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MATHO KANGRI EXPEDITION

an account of the first British ascent
of Matho Kangri during August 1992

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INTRODUCTION

Matho Kangri is one of a group of mountains in the Zaskar range, which is actually in the neighbouring kingdom of Ladakh. The group consists of a variety of peaks separating the Indus and Markha Valleys, situated just South of the capital city of Leh. The main peaks in the range are Stok Kangri, Golep Kangri, Matho Kangri and Nimaling (Kangri). The word Kangri means "snowy peak"; the first part of the mountains' names being derived from the village at their foot.

In summer, the southern sides of mountains in this range are predominantly steep scree and loose rock, with snow and ice largely confined to Northern aspects. Stok Kangri and Golep Kangri are glaciated with extensive snow and ice, whilst the North Face of Matho Kangri is almost entirely ice. However, bad weather can lead to considerable accumulations of snow throughout the range.

The area are a popular destination for trekkers, offering good routes based in Leh, which is served by frequent flights from Delhi. In addition, Stok Kangri is designated by the I.M.F. as a trekking peak (ie not requiring Liaison Officer etc.), and is a regularly climbed by UK trekking companies. The highest peak in the area is Kang Yissay, (which is further South, on the other side of the Nimaling Plain) and has had a number of ascents. Matho Kangri was first climbed in 1985 by the Japanese, who named it Yan Kangri. In 1989 it was climbed by an Indian team, who fixed ropes. The latter made ascents of three of the four listed summits. (Himalayan Journal, 46, 192-4)

In 1991 permission was sought from the I.M.F. for an ascent in August 1992, and applications made to both the M.E.F. and B.M.C. for funding.

GEOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

The group of mountains of which Matho Kangri is one are usually referred to as the Stok group. Matho Kangri is listed at location *lat* 335400, *long* 773000, with a height of 6230 metres. From viewpoints in the Indus Valley the peaks in this group rise up behind a complex of foothills, and give the impression of a continuous range. Existing maps (see footnote) which include Matho Kangri show it as the Eastern continuation of the line of the Stok Kangri/Golep Kangri massif: in fact it is detached, and lies North of the line.

Four summits are listed for Matho Kangri.(Himalayan Journal 46)

Matho Kangri I.	This is directly above the North face
Matho Kangri II.	Due west of the main summit, and joined to it by a ridge.
Matho Kangri III and IV.	We were unable to identify these peaks.

Altitude measurements taken during the expedition cast doubt on its published height of 6230m: it may be lower.

The mountain was briefly studied by M. Ratty during an expedition to Stok Kangri in 1991; further study was later possible using photographs taken at that time. A gully, clearly visible from below, provided an obvious line of ascent to a col on the West ridge connecting summits I and II, with the ridge providing a continuation to the summit. The North face also seemed feasible, although its angle could not be easily judged from photographs. Accounts of previous expeditions on the mountain were vague as to route, but suggested that there was some technical difficulty to be found. One Indian expedition had fixed ropes for 50m.

The complex geology of the area has produced spectacular, colourful and beautiful formations. The combination of conglomerates such as the Indus molasses, shales and granite has produced apparently excellent climbing in some places, but on Matho Kangri the rock is broken and tedious.

Travel and communication in the area is comparatively easy. An excellent military road follows the Indus valley both west and east of Leh. Those villages not on that road are served by jeep tracks or pony trails. The latter criss cross the Zaskar range, providing a fine network of treks, and visit spectacular and occasionally remote places. The village of Matho is reached by a good road, and the valley below Matho Kangri is an easy day's walk along a pony trail. In summer it is populated with shepherds and their flocks, living under canvas or in stone buildings. Such a short walk-in would not provide any acclimatisation, and so the expedition began with an acclimatisation trek lasting ten days.

footnote: maps showing Matho Kangri:

- 1 US Army Map Service (1962) series U502, sheet N143-12
- 2 Chabloz P., (1989) *Carte Artou Ladakh Zaskar*, Editions Olizanc

THE EXPEDITION

The primary aim of the expedition was to make a first British ascent of Matho Kangri. Four weeks were allowed, using Leh as a base. After acclimatisation, possible routes of ascent would be explored from base camp below the mountain, and ascent(s) made.

A team of five was made up from members of Lichfield Mountaineering Club. Four climbers would be involved in the ascent: Michael Ratty, Alan Rowland, John Shelley and Trevor Willis. All were experienced climbers and mountaineers; two had experience at altitude in the Himalaya and the Alps. In addition, Anne Alcock accompanied the expedition, but was not involved in the climb.

The expedition calendar was as follows:

Planning & organisation in UK:	Dec '91- July '92
Freight and other arrangements in Delhi:	July 20-27
Expedition flies to Leh:	July 28
Acclimatisation trek:	August 1-9
Exploration and ascent of Matho Kangri:	August 10-23

Planning and organisation. Most of this work was undertaken by Michael Ratty and Trevor Willis. Advice was provided by the M.E.F. and R.G.S. and B.M.C.. An expedition portfolio, squeezed onto one side of A4, and a standard letter requesting sponsorship, support, and/or discount were produced. Expedition members sent these to various organisations and manufacturers of outdoor equipment. Responses were excellent, and although time consuming, this proved to be a worthwhile exercise.

