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# Virgin Summits - Tibet 2003

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## SUMMARY

In September 2003 a team of four members travelled to the little explored Nyainqentangla East range in Tibet. Situated 400 kilometres north east of Lhasa this range has seen little exploration or climbing to date and therefore promised a wealth of exploratory mountaineering. The team had permits to climb Nenang (6870m), Chachaco (6575m) and Jomo Taktse (6582m).

The team consisted of Adam Thomas, Phil Amos and Bryan Godfrey, all from Edinburgh, UK and Graham Rowbotham from Vancouver, Canada. Thomas, Amos and Godfrey arrived in Kathmandu, Nepal on 14 September with Rowbotham arriving the next day. This left just enough time to finalise visas before all four flew to Lhasa on 16 September.

The team met up with the agent in Lhasa and did some last minute organisation before leaving in three Land Cruisers on 19 September. They experienced some very poor road conditions and were eventually stopped by landslides 40 kilometres short of Niwu, where they had planned to walk for three days to a base camp in the upper Niwu valley. They waited for four days for enough horses to carry their equipment and then walked for six days to get to base camp which was established at 4300m.

The team spent four days exploring around base camp before realising that due to problems of access and the available maps being inaccurate, none of the proposed peaks were feasible. They eventually decided to attempt a previously unknown mountain called Chukporisum (6359m).

On 6 October all four members of the team walked to an advanced base camp and spent the next 8 days on the attempt. Two days were spent ferrying loads and then the mountain was attempted in pure Alpine style from 5140m. A summit attempt from a high camp at 6040m ended at 6180m in extreme conditions of cold and wind.

Unfortunately, because of the time lost due to the landslides on the road while getting to the mountain, no time was left for any further attempts. The team then sent their guide and cook out to Niwu and the road head with the gear and proceeded to make a complete circumnavigation of the northern part of the range. This involved the first western crossing of a pass at 5300m and another pass at 5100m in five days. The team was back in Lhasa on 26 October before travelling back to Kathmandu overland in three days. The expedition ended on 1 November.

## EXPEDITION MEMBERS



Adam Thomas from the UK is 31 years old and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. His accomplishments include the exploration of the little known Tres Marias area in Bolivia (including numerous first and second ascents) and the second ascent of Kutshkulin Sar in Pakistan. He led the Anglo-New Zealand Hindu Raj Expedition 2000, which made the first ascent of Uddin Zom (5995m), also in Pakistan. He also co-led an expedition to Raksha Urai (6593m), in 2001, which failed just 150m short of the summit.



At 45, software engineer Graham Rowbotham has the dubious privilege of being our oldest member. Graham emigrated from Britain to Vancouver 12 years ago and has climbed very widely all over the world, including ascents of Bhagirathi II in India and the first ascents of Sahan Sar and Khan Sar in Pakistan. Graham was also on Raksha Urai in 2001 and brings a wealth of experience to the team.



Bryan Godfrey is 34 and comes from Queenstown, New Zealand. He has climbed many classic routes in New Zealand and whilst marooned in the UK, has climbed extensively in Scotland. He was also part of both the 1999 Karambar Expedition and the Hindu Raj Expedition in 2000, as well as being on Raksha Urai on 2001.



Phil Amos from the UK is a 32 year old environmental engineering consultant. Phil has climbed extensively in Britain and the European Alps, was the other half of the highly successful Tres Marias Expedition and part of the team that made the first ascent of Uddin Zom in Pakistan. He was also on Raksha Urai in 2001 and is responsible for ensuring our expeditions have a minimal environmental impact on the walk in and out, at base camp and whilst climbing on the mountain.

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ITINERARY

14 September	Thomas, Amos and Godfrey arrive in Kathmandu
15 September	Rowbotham arrives in Kathmandu
16 September	Fly Kathmandu to Lhasa
17 - 18 September	Sightseeing and shopping in Lhasa
19 - 21 September	Drive Lhasa to road closure 40km short of Niwu
22 - 25 September	Wait at road closure for horses to arrive
26 - 27 September	Walk to Niwu
28 September - 1 October	Walk Niwu to Base Camp
2 - 5 October	Reconnaissance and packing for climb
6 - 15 October	Attempt on Chukporisum (6359m)
16 - 18 October	Rest at Base Camp
19 - 23 October	Walk Base Camp to Lhari
24 October	Wait for jeeps in Lhari
25 - 26 October	Drive Lhari to Lhasa
27 October	Lhasa
28 - 30 October	Drive Lhasa to Kathmandu
31 October	Kathmandu - Thomas has operation
1 November	Expedition ends as members leave Nepal

## AREA DESCRIPTION

The best area description and history of exploration currently available is to be found in the Special Submission to the Japanese Alpine Journal, Vol.4 May 2003 by Tomatsu Nakamura. I quote Tomatsu for reference in this report:

"The Nyainqentangla East is located on the south-eastern rim of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. The upper tributaries of Yalung Tsangpo erode the plateau into deep valleys like sawing seams. The topography becomes complicated. The climate is humid and brings much snowfall, which fosters glaciers, makes tempting snow peaks and grows beautiful conifer forests....

From a viewpoint of the water drainage system, the main range of Nyainqentangla East forms the watershed between Yalung Tsangpo and Salween River (Nu Jiang). There are the upper Salween in the north and two tributaries of Yalung Tsangpo, Yigong Tsangpo and Parlung Tsangpo in the south. Countless peaks exceeding 6000m exist still veiled and unvisited. Almost all except for Sepu Kangri massif are not known as of today. Glaciers are well developed. One of them, Qiaqing Glacier, which is the largest one in the mountain range, has a length of 35km.

The branch range that separates from the main range near Lhari to the east in the south of Yigong Tsangpo is to be included in Nyainqentangla East. Here are many fascinating lofty snow peaks too. Mountains and valleys surround a scenic and historical spot with a lamasery. Turquoise blue Lake Basong brings to mind the European Alps. I call them the "Alps of Tibet". The highest peak, Nenang (6870m) is guarded with a precipitous snow face and a treacherous ridge. The breathtaking pyramid peak, Jajacho (or Kajaqiao 6447m) (or Chachaco, ed.) soaring into the sky, is the most impressive and alluring."

