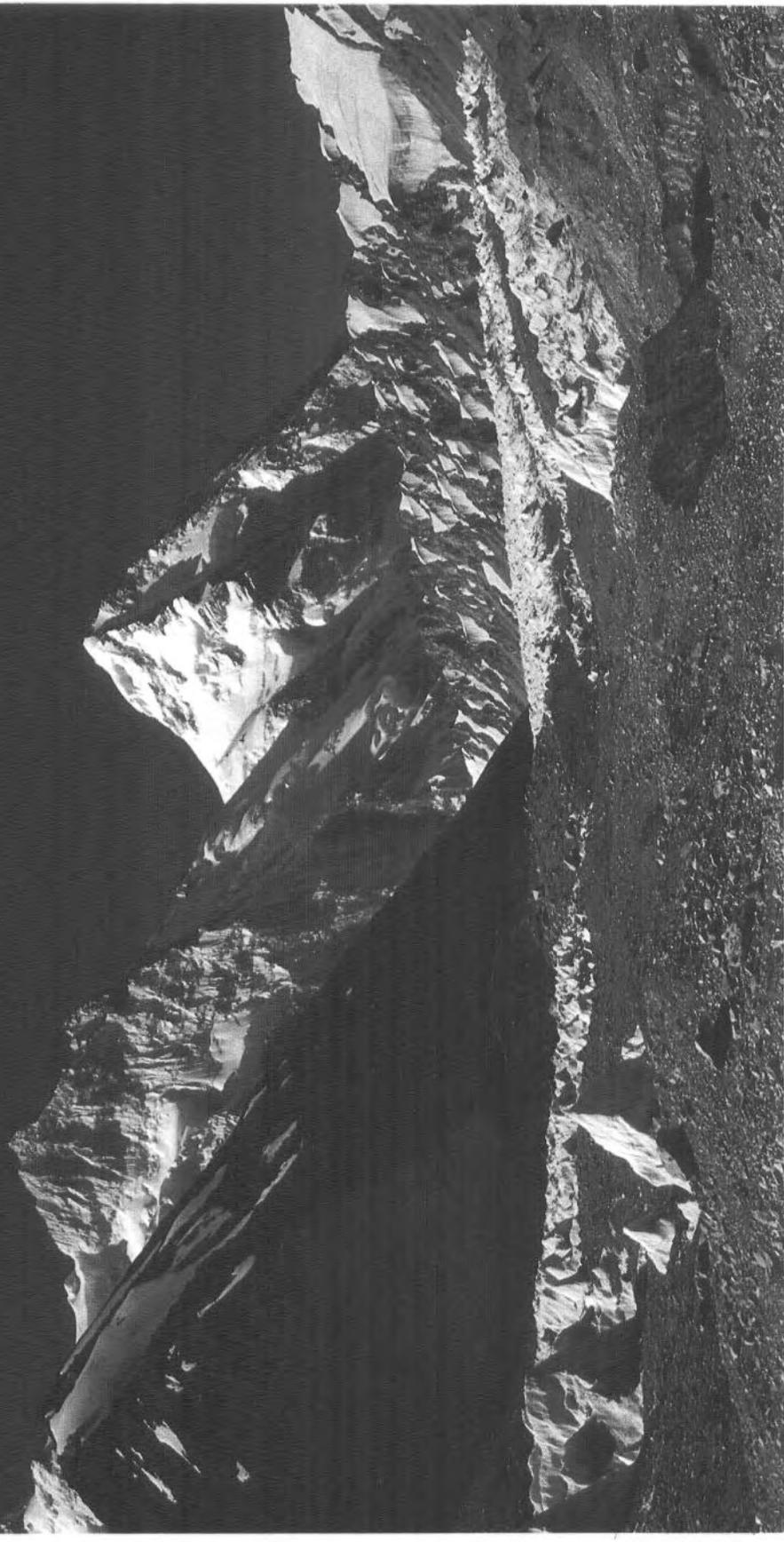


COLOR PLATE II

*Photos by Kollo Staffens*

**K2 from the Northeast.**



# Shaksgam Exploration

## Tilman's Loop and Gasherbrum Glacier to K2 Glacier

KURT DIEMBERGER

“T

HE NEXT MORNING TILMAN arrived. He had managed to reach the Staircase Glacier and to follow it down. In the bad weather, he had seen very little, but it was an interesting trip, and his compass bearings have been a help in plotting that section of the map.” In 1983, this laconic and somewhat enigmatic statement of Eric Shipton in his *Blank on the Map* was all that Julie Tullis and I found out from his book about what we called “Tilman’s Loop.” Luckily it was well marked on Spender’s map, a circuit of longish shape which holds in its center P 6350, which Tilman and Shipton had climbed in 1937.

