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**MERU SHARKSFIN 1997**

MEF REF 97/46



**Owain Jones, Nick Bullock, Jamie Fisher, Julian Cartwright**

**Liaison Officer: K. Puroshotam**

**Basecamp Cook: Dawa Deepu Sherpa**

**Financial assistance:**

<b>British Mountaineering Council</b>	<b>£750</b>
<b>Mount Everest Foundation</b>	<b>£900</b>
<b>Nick Escourt Award</b>	<b>£1000</b>
<b>Civil Service Sports Association</b>	<b>£100</b>

**No equipment was free but we are indebted to the following who went to great lengths to help us out:-**

<b>Tony Stephenson</b>	<b>Spindrift Equipment Ltd.</b>
<b>Frank Bennet</b>	<b>Troll Safety Equipment Ltd.</b>
<b>Rhys Henderson</b>	<b>Saloman Taylor Made Ltd.</b>
<b>First Choice Foods, Pickering, North Yorks.</b>	

+628

## **Introduction**

The aim of the expedition was to make the first ascent of Meru Central 6500m by its famous East Face feature known as The Sharksfin. We are unable to ascertain as to whether anyone has reached the Central Summit via any route. The I.M.F. regarded our mountain as Meru South, for which we had permission. Their knowledge of the existence of Meru Central as a separate top was sketchy. A peak of 6500m and below is US\$ 1500; Meru South at 6660m is US\$ 2000!!! so haggle!

The East Face route we chose is probably 1500m long minimum, but it is difficult to be sure exactly as the summit height given is approximated.

The climb is comprised of distinct sections: the lower snowfield, the diagonal ramp/buttness leading to the snowpatch at the base of the Fin and then the Fin itself. The transitions of the terrain are the reason the Fin is still unclimbed. It necessitates a lightweight approach. The lower snowfields are not steep enough to haul so everything must be carried. The Fin itself requires the whole gamut of big wall gear, probably portaedges, you may even need to carry water. Descent is probably safest by the same route. Having talked to a climber who has summited Meru North, traversing to here and then down the Meru North route would be very long, often knife edged. It also seems that Meru Central's summit is set forward so there is a potential extra difficulty getting off this and onto the connecting ridge. Any descent of the route means returning down the snow slope, which if laden is extremely avalanche prone.

## **Diary of Events (Approximate)**

<b>1 September 97</b>	Depart Manchester pm
<b>2</b>	Arrive Delhi
<b>3</b>	Buy food/M.E.F./clear cargo
<b>4</b>	Travel to Uttarkashi
<b>5</b>	Travel to Gangotri
<b>6</b>	Travel to Bhojbasa
<b>7</b>	Arrive Tapovan Basecamp
<b>8 September - 3 October</b>	Acclimatisation and Climbing Period

4 October 97	Tapovan to Gangotri
5	Gangotri to Uttarkashi
6	Uttarkashi
7	Delhi
8	Delhi I.M.F. debrief
9	Delhi
10	Fly from Delhi to London
11	Arrive London

### Account of Expedition

As expedition leader (Owain Jones) I kept a diary of events. On our return this was mislaid hence it is difficult to recount specific dates, however, what follows is a detailed account of the expedition activities with the focus on information of use to others.

We arrived in Delhi in the early morning of September 2nd and were met by a courtesy bus from Rucsac Tours our agent in India. We only spent a couple of days in Delhi. Quickly dealing with cargo clearance (we paid our agent to do this) we went to the I.M.F. for briefing, bought some food and we were off, arriving at Basecamp 7 days from leaving Great Britain.

I had no difficulties liaising with the I.M.F., in fact our "X" visas were sorted three months before we left. The I.M.F. has a new director, Mr Badgel. He seemed hopeful about reaping changes and was receptive to ideas.

Rather than freighting the L/O gear we hired it from the I.M.F. It was very poor quality and cost US\$ 700. This caused a lot of ill-feeling with our L/O who was expecting new equipment. The I.M.F. director informed us he was aware of this problem and that the hire fee is to be lowered in 1998. The whole issue of Liaison Officers is still causing problems in this area. Our L/O was a bank clerk and scout leader with no mountaineering experience. We had to help him to Basecamp which he soon referred to as "an open prison". His abject misery and boredom each day did nothing to help our own psyching up process. Luckily our cook, who we hired through Rucsac Tours, and who travelled with us from Delhi, was a man of all trades who did all our liaison work.

