

# A Hidden Gem—Ama Dablam's Northeast Face

MICHAEL KENNEDY

SUNSHINE, light, and warmth were all I wanted after Ama Dablam. But memory plays its tricks. The cold, the wind, the frustration of moving too slowly through soft, deep snow, the long, dark nights, all seem rather vague in retrospect. And what of the concrete recollections? They are of laughing through the green lowlands of Nepal, long afternoon hill walks in the upper Khumbu, and a few brief moments of inspiration and power on the climb itself.

We started with a simple enough idea. Carlos Buhler had gotten a permit to climb on the north side of Ama Dablam in the 1985/86 winter season. We hoped to climb a new route on the northeast face, which I had seen from nearby Island Peak in 1981. This face, invisible from most viewpoints, hadn't ever been attempted, although the ridges on either side had been climbed.

On the right, the north ridge was an attractive alternative should a new route prove excessively dangerous or otherwise unfeasible. A second pair of climbers, operating independently, would have this as their main objective. Not only would the party as a whole have greater self-rescue capability, but the relatively high fixed costs of a climbing trip to Nepal could be shared among four rather than just two people. We agreed that the trip should be a low-key one, self-financed as much as possible. It would be a climbing holiday. In the modern idiom, we would go light and fast. By acclimatizing during the approach in November, and starting on December 1, the beginning of the official winter season, we hoped to complete the climb and be home by Christmas.

In the end, things were as simple as we could have hoped for. The second climbing team dropped out a few months before departure. While easing the organizational burden, this put additional strain on our already-extended finances, but we eventually arrived at a budget that we could live with. Carlos' 60-year-old mother Julie Dougherty, his brother Roman, and my wife Julie decided to walk into the Khumbu with us, giving the whole trip the feel of a family outing.

Many regard a Himalayan approach as a necessary evil, something to be dispensed with as rapidly as possible so that the real task of climbing can be attended to. I know that I have often felt this way. But it is also a wonderful time to relax and unwind from the pressures of work, to acclimatize and prepare



PLATE 10

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**Northeast Face of AMA DABLAM  
from Island Peak. (See Plate 62 in  
A.A.J., 1986 for route.)**

yourself for the climb ahead. We were doubly fortunate in having family along for this particular journey. Not only could we share an integral part of the whole experience with them, but the presence of loved ones, more concerned with the wonder of the mountains than with their performance in this particular arena, helped defuse the intensity which so often accompanies a climbing trip.

As we made our preparations in Kathmandu, we learned that an unseasonably severe storm in mid-October had forced many post-monsoon parties off their routes. There had been several deaths, and reports of deep snow at the higher elevations. This caused us some concern. Not only were we contemplating a steep and potentially dangerous ice route, but our Base Camp would most probably be inaccessible to yaks. As we passed through Lukla and Namche a few weeks later, our fears diminished. A large guided party had succeeded on the southwest ridge of Ama Dablam, reporting plentiful snow but good conditions overall. The skies were clear, and the weather appeared stable.

The days on our walk had fallen into a delightfully predictable pattern. Rising early to steaming mugs of tea, we'd gobble down a quick breakfast while the loads were packed. Strolling along the well-travelled paths, each at our own pace, we'd eventually reach the night's camp by early afternoon, having stopped along the way numerous times to snack, drink, or simply take in the view. After lunch, the slothful among us would read and nap for a few hours—those few hours often extending into twilight.

Late afternoons were spent taking long, lazy walks up the hillsides near our camps, gaining a few thousand feet in elevation, hoping for an edge in the acclimatization game. Julie and I had a particularly fine experience in reaching Kala Pattar, the trekker's viewpoint opposite the Khumbu Icefall on Everest. Having moved camp that day to Lobuje, we originally planned to spend the night there before going on. But after consuming an embarrassingly large lunch, we both felt surprisingly good and decided to proceed that afternoon.

Reaching the top late in the day, we were entranced by sunset colors bathing Everest, Nuptse, and Pumori. We lingered on until twilight, but all too soon the evening's chill and the prospect of a long walk home drove us back down to the trail. Bathed in moonlight, we stumbled back to camp late that night, tired but overjoyed by the magic of a perfect late fall day.

