

# **THE REPORT OF THE BRITISH KANTI HIMAL EXPEDITION 2007**

**(formerly called the McMahon Line, Nyegi Kangsang Expedition)**



## **Sponsored by:-**

**The Gore-Tex Shipton Tilman Grant Award  
The Mount Everest Foundation  
The British Mountaineering Council**

**plus personal contributions by the expedition mountaineering team:-**

**Julian Freeman-Attwood (leader)  
Luke Hughes  
Phil Wickens  
Nick Colton**

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

### **Explanation of change of expedition name**

Our permit for Nyegi Kangsang was withdrawn just a week before the team was due to leave for Kathmandu en route to Lhasa. This situation was immediately explained by letter and E mail to our sponsors. We are particularly grateful to all of them for their understanding and continued support for the team with their change of objective. The reasons that the permit for the McMahon Line Expedition was withdrawn are complex. The CTMA (China Tibet Mountaineering Association) were equally perplexed themselves. The CTMA expected the permit to be issued, most especially because the leader had already been permitted into the area concerned to affect a reconnaissance in 2001. The following are factors contributing to an increased level of paranoia, above the normal levels, to be expected from China's regime in Tibet:-

1. The video footage last year of a Buddhist nun, and another Tibetan being shot dead on the Nangpa La. The footage was taken by foreign climbers on Cho Oyu.
2. The unfurling of a 'free Tibet' banner at Everest base camp in April. A Tibetan American and 3 other Americans were arrested and detained. This caused over reaction from the Chinese authorities who then sent troops down to the Nepal border at Zhangmu and closed the border for 3 days.
3. The possibility of demonstrations in the run up to the 2008 Olympic Games year, against the Chinese occupation of Tibet, has made the Beijing government very edgy. The issuing of permits for border areas, such as ours on the already sensitive McMahon Line, have been taken out of the hands of regional civilian governors and into the hands of army commanders. We presume that when they were asked for this permit by the CTMA, they were simply not prepared to consider the possibility of any problem on their patch. This decision was plainly over the heads of the CTMA.
4. More recently, the Congressional gold medal given to the Dalai Lama in New York caused understandable celebrations by Tibetans in Lhasa. This in turn caused the authorities to impose a 9p.m. curfew in the city for several days and cancelled visas for low cost tourist groups from Nepal to Tibet. Since the opening of the Lhasa railway, 92% of Tibet's tourism is now Chinese and just 8% the rest of the world so they have little to fear from the economic implications of alienating Western tourists.
5. Although peak permits seem to be obtainable for east Tibet (Nyainqentanglha), it seems that border areas will still be difficult to access next year at the time of the Olympics. It may be that matters will quieten down only in 2009 and onwards. None of this will affect the 8,000meter peaks although a new rule for Everest next year is that each team must be of one nationality and not mixed.

The CTMA suggested we choose an alternative. This was not easy in the time available but it was lucky that the leader had done some research regarding Rongla Kangri. We therefore asked for a permit for Rongla Kangri 6647m (Kanti Himal in Nepal), a border peak on the west Nepal frontier, which Tomatsu Nakamura had previously indicated was still unclimbed; a fact which he later confirmed.

Only 2 peaks in a wide area hereabouts had ever been climbed and these were Kaqur Kangri 6859m (the highest in the Rongla Range) in 1992 by the Doshisha University Expedition led by Toyoji Wada and another border peak of 6159m climbed from the Nepal side in 1997 by YOSHINAGA Sadao and OHNISHI Tamotsu of the Osaka Alpine Club.

Nevertheless, the Chinese army Commander in charge of permits for this area was away. Since we had all our equipment in Kathmandu, and had paid our air fares, we had no alternative other than to give up on Tibet for 2007.

### The Expedition Alternative

We were very fortunate in being able to get, at short notice, a permit from the Nepal Government to access the Kanti Himal through the good offices of Bikrum Pandey. This seems also to have coincided with a cessation of problems with Maoists in the west, one of their stronghold areas. We were fortunate to meet Mr Dhakal, the Under Secretary at the Nepal Tourist Ministry. (the issuing authority for climbing permits). Mr Dhakal, whose nom de plume as a writer and poet is Prateek Dhakal, is an enlightened, helpful man who had himself travelled extensively in Mustang and Dolpo. Both of these areas are covered in one of his fine books 'Beyond the Himalaya'.



