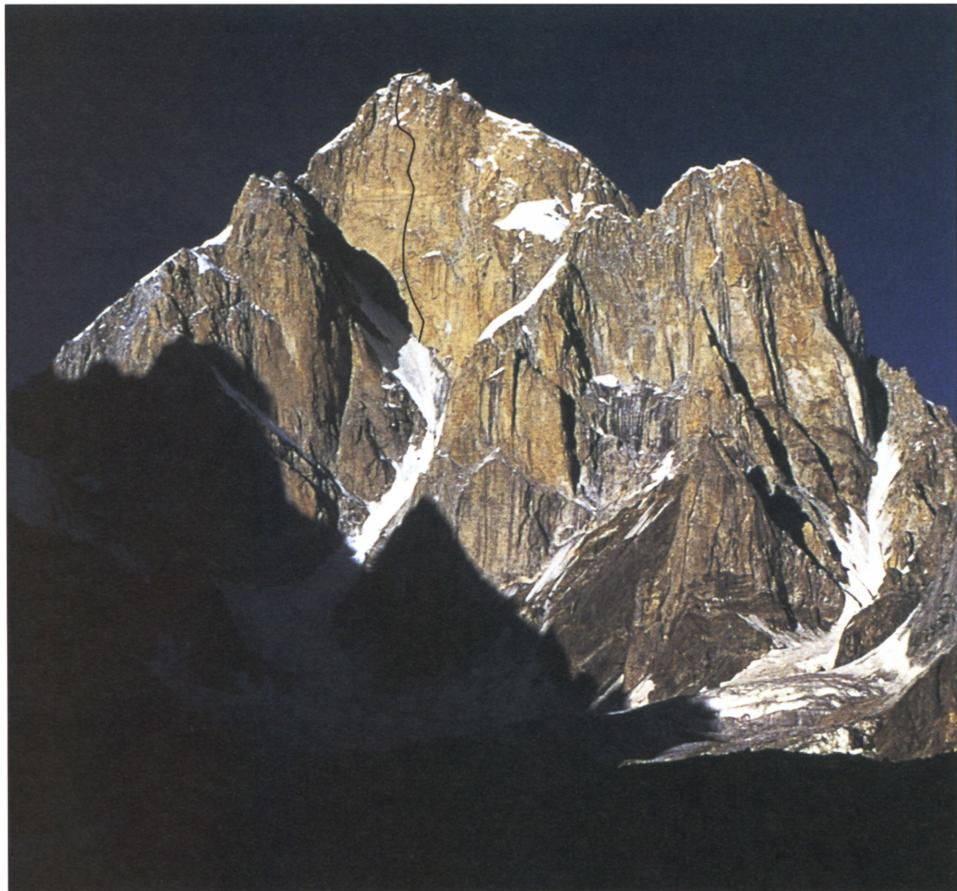


# The West Face of Latok II

*El Cap on top of Denali*

BY ALEXANDER AND THOMAS HUBER



*The west face of Latok II, showing Tsering Mosong. ALEXANDER HUBER*

*Alexander*

**A**ugust 13, 1995: The four of us sit at 6600 meters on a tower on the northwest ridge of Latok II. A difficult decision must be made. For three days, we have been struggling on the ridge; the weather has been fantastic. One more bivy and we will be on the summit—except for that treacherous front of clouds, still far away in China. All of us are more or less weakened, if not on the verge of exhaustion, from the demands of the last few days. For reasons of weight, we have taken only sleeping bags for bivouacs on this alpine-style attempt. A delicate, and, on closer examination, precarious situation. The consequences of a night of storm on this exposed ridge would be fatal.

The mountain gained a victory on us; we descended. It was our last attempt. The object of our yearning, the summit of Latok II, vanished in the mental emptiness, in the vacuum left by defeat.

For four weeks, we had been captured by the idea of reaching this summit. The last steps to the summit dug deeply into our thoughts, but we didn't succeed in converting illusion into reality. The mountain chucked us out; we reached base camp pumped and empty. But I gained new energy from this vacuum, too. The joy of having gotten off unhurt and of having spent a good time with friends made the blood run fresh again in my veins. I wouldn't be myself if such a defeat didn't spur on my ambitions even more.

