

rec 24748

Objective

The objective of the expedition was to make an alpine ascent of the South-East ridge of Baruntse, 7120m. The mountain lies in the Khumbu Himal of Nepal, in a remote area not far from the Everest massif and quite close to Makalu.

Six British climbers took part in the expedition, leaving Kathmandu, Nepal on 29th March 1989. The members of the team were David Beer - age 41, Paul Evans - 27, Dave Hatton - 42, Yvonne Holland - 31, Steve Magowan - 28, Andy Wigley - 26.

Approach to Base Camp

We intended to take the traditional Khumbu approach march to the area from the road head at Jiri. The route from the Dudh Kosi valley crosses several high passes cumulating in the Mera La (5500m), which provides good opportunities for altitude acclimatisation as it gives access to the Hunku valley. This remote valley is totally uninhabited and Base Camp was intended to be at its head. Above there a 45 degree snow slope leads to the West Col at 6135m and the South East ridge of Baruntse.

Two problems were immediately apparent, that had a significant effect on the planned expedition. First and foremost, there were reports of heavy late spring snows in the mountains which meant that the high passes that we had intended to cross during the walk in were impassable for porters. Our agents, Mountain Travel Ltd, and our sirdar Dawa Tensing, strongly advised us not to attempt an approach via the Hunku valley, as it would be impossible to hire porters, and much time would be wasted. The alternative offered was for a long bus journey to Hille near Dharan, and from there to make the usual walk to Makalu base camp, crossing from the Arun valley to the Barun valley via the Shipton La at 4200m. The approach to Baruntse would then be from the east (Makalu) side instead of from the west. The walk in time was expected to be similar to that planned, but there would be less opportunity for altitude acclimatisation. The revised plan was accepted as the only practical solution.

The second problem encountered was a fuel shortage due to rationing, as a result of a dispute between Nepal and India over their trade and transit agreement which had just expired. This meant that there was insufficient kerosene for cooking during the trek in and at base camp, (we had imported gas for use above base camp), so it would have to be supplemented with local wood. The initial bus journey from Kathmandu to Hille was delayed by having to search for diesel fuel, and it took 36 hours to travel about 450km, the most traumatic part of the whole expedition!

At Hille about 30 porters were hired to carry food and equipment, and the trek in started on the 31st March. After 8 days a change to high altitude porters was necessary for the rest of the journey. We were at the last inhabited village, Tashigaon, and the porters there were demanding 3 times the normal pay. This was caused by a Belgian team climbing Makalu, who had been trapped by the heavy snows two weeks earlier, and had been able to pay a lot of money in order to get through. The tracks were now well trodden in the snow and would present no difficulties, but the porters thought that if one expedition could afford to pay extra they all could. (The same problem was encountered on the walk out.) Eventually after a day's delay, and much bargaining, bluff and counterbluff, porters from a nearby village were

found who were prepared to work for 100 Rupees a day. (Usual rate was 70 ru/day). Just above Tashigaon we encountered strong winds, rain and snow, and the porters quite reasonably did not want to proceed. They were persuaded to wait at the camp at Kauma (3600m) rather than descend at once. Fortunately the next day dawned fine and clear and we continued over the Shipton La to the Barun valley, making a total of 13 days walking to Hillary Base Camp (5050m), where we arrived on 14th April.

Another problem was encountered four days into the trek, when the Liason Officer (LO) announced that he was ill and could not continue. He initially wanted to remain there at Khandbari and meet us on our return, but since this was 9 days from Base Camp it seemed completely pointless. It was agreed with our sirdar that the best action was for the LO to return to Kathmandu from nearby Tumlingtar airstrip, and this is what happened. The LO briefly re appeared during our walk out, having flown back out from Kathmandu to get the preliminary expedition report. He returned the same way next day. Fortunately, apart from the porters dispute there were no serious incidents that required his services. This problem was reported to the government authorities after our return.

