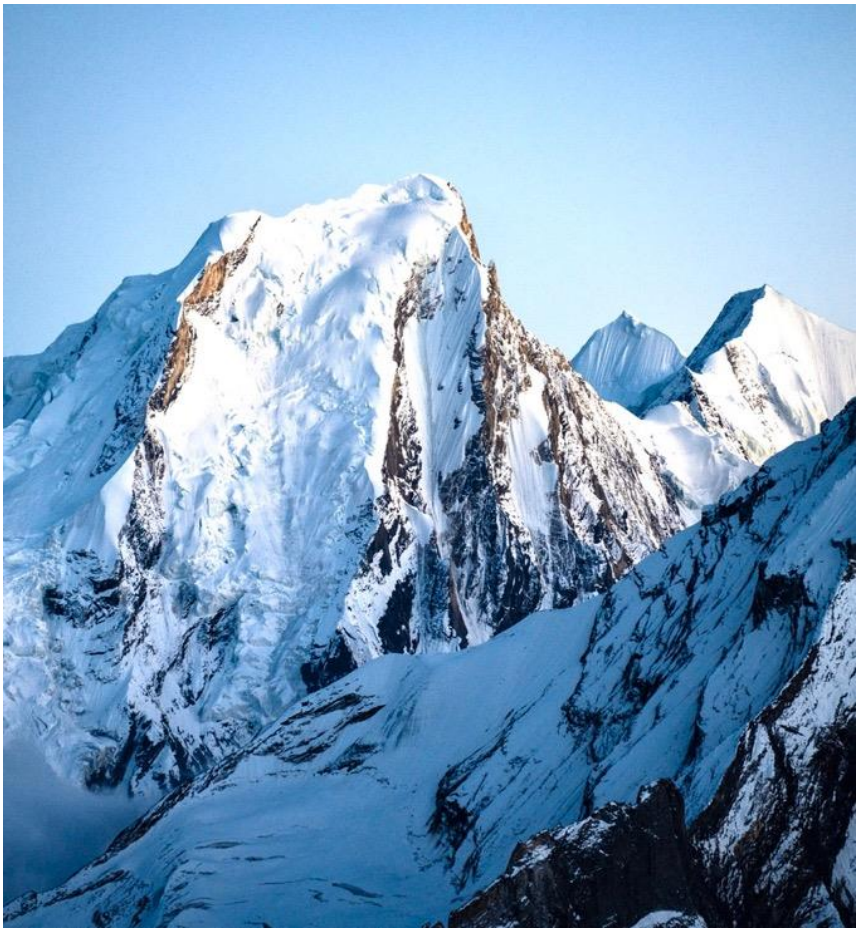
Salimor Khola Expedition - 2023



The north face of Surma-Sarovar.

Supported by:

- Mount Everest Foundation (Ref 22-17)
- British Mountaineering Council
- Alpine Club Climbing Fund
- Mountain Equipment

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Financial Assistance

- Mount Everest Foundation
- Alpine Club Climbing Fund
- British Mountaineering Council
- Mountain Equipment Ltd

Equipment

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Aims of the Expedition

Our intention was to force a route through the ‘impassable gorge’ of the Salimor Khola and explore the upper valleys potential for technical mountaineering routes, on the many unclimbed faces (typically 1000 – 1600m high) and frequently unclimbed summits (range from 6000m – 6800m).

The Team

Hamish Frost, Matt Glenn, Paul Ramsden and Tim Miller

Paul Ramsden (53) British. Health and Safety Consultant

Extensive rock climbing and mountaineering experience in Europe, Middle East, Africa, North America, South America, Asia and the Antarctic. First winter ascent of Cerro Poincenot. Winter ascent Fitzroy Supercouloir. New routes on Jebel Misht (Oman), Thunder Mountain (Alaska), Siguniang NW Face (Sichuan), Manamcho (Tibet), Sulamar North Face (Xinjiang), Shiva (India), Kishtwar Kailash (India) , Hagshu NE Face (India), Gave Ding N Face (Nepal), Nyainqentangla N Face (Tibet) etc.

