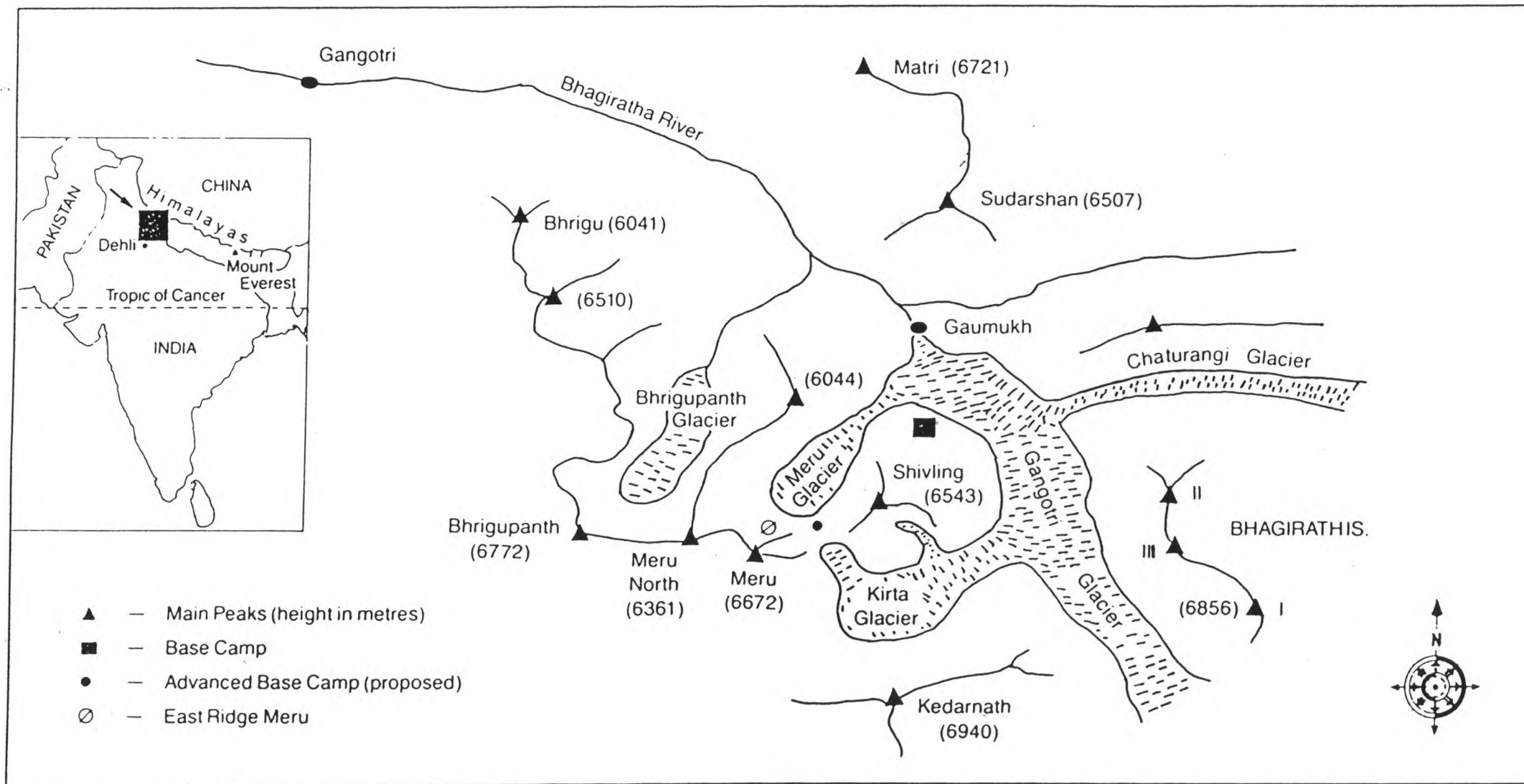


B R I T I S H E A S T R I D G E

M E R U E X P E D I T I O N

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Map of Gangotri Region

BRITISH MERU EAST RIDGE EXPEDITION 1989

TEAM MEMBERS

Andrew Macnae
Gavin Thomas
Paul Bale
Steve Thompson
Richard Spillett

David Cosford
Richard Luff
Ian Brown
Felicity Brown

INTRODUCTION

Meru's East Ridge resembles a spur as one approaches it and forms a compelling obvious line to the main summit of Meru at 6,672 metres.