**Route to Mugu and Our Base Camp from Jumla**

Our liaison officer for the trip was Manohari Baral who was extremely helpful, most especially in dealing with less than straightforward muleteers, donkeymen and porters. We took with us a cook, Prem Tamang, who had been on many Tibetan expeditions with Julian and Luke. With Prem came Phurba Tamang who was to help Prem, as well as acting as a porter above base camp.

The approach from Jumla to base camp and back was, as it turned out, to take some 18 days. With little possibility of stocking up on anything but staple foods en route, we started with 800kg of assorted food, tents and climbing gear. Since the road from the south to Jumla was blocked in 15 places due to monsoon rain landslides, and since it would take 5 days to porter gear just to that point, we chartered a plane to fly us and all our gear in one hop from Kathmandu to Jumla. With a lot of haggling we eventually got this flight cost down to a reasonable level. Thanks again to Bikrum Pandey and Sushil Vista.



The monsoon, as will be seen, had by no means gone away completely and the ride to Jumla was bumpy but gave spectacular views of the Langtang Himal, the Ganesh Himal, Manaslu and the Annapurnas, but the Kanjiroba massif was still well banked in cloud.



**Loading the plane at Kathmandu airport en route to Jumla**  
**Left to right:- Phurba Tamang, Prem Tamang, Nick Colton, Julian Freeman-Attwood, Manohari Baral, Luke Hughes, Phil Wickens**

We camped temporarily in the playground of the Kailash Bodhi School run by Tashi Dondup and his wife Tenzin. The school had recently been set up as a branch of the main one in Kathmandu and I remember being particularly impressed by the whole school singing 'We shall Overcome', as a part of their morning assembly. There were resonances of Victorian Empire in it all.

There was a considerable problem for us in Jumla as there was no kerosene available at all in the town so we had nothing for the base camp primus stoves. We did however have sufficient butane/ propane gas for high altitude. At this stage we procured just 2 gallons of diesel which Prem expertly used with little problem in the primuses, and Manohari found out that we might get kerosene 4 days away in Gamgadhi. We would have to manage until then. There was also the problem of whether to engage porters or pack animals. Bartering and bantering with porters can take days and nerves can get frayed but, as we were all used to such inconveniences, we knew that patience was indeed a virtue so long as you have the patience of Job. The porters would not strike a reasonable deal so we opted for mules and donkeys. Whilst donkeymen can be just as argumentative as porters, at least the donkeys themselves don't argue; instead they kick, most especially (as we were to find out) when freedom was imminent and they are being unloaded at the end of a long day.

We set off on the 13th September. Over the next 2 days we crossed the Danphe Lekh and down to the Nauri Ghat River where we camped in front of a gigantic wall of cannabis used, as in Bhutan, as a fodder crop for domestic animals.



**A wall of cannabis plants at camp in Tharmare village**

Over the following 2 days we crossed the Gauchi Lekh, camping on its 3460m pass above which we obtained views of the holy Rara Lake. The next day all hard-gained height was lost down a wooded 1400 meter drop to Gamgadhi on the Mugu Karnali River. Gamgadhi is the main town in the Mugu district of Karnali zone. There we found, as Manohari had predicted, some kerosene although as it turned out we did not purchase quite enough.

What we did find in full swing was a women's festival, occurring just on this one day each year, run by the splendidly named 'Gangadhi Women's Upliftment and Awareness Center'. This was run by 2 sisters and included various singing matches, followed by a shot-putting competition (using a ball of granite) and then a version of blind man's buff where the competitors have to strike, with a large stick and at some distance from the start point, an object that is meant to represent a useless and drunken husband which they then thrash with relish.

The whole thing was extremely colourful and jolly. We were lucky indeed to arrive in Gamgadhi on just this day but less fortunate to lose four donkeymen whose home was nearby. We suspected a late start the next day, as in reality all previous days had been. This had been due to the donkeymen not being early risers and also the fact that on most mornings several animals could not be found either because of wandering into nearby woods or because they had decided to head for home.





**Gamgadhi Women's Festival**



**Shot-putting competition**



We finally moved from Gamgadhi on 17<sup>th</sup> September with hung-over donkeymen at 1pm. What was left of that day was marred by the fact that a bridge 2 hours down the road was not wide enough to take the mules with blue barrels sticking out. By the time everything was unloaded night was falling. Barrels are useful to mountaineers for keeping contents dry and secure, but they are less useful on the back of a mule in a confined space.



