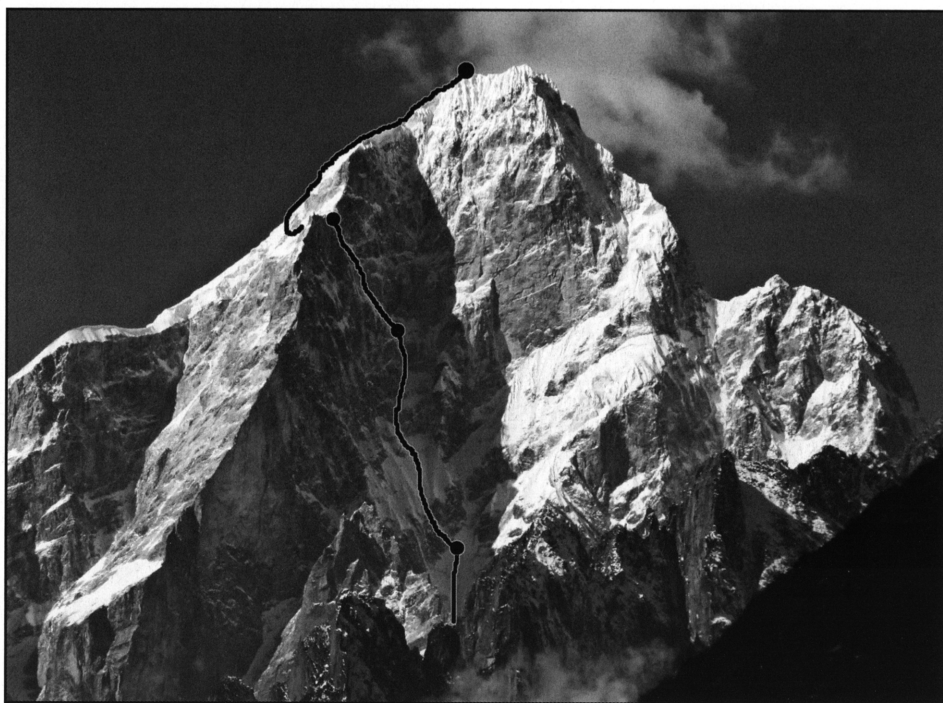


THE ROSE OF NO-MAN'S LAND

Eight days under threat on the east face of Mt. Edgar, in Sichuan, yields a route almost too dangerous to be proud of.

BRUCE NORMAND



Edgar viewed from Yanzi Gou to the east-southeast. Marked is The Rose of No-Man's Land climbed by Kyle Dempster and Bruce Normand. The smaller inset face to the left, rising to the lower south ridge, was likely the goal of the ill-fated American expedition. *Tamotsu Nakamura*

There's nothing neutral about Mt. Edgar. It's stunning and savage. It's beautiful and deadly. It's amazing climbing with incredible dangers. Kyle Dempster and I stepped into the Casino Edgar in November of 2010. We didn't lose our shirts, but the old adage always holds true: nobody beats The House.

