

## Langtang Lirung South Face 1980

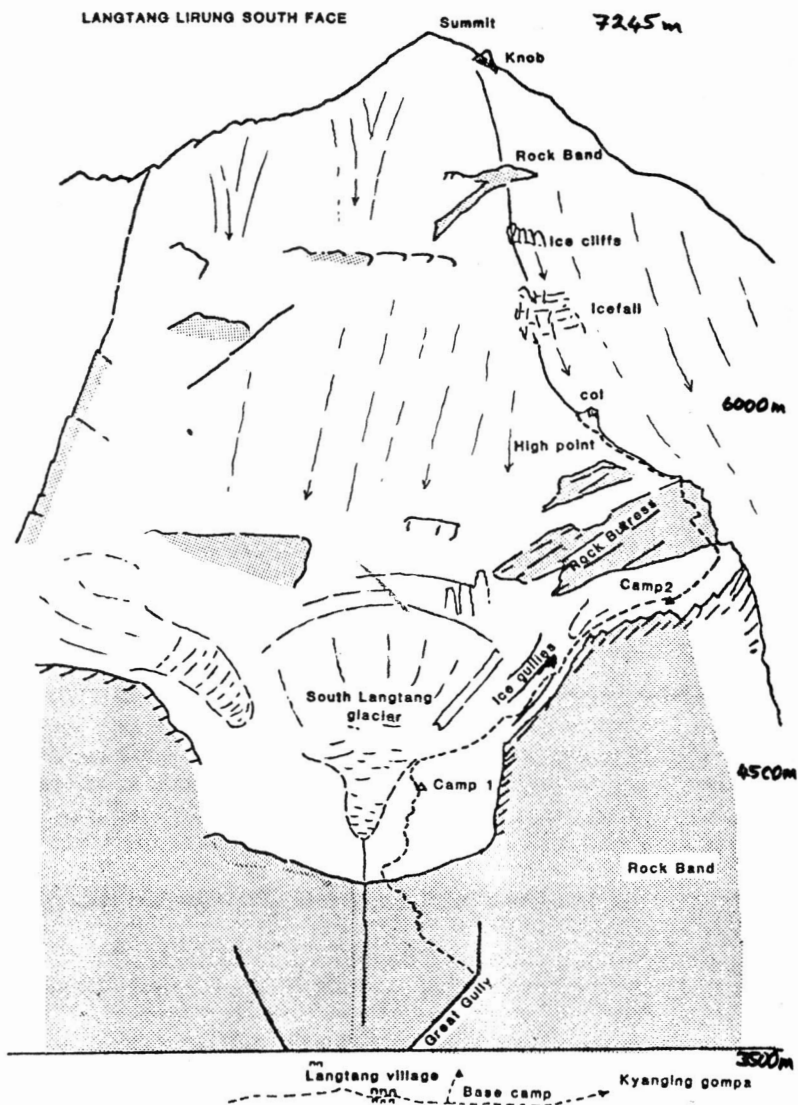
**Mike Searle**

They say that once you have climbed in the Himalaya, like the desert you'll keep coming back. The first time I saw the great white mountains was between swaying bodies clutching on to the roof of a wildly careering Indian bus approaching Mandi at the entrance of the Kulu gorge. A week later 2 of us were trekking up to our base camp on the Tos glacier with 5 ponies and food for 6 weeks. Three mates joined us after a week and we had a riot of a holiday climbing 11 peaks between 5500m and 6400m, three of which were first ascents and 7 new routes. The weather was perfect, the granite solid, the ice hard and there were miles and miles of untrodden Himalayan mountains to hallucinate and even climb over. It was all so pleasant and satisfying that we decided to return.

My particular fantasy was the unclimbed S face of Langtang Lirung in central Nepal, a magnificent 7238m mountain as spectacular as any of the famous Khumbu giants. The mountain had first been climbed in 1978, after 8 previous attempts by the Japanese via the dangerous Lirung glacier route and the E ridge. The 3300m S face, one of the largest faces in the Himalaya, was still unclimbed. The troops were rallied up from the Culag bar in Lochinver to the 'Bar Nash' in Chamonix. Nick Groves and Mike Stead were on our first Kulu trip, and we were joined by Neil Harding-Roberts, a doctor Neil Mackenzie and John Marjot. Finally I asked Shaun Parent, a Canadian friend, along. Peak fees were paid, sponsors in the form of the BMC and the MEF found, tickets bought and there was the semblance of an expedition.

I may have had a premonition about what was in store when I boarded Ariana Afghan Air for the 10 hour trip to Kabul and Delhi. It turned out to be a three and a half day trip via Istanbul, Tehran and Karachi (a little off route but nowhere else would take us as Kabul was under a blizzard), and finally a forced landing at Delhi. I had a month in Nepal before our expedition was to meet up, so I made a rapid trek up to Everest Base Camp to get fit and acclimatised.

