

The Arwa Tower

An old-fashioned adventure

by Mick Fowler, *United Kingdom*

“Probably never photographed before,” the caption said. I peered closely at the photograph again. It showed a wild, ice-streaked, rocky spire that was beginning to give me quite an urge.

“Arwa Valley, India,” the text said. The photograph was by Harish Kapadia. That man again. A promising sign. Harish lives in Bombay and has a commendable habit of exploring and climbing in the rarely visited parts of the Indian Himalaya that also attract the likes of me. It seemed that our paths were likely to cross once more.

But the Arwa Valley is a couple of days’ walk north of the Hindu holy temple at Badrinath in the Garhwal Himalaya. This area is near the Chinese border and, as part of what the Indian authorities refer to as the “Inner Line,” access can be as big a challenge as the climb. Expeditions here are only for those prepared to live with a fair amount of bureaucratic risk and uncertainty. There are, though, potential rewards that, to my mind, outweigh the risks. Just about all the mountains in this area are unclimbed. Harish’s photograph showed two mind-boggling ones—the Arwa Tower and the Arwa Spire—but it seemed probable that there were other fine peaks nearby. There was no doubt about it: I simply had to go.

By April, 1999, four of us were ready to leave. I was to climb with Steve Sustad, a cabinet-maker based in Oswestry and my long-standing Himalayan climbing partner. We were to be accompanied by the delightfully named duo of Crag Jones and Kenton Cool. Crag has some sort of curious career analyzing sea life; Kenton is into cleaning buildings whilst hanging on an abseil rope. As a valuer of unquoted shares employed by the British Tax Service, I felt we were a good, diverse team, joined by little but a common urge to go climbing.

In retrospect, we put so much effort into getting a permit from the authorities that we had not focused sufficiently on finding out more details about the geography of the area. Our maps showed that Arwa Tal (Arwa Lake) was the obvious place to have a base camp—but where was it? In fact, where were the mountains we had come to climb? Naively, I had expected them to be obvious, rearing up in their full splendor above the Arwa Valley (the “Valley of the Ghosts” in Hindu mythology). But all we could see was one spectacular summit poking up over the bounding ridge. It didn’t look like either of the photos we had seen, and we would have to cross the ridge to get to it. This was a serious problem; if the ridge was too difficult or dangerous on the far side, we could fail without even reaching the mountain.

Our two teams of two had somehow become separated. Steve and I felt that the lake must be further up and carried on. Meanwhile, Crag and Kenton had to cope with porters refusing to continue (they had run out of food). They decided that there was nothing for it but to stop at the only passable base camp site they could find. Steve and I, with a small group of porters, got ahead and out of contact with the others. It was delightfully disorganized. Tempers became frayed, and it was perhaps something of a miracle that the day ended with all of us and all of

the gear in the same place. The porters still refused to continue and there was nothing to do but to pay them off and make the best of a bad job at Crag and Kenton's Base Camp site.

“What is this peak?”

Steve and I were standing on the ridge separating the Arwa Valley from the summit that we had glimpsed earlier. Much to our relief, the descent on the far side didn't look too bad.

I had feared that we might be heading for a boring peak capped with an interesting summit, but ahead of us was an orgasmic mountain that dropped sheer to the unnamed, snow-covered glacier below us. It bore no relation to either of Harish's photographs, but whatever it was, it was the one for us.

Somehow we convinced ourselves that it must be the Arwa Spire (it wasn't) viewed from a new direction. Retreating to BC, we formed a plan of action. Things were looking up after all.

It took us two days to get from BC to a relaxingly flat col at the foot of the north buttress of what we were ultimately to conclude was the Arwa Tower. Above us, the buttress soared to a forepeak, whilst to its right the northwest face was seamed with snow/ice streaks and looked to be our preferred option. It did, though, have several distressingly difficult-looking sections. This peak was not going to give up her virginity easily.

Crag and Kenton were also on the col. We had by now sorted out the location of the two peaks that we had come to climb, and they were off to attempt the Arwa Spire, which had previously been out of sight. The weather was perfect, but ground conditions were prompting considerable comment.

