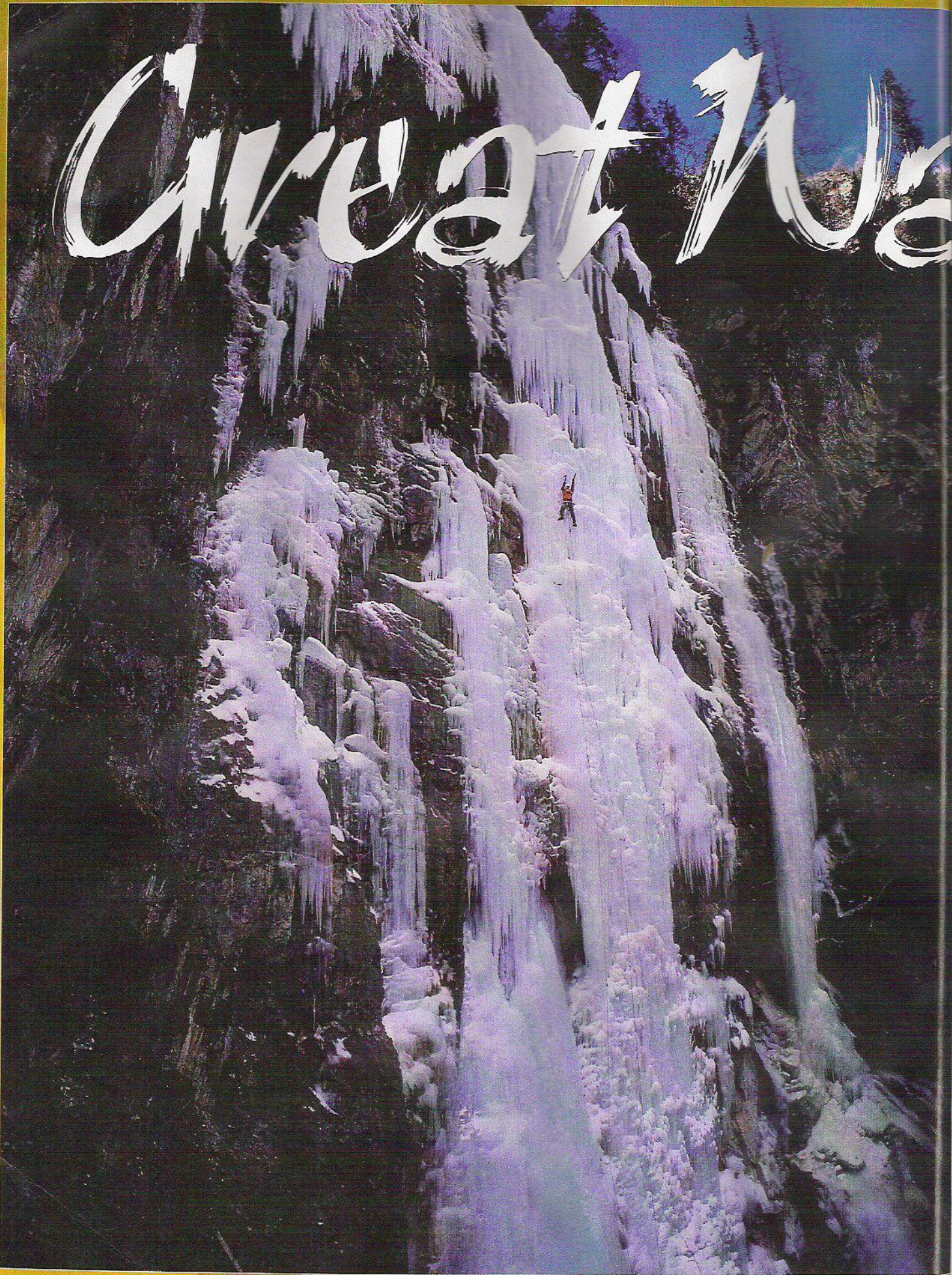


# Great No



Peter Doucette hanging it out on *Draggin' Butt* (WI5+).

