

Guy Buckingham - 4 Jul 2023



View into the Cirque on the approach to
Thalay Sagar (highest peak on the left)

Summary

The primary aim of this expedition in May / June 2023 was to make the first ascent of the South East Ridge of Thalay Sagar (6904m) in the Garhwal Himalaya, India. We attempted this objective during the period 20-24 May but were unsuccessful due to adverse snow conditions but achieved a new route on the East face of Thalay Sagar getting to the ridge. Once recovered at base camp, we switched our sights to the West Ridge of Shivling, which was a suitable, achievable objective given our limited time and resources, however, after making good but tricky progress to above Camp 3. We were repulsed by the Serac band (6200m), through which we could not find a safe way. With the porters and basecamp already at Gangotri, we headed back down the mountain and towards civilisation.

History

Thalay Sagar has a long climbing history stretching from its first ascent by a joint Anglo-American team in 1979, through to the various Piolet D'or routes on the North Face. The South East Ridge has remained unclimbed except for the very top section, which was part of a Dutch ascent of the East Face.

Expedition Members

The expedition consisted of three British Climbers and four permanent Indian support staff.

- Guy Buckingham (Leader)
- Keith Ball (Climber)
- Mike Pescod (Climber)
- Sunil Kanwal (Liaison Officer)
- Vivek Rai (Fixer)
- Stanzin Sherpa (Guide) - for the approach to base camp
- Santabir Sherpa (Cook)
- Samgiyal Sherpa (Cook's Assistant)

Key Administrative Points

The team applied for the Open Peak of Thalay Sagar through the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) with the help and support of our in-country provider Rimo Expeditions. The process for application has started a migration to being online. Although the process will eventually become much more straightforward, there were too many technical glitches that make it useable for this application, and we reverted to the manual process. There was an issue in paying our deposit for the Peak Fee, which might have been specific to the UK Bank used for the Exped funds, however, the bank would not let us pay directly to an Indian Charitable account (which is how the IMF is structured).

Luckily, our always helpful in-country agent agreed to pay on our behalf once we transferred the fee to them.

Schedule

3 May - Leave Heathrow
4 May - Arrive Delhi (IMF Briefing)
7 May - Arrive at the RoadHead (Gangotri)
12 May - Arrive Basecamp
13- 19 May - Acclimatisation Kedardome (2 nights 5800m)
20 - 24 May - Attempt on SE Ridge Thalay Sagar
25 May - 1 Jun - Rest and recuperation Basecamp
2 - 6 Jun - Attempt on West Ridge Shivling
8 Jun - Leave Gangotri
10 Jun - Arrive Dehli
12 Jun - Arrive Heathrow

Narrative

13 - 19 May Acclimatisation

We kept to the planned schedule except for arriving at Basecamp one day later due to adverse weather and leaving Gangotri 2 days early. We conducted an extensive acclimatisation period, using Kedardome and going to 6100m and sleeping at 5800m for two nights.

20 - 24 May Attempt on SE Ridge Thalay Sagar

20 May: Basecamp - High Glacier Camp (4500-5000m)

After an extensive acclimatisation period, we set off in the morning to travel the 8km to get as close to our objective as possible. We had already recce'd a good way onto the glacier and after about an hour of moraine crossing, we got onto the wet middle section of the glacier and started towards the cirque formed by the South side of Meru and Thalay Sagar. It was a hot day, but we made good progress. We established where to camp and then Recce'd towards the face leading to the SE ridge. We had only a rough idea of the route we would use, having only had a side view up to now. Looking head-on, we saw a possible line but were still unsure about the top section of the Headwall, which was still not clear, although we believed there might be a shallow gully leading to the cornices.

21 May: High Camp - Face Camp (5000-5700m)

We set off at 0300 to make the most of the cold in stabilising the snow underfoot. We followed our already broken trail to the foot of the mountain. We had seen a bergschrund on our approach the night before but knew if we stuck close to a rock feature, we christened Kenny Everett's finger, we would avoid it and another large crack nearby. We

continued to head up to a feature we named the bi-valve; we had intended that if there was enough ice in that feature, we would use it to gain access to the upper half of the face. It was a collection point for a lot of debris and snow from the Headwall, so this would only work early in the morning. When we got closer, the feature didn't look complete so we moved left to an open couloir remaining on the snow ice. Generally, the angle was between 45-60 degrees, and we solo'd making good progress. As the sun came up the snow soon turned to mush slowing our progress, and we picked a suitable location under a small rock promontory to dig our tent platform and sit out the rest of the day.