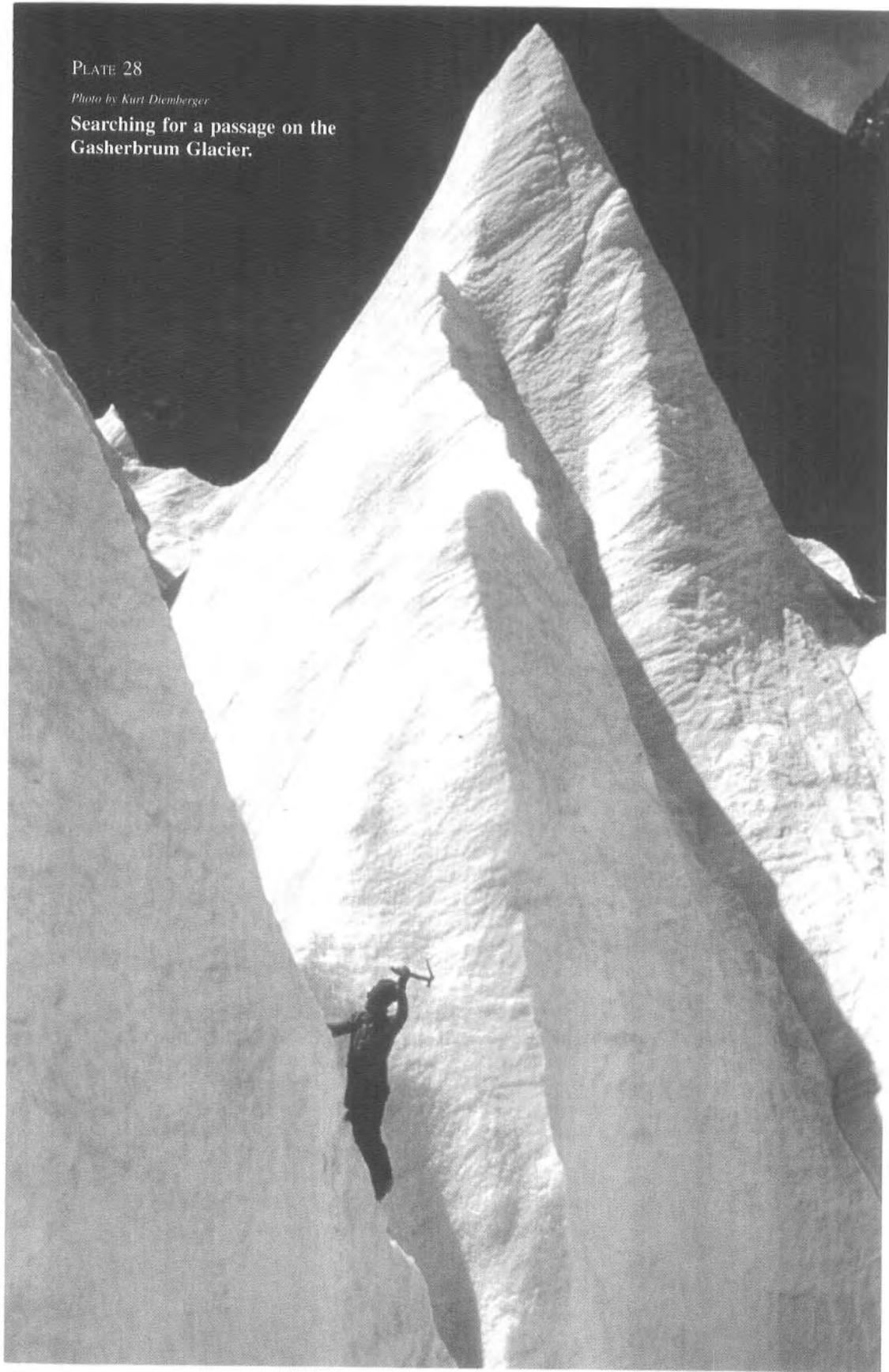
This loop extends north from Sughet Jangal up the K2 Glacier, but Tilman left that glacier to the northeast going up into a wide snow-and-ice cirque and over a narrow gap of roughly 5300 meters, which we call “Tilman’s Gap.” He made a steep descent on a lateral glacial arm and eventually reached the huge ice-stream he called “Staircase Glacier.” (This is “Skyang Glacier” on Spender’s map and now is usually called “North Skyang Lungpa Glacier.”) He followed it down to its end until he could enter and pass a wild, deeply-cut gorge. In 1983, Julie and I wondered if he really could have done so when we passed through it. The only alternative was to cross meters above the chasm clinging to a steep, rotten wall which would have earned him “The Golden Hoof” in a competition with agile Karakoram mountain sheep. Whatever he did, in some way he managed what became the crux of our 1994 traverse from the Gasherbrum Glacier to the K2 Glacier, when we were forced to find an escape route over dirt-covered slabs climbed on crampons, which wrecked our time schedule and put us on hunger rations.

