

British Talung North Pillar Expedition 2012

Supported by Arc'teryx, Mountain Equipment, Suunto and Mountain Drop-offs.

With Financial Support from The Alpine Club, Nick Estcourt Award, Mark Clifford Award, The British Mountaineering Council and The Mount Everest Foundation.

Expedition Members

Gavin Pike (leader)
Dave Searle
James Clapham

Dates

17/10/12 – 8/12/12

Location

The upper Yalung glacier in the Kanchenjunga region of Nepal.

Introduction

This is an Expedition report from our 2013 Expedition to attempt the unclimbed north pillar of Talung Peak 7352m

Travel

We all travelled from Chamonix, France together first taking a transfer (with Mountain Dropoffs) to Geneva Airport and then by flight to Kathmandu via a long layover in Dubai with Emirates and Fly Dubai). We followed the same route back. From Kathmandu we travelled with Buddha Air to Bhadrapur where we were met by a vehicle and our support staff and travelled to the roadhead at Medibung over two days via Ilam. From here we trekked to our basecamp at Ramche in six days.

Environment

The Trek

We passed through a variety of different ecosystems and agricultures from Tea Plantations and Paddy fields to lush jungle, evergreen forest and high Plateaus above the tree line. The temperature and climate were very agreeable on both the way in and out.

The Basecamp

Our basecamp was at Ramche, 4300m which was the highest flat and hospitable place and had impressive views over to Rathong (6500m) and the start of the Kabru chain (7000m+). It was a cold place due to its bowl like nature alongside the glacier which caught and held the cold air. The coldest we recorded in the tent one night was -16. There were a few easy walks from camp up the moraine to overlook the glacier and behind camp up the hillside. It was a grassy place with plenty of flat camping spots (which were handy during the busy trekking season). When we first arrived there

was a reasonable sized lake which we could get water from but by the time we left we (or our basecamp staff) were collecting water from a stream some 500m away from our camp. There was a small building which was manned during our stay which sold a few items and provided cooking space for trekking groups. They used yak dung and small (juniper) bushes from the hillside to fuel their fire. We very much enjoyed playing hand and football with the staff there on rest days. Whilst up in basecamp we were lucky enough to see rare wild Blue Sheep and Roe Deer.

The Mountains

Above Ramche the terrain became a lot more inhospitable and after the initial hour long walk to Oktang (which is the end of the line for The Yalung/Kanchenjunga Basecamp trek) you walk down to the Yalung Glacier which is 80% moraine and stretches some 16km to the base of Talung. The glacier is flanked by steep, impending walls of very loose rock and rockfalls are constant. We were told that during the summer months / monsoon it can rain to 5500m which we can believe and for this reason the glacier is receding at a frightening pace, this is no doubt due to global warming. There was no snow on the glacier until we got close to the base of Talung at 5400m where there was a light covering of maybe 2-3 feet at most. It appears that this glacier will be destroyed within the next 20-30 years due to the lack of snow feeding it and the alarming rate at which it is receding.

The Weather

We were fortunate to have good weather for nearly all the trip minus two days of precipitation and then the strong winds that plagued our summit attempt. This stability is normal at this time of the year but the winds up high are unpredictable and as we found out can be very strong.

The Travel to Base Camp

We left Kathmandu on the 20/10 and took an internal flight to Bhadrapur in eastern Nepal. From here we took a small taxi to Ilam where we changed to a 4x4 Jeep due to the deteriorating road quality. We stopped one night in Phidim and continued to the roadhead at Medibung the next day. This is where we started the trek which took a total of 6 days to get to our basecamp in Ramche via: Bungawa, Kewang, Yamphudin, Lasiya Bhanjyang and Tseram.

Climbing and Acclimatisation

Upon arrival in basecamp Gavin came down with a flu-like illness which took two weeks to clear out. After a few short forays up the glacier it pretty soon became apparent that the glacier itself would provide us with a much larger obstacle than we first anticipated. From basecamp to the bottom of the mountain was 15km of steep and unstable (hellish!) moraine and precarious ice fins. We also had very little local help due to the high (almost extortionate) prices of portage above Ramche, our basecamp. Nonetheless we carried loads and pushed out an ABC half way up the glacier which was known as Middle Camp. Whilst Gavin recovered from his illness James and Dave cached climbing equipment at 5100m and 'cairned' a route through the glacier to help subsequent trips. After Gavin had recovered we scouted a route to the base of the north face through a small icefall and then began to acclimatise on the original route on the Southwest face of Talung.

