

# International North Sikkim Expedition 2023



*Dhairya Peak (5597m) - Photo Tom Davis-Merry*

## A Report on Exploratory Mountaineering in the Indian Himalayas

*Tom Davis-Merry, Thomas Simpson, Kasia Piatek, Ula Stopka-Farooqui,  
Sam Poletti, and Elie Jaumin*



## Expedition Summary

The International North Sikkim Expedition travelled to the Brumkhangse region of the Indian Himalayas in September 2023 to make the first ascents of several previously unclimbed 5000m peaks. From Delhi, the team flew to Bagdogra, located in the small strip of land between Nepal and Bangladesh, before travelling overland to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. The Yumthang valley and Brumkhangse glacial system is then reached via Lachung from Gangtok by road.

Brumkhangse (5635m, several ascents) is one of Sikkim's Open Alpine Peaks, accessed from the Lachung valley to the east. It is surrounded by eight peaks, which, prior to 2023, were thought to be unclimbed. Several of these are higher than Brumkhangse, and in October, these were the goal of a six-member multi-national team comprising Tom Davis-Merry and Tom Simpson (UK), Kasia Piatek and Ula Stopka-Farooqui (Poland), Elie Jaumin (Italy), and Sam Poletti (Switzerland).

The expedition approached by road via Gangtok, Lachung, and Yumthang (c3700m) to a 4000m base camp at Shiv Mandir, arriving there on 2 October. They moved west toward the Brumkhangse glacier, made an intermediary camp by a small lake at 4500m (mainly used for acclimatising and storing spare gear and food), and finally established an advanced base on the glacier at 5100m. The weather was unstable throughout their stay, typically with limited cloud cover in the morning and snowfall in the afternoon.

On 14 October, Davis-Merry, Simpson, Piatek, and Stopka-Farooqui climbed Peak 5543m (provisionally named Dhairya, with a recorded altitude of 5597m, 27°50'32.67" N, 88°38'54.52" E) via the southwest face (PD). The same day, having previously established a higher camp at 5200m, Jaumin and Poletti climbed Peak 5878m (provisionally Sara Peak and recorded at 5844m, 27°50'32.25" N, 88°38'6.13" E) via the northeast ridge: *Cloudy Dreams* (300m, D+/M5).

The following day, 15 October, Davis-Merry and Simpson climbed Peak 5604m, a small summit northwest of Dhairya, by the west ridge at PD. This was provisionally named Thoda Peak.

On 18 October, the team left base camp five days earlier than planned due to persistent rain, which had caused major flooding throughout the region.

Any teams considering the area for future expeditions are strongly encouraged to contact Tom Davis-Merry at [tom.davis-merry@outlook.com](mailto:tom.davis-merry@outlook.com), who will gladly share additional photos and further information.

*The expedition was endorsed and supported by the Alpine Club. Financial support was generously provided by the Mount Everest Foundation (MEF), Montane Alpine Club Climbing Fund (MACCF), Austrian Alpine Club (UK), and a British Mountaineering Council (BMC) Expedition Grant. Additional funding was kindly provided by the Grit & Rock Grant Award, Julie Tullis Memorial Award, and the Alison Chadwick Award. The team also received support from Expedition Foods, Montane, FATMAP, Precision Fuel & Hydration, MSR, LifeJacket Skin Protection, and Marabut.*

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## Notes

**Expedition name:** International North Sikkim Expedition 2023  
**Dates:** 24 September - 28 October 2023  
**MEF reference:** 22 - 23  
**Team members:** Tom Davis-Merry, Thomas Simpson, Kasia Piatek, Ula Stopka-Farooqui, Sam Poletti, and Elie Jaumin  
**Location:** Shiv Mandir, Yumthang, North Sikkim, Indian Himalayas

## Expedition Support

The expedition team is grateful to Mr Pandey and his company, Himalayan Run & Trek Pvt Ltd, for providing logistics and base camp support throughout the expedition. The support team was friendly and professional, and sharing our time in India with them was a delight.

Website: <http://www.himalayanruntrek.com/>

Email: [hrtindia91@gmail.com](mailto:hrtindia91@gmail.com)

[info@himalayan.com](mailto:info@himalayan.com)

## Base Camp Staff

Mr Mangal Singh	Basecamp Manager (HRT)
Mr Hira Singh	Cook (HRT)
Mr Budda Tamang	Cook's Assistance (HRT)
Mr Motiram	Local Guide
Mr Roshan Chhetri	Liaison Officer

## Carbon Footprint

Values calculated using <https://www.carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx> for a team of 6.

