

# MOONLIGHT SONATA

*On the oft-attempted southeast buttress, two Russians define commitment, deprivation, and triumph of the spirit while making the first ascent of 7,804-meter Nuptse East, Nepal.*

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YURI KOSHELENKO



One of the great lines of the Himalaya, the oft-attempted and finally climbed southeast buttress of Nuptse East rises 8,000 vertical feet to a (formerly) virgin summit. A chronology of attempts appears at the end of this article. *Valeri Babanov*

Most people find contentment living quietly within their own boundaries. Other personalities need to discover their breaking points. A climber takes this quest as his duty, and his pursuit of risk counterbalances the quiet lives of the majority.

Mountains, too, have their individual character. As we humans express ourselves in words, so the mountain talks in the language of its height, relief, and proportions. Nuptse East is not poster beautiful, like the Matterhorn. Its charm is in the naturalness of its climbing line. This great route is the southeast ridge, with its lower slopes of rock, ice, and snow, then huge seracs, and finally up the pyramidal tower's left side to the summit. The perfection of this line is more than enough to supply climbers with a pulse.

To breathe as clouds do, to see places unseen even by birds, to observe the Earth's interior raised almost eight kilometers high, to reach the unlawful: that's what attempting such a route means.

Our small expedition arrived at base camp near the pedestal of Nuptse's southern wall at the end of September, when the monsoon leaves. Billy and Fabrizio, two American climbers also wishing to try their luck on this wall, were already there. On September 21 we joined them at base camp; and the next day we were on our routes. They were attempting a new line on a buttress to the right of ours. These two days Nuptse was misty and obscured most of time by the last monsoon clouds. Then, suddenly in the evening, we had an exciting vision: Nuptse, appearing from behind the clouds almost in zenith. Oh, my Lord. Such a mountain is a climb to high Heaven. Fabrizio and Bill never tired of repeating "Crazy!" meaning not just the view, but also our excitement. When the base of a mountain is veiled by clouds and only the battlement can be seen soaring so very high in the sky, a vision like that may delight, confuse, or both.

