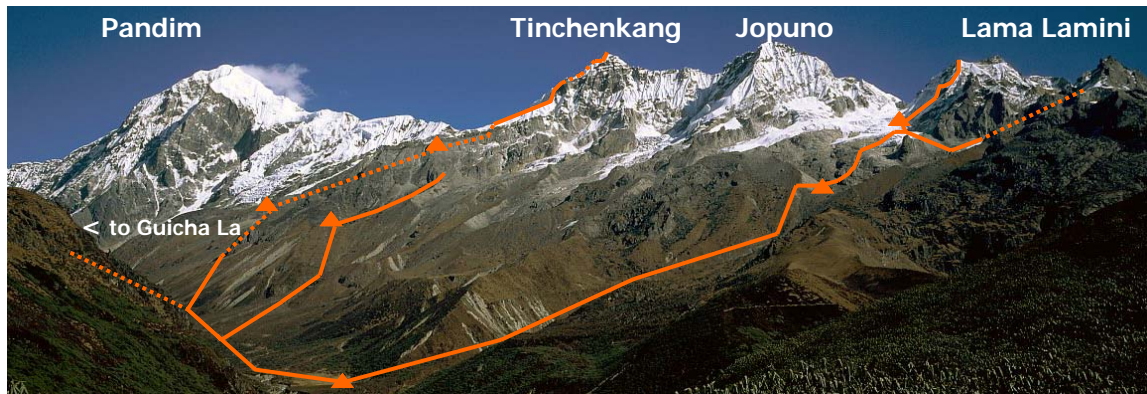


Report of the British Sikkim Expedition

Thangsing Valley, March-April 2005



Supported by:



Expedition Members

Kunzang Gyatso Bhutia
Julie-Ann Clyma
Roger Payne
Sagar Rai
Phurthemba Sherpa (Cook)
Loute Subba (Cook's assistant)

Acknowledgements

The expedition thanks the following for their support, without which the expedition could not have taken place:

Government of Sikkim

Permission for the expedition

Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association

Support for local logistics

National Bodies

British Mountaineering Council

Approval and expedition grant

Mount Everest Foundation

Approval and expedition grant

UK Sport

For grant support provided via the BMC

Clothing and Equipment

Beal

Reliable high quality climbing ropes

Charlet Moser

Reliable high performance crampons and ice tools

Lyon Equipment

For supplying products from Beal, Charlet Moser and Petzl

MACPAC

A lightweight and storm proof bivouac tent

Outdoor Designs

High performance stove and pan set

Petzl

Lightweight and reliable hands-free lighting

RAB

Lightweight high performance down jackets and sleeping bags

Vaude

A lightweight bivouac tent

Time Chart

March 2005	10	Depart Geneva
	11	Arrive Kolkata
	12	Delayed in Kolkata due to missing baggage
	13	Fly Kolkata to Bagdogra. By road Bagdogra to Gangtok.
	14	Gangtok – shopping for provisions, peak permit
	15	Gangtok to Yuksum by jeep
	16	Walk-in: Yuksum to Tsocha c.3100m
	17	Walk-in: Tsocha to Thansing BC c.4010m
	18	Thansing – rest day for acclimatisation
	19	Thansing to Samati Lake c.4200m for recce of Mt Tinchenkang
	20	Thansing to Mt Tinchenkang ABC under SW flank c.4730m
	21	Mt Tinchenkang ABC to c.5100m – stopped by bad weather and conditions
	22	Mt Tinchenkang ABC – back to BC
	23	Thansing – rest day due to illness
	24	Thansing – rest day due to bad weather
	25	Thansing to Lama Lamani ABC c.4900m
	26	Recce of Lama Lamani SW face and S ridge, return to ABC
	27	Recce of Lama Lamani NW face and move to Camp 1 under face c.5250m
	28	Make first ascent of Lama Lamani c.5650m, via NW flank & W ridge. Return to BC
	29	Thansing – rest day
	30	Thansing to Mt Tinchenkang ABC c.4860m under NW flank
	31	ABC to Camp 1 on ridge c.5400m
April 2005	01	Camp 1 to summit c.6010m, and return to BC
	02	Walk-out: Thansing to Tsocha
	03	Walkout: Tsocha to Yuksum. By road to Gangtok.
	04	Gangtok – debrief with Home Department
	05	By road Gangtok to Bagdogra. Fly Bagdogra to Kolkata.
	06	Fly Kolkata – London - Geneva

