

## Exploring the Rolwaling



A British expedition to the Rolwaling Himalaya

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## Summary

During November 2019 a British expedition to the Rolwaling Himalaya basecamped on the Ripimoshar Glacier with the primary intention of climbing a new route on Drangnag Ri. Following a heavy monsoon season the party found difficult snow conditions on the mountain and were forced to abandon their original plans after climbing to a high point of 6100m. Whilst attempting a smaller unclimbed mountain (peak 5981m) one of the party broke a leg and was rescued. The rest of the party returned to Kathmandu without incident.

## The Team

The Team consisted of 5 members. Ken Hopper, Simon Tietjen, Connor Holdsworth, Rich Lade and Will Rowland. Ken joined the team to help out at basecamp and assist with the trip in any way possible. The other 4 members were there for the climbing. (Appendix 5).

## Travel

Flying to Kathmandu is straight forward from the UK and reasonably priced flights will involve a stopover in somewhere like Istanbul or Abu Dhabi. Most of the team flew from Edinburgh-London Heathrow-Abu Dhabi-Kathmandu with Etihad airline.

Conveniently, our hotel provided transfers from the airport to our accommodation in Thamel, however, this wouldn't be costly- 500NPR each way.

We used private 4x4 transport to take us from Kathmandu to Gongar Khola where you start the trek in to the Rolwaling valley. This is expensive but should guarantee no snags at the start of the trip and is useful if supplies need to be gathered along the way. On our return trip to Kathmandu we used the local bus service which was very good value.

The road to Gongar Khola varies in quality. Some sections are very smooth tarmac, but the majority is rutted dirt track. The monsoon plays havoc with the dirt roads and it would not be advised to travel when it is raining heavily.

## Trek

Trekking in the Rolwaling was spectacular. It is steadily becoming well established as a trekking route and caters well for trekkers. We followed the below itinerary and stayed in the tea rooms to support the local economy. The return journey was done in 3 days.

- Gongar Khola (1430m) to Simigaon (1990m), 3.5 hours.
- Simigaon (1990m) to Dokhang (2790m), 6.5 hours.
- Dokhang (2790m) to Beding (3700m), 6 hours.
- Beding (3700m) to Na (4200m), 6 hours.
- Na to basecamp

## Drangnag Ri

Without porters we established an advanced basecamp on the moraine and a high camp below the start of the glacier. Rich found this hard work and the combination of this, altitude and flu symptoms led to the decision of returning to basecamp.

On the 16/11/19 Connor, Simon and I found a route up through the complex glacier leading to a col between Drangnag Ri and Khang Kharpo at 6100m. The snow quality was very poor following a heavy monsoon. Despite favourable high winds and fluctuating temperatures, the snow had not consolidated. Instead, there was a crust with sugar snow underneath.

Above the col, our route was loaded and if we didn't get avalanched, we thought it would be very difficult to safely retreat. We decided to spend the night and retreat back down the glacier in the morning. Appendix 1 shows the volume of snow on the intended ridge line and deep post holes can be made out in the foreground.

## Peak 5981

Above Basecamp a long ridge lead to a fine snowy peak which had been recommended to us by our agent (appendix 2). We originally planned Takargo East as a secondary objective but this peak made more logistical sense being much closer to our basecamp. Connor, Simon and I left basecamp at 3am but Simon was not feeling 100% and returned to camp before we started climbing. We traversed the ridge soloing and then moving together. Some of the rock was nice but most of it was pretty awful. It wasn't difficult and we pressed on towards a pinnacle which rose steeply between two cols. The plan was for Connor to cross over to the far col and I would then take over the lead to gain the top of the rock ridge (300m) which then led to the final snowy peak.

Things were going steadily until a detached block crumbled underneath Connor's feet at the top of the tower. Connor fell with the block and landed on a ledge below. He managed to build a belay and take me up to him where he informed me of his injuries and that he had called for a rescue using his inReach device. I told him not to worry and began sorting things out for getting him off the pinnacle. With a bit of rope jiggery pokery and bit of duct tape to splint his legs together we were in a position to start going down. We had no idea if/when a chopper would come but we weren't going to sit around to find out.

Unsure exactly how far away the ground was, I rigged up and prepared to lower Connor more than a rope length. Luckily, my suspicions were correct, I didn't have to lower past any knots, and I could simply join Connor in the gully.

