

BRUCE NORMAND

The Threat

Mount Edgar is no ordinary peak. Stunning and savage, beautiful and deadly, it hit the headlines hard in June 2009 when US climbers Johnny Copp, Micah Dash and Wade Johnson perished in an avalanche. In November 2010, Kyle Dempster and I used the more stable late autumn weather to attempt the mountain's infamous east face.

The Minya Konka range in south-western China's Sichuan province is barely larger than the Mont Blanc massif. Within it, however, are more than ten 6000m summits with one ascent or fewer. They form a north-south chain of satellites around Minya Konka itself, at 7556m one of the most imposing and dangerous mountains on the planet, and offer serious potential for alpine-style climbing on little known and highly committing peaks.

Mt Edgar is the highest peak not connected directly to Minya Konka. Its beautiful and imposing east face was the subject of an iconic 2008 photograph by Tamotsu Nakamura. Although the summit was reached from the south by a Korean team in 2002, it is this east face that gave the mountain instant legend status among alpinists. In May 2009, a Kyrgyz/Russian team of Mikhail Mikhailov and Alexander Ruchkin failed to climb the face because they couldn't see it. A month later, Copp, Dash and Johnson were killed in an avalanche on the approach – an event which rocked both the US climbing community and the small community of Chinese mountaineers working to develop alpine-style climbing in their home country.

The monsoon lasts from April to October in the mountains of Sichuan and because they are raked all winter by dry, north-westerly winds off the Tibetan plateau, autumn is the season to find ice. Once again denied access to eastern Tibet last autumn, Kyle and I decided to look for our alpine-style adventure in the Minya Konka range. Kyle, even more so than me, was both attracted and repelled by the east face of Edgar. Deciding, after much debate, that we'd have to try it meant making it the central focus of our expedition. Doing it in a single, fast push from the base would mean acclimatising somewhere else, such as the high valleys on the western side of the range.

We were accompanied by the independent pairs of Yan Dongdong and Gu Qizhi, both leading Chinese alpinists and our logistics experts, and French climbers Jean Annequin and Christian Trommsdorff. We bought our expedition supplies in Chengdu and Kangding, then drove to Laoyuling and trekked in two short days to a base camp at Shang Riwuqie (4300m). After a week of hiking and eating, Kyle and I decided our Edgar preparation would be aided by a little climbing. Situated directly above Shang Riwuqie, the rocky west face of Mt Grosvenor (Riwuqie Feng, 6376m)



35. The east face of Mount Edgar from the valley floor above Moxi, showing the line taken by Dempster and Norman to establish *The Rose of No-Man's Land* (WI5 M6). (Tamotsu Nakamura)

forms an almost perfect triangle, split in half by a single, central couloir. Tried first by Andy Cave and Mick Fowler in 2003 and later by a Korean party, this line was known to repel suitors in its spring conditions of thin ice and rotten rock. Now, however, it was October, and the ice conditions seemed solid.

We went for the single-push approach. Packing a tiny tent, one mat and a single sleeping bag for contingencies, we left BC at 3am, scrambling up moraines and our own old post-holes to reach the base of the route at 5.30. The wind was strong and a cloud front obscured the moon. We soloed up the snow cone and into the lower couloir, finding good, 45-degree ice with occasional steeper steps, and reached the crux pitches before setting the first anchor in thin ice.

Thicker ice for one rope-length at 80 degrees took us to half height. Moving back right and then up, Kyle led the crux pitch slowly and carefully. Although only WI4+, most of the pitch was rotten ice over slabby rock. At noon, I led us into four very long, calf-burning, simul-climbing 60-degree névé pitches to the very top of the gully. The clouds swirled around us for the entire afternoon while the battering wind threw blasts of spindrift from below. Kyle pulled through the steep exit step, commenting on quality ice-climbing above 6000m, and we dived under the summit cornice to enjoy



36. Kyle Dempster fully engaged with the crux pitch of Mount Edgar's east

face, on Day Four of the first ascent.(Bruce Normand)



37. West face of Mount Grosvenor (Riwuqie Feng 6376m). Dempster and Normand made the second ascent of the mountain via the obvious central couloir, followed by an abseil descent of the north face, in shadow. (*Bruce Normand*)

some respite from the wind. The evening sun began to show through gaps in the wind-torn clouds.

