

**British
Chaukula
Expedition
2001**



Exp HKI 01/32

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Background and general information

1.1 Expedition history

It was the prolific mountaineer and explorer of the Indian Himalaya Harish Kapadia, who drew attention to Chaukula, recommending it as an accessible and unclimbed "roadside peak", along with Pologongka, the highest of a group of neighbouring peaks. In 1997, a team made up of Mike Ratty, Trevor Willis, Richard Law, Anne Allcock and LO Narinder Singh attempted to climb both. Pologongka was indeed a roadside peak, visible from the road and was climbed in 3 days. However, although the Chaukula group is beside a main road, Chaukula itself is at the centre of the range, and Base Camp a day away from the road. ABC was a further day away, and although the expedition was able to find a possible route up the mountain, bad weather, with heavy snowfall, brought the attempt to an end.

Permission to climb Chaukula was sought again in 1999, but was withdrawn at the last minute, due to the worsening political situation in Kashmir, which eventually led to military action against insurgents. Access to some parts of Ladakh remains problematic: this is a border area which has seen considerable conflict, and has a strong military presence. Access is therefore a security issue, and during the formalities preceding the 2001 expedition, a briefing from local military authorities made it clear that the area in which we were climbing was patrolled by armed soldiers. Exploration outside agreed areas, and photography of sensitive locations was out of the question. Nevertheless, the army was very hospitable, and keen for us to succeed. They would also have provided the means of rescue if anything had gone wrong.

Permission for 2001 took a long time to arrange, and the expedition is grateful for the work and support of the IMF, and the efforts of our Indian agent Ibex Expeditions in obtaining clearance.

1.2 The Mountain

As you drive along the road eastwards from Leh, the Chaukula group becomes visible from the village of Chumatang onwards. It rises steeply above the road, so the peaks are hidden by the steep ridges that surround them. However, at one point, where a valley cuts through these barriers, an elegant pointed snowpeak briefly appears. This is Chaukula. The US army map shows an approach from the South East, following a track from the village of Mahe to the glacier below the mountain. The 1997 expedition used this route successfully, siting Base Camp by a stream. For 2001, we wanted BC a little closer, but otherwise followed the same trail. ABC was similarly sited just below the glacial moraine, at a small spring. From here, a climb through moraine leads to the glacier snout, and a clear view of the mountain.

The peak is the highest point of a classic U shaped glacial valley enclosed by a horseshoe of peaks and ridges. The true right side forms a massive peak with a steep North face (name unknown), whilst the true left arm is a rubbly ridge that runs level for a long time before rising steeply to form the East side of Chaukula itself. At the head of the glacier is a rocky ridge, quite low and broken, linking the two peaks. The

glacier is stable, and without any major crevasses or objective dangers. Since 1997, the snow on the ridges and at the base of the large S Face of Chaukula had retreated, so much so that the snow gully used by the team to climb the East Ridge no longer existed at all. One of the two lakes just to the NE that was covered in ice in 1997 was completely unfrozen in 2001.

The valleys below the east side of the range are the usual Ladakhi pattern with sparse vegetation (no trees), thin soil, and some boggy areas. The lakes are mineral rich, but the water is drinkable.

Conversations with the monks and villagers revealed that Chaukula is regarded as a holy mountain, and has also been known as "Goat Mountain". Some maps (US Army, and Japanese map) call the mountain Chumatang, but this is definitely only the name of the village. Of the various spellings and pronunciations (Chakura, Chakula), Chaukula was the closest to what was said. The monks explained that it has been visited by a Buddhist deity- Padmasambhava- and before climbing a *puja* was carried out, with offerings and prayers. We were also asked to abstain from eating any meat above Base Camp, which we did. Prayer flags were carried up to hang at the summit.

1.3 The Team

The 2001 expedition was made up of two pairs of climbers, a Liaison Officer, and two Base Camp support members:

Climbing teams: Trevor Willis and Chris Mothersdale
Mike Ratty and Miriam Denney

Liaison Officer: Dinesh Bedhi

Base Camp support: Anne Allcock and Ellen Mothersdale

In addition, the expedition employed (via Ibex Expeditions pvt) cooks, guides and pony-men. The two guides carried out all liaison with local villagers, and in addition helped set up ABC and ferry equipment onto the glacier. No human portage was otherwise necessary, as ponies are the normal means of carrying loads in Ladakh.

