

CHINA

TIEN SHAN

Kokshaal-Tau, Attempts and Exploration. I'd first learned of this area of China's Tien Shan/Kokshaal-Tau range from a series of black-and-white photos taken by Christian Beckwith and a write-up published in the 1999 *AAJ*. Beckwith speculated that a treasure of pristine, granite peaks lay within the Chinese side of the range. Through months of research, I found that, due to heavy military activity in the region, the Chinese government had long restricted all travel to this specific area. My contact in China confirmed that no one had ever entered this area from China to climb. I tracked down some 1942 topographic Russian military maps of the region that showed at least four huge valleys that appeared to hold endless formations of steep rock towering up to 19,000 feet.

My contact in China, Guo, whom I'd never met, told me that the military had demanded that he do a reconnaissance trip to determine whether or not we should be given permits. I wired several thousand non-refundable dollars to Guo for his trip.

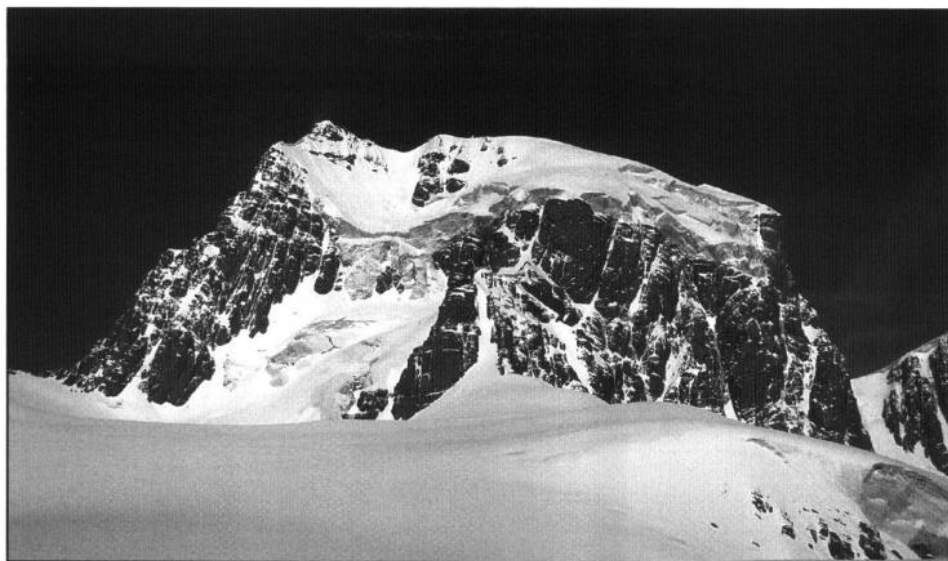
After several anxious weeks, I received an e-mail from Guo. He was almost certain we would receive the necessary permits to enter the area, but he could not guarantee it. There was another catch, as well: we would not be allowed to go within five kilometers of Kyrgyzstan's border, exactly where the maps revealed the steepest and biggest features to be. In spite of the uncertainty, Jed and Doug Workman, friends of mine from Utah, accepted my invitation. Jerry Dodrill, a climber and photographer I'd met years before in Yosemite, also accepted.

We arrived in Beijing in late July. Our itinerary, created by Guo, who would be acting as our chief liaison officer, was strict and specific. A travel snafu delayed our arrival in Urumqi for three days. The flight delay in Beijing hampered us even further: hours before we arrived, the military police station closed for the weekend. When it re-opened, we were pleasantly surprised when things went smoothly: we traded the rest of our payment (almost 120 U.S.\$100 bills) for our visa extensions, permits, and upcoming services from our Chinese escorts. We spent the next two days driving 1,000 kilometers west to the town of Aksu. One of our trucks broke down, and our strict schedule lost another day.

A few more days in the trucks heading northwest brought us through Wushi, Akqi, and Karabulak, where, much to our relief, we passed through the final military stations with permission to explore in the area. Once again, we were warned not to go within five kilometers of the border.

Finally, we arrived in a tiny, Kyrgyz mountain village (in China) where we would park the vehicles for the next several weeks. Our team—comprised of Guo, a cook, a few porters, and several camels and mules—set out walking slowly up the valley along a huge, muddy, glacial river. At about 12,500 feet, we encountered a Kyrgyz nomadic village. The next morning, with animal and porter support for a couple of hours more, we started the trudge up into the cold wilderness. The animals and porters could go no farther and turned back before the rough glacial terrain. Though our Chinese companions were supposed to monitor us at all times, Guo and his cook decided they would camp where the camels dropped us off in a grass valley below the glaciers. We would return a few weeks later.