Tim Miller (27) British. Aspirant Guide

Extensive rock-climbing experience in the UK, trad up to E5 & sport to 8a. New winter routes in Scotland at VIII and ascents of The Needle and Centurion. In the Alps ascents of Walker Spur and Gervasuttie Pillar. Winter climbed in Polish Tatra and Slovenian Julian Alps. Past expeditions to Kyrgyzstan, where we summited Kahn Tengri as well as an unclimbed 5000m peak and to Pakistan where we attempted the unclimbed SE Pillar of Ultar where we reached 5900m.

Matthew Glenn (29), British, Construction Labourer **-** matthewglenn2021@gmail.com

Climbed throughout the UK and Ireland Including: Knuckleduster Direct VIII, 9. Sioux Wall VIII, 8. Ben Nevis. Alpine routes including: The American Direct ED1, Les Dru. Direct des Capucins ED1, Grand Capucin. Walker Spur ED1, Grand Jorasses, Central Pillar Freney, ED1, Mont Blanc. Rolling Stones ED1, Grand Jorasses Voie Lesueur ED1, Les Dru. Expedition Climbing: Tengkangpoche NE Pillar FA – Nepal. North face of Barnaj II East FA, India.

Hamish Frost (36), British. Photographer - info@hamishfrost.com

UK trad to E3. Winter climbing to VIII / M7. Alpine multi pitch rock to ED1 6c+. Mountaineering and ski mountaineering experience in the Alps, Scotland, Slovakia, Norway, the Himalayas and Argentina.
Selected Highlights: Nocando Crack - Cairn Lochan, Scotland - VIII 8, The Link Direct - Lochnagar, Scotland - VIII 7, Elegencia - Tatras, Slovakia - M7, Sale Athee - French Alps - ED1 6c+, Contamine (Aiguille du Midi) - French Alps - ED1 6c+. Accompanied Malcolm Bass, Paul Figg & Guy Buckingham on their Janhukot expedition in the Gangotri region in the role of photographer/filmmaker. Joined during acclimatisation on Kedar Dome and accompanied the team as far as ABC. Summit of Ama Dablam 6805m (via SW ridge on fixed ropes) in role as filmmaker/photographer documenting the expedition for an outdoor brand. Summit of Cotopaxi (5897m) and Stok Kangri (6153m) via non-technical routes.

Preparation

The decision was made to organise the expedition though an agent to save time. The permit and travel to was organised through Iswari at Himalayan Guides, who proved to be well organised and helpful.

Some discussion was had regarding the availability of porter in this region of west Nepal. I know that in the past, expeditions have taken all their porters from Kathmandu. We decided not to do this and had no problems with porter availability.

Iswari Paudel, Himalayan Guides

Email: himguidenp@mos.com.np

Timing

27/09/23	Arrival to Kathmandu
28/09/23	Collect permit and organize food and gear
29/09/23	Flight to Dhangadi via Nepalganj
30/09/23	Drive to Dajhang
01/10/24	Start trek to BC
07/10/23	Arrive BC
25/10/23	Surma-Sarovar summit day
28/10/23	Trek out and return to Kathmandu
05/11/23	Debrief at Ministry of Tourism and fly home

Account of the trip by Paul Ramsden

For me adventure in the high mountains can only be found climbing alpine style, ideally somewhere remote and rarely visited. These were the ingredients that drew us to the very rarely visited Salimor Khola valley, in the far west of Nepal.

Information about this area was very hard to come by. Expeditions first tried to visit the area about fifty years ago. A 1974 British expedition had tried to follow the Salimor Khola valley before being stopped by an ‘impassable gorge’. At this point they had headed up a side valley and unsuccessfully attempted a peak they called Nampa South before later identifying the peak as Rokapi. In 1975 we understood that a Japanese expedition had passed the ‘impassable gorge’ before making the first ascent of Jethi Bahurani Chuli (6850m). Pictures exist from this expedition, but we were not able to ascertain how they passed the gorge section of the approach. Since then, we were aware of several British and American teams who had been to the valley, and all had apparently failed to pass the gorge guarding the lower section of the Salimor Khola. Google Earth indicated that there were sone interesting peaks hidden beyond the gorge, particularly Bobaye Chuli (6808m) and Surma Sarovar (6564m). There seemed to only be one way to find out more and that was to go and have a look.

