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The British Police Himalayan Expedition to Manaslu
1996

At the beginning of 1995, I felt I had completed my mountaineering apprenticeship and was ready to actually put my name at the top of a climbing permit. In looking around for a suitable peak to go for I had a fairly simple set of criteria. For one thing I wanted to climb an 8000m peak (very unfashionable I know). I wanted to visit Nepal and I wanted our trip to be an adventure, an exploration away from the crowds. Finally, I didn't want to attempt anything too desperately technically hard. The more I looked into it the more Manaslu jumped out of the page at me.

At 8163m. it is either the seventh or the eighth highest mountain in the world, depending on what the current heights for Dhaulagiri and Cho Oyu are. Of all the 8000m. peaks it is surely the most remote, requiring a 10-12 day trek just to get to base-camp. Back in 1995 it had only had the one British ascent, by Alan Hinkes, with a French expedition, from the west. Very few routes have been put up on the peak. Whole chunks of it are untouched and unexplored.

I wanted to make the expedition as representative as possible of the British police and therefore put adverts in newsletters, magazines etc. and even telephoned all members of the Alpine Club, daft enough to have written police officer as their occupation. Accordingly a cast of thousands expressed an interest and came up to Wales or the Lakes to climb VS's in the wet, drink beer and generally get to know one another. However, although people will pledge their support, their life not to mention the mortgage on their house at 11.00 p.m. with six pints inside them getting them, in the cold light of day, to write a cheque is another matter entirely. Consequently the four of us who were definitely going reluctantly agreed we would have to widen the net to take in friends from outside the police.

From the summer of 1995 we embarked upon our fund raising campaign during which we sent out literally thousands of letters. Following this I now have a big file of nice letters from influential people within industry, each saying "We are not going to give you any money" in a different but charming way. We were cheered up by a few letters though, in particular from Young's Brewery (a product we could all happily endorse) and from the makers of that wonderful show "The Bill". We also received invaluable support from the Metropolitan Police Athletic Association and, of course, the M.E.F. and B.M.C.

Finally on 2nd. September thirteen (seven climbers and six trekkers) of us touched down on a rainy Kathmandu evening. As this was my first visit to Nepal I was captivated by the place. Rarely have I been anywhere where east and west mingle so effortlessly, or so it seemed to me. Tourism is their main source of foreign exchange but they appeared to have catered for this aim without sacrificing the character of the city. Garish neon signs overlay walls and buildings but, underneath it the bones of an ancient culture still show through. Thamel, the part where penniless climbers and trekkers tend to end up, is, I feel, unique-an eclectic mix of Amsterdam, Notting Hill and Ibiza set in the middle of the Third World.

In between trips to the market and the Ministry of Tourism and the market we met three people who were to be very important to us for the next two months, Mr. Harry, our genial and helpful trekking agent, Wasti our liaison officer and our sirdar Moti Lal Gurung. In discussing our respective climbing experiences, Moti casually remarked he had been on trips to Everest, Makalu, Dhaulagiri and several smaller peaks. It took a little while for it to sink in that what he meant was that he had SUMMITTED on these mountains.

After he had been out for a beer with us, Moti announced that as he was a police officer as well, he wished to climb with us. Whether this was prompted by the camaraderie and mutual respect that exists between law enforcement officers the world over, or whether he simply felt sorry for a bunch of no-hopers I'm not quite sure.

We cleared Kathmandu in four days and nursing hangovers from Spam's, K.C.'s and all points in between we set off by road for Ghorka and the start of our walk. After the hard work and deadlines of the past few weeks everybody felt glad to be able to relax and stroll along with mind in neutral. Most of us took the opportunity to slog up the hill to the Royal Palace at one time the seat of government for Nepal and a fantastic sight. Over the mountains the monsoon was still raging but we were too far south to be rained upon and spent our first few days in glorious sunshine.

At the end of day two we arrived in Arughat and the Gandaki river itself. Here at just above sea-level the river is about 100m wide but still fast flowing. From here we were to follow the river up stream until it became a glacier. The Manaslu circuit is still very rarely travelled by westerners consequently we were very much a novelty for the locals. On more than one occasion we disrupted lessons in a school and ended up with an accompanying party of Nepalese infants yelling "Hello. How are you? What time is it?"

