

British Sikkim Expedition 2008

Rathong (6679m), West Sikkim (MEF ref 08/28)



Photos:

- i) Owen Samuel on the southeast ridge of Rathong
- ii) Rathong with the southeast ridge in the centre of the picture
- iii) Strong winds blowing across Kabru

Summary

On 13 November 2008, Owen Samuel and Roger Payne reached around 6300m on the unclimbed southeast ridge of Rathong (6679m) in West Sikkim. After a night in a position exposed to a very strong crosswind on the crest of the ridge, further progress was prevented by the incessant strong winds blowing across the summit ridge. This expedition was a re-arrangement of an original proposal for Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne to attempt Gurudongmar (6715m) in North Sikkim.

Just prior to the attempt on Rathong, Samuel and Payne had led a small international group climbing in the Lachung Valley of North Sikkim. Although not a part of the MEF supported expedition, information on these ascents is included in this report. This group climbed Brumkhangshe North (c.5500m), Ta (Horse) Peak (c.5300m), Changma (Bride) Peak (c.5000m) and Marpo (Red) Peak (c.5400m). The latter three summits were apparently virgin.

Acknowledgements

Samuel and Payne would like to record their thanks and appreciation to the following:

Mount Everest Foundation	Approval and expedition grant
British Mountaineering Council	Approval
Government of Sikkim	Permission for the expedition
Sikkim Holidays	Support for permits and expedition logistics
The North Sikkim Team	For excellent climbs and preparation for Rathong

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The South Face of Rathong and Kabru South seen from Kaktang during the 2006 expedition. The Southeast Ridge descends to the right of the summit, with Kabru South behind. The high point reached in 2008 is on the ridge directly above the climber's head.



Team Members

Roger Payne
Owen Samuel
Budha Tamang (liaison officer)
Bombey Tamang (cook)
Arjun Thapa (cook's assistant)

The International Team in North Sikkim:

a) Monica Weil Kalozdi (USA)
Jean Pavillard (CH)
Fabian Pavillard (CH)
b) Claire Humphris (UK)
Simon Humphris (UK)
Roger Payne (UK)
c) Tom Middtun (NOR)
Owen Samuel (UK)
Budha Tamang (liaison officer)
Bombey Tamang (cook)
Arjun Thapa (cook's assistant)

Timetable

- 19/10 Arrive Gangtok
- 20 Formalities in Gantok
- 21 Acclimatization walk at Tsogmo Lake c.4000m
- 22 Drive to Lachen 2624m
- 23 Drive to base camp c.3900
- 24 Carry to advanced camp
- 25 Camp at advanced camp c.4500m
- 26 a) carry to glacier, b) return to base, c) carry on east ridge
- 27 a) bad weather, b) rest, c) retrieve equipment and descend
- 28 a+b) return to advanced, c) descend
- 29 a+b) up to glacier camp c.5100m, c) depart
- 30 a+b) ascent of Brumkhangshe North c.5500m
- 31 a) explore, b) Ta Peak, both descend
- 01/11 Rest
- 02 a+b) to Rula Kang, a) Changma Peak c.5000m
- 03 a+b) Marpo Peak c.5400m
- 04 Descend to base, drive to Lachen
- 05 Drive to Gangtok
- 06 Payne and Samuel Gangtok, others depart
- 07 Drive to Yuksom
- 08 Walk to Tchoka
- 09 Walk to intermediate camp
- 10 Walk to base
- 11 Walk to advance camp c.5100m below Rathong
- 12 Climb to 1st camp c.5800m
- 13 Climb to 2nd camp c.6300m
- 14 Descend to advanced camp (18 abseils)
- 15 Descend to base
- 16 Descend to Tchoka
- 17 Descend to Yuksom, drive to Gangtok
- 18 Gangtok

Southeast Ridge of Rathong

6 - 18 Nov, Owen Samuel's account:

In October 2006, Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne made an attempt on the southeast ridge of Rathong (6679m) in West Sikkim. Their attempt was curtailed by bad weather, so this striking line still needed a first ascent. Having set off by jeep from Gangtok on 7 November, without the need for acclimatization (because of the trip to the Lachung Valley - see below), in just four days of walking we were able to complete the approach trek and go straight to an advanced camp just below the southeast ridge at around 5100m.

