# 'Come on lads—it's no worse than the Midi/Plan'

## An account of the first ascent of Gauri Sankar's S peak

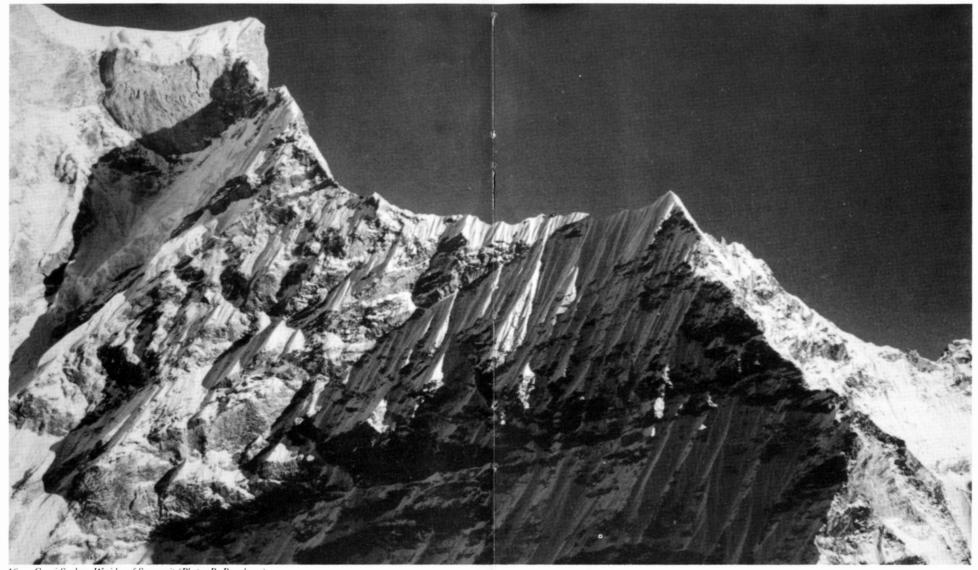
John Barry

'Come on lads', Pete would exhort us as our efforts to subdue the delicately corniced West ridge began to falter in a slough of timidity or lack of basic poke. 'Come on, it's no worse than the Midi/Plan traverse'. I thought about that a bit at the time—and a lot since—but try as I might I cannot bring myself to agree with the Great Man. As I remember it the Midi/Plan traverse is a doddle; sunkissed and festooned from dawn to dusk with all manner of Euro-citizenry and whilst we had our fair share of sun, even Boardman's massive presence and gentle scoldings scarcely served office for that voluble crowd.

It had all started nearly a year before with a 'phone call. 'Want to come to Gauri Sankar?' 'Yes,' I replied, flattered to be personally invited by the Great Man himself. 'We've had a late drop out,' he continued, 'and you were the only bloke I could think of who could get the time off'. Seeking comfort and consolation in an atlas I discovered that Gauri Sankar was 7146m high and had earned quite a reputation having repulsed no less than 6 worthy efforts including one by Whillans, Clough and Co. Moreover, the Swiss guide, Lambert, had pronounced it impossible and it had become known as the Eiger of the Himalaya. All of which made it very attractive.

We had permission for an attempt in the Autumn of '79 whilst an American/Nepalese team led by Roskelly was a step ahead of us with a shot in the Spring. Naturally, in the true spirit of mountains and mountaineers we hoped they wouldn't get up; but they did. A fine effort it was too. Hard and direct up the centre of the W face of the N (and highest) summit. You will have read of it in *Mountain* and elsewhere. All good stuff, but it left us in a bit of a quandary. There was little point in repeating their route and all the other probable lines seemed to rise from Tibet. The S summit, however, remained virgin and here 2 obvious lines beckoned; the S ridge, tortuously long and blocked near the end by a huge and vertical looking cliff or the W ridge, not quite so long and a fine looking line. Perhaps we could also bag the traverse between the two summits. Perhaps.

