BRUCE NORMAND

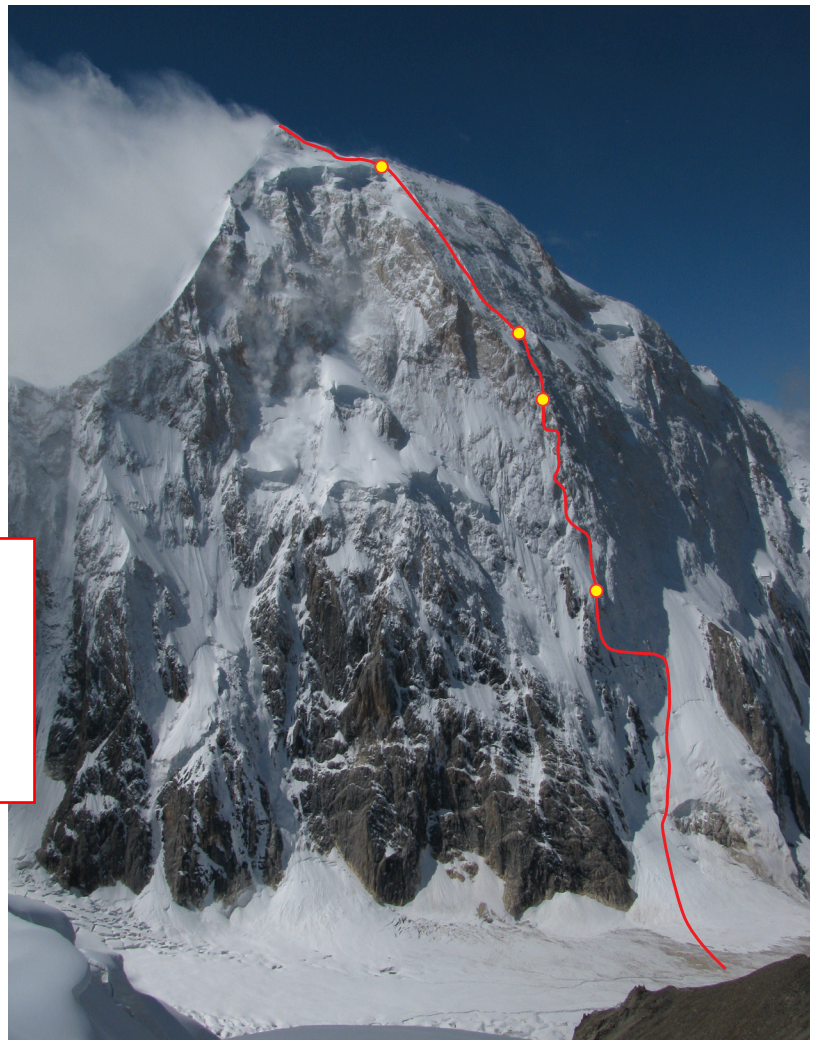
The Great White Jade Heist



52. Bruce Normand acclimatising on the west ridge of Xuelian North-east, with the Muzart glacier far below. *(Jed Brown)*

There is a blank on the map of world mountaineering in the eastern Tien Shan. In contrast to the heavily visited ex-Soviet part of the range, the Chinese part has seen only a handful of expeditions in recorded history. At the centre of the blank is Xuelian Feng, in translation 'Snow Lotus Peak'. My 2008 expedition with New Zealanders Paul Knott and Guy McKinnon was the first ever to approach the mountain from the north. What we found was a paradise for exploratory alpine climbing: a vast and entirely unknown region of peaks and glaciers in which the complex Xuelian massif offers challenging route options on a wealth of ridges, buttresses and sub-summits, all for a single China Xinjiang Mountaineering Association (CXMA) peak fee. The horizontal and vertical distances are just right for tackling expedition-scale problems in alpine style. The administration is quite simple. The approach is amazingly straightforward, with motorways and paved roads for 1000km from Urumqi, an easy gravel road for

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53. The north face of Xuelian West, Xinjiang Tien Shan, showing the line and camps of the Brown/Dempster/Normand route, *The Great White Jade Heist*. (*Bruce Normand*)

24km and a horse trek of only 22km in beautiful alpine scenery. The base camp at Hadamuzi occupies an idyllic, flower-strewn meadow with a jaw-dropping view directly into the biggest peaks. There's even a hot spring at the roadhead for soaking out the dirt, aches and odours at the end of a hard expedition.

