



# NILKANTHA 93

An attempt on the West Ridge of Nilkantha, 6596m by  
Duncan Tunstall and Chris Pasteur.

## Nilkantha 93: CLIMBING REPORT

I first became aware of Nilkantha on a business trip to Bombay, during which I squeezed in an impromptu days climbing on the local crags with Harish Kapadia and Stephen Venables. The climbing started early and after 3 or 4 hours of gentle cragging the rising temperature turned our thoughts to shade and refreshment. During this siesta the conversation turned to the greater ranges and in particular the Indian Himalayas. There are few more knowledgeable people than Harish and Steven on this topic.

During the conversation we inevitably discussed potential objectives. At the time I was planning small expedition with a relatively inexperienced team and was trying to narrow down our options. Harish suggested a mountain called Nilkantha which seemed ideal. A short walk in, the right altitude, 6600m and still waiting a first British ascent. It also appeared suitably challenging with no obvious route to the summit. The mountain also benefited from relative obscurity as it was on the "Inner Line" and therefore assumed to be out of bounds to non Indian Expeditions.

Harish was certain that as an approach from the South would not involve entering a restricted area the IMF would sanction an application. This proved to be the case and we obtained permission to attempt Nilkantha in the Autumn of 1989. This Expedition was not a success. Our Base camp was in the wrong place, our objectives were too ambitious. Jim, our most talented Climber was ill and the weather was atrocious. We only saw the mountain for 3 days in 5 weeks.

In the end we made an attempt on the SE or Symthe Ridge, and after being pinned down for 5 days by bad weather were forced to retreat from the first of five pinnacles. Our attempt has been followed by several equally unsuccessful attempts on the same Ridge and the mountain was still awaiting a non Indian ascent. In 1993 pre monsoon season a Joint Services team led by Lieutenant Colonel Chauhan put 36 climbers on the top via the avalanche swept East Face/Ridge (A fact reinforced by the death of 6 Japanese climbers attempting a repeat of the route in the autumn of the same year). The South Face and the Smythe Ridge were still unclimbed and I was continually being drawn back into the idea of a return visit.

I was also very interested in attempting a two man expedition in the style of Venables and Renshaw on Kisthwehr Shivling, and Nilkantha seemed an obvious objective. After all at least I knew how to get to it and the route I wanted to do. Chris Pasteur had expressed an interest in returning and he seemed the obvious choice of partner. I was very pleased when he agreed to come along. We had been climbing partners for several years, both been on Nilkantha, and found that our styles seemed well matched.

Once again, despite the increased peak fee of \$3000 we submitted an application to the IMF and found ourselves battling with Indian bureaucracy. Amit Roy was to his job and his predecessor had left the IMF in a mess. We were therefore somewhat dismayed to find a state of complete disorganisation at Anand Niketan and were forced to spend 3 days kicking our heels in Delhi. Our Liaison Officer, Arun Chatterjee, finally arrived from Calcutta and our small team was complete. We were now able to enjoy the pleasure of the Indian public transport system and set off for Joshimath. One advantage of returning to the same hill is that getting to base camp ceases to be an adventure and the next 3 days whizzed past as we completed the walk in with a cool efficiency. Not a porter or LO squabble in site.

Our base camp was the delightful alp by Unianital. It has all the amenities a base camp needs: close to the objective, sunny, clean water and an ample supply of good bouldering not to mention a fairly major crag a few hours walk away. It's only downside is that at a height of 4100m and only 2 short days from the road acclimatization is a problem. We should have arrived a week earlier and spent the time trekking in the Valley of the Flowers or a similar enterprise. As it was we attempted to acclimatise on the Mountain making a number of reconnaissance's and establishing an advanced base.

The approach to the mountain proved simple but dangerous. A grassy ridge less than an hour from base camp gave access to the gully that separates the hanging glacier from the SW Ridge. This gully gave easy walking to the Glacier above the Ice Fall. Unfortunately it also provided an expressway for any debris that fell from the band of seracs that so effectively deny access to the South Face. Observation showed us that this debris was not inconsiderable and that a major fall occurred approximately every 3 days. We had 500m of ascent to make in the fall line so the odds did not look too good.