Latok II was only a stage. Two years later, my dream would either be fulfilled or finally fade away as an unattainable illusion.

*Thomas*

Two years until departure. That means organizing, talking to sponsors, getting permission, going through a lot of (partly unnecessary) red tape with Pakistan, several convivial Bavarian expedition meetings and a continually changing expedition team. Markus Bruckbauer, for example, quickly decides to become a father, and it is only understandable that he turns his back on the potentially dangerous adventure. But most people remain faithful to the team.

Toni Gutsch, a quiet alpinist, but also strong and full of energy. Christian Schlesener, who is ruled by chaos but who in the mountains is capable of top achievements. Franz Fendt, an unknown mountaineer with enormous potential. Michael Graßl, a man without nerves but with a lot of experience in alpine first ascents. Bernd Geffken, the doctor of our expedition. And the two of us, Alexander and Thomas Huber. Our team, all members with strong heads, all with our own character, all wanting to breathe the air of adventure.

Two months before the departure to Pakistan, the airplane takes off, bound for San Francisco. Once again, I am standing at the foot of El Capitan, this time in order to experience the subtleties of big-wall climbing. With Conrad Anker, a big-wall specialist from sunny California, I am infected by techno fever.

Dreaming in the portaledges, 500 meters above the ground; friendship; tension; diving into a world of tricks and ploys, fear and child-like joy, two scamps who for five days creep through a jungle of hooks, heads, blades, and beaks are, in the end, immensely happy about a successful prank: *Gulf Stream*.

We talk about Latok II. Conrad is getting more and more anxious. In his eyes, a rhombus-shaped mountain, a part of the Bavarian flag at 6000 meters, a "Bavarian mountain. . ."

"You want to?"

"Let's go!"

The day of packing in Berchtesgaden! Two thousand meters of rope, gear and equipment for a big wall at 6000 meters, plus German specialties like Nutella and bacon. Everything is packed in sacks and barrels. Absolute chaos. The cheese finds a place between the crampons, the bacon gets mixed in with the copperheads. Everything is packed to weigh 25 kilos and locked down, ready for the journey to Pakistan. All in all, 1.7 tons of luggage—hard to imagine, but, considering the duration of the expedition, necessary.

The last days before departure. . . .

Damned telephone—every ten minutes somebody calls.

"How are you?"

“All the best!”

“Come back home well. . . .”

“Have you got the gear?”

Time turns into a roller coaster, up and down, making it impossible to have a clear thought. Our brains are pumped.

My personal things are packed. Time for a last beer in The Cuckoo’s Nest, my favorite pub in Berchtesgaden. The last drop, the last conversation with friends. I have a strange feeling in my stomach. We all know that this journey won’t be a cakewalk, that it is high-risk. The word “last”—has it got the fatal meaning of “it is the last time,” or is it just set in a timeframe? None of us will be able to answer this question. We don’t look forward to dying the death of a hero in the mountains. Fear is always present, and most so when saying good-bye to friends. . . but let’s go! Our adventure is waiting for us, there’s no time for sentiment or tears, I try to drive those moments away. Scotty, beam me up, into the timeless space on the way to another world.

Pakistan. Islam. An absolutely male domain. Rawalpindi: a synonym for dirt, oppressive sultriness, anarchy in the streets, and bacteria that lurk everywhere waiting to clean out your stomach. The week is not a particularly easy one: Formalities have to be settled, food has to be purchased at the bazaar. For reasons of interest, the topics of conversation in the hotel room shift to “How was it, what about consistency, thin or pulpy or solid with a little liquid afterward. . . .” Though this conversation might seem imbecilic, it is decisive for success on the mountain. A severe bacterial infection now would be, at the same time, a return ticket to Germany.

After the arrival of the rest of the expedition team, we leave Rawalpindi. Before us lie 24 hours of rough riding in a bus on the Karakoram Highway—an adventure of a special kind. Relics of bus drivers who fell asleep at the wheel lie far below on the shores of the Indus River, reinforcing the picture of the Pakistanis’ attitude toward life. Inshallah—God granting, we will arrive safely.

### *Alexander*

**J**une 14: The first day in base camp. I wake up with swollen eyes. I have caught it. Here, of all places. Head cold, completely. For the first two weeks, I am banished to base camp, condemned to passivity while the others transport gear, kit out the advanced base camp at the foot of the wall and get acclimatized daily to higher and higher altitudes.