# Walls of Ice

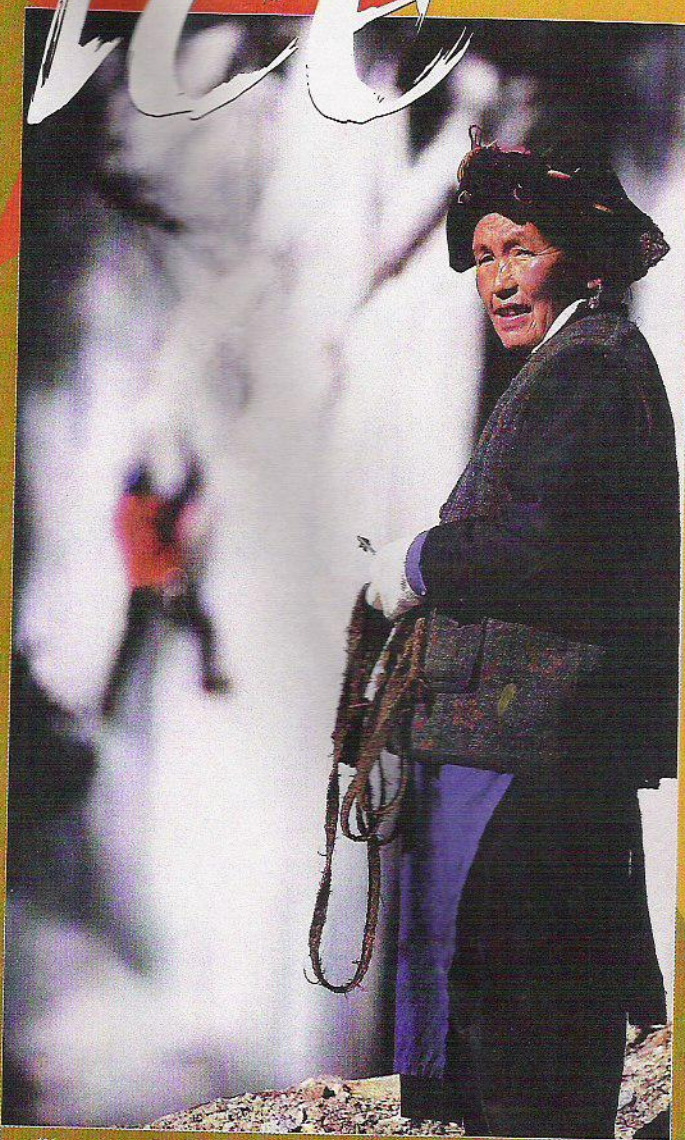
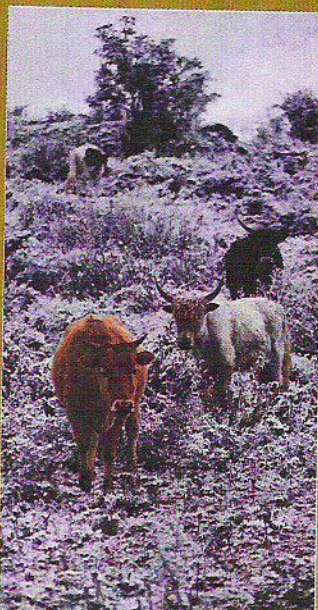
Vail, Colorado:  
20 climbs, 60 climbers.

Ouray, Colorado:  
100 climbs, 500 climbers.

