

Shisha Pangma, Southwest face - 17th of April 2011 - Ueli Steck

A factual analysis; a summary of the key elements

By Rodolphe Popier

1/ Steck didn't produce any photo from the summit of Shisha Pangma or anywhere high on the Girona route: the sole battery of his camera was flat once on the "summit ridge". Steck also carried a Suunto altimeter swatch, a GPS and a satellite phone. None of these was used to provide any evidence of reaching the summit, either a watch log, GPS waypoint, or phone call. Direct observation of Steck by ABC members (confirmed) on the 17th of April ended at c.09.30h am at c.7290m at the start of the crux section of the Girona route, then started again in the afternoon at 2h20pm at c. 7100m, when Steck was witnessed descending the 1982 British descent route from the Pungpa La. It is impossible to know what happened in between.

2/ In the official statement Steck claims to have climbed from c.7200m at c.9h15am on the southwest face to the 8027m summit in 2h25, reaching it at 11h40am. Depending on the precise altitude of his intermediate c.7200m "starting point" (which looks closer to c.7290m than 7200m) and his pause for rest at the exit of the Girona (five or 10 min?), it means that Steck would need to have progressed at a speed range between 300 and 350 vertical meters per hour (mh) for the whole upper section (variants are the starting point - 7200 or 7300m, and rest time 0 to 10min). This on an unprepared, untracked and unfamiliar route including the crux. In comparison, Steck climbed the lower part of the face that day with a speed of 147mh. Above 7000m, most lightweight, alpine-style or single-push ascents on unprepared terrain have moved so far in the 100-200mh range, with only occasional speeds up to, or over 200-250mh on easier-angled terrain, prepared one or in perfect conditions. How does one explain such drastic acceleration? Such

3/ Researchers who have focused on trail competitions estimate the ideal steepness for vertical speed to lie between 20° and 35°, 30° being the optimum observed so far during Vertical Kilometer competitions in the Alps (N.Giovanelli, 2015). Although this perspective of mountaineering has received little study to date, the fastest climb rate recorded so far in the Himalaya above 7000m, 250-300mh, always occurred on c.20° to c.40° straight slopes and on prepared known terrain. Two exceptions so far are 387 and 555mh of Pemba Dorji Sherpa in the 40° "Lhotse face" (Everest speed records 2003-2004). In Shisha's case, the section from C.7290m-7550m contains the technical crux of the route i.e. Steck still had the most difficult, slowest climbing to do (in "8000+" he describes it as "a 300m-high, demanding climb" with an overhanging rock section at the end). From the exit point of the Girona Route, on the ridge at c.7550m, to the 8027m summit is c.1.5km horizontally, for 470m vertical gain (17° average). And the ascent is not in a straight line. How is it possible to explain such a drastic acceleration with this configuration, on sight?

4/ Steck mentioned in interviews he had planned such pace increase prior to his departure: save energy in the lowest part of the face to be able to explode in the highest one, crux included. If really so, why such strategy was never mentioned in any of his publications afterwards?

5/ In 2011, after his usual Khumbu running sessions and an ascent of Cholatse north face for acclimatization, Steck is meant to have reached a speed between 300 and 350vmh in the crux section and on the "summit ridge". In 2016, despite more acclimatization (same kind of training pattern as 2011 in Khumbu, plus a night at 6900m above Shisha base camp), previous experience, and a solid companion (David Göttler), one can deduce by the data from two photographs that the pair didn't move faster than c.100mh on the summit ridge (between c.7630m and c.7750m). How is it possible to explain such a drastic speed difference with the 2011 climb?

6/ In interviews Steck reported perfect hard snow conditions on the whole route in 2011, in an explanation to explain his relatively slower speed above 7300m in 2016. However in his book "8000+" (about the 2011 ascent), he mentions such conditions only for the face itself up to c.7300m. Above there, he mentions ice and rock conditions on the crux section, then snow up to the ankle on the summit ridge, sometimes up to the knees, and in the hollows up to the hips. Were these conditions so different from those he and Göttler met in 2016?

7/ Steck has never provided any accurate or consistent description of the terrain from exit point of the Girona Route to the summit, or how he climbed it in 2011. Interviews after the 2016 Shisha Pangma expedition indicate that Steck cannot correctly identify the summit of Shisha Pangma from the east, confusing a closer sub-peak at the western end of the "summit plateau" for the main summit. As he claims to have climbed this terrain in 2011, shouldn't he know that the main summit lies some distance beyond this minor sub-peak? In fact the high point reached by the team in 2016 is a third of the whole distance between Girona's exit and the true summit.