After reaching their own summit the next day on Kala Pattar, Julie Dougherty and Roman headed back to the pleasures of Kathmandu. Carlos, Julie, and I established ourselves in the meadows of Shango, a seasonal pasture ground at 14,500 feet below the north side of Ama Dablam. With the help of our sirdar Ang Jangbo and two porters, we took food, climbing gear, and a tent to the normal Base-Camp site some 2000 feet higher. Deep snow there made us appreciate our lower and warmer camp.

The greatest danger of climbing in the winter season was in evidence as we studied Ama Dablam. Wind scoured the upper reaches of the mountain, ripping massive plumes of snow from the cornices and flinging them off into the clearest of skies. But the route itself, an elegant line of snow flutings rising up the center of the face, appeared far more reasonable than we had hoped. The threatening

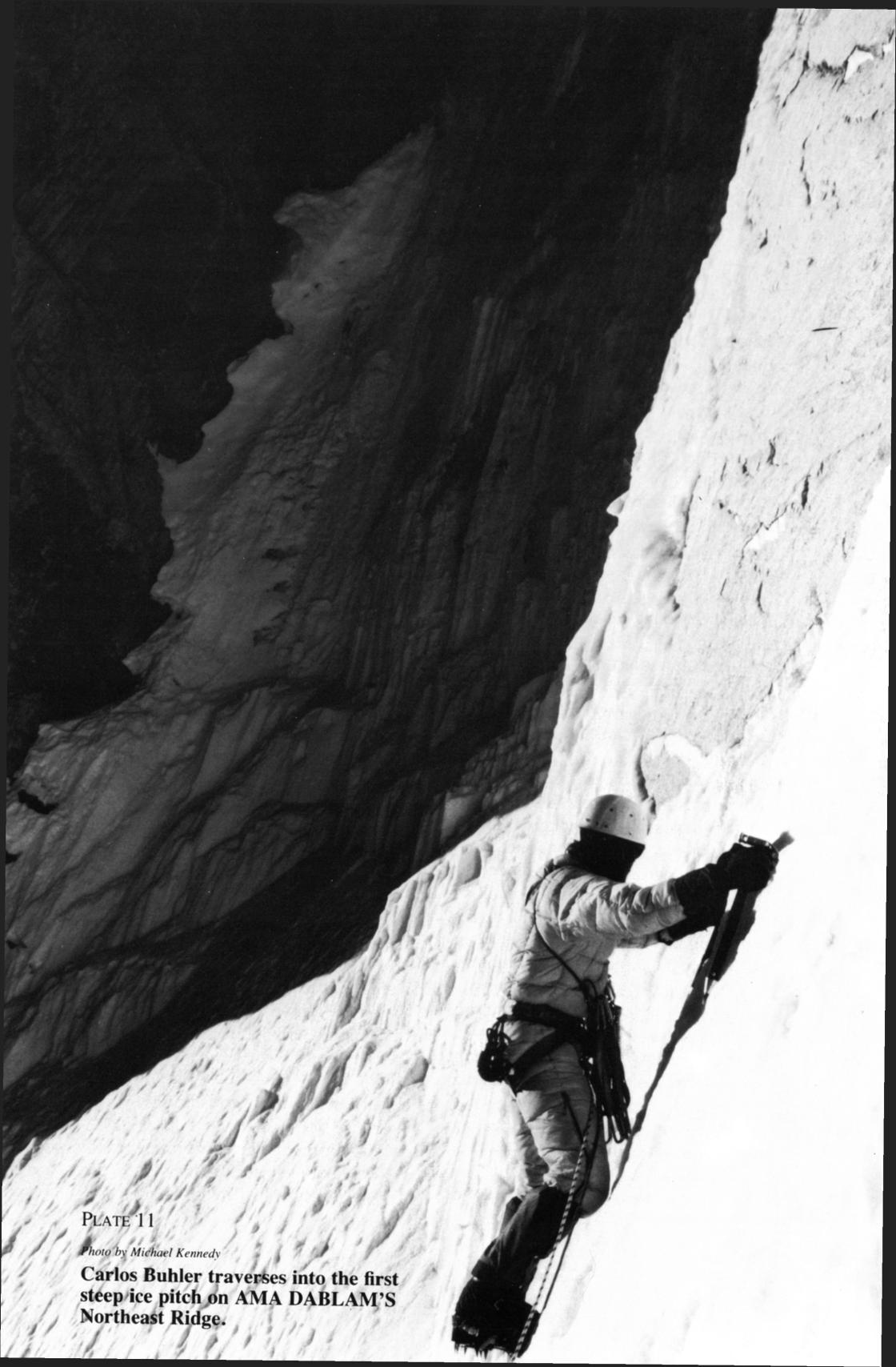


PLATE 11

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**Carlos Buhler** traverses into the first steep ice pitch on AMA DABLAM'S Northeast Ridge.

sérac barrier below the top looked fairly stable, and the crest we planned to follow was prominent enough that all but the most monstrous avalanches could be avoided. Nevertheless, we would be exposed to significant danger at several points. Fast climbing would be essential to both success and survival.

Having spent nearly a month walking in from Jiri, we were reasonably fit and acclimatized. Nevertheless, we hadn't been above 18,000 feet, and had planned a final acclimatization exercise before going onto Ama Dablam. Traveling light, the three of us spent a cold and windy three-day round trip from Shango on Island Peak's regular route, reaching the 20,285-foot summit early on November 24.

At midday on November 25, Julie left for Lukla and the flight home. It was a sad parting, but far better than the usual rushed farewell at the airport, after having worked seven days a week for months in preparation for the trip. We'd spent a very good month together, laughing and playing more than ever seems possible at home. And we'd only be separated for a few weeks if all went as planned.

The weather was superb, and the winds that plagued us on Island Peak had died out. After a few days' rest, Carlos and I left for our camp beneath the face. We spent parts of two more days finding an easy route through the lower snow ramps, leaving a cache of food and equipment at the base of the difficult climbing at about 18,000 feet.

