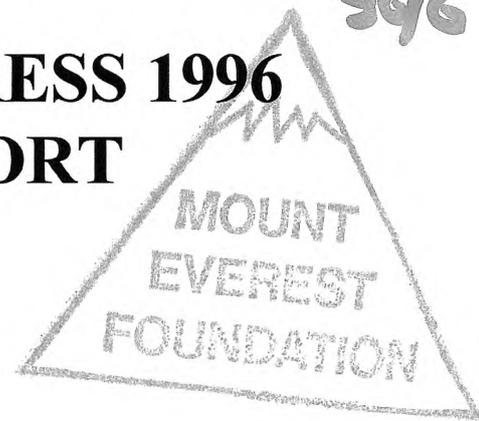


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PUMORI SOUTH BUTTRESS 1996 EXPEDITION REPORT



THE OBJECTIVE

A new route on the south face of Pumori following a series of couloirs, ice cascades and snow fields right of the route climbed by Sandy & Rick Allen in 1988.

THE TEAM

Joe Simpson (leader)

British, 35, author, guide, trek leader, member Alpine Climbing Group (ACG). Extensive Alpine experience summer & winter. 12 expeditions to Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, India, Ecuador, Africa. Routes include Droites N.Face winter, Dru Couloir, Walker Spur, Matterhorn Schmidt route, Cima Grande Comici route N.face. 1st ascents of West face Siula Grande 6356m, East face Pachermo 6250m, North spur Ranrapalca 6114m, as well as ascents of Ama Dablam, Lobuche, Island Peak, Huascaran, Alpamayo, Cotopaxi, Illiniza Norte, and attempts on Cho Oyo, Bhagarathi 3, Gangchempo, Pumori. Guided climbs and treks in Nepal, Africa, Peru and Ecuador.

Ian Tattersall (expedition quack)

British, 42, doctor, member ACG, extensive Alpine experience summer & winter. Expeditions to Nepal (Mera & Annapurna 3), Pakistan (Thui 2 & 3), Peru (Alpamayo), India (Kedar Dome), Patagonia (Aconcagua), Africa (Kenya), Canadian Rockies & North America (Yosemite, Bugaboos, Squamish, Tetons. Routes include 1st ascents on Mt. Moran, Tetons, SW Pillar Mera, Thui 3, plus ascents of Cassin Ridge McKinley, Lotus Flower Tower, Diamond Couloir, Ferrari Alpamayo.

Ray Delaney (general labourer)

British, 40, Retailer, extensive Alpine Experience summer & winter, expeditions to Nepal, India, Africa. Ascents Ama Dablam, Island Peak. Attempts of Mera and Gangchempo. Worked as guide and trek leader.

Ric Potter (general labourer)

British, 30, Plas-Y-Brenin guide/instructor, Alpine experience since 1982. Expedition to unclimbed peak in Himachel Pradesh, India 1984. 1st ascent on Kwangde East Face, Nepal 1991. Attempt on Huinchuli 1992. Ice Window route Mt. Kenya. 1st ascent North Spur Ranrapalca 6114m 1994. Other climbs include Huascaran, Chiborazo, Cotopaxi, Illiniza, Cayambe, Pichincha, Pisco, Urus, Kilimanjoro, Tent Peak, Salathe Wall, Half Dome NW face, Holder of MIC and member of Association of Mountain Guides.

THE EXPEDITION

Tattersall, Potter and Delaney joined Simpson (who had travelled in advance to confirm all the necessary arrangements) in Kathmandu on 14th. October after a delightful PIA flight via Dubai and Karachi ---- delightful because everyone was rendered unconscious by the good doctor and his medical bag.

Simpson reported that on arrival he had been informed by Reuters correspondent, Liz Hawley, that the proposed line had been climbed by a Czech team during the previous spring season. She had shown him a photograph of the route onto which were marked their bivouac sites etc. all conforming exactly to the team's plans. He reported further on the desperate struggles he was having with the agent who despite the clearest of instructions was determined to do things his way - mostly contrary to the needs and wishes of the expedition (these are not the sort of friends you need in Nepal, Folks !)

Now that the original objective had already been climbed Simpson, employing a few third world body swerves, managed to secure a permit which was so vague as to our objective that we could reasonably attempt any line on the south face of Pumori that we chose ! During the meeting in the Blue Note jazz bar it became clear that all members were keen to try a new climb as opposed to attempting a second ascent of the 'Czech' route and postcards purchased in Thamel suggested two realistic possibilities. Firstly, to the left of the Allen/Allen route there is a line through a steep chimney/couloir system leading to slabby mixed face before joining the south west ridge. Alternatively, to right of the Czech route lies a huge, complex mixed face and this offered a second alternative. So, despite the intense disappointment of missing out on our original objective all felt positive about the other possibilities.

