

ac
acl 270 98

98/28



Sissu Nala '98 Expedition

Mountaineering in Lahaul
Himachal Pradesh, India

20 July - 22 August, 1998



Gephan Goh, 5870m, from the Sissu Nala(NorthWest)

+ 625

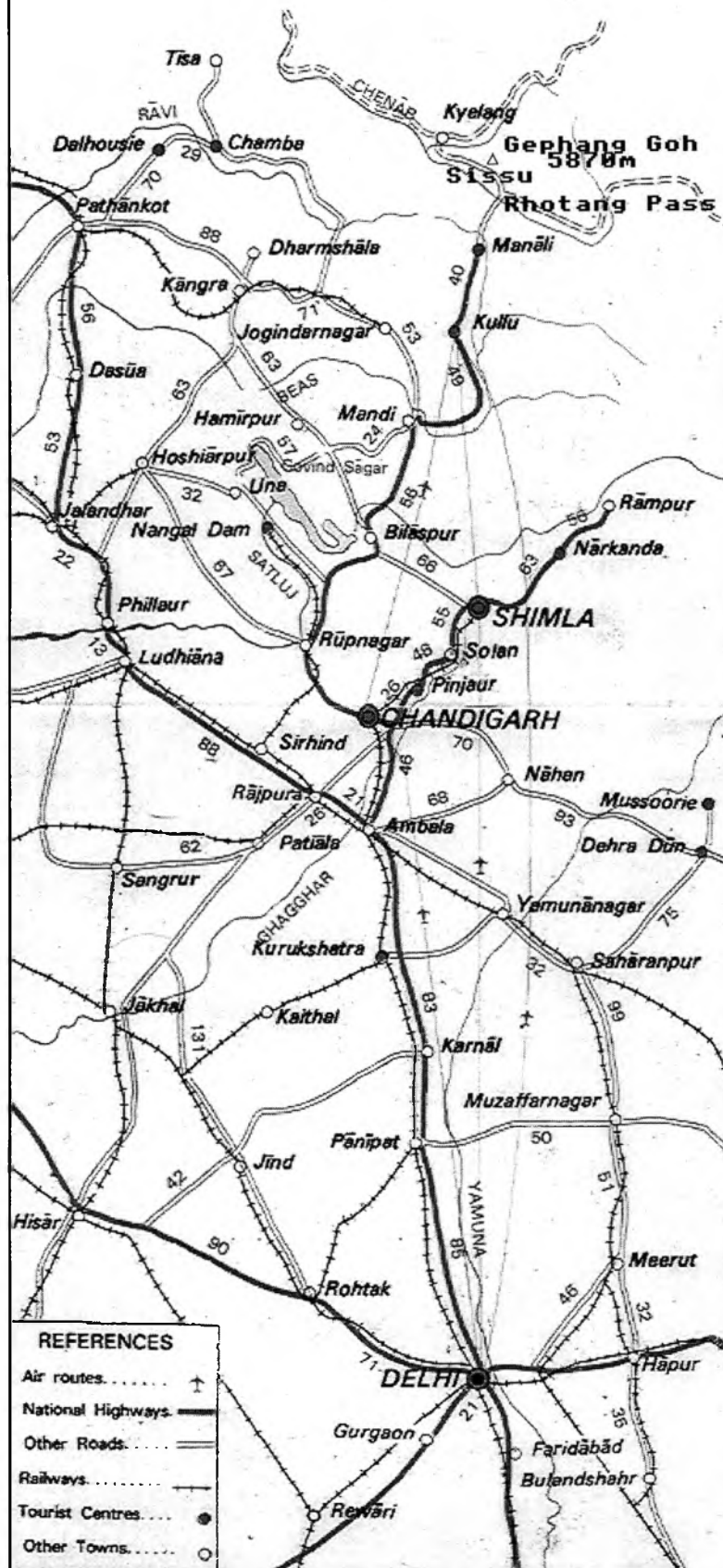
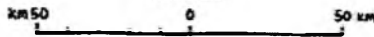
Contents

Map

1. Summary
2. Introduction
3. Approach and Base Camp
4. Climbing objectives
5. Religion and mythology
6. Equipment notes
7. Administrative matters
8. Conclusion
9. Personnel

APPROACH TO KULLU VALLEY

SCALE



REFERENCES

- Air routes ↑
- National Highways —
- Other Roads - - -
- Railways ·····
- Tourist Centres ●
- Other Towns ○

1. Summary

Our expedition to climb Gephan Goh (5870m) began according to plan. Base Camp (BC) was established by the advance party (IF/WS) on 30 July after 3 short day walks from the village of Sissu, our roadhead; Sissu itself being a 5 hour drive over the Rhotang Pass from Manali in the Kulu valley.

