
PAUL RAMSDEN

The North Face of Siguniang

(Frontispiece and Plate 5)

The Peak District, along with the rest of the country, had been closed to climbers for six months thanks to foot and mouth. But today, mid-summer, Stanage had reopened. You'd expect the place to have been heaving, but things were fairly quiet. Maybe the word hadn't got out yet.

Mick Fowler was easy to spot from a long way off. He had come straight from the tax office and forgotten his climbing clothes. He was, inevitably, the only person on the crag wearing suit trousers and a white collared shirt

'Mick! Careful you don't spoil those nice pants!' I shouted.

'Ah, Mr Ramsden! It's good to be out on the grit again.'

A pleasant evening was interrupted by encroaching darkness and a plague of midges. At the Little John in Hathersage we settled in with a few beers, before descending into the usual round of climbing bullshit and tall stories.

'So, Mr Fowler, have you got any plans for a big trip next year?'

'Well actually I noticed some rather disturbing pictures in the new AAJ. They have definitely given me the urge.'

'You mean the ones of China?' I came back perhaps a bit too quickly. Looking surprised and a bit concerned Mick responded that perhaps we should get together and come up with a plan before someone else did.

A few e-mails later and we were sorted. Some mountain called Siguniang had an unclimbed north face. We weren't sure how high the mountain was, how high the face was or quite how to get to it but we were going next April. Later in the year Mick phoned up to mention that he couldn't really manage much more than three and a half weeks. Doing a bit of quick arithmetic I figured that would give us about two weeks above base camp after travel and bureaucracy. And only if nothing went wrong. It wasn't really long enough for text-book acclimatisation.

'Ah, an added challenge for the Ramsden body!' he replied. What can you say to that kind of irrepressible optimism?

A week to departure. Pre-trip training had gone badly. Which is to say there wasn't any. I went through my cupboards patching holes in gloves, duct-taping up the weak spots in the bivvi tent. I hate packing. On the morning we departed, I got out of the shower and stepped onto the scales. Thirteen stones. Plenty of bivvi fat, then.

The team met for the first time at the airport. Mick and I were going to attempt Siguniang. Accompanying us to base camp were Mike Morrison and Roger Gibbs who were planning to try some of the other unclimbed



Frontispiece: Paul Ramsden on the seventh pitch of the first day of the first ascent of the N Face of Siguniang. (*Mick Fowler*) (p28)

peaks in the area. At check-in the minor problem of an excess luggage bill of £1,200 was soon smoothed over by Mick with all the efficiency of a senior civil servant.

'Do you realise we are an official British mountaineering expedition? Sponsored by the government?' The rest of us just stood back to watch some masterful bullshitting. Half an hour later we had an apology and an unlimited baggage allowance.

In China we had employed – over the internet – a local 'fixer' who called himself 'Lion'. He was a young lad but efficient and soon had us on the bus out of Chengdu and onto the road-head at Rilong in the Qionglai Mountains of Sichuan Province. Once in Rilong we stayed with Mr Marr, a friend of Lion's. Mr Marr is the local mountain guide and pony transportation sorter. His English is pretty basic but he is a good bloke with a strange propensity to strip naked on the summit of mountains, as his scrap book showed. Ponies were arranged and then loaded. At dawn we were following the relatively popular trail into the mountains. Base camp was established two days later, in a hanging alp below Siguniang's north face. Home sweet home.

A quick look at the diary and we realised how short of time we really were. It was tempting to go straight on to the route but we agreed that some form of acclimatisation, however brief, was essential. Now the acclimatisation outing on any trip is a strange thing. Basically you set off with a sackful of kit up some obscure and not too technical hillside until you collapse with exhaustion, the obligatory throbbing head and nausea. At the place you collapse you pitch the tent, cook dinner, throw up and try to sleep. On each subsequent day you repeat day one. It's such a laugh. After three days of this we had reached an unimpressive 5200 metres, had finished our books and were desperate to get onto something a bit more interesting. A retreat to base camp seemed in order and, disturbingly, we only took three hours to get down.