Tomatsu has this to say about exploration:

1. Japanese parties from Nagano Prefecture went twice in 1994 and 2000. They explored the northern side of Kajaqiao in 1994 and entered the valley north of Lake Basong in 2000.
2. In 1999 a New Zealand party led by John Nankervis challenged two peaks to the east of Lake Basong. (New Zealand Alpine Journal 2000).
3. In June 2001 T. Nakamura's party tried to go down the Yigong Tsangpo from Lhari, but frequent and dangerous landslides impeded them to carry on the trip soon after they had left Lhari.
4. In September 2001 John Town and his colleague visited the valley north of Lake Basong.
5. In March – April 2002 John Town and Nicola Mart entered Yigong Tsangpo from Lhari and made a reconnaissance of the north-western side of Nenang 6870m, now the highest unclimbed peak in the range as Sepu Kangri has already been scaled by an American party. (Alpine Journal 2002)
6. In April 2002 an American party of Mark Jenkins and John Harlin attempted to climb Jieqinnalagabu 6316m east of Lake Basong but was not successful.
- 7 In October – November 2002 T. Nakamura's party conducted the explorations in two phases. In Phase 1, they made a reconnaissance of the southern slopes of Nenang from Jula and ascended to a high pass Laqin La 5300m on the watershed to Niwu Chu."

## MAPS

Maps of the Nyainqentangla East are surprisingly detailed and reasonably accurate. We had been recommended the Russian military maps created in the 1940s as being the most accurate. We purchased sheet H-46-XVI from East View Cartographics who can be found at [www.cartographic.com](http://www.cartographic.com). There seem to be many different ways to code these maps so it is important to state exactly what area the desired map covers before purchasing.

In addition we were very fortunate to be able to use maps drawn by Tomatsu Nakamura who has produced several maps of the area. These were actually a little confusing as he produced a series of maps, each one based on a little more knowledge each time. This meant that some of the earlier drafts were not accurate. Unfortunately, we used one of these early drafts for our planning and ended up making decisions based on incorrect information. Tomatsu's map in the Special Submission to the Japanese Alpine Journal Vol. 4 May 2003 pp. 88-89 is the best and most accurate map available even though it is purely topographical.

Tomatsu had the advantage of being in possession of another map produced by the People's Liberation Army. He can be contacted for further details of this, but has clearly used this and the Russian map, along with his own observations, to create a very good map. It seems that heights above 6000m have come from the PLA map and heights below 6000m from the Russian map.

During the walk out from base camp we completed the first western circumnavigation of the northern part of the range. Our observations tied in very accurately with the Russian map and so in conclusion we would say that for general lay out and valley accuracy the Russian map is good. However, heights and topography above 6000m seem to be better on the PLA map. The best overall is the map produced by Tomatsu Nakamura.

## APPROACH ROUTE

After much deliberation in the planning stages the team decided to approach the Niwu valley from Niwu (93<sup>0</sup>57'E, 30<sup>0</sup>29'N according to Russian map) itself. John Town had been in this way the year before, albeit in March. We knew that the road to Niwu was passable and that this would mean a three or four day walk only. We also knew that Tomatsu Nakamura had reached the summit of the Laqin La two years previously and had not been able to cross the pass due to snow and generally poor weather. The pass was possible without horses, but this would mean that we would not be able to get any of our equipment to base camp.

We therefore chose to drive to Niwu from Lhasa. We knew that this had taken John Town three days and so this is what we allowed ourselves. We left in three Land Cruisers and followed the good tarmac road north from Lhasa to Damzhung and then turned off just south of Nakchu onto an unsurfaced road heading east. Here the road deteriorated considerably due to it being used very frequently by trucks involved in the construction of the Tibet-Sichuan railway. However, the road soon improved to a standard dirt track, although there was precious little in terms of habitation.

We stayed the first night in a tiny roadside shack that was clearly not designed to allow people to stay. The family who lived in it slept in the shed outside. The following day we made our way very slowly east. The road was poor and at one stage we were diverted around a village on a makeshift track. It turned out the village was infected with Foot and Mouth Disease and was in isolation.

We finally made it to Lhari (93°13'E, 30°38'N according to Russian map and pronounced Chali by the locals) that evening and found a government guesthouse to stay in. This again was basic, despite being designed for the purpose. Lhari is being rapidly turned into a modern Chinese frontier town with typical concrete Chinese architecture and communications. The Tibetan character of the town has been all but lost and the population is an interesting mix of Chinese and Tibetan.

In Lhari we were informed that the road to Niwu was not passable. We did have an alternative at this stage to attempt a crossing of the Laqin La, but it was impossible to find horses in Lhari to help carry our gear. We were therefore stuck with the road to Niwu.

We set out the following day and were quickly stopped by landslides. One in particular threatened to stop our progress, but after two hours of road building and a near disaster with one Land Cruiser nearly falling in the river, we eventually made it to a bridge where we were assured that we could go no further. We therefore unloaded at a bridge at the confluence of two rivers (93°38'E, 30°35'N according to Russian map 60 km short of Niwu and put up the tents.

We could find no horses or other pack animals to help with loads and no people to porter either. The only option was to send a man down to Niwu to round up some horses and come back. This would take 4 days and then it would be another 2 days to walk to Niwu. We therefore lost 6 days there and another three days on the way back, meaning 9 less days at base camp.

## **WALK IN**

We took the opportunity whilst waiting for the horses to explore the area a little and to get some acclimatisation. All four members of the team reached 5000m from our camp and got some tantalising glimpses of peaks from the north. We also managed a short rock climb up the side of the gorge we were in. Named after an incident with Adam's tent, "Yak Attack" was three pitches of British Severe on good granite. It is worth noting that the sides of the gorge towards Niwu would provide some superb climbing on very steep granite at least 500m high and relatively accessible.

