Siguniang

Behold one of the great ice lines of all time: the distressingly steep, thin, and long basalt dike on the northwest face of Siguniang, Sichuan Province.

By Mick Fowler

Siguniang's north face, where the line is the climb. Mick Fowler

Sometimes a scene remains indelibly imprinted on one's mind. On April 5, 2002 I came across such a scene. I was in central China, cresting a 4,500-meter col (in a bus!) when a range of spiky mountains became visible. They were impressive enough for me to rouse my climbing partner, Paul Ramsden, from his slumbers.

Paul awoke with a start. "Hell! What's that?"

The skyline was dominated by an outrageously spectacular snow-covered peak that towered a good 500 meters over everything else that was visible. It dawned on us that this was it—Siguniang, the mountain we had come to climb. That first view remains etched in my memory.

Siguniang (6,250m), the highest point of the Qionglai Range, is about 250 kilometers from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. After a six-hour bus ride to the village of Rilong (soon to become a tourist resort), we ferried our gear upward, first using horses, then our backs.

On April 14 we stood, feeling very small, below the towering, unclimbed northwest face, the feature we had come halfway round the world to try. An American team had tried it in 1981 and a Japanese team in 2001. Jack Tackle, one of the Americans, had been kind enough to provide a mouthwatering photograph. Back in England Paul and I had been bold enough to think that we were in with a chance. Now we were not quite so sure. Emotions had rollercoasted since that first sighting from the bus. From directly below, the face had appeared as a 6,000-foot blank granite wall with no obvious lines of weakness. Closer inspection, though, revealed the secret exposed in the Tackle photograph: a hidden basalt dike facing north and cutting clean through the most impressive part of the face. It was choked with ice and just called out to be climbed—in fact it was without doubt the most enticing line that either of us had ever seen. But were we up to it?

It took a day to reach an uncomfortable bivouac at the point where the serious ice climbing began. Already we were having trouble. What Jack's photo had shown as a straightforward snowslope back in 1981 was now ice punctuated by smooth, featureless granite slabs. Adrenaline flowed freely, and looking up we could see that the ice streak that would form the meat of the route was frequently vertical and intermittently thin. It all looked very distressing.

Day two started badly with me putting in an unconvincing performance on the first ice-streak pitch.

"Do you think it will go?" Paul obviously sensed the adrenaline flow and noted my disturbingly slow progress.

Progress was slow and hesitant, but by dusk our problem was a different one. We were over the first steep section and could see nowhere at all to spend the night. We had brought a small tent with us, but pitching it was out of the question. Fresh snow was pouring mercilessly down the face and we couldn't even find anywhere to cut out a bum ledge.

"Tent over the head?"

It took me a moment to register what Paul was saying. I had been optimistically waiting for a lull that would enable us to use the tent as a double bivouac sack. I had never before used it as a bag over the head although I had read about Joe Tasker and Dick Renshaw spending a night like this on the north face of the Dent Blanche back in the 1970s. It all sounded very unpleasant and I was keen not to emulate their experience. But it had to be admitted that the weather was particularly grim, and any attempt to get into the tent fabric from the top was inevitably destined to end with the tent and everything else full of spindrift.

"As unpleasant as your Taweche bivouac?"

Paul Ramsden appreciating the protection on the third pitch of the second day. Mick Fowler

It was nice of Paul to remind me of the most uncomfortable night of my life. Pat Littlejohn and I had squeezed claustrophobically into a narrow, icy, wind tunnel at 6,000 meters on the northeast buttress of Taweche, in Nepal. Spindrift had poured into the tunnel all night, and we never managed to get inside our sleeping bags. The "one on top of the other" position was not exactly comfortable. Surely this couldn't be that bad? Perhaps it could.

I stood there miserably, making negative noises about the difficulties of belaying securely with a bag over one's head. But I knew that I was tired and cooling down rapidly. We had to do something quickly, and in the conditions I was bleakly aware that I couldn't offer a better suggestion.

Wrapping a large nut in the tent fabric, Paul larksfooted it into our solitary belay and clipped himself into the sling on the inside of the tent.