After weeks of speculation we decided that no decision could be made on the poor photographs and scant information at our disposal; we would wait until we saw the thing. Which is what we did. We first saw it clearly from a rope bridge just above Charikot. It looked magnificent and it was easy to understand why for years the locals thought it to be the highest mountain in the world for it rises, from that bridge at any rate, right out of the jungle with no other peaks at hand to compete or compare. An orgy of photography ensued with longer and longer lenses vying for the prizewinning shot; to be sure it was an inspiring sight. As an Ulsterman I was allowed to wax fairly lyrical about it all whilst Guy Neithardt being French Swiss, was permitted some minor agitation. Tim Leach on the other hand had his Yorkshire heritage to restrain him and only allowed that though it looked interesting it was not nearly as exciting as the Caley Boulder which apparently boasts both the hardest and the most exposed climb in all the world. Pete, great man that he is, was still betwixt



16 Gauri Sankar, W ridge of S summit (Photo: P. Boardman)

Kangchenjunga, a marriage and K2 (or was it the other way round) and was heard, so modestly, to say to Pemba Lama, the fifth climber of the team, 'You should see Kangch'. Pemba could only gaze in awe, first at the hill and then at the Great Man.

The W ridge seemed favourite and we decided to press on to a base camp at 4900m which had been used both by the Rope Boy way back in 1964 and by the Americans. A blazed trail led us pleasantly through Dennis's 'thickest jungle in the world' and 10 days after leaving Kathmandu we arrived at Base.

The site was barren, rocky and a shade inhospitable, but what made it even more unsatisfactory was that we could not even see our mountain, nor any other come to that. Pete and Guy seemed to acclimatize immediately—Pete had 'Kangch' to thank

and Guy had spent all summer trotting up and down the Mittellegi. Tim and I suffered; Tim so much so that after a week even his Yorkshire stubbornness had to call for quarter and down he went to the jungle. As he lurched off down the hill we thought we would see no more of him this trip, but we were reckoning without his Guisely Grit.

In the next few days we found our mountain again—and what a beauty she looked. (Not just sexism that 'she'. The S summit is the Gauri bit and she is a goddess.) We sited an advance base at the foot of the W ridge on which, in vague discussion along the way, we had decided to concentrate our efforts. There ensued a week or so of lugging stores from Base to Advance Base. I found it hard work and any strong

ethical feelings I had ever held about the use of porters or Sherpas quickly evaporated. But it was too late (and in any case the others were made of stronger stuff—and Pete had his reputation to think of) for we had long since despatched our 40 porters leaving the 5 of us for the hill and a small team for Base Camp.

At last we had ferried our entire stock of food and kit to Advance Base and remained there ourselves ready for the next stage. There was no science attached to all this—no computing of provisions or rationalizing of gear. It was much simpler than that. We simply took all we had and hoped it would suffice. And a fond hope it may be considered when we could count only a dozen rock pegs, a couple of MOACs and a handful of deadmen between us.

From Advance Base the W ridge looked terrific—and colossal. We were at about 5300m which left roughly 2000m and all spread over a mile of very interesting ground—snow ridges, cornices, faces, buttresses and all sorts. The plan was nothing if not simple: get on to the ridge and keep on it to the top. Guy dismissed a long horizontal looking bit in the middle as a couple of hours of step cutting and before the sun set that evening we as good as had it in the bag. All that remained was the climb. The next day brought great excitement; new ground. Gaining the ridge proper turned out not to be absolutely straightforward and it took a full day and several mild contretemps to establish the best way. In fact we disagreed on this right to the finish and it was not unusual to see us set out together for the Ridge, split after a hundred yards, only to rejoin on the Ridge itself. Nor was it rare for us to do the same on the daily return trip.

Our tactics, democratically selected by Pete, were euphemistically dubbed 'modified alpine'. This is a useful expression which embraces a wide range of ethical weaknesses in an ever-degenerating spiral towards traditional Himalayan strategies. We opted for fixing ropes as we went on all the difficult bits (this transpired to be the entire length of the Ridge), abseiling back to camp at night, jumaring to the previous high point the next day and pushing on for as many days in this fashion as was necessary to exhaust our 17 fixed ropes. Then find a camp site, lift and shift the gear, again over as many days as it took until we had established the higher camp. Next recover all the fixed rope, leaving bright orange abseil loops where we could for the eventual retreat and finally repeating the performance from the new camp—until we got to the top or ran out of food, energy or enthusiasm, whichever came first. In the event they all arrived in exactly the reverse order!

