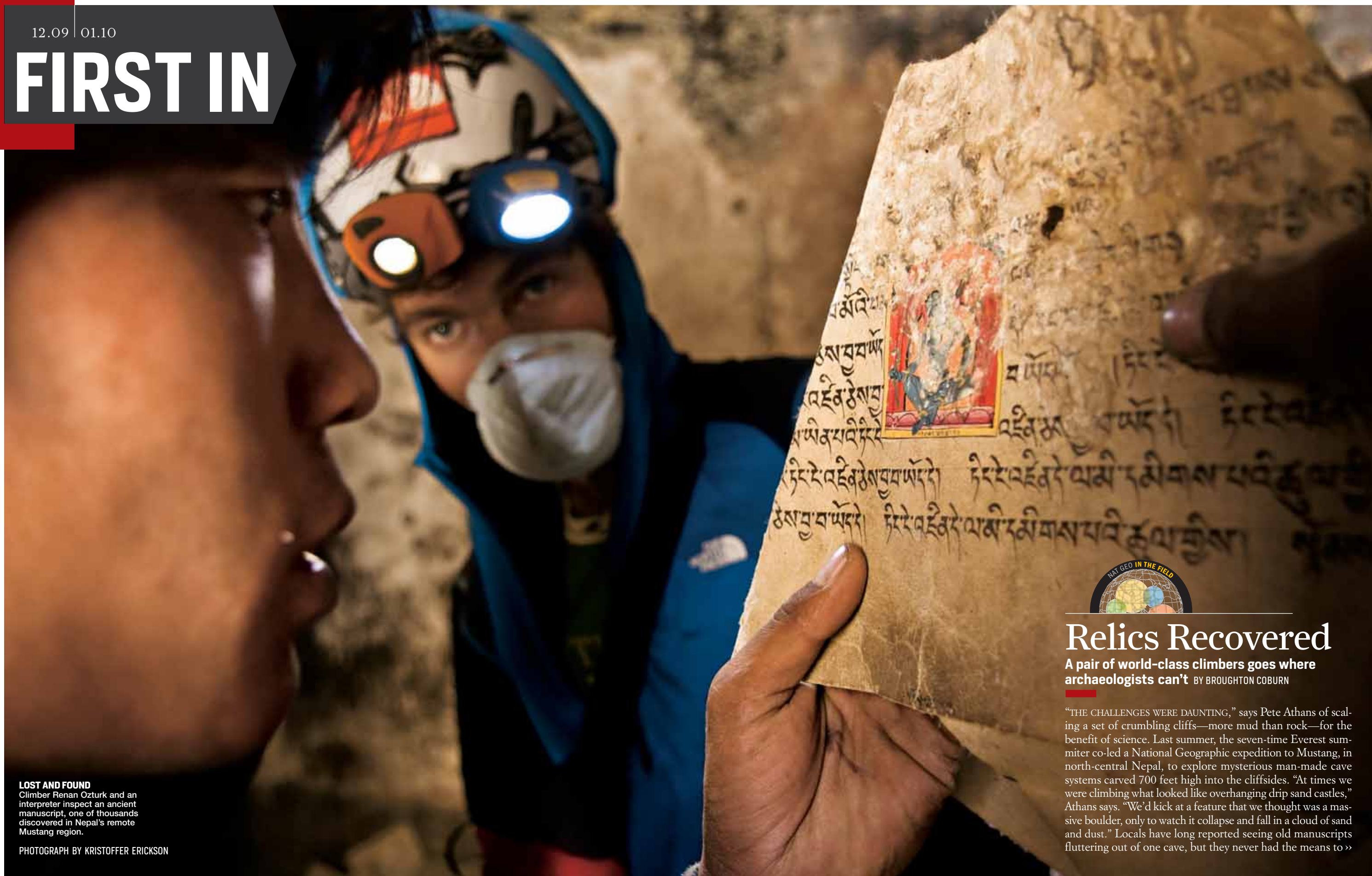


12.09 | 01.10

FIRST IN



LOST AND FOUND
Climber Renan Ozturk and an interpreter inspect an ancient manuscript, one of thousands discovered in Nepal's remote Mustang region.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTOFFER ERICKSON



Relics Recovered

A pair of world-class climbers goes where archaeologists can't BY BROUGHTON COBURN

"THE CHALLENGES WERE DAUNTING," says Pete Athans of scaling a set of crumbling cliffs—more mud than rock—for the benefit of science. Last summer, the seven-time Everest summiter co-led a National Geographic expedition to Mustang, in north-central Nepal, to explore mysterious man-made cave systems carved 700 feet high into the cliffsides. "At times we were climbing what looked like overhanging drip sand castles," Athans says. "We'd kick at a feature that we thought was a massive boulder, only to watch it collapse and fall in a cloud of sand and dust." Locals have long reported seeing old manuscripts fluttering out of one cave, but they never had the means to >>

explore it. The redoubt was simply too high up and the rock too unstable.

