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BIG WALL OF CHINA EXPEDITION 2004



Supported by:

**Finance:
British Mountaineering Council
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**Equipment:
Boreal
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Big Wall of China Expedition report

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Financial Assistance

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Equipment

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Information

Mick Fowler, Roger Payne, Tamatsu Nakamura, Tanja and Andrej Grmovsek

Contact names and address for further information

Anne and John Arran
25 Carterknowle Road
Sheffield
S7 2DW

Tel. 0114 2584047

www.thefreeclimber.com

Aims of the Expedition

- ◆ To climb unclimbed 5,000m peaks and rock walls in the Mt Siguniang National Park
- ◆ To undertake the first British exploration of the Suang Gou valley and report back on potential

The Team

John Arran (40) Computer programmer and journalist

One of Britain's most experienced and most accomplished rock climbers, with first ascents up to E10 in the UK. His first expedition to Kyrgyzstan (1999) resulted in a first ascent of possibly the hardest traditionally-protected free-climb in the country. He has since been to Iran, Egypt and led two expeditions to Venezuela, each of which was successful in establishing major new free-climbs of a very high standard.

Anne Arran (35) Photo journalist and climbing coach

A former British competition climbing champion, Anne was one of the first women in Britain to climb F8a. Subsequently she concentrated on traditionally-protected climbs, on-sighting routes up to E6. This wealth of experience has proved useful on expedition, where she has played a significant part in establishing major new big-wall routes in Kyrgyzstan, Venezuela and The Grand Canyon.

Lenny Zhenging Cheng 'Lenny'

Lenny was our Chinese interpreter and a superb base camp cook. While he did not climb with us he has much information about this area.

Preparation

There is no need to take food from the UK as everything can be purchased in Chengdu. Internal airlines did charge for excess baggage so take the minimum amount of equipment from the UK and argue to pay less.

Gas stoves and cylinders MSR fitting can be purchased at the outdoor shop next to the traffic hotel Chengdu. We advise hiring an interpreter if none of your party speaks Chinese. Access good maps and information about previous ascents etc. before arriving as relatively little information is available once in China.

Restrictions are minimal for climbing although permits may be required or requested for peaks over 5,500m. There is a cost to enter the park and camp. Some of this can be arranged in advance through an agent however a pay and you go approach as we adopted could be more economical, certainly for lower peaks.

Travel to the valley

We flew with Air China to Chengdu from Beijing booking a single ticket to keep flexibility. There are approximately 10 flights per day found on Opodo or Air China websites. Take cash for purchase of tickets, excess baggage and airport tax.

We arrived in Chengdu after the 2.5hr flight to be met by 'Lenny' who had been recommended to us. We stayed in Sam's guesthouse which is cheaper than the Traffic hotel at £7.50 a night for a double room. Both are favourites with adventure tourists and backpackers. Both hotels will store luggage.

We shopped at the local department store / supermarket which was a fun experience working out what each food packet contains. Noodles and wall snacks were available at cheap prices. Local city buses are a challenge to work out and it is better to take a taxi with heavy bags. We stayed at the **bus station** hotel before catching the 7.30am bus to Rilong. The journey takes about 6hrs with a stop off for lunch through wooded panda infested valleys and taking in a couple of road sections which were either subsiding into a river or had been landed on by rocks. No we didn't see any panda although there is Wolong nature reserve should you have time. The bus crosses a pass at 4500m before descending to Rilong. We stayed at the Tourist Service Centre for around £5 / night before collecting 'permission' and paying 'environmental protection fees'.

There are many places to stay in Rilong such as with Mr Ma 'Siguniang mountain guides' recommended by Mick Fowler. We had a meal in his café which was superb and he also can arrange horses for the Siguniang valley. If you take an agent they may recommend somewhere. If you don't take an agent check out Mr Ma a local Tibetan and also the iced-rock bar www.iced-rock.com who is owned by a friendly local climber with lots of information on climbing around China/Tibet and perhaps more than the Tourist service centre who has a CMA linked office, owns all the bus service and most of the valley's leisure activity.

