
Polar Regions

ERHARD LORETAN

Travels in Another World

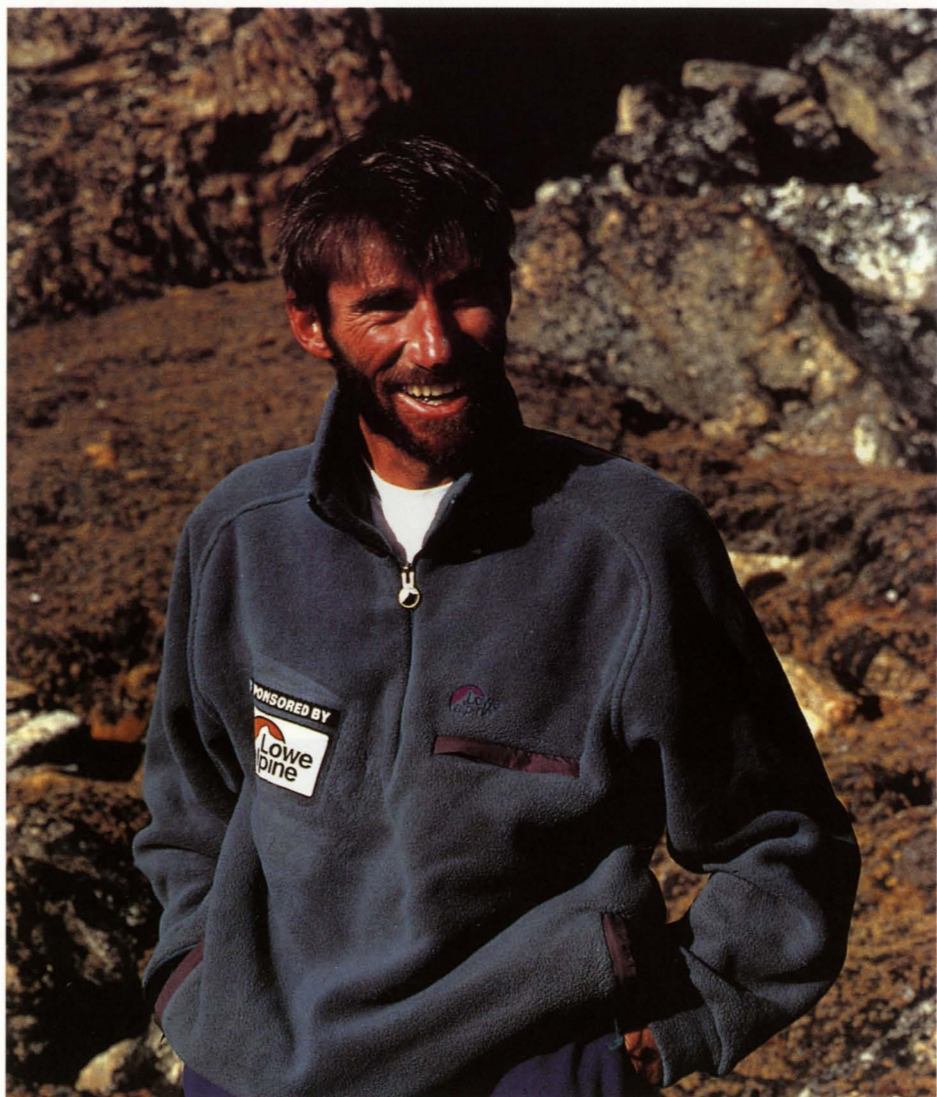
Translated from the French by Trevor Braham

(Plates 12–14)

