

# CHOMO LONZO

*A French national expedition pioneers two 7,000-meter-plus peaks in Tibet.*

---

YANNICK GRAZIANI

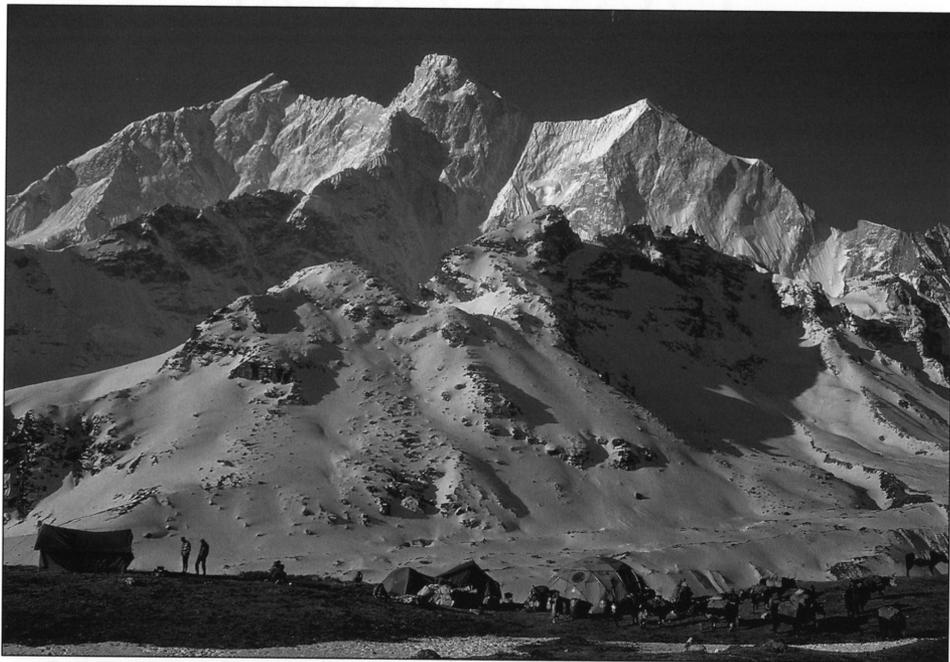


Yannick Graziani and Christian Trommsdorff work up the ice slopes on the northwest flank of Chomo Lonzo North at around 6,500 meters. They climbed a weakness in the cliffs above to reach the ridge at 6,800 meters and followed this to the 7,199-meter summit. *Patrick Wagon*

**F**or the first time in my experience, a high-altitude expedition is entirely sponsored. This makes it so easy to leave—all we have to do is to show up at a set time and board a plane. We owe this to Jean-Claude Marmier, our friend and president of the Fédération Française de la Montagne et de L'Escalade (FFME) Himalayan Committee, and to the FFME itself.

The idea for an expedition to Chomo Lonzo was hatched in 2003, and about 15 climbers were interested in the project, then 10, and the team ends up consisting of eight. We talk a lot before leaving—meetings, dinners, e-mails—and come up with a plan (rather vague and flexible, as the information we have on the mountain is sparse) according to which we will climb with our usual partners: two teams of three and one team of two.

On April 14 we arrive at base camp. The porters have left, the weather is beautiful, and winter snow still sticks to the northern aspects of the mountains. During our meetings in



The beautiful eastern flanks of Chomo Lonzo. The team first attempted the northeast ridge in the foreground of the central summit. During their successful ascent, they followed the west face of the north (right) peak to join the northwest ridge (right skyline) about midway. They followed this to the top. Then they descended to the saddle and spent two days climbing the steep, rocky ridge to the central summit. *Patrick Wagnon*

France, each team member had suggested ideas on how to climb and what routes might be possible. I hold a secret dream of traversing the three summits of Chomo Lonzo, the mountain that represents the goddess of birds for Tibetans, but the idea is still premature.