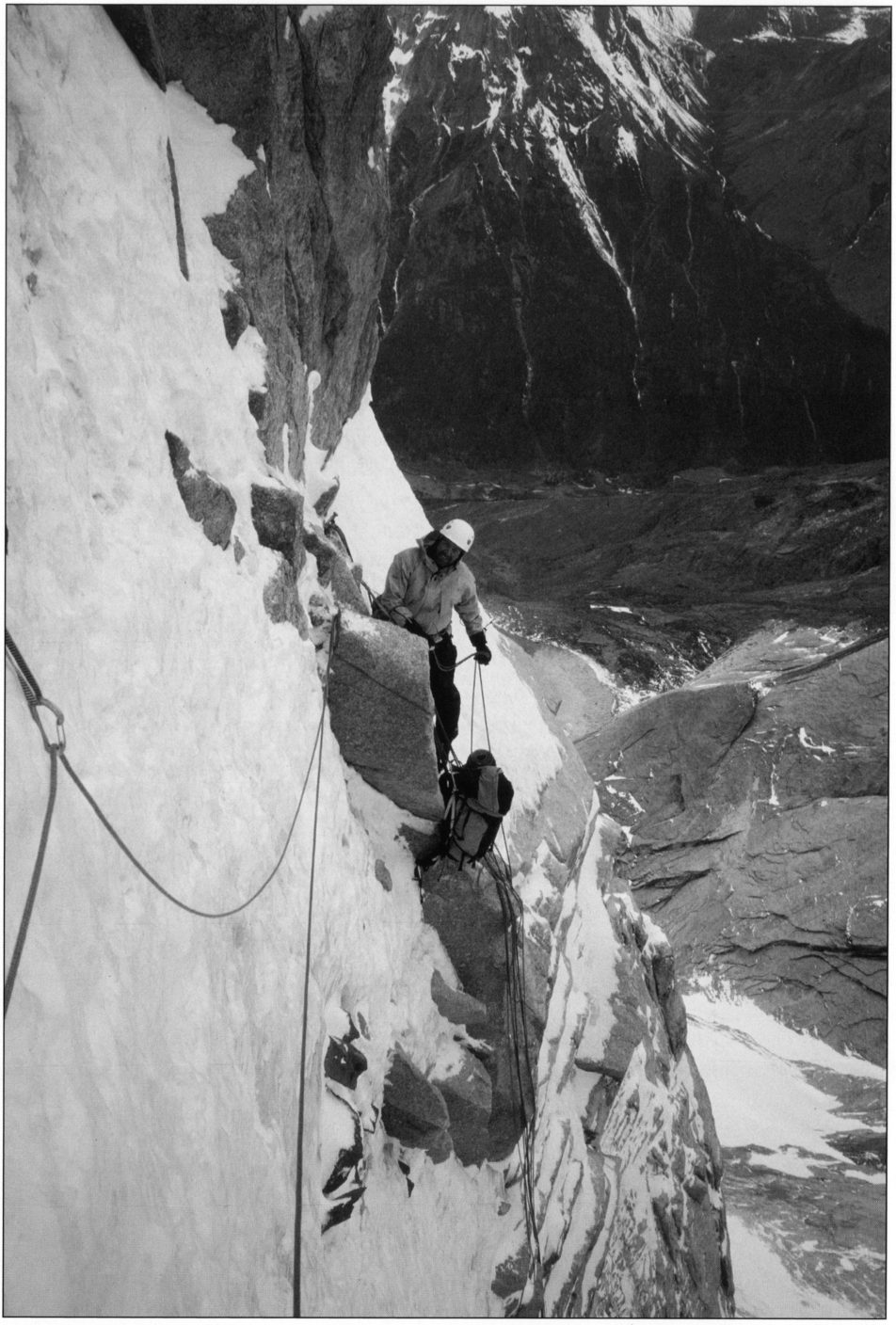
"Different world in here," he announced cheerfully.

I stared dubiously through the gloom at the tent fabric and wondered why I apparently enjoy mountaineering so much. The tent was well used, and I feared that any serious strain on the worn fabric could have unfortunate results.

"Are you getting in or what?" came from deep in the fabric.