Base camp below the Salimor Khola gorge.

In September 2023 myself. Tim Miller, Matt Glenn and Hamish Frost found ourselves in Kathmandu. After obtaining our climbing permits, one internal flight, several days driving and nine days trekking through jungle and alpine terrain, river crossings,

several earthquakes and being detained by the police, the porters eventually declared that they were not going any further. To be honest we could not argue with them as the next section of the valley was the ‘impassable gorge’ we had read about, so the decision was made to make base camp and explore from that point on our own.

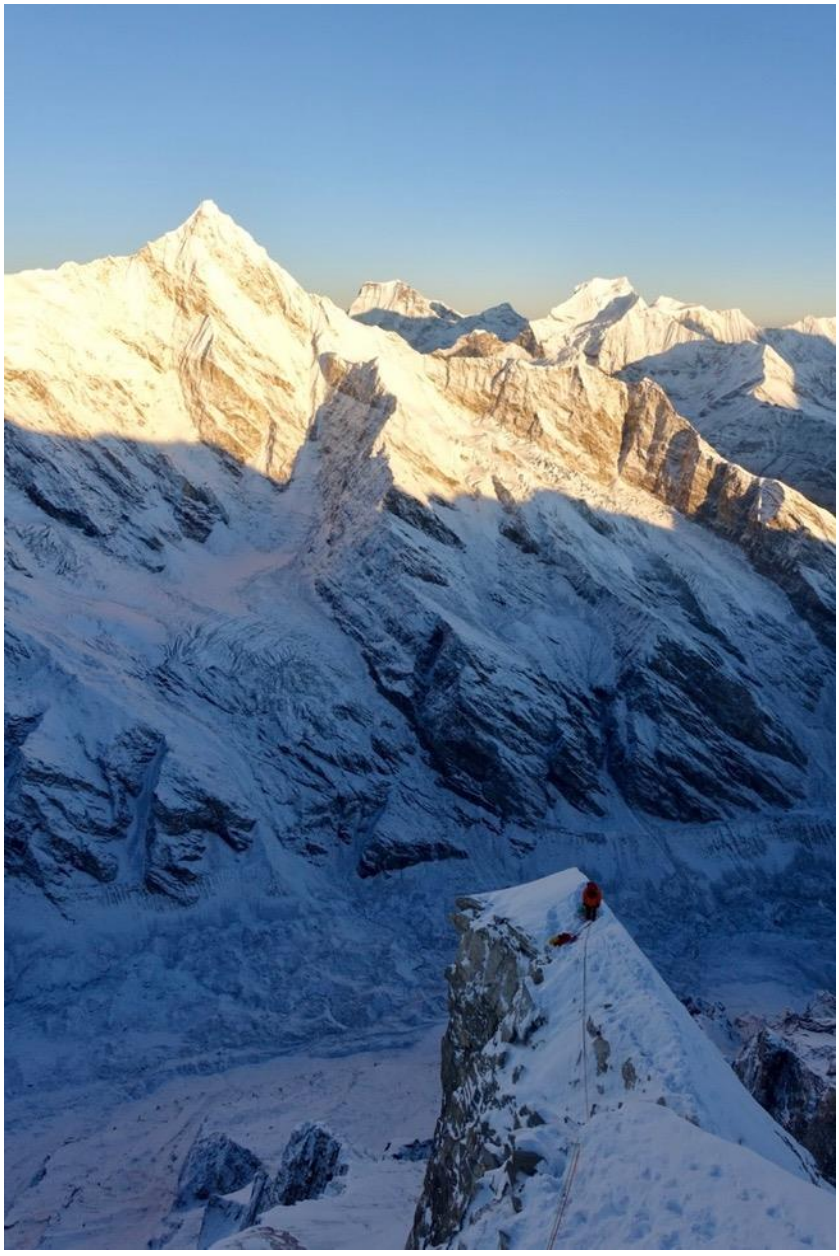
The gorge blocking access to the upper Salimor Khola valley looked formidable but after some careful exploration we discovered a wild and exposed shepherds track that climbed through the east side of the gorge, definitely not a path suitable for the porters. Packing a week’s food, we set of to explore the upper valley and hopefully find a suitable climbing objective.