The next day, with a stable weather forecast, our small team of three decides to go acclimatizing. Our team is based on friendship and trust; we've known each other for five years and have grown closer as each expedition has unfolded.

Christian is 41 and used to work as an engineer all over the world; now he's a mountain guide in Chamonix. He lives with Karine, a ski patroller. He did many expeditions before our paths crossed, and he has been able to share his experience with us. He's a stubborn, adorable person.

Patrick, 35, is a glaciologist who lives in Grenoble with his wife and three children. We tease him by saying he is the fourth kid. He crossed India on a bike at age 20.

As for myself, I live off of guiding and reside in Chamonix; Kelly, a U.S. citizen, has been living with me for the past five years. I find it hard to describe myself. I feel that I live the extremes, even though my ideal is wisdom. I like my opposites.

Our unorthodox team has found a meeting point: high mountains as a passion and adventure at high altitude as an ideal.

We acclimatize in the classic way, never too fast. We explore the northeast arête of the central summit to 6,000 meters, but conditions are not favorable—too much snow. During the next week we move to the other side of the mountain and find that the west face holds considerably less snow than the gigantic and difficult east face. Even if we don't want to admit it, the

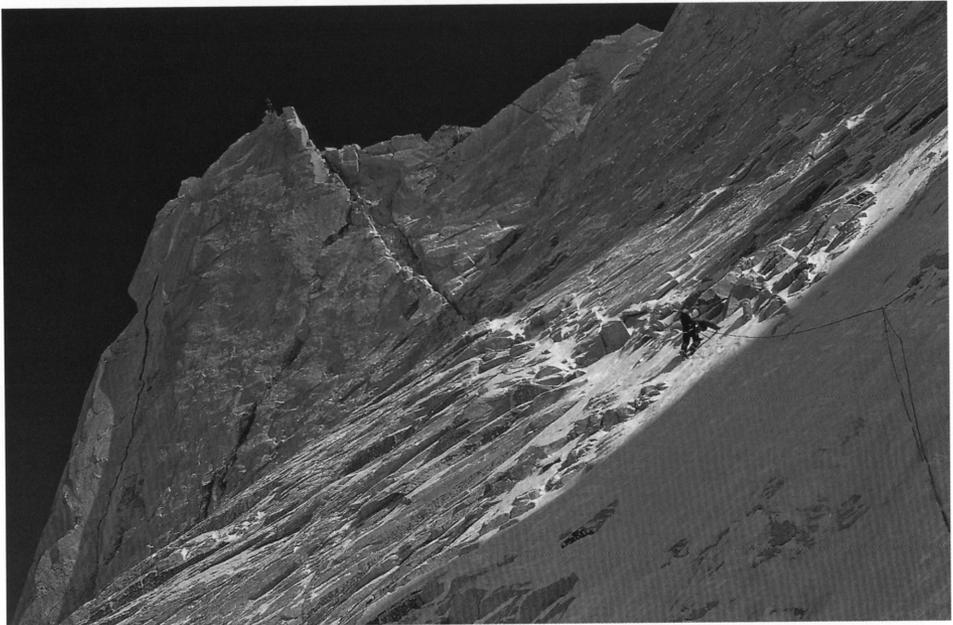
dice have been rolled, and we will be back on this face. We even leave gear at 5,600 meters.

When you head out on such a mountain, you have to check out the face you want to climb to make sure the itinerary you have picked will work out. This seems obvious, but let me explain. Choosing your line is also determining the style and the ethic. Ours is simple: climbing in alpine style. If the route is well chosen, it will match the technical and psychological level of the climbers. Modesty and ambition thus become a capricious couple, difficult to satisfy, manageable yet dangerous.

In early May we complete the first ascent of the 7,199-meter north summit of Chomo Lonzo by its northwest ridge. Now it is time to regain strength at base camp for our next project. We are aiming for the 7,540-meter central summit. We'll start by repeating our route over the north summit to reach the notch between the two peaks; we have left camps in place to wait for our return. The wind that blows constantly up high forces us to wait. At base camp, springtime is back. Golden marmots, eagles, and spotted does visit us daily.

