

Gyachung Kang

An alpine mentality in the Himalaya

by Marko Prezelj, *Planinska zveza Slovenije, Slovenia*

translated by Ana Perčič

“Have you noticed the mountain between Cho Oyu and Everest?” Andrej asked me in 1995.

“There are several interesting peaks east of Cho Oyu. I haven’t observed any in particular.”

“Well, I have. During acclimatization I spent the entire time watching the north face of Gyachung Kang. Look.”

He showed me a photo he took during an attempt of Siguang Ri. Looking at it, I immediately warmed to the idea of an ascent from the Tibetan side. After we found out that the mountain is rarely visited and that it remained untouched from the north, the goal became even more tempting.

In 1996, we tried to organize a small expedition similar to the one we had used on the first ascent of Menlungtse in 1992: two alpinists, a doctor and a cook. The plan fell through due to the enormous amounts of money the Chinese required for expeditions to Tibet. It wasn’t until 1998 that the Planinska zveza Slovenije (Alpine Association of Slovenia) actually showed some organizational interest in the idea. Our small expedition grew to become a PZS project: eight alpinists and a doctor. The enlarged team was intended not only to reduce costs, but also to transfer experiences to younger climbers. In this perspective, Andrej, the Himalayan veteran, was a real treasure, and he of course took over the post of leader.

In the spring, Andrej and Marko Čar made a reconnaissance to Gyachung Kang, exploring the approach and examining the mountain’s faces. They brought home a lot of useful information and photographs that only increased our enthusiasm. But we did not draw any specific routes on the photos; instead, we decided we would climb in roped parties of two, and that, depending on weather conditions and each individual’s feelings, the routes would only be chosen once we arrived at the mountain. This was probably the key decision of the expedition. Relaxation and freedom of choice overwhelmed the monotony that can occur if a team is directed toward one goal only, especially during acclimatization.

Autumn came, and our departure with it. In Kathmandu, we devoted our time and money to food, equipment and packing. The weather was bad and remained so, even after our arrival in Tibet. We turned the acclimatization stay we had planned in Nyalam to our advantage. We all climbed in the nearby hills and reached higher than 5000 meters, which was enough for a carefree departure to Base Camp.

We camped by the road at the spot where the rivers from Everest and Gyachung meet, waiting two days for the yaks that would carry our loads to BC. We used the time to get acclimatized on the surrounding hills up to 5500 meters. On October 2, after lengthy negotiations about loads and prices, the yak herders directed their animals to the Gyachung River valley. Tomaž, meanwhile, realized he had forgotten his wallet and passport where he had eaten his

lunch. This event, and Tomaž himself, became the source of jokes throughout the expedition. We proclaimed him the author of *Seven Years in Tibet: Part II*.

On October 4, we arrived at a little morainal plateau above the glacier where we pitched our nine tents. I shared a tent with Andrej and, as usual, we got along fairly well, complementing each other. We completely reduced superfluous talk about certain decisions. The younger team members often showed us how spontaneously well we understood one another when they brought us their own doubts and discussions.

The mountain we chose for our first acclimatization ascent—a 6700-meter peak neither mentioned nor named in Jan Kielkowski's guide—had first caught our attention during the approach. Andrej, Marko Čar, Peter and I set off to climb it. The ascent, via the southeast ridge, was technically not demanding. Clouds covered the surrounding peaks, so we could not study any future climbs as we had planned. We descended via the east ridge, roping up for sections due to crevasses. The other four reached the top the next day.

The name for the peak came by itself. A day after our arrival at BC, we emptied the satellite phone account. Back home, we had been reassured that the account would be filled with all the necessary codes (which had not been entrusted to us). Unfortunately, this did not happen. Hoping that our problem would somehow be solved, we kept checking the account. Each time, a pleasant female voice said, "You have zero." Zero Peak, then, is the name we suggest for the mountain.

After two days' rest, we decided on another acclimatization ascent which would also allow us to assess conditions and study the north face of Gyachung Kang. We divided into four rope parties for the unclimbed Siguang Ri Shar (6998m). Janko and Blaž chose to go up the left side of the north face and then continue up the east ridge; Andrej and I started on the right side of the north face; Matic, Marko, Peter and Tomaž decided on the north face of the saddle between Siguang Ri Shar and Siguang Ri.