With special permission from the Nepalese government, Athans and climber Renan Ozturk fixed three-foot-long anchors deep into the crumbling walls. The going was slow: At one point, it took 14 hours to cover 328 feet. The duo eventually reached a series of tunnels and shafts, fixing a route inside the cliffs while dodging rockfall. “It was like climbing through a dust storm,” Ozturk says. After working their way to the top of the complex, the climbers traversed from one opening to the next and soon entered a large domed room littered with more than 8,000 ancient manuscript folios, the illuminated pages filled with images of pre-Buddhist Bön deities. “It was the first time in my career that I got to use climbing techniques for something other than mountaineering,” Athans says.

After collecting the manuscripts, Athans and Ozturk carefully lowered them in



rucksacks to the base of the cliff, where monks from Mustang’s central monastery in nearby Lo Manthang did an initial cleaning of the impossibly tough handmade scrolls by thrashing them against rocks. The expedition’s

anthropologist, Oxford professor Charles Ramble, then deciphered the folios. Most, he explained, date from the 15th century and suggest that Mustang’s very first kings, though Buddhist, also practiced Bön. Evidence of the two religions coexisting was unsettling for some Lo Manthang residents, who consider Bön a primitive theology, full of black magic and arcane rituals.

Now the focus of the expedition shifts from exploring the caverns to preserving these fast-eroding, hard-to-reach sites. “We took some serious risks,” says Ozturk, who at one point used his body as an anchor while hoisting others into the caves. “I don’t think anyone other than our team is going to be cruising into these caves again anytime soon.” ▲

Tune in to PBS for a two-part National Geographic Special on the Mustang Caves Expedition, The Lost Caves of Mustang and Secrets of Shangri-la, premiering November 18.



Clockwise from above: Monks clean and collate the hand-inlaid folios; Pete Athans in Ridziling cave; Renan Ozturk scales a crumbly cliff face.



➤ Watch videos of the harrowing Mustang expedition at ngadventure.com.



GO GREEN
ECO-VOYAGERS

And the award for green cause of the year goes to . . . the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. After decades of anonymity, the floating trash pile located midway between California and Hawaii had a breakout 2009—luring news crews, a trio aboard a raft made of junk, a zero-impact rower, and some hipsters from *Vice* magazine. Oh, and it was featured on *Oprah*. But most of the coverage (even you, Oprah) failed to ask one rather important question: Now that we know it’s out there, what do we do about it? “It’s an impossible cleanup job,” says Captain Charles Moore, who first sailed through the Patch in 1997 after a yacht race to Hawaii and has studied the site since. The Patch’s 3.5 million tons of trash and tiny plastic particles extend a hundred feet below the surface. Any cleanup, Moore says, would harm plankton and other small marine life—that is, if we use current disposal methods. This past summer, a team aboard the schooner *Kaisei* experimented with ways to capture, clean, and recycle the plastic bits into diesel fuel, with limited success. Another proposal would utilize a giant floating artificial beach to scoop up and filter the junk. But an immediate solution seems unlikely. “Look, I’m all for cleanup,” says David de Rothschild, an NG Emerging Explorer who plans to sail to the Garbage Patch this month in the *Plastiki*, a ship made of plastic bottles. “But 70 percent of all marine plastics are at the bottom of the ocean, and we dump eight million tons more into the sea each year. It’s pushing water uphill to try to clean up this mess.” The best way to eliminate oceanic garbage, de Rothschild argues, is to keep it on land: “The *Plastiki* is about turning something we’re told is a throwaway into a valuable commodity. If people change the way they see plastic, they may stop tossing the stuff.” —RYAN BRADLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: KRISTOFFER ERICKSON (2); BROUGHTON BY MATTHEW HOLLISTER, MAP BY HANSAH HUSSEIN