Doubts set in as we leave the grass for the world of ice and rock. At 6,000 meters we find our VE-25 tent has survived the wind in perfect shape, but our camp 800 meters higher has disappeared according to the youngsters Yann Bonneville and Aymeric Clouet, who returned from their attempt on the route a few days ago. We're going to have to carry gear back up.

We have brought enough food for eight days. We reach Camp 2 at 6,800 meters after eight hours of intense effort on a bare ice slope. Winds gusting to 100 kilometers per hour suddenly pick up in the afternoon, and it takes us two hours to set up two tents. As I lie inside the tent to hold it down with my weight while my friends anchor it solidly, I am scared I might fly off. How about those on the outside? Their faces are all puffy from the wind and their hands are frozen. The wind lasts another two hours and then dies at dusk. Great! We will be able



Trommsdorff leads toward the steep ramp that gained the ridge at 6,800 meters on Chomo Lomo North.  
*Patrick Wagon*

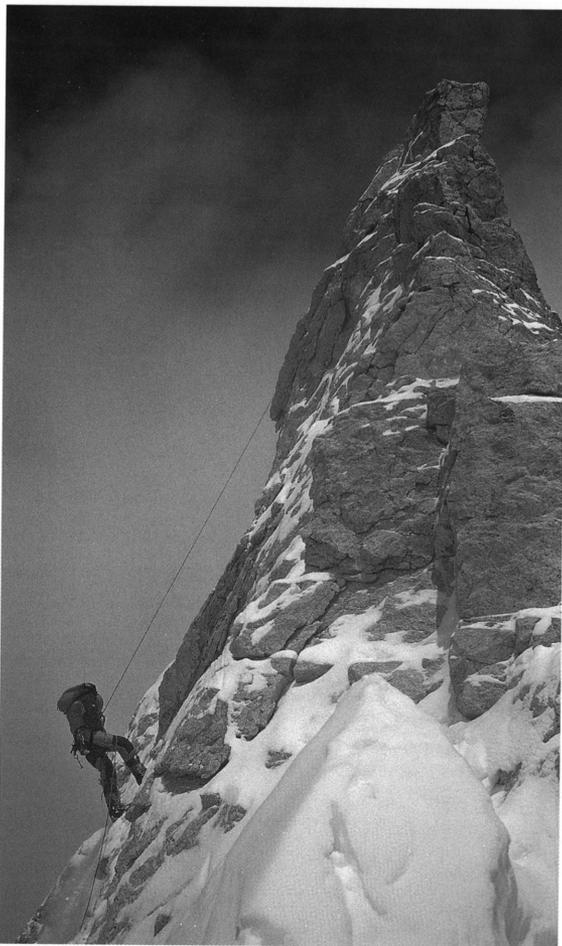
to sleep without all the commotion outside.

Six weeks have passed on the expedition, and we have used up much of our strength. Doubts set in again, and we discuss our plans. The weather forecast reassures us. The wind should die, but not tomorrow. So we decide to rest for a day. Going on would be a waste of energy considering what lies ahead. Christian has the lips of a silicon bimbo, and I laugh. But his chapped lips make him suffer enormously. After hearing from the meteorologist, it's time for the doctor to bring him a little comfort over the satellite phone; he recommends a painkiller that we hold in our little pharmacy. Patrick and I head out to anchor our two ropes to the rock headwall at 7,000 meters. The wind and storms again pick up like crazy in the afternoon. Our instinct has been correct, and this rest day gives us strength to spare.