We had already lost at least eight days of our original schedule, so there was no time to waste. Then, we ran into yet another unforeseeable variable: we discovered that we had been robbed. After some reflection, we realized that it must have happened back where we parked the trucks.



"Grand Poohbah Peak." Beginning at 4900 meters, Doug and Jed Workman, Jerry Dodrill and Mike Libeck climbed the southeast ridge (the prominent ridge on the left), reaching ca. 500 feet below the 5697-meter summit before being turned back by a lightning storm. The team turned around on a corniced ridge just below a final easy looking rockband. DOUG WORKMAN

We lost three new ropes, over 500 feet of 7 mm cord, a back-up camera, and toiletries.

We finally agreed to attempt a route on a very attractive 5697-meter peak we called the "Grand Poohbah." According to our map, it lay directly on the border of China and Kyrgyzstan. We opted for an ice/granite buttress to the west. We brought two bivy sacks, Clif Bars for a day or two, a few liters of water each, ice axes, one 8.8 mm rope, a light alpine rack, and swami belts without leg loops. Four of us simulclimbed with our one rope, which forced us to do many short, belayed pitches, and caused us to move very slowly. We had hoped to spend 24 hours on our attempt, but ended up spending over 60 hours with little, if any, sleep. After a few thousand feet gained to an advanced base camp from the valleys below, and well over 2,000 feet of steep climbing on granite, ice, and snow, we were turned around by an electrical storm just short of the summit.

After this attempt, we decided to climb on some vertical granite wall/crags. We spent several days climbing beautiful pitches on clean, solid, gold granite, including one of the nicest chimneys in the world and perfect, steep seams. This particular wall/crag area offers endless, beautiful cracks of all sizes.

The variety of climbing offered in this area of China, be it ice climbing, face climbing, wall climbing, alpine climbing, free climbing, or even bouldering, was top notch.

MIKE LIBECKI*

*Recipient of a Helly Hansen Mountain Adventure Grant

Peak Kezi-Sel, Traverse, and Jamanjar, Attempt. After 14 days' acclimatization in Kyrgyzstan

in the Kichik Alai and Alai ranges, Andrei Lebedev (leader), Ilia Guerov, Boris Malakhov, Piotr Rykalov, and I (assistant leader) began our expedition to China's Kashgar Range. Over 28 days, with no camels, L.O., or other support, we explored the southeast slopes of Muztagh Ata and the southeast slopes of Kongur (traveling 250 kilometers in total). We crossed two technical passes on the first part of our route; on the second part, we crossed a forgotten pass from the Karakul area east to the Teresaz-Su Valley. Here we descended to the lowest point of our route (2800m). We then went to the upper Chimgensu, walking through the complicated icefall of the South Chimgen Glacier and made a traverse (from east to west) of Peak Kezi-Sel (6525m on Chinese maps; 6590m on Soviet maps and in the Himalayan Index). This peak lies in the Kashgar Range to the south of Kongur; it was attempted in 1982 (see 1983 *AAJ*, pp. 296-7).

We then attempted an ascent of Jamanjar (7229m), which lies between Kongur and Kongur Tjube. Strong winds and deep fog stopped us at the east summit (7100m) on July 31. We had no time for a second attempt. On August 5, we crossed Torugart Pass back into Kyrgyzstan.

OTTO CHKHETIANI, *Russia*

KUN LUN SHAN

Shipton's Arch, First Ascent. In May, Sam Lightner, Nancy Feagin, Jeremy Schmidt, Gordon Wiltsie, and I went on a mini-adventure to revisit an arch originally introduced to the western world by Eric Shipton. The arch lies in the Kara Tagh, a tiny mountain range 25 or 30 miles northwest of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Province, and towers at least 1,200 feet above the narrow gorge it spans. The fact that no one has visited it since Shipton seems odd. But the arch is hidden within an obscure, crumbly range of conglomerate, and is surrounded by maze-like slot canyons. It is impossible to see without some careful research, some persistence, and some good luck. Or you can simply wander a little ways northwest of Kashgar, ask any local goat herder, and he'll tell you just how to get there.