It has been attempted twice, once by a British expedition in 1985, led by John Jones, and a Japanese team in 1988. Having read reports and spoken with John, we decided the ridge was an obvious choice for an attempt in 1989. The Gangotri itself is a superb area to visit with easy access combined with spectacular granite peaks promising a wide variety of climbing for all concerned. Permission was applied for and duly received from the IMF for the East Ridge from September to October 1989.

EXPEDITION PLANNING:

SPONSORSHIP

David was charged with the responsibility of promoting the expedition by putting together a brochure for the potential sponsors. 500 brochures were produced and sent to a variety of companies. Various delays in compiling the brochure meant a later than planned despatch of brochures in April (a January mailing would have been preferable and ensured a greater response). Despite this the merits of a quality leaflet were confirmed and provided us with an excellent response in the given timescales. We extend our thanks to Tony Reid and Colin Squirrell of The Product Index, Howard Ashton-Jones of Cotswold The Outdoor People, John West, Mornflake Foods, Thomas Tunnock & Company and Lloyds Bank for their kind assistance.

TRANSPORT

We booked our flights through Steve Bell and Steve Berry of Himalayan Kingdoms, Bristol, who negotiated a 35kg baggage allowance per person for both outward and return flights. They also provided us with contacts in Dehli and this country through whom we could organise the despatch of our freight. This consisted of one case of food and gear and one of Epigas bottles.

Abercrombie and Kent in New Dehli, with the able assistance of Captain Alok Chandola and Ashish Bhatnagar, were superb in arranging all transport and logistics to base camp once our equipment had appeared from Dehli airport. Unfortunately, they were not given the task of clearing the freight which, in hindsight, we would recommend. It would not only save time and money but also a lot of weary hanging around and fretful negotiations with customs officials. Abercrombie & Kent's assistance included arranging porters, cooking gear and base camp tent (through "Mount Support" in Uttarkashi). A summary of costs is detailed in Appendix I.

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FREIGHT

Unfortunately, the need to freight a crate of climbing gear, high altitude rations and canned food plus a crate of 75 Epigas bottles (packed to airline specification) caused us considerable problems in India.

We used Expedition Freight although SOS Air Cargo of Manchester are an alternative option. They were most helpful in arranging the packing of the gas canisters and we duly dropped our crate of gear and food off at the transport agents on time. Air France were the carriers and we would pick the freight up at the offices of Daga Air Agents upon our arrival in Dehli. We understood these would be cleared through customs and the Epigas canisters would be available from the IMF offices.

Unfortunately when Andy and Richard Luff arrived in Dehli, a week earlier than the rest of the team, neither had happened. The airway bill we had been provided with was the wrong number and Air France could not locate the Epigas crate. In addition, when this had been located it could not be released to anyone except D.B. Cosford whose name had been put on the airway bill documents. We had assumed prior to our departure that anyone from the expedition could clear the cargo.

Daga Air would not help clear the freight and charged us 100 Rupees for the pleasure of handing over the Airway Bill (as did Air France for the Epigas). Dave's first 48 hours in Dehli were spent with our own hired agent, Mr. Oberoid, trying to clear both crates. We now know that Mr. Oberoid took full advantage of our inexperience and plight.

The moral of this experience is:-

1. Always confirm arrangements regarding freight in writing and ensure instructions are clear.
2. Freight to be sent out in expedition's name or name of person who will receive it.
3. Ensure there is an agent there to clear freight through the substantial Dehli red tape. Our choice would be Abercrombie and Kent.

FINANCE

For security, American Express travellers cheques were taken out to finance the trip.