Late afternoon on November 30 saw us back at the site of the cache, hacking a tent platform out of a rib of snow and settling in for the first of seven cold nights. Having followed our most optimistic schedule to the day, and having no good excuses for not continuing, it seemed inevitable that we should actually get on with the climb.

Starting out the next morning was as difficult as always. Visions of the comforts of home, and the relative ease with which they might be obtained, always intrude on my thoughts during the first few days of a big climb. Fear of the unknown, uncertainty about how I might perform, the nagging questions about weather, illness, if we've brought enough food, all conspire to pull me back to the safety of Base Camp.

But there is always that little demon inside, wondering what might be ahead, prodding me to go a little higher, to see what's around the next corner. All too soon, any potential descent becomes far more problematic than continuing on. At that point, doubts and fears vanish—there is no room for them in a life that, temporarily at least, is reduced to those activities directly related to climbing.

Because of the shortness of the winter days, one of us would awake early and start the lengthy process of brewing up in the cold, dark hours before daybreak. We rotated this thankless task each day so that the other could enjoy the luxury of uninterrupted sleep. The sun usually arrived just as we were ready to emerge from the tent, fully clothed and ready for the day's work.

We never had more than four hours of direct sun before the shadow of the east ridge on our left plunged the face into intense cold. Although tolerable for the first two days, the shadowed afternoons became increasingly bitter as we

PLATE 12

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**Buhler on steep ice at 20,000 feet on  
AMA DABLAM'S Northeast Face.**



gained elevation. Toes and fingers required constant attention to prevent frost-bite. We could seldom climb more than eight hours a day, and would always search for the night's camp well before dark.

Setting up a bivouac in these arctic conditions was a race against the even colder nighttime temperatures to come. An hour of digging a platform out of the soft snow usually sufficed. One night we had to chip away at the ice of a sérac for five hours to make enough space, finally crawling exhausted into the tent at ten P.M. Three or four hours of melting snow, eating, and rearranging socks, hats, gloves, cameras, water bottles, pee bottles, food bags, and all the other paraphernalia of a winter ascent followed. Eventually, we would fall into a state of semiconsciousness until the alarm watch awoke him whose duty it was to start the next day.

