

# ***British Chombu Expedition 2022***

## ***Supported by:***

***Mount Everest Foundation***

***Berghaus***

***Alpine Club***

## **Contacts for further information:**

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### **Climbing Members**

Mick Fowler (66) British. Retired.

Regular climber in the greater ranges for over 30 years. Recent expeditions include Mugu Chuli West Face (2011), Prow of Shiva (2012), Kishtwar Kailash West Face (2013), Hagshu NE Face (2014), Gave Ding North Face (2015), Sersank North Face (2016)

Victor Saunders (72) British Retired.

Regular climber in the greater ranges for over 30 years. Six times to the summit of Everest. Expeditions in recent years include Ama Dablam (2011), Everest (2012), Aconcagua (2013), Chamsen (7017m –first ascent - 2013), Manaslu (2014), Sersank North Face (2016), Pregar (6185m- first ascent- 2021)

### **Expedition Support Team**

Subash Rai (Sirdar) , Deu-Kumar Chhetri (Assistant Cook), Devi-Ram Rai (Main Cook). Plus Six Porters and the excellent agent team of Barap Namgyal Bhutia and Bhaichung Bhutia of Sikkim Tour Trek and Expeditions.

### **North Sikkim**

North Sikkim had been extensively visited by British mountaineers in the early years of the twentieth century and, together with the long and winding Teesta River Valley, was the main route of entry to Tibet for the early Everest expeditions.

Several summits near or on the Sikkim -Tibet border were climbed by Alexander Kellas. In 1911 Kellas climbed Pauhunri (7165m), Chomoyumo (6835m) and Sentinal Peak ( 6490m), adding Kangchenjhou (6920m) in 1912, passing to the north of those peaks via Gurudongma valley. The 53-year-old Kellas died of a presumed heart attack during the 1921 Everest expedition. Nestled between, and slightly south, of these great peak was the overlooked Chombu (6360m) later to be described by Doug Scott as the Matterhorn of Sikkim.

### **Brief History of Attempts on Chombu**

1944 C Cooke and D McPherson tried to reach the foot of the north ridge but failed due to deep snow. (Himalayan Journal 1946)

1952 Reconnaissance by Trevor Braham. No attempt made. (Himalayan Journal 1954)

1961 Ascent by unspecified route claimed by members of Sonam Gyatso's expedition. Widely disbelieved. (Himalayan Journal 1961)

1992 Japanese attempt from the east via Sebu La and Chombu Glacier. High point reached not far short of summit ridge. (Alpine Journal 1993)

1996 Doug Scott's expedition turned back on N side by bad weather and soft snow. (American Alpine Journal 1997)

2007 Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma turned back on N side due to 'interesting' snow. (American Alpine Journal 2008)

2019 Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders explored approaches to the West Face in the spring season. Accimatising on the the Sebu La, they were shut down by the bad weather and unstable snow conditions on the west Chombu Glacier.

2019 Autumn Season; Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders returned to climb the North East Ridge and reached 6107m on the mountain before being forced to descend after a food poisoning event.

2022 Spring. The subject of the current report.

### **Summary**

Having had difficult snow conditions in April and October 2019 we reasoned that it could not be as bad in May, the days getting warmer as we approached the solstice and remembering that most successful ascents of the great Himalayan Peaks are often near the end of May.

When we arrived there was little snow below 5,000m and there had evidently been a period of benign weather giving firm re-frozen conditions above that in the mornings. Sadly, by the time we had completed our acclimatizing, this happy circumstance did not persist and was replaced by a daily pattern of bright early mornings followed in swift order by mid-morning clouds and then snow showers lasting into the night. (See weather summary below). This weather pattern left the North Face rock outcrops plastered, heavily loaded and unsafe to climb. A further deterioration on the weather left us trying to navigate between crevasses on the Northeast Chombu Glacier.

### **Weather**

The weather was consistently poor during most of our time in the field, seeing rain or snow showers, often heavy, throughout the afternoons, and often lasting the rest of the day and night. We had forecasts of low winds at altitude but that did not prevent gusty showers. It appears that the cause of this peculiar weather pattern was a large deep anti-cyclone in the Bay of Bengal producing excessive rain in Sikkim while sparing the more western parts of the Himalaya.

### **The Acclimatization**

On 24 April, after establishing a base at 4650m below the terminal moraine of the dying Chombu glacier, the team explored approaches to the west face of Chombu. The west face is attractive, criss-crossed by apparently climbable ramp lines that seemed to link up and form a complicated but climbable route through the some very steep ground. We climbed up to a point close to the start of the route and were disappointed to find that the preceding spell of good weather had stripped the snow/ice ramps of their cover leaving bare rock and the expectation of considerable rockfall danger ruling this face out of the question in the current conditions.