“What's going on here?”

Steve was voluble in his disapproval. I had to agree. Never before had any of us come across snow conditions quite like this. The surface layer was a three-inch-thick plate of ice, but every few steps this would collapse and we would fall into a bottomless sea of sugary snow. The sensation was not unlike I imagine it would be to fall through the surface of a frozen lake. The energy expenditure required to get back on to the hard surface was indescribable. Later in the trip, Crag and Kenton were only able to make progress by crawling on the surface, towing their heavy sacks behind.

Faced with such pleasures, Crag and Kenton made the wise decision to stay put until the morning, whilst Steve and I opted to crawl, fall and stagger our way across the short distance that separated us from the foot of the northwest face—which looked increasingly challenging the closer we got.

One good thing about the vast blank rock walls at the foot of the face was the minimal scope for disagreement over where to start. The north spur bounding the left edge provided the only feasible possibility—but not an easy one, as we were soon to find out.

“The crack has run out.”

Steve was sounding uncharacteristically negative. We were less than five pitches up and he was climbing a horribly thin-looking crack—or rather he had been, but had now ground to a halt.

The sun was shining obliquely across the face, and I was feeling comfortably warm and relaxed and well able to offer the sort of moral support that stretched leaders find so completely useless.

“How about traversing to that bit of snow out to your left?” I suggested helpfully.

Unrepeatable rudeness came from above as I continued to soak up the Himalayan rays. Soon, though, blankness in all directions prompted a fresh assessment of the situation.

“I’ll see if I can get a good peg in and then tension across.”

There was a sound of heavy pounding as I lay back once more.

“Ahggh!”

The air was suddenly full of a falling body. There was a thump, followed by silence, and then a string of obscenities.

“*****ing crack opened up.”

I murmured sympathies whilst noting that in half an hour or so I would be in the shade and the temperature would plummet.

Ten minutes later, I was glad to see Steve back at the end of the crack with a peg in place.

“I’m going to tension.”

It all looked horribly precarious. I felt glad to have the soft option of simply holding the rope. Disturbingly, though, I noted that Steve had left his rucksack hanging on the tension peg—a problem for me to deal with at some stage, although in the circumstances I could hardly complain.

Much scraping and grunting started to come from above, interspersed with the occasional “Watch me.”

It was clearly a desperate pitch and, following it with the security of a rope above, I used my usual Himalayan excuse of heavy sack (two in this case) and the need for speed to throw any ethical consideration to the wind.

“Pull!” I shouted as I dangled on the rope, gaining even more respect for Steve’s efforts.

“A fine achievement, Stephen. A pleasure to second you.”

We shook hands because that’s what the English do in such situations. And Steve, American-born but living in Britain for many years, is nearly an Anglophile now.