1.4 Geography of Rupshu

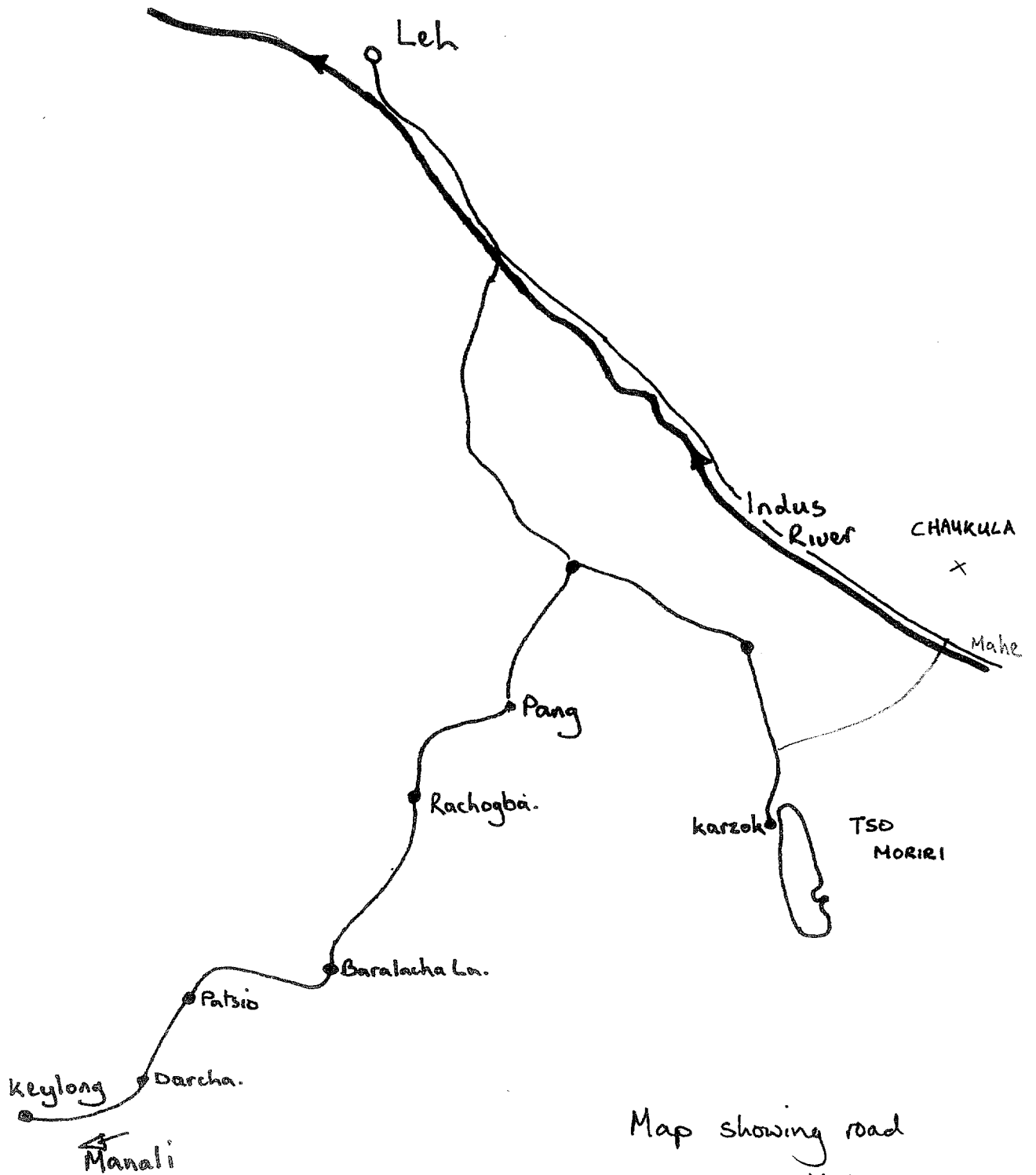
Ladakh is the eastern part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and was once a Buddhist kingdom in its own right. Here lies the relatively low, western end of the Himalaya and to the north, the Eastern Karakoram. Due west is Kashmir, and the disputed border with Pakistan, South lie Zaskar and Kishtwar. Access by road to Ladakh and its mountains is limited, and most visitors arrive by air at Leh, the capital city. This is now a major centre for tourism, trekking and mountaineering.