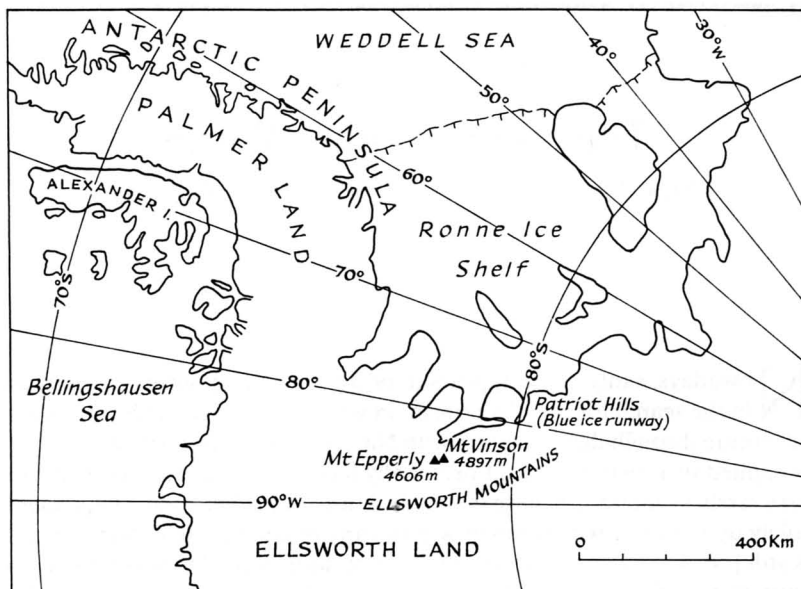
Nowadays, sadly, there appears to be a diminishing sense of creativity in the search for 'pure' alpinism, in which the principal objectives are adventure through direct contact with Nature. Whilst the term 'adventure' is applied in a relative sense, I personally feel that in the Alps today it can very rarely be found. I believe that in the Himalaya, where one is dependent solely upon one's own resources without any reliance upon outside help, it is still possible to find an absolute sense of adventure. However, there do exist on this planet a few other spots where adventure can still be found.

In 1994 I had the good fortune to make my first visit to the Antarctic. Every journey there is an adventure. It is impossible to work out any plan based on precise dates: everything is governed by the weather. The weather was one reason why, in 1994, I suddenly found myself alone at Punta Arenas. Romolo Nottaris, head of an import agency for 'New Rock' mountain equipment, who had provided the financial backing, had to withdraw for professional reasons following a week of flight cancellations owing to bad weather. We had made wonderful plans for an ascent of Epperly, 4606m, a mountain which some fairly well-known climbers had already attempted. What could be more thrilling for a climber than reaching an untrodden summit?

In making a solitary first ascent of Mt Epperly in 1994, I felt that I had experienced one of the greatest moments of my career. Moreover, I discovered that the Antarctic continent provided me with everything that I value most – solitude, isolation, commitment, technical difficulty and a magnificent environment. My sole wish was to return: but how could I find the money to enable me to do so? In the autumn of 1995, after climbing Kangchenjunga, my fourteenth 8000-metre mountain, I could see no prospect of finding a sponsor; and time was getting desperately short, with only three weeks left before a prospective departure date. Then, quite by chance one day, over an enjoyable meal of *fondue*, I met the directors of Adia Interim who, fired by the prospect of an adventure story, accorded me a grant in order to bring back a film of my fabulous experiences in 1994. Nothing now could prevent me from making another visit to that magical land.



12. Erhard Loretan, who climbed Kangchenjunga with Jean Troillet in 1995, became the third person, after Messner and Kukuczka, to climb, without oxygen, all the 8000m peaks. Erhard Loretan made first ascents (solo) of two peaks in Antarctica's Ellsworth Mountains: Mt Epperly, 4606m, in December 1994, and Pic Loretan, 4550m, in December 1995. (Photo: Abele Blanc) (p3)



Photographic gear was rapidly organised. Romolo Nottaris, who had some experience of filming in the mountains, set up a team which included Marco Zaffaroni of Milan, a sound technician, and Anna Mattei, who had responsibility for still photography. Thanks to the services of Adventure Network International, it is possible to fly from Punta Arenas on the southern tip of Chile into the heart of Antarctica. To bring down a large Hercules aircraft safely on to a wind-swept runway of pure glassy ice must make Patriot Hills one of the most difficult landing-grounds in the world; and the aircraft is not equipped with skis, but only with normal rubber-tyred wheels.