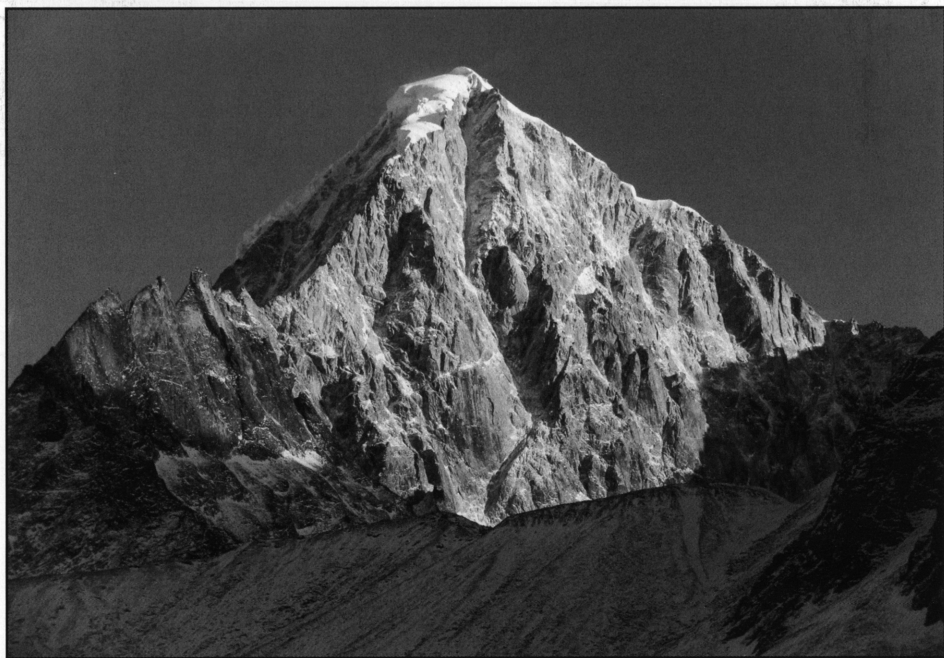
The Minya Konka Range in southwestern China's Sichuan province is barely larger than the Mont Blanc massif. However, it hides more than ten 6,000-meter summits, each with only a single ascent, or fewer. The place offers serious potential for alpine-style new routes on little-known and highly committing peaks.

This sort of adventure is precisely what Kyle Dempster and I were looking for when we planned another sortie into the remote summits of Western China. We'd found plenty of it on the Xuelian peaks in 2009, and we'd talked a lot about climbing philosophy as a result. In 2010 we were after more of the same, minus the talking.

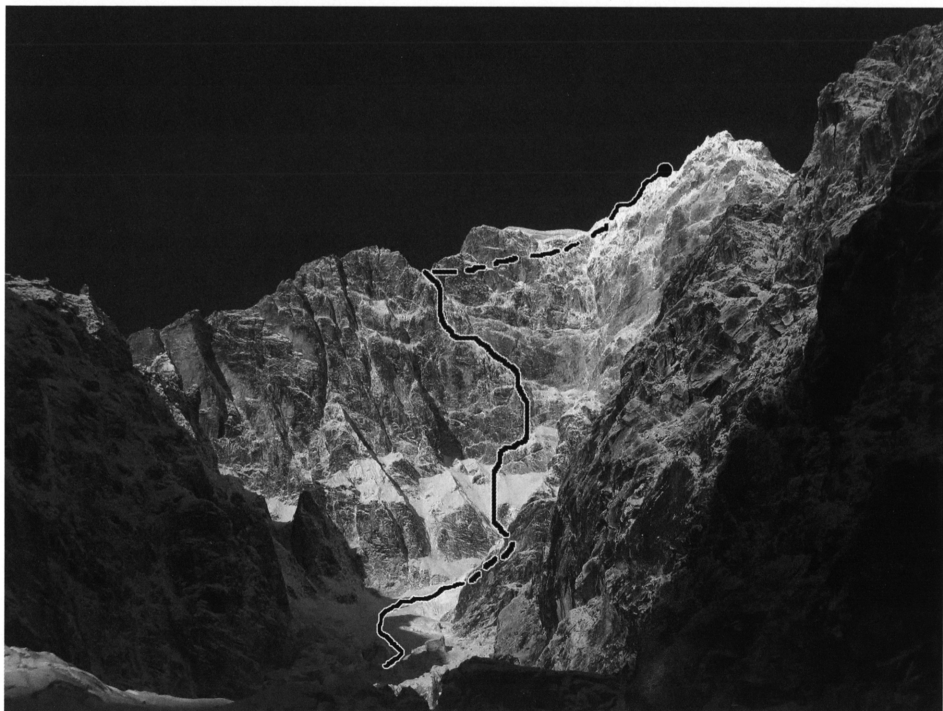
It's not easy to think about hard alpine-style climbing around Minya Konka without running into the specter of Edgar. Though the peak was climbed by Koreans in 2002, the climbing world didn't sit up and notice until 2008, when Tamotsu Nakamura published his iconic picture of Edgar's stunning east face. Two teams tried to climb it the following spring. The first—Alexandr Ruchkin and Mikhail Mikhailov—failed even to find it because of weather. The second—Johnny Copp, Micah Dash, and Wade Johnson—was killed in an avalanche after they'd decided the face was too dangerous to climb.