I have been looking at this wall for four years. I have turned over in my bed hundreds of times, haunted by its image. And now my body refuses to cooperate. Uncertainty arises. Can my body cope with the infection? Can my body deal with the altitude at all?

Bernd, our doctor, has caught it even worse. He loses the fight against the infection and descends, leaving behind three expedition barrels full of medicine. Michael, a member of the Berchtesgaden mountain rescue team, is our last hope from a medical point of view. But after two weeks he, too, must give in to severe inflammation of the kidneys.

Inshallah—let’s hope nothing more will happen.

### *Thomas*

**T**omorrow will be the day. The couloir. Self-doubts torture my brain. Is it a flight forward without return? Nobody will be able to answer this question for me.

Conrad, the “early bird,” drags Toni and me out of our sleeping bags at 1 a.m. We make tea and quickly enjoy muesli (if you really can call it “enjoying” at that time of night). Today we will take the first step into the couloir. We don’t talk much. Every one of us experiences the same oppressing tension at the thought of the most dangerous part of our expedition: climbing through this shitty snow couloir, the key to the actual wall.

We cross horizontally into the couloir, below an 800-meter rock wall. Let’s just not think of the accounts of rockfall in 1995, let’s just hurry away from here. But the situation does not get better. We ascend below an overhanging serac for half an hour before we can cross over to the right onto seemingly safe ground. Conrad’s eyes have changed; I have never seen this expression in his face. He shouts out something, the meaning of which I don’t quite catch at first—but then I understand it. It is a saying that describes the situation in the couloir rather well: “Dancing in the ballroom of death with the fat lady of faith.” From now on, we will endearingly call this serac “the fat lady.”

Eight hundred meters above us lurks another huge hanging glacier: The ballroom of death. The fear of gliding away into a black nothing with a loud bang is present at every step. But in spite of this fear, something draws us upward, step by step, as if up there, 1500 meters above our heads, there waits some huge treasure. We don’t know what is waiting up there; probably only snow, and, weather permitting, a gigantic view of the surrounding mountains. But this highest point emits so much energy, a magnet to which we are the counterpole, that we continue our way despite the risk. Three hours later, we arrive at a comparatively safe place below an overhang of rock at 5600 meters. We dig a small plateau—space for two little tents—and forget the time. Already it is eight o’clock. We must hurry down before the couloir begins to come alive.