But let us return to 1983. When Julie Tullis and I were filming the Italian expedition on the north spur of K2, we dreamed of reaching Tilman’s “Sanctuary” and his “Staircase Glacier.” We even envisaged repeating the whole of “Tilman’s Loop.” Somehow, I believe I had read or heard—though I know not where—that Shipton and Tilman had at first tried together to ascend the gorge but were stopped by a waterfall. When Tilman later reached the gorge on his way down, he probably did not give Shipton all the details of his remarkable undertaking. Therefore, when Julie and I got to the upper end of the gorge, we had no clear idea of what to expect. We looked at the entrance

PLATE 28

*Photo by Kurt Diemberger*

**Searching for a passage on the  
Gasherbrum Glacier.**



between steep slopes and enormous chutes and agreeing that we were not keen on long traverses on sliding scree, we entered the chasm.

Initially we jumped and zigzagged, but soon we were wading in rushing water up our thighs or even higher. The vertical walls at either side narrowed to a dark corridor a few meters wide. The domes of rock above our heads seemed to overlap. We feared a sudden rise in water level, surging down from the now invisible glacier above. After two hours, we understood, in a mixture of joy and madness, that we had no choice but to get through. A strange climax of life! At every curve, we hoped for light at the end. There were bridges of ice over which we had to work our way or under which we had to crawl. Once we had to squeeze through a big tube of ice. At one point, an enormous boulder blocked the way. On the top of it a big sheet of thick ice was balanced at an angle of 50°. It sloped down toward a cascade that fell in a rushing curtain of water for 20 meters. We edged onto the boulder. Without climbing equipment, I cut steps with a stone and a ski pole in the slippery, semi-transparent shiny blue surface. Finally, 4½ hours after the start, we sat on a large rock below the end. We reached Sughet Jangal at ten P.M. by torchlight. We both doubted that this could have been Tilman's route. He must have found some sort of traverse higher up.

The fascination of this glacier grew the more we realized how difficult access was from every side. In another break from our film work on K2, we stood at 6000 meters alongside P 6350 in the center of Tilman's Loop. We could look up "Staircase Glacier" (North Skyang Lungpa Glacier) a long way . . . and also to an intricate system of glaciers and peaks, where one might be able to find a way. "Anything but easy, but fascinating," said Julie in a low voice, her dark eyes mustering the rows of cols, peaks and glaciers that extended before us to the southeast. It was a wonderful landscape which made you want to step into the unknown. We would come back.