After a couple of days walking through pleasant green fields we were now in the jungle. Even though we had a fair amount of experience between us, Antarctica, the Karakoram, Alaska, Napes Needle even, I think we were all surprised at how unpleasant walking in the monsoon could be, with its attendant horrors of leeches, bugs and enormous nettle bushes.

Several times we found ourselves in the midst of enormous fields of eight foot fully mature cannabis plants. Such a plant, in case you're wondering is worth probably £300. Chop the leaves up, dry them in the sun and then put them in to 1/4oz. bags and sell them in the gent's toilet at your local pub and your investment has quadrupled. When it is finally legalised expect Nepal to do rather well. On second thoughts someone in the country is already doing very well - on our way back we did notice that virtually all of the crop had been harvested.

Day five of our walk-in brought us to the end of the really thick jungle and an absolutely idyllic camp site in the village of Jaghat. Set high on the west bank of the river, Jaghat is a hamlet of stone-built slate-roofed houses set around a flagged square. Our camp site was a lawn ringed with flowers. To complete the similarity to the Lake District there was even a village pub - a bucket of cold water with bottles of

beer in it. Our excitement was tempered slightly by a look at the map. Ten days into our expedition and we had only reached 1000m- the height of Scafell.

Leaving Jaghat, our surroundings changed. We were now leaving the tropics behind us and entering a more Alpine environment. We found ourselves in flower-strewn meadows dotted with pine trees with glacial streams bubbling past us. On this day we were also rewarded with our first sight of a big snowy mountain, the north ridge of Ganesh Himal peeking out from behind the monsoon clouds.

Two days after Jaghat we come to a fork in the river. Right would take us to the Ganesh group but our path goes left. We are crossing and re-crossing the river many times now. Bridges are becoming more and more ramshackle often with bits missing providing dizzying views of the raging torrent below. This is scary enough with nothing much more than a walkman and a camera so God (or whoever else is in charge up here) knows what it's like for our sherpas with their 30kg. loads.

By now the path was to climbing up and down the hillside on either side of the river as the gorge closed in. At times we are 500 feet above the Gandaki on rough paths with only room for one. We would occasionally turn a corner to find a family of monkeys sitting on the path looking at us with curiosity but no fear.

By day eight we reached a height of 3100m at the village of Lho and the environment started to change again. At this point we left Nepal, for all intents and purposes and entered Tibet. Cut off from central Nepal by the hard going in the valley we had just climbed up we were now more accessible from Tibet than anywhere else.

The local architecture reflected this change. We came across numerous Mani walls set in the middle of the path. These long low walls of intricately carved stone work should always be passed on the left side so that if a hand brushes against it, it is the clean right hand.

Finally on the 17th. September we arrived at the village of Sama, nestled underneath Manaslu. Here we paid off most of our sherpas and set about organising loads to be taken up to base -camp. The local Sama people have jealously guarded their right to take loads up to Manaslu base-camp and, unfortunately, aware that they have an unassailable monopoly charge expeditions three times the going rate. As we were out numbered and a long way from home we decided that discretion was the better part of valour and went along with this.

Unfortunately we have two setbacks on our first foray up to base camp. Our kitchen staff get held up at knife point by our new friends from Sama from and are forced to abandon their loads halfway up. Then, in a bid to make themselves really popular our Sama porters go on strike below base camp and say they need more money to go higher. Nobody is stabbed or hit, but at times it comes close (which is lucky as I'm sure we'd have lost if it had come to a fight). Wasti, our superb L.O., displays remarkable courage and diplomacy and manages to barter an agreement so our first lot of loads eventually make it up to base camp.

The next day we have more of the same. This time our loads only make it up after it is pointed out to the village leader that as we are the British Police team, we have been personally tasked by the Minister of Tourism himself to report on what is going on in Sama. All absolute rubbish but it seems to do the trick.

Finally, on the 20th., following a visit to the local gompa we establish base-camp at 4600m on the left bank of the Manaslu glacier. Our trekkers head off towards the Larky La and the end of the Annapurna circuit with one or two tears.

