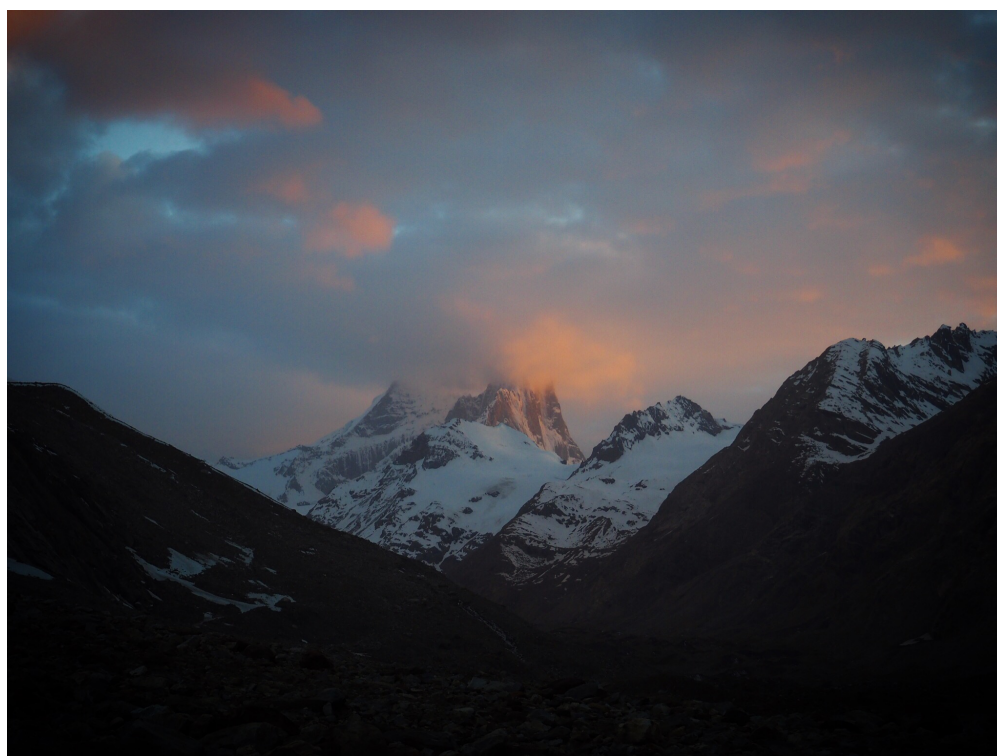


# **CHILING II NORTH FACE EXPEDITION 2018**

**Zanskar, India, June-July 2018**

Alex Mathie & Matthew Harle



**Mount Everest Foundation Expedition  
(Expedition Reference 18/21)  
Final Report**

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## 1 Aim

The aim of the expedition was to summit Chiling II (6253m) via its unclimbed North Face.

## 2 Summary

The expedition was led by Alex Mathie (UK), climbing with Matt Harle (UK). Support staff, in the form of a cook and a high altitude porter were provided by Rimo Expeditions. The expedition spent four weeks (early June – early July 2018) in the Zaskar region, India. The expedition made attempts on Chiling II (6253m) via the unclimbed North Face, and Lalung III (6126m) via the unclimbed East Buttress. Both attempts were repelled by poor weather and unsafe snow conditions.

## 3 Introduction

### 3.1 Purpose

The Zaskar Himalaya has been experiencing something of a renaissance in recent times, as the Indian government relax the regulations in the area. The valleys southeast of Rangdum, in particular, are replete with technical objectives in the 5000m-6000m range, many of which are unclimbed and on the IMF's Open Peaks list. The result is a veritable treasure trove of peaks for which permission and access is now reasonably straightforward.

Chiling I and II form an aesthetically pleasing and complementary pair of summits – the first an impressive pointed spire of rock and ice, and the second a squat granite fortress, defended by smooth fins of steep, orange rock on its southerly, easterly and westerly aspects, and by an impressively steep wall of ice and mixed ground on its northerly aspect. Making the first ascent of this north face was the aim of our expedition.

Chiling II has seen two attempts in recent years: First, a strong American team in 2015 set their sights on the north face, but failed to access it due to the state of the Chiling icefall. Instead, they made an attempt via the East Ridge, turning around 80 vertical feet from the summit owing to debilitating cold. The second, by Oriol Baró in 2016, succeeded in making the first ascent of the mountain via the East Ridge (900m, ED 6b M4+ 80°)

### 3.2 Geography

The twin granitic peaks of Chiling I and II, seen in Figure 1 dominate the skyline above the Lalung glacier and make for obvious objectives. However, many of the other attractive peaks hang over the glacier, including the summits of Lalung I and III, shown in Figure 2. Lalung I at the head of the valley has an enticing and expansive north face. Access to Lalung I would be long and complex; the head of the glacier being heavily crevassed.