**Pack animals en route to base**

The next day was a good day and we arrived at the police post at Pulu. We were still at only 2189m. From this point there is a direct short-cut high route to Jumla but not suited to pack animals.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> we passed the confluence of the Mugu Karnali and the Langu River which emanates from the Dolpo region to the east. It was on this latter river, a slightly larger stream than the Mugu Karnali, that Rodney Jackson and Darla Hillard (who wrote a book on the 1980 trip 'Vanishing Tracks') collared for the first time, a number of Snow Leopards. This part of Nepal was clearly a sanctuary for them and although both Julian and Luke had seen tracks on nearly every Asian expedition they had been involved in, neither had actually seen one of these illusive creatures. The nearest Julian had come to one was on a glacier in the Altai Range of Mongolia.

At this confluence there were some Tibetan chortens which told us we were entering Bhotia country.

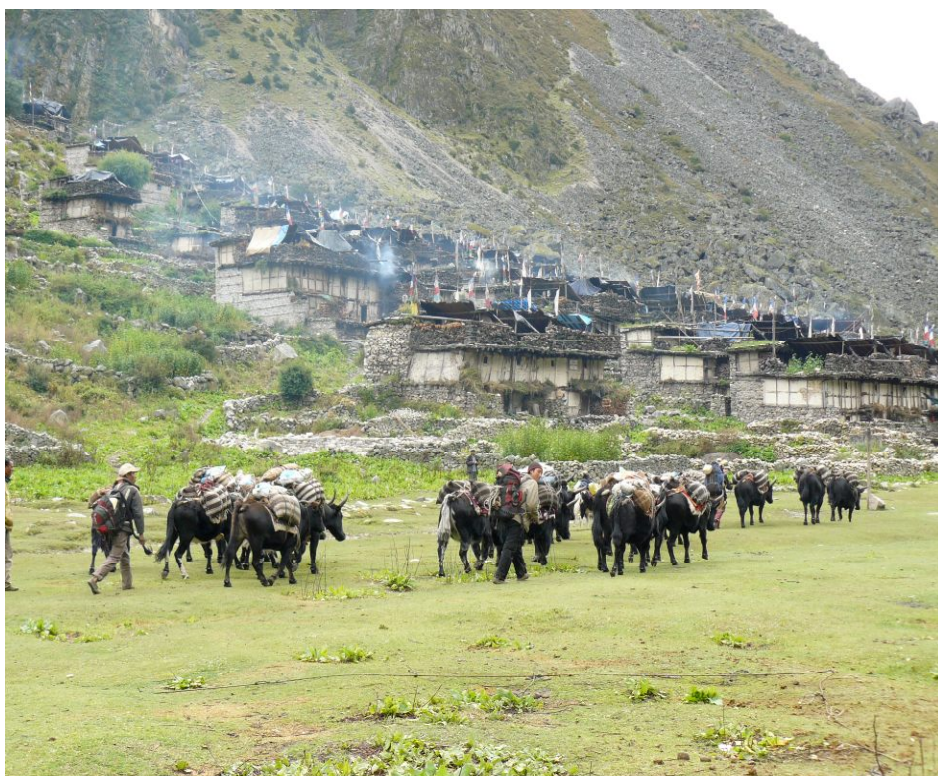




**Chortens at Mugu Langu confluence**

We finally arrived at Mugu (3350m) on the 20<sup>th</sup> September, after a somewhat gruelling haul in rain and wind which told us the monsoon had not yet disappeared. The village is made up of medieval looking, rickety stone and timber houses on the east side of the river. Above is a monastery with a resident Rinpoche, Sangak Lama. Opposite on the west side are myriad Chortens stretching away up the hill amidst banks of Mani (prayer) stones. We decide to stay here a day as we needed to get some local information on the side valley we wanted to find which is the Koji Khola stream. What most astonished us at Mugu were the quantity of salt-laden Yaks coming down from the main Tibet pass at the head of the Mugu Karnali, the Namja La. At just under 5,000m it is one of the main trade routes hereabouts and this unhindered trade, although small as a percentage of all Tibetan Nepalese trade, was seemingly going on with no interference from Chinese bureaucracy; or so we were told by Yak herders. Some 100 laden animals were coming down each day with salt picked up from near Zhongba in the Trans Himalaya (where Julian and Luke had visited on another trip). The origin of this salt is almost certainly from the Lunggar Shan salt flats from where it comes by truck and the highest peak of which (6600m) was climbed by Julian and British climber Phil Bartlett some years before. The Namja La is open from May to October. After that everyone vacates Mugu to prodigious amount of snow. The only ones to remain during winter are the few very elderly people, looked after by younger ones, who cannot make the journey out to Gangadhi.