On the down side, in summer at Hadamuzi it rains almost every evening, but then if it didn't there wouldn't be the flowers, streams flowing beside the cook tent or shower options where the water falls to the glacier. The local Kazakh horsemen tend to be stubborn, incompetent and usurious,



54. After the (first) storm: Dempster takes the air at breakfast on Day 3. (*Bruce Normand*)

demanding ridiculous fees, breaking agreed deals at any time and, when they do work, crushing loads and dropping them every kilometre. The spring and autumn seasons, which bring small numbers of trekkers to or through Hadamuzi, also seem to bring vast amounts of rubbish. In August 2008 we cleaned up everything we could find, but arriving in 2009 the place looked like a landfill. We removed more than 30kg of burnable garbage, 30 plastic drink bottles and 30 cans of cooking gas.

In 2008 the weather was not helpful, but a lot of glacier travel and snow-climbing took us to some 5400m viewpoints revealing much of the range. The Xuelian massif contains, in addition to the 6627m main peak, four distinct 6000m satellites and one major outlier (Yanamax, 6332m, which Guy and I climbed), as well as complete ranges of 5000m peaks to both north and south. While the north side of the massif has more than 20km of sérac-laden walls and ridges some 2000m in height, there is little doubt that its most compelling feature is the monstrous north face of Xuelian West, also known as Baiyu Feng ('White Jade peak'), which rises 2700m straight from the glacier opposite Hadamuzi.

In 2009 I was back to climb on Xuelian itself. Xuelian West would actually be the climax of a month of mountaineering, during which we'd acclimatise, reconnoitre and prepare by climbing the other satellites. I would climb mostly with Jed Brown, while our friends Kyle Dempster and Jared Vilhauer would work as a separate pair. After one acclimatisation trip to a 4800m peaklet, Jed and I tackled Xuelian North by its long west ridge, bivouacking at 5300m and working hard on precarious and rotten ridge

snow. From its 6472m summit, we had what turned out to be the only view of the month beyond the Marble Wall to Pik Pobeda and Khan Tengri. One of our objectives was to reconnoitre the steep and exposed final rock step to Xuelian Main, a peak that has been awaiting a second ascent since the 1990 Japanese success from the opposite side. Another aim was to size up Xuelian West, of which we had a perfect bird's-eye view across and down the north face.

Turning to the east ridge of Xuelian East, we were surprised to meet a pair of climbers: Kyle and Jared, of whom we had seen no trace for a week because fresh snow kept blowing over all our tracks, had climbed a different line on the north side of the ridge. They joined us for the long trek up to the summit. Our arrival was marked by the biggest storm of the expedition, which forced us into a record-breaking bivouac featuring four men in a Rab Summit Extreme tent. Jed and I returned to Hadamuzi to rest before a bid on Xuelian North-east, where we found rotten snow and delicate rock on an infinite ridge, not difficult but desperately exposed, dangerous and so time-consuming that we were forced to give up at 5400m. Equally industrious, Kyle and Jared stayed on the upper glacier to climb an ice and mixed line on the untouched north face of Yanamax, which they pushed to the 6180m summit crest of its north buttress ('Yanamax 2').

Jared suffered frostnip to a toe on this last route and decided not to try any more big routes. Then, without warning, our liaison officer informed us that for bureaucratic reasons the expedition would end on 30 August – a loss of three days that put us under time pressure. There was weather pressure too, as after three weeks of generally unstable conditions it was now clear and dry all day, without even the high cloud banners we had watched all month. Thus it was that on 24 August, Jed, Kyle and I packed as little gear as we could justify, walked down from Hadamuzi, across the Muzart glacier and up the 5km side glacier leading straight to the base of the face. Perfect evening weather and light gave us a last chance to examine and photograph the route up the buttress towering above us.

The north face of Xuelian West is a little wider than it is high. It has a rocky half, swept clean by the west wind, and a snowy, sérac-ridden half, the obvious line of both weakness and safety being the shallow prow in its centre that divides the two. The bottom seemed to offer very long ice lines just to the left of the prow, while the top, above about 5400m, was split by what looked to be a snow couloir. For the middle section, mixed or rock climbing of unknown difficulty would be needed to get through the slab barriers separating the snow patches on the prow. The beautiful orange rock of the central Tien Shan (the best example is Khan Tengri) is of course not granite but a particularly compact type of marble, and protecting long slabs of it would be perhaps the biggest challenge of all.