22 May: Face Camp to Ridge Line (5700-6100m)

Again we made a similar start time to make the most of the snow conditions. Now being to the left of our hoped-for weakness in the Headwall, we knew we would have to traverse the snow/rock ridge at a suitable point of weakness to get back on our line. After soloing another 100m vertically, we found a suitable small rock buttress (named the "sparks" buttress after a hard axe strike). We roped up and pitched back towards our main line. We then went back to soloing for a significant traverse rightwards to our selected point under the Headwall. At the time the snow continued to disintegrate and being mostly shale underneath, the climbing was arduous but not overly technical and with poor protection (Scottish Grade III). As we finally made progress to the Headwall, a view of a slim gully line was visible heading to the cornices and became our focus. However, first, we decided to find a suitable spot to rest and wait for the sun to go off the slope and hopefully improve the snow conditions, which we found under a giant boulder offering some protection from the occasional snow and debris falling from above.

Once the sun had started to leave the face, we began climbing and traversed across a further series of shale and snow flutings towards the gully. Eventually, we got a couple of decent climbing pitches with a grade IV crux leading to the cornices, which had a suitable weakness leading to the SE ridge. We ended up on an excellent snow platform suitable for our tent.

23 May: Ridge Day (6100-6150-6100m)

We ended up with a "small" rock tower on the Ridge leading towards the main objective. The evening before we had seen two options, either to pass around to the left (SW) of the tower or take a technical ramp leading up and around the tower, hopefully leading to a way around to the NE. We waited for the sun to warm the tent before packing up and setting off. The traverse proved to be much more complicated than expected. The snow, despite still being in the shade, was bottomless sugary mush which needed to be cleared; the rock was a mixture of shale or smooth granite, giving limited options for protection. Although the angle wasn't too steep, the climbing was tedious and time-consuming. Eventually, the traverse line ran out, and we returned back to the camp. Next, we tried the more direct approach, which at least was granite. Again a huge amount of snow had to be cleared before revealing either loose boulders or smooth granite. This technical pitch revealed our worse fears about the conditions of the ridge. Eventually, we established a

belay on the ramp around the corner of the tower with a possible way ahead to the ridge line. The next pitch was again technical and tenuous requiring significant snow clearing. Once past the tower, we got our first closeup of the ridge. Disappointingly, this showed 100s of metres of smooth slab covered by extensive snow, which, given our experience so far, would not only be unhelpful in climbing but require clearing to make progress. By this stage, it was early afternoon, and we should have been halfway up the ridge we could see.

