

Ama Dablam towers over Base Camp below

Fast & light on Ama Dablam

Making the decision to climb alone and quickly, **Jon Gupta** experienced a different side to Ama Dablam on his recent expedition in Nepal...

MEET THE AUTHOR...

Jon Gupta is a qualified Winter Mountain Leader and experienced expedition leader with groups both overseas and in the UK. While in Nepal he also led two groups to the top of Island Peak.





A monk performs a 'puja' for our team, wishing safe passage on the mountain

Three years ago an email arrived in my inbox with the subject heading of 'a mountain to dream of climbing'. I downloaded the enclosed attachment and was mesmerised by the image that appeared in front of me – that of Ama Dablam.

I can't tell you what thoughts went through my mind, but I do know my heart raced as I trawled around the internet desperately searching for information and images of this beautiful Himalayan peak. As I found out more, I made a promise to myself that one day I would stand on top of this incredible-looking mountain. I had become transfixed in a matter of minutes: I wanted to see the view from the top, I wanted to expose myself to this mountain to see what it could throw at me, and most of all I wanted to see if I was capable of climbing this beautiful statue of rock and ice.

GOING SOLO

Three years on and I arrived at Ama Dablam Base Camp fully acclimatised, having been in the Khumbu for nearly 30 days. I decided I needed a few days of rest to recover, refuel and prepare for the climb ahead – I had a plan and it was going to require a lot of energy. I'll be honest with you, I was intimidated by the mountain, by the unknown that lay ahead and by the sheer beauty of its southwest ridge. The long sweeping line soars high into the sky, from the edge of Base Camp right up to the summit of the mountain. I could feel its pull like a magnet drawing me closer.

I had made the decision to climb alone on Ama, and to climb fast. I wanted to totally immerse myself in the climbing and focus everything I had on a safe and successful climb. I left Base Camp around mid-afternoon and, after saying goodbye to Tim Mosedale and his team, I took a step towards Camp 1 for the very first time. I put my music on as the cold clouds enveloped me, and as the mountains disappeared I suddenly felt very alone.

Being fully acclimatised, I was keen to push myself and after just two hours I was nearing the base of the 'slabs' below Camp 1. As I entered the boulder field a vast expanse of huge boulders scattered carelessly across the mountainside, and as the final light from the day faded away I rummaged for my headtorch. Up above I could see a few tents glowing a deep warm orange as the occupants, warm inside their sleeping bags, melted ice and chatted anxiously about the day ahead.

I crawled into my tent half an hour later and quickly set about getting organised. It was slightly later than I had hoped, so I cracked on with my routine; snow in pot, stove on, sleeping kit out, get in sleeping bag, unpack bag, put crampons, axe, helmet, harness in porch ready for the morning, keep clothes, gloves, hats inside ready for the morning. Once I was all sorted, I set about eating and drinking as much as I could. Melting ice is a laborious task, but hydration is absolutely vital. Confident that I was as prepared as I could be, I switched off my headtorch, changed the batteries and drifted off to sleep, excited about the next 24 hours.

With just the lightest puff of wind outside, I



The view looking west from the summit of Ama Dablam – cloud base is at around 5800m



A buddist stupa looks out across the mountain



Crystal clear, starry skies over Base Camp



A badly-pitched tent as Camp 2 – space is limited!



Jon on the summit after ten and a half hours of climbing from Camp 1

Early moonrise over the southwest ridge, the route that most people climb towards the summit

entered into the dark night. It was just after 4am as I left my tent and clipped into the first of the fixed lines. I drew a long, deep breath and looked around at the surrounding peaks sparkling and glistening under the bright stars, and began my ascent. The climb was intense and unrelenting; between Camp 1 to Camp 2 I rarely stopped for a minute. All the southwest ridge is steep, to both sides and above and below, but with 7000m boots and good kit on I felt safe and protected from whatever the mountain could throw at me.

But for now the mountain remained quiet, letting me silently climb higher and higher up her slopes. The rock was some of the best granite I had ever climbed on and at times was quite technical; Yellow Tower giving a superb pitch at around HVS if led. The short patches of snow and ice were hard packed, wind-blown rime and neve, allowing my crampons to grip it like a fork in sticky

toffee. As I pulled up and over a short rock section to Camp 2, the sun was just beginning to rise and the faintest glow of morning promised to bring warmth and hope to the day. At Camp 2, half a dozen precariously-pitched tents housed a number of climbers from probably all corners of the earth, with most of them making their way to Camp 3 later that day. They were still sleeping and I passed them quickly and quietly, then took five minutes to refuel and enjoy the sunrise. Being alone on the mountains is a unique experience and one that can be very powerful. It gives you a chance to think, a chance to forget the trials and tribulations of everyday life and, for a short period of time, you are completely free.