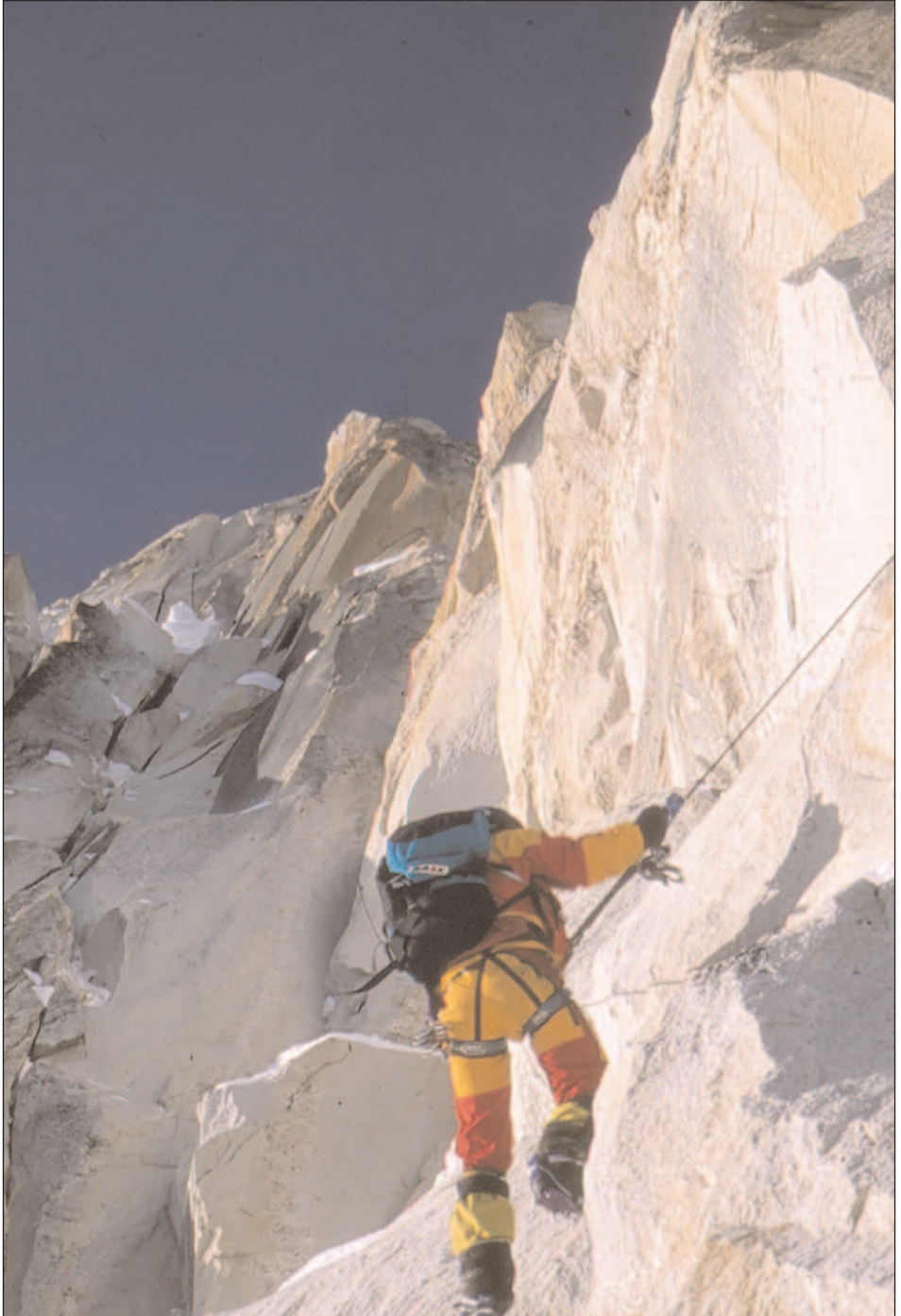
The bottom part of the southeast ridge is, overall, a large mass built of magnificent light granite filled with ice and covered by snow. The first bastion is precarious with falling stones, but higher up monoliths cut by ice streams provide complex and aesthetic freeclimbing. We named the tower at the top part of an edge "The Tower of God," as it represents the most perfect granite construction we have ever seen, and was no doubt raised with the help of the Creator's hand.

The ridge's edge was crowned with crests of an "empty snow" alternating with abrupt masses of ice. Here we faced complex "snow mushrooms" (a mass of snow hanging vertically with no firm foundation). The climbing was technically quite difficult, but at least there was still oxygen. This passage was just one necessary part of the whole route, and was far from being a deciding moment. The complex technical job was expected to come higher, at 7,000 meters.

We reached 6,900 meters only on October 15, after periods of rough weather had twice kept us from reaching this height. Thus far we were fixing ropes. However, from this point on we moved in alpine style. We had used the lower section for our acclimatizing period, before rushing to the summit. We chose our tactics based on what we had learned from all the previous attempts, beginning in 1986. It allowed us to use short periods of favorable weather, while saving ourselves for the final leap to the top.

The first summit attempt came on October 20, but we failed. The wind above 6,500 meters proved too strong, so again we turned back at 6,900 meters, realizing that in such wind frostbite is inevitable. We descended to base camp and then proceeded to the Deboche wood zone. After a month at high altitude, it's necessary to breathe the middle level's air, filled with the scent of rhododendrons.

During this time our friends Billy and Fabrizio finished their own expedition. Strong snowfall during these days stopped them, still at a height of 6,100 meters. Our decision to go down had



Valeri Babanov at 6300m on the 250 vertical meters of rock at the Diamond Tower. *Vladimir Suviga*

proven correct, and I found this to be a good sign.

Base camp was covered with snow when we returned on October 27. Two days later we underwent a psychological ordeal. Moving up the rope with ascenders and a heavy backpack, I suddenly discovered that my rope had frayed on a projecting block three meters above me, and I was hanging from only two thin strings. Hypnotized by these last two threads, I freeclimbed past them. But the very moment the job was done, I noticed (suddenly, again!) a big stone falling fast directly to where Valeri should be now! I was still in shock, with heavy pulsing blood from my own experience; and now the stone. It disappeared with a frightening singing and soon an acute sound of impact came from somewhere below. Then I heard Valeri shouting something I couldn't understand—but the shout meant that he was alive! The boulder had passed quite near to him, releasing the energy of casual and savage danger. It was the classic example of what we call the law of pairs. The impression of such a beginning accompanied me for a long time. The mountain was playing with us.