Jed and I had camped under the face for days while doing the north buttress, but as I approached the tent site there was no tent... We found it reduced to a few strings of prayer flags, perhaps by a windstorm or an avalanche blast wave. The outer tent had been completely shredded, the





poles broken and splayed out around the wreckage. The inner tent was a sodden and sticky mess of burst instant-noodle sachets and half-dissolved sweets. I turned it inside-out: stove…still OK; rope…still OK; mountain tent…covered in sticky red chilli but apparently OK; poles…OK. This was inconvenient, but it wasn't a showstopper. Jed fired up the stove and started cleaning the sweet-and-sour tent with hot water. Kyle took charge of the hardware, choosing and cleaning what we'd need for the route. I worked on food, salvaging and re-bagging what we'd need for a five-day climb. We ate as we worked, so when Jed had the mountain tent serviceable again we piled in quickly and slept. We were still on track.

Jed and Kyle are both 26. Jed is from interior Alaska, so his ideas of cold weather and camping hardship match the

On *The Great White Jade Heist.*

55. Opposite top: Jed Brown on high-quality ice, Day 2. (*Bruce Normand*)

56. Opposite bottom: Kyle Dempster on rare positive rock, Day 1. (*Bruce Normand*)

57. Right: Dempster vanishing in spindrift on the M6 lead, Day 2. (*Bruce Normand*)

58. Below: Dempster tackles the crux pitches. (*Bruce Normand*)



Russian norm rather than mainstream European tolerances. He misspent his youth cross-country ski racing, so his aerobic capacity has no limit. Kyle is from Utah, where he misspent his youth frying brain cells on desert rock routes. His idea of hard climbing is around 5.13 or M10. Together with their shared experience of hard alpinism, it meant confi-





59. A constant presence: view of Xuelian Main (centre right) and the north buttress (left). (*Bruce Normand*)

dence to face the unknowns and technical difficulties of a remote wall was not in short supply. Three is a good number for alpine-style climbing: one rope team, two ropes and one rack, one stove and one small tent. Even with five days of food, only the two followers need big packs and the leader can climb truly fast and light.

Dawn found us at the foot of a snow cone leading into the lower right side of the prow; the rising traverse that won us the first 300m would be the last non-technical terrain for four days. Jed led the first block and we simul-climbed four pitches of moderate ice to arrive beneath a towering rock wall. The line we had chosen became narrow and steepened to vertical. Jed picked his way carefully over the thin ice, working hard to get sparse protection. Jed and Kyle switched leads and Kyle found thicker ice in the steepest part of the couloir, as well as good rock holds. Another four pitches of moderate snow and ice took us to the first moderately sized snowfield on the prow. It was 4pm and we'd done 10 pitches, but another 10 might be needed before we found a similar spot to bivouac. Two hours' chopping was required to fashion a platform in the ice decent enough for a good camp, enabling us to eat, drink and sleep in good style – the next chance for that might be three days away.

Next morning we'd done one and a half pitches before the sun came up. Jed was in the lead again, and his block took us through thin, breakable ice over slabs to gain several pitches of névé and finally two pitches of excellent alpine ice on thick flows over the slabs. We'd gained the major snowfield on the left of the prow which marks half-height on the wall, but it is topped by steep cliffs. It was time to move to the right side of the prow and tackle

the slabs, so Kyle headed up the only ice line in sight. His second pitch steepened and required some wild bridging and leaning moves. Reasonable morning weather was giving way to thick clouds and light snowfall; spindrift avalanches began sweeping over the slabs. Our climbing options were also narrowing, with an aid wall above, endless snow over slabs to the right and a thin ramp running up to the left. We chose the last, and Kyle inched out along the narrowing ledge line, scratching to find tiny edges and periodically being deluged in spindrift. A virtuoso lead (we rated it M6) ended when he slapped an axe into some real ice on the crest of the prow. For Jed and me this was no longer a simple following exercise, as our bigger packs tried to pull us into a long, swinging fall.

Jed took the lead, but the ice streak was thin and brittle and the protection as shaky as ever. By the end of his pitch both the night and snow were falling fast. There was nothing in sight but 45-degree slabs with occasional snowfields. The risk of a night in the open in a storm was uncomfortably real, although as yet there was no wind. We were at the mental crux of the route. We voted to carry on, even if this meant climbing through the night. Headlamps on, Jed led us up the snowfield to the next rock spur. A smaller snow patch to the right was deep enough to make 60cm ledges. Then Kyle realised that the snow was so wind-pressed we could actually cut blocks of it. I dug two 60cm ledges, one above the other; Jed cut huge, solid blocks from the pressed snow and positioned them on the lower one; Kyle collected packs and hardware and rearranged our anchor. We piled side-by-side into the tent, harnesses on, backs against the wall and sleeping bags up to our chests, with the gear sitting on the blocks under our feet. The stove refused to work properly, perhaps due to oxygen deprivation, so we ate and drank only a little. Just as we were ready to sleep, the spindrift avalanches restarted, battering the tent against our faces and trying to push us off the ledge. We spent a miserable night pressing our backs to the wall and pushing snow off the canopy above our heads.