Report

1. Background

The objectives for this trip came from a trek in the autumn of 2004 to the Thansing Valley in West Sikkim. The well-known trek to the Goecha La at the head of the valley provides views of the southeast side of Kanchenjunga and a number of 7000m peaks. Many of these summits are officially closed to climbers for religious reasons. However, on the east side of the Thansing valley are the peaks of Tinchengkang (6010m), Jopuno (5936m) and the Lama Lamani group; and with the permission of the Government of Sikkim these are open for climbing. Our trek guide in 2004 was the President of the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association (SAMA), and he indicated that he could obtain the necessary permissions for one or more of these peaks, and so the idea for a joint expedition was born. The team was to be two Sikkimese climbers, Kunzang Gyatso Bhutia and Sagar Rai from SAMA, and ourselves, Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne.

2. Getting to the mountain

A permit was issued by the Home Department of Sikkim in Gangtok, giving us permission to attempt Tinchengkang (6010m), and to undertake a reconnaissance of the Lama Lamani group of peaks in order to determine their suitability as future 'trekking peaks'.

It was recommended by our Sikkimese friends that the best climbing seasons are early spring and late autumn. Due to work commitments, we undertook the expedition quite early arriving in Gangtok on 13th March. The 2005 winter produced a lot of late snowfall and unstable weather. This affected most of the trip, with daily snowfall and strong winds at altitude. The best weather was in the last three days at base camp.

Access to the mountains was relatively straightforward despite the fact that there is no direct air service to Sikkim. We flew into Kolkata on the 11th March, and then continued by air to Bagdogra on the 13th. It would have been possible to make this connection on the same day except for the fact that one of our bags failed to make it onto the international flight and so we were forced to wait in Kolkata for its arrival. At Bagdogra we were met by Kunzang and Sagar, and then continued by road (a five-hour journey) to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Sikkim has borders with Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan and visitors are required to have an 'inner line' permit. However, this is now relatively easy to obtain, either in advance, or at the border as we did (see appendices).

We spent just one and a half days in Gangtok to buy provisions and obtain our peak permit from the Home Department, and made the 5-hour journey to the road-head at Yuksum on the afternoon of the 15th March. The next morning we met our cook and assistant, then loaded up the yaks and started the walk to base camp. It was a 5-hour walk through jungle, on a muddy but well trodden trail, to Tsocha (c3100m), with a break in the middle of the day for a cooked lunch. Heavy rain in the afternoon made us very glad to have bought umbrellas in the Gangtok market – an essential piece of expedition equipment in West Sikkim. The following day we continued in steady rain to base camp at Thansing c4010m, another 5 hours walk. We did this stage via the 'low route' which is quicker than the normal trekking route that goes on a higher line to take in the view point at Dzongri, and requires an extra nights stop. As we had already done this the previous autumn, we were more interested to get to base camp quickly.

Thansing is a large, open, grassy area with a wooden shelter, basic toilets and numerous tent sites. We opted to sleep in the shelter because of the bad weather, and the four climbers occupied one room, while the cook and helper set up in the adjacent kitchen. From this base we could watch the steady stream of trekkers passing up and down to the Goecha La. The following day was spent resting at our camp to acclimatise, and then on the 19th we made a foray up to Samati Lake c4200m. This is just a couple of hours walk from Thansing, but took us past the peak of

Tinchenkang (6010m) which we wanted to examine for possible routes to the summit. The weather was bad with thick cloud and light snow almost throughout, but just as we turned back from Samati Lake we were rewarded with a brief clearing and a view of the NW side of the mountain. We could see a high glacial shelf which appeared to give access to the northwest ridge, but there were large bands of seracs above and below, and it was not possible to tell whether a route would be safe or not.

