

Talung North Pillar Expedition 2012

Gavin Pike



The unclimbed north face of Talung, with the north pillar on the left

Summary of an expedition to the Kangchenjunga region of Nepal to attempt the unclimbed north pillar of Talung (7349m), from 17th October – 9th December 2012

Expedition members

Gavin Pike (expedition leader)

James Clapham

Dave Searle



Introduction

I was first drawn to the north face of Talung when leafing through Lindsay Griffin's 'Mountain Info' in an old copy of Climb magazine. A photograph showed the very aesthetic, arrow-straight (and still unclimbed) line of the north pillar, which had repelled two separate previous attempts by strong Czech teams. A couple of years later, when thoughts came to planning a trip to the Himalayas with my friends Dave Searle and James Clapham, the decision was easily made. We were going to Talung.

Approach and Logistics

For this trip, we arranged a logistical support package with Loben Expeditions (<http://www.lobenexpeditions.com>), who came highly recommended. They were to arrange all logistics from Kathmandu to base camp. This included accommodation, internal flights and transport, food, arrangement of permits and liaison officer, porters and base camp staff. We found Loben Expeditions to be excellent, and very well organised, and would certainly recommend them to anyone looking to arrange an expedition to Nepal, India, Pakistan or Tibet/China.

We flew to Kathmandu on 17th October, and after a day visiting the Ministry of Tourism for permits, and walking into Thamel to make last minute purchases, we took a further flight to Bhadrapur, close to the Indian border in the south-east of Nepal. From here, a two-day ride in a Land Rover took us and all of our food supplies to the road head at Medibung, via an overnight stop in Phidim.

We had initially expected the approach trek with our porters to take nine days, but it was actually completed in six. The walk, through the idyllic valleys and foothills to the south of Kangchenjunga, was wonderful, and took in overnight stays in the delightful villages of Khewang, Yhampudin and Tseram. Altitude gain was gradual, and arrival at our base camp of Ramche at 4400m was headache-free. Our period at base camp and above was 27th October – 30th November. On departure, the same route back to Kathmandu was reversed, but the trek from Ramche to Medibung was completed in four days with our porters.

Base Camp and above



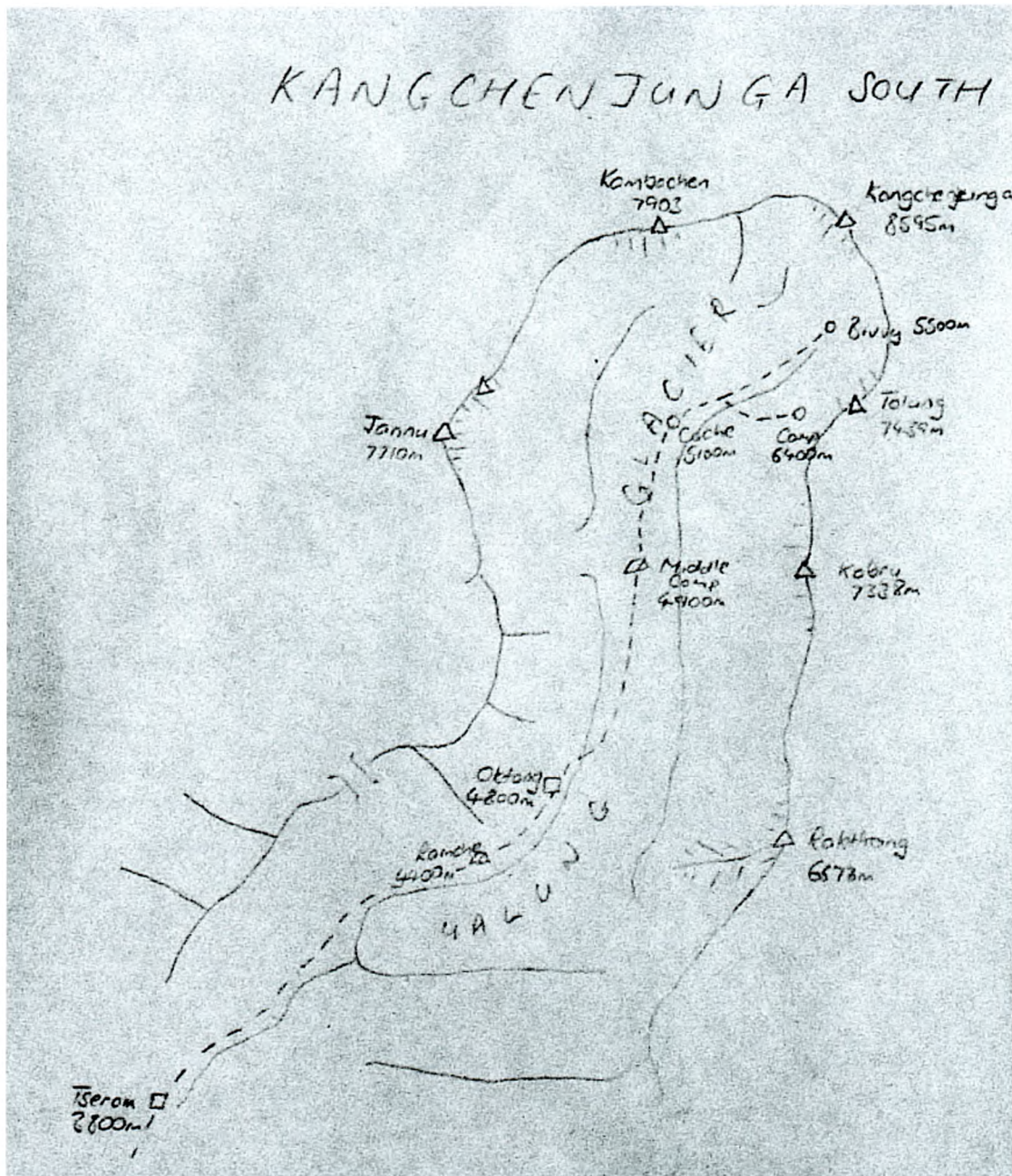
Ramche (above) is located on a grassy plain squeezed in beside the lower moraines of the Yalung Glacier. There is a tea house with a very basic shop there, but this is only opened up in the trekking seasons. Ramche is located at the last reasonable site with access to water before descending onto the Yalung Glacier. It is flat and comfortable, and indeed, a good site for a game of high-altitude football with visiting porters!

