

Garrett and Ted's Excellent Adventure

THE FIRST ASCENT OF A HIMALAYAN PEAK

Story by **Paul Gains**
Photos by **Ted Hesser**

An exhausted Garrett Madison stood on the summit of a 5,500-metre peak one afternoon three months ago sipping green tea from a thermos and munching on energy chews. As he gazed out across the Himalayas clouds formed in the valley beneath and slowly floated upward. Madison grinned.

There was no imminent threat of foul weather. The sky remained mostly deep blue as the clouds dissipated, so he and his six teammates lingered for half an hour on the snow-covered rock. Ted Hesser, a climber, and adventure photographer, who, like Madison, is a Mountain Hardwear athlete, adored the photographic conditions making images with a camera and an air borne drone. He described the experience as “ethereal.”

To the north, they recognized Makalu at 8,481 metres the world's fifth highest mountain. Closer still were three other unclimbed peaks which, along with the one they had just conquered, help comprise Nepal's Khembalung Valley.

The peak had never been climbed, so it's no wonder Madison and his colleagues were very pleased with themselves.

This achievement might not resonate with the masses to the same degree as Everest, K2, Lhotse, Aconcagua, Mount Vinson and other legendary mountains, which the 44-year-old Madison routinely guides clients on, but success brought exhilaration and personal satisfaction nonetheless.


“It's important to get in touch with that sense of adventure,” Madison explains, “that human intrinsic quality of needing or wanting to explore the world. Because we have this perception that everything has already been discovered or uncovered but there is so much out there that hasn't been. It's fun to take on a challenge that isn't a known quantity.”

Among the celebrants who stood with Madison and Hesser were four sherpas, including his good friend Aang Phurba Sherpa, who has worked as his foreman on more than 20 expeditions and whom he credits for encouraging him to plan this climb.

“He had been telling me for years that there were these peaks above his village which no one had ever climbed before,” he recounts. “And he said, ‘why don't we go up there sometime and climb one of these peaks?’”







“FINDING CHALLENGING AND REMOTE PEAKS WHICH HAVE NEVER BEEN ATTEMPTED, LET ALONE SUMMITED, DOES SOMETHING TO HIS PSYCHE”

“He would refer to this area as ‘the secret Shangri La Valley’ And I thought ‘Wow this sounds amazing; some place that is untrodden and untouched by humans.’ He had a couple of photos of this peak and said it was about a two day walk above his village. No trail.”

The description at once appealed to Madison’s lifelong passion for adventure. Reaching the summit was the ultimate realization of a dream. Four days earlier this same party had summited Ama Dablam (6,812 m) although Hesser, who was assigned to photograph the climbs for an upcoming Mountain Hardwear advertising campaign, had remained at base camp suffering flu-like symptoms.

Both Aang Phurba and another of the expedition members, Dawa Tenzi Sherpa, live in the village of Khembalung—when they are not away climbing with Madison. They testified the closest anyone had come to this unclimbed peak were the villagers who regularly scoured the hillside below looking for a caterpillar fungus called *Yarsagumba*.

Nicknamed “Himalayan Viagra” it is harvested then sold to Chinese entrepreneurs for its medicinal properties. But to be certain they would be first on the mountain, Madison went through the formal Nepalese

government channels.

“We checked through our contacts in the Kathmandu agency we normally work with to procure climbing permits in Nepal,” Madison reveals. “They said there was no record of anyone ever climbing this peak or ever applying for a permit for this peak. They didn’t think anyone had been there. And our sherpas are from the village and they said nobody ever goes up there to climb.”

Assured that this mountain checked the boxes as a worthwhile challenge and was not low-hanging fruit Madison then decided it could be an add-on to his 2022 commercial Ama Dablam expedition. And so, he offered it to his clients. They would be “mountain fit” and fully acclimated, he reasoned. The downside, of course, was that climbing the former would exact both a physical and mental toll which might affect everyone’s performance. So, there was some concern right up until the eleventh hour.

“It was pretty uncertain whether it would happen even when we were on Ama Dablam,” Hesser concedes bluntly. “That mountain is fierce; it really takes it out of you. It’s hard to go to another peak, let alone an unclimbed peak, after climbing Ama Dablam. I think

we had half our team with severe respiratory and fatigue issues that needed to go back to Kathmandu.”

Once those who had summited Ama Dablam had returned to basecamp Madison immediately turned his attention to the unclimbed peak. While the group recovered in their tents two sherpas from Khumbulung village were despatched to scout possible routes and to prepare a base camp on the unclimbed mountain.