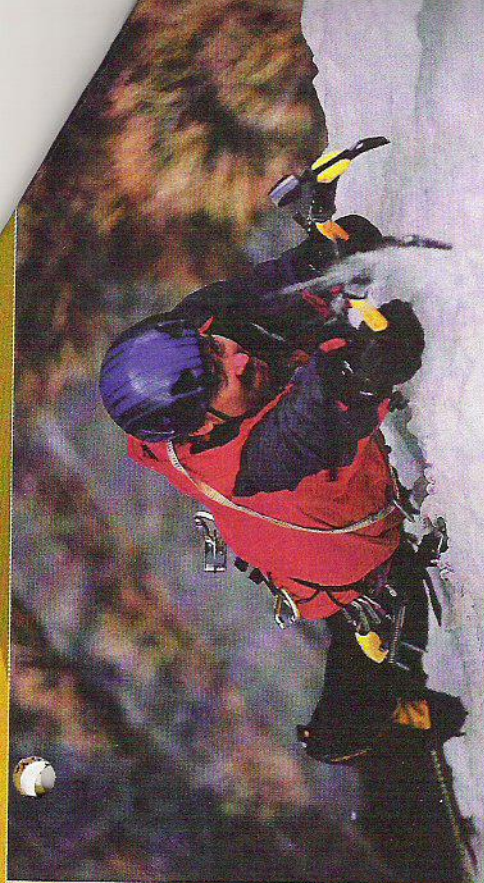
Shuangqiao Valley, China:  
125 climbs, 4 climbers.

Story and Photos by Craig Luebben

A herd of yak had been harassing us for days, prowling around our campsite and licking up the tundra wherever we urinated. Now it was coming to a head as our Chinese guide Mr. Ma — who'd grown up here in the Siguniang Mountains — stared down the alpha bull, clutching a large stone in his hand. The shaggy, filthy beast locked his sights on Mr. Ma, scratched the dirt, dropped his horns, and charged. The thundering brute was eight feet off when Mr. Ma popped him square in the forehead with a granite fastball; the yak staggered and retreated into the forest. Mr. Ma laughed at me clutching my ice axe, and returned to his sagging canvas army tent to down shots of *biju*, breathe through his cigarette, and chew on a hunk of yak jerky.



West meets East in the rural Shuangqiao Valley (above). Beware the marauding yak — pack a granite baseball, just in case.



Jon Tierney (left) getting wet on *Four Boys in a Shower* (W15). Doucette engaging in a cultural exchange of cutlery.

We were camped in Shuanqiao (pronounced schwan-chow) Valley, on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau in China's Sichuan province. We'd received a tip from Christian Beckwith, then editor of the *American Alpine Journal*, about little-known granite walls up to 4000 feet high and unclimbed 6000-meter peaks in the Siguniang mountains. My wife Silvia and I canceled our trip to Kyrgyzstan, heeding State Department terrorist-activity warnings, and headed to China in September, 2000.

We hired an American trekking company, High Asia, which provided us with our cook Jimmie, our translator Mr. Wei, and our ballsy guide Mr. Ma, as well as transportation from Chengdu, capital of the Sichuan province, to the Siguniang Mountains. Had we set our sights on 6000-meter peaks we would have been required to pay sizable fees and deal with red tape from the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA), the government entity that controls mountaineering and competition climbing throughout China. However, we were interested in wall climbing (which is relatively new in China), and the CMA hasn't begun charging fees or regulating wall or ice climbing — yet.

In Shuanqiao, a valley that's overgrazed and clearcut in some areas, yet lush with

cherry trees, raspberry bushes, and giant rhododendrons in others, we set our sights on a spectacular 2000-foot granite pillar, then spent three soggy weeks in growing despair under daily rain and snow. At least I had the right tentmate — my wife Silvia. When we left the valley empty-handed, Silvia began scheming about rigging a tipped bucket of water above Beckwith's office door. I couldn't help but wonder, "What's Shuanqiao like in winter?"

Four months later I was headed back to China with Topher and Patience Donahue. Every Chinese man in the Beijing airport wore a suit jacket, the unofficial uniform for everyone from *nouveau riche* businessmen to the street crews chipping away at the pavement with chisels and hammers. Amid the sea of gray and brown cloth, a screaming-yellow down parka emerged from the crowd — our Chinese translator Kai Zhao.

Kai is one of China's top rock climbers, and after a month of climbing with us, he became China's best ice climber. At first glance he appears gentle, almost meek. Look closely into his eyes, however, and you'll see fierce determination. Kai has a Masters in Physics from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, but jettisoned his career as a scientist to be a professional climber on the payroll of the CMA.