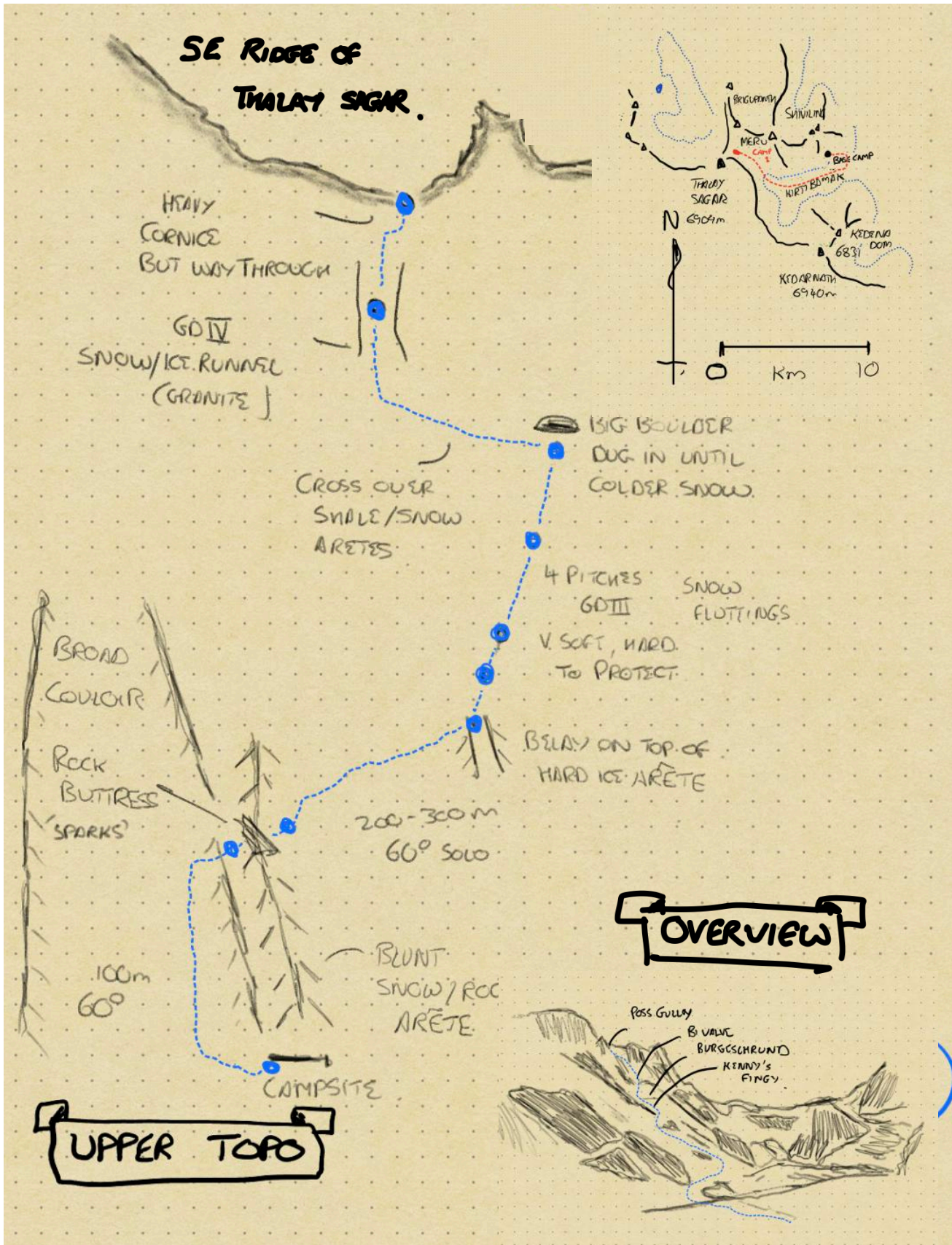
After a shouted conversation across three belay stances, we realised we all were thinking the same:

- In order to make decent progress, there either needed to be much less snow to rock climb the slabs or the snow needed to be supportive to make mixed progress.
- If we committed everyone to the other side of the tower, we were going to have a significant technical problem trying to reverse back to our previous campsite.
- Our next escape point was over 1.5km along the ridge.
- The weather was deteriorating over the next couple of days, making the climbing more difficult.

