

REINCARNATION

A bold new route on the southeast face of Cho Oyu in Nepal.

DENIS URUBKO



Denis Urubko leading the steep rock wall at ca 6,000m on the southeast face of Cho Oyu. Switching between boots and rock shoes, Urubko found moves up to 6b (5.10). *Boris Dedeshko*

Cho Oyu is generally considered simple among the 8,000ers. For serious alpinists it has often been used as a place to get high-elevation experience. But in 2001 I happened to catch a glimpse of Cho Oyu's southeast wall, with a logical line from the foot to the summit. It was terrifying and beautiful. For years I was obsessed with this route.

One day my old friend Denis Gichev, with whom I served in the army—and thanks to whom I ended up in the Central Sports Club of the Army of Kazakhstan—spoke to me about his planned trek to the foot of Mt. Everest.

"Take a look into the Gokyo Valley," I told him. "That will be a real journey, not for couch potatoes."

"And what's there?"

"There's the wall of Cho Oyu, Den! I want you to photograph it for me."

Denis set off on his trip, convinced I was nuts, but he brought back the photos. They were fantastic views, showing in detail the relief, the traps, the dangers. I spent hours examining them on my computer—zooming in for details, backing off to understand the scale.

In the spring of 2009 Boris Dedeshko and I finally examined the wall with our own eyes; it was more complicated than even our wildest presuppositions had hinted. Our base camp was tucked behind old moraines of the Ngojumba Glacier, by the fifth lake of the Gokyo gorge, and in order to catch sight of Cho Oyu we had to hike beyond a bend to the sixth lake. There we sat under the bright sun by huge rocks and studied the wall through binoculars.

"What do you think, Den?"

"Errr...my head is swimming. We'll climb those lower faces by, uh, I don't know how we'll climb."

"A direct assault?" Boris spread his hands, gesturing helplessness. "And what about acclimatization?"

My turn to shrug. I poked my finger farther to the east, in the direction of Gyachungkang, just shy of 8,000 meters. "We'll acclimatize on those slopes, or somewhere in the vicinity," I said. To touch our route on Cho Oyu would have been unsporting. We wanted to climb it alpine style, in a dash from foot to summit.



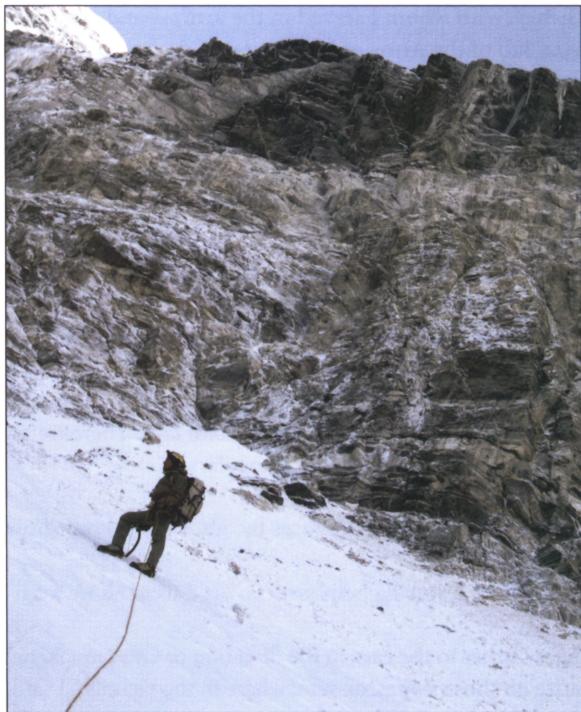
I shook hands with Chokra and Mingma, our cooks. "If we don't return after eight days, go to the wall and take a look," I said.

"And if we're not back in 10 days, you can take down base camp and go home," Boris cheerfully added.

During our reconnaissance of the approach, we had built small cairns to show the way, and thus we arrived in just two hours at the base of Cho Oyu, at 5,300 meters, where we had left a tent. The silent surrounding mountains intensified our emotions. One wanted to race away to freedom, away from these somber, claustrophobic walls.

We began the ascent in the depths of night on May 7. We carried only the inner half of the tent and two of its four poles. We had food for five or six days and two large gas canisters. We carried eight ice screws, half a dozen nuts, a set of cams, and 12 pitons, some of which we had sawed off to save weight. Our plan was to descend from the summit via the Austrian route (Furtner-Koblmüller, 1978) on the east side of the face.