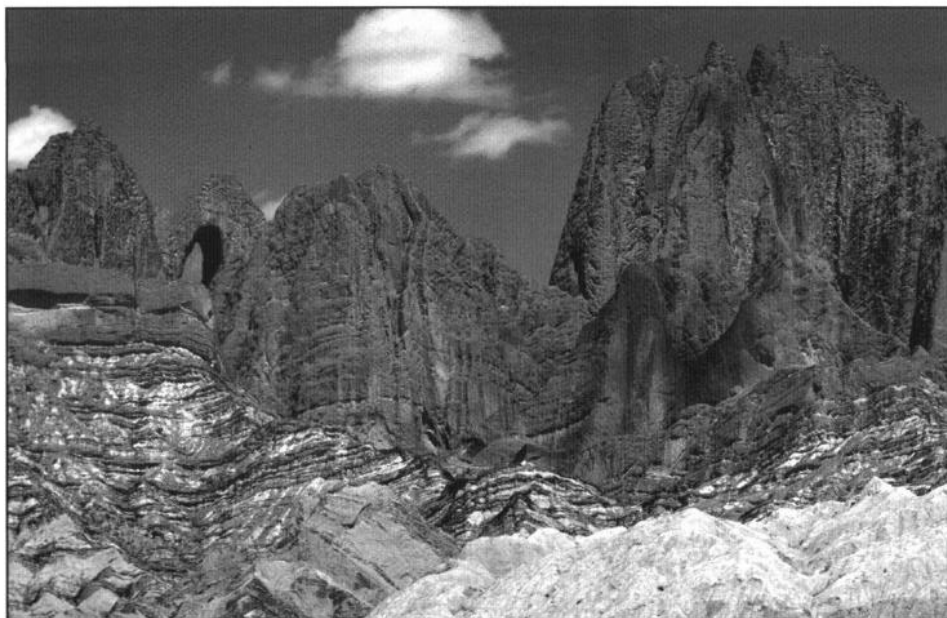
Our trip was organized by Jeremy Schmidt, who had won the backing of the National Geographic Society by pitching our trip both as a journey of exploration and a journey back in time to learn about Shipton and his wanderings in the vast expanses of northwest China. I had seen the arch from a distance in 1993 and had given Jeremy the idea of refinding it. Sam Lightner Jr. had added the challenge of climbing the arch, fleshing out the trip.

Once in Kashgar, it took us only a couple of days to reconnoiter the mountain range, known as the Kara Tagh by the local Uygurs and Tajiks. By following the directions given to us by local goat herders, we spotted the arch. We then hired a local guide to show us the proper slot canyon that led to the arch from the south side of the range. He took us about halfway there before we ran out of daylight.

But Shipton (and his wife) had written that the approach from the north, though harder to find initially, was easier to follow. So we swung around to the north, where another goat herder took us all the way there—about a three-hour hike up a narrow canyon with a few short but vertical chimneys that are slippery when wet.

Once established at the base of the arch, Sam, Nancy, and I climbed up its west arm, placing a couple of bolts for each belay and six or seven bolts for protection along the way. We climbed approximately 600 vertical feet to attain the summit.

The climbing up the western arm is generally easy fifth class with one or two over-



Shipton's Arch from the south, just outside the small village of Mingyol, about 30 kilometers west-northwest of Kashgar. MARK NEWCOMB

hangs that went at about 5.6. The rock is loose conglomerate. The exposure is similar to the East Ridge of Wolf's Head in the Wind Rivers with several hundred more feet of exposure on either side.

Having climbed the arch and done some measurements via a wild rappel undertaken by Sam, we proceeded to rappel down the 800-foot wall that led down to the slot canyon beneath the arch. We rappelled off double bolt anchors placed in relatively solid, water-polished conglomerate. Once down, we threaded our way southward out the slot canyon, reaching in a few hours the point to which we had been led before by our local guide and completing our journey through the Kara Tagh.

MARK NEWCOMB

Chakragil, West Ridge. While taking advantage of a free week during a visit to the far reaches of Xinjiang Province in northwestern China, I climbed the west ridge of Chakragil (22,071'). I took no map or altimeter and am therefore uncertain of the elevations of my camps. The roundtrip, from the Karakoram Highway and back, took six days. I had long been intrigued by Eric Shipton's account, in his book *Mountains of Tartary*, about his attempt with Bill Tilman in 1948 on the north ridge.

I took three days to ascend to a high camp. My route ascended the northerly of two glacier basins. A deep gorge with a swift, muddy stream exits the southerly of the two. A clearer, mellower stream and a substantially shallower gorge exits the northerly. It's an easy hike up the northerly basin, onto the terminal moraine of the glacier and along the lateral moraine on its north-northwesterly flank.



The west ridge of Chakragil, as seen from the south. MARK NEWCOMB

From a second camp on the lateral moraine of the glacier, I ascended about 2,000 feet to a high camp on the rim of a small, glaciated basin that leads to the west ridge. The ascent to the summit took six hours from my high camp, first along a sharp, sometimes corniced ridge and then up a broad, well-rounded ridge with a few false summits. New snow along the first two-thirds of the ascent hampered progress, but the upper third was blown relatively free of snow and made for easier travel. The summit is a broad dome of ice with no well-defined single highest point.