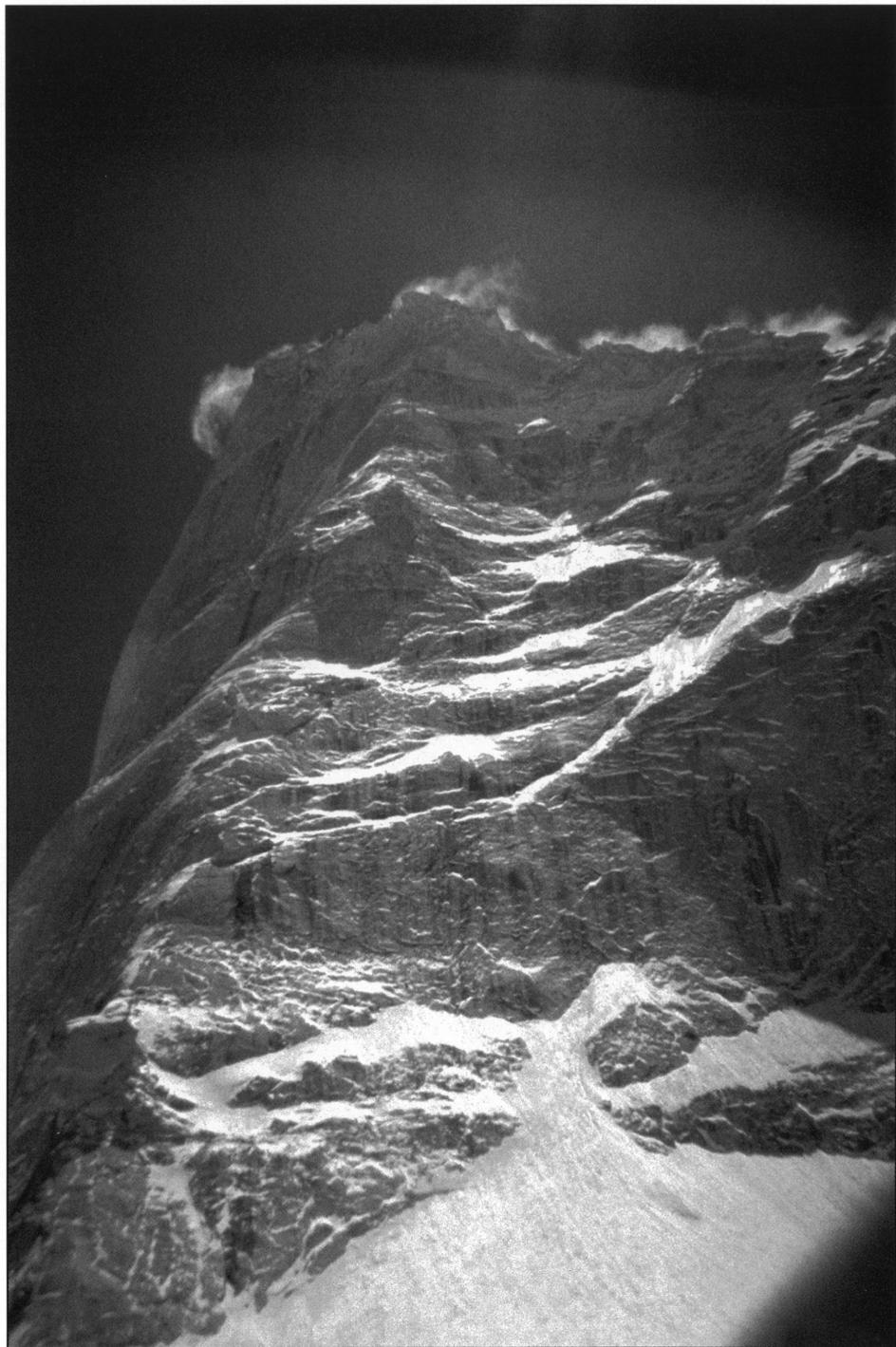
He was his usual calm and philosophical self. “Your pitch looks nice, too,” he said.

We almost always stick to alternating leads on long climbs. Sometimes Steve will take the lead out of turn on aid pitches and I on mixed sections, but by and large we are of much the same ability, and it suits our style to swing leads.

