

Great Trango Tower

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ALL CLIMBERS WHO PASS URDOKAS, an obligatory halt on the road to the giants K2, Gasherbrum I and II and Broad Peak, admire the Trango Towers that crown the other side of the immense Baltoro Glacier. The faces of the Great Trango Tower and Nameless Tower rank high among the most impressive walls of the world. Since the first and tragic ascent of the east pillar of the east peak of the Great Trango Tower in 1984 by Norwegians Christian Doseth and Finn Daehli, who died during the descent, their mythical route has been attempted only twice: once by Japanese, who had to abandon their attempt below the summit, and then by Spaniards, who went only to the rim. The time had come to write a new page in "The Legend of the Big Walls." With that goal in mind, John Middendorf, Ueli Bühler, François Studenmann, Ace Kvale as photographer and I returned to the Karakoram, an international team that had climbed world-wide. I also had the crazy idea of attempting a base jump from the summit!

Rawalpindi, Skardu, Askole, then finally the Dunge Glacier. On June 23, 1992, our dare-devil Swiss-American team, accompanied by 46 porters, set up our "household gods" below our objective. Now we had to find our new route for which we had come—an arduous task which we immediately embarked on.

In comparison with its neighbor the Nameless Tower, the east summit of the Great Trango Tower offered hardly any lines of evident weakness and contained objective dangers that considerably reduced our route options since the wall sits under the direct menace of a long snow cornice. The only apparent new route started up the east face, then veered off to the right, where we observed a huge flake. John would select our route. With an impressive record of first ascents on the American Big Walls, we naturally designated him to be the leading authority and guide of the group.

The initial climb up the Edelweiss slopes on the right bank of the hanging glacier was rapidly completed with 300 meters of fixed rope. When we had arrived at the foot of the Norwegian Pillar, dominated by a large sérac, we decided to follow the base of the left wall by climbing Ali Baba's Couloir,

*Tragically, Xavier Bongard was killed on April 15, 1994 in a base jump from the top of the Staubbach above Lauterbrunnen. He had hoped before his death that this article would be published in the *American Alpine Journal*. It appears here both in memory of the author, one of the foremost mountaineers of the world, and to celebrate this outstanding ascent, one of the most difficult yet accomplished in the great mountains of the world.

which was often swept by avalanches. One small hitch—John and I had underestimated the dangers we would be exposed to on that sunny slope. Never had we followed the old adage, “Run for your life,” with such vigor! We did not intend to climb the couloir up to its top. Very rapidly, the grave dangers pushed us to enter a prominent cleft, the Canopy, where we discovered a site for Camp II, well protected by an overhang.

Bad weather disheartened the team and stalled progress. The snow caused avalanches that made Ali Baba’s Couloir impracticable for two days. The weather tortured our nerve endings as we tried to find the key to the route up the mountain. July 5: most of the team was at the Canopy, the highest point we had yet reached, and in fact the real base of the wall. In the course of the next three days, John and I fixed six rope-lengths, 250 meters in all. After free-climbing the start of the route, we now had to prepare ourselves for a more technical climb. Progressing on hooks, we danced a veritable aerial ballet, balancing ourselves from one edge to the next. Often, we made ourselves as small as possible beneath our helmets. By wonderful luck, we had discovered a choice route.

At that point, the spirit of the team was put to a rude test, as we couldn’t agree on how to continue, all the more so when the conversation became awkward and the three Swiss spoke only in their mother tongue. For Ueli and François, the ascent was becoming too technical, and they decided to attempt the Nameless Tower. Selfishly, I felt relieved. I definitely had to abandon my plans to base jump because once on the summit, I could not let John descend by himself.

So after a period of bad weather, John and I set out on July 13 to carry 120 kilos to Camp III at the top of Pitch 5: 50 kilos of food (for 25 days), 40 liters of water, 20 cartridges of gas, three liters of gasoline for the stove, portaledge, plus all the gear for a “Yosemite-style” big wall, and six ropes.