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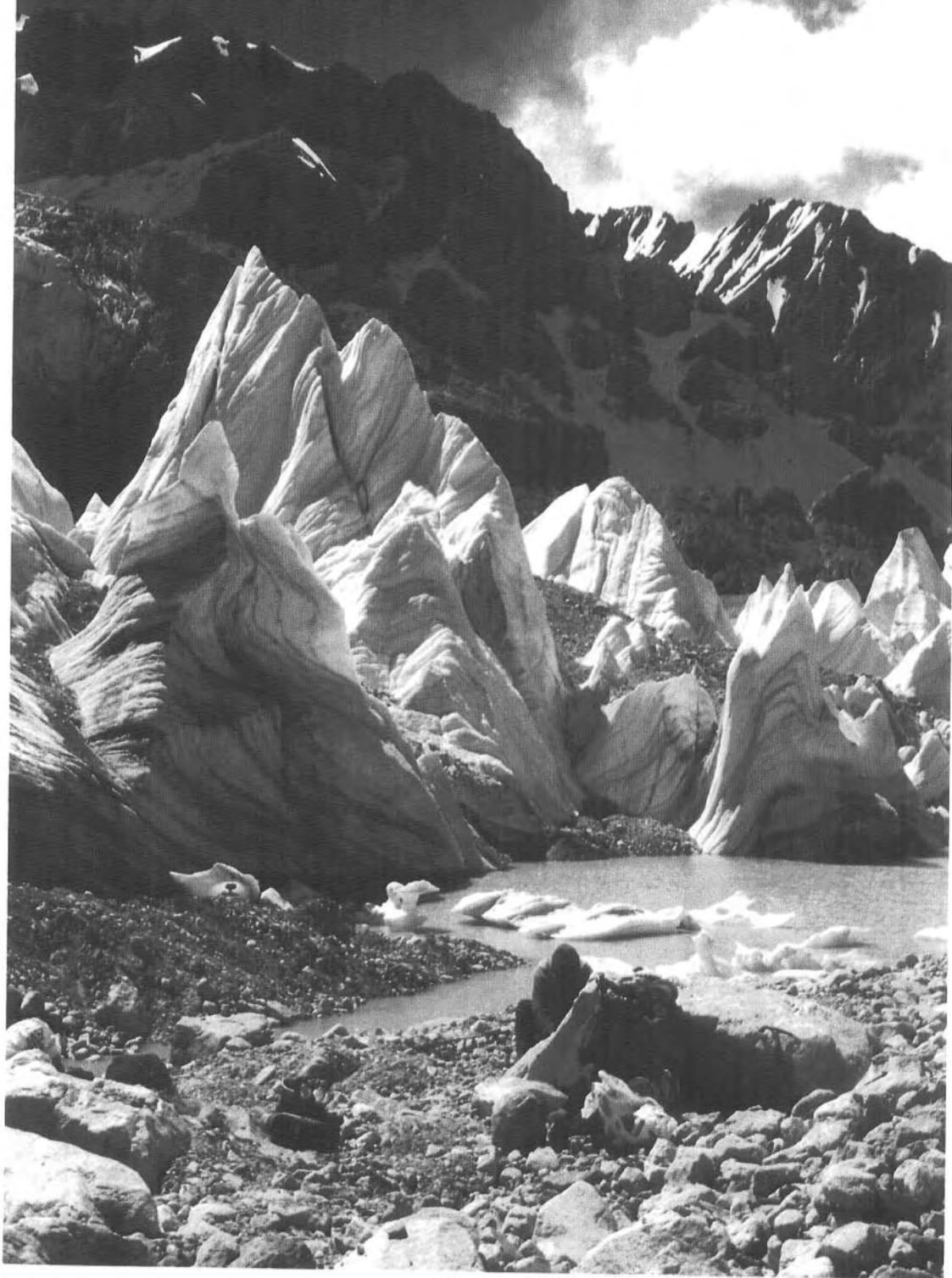
Autmn 1991: eight years later, I was again on the "other" side, in China, but on the northern Gasherbrum Glacier, together with Catalan friends exploring the unclimbed east face of Broad Peak. And Julie? She remained for ever on K2, only three years after our striving for Tilman's Loop and perhaps beyond. But I did not forget our old promise. I wanted to find the access to "Staircase Glacier" from the Gasherbrum side. Some maps showed a ridge separating it from the East Skyang Lungpa Glacier, some a col. What was true? I moved up alone, carrying a camp with me. At the second effort, I spied an unknown saddle which had to lead to Tilman's Staircase Glacier, but time was too short and there were many crevasses.

