

Bandaka and Changabang

JOHN PORTER

CHANCE IS AN ACTIVE partner in our lives. It was by chance that I was hitch-hiking from the Lakes to Leeds one Sunday in 1975 when Dennis Grey stopped to ask me to climb with a group of Polish climbers visiting Britain the following week. "Sure," I replied. But what could I have been sure about? Three years and two expeditions later, only the summits seem sure.

Andrzej Zawada, the leader of the Lhotse attempt in winter, was amongst that group. When I visited Poland six months later, the possibility of an Anglo-Polish Hindu Kush Expedition was cheerfully discussed over vodka with Andrzej. "You bring dollars, we provide equipment, food, and transportation, ok?" "Sure," I replied. A summer passed and a dark winter was descending outside the pub doors, when one day a letter arrived, and it was on.

I had six months to organize the first expedition.* A hastily assembled team was as rapidly dispersed: a broken leg, the lure of another expedition, job responsibilities—each took a member. I roped in Alex MacIntyre, only semi-conscious after a month of final exams, three weeks before we left. Howard Lancashire and Peter Holden also agreed to come at short notice. Terry King had been in since the beginning. We got together what food and equipment we could from sponsors, but it seemed a pitiful amount. "Don't worry, boys. As long as we bring dollars, we can arrive in our underwear!"

A week after we left Britain, we were on a train travelling across the USSR. "The Russians don't know you are going this way. It is forbidden to westerners," Zawada assured us. For five days the great continental plains rolled beneath us; across the Volga to Orsk, then down between the Aral and Caspian Seas through Bukhara to the River Oxus at Termez. The Russian Colonel shrugged his shoulders after his initial surprise. "Since you are here, we will let you cross the river . . . in a few days."

Five of us moved on to Mazar-i-Sharif, three plus wives stayed in Termez to wait the arrival of the equipment via freight train. (Had the

* For more details, see *A.A.J.*, 1978, pages 633-4.

PLATE 14

Photos by John Porter

Zurek leading in the Cyclotron on the
third day on BANADAKA.