**Mugu village and salt laden Yaks from West Tibet**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> September we left Mugu and after 5 miles found the improbably small entrance to the gorge of the Koji Khola. After crossing the river by a bridge, we entered some autumnal coloured woodland of birch, hemlock, azalea and dwarf rhododendron. In freezing rain squalls and bad visibility we camped at 4310m.



**In the Koji Khola with un-named peak 6273m**

The next day dawned clear with snow clad and impressively rocky 6,000m peaks to be seen to the south east. We pushed the donkeys onwards towards a suitable base camp. The donkeymen themselves needed some herding along, as they are inclined to go the least distance at this altitude and have no concept of the notion that, if you want to achieve anything in the Himalaya, you must get base camp set up as close to the mountain as possible.

We found just the spot on some flat ground at 4650m and although we would like to have been a little nearer the border, there was only moraine in front of us, up which we could see no way for pack animals.



**Base Camp under the Koji La, Tibet border**

We sent the donkeymen back (after the usual haggling) with an arrangement to reappear some 16 days later and for one of them to bring back some more paraffin before that. As the above photograph above makes clear, we had nearly 10 days of snow at base (and above) in the 16 days we were to explore and operate from here. It effectively left us with 6 days of activity. We later found out that this was to be one of the worst post monsoon periods for many years and that almost no climbing was achieved in the Nepal Himalaya. It also seems that high snow fall was encountered all the way through to east Tibet and even on into the deep gorges country of the Salween, Mekong and Yangtse where Tomatsu Nakamura was making one of his annual photographic forays.

The first job was to find the site for an Advanced Base Camp (ABC) which would need to be located somewhere under the Koji La and at the lower end of the Koji west glacier (this not an official name). We had seen this glacier on Google Earth and had also managed to get copies of the recently completed Nepalese/ Finnish 1:50,000 maps of the area. Although we arrived at base on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, it was not until the 26<sup>th</sup> that we got to the Khoji La lake and to 5200m on the west glacier. After more snow it was the 29<sup>th</sup> when we first load carried to ABC and not until 1<sup>st</sup> October when we occupied it.



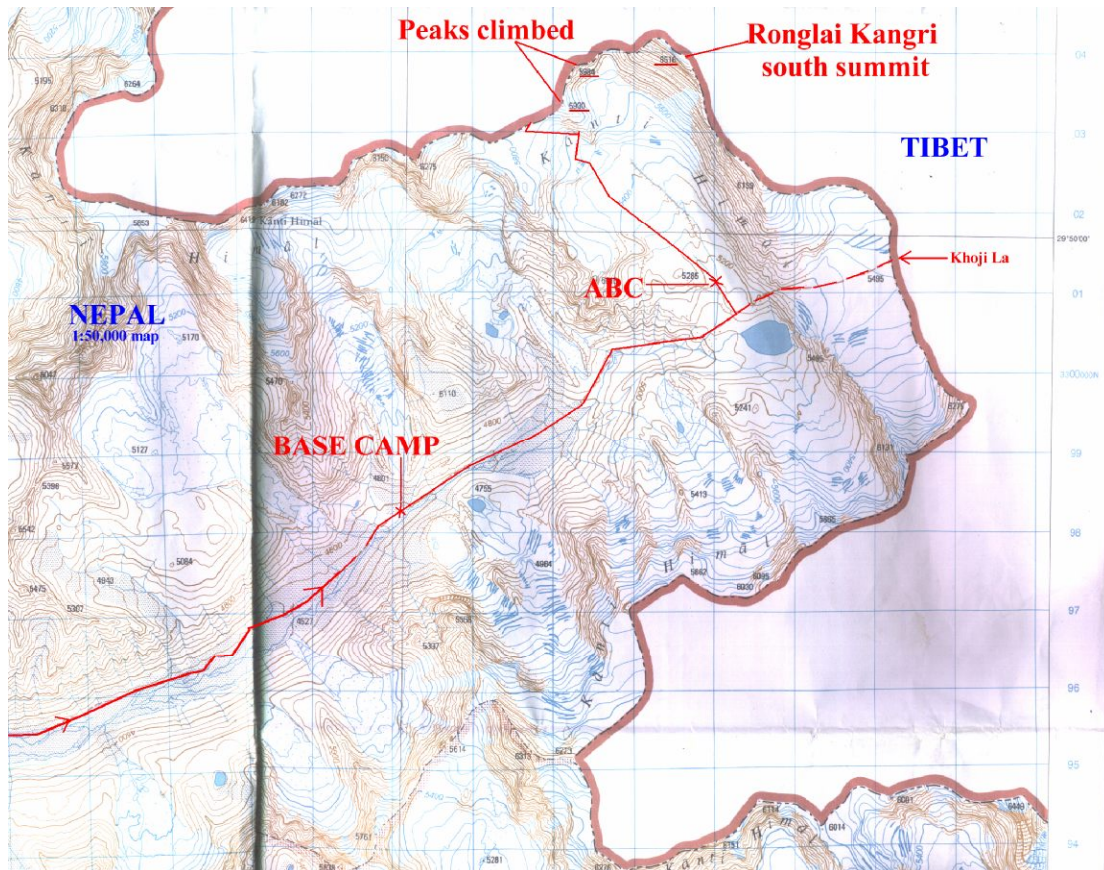
On that day Prem and Phurba took up monster loads along with Julian and Nick. Starting a little earlier, Phil and Luke had gone up to recce the glacier, the snow cover of which they found was horrendous and soft. Luke had cunningly brought along some one meter long mountain approach skis which proved very useful; we all rued the day we had not done the same. That day Luke alone reached the Kogi / Ronglai glacier divide which was also the Tibet border. Phil had been 'post holing' up to his knees in snow and was exhausted when he got down to ABC. Meanwhile Nick and Julian had set up the tents next to a good source of melt water.