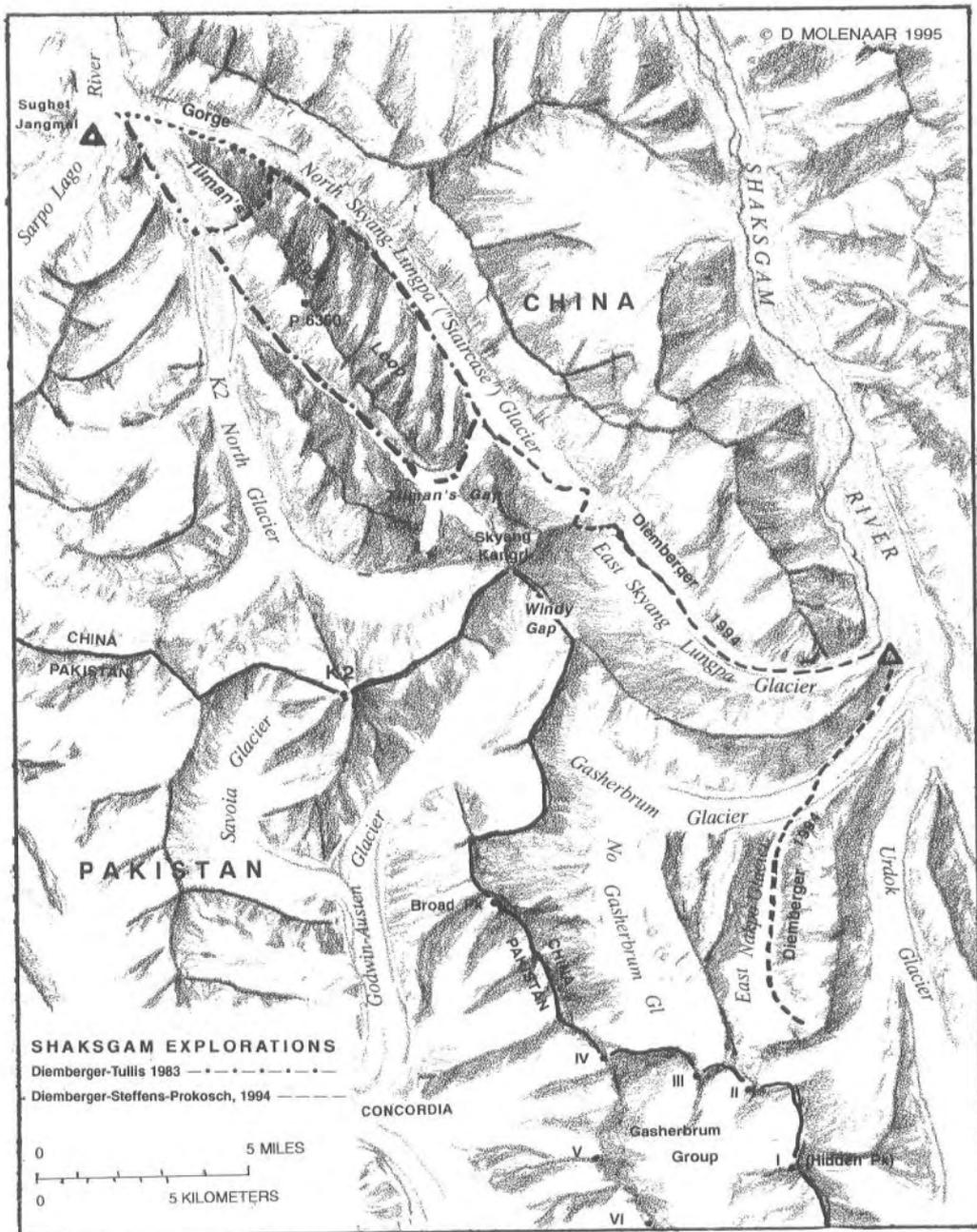
A year later, I was back again with my Catalans. They climbed Broad Peak Central, but although I went to Camp II, I was here to explore. Being alone, I could not enter areas with hidden crevasses, so I climbed high on nameless mountains to find routes from good viewpoints. I must return with a friend, a partner who would have pleasure in exploring passes, peaks and glaciers.