Running across the country from east to west is the River Indus. Rupshu is a large, high altitude area at the southeast end of Ladakh, on its border with Tibet (China). The proximity to Tibet has meant that it was part of the "Inner Line", a buffer zone that was effectively closed to foreigners due to political sensitivity. India has recently changed its policy, and Rupshu can now be visited with a permit of short duration.

Rupshu is notable for two very large lakes- the Pangong Tso and Tso Moriri- and extensive salt deposits. There are numerous mountain groups rising to 6000m and above. These are part of the western end of the Himalaya, which was formed by the collision of tectonic plates. Just north of the Tso Moriri is the Indus Yarlung Suture (followed in part by the Indus river), which is one of the joints in the complex uplifting, caused by the subduction of the Indian continental plate under that of the Eurasian plate (on which lies Tibet). The Chaukula group lie midway between the two large lakes, just north of the Indus.

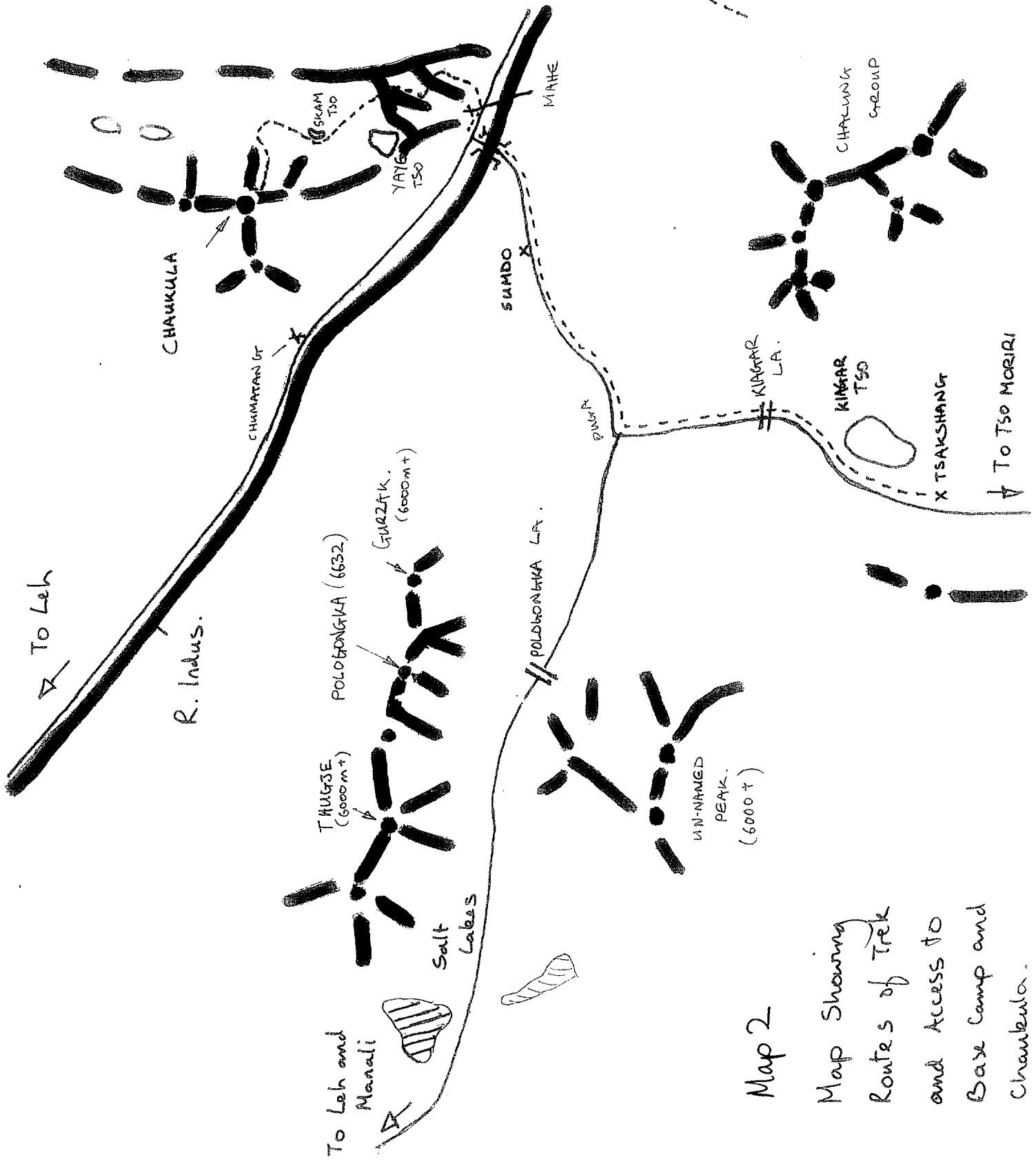
The region is arid, and at a relatively high altitude, so conditions are harsh. Despite the dry soil there are numerous plants to be found, which provide the grazing for the nomads' herds. Apart from grasses, there are the usual alpins such as edelweiss and gentians, also the rare Himalayan blue poppy, and many which are used by the local people as medicines. Apart from the domestic animals there are blue sheep, ibex, wolf, wild ass, and the rarely seen snow leopard. Tso Moriri is home to a variety of migratory birds, including bar-headed geese and grebes. When camping near the Pologongka La on a previous expedition, we shared our site (and some food) with a large colony of hamsters.