The other 3 climbers (AP/TM/MS) arrived at BC on 7 August, with the monsoon unexpectedly in tow. Despite these freak rains an attempt on our original objective, a new route up the West ridge, was made by two climbers (IF/AP) in a single, Alpine style, push. The other 3 aborted a repeat of the 1954 North ridge route and made a recce of the Sissu Nala instead.

A snow hole below the bergschrund and two bivvies along the ridge put us in a position to attempt the summit on 14 August despite frequent, heavy showers. The day started fine and after 5 pitches of Scottish grade II/III the angle above camp relented. Numerous crevasses and poor snow conditions hindered progress until, after two short falls and the return of the cloud, we decided to return having reached c.5550m. Time constraints prevented a subsequent attempt.

We believe this route to be feasible under normal weather conditions but it should not be underestimated. The Eastern end of the ridge looks much easier when viewed from BC.

Many other mountains could be climbed from the Sissu Nala including the virgin peak 5852m. This would require considerable routefinding skills and much time.

Leader: Ian Ford

Members: Trevor Milton
Andy Parkinson
Wilrik Sinia
Mark Smith

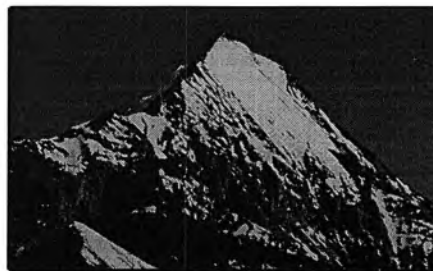


2. Introduction

At the inaugural meeting it was agreed that this expedition, being our first, should aim for success and enjoyment ahead of either the technical challenge or any arbitrary height objectives. Given that some members would be limited to annual leave, it was also decided that, of the peaks seen by the Leader during his reconnaissance (July/August 1997), Gephang Goh (5870m) offered the best compromise. It had easy access, an identifiable route and good weather (being 'beyond' the monsoon).

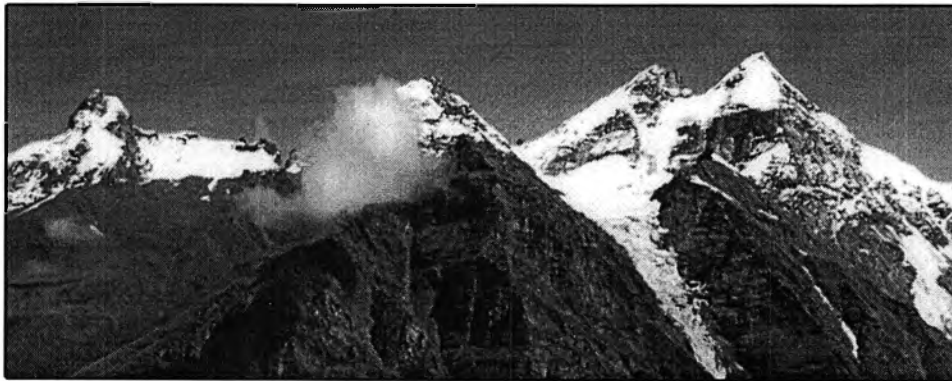
Which peak?

Whilst researching our expedition we found that there was considerable confusion over the naming and respective heights attributed to the three main peaks of the Sissu Nala. This is summarised below.