These nightly eternities were not without their humorous moments. The most amusing, at least for me, was awakening momentarily at 20,000 feet to hear Carlos fumbling about in his sleeping bag, cursing everything holy on this earth. I quickly dozed off, wanting no part of whatever problem he might be having. When I queried him the next morning, he sheepishly admitted that he had woken up with an urgent need to urinate, but had only done half the job into his pee bottle before falling back asleep, thus dousing himself, his clothing, and his sleeping bag. Miraculously enough, the half-filled one-liter bottle remained upright between his legs until he awoke some time later. Suffice it to say that modern synthetics, noted for their wicking properties, worked well.

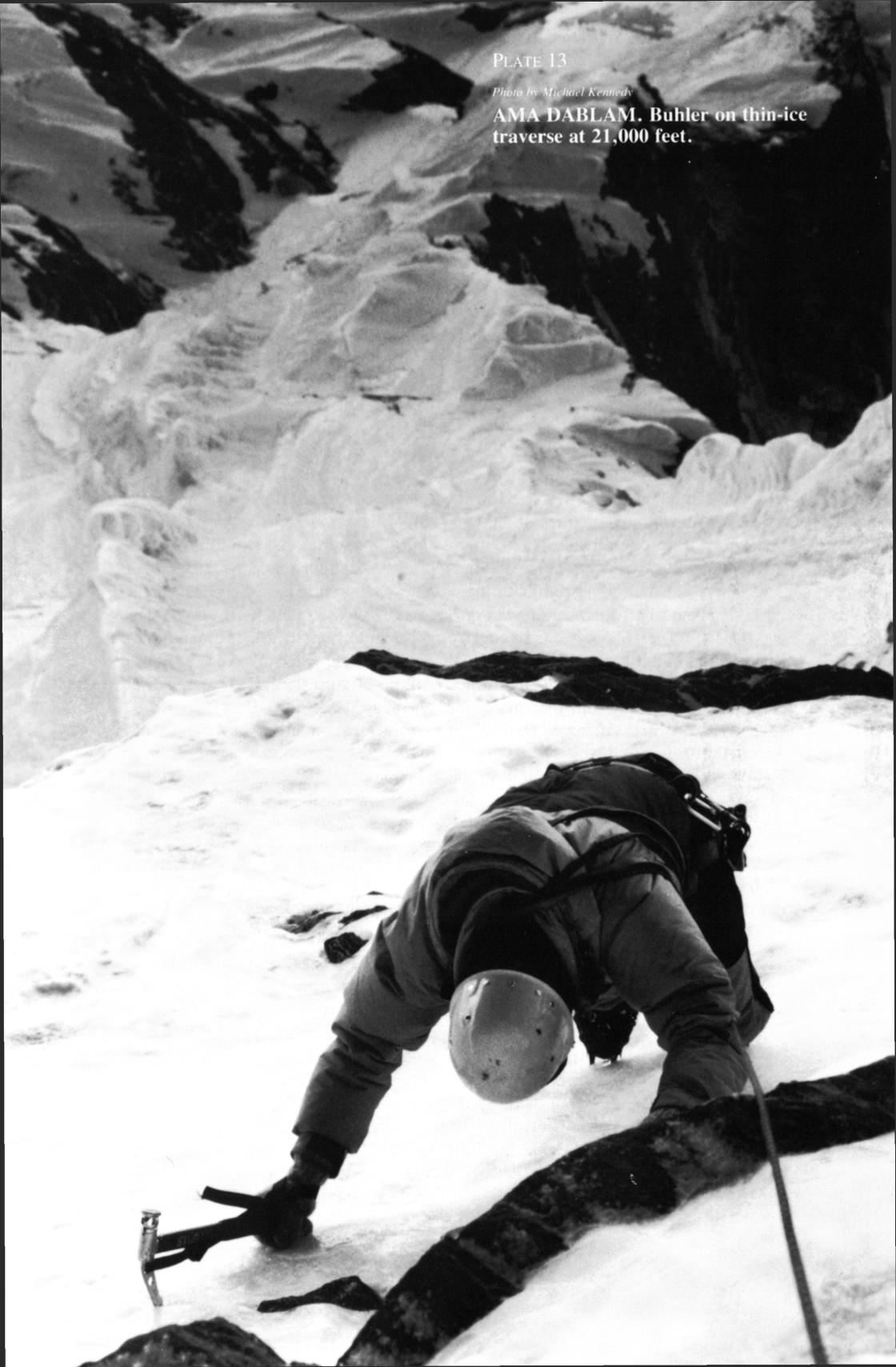
The route was entirely on snow and proved surprisingly sustained and difficult. For a medium which most climbers regard as boring, snow displays an incredible variety of form, texture, and consistency. And the techniques required, while perhaps not as elegant or as artistic as those on rock, are nevertheless complex and engaging in their own right.

