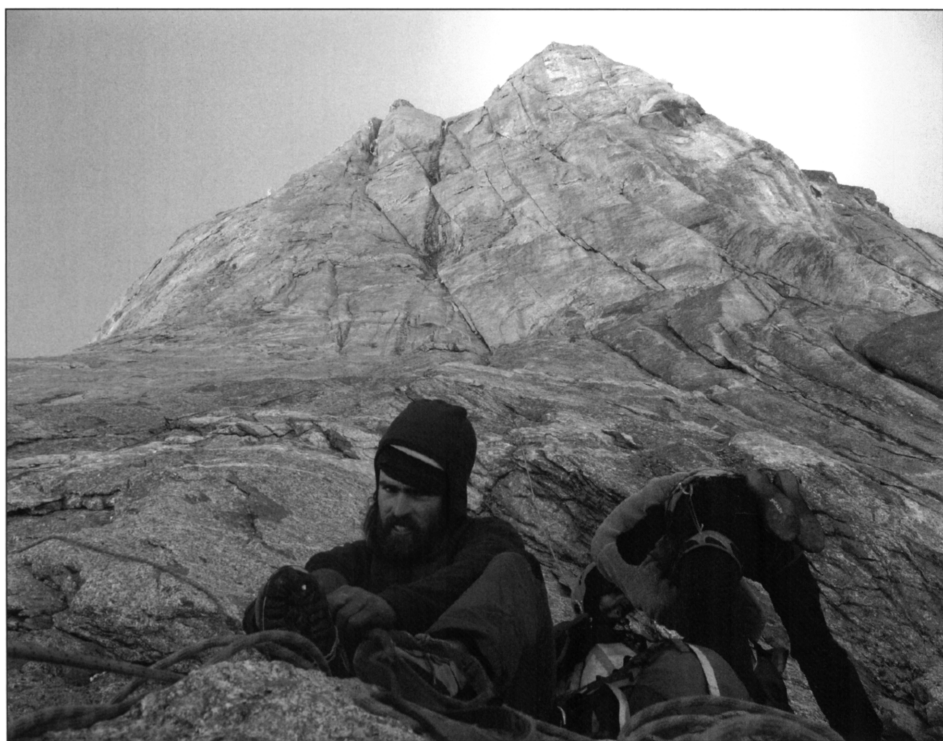


HANDHOLDS TO HEAVEN

Hard free-climbing on the rock walls of Pakistan's Charakusa Valley.

NICOLAS FAVRESSE



Sean Villanueva (left) and Olivier Favresse prepare to climb the final headwall cracks on Badal, a 26-pitch mostly free climb on the west flanks of K7 West. *Adam Pustelnik*

Beep, beep, beep.... It's one a.m. I wake in the middle of one of those dreams where nothing makes sense. It seems as though I've barely fallen asleep; but, no, it's already time to get up. I'm warm in my sleeping bag, and the thought of having to get out reminds me of those rough mornings before school the day after a mega climbing session with my friend Sean Villanueva. We were so motivated that we would end our sessions at home with pull-ups and weighted hangs, filling our climbing packs with bags of potatoes and bottles of olive oil; we would continue until we had drained ourselves of all our energy, nearing masochism, beyond midnight. The next day, getting out of bed was a piece of work, and thinking in school was even harder. But climbing was our passion!

Now I'm on an expedition in an isolated region of Pakistan: the Charakusa Valley. The big walls are all around us. It takes me a few minutes to come back to reality, and then I recall the magnitude of the day ahead. I close my eyes one last time and think about the gigantic needle we hope to climb, its beauty, the pleasure it will provide, the place where we are. That's it! I feel ready. All my anxieties about this attempt vanish, giving way only to positive thoughts. I get out of my sleeping bag and start to get dressed, respecting meticulously the layering that I had decided on the night before. The full moon is out, so powerful that we can barely see the stars. The weather forecast seems accurate: The sky is completely clear. Sean is already up, busy making porridge. He tells me he wasn't able to sleep; he was too excited.