(a) Chiling I (left) and Chiling II (right) viewed from the east. (b) The north face of Chiling II. Note the spindrift pouring from the central gullies.

Figure 1: Aspects of the Chiling peaks.



(a) Northerly aspects of Lalung III. (b) The north east face of Lalung I (centre) and the easterly aspect of Lalung III (right).

Figure 2: Lalung peaks.

The June weather in the Lalung valley was dominated by daily cycles; clear mornings, cloud building through the day and considerable precipitation beginning by the late afternoon. This pattern, however, appears to be extremely localised. A Spanish team had long stable spells of good weather in Shafat valley, 10km down the road.

Warm temperatures at higher elevations seem to be a theme in the Kashmiri ranges during the summer months. We found the  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$  isotherm was commonly around 5000m. Precipitation often fell as rain above 4500m. The resulting soft wet snow made progress on slopes laborious. Solid ice was also hard to find.

### 3.3 Access

Climbing in the Suru valley is accessed from Leh. A two-day bone-shaking journey on unsurfaced roads road via Kargil and Rangdum, followed by a short two-hour approach from the roadhead reaches a basecamp at 4200m below the snout of the Lalung glacier. From there it is one day to an ABC at 4700m, high on the medial moraine of the Lalung glacier, and a second day to the base of Chiling II North Face at 4900m (though this could perhaps be achieved in a huge one-day effort by a very fit team).

Approximate locations of BC and ABC and an approach route can be seen in Figure 3. From BC a slowly rising terrace on the south side of the valley is picked up well in advance of reaching the terminal moraine. This is followed until established on the glacier. The col at the base of the south-east ridge of Chiling II is gained by steep scree slopes to the right of a small icefall leading down from the col. The Chiling glacier is then accessed by traversing and descending snow slopes to the east of a large icefall which bars quick access to the face. One of the original appeals of this objective was the relative ease of access—we had hoped to be at basecamp (BC) within 5 days of leaving the UK—but in practice it took us a full week from leaving the UK to establishing our BC.



Figure 3: The approach to Chiling II north face. The locations of BC and ABC are marked along with an approximate route.

## 4 Team

The expedition team consisted of Alex Mathie and Matt Harle (both UK). The agency was Rimo Expeditions, who had arranged all the relevant permits and paperwork at the IMF. The cook, Narish, and the high altitude porter, Karma, were provided by the agency and were both invaluable assets to the expedition. The LO was Jaiprakash Gupta.



Figure 4: The team at ABC. Described left to right: Jaiprakash Gupta, Karma Sherpa, Matt Harle, Alex Mathie.

## 5 Preparation

### 5.1 Conception

The inspiration for attempting the North Face of Chiling II was the write-up and photos of the 2015 American expedition, freely available on MSR's *The Summit Register* website. The inspiration for visiting the Zaskar Himalaya came from wanting a shorter, less expensive and less logistically complex expedition to an aborted plan to visit a remote area of the Chinese Karakoram. The Zaskar range, with its relatively easy access, affordable costs and straightforward permit situation, was an excellent choice for a four week expedition compatible with having a full-time job with limited annual leave.

There is some confusion in the literature about when the peak was first climbed, to the extent that we thought we would be making the first ascent, right up until attending the MEF panel interview at the Alpine Club, where Lindsay Griffin informed us otherwise. This confusion stems firstly from the fact that the mountain has gone by two names (Chiling II and Z2) and secondly from the fact that the mountain has both a true (North) summit (6253m) and a lower, South summit (6080m). An Italian party in 1977 claimed an ascent of the peak, but it is unclear to which summit they climbed. Another Italian party in 1982 made an ascent of 'Z2' to its South summit. Baró's 2016 ascent of the East Ridge is considered to be the first unequivocal ascent of the mountain to its true

summit.