Rilong to base camp

To get into the valley you need to buy a tourist bus ticket although it may be possible to also go in through a check point by hire car. It looks like valley locals are not allowed to transport tourists. There are no horses available in this valley although locals at the road head could be available to help move bags. We made 2 base camps during the trip, one at the base of Putala Shan and the other at the road head. Watch out for energetic yaks and cows/bulls that can disrupt camp life given the opportunity. It is best to camp over the other side of the river from locals' houses. Return journey bus tickets to Chengdu are normally reserved one day in advance and can be obtained from the local grocery store.

Weather

We arrived in the valley in drizzle with low cloud cover so it was difficult to see objectives. The weather did not follow any specific pattern but tended to rain for a full day then rain/snow high up for part of the next day and the night and have a clear day or two following. There were a couple of thunder and lightening storms mainly towards Siguniang although Mount Hunter seemed to get its fair share of bad weather and cloud. During these there was no possibility of climbing with heavy and persistent rain. Sometimes it would splatter a bit mid day and was worth continuing climbing to see if it stopped. The rock took about 4hrs to dry fully following rain. This was inconvenient for alpine style climbing which required a determined approach in this weather. It was cold and unpleasant bivviing out during rain with just a duvet jacket and bivi bag, even with a cave shelter. During the day if sunny it felt hot and was tee shirt weather although most of the time we were climbing in a thin fleece. North faces could have snow drips coming down and there were patches of snow on the ascents. It is cold and clear in the winter and warm and wet in the summer.

CITY: CHENGDU PROVINCE: SICHUAN

LATITUDE: 30 DEG 40 MIN N LONGDITUDE: 104 DEG 1 MIN E ELEVATION:
1660 FT

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
HIGH (F)	49	53	61	71	79	82	86	86	77	69	60	52
LOW (F)	36	40	47	55	60	69	72	71	65	58	49	40
RAINFALL (IN)	0.3	0.4	0.8	1.9	3.6	4.1	9.3	8.9	4.9	1.7	0.6	0.2
HUMIDITY (%)	81	81	79	78	77	81	86	85	85	86	84	84
DAYS OF SNOW COVER	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Climbing potential in the area

Best time for ice is apparently in January when many Chinese take a vacation to climb the icefalls some of which have been documented. NE face of Siguniang is a good unclimbed mixed objective as well as two peaks at the head of our valley which looked to be in the high 5 or low 6,000m peaks with steep mixed climbing faces. On the eastern side of our valley there are many unclimbed peaks in the 5,200-5,900m range as rock and snow objectives. From where we climbed on our side of the valley as well as new peaks there were many big walls and spires which looked very difficult requiring a big wall style approach using fixed ropes. These looked harder than objectives we had seen in the Ak Su valley but there wasn't much between broken alpine and full on desperates, some faces looked completely impossible. Further down our valley there were also many fine unclimbed peak and ridge objectives that we had not been able to see on the way up the valley. With the valley floor at 3,200-3,500m multiple climbs are possible in one trip. There are also some peaks where it looks possible to walk or scramble to the summit but not many.

Timetable/diary

The rock was better on the Putula Shan side of the valley

D1 Arrive in Beijing 19/7. Visit Forbidden city and stay Fanguang Hotel

D2 JA arrives and we fly to Chengdu where met by Lenny and stay in Sam's guest house

D3 Shopping for supplies

D4 Bus to Rilong (6hrs) and permissions from the Tourist Service Centre in Rilong. Walk up towards Siguniang 1.5 hrs for acclimatisation. Stay in Tourist Service Centre. Stopped by guard and then continued.

D5 Tourist bus into park (3hrs with stops). Set up base camp under Putula Shan to climb peak to right (we named mi mi shan). Take up bags 1hr through dense wood and return to base camp (~3,200m).

