

41. The much comfier bivvi at the end of Day 3 at approximately 6550m. *(Nick Bullock)*



42. Down safe! Bullock (left) and Houseman at the base of the face on Day 5 after 14 hours of abseiling and down-climbing. *(Andy Houseman)*

time I weighted a foothold, expecting it to collapse. Finally we reached ice and quickly drilled a V-thread. A single 60m rap brought us back to the previous night's bivvi ledge. It was late in the afternoon, and since neither of us had the energy to chop another ledge lower down the face we spent a while on enlargement and settled in for one last night on the face.

After 14 hours of rappelling the next day, we crashed out in the cave at the base of the face, our rack gone but at last the true feelings of success sinking in. It was almost like standing on the summit again – but this time there were no niggling thoughts of unknowns still to overcome, just pure satisfaction.

Summary: Alpine-style first ascent of the central spur (1800m, ED+ M6) on the north face of Chang Himal (6802m) (aka Wedge Peak or Ramtang Chang), Kangchenjunga Himal, Nepal, 29 October – 2 November 2009, by Nick Bullock and Andy Houseman. The pair bivouacked at the base of the wall before and after the climb, making a total of six nights away from base camp.

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MICK FOWLER

'Mind the Gap'

Steep and Deep in the Tien Shan

After 35 years of mountaineering, to find myself dangling deep inside a dark crevasse came as a new and unwelcome experience. Paul Ramsden and I had been descending an unnamed glacier in the Xuelian area of the Chinese Tien Shan. The range had been visited by mountaineers just twice before and the glacier just once. I find unexplored terrain and remoteness great attractions when I am pondering objectives in comfort back in the UK – but somehow such criteria felt less appealing now.



43. Daylight beckons or taunts. From within the crevasse. (*Mick Fowler*)

I had been probing cautiously when, suddenly, the snow around me collapsed and I felt as if I was being sucked into the dark bowels of the glacier. I came to a halt 10m down, rotating slowly among dripping icicles. As these broke off like organ pipes, it struck me that wearing snowshoes and with only ski poles in my hands, making a quick exit would be on the challenging side. I dangled forlornly, eyes slowly adjusting to the limited light filtering down through my small entry hole. Above me our single 7mm rope cut deeply into the overhanging eaves. I had learned about crevasse rescue techniques on an Austrian Alpine Club course back in 1969. Perhaps now was the time to see how much I had retained.

Below, a fragile-looking ice bridge hung between apparently bottomless voids whilst above, the walls converged in such a fashion that climbing up the side wall and bridging out looked a possibility. That, though, would require crampons and axes both of which were attached to the back of



44. A question of balance; Fowler tackles a challenging river crossing. (*Paul Ramsden*)

my sack. In the dim light, hanging frustratingly close to the ice bridge, I removed snowshoes and poles and clipped them into my harness. Swinging my rucksack in front of me, I then picked short-sightedly at the tight knot in the thin black cord that I had thoughtlessly used to tie my crampons to my sack. Getting kitted out without dropping anything was not a job to be rushed.

By the time I was ready with axes out and crampons on, my down jacket was soaked and I was getting concerned about what Paul must be thinking on the surface. Communication was impossible, the snow and ice seemed to absorb all sound of my shouts. To my relief though, the rope seeming to be taken in as I ice-climbed the side-wall, bridged up and finally thrashed inelegantly out of my entry hole. Gasping on the surface I felt distinctly like an exhausted seal emerging from a blowhole. Paul commented that I looked like one too. Falling in crevasses, I decided, is not to be recommended.

Paul and I were in the Tien Shan mountains in western China aiming for the first ascent of the north ridge of Xuelian East. And things were not going quite according to plan. The plan was that we would begin by spending a couple of nights acclimatising at around 5200m and then descend to base camp for a day of eating before tackling our main objective. Early that morning we had finished our acclimatisation nights and set out intending to get back to base camp that day. However, the best laid plans…

By lunchtime a foot of snow had fallen, Paul had dipped below the surface in a crevasse and an hour had been spent sitting in our tent on the glacier because we had no option but to wait for better visibility. My little crevasse incident then intervened and by nightfall we had only managed to descend to the main Muzart glacier – a distance that had taken a mere three hours on the way up. By the next morning the snow depth was up to a metre and by evening still more had fallen and we were still only halfway



45. Ramsden follows up on the mixed band, Sulamar north face, Day 1. (*Mick Fowler*)

back to base camp. By the time we arrived there on the third day we had been without food for two days – more stretching than we would normally expect on a straightforward acclimatisation exercise.