Northern Peak

2. 18 930' (5771)*
3. 6113m
4. Gepang Goh 6053m
5. Gepang Goh 6050m



Looking North from the Rhotang Pass

Western Peak

1. "of almost the same height as the lower head of the true Gaphan"
2. Gepang 19 259' (5870m)
3. Gephon
4. Geopang Goh (5870m)
5. Gepang Goh (5870m)
7. Gepang Goh (5870m)
8. 6088m

Eastern Peaks

1. Gaphan
2. 19 200' (5852m)
"three or four hundred feet lower than Gepang"
3. 5852m
6. Gepang Goh

* this appears to match a peak of 5769m marked on some maps. Those same maps show a higher peak to the East though Wollaston's text is clear on this point. Talking of the 18 930' peak he says, "In height it is a worthy second to Gepang in that area ..."

References

1. Kulu and Lahoul, C.G. Bruce, London, 1914
2. Peaks of the Sissu Nala basin, Lahul Himalaya, Wollaston, N. , HJ (volume not recorded)
3. Indian Himalaya Series, sheet 5, Himachal Pradesh - Kulu valley, Parbati valley & central Lahaul, 1:200 000, Leomann Maps, UK
4. Trekking route map of Himachal Pradesh, sheet no. 1, 1:250 000, 1976, Government of India, India
5. Trekking map series, Kullu valley, 1:250 000, 1990, Survey of India, India
6. HJ, vol. 43 1985/6, opp. p. 152
7. Mehta, S. and Kapadia, H., "Exploring the hidden Himalaya", 1990, Hodder & Stoughton, London
8. High, No. 187 June 1998, Mountain info p. 27

In addition, an American military map [Palampur NI 43-16 series U502] shows the name Laguche Dhar written over such a broad area that it could refer to either the SW peak or the range as a whole; the latter being more likely given the translation of Dhar. Likewise, Gephang Goh is written so that it could be identified with either of the southern peaks.

Wollaston also refers to the name Laguche Dhar on their map, but claim that the locals had never heard it used.

Bearing this confusion in mind we acquired a GPS and a WWII sighting device before departure. We were prevented from using the GPS* by the IMF and only a few readings were taken with the sighting device; not enough for worthwhile results. A pity, but clear days were rare enough and climbing our priority.

*Apparently permission can now be obtained through the IMF application process.

Lobzang, our Sirdar, however, seems to have clarified the position so far as names are concerned (See 5. Religion and mythology) whilst our altimeter readings (an Avocet Vertech watch) would seem to agree with the most often quoted height of 5870m for Gephang the South-western peak.

Previous Expeditions

1912	Leader: C.G. Bruce Summiteers: Heinrich Fuhrer Lalbahadur Unnamed orderly Route: South ridge (traversing down West ridge)
1954	Co-leaders: N. Wollaston, R. Platts Summiteers: as above Route: North ridge (true North-east spur)
1997	Details unknown

The 1912 expedition very nearly succeeded in climbing the Eastern, twin-summitted peak from the South. The 1954 expedition also tried from the South but did not get as far.

3. Approach and base Camp

Flights

Our international flights were purchased through KE Adventure Travel Ltd, Keswick after negotiations direct with PIA. PIA were keen to help and went out of their way to get us the flights we wanted and an additional 10Kg baggage allowance. The outward flight stopped over in Lahore where we were to have one night. The arrangements were made very efficient by the PIA officer at the airport.

We considered flights from Delhi to Kulu, the nearest airport to Manali, for the second group. Given that these arrived in an evening we preferred an overnight taxi. It would arrive at a similar time, save on the cost of a Delhi hotel and avoid the complications of excess baggage. More importantly, we needed reliability and a flight during the monsoon was thought too much of a risk.

Delhi — Manali

This section of our journey was arranged in advance through Ruck Sack Tours (Pvt) Ltd. Prices were quoted as:

Ambassador (large car with roofrack)	\$200
Maxi van (10 seater minibus)	\$550

We arranged 2 Ambassadors for the advance party (IF/WS and LO) but a Maxi with two drivers was supplied at no extra cost. This took 17 hours to Manali.

The other three climbers were picked up at the airport in an Ambassador. They took about an hour less despite more frequent stops. This extra speed was not appreciated by the occupants.

The return trip was made in another Maxi. This accommodated the five climbers, our LO and all our gear comfortably. Unfortunately there was only one driver. Having just driven up from Delhi he now expected to turn around and continue the marathon. We stopped regularly during the night but next morning he fell asleep at the wheel, 100 Km short of Delhi, crashing off the road. No harm to us but one pedestrian received serious head injuries. After getting him to hospital we continued in another bus.