We were pleasantly surprised on our first foray into the gully. We could avoid the first section which looked the most dangerous, by a grassy ridge. Above this everything seemed quiet and the biggest danger seemed to be the odd stone fall from the glacier above us. Such was our sense of security that we were relaxed enough to loiter building claims on prominent boulders in case of weather reverted to type. We had carried some climbing gear and this was left in a rucksack at the start of the glacier. As we set off some sixth sense made me return and placed several large stones on top of the sack and made sure it was wedged under a rock outcrop.

Any optimism and sense of security that existed after our first reconnaissance were quickly removed.

The following day we decided to do some cragging on an impressive boulder at the foot of the face and while climbing we couldn't help but notice a large avalanche cone at the foot of our gully. After congratulating ourselves on our impeccable sense of timing we continued cragging and slept well grateful that our marked route was safe from any such fall.

The next day we attempted to establish ABC and to camp under the face for a couple of days making a thorough reconnaissance of the route options. We were somewhat horrified on returning to find that not only had our lovingly erected cairns disappeared but that the whole gully had changed appearance. The complete area above the grassy ridge had been cleared of all debris and resembled the early stages of road building where all rubble and boulders have been scraped clear by JCB. This was not a place to linger!

Just as worrying was the realisation that the ice debris from the serac fall covered our gear dump. We did not have spare kit. Was the expedition over? I am lucky enough to acclimatise quite quickly and was going considerably faster than Chris. I therefore arrived first at our dump. My worst fears looked to have been realised. The area bore no resemblance to the one we had left so joyously 2 days ago. A quick search confirmed my thoughts. No rucksack. I sat despondently waiting for Chris. After a few minutes I began to get my bearings. I was 30m above the ledge where we had left the kit. Looking down amongst the piles of ice I thought I spotted some red!! I quickly skipped down and to my surprise and joy saw the buckle of the rucksack poking out of the ice. We were still in business. Just.

We continued up the glacier to an area of crevasses and decided to camp. From here things looked safe and fairly straight forward. We had access to both the SE ridge, and west ridge. The weather, which had been good up to now looked stable. Our main worry was that Chris was still struggling with the altitude. This was not too serious as we had plenty of time and were, after all at 4600m. Chris had a bad night, during which he suffered very high and somewhat erratic pulse beats and severe headaches. The Nurofen were not relieving the pain and inevitably after such a night we were not going to achieve a lot the next day. We decided to leave the camp where it was, move up the glacier for an hour or two before retreating for a lazy afternoon. All good acclimatization.

Even that plan was too ambitious. Chris clearly did not feel comfortable so we hurriedly made the decision to retreat to Base Camp. We spent a couple of days sorting kit and continuing our assault on the boulder hoping to get fitter and continue acclimatising. The next plan was to make an attempt on Parvati Parbat (6200m) to get a good view of the upper part of Nilkantha. Unfortunately this did not look feasible as Chris was still suffering from the altitude at base camp. A change of plan was called for so we chose to cross Holdsworth's Col (5000m) and drop down to Badrinath for a hot bath and some high living. The walk over was superb, albeit a major slog, passing our 1989 Snow Cave we were greeted with amazing views of Nanda Devi. From here a descent below the East face in perfect weather gave a good view of the SE ridge and the pinnacles that had caused Graeme Littles' team so much difficulty in 1991.

The rest seemed to have worked and we were both in much better spirits on our return visit to the Col. We were able to maintain a good pace, chatting away and discussing our plans for our ascent. This was a valuable time as it cleared any rifts that had grown between us as during the early part of the trip.

Back at base the weather stayed good but Arun kept promising that typically the weather broke on the 20 October (advice, I suspect, based mainly on his desire to be in Calcutta for the Durga Puja Festival). Should we revert to plan and acclimatise on Pavati Parbat or should we make an immediate attempt on the hill? My memories of continual bad weather in 1989 made us keen to attempt Nilkantha as soon as possible. Chris was sounding much happier so we decided to go for it. As a compromise we decide to attempt the easier looking West Ridge rather than our original objective, the South West Buttress.