Our climb began at 5,600 meters. We belayed with two 9mm ropes as we moved up the lower slabs. It was necessary to choose the line carefully, for above were several icefalls. During this day and the night that followed, several times avalanches and rocks flew by, two or three meters away. Sometimes we could climb in rock shoes, but often we had to wear crampons. We belayed six pitches, up to 6b, with a fair amount of 6a on the slabs. At day's end we were at 6,100 meters, still below the overhanging bastion. After spending the night half sitting up,



Denis Urubko and Boris Dedeško needed most of two days to climb the rock "bastion" on Cho Oyu, following a line above and to the right of the climber. They had to sit up in their tent throughout the first night on the wall. *Boris Dedeško*



we continued the ascent in fog and mist.

The rock overhang extended for about 80 meters, and we climbed most of it with aid. The weather was bleak. The world narrowed to the dimensions of a dull glass box 10 meters on a side. I couldn't see Boris; now and then we communicated with short phrases: "take in," "hold fast," "slack on the blue rope." We spent most of the day climbing two and a half pitches. Beyond a bend of the rocky bastion appeared a series of icy slabs and chutes, and we followed these as snow began to fall until we attained an altitude of 6,600 meters. Here, under the cover of a serac at the beginning of a crescent icefield, we set up our tent.

"We've climbed the most difficult part," Boris said. Sipping thin soup, I nodded. We were full of optimism.

"And do we have enough provisions and gas?" Boris furrowed his brow.

"Six servings of Bystrov kasha [porridge], four of Chinese noodles, sugar, tea...oh...here's a lot of sausage! So we have to think we have enough provisions," I concluded.

"It will be necessary to 'have to think,'" Boris laughed.

A beautiful morning was our reward for the previous day's hardships. Mountains extended to the edge of the world, and I felt like a speck of dust in this chaos. Like a palisade, the peaks circled the horizon, eliciting the sensation that we were alone on the

planet. And like a gigantic guard to the east, Everest rose quite close. My lord! So much had happened in just a few months: the desperate ascent of Makalu with Simone Moro in February, and now, in May, here I was again, hanging between heaven and earth on an unclimbed wall of an 8000er.

Along a series of icy ridges we confidently reached 6,900 meters, and then a powerful storm bore down. As a whole, I should note, the weather in the spring of 2009 was different from the norm in the Himalaya. Instead of daily afternoon snowfalls with rare storms lasting two or three days, the weather had more contrast: bright periods extending four or five days, after which a storm would follow for several days.

As the storm continued, we managed to get to 7,100 meters. It's better not to recall how I fearfully traversed those unstable pillows of snow. But it worked out. We squeezed our tent into an icy niche at a small bergschrund, widening it with our ice axes. At night several powerful avalanches flew by, causing the ice to rumble and shake under our sleeping mats. It was terrible.

