

# Leeds Gangotri Expedition 1985<sup>1.</sup>

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Andy Perkins      Jerry Hadwin      Neil McAdie      Andy Scrase

Abstract: During September, 1985, the four-strong Leeds Gangotri Expedition attempted a new route on the south-west face of Pt. 6504 m in the Gangotri area of the Garwhal Himalaya. Despite a two-week spell of bad weather, the team reached 5800 m before retreating in the face of poor snow conditions and frequent avalanches.

Oh dear! what can the matter be?  
Four young climbers stuck in the Gangotri  
The weather's like something I flushed down the lavatory,  
Nobody knew we were there.

To R and J

ack 8320

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the enormous help received, the team would never even have left Headingley. Listed below are the majority of people, companies and grant bodies who helped us along the way. If anyone has been omitted, I apologise. We are deeply grateful to everyone who supported us in any way at all.

For Financial Help

British Mountaineering Council	Leeds University Students Union
Geoteam (U.K.) Ltd.	Mount Everest Foundation
Leeds City Council	Mouat Jones Memorial Fund
Leeds University Union	West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council
Mountaineering Club	Yorkshire I.M.I.

For Equipment

Centresport	Mountain Equipment
Davie, Mason & Co.	Optimus AB
Epigas	Penguin Books
Ergoflame	RAM Products
Europa Sport	Roche
Gnome gear	Sports International
W.L. Gore	Troll Safety Equipment
Kodak	Wild Country
Lyon Equipment	Wintergear

and don't forget The Red Baron

For Food

Batchelors	Jordans
Birds	Rowntrees
Blue John Cavens	Sanctuary Mountain Sports
Healthilife	Sportive Perform

For Advice and Help

Andy Bowman

Dr. Fraser

Don French

Allen Fyffe

A/S Geoteam

Dennis Gray

Paddy Gibson

Mark Knopfler

Howard Lancashire

Lads and Lasses of Leeds 6

Leeds University

Roy Lindsay

Mr. &amp; Mrs. McAdie

Maxi Haulage

Martin Moran

Alistair Morgan

Mount Support

Satish Patki

Bali and Budhi Singh

Shell

Syrian Arab Airlines

Dick Turnbull

The Walkman Concept

### Introduction

Between November, 1984, when we made the first tentative moves to organise the expedition, and October, 1985, when I sit writing this report, we have learnt a great deal. As it was our first visit to the Himalaya, we had to get along by advice from others, our own experience from previous trips, and (often) blind guesswork. Of these three, the first was most valuable so, for anyone planning an expedition to the Gangotri, I hope this report will give some guidelines to the problems of organising a lightweight expedition to this superb mountain area. No trip to the Himalaya will ever be hassle-free, but as we build up a pool of knowledge, the solutions to some of the problems will become easier to find.

### Diary

When Jerry and I returned from Kenya in late '84, we had already decided to organise an expedition to the Himalaya. We selected the Gangotri as there had been a fair amount of coverage in the media of this area which emphasised its ease of access, convenient altitude of the peaks, and the quality of the climbing. (For details of the general background of the area, see Mountain '84.) We originally applied for the West Pillar on Bhagirathi III, and the East Face of Kedardome, but were told these were already booked. Curiously, there were no teams active on either of these routes while we were there.

Our attention was drawn to an un-named peak, 6504 metres high, by a letter from Chris Bonington to Andy Bowman of Centresport, in which it was described as "unclimbed and quite challenging". I visited the Alpine Club library in London to search for photographs in November, 1984. I failed to turn up any, but discovered the names and addresses of several people who had been to the area in previous years. These personal contacts were invaluable and confirmed my belief that the only way to find good objectives in the Himalaya is by the high-altitude grapevine.

We paid the peak fee in early 1985, just as the pound was at its weakest level for years, and in the next seven months the organisation gradually came together. Communication was difficult at times with Jerry working off-shore for half the time and Andy Scrase based permanently in Oslo, and I was grateful for the fact that Neil and I lived only 5 minutes from each other in Headingley. The expedition team only met together twice before flying out: once in Aberdeen for two hours in a pub, and then in Sheffield for packing, two days before our flight out!