3. Recce of Tinchenkang (6010m) (also known as Tingchen Khang, etc.)

The following day, 20th March, we left base camp for a reconnaissance of the SW side of the mountain. We set off from base camp in excellent weather, and after four hours had reached a good ABC camping spot at c4900m. Kunzang and Sagar had attempted the mountain from this side in 2001, and reached the west ridge via what they described as easy rock scrambling (this is the line taken on the first ascent in 1998, see appendices). However, on the 21st, having had another overnight storm and another 5cm of fresh snow, the rock was well covered. We decided to recce the route as far as we could though, and climbed to around 5200m. Most of the terrain was straightforward, with a couple of short, awkward pitches.

At around 12:30pm we decided to dump the food and most of the technical gear and return to ABC, with the intention of climbing through to the west ridge the following day. The 22nd dawned clear, but Roger had woken with a severe peripheral oedema in his face. Although he felt okay, it seemed too risky to push on to a higher altitude until we were sure about his well-being. With the poor conditions on this side of the mountain, we therefore decided to retrieve our gear, return to base camp, and think of another strategy.

4. Reconnaissance and ascent of Lama Lamani North (c5650m)

The 23rd was spent at base camp waiting for Roger to recover, and then another day was spent there on the 24th due to more bad weather in the form of persistent snowfall. Finally, on the 25th we had good weather, and we set off again, this time to start our reconnaissance of the Lama Lamani group. A five-hour hike up a steep ridge directly behind base camp, and then up a moraine rib, took us to a camp site at c4900m just below the glacier between Jopuno (5936m) and Lama Lamani North. On the 26th we spent a long day (8hrs) climbing up onto the glacier to view part of the NW face and W ridge, and then traversing around the mountain to see the SW aspect. We continued up this branch of the glacier until a col under the S ridge at c5350m where we stopped for a rest. The visibility was intermittent, but the SW face seemed unappealing, while the S ridge offered a striking line. We then returned to our ABC with the idea of moving up to get into position to start an attempt on the mountain.

On the 27th we woke to another clear morning, and packed up camp. Our first priority was to complete the recce of the NW side of the mountain before we decided which route to attempt. As we progressed up this branch of the glacier towards a small icefall, an obvious line up the NW face and W ridge became apparent. We quickly went back to our gear dump and moved camp to c5250m underneath this line. On the 28th, under clear sunny skies, but with very cold, windy conditions, we made the first ascent of the north summit of Lama Lamani (c5650m). We set off at 5am to cross the bergschrund and soon discovered that the face was deep unconsolidated snow. A couple of short pitches on mixed ground led to a long section of moving together on snow, and then a further four long pitches on mixed ground again to reach the crest of the ridge. This fortunately was blown clear so the climbing was less laborious, but the position on the crest was very exposed and it was very windy. About halfway up the ridge it was possible to drop into a small depression and have a much appreciated rest out of the wind. The temperatures were very cold, and we climbed the whole day wearing all our layers, including fleece salopettes and jacket, a duvet and goretex jacket and pants. The final section of the ridge was very icy, causing us to take a line to the right of the crest on better snow and mixed ground.

The summit was reached at 10am, and surprisingly sheltered. We stayed for about half an hour, tying our prayer flags to a small rock outcrop and taking many photos. Immediately opposite was an impressive face of a peak we had been unable to see from the glacier. Kunzang and Sagar had no knowledge of it, and without a map it we could not identify it either, but it sums up the potential for exciting objectives that exist in Sikkim.

The descent was back down our line of ascent, pitching and down climbing the ridge and then abseiling the face. We were back at our glacier camp by 3pm, and with everyone keen for a good meal we descended immediately back to base camp, arriving at about 6.30pm. The route on Lama Lamani North we felt was about alpine AD+ in the conditions we encountered, but with more consolidated snow later in the season could be easier.

5. Ascent of Tinchenkang (6010m)

The 29th was spent at base camp resting and eating, and for Kunzang and Sagar the expedition had reached a satisfactory conclusion. Roger and Julie-Ann could see that with three days left it might still be possible to make an ascent of Tinchenkang. The big question was whether to go back and try the SW flank as Kunzang and Sagar had done previously, or to take a chance on the glacier route on the NW side. With rumours that a Himalayan Club expedition had been to the NW side the previous autumn, and having seen the glacial shelf that would give access to the northwest ridge, it was decided to try this approach.