The greatest problems were in completing arrangements with the Indian Authorities. Communication with the I.M.F. was slow. The issue of visas was only possible at the last moment, and the appointment of a Liaison Officer was carried out the day before our flight to Leh! Retrieving our freight (one small barrel) from the cargo terminal took up most of two days. We would recommend any expedition to allow extra time for Indian bureaucracy, and if possible to establish communications with an agency in Delhi by fax, so they can act on the expedition's behalf.

Acclimatisation was achieved by a ten day trek from Spitok to Hemis, through the Markha Valley. This involved crossing two high passes- the Ganda La and the Kongmaru La- and passed the historic fortifications at Hankar. It also circumnavigated the Stok range, providing some opportunity for studying the peaks from the South. According to the maps, Matho Kangri should be visible from the Nimaling Plain. It is not. The mountain rising North of the Plain is Nimaling (Kangri?), and its Eastern slopes, which descend to form the Kongmaru La, hide Matho Kangri.

Base Camp was set up in the Mirutse valley on August 12th. The following day, Advanced Base Camp was established almost directly below and to the left of the North face of the mountain. The face was largely ice with snow in places, and not steep. There were no obvious avalanche lines, nor any sign of debris from avalanches. Below the face, the valley was a flat boulder and stone field. On either side of the Face, steep snow or ice filled gullies descended from near the summit. At the opposite end of the valley was a gully leading directly to a col on the west ridge, that we had seen from below.

Trevor Willis and Deepak Jhalani (the Liaison Officer) were anxious not to waste time, and set off the same evening with a lightweight tent aiming for the col. This would establish a camp on the mountain itself that would be suitable for retreat or shelter during ascents or traverses. It was agreed that the remaining three members would follow on in the morning, and meet at the col. Given good conditions all would continue to the summit.

The following morning was fine and clear. From the stony hollow below the face, an alternative line to the ridge appeared feasible, via a traversing line below the face. This was a mistake. The traversing line was interrupted regularly by broken rock ribs and gullies. The rock unstable, and where the gullies were ice-filled and steep, it was necessary to rope up. Eventually, a steep rib was met which had to be climbed for some 50m before it was possible to descend into the gully on the far side. The gully led steeply to snowfields below the summit. However, in order to rejoin the others, a line was taken to a notch in the ridge, which involved climbing snow and ice for some 100m. The diversion was tiring, and cost several hours.

Once on the ridge, the route followed a line which stayed below the friable rocks of the ridge itself, on its southern side. We were walking on scree or loose rock for most of the time, until below a short rib, where a scramble gave rapid access to the extensive summit. Progress was slow, with altitude and the long day taking its toll. Also the weather had begun to deteriorate, and views were limited.

Once back at ABC the weather became unpleasant. For three days, cloud was down below the level of the camp, and there was intermittent heavy rain. On the fourth morning, we awoke to a blizzard. It was now obvious that, with only three days left, an attempt on the North face or the various gullies was out of the question. Alan Rowland accompanied by the sirdar, Dorje, trudged up to the col in heavy snow, and dismantled the camp. The next day, ABC was dismantled and the team retreated to Base Camp.

FINANCE

The total budget for the expedition was £12900, made up as follows:

Travel	£ 2800
General equipment	£ 1700
Peak Fees & Liaison Officer	£ 1400
Local labour, food & accommodation	£ 3600
Insurance & visas	£ 810
Personal equipment	£ 1870
Airfreight	£ 240
High Altitude Food	£ 180
Miscellaneous	£ 300
 Total	 £12900

The primary source of finance was the expedition's members. In addition grants were obtained from the M.E.F., and B.M.C.. Donations were also received from South Staffs Water Co, British Gas, Midland Electricity Board, and Polypipe. Duofold generously provided thermal clothing for the entire expedition. Multipower Nutrition supplied high energy bars and *Top Form* drink powder free of charge. A variety of waterproofing agents were generously given by Nikwax. Lichfield Tents kindly loaned a tent for Base Camp use free of charge.

A variety of other manufacturers provided goods at substantial discount: Phoenix, Craghopper, North Cape, Troll, Viking, Mountain Technology, BCB Foods, Allcord, DMM, Fuji, Ever Ready.

In exchange for these gifts and services the Expedition provided reports and photographs of the equipment in use, where this was appropriate.

CONCLUSIONS

The team succeeded in making the first British ascent of Matho Kangri by a straightforward route. All the members reached the summit, which was a fine achievement for those whose first Himalayan peak this was. Other more interesting routes to the summit clearly exist, and given good conditions, should be perfectly feasible for those with some technical ability.

None of the maps to which the team had access showed the mountain's position accurately. Observations made during the ascent showed that Matho Kangri is separated from the main line of peaks and ridges, and North of the position shown, which may be occupied by Nimaling Kangri. Further observations will be necessary to establish the geography of this interesting and accessible peak.