We made Camp IV at the base of the couloir we baptized “Golum’s Gully.” (Golum is an evil genie of *Lord of the Rings*.) We preferred a portaledge hanging at the side to a comfortable ledge within the vertical couloir. Strange as it might seem, we had reason to be wary. In the afternoon, as soon as the wall was in the shade, we embarked on the ascent of the wall. The attempt was quickly aborted as a cornice above us collapsed, and I emerged with a black eye and bruises all over my arms. Because of that, we climbed for the next two nights to reach the huge “Snowledge.”

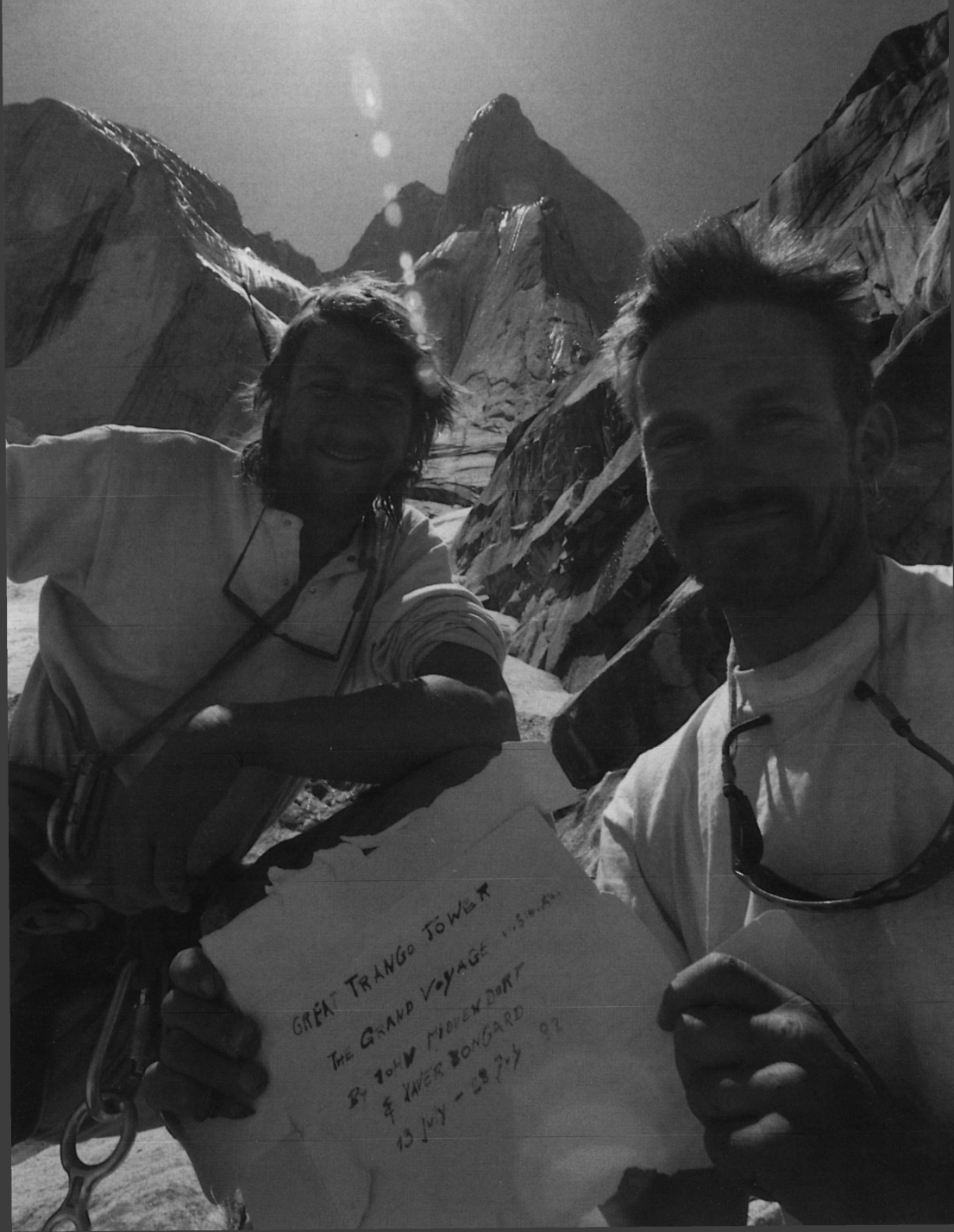
There were only five pitches in Golum’s Gully, which involved first climbing delicate ice and then the irksome hauling of our sacks with belays on the terribly slick left side of the couloir. When we had reached the Snowledge, the curtain rose and the Nameless Tower sprang into view. From now on, we no longer had to submit to Golum’s mood swings and we had the satisfaction of knowing that we had reached the halfway mark of the climb.