After summiting, I descended past my high camp to the next camp down. The next day I hiked south across the glacier and over a saddle, dropping about 2,000 feet down the south side of the saddle to the southerly of the two glacier basins. I followed a goat path out the narrow mouth of this basin and hiked to a hidden meadow not far from the Karakoram Highway. The next morning I hiked out to the highway and caught a ride into Kashgar.

MARK NEWCOMB

Mt. Mustagh Ata, East Ridge. In 1994, Dan Waugh had seen and photographed the east ridge of Mustagh Ata (7546m) and suggested we might try to be the first to climb it. Through correspondence with Japanese Alpine Club members, including Masanori Suzuki, as well as a previous attempt on the route in 1998, Daniel Mazur and Jon Otto (U.S.) established that the ridge was unclimbed.

Our journey started on June 10 with a preliminary climb of the normal route, on the western slopes of the mountain, where the team used snowshoes and skis to place all members on the summit. After reaching the summit, Thijs Van der Plas (Belgium and the Netherlands), Christian Zimmer Conrad (Germany), Walter Frehner (Switzerland), and Krzysztof Berbek



Dan Mazur (in front) with Walter Keller at ca. 6100 meters on Mustagh Ata's East Ridge. Camp III is visible behind. JON OTTO

(Poland) departed base camp on July 1.

By July 4, the new-route team, including Yang Li Cun (China), Anne Ramzy (U.S.), and Lakpa Tamang (Nepal), reached base camp at 4600 meters on a grassy slope at the head of the Kuksay Glacier. On July 8, we traversed along the Potterfield Glacier and scrambled up a steep boulder field to our 5350-meter Camp I at the top of the Waugh Plateau.

The following day, we climbed a 40- to 80-degree buttress with exposed rock, ice, and snow that we called the "Arrowhead." In our excitement to finally be on the route, Jon dropped both ice tools down a snow face, and Walter got his rucksack wedged in a rock chimney. We recovered our composure and continued on.

Finally we were on the ridge! For the following six days, Walter and Jon led our snowshoeless group of three through phenomenally deep snow, some of it tilted at precarious angles and fractured into carelessly tossed heaps of car-sized snow blocks. On the afternoon of July 15, we made it to a point 100 meters below the summit. Bitterly chilled, without adequate food, water, or fuel, we dug our single wall tent into the sunless, wind-blasted snow face for the last time. We had determined that our only logical choice was to finish the climb across the top and descend the normal route.

The next morning, Dan awoke unable to speak clearly. He mumbled that he thought he had suffered a stroke, but was able to function. His symptoms appeared to be those of cerebral edema. Meanwhile, Jon stylishly soloed a ten-meter near-vertical rock pitch without much protection, and was the first to stand upon the summit. Walter followed on a rope, and the two prepared a hauling system. At the bottom of the pitch, Dan, not thinking 100 percent clearly, untied himself and the rucksacks, then fell downslope 80 meters, clutching two bags. Jon climbed back down and helped Dan carry the sacks back up to the rope. The two then re climbed the pitch.

Reunited on top, we snapped a few summit photos, then descended immediately via the normal route. That evening, exhausted, we found a small gray tent at 7100 meters, and later discovered we had slept upon mattresses used by a man who had disappeared just a few days before.

On the night of July 17, we fled the clutches of Mustagh Ata, but not before a bloody motorcycle wreck slapped Walter and his Kyrghyz driver into the pavement.

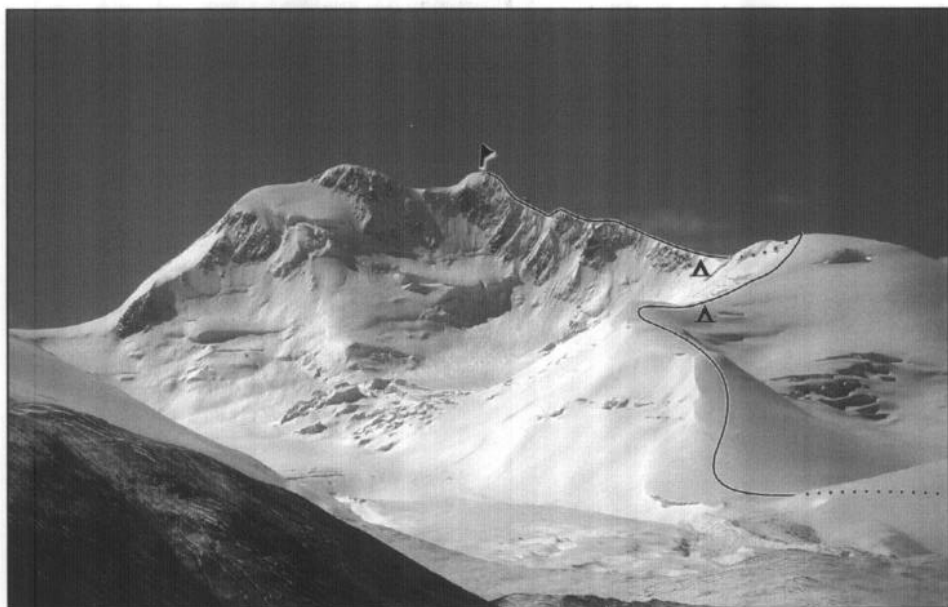
WALTER KELLER, DANIEL MAZUR, and JON OTTO