The altitude and aridity has meant that there are few towns or villages in Rupshu. The largest population is probably military, who maintain a watch on the border. However, various roads and tracks link the area with Zaskar, Lahoul, Nubra and Spiti, often crossing high passes to do this. It is the home of the *Khampa* (*Champas*): these are nomadic herders of goats, sheep, yaks and dzos (hybrid yaks). Their homes are tents made of homespun yak wool. Also in the vicinity of the expedition's Base Camp were a nunnery and a monastery, both recently built or renovated, supporting a school for local children.



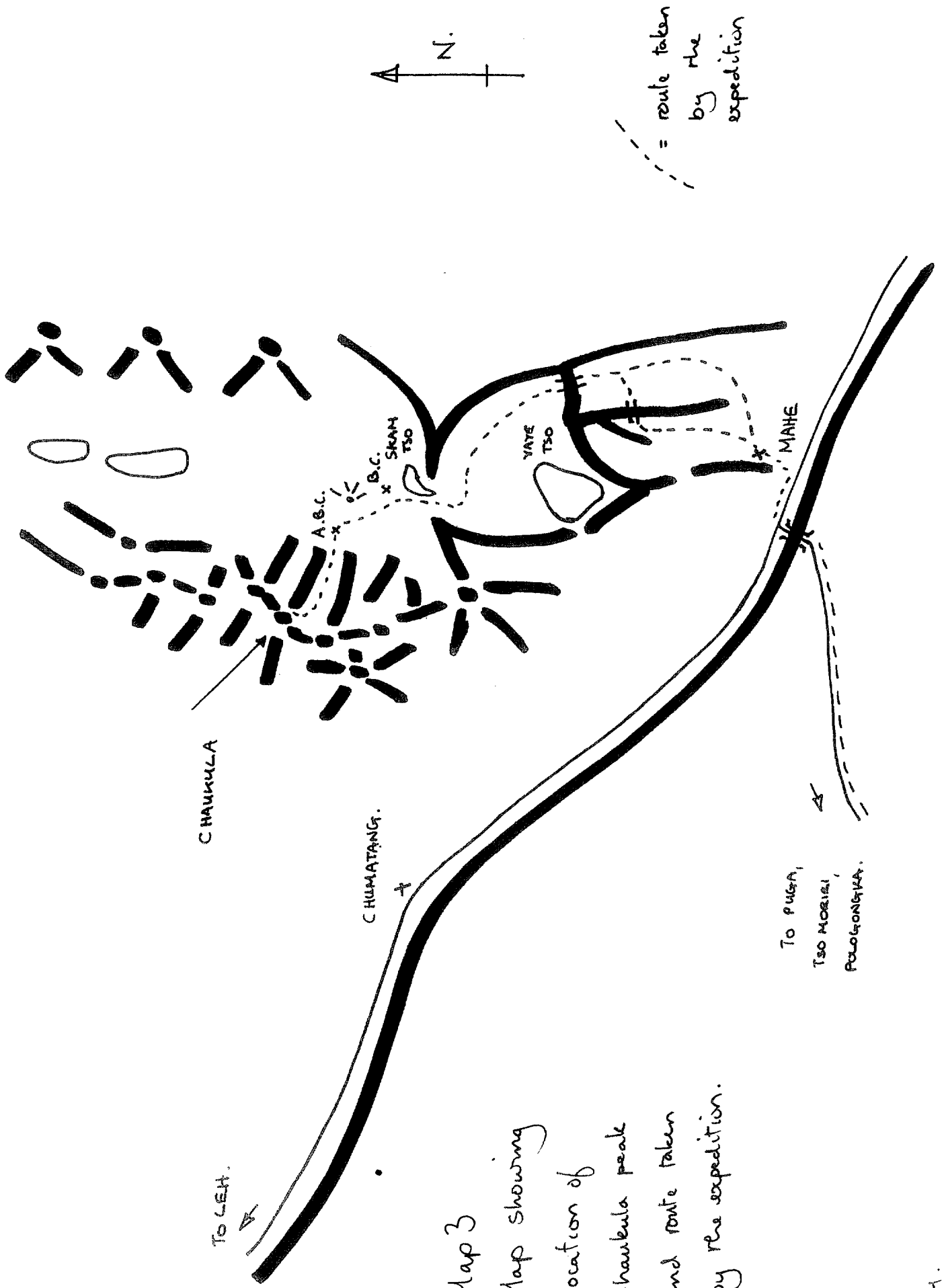
Map showing road access to Mahe and Chaukula.