*Alexander*

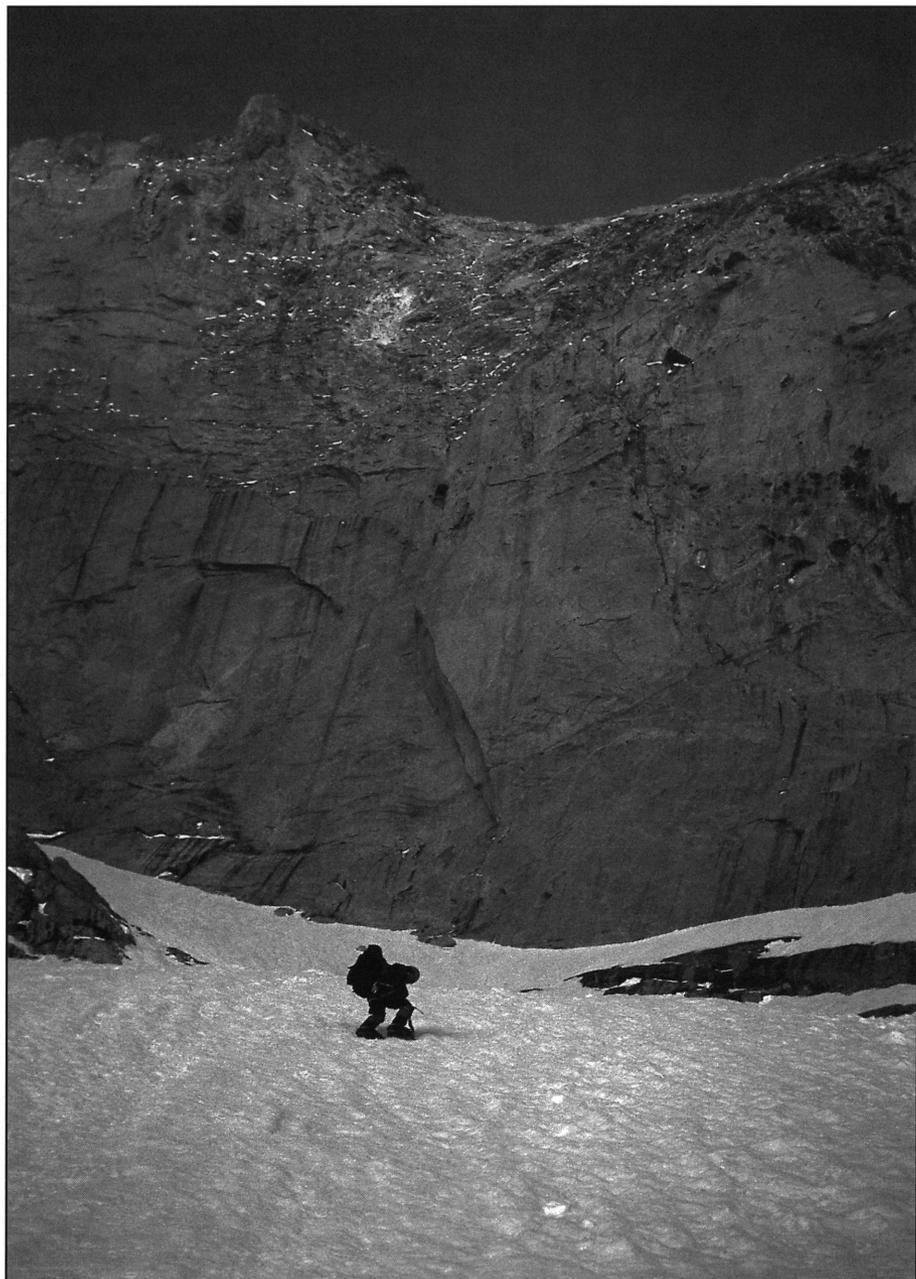
Today, on June 24, Thomas, Conrad and Toni have already reached the balcony camp at 5600 meters. The foot of our big wall is coming closer, and my hopes of still taking an active part diminishes more and more with each meter of altitude the others gain.

*Thomas*

Over the next few days, a kind of working routine sets in among the team. Get up at 1 a.m., transport as much gear as one can to the balcony camp, go down to the glacier camp and sleep or read by day. The fear has disappeared, too. One’s thoughts don’t wander any longer to the danger threatening from above—they are busy with one’s own body. Holding out, motivating oneself again and again, meter by meter, in order to get the 30 kilos on one’s back higher up.

Conrad and I put down our loads at the balcony camp. It’s starting to snow. Soon, the whole mountain is in motion: spindrift from the walls, avalanches in the couloir. We have no business staying here.

