

THE MAGIC PILLAR

A pure alpine-style first ascent of the west ridge of Jannu in Nepal.

SERGEY KOFANOV



Jannu (Kumbhakarna) from the north. To reach the west ridge, Valery Babanov and Sergey Kofanov spent two and a half days climbing to the 6,350-meter saddle between Jannu and Sobithongje (6,652m). From there, it was 1,400 vertical meters and five days to the summit. *Valery Babanov*

The impossible is possible. There was a time when man thought that flying was impossible. There was a time when I thought it was impossible for two men to climb a new route in alpine style on Jannu's north side. But with his phone call in February 2007, Valery Babanov forced me to think hard about the possibility of the impossible.

Valery had called to discuss our planned expedition to Chomo-Lonzo in the fall. We talked about the dates of our flights, an approximate budget, equipment, and other matters. Somewhere in the middle of our conversation, Valery dropped a phrase along the lines of,

“Actually, Sergey, I’ve decided to change the goal for this climb. Let’s go to Jannu. What do you think?” For about a second I matched the word “Jannu” with the image that was rising in my brain, and then I said, “Yes. Of course, yes!”

In fact, it was fundamentally unimportant for me where I would climb, so long as I was psychologically and physically prepared for any route and any mountain. The defining priorities were with whom and how I would climb. Valery could have suggested that I join him in climbing Olympus on Mars—I would have agreed without hesitation even to that.



Jannu (Kumbhakarna) is rightly considered one of the most beautiful and difficult 7,000-meter peaks in the world. From the time of the first successful French expedition in 1962, not many alpinists have stood on her summit, and the reason for this is very simple: There are no simple routes. Even on the classical routes, to succeed it is necessary above all to change oneself, to switch one’s consciousness onto a different plane. Only then will one acquire the resolve for this deed. But one must not construct such resolve on a foundation of anger. Rather, there should be a kind of commitment that borders on dispassion. In the mountains and in life in general, there are situations when one needs precisely this sort of dispassionate resolve, and yet it is very important to turn it on only at the most necessary moments. I call this the “syndrome of disconnecting the instinct for self-preservation.”

Having resolved with Valery to put up a new route on Jannu, we both disconnected our instinct for self-preservation on the eve of our departure for Kathmandu. Or, rather, we tuned our internal clocks to turn off this instinct at the moment we started climbing in October.

I am certain that, from the moment of the conclusion of that telephone conversation with Valery, neither he nor I outwardly changed in the least; we continued to live as usual, though perhaps we did slightly more training. But inwardly we became different. Both of us understood that now we were and were not ourselves. We were other. No one, not even our closest friends, noticed anything. Only we sensed it. Only we knew that within us the clocks were, already ticking, counting out the time from that moment when we’d made our decision.



Where there is comfort there is no energy—I needed more training, and I sacrificed much in order to find time for it. The expedition to Jannu was to be my seventh that year. Beforehand, there was Everest and Peak Communism, among others. In between expeditions I had breaks no longer than two weeks. In these intervals I trained more intensively, climbing in the gym and running laps on the track.



Sergey Kofanov at base camp, preparing for the ascent. For Kofanov, 29, the Jannu expedition was his seventh of the year. *Valery Babanov*



Kofanov in the glacial basin below Jannu's north face. After a rough night on the 45-degree ice slopes above Kofanov's right shoulder, the two men reached the col at 6,350 meters amid hurricane-force winds. *Valery Babanov*

In late spring Valery sent a letter posing a completely logical question: Would I be able to tolerate such a rhythm and still be ready for a difficult climb in the Himalaya? Insofar as I'd never had such a heavy season, I didn't know the answer. I laughed it off with a question of my own for Valery, then at the height of his guiding season in Chamonix: "And will you be ready after ten runs up Mont Blanc?"



On the 12th of September I was sitting in the airport in Qatar waiting for our connecting flight to Kathmandu. Next to me was the famous tennis player Marat Safin, who was flying with the climbing team of Sasha Abramov to Cho-Oyu. A girl approached and said, "Excuse me, are you Sergey Kofanov?" We conversed for a while; I gave her my card and autograph. Evidently, the result of specialization is that here, on the way to the Himalaya, Marat Safin is less well known than I am.



