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FIRST ASCENTS IN WEST NEPAL

CHAPTER 1: TAKPHU HIMAL

Sometime in 2015 I used Google Earth to “discover” some unclimbed, mid-6000m border peaks, which go by the name Takphu Himal, in the furthest northwestern corner of Nepal. At the time I was not convinced how attractive they were, given the long and expensive approach from Kathmandu, and I pointed them out to Christof Nettekoven. Christof was excited, in particular that two of the Takphu peaks are on the Nepalese Ministry of Tourism’s permitted – and unclimbed – lists, under the names Til Kang (6369m) and Takphu Himal (6395m). It hadn’t escaped my attention that the Takphu cirque contains three higher summits, P6613, P6521 and P6422, the first two located on the Tibet side of the theoretical border. It hadn’t escaped Christof’s attention that British explorer Julian Freeman-Attwood seemed to have already visited every valley in “Far West” Nepal. Thus when “JFA” contacted me in spring 2018 about something different (Ultar), I had to ask him about his autumn plans. Takphu. To avoid disappointment all around, I brought both sides together and a truce was arranged: Julian had the best logistics, Christof didn’t have many committed people and I would come along as middleman. In the end, Julian’s team consisted of old friends Nick Colton and Ed Douglas while Christof and I came alone, so five of us met around the JFA gear stash at the Marshyangi Hotel in late September 2018.

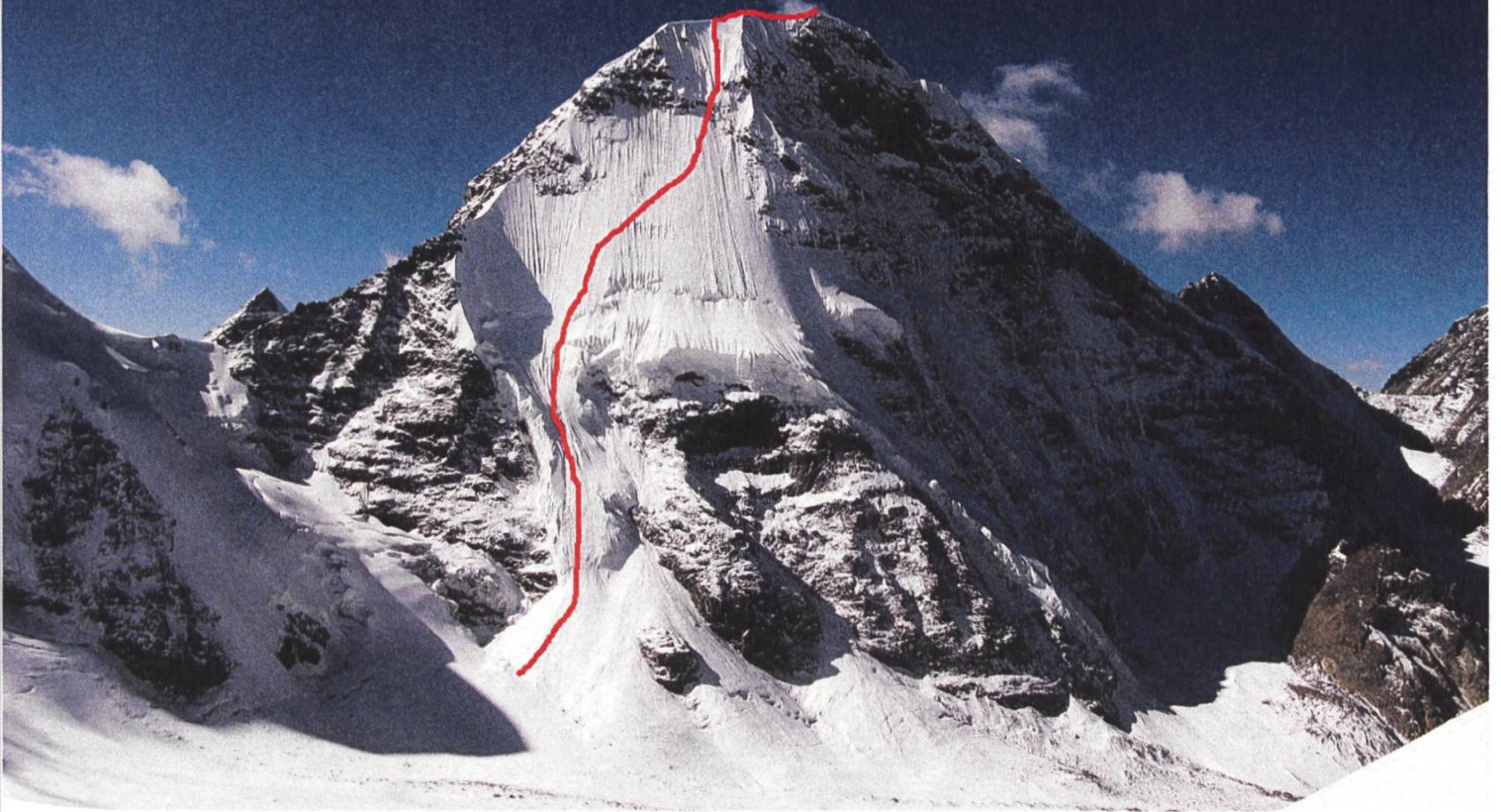
The usual whirlwind Kathmandu preparations with our young but experienced staff, guide Lhapka and cook Ngima, soon had the three of us and all the baggage on a