Flights (return)	Per person (tCO <sub>2</sub> e)	Number ppl	Total (tCO <sub>2</sub> e)
UK - Delhi	1.98	4	7.92
Geneva - Delhi	1.79	2	3.58
Delhi - Bagdogra	0.32	6	1.92
<b>Road Moves (return)</b>			
Bagdogra - Lachung (194 km)	0.08	6	0.48
<b>Domestic Travel (return)</b>			
Average journey to airport (50 km)	0.1	6	0.6
		<b>Total (tCO<sub>2</sub>e)</b>	<b>14.5</b>

The expedition offset carbon emissions (14.5 tCO<sub>2</sub>e) using a Global Portfolio VCS-certified carbon reduction programme provided through <https://www.carbonfootprint.com/> at a total cost of £131.



## **Waste Disposal**

The expedition adopted a policy of 'take nothing and leave nothing behind'. All human waste was either burnt or buried, and all other waste was carried out. Latrines were sighted to minimise the risk of water sources becoming contaminated. Waste that had been carried out was disposed of in Lachung. Although recycling opportunities were very limited, the expedition was able to dispose of waste as best the local facilities would allow.

## Expedition Team



**Tom Davis-Merry | 33 | Sabbatical | UK**

After serving for eight years in the British Army, Tom is on sabbatical for a year to focus on skiing, climbing, and photography. He has previously led and organised successful exploratory mountaineering expeditions to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and was the communications officer for an exploratory trekking expedition to Nepal with the Army Mountaineering Association. Tom has climbed in the Alps in summer for over 10 years, and has climbed in Slovakia, Scotland, Kyrgyzstan, and Norway in winter. Tom is a qualified Mountain Leader and also enjoys ski touring, cycling, and trail running. Tom is an Ambassador for Precision Fuel & Hydration, Montane, and Expedition Foods.

**Tom Simpson | 32 | Arborist | UK/Germany**

Having recently moved to Germany to continue working as an Arborist, Tom is usually found up a mountain or a tall tree. He has been climbing in the Alps up to TD and has also gained quality experience on summer rock and Scottish winter routes. Tom climbed with Tom Davis-Merry on a previous expedition to Kyrgyzstan in 2021, and the pair have maintained a formidable friendship ever since. Tom will take a particular interest in ensuring any expedition has an abundance of quality food supplies, and specialises in baking superb chapati in the most hostile of environments. Tom also enjoys trail running, ski touring, and ice climbing, which his new home in Germany provides in abundance.



**Kasia Piatek | 34 | Outdoor Instructor | PL/UK**

Kasia is an experienced climber, Mountain Leader, Rock Climbing Instructor, and mountain rescue team member. She has a passion for the mountains and has spent countless days exploring them. As a young Alpinist, she tackled some challenging climbs, earning grades of M4-M5 in Scottish winter and has scaled several 4000m Alpine peaks in Europe. Her commitment to the mountains is evident as she works towards her MCI qualifications. In addition to her work as an outdoor instructor, Kasia delivers Adventurous Training to British Army recruits, teaching essential skills and helping them succeed in their careers.

**Ula Stopka-Farooqui | 41 | Scientist | PL/UK**

Ula is a scientific researcher at the University College London, specialising in early diagnosis of prostate cancer. She is also a qualified Rock Climbing Instructor with eight years of climbing experience. She has climbed in both summer and winter in Scotland, the Tatras, and the Alps. She has successfully summited Mont Blanc, Elbrus, the Matterhorn, and several other 4000m peaks in the Alps. In 2014 she set off on a six month motorcycle trip with her partner across India and Nepal, and trekked to Everest Base Camp. When not in the laboratory, Ula can often be found in the mountains exploring.



**Samuele Poletti | 35 | Anthropologist | CH**

Sam is a British-trained social anthropologist (PhD) with a decade of research experience in northwest Nepal (Jumla). A certified 'Jugend+Sport' (J+S) mountaineering instructor in Switzerland, Samuele is a member of the Alpine Climbing Group (UK) and the Gruppo Scoiattoli dei Denti della Vecchia (CH). He has extensive experience in the Alps both in summer and winter, where he has climbed routes up to ED, opened new summer and winter routes, and made several first winter ascents. With real enthusiasm for this expedition, Samuele is now particularly keen on taking the experience he has matured in the Alps to the Greater Ranges.