We arrived at base camp at the end of September. Over the next several days the wall was hidden by thick clouds. Finally the summit revealed itself, and for the first time we saw the wall in the flesh, not just in photos. For the first several hours, it simply took our breath away—the urge seized us to set off immediately and, if not begin climbing, at least touch the wall in order to convince ourselves that it actually existed, and wasn't merely a dream.

We studied the face and examined our options. There were only two: the western ridge



The first headwall on Jannu's west ridge climbs to about 7,200 meters. After a long snow ridge, difficult climbing resumes on the summit tower at about 7,400 meters. *Valery Babanov*

and a steep ramp well to the left of the “classic” Japanese route. We chose the ridge: It was very logical and beautiful, and, besides, a huge serac that was not visible in the photographs hung above the ramp option.

For acclimatization we slept at 6,200 meters, practically on the summit of Merra, not far from Jannu. We both understood that a preparatory ascent to this elevation was insufficient to climb in alpine style to 7,700 meters, but there was nothing to be done—there was nothing higher and relatively uncomplicated near Jannu. At night I couldn't sleep, so I read *My Way* by Tomo Cesen, where he recounts his new route on the northern wall of Jannu, which he did in 28 hours with two cans of sardines. Periodically I glanced outside the tent and looked at the northern wall illuminated by the moon—its appearance was simply unreal.



Our plan was to set out on October 14, even though the forecast predicted suitable weather for climbing only until the 16th. After that there would be snowfall and 80 to 100 kph winds on the ridge. We would have preferred to wait it out, but we couldn't wait because we didn't want to lose what little acclimatization we had.