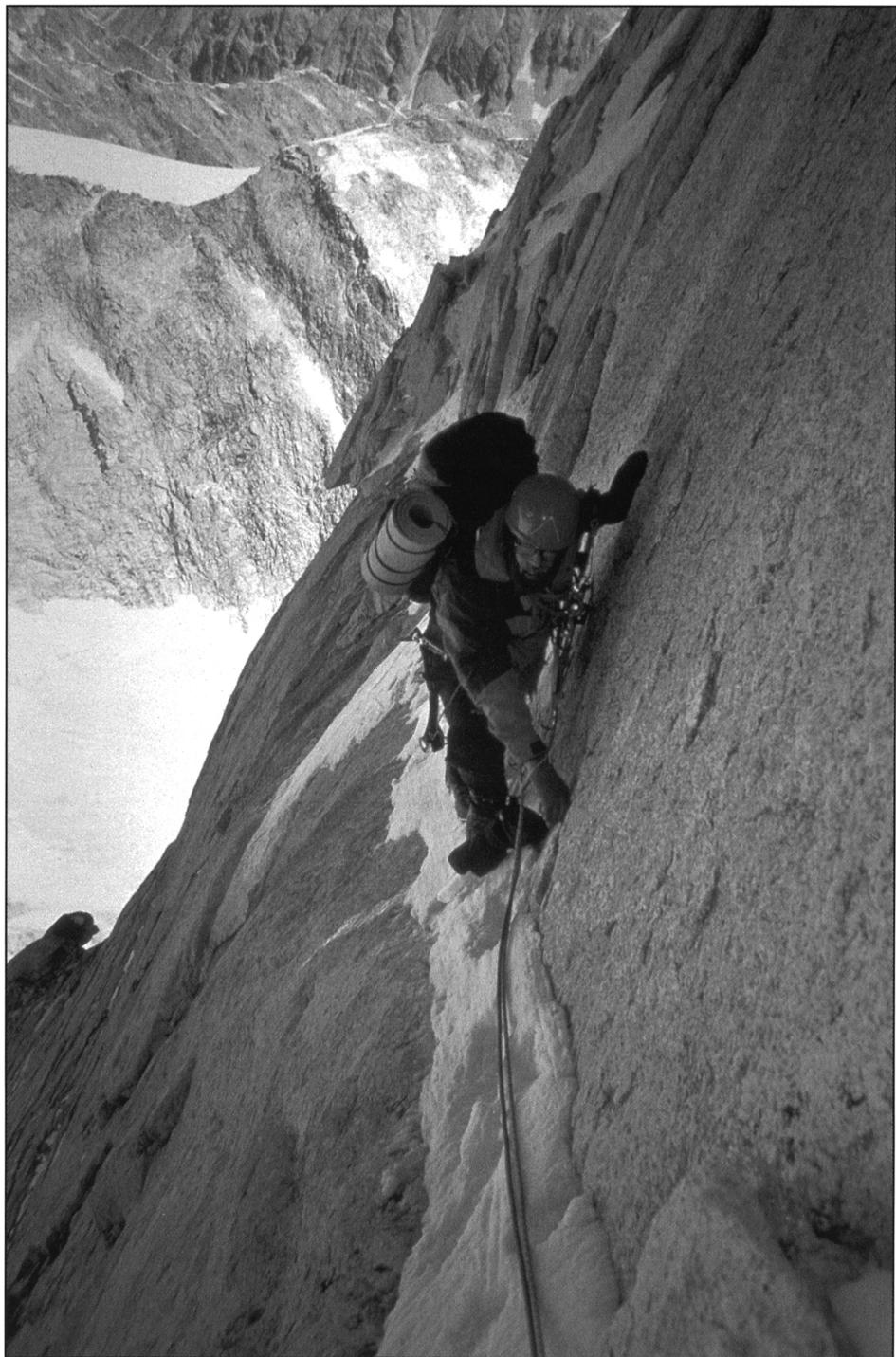
The pitch that Steve was pointing to looked to be a short but vicious and unprotected wide crack that led to what appeared to be a ledge of some kind. I was feeling tired, but try as I might, it was difficult to put it into the “aid” category and hand over to Steve. Also, it was getting late now and Steve’s belay was a foothold on a steep slab. Unplanned Himalayan bivouacs are invariably cold and unpleasant and can easily result in rapid erosion of willpower and ignominious retreat. With such thoughts in mind and the lure of a ledge not far ahead, an extra-special effort was called for. I thrashed up in what was apparently an amusing, ungainly fashion into the gathering gloom.

It perhaps says a lot about Himalayan climbing that it is a real pleasure when a potentially atrocious night is suddenly replaced with the relative luxury of a ledge to lie on. In fact, this one was not quite five-star accommodation, but we could at least lie down end-to-end. I snuggled into a Gore-Tex bivouac bag whilst Steve managed to half erect the tent and began the evening’s cooking efforts.