Back in Kathmandu, our expedition finally fell together. We were a typical shoestring British expedition which could fit easily into three overloaded rickshaws. Our one Canadian member arrived fresh from the fleshpots of Bangkok in 3 more overloaded rickshaws all of his own, much to our amazement. We had agreed to climb this thing Alpine style, had we not? We promptly gave away one rickshaw load of gear to our



liaison officer and assured him that his new boots, duvet and track suit would keep him adequately warm at our base camp.

One of our biggest finds in Kathmandu was Purna's secondhand gear shop. Purna is a Godfather figure of the Kathmandu Sherpas and runs a sort of 'fell-off-the-back-of-a-yak' shop where he proudly shows off his framed letters of recommendation from Chris Bonington and Prince Charles. He sells everything from 100m of the best 'ex Doug

Scott' rope to 'ex Womens Annapurna Expedition' tent, and throws in generous loans of pots and pans to clinch any deal. He also buys back any gear after the party's over at somewhat reduced rates. The Godfather is also useful in other ways. Our trekking permits needed 3 days to get an official stamp but hours before departure the good man exits from a Ministry back door clutching our precious documents, and saves the day.

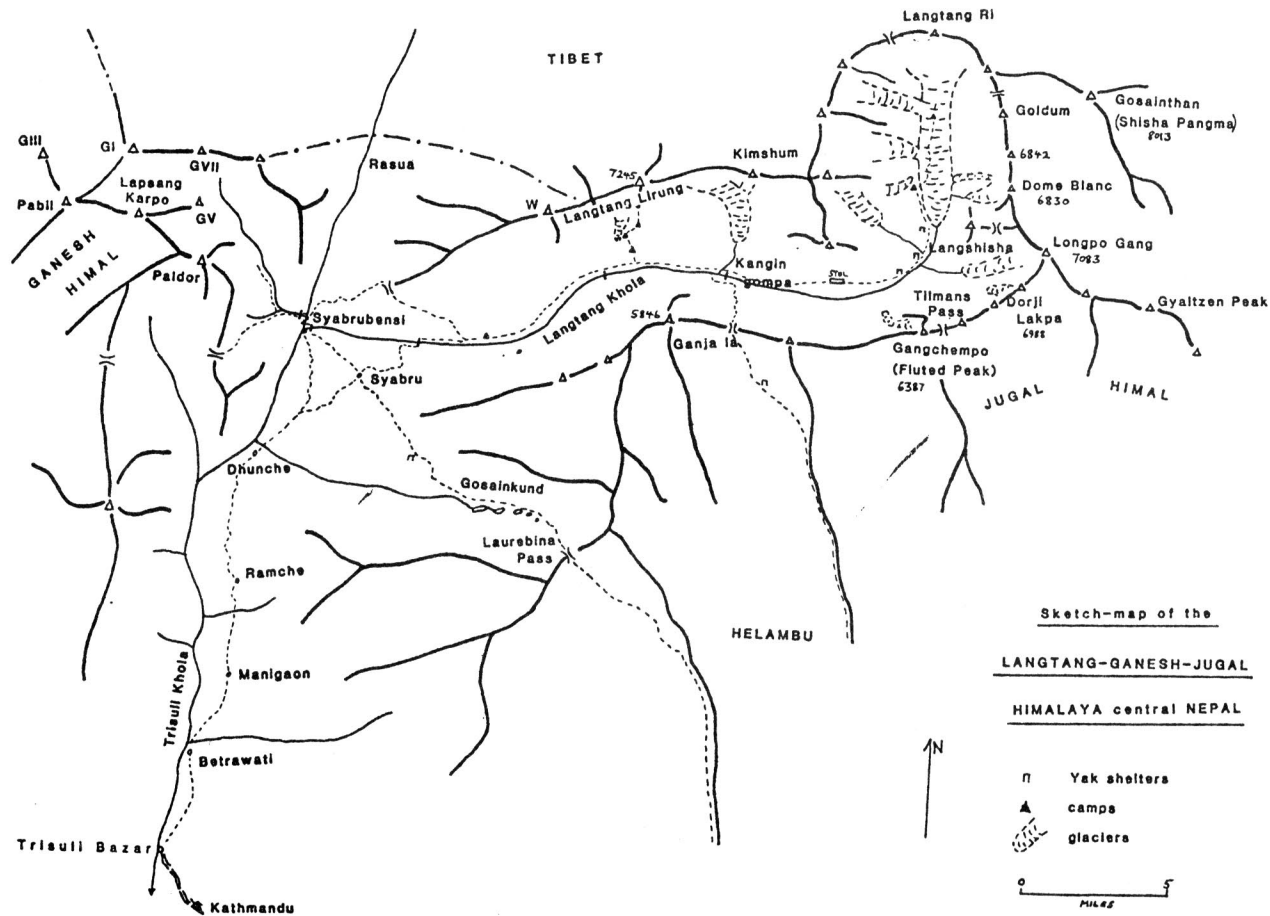
All is packed and ready to go as we start off, with the Godfather's blessing, to meet our mountain. Five hours and four breakdowns later, our dilapidated bus reaches the road-end at Trisuli Bazar. Sarki Tsering, our tireless and efficient Sherpa Sirdar, instantly collars 25 hefty-looking porters, 2 of them Tamang women, packs far too much gear onto their backs, and points them uphill. These porters are the real unsung heroes of any Himalayan expedition—most would not get off the ground without them.