Higher camps

The position of our Base Camp (BC) meant that we had a longer and more complicated approach to the mountain than we had anticipated, and there was a psychological barrier to overcome as we couldn't see Baruntse. It soon became clear that we would have to set up an Advanced Base Camp (ABC) since the Barun valley above BC was filled with piles of loose rock and ice cliffs which took a lot of time and effort to cross. The lateral moraines were very loose and also exposed to rock falls so were best avoided. We had 6 people and 3 weeks at or above base camp and we intended to climb alpine style in twos or threes as health, fitness and acclimatisation permitted, setting up and stocking one or two high camps as we proceeded. There were no porters above base camp and whatever we wanted had to be carried up ourselves.

From BC, acclimatisation climbs were made to explore the approach routes to the SE ridge of the mountain. The glacier leading up to Sherpani Col (6146m on 1988 NGS map) was the first choice but like all those in this area, had receded since initial explorations were made, leaving a shattered rocky headwall at the top. The approach on this glacier also meant that it was necessary to pass under a line of hanging seracs to the south east, to avoid a badly crevassed region - two good reasons to avoid this route.

The next possibility was another spur off the Barun valley containing a glacier descending from an un-named pass (6131m) on the map. This col was also separated from the top of the glacier by steep loose rock, but by taking a right fork when ascending the glacier, an approach to a point marked as 6183m on the map was found, which we called East Col. There was a rocky scramble of about 50 metres from the top of the glacier to the ridge and an ice slope of about 50 degrees on the west side, leading in about 65 metres down across a small bergschrund to the Lower Barun glacier.

We had no prior knowledge of any of this area so so we were exploring and planning as we went. ABC was set up on the moraine at the foot of the East Col valley on 19th April, at 5300m. The approach from BC entailed several hours of tedious walking over the undulating moraines of the Barun valley before ascending the side valley for a short distance. Three tents were pitched on a tiny level area amid steep loose boulders, by a stream flowing from the glacier above. The position was not ideal and floods threatened to engulf us several times in the following weeks as the weather warmed up, fortunately without success.

Camp 1 (6130m), a snowhole large enough for three, was established on 24th April at the top of the glacier, just below East Col. The previous night a bivouac was used beneath some overhanging rocks at 5800m, on the side of the glacier. The walk from ABC to Camp 1 was for half the time up steep, loose moraine boulders, and then up the glacier itself which was quite straight forward and had very few crevasses showing.

Everyone returned to BC by 26th April for a rest and it was agreed with our sirdar that the return walk should start on 7th May in order to reach Kathmandu in time to catch return flights to the UK. At this time, Andy, Yvonne and Steve had not slept above ABC due to acclimatisation and respiratory infection problems.

On 27th April everyone had moved up to ABC for the final assault - it was apparent that time was getting short since the approach was longer and more difficult than anticipated, and altitude acclimatisation was only just being achieved.

On 28th April the snowhole at Camp 1 was enlarged to hold 4 people and a rope fixed on the west side of East Col for our descent onto the lower Barun glacier, and subsequent return. Andy and Yvonne carried some stores above ABC and camped high on the moraine, and the remaining 4 occupied the snowhole. In our absence some of the food cache at camp 1 had been stolen by birds (choughs), despite being in plastic bags in the snowhole, a reminder that everything had to be buried to keep it safe, a policy already adopted at ABC.

Weather up to now had followed a well established pattern, with clear skies each morning, but increasing cloud after midday and some showers of varying intensity during the afternoon. It was frequently windy higher up and spindrift was evident along the ridges above us. Tracks on the glacier were often filled in each morning as a result of the showers or wind.