We finally left for Niwu late in the afternoon of 26 September. We could not find enough horses to carry all of our equipment and so took enough food for 9 days and our personal kit, leaving the rest behind with a local to arrange to bring it up after us. I have to admit to being rather concerned about this arrangement, but we had lost enough time already to make it worthwhile. As it turned out, our equipment arrived at base camp exactly on schedule.

The first night was spent camped on the track. Very early into the walk it became obvious why the track was not passable by vehicles. Numerous large landslides and rock falls meant that in places we even had to unload the horses to get them



through. It would appear that all of the damage is done during the summer monsoon months and that earlier in the year the track is drivable. Once the monsoon is over, the road is repaired and lasts through to the next monsoon. This would explain why John Town made it through. As soon as the harvest is over, local people are co-opted into working on the road to clear it for vehicles. This is normally completed in early November. Our timing could not have been worse.

The second day to Niwu was very long and hard. The number of landslides made for difficult ground for the horses and at times it was hard to believe that the track could ever take vehicles. The scenery was spectacular and there were no settlements at all for the entire journey. The very deep gorge meant that we saw little sun and no mountains, even though we were walking right below mountains up to 6000m.

According to our guide, when asked what animals could be found in these parts, he quite seriously listed blue sheep, musk deer, snow leopard and yeti. The valley was Alpine and very different to other parts of Tibet that we had seen. We seemed to be descending off the plateau into a much more luscious climate with deciduous and coniferous trees. We eventually reached Niwu as the light was failing, but the gorge suddenly opened out into a wide valley with cultivation terraces as far as the eye could see.

We had been checking our progress with our GPS against the Russian map that we had and it appeared very accurate. However, at Niwu we found the only real anomaly regarding valley detail in the entire trip. The map states that Niwu is at 4000m, whereas our GPS stated 3400m. This meant that we had actually descended 800m to get to Niwu, which we would have to regain over the next few days.

We eventually left Niwu in the afternoon of the 28 September after having sorted out some fresh horses and horsemen. After one hour the horsemen unloaded the horse and rode back into Niwu to argue about the price we were paying them. We eventually settled the price and got 5 kilometres that day.

On 29 September we fared better. We finally got established in the Niwu valley although the views that we had hoped for were few and far between due to changeable weather. This had been the pattern ever since we had arrived in Tibet and we hoped that things would improve soon. Certainly the views that John Town had tempted us with were not visible although we did get the odd glimpse of some big mountains to the south.

The Niwu valley is amazing. It is very isolated and the way of life seems to have remained unchanged for many centuries. Most of the locals still dress in traditional clothes and the agricultural practices are very traditional. The houses are sturdy and built of stone, with many having two storeys. The availability of stone and wood clearly makes life much easier here than on the plateau and the relatively low altitude and high rainfall also takes the harsh edge off life. The locals were intrigued by our presence and made us feel welcome by helping with overnight stops and giving us fresh vegetables.

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**Above:** Jeep incident on road to Niwu

**Right:** Rock walls in gorge on way to Niwu

**Below:** Local family, Upper Niwu

**Left:** Chumu Tashi Lama



We reached Upper Niwu (John Town calls this Ekar) that afternoon and then kept going towards the Aigagong Glacier (identified as such by Tomatsu Nakamura, but called the Ekar Glacier by John Town). As far as we knew, and according to the locals, no westerner had ever been beyond this glacier, so we were all very excited. We camped above the glacier that night and finally made it to base camp the following day.

We made the decision to site base camp at the junction of the two rivers (approx. 93°38'E, 30°24'N according to Russian map) in the upper valley to give us the option of exploring up both valleys. Sadly, this meant that we would be unable to attempt either Jomo Takste or Nenang, but we thought we would still have a chance with Chachaco. Base camp was a pleasant site with plenty of water and some wood for the occasional fire. The only sign of habitation was a small hut on the hillside and some unoccupied seasonal herders huts nearby. We found later, however, that a few people did live up the southern branch of the valley.

It is worth noting at this stage that we had underestimated the scale of the area, partly by not interpreting the map correctly, but also because photographs that John Town had sent us had shown the mountains being relatively close to the main valley floor. However, when we got there it became clear that these photographs had been taken with at least a 300mm lens and that the mountains were, in fact, some distance from the valley floor.

#### **EXPLORATION AND ACCLIMATISATION**

On 2 October we began to explore the areas up both valleys from base camp. Graham and Bryan took the southern branch in order to get a closer look at a mountain that we could see through the clouds from our tents. This mountain seemed to hold the cloud much more than any others, but it did appear to be worth a look as it seemed to have potential. Graham and Bryan returned late that night to report that it was a feasible objective although it would be nice to see more than they could before committing to it.

Adam and Phil took the northern option in order to explore the southern access to Chachaco. The maps that we had indicated that a branch valley (approx 93°31'E, 30°26'N according to Russian map) would allow access to Chachaco, which could hopefully be climbed by its south ridge or the faces either side of the ridge. There were no photographs of this side of the mountain so none of us really knew what to expect.

The pair walked up the branch valley to 4800m where a good view opened up of the mountains at the head of the valley. There were four distinct summits, although the main feature was a barrier ridge which included all of the summits. Slightly to the east was a large snow dome. All of the summits appeared to be between 6000m and 6500m. However, none looked remotely like how we had expected Chachaco to look! All the summits looked to be climbable, but none really stood out as being the kind of objective we were looking.

Adam and Phil returned to base camp that evening to check all of the available maps. It slowly became clear that the Russian military map was incorrect and had sited Chachaco on the barrier ridge. Early maps by Tomatsu had done likewise, but

it was only Tomatsu's later maps, the best produced in his report noted earlier, that showed that Chachaco was actually north of the barrier ridge. This was a major blow to the expedition as it meant that Chachaco could not be attempted from the south. As we had already made the decision to site base camp up the valley from the access to Jomo Takste and Nenang, this meant that none of our original objectives were possible.

Graham and Bryan set out from base camp on 3 October to visit the branch valley that Adam and Phil had been to the day before. The plan was to camp in the valley and make further exploration if possible. They reached 5500m and stayed over night at 4800m, but came to the same conclusion as Adam and Phil.