However, make sure the cheques are all cashed in Dehli at the American Express office before departure. This would have saved us a 3 day round trip to change sufficient cheques to pay for porters, etc. Travellers cheques cannot be changed in Uttarkashi and in only certain larger branches of the Punjab National Bank in the region of Uttar Pradesh (please note agent bank varies by region). The State Bank of India and Canara Bank would change only National Westminster and Midland Bank travellers cheques.

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NEW DEHLI, INDIA : 21ST - 29TH AUGUST

The advance team's brief was to:-

1. Make sure all was OK at the I.M.F. and arrange a Liaison Officer.
2. Hire transport to Gangotri via Abercrombie and Kent.
3. Pick up the freight that should have been cleared by agents in Dehli,

Things were not going too well on the 22nd. In addition to the freight problems the I.M.F. told us we did not even have clearance, let alone a Liaison Officer to climb the East Ridge of Meru. After much haggling we persuaded them that we did have clearance and a Liaison Officer was promised for the 28th.

The clearance of the freight was further compounded by a national holiday, a weekend, and a computer breakdown which, in addition to the incorrect paperwork and poor organisation, slowed things up considerably.

Eventually the freight was cleared by midday on 29th August by which time the rest of the team had completed the necessary last minute shopping (base camp chairs, sun hats, etc.) and our bus had been hired to take us to Gangotri.

More bad news! There was to be a general strike on 30th and all roads north would be blocked.

Derek, the driver, was still keen to move, so early on the afternoon of 29th, with the freight loaded, we set off for Rishikesh to meet Richard Luff who had gone ahead to arrange accommodation.

By this time our Liaison Officer, Ashwani Sood, a young Dehli student, had joined us on his first trip, together with a Shivling bound US team who were sharing our bus and Liaison Officer.

THE DRIVE TO GANGOTRI

Because of the effect of the general strike Derek decided to drive through the night to beat the roadblocks under cover of darkness and hopefully reach Uttarkashi before dawn on 30th.

He did us proud. Having picked up Richard on the way we bribed our way through roadblocks where necessary and woke up the Bhagarathi Palace Hotel in Uttarkashi at 6.00 a.m. where we slept and recuperated.

Andy and Sood registered the expedition at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (miles up a hillside) followed by the Superintendent of Police (bad tempered) and another VIP, whose job description was unclear. They all read our letters from the I.M.F. signed an appropriate form and wished us luck.

At Mount Support we encountered the efficient Buhdi Singh Rana and soon had porters/Sirdar, cook, stoves, fuel, base camp tent and food supplies arranged. We still had no money and found to our dismay that the banks refused to change our Amex travellers cheques. An emergency meeting was convened and Dave and Ian were volunteered to return to Rishikesh to find money. A 5.00 a.m. bus was booked for them.

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Derek had been warned of landslides on the precipitous Gangotri road and suggested we leave at 5.00 a.m. as well to give us the best chance of getting through.

All went well until 10.00 a.m. when we encountered the first landslide. It took an hour to clear and a few miles up the road we joined a queue of buses. The news wasn't good. Multiple landslides for the next 20 miles - 3 days to clear. Derek started to turn the bus round until we objected and managed to talk him out of it. The smaller slides ahead could be cleared by hand, there being no shortage of people stranded on the road, the bigger slides were blasted by the army from a nearby base. At one point a bridge had been washed away but Derek with the "bit" now firmly between his teeth ploughed on relentlessly. Indian buses are hardy animals!

To our surprise we reached the end of the road - Gangotri just before dark. Having quickly unloaded Derek turned the bus around and "legged it" down the valley before the imminent rains. We checked into the Tourist Rest House.