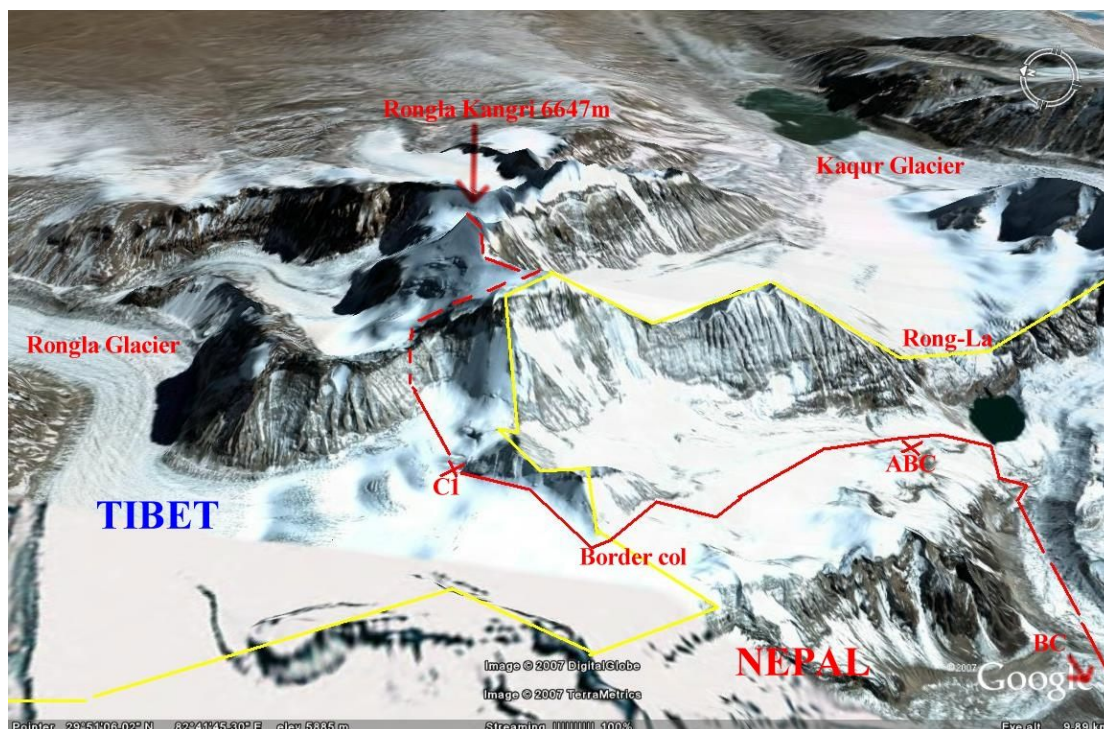
**Advance Base Camp 5170m with the lower part of the south summit of Ronglai Kangri (right)**  
**The 2 peaks that the team climbed are at the head of the glacier in sunlight. (5930m on left and 5984m on right)**