Following our direct line, well to the left of the Norwegian route, we had reached the foot of the headwall without having to climb the 300-meter-long snow ridge that connects the top of the Norwegian Pillar to the headwall. Here,

PLATE 31

Photo by Ace Kvale

**John Middendorf and Javier Bongard
on the GREAT TRANGO TOWER.**



at the head of the Snowledge, we were able to make our only non-hanging bivouac of the whole climb by digging a flat platform in the snow. The snow also provided the water necessary for the second part of the climb.

The beginning of the headwall was so smooth that rursps, copperheads and other cliff-hangers were useless. We had to borrow the Norwegians' pillar route for four pitches. After a fantastic lead of 6b (5.11), we veered off the Norwegian route to the right, only to find delicate climbing that was undoubtedly the hardest part of the ascent (A4+). On that day, suffering from a stomach upset, John had to descend to the Snowledge. Once again, I found myself alone. So, peacefully, I sampled a superb technical pitch. The next day, John had still not recuperated and I spent the day lugging the 50-liter water container to the highest point, Pitch 19.

On July 21, we hauled the rest of our gear to the last belay point. John, who was undoubtedly trying to make up for lost time, led several pitches in a row, hauling the sacks behind him as he went—a real exploit when you know what they weigh. After Pitch 18, it became possible to free-climb; however, for reasons of speed and convenience, we continued to climb with *étriers* most of the time. When certain pitches started with aid and we could then have continued free, it was more rational not to change materials mid-pitch.

When the cracks got wider and wider, we had no choice but to proceed by free-climbing. After a systematic search of our packs, we realized that we had left our big Friends with Ueli and François. This unfortunate error cost us a lot of futile effort, hammer blows and cold sweats.

Pitch 23 was now behind us. To belay, I jammed into a narrow chimney. John, who was larger than I, had no chance of fitting in and continued up the outside. Hauling the sacks, I got up to his level and squeezed back into the crack, first removing my helmet, which was too big to fit in. John continued to climb on the exterior. I was resting from my efforts when I saw him fall and swing in an impressive pendulum. Uttering a cry, he looked at his hand. Shit, he must have lost a finger! We expected the worst, but close inspection revealed only a superficial wound. Gloomy thoughts flashed to mind. What had happened? I saw that a Friend that was part of the belay had wedged off a flake which had fallen onto us. And I had just taken off my helmet! We set up Camp VII in the chimney, well protected from the debris that could fall from above.

A succession of chimneys and spells of bad weather complicated our lives. Most of the time, days dawned bright, but by afternoon it would either rain or snow. We did not let ourselves be beaten, however, and kept climbing until, soaked from head to toe, one of us insisted on returning to the sanctuary of the sheepfold. We finally understood Baltoro weather: with regularity, three days of good weather alternated with three days of bad.

At the very beginning, a photo of the face, crowned at the top with snow and ice, had made us wary, and ever since, the slightest snowfall caused us anxiety, although now, in the upper part, this detail lost a little of its importance. One night at Camp VII, it started to snow. At dawn, I cleared off the snow that had accumulated on the portaledge. Submerged in deep sleep, John didn't even

notice. This precipitation, however, had the noteworthy advantage of filling our plastic water container, replenishing our water supply.

In three days, we did not advance more than a pitch and a half. Then, on July 26, the sun came out, illuminating the smooth summit wall, streaked with meter-wide grooves, carved by erosion. Indefatigable, John rhythmically wormed his way up these worm holes. At the belay, I traded my tight climbing shoes for completely frozen plastic shells. It was impossible to keep warm in these conditions! I got away with some superficial frostbite. And yet, the temperatures generally stayed where we rarely had to wear gloves to climb.