## 5.2 Objective

The North Face of Chiling II rises some 1400m from the bergschrund to the North summit and comprises a complex array of steep ice and mixed terrain. The Eastern side of the face is made predominantly up of steep walls of dark rock in the lower parts, and snow-covered slabs in the upper section. The centre of the face is the obvious line of weakness, and our identified route followed steep goulottes in the lower third to a large median snowfield capped by two very compact rock bands. Crossing these rock bands at their western ends would lead to the looming headwall that dominates the upper third, where an open-book corner promised a feasible—if arduous—route to the summit shoulder.

## 5.3 Permission

Permits for peaks in the Zaskar Himalaya are granted by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF). A permit was obtained for Chiling II (\$1000, inclusive of LO fees) and we were informed by the IMF that were we to climb any of the other ‘open’ peaks in the area (we were interested in the Lalung group as secondary objectives), we would be able to purchase permits retrospectively on our return to Delhi.

## 5.4 Logistics

Transport infrastructure around Ladakh is generally good. A large concentration of tourists can be found in Leh and trekking companies offer guides for walking and driving tours and easy peaks in the surrounding area. Many of the roads are maintained in excellent condition due to the huge military presence in the area. Proximity to the border never proved to be a major obstruction to climbing in the region. Regular stops have to be made at military checkpoints to show passports but these interactions were always friendly and brief. Permits from the IMF were left with the relevant authorities in Kargil (the closest major settlement to the Lalung valley).

Owing to the trekking industry in Leh, supplies such as gas canisters are easy to come by and can be haggled for at many of the outdoor shops in the town.

Climbing equipment consisted of: two half ropes (60m x 7.3mm) and abseil tat; a rack of nuts, a full set of cams (0.5-3 Camalot sizes), a set of micro cams and a selection of pitons for rock; and a selection of ice screws and a v-threader for ice. We took a spare set of wires, doubles of midsize cams, and plenty of spare slings and tat to leave at BC in case we were forced to abandon gear or supplement the rack.

No fixed ropes were used and all attempts on peaks were to be made in ‘alpine style’. Seemingly, an alpine style of ascent remains little known to the staff at the IMF and took some explaining at our briefing.

## 5.5 Medical

No additional vaccinations were required for visiting the Zanskar region. A BC first aid kit included antibiotics (two single-day 1000mg courses of azithromycin, which were both used and were like a gastrointestinal nuke—not much fun but phenomenally effective) and various strong painkillers (inc. Cocodamol) sourced from the UK before traveling. A smaller first aid kit was carried when climbing including dexamethasone (for AMS/HACE/HAPE-induced retreat), cocodamol and a small selection of dressings, bandages and tape.

## 5.6 Travel

Following the IMF briefing, flights were taken from Delhi to Leh. The smooth Border Road Organisation (BRO) highway was taken from Leh to Kargil. This is a 6-8 hour journey and costs around 60 by taxi. The road from Kargil to the roadhead, near Rangdum, was another full day’s drive and far less smooth!

## 5.7 Finances

A complete breakdown of the expedition finances can be seen in Table 1. Values are quoted in GBP.

Table 1: SUMMARY OF EXPEDITION FINANCES

Item	Income (GBP)	Expenditure (GBP)
Return Flights		994.00
Additional Baggage		331.53
Insurance		326.84
LO & Peak Fee		887.14
LO Domestic Flights		276.93
RIMO Expeditions*		3089.00
Climbing Gear		978.06
Expedition food		592.68
Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust Grant	1000.00	
British Mountaineering Council Grant	250.00	
Mount Everest Foundation Grant	2900.00	
Alpine Club Grant	500.00	
Personal contributions	1176.81	
Total income	5826.81	
Total expenditure		5826.81

\*The payment to Rimo Expeditions is inclusive of; return transport from Leh to Rangdum, hotel stays in Leh and Kargil, porters’ fees and a cook and high-altitude porter to stay at base camp.



The MEF grant was used against RIMO Expeditions fees, the JWCT grant paid the IMF and peak fees and the BMC and Alpine Club grants were put towards the cost of flights.

The authors would like to thank all of the expedition's sponsors for their generous support.

## 6 Expedition Log

### 3rd June

Depart LHR on an evening flight, arriving in Delhi early the next morning.

### 4th June

Arrive in Delhi AM. Retrieve baggage and transfer to IMF for briefing. Having failed to withdraw sufficient GBP or USD cash before leaving the UK to pay the IMF, the day is spent on a tour of Delhi's ATMs, attempting to withdraw the equivalent of \$1000 in rupees without having our cards blocked. 'Sleep' at the IMF. Air conditioning is broken and bathroom is full of geckos.