The next day 2<sup>nd</sup> October, we all carried loads to the border col and made a dump at Camp 1. It was a debilitating day of soft snow and again we wished we had all brought skis. It was a fantastic feeling being back in this area and looking north to the Tibetan Transhimalaya which we knew so well. To the east and south lay a jumble of unclimbed and mostly un-named 6,000m peaks. The wind here was devastating and was to prove a feature that, this year, was not going to drop. We were in fact standing on the previously un-trodden upper reaches of the Ronglai Glacier, one of the main sources of the Brahmaputra river. Furthermore, we could see the way up a 45 to 50 degree granite wall which would give access to the Ronglai border summit 6516m and from there easily enough to the main top.





**Central Kanti Himal**



**Google image of position of Ronglai Kangri and site of ABC, with proposed route from Camp 1 dotted.**



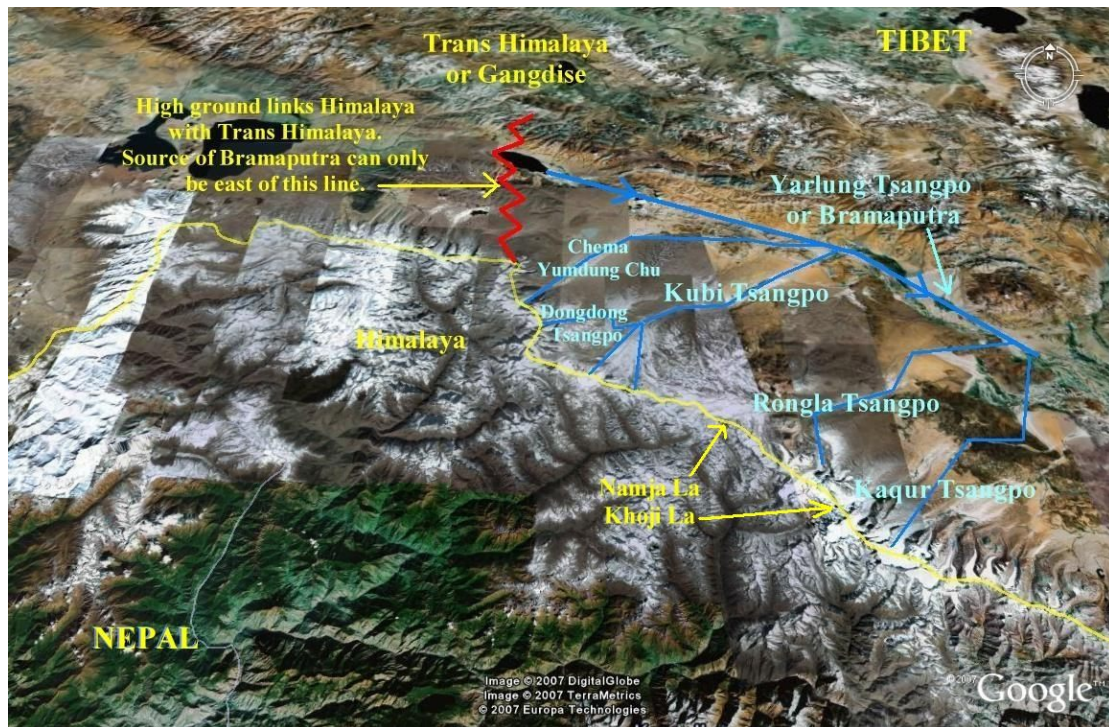
The next day Luke and Julian made a foray to the Koji La. According to local yak herders this is an ancient, but little used, trade route. The lack of use is due to the fact that no Yaks can now cross the rocks on the Nepal side, revealed by recent glacial recession, so that it is now impassable except on foot. We were under the impression that a few smugglers use the pass in summer and we found prayer flags at 5300m.

The wind was very strong at the pass itself (5495m), but the visibility was clear and gave great views along the border and back into Nepal. Besides Kaqur Kangri to the east of us, climbed in 2003 from the Tibet side by the Japanese, and a border peak 6159m just to the north of the pass climbed in 1997, everything we surveyed were virgin summits.