Another pitch, short and easy, took us to the rim and the pillar was behind us. Enormous relief! In a few rappels, we descended to our last platform, "The Yellow Submarine," as we had dubbed our portaledge home at Camp VII.

The next day, while we were getting ready for the final climb on snow and ice from the rim to the summit, shouts reached us from the Nameless Tower. But this time, they were not the usual joyous cries of our companions. At the same time on the radio, I caught, "Hell, I broke my leg!" What could we do now? The situation was dramatic but not critical. After discussing it on the radio with Ace, who had stayed below, we concluded that their descent would take several days and that two hours more or less (the time we thought it would take us to reach the summit) would not make a difference. Ace left immediately for Payu, the closest military base, in order to get help and ask for a helicopter to pick our partners up at Base Camp. (In Pakistan, helicopters do not go higher.) Ueli and François had two days to descend by their own means.

Still in shock over the accident, I climbed the last snow-and-ice-covered pitches that led to the summit with mixed feelings. The varied terrain offered an ascent which did not lack interest and the difficulty of which I had underestimated. Several times, I was literally swallowed up to my chest in snow. Could I ever get to the summit? My deep-snow, Cordillera Blanca training helped. Instinctively, we followed a route to the summit, like the Norwegians eight years before. We discovered several of their belays on the way. To get onto the crest of the summit ridge and find solid footing, I had to dig in the snow like a mole. Just as I began seriously to doubt our chances of success, I suddenly found myself sitting on the summit, which was like the blade of a knife hidden under a deep layer of snow. A final act of courage!

On Day 16, July 28, right before sunset, the dream of the east summit of the Great Trango Tower becomes reality. John comes up. An emotional moment! We hug each other. "Good job, fucker!" We engrave the fantastic panorama into our memories. Later, we will have all the time to marvel at it. For the moment, we must leave as the sun will disappear in half an hour.

An hour after nightfall, we reached the top of the wall and three hours later, we found shelter in our little titanium house. The next day, we tossed off our toughest gear. The water container exploded against the wall after falling a few meters. It had no more chance of success in its descent than my base jump project. And I could descend with a peaceful conscience.