Qong Muztag, First Ascent. The Waseda University Alpine Club of Tokyo sent an expedition to the Kun Lun Range of Sinkiang, China, in the summer of 2000. They made the first ascent of Qong Muztag (6962m) on August 15. The 12-member expedition, which included five students, was led by Shin Yamada.

The upper Keriya river basin where Qong Muztag is located was explored for the first time in 1898 by Captain H.H.P. Deasy with the Survey of India. We sent a reconnaissance party to explore the approach route to Qong Muztag in May, 1999. Hiroaki Kino and Hideki Inaba started their caravan from the village of Pulu. Pulu is located 75 kilometers south of the town of Keriya (Yutian in Chinese).

The party were the first foreigners to have gone into the upper basin of Keriya River since 1898. But they could not reach the intended Base Camp due to lack of grass for donkeys and cold weather. In September, 1999, the geographer Shigeru Kodama explored the Karasai route. He followed the caravan route that Deasy traced in 1898. Kodama reached the northern foot of Qong Muztag after ten days of donkey caravan from Karasai, the upper village of Kyantokai.

We started the approach march from Kyantokai, a small village at the foot of the Kun Lun, on July 23. Kyantokai was reached from the town of Minfeng, some 300 kilometers east of



The north face of Qong Muztag, showing the line of first ascent. EIHU OTANI

Hotan, in a one-day drive. The caravan consisted of 91 donkeys (59 for baggage and 32 for riding), 17 donkey handlers, three staff members of the Xinjiang Mountaineering Association, and us. The unusual rainy weather of the summer affected the 220-kilometer approach march. The rushing torrents of rivers forced us to stay on the banks for two days. It took 12 days of crossing the high-altitude desert to reach Base Camp (4850m) at the northern foot of the mountain.

We made Advanced Base Camp at 5200 meters. Equipment was carried there on the back of donkeys. Then we established Camp I at 5900 meters and Camp II at 6400 meters, both on the north ridge of Qong Muztag, by August 12. The ridge was broad and covered with deep snow.

On August 15, Eiho Otani, Hiroaki Kino, and Yasushi Tanahashi started their summit assault from Camp II. The previous day, they had fixed some pitches on the steep slopes of the "Snow Dome" (6650m) above CII in order to avoid the risk of avalanche.

Variable weather often forced them to stop going forward. A snowstorm eliminated visibility. They reached the bottom of the rock ridge near the summit at 2 p.m. Beijing time, when it began to snow fiercely. They stayed there for two hours waiting for a clear view. They chose a route along the contact line of a rock ridge and a steep snow slope, fixing 50 meters of static rope. The final section to the summit was an easy snow slope. At 5:30 p.m. they reached the summit.

The poor weather continued. At 9 p.m. Otani decided to bivouac beside the large rock on the saddle between the summit and the junction to the west peak (6740m). They made it back to CII the next day at 12:30 p.m.

SHIN YAMADA, *Japan*

Jambeyang, Attempt. Jambeyang, throne to the Bodhisattva of learning, stands at the head of the Duron Valley. This unclimbed pyramid shares the idyllic valley with two other stand-alone peaks, Xiangre Ri and Chondorjie. Located in the far southwest of Sichuan Province, China, these remote mountains have attracted relatively little Western attention until quite recently.

Fred Beckey had seen pictures of Jambeyang several years ago and had been quietly planning to attempt the mountain ever since. Beckey recruited Canadians Rick and Lisa Clements and Americans Judd Stewart, Wesley Bunch*, and Dabney Eastham. Dabney was the only member of the expedition to have actually traveled to the Duron Valley; this was to be his third trip.

Our party size was reduced by one when Rick was struck by lightning while climbing with Beckey in Banff several weeks before departure (he survived, but suffered burns and brain swelling). Lisa made the trip to the valley, but unfortunately she became ill and had to leave after only several days.

