

NEW ZEALAND ALPINE JOURNAL **2011**



NEW ZEALAND ALPINE CLUB

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COVER *Miroslav Kopecky just below the summit rocks on the Linda Glacier Route on Aoraki Mt Cook.* Michal Karnik

INSIDE FRONT COVER *Ski tourers on the Tasman Glacier.* Adrian Caum

HALF TITLE *Ice pyramid.* Hinrich Schaefer

THIS PAGE *Jamie Vinton-Boot and Paul Hersey on the first ascent of Honey Badger (W13/4), Hopkins Valley.* Troy Mattingley



Pabuk Kang (6244m), Pabuk Valley, north-eastern Nepal. In October 2010, Dave Barton and Tim Macartney Snape made the first ascent of the peak via the snow ridge immediately left of the rocky face.

Ken Baldwin

YANGMA EXPEDITION 2010

by KEN BALDWIN and COLIN CAMERON

The 2010 Yangma Expedition successfully climbed the previously unclimbed Pabuk Kang (6244m) in north-western Nepal, near the border with Tibet. Team members John Finnigan, Theo Hooy and Tim Macartney-Snape and myself were on the 1978 ANUMC Dunagiri Expedition, the first Australian Expedition to climb a 7000m peak. It was the first Himalayan trip for the remaining three climbers, Colin Cameron, David Barton and Keith Scott, the first two of whom are also former ANUMC members. Stacy Rodger provided support at base camp.

After flying to Biratnagar, we experienced an horrendous 24 hour bus journey over monsoon-eroded

tracks to the roadend at Taplejung. From there, the first few days of the trek in followed a variant of the Kangchenchunga Base Camp Trek, through terraced Nepalese foothills and jungle paths under showery end-of-monsoon clouds. We then continued up the less travelled Yangma Khola to Yangma, a small village of about 70 people which, at 4200m, is the highest village in Nepal. We were told that only one mountaineering expedition had previously come through Yangma, in 1982, to climb Omikang Ri (6839m).

After trekking for ten days we neared the Tibetan border. The landscape had changed to alpine meadows and we established a camp at 4670m, one day

to the north-west of Yangma. This was the high camp for the ten trekkers who accompanied us. Fortunately the cloud cleared after a week of occasional light rain, and over the next two days many of us climbed a nearby snowless peak to enjoy 360 degree views of the immediately surrounding snowclad 6000 – 6500m peaks, including the first view of our objective. The trekkers then began their return trip.

We climbers travelled one day by yak trails, accompanied by the yaks carrying our gear, to establish a base camp at 5170m to the north-north-east of Yangma. By comparison, Everest base camp is at 5360m. According to the locals, no foreigners had ever travelled up the valley in which our base camp was located.

The next six days were spent acclimatising and establishing a route through very steep grassy slopes, boulder fields, moderate solo-able slabs and sub-glacial snow to an advanced base camp (ABC) at 5540m. The views from this high altitude balcony were magnificent. From there we roped up to establish a route up the glacier to a rockband at 5800m, which we set up with fixed ropes.

We returned to base camp for a couple of days, sitting out a cold storm which dumped up to 200 millimetres of snow to elevations well below base camp. We then moved back up to ABC, with four of us (Dave, Tim and Keith and I) spending a night at an interim camp at 5800m just below the fixed ropes. The next day we ascended the fixed ropes and plugged a route up a high snow névé to establish our high camp at 5900m, at the foot of a steep snow gully. Together with two high altitude porters who returned to ABC, Colin and Theo joined the group at the high camp that night, in position for the summit push. John had unfortunately succumbed to a chest infection and had an adverse reaction to antibiotics and wasn't able to go higher than ABC.

The summit day was clear and cold. It was -17°C when we set off at 4.00 am. From our high camp we climbed unroped up a deep snow gully following a trail laid by Keith the day before to just below the long (two kilometres) summit ridge. We gained the ridge by front pointing up steep, firm snow and traversed the ridgetop for about 700 metres unroped, enjoying spectacular views as dawn arrived over Kanchenjunga to the east. It was still bitterly cold when we reached a significant obstacle: a rock peak comprising several hundred metres of broken schist which we were forced to traverse while belaying.

The first pitch was a steep snow traverse, the sec-



Keith Scott preparing to descend the rock peak late in the evening. Kangchenjunga and Jammu can be seen in the background.