“After we had summited Ama Dablam and were back at our basecamp we took a couple of rest days,” he recalls. “Then we flew from Ama Dablam by helicopter to the unclimbed peak basecamp. They (the sherpas) had constructed a small landing pad out of stones, so we landed and were dropped off there and started our adventure.”

Initially, they had used Google Earth to try to get an idea of what they might be dealing with and from Aang Phurba’s pictures they saw a few ridge lines that offered potential routes. Madison says he knew that until they were on the mountain, they would not have an accurate picture.

Arriving at basecamp, located at 12,000 feet, they encountered white-out conditions. For

the first two days they were restricted to their tents due to the blustery weather which did nothing to improve the mental state of the team. Once the clouds parted, however, they were able to do some reconnaissance and scouting around the area. Hesser, together with Aang Phurba, climbed three hours up to the mountain's saddle and then sent his drone up to survey the terrain from different angles.

"That day when I went up to the saddle and scoped it and came back, I said to Garrett, 'I think it's possible to climb it but I think we need two days not one.'" Hesser remembers. "He was like, 'Yeah, but I think everybody wants to go home so tomorrow is the day.'"

Garrett has an reputation for safety. He has lost people close to him during mountain avalanches. And in 2014 Aang Phurba lost his brother, Phur Temba Sherpa, on Everest. So, the decision to do it in a day was not taken lightly and was made from his decades of experience. He sent two of the sherpas ahead to fix lines. A high camp was established at 16,000 feet.

"Once we got climbing it became clear that it was big," Hesser continues. "It was just a lot bigger than what it looked like from base camp. From basecamp it looks like a ridge you could scramble up. Of course, it's the Himalayas and everything is bigger than you think it is. I think there was 1,400 m of fixed rope, so, it was quite a long climb."

The four sherpas led placing anchors and were the ones fixing the rope. The team used figure-8 belay devices which helped move them swiftly up and down the face and which Madison says, is gentler on the ropes than the newer ATC devices. The final push for the summit began at 2:00 a.m. on Nov. 14.

"There were a few points where we got to a tower section and thought, 'Oh well, shall we go right, left or straight up and over it?'" Madison recalls laughing. "We didn't really know it was a bit 'choose your own adventure' at times."

"It was tough; one big summit day from our high camp. We left at 2 a.m. and we reached the summit a little over 12 hours later at about 2:30 p.m. We got back down just after dark. But it was fifth class climbing—steep, snow, ice, rock, a lot of loose rock, a lot of ridges climbing. So, crampons, a lot of mixed terrain. It was tough. But it was a very rewarding day getting up to the top there was a sense of elation in celebrating with the other climbers but also relief that we had made it."

Although he has climbed other "unclimbed mountains" over the past few years he had been reluctant to share details of where and when an attempt would be made. This is because of a negative experience.

In 2016, he had targeted another unclimbed mountain east of the Ngozumpa Glacier. The

climb was scheduled for the fall of that year. Two climbers quickly signed up. One potential client asked for details saying she didn't want to join the team without knowing more about the location. Madison shared photos and other details with her. Unfortunately, the others were forced to postpone until the following spring of 2017. Madison informed the lady of the change in dates. To his surprise, she decided to go anyway.

"We would like to name it the Khembalung Peak after the village where our sherpas are from," Madison responds, underscoring his relationship with his climbing friends. "Just to honour them and their village. But it's a lengthy process with the Nepalese Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation. We will see what happens."

No mountain is a given, he adds. But the challenge of finding challenging and remote



"She hired her own team and, based on the information I had supplied her with, went and climbed the peak," he says shaking his head with a smile. "It isn't that hard to do if you have some information and hire a good team. So I learned the hard way about being open with my information about peaks."

Madison is not the kind of guy to hold a grudge. Since that experience he has successfully led clients on two other unclimbed peaks—in addition to this latest one—but with his advance plans embedded in a great deal of secrecy. This recent success raises the question: what would the team like to call this peak?

peaks which have never been attempted, let alone summited, does something to his psyche. There are more out there, but he won't comment on them.

"I would certainly like to do more of these unclimbed peaks going forward," he says during a rare visit to his home in Seattle. "It's hard to find them. You must ask around or sleuth around to get some information. Then it's hard to get people excited to commit to the project because it's an unknown quantity—there are no photos, no route description. But it all adds to the sense of adventure for those that are willing to try something new."

Paul Gains is a writer based in Ontario.