**View down the Koji Khola from Koji La showing some of the unclimbed peaks.**

**Source of Bramaputra:-** The area to the immediate north and west of the pass are the sources of the Bramaputra River. Known as the Yarlung Tsangpo whilst in Tibet, and running eastwards (but remaining north of the main Himalaya until breaking through the range at Namche Barwa between Bhutan and Burma) this is the most holy river in all Tibet. Even in India where it assumes the name of Bramaputra, its sacred status is matched only by the Ganges. (NB Sven Hedin and other geographers give, on their maps, the name of Bramaputra right up to the river's Tibetan source.)



**Source streams of the Bramaphutra**

On the 4th October, a brief respite in the weather enabled Luke, Nick and Phil to set off from ABC, cross the col (at 5495m) onto the expansive glacier and on to establish Camp 1 under the lee of an East-facing granite cliff. Julian had acclimatised less successfully so returned to BC to recuperate for a couple of days. (NB Although the trek to base had taken 11 days, this was nearly all below 3000 meters. We all felt less acclimatised than we had expected to.)



**Nick with tents and crevasse at C1**



Relentless winds and heavy drifts of snow were the norm for the next few days. Nonetheless, on the 5th, Luke went back to the col to collect some of the gear, while Nick and Phil broke a trail to the foot of the granite wall. The three then regrouped and pushed up the main snow gully where they deposited gear, food and gas at a high point of 5810m, before retreating to C1. On the next day (6th), the weather worsened. Mindful of depleting supplies, Luke took advantage of his skis to return to ABC to collect more gas and food.



**Looking up the 200m granite slopes from the Ronglai glacier to the NW ridge of Ronglai Kangri's south summit 6516m**

**The projected route is up the couloir to half height and then right a little and up. Beyond the skyline rocky ridge (heading up right and out of sight) is an easy angled glacier with few difficulties to the top.**

The winds remained savage and the visibility poor, so Luke made his way back to BC to discuss options with Julian. BC was running out of fuel; Camp 1 was running out of food; the true summit of Ronglai Kangri had not yet been seen from the ground (even though Google Earth had revealed the ground between the South summit and the peak to be straightforward). Nothing more would be possible without a break in the bad weather and the establishment of a camp at the top of the wall. Time was against us. Ronglai Kangri appeared to be out of the running unless we had perfect weather from now on.

It was not to be. Nick and Phil had valiantly hunkered down at C1, amusing themselves making film footage of the poor weather conditions and venturing out to dig out the tents. Luke returned on 7th, but neither had the wind dropped nor had the visibility improved. Various consolation prizes were discussed and plans made for the next day. It was agreed that Luke would ski up to collect the gear from the high point on the wall, while Nick and Phil would make their way back over the col to establish a camp on the west-facing slope of the glacier, on the off-chance of a clear spell. Having made his way back to the high point, Luke felt it would be a shame not to take advantage of the circumstances, so set off alone to climb Pk 5984: reasonably compacted snow with some rocky bands, but with the summit still pummelled by heavy winds. During his return, Luke also explored the northern-most col between Ronglai Kangri and Pk 5984 and established it offered only sheer, loose ground from where the glaciers had recently retreated, and no viable access.



**Phil on top of Pk 5930m with the impressive square summit of Kaqur Kangri 6859m in the background. All the peaks behind (to the east) are unclimbed.**



Meanwhile, Nick and Phil had crossed back over the southern col and dug into the glacier, unexpectedly stumbling on an unthreatening crevasse, ideal for a sheltered night, and there established a camp. That night, the wind suddenly dropped and the three emerged on the morning of 9th Oct to find perfect conditions. With an early start they made their way back to the col, then climbed up the compacted ice of the south ridge to reach the summit of Pk5930 at about 8 am.

Of the fourteen days planned at BC and beyond, nearly ten were beset by snow, wind or storm. Julian, Phurba and Prem came up to strike Advance Base Camp at midday the same day (9<sup>th</sup> October). We left it in pristine condition. We were sad that time and weather had defeated us most especially as we had found a feasible and safe route up the mountain. It turned out to be one of the worst post monsoon periods in Nepal for many years.



**The Nepal face of Ronglai Kangri's south summit 6516m**

Although the 10<sup>th</sup> October was to have been a rest day, we decided that if more snow came in, then striking base camp would be a laborious nightmare. We packed and left while the going was good and made it that night, but only when darkness had fallen, back down to the Koji Khola confluence with the Mugu Karnali river. The autumnal colours of the trees were absolutely spectacular by now.