COLOR PLATE 12

*Photo by Kurt Dienberger*

**Ice Ships on the East Skyang Glacier.**





I found him: Rollo Steffens from Germany, young and full of enthusiasm for my plans. Erika Prokosch from Vienna, another experienced mountaineer, joined in. In August 1994, from Islamabad we traveled by bus along the Karakoram Highway over the Kunjerab Pass to Kashgar, then onward via Yecheng across the Kun Lun to Mazar. From there, we marched with our camels over the 4700-meter Aghil Pass with two Uigur camel drivers and our Chinese liaison officer.

Our enterprise almost ended in tragedy before it began. Crossing the Shaksgam River an hour above Durbin Jangal, Erika's camel was carried away in the icy-cold water for half a kilometer and she was lucky not to have been drowned. We lost three loads, mainly food and some gas, but luckily we had split up the supplies before the river crossing.

On August 16, we established our little Base Camp at 4150 meters near the stream that comes down from the Gasherbrum Glacier, close to where the East Skyang Lungpa Glacier forks off. The great traverse from there to Sughet Jangal was the first priority. It would establish a route for future mountaineers from the Sarpo Laggo valley to the north side of the great peaks without the dangerous crossings of the Shaksgam River when the valley is flooded. We still had to reconnoiter part of it, especially on the far end, on Tilman's ground.

After some days for acclimatization, we set out, heavily laden, but having the advantage of my knowledge of the start of the route from 1991. We climbed the black snout of the East Skyang Lungpa Glacier bent under heavy packs and stumbled fatigued between enormous hills of moraine to enter a fantastic landscape of Dolomite shapes, often clothed in glaciers: towers, faces, ridges that led up to over 6000 meters, a climber's heaven! Petrified shells reminded us that this was once the ocean bottom.

It took us five days to reach the unknown saddle opposite Windy Gap, to which I had come so close. We crossed the northern slopes to avoid useless zigzagging between ice pinnacles. Good Rollo ran back to fetch more food and gas while Erika and I climbed a fine 5600-meter peak. We caught a splendid view down "Staircase Glacier" and finally knew that col was the pass we wanted to find. Far in the distance, perhaps still 20 kilometers away, was a jagged line of pinnacles. They must be "our" ice towers, Julie's and mine, near the spot that we reached after our marathon through the gorge. For the past days, we had seen K2 rising behind Windy Gap, had glimpsed Broad Peak and of course, mighty Skyang Kangri was ever present.

The next day, after crevasse zigzagging and a descending traverse, we made our way into the col—it would have been utter nonsense to try to reach it along the glacier floor, which was nothing but broken ice, crevasses and towers. We three hugged on the saddle. The joy was no less than on an unclimbed peak. Our altitude read 5245 meters, but it may well have been a little higher. Then we spread our wings and flew into the new land, the promised land.

We left a depot for the way back (one of several caches) and continued over the wide glacial floor. Crevasse fields intermingled with easy ground. We noticed that on our left there were several possible crossings in the ridge of