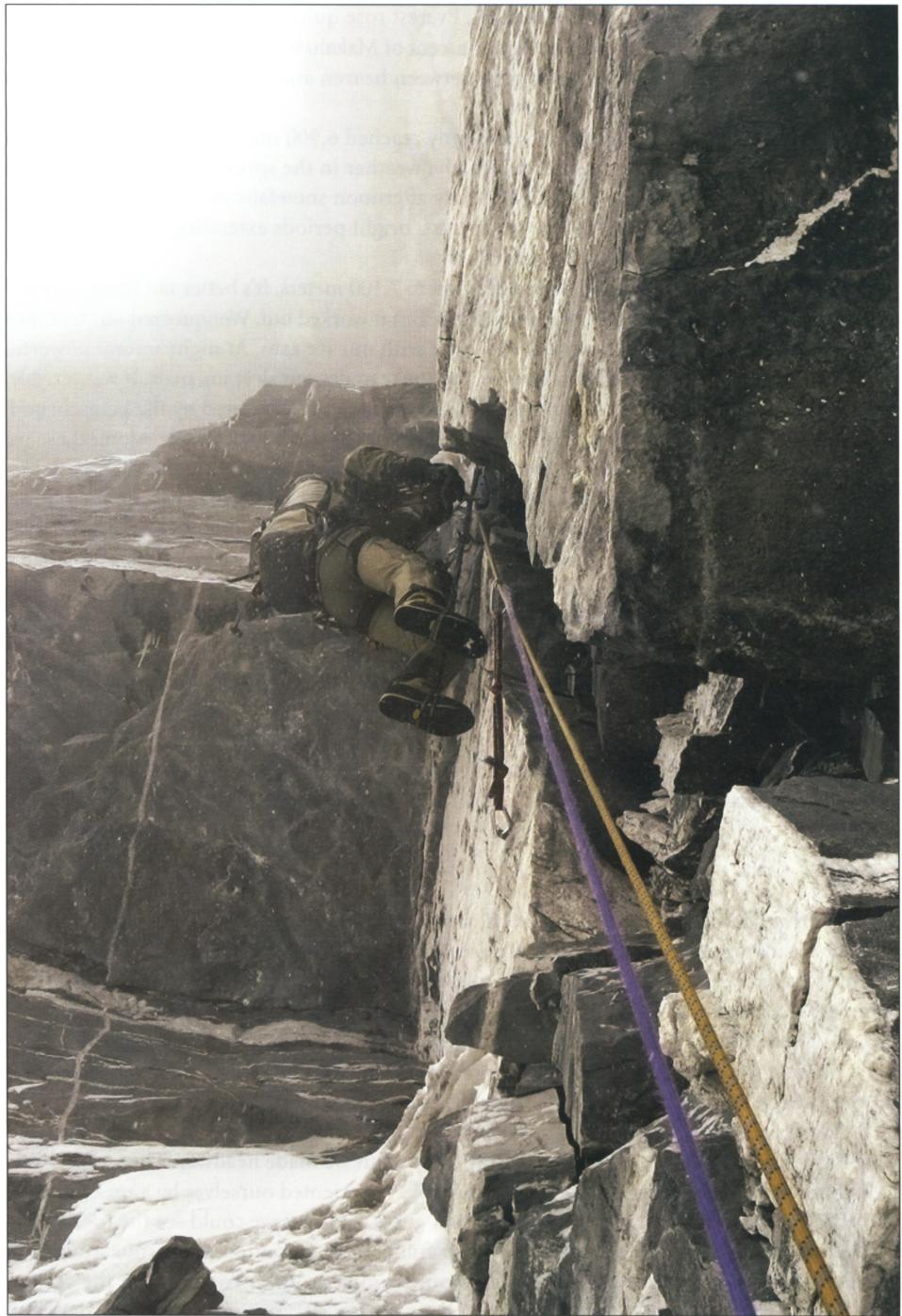
Morning did not bring improvement in the weather, but, sheltered by the bergschrund, we continued obliquely upward, finding secure anchors in small rock ridges. Along these we ascended to 7,300 meters, where we traversed to the left under a zone of seracs. We were lucky, because the new snow had not stuck to these steep walls, and avalanches had tamped down the snow underfoot, so we progressed relatively easily. At one point, though, a half-meter avalanche slid from under me, knocking Boris off his feet at the belay. As we turned up through icy overhangs, we had to work desperately hard. In one section the snow was up to our waists, but the proximity of the icy walls allowed us to set up a belay. As darkness approached we reached 7,600 meters and again hid our tent under a small bergschrund.

With the snow conditions that had developed, our planned descent of the Austrian route did not seem feasible. Moreover, the completely independent route we'd hoped to follow to the top of the face led to the left into a dangerous couloir. Thus we decided to climb up onto the southeast rib, where we would join the Polish route (Berbebka-Heinrich-Kukuczka-Pawlowski, February 1985) and follow it to the top. We would have to descend by the route of our ascent.



During the night the storm quieted a bit. Nonetheless, it was terribly cold when we woke at 2 a.m. on May 11. Just before sunrise, at around 4 a.m., we left our tent and began a diagonal traverse up to the right, belaying on rocks and icy outcrops. We carried a few slings, a complete set of nuts and cams, and six ice screws. Again we were lucky because the fresh snow had sloughed off, and the layer underneath was harder. Still, sometimes, when crossing couloirs, we were waist-deep in snow. In midmorning, via two simple rock walls, we reached the southeast ridge at about 7,950 meters. Here I left my pack in the snow as a landmark.