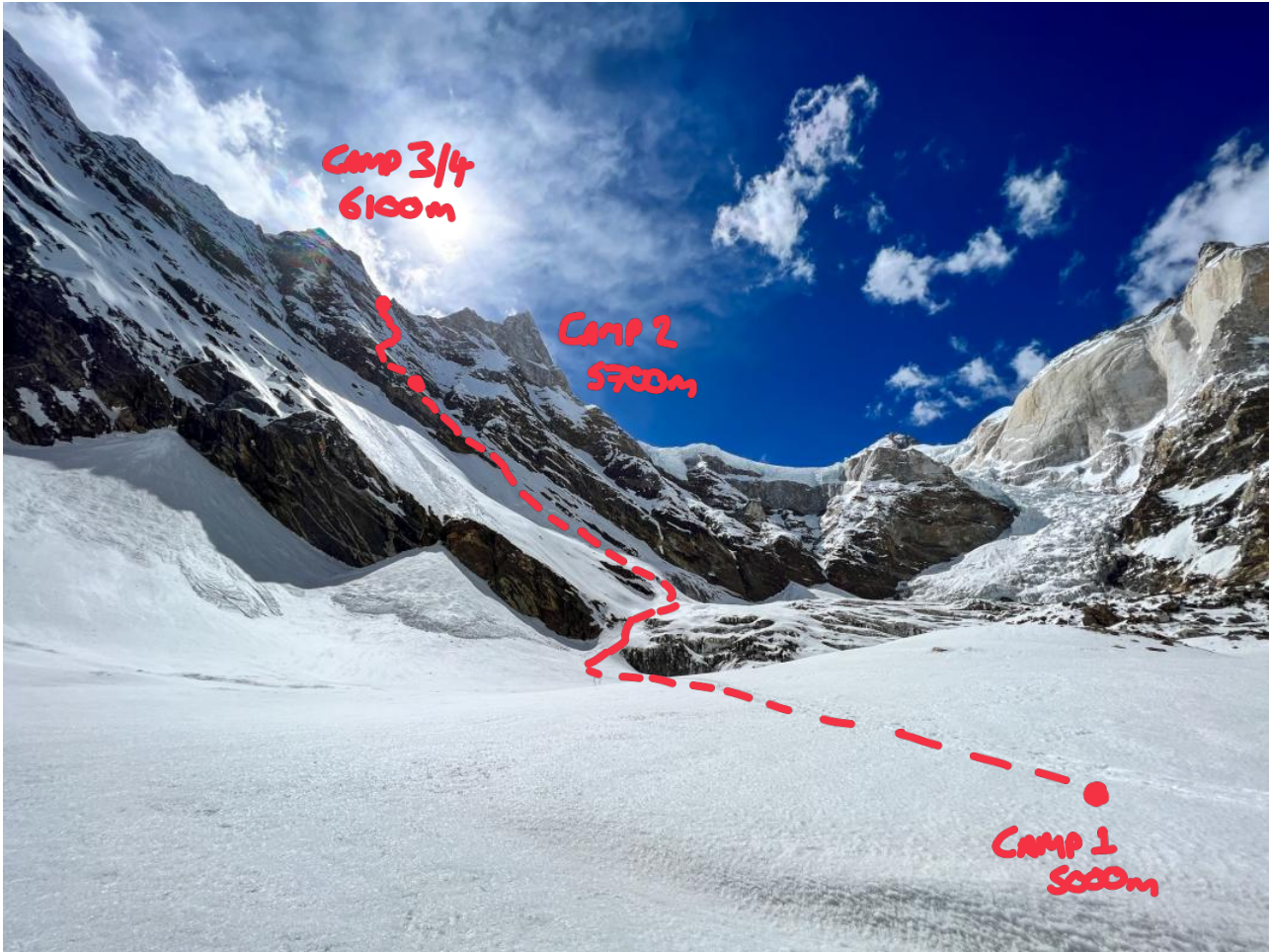
We retreated back to our camp platform and re-established our tent. That evening, we sat through a fantastic thunder and lightning storm and had an unsettled night's sleep.

24 May: Return to basecamp. (6100-4500m)

In the morning, the decision remained the same and we proceeded to reverse our route, using the same belay points as on the way up. After 7 hours, we had descended the face and were back on the glacier. The four hours of glacier descent was pleasantly broken by the surprise of finding an Indian Team having established a Basecamp high on the glacier in preparation for their attempt on Meru. They were very hospitable and their cups of tea were most welcome. We were back in Basecamp by late afternoon, already forming plans for our remaining time



EAST FACE OF THALAY SAGAR 20-24 MAY 23
'SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE' 1100m IV D



View of the route - Swimming against the Tide.
East Face of Thalay Sagar
Keith Ball belayed by Mike Pescod, questing
towards the Headwall.
Keith Ball Abseiling from our high Point.



25 May - 1 Jun Rest and Recuperation

After returning to Basecamp, there was a period of unsettled weather which tied in nicely with our need to rest and recuperate. We were all keen to make the most of our remaining time, and so arming with an old sketch map and a vague commercial itinerary, we planned to make an attempt on the West Ridge of Shivling. We believed that with our limited High Altitude food and climbing rack that had not been left on the descent of Thalay Sagar, this would be an achievable timely objective if the weather was on our side.

To make the most of the weather, we spent a few days at base camp before shifting our climbing gear and food to Camp 1 on the West Ridge of Shivling. In overview, it meant, between the three of us we took packs of around 20kgs in weight from one side of the mountain to the other. We spent a night at Camp 1 (5200m) before making the 6-hour return trip to Basecamp with light packs and hearts.

Although we were expecting some snow from 30 May to 1 June, it was a complete surprise to receive over a 1/2 metre dump. We had planned to go back up to Camp 1 on the 1 Jun but had no choice but to wait out another day, hoping the snow would start melting and stabilise. By this stage we were starting to run low on supplies at Basecamp and getting close to the hard window end for trekking out.