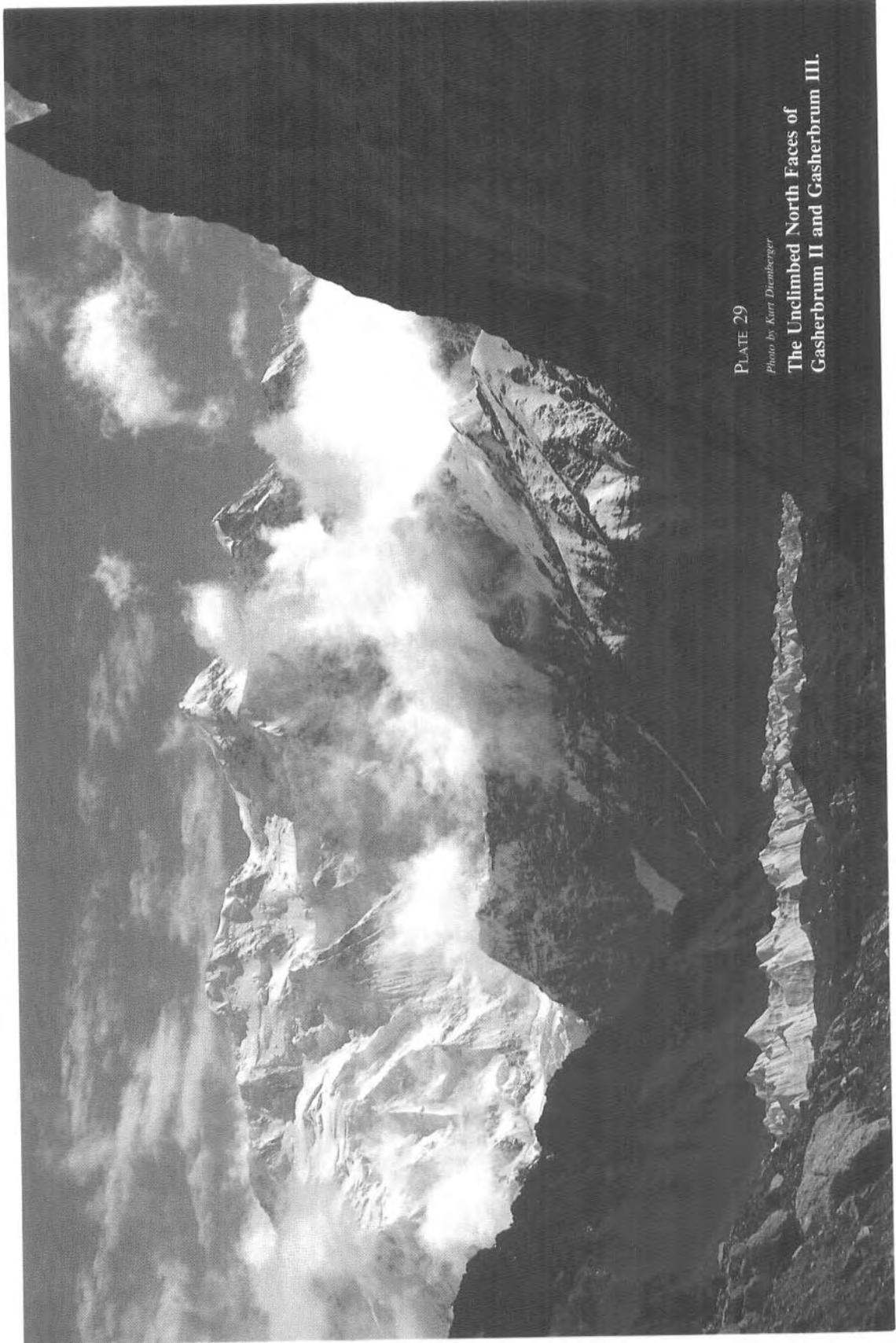


PLATE 29

*Photo by Kurt Diemberger*

**The Unclimbed North Faces of  
Gasherbrum II and Gasherbrum III.**

peaks that divided our glacier from the valley we came from. By evening we met an impressive row of ice towers that came in from the left at 4500 meters and found a perfect flat spot of black soft sand between the pinnacles for our tent. In the distance, thrusting skywards, K2 appeared again, beautiful in another magical shape.

The next morning we spied Tilman's Gap and the steep, white slope below it. We hesitated, not knowing whether to cross or to continue down our Staircase Glacier to the very end, hoping to find Tilman's exit or to tackle once more Julie's and my gorge. This time we had rope and pitons for an abseil. If we failed to make it to Sughet Jangal, we'd have to make a hunger march through Tilman's Gap.

We decided to stay with the glacier. The pinnacles increased in size and number with growing humps of debris. We turned to the lateral moraine on the left, crowned here and there with a few flowers. Where several small glaciers came in from the left, our comfortable "highway" was interrupted and made us work to deviate to the main glacier or climb over chaotic moraine hills. It was late when we climbed down into the deep ditch alongside the snout of the glacier. This enormous wall of black ice was discharging boulders and water while with a deafening roar the mighty river foamed from the black mouth. "So much for our gorge, Julie," I think.