This was the only option for acclimatising due to the condition of the glacier and moraine which guarded the approach to all but our objective. We spent a week acclimatizing up to 6400m and placed some bamboo wands to mark the route (this was our intended descent route) then we returned to Middle Camp for some much needed rest. After two days of rest we headed up to the bottom of the face to make an attempt on the North Pillar. At this point, due to the logistical

difficulties and team illness we had a window of 7 days before porters arrived on the 30/11 to carry our equipment out of the mountains.

We had scouted an appropriate line up the pillar on a previous trip up the glacier and had decided that if the steep first pitch went ok then the line would probably go. When we arrived at the base of the pillar we all decided that the first pitch off the glacier looked too dangerous and difficult to attempt due to the conditions and an obvious lack of protection. Trying to tackle 60m of vertical and overhanging neve blobs at 5600m with no visible protection appealed to no one in the team and we soon agreed that it would be foolish to venture up the unknown with a bad gut feeling. We returned to our tiny tent on the glacier and decided to switch objectives to the less aesthetic but ultimately more achievable North West Pillar.

We were soon happy about our decision to sack off the North Pillar as that evening the wind picked up adding to the already cold temperatures. We could hear the wind howling off the south ridge of kangchenjunga approx. 5km away which sounded akin to a freight train outside the tent. Our tent was getting buffeted on the glacier and in the morning we could see huge clouds of loose snow being blown off the summit ridge of Talung. We estimated these winds at 100+mph.

We spent a further two nights on the glacier waiting for the wind to abate, which unfortunately never happened. A combination of the winds with a temperature on the glacier of -20C made an attempt unjustifiable. By this point we had ran out of time and supplies to make a concerted effort on the mountain and made the decision to head back to basecamp empty handed. We later received belated weather forecasts on our satellite phone forecasting 95mph winds during our climbing window. We spent the following two days reverse hauling our equipment back to Ramche where we followed the same route out of the mountains.

We were all pretty frustrated that we didn't manage to climb even one pitch but I guess this is an occupational hazard of Himalayan climbing and with discretion being the better part of valour we are all looking forward to returning to Nepal in the future.

Waste Management

Whilst climbing all packaging waste and empty gas canisters were carried down with us, and as we were climbing alpine style, no ropes or equipment was left on the mountain. Waste at base camp was collected throughout and carried out with us. Extra care been taken with the final clean up of camp to ensure it was left exactly as it was found.

We placed a \$1000US environmental deposit with the Nepali ministry of tourism, this was returned in full.

Finances

We were very fortunate to receive generous financial support from the following: The Mount Everest Foundation, The BMC, The Nick Estcourt Award, The Mark Clifford Grant and the Alpine Club.

We were also sponsored with £500 of equipment from Mountain Drop Offs after a Facebook campaign by gaining then in excess of 600 'Facebook likes'.

Suunto were generous in providing an altimeter watch.

Mountain Equipment generously provided Gavin and James with climbing clothing and sleeping bags. Dave was sponsored with Arcteryx clothing.

Without such assistance this expedition would not have been possible and we really appreciated the level of support from all sources.

Expenditure	Flights	£2129
	Expedition support *	£13319
	Insurance	£1050
	Mountain food	£150
	Accommodation and expenses in Kathmandu	£200
	Visas	£187
	Gas	£65
	Tips	£250
	Equipment	£1200
	Total	£1855
	- Our expedition support was provided by Loben Expeditions, and included internal transportation, accommodation after Kathmandu, peak permit, liaison officer, base camp staff, porters, food and fuel	
Income	Mount Everest Foundation grant	£2700
	British Mountaineering Council grant	£1500
	Nick Estcourt Award	£1500
	Mark Clifford Mountaineering Grant	£1000
	Alpine Club grant	£600
	Mountain Dropoffs equipment contribution	£500
	Personal contribution	£10750
	Total	£18550

Acknowledgements

We would like to say a thank you to everyone who supported this expedition, it wouldn't have happened without it.

Mount Everest Foundation

The BMC

Nick Estcourt Award

Mark Clifford Grant

Mountain Equipment

Arc'teryx

Suunto

Mountain Dropoffs

We organised our expedition through **Loben Expeditions**, <http://www.lobenexpeditions.com>. They provided a first class and personal service and we would highly recommend them to anyone planning a trip to the Himalaya, trekking or climbing.