On the summit at 6pm, the west face of Jiazi Feng (6540m) gloomed large beside us, ragged clouds covered Minya Konka and to the east Edgar looked steep and menacing. Our words lost on the wind, we shook hands and headed down the north-east ridge. Easy snow soon steepened and turned into low-angle down-traversing beside a corniced edge. Night fell and the wind remained strong, sucking additional warmth and strength from us. We abandoned the ridge, descended steep snow into the north face and then, like the first-ascent party (Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma, who climbed up by the south-west ridge in November 2003), were forced into a long, dark abseil. Kyle is a true expert at finagling anchors in the sketchiest terrain, and it took 15 of these to reach the upper glacier basin at 2am, where we stopped to bivouac. We awoke to a nice day, nothing like the previous one, and were back in BC by mid-afternoon. The fine weather lasted while we recovered, and a storm moved in when we were thinking about more climbing, so we finished our acclimatisation with three days spent shovelling snow. We were ready for Edgar.

Mount Edgar is a rather different story from Grosvenor. The east side of the range resembles a subtropical cloud forest: the approaches begin in verdant valley floors at only 1500m, and misty, rainy weather fills some-



38. Kyle Dempster following the lower section of the central couloir on the west face of Mount Grosvenor. (*Bruce Normand*)

thing like 300 days of the year. With more than 2000 vertical metres of precipitous slopes and blown-out river gorges separating the fields from the mountains, this region shrouds its peaks in a special brand of mystery.

In Moxi we met up with our Sichuan Mountaineering Association liaison officer, Li Zongli, who had also been LO for the ill-fated American expedition. A trained climber, conscientious, well qualified and genuinely passionate about the mountains, he was easily the best LO I have ever encountered in any country. In keeping with the mysterious spirit of Edgar, our first day featured unbroken low cloud and drizzle from dawn, when we'd already crossed a road-closing landslide, to dusk, by which time we'd established that the local porter we'd hired had no clue where the mountain was. Worse, we'd spent most of the day in a shockingly unstable river gully, with semi-vertical, moraine-like edges left by a recent, massive blowout. The porter left after showing us a tiny campsite among mossy boulders in the rhododendron forests.

The next day had some brief, blue patches, but clouds and then mist prevented us from seeing even to treeline at around 4000m. Still scrambling blindly up the unstable gully, we suspected that one massive fork might be the junction of the approaches for the south-east and east faces. Occasionally we dodged bouncing rocks and thought about the video account of the American expedition, but rain in this place didn't bear thinking about. The