We established a higher advanced base camp at Middle Camp (4800m), in the centre of the Yalung Glacier between the Jannu and Kabru massifs. The trek to Middle Camp involved a pleasant walk to Oktang (4700m), beyond where a large landslide from the previous year has forced an earlier descent down onto the Yalung Glacier. The journey between the two camps would typically take around four hours. Middle Camp is in a much more austere setting, surrounded by huge moraines, and with nearby rockfall from newly-exposed slopes at the sides of the glacier almost constant. Here, a small frozen pond served as our water supply.

Our base camp staff, Asta and Lila, stayed at Ramche throughout our three week stay at Middle Camp and above, although we did employ Asta to help with some of the load carrying. We found that porters would ask for up to 5-10 times the normal rate (6000 rupees in one instance) for a carry up the glacier. This, however, is for good reason, as the Yalung Glacier is quite an unpleasant place to walk. Huge, tottering moraines abound, with passage dangerous in some places. On several occasions, Asta and Lila made a morning trek up to Middle Camp just to cook us a huge lunch of curry and dal bhat, which was morale-boosting indeed.

I was quite shocked at the condition of the glaciers in this area. The Yalung Glacier is one of the largest in Nepal, and, for most of its length, it seems in quite a dire state. All of the lower and central sections of the glacier are covered in huge, precarious moraine hills, which make the walking tortuous. The glacier has visibly lost a huge amount of depth. In many places, cliffs and slopes appear to be newly-exposed at the sides of the glacier, all of them

dangerous, with regular rockfall occurring. Access to the Jannu and Kabru massifs from this glacier looks to be, at best, dangerous, and a major headache for any expedition planning an attempt on these peaks.



Sketch map of the Yalung Glacier region, showing high camps and route taken

As we finally cleared the highest of the moraine, at around 5300m, three hours of walking from Middle Camp, it became clear why the glacier is in such a bad condition. Even arriving not long after the end of the summer monsoons (the main precipitation event of the year), the upper glacier to the base of Talung at 5600m held a mere three or four inches of snow on top of the ice beneath. It seems that it often rains to a high altitude (possibly 6000m) in

the monsoon period. Without a good quantity of snow to feed them, the glaciers in this area appear to be dying very quickly.