The morning was sunny but windy, and the avalanches were still pounding us. It was 11am when the wind died and the spindrift sloughs ceased some time later. Kyle and I stood outside on a beautiful morning while Jed used the opportunity to make the stove work perfectly, and plied us with food and hot fluid. We were still perched in the middle of an endless slab field, but the wall above was the last before the 'exit' snowfield at 5400m, beyond which the prow seemed to have a long snow gully; certainly the easy way off the face from here was to go over the top. It was Kyle's block again, and his lead meandered right and left, every move delicate but few truly difficult, and every pitch with only a few features in which to place gear. After six slow and careful pitches, we hit the snowfield, almost ran to its top, set two anchors in the rock and dug a full-width tent platform.

No sooner were we all installed in the tent than a series of flashes and rumbles began to pierce the night sky. The only lightning storm of the entire month had chosen this moment to pass right over our heads. From a

distance, Jared shot video of the entire mountain lighting up like a flashing Christmas tree. From underneath, the risk of a lightning strike was irrelevant; another cataract of snow and hail cascading off the mountain tried hard to flatten the tent and take us down with it. I spent an hour outside in the torrent, heaving snow off the tent while Jed and Kyle gamely weighed it down from the inside, until the storm subsided.

The morning of day 4 was sunny but windy, and spindrift was still sluicing down the exit gully. After a quick, soloing start, we roped up again on encountering some of the slabbiest rock steps we'd seen on the whole route. Jed led another long, simul-climbing push with infrequent protection, until we emerged on the upper snowfields at 5900m in the early afternoon. The hard part was over. This day was deteriorating too, and by the time I'd led a long, deep slog to the cornice guarding the west ridge, it was snowing again with visibility near zero. We decided to camp here (6300m), out of the wind, and try for the top and the unknown descent route in the morning.



60. On the summit of Xuelian West; from left, Jed Brown, Bruce Normand and Kyle Dempster. *(Kyle Dempster)*

Even as we set off at sunrise, a clear night was turning to clouds blowing over the ridge from the south-west. We hurried to the summit (6422m), but the white-out beat us to it. The wind was cold and the only view was of Jed and Kyle smiling and shaking hands. The risk of frostbite on the exposed ridge was real: we had to watch each other and warm up white patches on our faces. Soon we were below the clouds and wind again, following the south-west ridge and rappelling into the south-west face. A long, simul-climbing traverse took us back to the west ridge just above a point where we could descend a small, hanging glacier on its north side. Clouds and snow showers blew in. Three more rappels plus a deep slog down a steep, crevassed snow slope and we had threaded a route through the slots to the final col. The falling snow was turning to rain as we descended slush, mud and talus slopes to regain the flat glacier. We were back at our advanced base an hour after dark, soaked and exhausted from our five-day marathon, but warm and satisfied at a job well done.



61. Descending the south-west ridge of Xuelian West (*Bruce Normand*)

In the morning our feet felt nearly as heavy as our packs as we staggered down the glacier with all our climbing and camping gear. This was the day the horses would come for the hike out, and indeed Jared and the staff had been packing for hours when we arrived. We changed our boots, added our packs to the loads and marched straight on. The journey out turned into something of a record: we were in Xiate Hot Springs by 9pm that evening, where the CXMA liaison officer had already rented a vehicle which took us to Zhaosu. The next day we were on the direct bus to Urumqi, where we arrived the following morning, just 70 hours after we'd topped out. With a getaway like that, it felt as though we'd just robbed a bank.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of Xuelian West, the west summit of Xuelian Feng, Xinjiang Tien Shan, China, by Scotsman Bruce Normand and Americans Jed Brown and Kyle Dempster. Their route *The Great White Jade Heist*, 2650m, WI5 M6 5.7 R, takes a direct line up the north face and was made on 26 to 30 August 2009. The ascent was one of two to be recognised by the 2010 *Piolet d'Or* awards.

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