



GANESH II SOUTH FACE

----- Line of ascent on right.

▲ Bivouacs.

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RICK ALLEN

Nick and I had encountered one another several times in the last few years in a variety of bars, tea houses and bothies and we both entered 1984 with plenty of enthusiasm and no place to go. During a stormy January weekend in Glencoe the decision was made to go somewhere, the rest was just detail.

I was keen to return to Nepal and the recently opened Ganesh range with its relatively short approaches seemed to offer abundant opportunities. However, the few published pictures showed only the wrong facets of the wrong mountains. Picking a line from a hazy telephoto shot in a journal is enough of a pig in a poke without indulging in an outright guess. A chance meeting with John Cleare, one of the few British mountaineers to have visited the area, yielded a magnificent collection of prints of the southern side of the range and an oblique view of the south face of Ganesh II accompanied an application just two weeks before the deadline for the post-monsoon period.

The face is about 2,500 m high and curves round in a huge arc to join the tumbling seracs of the south face of Ganesh IV. The right hand half appeared to be relatively free from objective danger, predominantly snow and ice slopes interrupted by some major rock bands.

In March, reports were published describing the Polish attempt on the face in 1983, the first we had heard of it. We suspected that Wielicki and Pawlikowski were not types to give up lightly and they reported unstable snow and loose rock. Correspondence with the editor of a Polish Journal yielded valuable photographs and we knew beyond doubt that we had not picked a cake walk.

Permission was received and the project launched although we were too late to qualify for grants. The budget received a knock as late as August when His Majesty's Government of Nepal doubled the peak fee.

Our arrival in Kathmandu in mid September was delayed by late rains and major obstacles loomed. The rains had cut the road from India causing paraffin rationing, a Swiss expedition, apparently with permission for the same face, had just left and the air freight was firmly in the hands of the customs officials. However in just three days of frenetic activity all problems were solved, circumvented or ignored and we could leave for Trisuli Bazar in a hired bus with a full complement of porters.

Phu Tsering Sherpa was something of a star. He had been a high altitude porter on the SW face of Everest, tried but disliked an office job and returned to the mountains in the more comfortable role of sirdar.

Mr. Bishnu had been plucked from behind a desk to act as liaison officer in the unfamiliar uplands of his own country for a two man show which did not match his preconceptions of an expedition. At least he stuck at his non-existent role to the end.

The approach route lay across country to the Anku Khola then up the valley of this river to its source below the Ganesh peaks. Few trekkers venture up this cul de sac and only a handful of expeditions have passed this way. Little Western influence is apparent in the self-sufficient villages and buying a few potatoes is a major exercise for a sirdar who speaks no Tamang. Beyond Hindung the trail entered the steep upper gorge of the Anku Khola, rising rapidly and repeatedly crossing the river. The Swiss expedition on their 12 day walk had rebuilt every log bridge, saving us four days. We reached base camp on an exposed vegetated ridge below Ganesh IV to find the Swiss committed to a circuitous icefall route leading to the west ridge of Ganesh II. Entente cordiale was established over a bottle of whisky with Roland Garin and his team mates, secretly relieved not to be debating who should be climbing where.

Across an intervening glacier the scale of the south face defied appreciation; with the upper two thirds foreshortened it was still a monster. We crossed the glacier and established our advanced base camp tent on the far bank about 200 m below base camp. This was not much help in acclimatising so despite streaming head colds we embarked on the face with massive sacks on 3rd October. Climbing up the glacier and over rubble strewn ledges at the foot of the face led to a key chimney pitch with an abandoned rope and more traces of the Polish visit at their first bivouac site. The next day a major ice gully led to the foot of the most prominent rock wall on the face. The sun turned this gully into a bowling alley by midday so we were glad to move leftwards below the sheltering wall. The combined effects of a head cold, diarrhoea and altitude exerted themselves and I reached the second Polish bivouac site utterly spent. Nick was in better shape and managed the tent and the cooking single handed.