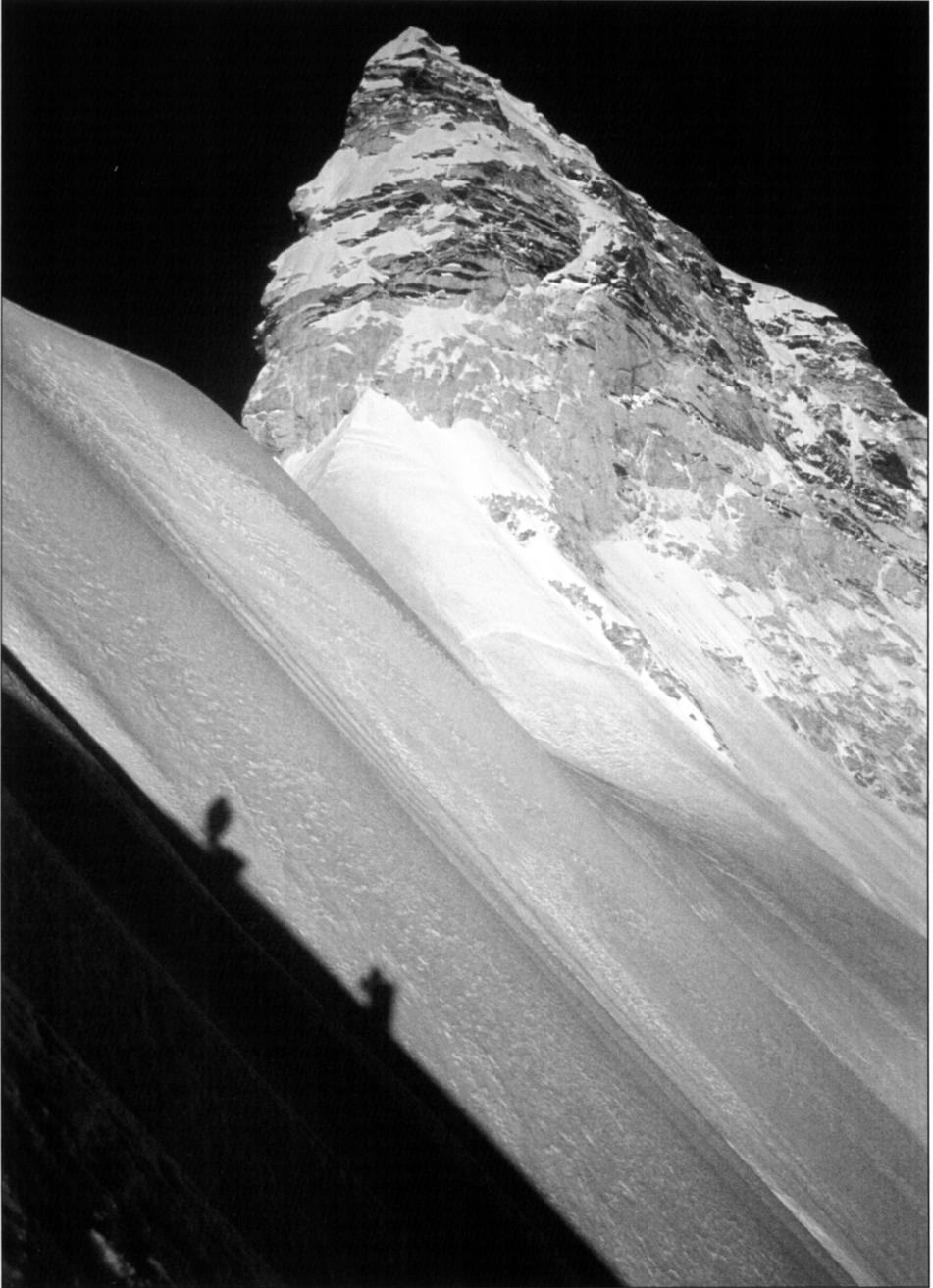


Kofanov follows the spectacular snow arête above the first rock headwall. The summit of Sobithongie (6,652m) lies behind. *Valery Babanov*

We both understood that the advantage of alpine style and a two-man ascent is above all speed, and for that reason we tried to make our packs as light as possible. We packed dried food and fuel for approximately eight days, plus two cans of sardines. At the start our packs weighed 18 to 20 kilos, but the majority of this weight was equipment, which would hang from our bodies and harnesses while we climbed. We took a selection of slings, stoppers, and cams, about a dozen pitons, seven ice screws, two 60-meter ropes (one 5.5mm and the other 8.6mm), and a pair of ice tools for each of us. Our tent weighed less than a kilogram, and our sleeping bag, specially sewn to fit both of us, weighed only 900 grams.

Jannu's western ridge begins from a saddle at 6,350 meters between Jannu and Sobithongie (6,652 meters). During our first few days of climbing, approaching this col, we had to wander through a labyrinth of seracs along a huge glacier and climb ice-glazed rock and steep ice. On the 15th, we were forced to spend the night on an icy 45-degree slope. Before we were able to set up the tent, it took us almost two hours of chopping with our axes to remove about three cubic meters of ice. Even so, we weren't able to make room for our tent. Before sleeping we ate the last can of sardines. All night we tossed and turned—maybe as a result of the uncomfortable situation, or maybe the lack of acclimatization was beginning to take its toll.

But all this was just work and the mountain was not presenting us with unsolvable tasks. We knew the fundamental difficulties would begin above 7,000 meters, where our bodies would cease to renew themselves at night and the immovable burden of exhaustion would accumulate. Each of us had experienced similar moments more than once during other ascents, and so we knew what to expect.



Jannu's summit tower, as seen from the west ridge. Babanov and Kofanov followed the snow ridge to its high point below the tower, then angled up and right, and then back left, following snow ledges and steep mixed ground. This line on the summit tower had been climbed in 1981 and 1983 after an approach by the southwest spur; three French climbers reached the top by this route in 1983. *Sergey Kofanov*



Babanov begins the first lead on the summit tower: difficult mixed climbing at 7,400 meters. *Sergey Kofanov*

On the 16th we climbed almost seven rope lengths on very steep ice, two of which were at nearly 80 degrees. Toward lunch we reached the saddle, and Jannu's west ridge greeted us with hurricane winds, which forced us to curtail work on the route at noon and wait out the bad weather in our tent inside a crevasse.

In the morning we listened for a long time to the howling of the wind and debated whether it was worth crawling out of the tent. The wind, understanding that it wouldn't be easy to lure us out, got crafty; it let up for about an hour, waiting for the moment when we rolled up our tent, and then hurled itself upon us with redoubled force. We likewise decided to deceive the wind, and for about three hours we pretended to wallow through the snow in earnest, approaching the rocky part of the western ridge, but then unexpectedly we swung under a serac and set up a bivouac. The wind tried to rip our tent away over the next two hours, and then abated. This time, Valery and I were not fooled by this trick, and we didn't crawl out

of the tent until the next morning. The forecast, which Valery's wife conveyed to us via radio, was for even stronger winds the next day, reaching 100 kph above 7,000 meters.