On 4 October the clouds finally cleared from the mountain denominating the southern valley that Bryan and Graham had explored earlier. From base camp it looked fantastic with a very snowy north ridge being the obvious line as long as there was access to it from the glacier below.

It was therefore decided to make an attempt on this mountain. The map showed it as an inconsequential lump at 6359m (93°29'E, 30°18'N according to Russian map), a fact that was glaringly obviously wrong from our position at base camp as it towered over us and was the dominant feature of the valley. It was therefore prime choice for an attempt.

We all decided to attempt the mountain together and so 5 October saw us sorting out gear and planning the attempt. The plan was to take 10 days of food and gas from base camp and establish an advanced base camp at the foot of the mountain which was some four hours walk away from base camp. We would then ferry loads to the base of the glacier and then climb the mountain in one push from there.

This approach would need some help getting to advanced base camp and so the guide, Bhu Chung, Adam, Phil and Graham went up the hill above base camp to where a small fire was burning outside a hut. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the Tibetan month and, this being an especially holy day, someone was burning incense and juniper. It turned out that the hut was, in fact, a small, home built monastery with one monk, the man who had built it, Chumu Tashi Lama.

It was a basic hut with a rack of Tibetan texts along one wall and a statue of Guru Rinpoche next to it, arranged in a shrine. Chumu was reciting some scripts when we arrived, but happily stopped to welcome us. He told us that the mountain that we wished to climb was called Chukporisum which means "mountain that is in the middle of three mountains". We never really found out which the other two were. However, the monastery was built because Guru Rinpoche once meditated at the foot of Chukporisum, thus making the whole site holy. We were assured, however, that there was no problem with us wanting to climb the mountain.

Chumu only practised on certain days of the month and the rest of the time he managed a small holding up the southern branch of the valley above base camp, past which we would have to travel to get to Chukporisum. He volunteered to provide two horses to help get our kit to advanced base camp the next day, an offer that we accepted for a small fee.

The weather up to this point had been changeable. Chukporisum had rarely been out of cloud which caused some concern about the amount of snow that might be building up on its north ridge. The night of 4 October saw snow at base camp and then the temperature fell for the following few days. This, however, also coincided with a clear spell which saw Chukporisum out of cloud. It seemed that the prevailing wind coming from the west off the Tibetan plateau was bringing with it a fair amount of moisture. This was causing the cloud on Chukporisum, which was on the western edge of the range, and leaving mountains to the east clearer. However, from the confines of base camp it was difficult to tell exactly what was going on.

## THE CLIMB

All four members of the team set off after lunch on 6 October with Chumu and his horses, all the climbing kit and 10 days food and gas. We walked past a glacial lake formed by an almost perfect circle of terminal moraine and eventually sited advanced base camp to the west of the lake at the very foot of the lateral moraine coming down from Chukporisum (approx. 93<sup>0</sup>31'E, 30<sup>0</sup>21'N according to Russian map). Although four hours walk from base camp, advanced base was only 280m higher at 4580m.

We were finally alone and ready to start climbing although first we had to contend with that most dreadful of Himalayan tasks, the load carry. On 7 October we set out with heavy rucksacks to climb the lateral moraine on the west bank of the glacier coming down the north eastern flank of Chukporisum. We then cut down from the moraine to the snout of the glacier and found a site for the tents. We stashed gear here and proceeded to climb further up the side of the glacier snout to 5140m. We found an extremely good site for Camp 1 here and so decided to move the tents up to the better site the following day with the second carry.

On 8 October we packed all of the remaining gear and headed back up the moraine. We passed the original tent site and picked up the gear stashed there before proceeding to Camp 1. We established the site on a flat rock at the foot of the glacier and then packed climbing equipment into the sacks with a view to carry this higher onto the glacier itself.

This we did and eventually reached 5370m before it became necessary to rope together as the glacier was covered in snow and there were many crevasses. We cached some gear, marked the cache with wands and a GPS fix and returned to Camp 1 for the night. The weather had been stable and clear for the last three days and the route to the base of the north ridge seemed to be reasonable.

That night the weather turned somewhat and brought wind and some sleet/snow. The following morning things had improved a little, the snow having abated, but the cloud was down low and visibility was not good. We decided to proceed to a col at the base of the north ridge that day as the line up the glacier looked reasonable. We picked up the cache of gear and carried on up. At this stage, with 6 days of food and gas in knee-deep snow the going was tough. There was some debate half way to the col about the gain in altitude, but due to a lack of suitable campsites we decided to proceed.

During the afternoon the weather deteriorated so much that at one point we were climbing in a full white out for about an hour. In the poor visibility it was difficult to see how far there was to go and it transpired that it was further than expected. Eventually, the col was reached in poor conditions with wind and snow. At 5790m, the height gain of 650m in one day was more than anyone had wanted, but no one suffered unduly.

However, due to the large height gain and the poor weather it was decided to have a full day at Camp 2 to acclimatise and recover. A trail was broken on the afternoon of 10 October about 100m above Camp 2 up the north ridge, but we stayed at Camp 2 that night.

The next day dawned fine, but there was a strong wind and it was cold on the north side of the mountain. Despite this, we packed up Camp 2 and headed up the north ridge. The going was slow in deep snow, but the views opened out towards the north and across to the east and west. A short section of Scottish III allowed access to a 50° snow slope above and then further up to a steeper section of ridge towards the summit. At this section, the ridge became broken with seracs and there looked to be some considerably steeper sections above.

After searching out a route slightly to the east of the ridge it became clear that pitched climbing would follow and so we decided to look for a place for the tents. The only option was to dig into the 50° slope where the snow was soft. This was accomplished, but not before Phil suffered the onset of AMS. He took half a Diamox and half an hour later was much better. A period of monitoring followed and his symptoms did not reappear so it was deemed unnecessary to descend.