D6 Leave Lenny and carry camping equipment to ABC (6hrs) ~4,300m and stay the night.

D7 Go down for remaining equipment and ferry sacks for climb to base of scree beneath rock (4,600m) and return to ABC

D8 Get up 5.00am and go to base of climb. Make climb to subsidiary peak we called Mi Mi Shan (5016m) and descend by abseil –ABC 9pm. (see climbing achievements for detail)

D9 Rest am and descend 4pm to base camp 8.00pm. Heavy rain and hail for most of the day.

D10 Rest, dry equipment and pack

D11 Move base camp to road head (3,500m) and set up new base camp.

D12 Pack and reconnaissance. Move up to 4,400m to bivouac initially through dense wood and troublesome virtually impenetrable rhododendrons via a wet cliff face to avoid vegetation and then up a spur. (6hrs)

D13 Torrential rain, hail and heavy storm all day and into the evening. Stayed in ABC camp with basher. Very cold.

D14 Start climb 9.00am when rock beginning to dry, climb to summit of 'heart of cow' and descend to bivouac for 1am the next day. (See climbing achievements for detail)

D15 Descend 3hrs in light to base camp. Rest and arrange logistics to leave. Weather deteriorating

D16 Bus Rilong – Chengdu & flight to Guilin. End of expedition.

D17 Rock climbing

D18 Rock climbing

D19 Rock climbing

D20 Flight to Beijing

D21 Flights to UK and Pristina

Expedition achievements and account

Summary

The expedition climbed 2 new peaks, 1 subsidiary and one main peak in the Suang Qiao Gou valley, Siguniang national park. Peak 1 we set up base camp at 4,100m and took equipment to the base of the route. We then ascended right of a spur 9 pitches 350m at E3/E4 5c to reach the sub peak we called Mi Mi Shan. The second objective was Heart of Cow named by the Chinese. We set up ABC bivi at 4,400m and after a day of rain climbed the North Face and ridge to reach the summit. We descended by the NE face in 9 abseils and then scrambling in the dark to reach ABC after midnight. There was technical climbing (9 pitches) up to English 6a and we found it difficult to give it an E grade but could guess E4/E5.

Heart of Cow -

Pm Lenny stayed at base camp. We expected a 2-3 hr walk mostly on an easy path up the valley with a few trees before easy grassy contouring to the base of the route. We told Lenny to look out for us on the route.

The trees got thick and difficult but we are old hands at dense vegetation so marked out a route with practiced efficiency. The trees give way to virtually impenetrable rhododendrons. We crawl beneath the bigger ones awkwardly and climb over the smaller ones tired of aggressive branches scraping or bouncing back. The medium size were the worst like trying to run through porridge. The end was in sight but not for a while yet. The promised land of a grassy contour was an illusion. Reality is more rhododendrons interspersed with small soaking cliffs; as if we weren't having enough trouble already.

6pm Finally we have to break the rope out and John solo's 2 pitches up wet slabs in trainers and pulls up the bags. Then more plants!

7pm Finally the ground clears. Not quite sure where we are but the original objective seems unlikely now due to difficulty of approach. – don't have time tonight before dark and want to climb first thing tomorrow so we decide to climb the wall above us instead of the longer wall around right.

8pm Arrive at a collection of boulders and choose a bivi. Very tired and excited about climbing tomorrow.

9pm Starts raining but we are well protected deep inside our boulder cave.

10pm Rains and continuous rain drips from the roof getting ever closer and wetter. Hardly any sleep due to cold. Maybe should have bought sleeping bags because feet particularly got cold. Had to brew up several times in the night for warmth.

Day 2

6am No need to get up because it's pissing down and we couldn't climb if we wanted to. Maybe in an hour it will brighten up – it often seems to do that. Still raining/snowing still cloudy, no chance of making the top today. Hope it will stop and dry out for tomorrow.

