

Kwangde's North Face in Winter

DAVID BREASHEARS

I'M STUNNED DURING A PAUSE to rest while chopping a platform out of the ice below my hammock which is anchored to the north face of Kwangde. Across the valley, miles away, a magnificent scene has swelled from the world's highest horizon. Assembled along the Tibetan border, Everest, Nuptse, Lhotse and Makalu are bathed in a salmon-pink afterglow. The headwall on Makalu's west face captures my attention for a moment, then the full moon rises over Makalu La. I've seen them all before, but never like this. The big peaks seem benevolent and approachable under the illumination, but quickly it's gone, committed to memory and Kodachrome.

Two days earlier, Jeff Lowe and I had reached the top of an elegant ice runnel, 1600 feet high at angles up to 80°. The ice was superb from bottom to top. The sixth pitch was my lead. It was obvious that to reach the next belay situated above a long steep section of ice, we would have to tie the lead rope of 300 feet to the 200-foot haul line. After 200 feet on easy snow and ice, I slammed a good piton into Kwangde's compact granite. That would give me 300 feet more until the knot jammed on the carabiner. From my stance the runnel rose 200 feet, between 70° and 80°. Partway up I began to feel the strain in my calves and arms and to breathe heavily. I traversed to the neighboring rock for a quick piton, for the ice was too thin for a good screw placement. Fifty feet later I chopped a step and rested, one foot at a time. The pack and 350 feet of rope were a burden. With both tools placed, I paused to consider the situation and realized I was content. The steep ice, the run-outs, the exhaustion, the exposure. In that moment I found what I'd come for, not a snow slog but steep hard climbing for which the basic prerequisite is control. To be timid then would have resulted in more protection and less speed, more bivouacs and less chance of success. It's not always so easy. At the base, in the shadows, self-doubt can prevail. It's always better to be engaged than waiting to embrace the difficulties. With my protection far below, the ice bulged. Over the final fifty feet my silent reverie transformed into a frustrating tug of war between me and the 400 feet of rope. That I didn't enjoy.

The north face of Kwangde is 4500 feet high. Kwangde itself is located two to three days on foot from the STOL airstrip at Lukla, which is forty minutes

from Kathmandu. From our sirdar Nima Tenzing's house in Khumjung you can view the upper half of Kwangde's north face. A three-hour walk brings you to the village of Hongu. Off the beaten path and rarely visited by trekkers, Hongu lies near the base of Kwangde. With our bright tents and exotic hardware, we became fifteen-minute celebrities among the dozen or so winter residents of the village. Their poverty and poor health and lack of education stood in sharp contrast to the prosperous villages of Namche and Khumjung just hours down the trail.

Finally, after much despair, I negotiate a fairly comfortable position in my hammock. Jeff hands me a quart of hot lemonade. I covet the warmth and hold the bottle against my chest until the liquid is cooled enough for my parched throat. I haven't drunk all day, so by evening my thirst is enormous and by midnight I must face the ineluctable task of urinating and the disruption of my hammock.

We'd passed the crux yesterday. Jeff had made a tremendous lead (sans pack) up a 160-foot pitch of water-ice over a rock band which barred access to the rest of the face. There had been no riddle in the route-finding: ice was the quickest, easiest . . . and only . . . path. It was pure pleasure watching Jeff weave his way through the weaknesses of the pitch. Pausing occasionally to place marginal protection, he climbed with a *sang froid* cultivated over fifteen years of frozen-waterfall climbing. His confidence and subtle technique obscured the fact that the ice was nearly vertical at 18,300 feet. This was Jeff's ideal, alpine-style over steep technical ground on a Himalayan north face in winter conditions. For him and for me, it was the easier sections that were dispensable. We wanted more of the hard stuff.

Lying in the hammock I can hear the impetuous wind tearing at the summit ridge. Ice pelts our Bat tents. Tomorrow we should reach the ridge and our first sun in seven days. It's a good feeling to be secure and in control, untethered except to a partner and an ethic, completely self-reliant, free for a while to determine our fate through the work of our own hands. Each day we have tapped a full repertory of our alpine skills. All the same it will be good to be finished.

The next day, after several hard pitches, we reach the summit ridge. Disappointingly, the sun has long gone. After some exploration, we find an old cornice clinging tenaciously to the ridge and chop out a cavity to shield us from the wind. A short scramble next morning brings us to the 19,720-foot summit and warm sun.