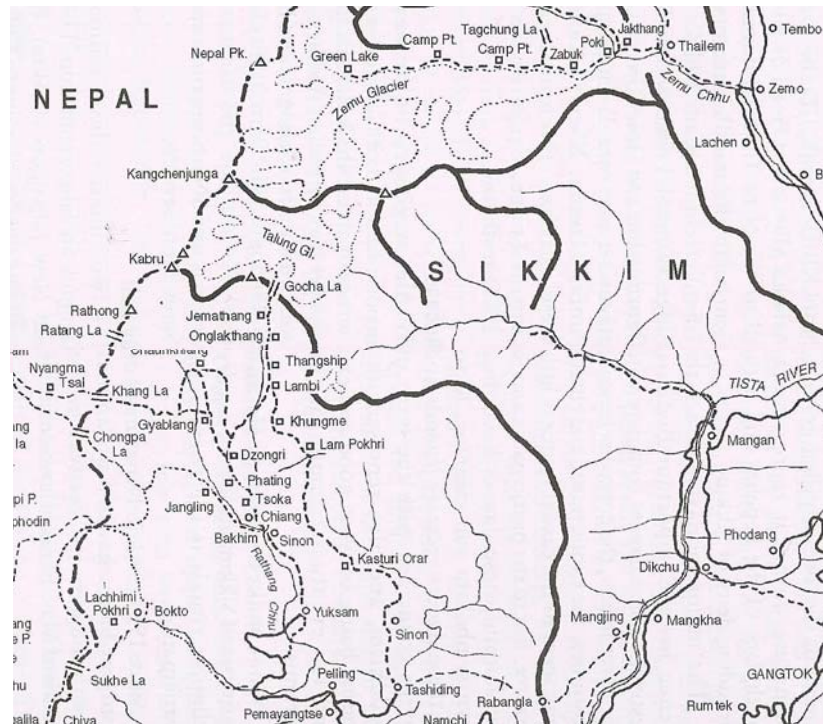
Leaving base camp in clear weather on the morning of the 30th, it was a long, tiring slog up the valley and lower slopes to an early camp at c4850m. The stop was necessitated by deterioration in the weather, with very strong winds blasting down from the summits. The next day the skies were clear and calm, and so we continued through deep fresh snow, first up the left side of the glacier, and then in a long traverse across the shelf to reach the northwest ridge. While the serac barriers above and below this shelf had looked to make the route improbable, in fact it was possible to pick a safe and relatively straightforward line. We placed a camp just below the ridge at c 5400m. Although we had hoped to get much higher on the mountain, we were plagued by deep, unconsolidated snow, and progress up to the ridge was more often by wading than walking.

On the 1st April we left the tent at 6am into another bitterly cold, but calm day. Fortunately, once established on the ridge the going was much easier, as again the snow had been moved by the winds. The climbing was easy until an obvious rock wall, topped by an ice wall where a serac band ran out into the upper part of the mountain. One very awkward rock pitch, followed by another loose but slightly less awkward pitch, led us to the ice. It was unclear what the best way to go was – a direct line to get onto the upper part of the route was short but involved hard, glistening blue ice. The alternative was a longer line, on a strip of what looked like good neve curving under the ice wall. We opted for the later, and found excellent conditions.

About four rope lengths on 50-degree slopes led us up onto a large shelf by 12:30pm. From here it still looked distressingly far to the summit, and the ground was very broken with large crevasses splitting the slopes and apparently cutting off the final ridge to the top. However, the altimeter read only another 150 vertical metres and so we pressed on. As it turned out, the crevasses were easily circumvented and the final exposed ridge was on excellent neve. The summit was reached at 2pm, unfortunately coinciding with the usual afternoon cloud, and so there were no views to be seen. Taking a quick photo, and retrieving an old snow stake marked with the Himalayan Club initials, we soon down climbed back to the top of the rock band. Three abseils and we were back on the lower ridge, and then back at our tent by 6pm. As we were due to depart base camp the following morning, there was nothing for it but to pack up and keep descending. We walked into base camp, rather fatigued, at 11pm that night.