1pm Stops raining at last. Celebrate by breaking out a new tea bag. We have been reusing them so far as we didn't expect to be making more than a few brews. In reality it is the only thing that has kept us warm and sane all night.

1.05pm Starts raining again harder than ever.

6pm Stops raining and clears to eerie swirling cloud. There is new snow down at 4300m just above our altitude. Everything is drenched so no chance of trying this evening. Hopefully an early start tomorrow.

7pm Rearrange basher to act as a second skin roof to catch drips from the ceiling of the cave. It seems cosier this way. Also decide to share a climbing sack for both of our feet to try and avoid getting as cold as last night.

10pm Awake again freezing cold and much colder water around which means the temperature is lower than last night and need more tea to keep us warm.

Day 3

6am Plenty of swirling mist but thankfully no more rain over night. Sadly hardly any sleep either. Pray for the sun to dry the face and warm the spirit.

8am We get up and pack, picking out a line up the bottom slabs then up onto the west ridge. Looks possible but would definitely help if it dried.

10am 1 pitch up the slabs and things aren't going well. Drenched rock and no gear isn't a good combination. After what feels like a 6a friction traverse (probably 5b in the dry). Every way looks much harder all of a sudden now we know that the slab doesn't have edges on it at all and it only has gear every 10m at best. All exits to the terrace above look dire, either hard, grassy, unprotected or all three. I'm lucky to find a way through actually in one of the least likely places but crucially it sported an helpful collection of edges on its apparently most blank and hopeless section. Time for a major rethink on the terrace.

12 noon We can connect with the ridge again higher hope hopefully as the rock hereabouts is still wet to climb at any speed so we are heading up a scree slope for a while to gain a bit more height at the same time. A steep headwall awaits and we have no idea how hard it will be but its relatively short at least.

2pm Even gaining the base of the headwall is a challenge cutting steps in a snow bank with rocks in hand and wearing trainers got us up as far as the hideous unstable rock scree gully with no gear options. Feels too much like mountaineering and this is not what we are equipped for.

4pm Just done what is hopefully the crux we reach a much steeper snow bank needing careful step cutting so as not to be too dangerous in trainers. Then a bit of an improvised ascent up the gap between the top of the snow and the overhanging loose rock. Finally had to commit lay backing up dry rock but in wet trainers from the snow and soon needed all the experience water climbing, loose rock and steep trad all rolled into one. I knew these decades of experience would one day be useful.

6pm After an unprotected traverse and leaving most of the holds in place the rock dramatically changed the rock dramatically improved and I was suddenly in seventh heaven cranking up on solid edges with an easing of angle just above. We've cracked it 6pm a few pitches later up the final arête and onto the top. What a relief. It's a lot later than we had hoped but should give us enough time to get down before dark if we're lucky. Good news there is no sign of anyone having been here before.

7pm The descent looked like about 4 abseils to the col with a bit of scree walking beneath them. In reality it was 9 abseils of mostly the full 60m and no chance of walking anywhere – far too steep, can see now why the peak was unclimbed. As we thought that the face we were descending would be quite short - didn't notice we'd come up this; must have been having too much fun to notice the final abseil is 63m. We stretch the ropes to get down and race across a grassy traverse to the col proper and its pretty much dark.

9pm The steep bank we're descending is getting steeper and darker and there is a feeling that it will end in a cliff. We can hear the water cascading down a ravine nearby but its impossible to make out where the best way is in the dark. Decide to go back up and traverse round in search of less steep ground.

10pm and 3 steep ravines later we are no better off. If only we could see further than 10m ahead. Running out of options we descend steeper and steeper ground using whatever vegetation available for assistance, solo or lowering down over hummocks to potentially flatter ground and repeating the process. It's now definitely climbing angle, below is a steeper blanker void. I go hunting and find to one side a thick rhododendron I feel is good enough to abseil off, but to where?