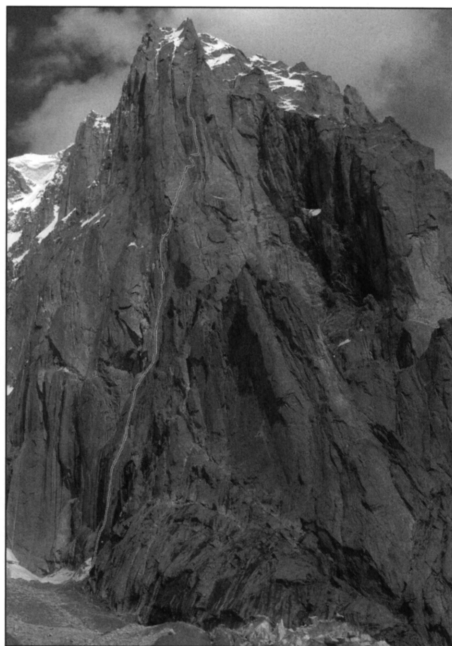


Sean Villanueva, my brother Olivier Favresse, and I (all members of the Belgian Alpine Club Rock Climbing Team), and Adam Pustelnik from Poland (Hi-Mountain Team) have traveled to the Charakusa Valley to free-climb new routes on steep rock faces in the best style we can. We had known this was a great area for traditional alpine climbing, but it wasn't clear whether we would find the steep faces of good granite we were looking for. What kept us going was our faith in a few statements by previous explorers, mentioning the great rock climbing potential.

It's our first time in Pakistan, and we are extremely impressed by the kindness of the local people. A week after our arrival in Islamabad, we reach K7 base camp (4,200 meters) in the Charakusa Valley, after three casual days of trekking from the village of Hushe. We set up camp along a stream next to a moraine in a grassy field full of beautiful granite boulders. The bouldering here is top-class, with plenty of problems of all difficulties.

None of us has had much experience with such altitude; three of us have never been above 3,500 meters. Acclimatizing feels like we're getting spanked at first. It doesn't help that we're underestimating these walls' size by a factor of three. Near our camp is a crack-covered cliff called the Iqbal Wall that looks perfect for an "easier" adventure day. We estimate the wall at 150 meters high. It turns out to be about 400 meters.

We decide to split into two teams for two different lines on the Iqbal Wall. Olivier and Adam go for a beautiful dihedral on the left side of the wall, while Sean and I head for some thin cracks through the steepest part. We feel very sure of ourselves—it should be casual to put up two new routes in one day! But we quickly learn our lesson. Sean and I bail at a free-climbing dead end at the top of our fourth pitch, completely exhausted by the altitude.



The Belgian-Polish team stopped climbing when the line of Badal reached lower-angle rock and snow. Although they had hoped to reach the summit of the "Badal Wall" formation, about 300 meters higher, lack of food and a forecast for eight days of bad weather convinced them to descend. *Nicolas Favresse*



Villanueva scopes the route ahead. *Adam Pustelnik*

Meanwhile, Olivier and Adam have a much worse experience. On the sixth pitch of their dihedral, Olivier detaches a fridge-sized rock despite hardly touching it. He tries to hold the rock in place, but it's way too heavy. The huge rock rolls over his back while Olivier manages to hang on, and then it bounces down the dihedral and glances off Adam's foot—and fortunately just his foot! His heel is completely cut open in the Achilles area.

In normal conditions, such a cut would have healed after 10 days, but at this altitude everything heals slower and hygiene is harder to maintain. During the whole expedition, Adam's wound will never recover completely, and he won't be able to wear his climbing shoes or do any free-climbing. Despite his ugly wound, however, he joins us on all of our projects and strongly contributes to the success of the expedition.