minibus to Nepalganj in the Terai, while the others flew. From Nepalganj it is a 45-minute flight to Simikot, where Rinjin Lama fulfils every function from baggage-handling and airport security through guesthouse owner, cuisinier and warehousing specialist to kerosene- and egg-dealer. And muleteer discipline enforcer. Despite some of our gear barrels flying in two days late, Rinjin had everything on the road with the delay down to a day.

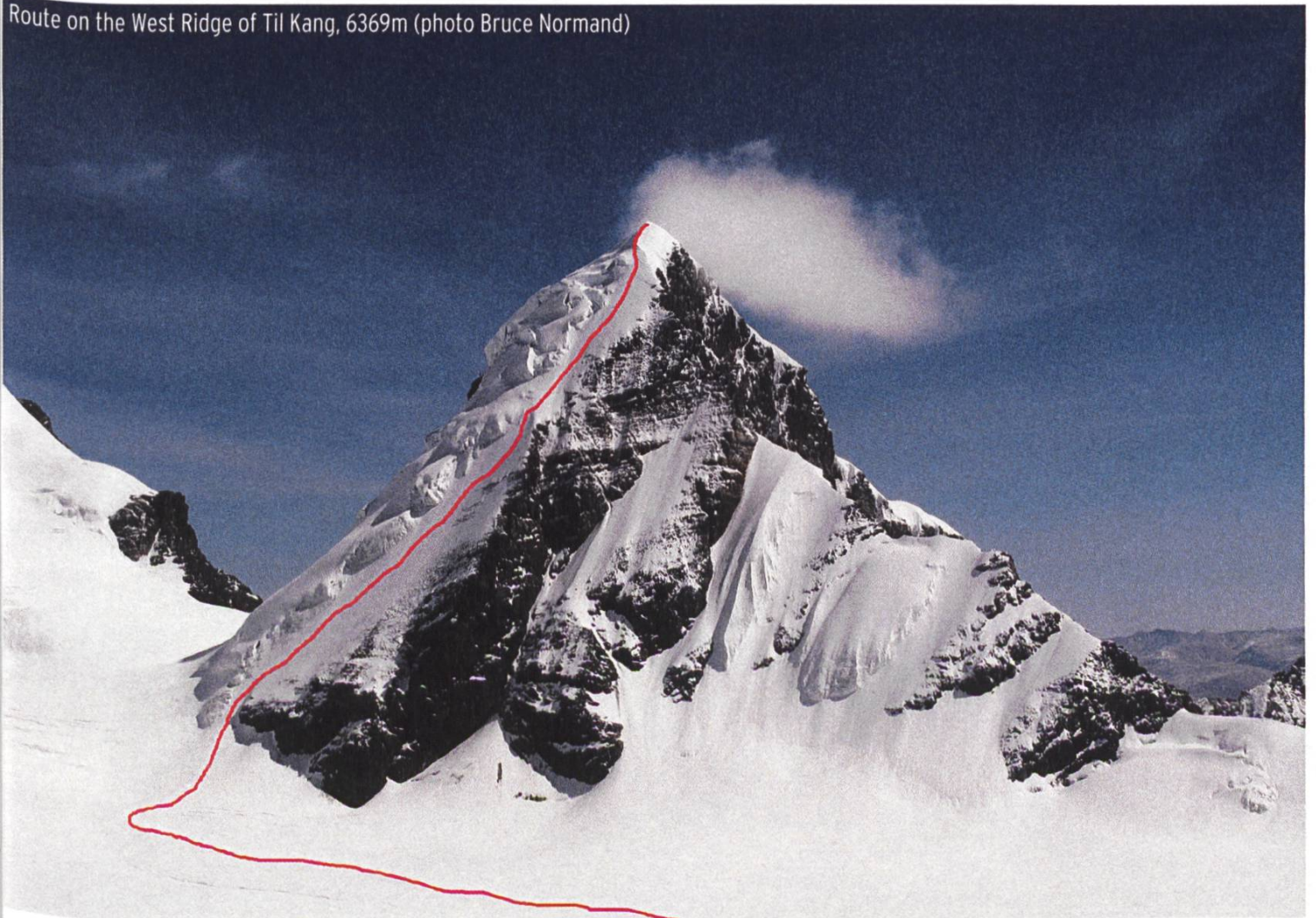
Our trek followed the main branch of the Karnali river, first traversing far above the river with views down cascades of terraced fields, then beside it past a brace of waterfalls. Beyond Kermi we climbed again, gaining excellent views southwest to Saipal (7030m). A northward turn sent us up a steep valley full of autumnal trees, before we left the treeline behind at 4000m and entered the world of broad, windswept valleys. We crossed the Nyalu La (5001m), taking in vistas to 6000m peaks on both sides and the Tibetan plateau far ahead, then descended to cross the upper Limi valley. We continued up a motorable road towards the Lapche La, the 5018m crossing into Tibet, but turned left (west) into the long, wide Sakya Khola, following it to the stony edges of a glacier lake at 4900m, where mounds of rubbish informed us we had found the base camp (BC) used by two teams in 2016.

