

British Chang Himal North Face Expedition 2009

Supported by Mountain Equipment, Black Diamond, Scarpa, Mammut, DMM, Crux, SIS (Science in Sport) and the Lyon Equipment Award.

Financial support from Mount Everest Foundation, The BMC, Nick Estcourt Award, Shipton/Tilman Award and the Mark Clifford Grant

Expedition Members

Andy Houseman (leader)
Nick Bullock

Dates

29th September – 17th November 2009

Location

Kangchenjunga Himal, Nepal

Summary

1st Ascent of Central Spur, North Face Chang Himal, 1800m ED+ M6.
(Nick Bullock & Andy Houseman 29th October – 2nd November 2009)

Introduction

Situated in the Kangchenjunga Himal, north-east Nepal, the striking 1800m North Face of Chang Himal, 6802m, was first brought to our attention by an article 'Unclimbed' in Alpinist 4 magazine where Lindsay Griffin picked it as his gem. The obvious line, as pointed out by Lindsey in the article and catching the eye in photos was the Central Spur, hoping it would provide an objectively safe line to attempt the North Face and leading straight to the summit, this was our proposed line. Tried once in 2007 by a team of Slovenians who were forced to retreat under half height due to bad snow conditions, we were hoping for good weather and better snow conditions as we started the trek to base camp in torrential rain.

We were joined on the long trek in to base camp by three friends who would then carry on to cross over to the south side base camp of Kangchenjunga, completing the popular Kangchenjunga trek.

Travel

We both flew from Manchester to Kathmandu with Qatar Airways via a 7 hour stop over in Doha. We enjoyed a good service on these flights with all bags making it to Kathmandu.

Different internal travel routes were taken on the way in to and out of base camp due to the unreliability of flying all the way to the start of the trek. For the approach we took a 45 minute

internal flight from Kathmandu to Bhadrapur where we were met and started the two day drive to Taplejung. We were a bit confused as to why half way through the first day we changed vehicles into an old Land Rover as the road were paved and good, we soon found out the next day... After 7 hours we arrived in the small town of Phidim where we stayed in a local lodge/hotel. Within five minutes of leaving Phidim it was obvious why we'd changed vehicles, the tarmac finished and the next 7 hours of driving were on very rough and dust roads. The road ends at Taplejung and we spent the night here in good lodge. The road is planned to be paved all the way to Taplejung in the next 2 – 3 years.

On the return journey we flew out of Suketar, this is a village on the ridge line above Taplejung, flights operate twice a week from here, Wednesdays and Sundays, although in the early season due to weather they can be very unreliable and hence why we drove to Taplejung on the way in. It took two flights to get back to Kathmandu, a 20 minute flight to Biratnagar (170 rupee airport tax) and then a 30 minute flight back to Kathmandu. It is also possible to get a charter flight direct from Suketar to Kathmandu.

All internal flights were arranged by our agent so I can't comment on the availability/ease of booking these. Although speaking to a few other parties it seems it could be quite hard with limited availability.

Environment

The Trek

Taplejung is at an altitude of 1800m and the trek is started by dropping down to Mitlung at 900m. From here the Tamor river is followed, through jungle, small villages and rice/maize fields. Much fresh fruit and vegetables are grown and always available. Branching off and following the Ghunsa Khola gaining altitude steadily and entering larch and pine forests eventually reaching open land at Kambachen and following the moraine of the Kangchenjunga glacier to base camp.

On the trek into base camps we used tents every night except the first, on the trek out we stayed in tea houses except for the nights at Kambachen and Phurumbu.

Base Camp

We situated our base camp at 5050m, on a grassy plateau above the Kangchenjunga glacier, directly opposite the North Face of Chang Himal. This was about 2km west of Pangpema, the base camp for anyone attempting the north side of Kangchenjunga. Base camp was a very windy place, as with Pangpema, for the entire stay.

Chang Himal

We were fortunate to find good hard snow on the initial easy angled snow slopes on the lower face. On the steeper ground there was a mixture of loose unconsolidated powder, firm enough to make progress or rotten ice. To reach ice for gear a belays was anything from 30cm of digging to non existent where you'd expect it, either straight to rock or bottomless snow.

The rock on the north face was granite, it varied in quality from bad to very bad, making protection very hard and time consuming to find.

Weather

Overall we were very fortunate to have very good and settled weather for most of the trip. It rained heavily on the first day of the trek and after that we had evening precipitation for the next 5 days, been cloudy and over cast in the day. Once this had passed over we had good and stable weather but with constant strong winds for the rest of the expedition. The face was mostly shelter from the wind as we found out.

The temperature seemed unseasonable cold, especially with the added wind chill. Whilst climbing we noticed a definite drop in temperature on the last two days, this was also noticed when back at base camp, winter was definitely on its way.