**Elie Jaumin | 25 | Biomed Engineering | CH**

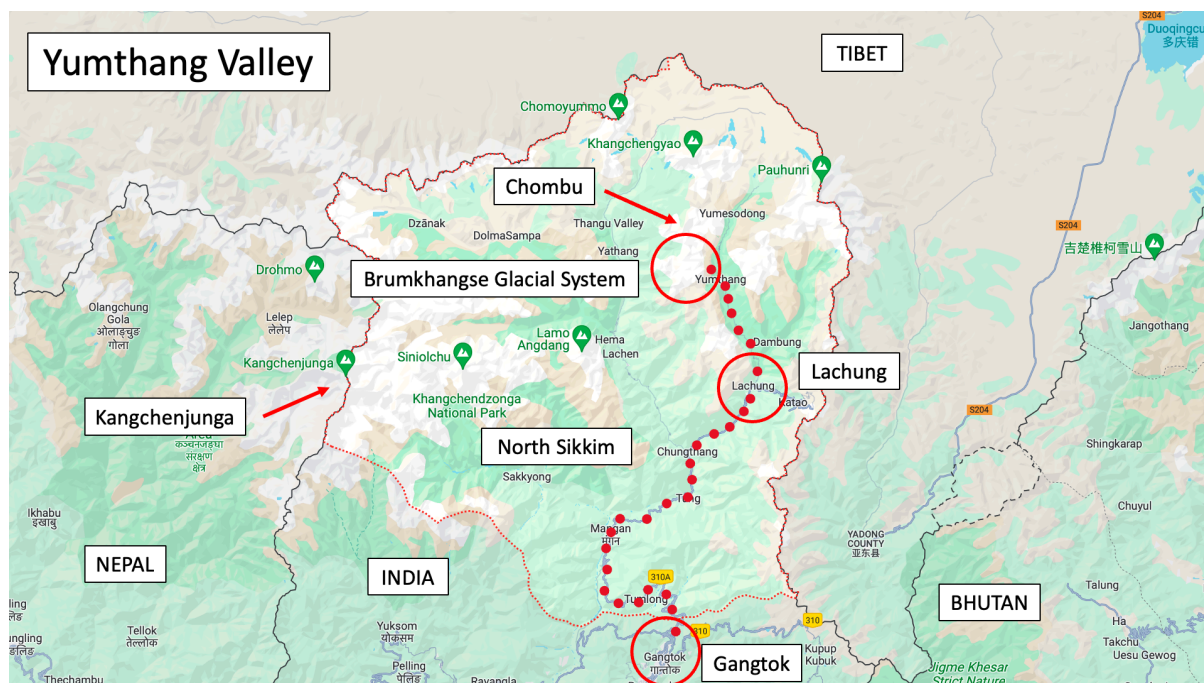
Elie has recently graduated in Biomedical Engineering and is a certified 'Jugend+Sport' (J+S) ski instructor in Switzerland. Elie started climbing at the age of three, and has enjoyed sailing and rowing at an international level, competing both for Switzerland and Italy. Now focusing again on climbing and mountaineering, Elie has climbed extensively in the Alps on both classic routes and technical routes involving rock, mixed terrain, and steep ice. Elie is a member of the selective group of the Scoiattoli dei Denti della Vecchia (CH).





## Yumthang Valley, North Sikkim

North Sikkim is the northern province of Sikkim, a small state in north-east India, in the Indian Himalaya. Its location between Nepal to the west, Tibet to the north, and Bhutan to the east makes the region of significant geopolitical and strategic importance to India.



*The Yumthang valley showing the route taken by the expedition from Gangtok to the Brumkhangse region of the Indian Himalayas.*

From Delhi, the team flew to Bagdogra, located in the small strip of land between Nepal and Bangladesh, before travelling overland to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. The Yumthang valley and Brumkhangse glacial system is then reached via Lachung from Gangtok by road.

Four permits are required for mountaineering in this region of North Sikkim:

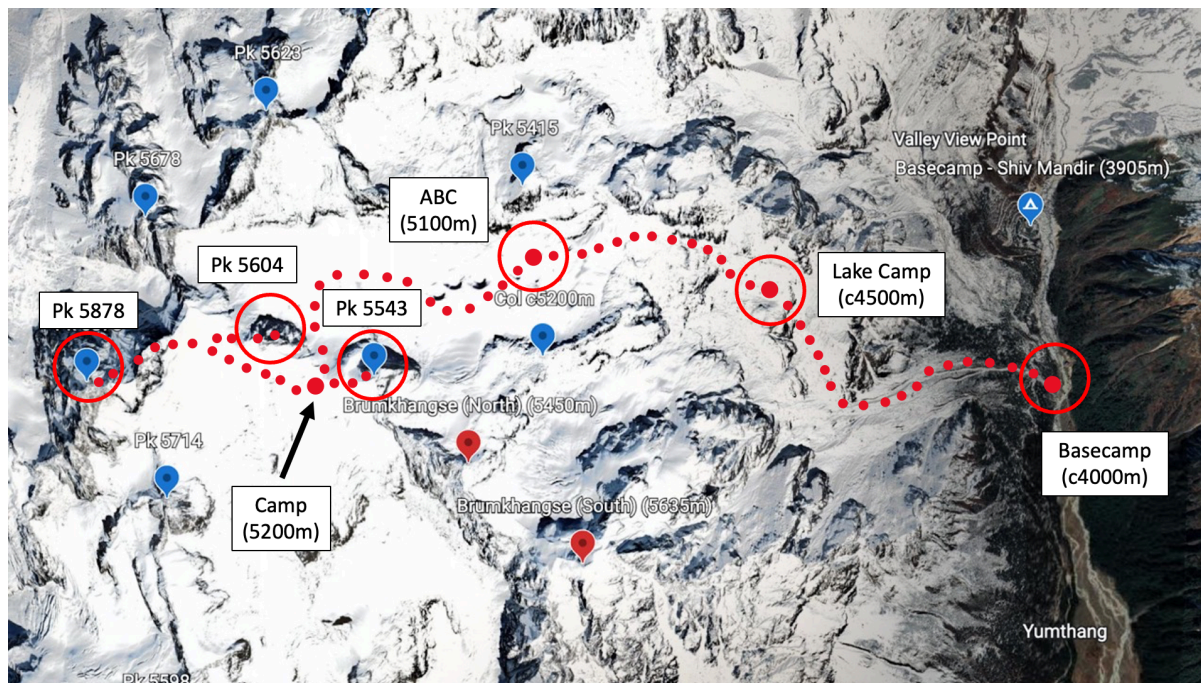
- Restricted Area Permit (RAP) for Sikkim. Entry permit for foreign tourists at Rango.
- Protected Area Permit (PAP) for Tsomgo Lake.
- PAP / Entry Permit for North Sikkim.
- Peak Permit for Brumkhangse (required for access to climbing region).