Kai trains obsessively for competitions, can easily crank a dozen one-arm pull-ups with each arm, and recently fired what is currently the hardest redpoint by a Chinese climber, a

5.13b on Moon Hill in southern China. (Just three years ago the best Chinese climbers were sporting around on 5.11.) Kai also loves traditional climbing, as does his wife Qing, who hikes steep 5.12d sport routes and is a top competitor.

Kai and Qing are part of the burgeoning climbing community emerging from China's new middle class. Most Chinese climbers are highly educated, and many speak decent English. They love their new sport — climbing gyms are popping up all across China, and Kai and Qing currently work for a climbing wall company. If the growth trend continues, China, with its population of 1.2 billion people, will have more climbers than any other country within 20 years.

The growth of climbing is a result of the recent industrial and technological revolutions in China (check the last consumer goods you bought to see where they were manufactured). Though the government still purports to be Communist, China's fast-growing economy thrives on capitalism, which has produced a middle class with discretionary income, free time, and — for some — a desire for adventure and athleticism. Unfortunately, many moneyed Chinese are embracing more insidious Western influences like serial television, rampant consumerism, and fat-dripping fast food. The new affluence is not universal, though: Hundreds of millions of Chinese still live a subsistence lifestyle, with little chance to share the spoils of the modern world.

We arrived in Shuangqiao, and I quickly found myself belaying Topher, one of America's top all-around climbers, as he coolly led the relentlessly vertical third pitch of a beautiful ice face reminiscent of the Canadian classic *Nemesis*. Later, as we topped out, Donahue told me, "I never thought I'd get to make the first ascent of a huge ice wall like *Nemesis* in my lifetime. I'm so psyched!" For the two of us it was a dream. We'd spent our entire careers repeating ice routes in Colorado, Canada, and Europe, but everything we attempted here was a first ascent. The potential was amazing: big ice walls, steep pillars, low-angle gullies, free-standing columns, and wild hanging daggers.

Earlier that day we'd bailed off another spectacular line. Topher led the first pitch bravely, picking his way around bizarre cauliflower blobs, placing questionable screws in mushy ice. The second pitch, a long

Kai and I returned to another line on the "Nemesis face" that began in a dark, crumbly chimney speckled with little ice blobs and paper-thin verglas on one wall and rotten schist on the other. Snot-like splotches of ice crumbled under my front points as Kai, with his lean sport-climbing physique, shivered below at the belay. I couldn't face-climb the ice specks, so I resigned myself to stretching my legs to their limit across the chimney. The verglas made it impossible to use my hands or my ice tools. With crampons screeching on rock like fingernails on a chalkboard, a series of wicked leg thrusts and Kung Fu screams allowed me to eke out progress. Finally, an over-the-shoulder backhand swing snatched a marginal nub of ice and I exited the oppressive chimney.

Fragile, overhanging columns led to some horrendously brittle ice. I worked frantically to stick the right axe as one large dinner plate after another sheared off. Finally, just a few

*We'd spent our entire careers repeating ice routes in Colorado, Canada, and Europe, but everything we attempted here was a first ascent.*

vertical column, was comprised of tiny, fused icicles that barely held body weight. I'd never seen ice quite like it before; Protection was non-existent. I dug deep trying to lead the pitch, but backed off. Twice. The second time I returned to the belay gibbering like a fool, saying, "Topher, that's totally horrendous and freaky. We need to get out of here before the sun comes around." Four days later, the first two pitches collapsed.