The whole issue of costs in India is a serious one for climbers on a budget. Peak fees recently rose. On the positive side the US\$ 1000 refundable environmental bond has been dropped. We were refunded in Delhi only after our agent told us. However the non-refundable bond of US\$ 300 will probably rise. The environmental issue is a serious one and despite raising the issue at the I.M.F. we were unable to see a clear environmental plan in action. I visited Tapovan in 1988. In the intervening 10 years the situation has got worse, probably not on the scale of some Nepalese areas but significant - bolts drilled into boulders for tarpaulins, expedition names daubed on boulders, crudely buried rubbish and loose rubbish, including used batteries. On the approach to Gaumukh on the Pilgrim Trail a refundable levy has to be paid to ensure tourists don't discard of plastic. This is run by the Gaumukh Protection Society. No monies coming from the I.M.F. it seemed. There seems to be no liaison.

### **Basecamp and above**

Throughout our stay at Base and attempts on the mountain the weather was very erratic and changeable. On arriving at Tapovan in mist and drizzle we did not even see Shivling, right above us, for a week. Establishing A.B.C. proved difficult because visibility was often down to 30 ft and we kept losing the approach. On arrival conditions seemed good. It was possible to walk to Shivling's A.B.C. on the col below the West Ridge normal route in trainers with very little snow. The bottom snow slope of our route looked relatively safe. We chose Shivling's A.B.C. because at the time there was running water and it was possible to pitch on earth rather than cold glacier, though this did require a short descent to the upper Meru glacier and so to the base of our route.

In one month at Basecamp the best weather window we had was 2.5 days, before a storm cycle, with heavy mists and snow would set in. Often the weather felt quite mild and rain was experienced at 5000m and above.

Due to the uncertainty of the weather we acclimatised by making many carries to A.B.C. With at least two weeks food and huge amounts of hardware we were in a strong position. With this in mind we all moved to A.B.C. with the intention of sitting and waiting for the moment.

From our inspection of the route we came to the conclusion that the only viable method of ascent would be capsule style. Our intention to climb as a supportive team of four. Both teams leading on easier snow ground with one team resting whilst a lead team fixed the ropes we had on the harder rock sections.

We carried lightweight hammocks, bivouac gear, food for 10 days at a push and gas, two descent big wall racks, two 60m 10mm lead ropes, two 60m 8.5mm double ropes. We also had 200m of static 10mm. This we left at the base of the route to pick up on return. The weight of our rucksacks made the decision easy.

At the first sign of clear weather we left advanced base camp at around midnight with the intention of climbing through the night hoping to gain the prominent flat area a third of the way up the lower slope. Initially OK this proved very tiring as the snow became deeper and unconsolidated. Eventually we roped up soloing initially. The final 200m to here consisted of deep powder, proving very strenuous and unnerving. The flat area was reached around 7am the following morning. Due to the intense daytime heat we waited here, getting a little sleep, until early afternoon, and then began climbing again. Although the terrain looked easy we only made about four ropelengths. Our rucksacks were mind-numbingly heavy and the snow covered ice that was honeycombed and lacking in good placements. On average each placement required around 10 blows. Jamie and Jools climbing ahead of Owain and Nick fixed their rope and descended. We all bivvied maybe 200m above the flat area progress being very slow. The next day we jumared the fixed lines and then climbed side by side, Jamie and Jools soon getting ahead, Nick feeling strong but Owain struggling with the weight of his rucksack and altitude. That day we made it to the top of the icefield and moved left to gain a flat spur at the beginning of the rock section. Here we excavated a ledge and bivouacked. We found old portaledges and a food cache. The ledge was good and we wished we had brought a tent rather than just bivouac gear. The final 300m to this bivouac was very nerve wracking on either deep snow or very poor ice. Jamie and Jools executing some very trying leads. The following team jumared. With the heavy sacs this was exhausting. Sometimes it was probably easier to climb.

The approach slope to Meru's Sharksfins is its prime defence. Dangerous snow, rotten ice, not steep enough to haul and not a place to hang round. It negates the chances of too many retreats and retries and limits what you can actually carry to the base of the Fin itself. We are all of the opinion that without this dangerous approach the Fin would have succumbed to a strong team by now.