Kyle and I complement each other. I'm the scientist and he's the artist. I have all the details under control; he has the big picture. I get stuff done; he has fun doing it. I'm your guy for the drudge work; he's your guy for the spectacular finishing moves. This said, we both had exactly the same feelings about the east face of Edgar: equal parts attraction and repulsion. Kyle's emotions were even stronger than mine, not least because he felt a deeper connection to Johnny and Micah through shared American climbing circles. After a lot of talking, we decided we'd have to go. We opened the door and, in its all-or-nothing way, Edgar sucked us in.

We knew the approach to Edgar would be no place to hang around, so we decided to climb in a single push from the base. That meant acclimating somewhere else, and for this we chose the high valleys on the western side of the Minya Konka Range. We were accompa-



Mt. Grosvenor (a.k.a., Riwuqie Feng, 6,376m) from the west. Kyle Dempster and Bruce Normand climbed the obvious central line in the face, making the peak's second ascent. From the top they climbed a little way down the left skyline before rappelling the north face, part of which is visible in shadow. Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne climbed the right ridge in 2003 for the peak's first ascent (AAJ 2004, pp. 418–420). *Bruce Normand*



The east face of Edgar showing The Rose of No-Man's Land as seen from ca 4,200m in the dangerous approach gully.
Bruce Normand

nied by accomplished French alpinists Jean Annequin and Christian Trommsdorff, climbing as a separate pair, and by premier Chinese alpinist and logistics expert Yan Dongdong.

We made all our preparations in Chengdu and Kangding, and then trekked in two very short days to a base camp in Shang Riwuqie (4,300m). Dongdong and I had been there the previous winter, and we knew it would be a good place to spend two weeks hiking, climbing, and eating. The local peaks, including Little Konka (5,924m), Jiazi Feng (6,540m), Mt. Grosvenor (Riwuqie Feng, 6,376m), and Leduomanyin (6,112m), offer plenty of climbing challenges, spiced up by biting west winds that blow off the Tibetan plateau.

In addition to the hiking and eating, we did one piece of climbing: the central couloir on the west face of Grosvenor, which rose directly above our camp. This route had been tried twice before, including by Andy Cave and Mick Fowler in 2003, but the parties had been turned back by dry conditions. When Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma made the first and only ascent of Grosvenor in November 2003, they took shorter couloir leading to the southwest ridge.

In Sichuan most snow falls in summer, which makes autumn, when we were there, the season to find ice. Kyle and I decided on a single-push strategy and left base camp at 3 a.m. We cruised unroped all the way to the crux (at 5,800m), and by noon had climbed its two thin pitches. Unlike all our preparation days, this day turned cold, with clouds, strong wind, and occasional snow. We simul-climbed the upper couloir all afternoon until some nice exit moves. A little sunshine through the wind-torn clouds greeted us on the summit at 6 p.m. Off to the east, Mt. Edgar looked menacing.



Dempster enjoying some of Edgar's best ice. *Bruce Normand*

The descent was no giveaway: like the first-ascent party, we made a little progress down the increasingly corniced northeast ridge until dark. Then we launched into 15 rappels down the precipitous north face, arriving in the upper glacier basin at 2 a.m., where a little walking took us to an icefall. We'd been on the go for 24 hours in the cold and the wind, so we stopped to bivouac, returning to base camp the following day.

Mt. Edgar was an altogether different story. On the east side of the range, its approach begins on verdant valley floors at only 1,500 meters. Misty, rainy weather is the norm for about 300 days of the year. With over 2,000 meters of precipitous forested slopes and blown-out river gorges between the fields and the mountains, this region shrouds its peaks in a special brand of mystery.