We made our way relatively slowly, belaying off ice axes or sometimes an ice screw. We were dead tired and did not always belay sufficiently, but we made headway. The weather was repugnant: light wind, tedious snow, and dense fog. We oriented ourselves by a rock tower to the left of our route. Or rather, that was our best guess. At times we could see the rock bands and seracs lining the summit plateau. A steep final chute presented dangerous avalanche conditions, and we sat down and thought about turning around. We rested in the snow a long time, trying to get used to the idea that again a large risk awaited. Moreover, darkness had descended.



Urubko spent most of the second day aid-climbing an overhanging 80-meter headwall. Boris Dedeshko

Do you know what this feels like? When, using up the last shreds of strength and nerve, step after step you strive to move forward, summoning your will into a fist. But then hope reaches its limit, and you cannot muster the resolve to take the next step. Around us was dark, grey emptiness. Boris and I sat, afraid to stir.

"How does the saying go, Boris?" I joked darkly. "If you go one way, you'll lose your horse. Go the other, and you'll lay down your life. But in those old stories, the hero finds a way."

Borya nodded toward the summit. "Shall we risk it?" His muscles twitched under his sunken, unshaven cheeks.

"Let's risk it.

With that decision we buried ourselves. By all conceivable laws, we were not destined to return. The sad experiences of Boukreev, Khrishchaty, Terzyul, and other alpinists who did not find in themselves the strength to halt in time, to retreat, say that one has to *run* away in such situations. Ghosts of those buried in the snows circled around me. They walked along our path; from the darkness their eyes attentively followed us, hoping and believing that we would overcome this insanity.

Falling snow, carried by a west wind, had piled up on the eastern slopes. It was necessary to plow ahead at full steam. Tramping down a track in the snow, hardly daring to breathe, praying to the saints, I leaned carefully into each step so that it would not collapse, unleashing an avalanche. Because if the slope took off, we would too. Atheism or faith—what difference does it make? Just so we remain alive.

Finally, along the ridge, just 200 meters from the summit, the snow was only knee-deep. I began to breathe easier. And at 8:10 p.m. we reached the summit plateau of Cho Oyu. The ridge widened, the slope diminished, and we could make out the far side, descending into Tibet. I crumpled onto my side, devoid of strength.

I felt nothing. I was empty and transparent, like glass. I just lay there and tried to calm my breathing. In the murky darkness the wind and snowflakes rushed through me, the mountain lay below me like a beast grown quiet. I watched dully as a light indicated Boris approaching. He dropped next to me in the snow.

"That's it?" he exhaled.

"We've arrived, Boris." I was scarcely able to answer. "And now for a photo."

"What photo?" He waved his hand in the darkness.

"Just of ourselves." I shrugged.

Many have experienced similar impassivity, when a longed-for goal is finally attained but one doesn't have the strength to understand it. When one is empty of emotion despite a great success. But I remember one thing clearly: anger at myself for proceeding, under the prodding of my own stubbornness multiplied by ambition. The ascent was a trap, into which we fell. Now, sitting on the summit, I believed we had no chance of descending alive.



After taking a few photos, we set off.

It was easy to follow our deep path in the snow. Moreover, my pack was lying at the turn at 7,950 meters, showing us the way. As we lost altitude our strength began to return, as if the mountain were giving back what it had taken. Boris' lamp was almost dead, but mine continued to work, and the light gave us hope. We descended past the cliffs without problem and at 12:30 a.m. reached our tent at 7,600 meters. Here was a stove, imagined warmth, and safety. We

drank a few swallows of water and collapsed into sleep.

That night it began snowing hard again. Very early in the morning, we tried to start down but set off a couple of avalanches that raced down the mountain with an unbelievable roar. We decided to wait. Soon, though, avalanches from above began to cover the tent, despite the shelter of the overhanging bergschrund. A few times the tent was buried completely, and, clenching our teeth, we supported it with our bodies until the snow stopped moving. We went outside to dig it out each time. Everything inside was covered in frost crystals.

"It's impossible to go to the bathroom!" Boris hollered above the wind. "My pants are full of snow."

"And the tent, the tent!" I giggled nervously, idiotically. "It's like a sieve. Look, there's snow all over my sleeping bag!"

Imagine our joy, then, when around 8 a.m. a hole suddenly appeared in the clouds to the east, revealing Everest and Lhotse. Despite the obvious idiocy of descending in such dangerous conditions, Boris and I decided to try to force our way lower, although bad weather was again pressing in; it was better than sitting and waiting for death. We successfully rushed across the most dangerous place below the zone of seracs, but as we rappelled Boris knocked loose a piece of ice or rock that smacked me in the head.