We spent a day binge eating, rucksack packing, rucksack unpacking and rucksack repacking. I admit to being totally obsessed with the weight of my gear. The scissors were in action cutting off extraneous features, labels and so on. Mick on the other hand just threw everything in his huge pack and topped it off with the latest Harry Potter.

We set off early next morning, intending to establish our first camp on the flat glacier shelf below the face. Occasionally I would gaze up at the route and watch the constant spindrift avalanches fall in parallel lines down the lower half of the face. Our first camp was idyllic, flat and sunny. Once inside the tent you could forget where you were, almost.

The initial section of the route took the form of a huge open couloir consisting of partially iced slabs threatened by séracs on the left-hand side. Mick set off up the first pitch, which soon developed into an insecure, snowed-up steep slab. Following, I found it hard and disturbing. And it got much steeper above. Mick hung at the stance with a big cheesy grin on his face, obviously glad to be back on technical ground.

Similar pitches led to an ice field one pitch short of the start of a central gully line. It was obvious we would be a long way up this before we found a decent bivvi spot, so here would have to do. After a few hours hacking away beneath a small roof we had a ledge 12 feet by 12 inches. Mick hung in the Gemini tent at the far end while I made do with my bivvi bag. We ate dinner watching the sun set and I was actually enjoying myself. Things soon changed the following morning.

Mick managed about 30 feet of the gully before shouting down: 'It's steeper than it looks. I'm going to have to leave my sack here and haul it later. And the ice is a bit thin here. The screws won't go in fully but there is some nice shale basalt beneath!'

My heart sank. This was going to be another typical Fowler outing.

'Added challenge!' I shouted back positively, without feeling it. Two steep mixed pitches were followed by a vertical icefall 150 feet high. The problem was that we only had five ice screws. Two in the belay left two for the next belay and only one for protection in the pitch. The only option was to occasionally clip into our tools and rig Abalakov threads as runners.

All too soon it became obvious we would have to find somewhere to bivvi. I was perched on a steep smear of ice below a protective roof but the belay was poor. I brought Mick up and we started to excavate the slope by our feet, only to find the ice inches deep.

Mick thought he saw a ledge off to the side. I was not convinced but the desire to find somewhere to at least sit down was too much. Mick headed off and immediately got involved in some difficult snowed-up rock. It started to get dark. No ledge was forthcoming but there was a bomber single nut belay. It would have to do.

The spindrift increased in intensity. Getting into our pits without soaking them was out of the question, as was cooking. In the end we spent the night standing with the tent draped over our heads. I don't remember much of that night; it seemed better to forget it.

The following day saw us back on steep ice. This time it got fat for several pitches but with a corresponding increase in angle being around vertical for much of the day. We settled into a routine of climbing in spurts until lack of oxygen and cramping forearms brought us to a panting halt. The exposure became truly head-spinning.

The third bivvi was on an ice smear a pitch out to the left of the gully line. There was no chance of pitching the tent but we did find ice thick enough to hack out a bum ledge. Again we used the tent as a double bivvi bag with the stove hanging on a screw to one side. After the first brew however the spindrift started up again giving us little choice but to retreat into the tent without dinner yet again.

Every time we leaned forward, spindrift went down the gap between our backs and the recess chipped in the ice. Over time this wedge built up until after a few hours we were prised off and left hanging from our harnesses. As Mick slid off his ledge, slack in his belay system meant that he ended up

stood in the bottom of the tent. His weight was thus neatly transferred to the top of the tent that was braced against my head. Hours passed slowly as I drifted into a state of semi-consciousness, my legs numbed, my neck straining against Mick's weight and the cold damp tent fabric pressed against my face. I hate bivvies.

Next day Mick pulled off a very fine lead up an overhanging groove where the gully had been bisected by a horizontal band or sill that created an overhang. I seconded the line of loose basalt flakes and thin rotten ice with my sack on. Halfway up the pitch I became concerned that my lungs might burst from my desperate effort to suck in more oxygen. Steep climbing at altitude really hurts.