The next day we reached 6,900 meters for the third time. The southeast ridge fades into a wide crest, smoothly turning into a slope of snow and ice below the topmost tower. We had to make a decision about tactics. The route above 7,000 meters was expected to be technically difficult, requiring equipment. To be able to move quickly, we would have to leave something behind. We had abandoned our down overalls far below. Now we abandoned our sleeping bags, spare socks and mittens, one pad, and the larger part of our food. We believed that at heights above 7,000 meters a meal brings no pleasure.

Here is what we took higher: the tent, one pad, two gas-cylinders with a burner, tea, medical kit, sugar, four snow stakes, five ice screws, seven pitons, five cams, some nuts, about 10 carabiners, and two 60m ropes, one 8.6mm and one 5.5mm.

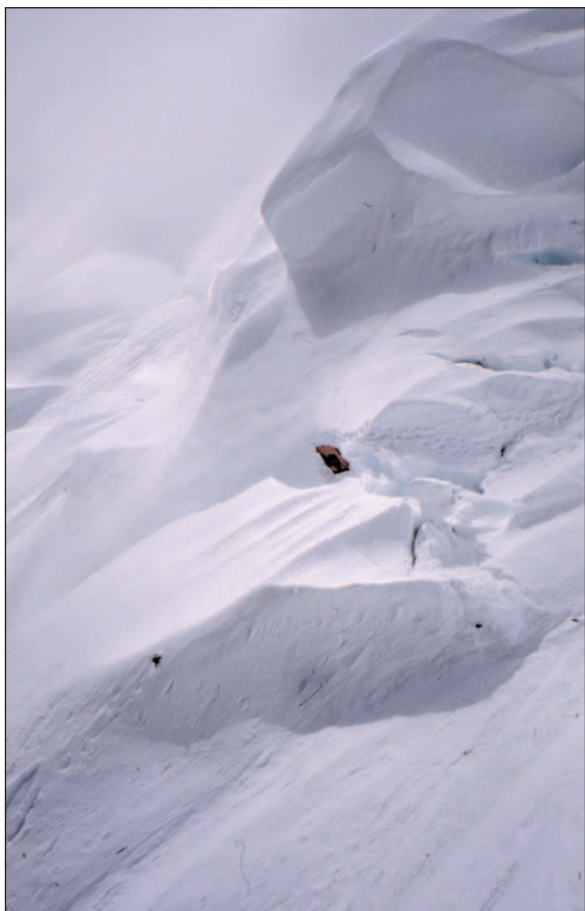
We attained 7,450 meters in a day and a half. This passage was a snow and ice slope, with a number of bergschrunds. The first night without sleeping bags (approximately at 7,225 meters) proved to be a much harder test than I would ever have presumed despite all our readiness for



Vladimir Suviga on the Diamond Tower traverse during the spring 2003 attempt. Valeri Babanov

deprivation. Both Valeri and I were on the only pad, which was half a meter wide; we were like a pair of sardines in a can. We tried to warm our feet with down jackets. Our gas stove suffocated in the absence of oxygen so its flame was unstable and weak, much like the tiny light of a spirit-lamp. We did not slumber, nor even become drowsy, but always felt the cold penetrating through our clothes, gradually seizing our vital space. Just before dawn I began to make respiratory exercises, warming myself a little bit and producing a faster bloodstream in my lungs.

The next night, November 2, at 7,450 meters, just before the final storm, was even harder than the previous one. During the day Valeri, having replaced me in the lead, passed two of the first difficult pitches at the bottom of the topmost tower. Viewed from the outside, it looked like an easy job for him. But internally—I don't think so. In addition to our continuous struggle with cold, Valeri had a sudden attack of the fever. Medical measures had to be taken quickly; I lay beside him and covered his feet with a parka. Soon he felt much better, feeling warmed, and he even could fall asleep for a short time. To brighten up the night some way, I tried to turn on our gas stove from time to time, but it gave no warmth at all.