In the afternoon, we all set up bivouac tents at about 6000 meters, at the bottom of our intended routes. The next morning, we began our ascents. A strong wind blew, piling snow in drifts and launching small powder avalanches. The cold bit our toes as if we were at least 1000 meters higher. Andrej and I packed our rucksacks and started climbing near a poorly defined rock rib. We had no big difficulties; still, we found occasional hard ice beneath the snow, and we had to use both ice axes and touch the rock a couple of times to go on.

The wind followed us to the rib, where it forced us to make a long diagonal traverse to the right toward the saddle. The angle lessened as we waded through ankle-deep snow. In the middle of the traverse we saw the other four below, climbing right toward the rib. It seemed as if they were being strafed by powder avalanches even harder and making progress even more slowly than we were.

The fierce wind showed its true power on the saddle, where it literally blew away every thought of proceeding. We started preparing a place for the tent, putting pressed plates of snow around the tent as a sort of a windshield. The two other teams set up their tents next to ours. Though we were already feeling the affects of high altitude, the night was quite pleasant because of the attention we applied to setting up the tent.

In the morning, the wind was still blowing. Lightly equipped, we all decided to climb to the top of Siguang Ri (7309m), which looked easily approachable from the saddle. The only problem was the wind, which hampered the ascent and blew doubts into our heads.

We quickly climbed the first steep section, which was followed by a long plateau to the summit pyramid. Walking with the wind blowing in our faces was no fun whatsoever. Except for the beautiful view of Gyachung Kang and Everest, and the wish to get to the top, I had no



Siguang Ri and Siguang Ri Shar on the left, Zero Peak on the right. MARKO PREZELJ

real motivation to continue.

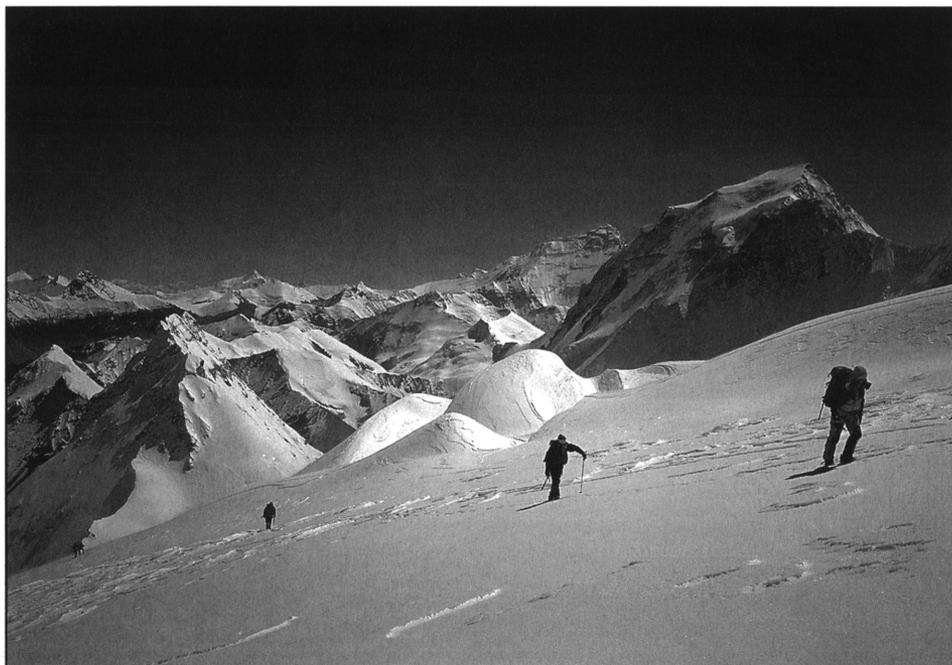
The final pyramid lured us for so long that we finally climbed to the top. The view would have been fully experienced only if the hurricane had stopped. We quickly turned to descend. Our doctor, Zare, told us over the phone that Janko had reached the top of Siguang Ri Shar the previous day. I thought it was great that we were climbing these mountains just like that. We were more experienced and no longer felt the fear and respect for the mountains that once kept us from climbing in such a way.

We descended quickly, reaching the saddle while it was still in the sun. The second night was less pleasant than the first. In the neighboring tent, Matic suffered from oxygen deprivation. We gave him first aid and reduced communication to a minimum. It appeared we were not yet acclimatized.