**Bharal Sheep at 4900m near Base Camp. A large horned buck faces camera with females and yearlings.**

[During the snow fall period, the slopes neighbouring BC were visited by a herd of 25 Bharal (blue sheep). These shy animals, a delicacy to snow leopards, had become acclimatised to our presence at BC. Julian set off to exercise his Scottish stalking expertise with his camera, approaching within 40m of the herd: four bucks, nine females and twelve yearlings. Ramchikor (Himalayan snow cock) were other noticeable companions.]

We reached Gamgadhi on the 14<sup>th</sup> October after long marches and settled up with the muleteers with much assistance from our liaison office, Manohari.. We decided to try to get a flight out of the small dirt airstrip high above the town but with worsening weather again, that did not happen until the 17<sup>th</sup> October. After a somewhat dodgy flight amongst great thunderhead clouds, (including the need for our Twin Otter plane to circle 3 times over Gamgahi to get enough height) we finally landed at Nepalgunj where we caught a scheduled flight back to Kathmandu.

It had proved to be an exceptionally worth-while expedition into little known territory.

*(All base camp rubbish that could be burnt was burnt. All glass or plastic was removed to Gamgadhi. A Tibetan prayer flag were left at the site.)*





**Another virgin summit just south of Koji La, and a view of Kaqur Kangri (background)**

In Kathmandu Julian had a debriefing with Mr Dhakal at the Tourism Ministry. Mr Dhakal was very interested in the area we had travelled in and was supportive of any future plans we may have in Nepal. He told us that his country had approximately 2200 peaks over 6,000 meters, that less than half had a name and even less had been climbed. We guessed that this area of West Nepal (west of Dolpo) could boast around 250 still unclimbed peaks.

This was of some interest to the renowned journalist Elizabeth Hawley who has chronicled all Nepal mountain expeditions over 40 years. She was telling us that in the 1950's, 60's and 70's much more exploratory mountaineering was undertaken while young climbers today just seek the few highest summits. It seemed to her a pity, that in most years in Nepal, the vast majority of mountaineers go to just 3 mountains:- Everest, Cho Oyu and Ama Dablam. This seemed incredible to us who had just seen so much that remains unknown. It is surely a sign of the times where a big 'tick' is more alluring than the magic of first ascents.

## Accounts

**(In £ sterling with US Dollars in brackets at rate of £1=US\$2)  
(Nepali rupees were converted at rate of 70 rupees to US\$1)**

### **EXPENDITURE**

Air flight Manchester – Kathmandu ... 4 x 580.....	£ 2320
Medical supplies.....	£ 146
Air freight, customs and insurance.....	£ 550
Flight Kathmandu-Jumla and Gangadhi-Kathmandu.....	£ 2508
Peak fee.....	£ 1000
Liaison officer.....	£ 875
Bikrum Pandey (agent).....	£ 250
Food, kitchen equipment and paraffin.....	£ 1368
Porters, mules and staff wages.....	£ 1624
<b>TOTAL.....</b>	<b>£10,641</b>
	<b>(US\$ 21,282)</b>

### **INCOME**

Shipton Tilman Award.....	£ 3500 (US\$7000)
Mount Everest Foundation.....	£ 2100
British Mountaineering Council.....	£ 375
Members contributions 4 x £1166.....	£ 4666
<b>Total.....</b>	<b>£ 10,641</b>
	<b>(US\$ 21,282)</b>

We would like to thank our sponsors, without whom the expedition could not have taken place, especially their kind understanding following the withdrawal of our permit by the Chinese authorities.

A particular thanks are due to The Shipton Tilman Award. They backed the Nyegi Kangsang expedition when first brought to their notice back in 2003. Following the death of Mr John Lecky, who was to have been one of the climbing members and sponsor of that expedition, it had to be cancelled for financial reasons. It was resurrected for 2007, again with the blessing of the Shipton Tilman Award panel. We are very grateful that they understand the vagaries of dealing with the Imperialist Chinese regime in Tibet.

Finally, many thanks are due to the various officials, agents and staff:-

Prateek Dhakal (Ministry of Tourism (Kathmandu)

Bikrum Pandey

Sushil Vista

Shiva Dhakel

Manohari Baral (Liaison Officer)

Prem Tamang (cook)

Phurba Tamang (high altitude porter)

Govindra (porter and cook assistant)

All the donkeymen (however argumentative.)

Report compiled by Julian Freeman-Attwood (December 2007)