It was dark outside now and the urgency in Paul's voice brought home to me the fact that I was moving lethargically. It was time to doublecheck the safety of the arrangement and make a move.

He was right. It was a different world inside. A world where we hung like a bunch of



Paul Ramsden belaying the start of pitch four, day two. Mick Fowler

Just hanging around having fun. Paul Ramsden belaying pitch three, day three. Mick Fowler

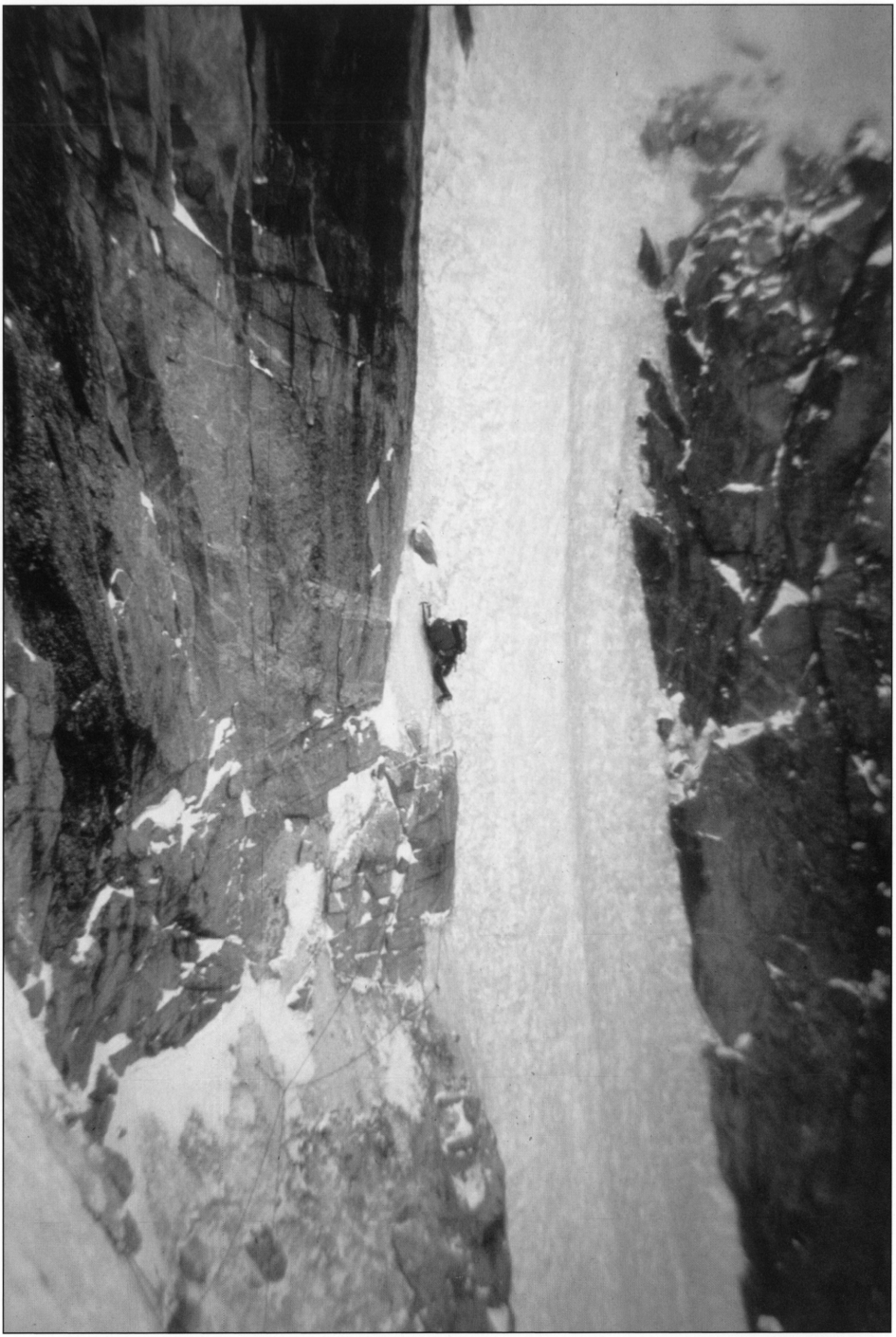
bananas from a single sling while the fabric flapped against our faces and the entrance zipper flailed disconcertingly around our ankles. Extreme care was required, as anything dropped would disappear straight out the bottom of the tent. As if to prove the point, my sleeping mat had miraculously disappeared by the time I came to look for it.