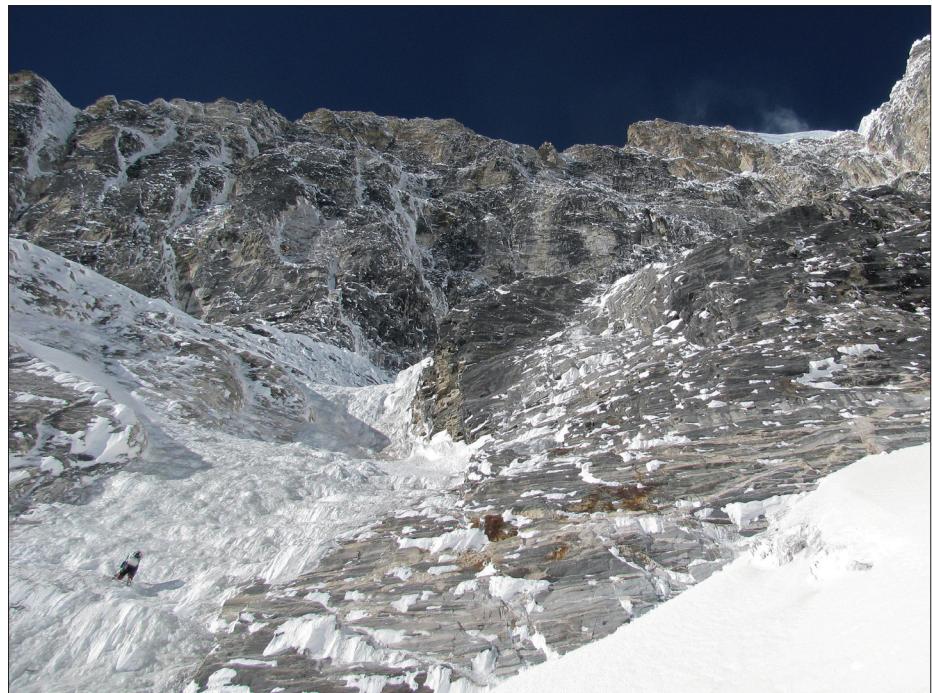
39. Kyle Dempster leading into the approach gully, at 4200m on day three, Mt Edgar. (*Bruce Normand*)

gully opened out before ending abruptly at a rock wall, where we found a flat and unthreatened spot on the icy toe of a small glacier. Light snow set in as we pitched the tent. The altitude was 4100m.

In the bright sunshine of our third morning, a glacier-filled cleft sliced up between the rock buttresses above us, their snowy faces sparkling in the morning light. Behind them towered the east face, which was nothing short of stunning: vertical, rocky, cornice-rimmed, seamed with thin-looking ice lines on the left but entirely blank on the right. The cleft avalanched as we watched, a wave of powder billowing down and past us. Our policy decision was to seize the weather window: we waited for two hours in the strong sun to see if anything would change, then went up for a look.

In the shadows of the narrow ravine, we crossed a large debris mound from the morning's avalanche, clearly a sérac collapse above us. The slide track was very well defined, easy to climb up and easy to jump out of. This was a roulette game, but the odds didn't seem too bad. We made rapid progress to 5000m, where the track ran out, the snow deepened and the slope steepened. After several knee-deep hours we reached the base of an ice ramp that led through a step to the main east face. It was 5pm and we were at 5500m; this face was not as big as it seemed on the picture. We dug a full-size tent site into the slope and settled down for a comfortable night.

A full-colour sunrise ushered in another perfect day. I led us up the 70-degree ice ramp for a few rope-lengths of simul-climbing, then on up another long snow slog to the base of the wall at 5800m. The east face is like a scoop: the steep, rocky right side (facing SE) and the ice-seamed



40. Bruce Normand leading the initial ice ramp at 5600m, day four. (*Kyle Dempster*)

left side (facing NE) are separated by a central gully that catches everything falling off the corniced upper rim. To avoid the gully, we started the serious climbing in a faint dihedral well to its left. We were aiming for the ice lines on this side, knowing we would be forced off the face at its upper left, well below summit height: the centre of the scoop simply could not be climbed at any acceptable level of risk. There couldn't be much more than 400 vertical metres of climbing to the exit.

Kyle launched into the shallow corner. The good news was that the rock was sound, granitic material offering plenty of placements. The bad news was that it was punishingly steep, and Kyle was forced to hang while reassessing both his gear and his balance between two lines of holds. He climbed in his usual systematic way, focusing first on the safety of frequent gear placements and only then on the tenuous and athletic moves. The exit was the steepest and slabbiest part, and again he worked steadily through, passing onto a ramp of loose snow and breathing deeply at the anchor. For me the pitch was fun despite the heavier pack: small, positive edges for crampons, small, positive axe placements, sequences of small balance problems to the thin exit moves.