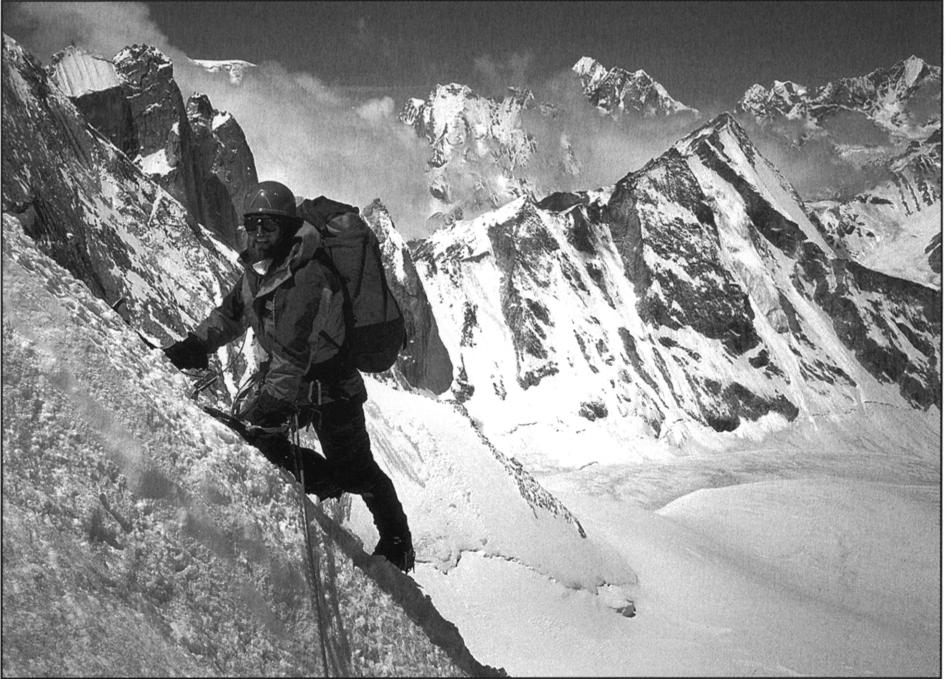
Our food requirements had arguably not been attended to thoroughly enough before leaving the United Kingdom. On our last expedition together, we had existed for 14 days primarily on mashed potato and noodles. It was not exactly the world’s most interesting or varied diet, but Steve, who is much more of an expert than I in these matters, had assured me that it



The northwest face of Arwa Tower. The route starts on the left-hand spur and moves right to one-third height, where it continues up the center of the face. MICK FOWLER



A delicate start to the morning: Steve Sustad, pitch 1, day 2. MICK FOWLER



Sustad on day 2, with the unclimbed Arwa Spire above his head. MICK FOWLER

contained just about all the nutrients we might need. Being as we survived for a fortnight on it, I could only assume that he was correct. As such, there had been no need for complex discussions about dietary requirements for this trip. Mashed potato and noodles would be fine.

But we had hit a problem. Try as we might, we hadn't found any mashed potato in Delhi. Perhaps we had brought it out from England last time? In true disorganized fashion, neither of us could remember. On an expedition back in 1993, Steve and I had used baby food as one of our staple courses. That had worked well then, so the decision was made. Alternate nights of noodles and baby food it would be.

Over the years we have climbed together, Steve has increasingly recognized what Nicki, my wife, has always told him. I, for some inexplicable reason, appear not to be suited for work in the kitchen or the preparation of food of any kind. My mealtime responsibilities in the mountains now usually stretch to snow collection and melting whilst Steve takes on technical jobs such as hydrating noodles and mixing baby powder. And so I was able to lie in my sleeping bag and marvel at the stars as Steve labored over the stove and produced a truly disgusting "meal" of lurid orange "peach"-flavored baby food. I chewed the powdery lumps thoughtfully. Next time I would make a special effort to buy mashed potato in England.

Up above us, the rock looked disturbingly steep and blank. Perhaps with hot weather and rock boots it would give excellent rock climbing, but the morning dawned with a few gentle snow flakes, and our heavy sacks, big boots and ice climbing gear were clearly more suited to any ice streaks we could find. Steve had, in fact, brought his rock boots along, but the weather conditions and ground ahead convinced him that they would no longer be required.