With a metre of wet snow on the lower glacier, and goodness knows how much higher up, the prospect of a 25km wade to the foot of Xuelian East's north ridge was unappealing. It was time to instigate plan B, the north face of Sulamar, a 5380m peak which had attracted our attention in a panoramic view of the range and had dominated our walk in to base camp. From what we had seen, the face sported an eye-catching steep buttress leading directly to a summit visited just once before, by the British/NZ team of Bruce Normand, Guy McKinnon and Paul Knott in 2008. For all the face was unclimbed, it adorned numerous posters and tourist literature in Xinjiang. In fact the more we contemplated, the more enthused we became at the prospect. The fact that none of the photographs we had seen, or the views we had obtained, showed the bottom section of the face was merely an added uncertainty to the usual raft of uncertainties that go with climbing in the greater ranges. There was though one greater uncertainty – which valley was the foot of the face actually in? Our rudimentary map had disintegrated when one of our horses fell into a lake on the walk in and the answer was by no means obvious.

It was, then, with a sense of exploratory excitement that Paul and I left base camp, retraced our steps along the walk in, confused local Kazakh



46. ‘The rock was interesting or appalling depending on one’s take on such things.’ Ramsden gets to grips with the north face. (*Mick Fowler*)

herdsmen by wandering through their summer meadows wearing full mountaineering gear, and headed in the direction we hoped would lead to the north face of Sulamar.

Soon we were fording difficult watercourses, thrashing through lush, green vegetation and making crucial decisions about which way to go. Faced with such uncertainty, we were elated to exit from a long and delightful ablation valley late that afternoon in the knowledge that not only were we almost certainly the first mountaineers to pass this way but that we were in the right valley with no insuperable obstacles to reaching the foot of the face.

Pitching our little tent on snow at the foot of the face we ate noodles and crunchy fish heads (unable to understand the language, you never know what’s in these Chinese food tins until you open them) and scanned the full face for the first time. There looked to be some stunningly steep ice sections on the first half and difficult looking mixed ground towards the top. The main thing that struck us though was how big the face was for a 5380m peak. The height interval of about 1600m was actually greater than the height interval on our original 6400m objective.

‘4am alarm?’ suggested Paul. ‘Local time?’

The ‘local time’ bit is important in this part of the world as the Uyghur people use ‘local time’ whereas the majority Han Chinese population use Beijing time – which is two hours different. With both Chinese and Uyghur people involved in our trip the potential for confusion was high.

Local time or Chinese time aside, a clear night gave a good frost and we were pleased to be at the first difficulties, a steep band of snow-dusted rock, by daybreak. The difficulties and problems started immediately. The first pitch was mixed snow and ice and for reasons I still can’t explain both my crampons started to come off at the same time. Paul watched with an air



47. ‘Steep, uncompromising ground continued…’ Ramsden on Day 2. (*Mick Fowler*)

of detached despair as the minutes ticked by while I perched stork-like on little steps cut in the ice, securing each crampon in turn. By the time I had completed the process I was beginning to feel a bit of an expert at attaching crampons in tricky spots like inside crevasses and part way up technical pitches. Concerned about a repeat performance, I tied safety cords to each crampon but all was secure thereafter and the cords served no purpose other than to regularly trip me up.

The rock was interesting or appalling depending on one’s take on such things. It varied from coal-like black shale to shattered marble, both being equally unhelpful in terms of finding secure protection. With the benefit of hindsight it would have been easier to link together surprisingly crisp snow patches, but having committed ourselves to rock we persevered with time-consuming technical looseness, finally gaining what looked to be an

icefield above rather later than we would have liked.

In fact the 'icefield' was initially rock slabs covered in powder snow, demanding care and not at all the fast ground that we had hoped for. Above, though, lay distressingly obvious ice in the form of two unusual and very steep cones. How these ice cones had formed prompted a fair bit of discussion. The left hand one was near vertical for about 100m whereas the right hand one was perhaps 75 degrees. We concluded that they were almost certainly the result of particularly severe spindrift (fresh snow sliding off the face) avalanches and we would do well to get above them before the regular afternoon electrical storms began. It was not long before



48. Ramsden pushes on in storm conditions, Day 2. (*Mick Fowler*)

we had failed in our race against the elements and our theory had been proved correct.

The deluge was huge. Some 900m of face emptied vast quantities of hailstones down the shallow gully above the ice cone. I was belayed just to one side of the flow but even so the noise was akin to standing next to a speeding express train and the air full of choking, wind-blasted snow. Paul had just pulled out of sight and I could only hang there well muffled on my belay and wonder how he was doing. Nothing happened for a long time. Eventually the rope started to be taken in and I could only assume that I was expected to climb. It transpired that Paul had managed to cross the main flow before it came down and was belayed on the far side – a situation that inevitably meant I had to climb directly through the maelstrom – another memorable experience I do not care to repeat.