Looking up the side valley below the north side of Surma-Sarovar.

A week later after many days of crossing moraines, epic river crossings and storms we fully understood just how large and wild this area was. Located on the divide between desert like terrain and dense forested areas, there was a great variety of climates and terrain within one valley. But most importantly, Tim and I had found an objective, the northwest face of Surma Sarovar. Matt and Hamish had explored the upper valley with a view to climbing Bobaye, however the hoped for route on the north face looked exposed to seracs, so they decided they would go and look at some interesting peaks directly above our base camp, bellow the gorge.

We believed our mountain to be unclimbed, the northwest face looked huge over 2000m high and most importantly there looked like a safe descent down the northeast ridge. Our main concern was a steep rock band that appeared to block the

upper part of the face with no obvious way through. The only way to find if the route would go, was to give it a try.



Bivouac high on Surma-Sarovar with Jethi Bahrani behind.

It took a full two days of walking, with two river crossings, to reach the start of the route. Once on the route itself two days of climbing allowed us to reach the foot of the summit rock band. Bivouacs were all on ledges cut into the ice or using a snow hammock to construct a place to pitch the tent. Once under the upper rock band we found a steep crack that led us through to the upper slopes and with a further

bivouac we reached the summit on the 25th October, the GPS altitude was noted as 6605m.

Tim Miller leading on the crucial crack line through the steep rock band on the north face of Surma-Sarovar.

Sadly, after many days of good weather the summit was reached in a whiteout so we had to bivouac for another night hoping for improved visibility on the descent, which we could see was going to be longer and more complex than expected. That night it snowed heavily. After the fresh snow the descent was slow and worrying. We thread

a line between seracs and avalanche prone slopes, abseiling most of the way. Before downclimbing a long rock ridge that led us safely down to the valley below.

Tim Miller and Paul Ramsden on the summit of Surma-Sarovar

Exhausted on day eight we arrived in base camp late in the evening, to find Matt and Hamish freshly back having unfortunately failed to summit on their projects. Initially they had tried the very impressive northwest face of point 6054m. Unfortunately, bad weather, thin ice and poor protection resulted in a retreat to base camp after just a few days. Keen to get something climbed in the remaining time, they attempted the south ridge of point 6390m. Despite a strong effort, avalanche prone slopes, lead to a retreat 300m below the summit. Interestingly on this route they found evidence of very old fixed rope, which we presumed was left behind by the 1974 British Expedition, on what they believed to be Rakopi.

The porters had arrived the same day for our return journey and a tight schedule meant we had to leave for home early the following morning. Over the six-week trip we had almost no rest days.

Account of the trip by Hamish Frost

Paul Ramsden had enticed us here with a unique proposition. A remote 50km valley in far north-west Nepal, jammed full of unclimbed peaks, but guarded by a steep-sided gorge that had repelled many previous teams.

How could any of us turn it down? We were here for the adventure of a lifetime. One thing Paul emphasised, above all else: ‘This is a trip where you might not do any climbing at all’. But the lure of getting to explore an area relatively untouched by humans, with even the slightest possibility of getting to try an unclimbed summit, was too great. We were all in. Happy to play open hand: no expectations, nothing to lose.

Two days’ drive north from the nearest airport, along winding, potholed roads. Seven days’ trek through the foothills of the Himalaya. Jungle, insects, sounds, and colours overwhelmed us. We took relief from the end of the monsoon heat, swimming in glacial rivers and lounging on warm slabs of granite. As we neared the Salimor Khola Valley, it began to get colder. The seasons were changing.

Typical trail along the Seti Khola.