12 November 2008:

With 4 days food and gas in our bags we got straight on with the climbing. A good first day was had passing the high point of 2006. Climbing through rock bands gave the most challenging pitches with moves up UIAA 4+. Heavy bags increased difficulties, though they were not sustained. We continued to a fine snow platform just under the ridge at around 5800m. This was comfortable, and we were able to rehydrate, eat and sleep well enough to be ready for action the following day. We could hear the wind howling across the south face during the night, but we were sheltered and heading across the flank the next day, and hence thought the wind would not be a problem.

13 November 2008:

We set off shortly after first light and began by moving together across steep snow slopes between rock bands. The key to reaching the upper ridge was the hope that a couloir would lead through to the foot of a large rock barrier and give access to easier terrain on the south face. We soon found what we were looking for and were pleasantly surprised at the moderate difficulties encountered. Once on the south side of the ridge good progress was made pitching and moving together. It was only while passing a rock barrier on the far south side that the full force of the wind became apparent. While I belayed in an airy position, Roger led an exposed pitch of steep poorly consolidated snow. As he took his time on the unprotected ground getting buffeted by the wind, I found I was in a battle to stay warm.

Once Roger had belayed I followed the pitch, and it was only then that I found quite how cold I had become. With only an hour of daylight, we found an area of snow on the more sheltered side of the ridge to cut out a tent platform at around 6300m.



Above: Approaching Rathong.

Below: Owen Samuel negotiating a tricky step at around 5700m.





Above: The couloir that led back to the ridge.

Below: In strong winds Owen Samuel climbs poorly consolidated snow back to the ridge crest. The footprints on the ridge became the camp site for the night.



Below: Eighteen abseils and sections of down climbing back to advance camp.



After an hour of hard work we had made a platform only big enough for $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the tent. We got the tent up and maneuvered our way inside. Though it was great to be out of the wind, I only had snow supporting my upper body, with my legs hanging out over hundreds of meters of space between the tent floor and the glacier below. Needless to say, it was not going to be a comfortable night. From a better position, Roger tended to the stove, but had a battle against the wind to melt even the minimum volume of snow for drinks.

The wind battered the tent all night, and with the feeling that I might slip of my perch, sleep was hard to come by. After a brief discussion, we came to the conclusion that if the wind did not reduce we would have to go down. The ridge above looked to be more exposed to the wind and less endowed with rock for belays, not the sort of place to be climbing with the threat of being blown off. Not to mention the chilling effect we had already encountered.

14 November 2008:

Well into daylight, with the wind still blowing we broke camp and started our descent, not only with the sense of defeat but the knowledge that our return down the ridge would be far from easy. With the slimmest of racks we would have to be sparing with what we left behind at the rappel anchors. Rappelling would be made particularly difficult by the weaving nature of the route. The risky practice of rappelling from a single nut backed up for the first person was used and we made surprisingly good progress.

We were amazed at how reasonable it was to find good anchors, and this made the 18 rappels necessary for the descent quick with only a few sections of down climbing. We were glad to make it all the way to advanced camp in a day. The mountain ridges all around us had been pluming snow all day, and dust storms blew up the valleys, this at least helped us to feel our decision to descend had been correct.

One day ahead of schedule, we made our way back to Gangtok. Disappointed to be stopped by the wind, but happy to have found such good climbing. This route will definitely be climbed, and some day will become a classic enjoyable route for the Himalayan alpinist.

Climbs in the Lachung Valley

19 Oct - 5 Nov Roger Payne's account:

Following on from explorations in autumn 2007 by Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne, an international group of eight climbers shared a base camp and operated as three teams. Monica Weil Kalozdi (USA), Jean Pavillard and Fabian Pavillard (CH) had the least amount of time. Unfortunately, bad weather, heavy snowfall and high avalanche risk thwarted their efforts to climb the northwest ridge of Brumkhangshe. The same storm thwarted Tom Midttun (NOR) and Owen Samuel (UK) on their attempt to make the first ascent of the east ridge/buttress. After retreating from around 5000m, they joined with Claire and Simon Humphris and Roger Payne to attempt the northwest ridge of Brumkhangshe. With up to 60cm of fresh snow and high avalanche risk continuing, the team diverted to the southeast ridge of Brumkhangshe North, reaching the summit on 30 October.

