

INDIAN SUMMER

THE EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY LAHUL EXPEDITION

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In the summer of 1985 I took part in an expedition to the Miyàr Nala glacier system, in Lahul, part of the Greater Himalaya in northern India. The six-man expedition had a very small (student!) budget of £5,500 and we were lucky to receive sponsorship from many sources, including the Cairngorm Club. We were hoping to make the first ascents of at least two of the 6000 m peaks at the head of the glacier.

The planning of any Himalayan expedition is a lengthy task, and it took us nearly two years to complete our preparations, from the first application to the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, to the frantic packing and weighing of our equipment the day before our flight on July 18th.

We raised a few eyebrows in Heathrow departure lounge, our duvets being crammed with climbing gear and duty-free Mars bars in order to keep our 30 kg. baggage allowance within the limit. Despite its extra burden, the 747 managed to take off safely and eight hours later we were deposited in delightful Delhi (an assault on all the senses!) still reeling from the effects of the air hostess's generosity with the drinks trolley!

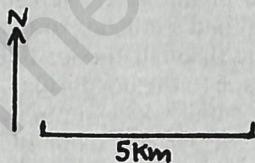
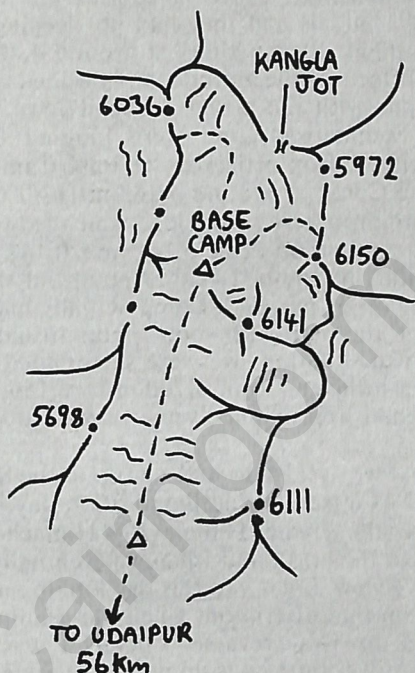
Two days later, after obtaining our permit and Indian Liaison Officer from the IMF we left the 33°C heat of the capital and boarded the infamous Manali bus (3rd class), the first stage of our journey to the mountains. For 17 hours through the night we endured the bus's blaring horn and, even worse, the Indian radio music, which consists of a very unmelodic wailing. The road was in a worse state than the Derry Lodge track and at one point, in the early morning hours, everyone got out to help push the bus out of a monsoon-flooded river! Eventually, we reached Manali, 1,981 m (6,497 ft) and I had just enough strength left to crawl from my seat and collapse in the gutter, where I was very ill for the rest of the morning!

The Kulu valley, where Manali is situated, is one of the main apple producing areas of India, and we spend five days here, waiting for a landslide on the road ahead to be cleared. We wandered around the market place buying local food, such as rice, lentils, sugar, tea and flour, to supplement the Batchelors dried meat we had brought from Scotland, and BG, our Liaison Officer, was a great help with this.

When the road was finally cleared we spent another 12 hours or so being jolted around on the final stage of our bus journey over the 4,267 m (13,996 ft) Rotang La Pass into Lahul and so down to the roadhead at Udaipur on ever-worsening roads.

From Udaipur we trekked for five days up the Miyàr Nala Valley, walking in the cooler hours of morning and pitching camp in the early afternoon. We had hired six ponies as well as two porters to carry most of the heavy gear, so the walking was very enjoyable with only light

rucksacks. The scenery had gradually been changing: thick Scandinavian pine forests turning to beautiful grassy meadows surrounded by fields of seed-potatoes, and eventually barren moraine-covered slopes with tantalising snow peaks rising thousands of feet above.



MAP OF HEAD OF THE
MIYĀR NALA VALLEY.

Figure 1 Map of head of the Miyār Nala Valley.
(Drawing by Alastair P. Matthewson).

The ponies left the six of us, BG and the two porters at a camp within sight of the moraine-covered snout of the glacier at a height of around 4,256 m (14,000 ft). We were now faced with the task of moving ourselves and our food and gear the further 24 kms to our intended Base Camp site at the head of the glacier.

This took nearly two weeks of load-ferrying and involved two intermediate camps, one on a spur at the side of the glacier and another higher up on the bare ice itself. The carry through the horrendously loose moraine was possibly the most demoralising part of the trip, but the porters were amazingly cheerful considering that their only footwear was plastic sandals and they had no sleeping bags—we lent them our duvets at night. By this time, at around 4,408 m (14,500 ft) BG was feeling the effects of the altitude, and decided to go back down the valley to Udaipur with the porters. Luckily, we were all feeling relatively fit and acclimatised, and were looking forward to the independence of being liaison-officerless at Base Camp.

We set up Base Camp at around 5,168 m (17,000 ft), on a level piece of ice below an impressive snow ridge which led to a rocky tower and eventually the summit of Peak 6,141 m (20,142 ft), one of the mountains we intended to climb. I should point out that none of the mountains in the region of our Base Camp actually had names – they were just marked on the map with spot-heights (usually inaccurate).

It was a beautiful situation; we were surrounded on all sides by virgin peaks ranging in height from 5,700 m to 6,150 m (18,696 ft to 20,172 ft), and we had approximately two weeks in which to get to know them better!