On the next day we awoke to crystal-clear views of the E Faces of snowy “Til” and rocky “Takphu,” but only I went for a glacier recce. The two problems that plagued our expedition were coming into focus. One was

Route on the North Face of P6613 (photo Bruce Normand)



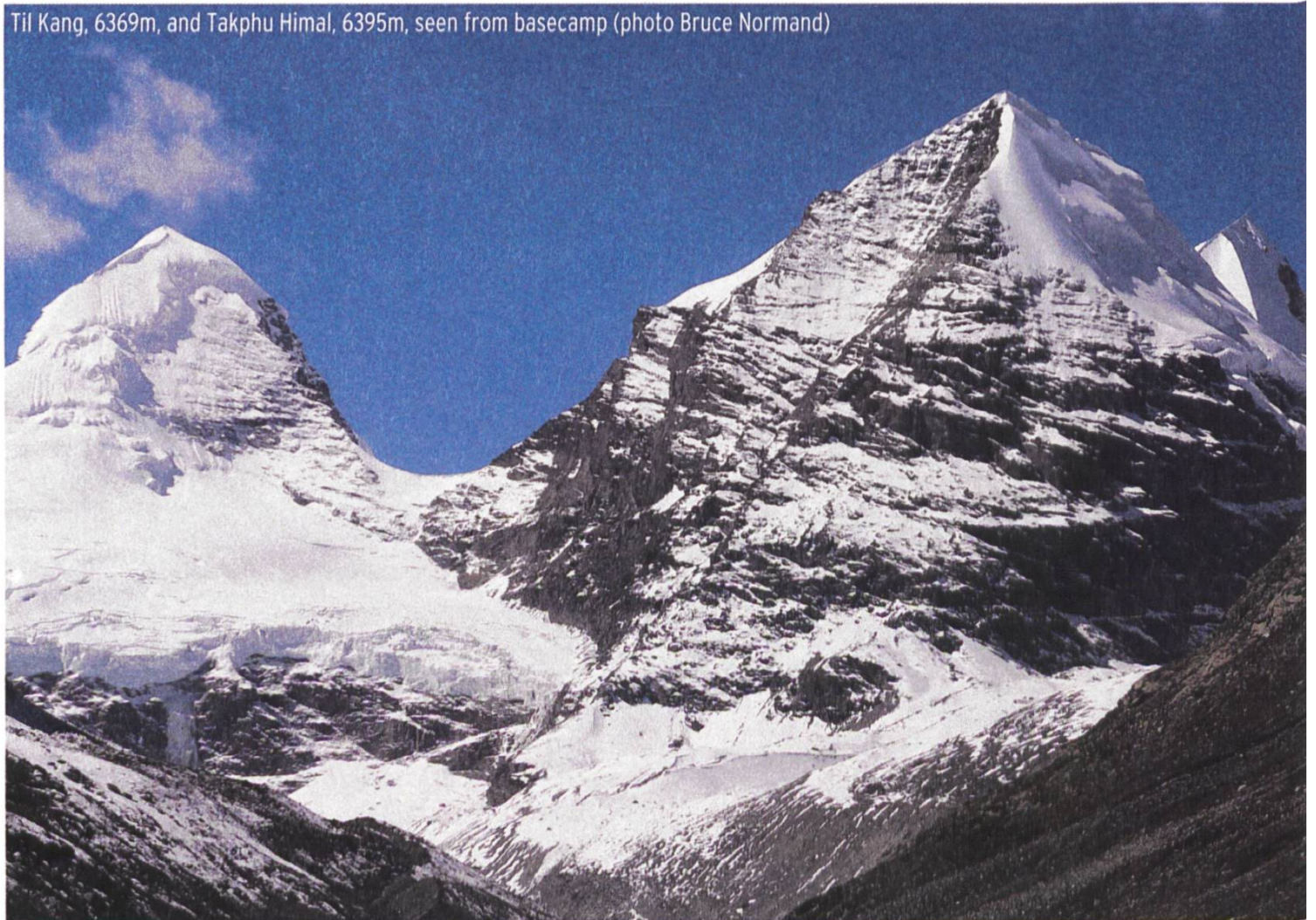
Route on the West Ridge of Til Kang, 6369m (photo Bruce Normand)