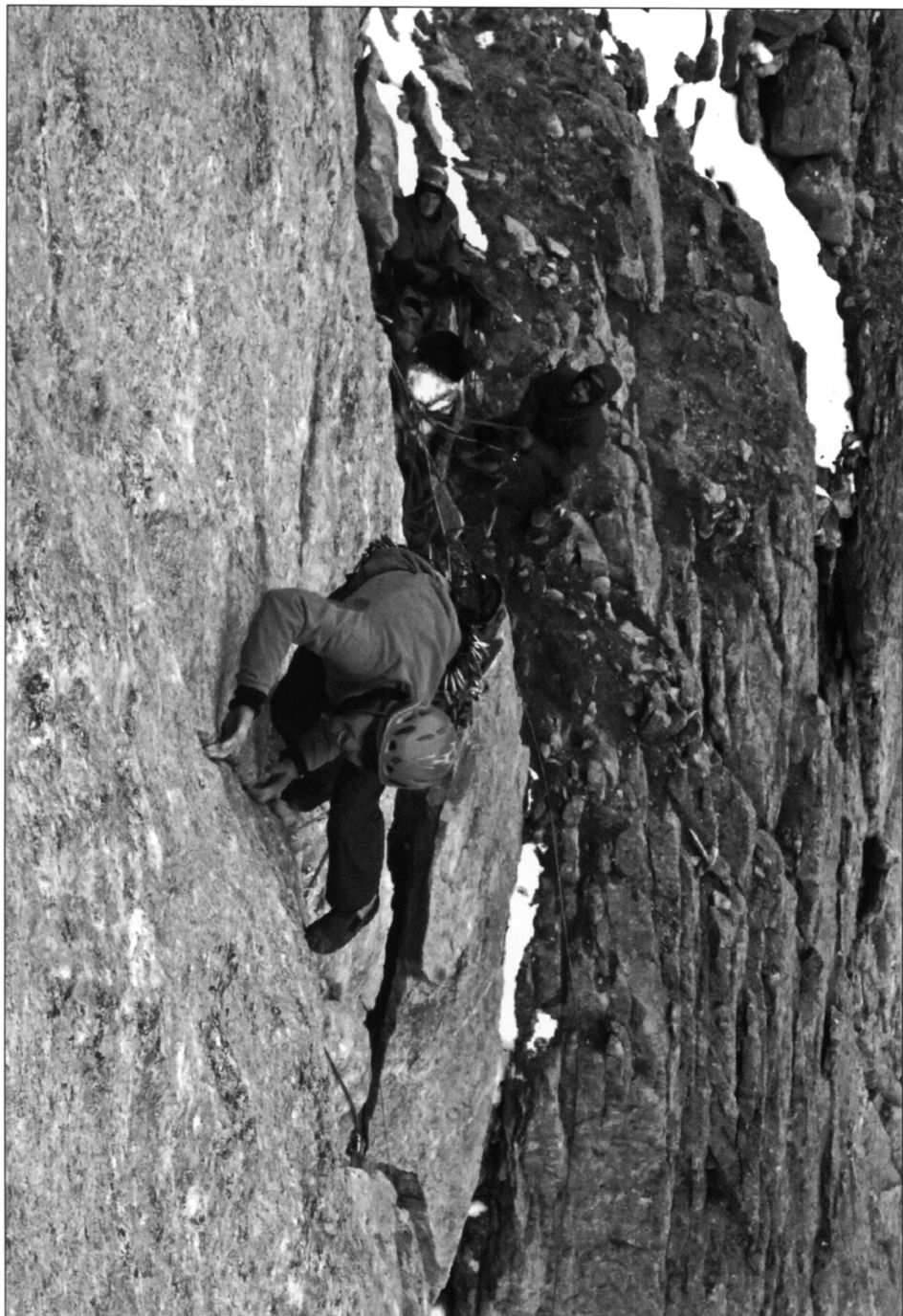
After unsuccessful lightweight attempts on two different faces, we reconsider our strategy. Right in front of our base camp, along the west side of K7 West, is a major wall, some 1,200 meters high. After asking local people about it and looking at our notes, we are surprised to learn that probably no one has climbed or even attempted this face. For this huge objective we pack about 20 days worth of food, aiming to stay on the wall either until there isn't any more food or the summit is made. Going big-wall-style seems like a good way to get our bodies acclimatized to this altitude.

Sean and Adam do a day of reconnaissance on the first eight pitches, and then we launch. Once on the wall we climb capsule-style; we fix rope above our camps until we find a well-protected ledge, and then move our camp upward. During the climb we establish three camps.

The first seven pitches follow a steep dihedral leading to a snow patch, our first camp. Up to pitch 11 the best route is easy to follow, with straight-up crack systems. But on pitch 12 the path becomes much trickier. I am not an aid climbing expert, so I have to spend six hours aid-climbing the line, with many hook moves and beak placements. But even though the aid climbing is quite difficult (I'm guessing around A3+), we find a way to free-climb the pitch using small crimpers on pre-fixed, run-out gear, at a difficulty of around 7c (5.12d).