The next morning, October 18, we set off with the first rays of the sun—in those hours the wind was not yet so strong. At first we climbed about four pitches along steep ice. Then the ice gave way to rock, where Valery took the hardest sections. After this we belayed each other by turns. We met the sunset on a sharp, snowy knife-edge that was buffeted by the wind from two directions.

Working together, we struggled to blunt the firn-clad top of the knife in order to set up our tent on a well-formed platform. With the sun below the horizon, Valery removed his sunglasses, but this was a little premature. The wind whipped snow into our faces, covering our mouths and eyes. It wasn't possible to work without glasses, so Valery put his on again, but now they were frozen and filled with snow. He swung his axes blindly, periodically asking me



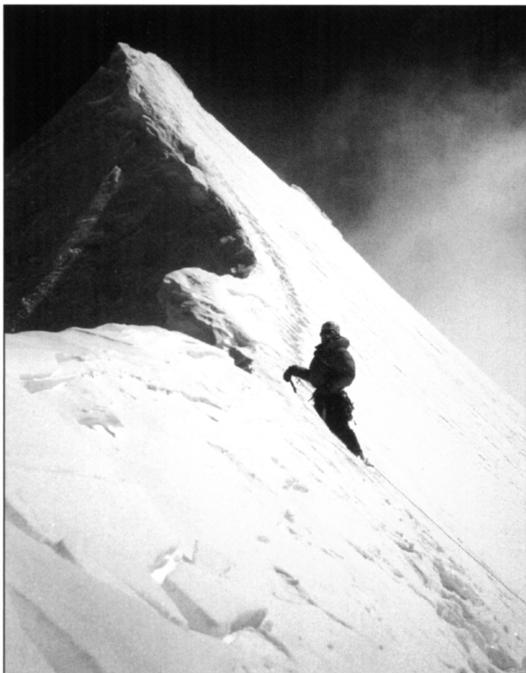
Kofanov belays at 7,500 meters, partway up the steep summit tower. Hoping to gain the summit and return to their equipment cache that same day, the two men could manage only 200 vertical meters before nightfall forced a bivouac at 7,600 meters. *Valery Babanov*

whether he was cutting in the right place. A few times he grazed his own head (thank god he was wearing a helmet), and he ripped the hood of his down parka. One time, I too fell under his busy hand, and a hole appeared in the sleeve of my parka. The wind happily snatched up the down and mixed it with the swirling snow, and we had to spit to clear our mouths because the down, though white as snow, did not melt in one's mouth.

After about an hour we crawled into the tent, which was beginning to remind us of a hen-house, with feathers swirling in the air. While I melted snow on the stove, Valery tried to use a bandage from the first-aid kit to prevent the last bits of down from escaping from his parka.



We passed that night in a half-delirious condition—neither Valery nor I could sleep at all. Therefore, we stirred ourselves long before light and set out with the sunrise. Now we were back on icy rocks; the leader climbed without a pack and hauled it up after each pitch. Near lunchtime the rocks ended and we climbed onto a relatively uncomplicated snow ridge, which led toward the summit tower. Valery's altimeter showed a height of 7,200 meters, and from this vantage point we could begin to see the other side of Jannu: huge snowfields extending to the south. We started the long climb toward the summit tower along snowy knife-edges. It seemed as if the tower was not far away, but night again found us still moving on the snowy ridge, between two gendarmes. Now used to swinging axes in the evenings, we chopped into the dense snow for two hours, and by the time the moon appeared we had crawled into the crookedly



Babanov below Jannu's 7,710-meter summit. The descent would require about 40 hours, concluding a 10-day round trip. *Sergey Kofanov*

erected tent. With a complete lack of appetite, we chewed on a piece of cheese and collapsed into half-conscious oblivion until morning.