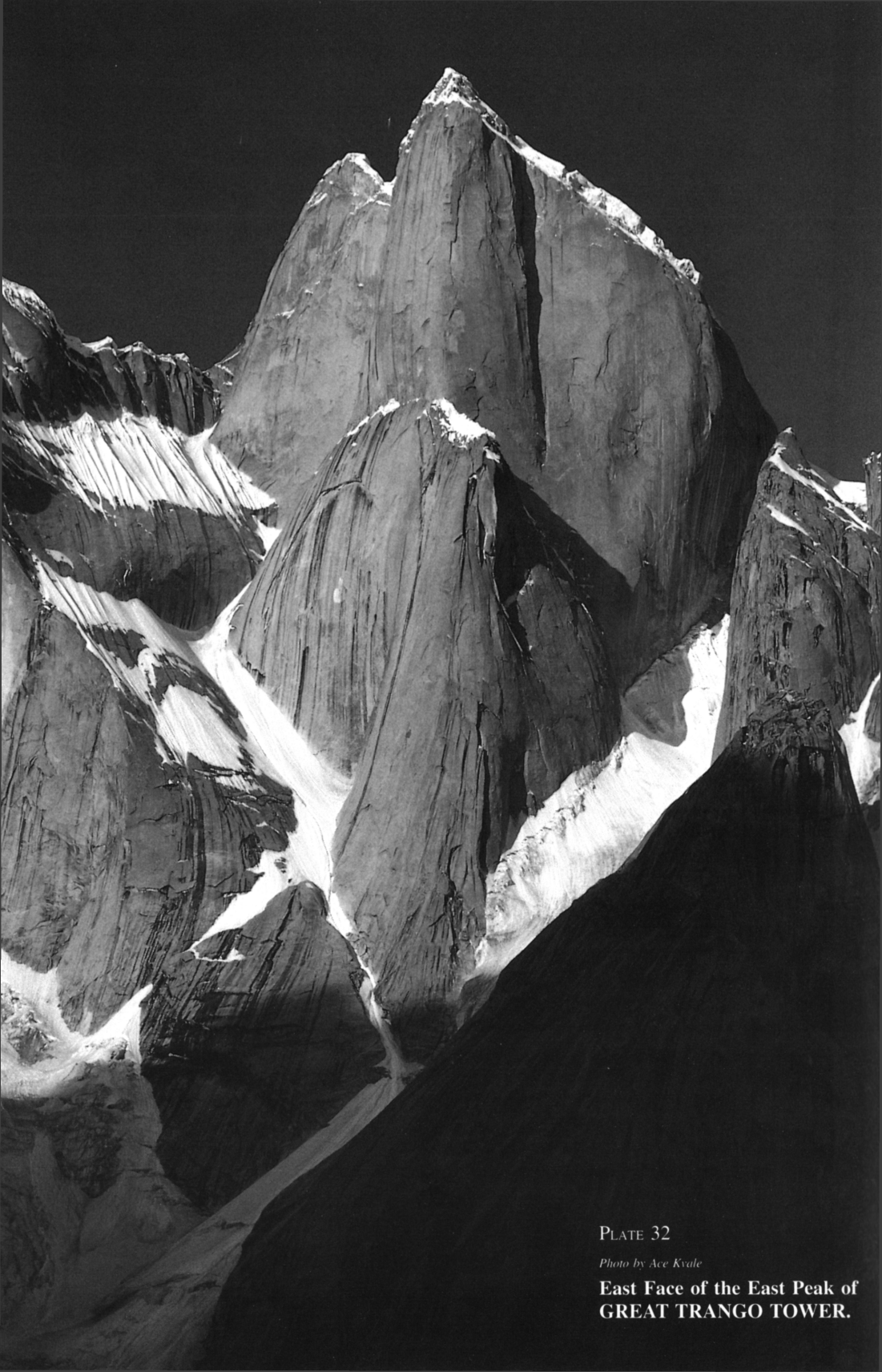


PLATE 32

Photo by Ace Kvale

**East Face of the East Peak of
GREAT TRANGO TOWER.**

We took forty-eight hours to return to the Canopy at the foot of the wall. It was so warm during those last two days that Ali Baba's Couloir had become particularly dangerous, even at night. After hesitating for a long while, we made a dash for it at dawn and rappelled down the rock slab on the other side. The base of the wall was approaching. In the course of a climb, you feel strong, invincible and ready to face any danger; then on the descent, courage evaporates. The last rappels, crevasses, objective risks, crampons, glissades; then the last danger was behind us. After forty-four interminable rappels, we had finally reached the barnyard floor, the good old Dunge Glacier. Finally, we bathed in the security that we had so wished for up there, on the top, liberated from the prison into which we had voluntarily locked ourselves.

The next day, we left in search of the rest of our gear. A month before, one of our sacks had fallen from the cornice and rolled to the moraine. Normally, Ace would have been able to help by indicating where our gear was, but he was busy with the rescue of our companions. We easily located the blue water container as well as the foam mattress. I ventured in the direction of our gear, only to turn back quickly, too afraid of the real danger that the cornice would collapse. As for John, he could not find his ski poles. They had been buried by rockfall. Once again, the mountain had slammed the door in our faces. The Great Tower spoke, "Hey, little man, go away! You have pierced me with dozens of holes. You've changed me enough. Leave me alone so that I can regain my strength and create icy avalanches that are better and more fantastic than those I have given you this year. Inshallah!"

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Baltoro Karakoram, Pakistan.

NEW ROUTE: East Summit of the Great Trango Tower, 6231 meters, 20,443 feet, via a new route left of the Norwegian route as far as the top of the Snowledge, for four pitches on the Norwegian route and from there to the summit to the right of the Norwegian route; summit reached on July 28, 1992 (Bongard, Middendorf).

PERSONNEL: Swiss Xaver Bongard, Ueli Bühler, François Studenmann and Americans Ace Kvale and John Middendorf.