We flew Syrian Arab Airways from Heathrow on August 18th and arrived in a humid Delhi on the following day. Operating from the air-conditioned haven of the Indian Mountaineering Federation we spent two days buying food and equipment in Delhi, then took the night bus to Rishikesh on 21st. Arriving there, we found the road north was blocked by landslides, and spent two trying days in Rishikesh, waiting for the road to be cleared.

On Sunday, 25th August, we travelled to Uttarkashi, where we were met by Budhi Singh Rana of Mount Support trekking agency. He arranged our porters, cook, purchase of food and fuel and was without doubt a great help. We took the bus to Gangotri on 27th, which was a harrowing journey along dirt tracks clinging to hillsides dropping steeply to the Bhagirathi river. Because of an officious policeman of dubious ancestry, the bus had to stop at Lanka and we had to walk the last 10 kilometres of the journey to Gangotri, but this gave us a little bit of extra acclimatisation and was a good warm-up.

We spent 2 days at Gangotri purely for acclimatisation purposes (3000 m), then on 30th and 31st we walked from there to our base camp at Tapoban at an altitude of 4,500 m. At this stage, the weather was still governed by the monsoon, with clouds all day and rain every afternoon, but 2 days after our arrival, it cleared and we assumed the stable period of post-monsoon weather had arrived.

We spent the next week establishing Advanced Base at Sunderban, and moved there permanently on the 8th, leaving our Liaison Officer and cook at Base

Camp. We had with us 17 days of food and fuel, ample to handle the carry from Advanced Base Camp to the foot of the mountain and an ascent of the peak, which looked in good condition.

We were established at Camp 1 (4800 m) at the foot of the mountain on the evening of the 10th, and were quite optimistic about our chances on the route. We were well acclimatised, having spent 10 days between 4500 and 4800 m, the weather was settled and we could pick out a reasonable route up the ridge bounding the south-west face, a series of snow fields linked by short rock walls and mixed terrain, to a long summit snow-ridge.

On the evening of the 11th, however, our luck changed, we woke the following morning to find 2" of snow covering our tents, and heard avalanches booming off the mountains all round. Having no idea how long a fresh fall of snow would take to consolidate, we decided to wait for 3 days. It continued to snow every day but on Sunday, 15th we established Camp 2 at 5,300 m. This was in a glacial bowl directly below the face, from where we could observe the powder avalanches pouring off the face. We waited a further day while it snowed some more, then on the morning of the 17th we decided to go for it. Individually, we all felt that the mountain was in a dangerous condition, but no-one had the courage to admit that to the others, and we had spent too long cooped up in bivvy tents. These two factors, combined with the necessity to "rub our noses up against it", and the limited food at our disposal forced us to try the route.

The approach to the right-hand ridge was up a broad couloir which was in an avalanche prone condition. As the day warmed up, the potential avalanches became reality and we found ourselves in a very dangerous situation, pinned against the left wall of the couloir. Our retreat was cut off by avalanches fanning out below us, so we roped up and climbed in knee deep collapsing 'demerera' snow with poor belays to a ledge system at 5,800 m, overlooking the couloir. From there, we watched the slides become larger and larger, both in the couloir and on the face above us. This last point was telling, as our planned route diverted onto the face at one point to avoid an over-

hanging rock step, and here the face was frequently swept by avalanches of fresh snow. With this factor, and with the snow in appalling condition covering all the belays, we decided to retreat and wait for better weather. We waited 'til midnight on our bivvy site, then packed and started back down the couloir at 2 a.m., light snow still falling and the sound of running water underneath our feet. It was obviously rather warm for the conditions: 19,000 feet up at 2 in the morning, and the temperature above zero! Not exactly the sort of conditions in which to be climbing a mixed route!

Back down at Camp 1, we debated long and hard about the feasibility of another attempt, but further snow gave us an answer, and on the 21st September, we retreated back to Advanced Base. On the 22nd, the weather cleared in a typically perverse way, giving us a slim chance, but on the 23rd and 24th it had a relapse with heavy snow, sleet and rain. We cleared Advance Base, then Base Camp on the 27th, as our food and permit expired on the 30th September.

After selling equipment in Uttarkashi, we travelled by bus to Delhi and arrived there in the early morning of 1st October. Neil and Andy Scrase left for the fleshpots of Goa a day later, while Jerry and I visited Agra and the Taj Mahal and festered in Delhi, before flying back on 7th October.