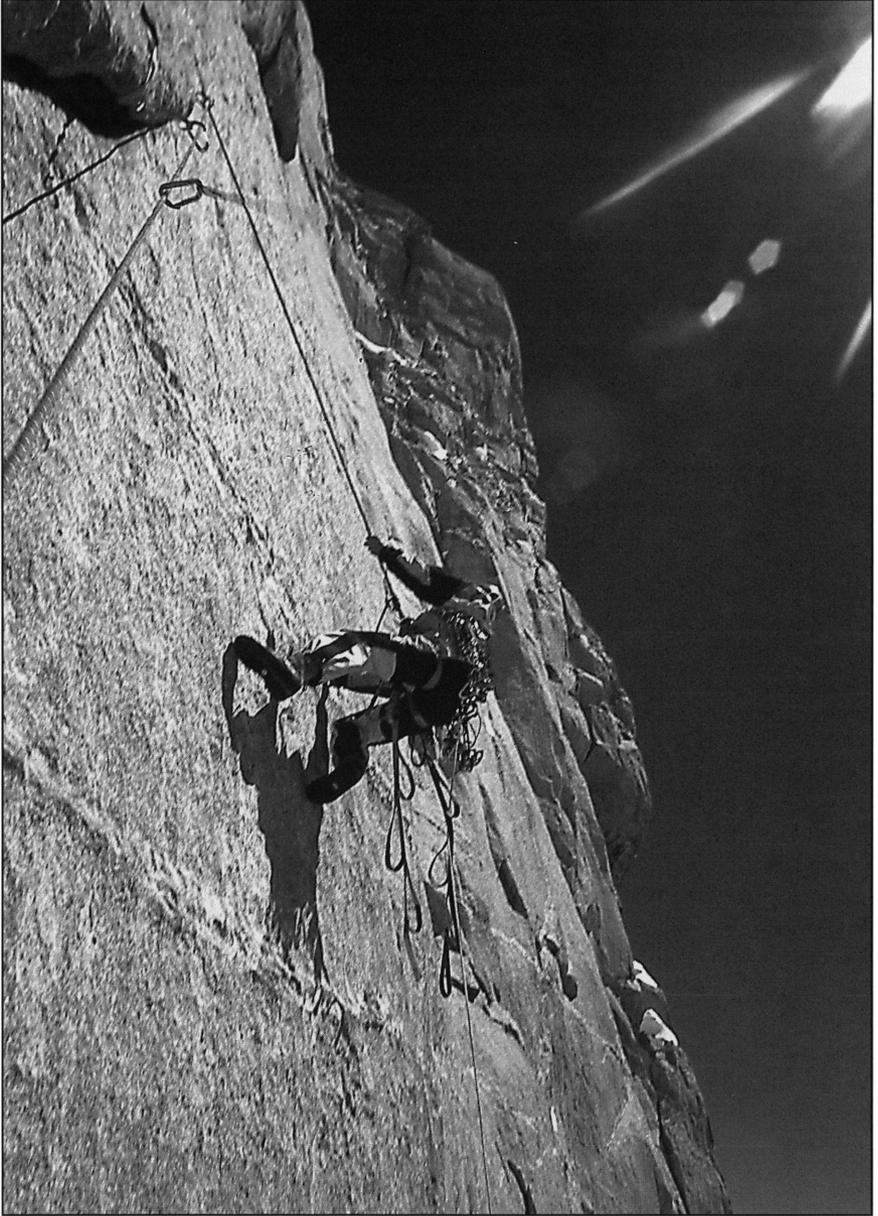
Every minute counts now; the adrenaline in our bodies chases us through the couloir. We are running, jumping over the snow slides. . . . After 30 minutes we reach safe ground before the bigger avalanches roar through the couloir.



*In the couloir at 5300 meters, with the west face looming above. ALEXANDER HUBER*

*Alexander*

**D**uring the following days, we get almost one meter of snow in base camp. We have now all come together here and stand on our marks. It is my big chance. If my body is able to cope with the infection during this spell of bad weather, then—so I hope—



*Conrad Anker penduluming to better features on pitch 16. Note popping gear. ALEXANDER HUBER*

I can make up for my delay in acclimatization.

Three days later, on July 3, I start from base camp with Toni. We stand at the beginning of the climb in the thin air of 6100 meters. My delay in acclimatization has been noticeable for the first time today. Twice I had to hand over my load to Toni while leading in the couloir; try as I might, I was not able to pump the necessary oxygen into my lungs. My brain cells

have been laboring amidst oxygen deficiency for hours, and slowly but surely I'm getting drunk—intoxicated by the altitude.

Fifty carabiners, 20 friends, 30 nuts, 15 pegs, six different skyhooks, hammers, ladders—a heavily laden Christmas tree stands in the snow in front of a one-kilometer-high piece of granite. With trembling legs, I stand on the first footholds of a 6b slab with bad protection and some runouts. At last we gain the lower end of the crack system for which we have been heading. I hang from the first good protection, relaxed, my brain cells approaching a state of drunken stupor. With pegs and hammer, I toil clumsily to get over the first roof. Thank God that compared to free climbing, aid climbing is not too strenuous, and I soon recover.

After two pitches, we rappel and set up our bivy at the foot of the wall. Our first night at 6000 meters. Again and again, Toni and I wake up, gasping for air. We are not yet acclimatized and our respiratory systems react with Cheyne-Stoke breathing—no sounds for two minutes, followed by a panic-stricken struggle for oxygen. Nevertheless, the next morning Toni performs a phenomenal lead over a desperately smooth-looking roof. Rurps, knifeblades and another hook, and the first A3 pitch is finished.