As we arrived at the high bivvy the weather turned and it snowed throughout the night. The next day was clearer. Jamie and Jools stayed at the bivvy and dried gear. Nick and Owain started fixing the lower rock buttress. After two ropelengths the weather worsened and climbing became impossible. Fixing all their ropes Nick and Owain descended to the bivvy. The snow continued for another 24 hours. During the night Owain's sleeping bag became soaked; continuing storm the next morning suggested retreat as the only option. The rest of the day was spent descending. We hugged the rocky left edge of the snowfield (facing Meru). Descent was trying as we had to trend left continually to find anchors. Descent of the crest directly was too difficult due to the knife edge. Once back at the flat area further descent looked horrendous. Fresh snow made the slopes very unstable, the snow being past waist height. Luckily we excavated four fixed lines starting from the ledge. We floundered down these and then swam the last few hundred metres. We reached A.B.C. late that evening.

Back at Basecamp we waited for another weather window. One rope had been left at our high point, so a new attempt had to start from scratch. After some deliberation Owain decided not to go back. His bivouac bag was leaking and he felt it unfair to risk the chances of the other team members. He also felt the lower slope was now too dangerous. Jamie, Jools and Nick were feeling fitter and keen to try again. We decided that a three might have a stronger chance. Also they would return with a two man tent to pitch at the high point.

After a couple of days at Basecamp the three returned to A.B.C. in still unsettled weather. Owain stayed at Basecamp and monitored their progress through binoculars.

Jamie, Jools and Nick left A.B.C. at 11pm having walked from Basecamp the same day. The bottom snowfield was more laden than before. The old fixed ropes were ascended to the flat area. One of Jools crampons disintegrated at this point but they continued. Feeling fitter the team arrived here three hours after leaving A.B.C. at around 2am. They continued until daybreak stopping for a brew at the previous first day bivvy. Jamie was showing symptoms of hypothermia but insisted he was OK. They continued without bivvying, climbing right to the previous high point where they set up the tent. Due to dangerous snow they had to move left and gain the ridge with several mixed grade 5 pitches. Jools other crampon also snapped to pieces. They decided to continue as the terrain was predominantly rock.

Having spent a night at the previous highpoint the next day they ascended the fixed rope left by Owain and Nick on the first attempt. This section goes diagonally rightwards to meet the righthand end of the obvious snowpatch at the base of the Fin. To its left is a deep gully which has to be crossed. Ascent of the gully direct would be very dangerous. Jools led

out another 60m aid pitch of A2, Nick and Jamie following. On ridge crest easier ground for 60 metres with old fixed gear (the last signs of any previous passage). Jamie then led an ice traverse across the top of gully to the base of ice runnel leading to snowpatch. Ropes were fixed and all descended to tent for second bivvy.

On the third day all three jumared fixed ropes, cleaning as they went. The tent was left erected and bivvy gear was now carried. Regaining ice runnel proved difficult with a horizontal jumar across the top of the gully (Jools without crampons). Jamie led ice runnel grade 5. Nick and Jools jumared. Weather was now deteriorating, winds increasing. Temperatures dropped significantly and cloud cover increased. All three continued onto snowslope at base of righthand side of Fin and hacked out a poor bivouac where the third bivvy (fourth night out) was spent. Snow remained heavy until 3am and then cleared. It was now very cold and beginning to snow at Basecamp (late September).

The fourth day of climbing began at 8am. Weather initially clear but cloud cover coming in earlier each day. The team began traversing the snowslope heading for an obvious steep corner at the base of the lefthand side of the Fin. This snowpatch has few decent bivvies and is composed of steep unstable snow. Whilst crossing this on jumars a directional anchor pulled and Jools took a large pendulum injuring his leg. The team pushed on reaching the base of the large corner at 11am. The corner looks very hard with mixed rock/ice to Grade 6. The wall to the right would require portaledges. The weather was poor again and heavy snow had begun. By midday the weather was atrocious. The three decided to descend. Jools leg was badly bruised and becoming immobile.

The retreat from here to tent site took until 6pm with the weather very bad and the difficulty accentuated by the need to descend with traverses to regain the diagonal ramp. The fifth night out was spent. Up to two feet of fresh snow fell overnight.

On the fifth day all three descended the now highly unstable lower slopes, witnessing many avalanches and narrowly being missed. All lead ropes were either trashed or jammed on descent and all were lost. A.B.C. was reached at 5pm.