#### Conclusion

This was a very worthwhile trip, despite the failure and all the frustrations. We did our best on the mountain, and probably pushed it further than we should have done. In better conditions, the route would go, and while it's not the best objective in the area, it would be appropriate for a team of moderate ability. To anyone who tries it, I hope they have better weather than us.

Appendix 1: Travel

We flew with Syrian Arab Airways, with a stop-over at Frankfurt and Damascus, the latter involving a 2-hour stay in an airport transit lounge (not exactly the most pleasant place to be wearing Koflachs!). In Syrian Arab Airways' favour, the flight was cheap (£345) and they also generously gave us 60 kg extra free baggage allowance. This, combined with chunky hand luggage and a very understanding lady at the Heathrow check-in desk, meant that we managed to transport a quarter of a tonne of gear to India without paying a penny for excess baggage. Carrying ice axes and hardware through security remains a problem. Make sure the gear is well-marked with your name and destination, as it will be taken off you at security and given to the cabin crew for 'safe' keeping.

In Delhi, we used a combination of buses (very cheap, reliable and exciting to board!!!), auto-rickshaws and taxis. The last two usually rip you off unless you insist on them using the meter. To transport our gear to the bus station, the Super Bazar provided a truck. The night bus to Rishikesh was crowded, uncomfortable but safe compared to the mountain buses. It's wise to keep an eye on your gear at each stop, as Western rucksacks will walk if left unattended. We were delayed at Hardwar for a few hours as heavy rains had washed mud onto the road.

The delay at Rishikesh was much more prolonged, due to substantial landslides on the road. The grapevine indicated that it was possible to porter across these blocks, but with the amount of gear we had (13 heavy sacks) we elected to change buses as little as possible.

The bus journey from Uttarkashi to Gangotri was hair-raising, and our most frightening moment of the entire expedition was traversing a moving scree slope in a bus full of 40 people with a 500 foot drop to the river below.

The approach march from Gangotri to Tapoban is very pleasant, split into 14 km and 10 km stages with an overnight halt at Bhujbas. The second stage



was particularly enthralling, as we got our first views of the Bhagirathi peaks and Shivling.

Above Tapoban, it is necessary to drop down onto the lateral moraine of the Gangotri glacier, and then cross the moraine covered Kirti glacier. The going on these moraines is complex and difficult, but once the route is learnt, the walking becomes much easier. Similarly, above Sunderban one has to cross the Gangotri glacier, but fortunately the terrain is flat ice above the junction with the Ganohim glacier. Overall, it would take a fit acclimatised person carrying a light load about 6 hours to walk from Base Camp to the foot of the mountain, once the route was established.

#### Gear

With the weather being much warmer than usual, we were slightly over-equipped for the conditions. All the gear was equal to the conditions imposed on it, which, considering the amount of snow we had to withstand, is a point in its favour as regards waterproofing.

For underclothing, we wore Baselayer woollen wear from Davie, Mason & Co. Pile salopettes and jackets went over these, with Goretex shell clothing provided by Mountain Equipment salopettes and Troll jackets. Goretex-covered Lightline down jackets were supplied by Mountain Equipment. These last two items (jackets and duvets) were particularly well-designed, with a tracksuit-type of Goretex giving a high degree of mobility and light weight.

For footwear, we wore Koflach Ultras with alveolite inners. These proved warm, comfortable and easy to put on, having velcro rather than laces. Yeti-gaiters suffered badly on the moraine between Camps 1 and 2, and rands were trashed in a couple of days. Some sort of light fell boot (K.S.B., Trionic) would have been very useful on the approach.

Sleeping bags were exclusively from Mountain Equipment, being mainly Goretex shelled Expedition Redlines. These were very warm, but needed a face-cover to prevent spindrift from entering the bag. For sleeping on ice, 5-season Karrimats were found to be useful.

Rucksacks were from a variety of sources: Karrimor, Lowe and Troll. The

80-litre Lowe Triolets were particularly comfortable, although their huge size was sometimes a disadvantage!

Tents were provided from our own personal sources, the British Mountaineering Council Gear Pool, and the purchase of two new bivvy tents from Wintergear. At Base Camp, we used a Phoenix Phortress, a Snowdon Mouldings Limpet and a Blacks Tunnel Tent (known for the duration of the trip as Dougal). On the hill, we used Wintergear Mountain Geminis, which were extremely light (3lb 14oz) and easy to erect. They were small but once accustomed to living in cramped conditions, we found them acceptable providing all but essential gear was left outside.