The night passed by slowly with little sleep, but when the morning came, I had to push the sleepiness away. Andrej, Marko and I decided to climb Siguang Ri Shar by its south face while the others descended to BC.

The strong wind weakened as we started a long traverse over the south face of the mountain. The sky gradually became completely covered by clouds. An unknown energy drove me on, and I led from the tents all the way to the top, through snow and short rock steps. Despite the sleepless night, I felt great. It seemed to me that with a pace like this we could visit all the surrounding peaks in two weeks. From the top we returned to the saddle, packed the tents and equipment and started a long descent to BC.

The next two days in BC were really nice. We were together again, ready to joke and tease. We celebrated my birthday. We infected one another with positive energy, not bothering our heads about the upcoming climb on Gyachung Kang. We felt pleased with the fact that we had already climbed three peaks with no major problems, something for which many people would have organized an independent expedition.



On the plateau before the summit of Siguang Ri. Siguang Ri Shar is visible below left and up from the col, Everest and Gyachung Kang on the right skyline. MARKO PREZELJ

Three days after Siguang Ri Shar, we hurried to the foot of Gyachung Kang. Curiosity and a wish to put up an Advanced Base Camp to allow fast access to the face would not let us rest. We marked our way on the rolling glacier with cairns and pitched two tents about half an hour's walk from the foot of the north face. Doing it together helped us get through some personal tensions that arose about the forthcoming ascent. In our minds, we looked for passages on the north face and at the same time "climbed" the east face, but we postponed making the final route decisions until later.

After we set up ABC, we had all the conditions to go to the top. We only needed to rest.

So we did, for two days, taking the rest seriously. Still, we did not raise the question about the route or how we would climb Gyachung Kang. On the third day, it started snowing. The snowstorm lasted for more than 60 hours and covered BC in almost a meter of snow. "We will get snowbound!," we joked at first. For three days, we shook the snow off the tents and cleaned the trails to the dining tent and toilet. The wind kept bringing new snow so that we could not think properly about the climbing.

On the storm's third day, the kitchen and storage tents collapsed under the weight of the snow. Gradually, we realized that our ambitious fairy tale was coming to an end. Or had it just begun?

"How are we ever going to return to the valley in all this snow?" Although it appeared on all our faces, it was the question nobody asked out loud.

In the afternoon of the third day, the snow stopped falling. The cold now became a visible fact. That evening, Andrej established the seriousness of the situation. We only had about 30 liters of kerosene left for cooking—and now, also for melting snow. This would hardly

suffice for a week. In any case, we couldn't leave BC quickly because the yaks could not reach us in such conditions.

"So we will have to wait for the mountain to get rid of the snow and ascend just before we planned to leave BC."

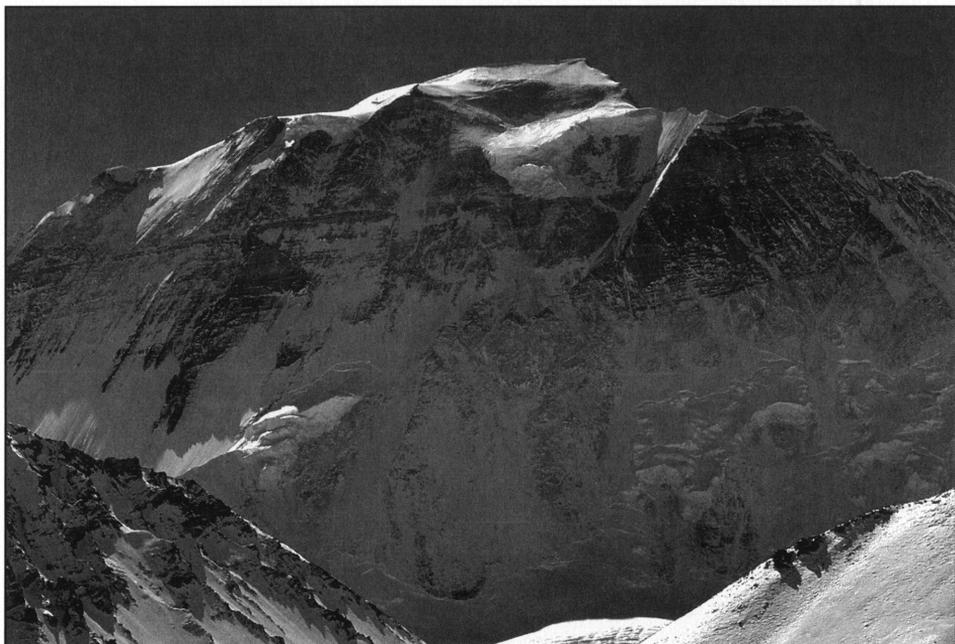
Andrej's summary of the situation was so real that nobody dared doubt it, though we were all full of doubts. The thought of going back into the valley now lost its meaning.