Ever conscious of surplus weight, he tied them together and threw them down to be picked up from the foot of the face on our way down. Needless to say, they were never seen again.

The “snow/ice” streaks of the northwest face proved to be disturbing. The rock hereabouts was a smooth, sparsely featured granite. It rapidly became clear that what looked like fairly substantial snow/ice lines tended to be powder snow clinging to slight easings of the angle. My crampon points scratched and grated. I felt distinctly insecure.

“Can’t you get any protection in?”

I obviously looked as insecure as I felt. . . or was it just that Steve was noting the long swing onto blank rock that he was facing if he should slip?

We persevered. Patches of ice occasionally provided security in the form of solid ice screws, but the rock was notably blank and the climbing unsettling and time-consuming. All the time I was very aware that we were moving out above very smooth walls and, if anything went wrong, it might be extremely difficult to abseil directly down the face. The adrenaline was slowly but inexorably building up.

As the hours ticked by, I began to wonder where we might spend the night. A repeat of the previous night’s relative luxury looked unlikely. I must be getting old. I don’t remember feeling this concern ten years ago. Then, I would just climb and trust that when dusk was approaching, we would be able to cut a bottom-width step in the ice and hold ourselves in place with a length of rope stretched taut between ice screws on either side. Perhaps, I considered, that was the problem: on this kind of ground there was no guarantee that we would be able to find a big enough patch of thick ice, and the thought of spending the night standing on a collapsing step in three-inch-thick powder snow with minimal belays did not appeal.

By late afternoon, little had changed. A couple of particularly exciting pitches up very thin ice streaks had necessitated sack hauling again, but we had now reached an impasse with no obvious way around it.

“Take care, Michael. Belays aren’t very good.”

Reluctantly, my eyes were drawn to the three tied-off ice screws to which Steve was attached. Half of their length was protruding from the ice. Backed up by the picks of his axes, they might hold a fall, but they hardly inspired confidence.

The impasse was a 20-meter exfoliating rock slab with an occasional smear of transparent ice. I teetered up on fragile edges, the points of my crampons grating unnervingly. Pegs behind insecure, exfoliating flakes did not exactly inspire confidence.

A bolt would solve the problem, but Steve and I have strong views on such things. Bolts can solve almost any protection problem. They do not require any weakness in the rock or any skill to place, and they destroy the traditional challenge of mountaineering. Once, after completing the first ascent of the Golden Pillar of Spantik in Pakistan, with Victor Saunders, a Spanish team actually contacted Victor and asked him if we minded them trying to repeat the route with bolts. Perhaps their misgivings sum up the sensitivities on the subject.

Either way, here on the Arwa Tower we had no bolts and no intention of using any. In retrospect, we would be able to say that we faced up to the full challenge of the face. At the time, it just felt downright frightening.

We were gaining height now and could see over the lower peaks to the north and on to the Tibetan plateau beyond. To the northwest in particular, exciting unclimbed objectives were coming into view. There will be plenty of potential in the Himalaya for a few generations yet.

Pulling out of the top of the pitch heralded a real change in the conditions. We were approaching the upper bowl of the face, and I could only assume that the wind howling over

the crest and the lower temperatures at this altitude were responsible for the sudden change to bottomless powder snow. It was getting late, and I was feeling tired (completely knackered, actually) as Steve came up and headed off into the gathering gloom. The angle averaged perhaps 60 degrees, with numerous vertical rock steps. There was still no obvious place to spend the night.

By the time Steve had belayed and brought me up, there was nothing for it but to bivouac where we were. Overhangs above looked as if they might provide a bit of shelter, but the absence of any ledge promised some interest.

I hung forlornly in a shallow scoop in the powdery snow. Steve had somehow managed to excavate a better-looking ledge and set about preparing luke-warm baby food. I struggled not to retch while contemplating the gently falling snow and increasingly poor visibility. I was thankful that we were high enough on the face to be above any dangerous spindrift avalanches. There was a time when I would have been deeply concerned at the onset of a spell of bad weather, but years of doing this kind of thing have changed the old feeling of rising panic to one of resigned acceptance. After all, it would be naive to expect the weather gods to provide absolutely perfect weather for the full duration of something like a seven-day climb.