The tent at 7,450m, taken on the summit day. In 10 hours they reached the summit of Nuptse East, 7,804m. *Valeri Babanov*

In such a situation we sensed our friendship as special, that we were kindred souls. We depended on each other, and accordingly we fully trusted each other. Without this, it would be useless to even to think of reaching the summit.

At 6 o'clock in the morning we started to prepare for the coming out. Despite the fact that two sleepless nights had taken much of our vital strengths, we were ready for the fight. We had something helping us in our assault: the moral certainty that our reaching the summit had been predetermined from above.

At 8:40, when we began climbing the ropes fixed the previous day, my brain clicked and said: at 6 p.m. we'll reach the top, but not earlier. This was realistic. But then the mind game began; using cunning and counting, a certain part of me, less realistic, wanted the hope of an earlier summit. Finally, we agreed with 3 p.m.

All through the day I had the sensation that actually there were three of us. This third was a

certain Presence, “Kun-Dun,” as they say in Tibet.

At the beginning Valeri and I were switching places, but then Valeri went three pitches one after another without a break. We reasoned as one individual, each doing our own part in order to reach a common result. At one belay station Valeri decided to leave his backpack; so I placed some of his items into my own sack.

Orienting on the route proved difficult, sometimes requiring traverses across couloirs with mixed firn and ice and direct passages over M4-M5 rock. We had to find a passage leading onto the crest. The photograph I had seen in Valeri’s magazine was stamped in my memory. There was a way to the crest along a narrow ledge of snow, in the opposite direction to the basic line of our movement. Yet we were seeing rocks and nothing more. There was nothing similar to that ledge. Evening approached while we were still far from the top; it was not clear how far. Meanwhile we had already reached about 7,700 meters, and the other tops of Nuptse were clearly visible almost on the same level we

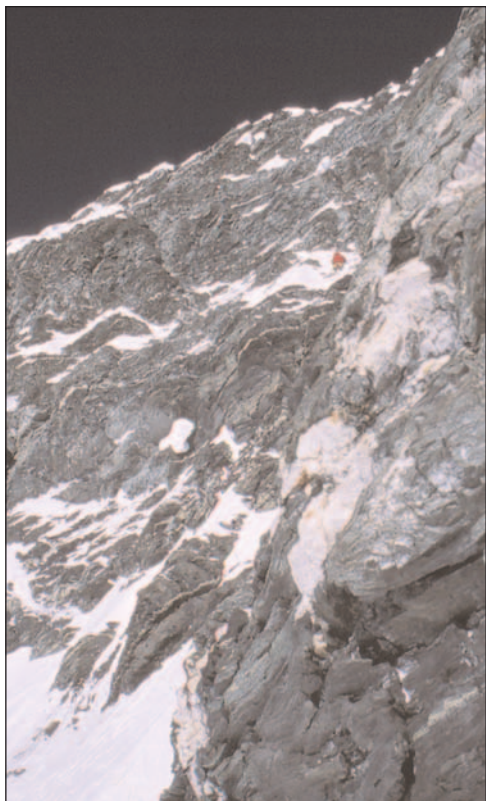


Valeri Babanov on the Diamond Tower traverse during the spring attempt.  
*Vladimir Suviga*

were. It was the critical moment of the rise, and we both had doubts. We were high, but the top was still inaccessible. Moving further upward meant night climbing and the descent after, with all possible consequences, from frostbite to an increasing probability of making a fatal mistake.

The wind and cold were powerful, fingers did not warm up any longer, and it was clear that night would increase these torments.

“Do we continue?” Valeri asked.



Hard mixed climbing at 7,700 meters. The summit was reached at 7:20 p.m. in the moonlight. *Yuri Koshelenko*

“You can’t go back without the summit, can you?”

He was silent. My question was also his answer.

We looked into each other’s eyes for a while and then all the doubts faded away. We calmed down at once.

I had the feeling that our decision did not involve the physical mind, that it came from above. There was still a Presence, even in this decision.