On arrival there, I found friends I had met the year before who work at Patriot Hills during the four summer months. The pilots of a twin-engined Otter aircraft, who were based there, took advantage of the fine weather to fly us to our ultimate destination where we wanted to set up our base camp. Once the Otter had deposited us there and departed, we found ourselves in another world. The silence was absolute. To our right, a white sea of ice extended as far as the eye could see. To the left were magnificent walls rising 3000m above us, presenting an aspect that both attracted and repelled. It was here, in this icy desert, where not even lichen grows on the rocks, that we were to spend the next three weeks.

Obviously, this year, priority had to be given to preparing a film that would re-capture the story of my solo ascent of Epperly in 1994 by its 2600m West Face. This was a task which involved a period of hard work lasting

15 days, during which we filmed for 10-12 hours each day, mostly between midday and 3-4am. Romolo used a 16mm Bolex-type movie-camera which, although ideal for a small team like ours, possessed certain limiting factors in conditions of extreme cold, when a mechanical handle and spring had to fulfil the functions of an automatic motor. Once the filming was complete, each of us planned to take a few days off. Anna, Romolo and Marco wanted to attempt Mt Vinson, 4897m, the highest point of Antarctica. I had other ideas.

In 1994, I had spotted a nameless peak which seemed to stare at me defiantly every time I looked at it. The same thing had happened this year. Each time I glanced at it, the peak bore the same challenging aspect, and its 2500m face struck me as being steeper and more difficult than Epperly. Two conflicting emotions had troubled me throughout the expedition. One was an almost irresistible urge to tackle that huge face, austere and full of mystery, and to experience the unique thrill of being the first to step on to its highest point. The other was a searing mixture of anguish and doubt, which almost made me wish that a delay in completing the film, or the arrival of bad weather, would prevent me from starting out. Of course I could simply abandon the whole idea, but I knew that there could be absolutely no justification for doing so. I felt fit, the weather was good, everything was in my favour. I was certain that if I gave up now, I would regret it for the rest of my life.

I packed into my rucksack only climbing gear and a small stove. I estimated that, given its technical nature, I would require about 20 hours for the ascent and descent of the 2500m face. Accordingly, I worked out that I would need to set out at 9am in order to arrive at the start of the difficulties when the sun might be bestowing some mild warmth on the face. Having made my decision at 1300 hours, I now had to wait practically a whole day before starting. As always, I found this spell of inaction very trying – it is during periods of waiting that doubts begin to fill my mind and I start thinking about the difficulties of the route, analysing all the possibilities and trying to anticipate the implications of the unforeseen.

29 December 1995

In action at last, I am fully relaxed. I approach the face on ski. I notice a few odd-looking clouds, but the weather looks like holding out for another day. An icy wind sweeping down the wall paralyses my face muscles; but never mind – whilst I keep up a mental commentary during the climb, there will be no need for me to speak. At first the snow is hard and I am aware of the distinctive grating sound of my crampons. Within an hour I arrive at the first rock section, which does not present me with any problems, but the depth of the snow begins to increase. This puts me on the alert for the possibility of windslab breaking away; to avoid this, I vary my upward direction. Within three hours I have climbed just over 1000m, and the



13. Ellsworth Mountains, Antarctica: the West Face of Mt Epperly, 4606m.
The ascent route was via the central couloir. (*Erhard Loretan*) (p3)



14. Erhard Loretan ascending Pic Loretan, c4550m, 29-30 December 1995.
(*Romolo Nottaris*) (p3)

intense cold is my greatest enemy. My rate of ascent has exceeded my predictions, but this means that I shall remain in shadow for a further six hours. My feet bother me, and in spite of continually moving my toes and loosening my boot fastenings, I am unable to keep them warm. The frostbite that I sustained on Kangchenjunga last autumn doesn't help. This is one of the problems that continually troubles me as I gradually gain height. But the sight of clear blue skies above helps to reassure me.