A brief attempt at further upwards progress failed and instead we focused on digging out (literally) a sitting bivouac shelf from the impressively loose and fractured rock. Later the clouds parted momentarily and it was reassuring to see that we were now level with the unclimbed peaks on the opposite side of the valley.

A grey dawn prompted gentle grumbling. Paul's back was aching and



49. Paul Ramsden on Sulamar's summit ridge, Day 3. (*Mick Fowler*)

my ribs were distinctly uncomfortable after a less than graceful slip in the bath at our last hotel. Understandably Paul took every opportunity to remind me about this embarrassing incident.

On the bright side though the spindrift had stopped, upward progress was possible and challenging climbing is a great cure for aches and pains. The section that stopped us the previous day was quickly despatched and in improving weather we made good progress up a pleasant snow crest, across an insecure traverse and up a shallow couloir with great climbing up steep icy steps. Way above us we could see a prominent overhanging rock wall we knew to mark the top of the face.

Paul and I tend to adopt a relaxed 9-to-5 approach to mountaineering. We enjoy savouring our limited time in the mountains and have no desire to rush up and down as quickly as possible. Usually we start keeping an eye open for reasonable bivouac sites from mid-afternoon. Here though there seemed good reasons to make an exception to the rule. Above us it was pretty obvious that steep, uncompromising ground continued all the way to the top and comfortable bivvi sites were non-existent. Furthermore it seemed just possible to get to the summit ridge and a probable spot to

pitch the tent before nightfall. The temptation was too much. We decided to climb into the night if necessary.

Having crossed this Rubicon, it was perhaps inevitable that the daily electrical storm should be earlier and more intense than usual. Clouds gathered, visibility shrank and the ground was regularly illuminated by wild flashes of blue followed instantaneously by ear-splitting cracks of thunder. The wind seemed to gust from all directions at the same time and around us the face was awash with spindrift. Regretting that we hadn't dug ourselves in earlier, we persevered. But it was hopeless. The combination of darkness, cloud and snow made the best route impossible to find. Cul de sacs abounded and there was nothing for it but to bivouac as best we could.

The chosen site from limited options was a small ice step under a slanting overhang. It was protected from the worst of the spindrift but inconvenient in every other possible way. After two hours we had fashioned an unattractively outward-sloping bucket seat and Paul had ripped his down jacket open on the jagged rocks of the overhang. The conditions remained wild and in an effort to keep crucial equipment dry and facilitate a quick exit if need be, we decided to don all our clothes, keep our boots on and not get into our sleeping bags. Having positioned ourselves within the tent fabric as best we could, we set about tying ourselves snugly into the belay loops that Paul's mother-in-law had expertly sewn through the corners.



50. Summit: Fowler (left) and Ramsden.

'She will be happy to know that her efforts are being put to good use,' commented Paul.

It was probably the last positive observation of the night. After less than an hour my fidgeting in particular was attracting adverse comment.

'What are you doing? Can't you sit still?'

I suppose Paul was justified in that a little fidgeting was indeed going on. At the time of his asking I was experimenting with a new position which involved a semi-inverted hang with my head down and knees and elbows against the slope. This went some way towards relieving pressure from my leg loops and restoring circulation in my legs but, as ever, it proved not to satisfactorily resolve the overall discomfort problem. Much to Paul's annoyance, I spent the rest of the night fidgeting badly in a never-ending quest for comfort.

Daybreak revealed that we had been hanging a mere 25m from an easy exit through the summit cornice. Even in the midst of the storm it wouldn't have taken more than 20 minutes to gain a spot where we could have escaped the face and fashioned a ledge for the tent.



51. Sulamar from above Xiate, Chinese Tien Shan. Sulamar and the north face centre stage. (*Jed Brown*)

But the difficulties were not over. Instead of a straightforward short ridge to the summit we were faced with a long and crenellated snow crest that was roasting hot on one side and frostily cold and windy on the other. Soon the snow on the sunny side was such that we convinced ourselves of the reasonableness of stopping earlier than our 3pm norm and enjoying an idyllic, relaxing afternoon brewing, reading and generally soaking up the view. In a pre-dawn start the next day it all seemed so much easier and an enjoyable ridge crest traverse in spectacular positions led to the summit.

Our descent of the previously unclimbed south ridge was very pleasant until we were seduced into descending an easy looking snow slope to the west. I shall refrain from detailed mention of memorable ice-cliff abseils and insecure soloing on shattered marble and simply conclude by noting that the sense of exploratory achievement and satisfaction of completing new climbs in rarely visited places is difficult to beat.

Back at base camp Abdul, our 'guide', had a celebratory beer to hand. We drank a toast with such enthusiasm that Paul cricked his neck and all further activity had to be put on hold for a day.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the north face of Sulamar (5380m) in the Xuelian area of the Chinese Tien Shan, Xinjiang province, by Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden, 30 August – 2 September 2010.

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