So, this left us looking once again at the Northeast spur which we had climbed to 6107m in 2019. On 26 April we bivouacked at 4950m below a 500m couloir, the Fowler Couloir, and found firm conditions underfoot the next morning on 27 April. On 28 April we reconnoitered the glacier approach to the Northeast Spur and on 29 April, with an excellent forecast for the coming week, descended the Fowler Couloir to basecamp. The route to base from the bottom of the couloir lay over unstable large rocks. It was while crossing this oversized scree that Saunders rolled a boulder and was plunged headfirst into a sharp-sided granite block cutting his hand badly. This was to put back the start of the climb by several days while the wound healed sufficiently bear an ice axe.

### **The (attempted) climb**

On 4 May we trekked up the moraines and boulder fields leading to the bivouac site under the Fowler Couloir and the following morning saw us climbing to the top of the couloir at 5512m. 6 May found us in deep banks of fog making it not possible to navigate the glacier safely to the Northeast Spur. 7 May dawned bright, but by the time we reached the base of the Spur (at 8am), hemmed in by crevasses to our left and avalanche slopes to our right, the

fog had returned and unable to begin the climb (we could not see the start) were forced once again to bivouac while we waited for the weather to clear. It snowed heavily that afternoon and all night. The next day it had become clear the only safe course of action was to move away from the avalanche potential under the North face and try to navigate back to the bivouac above the Fowler Couloir. Fortunately, we had recorded a few way points on the GPS, and this helped steer us away from the crevasses in the fog. It continued to snow for the rest of the day, and we were forced to bivouac two nights to avoid descending the 500m Fowler Couloir in avalanche conditions which we were able to safely do on 10 May, deciding to rappel the slopes to avoid the avalanche potential. There followed a brief reconnaissance of the approaches to Chungukang (5824m) in the now further deteriorating weather. Our visas were now due to expire in a few days and we had the sad task of admitting to ourselves that the trip had effectively come to an end.

**Bureaucracy**

Sikkim was annexed by Indira Gandhi in 1972, but has retained a certain amount of autonomy since that date, though this has not made the process of getting mountaineering permits any easier. Officially there were just five "open" peaks in North Sikkim in 2021 (We understand this number has now been increased, though we do not know to how many). Anything else requires permission and approval from five separate ministries, a not inconsiderable paper trail to follow.

All our in-country arrangements and permits were handled by Barap Namgyal Bhutia and his assistant, Baichung Bhutia, whose services we found to be excellent. The contact details are as follows:

Barap Namgyal Bhutia, Sikkim Tour Trek and Expedition Sonam Gyatsho Marg  
Near Enchay Compound  
Tibet Road, Gangtok PIN 73701  
E-mail: [gosisikkim@gmail.com](mailto:gosisikkim@gmail.com)

**APPENDICES****Expedition Accounts****Expenditure**

Payment to agent (permits, cook, kitchen boy, sirdar/LO, porters etc.)	10,421.02
Travel Costs*	3565.88
Mountain Gas	82.53
Visa costs	275.6
Insurance	801.82
Weather forecast	383.87
Hotel in Gangtok	125.4
Courier costs	83.71
Hill Food	277.05
Satellite Communication Device	65
Equipment	327.47
Misc	228.94
	16638.29

\* the travel costs were higher than usual due to Covid and the closure of Bagdogra airport which resulted in us having to travel via Kolkatta.