Beautiful cracks take us up the wall past two more camps, at pitch 14 and pitch 20. Above the 16th pitch are amazing cracks on a steep headwall. And after 15 days (seven of them stuck in snowstorms) and 26 long pitches of sustained and steep climbing (all free except for five meters of icy crack on pitch 24 that would not be an issue to free in good conditions) we reach the top of the rock face at an altitude around 6,000 meters.

Unfortunately, the forecast calls for eight days of bad weather. We no longer have enough food to wait for good conditions to climb snow to the real summit, about 300 meters higher. Anyway, the rock and the free climbing are what we've really come for. But we have to admit that topping out would have been icing on the cake.



Nicolas Favresse leads the crux 12th pitch of Badal. The first ascent of this pitch required six hours of aid climbing, with many hook and beak placements, and the free climbing went at 5.12+, with just one bolt. *Adam Pustelnik*

Back in base camp we quickly refill our empty reserves with some actual cake and whiskey. We call our new route Badal, which, according to our guide, Raja Nafees, means “mix cloudy” in Urdu. We had thought “mix cloudy” meant good weather for climbing, but in the end we’ve found it means mostly bad.



Deep up the valley is a beautiful needle detached from the south side of K7. To us it seems like the nicest feature in the area for free climbing. The quality of the granite is excellent, and the wall magically appears to have splitter cracks all over it. After studying past expeditions’ accounts, we learn that climbers had tried the left side of this feature in big-wall style, but didn’t succeed. It’s almost like a dream to find this virgin piece of rock.

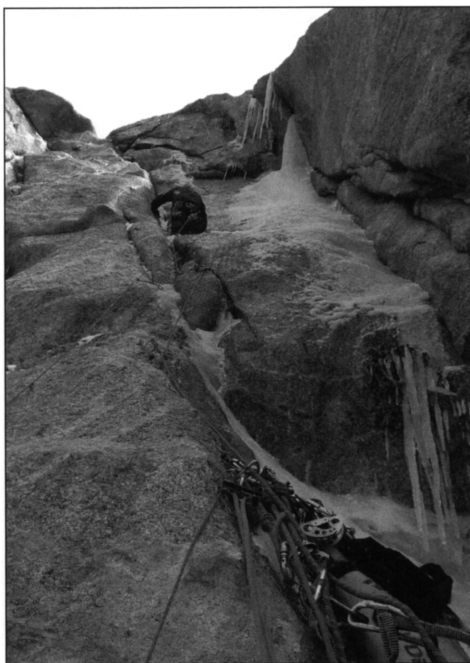
Early in our expedition, we tried to climb the longest and most obvious line on this needle, the south ridge. But we were exhausted from not being well acclimatized, and we reached a free-climbing dead end about 10 pitches up. Thirty days later, after climbing Badal, we couldn’t be better acclimatized, and after scoping the wall we decide to try again, following a slightly different crack system. Our strategy is to go light and fast, with no bivvy gear. We pack a stove for melting snow, four bolts, and about 10 pitons.



At two a.m. we leave base camp without headlamps in a mystical light created by the moon. All the summits are visible. I can hear only our shoes crushing the ice. We are dumbfounded by the lunar ambience. Stopping by a water-filled crevasse, we try to drink as much as possible, but it is so cold that my teeth freeze each time I swallow. We’ll have to make do with three liters of water until we find snow to melt on the route. We can’t waste any time!

Around 4:30 a.m. we reach the foot of the needle. It is so big and beautiful that it is hard to look away. We put on crampons and climb up a gully threatened by hanging glaciers. I feel so vulnerable, but reason reassures me, reminding me that conditions are good. We reach a little ledge, sheltered from the seracs, and now we only have to overcome an ocean of granite to reach the summit. Without wasting a second, I put on my climbing shoes and am warmly welcomed by a beautiful offwidth. It’s only the beginning and I am already fighting with all my might. “Off belay—blue rope coming up—rope, Adam, fixed!” There we go, we’re on it. We have thought so much about this route that we are like preprogrammed machines. I look around me and the sun is already lighting up the summit of Kapura.