We only had one option, and it quickly became a decision that we then turned into a belief. The cook promised to economize with fuel. Every day after the snowstorm we walked alone to the edge of the glacial moraine, looking toward the white valley like sailors over the endless ocean—and at the same time, watching conditions on the mountain.

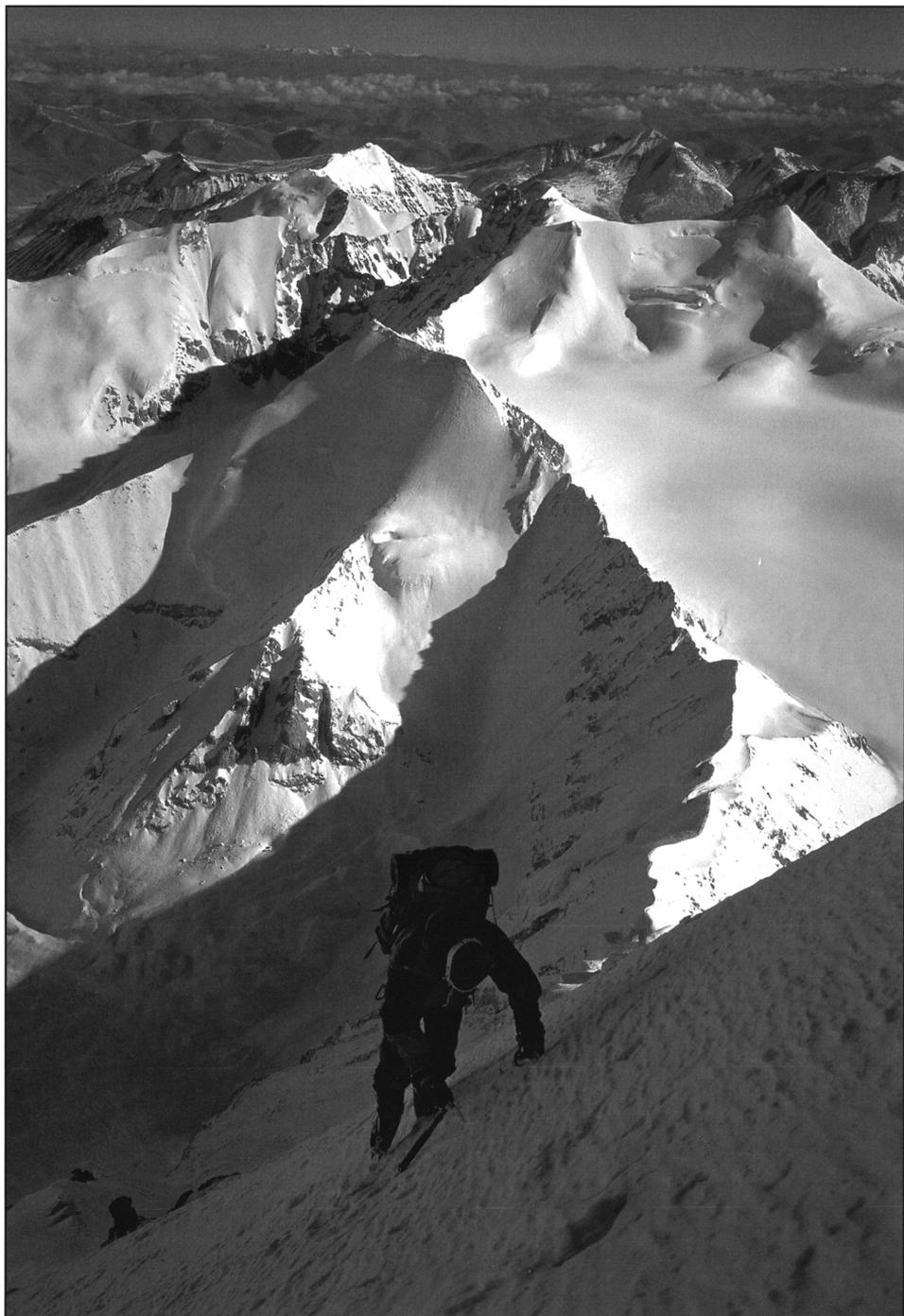
Two days after the snowfall, Andrej and Tomaž went into the valley. The satellite phone—our connection with the rest of the world—kept informing us, "You have zero," and now was a good time to let our families in Slovenia know how we were. We also had to arrange for the arrival of yaks to BC. Tomaž worried about his lost passport. In the village of Cho Dzom, they found out that the snow had chased away all the Everest expeditions on the Tibet side. The only message Andrej and Tomaž were able to send home was the letter describing what happened, our determination to continue and the loss of the passport. The letter was personally taken to an agency in Kathmandu by a trekker, and from there it went to our homeland by fax. A substitute passport would be waiting for Tomaž on our return to the border of Zangmu.