Christof and Ed climbing the West Ridge of Takphu Himal, with P6521 behind (photo Bruce Normand)



Til Kang, 6369m, and Takphu Himal, 6395m, seen from basecamp (photo Bruce Normand)



that Ed had given us all some kind of flu, and while he, Christof and I largely recovered, Julian and Nick were laid low for the entire trip. The other was the weather: Nepal in the post-monsoon usually has cloudless blue skies, mild winds, firm snow and icy glaciers, but 2018 saw a cold, moist and unstable flow throughout October. In the Far West this exacerbated the results of a major snowfall that had hit the Indian Himalaya in late September, piling up 60-80cm of loose snow on all our glaciers. I slogged around the slopes above BC discovering this while a cloud wall hung persistently over Til, as it subsequently did all month.

Christof, Ed and I aimed first for Takphu North, two of whose three summits had been climbed in 2016 (P6153 by Japanese and P6142 by Germans). We ploughed a deep track up the glacier behind Takphu, up its N side and onward to the summit of P6153. As would become standard, the winds got up during the day and clouds moved in to ensure a less than photogenic finish. However, we did get a decent view of the north-facing slope leading to the col between Takphu and P6521, which would be our route to Takphu. Two days later with the gear and rations for a night out, we re-ploughed our blown-in track and set a camp at 5800m. The next morning was sunny and windy, but we were in shadow and deep snow for three hours, the resulting freeze damaging everyone's toes. Reaching firm snow and weak sun at the col (6150m), we strode up the W Ridge with renewed enthusiasm, grabbing photographs of the spectacular backdrop (Til, P6422, P6613 and the triangular E Face of P6521). Unfortunately, the wind and clouds closed in, and the summit photos show a grey and miserable moment. We beat a hasty retreat

to high camp, where joy at a first summit was tempered by numb-toe concerns and several hours of snowfall. The snow stopped but the wind blew all night, causing us yet another slog to get back to BC.

Julian and Nick had been up a 6000m top and realised they were exhausted by illness. Christof's numb toes bothered him enough to stop climbing too. Only Ed and I, who had damaged our toes enough before, were ready to tackle our other targets, which meant hiking around the south side of Til to cross a 5800m col and enter the glacier basin ringed by all 5 of our peaks. First we crossed the 5300m col separating the Sakya Khola from the valley south of Til, finding reasonable snow conditions for all but the last 100m, and dropped into a deep, rocky basin. At 5000m we decided to traverse a ledge in a rock buttress, and after some scrambling and a rock "tunnel" were rewarded with a route straight into the glacier basin below our target col. Some snow-covered moraine walls, several hundred metres of lower-angle but crusty snow and a final steep gully at nightfall brought us onto endless flat ground, where we dug our tents into 1m of powder.