6. Return home

The walk out was uneventful, and coincided with the best weather of the trip. In two days we reached Yuksum, and got a jeep to take us on to Gangtok. We spent one day there on the 4th April, with a very productive visit to the Home Department to discuss the possibility of opening up other lower altitude peaks for exploration. The following day we drove to Bagdogra and flew to Kolkata, and then on the 6th flew from Kolkata back to London.



Appendices

1. Inner Line Permits & National Park Fees

All visitors to Sikkim are required to have an 'inner line' permit. Indian missions abroad are authorised to issue a 15-day permit, which can be stamped in your passport at the time of obtaining your visa, but you have to ask for this. It is also possible to get a 15-day permit from any of the Sikkim Tourist Offices in Delhi, Kolkata or Siliguri. This will be issued on the spot if copies of passport and visa details, along with two passport-sized photos, are available. It is not a problem though to arrive at the state border Rangpo, without an inner line permit, as the Tourism Officer stationed there will issue a permit with a two-day validity to enable you to enter the state. The permit can then be revalidated in Gangtok for the full 15 days. It is also possible to extend the 15-day permit for two further 15-day periods if you want to stay longer.

Climbing in the Thangsing valley means entering the Kanchenjunga National Park. Foreigners are required to register at the Park Headquarters in Yuksum, and to pay a fee of 250Rs for the first 6 days in the Park, and then 50Rs per day thereafter. Within the Park at the main overnight rest spots on the trail there are basic wooden shelters providing floor space, or there are tent sites. A caretaker resides at each campsite and collects the camping fees (50Rs per person per night in the shelters, or 30Rs per night to pitch a tent).

2. Mountaineering Associations & climbing regulations

The Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association (SAMA) was founded in 2001, and recognised by the Sikkim Home Department in 2003. It is a very small association that primarily aims to provide training and promote mountaineering for local people, as well as protecting the mountain environment. However, they are also very active in lobbying the Home Department to relax access restrictions to the mountains, and to open up more peaks, for local people and visitors. We found their assistance invaluable in liaising with the Home Department for the mountaineering permits, and for undertaking the logistics of getting us to base camp.

Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association

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It is encouraging that this expedition was given a remit to explore the Lama Lamani group of peaks for opening to the wider public, and several other peaks are currently under consideration by the Home Department. However, under the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act 1991 and the State Government's Notification No.59.Home/98 dated 26.10.1998, the following peaks are classified as Sacred, and the 'scaling of the sacred peaks' is banned:

Kanchenjunga (main, south and west summits)
Mt Narsing
Gabur Gangtsen (Kabur Dome and north and south summits)
Pandim Peak
Mt Simvo
Goecha Peak
Fork Peak
Paohunli
Mt Siniolchu

3. Transport

We flew with British Airways from London Heathrow to Kolkata – a service that currently operates three times a week, and lands in Kolkata at 04:30. On arrival we then bought a ticket at the domestic terminal with Jet Airways for the internal flight from Kolkata to Bagdogra. This service runs twice daily with departures at 10:30 and 13:30, and the flight takes just over an hour. The cost was around £110 each for a return ticket. It is very easy and quick to transfer from the international to domestic terminal as they are adjacent and just a 500m walk. For those with more time for local train travel, there is an overnight train service from Kolkata to Siliguri, which takes about 12 hours. Alternative options are to take a flight to Delhi, which has the benefit of daily international services, and from there take a Jet Airways internal flight to Bagdogra, or train to Siliguri. Some useful websites are:

www.britishairways.com
www.jetairways.com
www.sikkiminfo.net/bus_air_train_timings.htm

For overland transport the expedition used one four-wheel drive vehicle to transfer from Bagdogra airport to Gangtok, and then from Gangtok to the road head at Yuksum. One vehicle was sufficient for four people and all our equipment and provisions. For the two-day walk-in from Yuksum to Thangsing base camp nine yaks were used (cost around 350Rs per yak, per day). It is also possible to hire porters in Yuksum if yaks are not available (cost around 150Rs per man, per day).