Before we can start climbing there are a few formalities to be seen to. The local lama has to visit our base camp and bless the expedition. One ignores these conventions at one's peril. The Japanese team that first climbed Manaslu, back in 1955 dispensed with this service. Tragically, the following winter, an avalanche wiped out a nearby monastery. Perhaps this is what hardened the attitude of the locals towards foreign expeditions.

Having received permission from the goddess of the mountain and with our home-brew beer bubbling evilly away in the kitchen we turn towards the peak. By this stage the monsoon has been over for a week and we are enjoying brilliant sunshine and blue skies. Manaslu is uncharacteristically busy this year with French, Italian, Czech, Japanese and Americans ploughing away on the mountain as well as us. The Japanese have been here the longest and have already made excellent progress towards Camp 1.

From base camp our route takes up the left bank of the glacier. The glacier is set with enormous crevasses but thanks to the work of the Japanese our route up is clear. We establish an ABC at 5300m and after four days hard work we have two tents and a load of food at Camp 1, on top of a rock buttress at 5800m. Occasional bouts of heavy snowfall and the odd little illness naturally slow us down however we make good progress and by October 1st., Camp 2, at 6600m. has been established. Peter Cox and Moti do heroic work in breaking trail, at times it seems for everybody else on the mountain.

The journey from Camp 1 to 2 was particularly exciting. From behind our first camp gradually steepening snow slopes lead up to a tangled ice-fall with numerous little ice pitches, gullies, chimneys and the odd crevasse to prevent attention wandering. Popping out of this ice-fall one is faced with a 45 degree slope made up of rock overlaid with hard blue ice. Above this chute hangs a set of leaning seracs, several hundred feet high. There was no safe time or manner (apart from quickly) in which to cross this obstacle, as events were to prove. On the other side of this was an enormous overhanging, icicle festooned serac which had to be walked under before we were faced with four pitches of steep neve with occasional patches of ice. From the top of here it was a gentle walk up to the welcome tents of Camp 2.

It did appear that the Japanese had timed their arrival right because as we were making our Camp 2 two of their team were summitting. At this point we all thought the peak was in the bag and that we'd be flying home following a week in Goa. However on 2nd. October it starts to snow in a big way. I've experienced bad

weather in places as notorious as K2 and Wasdale but I had never seen so much snow fall in such a short space of time. At base camp where half of us were, we were getting two feet overnight. For our team members up at Camp 1, they were spending very uncomfortable nights, constantly having to dig their tents out. We were to later learn that two Americans suffocated in their tents, on Annapurna in this deluge.

However the two Japanese, mentioned above were faring less well. Tragically, they had separated on the summit plateau. One was now missing, never to be found again and the second one was trapped at Camp 2 with two sherpas feeding him and tending his badly frost-bitten feet.

On 6th. October it finally stops snowing and everybody is able to take stock. Our people at Camp 1 spend the day finding and repairing what is left of our camp. They try to move down but find it rather hard in snow that is, in places, chest deep. We all watch through binoculars as the badly injured Japanese climber attempts to get down to Camp 1. Several times, he and his two sherpas get agonisingly close but each time turn back, evidently afraid of the avalanche prone slopes they are climbing on.

The 7th. again dawns bright and clear and movement is at last possible. We witness an epic rescue by helicopter from on top of a serac at over 6000m. Everybody is able to get back together again at base camp. Our cooks surpass themselves with a meal of pizza and chips and the first few bottles roll off the production line of the Yak Brewery in the kitchen.

The snow has knocked the heart out of some of the teams and the Czechs and most of the French have decided they are going home. As our liaison officer is the only one left for miles around, the remaining French and Americans team up with us.

Whilst Mark, Glenn, Chris and John recuperate at base camp myself, Peter, Paul and Moti get back on the treadmill up to Camp 2. Bamboo wands and ropes, where necessary, have to be re-fixed.

By 10th. October the four of us in front have reached Camp 2 and made it habitable if not exactly comfortable. Over the next couple of days the four of us make several forays up to try and find somewhere suitable for a third camp. The wind is very powerful by this time and it is hard to find anywhere sheltered enough to want to stay there. We cache tents and food just below the summit plateau and returned to Camp 2. By this stage the French team have decided that winter has come and that they have had enough. Paul and Peter, in spite of having carried enormous loads the previous day decide that they are too ill to stay up and go down intending to come back up again.