Climbing

The ascent was made in a lightweight alpine style, no fixed ropes or climbing Sherpa's were used.

29th October, Day 1

Setting out at 02.30 from our cave/bivvy at the base of the face and gaining the large snow cone at the right of the spur via an ice/rock gully. We soloed the narrowing on the left side as much as possible sensing the seracs above 30° - 60°, until level with the top of the first buttress. A 70° unconsolidated slope/runnel was then followed and eventually the first rock buttress reached.

Rope out, a direct line was climbed to the right of the spur, M4+ 60m, and a further 120m was simul-climbed. It was approximately 3pm now but knackered and at about 6000m, a fin of snow gave a reasonable dig out step for us to recover and spend the night.

30th October, Day 2

Andy took the lead from the bivvy stating climbing a steep runnel and pulling an unprotected bulge at its top, M5 55m. Three possible overhanging continuations presented themselves, leading through the rock band. Nick took a shallow overhanging corner line sprayed with a sheen of ice. Not the best with a big bag and above 6000m, pulling the exit mush with relief after 60 testing meters, M6. Pitch 3 of the rock band included traversing right to belay beneath another vague shallow rotten snow runnel, M4, 55m. Pitch 4 was fortunately not as steep or as rotten as pitch 2 either and went ok, M4, 65m.

The biggest roof on the route was traversed beneath while hunting for a bivvy site that didn't materialise (M4, 70°) and in the dark a snow slope was reached on the right of the roof. 70m. A final 30m of 70° was climbed until back on the crest directly above the roof and at 19.30 a 30cm step was cut for 'oh, what a comfy evening.' The approximate height on the face was 6200m.

31st October, Day 3

The day started well with a 2.5 hour simul-climb following a broad right slanting snow ramp. 60°-70° to rejoin the crest beneath the final headwall where a rising traverse was taken, loads of rotten snow eventually lead to snow flutings on the right of the face (M4, 80m). Crossing 2 flutings and climbing a particularly rotten bulge of rock (M4) until ensconced deep inside a fluting that gave no particular support, 50m. The day was finished with a flounder up the fluting with no protection and a possible dead end at 6550m. The best bivvy of the route was dug out with a fine, all be it chilly, view.

1st November, Day 4

A steep flounder directly out of the top of our bivvy (made easier without the weight of rucksacks which we had left at the bivvy) brightened our slightly cold and breezy day, when, with a bit of Peruvian/Nepal unprotected jiggery pokey, we entered the guts of a continuation runnel which we hoped and prayed lead to the summit crest. (70° 180m)

A final 100 metres of wind scoured 50° lead to the knife edge summit at midday, directly above everything we had climbed.

After half an hour on the summit we down climbed to our bivvy, reaching it at 15.0, enlarging it we stopped here for the evening.

2nd November, Day 5

Constructing abseil anchors from very little indeed had us down in a one-er without too much drama. 13 hours later we hit and down climbed the initial snow gully and cone and ice runnel to nestle back into our cave feeling very happy with our lot 14 hours from leaving the high bivvy.

Waste Management

Whilst climbing all packaging waste and empty gas canisters were carried down with us, and climbing alpine style, no ropes were 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.

Equipment

Clothing/Footwear

Both members were supplied with clothing and footwear from their sponsors, Mountain Equipment & Scarpa for Andy and Mammut for Nick.

Hardware

Again supplied by personal sponsors, Black Diamond for Andy and DMM for Nick. We used a solely DMM rack on the route as well as Petzl pitons supplied by Lyon Equipment.

Stove

A Jet Boil was used on the route (supplied by Lyon Equipment) with Butane/Propane canisters. We took 3 canisters with us but only used one and a half.

Food

We bought dehydrated food packs in the UK for use on the route and were supplied with energy bars, gels and drink mix from SIS (Science in Sport), we found the energy products great to use and well worth taking. Food for acclimatisation trips was bought locally in Kathmandu, and all base camp food was supplied by our agent. We were fortunate to have a very friendly and skilled cook 'Buddy' for this trip, definitely the key to success!

Budget

We were very fortunate to receive generous financial support from the following, **Mount Everest Foundation, The BMC, Nick Estcourt Award, Shipton/Tilman Award and the Mark Clifford Grant.**

Without such assistance this expedition would not have happened, we really appreciated the level of support.

Income		Expenditure	
MEF	£1,300	Flights	£1,289
BMC	£2,500	Loben Expeditions*	£7,430
Nick Estcourt Award	£1,500	Permit	£370
Shipton/Tilman Award	£1,865	Insurance	£368
Mark Clifford Grant	£500	Expedition food	£150
Personal contribution	£2,657	Acc + Food in KTH	£250
		Visas	£150
		Excess baggage	£80
		Gas	£65
		Tips	£170
TOTAL	£10,322		£10,322

*Loben Expeditions is the agent used in Kathmandu, this cost included all internal travel, and a full base camp service.