Manali — Sissu

A deal was made with Ramesh Kumar a local taxi driver (registration number HP02 0434). He did three trips for us over the Rhotang Pass in his Gypsy (a jeep with cargo space). A second driver followed for the first trip and another for the final return trip. The return was rather cramped but there was always the option of some members using a bus. Each Gypsy trip cost Rs1800 (approx. £25). Kumar proved to be accommodating to our ever changing plans and always reliable.

Sissu — BC

During the recce of '97 the Leader misunderstood instructions for the best path up the Nala and followed a poor trail along the river. With the foreknowledge of a better path higher up, alongside an irrigation ditch, the approach was feasible for ponies.

On our first trip up progress was limited by our acclimatization and later, after the end of the ditch, by the need to prepare paths. There are many good campsites along the way though many were already occupied by gaddis (shepherds).

We made our first camp after just 3 hours walk, having reached some pleasant meadows. The ponies returned for a second load and were back again 5 hours later.

The next day included the crossing of a snow filled gully. Our initial hesitance was forgotten as we watched the ponymen in cut-off wellies strolling across. Two hours walking brought us to another snow filled gully. There was considerable discussion as to the best way from here to BC (now visible). In the end Lobzang's choice, over the gully, prevailed; they being his ponies. He and his men built a rough path up the landslide on the far side.

On the third day we reached and established BC (4150m). This took two hours for each load.

A few days later the Leader returned to Manali to guide the other three climbers to BC. It took only three hours down to Sissu and another 5 ½ hours on the bus to reach Manali. This second group took a day and a half to reach BC from Sissu, the ponies doing that and the return journey in just one day.

BC was sited on a grass meadow between two moraines.

- a large boulder provided a good anchor for the tarpaulin kitchen.
- drinking water was available from a glacier fed stream emerging from the hillside
100m away
- another surface stream provided washing water
- toilet sites were found over the left moraine
- cooking was done on a gas stove using two 14kg 'calor gas' type cylinders. These cost approximately £5 each to refill and only proved difficult to light on the colder mornings.
- a ditch was dug for food waste
- paper and other combustibles were kept and burnt in one large fire before leaving
- tins and glass were returned to Manali

Weather

The weather experienced during the recce trip in 1997 was excellent. Cloudless skies daily were a major factor in our decision to climb in Lahaul especially given the summer 6 weeks constraint applicable to our teaching members.

Research showed that we could expect the same. Previous expeditions and geographic references were clear on the point. The monsoon is prevented from reaching Lahaul, and parts North, by the Pir Pinjal range that we were to cross by the Rhotang Pass.

The first sign that this was not to be the case in '98 arrived with the three climbers of the second party. A heavy shower on the night of August 2nd was followed by gathering clouds on the Pir Pinjal. As the second party left Sissu there was another shower and from then on, until the 16th, these became a daily occurrence.

During the attempt, 11-15 August, rain was experienced on each day and every night but the last. Above 5200m there was often thick cloud and fresh snow.