The challenges of passing the gorge looked inestimable. We knew it would be asking too much for the porters to carry loads through, so we established base

camp below the gorge, at 3,800m – not ideal for acclimatisation, but an acceptable launchpad for excursions up the valley.

With scant information about other teams finding a way through, the gorge had been the question mark for the whole trip. Everything hinged on this. While Paul tried to find a route on the south side of the river, I followed Matt up a vague trail leading to cliffs. The trail turned to exposed, narrow ledges, and we eagerly continued into an arid, desert-like landscape. White peaks glittered overhead.

We'd found a way through. We were elated. Everything on the table. Game fucking on.

Matt Glen crossing the Salimor Khola

Tim and Paul had found a line they were excited about: Surma-Sarovar, an unclimbed 6,600m peak midway up the valley. Meanwhile, Matt and I pondered our options. In another valley, Tim had spotted a vast wall of steep, compact rock, bisected by a streak of white. The line ran 800m up to a ridge, which in turn led to an unclimbed summit. Upon seeing a photo Tim had taken of the line, Paul seemed impressed in his calm yet enthusiastic way. 'You don't see features like that in the greater ranges very often.'

There were a lot of unknowns. Would the ice be good enough? Would we be able to find decent spots to bivvy? Would the rock above be climbable? The only way to find out was to get on the thing.

Matt and I carried impossibly heavy packs, stuffed with everything we'd need to survive a week on the mountain. Camping below the foot of the route, we spent that afternoon watching for any signs of rockfall on our planned approach and trying to spot a route through the heavily crevassed glacier below the line.

Our minds struggled to switch off. Sleepless hours stretched out ahead of us. Finally, at 3.00am, we began the approach to the face, struggling at first in loose moraine and hard glacial ice. But the sun rose – and ice pitches at the base of the gully beckoned.

'Safe!' My call down to Matt, belaying me from the bottom of the pitch. I was relieved to make it up without incident. I'd found the ice thin but climbable. Only a few half-protruding, tied-off ice screws had offered any protection. 'Climbing!' he called up.

I reached a steepening about a third of the way up the gully, we still had a decent amount of the day left. Initially it appeared that the right hand side might give easier passage, but upon closer inspection the left hand side offered more hooks and protection. As Matt arrived at the belay I pointed my gloved hand. 'That looks like the most obvious way up,' I said. After some discussion, he agreed – although higher up looked steep.

He tried. Thinning ice and overhanging compact rock repelled him. As he lowered back down off a marginal piece of gear, Matt looked back at me and we both nodded our heads in agreement. *We're done for the day*.

I woke from deep sleep to a noise like thunder and a sense of pressure in my ears. Disoriented, it took me a moment to realise what was happening: a powerful torrent of spindrift was slamming into the tent. 'What the fuck?' Matt cried as we both lunged upright in our sleeping bags, using our bodies to add structure to the shelter and stop it from being squashed. One side was bulging inwards – dramatically, terrifyingly.

It was about 2.00am. During the night, spindrift had begun funnelling down the gully and collecting in the void between the tent and the slope. Now we had to do something or the tent would collapse. There was little time for discussion.

While I braced myself against the tent walls, Matt extricated himself from his sleeping bag and jumped outside to clear snow. Moments later, a huge avalanche

of spindrift hit us. Snow poured violently through the vents. Within moments the poles snapped under the force and the tent imploded. I managed to swim to the tent door and get my head outside, but the weight of the snow pinned me in place there.

'Matt!' I shouted. I couldn't see him. No answer. *Has my best friend been pulled off into the gully? Am I now alone on this mountain?* 'Matt! Where are you?' Moments passed. The freezing weight of snow entombed my body, making movement impossible. Then: 'I'm here!' he called back.

We spent the next few hours trying to dig out the tent and our belongings, but a continuous flow of spindrift undid our efforts. Eventually giving up, we dug out a tiny ledge to perch on and huddled together for warmth, our feet dangling into the blackness of the gully below. It was in these moments that I fully appreciated how glad I was to be doing this with Matt – sitting there in the freezing cold, in the darkness, on a tiny ledge, with no shelter, and spindrift pouring down around us. 'It's insane, isn't it?' he said after a while. 'The suffering we put ourselves through voluntarily.' I laughed. The situation was so shit there was nothing we could do but laugh. It made light of what would otherwise have been a miserable few hours until dawn.