We had 2 full rest days and then made a 4.00 am start on the 18 October. We made excellent time up the gully and on reaching advanced base collected the kit and continued up to camp at the foot of the West Ridge. The ridge itself was guarded by a 300m rock wall which appeared to be composed of vertical rubble. Setting off at 5.00 the next day we climbed a 100m snow slope, reaching the rock wall at first light. We were not climbing well and the first pitch proved to be harder than expected. Chris had stopped at a small overhang 15m up and belayed. I came up to him and after also being repulsed decided to have a go without the sack. A definite error! The pitch was probably no more than IV but protection was sparse and the cliff seemed to consist of nothing but one loose block jammed on top on another. Very reminiscent of the works rock one finds in the Dauphine. I ran the rope out slowly and after about 40m overcame the last overhang to reach a ledge with a good belay. Now the problems started, this was not the terrain to sack-haul. It probably took longer to get the sack up the pitch than it had done to climb it.

Fortunately we had warmed up and must have become accustomed to the looseness for we made good progress and began knocking the pitches off in fairly short time. Two pitches were particularly memorable, mine a pleasant but poorly protected VS pitch on solid rock and one of Chris's up a steep pile of rubble in which both protection and holds were of an ephemeral nature. We took ten pitches to complete the rock buttress and found ourselves at the foot of gully leading to the ridge. The afternoon sun had made the gully and unattractive proposition so we started looking for a bivouac ledge. None was forthcoming so we were reduced to cutting out ledges from a small snow patch to the left of the foot of the gully. Here we slept in a two tier system anchored to numerous pegs in the rock wall above us.

Again an early start saw us climbing the gully at first light and good conditions enabled steady progress to be made. We moved together placing runners where possible. The angle was around 50 degrees and led to a large snow field which made a rising traverse up and rightwards below the rocky crest of the ridge. We climbed 300m swapping leads before a combination of the sun and altitude began to slow us down. Chris again seemed to be suffering but I felt that if we could reach a good bivouac sight an afternoon brewing would set us in a good position. We were unable to relax as the sun would soon turn and firm neve into slush. For this reason Chris suggested I do all the leading as we would make better progress. We pushed on getting slower and slower and I began to have my doubts and suggested that we should perhaps go down. finally after one more rope length Chris reported that he was beginning to see blood in his mucus. The decision had been made for us.

By now the snow in the sun was rapidly decreasing. There was no obvious bivouac site so we opted to tie both ropes together. I would lower Chris 100m and then he would belay me down as I down-climbed. This exercise was repeated 4 times which took us to the top of the gully. Two abseils later we were back at our bivvy site.

We continued to descend the rock wall in nine frightening abseils, grateful not to have pulled off too many blocks or got the rope stuck. The snow slope below resembled a bomb site with the debris dislodged during our ascent and descent.

After a more comfortable camp than the previous nights bivouac we descended the glacier and gully to the top of the grassy ridge. This was down - climbed for the last time to reach base camp and breakfast, disappointment at our failure to reach the summit temporarily obscured by the relief of regaining base camp without incident.

We had time and weather for another try but a combination of Chris's health and a general consensus that we had used up our luck in the approach gully made this option unattractive. We jointly decided to call it a day and all that was left to do was clear up the camp, arrange porters and head back to civilisation.

**MEDICAL**

The usual basic medical kit was taken.

Paracetamol are effective for altitude headaches - Neurofen are not.

Adalat was included in the first aid kit. Research is currently being done on its use in the treatment of oedema. We did not use it however.

The team experienced no medical problems except acclimatization, particularly Chris who never acclimatised properly. This was the reason for turning back on the mountain.

**EXPEDITION BUDGET**

Expenditure

Flights	885
Transport in India	51
Hotels & Food	135
Porters	91
Cook at Base Camp	54
Food	160
Base Camp Equipment	38
Gas	80
L.O. Equipment	150
Insurance	278
Visas	50
Miscellaneous	50
Peak Fee \$ 3000	<u>2000</u>
	<u>£4072</u>

Income

Mount Everest Foundation	500
British Mountaineering Council	500
Sports and Arts Council	500
Personal Contributions 2 x £1286	<u>2572</u>
	<u>£4072</u>

**THANKS**

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The Mount Everest Foundation

The British Mountaineering council

The Sports and Arts Council

Troll

Needle Sports, Keswick

Phil Butler

Dr Gary Kerr

Paul Pritchard



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NILKANTHA 1993 EXPEDITION.



MEMBERS.

