

JARJINJABO

New routes, old worlds, and other epiphanies from the Tibetan borderlands.

EDITED BY PETER ATHANS



The unclimbed Todju Puba Spire in the Jarjinjabo Mountains. Robert Mackinlay

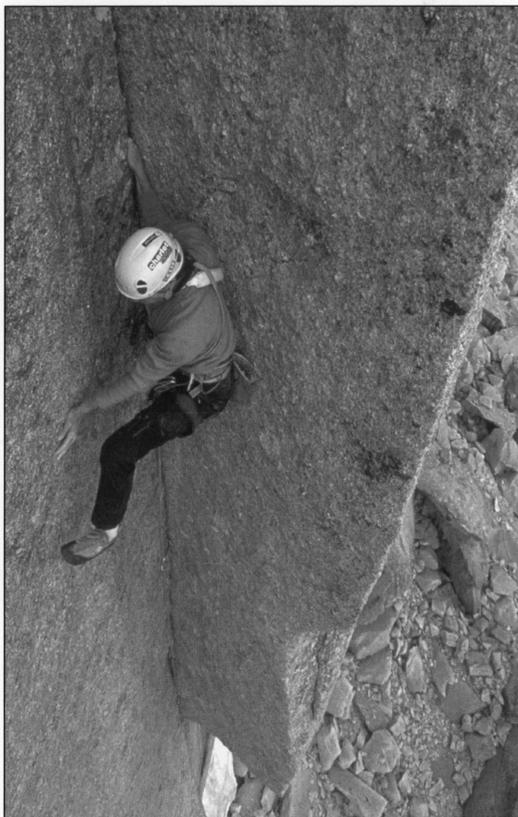
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It felt like jumping off the edge of the world. Where China's Sichuan Province and Tibet meet in the Tibetan Borderlands, the ranges appear wavelike, one rising behind the other, and exploring such realms has been a passion of mine for years. Having stood atop Everest seven times, and having witnessed countless celebrations and desecrations of that colossal mountain, I was ready to immerse myself in a lesser-known region.

In the summer of 2002, Kasha Rigby, Hilaree Nelson, Jared Ogden, Mark Synnott, Robert MacKinlay, and I joined together on an expedition that did not follow the linear path of most endeavors. Rather, it was cyclical, beginning with a cultural introduction to Tibet. Afterward, our temporary home was the spectacular Jarjinjabo massif of alpine peaks, granite spires, and a monastery with 800 years of history. The expedition's dreamlike quality allowed us to dwell in a place of unlimited possibilities. We established a dozen new routes over the course of our weeks there. Each climber had stories to tell, and the diary excerpts below present varied images of this transcendent and now-accessible place.

MARK SYNNOTT: Here in this valley, surrounded by green-rolling hills, we've spent the last few days at the Litang Horse Festival, an amazing event. There are about 1,000 tents set up here, and we have been mingling with the Tibetans, gaining insights into their culture. The Tibetan Borderlands region is a swath of land that runs north to south, maybe 200 miles wide and 1,000 miles long. On the east are hills with farmlands; on the west is the high Tibetan plateau, basically a desert. Until four years ago, outsiders had rarely visited—there was no road. But after a silver mine was discovered, a new road gave access to an incredible mountain valley with, among other features, one of the few monasteries in Tibet that wasn't destroyed by the Chinese.

JARED OGDEN: We spent the first two days traveling by Jeep over the harshest roads you can imagine. We arrived at a beautiful pass around 14,000 feet, with a rock shrine that formed the gateway onto the plateau. It was an amazing landscape of light, green valleys, and forests. We finally arrived in the village of Litang, where we will be spending two days. This is where the Horse Festival is held, and many people are doing traditional songs and dances. Everyone feels good and the weather has been fantastic. We're traveling to the Jarjinjabo Range shortly, where our base camp



Mark Synnott on the second pitch of the southeast face route of Janmo Spire. Robert Mackinlay