The expedition also required a local guide and a liaison officer appointed by the Indian Mountaineering Federation.

## The Expedition

### Expedition Map

The map below shows the routes taken to establish an advanced base camp (5100m) on the glacier to access Pk 5543 and Pk 5604. Pk 5878 was climbed using an additional camp on the col at 5200m.



*The expedition map from Google Earth showing camp locations, routes taken, possible objectives (blue waypoints), and objectives climbed (red circles).*

### Selection of Objectives

As this glacial system is understood to be unexplored prior to this expedition, no photographs or written accounts could be found which describe the area. Potential objectives were therefore identified digitally using Google Earth and FATMAP. Once established on the glacier, routes to be attempted were selected by balancing accessibility, potential hazards, and likely technical difficulty.

The aim of the expedition was to conduct a first exploration of the area, whilst climbing as many peaks above 5000m as possible. An emphasis was also placed on seeking a technical challenge on lines of aesthetic merit, where possible. Given the near constant snowfall which made conditions quite challenging, we feel the expedition met this aim by making three first ascents above 5000m, including one new route graded D+/M5.



## Establishing Base Camp

Base camp (BC) was established on 2 October 2023 at Shiv Mandir (3900m). Several options were explored around the area, with the team eventually settling on a large, relatively flat area on the bank of the Yumthang river, easily accessible by 4x4. BC consisted of a mess tent, kitchen tent, gear storage tent, and sleeping tents. Whilst the area was a suitable size and with good access to running water, drainage was poor. With the heavy rains encountered by the expedition, walls had to be built around the tents and drainage channels dug out to prevent the camp from flooding.



*The expedition base camp at Shiv Mandir (3900m).*



*The expedition team enjoyed frequent tea and biscuits in the mess tent.*



*The team dried as much wet clothing as possible on the one afternoon of good weather and sunshine experienced at base camp.*



## Establishing Lake Camp

On 5 October 2023, an intermediate camp before advanced base camp (ABC) was established at 4500m. This was to aid acclimatisation and provide a gear cache when hauling loads to establish an ABC on the glacier.



*Lake camp (4500m) on the shore of a small lake not marked on any of our maps.*



*Kasia and Ula pitch their lake camp tent and shelter beneath the imposing northeast flank of Brumkhangse.*





*Kasia after brewing up at lake camp (4500m).*

### **Establishing Advanced Base Camp**

ABC was established on the glacier at 5100m. The camp gave stunning views up the glacier and of the chosen objectives on the glacier's southern flank.



*The team spent hours scrambling up wet slabs and loose moraine to establish ABC on the glacier from lake camp.*