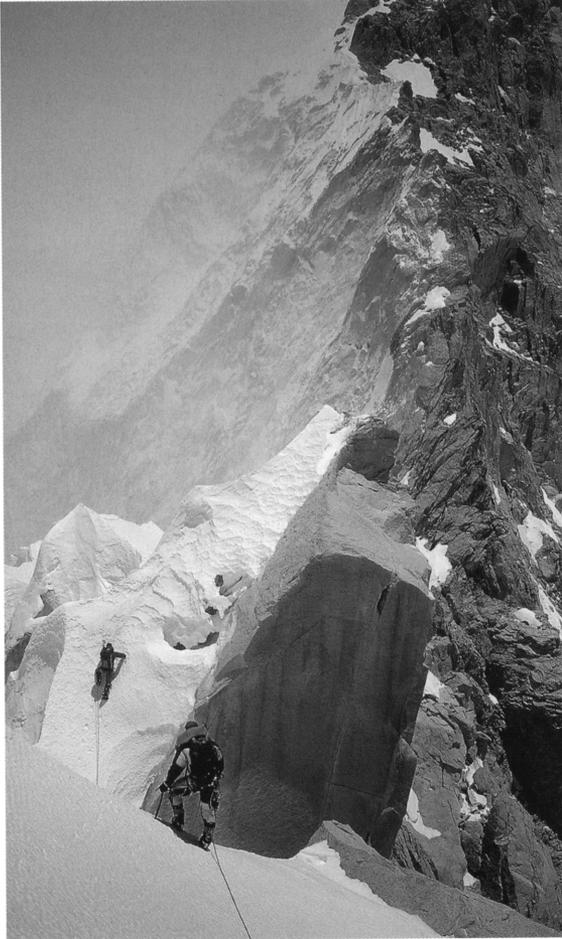
The fourth day is splendid. The north summit of Chomo Lonzo is close by and we quickly reach it. Ahead lies a corniced ridge. The doors to the unknown now lie wide open.

What's the value of a virgin summit? Is it even possible to quantify a mountain? For the high-altitude climber, every summit is worthy and gratifying, whether it has already been climbed or whether no one has yet set foot on it. Only the adventure matters, and mountains will never belong to somebody or to something: a country, a man, a religion. They bring extraordinary joy to those who climb them, that's all.

We progress down the ridgeline toward the pass between the two summits. We lose 150 meters of elevation over one kilometer. Pinnacles block the way, but we find a way over or around them. Approaching the pass at 7,050 meters, we grow worried as we realize the route up the central summit starts with a very steep, 100-meter rock ridge. Before settling in for the night at the col, we try to find an easier way around this granite barrier. We would like to reach the summit tomorrow. It might be possible to rappel 50 meters to reach a hypothetical line of weakness that could lead us higher up on the ridge, where it becomes easier. But it's late and the wind is picking up. It's time to set up our camp.



Graziani descends a gendarme en route to the col between the north and central peaks. *Christian Trommsdorff*



Tough road ahead: Graziani and Trommsdorff head for the steep buttress above the col. *Patrick Wagnon*

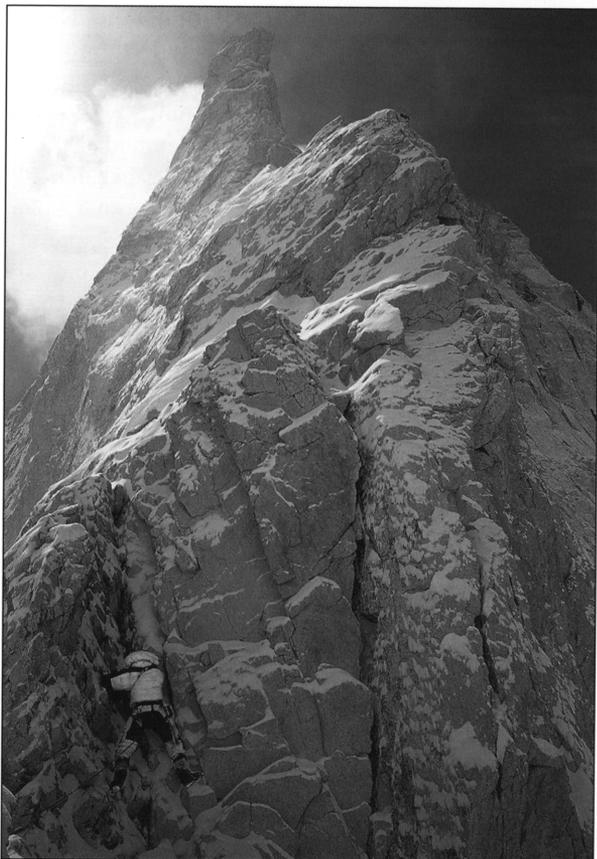
There will be no D-day the next day, only D-minus-one. Despite giving it our greatest effort, reaching the summit seems inconceivable. We leave around 8.30 a.m. in snow flurries and gain barely 100 meters in elevation. Around 3 p.m. we come back down, making sure that our 100 meters of ropes are well-anchored. We have every reason to believe the weather is going to be favorable the next day. As we reach our little tents at the base of the ridge, we have to spend another two hours anchoring them properly because the ropes we had used before are now up on the rock with our jumars.