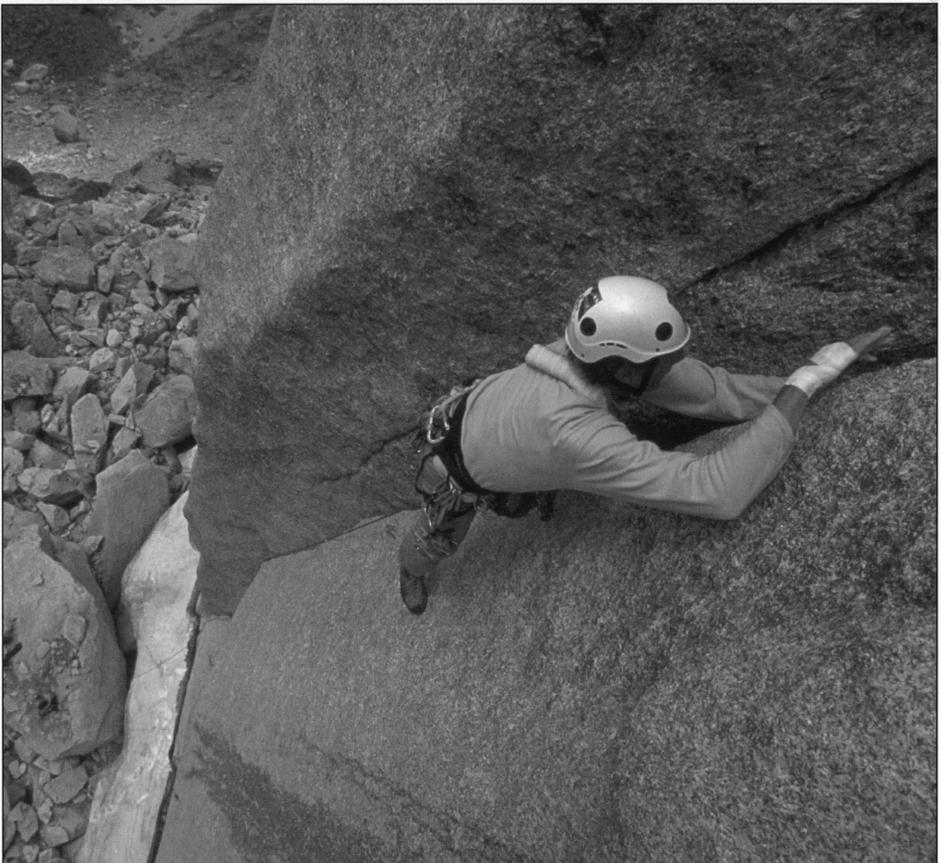


Synnott on or near the fourth pitch of the southeast face of Janmo Spire. Jared Ogden

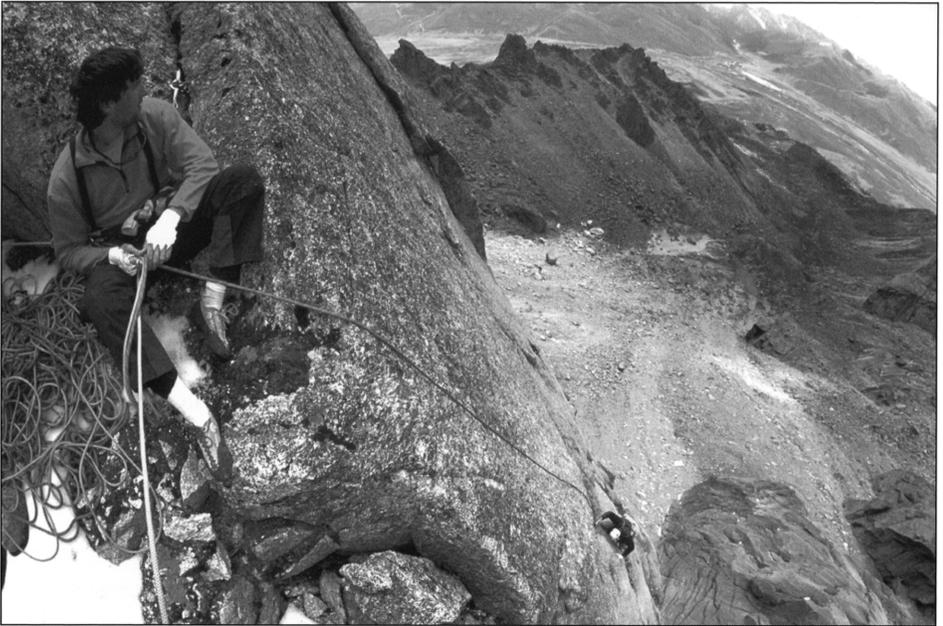
will be for three weeks. There is a monastery and a hot spring there at 12,500 feet, and everyone is excited to start climbing and skiing. It's been great to see and interact with the Tibetans. Their dress is unbelievable! On our first night we went out for dinner and saw a disco next door, so we went over and partied to rave music with Tibetan horsemen—incredible equestrians and rowdy dancers.