A good example is 5.10 snow. Usually found plastered over a hopefully-short band of steep rock, it generally has the consistency of wet sugar. Modern tools, for all their advantages on steep ice, are of absolutely no use here. The preferred method is to punch the hands as far down into the snow as possible. The feet then are used to pack down a nebulous platform on which to stand. Distributing his weight as evenly as possible over all four appendages, as well as any other part of the body coming into contact with this repellent surface, the climber progresses by a combination of delicate balance moves and dynamic readjustments as holds collapse unexpectedly. Since the underlying rock is often smooth or completely rotten, protection is usually far below at the belay, which may not be any good itself. Having surmounted such a pitch, sinking tools into 165 feet of perfect, vertical styrofoam ice is pure pleasure—a simple technical trick, spectacular but not particularly demanding. There was a savage joy in this sort of climbing, a feeling of light, quick flowing across steep, hollow onion skins of ice, thousands of feet below and the sky a blue vault above. At times, I wanted the climb to be longer, harder. Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse, and Makalu towered close at hand, and Kanchenjunga winked out in the hazy distance. Each rope-length was a challenge, but what more satisfying toil could we ask for?

PLATE 13

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**AMA DABLAM. Buhler on thin-ice  
traverse at 21,000 feet.**



Most of the climbing on Ama Dablam's northeast face wasn't at these extremes. It started with three pitches of very steep ice, tucked in the back of a gash in the lower rockband. Anything that fell from the upper part of the face would funnel directly through the gash—fortunately, nothing came down. Above this, we followed a crest of snow flutings in the center of the face as it slowly steepened and eventually faded out several hundred feet below the sérac barrier.

Here, another three pitches of steep ice led to our most spectacular bivouac, atop a fin of ice next to the upper rockband. A short step of rotten rock forced a traverse right for most of a rope-length on thin ice over rock. More thin ice gained us a cramped tent site below a sérac, followed by easier ground to the big sérac barrier at 21,500 feet. Weaving through this, we encountered a final spectacular pitch, with the Nuptse-Lhotse wall and Everest spread out in the background, before reaching the easy snow slopes above the séracs and a final windy bivouac at almost 22,000 feet.

The final morning was as cold as any I've yet encountered. Despite the most perfectly clear day imaginable, the wind was raging around the north ridge, and it was all we could do to stave off frostbite. A few tea bags and half a gas cylinder were all that remained of our supplies, but fatigue made the packs seem as heavy as when we'd started up the last few hundred feet of the north ridge.

The summit itself was almost anticlimatic. The wind had died to a whisper when we arrived at ten A.M. greeted by a patch of flat snow the size of a football field and a cloudless panorama of the Himalaya stretching as far as the eye could see. We were happy to have put the pieces of this particular puzzle together, and after 45 minutes on top, wearily turned our thoughts homeward.

With many fixed ropes still in place from ascents earlier in the fall, the descent of the southwest ridge was uneventful. We arrived at the bottom well after dark, having lost over 5000 feet in elevation, and stayed in the tents of the New Zealanders attempting a winter ascent of that route.

There had been much soul-destroying wading through soft snow, and every variety of ice imaginable. Tools were dulled by intimate contact with rock, ice screws were dropped, precious water was spilled over an already food-encrusted sleeping bag. A careless step ripped the tent. The food was adequate, if not exciting. Shoulders ached from too-heavy packs, and insufficiently-large lungs wheezed in the cold, dry air.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Mahalangur, Himal, Nepal.

NEW ROUTE: Ama Dablam, 6812 meters, 22,350 feet, via Northeast Face, December 1 to 7, 1985 (Carlos Buhler, Michael Kennedy).