We used paraffin stoves at Base and Advanced Base, using Indian cast iron monsters and Optimus 00 respectively. Both proved reliable. Above Advanced Base Camp, we used Epigas Propane mix connected to Ergoflame burners with specially lengthened tubes to enable the cylinder to be warmed inside a bivvy bag while the burner was operating. These were also reliable, although we had a little difficulty with one of our burners. MSR stove shields were extremely useful in conserving fuel.

As we spent so little time on the hill, any review of climbing equipment is going to be based on our experiences during "pre-expedition training" in the Alps.

The lightweight Beal 8.8 mm ropes kinked badly but any doubts about their strength were dispelled in a 100 foot fall of fall factor 1.5!

Harnesses from Troll were light and very easy to put on over crampons.

In all, the gear we took performed well, and while there were little niggling faults here and there, we were generally delighted with its design and suitability to the conditions.

#### Medical

Although we felt like a bunch of hypochondriacs at times, for the most part we had very few medical illnesses, and Jerry was infuriatingly healthy for the whole trip.

The rest of us all suffered upset stomachs on arrival in Delhi, myself, Andy Scrase and Neil in increasing order of severity. In Neil's case, this appeared to weaken his resistance to other bugs, and when we arrived at Gangotri (3000 m) he went down with a chest infection. We treated this with an antibiotic, Erythromycin, and left him to rest at that altitude, while the rest of the team walked in to Base Camp.

At Base Camp we developed bad colds for the first few days, but once over that we were all relatively healthy. No-one took diamox, the acclimatisation drug; we found that it was far better to take the ascent gradually. In particular, the three nights we spent at 3000 m before walking in to 4500 m were felt to be very valuable in preventing Acute Mountain Sickness.

Apart from the Erythromycin, we also found the following items of medical gear to be useful: Valium, a sedative, for use during bad nights; Fisherman's Friends for sore throats; Calamine for sunburnt feet (!) and mosquito bites and of course Aspirin and Paracetamol.

#### Food

While travelling, we ate local food exclusively which, providing we were sensible and stuck to vegetables, didn't give us any serious internal problems. Pre-expedition training in the curry houses of Leeds obviously paid off here!

At Base Camp, our cook produced miracles from a large supply of staples (rice, dhal, soya, etc.) with fresh vegetables for the first week. At Advanced Base Camp and above, we survived on a breakfast of Jordans crunchy bars, mid-day meals of Yorkies and Peanut protein bars, and dinners of freeze dried.

All the food was a success, that is it was all eaten. In particular, the Jordans, the peanut bars from Healthilife and nutrient drinks from Sportive Perform were exceptional.

## LEEDS GANGOTRI EXPEDITION 1985

Financial ReportTransactions in Britain:

<u>Income</u>	<u>£</u>	<u>Expenses</u>	<u>£</u>
Mount Everest Foundation	400	Peak Fee	805
British Mountaineering Council	550	Liaison Officers Equipment	28
Leeds University Mountaineering Club	100	Camping Equipment	143
Leeds University Union	300	Medical Equipment	76
West Yorkshire M.C.C.	100	Insurance	387
Leeds City Council	100	Film	188
Mouat Jones Travel Bursary	250	Pre-Expedition Administration	123
Geoteam (U.K.) Ltd.	300	Food Purchased in U.K.	200
Personal Contributions	2,600	Personal Gear	1,370
		Air Flights	1,380
	<u>4,700</u>		<u>4,700</u>

Transactions in India: (based on an exchange rate of Rs 16 to the £)

<u>Income</u>	<u>£</u>	<u>Expenses</u>	<u>£</u>
Personal Contributions	830	Accommodation & Meals	146
Sale of Camping Gear	36	Transport (buses & taxis)	90
	—	Food & Fuel	209
	866	Camping Supplies	47
	—	Porters and Cook	374
			<u>866</u>

Total Turnover: £5,566 i.e. £1,366 each.

Total Cost to Each Member  $\frac{2,600 + 830}{4}$

= £857 each.

PRINCIPAL FEATURES  
OF THE GANGOTRI

AFTER "SWISS FOUNDATION  
FOR ALPINE RESEARCH :  
GARHWAL - WEST"