The next day dawned bright and stayed that way. From Takphu we had seen that the "walk-up" option on Til was the 45-degree snow face beside the W Ridge. Ed and I traded painful trail-breaking duties to the base of the face, when I took over with some major wallowing. Fortunately the snow became firmer as we climbed, until the upper half was fine firn, and we topped out at 1:30pm to enjoy excellent views of Gurla Mandata to the north, far out onto the Tibetan plateau in the northeast, to India in

the west and over the known and unknown ranges of Nepal to the south and east. This was certainly the finest panoramic day of the expedition. Still, the stiff wind soon pushed us down again. Our glacier trail had blown in completely, and following it was possibly harder than making a new one.

Ed was finished and headed back to BC. I aimed for P6613, which would have to be climbed by its N Face, skirting a serac zone on its left side, traversing towards a rock band at 6400m and finding a way through that to the exit slopes. The next day started with trail-breaking down the flat glacier, avoiding some minor crevasses. The lower face was in excellent condition and progress was rapid. Deeper snow around the serac zone persisted into the middle face, but the conditions were mostly fine and the snow firmed up as I approached the rock band. The gullies to the left appeared near-vertical for 20m, so I kept traversing until I found a rock ridge on the left side of the shortest gully section. Launching up this, I found myself doing 10m of vertical ice which, thanks to the rock, was quite easy to stem. The problem was the exit, which was loose 60-degree snow over looser blocks. A different descent would be needed, and the slopes to my right looked more promising. I finished the last 200m on good snow, crossed the mini-cornice at its smallest point and walked 200m up low-angle firn to the summit. The views were extensive, but again the wind was strong with high clouds, making the lighting conditions disappointingly poor. On the descent, I found excellent 50-degree firn, with a couple of sideways steps over rock bands, to avoid my vertical section. As the afternoon sun returned over P6521 and Takphu, I regained

the glacier with plenty daylight to spare, but once again the wind had blown my trail in. I was back at camp well after dark.

The morning dawned grey, but in fact I was under the Til cloud and the sky was otherwise clear. I headed down the previous day's trail, now rock hard, and stopped beneath the col between P6422 and P6613. A mix of good, firm going and shin-deep post-holing took me to the col, from which I traversed around to SW-facing firn slopes and zig-zagged to the summit of P6422. Once again the wind was up and high clouds were damaging the light quality, but not really the views. This time my trail on the glacier was still in excellent shape, making for a quick hike back to camp.

With one peak left to complete my quintet, I was out early and quickly descended my trail before crossing the glacier to gain the scree below of the S Face of P6521. After 200m of shale, I made good progress up 35-degree firn and ice slopes, except when compelled to take pictures and then warm up my hands in the cold wind. This stopped when my camera shutter jammed at 6000m, denying me photos from what turned out to be the best day of all. Just as I reached the summit crest, the wind died completely. Here the snow was steep enough that a front-pointing traverse was required in places, but the summit had a minor flat spot in the otherwise knife-edge ridge. I continued along and down the low-angle summit crest, dropping into our col from a week earlier. Being at heart a Scottish-trained Munro-bagger, I used the beautiful afternoon to carry on up to Takphu and enjoy the experience this time. The 360-degree views were indeed

excellent, but there is no photographic proof. This time I descended more good firm slopes on the S Face of Takphu to reach the basin beneath Til, needing to cross only a few hundred metres of deep powder to reach windblown snow and then our old track under the W Ridge. This worked quite well for a change, delivering me back to the col camp at dark.

Next morning there was little left to eat and no reason to hang around. Intermittent clouds and wind accompanied me as I dropped down from the col, across the snow slopes and through our rock-ledge traverse. I had to dig deep to find energy to climb the 5300m col, where the winds were again strong and cold, then found firm going in the windblown remains of our old prints all the way to the bottom of the glacier. The guys were delighted to have me back so that now we could go home. The muleteers had already arrived, a day ahead of schedule, and Julian put up a spare tent to save me drying and pitching mine in the dark. Thus the next day we packed up and headed down the Sakya Khola, trading over the next five days the high plateau for alpine forests and then the cascading fields lining the Karnali river back to Simikot. In one big clean-up evening, Rinjin Lama inherited a lot of our used gear and unused food, and the next day saw us enjoying breakfast and lunch in Nepalganj followed by dinner in Kathmandu.