Andrej made a deal for the yak herders to come to BC on November 3. The end was now determined.

While diligently shoveling snow during the storm, I had developed a mild case of snow blindness. The other five broke trail to ABC without me, walking through knee-deep snow to dig out the two tents below the face, then returning to BC in the evening. The trail was soon



The north face of Gyachung Kang. ANDREJ ŠTREMELJ



Marko Čar on the north face of Gyachung Kang. MARKO PREZELJ

completely covered again by snow, but it still served as a directional later on.

The sun, which on our arrival had touched the north face for a short time, was by now low, with the face completely in shadow all the time. Wind and avalanches swept the snow from the face, which became more and more climbable.

Andrej and Tomaž returned from the village and told us that there were only nine days left to make the climb. Time pressures replaced the feelings of easiness. Again, Andrej had to make the final decision, because the uncertainty was greater for those who would go first. Andrej, Marko, Matic and I decided together to be the first to enter the face. The other four would follow the next day.

On October 26, the four of us eagerly (if slowly) waded through the snow-covered trail toward the two small tents below the face. If I missed a step, I sank in over my belt. Swearing did not help, nor did stepping carefully on the existing footprints. Marko waded through the first half; later, Matic and I alternated leads.

We came to ABC early enough to dig out the tents a little and dry the equipment. For the last time, we climbed the face with our eyes. I got into the real climbing mood; I no longer saw problems. While Marko and I cooked, Andrej and Matic went to make a short track in the snow toward the face, so that in the morning walking would be easier.

As the shadows covered the tents, we disappeared inside. I hung the cooker from the ceiling and opened the entrance to air out the tent as I cooked. I did not have much to do except light the cooker, which was constantly going out due to condensation on the pot.

We had already eaten the soup and rice when I started making tea. Andrej was napping in the corner, and I began falling asleep, too. The cooker went out again, and I lifted myself to light it. After a few unsuccessful attempts, I mumbled to Andrej, "Something's buzzing in my head," then fell back as if defeated by sleep. Andrej tried to light the cooker as well, but ended up like me.

When I came around, Marko was above me, saying "Breathe, breathe!" I bit for air, slowly realizing what was happening. Andrej threw up. Breathing deeply, I realized we had both been unconscious for some time. Marko and Matic had heard us rattle and hurried to help. We had been poisoned by carbon monoxide.

That night, we could not reach BC by radio, so Matic ran to get Doctor Žare. Meanwhile, Marko prepared something to drink and took care of us in a motherly way. In the morning, we concluded that the only option was to return to BC. After talking to Žare, we slowly went down. Halfway back, we met Janko, Blaž, Peter and Tomaž going up. It was enough to look at each other and say a few words before we each went our own way. Nobody knew whether we would be able to try again.

Žare examined us at BC. "No problem," he said. "Rest, and then you can try again."

The first four started climbing on October 28. We watched them from BC through binoculars and talked to them over the radio. They reported the conditions on the face were not bad and that they had put up two little bivouac tents on a snow crest at 6800 meters, the only real opportunity for a comfortable bivouac. The next day, a strong wind blew. Both rope parties decided to wait. Meanwhile, the four of us went up to ABC. We could not manage it without swearing this time, either. Andrej and I cooked in front of our tent that evening.