The SE ridge of Baruntse

On 1st May, the 4 of us at Camp 1 moved onto the lower Barun glacier for the first time, and crossed the nearly level plateau to a steepening just north of West Col. (This col leads down to the Hunku valley, our original planned approach.) At this time Steve decided to return to Camp 1 as he was suffering with continued respiratory problems, so Paul and the two Daves ascended the steep glacier to a small col at 6420m, at the foot of the SE ridge of Baruntse. There was plenty of snow on the glacier which made walking hard work and probably obscured most of the crevasses. Those that we did encounter we saw well in advance. It was cloudy, cold and windy by now and a snowhole for 3 was soon dug in a snowdrift in a crevasse. On the same day Andy and Yvonne reached Camp 1 and pitched a tent on the glacier below it. They spent two nights there, with Steve in the snowhole, before returning to ABC. They were not sufficiently acclimatised to the altitude to continue any higher, in the time remaining.

The 2nd May was fine with less wind and some exploration of the ridge above Camp 2 was attempted, but much of the time was taken resting, in preparation for a summit attempt next day.

Paul and Dave Hatton left Camp 2 at 5am on the 3rd May on a clear still morning. David Beer remained behind as he was insufficiently acclimatised to the altitude. Very variable snow conditions were encountered as the SE ridge of Baruntse was ascended, with some good ice up to an angle of about 45 degrees and some deeper snow making for hard work in places. As the sun

rose and picked out peak after peak we realised how priveleged we were to be able to enjoy the experience. A col at 6600m was reached fairly easily with a subsidiary peak (6745m) to the east. The route then passed through a series of ice cliffs and snow covered crevasses, taking a few vertical steps direct before exiting onto the west side of the ridge proper. Several small crevasses and rock bands were crossed and some steep climbing was necessary as the ridge itself was regained. This was then followed until it narrowed further to a knife edge, at an altitude of 6880m, and undulated for several hundred metres before meeting some more ice cliffs below a marked cleft in the skyline. Thereafter the ridge appeared to broaden and continue easily to the summit.

To the east of the knife edge was a dangerous looking cornice above a field of tottering seracs. The snow slope on the west side was very poor and sugary at about 70 degrees, and the whole area appeared particularly unstable. The snow extended down several hundred metres to the top of a rock slope which was loose and shattered, falling steeply down nearly 1000m to the Hunku glacier. The climbing had been going really well and we were both feeling fit despite the lack of oxygen. We were unable to find anything solid to belay to and my ice axe had already made a few spectacular holes through the cornice, so with some regret we decided to turn back. At the time we didn't feel disappointed at all, it was the only sensible choice, borne out by my photographs later. We commenced our descent at 1130am, reaching Camp 2 safely that afternoon. The weather remained fine and sunny with light winds.

The following day we cleared our rubbish from camp 2 and set off back down the mountain, emptying camp 1 as we passed, and joined the other 3 at ABC the same day.

