

# The West Buttress of Lobuje East

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A N EARTH-SHAKING CRACK told me

I was in trouble. Giant slabs of snow swirled around me as my world fell into chaos. Slow motion became fast forward, which became slow motion again as I began to fall. With feet desperately trying to find purchase on the disintegrating slab, I knew there was only one direction for me to go. I heard two voices, one saying, "Be cool, stay on top, stay upright!" and the other, that of a madman, screaming obscenities.

I was in the Ganesh Himal, on Paldor, where I had gone to acclimatize before getting to the main project of my three-month stay in Nepal. An inexperienced Sherpa had triggered a slab avalanche above me and sent me on a 500-foot plunge which stopped just short of a cliff. During the next three days of walking, sliding and crawling to Base Camp with torn knee ligaments, I had time to reflect on my luck. I hobbled back to Kathmandu where I spent three weeks healing and waiting for my climbing partner, Pemba Norbu Sherpa, to return from guiding a party on the south ridge of Lobuje East.

The late Mike Cheney called Pemba "the best Sherpa climber in Nepal." Pemba leads 5.10 rock, overhanging ice and snow-covered fifth-class rock in double boots and is an exceptional climber by any standard. His accomplishments include Annapurna via a new route, guiding Himalchuli and climbing to 8400 meters in winter on the Bonington route on the southwest face of Everest. In 1984, he received an award for heroism from the Himalayan Research Association for saving a porter's life. He diagnosed high-altitude pulmonary edema, carried the man on his back over the 16,770-foot Yalung La, leading and safeguarding the descent of the rest of the party. Pemba was climbing with me out of friendship, not for money. For Sherpas, small expeditions are not nearly as lucrative as big ones.

The approach to the Lobuje Base Camp was slow but uneventful. En route, I realized I had giardia and with a dose of Tinaba still in my system, I felt less than well. Base Camp was placed at 5100 meters between two beautiful hidden lakes at the base of the west face.

After a rest, Pemba and I spent some time teaching Sarke and Beamen, our two Sherpa helpers, the basics of rock climbing, jumaring and rappelling. As we