The wind did not stop in the morning. The rope parties, who had by now spent two windy nights at the first bivouac, faced a serious decision. Forward or back? Janko and Blaž decided to descend, Peter and Tomaž to continue.

Meanwhile, Andrej, Marko, Matic and I began our ascent. We soon met Janko and Blaž, who repeated what they had already told us over the radio. Some skeptical looks and

encouraging words, and again we went in our own directions.

We progressed well, although the old steps were sometimes a worse option than kicking new ones. We pitched the tents on the snow crest where the others had dug ledges for their first bivouac.

Andrej and I took pains to enlarge the tent area, setting up the tent with care so we would be well-prepared for the night. After supper, we heard from Tomaž and Peter, whose tracks disappeared under a rock barrier above us. They had had quite a lot of mixed climbing, but, considering the heavy snowfall of the previous days, the conditions were good. They had pitched camp on a serac. Our efforts with the tent, meanwhile, had not been in vain: Andrej and I slept surprisingly well.

We started out early in the morning. Before we lost radio contact with them, Tomaž and Peter managed to tell us that they would try to get to the top that day. Gradually, I was gaining the self-confidence I had literally suffocated a few days before in ABC.

After 50 meters, we encountered the first sections of mixed climbing. Fortunately, it was not very steep, so we did not belay each other. In this way we gained time and energy. Before the serac where the angle broke, I looked up the slope leading to the top and saw two figures about 100 meters apart.

“Peter and Tomaž are descending from the summit,” I thought.

But as we reached their tent, I realized they were slowly moving upward. They still seemed very close, and I got the idea that we could follow them. The summit seemed temptingly close as well. Only after we soberly estimated the situation did we decide to bivouac. I did not feel tired, but there was really no need to hurry. A rest would also save energy for the descent.

Andrej and I set up a tent on a large shelf. We dug deep into the snow. As the sun set behind the ridge, we went into the tents and cooked. While we melted the first container of water, Peter and Tomaž called during their descent from the top. They asked for some liquid. We were happy for them to have successfully summited, and we immediately made them some tea. The icy beard and shiny look as Tomaž came to get it were more expressive than all the congratulations and handshaking. His enthusiasm infected both of us and confirmed our determination to set foot on the summit the next day.

I slept well. In the morning I woke up motivated, got dressed and left the warm shelter of the tent. I felt great. We exchanged a few words with Peter and Tomaž, appealed to them to descend and went for the top.

Nothing spoiled my mood, not even the wind, constantly blowing but with less force than the day before. We quickly reached the northwest ridge. At such altitudes I often try to replace the monotony of the slow steps by counting them. Not this time. Filled with energy, I came to the front and after two and half hours of ascent, stopped below the summit.

I waited for Andrej, and we stepped on top together. We were sincerely happy to stand on the spot where everything turns downward, especially the view. After we shook hands and hugged in friendship, we relaxed and enjoyed the view with rapturous feelings caused by an old wish that had come true.

Soon, Marko and Matic joined us. Over the radio, we received congratulations and excitement from BC. For me, being there was a truly unique experience. Even the usual worry about the descent somehow dissembled to subconsciousness. I did not feel tired. It was an easiness I had never experienced before on any summit, intertwined with the joy of being able to share the moment with someone else.



We reached the tents in an hour, where we realized that Peter and Tomaž were still there. We encouraged them to start descending, then struck the tents and packed our rucksacks. Andrej suggested descending independently as quickly as we could, and we all agreed. I thought we were hesitating too long, so I slowly began down. We descended somewhat to the left of our ascent route because it was less technical. In spite of the exposure, there was no need for belaying. At first I stopped to wait for the others, but the frequent waiting made me cold, and, after Janko confirmed the correct descent route over the radio from BC, I decided to descend to ABC without stopping. I noticed that Marko, Peter and Tomaž rappelled at two delicate parts, then I made my way quickly to ABC. The seracs hanging above the face in a certain way maintained my speed.

Arriving at the tents, I looked back with relief and saw Andrej and Matic at the foot of the face, Marko and Peter somewhere between the first bivy and the foot, while Tomaž was slowly descending near the first bivouac. Pleased to have escaped the area below the hanging seracs, I waited for Andrej and Matic.

They joined me, but our enthusiasm about the quick descent did not last long. Marko called us on the radio and said that Peter had slid the last 200 meters and stopped at the foot of the face, injured. His nose bled, he was rather confused and seemed incapable of moving on his own.