We pitched our tent in a fabulous spot. Tufts of grass, flowers, and in front of us the river. Too much water for tackling the gorge, that was obvious. The V-shaped valley with its incredible flanks, exposed castles, vertical rock ribs, giant chimneys must be a paradise for mountain sheep! We found their tracks everywhere, real trails . . . no wonder good old Tilman made it through here. Where the sheep can get out, we can! Possibly this was an old pasture when people still used to go over the Mustagh Pass. We were exhilarated. We had made it. Rollo built a big cairn, crowned with a couple of blue sheep horns.

No more food caches. We ate and drank. The next day, we made good progress, following the animal paths, crossed boulder fields and went and went. It was truly a long way, sometimes up, sometimes down. . . . Far below us, the rushing river. . . .

Then, we saw the V-shape of the gorge below us, an awful shape, the lock that cut off this valley. Down loose scree slopes between vertical pillars were mountain sheep tracks, where they could get through. Perhaps it was 300 meters of an impressive abyss into the far-away roar of the chasm below.

Rollo dropped his pack to find out if there was a possibility. He returned with a long face: too much risk. All was loose. A fatal step would be easy . . . and we didn't have four legs. With the remaining food, it would have been a gamble to go back to Tilman's Gap. The only possibility was to climb over the high ridge above us to the K2 Glacier on the other side. A desperate solution! Could we get down over there?

We made it, but I shall never forget!

The next day, we climbed over boulders, loose scree, crumbling ribs and whatever one can imagine for a climber's hell up to "Rollo's Gate" and down

the other side. The climax was at the bottom, a hundred meters above the boulder field: a polished slab covered with a finger or two of dirt. We tackled it with ice axe and crampons. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. It took us all day. We slept a stone's throw from the tongue of the K2 Glacier, just where we had come down.

Nobody wanted to share my black-ink soup made from boiling Sughet Jangal mushrooms; they were a bit old. I must confess that when I saw a brace of ducks playing between the bushes, my ideals as a guarantor for Mountain Wilderness—well this was an extraordinary situation. Erika preferred tinned Russian fish, dug out from a last year's dump. Rollo waved packets of spaghetti, which he found in the trash. We descended to Sughet Jangal, that beautiful green spot all meadow and bushes. Little birds sang and in the meanders of the Sarpo Lago River small fish swam. Nobody was there. The American, Spanish and Italian K2 expeditions had all left.

Wisely, I had agreed with Don Arturo Bergamaschi that the Italians should leave a drum of food halfway up the K2 Glacier, but we were not sure to find it. We had small caches on the way back, but for now? A visit to the Australians' Base Cape up the Sarpo Lago Glacier? Rollo and I were on the verge of giving up when finally, after a couple of hours of stumbling and circling around the valley that leads to the Mustagh Pass, we found a single tent, with no one in it. They were all up on Chongtar Peak, exactly on that day making the first ascent of what may have been the highest still unclimbed mountain in the world. We wrote a thanking letter, chewing Australian cheese and chocolate.

Our return to the Gasherbrum Base Camp would be a story all of its own. It was difficult. Fresh snow had fallen and we had to break trail for hours and hours to get back to our col. And it shall not be a secret: my young German friend plowed most of the ditch to its top. Before that, we had done the other half of Tilman's Loop, ascending the K2 Glacier and climbing his gap below Skyang Kangri (previously called Staircase Peak.)

Yet, there is something to tell briefly about other explorations last summer. I wanted once more to get a close look at the north face of Gasherbrum II. I had been to its base in 1983 with Julie and Italians of the K2 expedition. But the real view point could only be exactly in front of the face and higher up. One fine day, we crossed the ice pinnacles of the Gasherbrum Glacier, reached its southern side moraine and pitched a tent at a little lake. The next morning, we wanted to climb up the East Nakpo Glacier to get behind a sawtooth ridge that blocked our view to the face, but it turned out to be a complicated matter as the moraine had been eroded and the glacier was chaotic. An idea suddenly struck us. We should climb a little frozen stream towards a yellow tower. There had to be a gap there! We climbed for two hours, and then—the view was down to the Urdok Glacier. We noticed the final crest of the sawtooth ridge. I had to convince Rollo to go on up.

We shall never forget it! There were Hidden Peak, Gasherbrums II, III, IV, the "Camels," Broad Peak and at the far end K2. It was the greatest view of the expedition. And one, I might say, that might be a key to the future.