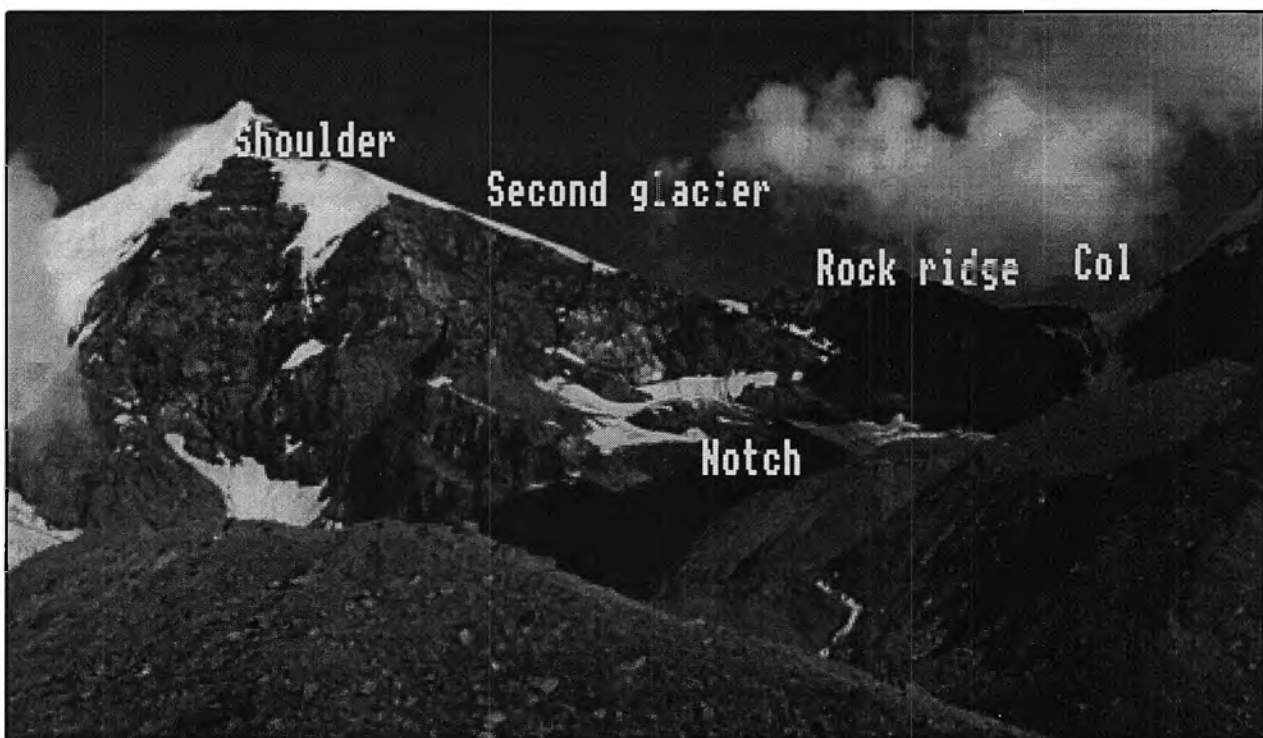
Fortunately, the 'tourmentes' experienced by the 1912 expedition were never encountered.

We might well put this freak weather down as another of El Nino's tricks. It was certainly felt all across the Himalaya and eventually as far away as Bangladesh. It would not put us off a repeat attempt during the same season but we shall be watching for further reports.

A pre-monsoon climb would probably be a better option for those with more choice in their timings though it should be noted that the Rhotang Pass is seasonal. This is normally open only from May to September and though alternatives exist they would negate the advantage of quick access. Snow cover would be considerably better on the glaciers though if much more remained in the gullies and at BC, alternatives might need to be found.

4. Climbing Objectives

The route involved 3 main difficulties. It will therefore be described in stages where these, and our solutions, can be detailed.



1. To the bergschrund

From BC a shepherd's trail along the left moraine lead up to a patch of snow between this and the main moraine to the right. This snow allowed quick progress to the top end of the moraine.

Originally we took a high line from here to the obvious notch in the moraine on the far side of the valley [approx 2 hrs]. After watching some incredibly large rockfalls from the North face we made subsequent crossings by a lower line.

At the top of this notch there was evidence of a camp which could possibly be from a Snow and Avalanche research team apparently in the Nala in '97.

From here we donned crampons. This first glacier was relatively straightforward; crevasses being obvious and generally avoided by a middle line up the glacier. On the first afternoon of our attempt we dug a snow hole just below the bergschrund (4800m) to shelter from the rain having taken about 6 leisurely hours from BC.

2. Crossing the bergschrund

Our original plan was to cross the bergschrund and climb to the col early due to obvious signs of rockfall, hence the choice of campsite. The overnight rain put us off the bergschrund itself and we headed off right to where the snow reached up to the rock slabs.

Several pitches up, and then across, finally brought us to the couloir above the bergschrund; the detour being justified by several large rocks seen bouncing down to our left. The rock was very poor, being mostly loose shale, but occasional pegs in sounder rock provided the necessary protection.