Things had improved slightly by the morning. Up above us, the sun intermittently caught the jagged crest marking the top of the face. We plowed on—literally. Even near-vertical pitches were plastered with a deep layer of useless powder snow. The climbing was precariously time-consuming, and it was not until late afternoon that we broke through the final difficulties onto the crest.

I had long anticipated this moment, and hoped that from here it would be an enjoyable scramble to the summit. It was, then, with some shock and dismay that we saw that, although it was probably less than 100 vertical meters to the highest point, the ridge was a complex knife-edge of overhanging towers. Some of them looked disturbingly blank and holdless.

By nightfall we had made little progress, although we had at least managed to cut a ledge in a small ice shelf, and were therefore able to spend our first night together inside the tent since we started on the face. Only a quarter of the floorspace hung off the ledge, but with sleeping mats down, it was easy to forget such minor problems. We slept soundly.

“What happens now?”

Steve was standing on the knife-edge crest of the ridge contemplating the way ahead.

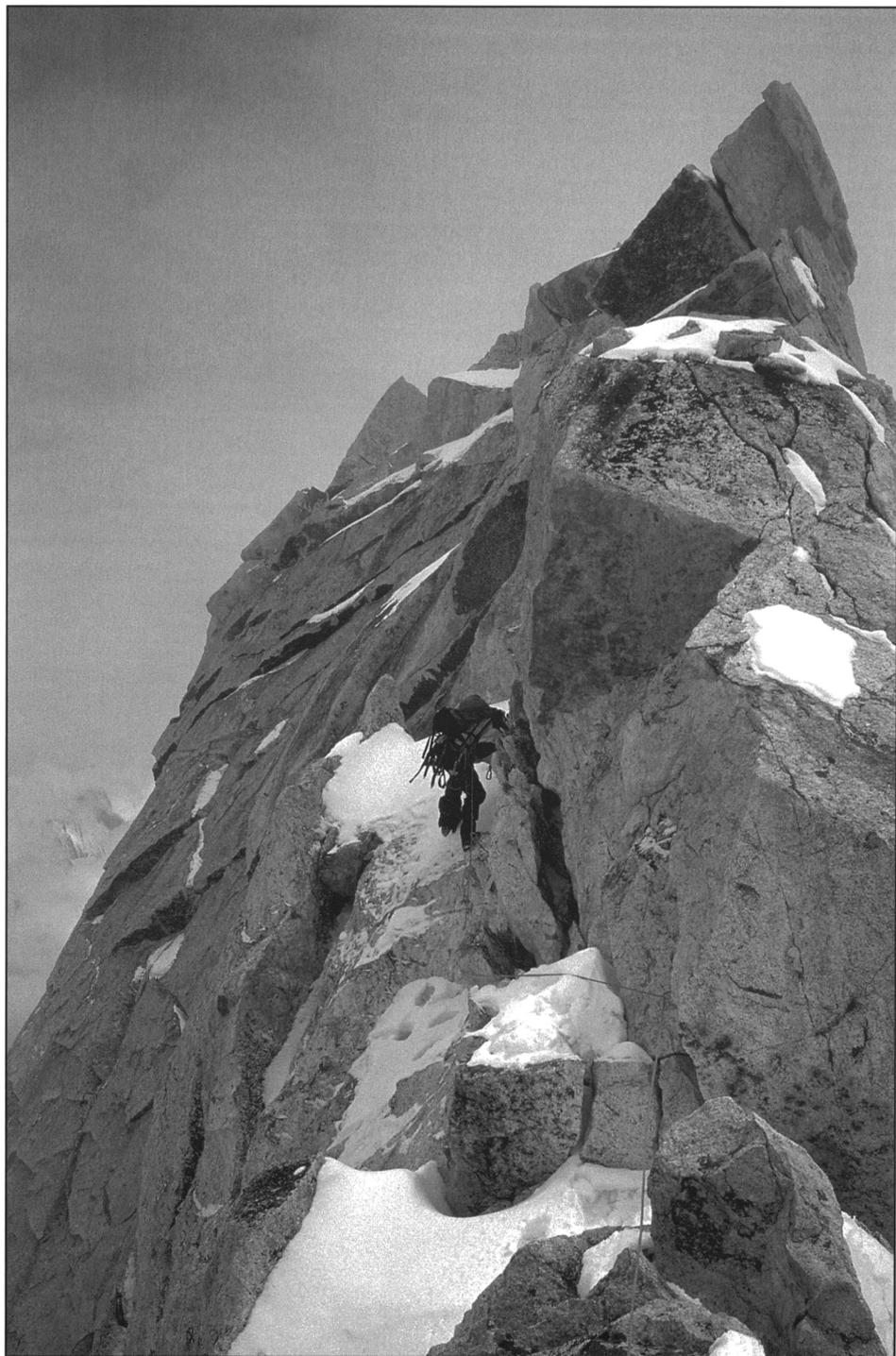
“We could abseil down there.”