After that I moved forward until options led in two directions. One was definitely a dead end; the other went to the left, against the basic line of movement, and I had no doubt it was the way to the crest. Again Valeri moved ahead. The sun disappeared behind the horizon. He went behind the bend and the rope tensioned, so we climbed simultaneously for some time, moving by touch in the abrupt snow couloirs. It got dark quickly. I knew we were going to the top; my whole body worked automatically, using all the skills and experience of 20 years in mountaineering. Consciousness had separated, conceiving the world independently, and the part of the route we had already done became a separate climb for me.

Some time later I found Valeri above. He was standing on the crest and looked like a big black bird with waving wings, while the night sky served as background. As I approached the belay, he asked, “would you come till the very crest? There are 15 or 20 meters to go.” But there were 60. After we arrived on the crest, the wind penetrated my body as if I were only in my underwear and the cold was outer space. But behind the bulge we could see the pyramid of Everest; so we were near our goal. The top seemed just a few steps away, maybe five meters or ten, not more. While Valeri moved upward, I began freezing; my body persistently reminded me it wanted to go down. But we moved further, Valeri first, with me following.

The summit view shook me. Though the moon was not full, its light was more than enough to see the supernatural beauty of that vast expanse. Directly below us lay the Western Cwm, with the giants Everest and Lhotse trailing long snow plumes into Tibet. “Om Mani Padme Hum”—these were the words written there, I’m sure.

As it is impossible to measure mentally the whole empty breadth of space, so it would be impossible to analyze the beauty before us. We both stood as bewitched, soaking in this scene, and finally we embraced. Such embraces express many things: brotherhood, pride, silent joy of fulfillment. Our bodies had suffered hard, but the overcoming spirit was pleased. We stood on the uppermost point at 8:30 p.m. It was time now to think about going downward as we both were

seriously overcooled, with all reserves exhausted.

We led the first pitches alternately, and later rappelled. During the descent we missed Valeri's pack, so it still is hanging on a rock somewhere close to the top. It was November 3 (about 12:30 a.m.) when we came to the tent at 7,450 meters; we were almost fully exhausted. Moving downward the last rope length, I lost a flashlight. It fell down a steep ice couloir, sparkling last signals of farewell. And at that very moment a blurry comprehension found its way through my tiredness; I realized that we had climbed the mountain.

One more night without sleeping bags, without sleeping a second, in a small tent, together on the only pad, and with all thoughts focused on tomorrow's descent. In the morning, at once after rising, we continued the descent. We reached the sleeping bags at 6,900 meters at 2 p.m. We put up the tent, drank some tea, and finally went to bed. Our slumber was deep, but when we awoke on November 4 we both felt a kind of collapse; we had not yet reached the elevation where the organism can be restored.

We could barely get out of our sleeping bags. Nevertheless, at 5:30 p.m. we were back at base camp. I do not find that "happiness" is a suitable word to describe our state after the mountain. For some time we stayed lost between reality and daydreaming. The requirements of our bodies were real; at the same time our consciousness was always somewhere near, but aside. Our emotions had a sense that we had been beyond the limit for a while. A kind of division had happened, and the result was a blurry vision of the future, along with a strong fixed sense of the universe acquired at the summit.

A night ascent of an unknown, nearly 8,000-meter, summit is always full of uncertainty, especially about coming back. We had made a decision comparable to a high meditation level, when in the last outward breath the possibility of no return becomes real. For us, the climb was not simply an achievement. It was a check of our capabilities, but first of all it was the recognized harmony between the spirit's direction and its embodiment in the physical world. We reached this virgin summit because of our mutual consent, and thanks to the mental denial we each accomplished.

#### A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Widely considered one of Russia's best climbers, Yuri Koshelenko has contributed lead articles to the *AAJ* about his routes on Bhagirathi in the Garhwal (*AAJ* 1999), the Great Trango in the Karkorum (*AAJ* 2000), Lhotse Middle (*AAJ* 2002), and other climbs. His first hard route was on the north face of Ak Su in 1988, and he has barely rested since then. He is with a Russian team attempting a new route on the north face of Mt. Everest as we go to press.