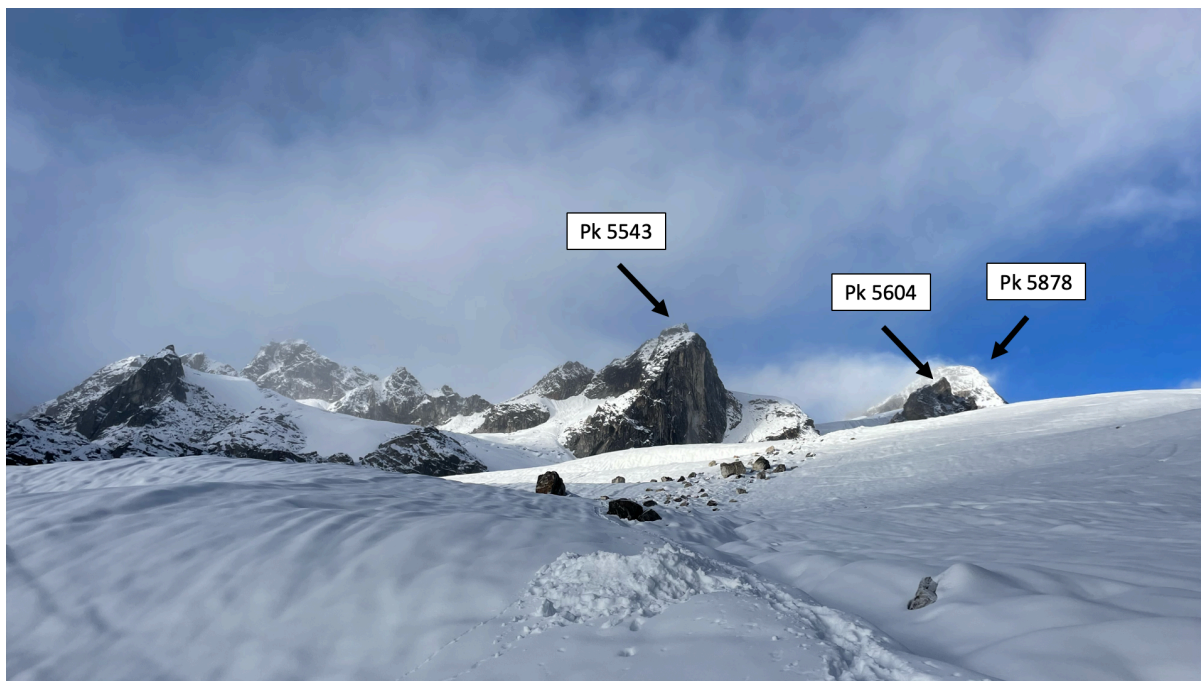




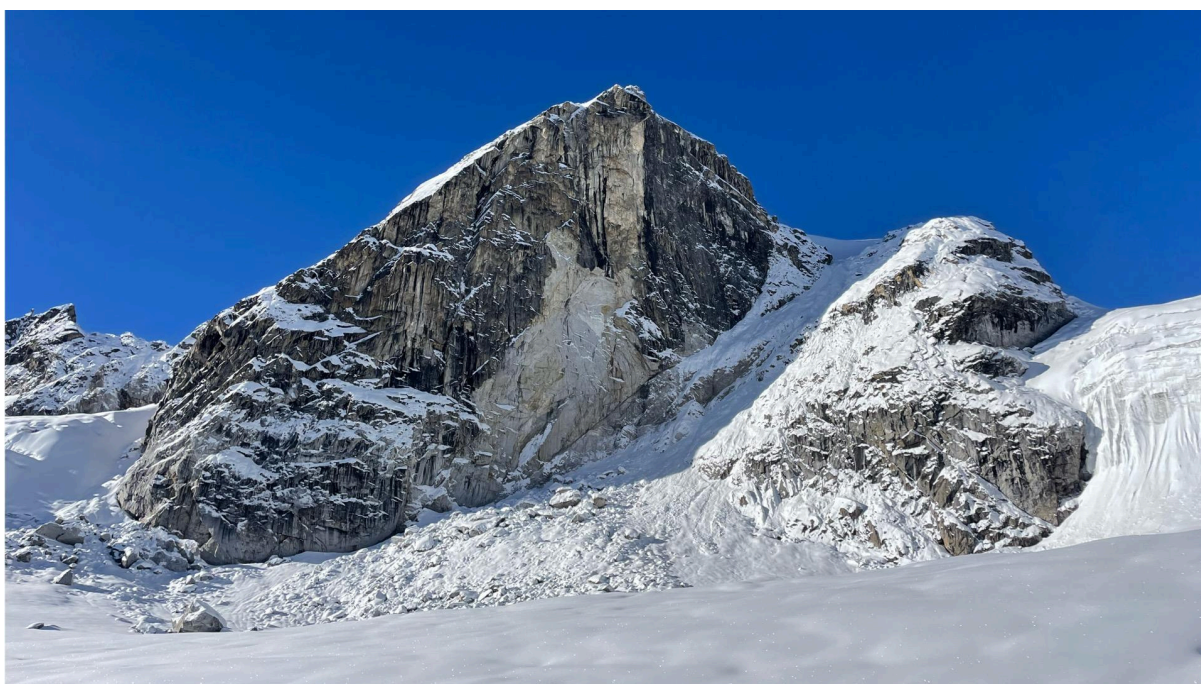
*Ula (left) and Kasia (right) after pitching their tent at an advanced base camp on the glacier (5100m).*



*The view eastwards up the glacier from ABC. Cloud filling the skies in the late morning before the afternoon snow was an all too common sight.*