Kyle pushed on up a steepening, snowy groove to the base of the most pronounced ice line on the face. Only the opening was solid, then we were on steep, thin ice poorly bonded to slabby rock. The first pitch was again delicate and mixed, the second only slightly less precarious. Darkness was falling as a short, steep third pitch took us into the snowfield for which we'd been aiming. It was steep and icy; the only option was to hack out a



41. Kyle Dempster leading an ice pitch at 5900m on day four. (Bruce Normand)

shelf for a sitting bivouac. The night was nice, calm and clear as we brewed up while watching the stars, but towards morning the winds rose slightly and we found we were sitting in a spindrift funnel.

As the sun came up, we whipped off the sleeping bags and brushed everything down. A mouthful to eat and drink, a little thawing in the weak, early light, and we started climbing in the shadows to our left. Another steep, thin ice streak took Kyle to a long, leftward traverse across snow.



42. Kyle Dempster on the traverse into the southern slopes of Edgar, at 6300m on day six. (Bruce Normand)

The day turned cloudier, with wind raking the ridgeline above us. The ice turned breakable, and finally borderline useless. We could see the exit col, but two thin variants of the direct line ended up in checkmate, and our gazes turned to the terribly long and dangerous descent yawning beneath us. Failure was not an option. More rising, leftward traversing took us into another shallow groove. Kyle, leading over the tenuous, slabby rock, was forced to remove almost every vestige of white stuff to dry-tool the features beneath. Two last delicate pitches brought us into a shallow dihedral below a roof, where we pulled out onto a snowy col.

The hard climbing was over, but the alpine nature of the beast took over. In a howling gale, we threw up the tent and dived inside to rest and fuel up. In the morning the wind was unchanged, but the day was clear and sunny. Minya Konka was trailing a huge streamer of clouds, and the summit ramparts of Edgar glowed orange in the sun. Getting there required a long ice traverse, into the south-facing slopes and up through a sérac line to the rounded south ridge. The winds stayed strong and the clouds were thickening as we pulled over onto the broad shoulder of the first ascent route.

We dropped the packs and climbed the snow slopes, enough gaps in the mist showing the cornice rim to our right. I crawled over the final, steep ridge crest, ready for the summit cornice. When my axe-shafts disappeared, we were there. Kyle and I did the arm's-length summit photo, our

smiles of relief only, not of any sort of triumph or success. The white-out wasn't showing any signs of another gap, so we set off down.

We launched into a fast and blind descent, aiming for a high glacier basin we'd mapped out from above. Kyle led down the firm snow slopes, heading south as the stormy winds picked up. Down-climbing steep snow, we followed a ridge and a rocky edge, passed through a col and reached another firm snowfield perfect for walking. As the wind dropped, so did the visibility. As the going flattened, the snow got much deeper. Snowfall was thickening as the light faded and we camped beneath a tiny rock overhang to avoid avalanche danger.

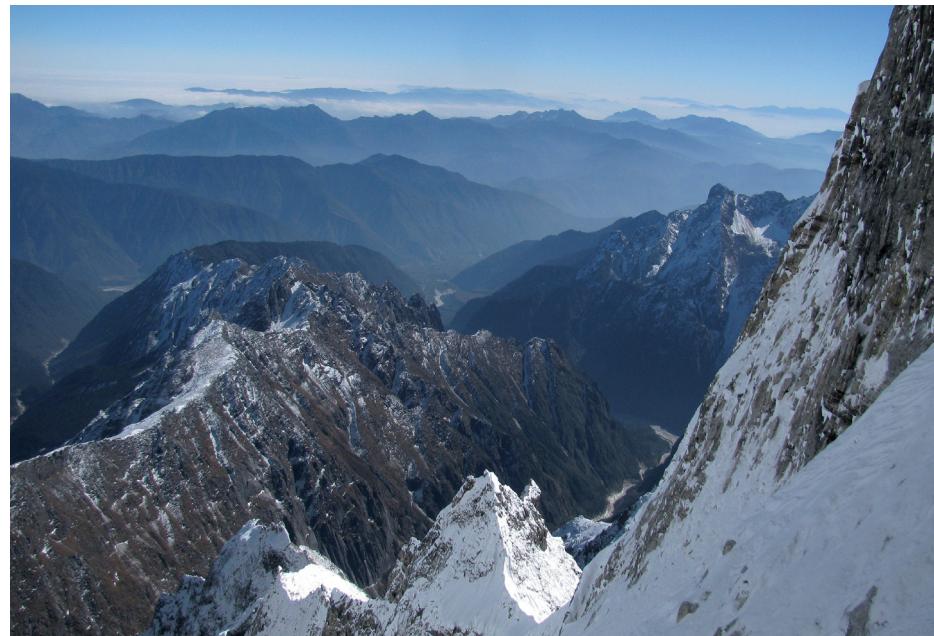
The morning was clear and we could look back at the summit of Edgar. Irrational exuberance made us sure we could get through the invisible