On the sixth day of our climb, at around 10:30 a.m., we head up our ropes to their high point at 7,150 meters. We are now 400 meters away from the summit. It's scary to hang from the ropes with a 2,000-meter drop down the east face beneath our feet! There is one 40-meter pitch of really hard rock left to complete the steep barrier. It's vertical and completely rotten and unstable. This crux takes us yet another hour and a lot of cold sweat. What would you think of

falling at such an elevation? It's unthinkable, and every measure of concentration must be brought to bear.

The next section is more straightforward, or let's just say it's more "classic;" nevertheless it requires some belayed pitches. Now we are moving faster. Christian leads, his intuition and experience helping to find the right way. We rapidly gain altitude, and Chomo Lonzo lets us in on her secret passages and lines of weakness each time we're presented with an obstacle. It would only take a single featureless wall to stop us, but each tower can be bypassed on either its left or right side. Making the right choice on such climbs is often the key to success. We are well into the day when dark clouds start surrounding Everest. We only have one thing in mind: be fast. We are starting to feel tired from all the effort, and we haven't swallowed any food since the morning.

The ridge had looked like a straight line from the col, but in fact it zigzags, which adds to its length. We get over the last difficult section at around 4 p.m., and now we should be able to climb even faster. We drink a little melted water. We're at 7,400 meters and the summit is really close,



Graziani leading at around 7,150 meters on the rock buttress of the central summit. "What would you think of falling at such an elevation? It's unthinkable." *Patrick Wagon*

but so is our deadline for turning around. The storm kicks in; wind and snow work together with violence; we are forced to wear our goggles and hide our faces. We are roped up 25 meters apart in this raging storm, and we can't even see each other. The commitment is intense and we all feel it. Our goggles freeze up and I can no longer see anything. What to do? Go on or turn around? We stop to talk it over. The summit is too close—we decide to keep going. Christian comes to a halt 20 meters below the top, and these are some 20 meters! When I reach him, I see that he is anchored to a single ice screw only halfway in at the bottom of a large crack. The wind is a little calmer now, but we are overwhelmed by what lies ahead. Yet this is the only way up. I decide to try it. There is no way to protect the pitch. My only chance is to reach the snow on top with my ice axes and pull myself over. I can only hope that my ice axes will hold!

It's 6:45 p.m. when Chris and I reach the summit. Patrick is 100 meters away, saving strength to make it back down. This instant, this stolen moment, belongs to us. An exquisite happiness invades us. It's late, time to head back down fast. It's 7 p.m. when we start. Within 15 minutes, the weather turns nice again; the sun is bright as we rejoin Patrick. We rappel down each tower we had bypassed on the way up. We are eager to lose as much elevation as possible before night sets in. We turn our headlamps on at 7,300 meters. The sky is clear and there is no wind. We know the full moon will soon show up, and we decide to wait for it. It's almost 11 when we stop under a big boulder to melt snow. We then head out again on a long series of exhausting rappels that lead to our camp at 4 a.m., after 20 hours of effort. We light all our stoves to melt as much water as possible. It'll take us two hours to melt just two liters! We definitely have to sleep, but we must rehydrate first to recover. It's survival.