**Income**

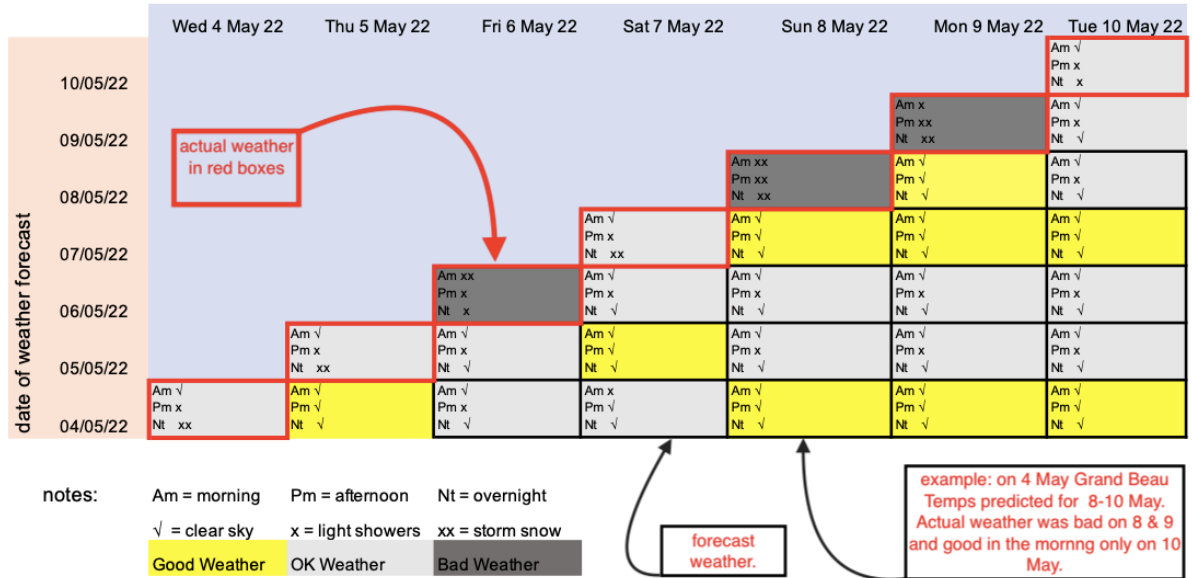
Mount Everest Foundation	8000
Berghaus	6300
Alpine Club	1800
Personal Contributions	538.29
	16638.29

**Expedition log**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>night (m)</b>
19/04/2022	LHR to Kolkatta	
20/04/2022	Kolkutta to Pakyong airport	
21/04/2022	to Gangtok	1,500
22/04/2022	by road to Tangu	4,000
23/04/2022	to Chungkang	4,460
24/04/2022	to BC	4,650
25/04/2022	recce West Face	4,650
26/04/2022	to Bivouac 4950	4,950
27/04/2022	to FC bivouac 5512	5,512
28/04/2022	recce to base of N Face	5,512
29/04/2022	to BC	4,650
30/04/2022	packing and preps	4,650
01/05/2022	bad weather	4,650
02/05/2022	bad weather	4,650
03/05/2022	re-packing	4,650
04/05/2022	to Bivouac 4950	4,950
05/05/2022	to FC bivouac 5512	5,512
06/05/2022	bad weather	5,512
07/05/2022	to base of N Face bivouac.	5,700
08/05/2022	return to FC in fog banks and bad weather.	5,512
09/05/2022	bad weather	5,512
10/05/2022	return to base	4,650
11/05/2022	recce Chukukang	4,650
12/05/2022	packing base	4,650
13/05/2022	packing base	4,650
14/05/2022	to Tangu	4,000
15/05/2022	to Gangtok	1,500

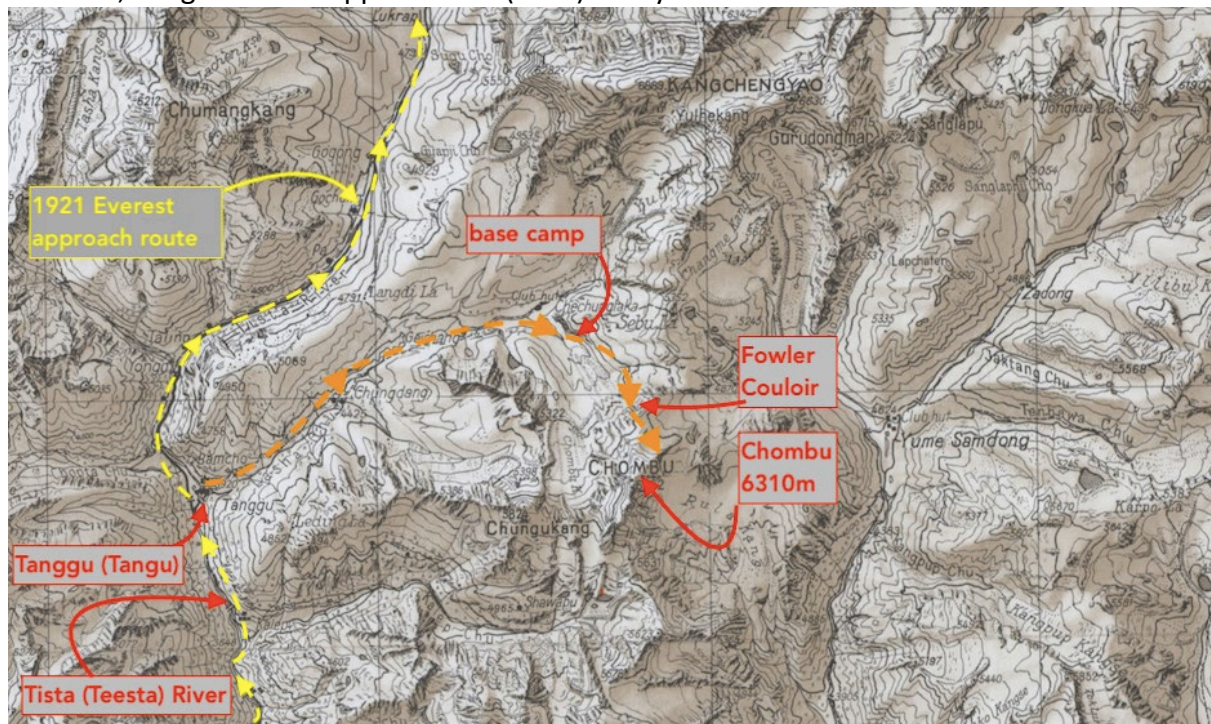
### Weather Log for the period 4 to 10 May