The climbing was constantly interesting, often exciting and sometimes quite tricky. At last 3 or 4 pitches of Scottish 3 led to a point where we had no more rope to fix. It was an unlikely looking campsite but Pete decreed it, a mite traditionally, 'Camp I', and Guy with Gallic flair, 'Nid d'Aigle'. It was short on space, long on exposure and boasted what must be one of the world's most precipitous lavatories.

The load carrying followed. A long jumar from Advance Base to the 'Nid D'Aigle'—collapse and gratefully shed the contents of rucksack—and occasionally stomach too—and abseil home. Even Pete was seen to puff a bit while Guy's 'Nom de Dieus' increased in frequency and volume, power and range! Then just as we were about to take up the ropes for the next stage who should heave over the horizon but Tim, half bent double under an enormous sack and eyes set fast on the summit. I barely managed to stop him; but when I did he accepted an invitation to join the team. He was a wee bit scornful of our pedestrian tactics and would, I suspect, have much preferred a bolder approach, taking in every obstacle direct and only stopping for breath, and then briefly on the summit before glissading back to the Caley Boulder.





17 Peter Boardman on the Wridge (Photo: T. Leach)

18 The ridge between Camps 2 and 3 (This and next photo: J. Barry)

We all welcomed Tim's arrival but none more than I. You see I had been responsible for 'organizing'—I use the word in its loosest possible form—the food. Now, only a third of the way up the route, it was looking distinctly sparse and Tim's unexpected arrival brought me a perfect excuse of an extra mouth to feed. I hoped the others wouldn't notice that he hardly ate at all.

Domestic life at the Nid d'Aigle was a bit fraught. Three were squeezed into one tiny tent whilst the 2 in the other cooked for all 5 and did a sort of meals-on-wheels around the campsite. Moreover, Guy, being Swiss, could not entirely divest himself of the trappings of civilisation and insisted on clean cutlery, pristine pots and *cordon bleu* cooking. All of which was asking too much. In the end he pronounced us 'animals' which seemed to make us all feel happier and we soldiered on—a team once more.

With an expansive wave of the hand Pete indicated the next campsite some 450m above at Pt 6000 metres (actually Point 6037) and atop an improbable looking ice-cream cone. By now we knew better than to argue. The standard reply began 'On Kangch'—and in any case he was always right.

Off we went and lots more of the same. A few hard rock steps fell to Tim's Caley cavort, the ridges to Guy's Gallic gyrations, the plods to Pete and the rest, whatever that was, to me. Pt 6000, as we prosaically referred to it, was reached after some pleasantly exciting climbing up steep exposed snow slopes and sharp, equally exposed ridges. The last few hundred feet of fixed ropes were precarious but they survived the days of load ferrying that followed. Two small platforms, each no longer



19 Looking back to Fawlty Towers and Pt 6000

than the groundsheet, were eventually chopped in the  $45^{\circ}$  slope immediately under Pt 6000 and we braced ourselves for the next hurdle.

Looking along the ridge from our new camp Guy's 'few hours of step cutting' looked as if it might consume rather more of our time. Guy was still contemptuous—I, rather sceptical. The next day, a rare stormy one, Guy and I were put to the ridge while Pemba, Pete and Tim ferried some last few stores and brought up the remaining fixed rope. In the sunshine the day before, Guy's optimism had carried the day. Today shrouded in cloud and windy and cold my scepticism spelt defeat. Together we crawled out 2 cringing rope lengths before retreating to the tent with our tails very firmly between our legs—and mine threatening to stay there. It was my worst performance on any route anywhere. True I had seen little evidence of Guy's promised prowess at the step cutting but it was my own abject defeatism that wrankled then, and still does. Pete, arriving late from his toil, was less than pleased though he took it all with his usual stoicism.