THE WAIT - AND WALK-IN TO BASE CAMP: 31ST AUGUST - 5TH SEPTEMBER

The morning of the 31st dawned wet, very wet. We packed our gear into 25 x 25kg porter loads, our porters having arrived from Uttarkashi the previous night. At the appointed hour of departure, however, there was no sign of them. It transpired that an Indian expedition had poached them with promises of ready cash, something we were unable to provide until Dave and Ian arrived. The Americans left for base camp with their porters (from the competitor Yeti agency) at midday in heavy rain accompanied by most of our team. Andy remained behind to supervise the loads and was eventually joined by Budhi Singh Rana who, after much shouting, quickly despatched donkeys and more porters to base camp. They caught our team up at Bhoujbas, 13km up the trail and the overnight stop.

Andy remained in Gangotri for Dave and Ian who were by now overdue and did not arrive until the evening of the 3rd. The heavy rain had caused massive slides and taken the road out above Uttarkashi. On the 2nd Richard Luff reported that Paul and Gavin had reached Tapovan base camp at 4463m on the 1st in very heavy snow. On the 3rd the last porter loads made it through and the weather began to improve.

When Dave and Ian arrived in Gangotri they had been to 3 cities and 11 banks in order to change the required number of travellers cheques. Their return was fraught with problems culminating in a 40km walk in flip flops to circumvent a number of landslides. However, with loads packed we could now head for Tapovan to join the rest of the team.

The pilgrim trail gave us a beautiful easy walk to Tapovan via Bhoujbas and Gaumukh, the glacial source of the Bhagarathi river and hence the Ganges. It is here that the hardy pilgrims journey to bathe. Ian joined them and found it very cold. Above Gaumukh we walked on to the more difficult terrain of the Gangotri glacier, crossing broken moraine ridges from left to right culminating in a steep climb up loose ground to reach Tapovan. Paul met us with a "brew". Base camp at last.

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BASE CAMP TO COL 5700M : 5TH - 12TH SEPTEMBER

Base camp occupied a large flat spectacular basin on the side of the Gangotri glacier. Above rises Shivling, wildly impressive, with the precipitous west faces of the Bhagarathi's shapely peaks facing us across the glacier. Directly behind our tents was the moraine ridge bounding the Meru glacier.

Our route took us up the moraine and under Shivling's monstrous north face. The glacier then makes a sharp turn south travelling beneath Meru's east face rising steeply to the col at 5700m. The ground leading up to the col is steep and seraced and, with our route necessitating a crossing of this at some point, it formed an obvious avalanche trap.

Over the period 5th to 11th September we established first a "dump camp" at 5000m, christened the "Green Man" after Dave's "local" where most of the trip was planned. Steve and Paul then forced a trail through deep snow to the col and established a camp at 5700m. This was stocked on the 11th by the rest of the team who descended the same day as bad weather closed in. The best possible line to the col rose up the left hand side of the ice fall, crossing to the col at the top. It was clearly prone to avalanche and prompted Paul to pull out of any subsequent attempt on the mountain. On the 12th we rested, Gavin and Richard Spillett had bad coughs and needed rest. Steve, Dave and Andy decided to keep the momentum going and moved up the next day to the "Green Man" and subsequently to the col to start on the route proper. Richard Luff, Ian and Felicity would follow a day behind and Richard Spillett and Gavin when they had recuperated.

MERU - THE EAST RIDGE : 13TH - 24TH SEPTEMBER

The 23rd found Richard Spillett, Steve, Gavin and Andy at the col watching cloud clear slowly from the mountain. The weather was beginning to hamper our efforts.

Up until the 13th Dave, Steve and Andy had spent 3 nights at the "Green Man" enduring heavy intermittent snow preventing any movement on the mountain. When they moved up to the col on 16th the trail had vanished, the going was very hard and the A.B.C. snowhole and tent needed much excavation to make them habitable once again. Gavin and Richard Spillett arrived the next day and enlarged the camp with a further snowhole and tent prior to Felicity, Ian and Richard Luff joining us.

The weather continued unsettled and we needed at least one clear night before we could consider moving on to the east ridge. The line up the first 600m lead diagonally up the east face and was prone to constant spindrift avalanches both during and after snowfall. The weather did not lift for a further couple of days so to conserve our high altitude food Dave, Ian, Felicity and Richard Luff went down leaving the 4 main climbing members with enough food and gas to last out.