Map 1



Map 2

Map Showing Routes of Trek and Access to Base Camp and Chaukula.



Map 3
 Map showing
 location of
 Chaukula peak
 and route taken
 by the expedition.

Expedition Account

2.1 Expedition Timeline

<u>DATE</u>	<u>ACTIVITY</u>
24 th July	MR AA CM EM arrived Delhi. Rest day.
25 th July	Freight, admin., & IMF briefing
28 th July	TW MD travelled London to Delhi
29 th July	Flew Delhi to Jammu
30 th July	Flew Jammu to Leh
31 st July	Leh admin and acclimatisation
2 nd August	Drove Leh to Kiagar Tso via Tso Moriri
3 rd – 5 th August	Trekking Kiagar Tso to Mahe.
6 th August	Established BC from Mahe
7 th August	Established ABC
8 th - 10 th August	Established glacier camp/equipment dump below S face
12 th August	Team 1 (TW & CM) established bivouac site
13 th August	Team 1 climbed Chakula from bivouac.
14 th August	Team 1 descended to ABC
15 th August	Team 2 (MR & MD) at glacier camp
16 th August	Team 2 attempted Chakula from bivouac
17 th August	Team 2 descended to ABC
18 th August	Cleared ABC
19 th August	Cleared Base camp, walked to Mahe
20 th August	Drove Mahe to Leh
21 st – 22 nd August	Leh admin
23 rd August	Flew Leh to Delhi
24 th – 25 th August	Delhi admin, IMF debrief & freight
26 th August	Team flew Delhi – London.

The expedition timeline is a summary of the events described below.

Please refer to the preceding maps for information on location.

Map 1 shows road access to the Rupshu area from Manali and Leh.

Map 2 shows the main roads in Rupshu, with the route taken for the acclimatisation trek, and to Chakula.

Map 3 shows the Chakula range in detail, and locates Base Camp, Advanced Base Camp and access to the route used for ascent.

2.2 Administration

Two days were spent in Delhi, reclaiming freight from the airport, and at the IMF briefing, where we met our Liaison Officer. We then flew from Delhi to Leh (via Jammu). Leh is the local administrative capital for Ladakh, with civil, police, and army headquarters, all of which have to be contacted by the expedition and clearance to continue obtained. This was particularly important for our expedition, which was going to an inner line area. Altogether this took 2 days, and provided those members not involved with the formalities with an opportunity to visit local sights including monasteries and the Royal Palace at Stok.