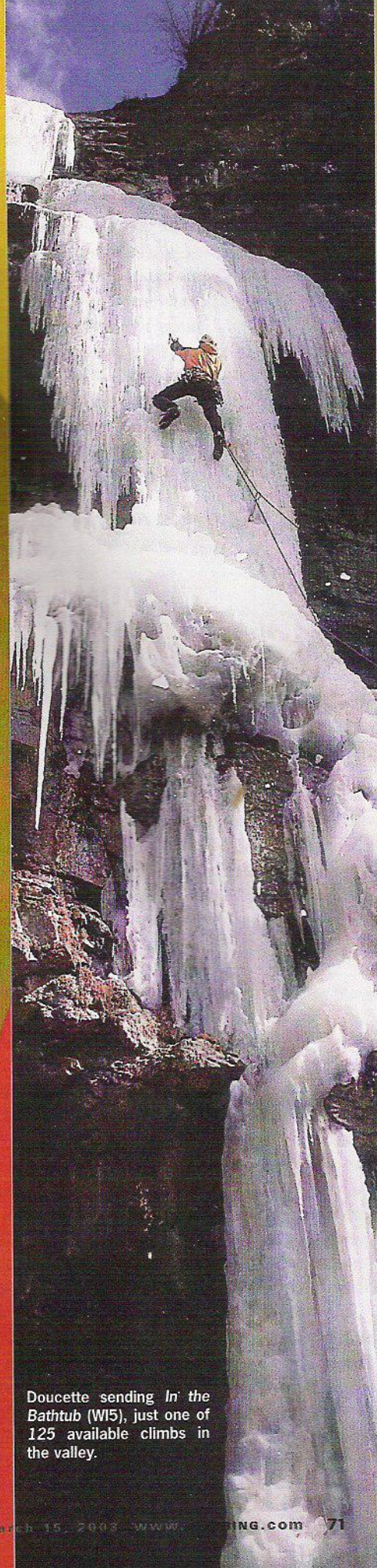
After Topher departed early with Patience due to her unexpected illness, it was just Kai and myself in a valley with over 100 unclimbed waterfalls. We were staying at the Ma family hostel, spending five dollars a day for room and board, including beer. The room, food, and hospitality were great, but the heat consisted of sitting around an electrical coil designed for cooking, not heating, or, during the frequent power outages, a bucket of coals. During this time I became quite close with Mr. Ma the yak slayer and his perpetually-smiling wife Deng, and they made me Godfather to their 10-year-old son Maduo.

seconds before my locked-off biceps exploded, the tool stuck. Yes!

The second pitch was cruiser until the finale, where I had to bash through a row of hanging icicles to exit a cave, and crank over a roof on the icicle stubs. More fun icicle bashing (I love watching big icicles disintegrate as they plummet) and wild, overhanging ice led to pumped arms, fat ice, and the top of the fall. Kai finished the final pitch of our route, which we dubbed *Dragon Breath*, in the dark. Three rappels and a hike down the ice-filled drainage led us to our "rescue team" — four concerned Chinese who could not even approach the climb because they had no boots or crampons. Ever since Topher and Patience had left, I had been climbing scared: No one within thousands of miles could help if we got hurt. Having received our fill of fear for the month, Kai and I departed for Beijing.

In Beijing I was invited by the Peking University Mountaineering Association (PUMA) to rock climb on their outdoor wall

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Doucette sending *In the Bath tub* (WI5), just one of 125 available climbs in the valley.


# Great Walls of ice

(continued from page 71)

at the university. When I arrived, 50 enthusiastic students and local climbers were waiting. I presented clinics on rock technique and self-rescue, and was made an honorary member of the club.

The next day we went ice climbing near Beijing. On the first free ascent of *Peking Duck*, a 200-foot vertical ice face, a large ice chunk hit me in the eye. I couldn't see for several minutes, but eventually finished the pitch. When I got to the ground I had a huge shiner and a small piece of bone had been chipped out of my eye socket. I looked like I'd gone 10 rounds with Mike Tyson ... except I still had both ears. For the rest of the week, Chinese people in the street avoided the big American with the black eye and gashed face.

That night and the following morning, more than 30 Chinese ice climbers arrived, and the weekend turned into the first Beijing ice festival. As I presented a clinic on ice climbing safety, a climber sketched and scratched his way up the ice behind me, taking repeated leader falls onto a stubby screw. Later I saw another climber leading on a static rope. When I confronted



*Jon immediately began mapping the icefalls in the valley: The tally came to 125 flows in a 20-mile stretch.*

her, she looked at me dumbfounded and said, "Don't worry, I won't fall." That evening *biju* and *piju* (rice spirits and beer, respectively) poured freely, and many courses of delicious food were served (I passed on the grubs). An exuberant Chinese climber and software engineer named Andes, with whom I'd climbed on my first China trip, informed me that, "in China, beer is cheaper than [bottled] water." I agreed to economize and drink plenty of Blue Sword beer.