The ledge that was dug could accommodate both tents (one Terra Nova Gemini and one Integral Designs mountain tent courtesy of the Canadian Himalayan Foundation cache in Kathmandu). The height of Camp 3 was 6040m. We then settled down to the most fantastic sunset in an incredible position with a view to climbing to the summit the following day. This would involve leaving the tents and climbing with just a day's rations.

However, the weather had other designs. At 5am we awoke to a howling gale and a sudden blast of spindrift coming across the ridge from the north west face. The strong westerly wind seemed to be picking up snow from the west ridge and north west face and throwing it across the north ridge. It was settling in every undulation in the ridge and found the ledge that had been dug for the tents an ideal resting place.

Within minutes the snow was built up to the height of the tents. Phil and Graham emerged to dig the tents out, but could only just keep up with the build up. After some time Adam and Bryan had brewed up and all four retired to the tents for a drink. Immediately it became necessary for Adam and Bryan to go out to start digging.

This situation continued until about 10am. The sun was shining and there was no snow in the air, but the volume of spindrift was incredible. At 10am, we decided this could not continue and something had to be done as the spindrift was now building

up inside the tents and making life extremely uncomfortable. The decision had to be made to either descend or to dig into the hillside.

We chose the snow hole and Graham set to with the shovel. Within half an hour there was a hole large enough for one man to get inside and swing the shovel. We each took a turn and with a good deal of teamwork four hours saw a magnificent snow cave with a vestibule and two bedrooms. We christened it the "Chukporisum Hilton". Inside it was just below freezing and was totally still. Outside the wind still howled, but the spindrift just blew straight past.

Later in the day the wind died down and by 2pm it was a brilliant sunny afternoon. Until this point, we had thought that we had a reasonable chance of success on the summit attempt. However, under these conditions it was clear that this was going to be a serious challenge. We had invested too much time to turn around without a try and so the decision was made to attempt the climb the following day, 13 October. However, the usual Alpine early morning start was ruled out due to the intense wind and cold. We therefore decided to start the climb at 8am.

The following day started like the previous one. Inside the snow cave all was quiet and calm while outside the spindrift blizzard howled. A delay was put on the start time and we eventually started at 10.30am after Graham (salopettes zip) and Phil (crampons) had sorted out gear troubles. The rationale was that whilst it was clear that the climb would be long, there would be more chance of climbing late into the night before the wind started again and therefore not being out in the wind too long in the morning.

The climb started up a 60° slope at about Scottish IV in places towards a col on the ridge. Phil, Graham and Bryan belayed at the bergschrund in the full blast of the wind whilst Adam led up the slope using snow stakes for protection although the climbing was somewhat precarious. When the rope went tight, the others followed, moving together on two separate ropes. After about 120m and an hour of climbing, Adam reached the col. By 12.10pm, we had all reached the col.

At this stage the wind and cold were frightening. Despite a clear blue sky, the wind howled across the ridge bringing copious spindrift with it. The temperature was estimated to be about -15° C with a 40mph wind. The windchill was a real concern.

Phil, Bryan and Graham had all got very cold whilst belaying at the bergschrund. Graham had lost feeling in the index finger of his right hand and was extremely concerned about it as it had become wooden. Bryan was very worried about his extremities and his ability to stay warm enough if the climb continued. Phil warmed up during the climb to the col, but on stopping immediately lost any warmth he had. He found this particularly debilitating and with the concerns of the others it was clear that the team would struggle to continue from the col.

However, perhaps due to his lead earlier, Adam was not as cold as the others. He remained upbeat about the chances of success, despite realising that the other members of the team could not continue. Phil decided to descend and Bryan agreed to go with him, leaving Adam and Graham with the gear and the stove that the team was carrying to continue the summit attempt.

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**Left:** Chuporisum with our route, camps and high point

**Above:** Camp 1 (unknown mountain behind c.6500m)

**Right:** Terrible conditions on our summit attempt

**Below:** Inside the Chukporisum Hilton





Graham decided that he was too cold to belay and so Adam stayed on the col whilst Graham went on. About 8m up, Graham discovered loose, unconsolidated snow giving way into a crevasse. It was clear that the ground ahead was very broken and would take time to climb. Graham was still very cold and decided that he did not have the time needed to work out a viable route. He therefore descended to the col.

The high point reached was 6180m, just 179m vertically to the summit. However, the ground above did look challenging and the team was well beaten.

Graham and Adam then descended towards the snow cave, meeting up Phil and Bryan at the bergschrund at 2pm. The wind was still howling and the temperature still very low despite the sun having reached the ridge. In fact this was the worst day that we had encountered so far and the wind did not abate until 4pm. At that time, the sun was out and a superb evening followed. The views out over the northern part of the Nyainqentangla East with over thirty 6000m, mountains all unclimbed, was breathtaking. Despite the real disappointment at not reaching the summit, we agreed that this was something to savour. The potential of the area is incredible, with the jewel in the crown, Chachaco, rising up in a perfect pyramid almost due north.

We stayed at Camp 3 in the snow cave that night and then packed up and descended to Camp 2 the following day. We picked up the few items remaining there and headed on down to Camp 1. Again, there was equipment to pick up there and then down to advanced base. This was reached in the evening of 14 October.

Fortunately, the following day saw a group of local herders in the valley and they were persuaded to help carry a load back to base camp. So, 10 days after having set out and with no food or gas left, we arrived back in base camp. Chukporisum was, of course, out of cloud and looking majestic, way up above the valley. From below it was clear that there had still been some way to go up the ridge, but we knew that we had given it our best shot.

With only three days left before having to leave base camp there was no time left for any more climbing. Those three days were therefore spent recovering: eating mountains of food and drinking endless cups of tea.

## **WALK OUT**

Base camp was finally cleared on 19 October. Bhu Chung, the guide and Tashi, the cook packed up all of their equipment and took this, along with some of the team's personal kit on horseback down to Niwu. They then retraced our steps along the Yalung Tsangpo gorge to the bridge at the river confluence where we had camped for five days on the way in. From there Bhu Chung secured a motorbike ride back to Lhari and arranged a truck to pick up all of the kit and take it back to Lhari.