CHAPTER 2: RONGLA HIMAL

A confluence of circumstances led to all of my partners for a mini-expedition after Takphu having to cancel, leaving me in Kathmandu fully acclimatised, fully alone and with four weeks to kill. This solo situation

hadn't come as a complete surprise, and some Google Earthing had revealed Rongla Kangri as a worthwhile target. After a few days to round up paperwork, a few hours to work out the transport and a few minutes to pack what I could carry, on 31st Oct I headed on my way.

This way started with two and a half days on public buses, from Kathmandu to Surkhet to Manma and thence to Gamgadhi, with one total gearbox failure and two punctures spicing up the experience. My pack leaving Gamgadhi was about 25kg; given my agenda, the added complication of a porter seemed unwise. I set a conservative pace up the pretty canyon of the Mugu Karnali for two days, then on the 3rd day the valley turned north and at Mugu village opened out into high pastures lining the river. I found a grazing trail through a cedar forest up the Koji Khola and ended the 4th day at the 5000m lake directly below the Koji La.

A day of partial rest, of moving my camp out of the howling wind and of visiting the Koji La (5470m) ensued. Despite this being an entirely off-limits crossing into Tibet, it sported quite a well-marked trail to the flat, icy glacier. The S Face of Rongla was vertical, banded, red rock and from a distance the entire cirque offered no evident ascent routes. The next day I set off underneath the SW Face, planning to cross the W Ridge and find a route up the NW Face. However, the ridge turned out to be vertical mud, so I returned to a valley fork and climbed the next peak west from Rongla. A glacier hike to 5800m, a 400m face of 45-degree firm and 500m along the NE Ridge brought me to a summit I measured at 6265m. The wind was moderate and the sky cloudless,

affording spectacular views across both Tibet and Nepal. The NW Face of Rongla had a steep, rocky finish, so the southeast-facing cirque was going to need a more detailed inspection after all.

With the weather remaining excellent, I set off early next morning intending to summit that day. I met the sunrise on the Koji La and continued northwest. The glacier flattened out and met the cliffs at 5800m, but indeed there was an option on the far left side of the cirque to climb 45-degree firn all the way to the top of "Rongla South," a sub-peak of 6516m. From there I dropped about 75m down a low-angle ridge and then hiked up snow slopes to the true summit of Rongla Kangri (6647m). I was treated to views from Gurla Mandata to Annapurna, far out over the red plateau lands of Tibet and across the jagged white carpet of Nepal.

The 8th day was a rest day, which turned cloudy and cold. For the 9th day I had considered climbing a peak above the southern wall of the Koji Khola, but I had no desire to push my soloing luck on north-facing, snow-covered glaciers, as opposed to the south-facing, icy ones. Instead I climbed just high enough to recce Churau, 6419m, the somewhat dramatic, double-peaked mountain west of P6265, and then moved my camp an hour down-valley. Sunrise the next morning found me well on my way up, but a hidden glacier trench forced me to change plans from the direct S Face to the E Ridge. On another perfect but significantly windier day I reached the ridge, then followed it over a sub-peak to a final 45-degree snow climb. The views once again stretched NW across the many

unclimbed border peaks and south to the Dhaulagiri massif. From this angle, several peaks in the Dolpo ranges were visible beyond the impressive Kaqur Kangri (6859m), reinforcing my earlier thoughts of giving these a closer look.

The 11th day brought cloud and snow showers on a strong wind, so I walked out to Mugu. This meant a 2000m climb to cross into the Upper Dolpo, and the canyon was unrelentingly steep. Locals were moving their families, animals and bags of a root-like plant down for the winter. Beyond the treeline it was cold and windy, and parts of the river were frozen completely solid. I no longer had the time or energy to get to the peaks east of Kaqur, and nor did I have enough body-fat left to stay warm even at 4000m. On the 13th day I reached the Chyargo La (5150m) and stared across to Kaqur, Chandi Himal (Lalung Kangri, 6623m) and the Upper Dolpo ranges, seeing no trace of a trail beneath me. Despite the attraction of the unknown, with three 6000m peaks already under my belt and only three days of food left, this was clearly a target for a later expedition. I retraced my steps, arriving in Gamgadhi at the end of my 15th day out and then relaxing for the next 55 hours on another scenic bus tour back to Kathmandu.

Bruce Normand

The author would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation and British Mountaineering Council for their support of his participation in the Takphu Himal expedition, and is grateful to Julian Freeman-Attwood for the years of experience and

Rongla from the West (photo Bruce Normand)



View towards Gurla Mandata (photo Bruce Normand)