A few more pitches and I managed to climb out onto the rib that bound our gully on the right-hand side. It looked like we were only a few pitches from the point where the gully eased back and onto the slopes below the summit sérac band. However, the next section looked steep so we opted to bivvi where we were. Mick scouted around and found a ledge big enough to sit on comfortably behind a small flake. But that wasn't enough. Mick was determined to pitch the tent. It took some creative thinking and advanced dry-stone walling skills.

My side of the ledge was the most undercut, but by piling up some loose blocks I managed to balance the cantilevered stone that was to be my bed. Once inside, however, it was soon clear that the mere fact of pitching the tent would not make us comfortable. At least we were able to cook in relative comfort for the first time in three days. But the night was one of the grimmest with my head below my feet, a rock spike in the small of my back and Mick's feet on my head.

'I slept quite well,' Mick chirped in the morning. I bit my tongue. Smug bastard.

As we packed up, a sense of urgency developed. We were keen to get out of this vertical world onto some easier slopes. I led off, onto what for me would be the crux pitch of the route. Good ice led up to a band of roofs. To the left was a very steep pillar of ice separated from the rock behind. Now the wind got up and spindrift engulfed the ice at regular intervals. Leaving a good screw, I swung onto the front of the pillar, which unfortunately proved to consist of soft, rotten ice with a fragile crust on top of it. Ice screws could be pulled straight out by hand.

I pushed on and it got steeper. I was repeatedly engulfed in spindrift. My lungs pumped like bellows and my forearms burned with real pain. Then, in a white blur, it was over. Above, the angle eased back into classic fifty-degree alpine ice slopes towards the sérac barrier up and out to the right.

The initial plan had been to sneak through the séracs on the left-hand side along a ramp line we had supposedly spotted from below. Intimate contact with the séracs and their fearsome angle soon changed our minds. The only feasible option was a long traverse rightwards beneath the séracs, looking for a weakness in the barrier above. Several calf-pumping pitches

later we arrived beneath a gully that led directly up to the summit. By now it was almost dark so we carried on traversing right onto a short rib that looked sheltered from the avalanche slopes above. A small rock flake provided a reasonable half-sit-down ledge and a decent belay so we settled down for a long night.

Dawn was beautiful. A cloud inversion filled the valley and the surrounding peaks glistened under the heavy mantle of snow that had fallen during the night. It had snowed right down to the valley yet again. Today was summit day. One more pitch of steep ice and we were onto the final slopes. Deep snow slowed progress, as did the lack of oxygen on top of our already low energy levels. A fairly steep step and we were onto the summit cornice and there was nowhere else to go. Feeling no real desire to edge out onto the final thin bit we sat down on flat ground for the first time in a week. On every side we could see nothing but endless unclimbed peaks.

Mick grinned. 'The potential is most disturbing.'

It was still morning, but we dropped down a short way and stamped out a flat ledge. We needed a rest and a good feed. The simple pleasure of getting out of a properly pitched tent and urinating without a harness on is very rewarding. Over dinner the subject of descent came up in conversation. Mick with his insatiable appetite for exploration convinced me it would be more rewarding as well as more aesthetic to descend the as yet unclimbed north ridge that bound our face on the left.

The north ridge took two days to descend and its razor sharp but not quite vertical angle made abseiling difficult. Added to that were problems of giant unconsolidated snow mushrooms and a bit of loose rock thrown in for good measure. At least the halfway bivi was good, even palatial. The tent *almost* fitted on to the ledge.

The 5000 feet of descent swallowed up much of the rack and the endless Abalakov anchors required us to shorten one of the ropes considerably. A last flounder down the glacier and we collapsed onto the boulder field in the sun. Handshakes, congratulation, cheesy grins then silence. After days and days of heightened awareness to all the dangers around, safety almost leaves you deflated.

The return to civilization was simple and rapid. Loads carried down to the valley to meet the ponies, a stroll down to Rilong, then the bus to Chengdu for our flight home. Once at home, I stepped onto the bathroom scales. Eleven stone three pounds. I'd lost almost two stone in three weeks. That's some diet.



5. The North Face of Siguniang. Fowler and Ramsden's route took a prominent ice goulotte hidden from view. (*Mick Fowler*) (p28)