Trip Diary

A brief summary of the expedition

17/10: Travel from Chamonix to Geneva and then flight onward to Dubai

18/10: Flight from Dubai to Kathmandu

19/10: Meeting with the Nepali Ministry of Tourism, collection of permits and payment of Environmental bond.

20/10: Internal flight from Kathmandu to Bhadrapur, met with expedition staff and drove to Phidim.

21/10: 4x4 Journey from Phidim to the roadhead at Medibung, organisation of porter loads.

22/10: Trek from Medibung to Bungawa.

23/10: Trek from Bungawa to Kewang (where we saw a fantastic local football tournament and inquisitive school teacher!), 9 Mules employed to carry loads.

24/10: Trek from Kewang to Yamphudin, many porter loads shifted to 7 Yaks.

25/10: Trek from Yamphudin to Lasiya Bhanjyang col.

26/10: Trek from Lasiya Bhanjyang to Tseram (3870m) at the snout of the Yalung glacier.

27/10: Trek from Tseram to Ramche (4430m) alongside the Yalung glacier. Base camp set up here and all staff returned home excepting our two base camp/expedition staff - Lila and Asta. Gavin Pike struck by flu-like illness.

28/10: Acclimatisation/rest day, Dave and James walked to Oktang (4800m) to investigate a landslide and the route onto the glacier. (We were informed it was an impasse by some trekkers we met)

29/10: Rest/acclimatisation in Ramche.

30/10: First cache carried onto the Yalung glacier.

31/10: Acclimatisation, Ramche and viewpoint above the Yalung glacier at 4975m.

1/11: Equipment sort and preparation of loads and food for ABC.

2/11: Second cache carried to Middle Camp/ABC on the Yalung glacier.

3/11: Rest day, Ramche.

4/11: ABC established at Middle Camp (4900m).

5/11: Cache established at the head of the moraine at approx. 5100m by James, Dave moves to ABC.

6/11: Second load carried to the cache at 5100m.

7/11: Dave and James move to Yalung BC (Kanchenjunga South BC) at 5545m to acclimatise and get first proper view of Talung North Face.

8/11: Return from Yalung BC to Middle Camp.

9/11: Rest day in Middle Camp, Gavin moves from Ramche to Middle Camp.

10/11: All climbing equipment and food moved up to cache at 5100m.

11/11: Route scouted through the icefall on the upper Yalung glacier to camp at the base of the North face of Talung at 5500m.

12/11: Base of the North Pillar approached and potential route spotted. Return to Middle camp.

13/11: Rest day at Middle Camp, gave medical assistance to a Nepali porter (from a previous Indian expedition) suffering from HAPE.

14/11: Moved to camp on moraine at a windy col below the Southwest face of Talung at 5510m.

15/11: Scouted out an access route onto the glaciated SW face of Talung and set up camp under a serac at 5995m.

16/11: Acclimatisation on the SW face of Talung. Proposed descent route wanded.

17/11: Moved camp up the Southwest face of Talung to approx. 6500m to a safe camp and further explored and wanded the route.

18/11: Acclimatisation day at 6500m.

19/11: Descent from our acclimatisation camp back to Middle camp in strong winds.

20/11: Rest day in Middle Camp.

21/11: Last kit arrangements and rest day in Middle Camp.

22/11: Approach to the base of the North pillar at our previous camp site, 5500m.

23/11: After approach to the first belay the attempt on the North pillar is abandoned after the first pitch is deemed unprotectable and unjustifiable. Route to the true base of the Northwest pillar/face made through the glacier and camp set up nearby.

24/11: Team awakened at 2am by extremely strong Jetstream winds roaring over the south ridge of Kanchenjunga and Talung. A vast snow plume is blown off the summit ridge and upper face of Talung. Estimated wind speeds of 100-120mph. (Forecasts received afterwards predicted 100+mph)

25/11: Waited in our bivouac below the NW face for the winds to abate. The bivouac tent was continuously buffeted by strong winds.

26/11: With insufficient time and food left we returned to middle camp with all of our equipment.

27/11 – 29/11: Load carrying off the Yalung glacier and return to rest in Ramche Base Camp.

30/11 – 6/12: Reverse of the approach trek to return to Kathmandu via Ilam. The environmental paperwork was completed in Yamphudin national park office (2/12) where our waste was inspected and our expedition given the 'All Clean'.

7/12: Day in Kathmandu, report to ministry of tourism.

8/12: Departure