Sean, Olivier, and I share the leading, and we follow most pitches free. Adam jugs up with



Villanueva leads the icy final pitch of Badal before reaching low-angle rock and snow patches. This pitch went free, with boots and ice tools, but an icy crack two pitches below required five meters of aid. *Nicolas Favresse*



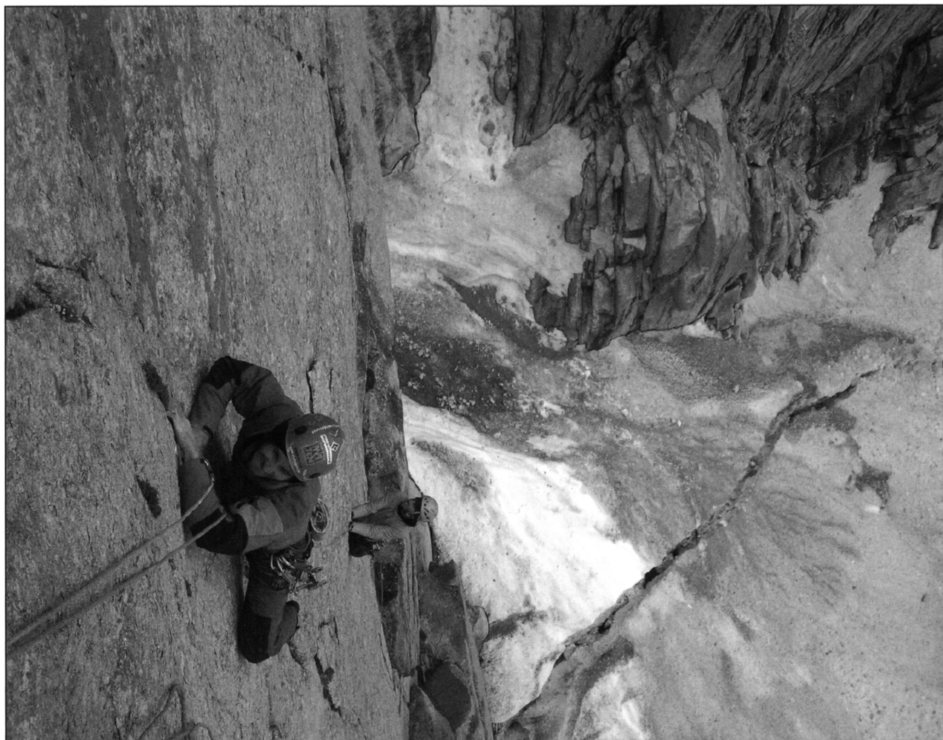
Nafees' Cap stands below K7 (right) and K7 Central, with the line of Ledge-way to Heaven marked. The four men climbed the 28-pitch route all free at 5.12+ in a 40-hour round trip from base camp. At least one team had previously attempted the left side of the formation. *Olivier Favresse*

a huge pack because he still can't put on his climbing shoes. The altitude and the hygiene didn't help his healing, but his mind has remained strong, which impresses us a lot. He makes our task much easier by carrying lots of gear, which enables us to move faster.

Below the fourth pitch, no cracks are visible ahead. The only way is to climb an unprotectable ridge. During our first attempt on this spire, we had wondered if we would have to place a protection bolt here. It didn't look too hard, but the climbing was delicate, not allowing for any mistakes. It was Sean's turn to lead. The rock was lightly covered with green lichen, not helping Sean with his confidence, especially considering that a fall could be lethal. I could barely look. Sean made some progress, but then hesitated. Once he committed to this crux, retreat would likely have been impossible. He tried the moves a few times, then he looked at me with an expression of regret and said, "Give me the hand drill!" I opened my pack to find the gear, but before I could send it up to him I realized that, without a word, he was going for it!

Demonstrating total mental control, he was quickly through the hardest part. A climb like this feels like a big video game, where each pitch represents a unique test that we have to pass in order to continue to the next level. Now, during our second attempt on the route, this test is much easier, since we know what is coming.

Offwidths, chimneys, finger cracks, dihedrals—we quickly link the pitches. Sean sends a superb pitch, worthy of the most beautiful leads on the Nose in Yosemite, and then comes the big question mark. It's our 12th pitch, and we're near the dead end we had encountered during our previous attempt. This time we'll either follow a thin, oblique crack, or attempt a traverse farther left toward a bulge, without knowing what lies beyond. After some hesitation I climb up the thin crack. Then, looking to the left, I change my mind and attempt the traverse. I fall. I try again, but it's very hard. The smooth wall has barely any holds, but I feel drawn to it like a magnet. I try to traverse higher, lower, then a hold breaks. With every try, my heart races and I am completely out of breath. Last try, because time is precious. I rub my shoes and go for it, as confidently as I can. In the middle of the crux, I realize that my sequence will not work. I change plans instantly and throw myself into a battle with fingernail crimpers. And...yes! It works! Behind the corner, I find another crack system that puts us back on track. Now the summit



Brothers Olivier Favresse (top) and Nicolas Favresse follow the second pitch (5.11+) of Ledge-way to Heaven. "No one wants to jug on such beautiful pitches!" Sean Villanueva

seems to be reflecting in my shining eyes.