Cooking, or even melting snow, was out of the question. Conversation drifted intermittently as we dozed. We had been unable to get into our sleeping bags and so had opted for standing/hanging in our climbing clothes supplemented by down jackets. Nevertheless, despite minus 20 degrees or so outside, we did not feel worryingly cold. What I mean, of course, is that it was bloody freezing—but, remarkably, frostbite was not a major concern. Good stuff, this modern gear.

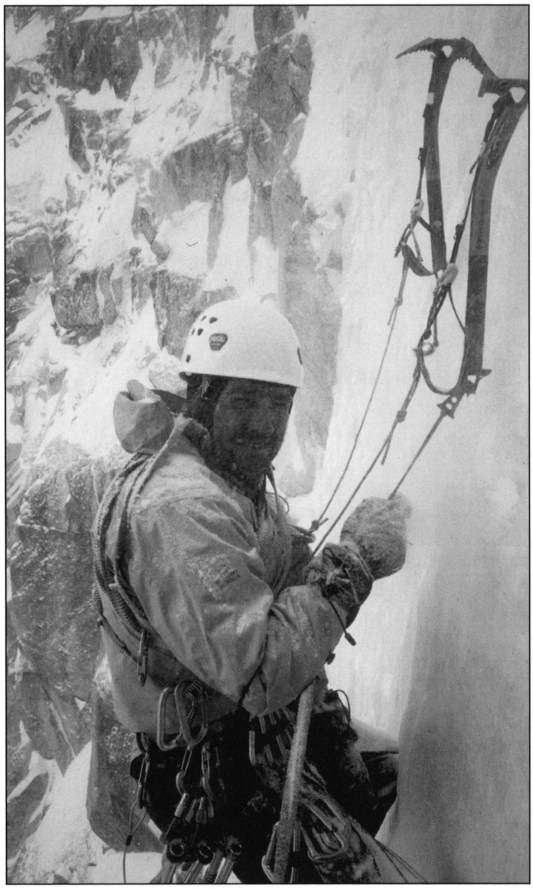
The next day we didn't feel very perky and decided to move up just to the first decent bivouac spot and call it a day. The ice was thicker now but with long vertical sections that made climbing with a rucksack ridiculously exhausting. We persevered, with the leader frequently climbing without a sack and then hauling it up after him. This was effective but bad for blisters. We never did find the longed-for decent ledge, but the weather improved and we made much better progress than expected. Our bivouac, another sitting/hanging effort, was slightly better than the previous one in that we at least managed to get into our sleeping bags and melt a small quantity of snow to relieve our parched throats. We passed the long hours listening to the incessant hiss of spindrift and searching endlessly for the much dreamt of, but unachievable, positions of comfort.

Usually I enjoy ice climbing, but after three days laboring in the deep, sun-less freeze of the fault line it was getting a bit wearing. Although the climbing had only a few technically desperate pitches, it was continually steep and we were frequently blasted by cold, enervating waves of spindrift. The altitude and relentless angle made it utterly exhausting. But there was no reason to go down. We were safe, relatively warm, and still had plenty of gas and food. Also we were steadily, if slowly, gaining height. With each pitch climbed the horizon broadened, and the expectant glow of success grew just a little bit stronger.