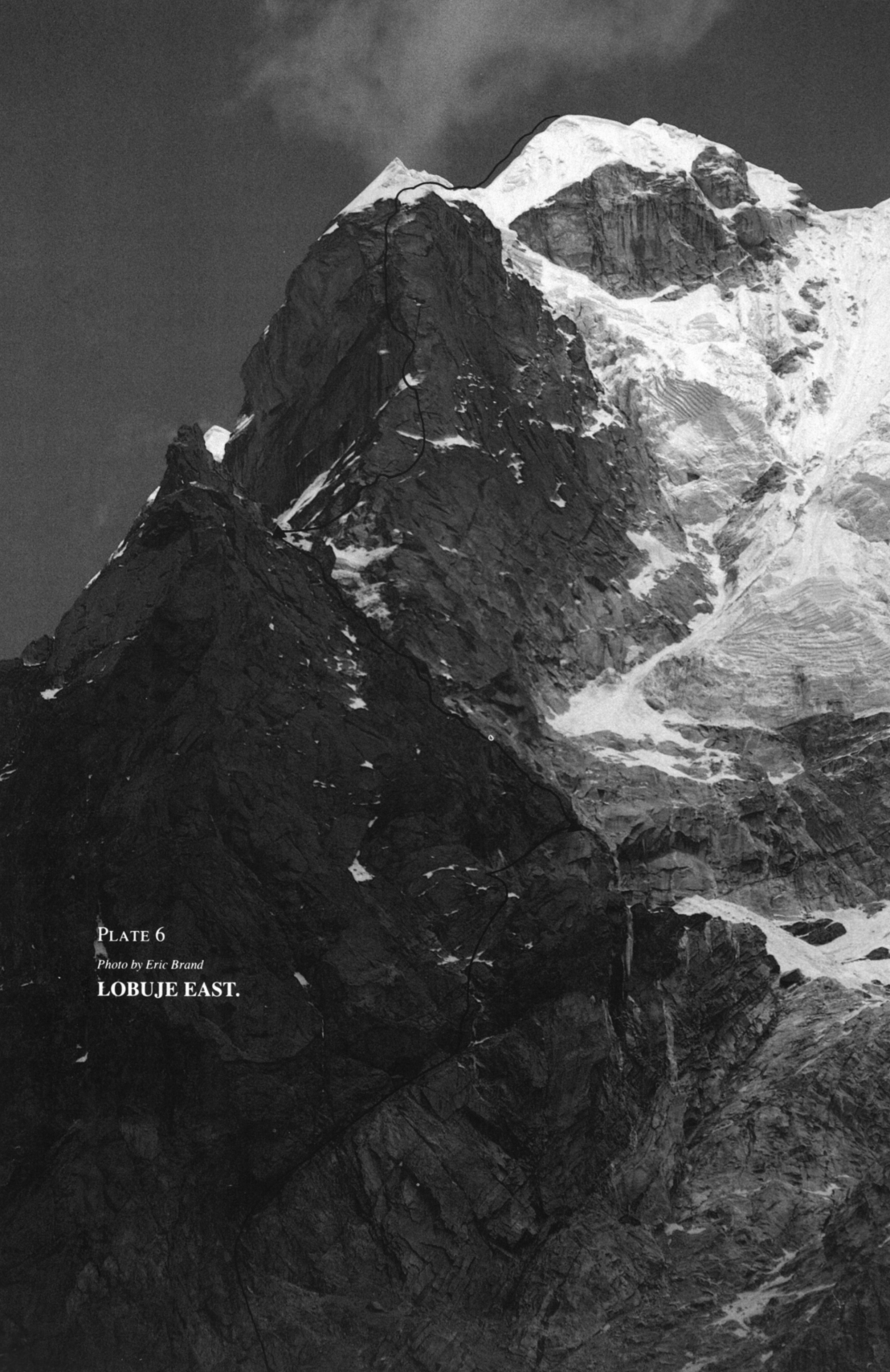


PLATE 6

*Photo by Eric Brand*

**LOBUJE EAST.**

were top-roping a 5.10 face problem, we heard a big rockfall very close. Above the talus approach to our route, there was a huge granite slab with a giant dirt-and-boulder "sérac" clinging to it. Unfortunately, only part of it had cut loose. Every day, it sent down little reminders of its presence. Carrying loads across the fresh debris was always a humbling experience. The lower part of the route was developing a personality.

We had attempted the route the previous year, following an obvious ridge to the crux pillar, where a lack of time, sickness and foul weather turned us back. This year, Pemba did all the route finding to our first camp. Dry conditions on the ridge led him to find a faster but more dangerous alternative on the right side of the ridge.

Our route from Base Camp off the talus above the southern lake went up the fifth-class rightmost chimney which cleaved a cliff band. This led to a long easy ledge trending up and right and to a big cliff with an obvious ledge-ramp system. On my birthday, April 26, I led a section of hard water-washed rock through steep and sometimes loose 5.6 rock. This is what I had come for, virgin rock in a wild spot. Pemba fired off the easy ramp. We left a rope and rappelled off as it began to snow. This introduced us to a soon-to-be familiar pattern.

Camp I was under an overhang. We called it "Paradise City," being the safest place next door to Hell. We were across from a gully that was freeway for the nastiest séracs on the mountain and 200 feet away there was a chimney that regularly spewed hundreds of pounds of rocks right next to home. All but the biggest sérac-fall would have missed us, but in any case we were out of there as soon as possible.

All of Camp I was moved to Camp II. Our first trip to Camp II was mostly unroped; we wore rock shoes and carried most of the climbing gear. We swung "leads" up fourth-and fifth-class rock with occasional patches of snow and ice and soon intersected the previous year's route. Our campsite at 18,500 feet had been the high point of our last year's attempt. It was perched on two rock platforms on the side of the obvious col beneath the steep final pillar. Pemba wanted to get one pitch fixed below the pillar. He got to lead 165 feet on snow-and-ice-covered loose blocks topped off by a short section of easy fifth-class rock.

It was four pitches to the base of the pillar from Camp II. The first pitch was already fixed. After that, we went across a fifty-foot section of class 2 to a series of A1 and A2 overhangs. I led through the overhangs quickly and then ran it out along a long, easy fifth-class ramp to a good belay. Sitting at the belay with a panoramic view of Tibet and Rolwaling in one direction and all the way to Chamlang in the other convinced me why I was there. As I soaked up the sun, I didn't realize how cold I would be later that afternoon and on every successive foray up our route. At the moment, it was bliss beyond compare.

Pemba followed up over the overhangs with one Jümar, a prusik, both packs and a lot of swearing. He led a short pitch to a big snow-covered ledge where we had to decide where and what kind of route we wanted to climb. To the right of the ledge, two possible routes led over giant flakes toward the summit of Lobuje

East. The lower route would have been very easy, the upper more stable. I preferred a third option: straight up the pillar. The direct line would involve hard fifth- and sixth-class climbing. This was our choice. Pemba took the next lead up a crack and face with Tuolomne-like knobs, ending in 5.10 R ceilings at the top. The fourth pitch above Camp II was the first difficult aid. After a miserable chimney section in a bergschrund, a couple of slippery free moves led to a short string of tied-off knifeblades. A rivet took me into a flake-choked chimney.