3. To the col

Despite pitches of poor, pellet-like, snow this couloir was soloed for speed. The left edge was obviously prone to rockfall from a side gully above, and newly exposed rocks at about half-height also made the right side an uncomfortable place to be until these were passed.

A dirty patch of snow near the top of the couloir turned out to be the effects of an under-snow stream. This was avoided to the right.

The col itself (5050m) was reached after 3 hours and running water was available for much needed refreshment.

A cairn and a cleared area showed evidence of a previous camp. It might be possible to reach this position by the continuation of the West ridge or from the glacier we could now see on the other side. The West ridge would probably provide the easiest going of the 3 options but would be significantly longer and require going over an intervening peak.

We decided to bivvy further along the ridge though this afforded no more shelter from the night's storm than the col would have done, and that had running water (of the drinking variety).

4. Rock ridge

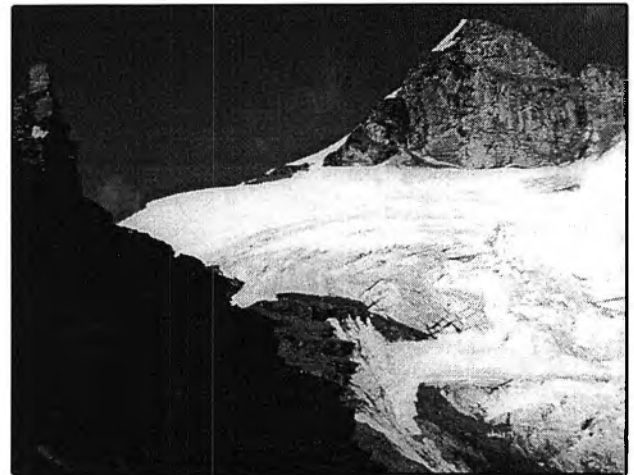


Looking back along the rock ridge

Although awkward and exposed in places our line on the RHS of the ridge avoided the major obstacles; 2 large towers. Being a shorter day (4 hours only) we had sufficient time for proper food and rest at our cleared site (5180m). By some fluke of radio reception we also managed to speak to the other 3 climbers somewhere on the far side of the North ridge that evening, relaying details of our progress and expected return.

5. Second glacier

We woke at 04.00 to a glorious morning but didn't start climbing until 06.00 due to the inconveniences of diarrhoea. Some 20m above our camp the rock ended and a steep bank of ice led upwards. With an ice-fall on the right and knowing the left edge to be corniced the choice of route was rather limited. The situation was further complicated by crevasses sweeping around from the ice-fall. We aimed off along the right edge of one of these planning to take a line perpendicular to the crevasses higher up.



The second glacier

Having presumed this to be a snow slope with only a short ice section we found ourselves poorly equipped for the 5 pitches of scottish grade II/III climbing on 40°-50° ice. With only two ice screws we could only curse at the useless deadman and snow stakes dangling annoyingly at our sides. Fortunately the ice proved to be excellent and the crevasses small enough to step across, apprehensively.

As the angle relented we continued in glacier mode crossing numerous crevasses though clouds regularly drifted through, restricting our view of the route ahead. Choosing crossing points over crevasses consumed too much time and our target of reaching the shoulder by 11:00 passed all too soon.

We continued thinking ourselves to be almost clear of the crevasse section but were never that far. AP took two short falls in quick succession and then, with a parting of the clouds allowing us a proper assessment of the situation, we decided enough was enough. (approx 11:45). We were at about 5550m and approximately 300m (distance) short of the shoulder. Those metres would have taken many hours. We were not prepared for a night out at that height and in that weather.

6. Descent

Descent was not easy as a snow storm soon reduced visibility to less than 100m and hid our tracks. Nevertheless we returned to our campsite (15:00) with only one incident. IF twisted an ankle leaping off a snow bridge.

We had faint hopes of making it down to BC that day but bivvied near to the camp 2 site (17:00).

We placed anchors for the first 4 pitches down from the col, the steepest section, then, with sporadic rockfall already, soloed down to the bergschrund. We lowered off a peg into this, and crossed on some jammed boulders.

The other three climbers and Lobzang met us at the top of the notch, and gave well needed support to BC.