The cloud cleared on 23rd and at 5.00 a.m. on 24th we moved up the east ridge. The snow was very deep just above the camp and Steve turned back after an exhausting hour's trudge. The last few days spent at 5700m had taken their toll.

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The remainder of the team gained height on the face, very slowly, finding the going desperately hard. As it steepened to above 50° the ground became more dangerous and unstable. At a point 100m below the head wall they should have found the bivouac site used by the 1985 team. The large rock under which that team had slept had either fallen off or was covered by snow, the only chance of a suitable "bivvi" was on the ridge itself.

It was 2.00 p.m. as they roped up with the snow melting and becoming increasingly unstable. Gavin lead up the first 50m of precarious ground to a decent belay spot. Richard Spillett and Andy followed with Andy leading through towards a slight dip in the corniced ridge above. It took a harrowing 3 hours before Andy reached the double corniced ridge at 6300m. It was sharp and very exposed with a sheer drop of some 1000m on the other side. After much searching Andy took a belay on a lump of snow formed by the two big cornices and by the time the others reached him it was 5.00 p.m. and snowing again. Visibility was poor and a decision had to be made on where to sleep. Do we try for a better spot higher up or endure a fearful night sitting in bucket seats on the corniced ridge? None of the team could remember anything of any potential above so opted for the latter. The night was most unpleasant.

THE DESCENT : 25TH - 27TH SEPTEMBER

It dawned clear on the 25th as they struggled out of their frozen "bivvi" bags and thawed out. The team could now clearly see the ground above and their impressions from the preceding night were confirmed. There was no secure "bivvi" site anywhere.

"To go on or not to go on?", that was the question! By 8.00 a.m. very high winds were blowing mackerel-type cloud over the top of Meru and heavier cloud was building up in the valley below. To be stranded on the face in heavy snow would be suicidal and after little sleep during the night all 3 were very tired.

The decision to descend was justified within half an hour as the snow began to fall. We were abseiling 100m at a time in "white-out" conditions and had to take big pendulum swings across the face to retrace our steps. Down-climbing was impossible as constant spindrift avalanches were pouring off the face. There was no belay point for the last 100m to the bergschrund so a controlled downclimb/slide was the order of the day. It was late in the afternoon when we finally reached A.B.C. where Steve had a "brew" ready. The 26th saw another heavy snow fall and high winds battering the tent. The team were cold and tired and a quick retreat to base camp was essential to recuperate.

The weather cleared during the night and in the early morning the camp was stripped; we headed for "base". The intense cold had taken its toll with all members suffering frostnip.

The additional snow had made the slopes of the col very unstable. The snow was deep and powdery, progress was slow with the team at times sinking up to their chests in the powder. Rucksacks were removed to ease progress and pushed ahead. All went well until Gavin's sack suddenly slid away and headed off downhill into a crevasse. Gavin tried to follow but the unstable slope cracked beneath him. A massive slab avalanche slid away from under his feet, although Gavin managed to anchor himself safely to the underlying ground. The proverbial "shaken but not stirred". The sack, however, was lost!

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The final slope below was equally unstable and all were hesitant to move on. Two sacks were thrown down first and set off a second avalanche breaking the trail for a safe descent to the "Green Man". Unnecessary gear was dumped and after a welcome "brew" we wandered back to base camp exhausted and relieved to be off the mountain.

BHAGARATHI II : 28TH SEPTEMBER - 1ST OCTOBER

On the 28th we had a much needed rest. Porters had been ordered for the 1st to take 5 of the team out with the original plan for Andy, Richard Spillet, Paul and Gavin to stay at base for a further attempt on Meru. However, prevailing conditions plus the loss of Gavin's gear meant both he and Paul would have to depart with the rest. Extra porters were hastily arranged.

The support team were keen for some action and Sood gave us permission to try Bhagarathi II. On the 29th the team, bar Steve and Paul, set off for the base of the easy east face route of this mountain.