The following winter I returned to the Siguniang Mountains with two climbers from Maine: Jon Tierney, owner of Acadia Mountain Guides, a paramedic, and wilderness medicine instructor; and Peter Doucette, a university student and climbing guide.

Jon, who can't relax for more than 30 seconds, immediately began mapping the icefalls in the valley: The tally came to 125 flows in a 20-mile stretch. Not much snow falls here in winter, so the avalanche hazard is minimal; approaching most climbs involves a 10-to-40 minute stroll up grassy slopes. Groundwater and glacial melt from the towering peaks above feed the waterfalls. As an extra bonus, the tourism association recently paved the road up the valley, so a casual 45-minute commute replaced the bone-jarring drive we had endured on the first two trips.

Kai accompanied us for the beginning of the trip. We switched partners each day and bagged the best-looking lines left over from the year before, save for a wild, 200-foot free-standing column that was the width of a rail-thin climber where it met the ground. Though the column buckled more each day, it never fell while we were there. We needed a Canadian madman to get up that thing, but none of us would have been willing to belay. Before we'd headed into the mountains we'd

learned via e-mail about the tragic death of Rod Willard due to falling ice in Vail. That news cooled any desires we had to push it.

Both Jon and Kai had to leave after two weeks, leaving Peter and I with our new translator, Lion. One day a television crew from Chengdu accompanied us to the ice wearing flimsy street shoes and suit jackets, and filmed us climbing two routes. They gained an appreciation for the climbing after the cameraman flailed for 20 minutes attempting the first 10 feet of the flow. Lion, who owned an outdoor gear shop in Chengdu, had ice climbed only once before (the previous year with us). He attacked the ice with crazy abandon, throwing wobbly swings that barely penetrated the ice, then hopping both feet up simultaneously like a rabbit. We were cringing, laughing, and shaking our heads. We couldn't believe that Lion's tools were actually sticking, but he got up a WI4+ with a couple of hangs on top rope.

On our final day in the Siguniang Mountains we attended, along with 150 local Chinese, the Tibetan engagement ceremony of Mr. Ma's brother. We consumed course after course of spicy Sichuan food and gallons of *biju*. After the feast the children played games while the adults danced and sang. The peer pressure among the men to pound shot after shot of *biju* reminded me of a high school party. Luckily (or unluckily) I was taking Flagyl for an intestinal ailment, so I could not drink. By the end, most of the men were totally hammered, while the women continued singing beautiful Tibetan songs. A band of staggering men commandeered our van as we tried to leave, forcing our Chinese passengers to pound more shots.

The next day we experienced the cliché *Harrowing Third-world Bus Ride*. The bus was already packed when we squeezed in, so I took a floor seat with views of seven other passengers crammed within 18 inches of me. Most of the male passengers chain-smoked cigarettes for the entire 10-hour ride. The largest passenger somehow mistook me for a lounge pillow, until I used my best American diplomacy and elbowed him off me. A big snowfall made the high pass treacherous and the bus slipped around the switchbacks, courting a 6000-foot tumble to the valley floor. Though we were temporarily relieved when the driver put chains on the tires, he just drove faster. Endless CDs helped me imagine a more pleasant situation. Upon our arrival in Chengdu, Peter flew home to Maine, while I joined a group of Chinese climbers to climb picturesque limestone towers in Yangshuo in southern China.

During my two winters in China, I ice climbed only a handful of days back home in Colorado, where the fun has gone out of ice climbing for me. Too many people, hacked-up ice, and leaders climbing completely out of control (and placing terrible protection) make me wonder when I'll be assisting in a rescue — or body recovery. Yet the prospect of climbing awesome new routes in China, helping the budding Chinese climbing community, and spending time with my Chinese family — the Mas — inspires me to keep my ice tools sharp. Besides, you never know when you might have to fight off a marauding yak.

*Aside from ice climbing in China, Craig Luebben has free climbed big walls in Madagascar, developed sport climbs in Cuba, and established offwidths in France (a rare thing indeed). He is a Senior Contributing Editor at Climbing.*