On 15th. October the team flew in an old Russian military helicopter to Lukla (Simpson, who was better acclimatised flew on to Syangboche). A truly wonderful experience, particularly for Simpson & Delaney who revel in the delights of aviation. In flight services included cotton wool (for the ears) and a drink of mango juice. From Lukla a leisurely walk led down to Phakding where the night was spent in one of the lodges. The following day Namche Bazaar was reached; Delaney achieving this in a respectable eight hours. The following day was spent at Namche as Simpson, in his capacity as leader, had to complete the formalities for the environment bond. The rest of the team spent the day walking up to Khumjung to stuff their faces at the German bakery (run by a Belgian !) and to aid acclimatisation. Potter, displaying true gluttony during this excursion, made himself very sick to the unconcealed delight of the rest.

On the 18th. all moved on to the Rhodendron Lodge at Dengboche and then over the following three days carried on to Lobouche via Dingboche where two nights were spent to aid acclimatisation. Instead of staying at Lobouche the team went a little further beyond the village to stay at the grotesque Lodge 8000. This absurd pyramid made of glass and steel was thrown up by an Italian research organisation though there was little evidence of any research taking place. The lodge, despite its high tech pretenses was squalid and spartan and costing 1000 rupees per person per night ! (a standard lodge which could be warm and comfortable would cost 50 rupees per person). Having survived the miseries of this hovel made worse by an Italian amateur opera society practicing arias half the night everyone was relieved to be able to escape to the site of the base camp situated on the banks of the smaller of two lakes; below and to the

east of Kala Pattar at a height of 5310 metres. A magnificent site; rocky, inhospitable and surrounded by some of the most beautiful & highest mountains All were all elated to finally be below the objective.

During the walk from Lobuche the team had been chased by evil looking fish shaped clouds and as base camp was being set up a huge cap concealed the summit of Nuptse. The next morning it was snowing. The day was spent sorting gear with a view to moving toward the face the following day to establish a cache of equipment and to take a closer look at the options.

The 24th. dawned cloudy with occasional snow. Carrying light packs everyone contoured above the lakes and then climbed to about 5600 metres, up terminal moraines, to a rocky outcrop on the left edge (true right bank) of the main tongue of the glacier descending from Pumori's south face. Having deposited the gear safely among some huge boulders Tattersall and Potter descended to base camp whilst Simpson and Delaney climbed up to the crest of the glacier to get a better view of the possible routes and approaches. The line to the left of the Allen/Allen route looked difficult with seemingly overhanging chimneys and a particularly alarming fracture in the ice at the top of the exit couloir. However, more worrying was the amount of snow on the slabby face above. All the pictures in the teams possession showed a lot of rock exposed and it was hoped that this would minimise the risk of avalanche (a real danger on the slabby rocks) and provide secure belays. However, this season the team were confronted with an almost uniform snow slope and it was impossible to determine how deep and how (un)stable this was. Given these circumstances it was felt that although it offered one of the best lines on the face it would be foolish to attempt it in such conditions. The other option to the right of the Czech route was clearly possible. The climbing would be much easier but not without some serious risk from avalanche. These slopes were also heavy with snow but by concentrating on a few strategic points in the face and linking these together it was possible to work out a reasonably safe route to the summit - in theory at least!

On the 25th. Simpson and Delaney left to take some more equipment to the high dump whilst Tattersall and Potter remained behind. Tattersall suffering from a chesty cough and Potter acclimatising only very slowly and needing a rest.

The 26th. Dawned very cold (-15°) with deep fresh snow. Potter, who had suffered from pumonary oedema during a climbing trip to South America, still feeling unwell descended to Pheriche. During the afternoon the clouds cleared revealing a magnificent wintery sight accompanied by the almost constant roar of avalanches.

During the 27th. the weather improved with the sun breaking through in the afternoon. The remaining members of the team discussed the possibilities and decided that the easier of the two routes was the only real choice. Food was divided and sacks made ready for an early departure to climb on beyond the gear dump and on to establish a cache at the foot of the climb and, time permitting, to fix some ropes.

It was cloudy but quite warm on the 28th. and Simpson, Tattersall and Delaney made good progress to the equipment dump before climbing onto the glacier and crossing over to a rock buttress at c. 5700 metres. Tattersall increasingly troubled by his chest left for base camp whilst Simpon ran out a fixed rope to c.5800 metres and Delaney got on with some well earned sunbathing under the rocks of the buttress.