PETER ATHANS: As Mark, Jared, and I loaded gear for the approach to a camp beneath slender Janmo Spire, we passed through fragrant cedars with only fluttering prayer flags and the occasional grazing yak to disturb our thoughts. Everywhere, symbols of an ancient culture spoke of ardent faith: carved mantra rock art, paintings, and prayer flags. Although the Red Guard desecrated this area 40 years ago, their shameless work is only a distant nightmare, and now the beauty of this place is miraculous.

We arrived in camp by mid-morning, erected the tent, and then labored uphill to the bottom of the spire. The burning questions for me before the expedition were, “Is the rock sound,” and “Are the climbs well protected?” Both answers, as we soon discovered, were a resounding “Yes!”



Pete Athans launching onto Janmo Spire. Robert Mackinlay



Mark Synnott belaying Pete Athans on the southwest buttress of Jarjinjabo. Jared Ogden

Jared won the toss for the first pitch and stepped from snow onto rock. Corners and finger cracks began steeply but were of good size, and he moved up smoothly into a pod before the crack opened to fist and off-width size. These cracks were remarkably clean, and Jared flowed through them confidently with an array of off-width moves. A hundred feet up, on a tiny ledge beneath an overhang, he stopped and constructed a belay.

Mark followed, climbing swiftly through the crux. Then he attacked an overhanging corner, throwing finger-locks into the crack that relented with a perfect hand jam where the angle eased. Pulling through sustained moves like this at nearly 17,000 feet was a challenge aerobically, so Mark took a short break before continuing up an elegant corner.

Routefinding is an acquired skill that borders on art, where one's imagination perceives a line in the absence of weaknesses. On Janmo Spire climbable options were everywhere, and pitch after pitch unfolded, with some of the cleanest and most enjoyable rock climbing I have ever experienced. All of us drew excellent pitches, mostly pure crack climbing with occasional face moves to add variety. The climb went free at a challenging standard.

As we reached the top of the seventh pitch, it appeared that we had it made. But my memory told me otherwise: from photos I had unearthed earlier, I recalled the summit block as an impregnable obelisk, devoid of features. I was hopeful that the photos weren't showing everything—that a hidden line existed. I was wrong. Incipient crack systems on all sides ended at half height on the summit block, and to complete the route we would need to place at least eight bolts. In the supernatural orange twilight we debated our next move. We hadn't yet drilled, our intention being to leave the tower unchanged. The idea of not imposing ourselves on the landscape seemed attractive, and so, in harmony with the style of our ascent and with the local Buddhist attitudes, we chose to descend, leaving the summit block untouched.

KASHA RIGBY: It's another 4:15 wake up, with rain pouring against our tent. How many days has it been now? The routine: wake up with goals of a summit, then go back to sleep with the sound of rain. Yesterday there was a giant hailstorm, today a small earthquake. I think it's been only four days, but somehow it feels like more. When returning home after being on an expedition, I find people thinking the trip had been "glamorous." Shoulder to shoulder with Hilaree in our little cocoon, she asks me if I am aware of the rat's nest in my hair. What glamour! I wonder if other women in the developed world get the luxury of feeling competent and glamorous irrespective of how they look. I don't want to go back to the "real" world.

SYNNOTT: Today we climbed what may well be the best route of the trip: the eye-catching southwest buttress of Jarjinjabo. We wanted to tackle the south face head on, but when we arrived at the base we found that the rock was wet and the crack systems discontinuous. There's a good line tackling the bottom half of the face and the same goes for the top, but the problem is that they don't link up. The southwest buttress, on the other hand, was a dream climb, except for one overhanging crack filled with mud and green slime. I knew it was free climbable, but it was so nasty that I found myself pulling on a couple of pieces to get through.

Jared, Pete, and I swapped leads all the way, traversing back and forth, negotiating tricky detours around gendarmes. It was a long day because it just isn't fast to climb with three. The route was around 13 pitches, and we were pretty tired when we pulled up over the top. Jarjinjabo, at 17,200 feet, is the biggest peak in this massif. Climbing this peak had been one of the main objectives of the expedition, so it was great to stroll the last few yards to the summit.

On some of my previous "first ascents" I'd arrived on top only to find an old piece of gear, a bolt, or some other item. We were nervous about this happening, but there was nothing. We sat silently for a few minutes, absorbing the magnificent surroundings. The setting sun sent a million shafts of light through the purple, blue, and gray clouds, illuminating the valley below in that magical light we had seen many times on the Tibetan plateau. I took a few photos but realized that no image could ever do it justice. Better to sit still and let it burn into my memory. Days like this are what climbing is all about.