The next stretch of ground was brutal. We discussed the possibility of Connor sliding or being lowered but he was in so much pain - that wasn't going to happen. I set up to abseil off with Connor attached to me, the ground was cluttered with loose blocks, scree and short steep slabs- the worst terrain for abseiling. We got down to more reasonable ground after a few abseils, I had to try my best to protect him and his leg during the descent. It was very physical as his weight essentially rested on my belt.

Now un-rope we managed to get Connor sat on his rucksack for a slide down the scree whilst I went down to basecamp. Fortunately, we had brought the radios and when I got down to the path I was able to chat to Simon who was already on his way up from basecamp. Connor had messaged the satphone from the inReach device and the boys were on the way.

It was dark when Simon and Ken arrived. They had come with overnight gear and were under no illusions. I described the way up into the corrie and onto the scree where Connor was waiting with his torch on. The lads assured me it was best to stay put and mark the way off the hill. I wasn't going to argue! Ken took his kit high up the scree and then returned to my point and we headed to basecamp. Simon continued up to Connor and then back to the other rucksack which he then carried up to the bivi spot where they spent the night.

The helicopter came first thing in the morning and Connor eventually ended up in Norvic Hospital KTM. He was very well looked after. (Appendix 3 & 4)

## In Country Logistics

We used a Nepali trekking company to manage the permits and arrange the porters which made for a smooth trip. It is possible to manage this without using an agent but it isn't worth the hassle as there is a likely risk that permits are refused by the Tourism Department. Porters are also a crucial part of the trip and it really helps to have experienced porters provided by in-country agent.

Compared to other countries I've been to Nepal takes its expedition seriously and mountaineering is regulated. Planning through a trekking company will help ensure that you are operating within the rules.

## Supplies

We had a tight schedule in Kathmandu but gathered all our food, basecamp supplies and permits within 1 day.

Thamel has small corner shops but for bulk buying it is better to travel to larger supermarket on the outskirts. Bhat Bhateni is a large supermarket which is attached to a shopping centre. Apart from food we purchased items such as mugs, ladles, large pots and Tupperware which we did not want to fly with.

For any equipment requirements Thamel is the place to be. There is a great deal of fake products, so you have to be careful. We bought winter mix Primus gas which worked very well but the liquid fuel we got for the multifuel stoves was terrible! We made the mistake of not testing it in Kathmandu but were fortunate to be able to buy some kerosene in the village of Na in the Rolwaling.

## Insurance

It is a legal requirement in Nepal to provide Insurance for porters as well as having personal climbing insurance.

We used rescue insurance from Global Rescue and other various travel/medical insurance. Connor also purchased an additional medical cover from Global Rescue which was particularly useful in the event of his accident. Global Rescue were very efficient.

## Permits

Permits were obtained through our agent which they applied for online. Once in Kathmandu the team leader attended a meeting at the permit office for a formal briefing and to collect the relevant permits. At the end of the expedition the team leader returned to the permit office for a debrief before leaving the country. Overall it was a pleasant experience. The Tourism Department of Nepal want climbers to enjoy Nepal and make repeat trips in the future.

## Porters

We used 7 porters on the way into basecamp and 4 porters on the return journey. They were local Tamang people from the village of Simigaun and were great characters, whom we got on with very well. (Appendix 5).

The legal maximum load is 30kg but some porters will carry more for extra money. It is also a legal requirement for porters to have insurance- check they have this even if you are booking through an external operator. Porters pay fluctuates depending on the job. Generally 1500NPR is what a porter will be paid per day from a company hiring for an Everest basecamp trek. We paid porters directly and agreed 2500NPR per day. As for all seasonal workers, tips are very important and we made certain to tip each porter for each day of work.

After 4 days work there was some uncertainty of going above Na to the basecamp as only one member of the party had *actually* been to the location. We ferried a load up to basecamp and located the best route to our camp with the head porter, returning to Na the same day. We found that the porters had found another job for the day and kept themselves busy. The following morning, the porters now convinced of the terrain that lay ahead, took the remaining kit up to basecamp.

Generally, the porters were ill equipped. At the end of the trip after the porters helped us down to get the bus at Chhetchhet we gave them various bits of equipment. Waterproof jackets, headtorches, roll mats, insulated jackets were amongst the mix.

## Synopsis of Mountain Region

The high tops of the Rolwaling are granite but the lower slopes contain various Schist and Gneiss metamorphic rock types. The rock experienced was generally poor quality. It could be described as black and white. Where it was bad it was atrocious and where it was good it was quality.