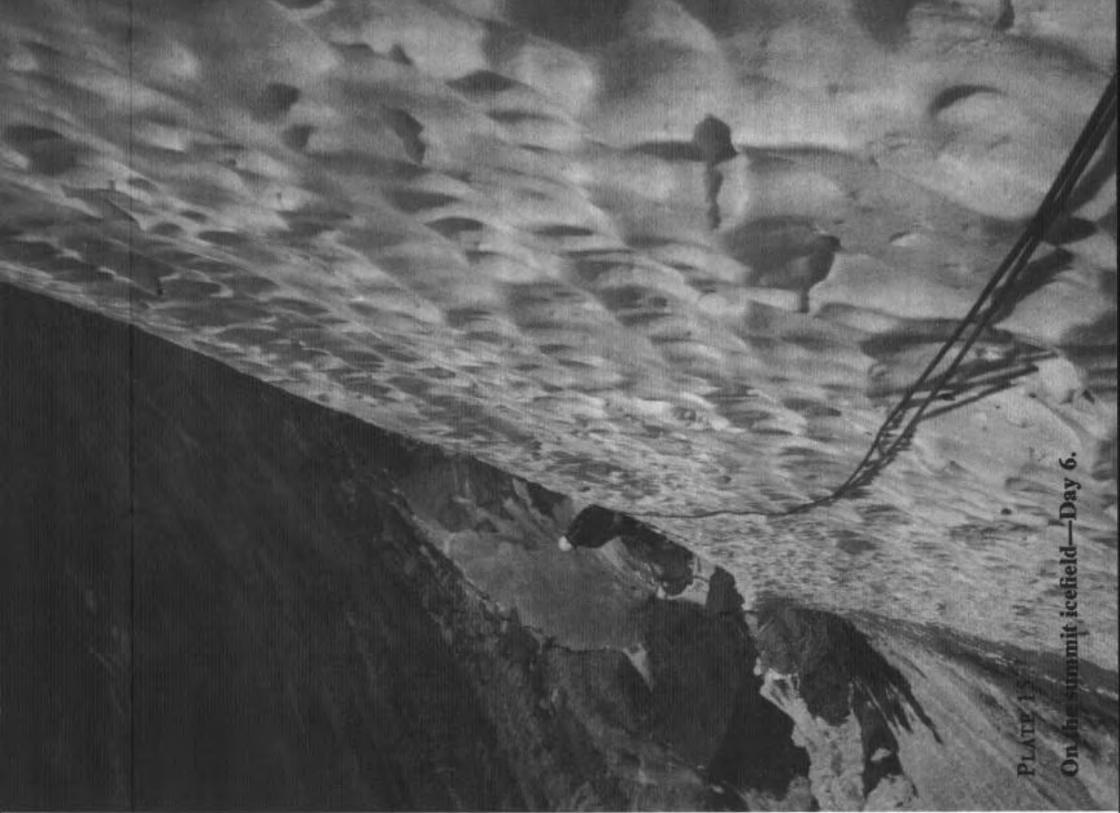
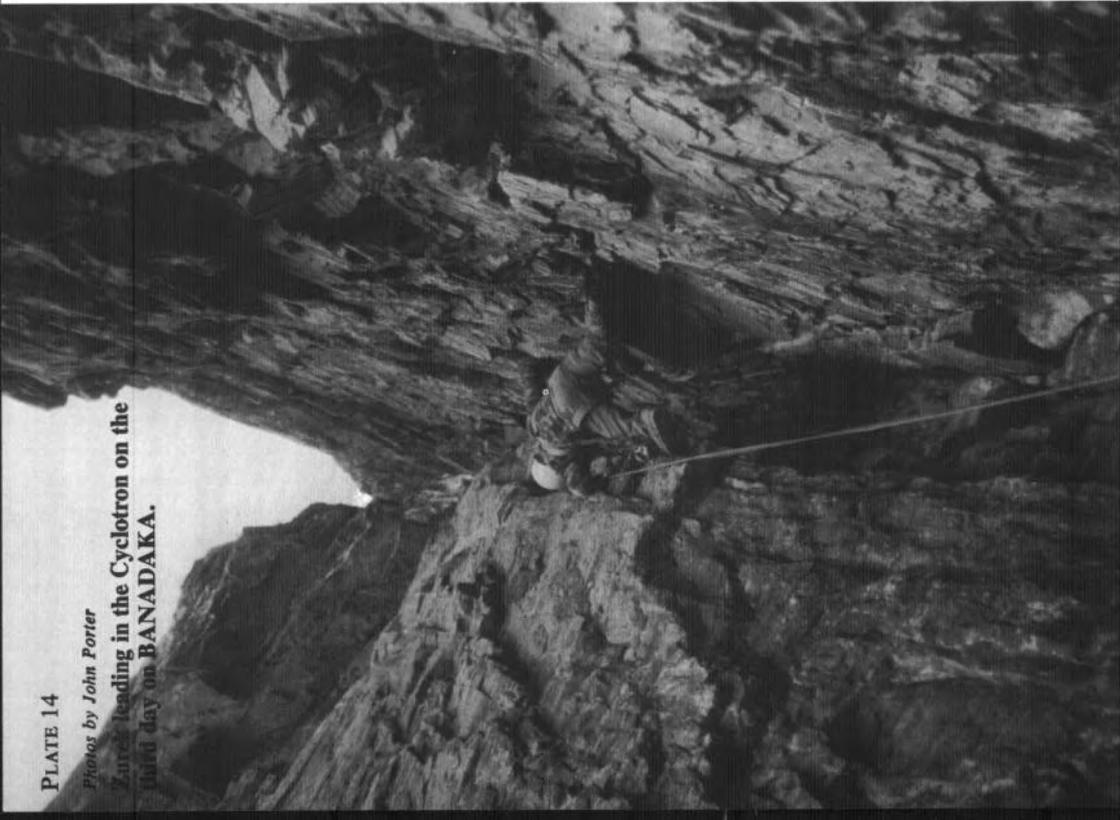


PLATE 15
On the summit icefield—Day 6.

two bottles for the yard master in Moscow been enough?) Andrzej Zawada and Peter Holden were in Kabul doing the bureaucratic rounds. The heat was like an invisible fire as we waited. Contrapuntally, we analysed our position, and languished among the lower cords of probable disaster. But when everything might have gone wrong, nothing did. By the end of July, we were all together with equipment in Faizabad.