5. Religion and mythology

The Puja

Lobzang, our pony sirdar, was keen to stay at a guest house in Shashin 1Km beyond Sissu and not the government rest house there. This other guest house turned out to be opposite the temple dedicated to Gephan. It also turned out that Lobzang's sister lived a few doors up the street. By some amazing coincidence a big party was planned for that night. We were invited and enjoyed fantastic hospitality but escaped before the various forms of alcohol put paid to our plans.

The next morning, only slightly worse for wear, we attended a puja; a ceremony combining aspects of both Buddhist and Hindu worship since Gephan is apparently venerated by both religions.

Inside the temple one corner was set aside as a shrine. On top of this rested a collection of golden sun hats, conical with dangling decorations around the rim. These, we were told, are called Gohs, hence the name Gephan Goh (see 2. Introduction and later)



In an atmosphere of burning juniper and josticks, our offering of prashad (butter and tsampa mix) was shaped into a yak by the holy man who, apparently, as a lay official, has no title. This was offered in front of the shrine with accompanying incantations. At the climax the holy man tore off the yak's head as an act of sacrifice.

We each made a donation and received some pink cloth for a scarf. We were also given a larger white scarf to place on the summit.

After the puja Lobzang explained that the sacrifice had been made to the, "mother goddess", reminiscent of Wollaston's reference to a legend of a goddess and her yak. This story was not known.

Gephan Temple, Shashin

We each received a share of the prashad for luck.

The story of Gephan

According to Lobzang, and attested by Rakesh and Tanzing, this is the story of Gephan:

A long time ago 5 brothers came down from Bodh a land in the North. These brothers were kings, later to be revered as gods. One of the brothers, Gephan, stopped to meditate in Lahaul. He was wearing a Goh (golden sun-hat) but this attracted a thief. The thief sneaked up behind Gephan, but as he tried to grasp the hat it flew up in the air and landed above Sissu. The people had not seen such a thing before and wondered what it was. When they found out, they built a temple, at Shashin, and worshipped it.

Gephan's other brothers settled nearby. One in Keylong, one in Malana and two in Kulu. The names Jhamlu and Jagdamni Rishi were half remembered though none of our staff was sure of their respective residences.

Many traditions have built up around Gephan. Not least, those to do with the god's image.

Every 12 years a new image is made from a freshly cut tree taken from near Malana. This is decorated with red and white ribbons and brought to the temple at Shashin. For the first 3 years it is locked away out of sight. After that time, only men and unmarried girls are allowed to look at it during its processions around various villages.

Our guest house had a colour photo of one such image which was fortunate as the last image was made in 1996 and therefore still locked up.

Interpretation and peak names

Given the shapes of these mountains, as viewed from the South (see 2. Introduction), it seems reasonable to suppose that the Western peak (5870m) is Gephan, the kneeling king in meditation. The higher of the two Eastern peaks (5852m) appears conical and would seem to be his sun hat, hence Gephan Goh.



Gephan Goh from Shashin



Summit enlarged

However, since the summit of the Western peak is just visible from Shashin and appears conical from there, this may be Gephan's Goh in the story.

Several people mentioned that Gephan was visible from Shimla and Dharmasala. Accurate sightings from both places would seem the best way to resolve the issue.

The Northern peak is almost certainly wrongly named, probably in the mistaken belief, prior to more accurate mapping, that it was the rear view of the more Southerly peak. It's height, though not determined accurately, is probably nearer to 5771m than 6050m (see 2. Introduction).

6. Equipment notes

1. Tents

Although two 3-man tents were taken for use on the mountain, neither was used since they were too heavy for the party of two making the attempt. In the event there was too little level space on the ridge anyway. 2-man tents would be a better option though only necessary in similar rainy conditions. Otherwise, bivvy bags would suffice. The rock formations offer few natural shelters.

2. Stoves

The expedition purchased two new gas stoves to cope with the cold and altitude. Our MSR XGK petrol stoves were rejected originally in the expectation of cooking inside tents. Both stoves, a Bibler tower stove and a Coleman Max Xtreme burnt a mixture of propane and butane. Testing at BC showed the Bibler to be hard to light and poor at burning; the Coleman had no such problems. This may have been due to the former using a 70/30 mix and the latter a 60/40 but this seems unlikely to be the sole reason. Even preheating the cylinders had minimal effect.