Duncan Tunstall. (Leader.) British. Age 31.

12 years Climbing Experience in UK, Europe and The Himalaya. Previous Expeditions include. 1987. British Karakoram Traverse, 1988: British Altai expedition. 1989. London Nilkantha Expedition, 1991. British Nobande Sobande Expedition.

Chris Pasteur. British. Age 30.

12 years climbing experience in UK, Europe and the Himalaya. Previous Expeditions include the 1989 London Nilkantha Expedition and the 1991 British Nobande Sobande Expedition.

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Date	Activity
25th September.	Chris and Duncan Fly to Delhi
26th-29th September.	Delhi: Buying provisions and arranging formalities with I.M.F.
30th September.	Public bus to Haridwaar, Rishikesh and then Joshimath.
1st October	Arrive Joshimath. Hire porters and cook.
2nd October.	Bus to Hanuman Chatti, walk in to Khirao.(6hrs)
3rd October.	Walk in to Base camp at Uni Ali Tal, approx. 4100m.(4hrs)
4th October	Acclimatisation, establish base camp.
5th October.	Reconnaissance of approach to West Col. It was expected that one of the most difficult problems would be the approach to the SW face. We were able to find a safe route up a grassy spur to the foot of the glacier. From here we were forced onto the lateral moraine between the Glacier and the SW Spur. This part of the approach is exposed to serac fall and took between 45 mins and 1 hour to cross..
6th October.	Rest, Rock climbing close to base camp.
7th October	Further Reconnaissance and attempt to establish Advanced base camp. Second ascent of this route confirmed our fears as a large serac fall the previous day had caused significant damage to our route. unfortunately there was no obviously safer alternative. We camped at an estimated height of 4600m on the West Col Glacier .
8th October.	An attempt was made to reach the West Col. This was halted as Chris had suffered bad headaches during the night and was moving very slowly. We were pleased to find that there was no further difficulty in that the West Col Glacier although crevassed was relatively straight forward to cross. .
9-11 October.	Acclimatisation. It was felt that the height of our base camp was slowing Chris's acclimatisation. We therefore planned to return to a lowered altitude for a few days. To achieve this we crossed Holdsworth's Col (5000m) and descended to Badrinath. (3150m). returning by same route the following day.
11th-14th October.	Further acclimatisation. Exploring area in vicinity of base camp.
15th October.	Attempt on peak. Ascent of glacier to establish camp at foot of the West Col (4800m)
16th October.	9 pitches of rock were climbed up wall to right of col. The ground was not technically difficult (max grade IV) but the rock was very loose with sparse protection. It was thus very time consuming and we were fortunate to reach the top of the wall just as it got dark. However the lack of any suitable ledges we were forced to construct a bivouac site in the foot of an Ice Gully. (approx. 5300m)

17th October.	The ice Gully was Climbed for 100m to reach a large ice field on the right flank of the west Ridge. The Ridge itself is very Rocky. The ice field was followed for 300m (approx. 45-50 deg) to where a further gully could be seen to break through the rocks to reach the upper snowy ridge. Unfortunately Chris suddenly started to develop the first symptoms of altitude sickness. We therefore decided to descend immediately.  Both ropes were tied together and Chris was lowered to the bottom of the gully where we again camped. We calculated our high point to have been approx. 5600-5700m.
18th October.	Descent of the Rock wall in 9 Abscils.
19th October	Descent to base camp.
20-21st October	Recovering at base camp.
22nd October	In light of Chris's difficulty in acclimatisation the Expedition was abandoned.
23rd October.	Descent to Joshimath.
24th October.	Return to Delhi.
25th October.	Debrief at IMF.

## NILKANTHA BUDGET 93

NUMBER OF PEOPLE

2

BASE

PEAK FEE	2000
LIASON OFFICERS KIT	150
FIRST AID KIT	50
ADMIN	80
MISCELLENOUS	50
FOOD	160
PORTERS	91
COOK + EQUIPMENT	92
GAS	80
INSURANCE	278
FLIGHTS	885
HOTELS	135
TRANSPORT IN INDIA	51
TOTAL	4102
INCOME	
MEF	500
BMC	500
Other Sponsorship	500
Total Income	1500
BALANCE	2602
Personal Contributions.	2602