

British Mera Peak West Face Expedition 1993

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(MEF Reference 93/32)



## Expedition Members

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## Objectives

To climb the West Face of Mera Peak.

## Expedition Background

After a reasonably successful trip to the Karakoram in 1992, Jim Hart, Paul Drew and myself decided we'd had enough of deserts and fifty mile glaciers. The prospect of green hills, trekking lodges and alcohol drew us to Nepal. Initially, we were four, but Richard Adams had to drop out at a fairly early stage as he decided to do a Ph.D starting in October.

After looking at costs, the choice of routes rapidly narrowed to those on trekking peaks. Mera Peak offered both a difficult and an easy route to the summit. The aim was to climb the second for acclimatisation (in the company of Emma Collingwood) and then attempt the first. We had also hoped that the easy route might offer a convenient descent.

I spent the summer climbing in India, and turned up in Kathmandu at the end of August, with Pyar Singh, an Indian cook and guide who wanted to see somewhere different. When Jim didn't turn up a week before Paul was scheduled to arrive, I decided something was probably awry. I met Paul at the airport the next week - Jim had broken his arm badly in an accident in the Caucasus (& had been lucky to get away with only that, as far as I could make out - see *High* magazine December 1993.). Paul hadn't been able to find a replacement at two weeks notice.

## Kathmandu

I wasn't unimpressed by Paul's interpretation of his 20Kg baggage allowance - something like 45Kg, including a paraglider, managed through various nefarious activities at Heathrow. Emma arrived later the same day, after a three day bus trek from Delhi, shattered (like all those other fools who take the bus from Delhi to Kathmandu - usually, 48 hours going on a week..).

We hired a couple of mountain bikes and cycled to 7000ft. Pyar Singh had never ridden before and had some interesting moments in the Kathmandu traffic, before retreating on the bus.

We had decided to buy food in Lukla, so we hired a porter for the climbing equipment, and one for the paraglider (still preparing itself for its five minutes of glory), spent

what felt like vast sums of money on permits and paperbacks, and set off at some unearthly hour on the bus to Jiri.

## To Base Camp

The walk from Jiri to Lukla takes five days. I managed to pick up some kind of virus, which lasted until we reached base camp, so some of the walking was hard work. Lukla is a crazy place - we counted thirteen flights the day we arrived (including a couple of helicopters).

We took a day's rest, bought vast quantities of boring food, ate too many plates of fried potatoes, hired five porters and set off over the pass to Tangnang. The pass is high (4500m), Emma felt sick, and we were all irritable, probably as an effect of the rapid gain in altitude. It's usual to camp just over the pass: we felt this was a bad idea, and pressed on for a couple of hours. We arrived at Tangnang (4300m) just after lunch the next day.

## Tangnang

The camp at Tangnang had two serious disadvantages. The first was that the sun was hidden behind the bulk of Mera to the East until about half ten in the morning. For most of the time that we were there, the sky would be clear in the morning, but would cloud over for the day between twelve and two. It would be dark by half six. Temperature at night was between -5 and -10. For committed expedition sun-loungers, this was a bit of a disaster. Mornings were generally spent huddling around the MSR, checking, every five minutes, the progress of the sun down the hillside. Afternoons were good for reading. The second disadvantage was the excellent view of the West Face of Mera.

There were, as we had anticipated, a couple of very basic teashops at Tangnang, which would supply biscuits, sugar, potatoes, rum and tsampa, if you were prepared to take out a mortgage on your tent (sugar at about £2 a kilo). It seems more sensible to get things carried in.

What we weren't prepared for was the ridiculous number of people climbing the mountain by the normal route. This was possibly naïve. At a guess, an average of ten people a day would have made the summit during October and November - some sizeable groups from such as Karakoram Experience, some private trips.

Base Camp provided the paraglider with its moment of glory. Despite gusting winds of uncertain direction, both Paul and Emma managed to take off from the slope above the camp, making short flights that permitted some very pretty (if oddly focused) photographs. Then, somehow, the thing got caught on a twig & torn. Five thousand miles and a week's carrying for five minutes' flying. Short and sweet.

## Climbing

After a couple of days rest, we packed up our excess food and tents, leaving them with a friendly rabid capitalist and teashop owner. We walked for a couple of hours to Khare (4700m) and camped there for the night. Even here, a man had found it worth his while to set up a teashop under a boulder, selling Tibetan tea and biscuits. He had a numeracy problem, but seemed to be doing OK nonetheless. The next evening we wandered up the glacier to the Mera La (5300m), camping just below the col, on the far side, where there is a little water mixed in with the flows of silt.

We got up at midnight. Emma wasn't feeling too good, so she and Pyar Singh decided to stay back, planning to make another attempt whilst Paul and I were doing another route. It took us six hours to reach the summit from the col, passing en route a couple of tents at circa 6000m. We'd dismissed, wisely as it turned out, the option of staying here on the grounds that AMS might be a problem, sleeping at this height, given that we'd come up quite rapidly. The climb would have taken a great deal longer were it not for the hardened path in the snow created by previous ascendants. This path wasn't always visible, but you'd sink up to your knees if you stepped off it. It also wound its way very elegantly around the odd crevasse... It was very cold in the hour before dawn, with a wind gusting strongly enough to knock you off your feet. I was somewhat perturbed to realise that I was wearing all the clothes I'd brought.