Sure enough, we had to start our approach blind, spending the first day in a landscape of cloud-forests and moraine-like canyon walls. We'd asked a porter to help with a gear bag, and his cluelessness about where we were heightened the mystery. On the second day, one porter lighter, we were still navigating in mist up unstable, vertical-sided river cuts. Occasional rocks would fall and bounce toward us. This place would be hell in the rain. Light snow started falling as we pitched camp on the edge of a small glacier at 4,100 meters. The cliffs above us were veiled in clouds.

On the third day, everything became clear. Glistening in the sunshine of a cloudless morning, a massive, rimed-up rock face towered directly above us. The east face is a shallow scoop with a dry, vertical, southeast-facing side below the true summit; a shaded, northeast-facing side seamed with several thin ice lines; and a central drainage gully

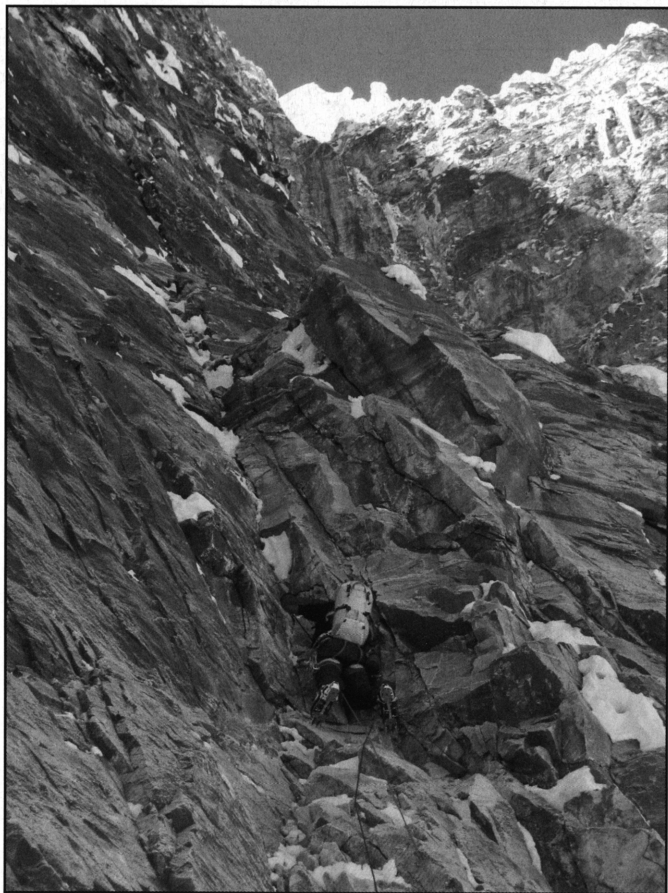
catching everything that falls off the cornice line rimming the face. The narrow access glacier-gully avalanched as we watched, a wave of powder billowing down and over us.

We waited two hours until the sun was off the glacier and then we continued up the approach, the air still threatening. We found a huge slide line, which at least made it easy to tell where the dangers were. My heart was hammering from more than just our speed. Later we saw the serac that caused the slide, and at 5,000 meters we were beyond it, post-holing in knee-deep snow. The relief was worth the extra effort. We slogged on up the steepening gully, pulling ever closer to the face. We pitched camp by digging a semi-cave at the foot of the first ice ramp, astonished to find ourselves already at 5,500 meters.