High above, I could see Camp 3 and I knew it was going to take a further two to three hours to reach it. Remaining clipped in for the duration of the climb, I was



Jon resting at Camp 3 before climbing the final four hours to the summit

constantly having to assess the fixed lines and switch ropes, adding and removing jumars and karabiners as I made my way further up the ridge. Shortly after Camp 2 there is a fabulous section of snow and ice called the Grey Couloir – 100m or so at 70+ degrees. My calves screamed at me as my front points dug deep into the snow, but superb conditions allowed me to make good time and I soon found myself at the foot of Mushroom Ridge. The climb was really getting exciting and I could feel myself smiling. Mushroom Ridge is a sensational, winding, narrow crest which rises like a serpent connecting the Grey Couloir and Camp 3. With careful haste, I made my way along the ridge – a fall along here could have catastrophic consequences.

As I climbed the final slopes to Camp 3, I realised that I was now in the sunshine and beginning to feel warm for the first time since starting out nearly six hours previously. I radioed down to Tim Mosedale at Base Camp to report my progress and took the opportunity to lose a layer and take on some water and food. Above Camp 3, I could see four climbers en route to the summit who had left Camp 3 only an hour before. Already they looked like tiny dots on the gigantic white summit slopes that reared up above Camp 3, an imposing face of thick ice.

THE SHARP END

Once past Camp 3, the summit slopes unveil themselves and present some of the steepest and sustained climbing on the mountain. On steep snow and ice, unrelenting for nearly four hours, I climbed through small weaknesses in the face up and up, until I got to the final snow ridge. I passed one climber who had called it a day and was descending and, then higher up, I passed another, but this one was not moving and had not done so for four days. I had known that I was going to encounter this body but had no idea how I would feel about it. So, focused on the summit and the ticking clock, I passed by, desperately aware that only a few days earlier he had been alive. Why had he died, I kept asking myself, why?

At nearly 6800m, I took a short break to allow the climbers I had seen from lower down to pass me on their descent from the summit. I sat facing out looking across a vista of mountain giants. I could name only a few, and the peaks seemed to extend to the furthest corners of the earth in every direction. Why do we do this, I thought, as I looked down the 2000ft face below me and then back to my thin 8mm cord that was my lifeline, and then back again to the very long fall I would take should I come off. Why put myself in this position? Before I had time to answer my questions, the climbers were beside me and with an exchange of a nod and smile we continued in our opposite directions. I was only too aware that the time available to me was running out.

Alone again at 6800m, I found my rhythm – one

step and four cycles of breathing, one step and four more cycles of breathing. I had been moving for nearly 10 hours non-stop at above 6000m. I was tired, of course, and I was alone and had the entire mountain to myself. With the energy slowly seeping away from me, small elements of doubt crept into my mind but finally, at 2:40pm, I stood on the summit and fell to my knees. I had done it!

The views from the top of Ama Dablam are quite simply breathtaking and, standing on the summit, I took time to take it all in. I had climbed alone to the summit and I suddenly realised I had not spoken a word all day. I gave a nod of approval towards Everest – I'm not sure why, perhaps a sign of respect or a message that she was next! I couldn't tell you now the emotions I felt as I stood there alone, but it was a very special moment for me. I looked out across the vast expanse of mountains that I could only dream of climbing one day, and with that thought I turned to go down.

Only too aware of what was still to come, I began the descent. I was tired but very alert and focused, with the words of Ed Viesturs sounding loud in my head: "Getting to the top is optional, getting down is mandatory". The descent was slow and laborious and full concentration was required on these steep and unforgiving slopes. A single mistake now and no one would ever see me again. With a combination of arm wraps and abseils, the descent towards Camp 3 didn't take too long and an hour later I was starting down the final ropes of the summit face.

I endured a long cold night at Camp 3 and, just after sunrise, continued on the descent, retracing the same steps I had covered only 12 hours before. Almost immediately I fumbled and dropped my abseil device, and it was gone. I watched it slide down the mountainside, clipped in, and cursed myself. From here on, I was forced to abseil dozens of fixed lines using an Italian hitch, a more time-consuming method. Nonetheless, it was amazing seeing the route I had taken only a day before from a different angle and in a new light. Abseil after abseil, I carefully descended the mountain until eventually, just before midday, I arrived back into Camp 1.

Removing my crampons, helmet and harness was like taking a shower after a day in the hills. I felt refreshed, lighter and a little energy even crept back into me. I knew I was safe now and the walk back to Base Camp would be easy. Later that evening, I took some time out to watch the mountain change as the sunlight faded to mark the end of another day and the stars slowly appeared in the sky. Ama had been kind to me, she had allowed me safe passage and calm weather and the ultimate goal – the summit – and I thanked her for that. The climb was everything I had hoped for; intricate, dedicated, committed and enthralling, and I had never in my life felt so alive. **T&M**

Jon used Tim Mosedale Logistics to climb Ama Dablam.