In the morning the volleys of spindrift finally subsided, and we were able to dig everything out. Gearing up again, Matt tried the right-hand line, but after 20m of climbing again the ice became too thin and he had to back off. With a broken tent and no way of climbing further, we admitted defeat and began descending the way we'd come.

Getting down is always hard. It needs your entire focus. However, we were able to start discussing options in spare moments at our abseil stations. 'We've got six days until the porters arrive,' I mentioned as we stripped an anchor. 'Just enough to try something else.' Matt nodded. 'It'll have to be nearby.'

We'd seen a vast beast of a south face on the other side of the valley, guarded by a maze of seracs and cornices. At the far left end it might just be possible to sneak through, gain the ridge, and follow a tenuous path to an unclimbed snowy summit.

It was our only option. In a tired haze, we staggered down to base camp with 24 hours to mentally recharge, patch up the tent, and eat like Kings.

Heavy. Everything felt so heavy. Mentally, were we motivated? Probably not. But we'd have kicked ourselves for spending the final six days lazing around at base camp. So we went.

After a day of approach, the first day's climbing was one of the most demanding I'd ever had in the mountains. Icy runnels and steep, loaded snow slopes. Over 1,000m of vertical in bad weather and on tired legs. As the daylight faded, we at last reached the ridge. Then, on day two, a narrow mixed ridge – sparse protection, run out, no room for error. High consequence. And that was before the snow and cloud returned. With increasing concerns around poor visibility and a high chance of making a mistake and falling down the south face, we decided to bivvy on a small ledge. We'd push for the summit in the morning.

Conditions on the mountain were cold and wet. Each morning, we woke to find everything inside the tent thickly coated with crystals of hoar frost. Getting moving again was always the hardest part of the day. As we fired up the stove to melt snow and prepare breakfast, the frost melted into our down jackets and shared double sleeping bag. Our kit was getting more saturated, its ability to keep us warm diminishing. "Well isn't this character building stuff?", I joked in a sarcastic tone, downplaying the level of our suffering.

It had snowed heavily overnight, but the next morning was perfectly clear – a sunrise in hues of pink and orange. So we set off towards the summit. We delicately toed a line between the heavily loaded snow slopes on our left and the monstrous fragile cornices to our right. Matt led, ploughing a trench through the soft snow, his psyche drawing me onwards.

Then, with a few hundred metres to go, the summit slope ahead of us avalanched. That slope was our route to the top. Where it slid, it revealed blue ice underneath, but a dangerous amount of snow still clung precariously to the face.

We only had four ice screws. Even if we were able to safely reach the ice, climbing it would be slow. Matt, braver and bolder in the mountains, called across to me, 'I don't want to die on this thing.' I could feel the sincerity in his voice. He was more experienced in this environment, and I trusted his judgement and motivation to keep pushing onwards. Once they ran out, I knew the game was up.

The final ridge of point 6390m. Point 6400m behind

My first feeling was one of complex, nuanced relief. I'd been worried that we might end up disagreeing on a big decision – that one of us could end up feeling we'd let the other down. But there was no disagreement. 'I think I'm done. I'm happy to turn around' I admitted to him, and he nodded. 'It's the only sensible choice.'

People often think that these are hard decisions to make, torn between summit fever and an awareness of your own mortality. This, however, felt like an easy decision. We'd had the adventure we'd come here for, and we were satisfied we'd tried our hardest on both mountains. Continuing any further would have felt like a roll of the dice too far.

Matt's words soon after making the decision stuck with me. 'To come here and have such an adventure, but not actually reach the summit, not tick the box… that's heartbreakingly beautiful.' His words, although delivered calmly, were full of emotion. He was right – the journey and overall experience are far more important than reaching some arbitrary point.