After spending the night at A.B.C. the three descended to Basecamp. Further falls of snow made even the descent trying down to Basecamp. A.B.C. had to be temporarily abandoned. It had been snowing hard for a week at Basecamp and conditions were far from ideal. Jamie, Owain and Nick struggled to make the return journey to A.B.C. to retrieve equipment. With Jools injured, bad weather and time running out the decision was made to

leave Tapovan. The route was now too dangerous and energies had already been stretched. All our lead ropes had also been lost.

After asking another team's liaison officer to arrange porters we left Tapovan on October 4th and returned to Delhi.

### **Other information**

Some thoughts on tour agencies. We used Rucsac Tours who helped us source gas in India. This cost no more than at home. Though you must check the cylinders as they are inevitably from previous expeditions. We also used Rucsac to release our cargo from the freight dept at the airport which they did at lightning speed. They also have an English agent who made communication very easy. Gas is a nightmare to cargo.

Rucsac Tours Private Ltd  
5 Bhikaija Cama Place  
New Delhi 110 066  
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Tel: 00 91 11 6173717  
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We hired a bus from them to Gangotri, a cook and all the kitchen equipment. They also arranged our porters on the way up. The service was excellent. However, in retrospect, extra unnecessary expense was incurred. For example on returning we sorted our own porters. In Gangotri we just walked to the bus stand and haggled for a jeep. The same in Uttarkashi. We got all this for around £80!! Also because we hired from Delhi we had to get everything back. Delhi is about trading. We would arrange a bus privately on arrival. Local agencies such as Mount Support Trekking, Uttarkashi, are still trading and are suffering because of larger operations.



## Accounts

### Expenditure G.B.

Equipment	£3500
Visas	£100
Flights	£1224
Admin/Tspt	£200
Food	£250
Medical	£110
Insurance	£820
Air Freight	£225
Gas	£125

**Sub total    £6554**

### Expenditure India

Peak fee	£1450
L/O Equipment	£432
Transport	£450
Food/Acc/Misc	£500
Cook/Kitch Eqpt	£550
Hire of labour	£380
Freight release	£140
Departure tax	£64

**Sub total    £3966**

### Income

Mount Everest Foundation	£900
British Mountaineering Council	£750
Nick Escourt Award 1997	£1000
Civil Service Sports Association	£100

**Total    £2750**

### Overall total cost

**£10, 520**

### Personal contributions

**£7,770    (£1942.50 each)**

## Conclusion

Meru Sharkfin is a magnificent challenge. The bottom snowfield is its biggest defence due to the difficulty of getting your gear to the real issue. The best chance is probably 2 man carrying a single skin tent for the crest at the top of the snowfield, leave this here, then bivvy gear and portaledge above. Weight is obviously the biggest problem.

Our attempt ended at 6000m. All previous signs of attempts ended at the base of the snowfield. So the Fin remains inviolate. We have lots of slides, more info etc. Anyone wanting more info can contact Owain Jones and we will happily impart of what we know,

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Lastly I would particularly like to thank all those who supported us. Special thanks to Paul Pritchard, Noel Craine and Mike 'Twid' Turner for their encouragement.

Appendix 1	Map of area
Appendix 2 & 3	Outline of climb



APPENDIX 2.

DIAGONAL RAMP.  
TENT SITE  
1ST BIVOUAC SIGHT.  
FLAT AREA



ROUTE 2  
KUNDAINI  
LOOKS  
MAGNIFICENT  
MUCH  
SAFER  
AND AWAITS  
AN ALPINE  
STYLE  
ASCENT.

Above: The East Face of the Meru Peaks. (S) South (main) Summit: L 6.660m. (C) Central Summit: c6.500m. (N) North Summit: 6.450m (1) the line attempted in 193 by Craine, Dawes, Lloyd and Pritchard. (2) Kundaini: Bahillo/Corominas/Elias, 1994: 6b and A2+ 85°. (3) Gully of 1984 Japanese attempt (4) Aurora: Knez/Hrasnik, 1988: V111 and AO (5) Broken Wing: Knez/Hrasnik/Hrasnik, 1988: V11. Photo Doug Scott.



———— LINE FOLLOWED  
- - - - - VARIATIONS

# MERU SHARKSFIN. C 6500 M.