We arrived in the Duron Valley on September 19, hoping that the post-monsoon season would bring the most stable, dry weather conditions. Jambeyang, Xiangre Ri, and Chondorjie are holy to the Buddhist Tibetans who inhabit this region. The Gongah Chonguh Monastery lies low in the valley at the foot of Xiangre Ri. The monks who live here in the cedar and larch forests below the 6000-meter peaks maintain and operate a tourist camp that caters to Chinese tourists who have come for the natural spectacles. The tourist operation was begun within the last two years; it will dramatically change the character of this beautiful place.

Unfortunately, our visit corresponded with a major national ten-day holiday. By the time the hundreds of tourists left the valley, the meadows and streams were littered with discarded cigarette packs and wads of dirty toilet paper. More seriously for us, the tourist stream had

*Recipient of an AAC Lyman Spitzer Climbing Grant

created a new economy in the area. Local officials almost made our trip impossible when they demanded outrageous fees for camping in their valley. Even though we had official permits and permission from the Chinese Mountaineering Association in Beijing, local authorities enjoy a degree of autonomy simply due to the vastness of China and the time and energy required to travel the great distances. Our official permits were useless rubbish here; Beijing was too far away to have any meaningful authority in this remote nook of the world. Only our excellent guides and their contacts saved the trip.

We had studied Jambayang in photos and these pictures hinted that the northeast ridge of the mountain would provide the easiest and safest climbing. Reality proved different: the ridge was very steep and corniced, with a large hanging glacier approximately two-thirds of the way to the top. The most feasible route appeared to be up the northeast face to a col at ca. 18,200 feet on the south side of the mountain. Americans Charlie Fowler and John Cato had attempted a similar line three or four years ago, but had been repelled from the mountain by difficult and dangerous loose snow conditions.

We established our ABC at the bottom of the route on a large, easily accessible shelf below the northeast face. Only half an hour of hiking was required before we roped up, put our crampons on and started climbing.

We had studied the face for several weeks and determined that a small avalanche runnel would provide the safest and fastest access to the mountain. We successfully climbed the 800-foot runnel and accessed the face proper. Immediately we ran into horrible sugar snow. Barely a foot deep, the rotten snow hid the friable limestone that characterizes the peaks in this area. Shattered and crumbling, the stone was useless for any sort of protection. Several short frightening pitches convinced us that a route up the face was out of the question. We managed a traverse to a large hanging glacier that descends from the south col. The glacier proved easier going and we reached the col late that afternoon. A snow cave bivouac was followed the next morning by a waist-deep powder slog to the bottom of the south face. It was immediately obvious that the south face was in even worse shape than the northeast face. Loose sugary snow clung to the steep, rotten rock; no way was this route going to go.

We poked around the col a little and got a bit of a view of the west side of the mountain. What we saw was a vast face of vertical and overhanging crumbling limestone rising out of the clouds and extending to the summit.

Conceding to reality, we began our descent. Despite the icefall danger, we chose to descend the hanging glacier. The solid ice anchors available on the glacier allowed a quick descent, and it wasn't long before we saw Dabney hiking up from ABC to greet us.

While we struggled on Jambayang, another American team was giving Chondorjie a shot. Led by Pete Athans, The North Face/*National Geographic* team had managed to get part way up their mountain but were repulsed by conditions similar to what we discovered on Jambayang. It appeared that the poor snow we encountered is typical for these mountains. Of the four expeditions that had attempted peaks in this valley, all had failed due to poor snow conditions. Given good conditions, the peaks would be serious but climbable. The climbers who make this long journey and find good snow and ice to climb would be very lucky indeed.

JUDD STEWART

Qionglai Mountains

Siguniang Region, Various Activity. In September, the American/Italian team of Craig and

Silvia Luebben traveled to the Siguniang Mountains in China's Sichuan Province hoping to climb new big wall routes. They established a camp in the Shuanqiao Valley below the beautiful granite walls that tower to 1200 meters in height. The team set their sights on an impressive 800-meter pillar, scoped a line, and began ferrying loads to the base at around 4500 meters. For the next three weeks, they endured incessant rain and snow storms, and only managed to climb a single approach pitch to the pillar. Between and during storms, they bolted a slab low in the valley that they had initially dismissed as being "insignificant." They climbed three pitches, with two more pitches possible to reach the top of the wall, and dubbed the line *Rain, Rain Go Away* (5.11). They found the granite in the area to be high quality, though the walls appeared to have few continuous crack systems.