The Coleman was selected for the attempt, along with three new Max 300 cartridges. No problems were encountered (one brew as high as 5300m). After five days of mainly morning and evening use one cartridge remained unused. The other two were only partially used.

3. Protection

Although we carried a selection of protection up to the col this was pruned rather too effectively before the second glacier and the hardest climbing. This is not the snow slope it appeared to be from below and the deadman and snowstake taken remained unused. 6 ice screws would have been more use.

4. Coffee

Indian instant coffee is worse than the cheapest UK own-brand powder and therefore almost undrinkable without lots of milk and sugar; the way it is served in most restaurants. We took three jars of our own Nescafe.

For other novices to altitude it may be worth noting the effects of opening low altitude coffee up high.



At about 3700m the foil top bulges after unscrewing the lid. Piercing it releases the pressure, violently. Coffee flies up approximately 50cm. Some 10% is wasted from the jar.

At about 4100m the foil top is blown apart as the lid is unscrewed. A more general spraying of coffee is achieved with consequently less wastage, only about 5%.

Be warned!

7. Administrative matters

Permit

Our application was sent off on January 3rd. Permission was received on June 1. This was for two peaks (IMF rules). Since the second peak was never attempted a refund was made. This was given in Rs cash but that was easily converted to £ at the airport.

Grants

Applications were made to the Mount Everest Foundation (and BMC/Sports Council) and Lyon Equipment. The MEF application was made for the December deadline with an interview at the RGS, attended by AP, in March. This was successful with grants of £500 (MEF) and £600 (BMC/Sports Council). The Lyon Equipment application was not.

Visas

These were obtained in London and the Hague without complication. Normal application forms and 3 passport photos were required; notification of our permission being sent direct from Delhi.

Insurance

This was obtained through the BMC and the Nederlandse Klim-en. No claims were required though we did contact the insurers to inform them of our crash (see 3. Approach and Base Camp)

Finance

Income		Expenditure	
Personal contributions	6 999	Travel	3 768
Grants received	1 100	Food	491
	-----	Equipment	988*
	8 099	Peak fees	1 427
		Hire of labour	449
Less:		Insurance	447
Equipment shared out*	(477)	Miscellaneous	52
	-----		-----
	7 622		7 622
	=====		=====

Exchange rates £1 = Rs 67 \$1 = Rs 42

* after the expedition, serviceable equipment was shared out amongst members and set against their contributions at 80% of cost.

8. Conclusion

Though we did not reach the summit, the route itself would seem to be feasible. Our time was too limited and the unusual weather conditions finished us. An attempt earlier in the year would certainly benefit from better snow coverage and hence improved progress over the numerous crevasses. We also think a line further to the left of ours would have been better but clear visibility would be essential to avoid the corniced left edge. Being prepared for a camp at the shoulder would also benefit slower/ less acclimatised parties.

More generally, with this being our first expedition, we recognise that it was ambitious to attempt a new route especially with very limited time. We have however, proved the potential for an attempt on a Himalayan peak within the constraint of annual leave and would recommend this area and our support staff (see below) to anyone considering a similar venture.

9. Personnel

Leader: Ian Ford

Contact address: 4 Bank Hall Tel. no. 016977 46034
Hallbankgate
Brampton
Cumbria, CA8 2NP

E-Mail address: IanFord@nctc.demon.co.uk

Members: Trevor Milton
Andy Parkinson
Wilrik Sinia
Mark Smith

Supported by: Sgt. Nizamuddin, Liaison Officer
Lobzang Bodh, ponies and base camp staff
Rakesh Negi, cook
Tanzing, cook's assistant
Mrs Rani Puri } Ruck Sack Tours, transport
Chris Pearson }
Manoj Sharma, Hotel Ever Green, Aleo, Manali, accommodation

Grants received,
with thanks, from: Mount Everest Foundation
BMC/Sports Council

Many thanks to: Marion Lawrence, PIA, international flights
Ged Feeney, referee and loan of equipment
Roger Salway, World Challenge Expeditions, referee
Dr Patrick Gray, medical advice and kit
Dave Renton, loan of equipment