The following day I was given the sack from the front and sent off on my own to bring up the remaining 3 or 4 fixed ropes. It was sunny again and I enjoyed the experience of being absolutely alone on this big mountain. About midday I regained the tents and looked along the ridge. There was no one to be seen and assuming that Tim had galloped along it I concluded that he may need rope and so I set off with the few that I had recovered. I found them about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  pitches beyond our previous 'high' point and having a hard time of it. Tim was easily the best technical climber in our team but seemingly this was no place for technique. I dumped the rope and sat to watch-there being nothing else to do. My very presence-I suppose I looked smug—seemed to provoke Pete who seized his axe and the lead and set off up the next section whirling his axe like a dervish and demolishing cornices with 2-handed claymore blows, the repercussions of which we felt shuddering down the ridge toward us. He covered 150ft in about 1½ minutes and left behind an M1-like footpath along which you could have wheeled your grandmother. As a gesture it was cataclysmic, as a demonstration galvanitic, as a piece of climbing artless-but it did the job. Unfortunately, he was now exhausted and flaked out 'a cheval' across the ridge. I ambled up the footpath he had left and led on emulating the Great Man's 'piolet bludgeon'. It worked. A couple of pitches later and with honour restored we went happily back to Pt 6000 with the key to the route in our pocket. The sunset was unforgettable.

The next camp site, and the end of the horizontal section of the ridge before it steepened considerably, was the most precarious thus far. We were perched beside a small rock tower so we christened the place 'Fawlty Towers'. One night Tim vomited into his sleeping bag and then all over Guy who broke the world 'Nom de Dieu', 'Bordell de Merde' record. The offending bag was put out to air at dawn (though not Tim—sadly, according to Guy). Shortly after a slithering sound, the sort nylon makes on snow, reminded Tim of where we were. Too late. Tim's bag was on its way to Tibet where it may now be keeping some surprised peasant cosy. After that Tim spent some cool nights huddled between Pete and me but never complaining—not that it would have done him much good if he had.

Back in the lead again Pete and I were fixing the final buttress—or at least we hoped it was. It was getting late in the year and some strong gusts were beginning to catch us on the ridge. I was feeling great, my earlier scepticism having vanished and with the end in sight a new optimism and energy emerged. On about my 4th pitch of the day a particularly fierce gust caught me and I had to cling hard to either side of the ridge with hands and feet to stay on. It lasted only a few seconds and then subsided

into comparative calm. Higher up I ran out of climbing rope but on seeing a friendly looking buttress 50ft ahead and easy ground in between, I untied from the climbing rope and called to Pete that I was continuing on the rope we were fixing which for some reason was about 50ft longer. It was a non-stretch 8mm affair. I quickly reached the rock and placed a good peg—so good that I stood back to admire it just as another gust whirled in, stronger than the last and with a hellish scraich I'll not forget for a while. Off I came and in, what seems upon reflection, slow motion, down, down, down I tumbled. The slope was steep, 60° or so, and I was soon hopelessly out of control with little prospect of stopping before the glacier some 1500m away. Rather like your toast, which falls buttered side first. I fell into Tibet and the shade. I was puzzled—I felt no fear. Fear it seems is generated by the mind to fuel a life saving effort. Here it was clear that no effort under the sun could help. There was no panic. either, perhaps because there was no fear. My thoughts were clear and, for once, rational. The rope would break. I was sure of that for it was not designed for shock loading. (When we collected them from the factory the old lady who had made them warned us maternally. 'Now don't you go falling on these'.) No, my life did not flash before my eyes in an instant but I did experience some deeply personal thoughts and then, realising that my head was taking a battering, I hoped that I might be lucky enough to be unconscious before much longer. This was it. Then I stopped. Pete had held and the rope hadn't broken. He said later that he realised that if he stopped the fall too quickly the load was likely to break the rope so he had let some run through his hands, burning clean through two pairs of gloves in the process. It was clear thinking and I hope I remembered to thank him for it.

