looking straight down towards the Rongbuk Glacier and some corpses at the foot of the Step. You may already be exhausted: if you can't find your footing quickly, step back up again to regain strength before trying again.

If you are fit, the entire Step can be climbed in less than 15 minutes, but most people take longer, resulting in traffic jams. Some climbers become frostbitten after having to wait motionless for 1-2 hours. Many climbers turn up their oxygen flow for the Step: don't do this too soon, or your supply may be depleted too fast.

Makalu, from the Third Step at sunrise

The route to the Third Step is much easier and relatively flat, in a straight line along the exposed ridge. If snow conditions are good, it takes only a few minutes to step up the natural path through this 10m-high pile of rocks. Enter from the left and head up to the top right, where it flattens out again. With care, climbers can even pass each other, so there should be no bottleneck. When going down, you can usually simply step down, facing out if you are confident.

Above is an interesting short curvy section over a snowy ridge, only a few steps from the sheer drop into Tibet. Then the way opens up again and you are at the bottom of the Snow Pyramid, the last main slope. If you are running out of oxygen or energy, turn around here. It may look close, but the summit is still at least an hour away, more probably 2-3 hours, plus extra descent time. You still have about 150m/500ft of altitude to gain, plus a long traverse.

The track starts straight up the 45° snow and ice field and then curves to the right until it ends horizontally at the base of some rocks. Fresh snow can make the ascent tough and much longer, but normally the slope is blown clean and the steps are easy. The rocks mark the beginning of a short, dangerous section: the rock traverse.

This part is very exposed, the ropes are usually in bad condition and the tracks rocky, slippery and narrow. Sudden gusts of wind can hit hard, throwing you off balance. If possible, wait for a quiet spell before heading to the end of the traverse. Make a 160° turn and head up the easier rocks until you reach another snowfield.

Turn right here and walk on easy ground to the top of the snowfield, which is a false summit. The real one is a further 150m/500ft ahead. The last section traverses between some giant cornices and a rocky slope, so take care, especially if there is no fixed rope. Soon you will see some colours to the left – remainders of prayer flags and maybe some clothing. Turn left to ascend the final 10m over a few switchbacks to reach the summit. You are on top of the world!