“Mmmmm.”

We both stared thoughtfully down the far side of the ridge. A 25-meter overhanging abseil would place us on a steep snow/ice slope that we might be able to traverse and then regain the ridge beyond the tower. There was, though, the slight problem of how to reverse this maneuver on the way back. Climbing up ropes is my least favorite mountaineering activity. Here, though, we seemed to have no alternative but to commit ourselves if we were to stand a chance of making the summit. Leaving one of our two ropes in place, we slid down and started our summit bid.

My level of optimism was not high. It was one of those situations where I think we both felt that the weather and the apparent difficulty ahead were likely to defeat us. But we judged that it was not dangerous to continue and, having got so far, we felt that we owed it to ourselves to give it a go.

The snow/ice traverse was horrible. Rotten snow lying on hard ice made for difficult going. Steve then managed a desperate pitch on powder-covered rock, and suddenly we were



Fowler on the knife-edge ridge en route to the summit. STEVE SUSTAD

back on the crest.

“What do you think?”

It was difficult to suppress my growing elation. Neither of us could really believe that three rope lengths had changed the outlook so much. What from below had looked to be an impregnable final section now appeared passable. Even the weather was brightening up, with the odd ray of sunshine piercing the cloud. The summit spire was visible only 50 meters away.

It was, then, almost with a sense of surprise and disbelief that we were able to sit astride the summit knife-edge, marvel at the intermittent view, take stock of the situation and contemplate the forces that had driven us to focus so much time and effort in reaching such a place.

Back in the tent, our conversation turned to more everyday things. Steve enthused about the mass-market potential of a porch that he had designed, whilst I enjoyed shocking him with tales from the Shares Valuation Division. Our climbing aspirations are very similar, our ways of earning a living sharply contrasting.

We both stared out across the vast expanse of the Tibetan plateau.

Variety, we agreed, is most definitely the spice of life.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Arwa Valley, Garhwal Himalaya, India

FIRST ASCENT: The Northwest Face (VI 5b A3 Scottish V/VI, 1000m) of the Arwa Tower (6352m), May 7-14, Mick Fowler and Steve Sustad (see Climbs and Expeditions, p. x, for a note on Crag Jones and Kenton Cool's attempt on the Arwa Spire)

PERSONNEL: Mick Fowler, Steve Sustad, Kenton Cool, Crag Jones



Mick Fowler

Born in 1956, Briton Mick Fowler, a valuer of unquoted securities, is married with two children, Tessa, 7, and Alec, 5. He started climbing seriously in 1976. With the route *Linden*, he was one of the first rock climbers to establish the E6 grade in Britain. His taste for the unusual has resulted in the dubious distinction of being the only climber arrested in both England and France for climbing on the chalk cliffs. Outside Britain, he has climbed a string of new EDsup routes, the most notable being the South Buttress of Taulliraju (Peru, 1982), the *Golden Pillar* of Spantik (Pakistan, 1987), the Northwest/North Face of Cerro Kishtwar (India, 1993), the Northeast Pillar of Taweche (Nepal, 1995) and the North Face of Changabang (India, 1997).