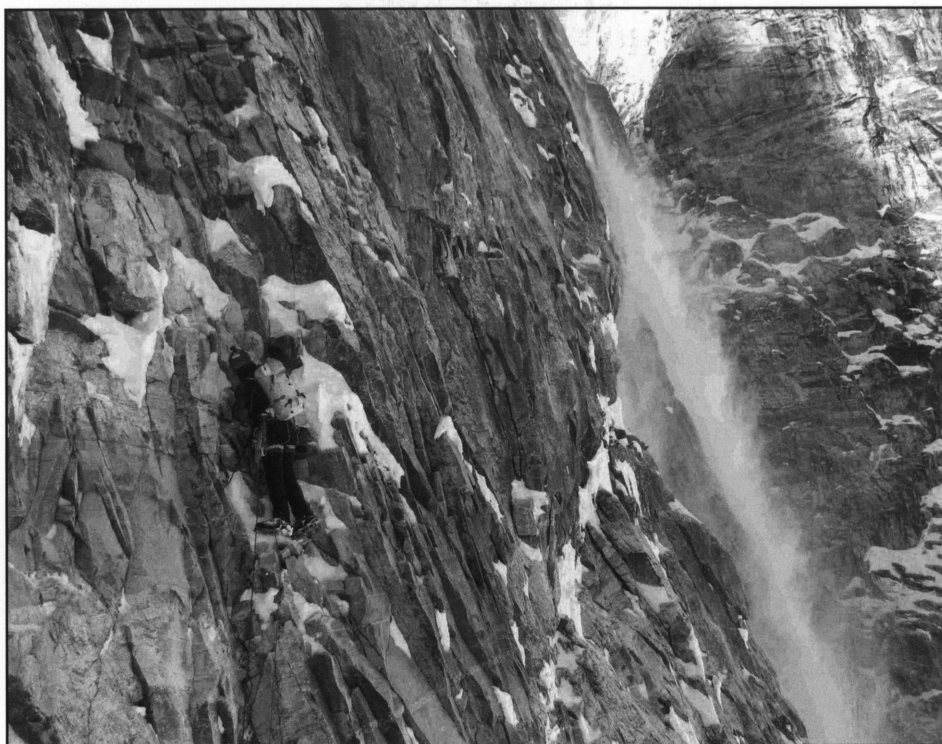
Two atmospheric pitches up the ice ramp in the morning sun, followed by more steep snow, took us to 5,800 meters. The serac behind us calved again, sending another wave of blocks down the glacier. We didn't need the hint. We had to stay out of harm's way by sticking to the left wall. Kyle chose to start the serious climbing in a faint dihedral, which turned into M6 dry-tooling. The climbing was thin and punishingly steep, and the exit moves tenuous, but at least the rock was solid and took protection much better than we'd feared.

While Kyle was working steadily on the lead, the easier option in the main drainage gully was getting pounded by a falling cornice. We'd definitely made the right choice, and a quick flash of relief moderated my trepidation about the climbing to come.

Despite the heavier pack, following was fun: small but positive edges and good hooks. Three pitches of steep thin ice followed. Kyle stayed on lead, climbing delicately to leave at least a little ice still glued to the slabs beneath. More fun for me, solving a different balance problem in his tracks. At nightfall we pulled into the snowfield we'd been aiming for, but it was steep and icy. The only option was a sitting