This graphic is included to illustrate the difficulty professional forecasters have predicting the weather in Sikkim. On 4 May we set out with an excellent forecast for 8,9 and 10 May, which would have been intended summit days. In the event those days turned out to have heavy snow fall and there were no days during the entire expedition when there was not some snow fall.

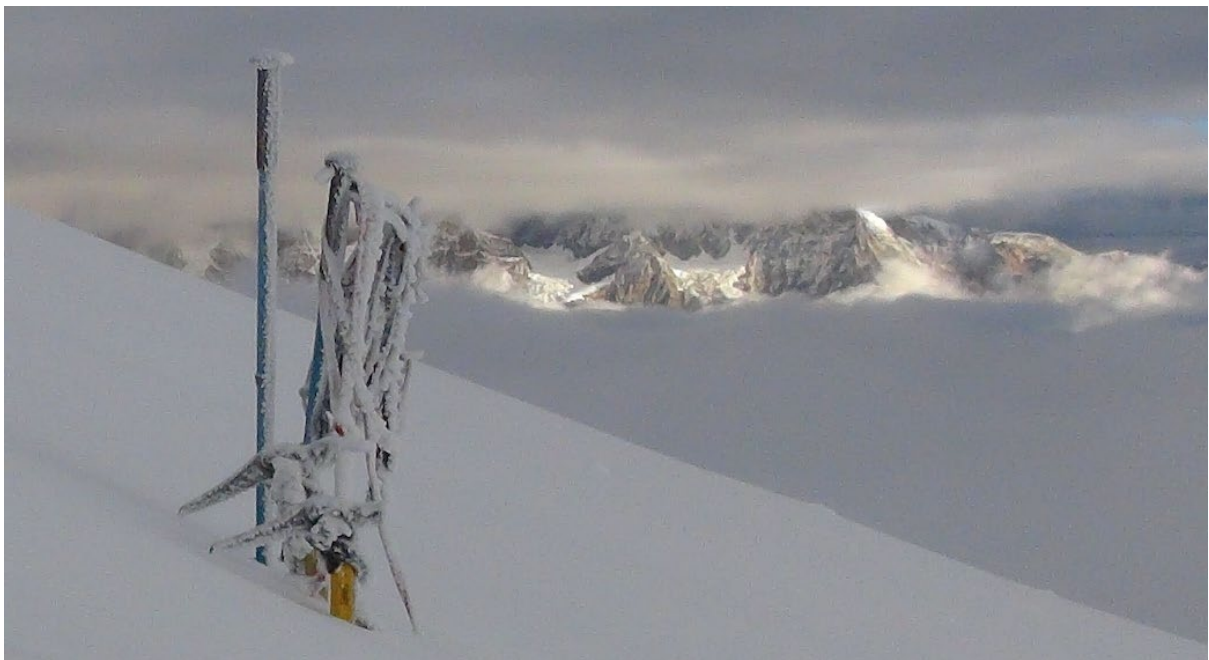


### MAP

#### Chombu, Tangu and the upper Teesta (Tista) valley



**A typical good weather day**



**The minor injury...**





**Our wonderful basecamp crew, left to right; Subash, Devi-Ram and Deu-Kumar**



## **Acknowledgments**

The expedition is grateful for the support received from the Mount Everest Foundation, Berghaus and the Alpine Club and the help and advice received from Julie-Ann Clyma, Doug Scott and Julian Freeman-Attwood.