Bandaka was Wojciech Kurtyka's idea. Jan Wolf had seen pictures of the face and he agreed immediately. Alex and I had never heard of it and replied with the inevitable "Sure." The expedition divided at Zebak. The other half continued on to the Mandaras Valley, where they had great success. From Zebak we began the long four day march to Base Camp.

Ours was a massive face, ugly yet compelling. To acclimatize, we climbed a new route up a jumbled, dangerous ridge to gain the main south ridge. Here, we were relieved to find a safe descent down the south side. In five days, we were back in Base, but Jan had developed acute bronchitis. That left three of us for the northeast face.

There was only one feasible line and we followed it exactly as we saw it from the glacier. The surprises were at times daunting. The climb lasted six days, no two of which were the same. The rock changed in character from day to day, and the architecture developed accordingly, steepening from sandstone into massive fluted walls of metamorphic rock. These in turn supported the upper half of the face with its great slabs separated by arêtes and finally the 2000-foot summit icefield capped by the "frogs eyes" séracs.

We averaged twelve pitches a day, two leading and one jümaring. My Jümar day fell on the fifth. I dreamed my way upwards, finding concentration difficult without the particular problems of leading to deal with. A block the size of a basketball joined me suddenly on one ledge as I sat gazing at distant Tirich Mir. I took it as a sign to continue jümaring. The rockfall had been so continuous from the beginning of the climb that it rarely deserved comment. At the end of that day we bivouacked on a ledge cut in the center of the summit icefield. The séracs leared down at us. I don't think any of us had ever before felt quite so pleased as when we broke through the summit cornice next day and emerged in the evening silence of high altitude.

We were at Base Camp three days later, and the return journey began immediately. Our total time in the mountains had been eighteen days and it had passed almost before we realized it. "Do we go again next year?" "Sure."

* * *

Changabang South Buttress fell to our lot after several other applications had failed. This year, the organization was easier. There were only two climbers from each country. Alex and I had only to save and



PLATE 16

Photo by John Porter

Zurek starting on the headwall on the fourth day on CHANGABANG.

Krzysztof Żurek, had the bulk of the food, base equipment, and transportation to find. Through much of the spring we continued to make arrangements without communication with the Poles. When I left Britain at the end of July, I did not know how we would get from Warsaw to India, but I knew now that *going* was the important thing.

No Soviet train this year, but Polish airlines to Bombay at their expense. Wojciech and I had a week's start on the others when we arrived in New Delhi, enough time, we hoped, to clear our permission. We were in for a shock. On our first visit to the Indian Mountaineering Foundation we were told that the Nanda Devi Sanctuary was closed to climbers. Terry King on a two-man expedition to Nanda Devi had been in Delhi for two weeks working his way up through government offices. Following his example, we argued that we should have been informed before leaving Europe for India, that we had come in good faith, etc., etc. Terry eventually received permission, and a few days later we were cleared for Changabang. Behind us, the doors closed on the Sanctuary to all but one expedition a year. The Indian government has made a formal complaint to the British government concerning the behavior of British expeditions in India. All smoke, I'm afraid. The fire occurred in 1965.

After the usual road blockages due to landslides on the monsoon saturated slopes between Rishikesh and Joshimath, the whole expedition was in Lata on September 4, only a week behind schedule. The rain fell in torrents. The first two days of the walk to Base were chaotic; wind and rain were producing near-hypothermia among some of our 32 porters. The Rishi Ganga was living up to its reputation. Still, we made good time and reached Base Camp on the sixth day in improving weather:

After a two day stint of organizing Base Camp, we went up to the face to reconnoiter and acclimatize, taking a day and a half to cross the glacier with its tedious cover of thick new snow. We bivouacked at the bottom of the face and next day climbed six pitches, straightening the line of the English attempt two years prior. We left what equipment we had at the high point and descended in the first of what were to be daily storms on the face. The meadows of Base Camp were a small but tense heaven during the three rest days that followed.

We had food for eight days and only hammocks for the bivouacks when we returned to the face. Even so, the sacks weighed no less than 65 pounds each and seemed like great stones as we wound across the now marked glacier path toward the wall. It snowed furiously as we reached the bivouac.

For three days we climbed the relatively easy lower half of the face, but were harassed by the afternoon storms which made jūmaring a private horror of spindrift and iced-up ropes. I reached the second bivouac at ten P.M. suffering from stomach cramps. Krzysztof was complaining of the same thing.