We all instantly went back up. Peter had to be moved from below the seracs. Marko radioed Žare, who confirmed the likelihood of concussion in addition to the visible wounds. We started a rescue that quickly proceeded on the avalanche cone under the face. As we walked, we sank deep in snow. We had been active all day, and our movement slowed down noticeably. Peter often simply collapsed and refused to move. Near midnight, when the trudging became unbearable and the serac danger was reduced, we stopped and pitched a tent, where we placed Peter and the exhausted Tomaž.

Concerned about Peter and Tomaž, we woke up early the next morning. Blaž and Žare came to help, followed by Janko and Kami Sherpa. With the first sun, we brought Peter, staggering, to ABC. Žare gave him and Tomaž additional medicine, and they immediately set out for BC. We cleaned and packed ABC, then descended, still sinking waist-deep in the snow when we weren't careful. Despite the heavy rucksack, I was not tired and reached BC at last light. By dark, we were all assembled, including Peter, who occasionally behaved like a child.

The doctor's diagnosis of Peter and Tomaž's condition was exhaustion and frostbite; Peter had also suffered a concussion with a possible skull fracture. This, and the fact that the yaks arrived at BC the next evening, spiked our happiness at the successful ascent with a great deal of concern. It would only pass in Kathmandu, where a careful hospital examination of Peter put our suspicions to rest.

At around noon on November 4, three days after summiting, the yak caravan left BC. We rushed into the valley, wanting to get to the village in one day. Upon arriving at Cho Dzom, we simply dropped onto the beds.

The quick pace from when we decided on the last ascent to when we left BC kept me from collecting my impressions until Pang La Pass, from which there is a wonderful view of the mountains from Makalu to Cho Oyu. We had spent exactly one month at BC, and, in spite of the bad weather, we had taken advantage of our stay. Although at first I looked at the fact that we had climbed four interesting summits, I realized that we had been through a lot, intensively gaining experiences that enriched us for good. Only there on the pass, four days after our descent from the summit, did I feel relief that the wish Andrej and I had shared for such

a long time had come true, and that I was, at least for now, free from my exaggerated curiosity. The question of what it would have been like to have come there only with Andrej was no longer of interest. But in Kathmandu, I was leafing through books again....

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Tibet

NEW ROUTES: The east face/southeast ridge (III/2, 700m) of Zero Peak (ca. 6700m, first ascent), October 6, Čar, Meznar, Prezelj and Štremfelj, and October 7, Jost, Navrsnik, Jakofčič and Meglič, with descent via the east ridge/east face (III/2, 700m), October 6, Čar, Meznar, Prezelj and Štremfelj; *Trzic route* (IV+/4, 1100m) on the north face/east ridge of Siguang Ri Shar (6998m, first ascent), October 10, Meglič, with descent via the south face (III/3, 800m); the south face (IV/3, 450m), October 12, Čar, Prezelj and Štremfelj. The north face/east ridge (IV/3, 650m) of Siguang Ri (7309m) October 10, Prezelj, Štremfelj (to the saddle between Siguang Ri Shar and Siguang Ri); to the summit (II/2, 800m), October 11, Prezelj, Štremfelj, Čar, Jost, Meznar and Jakofčič. The Slovene Route (VI/4, 2000m) on the north face of Gyachung Kang (7952m), October 28-31, Jakofčič and Meznar; October 30-November 1, Čar-Jost and Prezelj-Štremfelj

PERSONNEL: Andrej Štremfelj (leader), Marko Prezelj, Marko Čar, Matic Jost, Peter Meznar, Tomaž Jakofčič, Janko Meglič, Blaž Navrsnik, Žare Guzej (doctor)



Marko Prezelj, MARKO ČAR

Marko Prezelj was born in 1965 and has been climbing since 1982. Trained as a chemical engineer, he now works as a climbing instructor, mountain guide and photographer. Among his many ascents around the world are Cho Oyu by a new route on the north face in 1988, Kangchenjunga South by a new route, alpine style, in 1991, the first ascent of Menlungtse's main summit, alpine style, via the east face in 1992, and a new route on the east face of Torre Norte del Paine in 1995. All these ascents were made with Andrej Štremfelj. In 1993, he made the fifth ascent of *Wyoming Sheep Ranch* on El Capitan with Silvo Karo. He is married and has two sons.