Dempster leading the M6 mostly dry-tooling pitch on Edgar. Bruce Normand

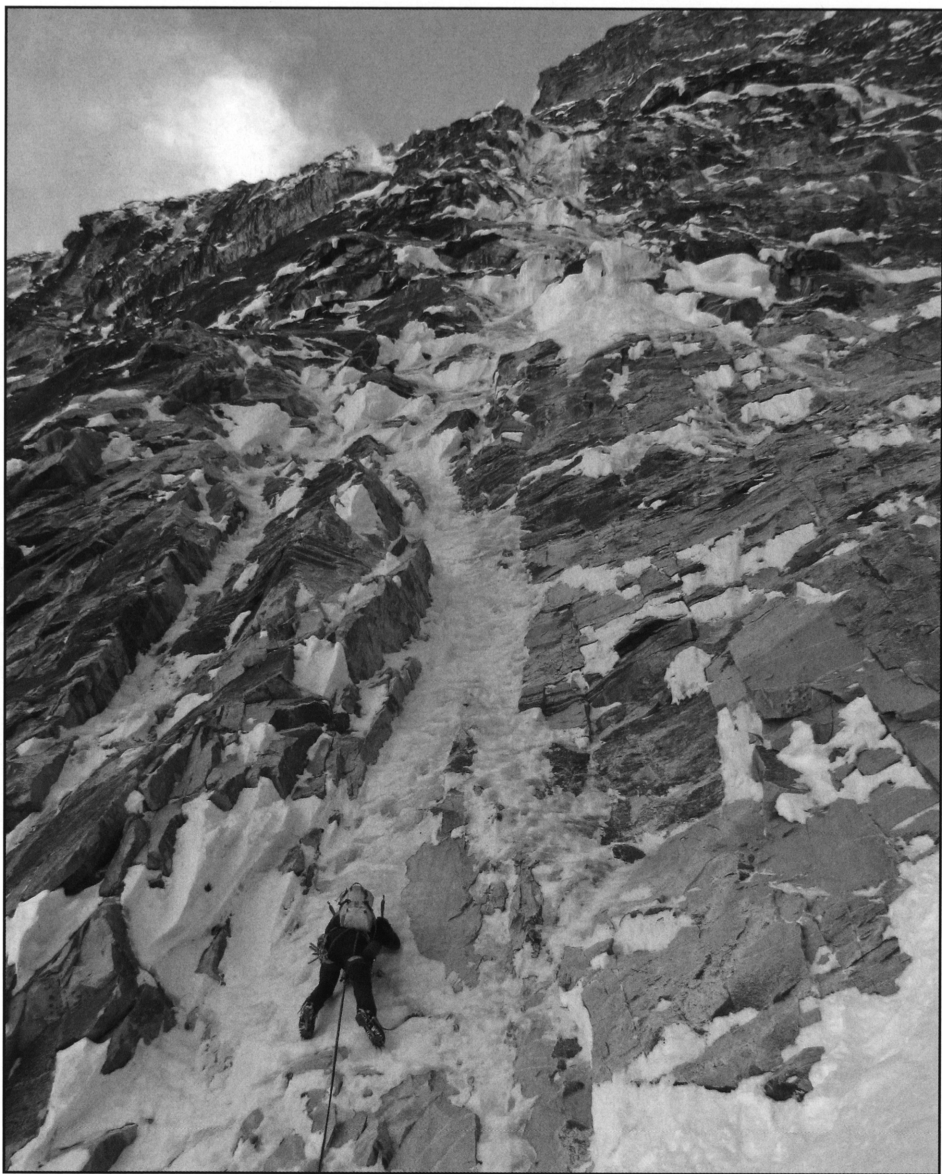


Dempster on rocky M6 with typical Edgar action in the background. *Bruce Normand*

bivouac on two shelves we hacked out. The night was calm and clear as we brewed up while watching the stars, but in the morning the winds rose slightly and we found we were sitting in a spindrift funnel.

The fifth day served up some new threats. The first was the weather, cloudier with wind whipping around the ridgeline above us. The second was the ice, which was thin, then breakable, and finally non-existent. Kyle, leading over the tenuous, slabby ground, was forced to remove almost every vestige of white stuff to dry-tool the features beneath. It was a taxing day, both from the nature of the climbing and from the ever-present possibility of a checkmate, followed by that horribly dangerous descent yawning beneath us. Finally we worked our way up a shallow dihedral below a roof and pulled out onto a snowy col in a howling gale. We were through. We threw up the tent and dived inside to rest and refuel.

The wind did not relent. Our perch, at 6,200 meters, had a stunning view of Minya Konka trailing a wind cloud and up the summit ridge of Edgar. Reaching the summit ridge required a long ice traverse into the south-facing slopes and up through a serac line to the rounded south ridge. Now the threat was exhaustion, which was prowling close by. We summoned reserves and pushed on to the summit, arriving at 2:30 p.m. on hands and knees to make sure we found the cornice line before it found us. By this time the stormy wind had brought in a full white-out: There was no view and no celebrating, only the stock two-man photo shot at arm's length.



One of the long ice pitches on Edgar. *Bruce Normand*

We launched into a fast and blind descent, aiming for a high glacier basin we'd mapped out from above. Easy slopes brought us down to 5,700 meters, out of the worst of the wind, but the snow thickened as the angle dropped. We ground to a halt in a bivouac spot under a rock as fresh snow started to fall. The threat that night was that we had no idea where we were.