A team from Trento, Italy, was camped nearby while working on a route up a beautiful streaked wall. Marco Sterni led all the pitches, climbing 300 meters of hard, wet granite, but in the end the Italians abandoned their route, 100 meters shy of the finish. They reported bad rock fall during the storms, emanating from another wall above their route. As the two teams departed, another team of Italians arrived, and reportedly succeeded on a new wall route (no details available), with the help of improved weather during mid-October.

During the three tent-bound weeks, the Luebbens speculated that the excessive moisture must combine with the huge vertical relief to form hellacious frozen waterfalls during winter. Craig Luebben returned with Topher and Patience Donahue in February, 2001, hoping to find big, steep ice. They recruited top Chinese sport climber Kai (last name unknown) to serve as their translator and fourth climbing partner. Holding their breath as they drove up the Shuanqiao valley, the team was relieved to find a plethora of waterfalls—rambling low-angle flows, vertical sheets, free-standing pillars, and danglers, including flows that appeared to be 700 meters high.

After opening a few routes of quality comparable to the Canadian Rockies or Val d'Aosta, Patience Donahue fell seriously ill with an intestinal bug. The team evacuated her to Chengdu, then back to the United States. Luebben and Kai returned to climb one more route in the Shuanqiao Valley and another in the nearby Changping Valley, then retreated to Beijing because the high sun at 30 degrees north latitude was severely deteriorating the ice (a route that Luebben and T. Donahue retreated from due to bad ice fell down less than a week later).

The climbing ranged to WI6+/7 M8 in difficulty, and the ice was often brittle. The valleys were dry of snow, making for easy approaches. Locals said that no ice climbers had been in the area prior to this season, but that another team did climb in a nearby valley just prior to the Luebben/Donahue trip. In the Shuanqiao Valley, the following routes were climbed: *Dragon Breath* (WI6+/7 M8, 320', Luebben-Kai); *Ah So Lion* (WI4, 500', Luebben-Kai); *Culture Shock*, (WI6, 100', T. Donahue-Luebben-Kai); *Ma Dynasty* (WI6, 300', T. Donahue-Luebben); *T&C Messnerized* (WI4, 250', Luebben-Kai); *Gang of Four* (WI6 M6/7, 250', Donahue-Donahue-Luebben-Kai). In the Changping Valley, the following routes were done: *Translator SuperKai* (WI5, 200', Luebben-Kai); *Peking Duck* (WI5, 250', Luebben-Kai, first free ascent). (This list does not include the routes that the Donahues did on their own.)

In Beijing, Luebben taught rock climbing and self-rescue clinics to 50 Peking University students on their outdoor, artificial wall. Two days later more than 30 well-equipped Beijing ice climbers traveled to another valley to share the weekend with the American ice climber. The ensuing clinics, climbing, and party turned into Beijing's first ice festival.

BORNEO

Mount Kinabalu, Lows Gully, First Ascent. Pep Soldevila, Carles Albesa, Xavier Fernández, and Xavier Vilella made the first ascent of Lows Gully via the route *La Alquimista* (A3 6b, 800m). One A3 pitch was free climbed at 7b by the second. Further details are lacking. (*Desnivel* 164)

Mount Kinabalu, Lows Gully, Second Ascent. In 1998, Steve Long had joined a trip to descend Lows Gully beneath Mount Kinabalu. The gully has long been famous as a mystical place of the dead and more recently infamous as the gully in which a group of British soldiers nearly lost their lives. Steve's team, with film crew in tow, successfully descended the gully. After the descent, Steve was whisked away from the mountain for breakfast with the Government. Leaving Borneo a local hero, he returned home with fond memories and inspired by the huge walls that bound the gully. In 1999, he returned with a team to the walls of Lows Gully, but suffered horrendous weather.

Kinabalu is a sacred mountain. Its 4000 meters of gray mass rise from the romantic but appropriately named mist forest. Sacred the mountain might be, but quiet it is not. On the mountain herself there are well-maintained paths, watering stations, toilets, and huts. Steve, Jerry Gore, Twid Turner, and I joined the crowds of locals and travelers plodding up through heavy greenery. Our walk-in took two days: the first to follow the tourist trail to a hut, then, on the second day, to leave the trail, cross a col and descend to a place known as Lone Tree. The walk acclimatized us not only to the altitude but also to the weather. In retrospect, living in North Wales and wintering in Scotland was perfect training for Borneo. It rains not all the time but at some time every day. If it is not raining, it is because it has either just stopped or is about to start!

We divided about 500 kilos of kit between us and a band of porters. We struggled to establish a base camp before the afternoon deluge began. As we descended into the gully, it became apparent that the approach to the wall would involve several hundred meters of abseiling followed by a climb up the gully floor, which included negotiating waterfalls. Finally we caught a view of the base of our wall. To our dismay, it looked completely blank.