Free climbing up the main pillar above was fun but cold. Here I pendulumed into steep crack systems just left of the pillar to avoid drilling. I continued upward, nutting and nailing. A week before, the pillar would have gone mostly free on steep friable rock crystals.

As the weather pattern deteriorated into daily snowfalls and cold wind, our progress up the pillar slowed to a crawl. A pitch a day of steep technical climbing was usually limited by the ability of the belayer to stay warm. We crawled up the pillar fixing rope as we went, usually getting stormed off by early afternoon. By then, I was leading most of the steep rock. The crux aid pitch was just below the summit ice ridge, a 110° overhang at the top and A3, mainly nailing and nutting a flake system. As I hung from a doubtful nut at the lip, it began to snow like hell. As the snow from the upper face funneled onto me, I decided to bag any fair tactics and went for the bolt kit. I managed to get a rivet in and groveled over the lip into the continually avalanching gully, breathing snow and eating it. After negotiating the short gully, I reached a big ledge where I stumbled around looking for non-existent anchors. Finally, I sank in a bolt, equalized it to a dubious #2 Friend and rappelled down my haul line to a frigid Pemba, ready for the now familiar descent down icy ropes and slippery rock.

With all but one pitch on the pillar fixed, we were ready to go for the top. At four A.M., I awoke feeling good and looking at clear skies. Not hearing Pemba's alarm, I rolled over "to rest my eyes" for a minute or two. The next moment it was 5:30. I called Pemba, "Hey, we're a little late but let's go for it." His mumbled response announced, "We're not going today . . . I didn't sleep all night. My tooth is killing me." A couple of years before, Pemba had cracked his incisor during some martial arts exercises and now he sports a gold cap over the tooth. The tooth was beginning to abscess. His face was drawn from pain and lack of sleep. We were low on food and fuel. The weather had been getting worse; there were fewer and shorter windows in the weather, less time for the rock and fixed lines to dry and thaw.

A year ago nearly to the day, we had been in the same kind of situation, with the roles reversed. We'd had to bail out when I fell sick. Now, after several false starts and as the snow began to fall, Pemba headed down for Base Camp for Ampicillin and a needle to lance the abscess. After nearly ten days, we were tired of our talus pile camp and wanted to get it over with.

The snow started coming down hard, sticking to the rock immediately instead of melting as is more typical in spring weather. My spirits were low, but I said to myself, "I don't care if I have to sit here for another week. I'm not going



PLATE 7

*Photo by Eric Brand*

**Pemba beginning the crux ice pitch on  
LOBUJE EAST.**



until I have the summit!" Patience isn't a virtue on long technical routes; it's a necessity.

Pemba came back the next day, somewhat improved. We decided to go for it no matter what the next morning. Jümaring up the snow- and ice-encrusted lines was a nightmare, especially for Pemba, who had left one Jümar in Base Camp. The weather stayed clear until we reached the ice ridge when it whited out. So much for a summit view!

Pemba has a disinclination toward protection, and Sherpa lungs make him go fast on ice. He got to lead the ridge that worked out to be seven pitches of mostly easy climbing along the now desiccated ice ridge. After four pitches, we came to a dead end. Choice A was to rappel into what looked like an artist's twisted idea of Purgatory in ice. Choice B was to step up the north side of the ridge onto honey-combed ice. Choice B it was and the crux pitch went with a one-screw belay at a good stance. Two more straightforward pitches followed. Upon reaching the last "belay" before the top, I found Pemba standing on his axe and an ice screw. I bent down and plucked the screw out with two fingers. The ice was frozen on the outside, but hollow on the inside. The next lead brought us to the summit. My belay was a joke; if Pemba had fallen off one side, I'd simply have pitched off the opposite one. I was mildly concerned when, as I watched him, one of his crampons sheared. Pemba had taken our only snow deadman with him on this pitch and so the summit belay was an improvement over the last. We reached the unclimbed northwest summit of Lobuje East and looked over at the main summit. It was 150 feet away, at most some 30 feet higher and split by a giant crevasse creating an overhang in the rotten ice. We decided that this was it. We had been prepared for it, having seen the summit on our approach. Pemba, too, had seen it up close a month before when he guided a party to the far east summit.

We were happy with our climb. It was five P.M. and we had a lot of descending to do or a cold bivouac. We reached our high camp at ten P.M., sixteen hours after leaving. The next day, loaded down with 70 pounds of gear, I was too tired to feel much satisfaction; just relief it was over. Satisfaction came when we were both safely in Base Camp and on our way home.

### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Khumbu Subsection, Nepal.

FIRST ASCENT: Lobuje East's Northwest Summit, 6110 meters, 20,045 feet, via the West Buttress, May 20, 1991, VI, 5.10, A3 (Eric Brand, Pemba Norbu Sherpa).