The four of us decided to return to Lhari by a slightly more direct route. We decided to make the first circumnavigation of the northern branch of the Nyainqentangla East by walking back to Lhari over the Laqin La pass (5300m, 93°23'E, 30°27'N according to Russian map) and the Keng La pass (5100m, 93°12'E, 30°28'N according to Russian map). The Keng La had been crossed in 1926 by F. Kingdon Ward and also in 2002 by Tomatsu Nakamura. Tomatsu also attempted to cross the

Laqin La from west to east, but was stopped on the western flank by snow. He made it to the pass alone, but could not proceed further due to the snow being too dangerous for his horses. As far as research shows, no westerner had actually made a complete crossing of the pass.

There are two main passes out of the Upper Niwu Valley, one from the northern and one from the southern branches of the valley. We chose the northern branch as this was the obvious route for returning to Lhari. We packed up 5 days worth of food and set off after lunch on 19 October.

The first night was spent below the east side of the Laqin La. It was then a long haul to the top of the pass the following day and the views were marred by cloud. As noted by Nakamura, the view from the Laqin La is disappointing. The views to the main peaks in the area are obscured by forepeaks and it is not possible to get an impression of the stunning potential of the area. However, we had no problems with snow and succeed in making the first known western crossing of the pass.

Camp was made that night on the west of the pass and the next two days were spent walking towards the Keng La. Many seasonal herders huts were passed, but in three whole days the team saw no other people. All high huts had been abandoned for the year, anticipating the onset of winter. The walking was delightful and would make a very good trek for anyone considering a trekking, rather than mountaineering trip.

The fourth day was spent crossing the Keng La. At its summit the terrain changed markedly. This was the line of the watershed between the dry and bleak plateau area and the more fertile valleys of the Nyainqentangla. The alpine environment that had been experienced for the last few weeks suddenly changed to barren slopes with low growing grasses and few shrubs.

Continuing over the far side of the Keng La towards Lhari, we finally came back into habitation. The first village was very basic with a few houses, some livestock and local women digging for wild tubers. All around were flattened dung piles out to dry in time for the winter. Beyond the village and we found a campsite on a flood plain outside another village.

The following morning when we rose we were in the shade of the nearby hill. The thermometer at 9am read -12° C, but only 15 minutes later when the sun arrived it read 10° C! The tents were packed away and the short walk to Lhari started. Lunch was taken on a beach by a beautiful ultra marine lake and Lhari finally entered via the municipal rubbish dump. Some contrast indeed!

We made our way to the guest house and were received with some suspicion due to the fact that they were unaccompanied by a guide. However, a note from Bhu Chung smoothed things over and the four of us settled down to wait for Bhu Chung and Tashi to arrive that evening. Sadly, the motorbike lift that Bhu Chung got as mentioned above only arrived at midnight. The jeeps were due to arrive the following morning to take us back to Lhasa so there was some urgency to get all of the kit to Lhari. This was done through the night by Bhu Chung who worked incredibly hard.

Unfortunately, the jeeps failed to turn up the next day. By this stage Bhu Chung had run out of money and had almost exhausted the reserves that we had lent him. It was therefore essential that the jeeps turn up, not to mention the fact that we all had to get back to Lhasa and then Kathmandu to catch our flights home. Eventually contact was made with the agent in Lhasa who assured us that the jeeps would be with us the following day.

True to the agent's word they did arrive and short of running out of petrol in a snow storm in the middle of the Tibetan plateau in the dark, we arrived back in Lhasa safe and sound.

#### **AGENT DETAILS**

From information provided by John Town, Adam contacted Bikrum Pandey at Himalayan Expeditions in Kathmandu. He has a wealth of experience organising trips in the Himalaya and had arranged the logistics for John Town. It made sense, therefore to ask Bikrum to arrange this trip from Kathmandu. His manager, Satish Neupane was extremely efficient and helpful with the arrangements and the whole outfit comes highly recommended. They can be contacted by using the following details:

Bikrum Pandey, Himalaya Expeditions, Nuwakott Ghar ,Sanepal Chowk, Lalitpur, PO Box 105, Kathmandu Nepal Tel: (01) 55 45 990 / 55 45 900 Fax: (01) 55 47 900 / 55 26 575 E-mail: [bikrum@HimexNepal.com](mailto:bikrum@HimexNepal.com)

Himalayan Expeditions use an agent in Lhasa for all of the local arrangements in Tibet. The China International Travel Service is run by a Tibetan, Ming Ma, and all the staff are Tibetan. The staple trips that they organise are jeep trips to Everest Base Camp or Mount Kailash. They are still relatively inexperienced at organising mountaineering trips and it is recommended to go through Himalayan Expeditions at this stage.

However, in one or two years time, Ming Ma will probably have the experience to make the necessary arrangements himself. This will be good news as he has valuable knowledge of Tibet and would be cheaper than using Himalayan Expeditions. The downside would be how to get visas for Tibet as these were arranged by Satish in Kathmandu. It is recommended that if Ming Ma is approached direct, all details be confirmed in advance. This expedition had particular problems with the cook and the transport. In addition, Ming Ma was advised of the need to purchase high altitude gas and had guaranteed that this had been done. In the event, the team had to spend a day in Lhasa searching for this gas. Ming Ma's contact details are below:

Fax: 0086 891 6345429 Email: [migmatse@hotmail.com](mailto:migmatse@hotmail.com)

#### **TRANSPORT**

International flights for all members, except Graham, were arranged through Gulf Air. The bane of expedition flying, namely not enough baggage allowance, was overcome by contacting the Gulf Air office in London. They very kindly agreed to allow us 50kg each, which was extremely generous and much appreciated. Graham

flew from Vancouver with Singapore Airlines and, as he was coming from North America, was allowed an unfeasibly large amount of luggage anyway.

From Kathmandu, a flight was arranged by our agent direct to Kathmandu. We then met up with the Tibetan agent, Ming Ma, who had organised three jeeps to take us as far as Niwu. As has been noted previously, the road was very poor in places and we ended up having to stop 40km short of Niwu due to landslides.