The next day Tattersall finally decided to descend in the hope that his chest would improve at a lower altitude. Simpson and Delaney decided to run some more ropes out and establish a camp. Having loaded more food and gas at base camp and stopped at the dump below the face to collect the rest of the equipment they climbed to the end the fixed ropes. Simpson fixed three old climbing ropes to below a rock wall c. 5900 metres where the loads were left in a cleft between the rock and snow slope. The pair returned to base camp tired but happy with days work to find Potter back feeling much better and confident.

Despite being at or above base camp for eight days there had been little chance to stay up high and as a result none of the team were sufficiently acclimatised. Therefore, Simpson and Delaney decided to bivouac on the summit of Kala Pattar for one night whilst Potter opted to go high up on the standard route. On the afternoon of the 30th. Delaney and Simpson descended to Gorak Shep, a squalid dust bowl, the only redeeming feature being the fact that beer is on sale ! A couple of bottles of beer each left them reeling and it was virtually dark when they finally began their climb to Kala Pattar and three hours was spent stumbling over and losing the path before they were safely esconced in their sleeping bags. After a cold night and a magnificent dawn they descended to base camp to wait for Potter and Tattersall.

The next day Potter returned and felt that he was not sufficiently acclimatised to attempt the face. A message was also received from Tattersall that his chest had not cleared and that he too would not be continuing with the climb. Simpson and Delaney decided to leave the next day for their attempt.

After collecting more equipment and gas at the buttess at the foot of the face Simpson and Delaney climbed the fixed ropes to the equipment dump below the rock wall. Whilst Simpson fixed some extra ropes through the rocks Delaney cut out a ledge in the snow and erected the tent. Simpson returned, elated at finally getting to grips with the mountain.

The morning of the 3rd. dawned fine and the tent was soon collapsed and gear packed. Simpson led off climbing the fixed ropes and waited at the end for Delaney to join him. Beyond the ropes the route led over rocky outcrops and snow slopes, moving steadily to the right, toward a large steep buttess which they intended to climb before traversing right to a rock island below a vertical line of seracs. At this rock island they hoped to bivouac. There was an easier way which traversed horizontally right from the first bivouac to climb a broad snow couloir which then steepend before reaching the same rock island. Whilst this would have been quicker and easier it was felt that the couloir was very risky. Any avalanches occuring higher on the face would almost certainly be channeled through this couloir taking anyone who happened to be there with it. Joe doesn't like avalanches. He's tried them and he knows..

Simpson led to the buttess and moved right to a corner/chimney system. Out of sight of Delaney he struggled with difficult, compact rocks which offered no protection before finally giving up and precariously descending to a miserable and cold partner who was too busy feeling sorry for himself to be listening to tales of daring deeds upstairs.. Simpson moved right to the crest of a sharp rock rib to try and find an alternative route up the buttess. It became clear that the rocks were going to be very difficult and time consuming to overcome and 50 metres to the right lay the couloir which we had been hoping to avoid. Simpson suggested that Delaney should lead across an intervening rocky gully and then on to the main couloir as there were no more real alternatives left. Delaney was not a happy boy. Frozen stiff and visibly vibrating with the cold he looked at this rocky couloir with little enthusiasm; it was seemingly at the point of falling apart.

Desperate excuses as to why they should not cross this particular death trap and that a sensible alternative would be to go back home were not well received. Finally, grumbling constantly, the couloir was reached (quite easily as it turned out) and was continued to the steep section which led to the proposed bivouac site. Delaney led through in growing darkness. After 20 metres the angle lessened and in the gloom it was possible to make out the rocks some way ahead. A further 15 minutes climbing and at full rope stretch a belay was fashioned. It was pitch dark and snowing when Simpson finally arrived at the belay. The possibilities for a bivouac were not promising and so Simpson led on to the first of the seracs which ran vertically down the snow slopes. There, protected by a ceiling of ice, a ledge for the tent was hacked out, an exhausting process which left them gasping. Finally, after an exhausting but exciting 14 hour day, the tent was squeezed onto the narrow ledge and a brew was made before the pair collapsed into sleep.

The following morning dawned cold and clear and the climbers awoke late after the efforts of the day before. Both felt tired and it was decided to make a leisurely start so that they could eat properly and, more importantly, to rehydrate. Simpson, always at his most cantankerous in the mornings, wrestled with the tower stove which refused to burn properly raising his temper to new heights. Spluttering constantly it frequently went out and took an age to melt snow. More alarming was that on this, only their second bivouac, they were using the third of their five gas cartridges. The stoves had been adapted with a reheat system to ensure that the gas was completely burnt, even at sub zero temperatures. Nevertheless, the 'empty' cartridges retained over a third of their weight in gas (?). It had become a common practice in Kathmandu to top up partly used cartridges with water and to sell them as unused, a potentially disastrous practice. It would seem that these cartridges, supplied by the trusted agent, had been 'refilled'.