*The expedition's successful objectives were viewed to the south from the glacial approach.*



*The imposing and slightly overhanging north face of Pk 5543.*





*Kasia, Ula, and Thomas (left to right) negotiate their return to base camp.*



*A covering of fresh snow only impedes travel up the moraine slabs between the lake camp (4500m) and advanced base camp on the glacier (5100m).*



*Ula (left) and Kasia (right) enjoy a brief rest stop at ABC.*



**Pk 5543 – ‘Dhairya Peak’**

Pk 5543 (‘Dhairya Peak’ - recorded height 5597m) was climbed by Ula Stopka-Farooqui, Kasia Piatek, Tom Davis-Merry, and Thomas Simpson on 14 October via the southwest face, grade approximately PD, in Alpine style. There was limited cloud cover before midday, with increasing snowfall into the afternoon. It is understood to be the first ascent.



*A captivating view of the imposing north face of Pk 5543 through the ventilation flap of our small advanced base camp tent on the glacier.*



*We set off from advanced base camp as the sun rises to the east of our little glaciated world. A blanket of fresh snow has been laid down during the night.*





*The morning sun bathes Pk 5543 in hues of orange as we make our approach over the glacier.*



*Ula (left) and Kasia (right) on the approach slopes between the glacier (c5100m) and the col (5200m).*



*Technical difficulties were minimal but the route did prevent us with some considerable crevasses to negotiate beneath the col at 5100m.*



*Approaching the west flank of Pk 5543 as the weather deteriorates and the cloud builds over the course of the morning.*





*Ula (left) and Kasia (right) comfortably negotiating the bergschrund before reaching the final summit slopes of Pk 5543.*



*Ula and Kasia on the final summit push for Pk 5543.*



*Our route to the summit of Pk 5543 from the col at 5100m, taken the following day by Tom Davis-Merry from the summit of Pk 5604 ('Thoda Peak').*

**Pk 5878 – ‘Sara Peak’**

Pk 5878 (‘Sara Peak’ - recorded height 5844m) was climbed by Sam Poletti and Elie Jaumin on 14 October via the north ridge in Alpine style. Their route *Cloudy Dreams* is given D+/M5 (300m). There was limited cloud cover before midday, with increasing snowfall into the afternoon. Understood to be the first ascent.

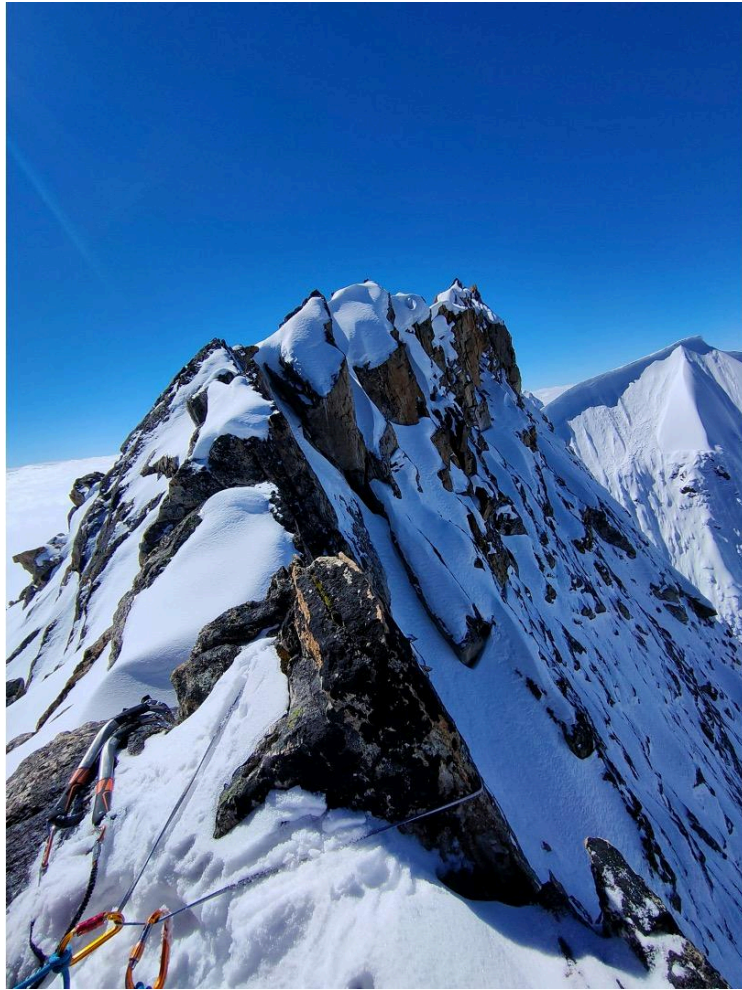


*Pk 5878 viewed from the east on the approach from the col over the upper glacier.*



*Sam leads the approach over the lower glacier as the pair head for the col at 5100m. The rocky peak in the centre is Pk 5604.*





*The spectacular final summit ridge of Pk 5878.*



*The view westwards from the summit of Pk 5878.*



**Pk 5604 – ‘Thoda Peak’**

Pk 5604 (‘Thoda Peak’ - not on original objectives or marked on mapping - recorded height 5604m) was climbed on 15 October by Tom Davis-Merry and Thomas Simpson, in Alpine style. The route is graded approximately PD. There was some limited cloud cover before midday, with increasing snowfall into the afternoon. Understood to be the first ascent.