Many minutes spent looking, listening feeling for clues and I decide that the steeper cannot last for too much longer I abseil off the plant and 50m later find myself on easier terrain. That saved us a ridiculously cold and uncomfortable night on a vertiginous bank without a bivi bag between us.

12 midnight. It should have been all over ages ago. The plan was to contour back along the base of our cliff, pick up the bivi gear and head straight down. We were already a day late due to the storm so we didn't have any more food. Going down was definitely the best option but the conspiracy continued albeit masked by the darkness and now also by the gathering fog. Both exhausted cold and hungry our earlier elation had long since given away to increasing frustration at the ordeal refusing to end; now we had no idea where the bivi was. After so many hours on the go everything that could ache was aching. Anne's pronouncement 'half an hour more and we are going down'. It sounded sensible but I still thought we were close and I couldn't bear the thought of having to traipse back up to collect the things that we had left in the cave.

Besides we still weren't sure how easy it would be to get to base camp from here. We knew that there was a path somewhere but so far we had not had a lot of success finding and following such things in the dark.

12.30am Convinced we had chanced upon ground we had been on the way up but equally convinced that the land looked wrong. Shapes in the mist played with our imagination, crags and huge ridges turned out to be large boulders or small sections of cliff as it seemed extremely difficult to judge height or distance. 3 steps later a boggy stream came and went. 10 minutes more was Anne's last word on the matter after we had circled hopelessly for too long. Just one more idea. We speeded up to make the 10 minutes last longer trying to feel encouraged and focused, then as if by some kind of magic both of us had the same feeling of recognition at the same time. The ground under foot was right and now through the mist the unmistakable outline of our boulders appeared. We'd over run our final absolute deadline by 45 seconds.

Friday 4pm Another virtually sleepless night & escape the next day through fields of oversized cabbages, yaks and boulders. Next day we arranged the exit, ate eggs and other real food again.

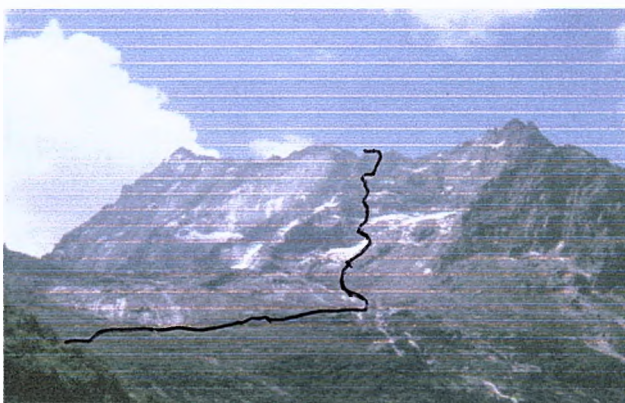
Exploration photograph compilation

See CD or www.thefreeclimber.com for many other images of the area.
Heart of Cow



Mi Mi Shan

Unclimbed ridge to the left leading to the main summit. The right hand peak is actually a lot lower than the top of the spur we climbed although it does not look like it in the picture.



Accounts

Costs:

Flights Beijing incl. baggage	£1357
Visas Incl. travel to get them	£80
Beijing to Chengdu and return	£434
Insurance (STA)	£88
Payment for interpreter/agent	£350
Food and fuel	£120
Accommodation in China	£95
Park fees, camping, protection	£114
Taxis/misc + bus Chengdu-Rilong	£200
Total	£2838

Income:

British Mountaineering Council (UK Sport)	£900
Mount Everest Foundation	£500
Personal contribution	£1438
Total	£2838

'The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.'

Maps

Sichuan Province



We thought that the left hand map was the most accurate with peaks climbed being 5016m Mi Mi Shan (subsidiary) and 4942m 'Heart of Cow' Niuxim Shan which was attempted by a Japanese party the previous year.

Maps source: Japanese Alpine Journal