After a 'rest day' we decided to make a trip to the Kangla Jot Pass, 5,468 m (17,935 ft), as a training/acclimatisation day. The Pass is on one of the routes over the Greater Himalaya of Himachel Pradesh from Lahul into Zaskar to the north and when we eventually reached it, we had a very impressive view down into this dry-looking northern region. I had a shock later on that afternoon, when, descending the glacier to BC, I fell 6 metres down a crevasse. Luckily I was roped-up, but prusikking out was still a time consuming (and very cold!) process.

Back at camp, our thoughts turned to the possibilities of various routes up the surrounding mountains. As Peak 6141 m looked rather tricky we decided to try something else first, and unanimously agreed on Peak 6150 m which we could see from BC, and had studied through binoculars. The most obvious route seemed to lie through the ice-fall to the west of the peak and up a steep snow/ice slope to the north ridge, which appeared to lead without difficulty to the small rocky summit.

Two days after our visit to the Kangla Jot we set out from BC again, at the rather unsociable hour of 2 a.m., our eyes set on the starlit hump of Peak 6150 m. A lightning storm further down the valley looked impressive, but the sky above us was clear and bright with stars, so we only used our head-torches at the most complicated crevasse sections. The early start meant that we crossed the glacier in its safest (frozen) state and had us roping up below the major difficulties just before sunrise at 5 a.m.

The bergshroud below the ice-face posed a tricky overhanging problem, but was overcome with a strenuous heave and soon we were making steady progress up the 50° ice slope. The climbing was not

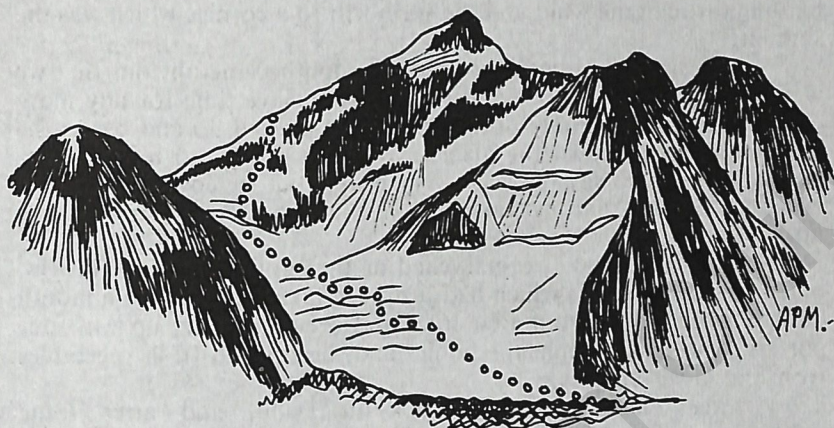


Figure 2 Peak 6150 m showing route to North Ridge.
(Drawing by Alastair P. Matthewson).

particularly hard (similar to the North Face of the Tour Ronde, Chamonix Alps) but was very tiring on the calf muscles, and I was glad of the rest at every delay. Eight 50 m pitches later we popped out onto the summit ridge, and the sun! It was only 9 a.m. so we had some breakfast and did some sunbathing, until the cold wind persuaded us to get moving again. Here, at around 5,928 m (19,500 ft) we were beginning to feel the altitude and I was only managing ten steps at a time. As we gained height however, the views of the surrounding hills and glaciers improved, and as we neared the summit itself all feelings of fatigue were lost! We unroped below the final rocky step and scrambled up the remaining 9 metres of mountain, crampons scraping wildly. Much to everyone's relief there was no cairn, and with great difficulty we all tried to stand on the small summit platform at exactly the same time!

We stayed on top for over two hours, soaking up the amazing panoramic view, taking photos and, of course, building a cairn. The weather was perfect, and the feeling of satisfaction immense; it all made up for the dysentery on the walk-in!

Following our steps back down the ridge, we covered the ground surprisingly quickly, but instead of descending the 400 m ice-field we chose to continue along the ridge to a 'bealach' from where we could abseil over a loose rock buttress down to the glacier below. From there it was a long trudge back to Base Camp, which we reached at 7 p.m., totally exhausted and looking forward to a decent night's sleep.

During the next few days at Base Camp, we spent a lot of the time recovering from our exertions on Peak 6150 m, but we did manage to get up another peak, 6,036 m (19,798 ft) although the weather turned bad half-way up, and it was more like Scotland than the Himalayas,

battling through the wind and the sprindrift to a cornice which was the summit!

After this second peak, however, it soon became obvious that we were running out of food, and we wouldn't have time for any more climbing. So, not entirely disappointed, we packed up and began the long march back down the glacier. With no porters to help us, our rucksacks were, to say the least, very heavy; but we covered the same ground in 3 days that had taken 2 weeks of load-ferrying on the way up.

As we descended, we marvelled at the proliferation of flowers, butterflies and animals which had just been taken for granted a month before. Then we saw our first trees and eventually met up with our porters, who had brought the ponies and, best of all, fresh vegetables from the lower villages.

A week later we were back in Delhi, and after some sightseeing – Taj Mahal of course! – flew back home, where we learned all about the terrible British summer.

	Map Height	Recorded Height	Route Description
<u>PEAKS CLIMBED:</u>			
From a Base Camp at 5150 m.	6150 m	c. 6100 m	By west face and north ridge. Grade: D inf (Alpine) 11 hours to summit
	6036 m	c. 6250 m	By east face and south-east ridge Grade: AD (Alpine) 12 hours to summit

The Team: Fraser Alexander
Ulric Jessop
Teresa Lee
Alastair Matthewson
Pete Smith
Jonathan Whitaker



Figure 3 The team with Peak 6150 m in the background.
(Photograph by Alastair P. Matthewson).