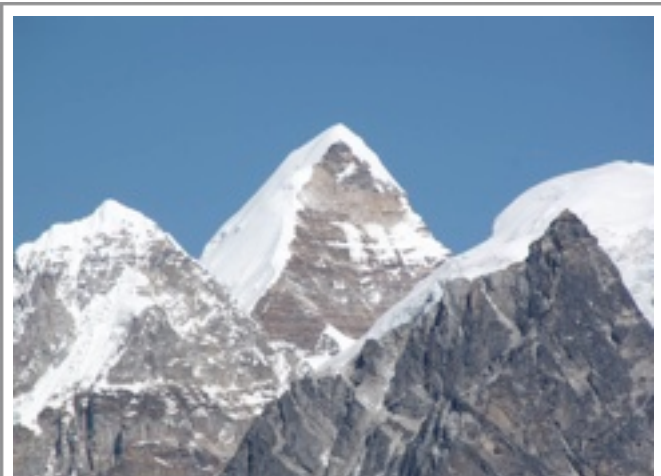


Yangma Expedition 2010 - Ken Baldwin (for the Yangma team)

The 2010 Yangma Expedition successfully attempted an unclimbed peak of around 6,500m in northwestern Nepal, near the border with Tibet. Team members Ken Baldwin, John Finnigan, Theo Hooy and Tim Macartney-Snape were on the 1978 Australian National University Mountaineering Club (ANUMC) Dunagiri Expedition, the first Australian Expedition to climb a 7,000m 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.



Above: Summit (centre) viewed from near Marson La on return trek
Photo: Yangma Team

After flying to Biratnagar, we experienced an horrendous 24 hour bus journey over monsoon-eroded tracks to the road-head at Taplejung. From there, the first few days of the trek in followed a variant of the Kanchenchunga 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 ~70 people that at 4,200m 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 (6,839m).

After trekking for ten days we neared the Tibetan

border. The landscape had changed to alpine meadows, and we established a camp at 4,670m, one day to the northwest 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 snow clad 6,000 – 6,500m 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 5,170m to the north-northeast of Yangma. By comparison, Everest base camp is at 5,360m. According to the locals, no foreigners have ever travelled up the valley in which our base camp was located.

The next six days were spent acclimatizing and establishing the route – through very steep grassy slopes, boulder fields, moderate solo-able slabs and sub-glacial snow to an advanced base camp (ABC) at 5,540m. The views from this high altitude balcony were magnificent. From there we roped up to establish the route up the glacier to a rockband at 5,800m that we set up with fixed ropes.

We returned to base camp for a couple of days, sitting out a cold storm that dumped up to 200mm of snow to elevations well below base camp. We then moved back up to ABC, with four of us (Ken, Dave, Tim and Keith) spending a night at an interim camp at 5,800m just below the fixed ropes. The next day we ascended the fixed ropes and plugged a route up a high snow neeve to establish our high camp at 5,900m 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, unfortunately had succumbed to a chest infection and an adverse reaction to antibiotics and wasn't able to go higher than ABC.

Yangma Expedition 2010 cont.

The summit day was clear and cold – it was -17 degrees Celsius when we set off at 4 am. From high camp we climbed unroped up deep snow gully following a trail laid by Keith the day before to just below the long (2 km) summit ridge.

We gained the ridge by front pointing up steep, firm snow and traversed the ridgetop for ~700m unroped, enjoying spectacular views as dawn arrived over Kanchenjunga to the east. It was still bitterly cold as we reached a significant obstacle - a rock peak comprising several hundred metres of broken schist that we were forced to traverse while belaying.

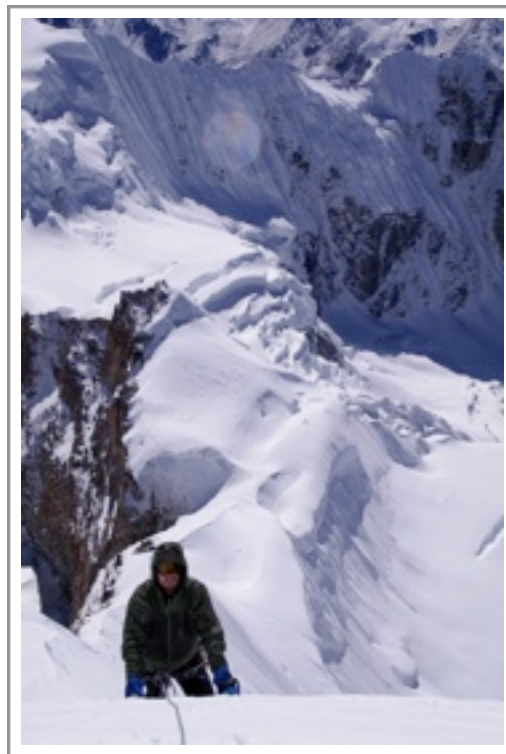
The first pitch was a steep snow traverse, the second pitch a mixed rock and snow traverse, the third pitch an abseil down to snow, and the fourth and fifth pitches a steep snow/ice climb. The rock pitch was particularly difficult and dangerous, with the recent frozen snow overlaid on shattered rock. 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 600m led to the summit, which required several front-point belaying pitches. Tim and Dave reached the summit at about 2 pm in almost perfect climbing conditions. The rest of the team reached the final col before 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 100kms along the Himalayan chain, including four of the five highest peaks in the world (Everest, Lhotse and Makalu 100km to the west, and Kanchenchunga 30km to the east).

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 5pm, 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 pm after a very long and tiring 18 hour day.

The next day we returned with heavy loads to base camp, cleaning out 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 4,900m passes, Marson La and Nango La, below the Sarphu peaks that rise to over 6,200m. We descended through cloud forest to Phale where we joined the Kanchenchunga 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.

Yangma Expedition 2010 cont.

Especially for the novice Himalayan climbers, the trip was quite an eye-opener. Compared to climbing in New Zealand, much of the trip was spent in setup, acclimatization and route establishment, with relatively little technical climbing. But then what technical climbing there was occurred at 5,500-6,500m. And there is 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 Kanchenchunga Base Camp trek from Phale onwards which itself is less travelled than other treks. And we were all impressed by the snow and ice that were remarkably stable at this time of year - we witnessed very few avalanches, compared to New Zealand and other parts of the Himalaya.



Above: Climbers ascending nevee below left hand skyline summit ridge (in sunshine)
Photo: Yangma Team

A n o t h e r surprise for the novice was the trekking. It was much more of a cultural experience than expected. Rather than just enjoying the interesting scenery (mountains, forests, terraced foothills, ...) 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 learnt a lot



Keith Scott descending the summit ridge at sunset, Kanchenjunga and Jannu beyond
Photo: Yangma Team

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 in 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: www.hollows.org.au