On the 13th. myself and Moti head up on our first summit bid. We soon make the col between Manaslu North and the main summit and start up the steep ice slopes leading to the summit plateau. In steadily worsening weather, having failed to find a suitable site to pitch the tent we end up digging a platform into a steep snow slope

and perching our bivi tent precariously on it. My initial fears that the storm would dislodge us soon prove to be unnecessary as I realise that three of the four sides of our tent are now solid frozen snow. We spend a miserable night and in the morning can only crawl out of our virtually collapsed tent before retreating back down.

We arrived back at Camp 2 to meet up with Mark, Glen and Chris. We learn that Peter and Paul had an eventful trip down the previous day. Having stopped just before the dreaded avalanche chute they hear an ominous rumble and see lumps of ice the size of cars come crashing down. This barrage catches a French sherpa and sweeps him several hundred feet. Convinced they have seen him die they are amazed to see the figure in the ice start to move. They run over to him, drag him out and to the other side of the danger zone where they splint his broken leg with an ice axe and take him down to base camp.

It has now grown considerably colder at Camp 2 and there is a constant plume of snow flying off the top of Manaslu. Mark, Glen and Chris decide they are not happy with the weather and head off back down, however, not without more excitement. On top of the set of steep ice slopes leading down to the avalanche chute between 1 and 2 they found an Italian sherpa wandering around, obviously in great pain, having lost his sun-glasses. They gave him what medication and managed to lead and lower him down to base camp.

Back at 6600m. everybody else apart from the remnants of our expedition had thrown the towel in. On 19th. October myself, Moti and the two remaining Americans, George Fuller and Paul Gardner head up and into the wind that is now howling out of China and across the north face. Paul, after a few hundred metres decides he loves beer, Colorado and his wife (though not necessarily in that order) too much to go any higher and gracefully retreats. A lot of snow has fallen in the past few days so, at times we are ploughing up through waist deep snow. What fixed ropes there were are difficult to uncover so progress is slow. We reach the height of mine and Moti's uncomfortable bivouac and gratefully climb past it. At about 7650m we find the remains of an Italian tent and pile into it glad we don't have to put up our own tent with frozen fingers. We brew and shiver through the night, intending to leave at first light.

In the morning the wind had picked up. The tent fabric is making such a noise that the only way to talk is to shout into the ear of one's friend. George and I were surprised that Moti was not his usual self. He was curled up in a ball, wouldn't speak to us and was uninterested in eating or getting his harness on. What must now be blindingly obvious to the reader took a little while to filter into our tired and altitude-fogged minds. It was only when we got on the radio and the phrase "withdrawn and uncommunicative" was used that we realised he was displaying textbook symptoms of high altitude cerebral odema.

The two of us got him up and out of the tent. As soon as we started moving he appeared to improve and by the time we regained Camp 2 he was his old self. The next day Moti, one of our sherpas and Paul the American went with him down to Camp 1 where he met up with Peter, Glen and Mark and they all descended back to base-camp.

Myself and George stayed up for a little bit longer hoping for a change of weather or divine intervention. Neither came our way and then when it started snowing again, mindful of what had happened to the poor Japanese guy we decided to make a run for it. We managed to stumble down in the dark to an emotional reunion fuelled by our now fermented and potent home brew.

Winter was now definitely here so we were unable to get over the Larky La but had to trek out by way of the Buri Gandaki, now taking on the distinct air of a Scottish glen. Our multi national expedition was given another facet when we picked up some Czech trekkers. Any maudlin thoughts about our failure to summit were quickly dispelled by the copious amounts of barbecued goat , beer and rakshi consumed on the way down. Everybody was still friends, everybody had their fingers and toes and we'd had a hell of an adventure.

Glen probably gave the expedition it's epitaph when he said "I reckon we've done everything possible on this mountain apart from summit it."

The British Police Himalayan Expedition was made up of Jonathan Wakefield , Peter Cox, Paul Vardon (Metropolitan Police), John Mudway (Staffordshire Police) ,Chris Smith, Mark Hamilton and Glen Wilks.

Assisting was John Wright a para medic with the Staffordshire Ambulance Service.

The star of the show was Moti Lal Gurung of the Royal Nepalese Police.