The formalities presented no difficulties, but it was clear that the Chaukula range was in a militarily sensitive area, and any exploration particularly to the North, was out of the question. Our acclimatisation was to be confined to our time in Leh, and a short trek from the south west.

2.3 Acclimatisation

All climbing at altitude requires acclimatisation, with successive height increases spread over a period of time. Leh lies at an altitude of about 3500m, so on arrival, a couple of days were needed for initial acclimatisation. This was followed by a three day trek from Tsakshang to Mahe village. Tsakshang is a camping ground near the road that connects the Indus valley road (from Leh) to the Tso Moriri lake. The latter, once remote and inaccessible, is being developed as a tourist destination, at some possible cost to its wildlife. From the camp ground we walked past the Kiagar Tso lake and over the Kiagar La pass to camp. From here we walked to Sumdo, and after another overnight stop, to Mahe village. Mahe lies beside the main Indus road on the N side of the Indus, and has a large monastery with a fine new school.

At Mahe we collected the remainder of our equipment, and hiked over the Yaye La to the valley of the Yaye Tso, and then through a narrow rocky streambed to the valley of the Skam Tso. This valley has a flat bottom that slopes very gently south to a small lake that is surrounded by boggy ground and fed by various streams. We set up Base Camp beside one of these streams. By now it appeared that our Liaison Officer was not well and needed to return to Mahe, where he could link with the regular public transport back to Leh, and eventually Delhi.

It took one more day to carry two lightweight tents, cooking equipment and food up to the site of Advanced base camp, immediately below the terminal moraine of the glacier that lies below the south side of Chaukula.

2.4 From Advanced Base Camp to the glacier.

Advanced Base Camp could accommodate all four climbers: from here a way was found by Chris and Trevor that led over the moraine to the glacier snout. The glacier ran roughly from west to east, with its head below Chaukula's South Face; one bounding ridge- the northern one -was apparently made up of loose rock, like boulder scree. The southern ridge formed another peak, lower than Chaukula, with steep N facing ice slopes and joined to Chaukula by a low rocky ridge. There were no



objective dangers such as crevasses or avalanche prone areas on the glacier itself, although some of the margins clearly received some stonefall. In 1997, the expedition had bivouacked on the glacier below the south face and climbed to the top of the northern ridge up a snow gully; the gully now held no snow and observation from the glacier suggested that the rocks bounding the South Face on its right (eastern) side would give the best line.

With the help of our sirdar- the enviably fit Kelsing-, equipment and food was carried, via ABC, to a dump at the glacier snout. From here it was taken up the glacier to below the South Face, where a tent was erected for storage and shelter. This took just four days, with the bulk of the work done by Trevor and Chris, who were acclimatising well. Finally, a bivouac site was found that had running water and a safe, level area to sleep, below the snowline on the South Face.

2.5 The Climb

Photograph 1 shows Chaukula seen from the glacier. The dotted line is the line of ascent; B marks the site of the bivouac, and T locates the difficult traverse across the gully.

2.51 Summit Day: account by Trevor Willis

We started from Base Camp on 12th August after our sirdar had performed a *puja* for us. We arrived at ABC around lunchtime and spent some time getting organised and sorting our sacks. We then proceeded onwards and eventually got to the boulder field that made up the terminal moraine. This was well cairned now and we knew our way through it. We relocated our stash point at the snout of the glacier. Our ever-thoughtful sirdar, Kelsing, had moved all our kit – ropes, food, climbing gear – from here to the camp at the end of the glacier. Unfortunately this also included our crampons so we had to trek across the glacier in boots.

At the glacier camp we collected the rest of the kit we needed – food, cooking gear and all the rest of the climbing kit and proceeded up to the bivvy spot. Chris and I had recce'd the ridge on 10th August and had discovered a fairly reasonable bivvy spot at around 5930m. We managed to relocate the spot and began preparing the site to take a couple of sleeping bags.

After an evening meal we set our alarms for 4am and were in our sleeping bags by 18:30 and watching a beautiful sunset and a pair of eagles flying overhead.