2 Jun - 6 Jun Attempt on the West Ridge of Shivling

We knew we were working against the odds to attempt Shivling at this stage; key among our thoughts were:

- Snow stability and depth. The approach to Camp 1 was threatened, and we wouldn't get a feel for Avalanche conditions until we got eyes on the slopes.
- Timeline. We had no real contingency between attempting the ridge, the porters arriving and the remaining High Altitude food.
- Kit. Most of our climbing kit and tents were at Camp 1 and would need to be retrieved at some stage.

On the 1 Jun, over 1/2 a metre of snow fell on basecamp, however, we still decided to take our opportunity and set out the next morning. We decided for an early start, aiming to have eyes on the slopes below Camp 1 at around midday, allowing us time to make a sensible decision about what to do next. The journey to Camp 1 was arduous with the prevailing snow conditions, and we were delighted to have already got the majority of our kit to Camp 1, meaning our rucksacks were relatively light. We were able to pick a sensible path through to Camp 1 and arrived in the late afternoon.

3 Jun: Camp 1 - Camp 2 (5200m - 5600m)

The journey to Camp 2 mainly was untechnical, heavy trail breaking with every step hard won. It took just over 4 hours; we found an excellent location for our tent platform and settled down for the afternoon baking in the hot sun.

4 Jun: Camp 2 - Camp 3 (5600m - 6000m)

This was the main rock ridge leading to the Serac Band, barring the way to the top slopes of Shivling. We were expecting a "*Difficile*" Ridge, which, if in the Alps, would have been at a technical level to allow us to move together over most of it and presented technical difficulties well within our capabilities. The Ridge was buried in a significant amount of snow; however, there were sections of climbing that were very difficult and at a couple of points, we were required to aid through some of the crux sections. It took over eight hours to get to Camp 3, and we were thrilled to finally reach a good platform un-threatened by the huge serac band above. We were surprised at the amount of fixed rope in place; much of it was buried under the snow but it was still apparent that many of the belays were complex and in a poor state.

5 Jun: Camp 3 - 6200m - Camp 1 (5600m - 6200m - 5200m)

We tackled the last section of rock ridge, moving together and soon arrived at the Serac band. There is a clear break (gully line) in the 150m high ice wall just to the right of where the ridge finishes. We pitched at the bottom of the ice and made an initially very tricky traverse towards the break. The ice was laminated and brittle, requiring cautious climbing to make progress. Once in the gully, the angle eased, and the next 60 metres were much more manageable. We felt optimistic as we got closer to the top of the band and regrouped at a point where there were several options for onward progress. Unfortunately, this is where our luck ran out. We tried four different options for progressing to the top of the band, all leading to dead ends in complex crevasses or threatened over-hanging ice walls. By this stage, it was getting late afternoon and the weather had closed in, snowing heavily. With no obvious way forward and worsening weather, we decided to retreat. We used a combination of abseils and moving together to make progress down the ridge and despite the poor visibility, we moved off to the south side of the ridge to the snow slope to avoid some of the technical rock sections. We continued down to Camp 1 and had a good night's rest.

6 Jun: Camp1 - Gangotri (5200m - 3300m)

After a slightly later start than planned, we headed to Tapovan, taking all our kit. Porters had already arrived at our Basecamp on the 4th, and all except our fixer (Vivek) and one porter had headed down to Gangotri ahead of us. Vivek and a porter met us at Tapovan, and we were very glad of their help to get our heavy loads off the mountain. We were moving well, so we decided to continue straight down to Gangotri and meet up with the rest of our team.



View of West Ridge of Shivling



Looking to the break in the Serac Band



Technical Climbing on the West Ridge

7 - 12 Jun Return to the UK

We had a rest day at Gangotri before starting the long journey back to Delhi, stopping at Uttarkashi and Haridwar on the way. The IMF kindly agreed to take our debrief on a Saturday and after a weekend in Delhi we headed back to the UK on 12 Jun.