The return journey was also by jeep to Lhasa, direct from Lhari. The condition of the road had improved markedly since the demise of the monsoon and we managed to get back to Lhasa in one long and one half day. We then elected to travel overland to Kathmandu. This was nominally because flights were cancelled before our departure from the UK and so flying did not fit in with our itinerary. However, there is little doubt that the trip overland from Lhasa to Kathmandu is well worth the effort with outstanding views of Makalu, Everest, Cho Oyu and Shishapangma.

### **PORTERS**

We had advance warning that load carrying in this part of the world was accomplished by the use of horses. We had expected to be able to drive as far as Niwu and then have two or three days walking to base camp. However, the problems with the road meant that we had a total of six days on the walk in and then five on the walk out. This changed the cost of the expedition somewhat. However, we had agreed with the agent that all costs for travel and porters to base camp was covered and the agent remained true to this agreement despite the changes.

Previous visitors to the area had paid 25 Yuan per horse and 25 Yuan per horseman. As each horse has its own man this effectively works out at 50 Yuan per horse or 25 Yuan for each load (a horse carries 2 loads). However, we had difficulties securing enough horses for the first leg of the journey and ended up having to overload the horses, for which we had to pay more. Our guide eventually agreed a price of 90 Yuan for each horse and horseman, well above the going rate. This ended up being the standard price for the entire trip.

Sadly the poor negotiating skills of our guide means that future trips will inevitably have to pay more for porter services, but it would still be worth negotiating this rate on arrival.

### **FOOD AND EQUIPMENT**

All personal climbing equipment and high altitude food was brought from the UK or Canada. This meant that we needed to purchase all other equipment and food in Lhasa. Some minor items were purchased in Kathmandu, but due to the fact that we flew from Kathmandu to Lhasa, we had to keep this to a minimum.

Supplies in Lhasa are actually quite reasonable. There are one or two climbing shops in Lhasa selling acceptable kit at good prices for those items that may have been forgotten. More importantly we found sufficient propane/butane mix gas for the entire trip in these shops.

We spent a day in Lhasa with the agent and cook buying expedition food and supplies. This was all done in a Chinese supermarket with a wide range of eastern and western products. Some bulk items were bought in local markets. We carried a large double burner gas stove with three large gas cylinders for the cook, all of which was provided by the agent. He also provided a cook/mess tent which was comfortable, but would not have withstood a storm at base camp! Luckily the weather remained relatively stable.

For food on the mountain we locally bought biscuits and noodles, of which there is a dazzling variety. We also brought Travellunch dehydrated meals from the UK for our main meals. We had not used these before, but they turned out to be excellent, especially the beef and potato hot pot.

All cooking on the mountain was achieved using home made hanging kits for MSR gas stoves. These again proved to be excellent with the gas purchased in Lhasa performing very well at altitude.

#### ACCOUNTS

Income	£	Expenditure	£
Gore Associates Shipton/Tilman Award	5000	Flights/Insurance	3660
MEF	800	Agent fee (inc. peak fee, travel Nepal-Tibet-Nepal, horses, food, accommodation, staff tip)	9340
BMC	2600	Additional food	470
Ottakars Books	250	Additional travel (inc. excess baggage Nepal-Tibet)	370
Canadian Himalayan Foundation	210	Equipment	160
Individual Contribution	1285 x 4		
<b>Total</b>	<b>14000</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>14000</b>

## **MEDICAL REPORT**

Apart from the AMS suffered by Phil at high camp, the expedition was largely free of any medical problems beyond minor strains and cuts. The team was not called upon to administer any form of treatment or first aid to local inhabitants and treated the cook for minor stomach upsets at regular intervals. Luckily, the cook was the only victim of his cooking!

Adam was extremely unlucky to get a perianal abscess at the very end of the trip. The symptoms first emerged as the team waited for jeeps to take them back to Lhasa. Over a period of six days from then the problem developed considerably, with minor sepsis developing as the team crossed the border into Nepal. He rushed to the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu and was operated on the following day. He was well enough to fly home five days later, but complications are still on-going four months later.

It would appear that no matter how much planning you do for a trip like this, medical problems can occur that you do not expect. This lesson has been an important one to learn and will serve to remind us all to keep vigilant for problems other than just those related to mountaineering. The book, *Medicine for Mountaineering and Other Wilderness Activities* (ed. James A. Wilkerson, MD), published by The Mountaineers cannot be recommended highly enough and we carry a copy on all our expeditions.

A group medical kit was carried and was as follows; (generic names have been used wherever possible, as trade names vary from country to country).

### **Physical trauma and injury:**

Surgical tape – Medipore and Elastoplast, Sutures and skin closure strips, Triangular bandage, Crepe bandage, Sundry dressings and surgical swabs, Iodine, Sterile wipes and Morphine (as a strong painkiller in case of serious injury). Also, 30mg ampoules of Pentazocine lactate for intra-muscular injections for severe pain.

### **Altitude illness:**

Acetazolamide (Diamox) 250mg – prevention and treatment of mild altitude illness; Dexamethazone 0.5mg – HACE; Nifedipine 10mg – HAPE; Chloramphenicol ointment – snow blindness and eye infections; Visine eye drops.

### **Gastrointestinal infections:**

Ciprofloxacin 250mg - bacterial diarrhoea (and urinary tract infections); Tinidazole 500mg – Giardiasis and amoebiasis; Loperamide 2mg - diarrhoea; Oral rehydration sachets.

### **General healthcare:**

Cannulea, syringes and hypodermic needles; Co-amoxiclav 250mg – urinary tract, inner ear and sinus infections, bronchitis and pneumonia; Chlorphenamine Maleate 4mg – antihistamine; Cetirizine 10mg – antihistamine; Lidramina - antihistamine cream; Co-codamol 30/500 & Dihydrocodeine 30mg – pain relief and cough

suppressant; Ibuprofen 400mg – anti inflammatory analgesic; Clotrimazole 1% - fungal skin infections; Paracetamol 500mg, Aspirin 300mg, Throat lozenges, Savlon, dental repair kit.