Both of us managed to sleep through our alarms and it wasn't until 5am that either of us awoke. Chris coaxed the MSR Dragonfly into life and we breakfasted on oats, noodles and coffee. Chris complained of a massive headache and I managed to find him some Ibuprofen tablets to take.

We eventually set off at 06:30 under a fairly cloudless and windless sky with the sun just beginning to be seen over the eastern peaks. We scrambled unroped up the rocky

ridge to about 6030m where a wide gully filled with snow crossed our path. Chris banged in a peg while I uncoiled the rope. I belayed and Chris started to make the crossing. He put an ice screw in after about 10m and made a slightly rising traverse for another 30m before putting another screw and descending to the rock. The first pieces of rock he came across were shattered, so by the time he had found a decent belay I had about 150mm of rope left!

I then took the peg out and proceeded to follow. The snow wasn't that good, and so with this, the altitude and because of the awkwardness of the traverse it was quite hard work.

We coiled the rope up and continued scrambling up the rocky ridge. This section of the ridge was steeper and looser than that below and so more care had to be taken. The top of the rock was around 6200m and we got the rope out again for the final snow slope to the top. We kept away from the right hand edge of the slope because large cornices could be seen. We started off on a zig zag path, the angle being fairly gentle at 40 deg or so. I followed in Chris's footsteps. The snow was softish – our feet went through the first 75-100mm of snow before biting on the neve below.

It was a fairly hard slog and the only way to gauge our progress was to estimate our distance from a couple of boulders that we had seen previously from ABC. It seemed to take an age to get to these and they were a lot bigger in real life. From around this point the angle start to increase to around 50 deg and so we resorted to front pointing our way up. The last 50m or so were steeper still and Chris traversed delicately left for a few metres to take use of a slight lessening of the angle before being able to stand on the summit ridge. From here it was about a 30m walk to the summit proper. We reached the summit at about 11am and immediately placed the prayer flags that we had bought in Leh, the scarf Kelsingh had given us and the Union flag on the top.

The weather had stayed good and we had a tremendous 360-degree view. We could see a large section of the Indus valley below us, Pologonka and the Tso Moriri peaks beyond this, Chinese peaks over to the east and some really high peaks over to the west.

Lots of photographs were taken and we eventually left the summit at about 11:30 and carefully retraced our steps. We down climbed the initial steep section and then walked down the easier slopes still roped up. We put the rope and crampons away when we got to the top of the rock ridge, getting them out again to cross the snow gully. Chris tied some tat to the rock and we made an awkward diagonal abseil to the lower rock ridge, before continuing to the bivvy spot. There we collected our sleeping kit and continued onto ABC dropping stuff in the glacier camp and the stash on our way.

We reached ABC at about 4pm to a very welcome cup of hot chocolate from Mick and Miriam.

2.52 Second Attempt: 15th August

It was now the turn of Mike and Miriam. In poor weather on the 14th, they climbed to the tent on the glacier, and spent an uncomfortable night, before moving up to the bivouac the following day. The night was cold and windy, which made sleep difficult, and the low temperature persisted through the next day. They made slow time up the broken and sometimes exposed rock ridge, and were grateful for the rope that Chris and Trevor had left across the steep gully. When they finally reached the snowfield, it was to find visibility reduced to a few metres. The entire summit area was hidden under cloud. They decided to wait for an improvement, and use this as an opportunity to rest and eat, but time was being lost. They pressed on, with Miriam leading up ever steepening snow. Although it was past midday, it was still very cold, and both had to wear duvets throughout the climb. In places the snow conditions were quite poor, with soft snow overlying hard ice, but the weather began to clear a little, and it became possible to see the slopes above, and pick out an obvious line. However, it was now quite late, and Mike was going slowly on the unremitting 45° snow. About 30-40m below the crest of the ridge they decided that there was not enough time to reach the summit (which looked a long way along the ridge) and return to the bivouac before nightfall. With considerable regret they turned back.

Administration and Organisation

3.1 Financial aspects

3.11 Cost breakdown

The total cost of the expedition was **£20,121**

This was made up as follows:	Agency costs	£8308
	International flights	£3300
	Internal flights	£1709
	Official costs	£6067
	Freight	£576
	Sundry costs	£161

Agency costs were paid to our Indian agents Ibex Expeditions pvt*, and covered all road transport, accommodation, staff costs, and tentage food and fuel at base camp.