### 5th June

Transfer from IMF to Delhi airport for an early morning flight to Leh. Walked to Leh Stupa without lungs exploding. Taken by LO to IMF office in Leh, unclear why.

### 6th June

Bought expedition food and gas in Leh: a combination of new and refilled gas canisters (7x8oz/227g canisters in total) and a selection of nuts, dried fruit and other hill foods which are widely available. Visited Thiksey monastery near Leh via the local bus.

### 7th June

Drive Leh-Kargil (approx. 7h on mainly well-surfaced roads). Overnight at Royal Inn, Kargil.

### 8th June

Drive Kargil-Roadhead (approx. 8h on unsurfaced dirt track). Alex, who has food poisoning from a dodgy omelette at Royal Inn, spends most of the drive in the foetal position, periodically stopping to vomit in wonderfully picturesque environments. Rendezvous with Rimo staff (Narish, Karma and porters) at the roadhead. Overnight at temporary camp by the road. Matt meets a team of Spanish climbers in the Shafat valley (the success of their expedition, which we would later learn about, testifies to how localised the weather systems can be: <http://www.barrabes.com/actualidad/noticias/2-10362/1-mes-zanskar-15000m-abiertos.html>). They were kind enough to give us some advice for accessing the base of Chiling II.

### 9th June

Alex continues to feel ill, so moving to BC is delayed by a day. Karma takes an advance party of porters to establish BC ahead of us.

### 10th June

Alex begins to feel better, so the decision is made to move to BC. Previous reports had suggested this could be a 6h walk, but it takes only 2h30. The river crossing at the head of the valley is straightforward. The remainder of the morning is spent sorting kit with the intention of making the first of two load carries to ABC. We leave in the early afternoon in the pouring rain, and make

a cache high on the glacier before returning to BC.



Figure 5: Fording the a small river on the way to BC.

### 11th June

With the help of Jai and Karma, we return to our cache and carry the gear the remainder of the way to ABC. Jai and Karma return to BC in deteriorating weather. We stay a night for acclimatisation.

### 12th June

We make an acclimatisation/reconnaissance trip to the plateau between Chiling I and Chiling II at approximately 5200m. From the top of the icefall leading down to the Chiling glacier we are able to take a few photos of the face before the weather comes in and visibility deteriorates. Precipitation begins. We return to ABC and continue down to BC.



Figure 6: Approaching the plateau below the Chiling peaks.

### 13th June

Rest day at BC.

**14th June**

We move back up to ABC with a further load to make an acclimatisation attempt on Lalung III (6126m). We arrive at ABC in the mid-afternoon and continue to a bivouac closer to the base of Lalung III's East Buttress.



Figure 7: Camped on the medial moraine for an attempt on Lalung III (centre).

**15th June**

A 4am start allows us to reach the base of Lalung III and climb the lower slopes to a bivouac on a snow shoulder around 5600m (unverified, as our altimeter packed in at the bivouac the night before). We get into the tent at around 1pm, precipitation begins shortly after and continues throughout the night.

**16th June**

In the morning nearly a foot of fresh snow has fallen and it is still coming. Visibility is poor and we decide to retreat, happy to have spent the night at 5600m. Back to ABC, then down to BC for rest. The poor weather continues, with snow down to BC (4200m).

**17th June**

Rest day at BC.

**18th June**

Rest day at BC.

**19th June** We move back up to ABC to make an attempt on Chiling II North Face.

**20th June**

From ABC, we ascend to the plateau and navigate the right hand side (looking down) of the icefall leading down to the Chiling glacier. Below the icefall, we cut back left though a huge crevasse field (many of which require jumping, one of which requires the leader to climb into and back out of). We establish a bivouac below the North Face of Chiling II and observe our intended line. The weather is poor, and the lower goulottes we aim to climb are pouring with snow. The median

snowfield is avalanching frequently.

### 21st June

The weather looks good so we approach the face. However, as ever, it is clear that a lot of unstable snow has been plastered onto the face with the daily precipitation. We cross the bergschrund at its highest point and climb a very hollow snowcone leading to the lower goulottes. As the sun hits the face, most areas begin to flow with huge amounts of spindrift as snow sheds from higher up. We attempt to climb the system of goulottes leading to the median snowfield but the volume of spindrift we encounter thwarts our attempt. The weather is deteriorating rapidly and we decide to rappel back to the glacier and wait to see if the weather improves the following day.



Figure 8: Traversing into the goulottes low on the face.