Toward 11 a.m. on the morning of October 20, we reached the rocky summit tower, the base of which begins at 7,400 meters, according to Valery's altimeter. Only about 300 vertical meters remained before the summit. We decided to leave most of our things in the bergschrund, including the completely frozen digital camera, and continued upward with only the stove, a container of gas, our tent, and a film camera. In such a lightened state, we thought we should be able to climb to the summit and begin our descent that day—300 meters is not a lot, after all. But it soon became clear that we had underestimated the complexity of those final meters. For a few pitches we climbed at the edge of our abilities, expending large amounts of time.

Completely exhausted, we greeted nightfall among the steep pre-summit rocks at 7,600 meters. It was absolutely impossible to continue at night on such complex terrain, so we began swinging our hammers again, trying to cut something vaguely like a platform in the ice. We stopped when the axes began to strike sparks from the rocks; in order to cut deeper, we would have needed not ice tools but miners' picks.

For liabilities, we had one pick of Valery's Grivel bent to an improbable angle, and for assets we had a cubic meter of uneven platform space. It should have been clear to anyone that our tent wouldn't fit there, but in defiance of healthy common sense we nonetheless tried to squeeze it in. As a result, we broke one of tent poles, but we did not have the strength to repair it. We sat in the badly pitched tent as if we were sitting in a sack. All night we dangled our legs into the abyss, with no sleeping bag for warmth; parts of Valery lay on top of me because of lack of space.

To our delight, there was practically no wind—otherwise our chances of greeting the following morning in good health would have been severely diminished. Before crawling into the tent, we had beaten pitons into the icy wall and tied runners to them for anchors, lest by chance we fly downward with our tent during the night. Around 3 a.m. Valery asked me, "Seryoga, are you tied in?" I looked at my carabiners and said, "You know, I'm not." He said, "Me either." We'd already gone almost 24 hours without food and practically without water—if this wasn't the beginning of HACE, then we were very close to the edge of it.

The cold was cosmic. Sometimes we started up the stove in order to create the appearance of heat in the tent. The flame of the stove worked hypnotically upon my consciousness. I couldn't turn my gaze away from the fire; it simply bewitched me. It seemed that it drew the "I"

out of me—in those moments I became an absolutely empty shell, and the entire surrounding world was concentrated in this stove, the flame of which filled me from within. Nothing existed except it. It was the pillar of the universe. At times it seemed that it was not me holding the stove, but the stove holding me, and then I would slip into half-sleep and the burning stove would fall out of my hands, sometimes onto me, sometimes onto Valery. This would call me back to this world, and for the next ten minutes I would come to my senses and begin to grasp who I was and where we were.

Around 4 a.m., after the regular awakening-by-stove, it occurred to both of us simultaneously that we had to do something. Otherwise we risked simply not waking up, remaining forever with the phantasmagoria raging within our brains. We forced ourselves little by little to stir ourselves, stuff our tent into our pack, fasten the pack to the pitons we'd pounded into the wall, and climb a little farther.



No more than 100 meters of altitude remained before the summit, but it took us three hours to cover this distance. At about 9 a.m. Valery shouted to me that he was on the summit and that he could see our base camp. I pulled out the camera and began to photograph him. Slowly I approached Valery while he dropped a few meters to one side to free up room for me on top. When I reached his level, he told me that we were not on the summit after all, and pointed to the continuation of the snowy ridge. We spent another half-hour crossing the 30 or 40 meters to the true summit, which was so pointed that only one person could straddle it at a time.

On top we both understood that something had changed. It was as if we had crossed an invisible border into a different world, in which the old sense of what was possible no longer applied. Until this moment the world—the mountain—had led us to feel at times strong and invincible, at other times helpless and weak. The world had forced us to adapt. Now we had forced a change upon the world, and we both knew it would never be the same as before.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Kumbhakarna Himal, Nepal

ASCENT: Alpine-style first ascent of the west pillar of 7,710-meter Jannu (3,000m, WI4+ M5 80°), October 14–23, 2007, Valery Babanov and Sergey Kofanov. The two approached the 6,350-meter col between Jannu and Sobithongie from the north. They followed the 1983 French route up Jannu's summit tower. Descent via the same route.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Sergey Kofanov was born in 1978 in Ekaterinburg, Russia, and now lives in Moscow. He has been climbing for more than 15 years and has extensive climbing and guiding experience in the Caucasus, Tien-Shan, and Pamir ranges, as well as the Himalaya.



Babanov (left) and Kofanov on top.

Translated from the Russian by Henry Pickford.