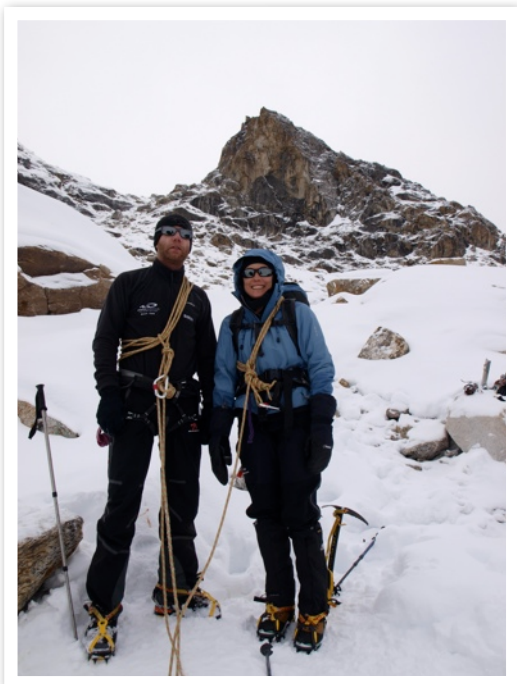
Before returning to base camp, next day the two teams explored rocky peaks above their camp on the glacier (which was below a col that Clyma and Payne crossed the previous year to explore the glacier to the north). Midttun and Samuel reached a rocky shoulder west of the col. Meanwhile, the Humphris and Payne climbed the northeast ridge of a c.5300m rocky summit east of the col. They called this summit Ta (Horse) Peak because the summit block required an *à cheval* maneuver. In the snowy conditions, the climbing was typical of a Scottish winter grade II ridge, or alpine PD-, with a short technical step to reach the summit.

After a short rest at base camp, the team then set off on 2 Nov to explore the western branch of the Rula Kang Glacier. After arriving at an idyllic advanced camp, Midttun and Samuel set off the same afternoon to climb a conspicuous summit of grey rock c.5000m. Scrambling and two pitches of easy rock climbing led to the top of what they called Changma (Bride) Peak.

Next day, the two teams headed towards a conspicuous summit of red rock c.5400m. This peak is to the southeast of Chombu and is circled by the main Rula Kang glacier. Passing under the south face, the Humphris and Payne headed directly towards the crest of the west ridge while Midttun and Samuel took an oblique line on rock joining the ridge part way along. An exposed snow crest, a short down climb with loose rock, then a steeper step beyond led to the top of what the team called Marpo (Red) Peak.



Above: On the summit of Brumkhangshe North



Above: Simon and Claire Humphris with Ta Peak. The ascent was by the right hand ridge. Below: south face of Marpo Peak



Annex

1. Permits

Visitors to Sikkim are required to have an 'inner line' permit. These can be obtained on arrival at Rangpo on the Sikkim State border. The Tourism Officer at Rangpo can issue a permit with a 15 day validity to enable you to enter sikkim. Once in Gangtok it is possible to extend the permit for two further 15-day periods if you want to stay longer.

2. The Alpine Peaks of Sikkim

The Home Department of Sikkim has designated five Alpine Peaks to encourage small expeditions. They are:

West Sikkim

Frey Peak 5830m (Chauriakiang valley)
Tinchekang 6010m (Thansing valley)
Jopuno 5936m (Thansing valley)

North Sikkim

Lama Wangden 5868m (Lachen)
Brumkhangse 5635m (Yumthang)

The peak fee is relatively modest at USD300 for a team of four. The regulations for climbing these peaks can be found at <http://sikkim.gov.in/>. Go to the section Government and click on Old Gazettes. Then click on 2006 and all the gazettes for that year will appear in a PDF document. Go to page 90, and the gazette dated 29th March 2006. This contains the application forms, guidance notes and schedule of fees.

3. Agents

There are many adventure tour operators in India and Sikkim. Sikkim Holidays has been used on several visits to Sikkim, including the provision of logistical support and services for the trips described in this report. The founder Barap Bhutia and staff of Sikkim Holidays are highly recommended.

Barap Bhutia (mobile +91 9832391716)
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4. Accounts for Rathong

Costs in Sikkim	Indian Rupees	GBP	
KNP and peak fees	19,815	287	
Overland transport	8,700	126	
Food and accommodation	7,800	113	
Staff costs and LO	18,700	271	
Yaks	16,800	243	
Provisions, fuels, equipment	18,185	264	
Service charges	20,000	290	
Total	110,000	1,594	
Income			GBP
Mount Everest Foundation			1,500
Member contributions			94
Total			1,594

All other costs, including travel to India, internal flights, personal equipment, replacement of lost technical equipment, etc. was met on a personal basis.