### 22nd June

The following morning has good weather, but clouds are soon developing on western side of Chiling II. We wait to see how the weather develops, and before long it has become the worst system of weather so far on the trip. Food and gas is too limited to wait another full day at our bivouac so we abandon our attempt and return to ABC.



Figure 9: Alex ponders conditions on the face. Hours later some we be chased down to BC by some serious weather, vindicating our decision not go climbing!

**23rd June**

Return to BC with as much as we can carry.

**24th June**

Strike ABC.

**25th June**

Weather continues to be poor, so we decide to leave early with the hope we can move flights forward. Karma goes to gather the porters from the nearest village.

**26th June**

Strike BC, drive from the roadhead to Kargil.



Figure 10: Stopped at a check point at Rangdum on the bone-shattering ride back to Kargil.

### **27th June**

Drive Kargil-Leh.

### **28th June**

Leh. Discover we can't move flights in an economically sensible way.

### **29th June**

Leh.

### **30th June**

Getting real tired of Leh. Matt is unwell.

### **1st July**

Leh.

### **2nd July**

Transfer IXL-DEL early morning, DEL-LHR afternoon.

## **7 Conclusion**

This expedition made attempts on Chiling II (via the unclimbed North Face) and Lalung III (via the unclimbed East Buttress). Both attempts were repelled by poor weather and unsafe snow conditions. Of the 18 days we spent in the range, all 18 featured precipitation at higher elevations.

The persistent weather pattern of early morning sunshine followed by precipitation from 11AM onwards, combined with the consistently high temperatures (the  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$  isotherm failed to fall below 5000m, even overnight, in some instances) meant that the conditions on the North Face of Chiling II oscillated between (a) being plastered in fresh snow from the afternoon and evening precipitation and (b) shedding this fresh snow the following morning, causing large amounts of spindrift in

the lower goulottes and triggering frequent small avalanches from the median snowfield. These conditions forced us to abandon our attempt on the North Face.

We believe that more stable weather in late summer (September) might make the North Face of Chiling II a more reasonable proposition. However, some previous expeditions have found the face difficult or impossible to access by this time. Indeed, we found the icefall linking what we have described as ‘the plateau’ to the lower Chiling glacier to be on the limit of what is safely navigable. This tension between conditions on the face and conditions on the approach may pose a problem for future suitors (though we hope to be proven wrong!)

Though this expedition was unsuccessful in its aims, we felt that it provided an invaluable learning experience and a useful introduction to the world of exploratory alpinism in the Himalaya. Many of the lessons we found valuable might be of interest to others in our position in the future, so they are listed in Appendix I.

## 8 Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous financial support of the following bodies:

- **The Mount Everest Foundation**
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- **The Alpine Club**
- **The British Mountaineering Council**

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- **Rab** — clothing and sleeping bags
- **Montane** — clothing
- **Expedition Foods** — freeze-dried meals
- **Torq Fitness** — energy, recovery and hydration products

A special word of thanks goes to Felix, a friendly chap from Luxembourg who loaned us some rupees to pay for the obscene excess baggage charges that Jet Airways stung us with at Leh airport on our way home after our debit cards were both blocked.

## A Appendices

### A.1 Lessons/Advice

It is hard to find advice for a first-time Himalayan alpinist, especially one who is visiting a new, unexplored area, or one going with the intention of making a first ascent. Below are some useful tips that may or may not be useful for young climbers making expeditions to this area.

- Be as prescriptive as you possibly can with your agency operator. We were often given vague assurances of “don’t worry, everything will be fine”, but it invariably wasn’t. In future we would create a very strict itinerary explaining each day where we wanted to be, when, and with whom, and then simply task the agency with executing.
- Take more hill food than you think will be necessary. We made a rod for our own backs slightly by not taking enough hill food and then only having enough to make one serious attempt on Chiling II North Face. Once we had aborted, we had shot our bolt, so to speak.
- This may sound obvious, but everything is unbelievably massive in the Himalaya. On many occasions we completely failed to accurately judge approach distances and times etc. For instance, the approach to Lalung III looked like it might take little over an hour in the Alps, but it took more than three. This is acutely true in areas for which no reliable maps exist.
- Ensure you take cash out with you. Foolishly, we thought we would be able to withdraw cash for peak permits in Delhi. This was not easy.

Anyone in need of more specific advice or information can contact us at:

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- Matt Harle – [matthew.harle.92@gmail.com](mailto:matthew.harle.92@gmail.com)