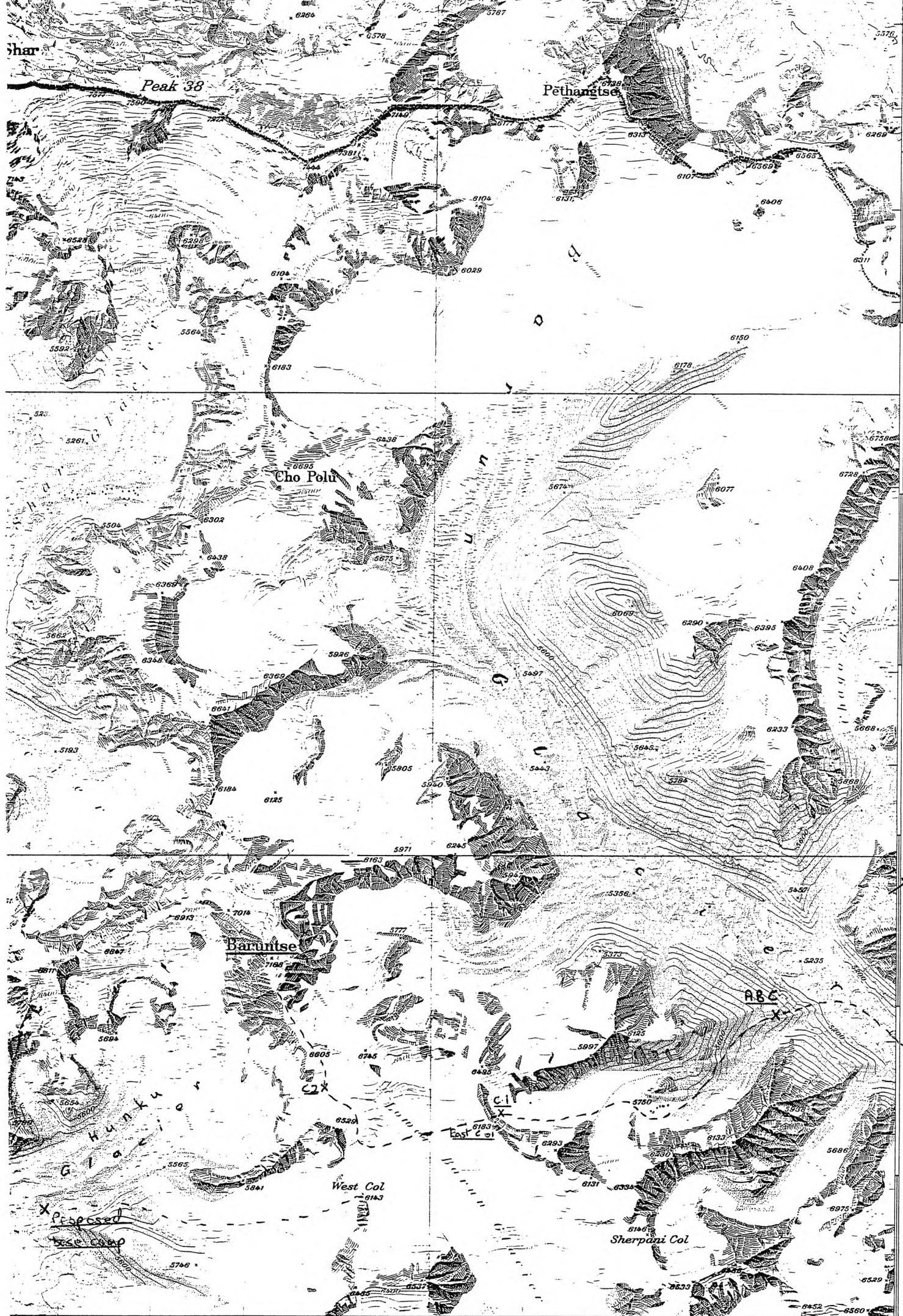
10 porters arrived at BC on the 6th May and we were ready to start our walk out the following day, as planned. It was found to be possible to fly out from Tumlingtar, and so avoid the uncertainty of a public bus journey which was certain to be overcrowded due to the fuel rationing, and by 18th May we were all back in Kathmandu.

Conclusions

Our main problem seemed to be in getting acclimatised to altitude sufficiently well to undertake the carrying and climbing necessary on an alpine style expedition. 3 of the team, Paul, Dave and Steve had not been above 4800m before, but this did not seem to be too important as they included the two who made the summit bid.

The change of approach route probably had a large influence on the outcome of the trip since there had been much less opportunity to acclimatise during the walk in. This meant that more time was necessary than had been allowed at or above BC, which was not as close to the SE ridge as planned. Travelling over the moraines was very tiring and time consuming for little apparent gain in height. A lot of time was spent exploring approach routes rather than setting up higher camps, and a planned camp near the difficulties on the SE ridge was never established because of this.

The summit bid did not succeed primarily because of the prevailing snow conditions found on the ridge. Another attempt would have required fixing a rope across the bad snow or more likely the rock below it, and was not possible with an alpine style ascent and such a small team of people, in the time available.



shar

Peak 38

Pethangtse

Cho Polu

Baruntse

Proposed
base camp

West Col

Sherpani Col

90

27°

55'

085

MAKALU

W. Ridge

BASE
CAMP

080

500
0 100 200

505







ISWA LA

Iswa Glacier

West Col
6725

Sherpani Col
6710

CAMP

CAMP

CHIMBU