A Karakorum experience team were already "in situ" and we found their base camp at 4800m up the Nandaban valley. One of their team, Pam Andrews, a friend of Gavin's, joined us and we completed the easy walk up to camp 1 at 5800m on the 30th.

From there we watched the Karakorum experience team descending from the top. They had set out early at 3.00 a.m. but did not return until 4.00 p.m. They reported poor snow conditions and some unexpectedly steep climbing just below the summit.

Upon their advice we decided to set out early; Andy and Gavin soloing, the rest to follow roped if necessary.

In the event only Dave, Richard Luff and Pam got away on time at 2.00 a.m., Gavin and Andy following an hour later. The rest of the team decided to stay put waiting for the sun to come up.

Towards dawn Gavin and Andy had taken the lead and were pleasantly surprised to reach the top at 6.30 a.m. as the sun came up. The last 50m was an interesting mix of rock and ice whilst the ground below was straightforward though exposed (45-55°). Sadly Richard Luff and Pam had turned back at 6400m whilst Dave got to the base of the mixed rock band just 50m from the top. Not wishing to solo this part he waited for Andy and Gavin to return. The downclimbing was more difficult, interesting but not desperate and all had returned to camp 1 by 9.00 a.m. With the porters' arrival at Tapovan imminent we stripped the camp and returned to walk out on 1st October. Andy and Richard Spillett stayed behind in the hope of trekking up some of the high valleys, but in the event the winter snows arrived early and they departed for Delhi with Sood and Ram on 3rd October.

APPENDIX I

Income		Expenditure	
BMC	£700	Flights	£3,690
MEF	£600	Bus Hire Up	£380
Flights	£3,690	Porters Up	£270
Pers Contribs	£3,003	Porters Rtn	120
Peak Fee Contribs	£630	Visas	225
Insce Paid	£875	Insce	£875
Visas Paid	£225	Equipment:	
Lloyds Bank	£500	Lyon	£386
		Mainair	£112
		W/Country	£500
		Coleman	£30
		Allcord	£176
		Clothing	
		B.Camp Tent	£60
		Cook	£140
		B.Camp Stove	
		& Utensils	£48
		Peak Fee	£630
		Food	£248
		Epigas	£120
		Freight-Equip	£298
		-Gas	£268
		Mount Support	200
		Freight - India	£230
		L.O. Gear	£450
		Beer	£30
		Music	£50
		Base Camp Food	£150
		Hotels & Food	433
		Sundries	104
TOTAL	£10,223		£10,223

EQUIPMENT NOTES

Most equipment used on the expedition is standard but a few items are worthy of note.

STOVES

At base camp heavy duty kerosene stoves were used which were hired from Mount Support in Uttarkashi. Whilst these operated unpredictably on occasions, "Ram" always managed to get them going. It is worth taking the advice of the agency as to how much fuel is needed as they can be thirsty.

We took an MSR X-GK as back-up but these were not used.

On the hill, Epigas HP Alpine stoves were used, (the gas was imported via air freight). These worked very well indeed and have a pre-heat tube and a liquid feed. This coupled with the flexible tube that allows the cannister to be lifted off the snow for warming make this a very efficient stove in cold conditions. Specific packing regulations have to be adhered to and Freightage agencies will advise and arrange for cannisters to be appropriately packed. The freightage of the gas in "hold" luggage seems to be getting increasingly risky. All baggage is now X-rayed prior to check-in so gas cannisters and battery powered objects will be removed.

TENTAGE

Mountain Supernovas were used which provided excellent cover and were comfortable for 3 people, snug with 4.

THERMORESTS

It is worth noting that Thermorests do not have any tie-on points. This provides problems on exposed "bivvies" where we found them slippery which was disconcerting on the East Ridge "bivvi".

CRAMPONS

Everyone had either Grivel 2F's or Messner Scissors. Whilst the 2F's are undeniably the better crampon for technical ground they do "ball up" more than the Messners. Vibram anti-balling plates are available.