The descent is not uneventful. Fifteen rappels, a field of chest-deep snow, and a guerrilla skirmish with dense junipers almost usurp the climb itself. The third evening after the summit we arrive back in Khumjung and make for our sirdar's house. There his wife, Pema Samgee, a friend of several years, greets us. As is true with so many Sherpanis, she shows no interest in mountaineering. Today though she looks at me with a seriousness and interest that is surprising. Gesturing at the ceiling, she asks me, "David, go summit?"

I smile and simply say "Yes."

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Nepalese Himalaya, south of Mount Everest.

NEW ROUTE: Kwangde, 6011 meters, 19,720 feet, ascent via North Face, descent via South Face, over a notch in Southwest Ridge and down East Face, November 28 to December 3, 1982 (David Breashears, Jeff Lowe).

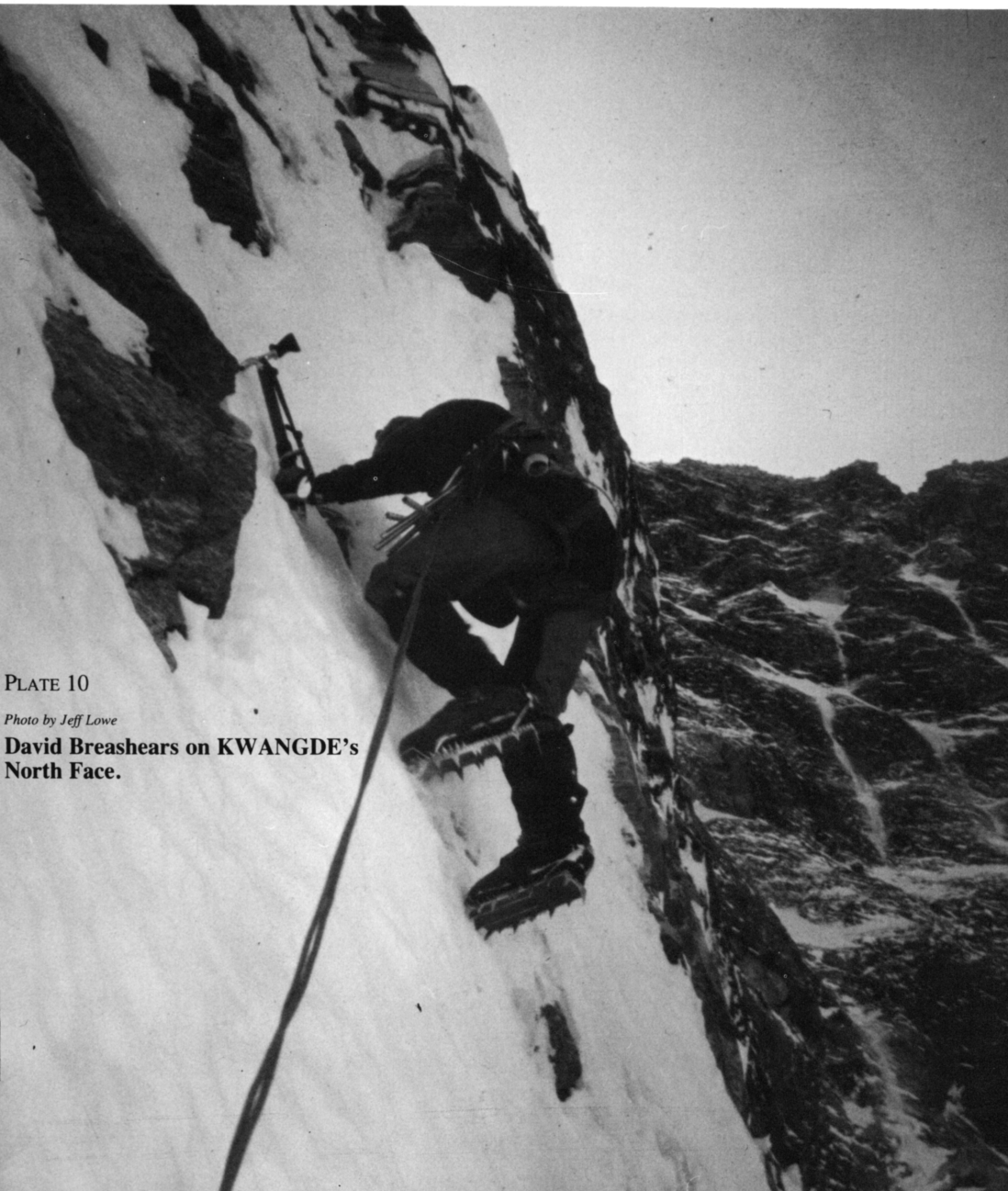


PLATE 10

Photo by Jeff Lowe

**David Breashears on KWANGDE's
North Face.**