During the next two days, Toni and I are replaced by Thomas and Conrad, and the two push the route up to 6450 meters before yet another front of bad weather unites us all in base camp.

July 13. Yesterday brought on more good weather. Toni and I are at the place where things are happening once again. From the end of the fixed ropes, I climb up a perfectly shaped lay-back flake until it runs out completely. I cross to the right, hooking on edges only a few millimeters wide, then composedly select the right hook for the next edge.

Damned hook—I hang upside down, ten meters lower. Back to square one. Again I'm at the upper end of the flake and again I cross to the right. This time, where the hook popped, I take the power drill, and with a little hole, the move is outwitted.

The next pitch is precarious, too. A delicately hooked slab is followed by a moderate hair-line crack ten meters in length. The following six-meter flake is pure dynamite. Fixed at the base only by ice, it hovers above our heads completely (or so it seems) detached. No, I don't want to—no flying exercises with such unairworthy objects. Again I fall back upon the power drill and drill five small holes, thus passing the flake.

When Toni and I rappel the next day at sunset, we meet Thomas and Conrad as agreed upon. The time has come when we begin living on the wall. Thomas and Conrad have toiled all day long to haul their entire gear to 6500 meters, including portaledge, for eight days of living in the vertical dimension.

While Thomas and Conrad work on the route for the next days, the same torture awaits Toni and me. Thank God the wall is so steep and solid that we don't have any problems hauling up the haulbag—the number one enemy of big-wall climbing.

Slowly the setting sun bathes the wall in glowing red light. Down in the valley, it has long been dark; up here, the last rays of the sun still warm us. Toni and I stick our heads out of the portaledge and watch Thomas and Conrad rappel. In the evening light, this scene appears unbelievably warm, but in only a few seconds the last rays of the sun go out and deadly cold forces us into our sleeping bags.

*Thomas*

**T**he day of the summit.

Eleven p.m. Conrad moves nervously in the portaledge.

“Another quarter of an hour, please!”

We had agreed on a 11:30 wake-up time. . . . But no chance, he is already in his plastic boots.

Four small lights move up on the fixed ropes to our turning-point at 6900 meters. In the background, 200 kilometers farther to the west, parallel to the Nanga Parbat range, the monsoon is showing its effects. A huge storm front, every second a glowing in the sky. The performance is impressive but at the same time, threatening. Have we got a chance in this weather? Will the monsoon reach the Latok range? A game with time. In one hour, everything might be over and a snow storm might sweep us off the mountain. A battle between success and defeat on the last stage to the summit.

Alexander leads. The climbing on mixed ground is harder than we have expected. To get over wafer-thin verglas on granite slabs, he works for more than an hour by the light of his headlamp. We, however, watch the weather while freezing at the belay. We are on pins and needles. Faster! If it goes on like that, we will never make it today! Maybe it is our last chance before the monsoon puts an end to this gigantic spell of good weather. Faster!

The monsoon remains at Nanga Parbat. Maybe Allah is on our side. Luckily, the climbing gets easier. Toni climbs what apparently is the last part of the ridge. There is a snow slope before us. Can it be true?

Together, we walk up the last meters to the top. Our eyes are shining. The energy, the moving force to tackle any situation, be it ever so difficult, is exploding like a volcano. The sparks get mixed up—we have done it, as a team!

And the summit is indeed “only” a little snow plateau at 7108 meters, but everybody finds his own personal treasure. A feeling of freedom, loosening the bonds in which we were caught when thinking of climbing through the west face of Latok II.

Six days later, Franz and Schlesi, too, stand on the summit of Latok II. They have climbed the northwest ridge alpine-style to the summit in a tour de force.

The success of our expedition can be described simply as thus: “A strong team was at the right place at the right time. . . .”

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: The Karakoram range, Pakistan

NEW ROUTES: *Tsering Mosong* (“Long Life”) (VII 5.10c A3, 2200m, ca. 1000m of wall, 26 pitches) on the west face of Latok II (7108m), June 12-21, 1997, Alexander Huber, Thomas Huber, Toni Gutsch, Conrad Anker; *Nomadu* (VI 5.10a WI5 A2, 1100m) on the Northwest Ridge of Latok II, Christian Schlesener and Franz Fendt