We were not alone in our efforts to climb the wall of Lows Gully. A month earlier, a team of Spaniards had arrived (see above). They had visited the area twice previously and climbed on the neighboring Victoria Peak. At present, they were based at a small hut just below the col we had crossed. We knew that they had taken nearly two weeks to find a descent into the gully. It was decided that we would return to the col and try to make use of their knowledge. The downside of this was that we would have to reascend the slabs of our descent and that we had just spent a huge amount of money transporting our kit to the wrong side of the mountain. Hope was not lost, but morale was definitely low.

We left early in the hope of glimpsing the walls before the clouds swamped and filled the gully. Our route through dense forest and bold slabs improved slightly. We had a viewpoint looking across the gully. The walls on the opposite side rose some 1000 meters, while the base of the gorge was only 50 meters wide. Hard at work on the opposite side were two members of the Spanish team. As a team of four, two would stay on the wall climbing and fixing rope. After a few days, they would swap. This allowed them to recover and more importantly to dry out. The wall was in fact incredibly overhanging, so when it rained most of the rock stayed dry (unfortunately, the wind would blow occasionally and then nothing could escape a good dousing).

Steve and Jerry descended to the hut where the Spanish were based to glean more information. Twid and I returned to Lone Tree to fetch more loads. The only line was where the Spanish had climbed through roofs to negotiate the blankest section of rock. We decided with complete

consensus that there was no point in bolting a ladder next to theirs. We would adopt a similar style of two climbing, while two rested, and climb their route for a few pitches, then follow a diagonal line to what looked like a large corner crack system.

We now shared the Sayat Sayat hut, on the main path to the summit of Kinabalu, with the Spanish. Twid and I started climbing. Day one was cut short by torrential rain and a narrow escape back across the gully. The sooner we got portaledge on the wall, the better. The next day we fared a bit better, following the Spanish line through the roofs. It was an impressive lead by the Spanish and must have given them sore necks and very strong arms! What had taken them days we were able to climb in one; someday, it will probably go free to someone with enough time and ability.

We fixed ropes to the first portaledge site and continued onto the imposing walls above. Without the camp established, climbing was a tense affair, since we knew that escape needed to be made before the day's downpour began, and the gully became uncrossable. The other down side of climbing in a gully is that in order to return to base you always have to go up. Getting home for tea involved abseiling down, then jumaring about 300 meters up our access ropes, then climbing over two cols before dropping down to our hut. This was usually executed in failing light, racing against the rain that turned the slabs into rivers.

Our aim was to now leave the Spanish line and to find the link into the system to the right. Our line diagonaled rightward. We had hoped to free climb, but the rock was compact and unfeathered. Accompanying us were two lads who were experimenting with filming and sending information back via the Internet. Along with them they also had mobile and satellite phones.

The line progressed, albeit slowly. The climbing was hard and serious, the rope work a complicated puzzle. However, we began to relax with the weather. Although it continued to rain, the wall was so steep we remained dry.

Steve and Jerry were progressing up the corner and would hopefully make a second ledge that we could move the portaledge camp to. We packed and prepared for an early start, when the door swung open, and two very tired and totally elated Spaniards walked in. They had finished. *The Alchemist* had been climbed. It was sad to see them go; they were good fun and good company, and their route was a fine and hard-earned line. They had been on the mountain for over 30 days and could not have been more pleased to be going home.

In the quiet that followed, we returned to the wall, moving the ledge to an airy platform high on the wall. We woke early and climbed until dark. The climbing was still hard but more absorbing than intimidating. Twid was weaving a line through the most incredibly steep ground. We were now overhanging the other side of the gully; anything that dropped fell rather alarmingly onto that side.

After three days, we could not see, but we felt we were close to the top. We decided to commit and go for the summit. Steve and Jerry cut off all means of retreat by stripping our lines and following us up. I headed off around an arête, glad to be climbing and not aiding, as I had landed upside-down on my previous attempt. It was a fine and thankfully easy pitch that stopped below a hideous chimney. Twid muttered on but then just kept climbing. We had emerged through the overhangs onto a final 100 meters of funneling slabs. To hesitate was folly, with the clouds creeping in and moisture spitting on our faces.

We were up; the others followed. We hugged and congratulated each other, utterly relieved to be at the top of the wall. As it became cooler we scrambled the final stones to the summit of Kinabalu. As a final gesture of goodwill the clouds cleared for our summit shots and final memories. As instantly as it had cleared, the summit disappeared, and the rain began.