It is 1600 hours when I arrive at the anticipated crux of the ascent. The couloir that I have climbed narrows, and ends in a rock face covered with powder snow. Now that I am at the key-section, even though I find it hard, my previous doubts disappear. My concentration redoubles as I begin to tackle the first rocks leading to a vertical wall. I am still climbing in shadow. I am pleased that the hard physical action gives me a fresh burst of adrenalin. The rock is sound, and I manage to make fairly rapid progress without placing any protection.

After a while, I find myself half-frozen inside an eddy of icy spindrift, which indicates that I am probably not far from the col. The face is now vertical and to climb it I am obliged to remove my gloves. The wind force increases and the spindrift penetrates everything. My eyelashes freeze, and I can scarcely see. My hands begin to stiffen. I can hear the heavy thumping of my heart. (*Loretan, what are you doing here?*) My crampons scrape across the rock, searching for a hold. I have managed to anchor my ice axe in solid ice a little higher up, which enables me to reach a small level platform where I can place both feet. This brings a dramatic sense of relief, and gives me the strange illusion that I am sunbathing on the Copacabana beach in Rio! Then I hear the roar of the wind sweeping across the col, and I realise that the game is not yet won. I place a mask over my nose, which has almost certainly turned white by now. Another 100m of ascent, and I finally emerge on the col. It is an extraordinary feeling: I find myself looking directly across at Mt Epperly, and memories of last year come flooding back. I find the summit ridge unexpectedly easy; it is composed of wind-compacted snow. It dawns on me that a few magical moments will now be granted to me as the light creates an enchanting glow in the sky. My shadow, which has persistently followed me, is now projected on to the immense cornices overhanging the edge of the ridge.

It is 1800 hours, and Loretan stands on the summit – one more of the many hundreds that he has ascended. But this time his sentiments are different. He is the first to reach this point. He is alone, lost somewhere close to the stars, in an environment which may seem hostile but which is a part of his universe. He feels almost as though he is a part of the mountain itself. Mt Epperly, directly opposite, gives him a friendly glance. He is moved to tears by the splendour of the spectacle, which reveals the magnificence and the utter perfection of Nature ...

Summary: In 1994 Erhard Loretan made a solo first ascent of Mt Epperly, 4606m, in Antarctica. While making the ascent, he noticed a nameless peak, c4550m, steeper and more difficult than Epperly, and felt a strong urge to climb it. In autumn 1995, after climbing Kangchenjunga (his fourteenth 8000m mountain), Loretan returned to Antarctica with a film crew to repeat and film the ascent of Mt Epperly. On 29 December, during the few free days that followed the filming, he made a first solo ascent, in nine hours, of the unnamed peak which he had noticed the previous year.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Antarctic Treaty, which controls the administration of Antarctica, was introduced on 23 June 1961 and has now been signed by 42 States. In 1991, to protect the unique environment of the Antarctic, a comprehensive Protocol on Environmental Protection was added.*

I do not wish to appear as one who would support unnecessary regulations, but it would be extraordinary if all climbers visiting Antarctica were to observe, entirely of their own accord, the measures necessary to protect the Antarctic environment. Unfortunately, the spread of pollution across the Himalaya and other regions has shown that rules and restrictions are indeed a necessity. I would therefore make the following recommendations:

- that mountaineering expeditions to Antarctica should be required to guarantee their strict observance of the 1991 Protocol on environmental protection,
- that preference should be given to Alpine-style climbers who do not use fixed ropes or camps,
- that no climbing equipment should be left behind,
- that all waste should be carried out,
- that nature should be left undisturbed by any human traces.

* *Details of the Protocol will be found in the article 'Antarctica: Wilderness or Wasteland' by Dr Peter D Clarkson on pages 8-12.*