A noise, starting somewhere high above, was heard by both climbers at the same time. The sound increased to a roar and the slope on which they were camped began to shudder. Both climbers, fearfully clutching the tent, were convinced that the avalanche was headed their way. Simpson, peeping through the zip opening, watched as the mass slid by the camp site down a subsidiary gully 20 metres away. Confirmation, if needed, that the couloir climbed the day before, was indeed a particularly unhealthy place !

The excitement over, the pair settled down to continue brewing tea and preparing for the day ahead. Gradually Delaney, sat in the back of the tent, began to feel unwell. Nauseous and lethargic with a worsening headache it was finally decided to descend.

Disappointed, the climbers hacked the frozen tent from the ledge, packed the rucksacks and began a long day of abseiling. Reaching the first bivouac site late in the afternoon they continued to the gear dump at the buttress below the face and after collecting the last of the equipment continued across the glacier to the moraine slopes leading to base camp where they were met by the Sherpa team.

In two days of climbing they had reached a height of only c. 6200 metres and with unreliable gas supplies, half the team sick (Delaney was fully recovered after a night at base camp) compounded by all the other difficulties and disappointments it was decided not to make a second attempt.

After a delay due to the late arrival of the Environmental Officer the team left base camp on 9th. november. Trekking out via the Cho La pass to Namche Bazaar which was reached on 14th. november. Simpson, enjoying his position as expedition leader was gainfully employed sparring with the staff of the Environmental Office to retrieve our environmental bond.

Finally, after numerous delays, the team flew from Syangboche to Lukla and then onto Kathmandu in the trusty ex. soviet helicopter - possibly the most dangerous aspect of the whole trip !

CONCLUSION

An unsatisfactory expedition due to a number of factors not least of which was the fact that the team only learned upon their arrival in Kathmandu that the proposed route had been climbed by a Czech team during the previous spring season. No one from the agency or from the Ministry of Tourism had felt this minor detail worthy of mention prior to their arrival !

Their problems were compounded by obstructive, grasping officials and a decidedly crooked agency. Even their wide ranging experience in this part of the world was no match for the inventiveness of these two adversaries and they were frustrated at every turn. The agent had been selected on the basis of a personal recommendation. The sponsor admitted only after the expedition that the agent had a rather profound relationship with the bottle! (Thanks). This had almost ruined the expedition as the funds for the permit had not been handed over to the Ministry of Tourism but donated to one of the local breweries; only timely intervention by our Sirdar, who paid the Ministry from his own pocket, secured the permission.

Sickness, faulty equipment coupled with a gradual erosion of resolve resulted in a single attempt on an alternative line which ended at c. 6200 metres.

Despite the frustrations and obstructions which confronted the team it would not be true to say that these were the only reasons for the failure. There were a series of bad decisions stemming from the desire to establish a new route on Pumori.

- We opted for two possible routes as substitute for the original goal and, even when it became clear that these options were in a fairly dangerous state, refused to consider a second ascent of the Czech route which is undoubtedly safer and would have been a much more satisfactory climb.
- Tattersall's chest complaint and Potter's lack of acclimatisation very much weakened the team. It would have been much better if Tattersall had descended much earlier to recover than to stay at base camp. The reasoning was simple enough; if he descended he would be out of synch with the rest of the team re. acclimatisation but the fact is that it is almost impossible to check a chest infection at the altitude of our base camp , c. 5300 metres.
- A second attempt could easily have mounted. There was sufficient time, gas and food and if Simpson and Delaney had stayed on at base camp to recover for a couple of days they would almost certainly felt more positive about the climb and had another go.

PUMORI 96 ACCOUNTS

Peak Permit	\$3000
1 Liaison Officer	\$1200
Sirdar	\$960
Office Charge	\$1000
4 men at \$30 for 30 days	\$3600
3 single Ktm/Lukla flights at \$90	\$270
1 single (Joe) Ktm/Namche flights at \$120	\$120
4 return Namche/Ktm at \$120	\$480
4 PIA Flights	\$2950
Returnable Environment/Rescue bond	\$5000
4 Insurance	\$600
Hotels & Lodges	\$500
EpiGas, Fixed rope, Snow Stakes	\$450
Total US Dollars	\$20,130
Total UK Sterling	<u>£12,580</u>
Less MEF/BMC Grant	£1500
Less Sport & Arts Grant	£1500
	£9580
divided by four personal contributions	= £2395 (each)

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Berghaus Equipment, Buffalo, Terra Nova supplied us with excellent equipment. John West Foods donated much need food supplies.