After three days in the confines of the fault we were just one pitch short of the end of the ice streak and were able to pull out onto what initially promised to be a reasonable bivouac spot. For the first time we were able to get the tent the right way up and put the poles in. Unfortunately



Starting the fourth cold day on the same unrelenting ice hose—Paul Ramsden on the sharp end. Mick Fowler



Paul Ramsden taking the hardware before heading up the fourth pitch of the fourth day. Mick Fowler

though, Paul's end of the "ledge" then collapsed and he ended up spending the night with his head two feet or so lower than his feet. We were desperate for something to drink and eat, but the unconventional pitching arrangement meant that the stove hung awkwardly against the fabric of the side wall. Holding it in a safe position was out of the question; we were far too tired to stay alert for the time it would take to get a decent volume of water from the fine, powdery snow. Instead I wedged my plastic mug between the windshield and the side wall. This was not a good solution. Soon clouds of acrid smoke filled the tent and red plastic globules dripped into Paul's sleeping bag. From his inverted position he was most voluble in voicing his dissatisfaction and insisted in taking over for the culinary highlight of the evening—noodles. Our inability to understand a word of written Chinese was to prompt some surprise on the food front. Much as Paul applied himself magnificently, vindaloo curry noodles are not to be recommended as high-altitude bivouac food.

But mountaineering is full of ups and downs. In the morning the sun was shining and the Ramsden face smiling. Only one more pitch of ice streak remained, a fact that I felt grateful for as I struggled to overcome ring sting and early morning lethargy. Above us now was the line of ice cliffs marking the lower edge of the summit icefields. Back down in base camp, using our binoculars, we had seen an easy-looking line of weakness; but now, as so often happens, things didn't look quite so straightforward. Firstly, the line of apparent weakness turned out to be a slanting vertical section on a series of overhanging ice walls; and, secondly, the serac ice itself was truly awful, dinner-plating in large, uncontrollable sections. Paul set off with gusto but soon ground to a halt.

"Nightmare! You going to have a look?"

I wasn't. I had great faith in his ability and the problems were all too readily apparent. We quickly agreed that outflanking the ice cliffs on the right was the best option. But all this was taking time. After abseiling out of the seracs and traversing laboriously rightward, it was dark by the time we were struggling on easier-angled, but iron-hard, serac ice bounding the right edge of the cliffs.

We ground to a halt and endured yet another sitting/hanging bivouac just 50 meters short of the summit snowslopes. This was the fifth bivouac in a row where we had failed to properly pitch the tent—a new and unwelcome record for both of us! The snowfall, always variable, was particularly grim in the night, building up behind us and forcing our bums off our already inadequate bum ledge. I hung uncomfortably, half in my harness and half in the tent fabric. Paul was just above me in a position whereby the tension in the tent fabric crushed his head to the extent that his helmet was even more useful than usual.

Paul Ramsden (left) and Mick Fowler on the summit at last. Mick Fowler

Good weather on the summit day would be critical for routefinding and pleasant for views. And, as luck would have it, the next morning the angle eased and the skies cleared to reveal an unbroken panorama. The hardships suddenly began to feel worthwhile. We plodded slowly up snowslopes and a corniced ridge to the summit...and felt on top of the world.

The plan now was to descend the unclimbed north ridge. Thankfully, the good weather allowed us to easily locate the top of it. If it had been misty I fear that much summit snowfield wandering would have occurred. As it was, we were soon engrossed in abseiling down a very steep ridge decorated with Peruvian-style snow formations. This had been our reserve objective if the ice streak had gone all wrong, but it would have been a nightmare to ascend.

Beyond this it was endless abseils off Abalakov threads and then we were down, a combined 30 kilograms lighter. Paul also managed 12 days without a crap, a personal best.

It had been a very fine holiday indeed.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Qionglai Range, Sichuan Province.

ASCENTS: North face of Siguniang (6,250m). 1,500m, ED(sup). Climbers: Mick Fowler, Paul Ramsden. Also Mike Morrison, Roger Gibbs.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Born in 1956, Briton Mick Fowler is married with two children, Tessa (11) and Alec (8). "Assistant Director of Capital Taxes" by day, he started climbing seriously in 1976. He was the first climber to do a grade V1 in Scotland (Shield Direct, 1979), and with the ascent of Linden he became one of the first rockclimbers to establish the E6 grade in Britain. He has climbed a string of EDsup routes in Asia and South America, most recently the north face of Changabang (1997) and Arwa Tower (1999). Siguniang's northwest face route won the 2002 Piolet D'Or award for the finest climb of the year (France).