I moaned, blood seeping through the hood of my jacket and flowing between my fingers. Stunned, I couldn't recall who and where I was.

"Den, forgive me," Boris said, repeatedly, seeing snow turning scarlet with blood. "Den, forgive me."

"Nothing serious," I finally managed to wheeze, coming to my senses a bit. "I'm the one responsible, for leaving my helmet below."

Boris brightened. "You just can't be killed!"

We spent that night in an ice cave below another bergschrund. The snowfall continued. Avalanches cascaded around us, at times flying across the bergschrund, covering the tent in dust. Our remaining provisions included nothing more than tea and 100 grams of dried horsemeat.

Next morning, same story. At 8 a.m. the sun shone for several minutes, and we decided to risk continuing downward. We rappelled 25 meters at a time on a doubled rope, having left the other rope at our second bivy site. Two avalanches hit Boris, who was descending first. He dangled from the rope like a hooked fish in a swift current, but the screws were in reliable ice,



Dedeshko arrives on Cho Oyu's summit in deep snow, darkness, and storm. *Denis Urubko*

and they bore the weight. Around 5 p.m., as we reached 6,600 meters, the weather suddenly cleared and it became terribly cold.

In the morning, after drinking some water, we continued our descent. For the first time in five days it became warm; soon the sun was burning. As we descended the rock bastion, we had to swing in on the rope to touch the wall. Near dark we reached the glacier and stayed there for the night. That evening the gas ran out.

The next day, collapsing into snow-covered pits on the moraines, dodging pools of water but without the strength to drink our fill, we descended for six hours to base camp. Fortunately, the cooks were still there despite our instructions to leave after 10 days.

In the village of Gokyo the Nepalese arranged a party for us. This was a celebration we could enjoy only with great effort. We were so exhausted. Boris and I had each lost about 10 kilograms. For the second time in my life I could encompass one of my thighs with my fingers.



Back home in Kazakhstan, I awoke one morning in a state of confusion. Popping up from the mattress on the floor, I looked at the empty walls. Through the window curtains I perceived the gray sunrise as if through a shroud. What? Where? It felt as if I were back on the summit of Cho Oyu, on *that* night. I felt empty and unconscious, like the specters that had circled in the storm. I had just seen their eyes in my dreams.

Then, suddenly, I understood that I had died on Cho Oyu. It was so simple and clear that I wasn't surprised. It was as though the pieces of the puzzle that had tormented me since the beginning of the winter had taken preordained places. First the storm on Makalu, like a razor tearing nerves and flaying skin. Then the sand and warmth of Goa, where I pulled myself



The Kazakh route on 8,188m Cho Oyu. The foot of the wall is at ca 5,600m. Denis Urubko



Urubko braces the tent against avalanches during the pair's stormy descent. *Boris Dedeshko*

together and turned to the future. And then the otherworldly storm on Cho Oyu, without a hope of survival...and I had died.

All that remained on this earth was merely a shadow. I (or it) had become an empty little cloud, without nerves or strength. But now the time had come to fill that void, piece by piece, selecting only what was necessary and correct. To arise out of the ashes of burned-out feelings, broken personality, and tortured body. It was as if Fate, having laughed its fill at absurdity, now offered a second

chance, the gift of another opportunity to test my endurance. I was alive again; life was only beginning. I strode across the room and flung open the curtain. The crimson sunrise met my eyes. Extending my arms, I stretched wide at the open window.

SUMMARY:

Area: Mahalangur Himal, Nepal

Ascent: Alpine-style new route on the southeast face of Cho Oyu (8,188m), Boris Dedeshko and Denis Urubko, May 7–14, 2009 (five days up from advanced base camp and three days down, via the ascent route). The 2,600m route went at 6b A2/3 M6, with steep snow and ice.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in 1973, Denis Urubko lives in Almaty, Kazakhstan. With this ascent of Cho Oyu, he completed the list of the world's 14 8,000-meter peaks. Urubko's first winter ascent of Makalu, with Simone Moro, was featured in the 2009 AAJ.

Translated from the Russian by Henry Pickford, with assistance from Elena Laletina and Anna Piunova.



Urubko in sunnier times on Cho Oyu.
Boris Dedeshko