ROPE

We climbed on a 100m x 8mm rope which allows big pitches to be climbed and knotless abseiling.

FOOD NOTES

- Although quantities of local produce were bought in Uttarkashi, a better selection is available and at cheaper prices in Delhi. However, you must ensure produce travels if bought there.
- No bread flour was available in Uttarkashi.
- Because of the religious significance of the Gangotri area, the Liaison Officer and Cook, although omnivorous, observe strict vegetarian diet above Gaumukh. Hence the correct quantities of vegetables and rice/dhal need to be provided since they will not eat any Western tinned fish or meats.
- Spaghetti although providing a welcome variety to diet does not cook well at altitude (base camp - 4750 metres). Pasta shells are preferred.
- Pressure cookers are essential at base camp and should be routinely supplied by the Mountain Agents. It is worth checking.
- The most popular high altitude food turned out to be Batchelors Savoury Noodles. These are nutritious, tasty and very easily and quickly dehydrated. They may be combined with a number of other foods but were used by ourselves to supplement the main high altitude army arctic ration packs. It is preferable to vary the single menu supplied to our expedition as the appeal of chicken supreme began to wane in the latter part of the trip.

LIST OF SPONSORS

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The Product Index

John West Foods

Ever Ready Limited

Thomas Tunnock Limited

Morning Foods Limited

Cotswold The Outdoor People

Air India

Kavli Limited

Bernard Matthews Kitchens

Karrimor

Berghaus

Mountain Equipment Limited

Lyon Equipment

Camtec Limited t/a Wild Country

Allcord

Colemans

Mainair

Our thanks are also extended to:-

Himalayan Kingdoms

Angela Stratton

Howard Ashton-Jones

SUMMARY OF DATES

August 21	AM and RL arrived Dehli
28	Rest of team arrived Dehli
29	Leave Dehli reaching Uttarkashi early 30th
31	ST, RS, FB, AM, RL, GT, PB leave Uttarkashi for Gangotri
	DC and IB return to Rishikesh and Dehra Dun on "bank run"
September 1	ST, RS, FB, RL, GT, PB reach Bhoujbas. AM stays Gangotri. DC and IB to Dehra Dun
2	GT, PB to Tapovan base camp (4463m)
3	FB, RS to Tapovan, DC and IB reach Gangotri
4	ST, RL to Tapovan.
5	AM, DC, IB reach base camp
6	PB, GT, RS, ST "reccy" the Meru glacier
7	AM, GT, RS, IB, FB, RL, DC establish Green Man camp (5000m) and return to Base Camp.
8	PB, ST to Green Man
9	GT, RS, AM to Green Man, PB and ST to col (5700m)
10	GT, RS, AM to col. PB and ST descend to base. RL, DC, FB, IB to Green Man
11	RL, DC, IB to col. All descend the same day to base
12	Rest
13	ST, AM, DC to Green Man
14	Snow all day
15	Snow all day but FB, IB and RL move up to Green Man and descend to base same day
16	ST, AM, DC to col. RS, GT to Green Man
17	RS, GT to col. FB, IB, RL to Green Man. Snow at night

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September 18	FB, IB, RL to col. Snow at night
19	Snow at col
20	FB, IB, RL, DC descend to base. Snow again
21	Snow at col
22	Weather clears
23	AM, GT, RS, ST attempt east ridge. ST turns back whilst others reach bivouac site at 6300m
24	AM, GT, RS, retreat in bad weather
25	Heavy snow
26	AM, GT, RS, ST retreat from col. RL and DC reach Little Shivling ridge
27	Rest
28	AM, GT, RS, RL, DC, FB, IB to Bhagarathi II base camp
29	All move up to camp 1 at 5800m
30	GT, AM to Bhagarathi II summit (6512m)
	DC to 6450m, RL to 6400m, RS and AM descend to Tapovan same day to join ST and PB. Others to Bhoubasa
October 1	ST, PB to Bhoubasa
3	Base camp dismantled. RS and AM to Dehli