I had fallen 200ft and now hung, fortunately, in a full body harness, some way below the ridge feeling cold, alone and rather sorry for myself. Happily I had a jumar from the morning's ascent of the fixed ropes and using my one good arm and leg (the left arm and leg refused to work) I regained the ridge and Pete. I am still ashamed to admit it, but I had a 30 second sob and then remembered the story of Shipton and Tilman so forgetting themselves as to shake hands and managed to pull myself together. The Great Man was wonderfully calm. He arranged abseils and together we made our way to 'Fawlty Towers' from where the others had started up to help on hearing the commotion. Abseiling was relatively simple once I had the descendeur clipped in—a struggle with one good hand and teeth. In fact the steeper the ground the better since gravity did all the work and an arm and a leg were enough to bounce me off the rock from time to time.

Back at 'Fawlty Towers' a general retreat seemed prudent but as I gradually recovered from the concussion I had sustained things looked better. After a discussion we agreed to leave the final decision to the morrow. Sure enough I felt better. Guy, suddenly a learned medical man, pronounced the leg and arm but bruised. The pain told me more, but in my head, as the Americans say, I felt fine.

We voted to continue and they did. And to the top too. But not before another of those ridges and some hard mixed pitches on which Tim's mighty talent was brought to bear. Not bad for a man we had written off a month before as a non-acclimatizer. While I lay in my tent munching pain killers and little else, for we had run out of food that day, the others, Pemba, Pete, Guy and Tim, pressed on to the summit. They had hoped to be up and down in the same day. Dusk, however, caught them after the difficulties were over and with but a few hundred feet of snow plodding remaining, they bivouaced. Having travelled light for speed it was a spartan experience. Pete says, 'It's cold at 7000 metres in late October with no gear'.

At 'Fawlty Towers' I worried. They should have been back and they were not. I

should be able to see them and I could not. All through the night while they shivered I lay snug in 2 bags and reasoned my way in and out of all sorts of possibilities. Still no sign of them at dawn, nor all through the day. At last I wrote a note to explain what I intended to do and determined to set off down at first light the next day. How I was going to accomplish the descent with what was later diagnosed as a badly broken wrist and a duff knee I neither cared nor dared to think upon.

Then I saw them and tired, but well in control, they abseiled into 'Fawlty Towers' at about 5pm. I was never happier to see anyone. Nor they, I suspect. During the inquest that inevitably followed, it transpired that I had not been able to see them because they followed the gentlest possible final slope to the summit and this was behind a ridge and in dead ground to me. Anyway it mattered no longer. All we had to do now was get down.

There is not much to tell of this—and still less that I care to remember. We were hungry; there was no food; it took 2 days and it hurt very badly. At one stage I said that I envied them having the thought of the summit to succour them, to which Pete replied that being alive wasn't such a bad thing to be thankful for—and right he was.

Some mountain. Some adventure. Big and beautiful enough for us at the time and there's the N-S summit ridge still waiting too, should you ever feel inclined.

#### Memories 3

### Present moments

#### W. H. Murray

Although bred in Scotland, I was unaware of mountains until I was out of my teens, except as a backdrop to the lively foreground. My change of focus came with the suddenness so often told of conversions in faith. By happy chance I overheard two men discuss a traverse of An Teallach—clouds lifting off a high ridge, sun-shafts lighting a glen below—and my attention was gripped. Here was a wildland of the skies, to me unknown, yet unlike the moon immediately accessible.

I knew no one who climbed mountains. So early in April I went alone to my nearest, the Cobbler at Arrochar. I had thought that cloudless day perfect for the job, not reckoning on hard snow plating the upper hillsides. Unaware as yet of a need for boots and axe, I learned the bad way. The lesson if salutary was not the important one of the day. That came at the rocky summit. I looked across hill-ranges, sparkling white or shadowed, receding to the rim of an arctic plateau. It looked as if it must stretch on for ever. I had never dreamt that my own country held wildland so vast. I recognized on the instant that every peak and glen of it had to be known.

A man around twenty enjoys a god-like assumption of immortality. But this day I saw with a pang of dismay that life is short and the hill-ranges long. There was no time to be lost.

My instant reaction proved constant—to know and explore mountains. A second need, to climb rock and ice, grew naturally out of the first a year later. But I felt most diffident about trying to join a club. People I had met on the hills assured me that