On the seventh day, a whole week on this climb, I wake at 8 a.m., get out of the tent, melt snow, and nibble on a few cookies while the others are getting ready inside. To go down, we need to climb up! The exit door lies at 7,200 meters, through the north summit. At 11 a.m. we start our descent, first climbing over the north peak and then rappelling past 6,800 meters.

We gather the extra gear there and head down the last rappels as terribly violent winds pick up again. It takes another 15 rappels on steep ice to reach 6,000 meters, and it's 8 p.m. before we reach a place where we can walk without a rope. We're in hurry to see grass and lose altitude, so we keep going all the way down to 5,300 meters. We're dead tired and collapse on the ground. It's 2 a.m. on the eighth day.

When we reach Kathmandu a few days later, we laze out and take advantage of the Nepali lifestyle before heading to Europe, its luxury, its despair, and its contradictions.

SUMMARY:

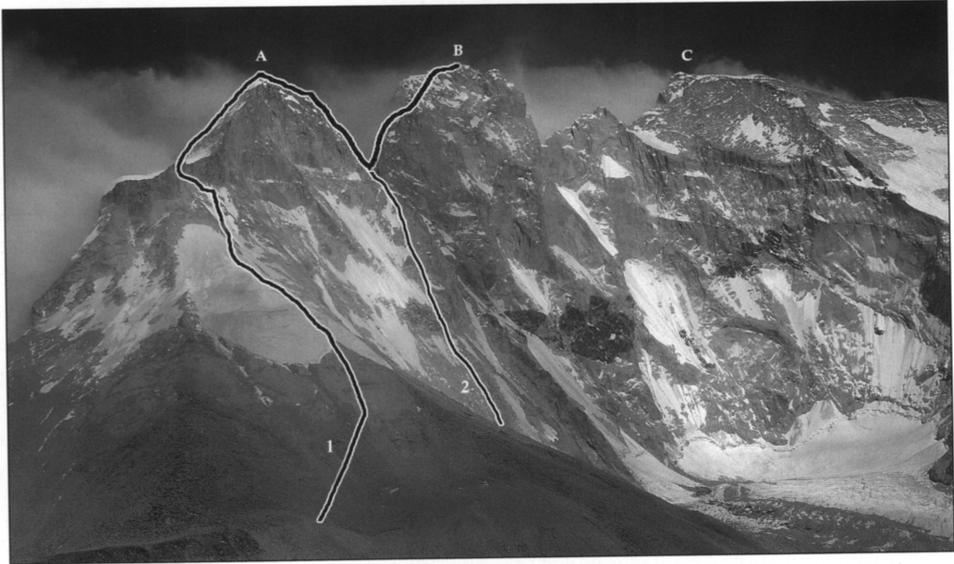
AREA: Kangshung Valley, Tibet

ASCENTS: First ascent of Chomo Lonzo North (7,199 meters) via the northwest ridge (1,500m, TD), Yannick Graziani, Christian Trommsdorff, Patrick Wagnon, May 3-7, 2005. First ascent of Chomo Lonzo Central (7,540 meters) via traverse over north peak and north ridge (ED), Graziani, Trommsdorff, Wagnon, May 15-22, 2005.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Yannick Graziani, 33, reached the summit of Makalu alone in 2004 and made the first ascent of the southwest face of 7,070-meter Chaukhamba II in India in 2002.*

*Translated from the French by Caroline Ware.*



1) Graziani-Trommsdorff-Wagnon line on Chomo Lonzo North and Central. 2) Benoist-Glairon-Rappaz line on Chomo Lonzo North. A) Chomo Lonzo North (7,199m). B) Chomo Lonzo Central (7,540m). C) Chomo Lonzo Main (7,790m). Patrick Wagnon