On the summit, we stopped long enough to scatter my father's ashes, and to take pictures of Everest and Makalu. During the descent to the Mera La we met perhaps fifteen people struggling upwards, including an Australian woman who asked us to check on her partner, who had been feeling unwell, and who had stayed at the camp at 6000m. This we did - he said that he was feeling better - we later discovered that we'd arrived about an hour too early. We returned to Tangnang the same day.

We took three days rest in Tangnang. On the second day, the Australians turned up - just after we'd left him, his condition had worsened, and he'd been lying in his tent with pulmonary oedema for four or five hours; this had developed into pneumonia. His guide set off across the pass to Lukla to radio for a helicopter, which turned up the next morning. We were impressed - though it did seem to have some problems leaving the ground loaded at this altitude & it appeared they had to throw most of their equipment out.

At this point we decided not to attempt the West Face. Paul was willing to give it a try, but the descent was more complicated than we had thought, and I felt that I hadn't sufficient experience of sustained technical climbing at altitude to be confident about giving adequate support in a party of two.

Instead, we headed back up to Khare to explore the glacier to the East (heading towards Kang Tega) whilst Emma and Pyar Singh made another attempt on Mera. After crossing, unnecessarily, a ridiculously unstable moraine (it looked OK from above), we decided that the most feasible looking route in the vicinity was an ice slope on the SW face of peak 6091. We climbed to near the base of this, and camped (at about 5600m) a long way from any water (a better spot would have been a lake an hour further down).. At midnight, I was feeling sick from excess of tsampa, but Paul was lively. I'd hoped that spending a couple of months climbing in India before turning up in Nepal would lead to a reasonable level of fitness - but by this time I was feeling excessively thin, and lacking much motivation. Paul decided to do the route on his own, climbing a 55 degree ice slope followed by a 70 degree cornice, and reaching the summit from camp in five hours. After a couple of hairy moments descending the cornice, climbing down was uneventful. He had reached the tent by eleven, and we returned to Khare the same day.

Pyar Singh and Emma, meanwhile, had climbed to within about 100m of the top of Mera. At this point, Emma started vomiting blood, and her face swelled up, so they decided to turn back. She still looked pretty bizarre, and very exhausted, when they returned to Khare - Pyar Singh still cheerful despite carrying gear for two. A plan for three members of the party to trek via the Mera La and another pass to Dengboche was hastily abandoned in favour of the easy return to Lukla.

Two porters carried our climbing equipment, and the ailing paraglider, back to Jiri. Paul and Emma (now more or less recovered, and consuming superhuman quantities of apple pie) decided to trek the retirement trail to Gokyo and Kala Pattar, then to fly back to Kathmandu from Lukla. I'd more or less run out of cash, and I'd had enough

Asian mountains for the year, so I accompanied them as far as Namche, and then sprinted (in a manner of speaking) back to Jiri. We went our separate ways, and met up a couple of months later in Chester.

## Equipment

Insufficient, in retrospect. We'd been lulled somewhat by the relative warmth of the Karakoram in midsummer. Nepal in late October seems a good deal colder, at least at altitude (more Alpine winter than Alpine summer). Gas for the stove was expensive but available in Kathmandu (and many of the containers are only half full). The kerosene we bought in Lukla wasn't good, and we more or less abandoned the big stove we'd brought in favour of the MSR

## Medical

The odd spot of flu. Emma took Diamox, but still got sick. After her vomiting session, she developed a nasty cough which persisted for the next week - it could have been, of course, that she had been coughing blood and vomiting simultaneously - antibiotics appeared to clear this up.

## Portering & Cooking

We paid Rs 3420, including bus fare to Jiri, for two porters from Kathmandu to Lukla. Five porters from Lukla to Tangnang cost Rs 5500. One porter from Tangnang to Khare cost Rs 250. Two porters from Tangnang to Lukla cost Rs 1600. Two porters from Lukla to Jiri cost Rs 2520. The merits of paying people more or less can be debated endlessly. We saved ourselves this dilemma by getting Pyar Singh, who has been a porter himself, to negotiate rates, and he invariably managed a better deal than we could have done. Of course, when it came to us paying him, the pressure was merciless, though we hadn't done ourselves much of a favour by carelessly revealing Paul's salary. We paid him Rs 16,000 overall for not a vast amount of cooking, but some good company and a few bad jokes. He wanted a plug, so here it is:

contact: Pyar Singh Rawat  
Village Salung  
Post Office Bhatwari  
Uttarkashi  
UP  
India

He makes excellent cheese pakora, and speaks good English, but negotiate all the details beforehand if you're vulnerable to moral pressure.

## Food

We bought everything in Lukla, except potatoes which were to be found in Tangnang, and ground coffee, which we brought from Kathmandu. Vegetables weren't too hot, other staples (rice, dahl, sugar, flour, oil) were OK but, unsurprisingly, weren't cheap. Some of the secondhand porridge we bought had fermented, and was something of an acquired taste. We carried cans and jars back to Lukla.

## Transport

Plane tickets cost £400 (mine, to Delhi, peak season) and £450 (Paul's, to Kathmandu). Paul's flight from Lukla cost £56, Pyar Singh's £20.