43. Kyle Dempster and Bruce Normand back in Moxi after eight days on Mt Edgar.
(Bruce Normand)

glacier which fell away below us. Four hours later, we were lost in a maze of slots, hiking into crevasses, down-climbing icy fins and abseiling around corners. The morning sun turned to another white-out. We aimed for the true left and made progress in the gap between rock and ice: some down-climbing pitches, then back onto the glacier to avoid huge holes by the rock slabs, then several more abseils back into the rock-ice cleft. We were abseiling steep slabs into the white-out, water freezing onto the ropes, the anchors becoming ever more flaky. Kyle explored a scree-covered ledge in fading light as I pulled our filthy, armour-plated ropes yet again. He pulled hard on a sling. Harder. The rock shifted and the sling blew. We were marooned on the stonefall-prone ledge for the night, but at least it seemed warm at 4300m.

Our eighth day dawned as white as ever, with thickly falling snow adding avalanche danger to the mix. We found an anchor, nearly failed to pull the icy ropes, and downclimbed on through endless steep, loose, snowy boulders and gullies. At 3600m things flattened out, the snow deepened, and we were thrown into a stream bed like the ones we'd climbed up a week earlier. The snow turned to rain. At 3300m the river gave suddenly onto a road. We were down. We walked for a bit, then hitched a ride out from some road workers in a classic Chinese Dongfeng truck. Low in the valley, we had to scramble over a giant landslip, where all trace of the previous road bed had been wiped out. Edgar was being characteristically hostile right to the end. Walking down the main street in Moxi, on firm ground for the first time in a week, we felt a little unsteady.



44. Looking eastward from the base of the crux pitch on Mt Edgar over the foothills of Sichuan. (Bruce Normand)

Our route, *The Rose of No-Man's Land* (M6, WI5), is not very direct, but it does seem to be the only safe line on the east face of Edgar. Having visited at the most stable time of year, we cannot recommend this face to any other parties. Our Edgar experience was the very definition of 'full value': a hard line on a hard mountain, climbed in the purest, ground-up alpine style (we left only our abseil slings and two dropped items on the mountain). However, the result for both of us was at best a draw – a borderline-epic adventure in a permanently threatening atmosphere. Despite the facts of our achievement, we came away with no feeling of success, or even satisfaction, just one of relief to have made it off this mountain in one piece.

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the east face of Mt Edgar (6168m), Minya Konka range, Sichuan, China, by Kyle Dempster and Bruce Normand, in an eight-day round trip from the nearest settlement, Moxi, summing on 12 November 2010; *The Rose of No-Man's Land* (WI5, M6). The climb was nominated for the 2011 Piolets d'Or. Prior to Mt Edgar, the pair made the second ascent of Mt Grosvenor (Riwuqie Feng, 6376m), completing a new route up the central couloir on the west face.

Acknowledgements: Bruce Normand would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council for their financial support.