On the walk-in we stay in a variety of chai shops and doss-houses or sleep out. The trekking is fascinating; we see thundering rivers, forests full of monkeys and multi-coloured sunbirds, quaint villages with children playfully rubbing dung into each other's faces, and magnificent lammergeiers soaring around lofty snow-clad mountains. We also pass police check-posts where one of us suddenly discovers his trekking permit is for Annapurna Sanctuary not the Langtang Valley. An hour's hacking through jungle around the village and the redoubtable explorer joins us again . . . and again, and again around a further 2 check-posts.

The Lirung is looking awesomely big at this stage. Its 2 summits lie 6km apart and cornices from the connecting ridge take a full 4 minutes to avalanche the 3300m S face. Sipping chai at Tiffin and squinting up through binoculars, we nervously pick out a line that does not appear to be swept by avalanche tracks and decide that this is the route that fate has chosen for us to climb. Base Camp is established 275m from Langtang village and climbing starts directly above on the impressive rock walls that loom overhead.

While our Nepali friends guard Base Camp, we climb—450m of rock, scrambling, climbing, sac-hauling. Another 450m of trudging up glacial moraine, dodging bouncing cannon-balls unleashed from melting ice above, and Camp 1 is established. We had originally hoped to climb the Lirung Alpine style, but the sheer size of the task (climbing starts at 3350m) and logistical problems of carrying enough food and gear for 8 to 10 days' climbing make us change plans. Our intention had then been to establish 2 or 3 camps stocked with food and to climb the top 1200-1500m Alpine style. This would have involved possibly 5 days climbing from a camp 3 at about 5800m and back to the valley assuming continuously good weather.

Above Camp 1 an intricate system of snow gullies and ice cliffs leads up to a spectacular position for Camp 2—we can survey the whole S face and see at first hand the Herculean avalanches falling all around us.



Sketch-map of the  
**LANGTANG-GANESH-JUGAL**  
 HIMALAYA central NEPAL

- n Yak shelters
- ▲ camps
- Glaciers

Sarki has done a couple of carries up to Camp 1 with us but feels unsure on ice and declines to go up to 2. The weather has never been good but now deteriorates finally. Every day it snows, and our 'ex-Doug Scott' fixed rope is buried under 2 inches of ice. Electric storms appear and hang around the mountain. It is difficult to sleep at 6000m with thunderbolts clapping all night, and occasional flashes of darkness between the lightning, and temperatures of  $-30^{\circ}$ , especially when some clown has spent two days lugging loads of food up only to take the stove pressuriser down by mistake, making hot drinks or food a delirious dream. Two of our 'fell-off-the-back-of-a-yak' oriental hoop tents have collapsed, one buried under 2 feet of overnight snow, the other sailing over Tibet in shreds at 6000m.

Another pair come up to push the route out. Five pitches of airy, exposed and technical rock climbing above give fine views of Base Camp 1800m below us and spectacular views of a wild array of peaks including Gangchempo, Longpo Gang and Dorje Lakpa to the east. Above the rock buttress we can peer up at the upper 1000m of our route as it unfurls in icy waves through the mist. It is at this point that one suddenly wonders what in Hell's name one is doing up here anyway. Express train avalanches are pouring down the S face, seracs crumbling and crevasses yawning uninvitingly.

Thunder and lightning herald the usual afternoon storm and buzzing iceaxe, hammer and front-points are all that lie between you and your Maker. An electric retreat is called for. Our 2 heroes stumble back into Camp 2 shedding steel weapons and with a wild look in their eyes. When the evening brew of dhal-bhat is scraped off the blackened pressure cooker and dished up with the last 8 day old chapatti, the talk comes around to that familiar subject—tropical beaches I have known.

Most of our team had reached the high point at the top of the rock buttress above Camp 2 and none of us were particularly keen to dodge the avalanches on the ice slopes above. The ridge was climbable but the objective dangers were considered too great. We were all satisfied though—we had enjoyed good climbing below and everyone had got along well enough. The monotonous regularity of the afternoon snow storms and objective dangers of avalanche were our reasons for failure.

The 3rd of May was evacuation day. Mike, Nick, John and I set off from Camp 2 down the snow gully, sinking knee-deep in the soft new snow. The abseil rope was again iced in and I abseiled down on the climbing ropes, jumaring back up and chipping the ice away carefully as I ascended. By contrast, the melting conditions lower down the mountain had completely altered the look of the glacier. We left some gear and a tent at Camp 1 and continued on down to Base. The next day Sarki, Neil and Shaun went up to Camp 1 to recover the gear, and the expedition was finally over. Back in Kathmandu the pleasant round of soporific euphoria followed, in the pie-shops of Freak Street, over a glass of chang in the Tibetan refugee shacks, and guzzling mo-mos and ice-cream at K.C's.