Yuri Koshelenko (left) and Valeri Babanov at the Nuptse south face base camp, 5,200m. Valeri captioned this: "We are so happy."



## SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Khumbu Himal, Nepal

ASCENT: First ascent of Nuptse East (7,804m), via southeast buttress (2,500m vertical, ED 5.8 M5 WI3 90°), by Valeri Babanov and Yuri Koshelenko. Fixed ropes to 6,400m over two weeks in October. Three days alpine style to summit from 6,900m camp, and two days descent to base camp.

## CHRONOLOGY OF ATTEMPTS:

For reference, note that the British (Bonington) Route followed the south ridge to reach the main summit of Nuptse (7,861m) in the spring of 1961 using siege-style tactics (see *AAJ* 1962, p. 99). The following chronology is for the southeast ridge (also known as the south pillar and south spur) and nearby south face alternatives attempting to reach Nuptse East (7,804m). It was compiled using various published records (*AAJ, Climbing, Rock & Ice*), Elizabeth Hawley's records, and information supplied by Valeri Babanov and Mark Twight.

1986, May: Jeff Lowe and Mark Twight (U.S.A.). Highpoint: 6,400m. 8 days continuous alpine style. Stopped by bad weather. See *AAJ* 1987, p. 232.

1987, January: Jeff Lowe and Mark Twight. 6,500m. Alpine style. See *AAJ* 1987 p. 232.

1987, October: Fabrizio Manoni and Enrico Rossi (Italy). 6,700m. Four bivouacs. Stopped by snow conditions. See *AAJ* 1988, p. 206.

1987, October: Rob Newsom and Jim Yoder (U.S.A.). 400m above base camp at 5,640m. Continuous blizzard. See *AAJ* 1988, p. 206.

1989, May: Peter Arbic and Jim Elzinga (Canada), and Enrico Rossi and Kurt Walde (Italy), in overlapping but semi-independent teams. 6,900m (Italians) and 7,500m (Canada). Alpine style for 15 days. Stopped by storms. See *AAJ* 1990, p. 228.

1994, October: Michel Fauquet, Christophe Moulin, and Gérard Vionnet (France). 7,500m. Fixed ropes on first 1,000m. Stopped by wind. See *AAJ* 1995, p.238.

1995, October: Eight-member team led by Wolfgang Pohl (Germany). 7,050m. Fixed 1,900m of rope. Stopped by wind. See *AAJ* 1996, p. 272.

1997, October: Hans Kammerlander and Maurizio Lutzenberger (Italy). Southwest ridge attempt to reach still-virgin Nuptse East. 6,600m. Alpine style. Stopped by deep snow. See *AAJ* 1998, p. 312.

1999, May: Italian-French trio led by Giancarlo Ruffino. 6,050m. Alpine style.

2002, May: Barry Blanchard (Canada), Steve House (U.S.A.), Marko Prezelj (Slovenia).



The southeast face of Nuptse East. Moonlight Sonata (Babanov-Koshelenko) ascends the southeast buttress to the summit of Nuptse East (7,804m). This has been the most-attempted line. The Blanchard-House-Prezelj attempt is left of the buttress and reached 7,300m. The far left route is the original British Route to Nuptse Main (7,861m; Bonington et. al.). *Valeri Babanov*

Route left of SE buttress. 7,300m. Alpine style. Stopped by wind. See *AAJ* 2003, p. 388.

2002, October: Valeri Babanov solo. 6,250m. Fixed 1,000m of ropes. Stopped by wind. See *AAJ* 2003, p. 396.

2003, April: Valeri Babanov and Vladimir Suviga. 7,450m. Fixed ropes to 6,400m. Stopped by storm.

2003, April: Hans Kammerlander (Italy) and five companions. Route near Slo-Can-Am (Blanchard-House-Prezelj) attempt. 6,900m. Fixed to 6,700m. Stopped by strong winds.

2003, October: Billy Pierson and Fabrizio Zangrilli. Attempted route was right of SE buttress. Some fixed rope. Stopped by knee injury.

2003, October: Valeri Babanov and Yuri Koshelenko. Reached summit via SE buttress. Fixed rope to 6,400m. Alpine style from there to summit.