The international flights were returns from London to New Delhi. Internal flights were between New Delhi and Leh, and included the cost of the Liaison Officer's ticket.

Official costs were those of peak handling fees, environmental supplement, and Liaison Officers equipment costs (paid direct to the I.M.F.) also the costs of accommodating and transporting the L.O., and finally mountaineering "X" visas, obtained from the Indian Consulate in Birmingham

Freight paid for the transport of rations and equipment to and from India. Only equipment was brought back; surplus rations were given to the school at Mahe monastery.

Sundry costs were made up of tips paid to camp staff and pony-men, taxi fares and expenses in Delhi, and bank charges for international credit transfers.

The expedition was in receipt of two grants, from the Mount Everest Foundation, and the British Mountaineering Council, of £440 and £900 respectively, making a total of £1340.

* Ibex Expeditions pvt Ltd, G66 East of Kailash, New Delhi 110065, India

3.12 Analysis of costs

No equipment or clothing was bought specifically for the expedition only, and none was left behind or lost. Such items are therefore not included in the cost of the expedition.

Approximately 93% of the cost of the expedition was met by its participants. These were shared equally, with the exception of the official costs, which were reduced for the two members who spent their time at Base Camp.

About 60% of the total spend was on simple expedition logistics, i.e. getting the participants along with sufficient equipment and food to Base Camp and beyond, and providing support during this time. The remaining 30% was spent on administrative matters. Peak fees were particularly high because in addition to the normal fee, there were supplements payable because it was a virgin peak, and because it lay within the inner line area. The Liaison Officers costs were increased because he became unwell soon after arrival at Base Camp, and incurred expenses in returning to Leh.

3.13 Trade sponsorship

The expedition is grateful to Nikwax for the provision of a range of excellent proofing products that enabled clothing and equipment (such as ropes and rucsacs) to be reconditioned and proofed prior to the expedition, and the field maintenance of footwear. North Cape also kindly donated thermal underwear for all members, and gave us a discount for further purchases.

Also thanks to Rab (down clothing and sleeping bags), Terra Nova (Tents, gloves and socks) and Patra (silk [thermal!] underwear) who kindly enabled us to purchase their excellent products at a discount.

3.2 Environmental Considerations.

Ladakh has very limited supplies of wood (which is grown primarily as a building material, and is a valuable crop) and there are problems with drinking water, particularly in urban areas, with endemic *Giardia* infection and pollution. Soil erosion is a newer problem in some popular trekking areas. The disposal of waste, particularly plastics, is another challenge for what is essentially a low technology area. However, Leh city is expanding quite rapidly as it accommodates increasing numbers of summer visitors, and is able to cope with waste disposal. The neighbouring state of Himachal Pradesh has banned the use of plastic bags in shops, and some businesses in Ladakh have followed suit.

The expedition's approach to these issues was to use an agency which is environmentally aware, and with employees local to Ladakh. All aspects of environmental impact were monitored by the expedition members.

Military roads were used for access, with equipment being carried between Base Camp and the road by local ponymen, from Mahe village or nearby. Throughout Ladakh, ponies are the "off road" local transport network, carrying trading material, crops, etc., and in the summer supporting trekkers and mountaineers. Their environmental impact is minimal, (except in on the most popular trekking routes, where the amount of available grazing is being steadily reduced).

Apart from dehydrated high altitude rations all foodstuffs were purchased locally. No wood or shrubs were cut for fuel. All cooking was done using kerosene. The main source of lighting in the evening was a solar powered electric lamp. Torch batteries were taken home.

A limited amount of combustible waste was burnt at the end of the expedition. All plastics, metals and similar solid material were compacted and stored in waste bags which were taken back to Leh for disposal. No equipment or waste was left on the mountain or the bivouac site, nor at ABC and BC.

Deep latrine pits were dug, well away from running water. Washing water was used in small basins, so that soap and similar materials did not pollute streams. A solar shower was used at Base Camp, but provided just a small flow of lukewarm water, suitable only for washing hair.