*Tom and Thomas prepare to leave advanced base camp just after sunrise.*

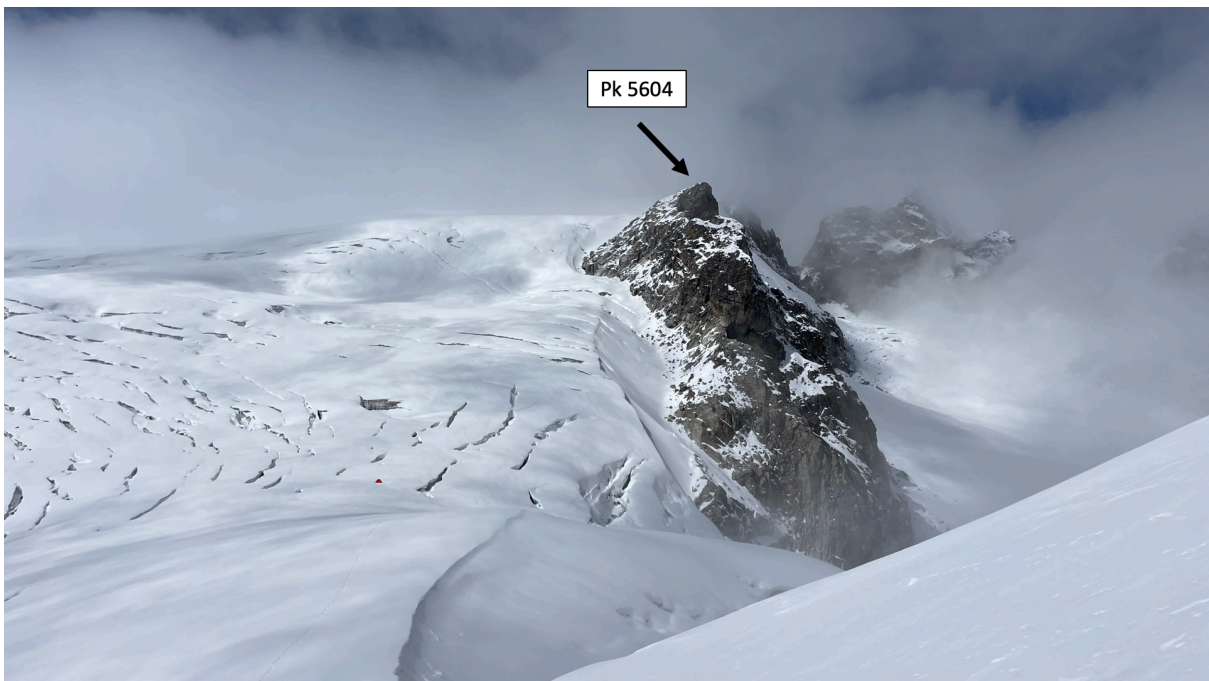


*The pair look back over their tracks towards the sun rising in the east.*





*From the glacier the pair wade through knee deep fresh snow to the col at 5100m which grants access to the upper glacier and Pk 5604.*



*Pk 5604 taken from final summit slopes of Pk 5543. The col lies between the two peaks and the upper glacier to the left (south). Pk 5878 is obscured by clouds to the left of Pk 5604.*



*Pk 5604 from the upper glacier looking eastwards.*



*Thomas moving over good rock on the Alpine terrain of Pk 5604. The steep start of the north ridge of Pk 5878 is seen in the distance.*





*Thomas arriving back at advanced base camp after summiting Pk 5604.*



*Pk 5543 ('Dhairya Peak') (left) and Pk 5604 ('Thoda Peak') (right) seen looking east from the upper reaches of the (lower) glacier. The col at 5100m lies between the two peaks.*



## Return to Gangtok

On 18 October, the team left base camp five days earlier than planned due to persistent rain, which had caused major flooding throughout the region.