All members also carried basic personal first aid kits that were used on the hill and augmented and replenished with base camp stores as necessary. Each climbing pair carried a high altitude kit with the necessary altitude drugs, IM analgesia and sutures.

The vast majority of the above pharmaceuticals are widely available in Kathmandu and Lhasa and are considerably less expensive than equivalent products purchased in the west, although care must be exercised with regard to out of date or poorly stored goods.

#### **EXPEDITION RESEARCH AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Research for this expedition started where so many others have started – in the hallowed space of the Alpine Club Library. Adam was initially interested in an area of northern India and started researching this area. However, as luck would have it that very morning an English language supplement from the Japanese Alpine Journal had arrived. It sat on the corner of the desk in the office with a photograph of the most amazing mountain on the front.

Further research revealed that the entire report was written by Tamotsu Nakamura of the Japanese Alpine Club. This remarkable man in his late sixties has spent a number of years wandering around the most remote areas of eastern Tibet, exploring valleys, crossing passes and putting together accurate sketch maps. The culmination of all of this work can be seen in a Special Submission to the Japanese Alpine News, Vol. 4 May 2003 – “East of the Himalayas – To the Alps of Tibet”.

Obviously, this report was not written when Adam planned his expedition and so a period of correspondence with Tamotsu ensued. He was incredibly helpful and we owe him a huge debt.

Another piece of the jigsaw came together with the publication of the Alpine Journal 2002. An article by John Town about exploration in the area prompted Adam to contact John for more information. Again, he was extremely helpful, sending photographs and map extracts to help with the planning. Without John or Tamotsu this expedition would never have got off the ground.

Virtually nothing else was known about the area at all. Frank Kingdon Ward had wandered around the Nyainqentangla East in the late 1920s and 1930s collecting plants and writing fabulous books about his adventures. Whether or not he visited the exact location of this expedition is unclear, but his books certainly give a taste of exploration in the area.

During the course of research only a few sources were consulted due to the lack of information about the area. They are included here for the sake of completeness.

Alpine Journal 2002 – article by John Town  
Japanese Alpine News Supplement 2002, Tamotsu Nakamura.

Lonely Planet Tibet (for background information only - information on the east of Tibet is almost non-existent)

#### **THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thanks are due to many people who enabled this expedition to achieve the success it did. We were fortunate enough to receive a considerable amount of funding for this trip and we feel this shows a very encouraging commitment to small exploratory ventures to unexplored regions by all the bodies concerned. To those that showed faith and enthusiasm for our trip we are very grateful and hope that we have rewarded them with what we have achieved. Below is a list of companies and organisations that supported us this year:

W L Gore Associates Shipton/Tilman Award 2003 - \$8,000US cash. A considerable commitment from Gore and a major contributor to enabling the expedition to get off the ground.

Mount Everest Foundation – provided financial support (£800).

British Mountaineering Council – provided financial support from Sports Council funds (£2,600).

Along with the MEF, the BMC Sports Council support is invaluable for expeditions such as ours and is very much appreciated. Encouraging mountaineers to explore new areas and make first ascents is extremely worthwhile and an indication of the commitment shown by these organisations to small scale, low impact, Alpine style climbing throughout the world.

Gulf Air – increased the baggage allowance for the British members of the team from 20kg to 50kg. This saved us over £5,000 when worked out at the going rate for excess baggage and was another major bonus for the expedition.

Terra Nova Equipment – very generously provided us with equipment from their Extremities range free of charge. All items including hats, gloves and socks performed incredibly well and played a significant part in us avoiding frostbite high on the mountain. Also loaned three Ultra Quasar tents for base camp use and exploratory trekking

Canadian Himalayan Foundation – provided financial support (£414) and granted us use of their gear cache in Kathmandu. This cache is available only to members of the CHF and contains a wide range of equipment.

Ottakars Books – our only commercial sponsor who provided financial support (£250) and a selection of ten novels for the expedition members to read at base camp.

The Alpine Club – for having the best selection of expedition records anywhere. Without the AC library, no research would have been possible.

Tamotsu Nakamura and John Town – as mentioned previously, both provided invaluable advice on the area in general, sketch maps and information about logistics in Tibet.



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**Above:** View from Camp 3 – all unclimbed

**Right:** Chachaco (6575m)

**Below:** Unknown peak (c6500m), Nenang behind

**Left:** Unknown peak (c.6200m)



## **THE FUTURE**

Never before have any members of the team been anywhere with so much potential for further exploration and climbing. This cannot be overemphasised as the view from our high camp illustrates. We could see something in the region of 30 mountains between 6000m and 6800m. One of these, Sepu Kangri has been climbed and none of the others have even been attempted. It is worth bearing in mind that our view was only north. To the south are other countless such peaks that are awaiting future exploration.

Whilst this trip did not succeed in reaching the summit of Chukporisum it should certainly be considered a success overall. The team managed to work out the real topography of the northern arm of the range and has some spectacular photographs of many of the mountains on view. This alone will enable future mountaineers to increase their knowledge about the area and the members of the expedition would be delighted to see more people visiting in time.

One word of warning is necessary however. There is little doubt that this area has been almost totally unspoilt by Chinese influence in Tibet. There is surely, therefore, a responsibility on the visitor to respect the lives of the local people and to treat their environment with the utmost care. The lives of these people will undoubtedly change as Chinese and/or western influence extends to the valleys of the Nyainqentangla East and all the members of the team consider it essential to enable the locals to maintain the way of life that they desire. If this can be achieved, the area has the potential to be a mountaineer's paradise for many years to come.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

A downloadable version of this report, a number of photographs and details of many of our previous expeditions are available on our website at [www.virginsummits.org](http://www.virginsummits.org). The webmaster is away at the time of publication of this report and the website may not be updated in the immediate future. Please check the site and if you experience any difficulties contact Adam Adam at the details given at the end of this report.

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that all or part of it may be copied for the purposes of private research.

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# Appendix 1

Extract of Russian Military map showing detail of Nyainqentangla East and expedition movements