We arrived back in base camp deeply exhausted but content. Tim and Paul arrived just hours later, having had a similarly full-on adventure reaching the summit of an unclimbed 6,600m peak nearby. The next morning we began the week-long hike back into the real world.

The foreshortened line on the northwest face of Surma-Sarovar.

The line on the upper northwest face of Surma-Sarovar with descent to the left down the north east ridge.

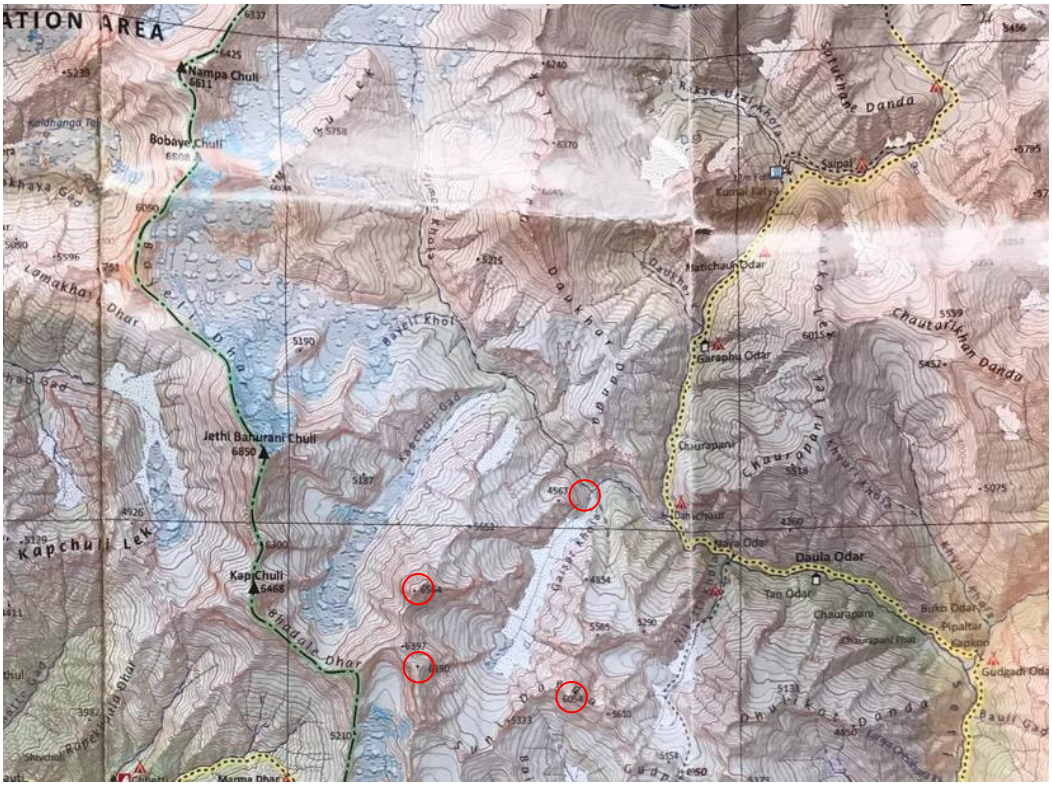
The descent line down the northeast ridge of Surma-Sarovar.

The northwest face of Peak 6054m.

Jethi Bahurani from Surma-Sarovar

The peaks attempted by Matt and Hamish

Matt and Hamish's line on Peak 6390m with the high point marked.



Map of Salimor Khola valley. With BC and mentioned peaks circled.

Accounts (£)

Expedition Costs		Expedition Income	
International travel (inc excess baggae and carbon offset)	£5750	Mount Everest Foundation	£7000
Domestic flights and transport	£2500	Alpine Club Climbing Fund	£3400
Permits and peak fees	£1260	British Mountaineering Council	£1550
Liaison Officer or Sirdar	£850	Mountain Equipment Ltd	£6000
Expedition members' insurance	£2400	Personal contributions	£4510
Porter / staff Insurance	£1000		
Food and fuel	£2750		
Agency fees if applicable	£950		
Porters and pack animals	£3500		
Misc	£1500		
TOTAL	**£22,460**	**TOTAL**	**£22,460**