We retreated the following morning having had as much acclimatising as we could take and left a dump of food, gear and gas. The peculiar siting of our advanced camp left an uphill slog to base, a nightmare on this occasion as I lost the track in the dark and blundered through streams and dwarf juniper scrub.

After two days' rest the weather persisted fair and there were no excuses left. Repeating the first two days took us to about 5,200 m, poised above the next ice couloir. From here the Poles had continued upwards on to successively more difficult rock to emerge on the pinnacled SE ridge, separated from the summit slopes by major obstacles.

Linking some crucial transverse pitches was required to break out into the centre of the face.

In the couloir early next morning we climbed sixty degree glassy ice for several pitches until Nick moved on to a short wall composed of loose mica flakes. Rock ledges took us left to an excellent natural platform and an early bivouac.

Crossing a short snowfield in the morning we reached a crucial ice pitch leading through the rock barrier above. Without the sack for once I climbed a full runout of good Scottish IV, revelling in a brief liberation from the oppressive burden. Snow flutings and another bivouac led to more steep ice through the next rock barrier and on up into a fan shaped hanging icefield. Climbing the left edge daylight faded without any chance of a site for the tent. My attempt to chop out a ledge struck rock almost immediately and we settled for the Kekus mark one angled snow ledge with rock fin. Thrashing about with the tent we broke one pole and finally settled for wrapping the fabric around us. Unable to brew up, two bundles were suspended in misery as spindrift trickled into the tent sack. A strong contender in the league table of appalling bivouacs.

In the morning just one ropelength led to a site where a tent platform could be dug and the day was spent brewing up. This hiatus at about 6,200 m may have helped acclimatisation and partly counteracted the weakening effects of the previous night.

The seventh day on the face began with a sensational traverse across vertical rotten snow on to a steep icicle and so out of a Z shaped ramp system through the last rock barrier. The slopes above were deeply fluted with hard green ice channels, alternating with icing sugar crests. Progress was slow; the steep ground demanded unrelenting concentration and diminishing loads could not compensate for fatigue and the debilitating effects of recurrent diarrhoea. At least we were never both ill on the same day.

So far the weather had been stable with clear skies every morning but on the eighth day banks of high cloud moved in from the west and enveloped the mountain. The tent platform that night was dug into the crest of a snow fluting leaving us exposed to the gathering wind. In the morning we faltered, retreating to our bags as snow flurries circled. Descending the way we had come was not inviting and with one meal left we could not sit still. We would go on until we could dig a snow hole. A slight improvement in visibility led us on and we decided to go for a descent by the west ridge, which entailed reaching the summit. Heads down against the wicked wind we emerged on to easier angled ground overlooking the east face and reached the level summit crest in a whiteout in the late afternoon.

Dropping below the crest we dug a small snowhole and began brewing up. My taste for instant noodles had declined to such an extent by this time that half of the last meal remained uneaten.



THE TEAM—L-R: Nick Kekus, Bishnu Datta Uperty—L.O., Sherbahadur Cook, Phu Tsering Sherpa—Sirdar, Rick Allen.

The wind was unabated in the morning as we stumbled down the upper slopes of the west ridge. A rock gendarme barred the way after a while and it became obvious that the Swiss team had not completed their route. Visions of descending a succession of camps stocked with chocolate were shattered and we embarked on a descent of the south face which was partly sheltered from the wind. This area of the face was capped by steep rock and as we abseiled into the mist, down overhanging walls, the situation seemed close to getting out of hand.

In the evening we reached a broad snow terrace which was familiar from photographs and would lead diagonally leftward to our line of ascent. We dug a level tent platform and brewed up lemon tea as the sky cleared. Two days later we reached advanced base camp after twelve days on the mountain.

Footnote – Following the Ganesh II expedition in 1984, Rick Allen was selected for the North East Ridge Everest Expedition in 1985. He spoke at an Indoor Meet on the first of these expeditions in January 1985 and one year later in January 1986 he spoke to the Club regarding his experiences on Mount Everest—Editor.