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

Shipton/Tilman Award

Mark Clifford Grant

SIS (Science in Sport)

Lyon Equipment Award

Mountain Equipment

Mammut

Black Diamond

DMM

Scarpa

Crux

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

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree to allow any of this report to be copied for the purpose of private research.

Andy Houseman a.houseman@gmail.com

Appendix 1

Expedition Diary

29th Sept – Fly from Manchester.

1st Oct – Land in Kathmandu, meet with agent.

2nd Oct – Stocking up on hill food in Kathmandu.

3rd Oct – Kathmandu

4th Oct – Meeting at Ministry, receive permit for Chang Himal.

5th Oct – Morning flight to Bhadrapur (45 min) then a 7 hour drive to Phidim.

6th Oct – Continue drive, 7.5 hours on bad un-paved road to Taplejung where the trek starts and we meet up with our base camp staff.

7th Oct – Sort gear into porter loads and start the trek to base camp, Taplejung – Mitlung.

8th Oct – Mitlung – Chirwa

9th Oct – Chirwa – Sakatum

10th Oct – Sakatum – Amjlosa

11th Oct – Amjlosa – Gyabla

12th Oct – Gyabla – Ghunsa

13th Oct – Rest day in Ghunsa (3600m)

14th Oct – Ghunsa – Kambachen

15th Oct – Kambachen – Lhonak

16th Oct – Lhonak – Base camp, 5050m

17th Oct – Sort kit and short acclimatization walk up to 5600m behind base camp.

18th Oct – Tried to get up to 6000m on a 'bump' behind base camp but turned round at 5850m due to strong wind.

19th Oct – Found and cairned a route across the Kangchenjunga Glacier to the base of the North Face of Chang Himal.

20th Oct – Rest day at BC.

21st Oct – Aborted attempt at climbing a near by trekking peak.... ‘route finding errors...!’

22nd Oct – Walked up to and spent the night 6060m on a Dorma Peak just to the East of Base camp.

23rd Oct – Climb to the summit of Dorma Peak, 6214m, then return to BC.

24th Oct – Rest day at BC, sort Rack for route attempt.

25th Oct – Walked across Kangchenjunga glacier and stashed kit at base of the North Face.

26th Oct – Rest day at base camp.

27th Oct – Rest day at base camp, sorted food for the route.

28th Oct – Crossed glacier and bivi’d at base of the North Face, 4950m.

29th Oct – Leaving the bivi at 02.30am we soloed up 30o – 60o slopes with regular steps of Scottish III until we accessed a steeper 70o broad gully heading back left to join the spur proper at around half height. One roped pitch and more simul-climbing brought us to a bivi on the spur at 15.00 around 6000m.

30th Oct – Slow climbing, all pitched, lead through the rock bands on rotten ice/snow before a traverse right under a roof before a short final pitch brought us to a un-comfy bivi above the roof. We covered 6 pitches up to M6/Scottish 7 before bivi was reached at 19.30 at around 6200m.

31st Oct – Easier ground was simul-climbed in the morning up a wide rightwards slanting snow ramp before 3 pitches gained a bivi at around 6550m at the top of an unconsolidated snow fluting.

1st Nov – Crossing into the next fluting this was followed till the east ridge was joined 100m below the summit. Straightforward slopes lead to the summit which was gained at midday. Down climbing to the previous bivi, arriving at 15.00 where we had left most of the gear we enlarged it and stayed there.

2nd Nov – The rest of the face was descended by abseil and down climbing the initial snow slope in 14hours, reaching the base at 21.30 and spending the night there.

3rd Nov – Returned to base camp across the glacier.

4th Nov – Rest day at base camp.

5th Nov – Porters had been sent for by our cook once he saw us on the summit as we had asked him to, they arrived a bit earlier than expected! So base camp was cleared and the trek out started with still very tired legs! Walked to Kambachen

6th Nov – Kambachen – Ghunsa

7th Nov – Ghunsa – Amjlosa

8th Nov – Amjlosa – Chirwa

9th Nov – Chirwa – Phurumbu. (The route differs from the approach trek here as we were flying out instead of driving so the headed straight up to the airstrip at Sukatar instead of going via Taplejung)

10th Nov – Phurumbu – Sukatar

11th Nov – Morning flight from Sukatar to Biratnagar (20 min) then an afternoon flight from Biratnagar to Kathmandu (35 min).

12th Nov – Maoist strikes mean de-brief with ministry is delayed.

13th Nov – Kathmandu

14th Nov – Kathmandu

15th Nov – De-brief with Ministry, Kathmandu.

16th Nov – Depart Kathmandu

17th Nov – Arrive back to UK