Ken Baldwin

ond pitch a mixed rock and snow traverse, the third pitch an abseil down to snow and the fourth and fifth pitches a steep snow/ice climb. The rock pitch was particularly difficult and dangerous as the recent frozen snow was overlaid on shattered rock. As each climber traversed the mixed pitch, less frozen snow remained, which meant that great care had to be taken to protect the following climbers as they dry-tooled across the now-exposed rock band.

Tim and Dave made it through the traverse reasonably quickly and continued on to the col beyond the rock peak. From there a steep snow ridge of around 600 metres led to the summit, which required several front-pointing pitches. Tim and Dave reached the summit at about 2.00 pm in almost perfect climbing conditions. The rest of the team reached the final col just after midday, leaving not enough time to summit unless we were willing to risk spending the night out without sleeping gear. We enjoyed spectacular views from the summit ridge, extending more than 100 kilometres along the Himalayan chain, including three of the five highest peaks in the world (Everest, Lhotse, and Kangchenchunga).

Dave and Tim rejoined the rest of the team, and we were able to avoid the difficult traverse by climbing the 'rock' peak, which from that direction was a steep snow climb. We reached this second summit at around 5.00 pm and descended in the dark, starting with three abseils down the broken rocky part of the peak to rejoin our ascent route along the long snow ridge. We reached our high camp at 10.00 pm after a



ABOVE *Dave Barton descending from the summit.*

Tim Macartney Snape

RIGHT *Dave Barton (left) and Tim Macartney-Snape on the summit.*

Dave Barton

FACING PAGE *Dave Barton on the summit ridge. Keith, Ken, Colin and Theo can be made out below, on a snow shelf near the col. The 'rock peak' is to the left of the group.*

Tim Macartney Snape



very long and tiring 18 hour day.

The next day we returned with heavy loads to base camp, cleaning out our high camp, the fixed ropes and ABC along the way. We rested for a couple of days at base camp, waiting for the yaks and porters to return. John, who had returned to basecamp from ABC, found that his condition was deteriorating quickly and opted to return to Kathmandu by helicopter, accompanied by Tim and Stacy.

Our trek back was also an adventure. We returned to Yangma but then spent several days crossing from the Yangma Khola valley to the Gunsu Khola Valley by traversing two snowbound 4900m passes: Marson La and Nango La, below the Sarphu peaks which rise to over 6200m. We descended through cloud forest to Phale where we joined the Kangchenchunga Base Camp route which we followed back to the mountain airstrip at Suketar, near Taplejung. We had stressed greatly about whether it would be possible to fly out from Suketar, wanting desperately to avoid a repeat of the unpleasant bus trip in. Fortunately the weather

cleared enough for us to do so.

The trip was quite an eye-opener, especially for the novice Himalayan climbers. Compared to climbing in New Zealand, much of the trip was spent in setup, acclimatisation and route establishment, with relatively little technical climbing. But then what technical climbing there was occurred at 5500 – 6500m. There is also no opportunity to return to civilization and enjoy rest, warmth, rich air, and lots of food before heading back up again. We spent five weeks trekking and climbing with very few rest days, and were at base camp and above for just over two weeks. The more experienced Himalayan climbers were impressed by the remoteness of the region we went to and we didn't see any trekkers aside from those on the Kangchenchunga Base Camp trek from Phale onwards which itself is less travelled than other treks. We were all impressed by the snow and ice which was remarkably stable at that time of year; we witnessed very few avalanches compared to what you would see in New Zealand and other parts of the Himalaya.

Another surprise for the novices was the trekking, it was much more of a cultural experience than expected. Rather than just enjoying the interesting scenery (mountains, forests, terraced foothills etc) we actually stopped at the villages and interacted with the locals. The higher villagers were Tibetan and we visited several Buddhist gompas. We didn't meet other climbers and trekkers to swap notes with, instead we talked quite a lot with those in the support crew (sirdars and porters) who spoke English and we learnt a lot about Nepal and the Nepalese. The Nepalese we met were extremely friendly and, almost without exception, extremely professional in doing their jobs which by our standards were very demanding and lowly paid.

All up it was a highly successful expedition with great trekking and climbing in magnificent surroundings amidst what we all agreed were unsurpassed vistas of the Himalaya.

* * *

Prior to leaving for Nepal, the expedition raised sufficient money to fund an eye camp for the Fred Hollows Foundation. The eye camp was held at a remote village south-east of Kathmandu while the expedition was climbing, treating 463 patients and undertaking 67 cataract operations. We are currently raising money to assist with funding a further eye camp to be conducted in another remote region of Nepal.

For more information on The Fred Hollows Foundation please visit: www.hollows.org.au