Climbing

After arrival at Ramche, I was afflicted with a debilitating virus for the following 12 days, at one point descending to the lower altitude of Tseram in an attempt to recover. At this stage, after an initial period acclimatising and then waiting in vain for me to recuperate, Dave and James continued on, with the help of Asta, to establish advanced base camp (ABC). They also made a reconnaissance of Yalung Base Camp (5500m), which was our initial planned site for ABC. The trek to this site, high above the glacier, proved to be difficult, and not without its dangers. It also presented a very awkward return to the glacier for the continuation of the approach to the base of Talung. This would have required several abseils on dangerously loose ground. It was quickly decided that this site was unsuitable, and that Middle Camp was to be our ABC.

Upon feeling finally recovered, I hiked up from Ramche to Middle Camp to join the other two, having handily missed out on much of the hard work of carrying loads up to establish the camp! However, a combination of our delayed start, the time-consuming difficulties of travel on the moraine, and the need for further acclimatisation, meant we would likely have the chance for only one serious attempt on the north pillar. We quickly started to carry climbing gear and supplies to a cache further up the glacier in readiness for an attempt, and made a reconnaissance to the base of the north pillar. The final section of the glacier before coming under the north face of Talung was heavily crevassed, but thankfully made safer by the glacier being dry. Much to-ing and fro-ing along long fins of ice looking for a way to progress was made, before finally reaching the flatter section above. We used bamboo wands to mark the route through this section of glacier.

The north face of Talung is approximately 1700m high. The line the Czech teams had tried on the previous attempts of the north pillar, up the centre of the bottom rock band, was completely dry, and looked to be on very poor rock. This presented us with three options: an initially very steep line of discontinuous ice up the right side of the rock band, or to bypass the rock band altogether by using snow slopes either to the left or right. Both of these slopes would have given a less direct, and less satisfying, line to get established on the pillar. And more importantly, both had awkward, and potentially time-consuming bergschrunds in a position greatly exposed to serac fall from above. Both were quickly ruled out, and the line of ice was decided to be the best option. This section looked very steep and difficult for the first couple of pitches where the glacier has dropped away in recent times, and would undoubtedly give the hardest climbing on the whole route. After the technical difficulties of the first rock band, the middle section of the pillar looked easier,

climbing up a snowy arête, with short rocky steps. Above this, a band of thin-looking rock slabs guarded entrance to the upper icefields and exit gullies.

We next spent a period of five days acclimatising progressively higher on the west face of Talung, an already established route that was our planned line of descent from the mountain. This initially climbs up steep and loose slopes to leave the Yalung Glacier, from where a broad ridge is gained beneath the bottom of the right section of the west face. Although from below the west face appears heavily crevassed and possibly serac-threatened, we found in reality that passage was quite reasonable. We spent an initial night at 5400m on the broad ridge, a further two nights at 6100m underneath a protective overhang, and on to a final camp at 6400m. After spending two nights acclimatising at this high point, we went down, confident that the west face would offer a rapid descent from the mountain. The climbing was on straightforward snow and neve slopes, and indeed, upon striking our camp hastily to depart in strengthening winds, we quickly lost almost 1000m of height in around 80 minutes.



Spectacular campsite at 6400m on the west face, with Jannu towering above the Yalung Glacier

Feeling more attuned to the thin air higher up, we returned to Middle Camp, and allowed ourselves two days in which to recover and prepare for an attempt on the north pillar. We packed a five-day supply of food and gas for our attempt, and returned with a lightweight bivvy tent to our campsite on the glacier beneath the pillar. Early the following morning, we

arrived at the bergschrund, and looked up. The first pitch was daunting, with a scary step across the schrund straight onto the wall, followed by 60m of extremely steep terrain. One section at about 15m looked particularly hard – around six overhanging metres of smooth, leaning rock, attempting to link discontinuous blobs of neve, to gain the easier, merely vertical neve above. We knew this would be very difficult, but what was more worrying on this close inspection was the absence of any visible protection. A promising-looking horizontal crack next to the steepest section was, it turned out, disappointingly flared. Dave, as the strongest technical climber, had psyched himself up for the lead of this section. But all three of us balked at what now looked like a very hard and dangerous lead, in a remote corner of Nepal. Too dangerous for any of us to be prepared to commit to. We retreated to our bivvy site to lick our wounds.

After a couple of hours discussing our options, we decided to turn our attention to the right side of the north face (also unclimbed), which seemed to offer great-looking climbing up continuous ice. The technical difficulties would be lower than those on the pillar, and we estimated a three-day ascent to be feasible.