Soon we reach a lower-angled section. It's around two p.m., and we are about a third of the way up the face. We have already been climbing for nine hours. Now we are able to move faster for about 300 meters, with four people simul-climbing, but fatigue and the altitude are starting to take over.

My brother Olivier has major stomach problems. He offers to go down alone with one rope or to wait for us on a ledge until we come down. But we insist on sticking together, whether we go up or down. We agree to keep moving and see how it goes. By dusk we are still far from the summit and Olivier's state is not improving. At the end of each pitch he is completely exhausted, and on each ledge he falls asleep. During a pendulum, he retches. We have to watch him carefully to make sure he doesn't make a foolish mistake. But we don't want to turn around, now that we are so far up. We each help Olivier as much as we can, and Adam heats water for tea whenever we find snow on ledges. All night we keep climbing. Each time we think we are at a dead end, a little miracle happens.

Around seven a.m. we all arrive on the summit of the needle. A magnificent sunrise lights up K7, K6, and Kapura—an amazing range of incredible summits surrounding us. Olivier tells us he is feeling better and thanks us for having pulled him up there.

The descent is long because we have to build every rappel anchor, but the nice weather stays with us. At dusk we set foot on the glacier, and around 8:30 p.m. we reach our base camp,

more than 40 hours after leaving. Our guide has prepared an amazing dinner. Yes, it is only rice with corn and a few green beans, and yet it seems to be filled with the lingering flavor from our new route, which I consider the most beautiful I have ever climbed.

We decide to name the climb *Ledgeway to Heaven* because it offers superb, comfortable ledges between the hard climbing, and we name the needle *Nafees' Cap*, in honor of our excellent guide.



A few days before our departure, Sean and I, along with Jerzy “Juras” Stefanski, a Polish climber in the area, return to the Iqbal Wall for some unfinished business. Our route follows an obvious oblique crack on one of the steepest parts of the wall. This time the climbing goes smoothly—completing a new route in a day on this formation now seems reasonable. We have come full circle.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Charakusa Valley, Pakistan Karakoram

ASCENTS: Capsule-style first ascent of Badal (1,200m, 5.12+ A1) on the west side of K7 West, all free except for five meters of icy cracks, by Nicolas and Olivier Favresse, Adam Pustelnik, and Sean Villanueva. The team reached the top of the rock wall at ca 6,000 meters on July 24, 2007, after 15 days on the face. They descended the next day. They fixed eight pitons and 12 bolts: six bolts to hang portaledge, four to reinforce belays, and two to protect free climbing. Single-push first ascent of *Nafees' Cap*, a spire at the base of K7's south face, by *Ledgeway to Heaven* (1,300m, 5.12+), Nicolas and Olivier Favresse, Adam Pustelnik, and Sean Villanueva, late July 2007. The climbers left one bolt and one piton on the route. All 28 pitches were led free, and most were followed free by at least one climber. First ascent of the *Ski Track* (400m, 5.11) on the Iqbal Wall, Nicolas Favresse, Jerzy Stefanski, and Sean Villanueva, early August 2007.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

From the smallest boulder to the highest mountain, Nicolas Favresse likes everything about climbing. Born in Brussels, Belgium, in 1980, he is a full-time climber, and home is two vans on two different continents. Favresse notes: “We were extremely disappointed to see that other expeditions had left trash near their base camps. We came down with two full trash bags of other people’s garbage. How is it possible that people come to this beautiful setting without respecting it?”

Portions of this article previously appeared in the journal of the Brabant section of the Belgian Alpine Club and were translated from the French by Caroline George.



The team, from left: Raja Nafees, Olivier Favresse, Sean Villanueva, Nicolas Favresse, and Adam Pustelnik. Olivier Favresse