The weather was generally very good during our trip. We had 2 afternoons of wet conditions during the walk in. Summit temperatures were at lows of around -30C and winds were at a maximum of around 80km at summit temperature. However, we did get a window of ideal conditions which lasted for 6 days.

The route we tried on Drangnag Ri would not have been possible in the previous decade. Bruce Normand sent me pictures (from 2005) which showed the col and north ridge to be out of bounds for any sensible climber. Climate change has certainly had a huge impact since this picture was taken, see Appendix 1 & 6 for comparison.

## Budget

Costs	Sub Total	Total (£)
Permit: 4 persons x 450/- USD	\$1800	
Trekking Permit for Ken Hopper	\$25	
Porter Insurance	\$1020	
National Park fee 5 x 20	\$100	
Service Charge 5 x 70\$	\$350	
Garbage 5x40\$	\$200	
Visa \$50 x 5	\$250	
Porters 4 x 3 days @ \$25	\$300	
Porters 7 x 6 days @ \$25	\$1050	
Accommodation (Trekking) \$50 per night x 9	\$450	
Accommodation (KTM) \$60 pp x 5	\$300	
Transport	\$700	
Fuel gas 15 tins @\$6 liquid 5L @ \$10	\$140	
School donation \$50 each	\$250	
Exped food		£320
freeze dried		£100
Sat phone rental		£240
Basecamp Tent	\$200	
Medication/1st Aid Supplies		£50
Flights £650 pp		£3,250
Equipment £500 pp		£2,500
Insurance \$350 pp	\$1750	
Miscellaneous	\$650	£13,799

## Observations

The Rolwaling is an amazing region with 7000m peaks, remote glaciers, high passes, beautiful forests, lakes and rivers. For years the valley was off limits and as a result the authenticity and natural beauty has been intact. As more people explore the Rolwaling it is developing as a destination. Development in infrastructure is ongoing in preparation for the region becoming very busy with trekking tourists. Although this will not happen overnight, it seems that the Rolwaling will in no doubt become a much more well-travelled valley.

## Thanks

Special thanks to Luka Plut, Nick Carter, Lindsay Griffin, Bruce Normand, Mingma Sherpa, Nima Sherpa, Mikel Zabalza, Norvic Hospital, Firepot, Crux, Mount Everest Foundation and all of our porters.



## Timeline

- 30.10 Travel
- 31.10 Travel
- 01.11 Purchase supplies KTM and Permit meeting
- 02.11 Travel to Gongar Khola
- 03.11 Meet porters and Walk to Simigaun
- 04.11 Simi to Dokhang
- 05.11 Dokhang to Beding
- 06.11 Bedding to Na
- 07.11 Porters rest. Gear drop to BC
- 08.11 Na to BC
- 09.11 Rest day
- 10.11 BC to ABC portering kit
- 11.11 BC to ABC portering kit
- 12.11 Rest day
- 13.11 BC to ABC portering kit
- 14.11 ABC to Camp 1 portering kit
- 15.11 ABC to Camp 1 portering kit
- 16.11 Climb to Col 6100m
- 17.11 Descent from col and porter kit from Camp 1 to ABC
- 18.11 Porter kit from ABC to BC
- 19.11 Rest day
- 20.11 Rest day
- 21.11 Peak 5981
- 22.11 Heli rescue & porter kit
- 23.11 Basecamp pack up and down to Na
- 24.11 Na to Dokhang
- 25.11 Dokhang to Simi

26.11 Simi to Chhetchhet /bus from Chhetchhet -KTM

27.11 KTM

28.11 KTM

29.11 KTM

30.11 Travel

01.12 Travel

## Appendices

### Appendix 1



Sunset on Drangnag Ri November 2019. Deep post holes in the foreground and loaded slopes above.

Appendix 2



Descending from the col of Drangnag Ri. Peak 5981 left of centre.

Appendix 3



Helicopter landing at basecamp to drop off fuel, doors and rig up the winch line.



Appendix 4



Connor being well looked after in Norvic hospital.

## Appendix 5



The team. From left to right- Ken “Skurg” Hopper, Kolak Tamang, Will Rowland, Connor Holdsworth, Kampala Tamang, Ashok Tamang, Rich Laid, Kamala Tamang, Purna Tamang, “Big” Simon Tietjen, Puskar Tamang, Jotta Tamang.



Appendix 6



Bruce Normand's experience in 2005. More snow and greater objective dangers particularly on the north ridge.