ATHANS: During the course of our expedition, MacKinlay and I made two first ascents that I count among my best in 30 years of



Jared Ogden, Mark Synnott, and Pete Athans on the southwest buttress of Jarjinjabo. Robert Mackinlay



The northern Jarjinjabo Massif, showing Janmo Spire in the upper right and Jarjinjabo itself is on far upper right. Note that this is slightly north and slightly less high than the Jarjinjabo (5,812') in Tamotsu Nakamura's East of the Himalaya story, in this issue. Robert Mackinlay

climbing. One of these was on Janmo Spire, which paralleled the trip's first route. I had been eyeing a crack system that disappeared up into overhangs. An initial short chimney and face gave access to the bottom of the system, and I could see that this pitch was going to be excellent in its steepness, cleanness, and sweeping elegance. Janmo continued its reputation as being created solely for climbers, as the crack above was ideal jamming size for an unbroken 200 feet. I slung a perfectly placed flake for protection, then launched myself upward. The dreamlike pitch seemed endless. I could feel the tension in my abdomen from having to breathe excessively because of the altitude. Yet my mind, relaxed and focused, allowed me to be in the moment. For me, pitches like that are true gratification—simply to live with no past or future considerations, savoring the moment, losing identity. It's this “action without I” that gives me such an intense feeling of liberation. Climbing is about liberation of the spirit—away from ego, desire, and sometimes even the sensation of body.

SYNNOTT: Just got back from high camp last night, having managed three new routes in three days. Yesterday, Jared and I made the first ascent of a beautiful tower we're calling Jarjinjabo's Son. It was about 1,300 feet high, and we did it all free, with the crux being a 5.10+ finger crack leading out a small roof. I was able to get in two bomber cams below the roof and then punched through a holdless section for five feet to another good hand jam. 5.10 feels a lot harder at 17,000 feet than it does at home. Shortly after that, Jared and I were sitting on the summit, a flat granite block about as big as a picnic table.

We rappelled, downclimbed, and then hiked back to advanced base camp. We packed everything and headed down because we had a plan for today: to climb the huge ridge rising above the nunnery. “Nunnery Ridge” was what we proposed calling it, even before we set foot on it. We were a little presumptuous.

We got up at about 6 a.m. I was tired but the weather was beautiful and we weren't about to waste the day. Our plan was to follow the ridge, and from base to top we estimated it to involve 4,000 feet of gain. We'd carry only one quart of water each, energy gels, and raingear. To save weight we decided not to carry sneakers, instead hiking up in our Sportivas.

It turned out we had misinterpreted the topography. What appeared from a distance to be a continuous ridge turned out to be a bunch of disjointed gendarmes. The outcome was apparent, and Jared was first to say, "This route is a piece of junk." We bailed.

HILAREE NELSON: Kasha and I came along to fill in the skiing/mountaineering side of the group. Both of us were a bit skeptical of trying to ski in the northern hemisphere in August, even if the objectives soared to 17,000 feet; nonetheless, we were game to give it a try. For three weeks we had been utterly denied. We had set foot on snow once, but our skis hadn't left their bags. Our frustration was now palpable, especially given the fact that the "boys" have been so successful with their climbing. Their excitement was killing us.

We had two days left to turn our fortunes around, and it wasn't going to happen on snow; we had to transform ourselves into rock climbers.

Morning dawned and we felt like today might be the day for success. I had a lot more climbing experience than Kasha, so I led a route while she suffered through long belays. We simul-climbed, got lost, got stuck, got cuts and bruises, but we made the summit! Eight hours after we started, we stood on top of Jarjinjabo. For all our excitement, it might as well have been Everest. We finally got the view we had been dreaming about. It was all air below and our previous frustrations blew away with the wind.

ATHANS: Late August arrived unwelcome; it was time to bid Jarjinjabo farewell. The monastery, with its surrounding forests and clustered huts, had become our temporary home, but it was time to relinquish it. Our expedition was a temporal experience in an environment that seemed to defy time until recently, with the advent of local mining. It might have been easy for us to criticize the development of the area's wealth; however, we certainly wouldn't have learned of the region's existence without the new access roads. We came away with one wish: that this remarkable and spiritual place will remain cherished by those in Tibet, China, and, indeed, all nations.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Kham Region of West Sichuan on the Tibetan Plateau



Mark Synnott, Jared Ogden, and Pete Athans racking up at the Zhoupu Monastery. Robert Mackinlay