*The team returned to a snowy base camp and with no more good weather forecast, decided to pack up base camp and return to Gangtok.*



*The 4x4s arrive to pick up the team from base camp and make the two-day drive to Gangtok.*

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Expedition Diary

Date	Activity
24 September 2023	Depart UK / Switzerland
25 September 2023	Arrive Delhi
26 September 2023	Admin day in Delhi
27 September 2023	Fly Delhi - Bagdogra and drive to Gangtok
28 September 2023	Admin day in Gangtok
29 September 2023	Admin day in Gangtok
30 September 2023	Lake Tsomgo (c4000m) for acclimatisation
1 October 2023	Gangtok - Lachung (4x4)
2 October 2023	Lachung - Shiv Mandir (3900m) (4x4)
3 October 2023	Exploration of the area surrounding BC and recce to establish camp at c4500m. Celebrate Tom's birthday with a fantastic chocolate cake.
4 October 2023	Stay in BC due to poor weather
5 October 2023	Team establish lake camp (intermediate camp) at c4500m
6 October 2023	Ula and Kasia stay at the intermediate camp to acclimatise whilst the rest of the team go higher to scout potential routes to reach the upper sections of the glacier; Sam and Elie establish a camp at c5100m.
7 October 2023	Kasia, Ula, Tom, and Thomas haul loads to ABC (c5100m) on the glacier. Sam and Elie explore the upper reaches of the lower glacier, looking for potential routes to reach objectives. Whole team stays at ABC.
8 October 2023	Team returns to BC
9 October 2023	Rest and laundry day at BC. Finally the sun comes out. Receive news that the dam in the town we passed through days before is damaged and many nearby villages are flooded.
10 October 2023	Stay in BC (poor weather conditions)
11 October 2023	Stay in BC (poor weather conditions)
12 October 2023	Whole team heads up: Sam and Elie push to ABC whilst the rest of the team stay at the lake to repair a tent damaged by heavy snowfall.
13 October 2023	Kasia, Ula, Tom, and Thomas move up to ABC taking the rest of their gear while Elie and Sam establish camp above ABC on the col (c5200m).
14 October 2023	Kasia, Ula, Tom, and Thomas summit Dhaiya Peak (recorded height 5595m), Elie and Sam summit a nearby Sara Peak (recorded height 5844m). Climbing teams stay in their tents at ABC and on the col.

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15 October 2023	Tom and Thomas summit Thoda Peak (recorded height 5604m) while the rest of the team returns to BC. The weather does not look promising to explore and climb further objectives. Kasia and Ula stop at the intermediate camp to hide in their tent as the weather deteriorates. Sam and Elie stop to refuel before going down to BC. Kasia and Ula haul the first load of gear down to BC. Tom and Thomas spend the night at ABC.
16 October 2023	Rest at BC. Beautiful morning. Ula heads back to the intermediate camp to bring the rest of the gear down. Tom and Thomas reach BC in the evening.
17 October 2023	Tom, Thomas, and a few of the BC staff retrieve the rest of the gear from the intermediate camp. Rest of the team stays at BC. Weather is terrible.
18 October 2023	Shiv Mandir - Lachung (4x4)
19 October 2023	Lachung - Gangtok (4x4)
20 October 2023	Day in Gangtok
21 October 2023	Day in Gangtok
22 October 2023	Gangtok - Mirik
23 October 2023	Mirik - Darjeeling
24 October 2023	Day in Darjeeling
25 October 2023	Darjeeling - Mirik
26 October 2023	Mirik - Bagdogra Airport and fly to Delhi
27 October 2023	Day in Delhi
28 October 2023	Depart Delhi
29 October 2023	Return to UK / Switzerland

# International North Sikkim Expedition 2023

## Appendix 2: Expedition Costings

Expedition Costs			Expedition Income		
	Per Person	Total (GBP)		Per Person	Total (GBP)
London - Delhi return flight	630	3778	Personal Contribution	3305	19830
Extra luggage / sports equipment		410	Mount Everest Foundation (MEF)		3500
In-country logistics (Himalayan Run & Trek)*	2796	16776	Alpine Club Climbing Fund Montane (MACCF)		2500
Additional logistics costs		376	Austrian Alpine Club (UK)		1500
Domestics flights (Delhi-Bagdogra-Delhi)	181	1085	BMC Expedition Grant		350
Domestics flights extra luggage	227	1363	Grit & Rock Grant Award (1000 USD)		800
Peak fees (US\$ 500 for team of up to 8 climbers)		415	Julie Tullis Memorial Award (BMC)		200
LO equipment fee (US\$ 500)		400	Alison Chadwick Award (MEF)		2000
Local guide fees + accommodation + food		800			
Government Royalties		565			
Environment Fee		360			
Tent pitching charge		72			
Tsomgo Lake (permit + local guide)		50			
Expedition Foods (with 30% discount)		1267			
Hill food (personal)	51	307			
Climbing Insurance (FFCAM etc.)		1079			
Visas		475			
Travel Insurance (various)		182			
Gas (screw-type canisters)		72			
Medical supplies		717			
Carbon offset (14.5 tCO2e)		131			
	<b>Total</b>	<b>30680</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>30680</b>