Another sunny morning gave hope that the glacier might not be too bad. Hours of deep snow, deep slots, down-climbing ice fins, and rappelling into crevasses dashed these hopes.



The difficult climbing continued even on the south ridge. *Bruce Normand*

The weather gave out and we were on a first-descent in zero visibility. The threat grew of starving to death lost in a maze. For a while we found the easiest going was between rock and ice on the true left, but as night fell we found ourselves marooned on steep, dirty slabs with icing ropes and nothing at all for a rappel anchor. We were still at 4,300 meters.

Our eighth day dawned as misty as ever, with thickly falling snow adding avalanche danger to the mix. We ate the last of our food—one way or another, we wouldn't be needing it later. We found an anchor, nearly failed to pull the icy ropes, and down-climbed through endless steep, loose boulders and gullies. At 3,600 meters things flattened out, the snow deepened, and then we were thrown into a streambed like the ones we'd climbed a week earlier. At 3,300 meters the river gave suddenly onto a road. We were down. We walked for a bit, then hitched a ride out with some construction workers in a classic Chinese Dongfeng truck, which left us feeling a little seasick when we finally walked on Moxi's main street.

On the surface, we got what we came for: a hard line on a hard peak, which we climbed in pure alpine style (we left only some rappel slings and two dropped items on the mountain). For both Kyle and me, however, the result was at best a tie—a borderline-epic adventure in a permanently threatening atmosphere. We might have done the hardest technical climbing yet attempted in the Minya Konka Range, but the outcome was not a feeling of success, or even of satisfaction, but rather one of relief to have made it up and off this mountain in one piece.

I try to picture how we'd have felt about Edgar if it had not claimed the lives of Johnny, Micah, and Wade. Our heads would have been lighter. We'd have cracked more jokes. We might have taken the bouncing rocks and calving cornices, each snowfall and each wind gust,

more lightly—just parts of a package we felt we could deal with if we didn't already know this mountain was mean. Or maybe we'd have been shocked and frightened away, completely overwhelmed by the savagery of the place, if we hadn't had some idea of what to expect. I will never know. As I write this four months later, I can still feel the climbing, the teamwork, and the mountain atmosphere of that face. I no longer feel the same immediate dangers, but I still feel the threat.

Although not a very direct line, our route, The Rose of No-Man's Land, may be the only safe one on the east face of Edgar. Kyle and I would like to dedicate this route to the memory of Johnny Copp, Micah Dash, and Wade Johnson. We dedicate it not to the dark side of Mt. Edgar—the experiences they faced there—but to its light side: the spirit of adventure, the quest for beauty, and the infectious enthusiasm for the mountains that they brought to their friends and to the entire climbing community.

SUMMARY:

AREA: CHINA, SICHUAN, MINYA KONKA RANGE

Ascents: First ascent of the east face of Mt. Edgar (6,618m). The Rose of No-Man's Land (WI5 M6) was climbed by Kyle Dempster and Bruce Normand during an eight-day round-trip from the nearest town, summiting on November 12, 2010. The previously untouched east face and upper south ridge of Edgar rises 2,500m and features an objectively threatened approach couloir. The smaller southeast face to the left was where Jonny Copp, Micah Dash, and Wade Johnson were killed by an avalanche in 2009. Dempster and Normand made a difficult descent of the south ridge and complex south glacier in generally poor weather. Mt. Edgar had been climbed only once before, in 2001, by a Korean team that ascended the west face. Prior to Edgar, Dempster and Normand made the second ascent of Mt. Grosvenor (Riwuqie Feng, 6,376m). They climbed it via the central couloir on the west face, which had stopped two previous attempts due to dry (no ice) conditions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bruce Normand, 44, is from Scotland but lives in China, where he works as professor of physics at Renmin University (People's University) in Beijing. Author of more than 20 first ascents and new routes on 6,000m peaks in the Trans-Himalaya, he has also climbed K2.



Kyle Dempster (left) and Bruce Normand on the summit in a white-out. Bruce Normand