Thalay Sagar Budget 2023

Money In	
Personal Contribution - Buckingham	£3,500
Personal Contribution - Ball	£3,500
Personal Contribution - Pescod	£3,500
MEF Grant	£4,500
BMC Grant	£1,050
AC Grant	£800
Jottnar Funding	£2,000
Total income	£18,850

Money Out	
Travel to Heathrow	£290
Indian Visa	£300
Flights to Delhi	£1,519
Travel Insurance / Rescue	£1,861
IMF Deposit	£318
IMF Remaining Payment	£954
Rimo Expeditions	£10,760
Tips	£535
Food above Basecamp	£520
Carparking Heathrow	£203
Expedition Drugs	£200
Extra Food / Accom Delhi	£553
Revised Flights Home	£575
Carbon Off-setting (Trees for Life)	£262
Total expenses	£18,850

Balance	
Income minus expenses	£0

Rimo Expeditions were our Indian Agent. These costs covered road travel, accommodation, Indian member wages, porters, food, fuel, tent and BC kitchen equipment hire.

Jottnar refers to a grant from the clothing company Jottnar we were proud to receive.

MEF, BMC and AC. The Mount Everest Foundation, The British Mountaineering Council and The Alpine Club all generously gave us grants towards the cost of the expedition. The Alpine Club Grant, known as the Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund, is supported by Montane and is only available to members of the Alpine Club.

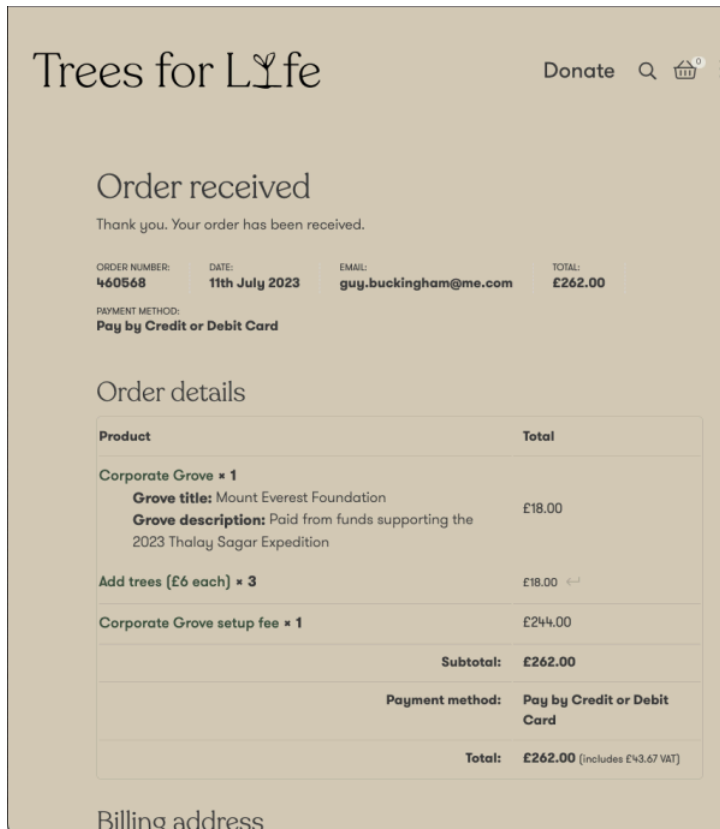
Personal contributions refer to the contributions of the 3 British members.

Waste Disposal

We were a small team that minimises the impact and carried out all non-organic waste. We dug latrines for human waste and buried other bio-degradable waste. Mike also organised a litter pick at the base camp to help clear some detritus.

Carbon Footprint

Our Carbon Footprint was as expected, around 6.5 tonnes. To minimise our impact, we have offset our footprint with a donation to Trees for Life of £ 262, equating to 18 tonnes of offset. The donation has been made on behalf of the MEF.



Support for the expedition

Expeditions to the greater ranges are inevitably expensive. They would be untenable for climbers without huge private means if it weren't for the excellent grants available to support British alpinists. The grants strategically prioritise new routes and first ascents, and this focus enables the UK, a country with no glaciated mountains, to maintain a proud reputation as a major alpine climbing nation. This plays its part in creating a strong national culture of outdoor pursuits which benefits health and well-being and supports a vigorous outdoor pursuits economy. The Mount Everest Foundation, British Mountaineering Council and Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund grants are of this type. We are extremely grateful to all three bodies. Jottnar provided a welcome grant, and Jottnar and Mountain Equipment generously supported us by providing superb clothing. DMM kindly provided climbing equipment to support the Exped.

Jottnar sponsors Mike, and Keith is supported by Mountain Equipment.

Report compiled by Guy Buckingham, The Alpine Club.