4. Accommodation

Accommodation in Kolkata was chosen to be near to the airport to recover our missing luggage, rather than close to the city centre. We stayed at the Hotel Rupasi Bangla (about a 5-minute drive from the airport) which had basic air conditioned rooms for around 1800Rs per night. The hotel was a 10-minute walk to a couple of shopping areas with supermarkets, internet cafes, and restaurants. Accommodation in Gangtok was at the Hotel Namling Residency. This is a relatively new hotel, very clean and comfortable, with friendly staff and a good restaurant. Prices range from 1200Rs to 2200Rs per night. Another excellent hotel, which we stayed in the previous year, is Netuk House (Tibet Road, Gangtok tel. +91 3592 22374, email: sig_netuk@sancharnet.in). In Yuksum we stayed in the Yangri Gang Guesthouse belonging to Kunzang's uncle. This is comfortable and clean guesthouse with a very friendly welcome and a good kitchen.

Hotel Rupasi Bangla VIP Road (Military Camp Bus Stop) Kolkata 700059	Hotel Namling Residency Namnang Road Below Assembly House Gangtok Sikkim	Yangri Gang Guesthouse Main Road Yuksum Sikkim
Tel: 2836 0974 or 2573 4742	Tel: +91 (0)3592 201314 or +91 (0)3592 201315	Tel: +91 (0)3595 241 217

5. Kitchen Staff & Provisions

At Yuksum the expedition hired one cook and one cook's assistant for the duration of the trip into the mountains. Our meals were excellent and we would highly recommend both men. Approximate costs for hiring a cook are 250s per day (although this may be higher depending on experience), and for the cook's assistant around 150Rs per day.

Provisions for base camp and on the mountain were bought by Kunzang and Sagar in the Gangtok market. There are no shops in Gangtok that sell climbing clothing or equipment. We were lucky to obtain some 'second hand' 250g cylinders of butane gas for use at altitude. Future expeditions should expect to have to use liquid fuel or arrange to freight their own cylinders.

6. Reference Material

Books and articles

Sikkim – A Traveller's Guide, 2nd Edition 2005

Photographs and essays by Sujoy Das. text by Arundhati Ray.

Publisher: Permanent Black, D-28 Oxford Apartments, 11, I.P. Extension, New Delhi 110092

Finalist in the Banff Mountain Book Festival. ISBN 81-7824-008-4. An excellent general introduction to Sikkim, with useful details of two of the better known trekking routes, to the Goecha La in West Sikkim and Green Lakes in North Sikkim.

The Himalayan Journal 1999, Vol 55, pages 217-221

Account of the first ascent by Indo-British military expedition on 10 May 1998

Maps

The following maps were purchased from Stanfords, 12/14 Long Acre, London WC2E 9LP
www.stanfords.co.uk

State Map of Sikkim, 2nd ed. 1981, scale 1:50,000, £3.95
Published by Government of India

Sikkim Himalaya, scale 1:50,000, £18.50
Published by the Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research - a detailed contour map

7. Accounts

<u>UK Expenditure</u>	£	Notes
Airfares and baggage to Kolkata	2173	1
Other transport (train & taxi)	94	
Visas	60	
Insurance	220	
Film	160	
Medical supplies	30	
Subtotal	2737	
<u>India Expenditure</u>	£	
Peak Fee	nil	2
Liaison Officer	nil	2
Airfares (Kolkata-Bagdogra return)	238	
Transport (Bagdogra-Gangtok-Yuksum return)	96	
Accommodation & meals	193	
Yaks (Yuksum-BC return)	143	
National Park Fees	75	
Cook & assistant	113	
Food & supplies	312	
Fuel for BC	63	
High altitude gas	28	
Miscellaneous	38	
Subtotal	1299	
Total	<u>4036</u>	
		<u>Income</u>
		MEF Grant 600
		BMC Grant 900
		Member contributions 2536
		Total <u>4036</u>

Notes

1. Airfares included 50kgs of baggage each, which included additional equipment for the two members from Sikkim. Because of high demand for flights over the Easter period the fares were higher than expected and it was difficult to get seats.
2. As this was a joint expedition with the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association the Government of Sikkim waived the peak fee.