I awoke to the alarm in the cramped bivvy tent the following morning at 3am, and quickly realised that we were not going anywhere in a hurry. The others had been awake for some time, listening to the roar of the winds higher up. The weather had been excellent throughout our trip, but temperatures were cold, and there were often very high winds at altitude. These had returned with a vengeance. The following two days were spent in that cramped little tent, listening, frustrated, to the almost continuous express-train roar of the winds tearing across the upper faces of Kangchenjunga and Talung. Looking up, we estimated the winds to be possibly 100mph in ferocity, and anyone on the mountain in conditions like that would very quickly have been facing a grim battle for survival. After waiting as long as we could with no change in the weather, we began our resigned trudge, via some very entertaining tongba (the local millet wine)-drinking sessions, down and out of the mountains.

Weather

With the exception of the winds, the weather was generally excellent throughout. A thunderstorm during the approach trek and a brief storm that dropped a couple of inches of snow at Ramche were all we saw of unsettled weather during the trip. Both of these occurred in October. Throughout November, the skies were blue. The temperatures, however, were low. We regularly recorded -15C inside the dining tent after sunset at Ramche. We estimated the temperatures to be approximately -20C when we were to begin our attempt on the north face.

The main problem though, was the wind. Strong winds at altitude were a regular feature throughout our stay at base camp and above, often visible as long plumes of spindrift extending from the summit ridges and upper slopes of Kangchenjunga, Kambachen and Talung. The strength of these winds became apparent on the first reconnaissance up to Talung, where, above our gear cache on the glacier, we mistakenly thought the increasing roar to be a glacial sinkhole nearby. There followed a dawning realisation that it was, in fact, the sound of the jet stream winds tearing over Kangchenjunga, still several miles distant. It was obvious that climbing in such conditions would be impossible. Although this was our first experience of climbing in the Himalayas, it seemed after emerging from the mountains that this had been a cold and unusually wind-afflicted autumn in Nepal, which had stymied the plans of many other expeditions.



A frustrating wait – listening to the maelstrom above on Talung

Waste Management

All non-burnable waste was removed from the mountains. Burnable waste was burned by our base camp staff at a discreet site several hundred metres from the camping areas. Toilet

waste was buried. The waste from the expedition was checked at the Kanchenjunga National Park checkpoint near Yamphudin on departure from the mountains. We endeavoured to leave every campsite used in the same condition as it was found. We left a \$1,000 environmental bond with the Ministry of Tourism when we obtained our permit. Although we understand the administrative process to have the bond refunded can often take a month from debrief at the Ministry, Loben Expeditions kindly returned the bond to us up-front before we left Kathmandu.

Equipment

Loben Expeditions supplied all tents and cooking equipment used up to and including base camp. Above base camp, we used a Mountain Hardwear Annapurna 2-person tent (along with a borrowed tent from LE) at ABC, and on the acclimatisation foray on the west face. For the north face itself, we took a Black Diamond Firstlight bivvy tent. We planned to carry two Jetboil stoves on the face. We also had an MSR XGK, with a supply of (very dirty) petrol, at ABC. White gas seems difficult to obtain in Nepal, so propane/butane cartridges or petrol are the obvious choices for fuel. The Jetboils performed reasonably well, and the gas cartridges are less afflicted with pressure drop-off at higher altitudes. Despite this, they did struggle on occasion. The petrol available, however, seems very dirty, and clogged up the brand-new filter on our XGK stove.

Approach shoes are suitable all the way to base camp on the approach trek. On the glacier, these, or summer alpine boots, work well. We used La Sportiva Spantik and Scarpa Phantom 8000 boots for the climbing and the upper glacier. We still had cold feet at times!

We planned to carry a good rack of wires, cams and ice screws on the four face, as well as five pegs. The rock quality on the lower face is dubious. We carried two 60m 8.1mm ropes.

Budget

Expenditure	Flights	£2129
	Expedition support *	£13319
	Insurance	£1050
	Mountain food	£150
	Accommodation and expenses in Kathmandu	£200
	Visas	£187
	Gas	£65
	Tips	£250
	Equipment	£1200
	Total	£18550

* Our expedition support was provided by Loben Expeditions, and included internal transportation, accommodation after Kathmandu, peak permit, liaison officer, base camp staff, porters, food and fuel

Income	Mount Everest Foundation grant	£2700
	British Mountaineering Council grant	£1500
	Nick Estcourt Award	£1500
	Mark Clifford Mountaineering Grant	£1000
	Alpine Club grant	£600
	Mountain Drop-Offs equipment contribution	£500
	Personal contribution	£10750
	Total	£18550

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