The third day took us to the point where the ridge merges with the headwall. Alex and I fixed three pitches above the bivouac in a white-out. During the five days on the headwall, the pattern repeated itself on all but the last. The sun each morning restored 90% of the energy and will power sapped by the prior day's efforts, but diminishing returns were obvious. Our progress was reduced from five, to four, to three pitches a day. Only on the last day with the summit in reach did we manage five again.

The technical difficulties were at times daunting. On day five, a grade-five ice pitch led us into a crackless chimney capped with hanging blocks. From below, this line appeared to be the only logical and direct line on the upper face, but now the dangerous rock encouraged us to take a chance on the open wall to the right. A tenuous line of cracks led diagonally up until it vanished in overlaps after three pitches. It was the only long section of aid on the climb. Two hours and three falls later, I descended to our uncomfortable second hammock bivouac. First a sky-hook, then a crack tack had rejected my weight, and higher up, a small hold had broken off spewing me out of the groove I was attempting to climb free. In the shadow of such nearly disastrous falls, I repented by doing the cooking, distributing the food along tiny ledges to the scattered hammocks.

Next morning, Krzysztof took five hours to finish the pitch I had ungracefully left the day before. As he leaned forward from the belay to signal Wojciech to climb, the pegs came out. Next time, he didn't lean forward. We tried not to think much about what we were jümaring on. That day Alex fell forty feet descending an icy rope onto a peg which I later removed with the tap of a hammer.

On day seven, we entered a positive dihedral line and followed it for three pitches to the upper icefield we'd named the "Cyclop's Eye." The last pitch gave Alex an exercise in one-arm ice-axe pull-ups after the lower half of the icicle he was climbing collapsed under him.

We traversed to the left side of the Cyclop's Eye and fixed a rope in an icy gully before returning to join the others at a spectacular bivouac nicked in a small ridge in the icefield. I was suffering on alternate nights from stomach pain and this was one of them. Sleep came only as a series of quick nightmares. Krzysztof's groans continually brought me back to the reality of our position. He had not eaten for four days and was losing coherence. I prayed for the summit next day and entertained myself with the glittering stars and the gradual dawn that gathered around the distant peaks of Nepal.

The last day was another painful Jümar day. Wojciech led all day, encouraging Krzysztof and keeping him "in touch." We broke onto the summit ridge and entered the world of big mountains whose presence had been obliterated by our concentration on the technical difficulties of

beg enough to finance the costs in India, and provide the freeze-dried food and hardware for the climb. The Poles, Wojciech Kurtyka and the climb. The wind was blowing hard, and cold penetrated to the bone. Our bivouac just below the summit was short as Alex awoke us at first light to witness the gyration of huge lenticulars around Nanda Devi.

The next ten days were the most pain filled of my life. After reaching Base Camp, I succumbed to my stomach pains and didn't eat anything solid for a week. I remember a tremendous feeling of accomplishment, stronger than what I had felt on the summit, after keeping down some mashed potato. One morning, I changed the river water we had been using for some grit-free stream water a short walk away. Within two days I had recovered, everything but weight.

I walked out the Rishi Ganga alone to fetch the porters. The smells of summer still radiated from the forests in the lower gorge. The accomplishment of one summit vanished on the high pass of Dharansi and became a desire for the many others that were receding toward the horizon, pyramid after pyramid. Two weeks later, Alex and I boarded a train in Warsaw for London. "Like going away for a long weekend, eh?" "When is next year, anyway?"

Summary of Statistics:

AREAS: 1977—Central Hindu Kush, Afghanistan.

1978—Garhwal Himalaya, India.

NEW ROUTES: 1977—Kohe Bandaka, 22,450 feet, via northeast face, summit reached on August 14, 1977 (Kurtyka, MacIntyre, Porter).

1978—Changabang, 22,520 feet, via the Direct South Face, summit reached on September 27, 1978 (whole party).

PERSONNEL: 1977—Wojciech Kurtyka, Jan Wolf, *Poles*; Alexander MacIntyre, *British*; John Porter, *American*.

1978—Wojciech Kurtyka, Krzysztof Żurek, *Poles*; Alexander MacIntyre, *British*; John Porter, *American*.

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