

Meanwhile, Bernard Marnette and Salvador Campillo made the first ascent of the Suri Tondo's west pillar with the seven-pitch route *BMW* (6a+). (*High Mountain Sports* 205)

CAMEROON

MANDARA MOUNTAINS

Zeuvu Tower, South Face, New Route. On December 3, our team met in Douala, the capital of Cameroon. We had come to climb in an obscure area called the Mandara Mountains that lay along Cameroon's northern border with Nigeria. Our climbing team included South Africans Ed February and Andy Deklerk and myself. We were also joined by Simon Boyce, Greg Child and Robin Freeman, on assignment to document the trip for *National Geographic Television*. We were eager to keep moving toward our objective, but unfortunately Cameroon lacks reliable travel by air and at this time of year, many roads are impassable from weeks of heavy rain.

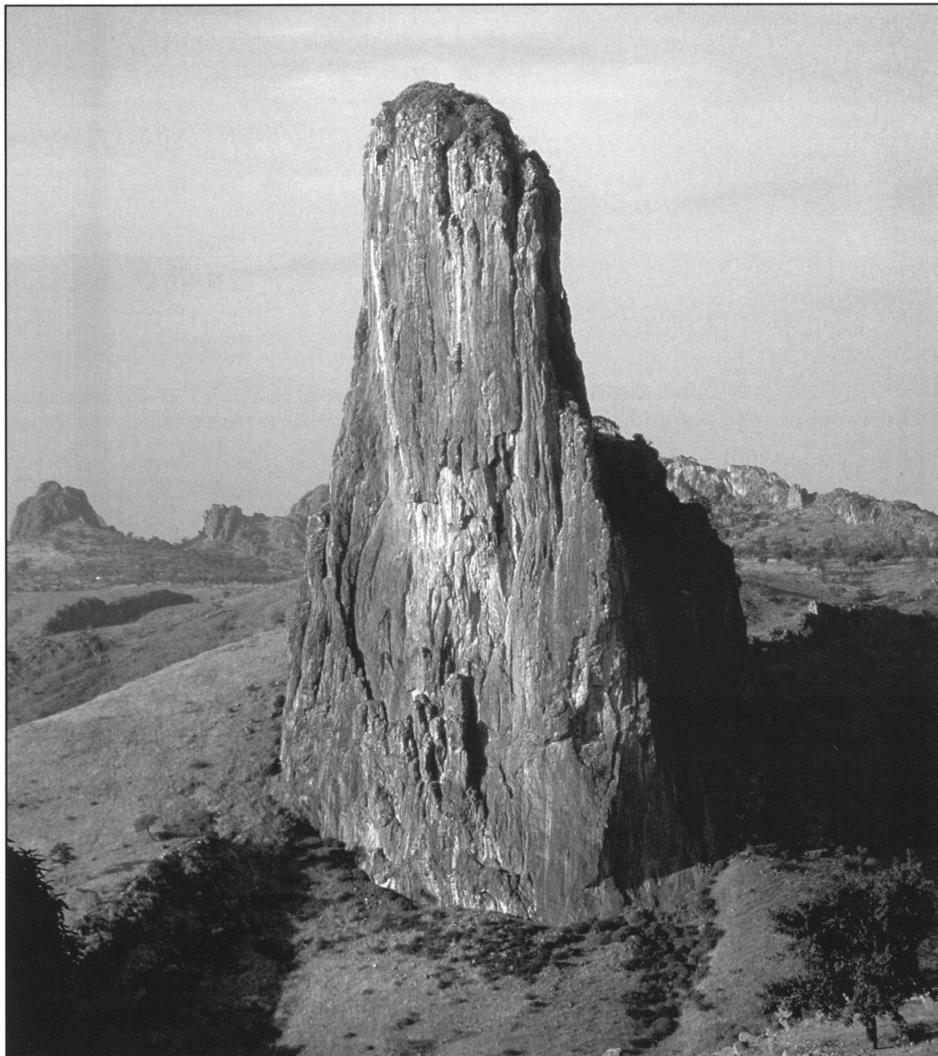
On December 7, we finally caught a flight to Garoua (one of the larger cities in the north) and the next day we took a bus to Maroua, the northern capital. The local Kapsiki people are incredibly poor, but the landscape in which they live is very beautiful, with craggy orange-colored outcrops set against lush green fields of peanuts, sorghum, millet and corn. After some last-minute shopping in the local market, we loaded two four-wheel-drive jeeps for the four-hour drive to the village of Rhumsiki.

With our first view of the Mandara Mountains, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. The horizon was riddled with fangs of rock poking into a hazy sky. There were dozens of towers clustered into an area of roughly 100 square miles. The spires looked steep, even overhanging, and up to 1,000 feet high. A quick reconnaissance determined that Zeuvu Tower (a tower we had seen in a French film called *Chocolat*; pronounced Zivi by those of Rhumsiki) was indeed the best objective, so we established a camp at its base just outside the village. We hired a local man named Koji who spoke good English to be our cook/guide. We would now have the companionship of nearly all the village children for the rest of our time in Rhumsiki.

We knew from our research that the first recorded ascent of Zeuvu Tower was in 1961 by a group of French volunteers who followed a jungle mountaineering route on the north face. However, the holds on this route were so polished that it was obvious it had been climbed by locals long before the '60s. We were initially guided up this 5.7 route by school children who had soloed it many times before. In fact, historians believe that hundreds of years ago, frightened villagers likely sought refuge on the tower during the frequent slave raids by tribes from Sudan.

We decided to attempt the tower's south face because it was close to 1,000 feet high and very steep. Unfortunately, the dense volcanic rock (which we believed to be syenite) was glassy smooth and lacking in hand holds and crack systems. We decided a ground-up ascent would be a bolt ladder, so instead we decided to approach the route on rappel. We spent the next several days cleaning off loose rock and vulture feces, as well as placing bolts in sections where natural protection did not exist. It was scorching hot to be on the face in the sun, so we tried to climb during the morning shade as much as possible.

Finally, we began our attempt to free climb the tower from the ground up. We ascended our ten-pitch route a couple of different times, but we had trouble getting it to go all free. Low down, Ed mastered a 5.11d offwidth coated in vulture piss, but Andy and I took whippers on



The south face of Zeuvu Tower. MARK SYNNOTT

the back-to-back crux pitches. On the final day of the expedition, we split into two teams (Andy and Ed and Greg and myself) for a last try. This time, Andy and I both completed the route with no falls. We called the climb *The Great Technical Adventure* (5.12d) (named after the local kids, who Greg and Andy nicknamed “the technicals”). Ours was the sixth route on the tower and the second on the south face. Andy Deklerk made two base jumps off Zeuvu Tower, which he believes were the first-ever base jumps in Cameroon.

We would like to extend our thanks to the National Geographic Society and specifically the Expedition Council for their generous support of the 1999 Rhumsiki Tower Expedition.

MARK SYNNOTT