'Over the years four women had died while attempting to climb Kangchenjunga and it made me appreciate all the more how lucky I was to make the first female ascent and return safely.'

Ginette Harrison's ascent of Kangchenjunga in 1998 illustrated the growing interest and ambition of women mountaineers. She describes her historic ascent for the first time in this 104th volume of the *Alpine Journal*.

Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke prove that mountain exploration is far from over with an account of their expeditions in a remote corner of Tibet, and Doug Scott recalls his latest first ascent, with Roger Mear, of the South Pillar on Drohmo in NE Nepal.

The richness of the mountaineering world is revealed in articles on the Yeti by Michael Ward and John Jackson, on Morocco by Dennis Gray and on South Africa by Stephen Venables.

Sue Harper gives a fascinating insight into the controversy that is making France rethink one of its most glorious climbing achievements: the ascent of Annapurna.

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**Jacket photograph:**

*Front View from the top of the Corridor on Sepu Kangri with Lhallum Tamcho in the background.*

(Chris Bonington)
It was difficult to imagine that there could be a major unclimbed, heavily glaciated snow peak within miles of us. The terrain was so gentle, with the close-cropped grassy slopes stretching up to rounded rolling summits, that the landscape was more like Lakeland than what we had expected to find in eastern Tibet’s Nyenchen Tanglha. But suddenly, as we came round a bend in the valley, laid out before us was a towering mountain range with sprawling glaciers, serac walls and rocky ridges, topped, at 6950m, by Sepu Kangri. It was not picture-book beauty, an Ama Dablam or Matterhorn, but it was undoubtedly formidable – a big complex massif which commanded respect.

Another hour’s walk brought us to the banks of a lake immediately below our objective. According to the GPS we were 93.8°E, 30.9°N at a height of 4700m, and to our surprise there was a house just beside the lake. It was an idyllic spot. In the next couple of days we learned that this was a holy mountain, that its full Tibetan name was Sepu Kunglha Karpo, which means the White Snow God, and its cluster of subsidiary summits were named after the family and court of the White Snow God. It all seemed very auspicious.

I had first seen Sepu Kangri in 1982 from the windows of the plane flying us from Chengdu to Lhasa on our way to the NE Ridge of Everest. We had passed over a huge range of mountains and, to the north, one peak in particular dominated everything around it. In 1989 I had tried to reach this area with my regular climbing partner Jim Fotheringham, but our permission was cancelled at the last minute. A few more years went by and in August 1996 I set out with Charles Clarke, who had been with me on several expeditions dating back to Everest South West Face in 1975 and in 1982, to try to find this mountain.

It was one of the best trips I have ever had. We only went above the snow-line twice, did no climbing, yet enjoyed a style of mountain exploration that Shipton and Tilman, or some of the early Tibetan explorers, must have known. The one major difference was that we were transported swiftly in a robust Jinbei pick-up truck from Lhasa to within three days’ walk of our objective. We were, however, the first foreigners ever to approach the Sepu Kangri massif. Having had a good look at the northern approaches we drove round to its southern side and had a hectic two-day walk and ride on Tibetan ponies to catch a glimpse of the dramatic peaks guarding the southern aspect of the mountain.
In the spring of 1997 we mounted our first attempt on Sepu Kangri, tackling it from the north. The team numbered seven, of whom four - myself, Jim Fotheringham, John Porter and Jim Lowther - were going to attempt the mountain. It took us three days’ motoring from Lhasa to reach the roadhead on a tributary of the Salween River at the village of Khinda and another three days to walk to the site of base camp at the south end of Sam Tso Taring, the sacred lake below our mountain. We established base camp on 30 April. The lake was frozen solid and although there wasn't much snow on the ground the grass was still burnt brown by the bitter winds and cold of the Tibetan winter.

Note: The above map of Sepu Kangri and the one of Eastern Nyenchen Tanglha on page 28 are published with the kind permission of Weidenfeld & Nicolson. They were drawn by John Gilkes from drafts by Graham Little, Victor Saunders and Charles Clarke.
10. Chris Bonington accepting from the hermit a holy flag to take to the summit of Sepu Kangri. *(Chris Bonington)* (p23)

11. Lhallum Tamcho at sunset from Camp 2 on Sepu Kangri. *(Chris Bonington)*
On our recce the previous year I had picked out a possible line up the north ridge of Seamo Uylmitok, the Turquoise Flower, a subsidiary peak on the NW Ridge of Sepu Kangri. Jim Fotheringham preferred an attempt to outflank the peak and approach the mountain from the west. We therefore made a recce of this approach, going up on the afternoon of 4 May to camp on the west edge of the Thong Wuk Glacier and early the next morning climbing the snow slopes above towards the crest of the ridge. It was heavy going, wallowing up thigh deep snow and we very nearly stopped on a moraine about 400m below the crest because visibility was so poor. A slight improvement kept us going and we reached the crest in the early afternoon. Jim Fotheringham, who had broken trail all the way, slumped down in the little niche on the crest of the ridge, disheartened, I think, by the negative reaction of the rest of the team. We got occasional glimpses of serac walls at the end of the ridge through broken cloud. I scrambled along the ridge for about a hundred metres but could not see much more and came back discouraged. We decided to retreat and go for the North Ridge of Seamo Uylmitok, even though we hadn't pushed the recce to its logical conclusion.

After a short rest we laid siege to what we came to call the Frendo Spur. Establishing a camp near its foot on the eastern side of the glacier, we fixed a gully and ramp system to the crest and, on 14 May, set up a camp at 5850m. We then continued to put out fixed rope to the side of the Frendo Spur. There was undoubtedly a significant avalanche risk and the weather throughout was unsettled, with snowfall and wind first thing in the morning and most afternoons. We took turns pushing the route out and on 16 May Jim Lowther and I reached a high point at 6050m. We could see an easy-angled ramp leading across to the col between Seamo Uylmitok and the main summit, and were confident that with another four days of reasonable weather we could make it to the top. It did not work out like that. The weather deteriorated, it got progressively warmer and we had nearly run out of time so we abandoned the attempt.

We returned in the autumn of 1998, Charles Clarke and Elliot Robertson setting out on 5 August, three weeks before the rest of the team, to find a route into the Sepu Kangri massif from the east. It was a particularly heavy monsoon and they were unable to make their approach around the southern aspect of the Nyenchen Tanglha. As a result they were forced to take the northern route through Nakchu and Chamdo and so reached the site of base camp on 30 August, two days after the main climbing party left the UK. They made excellent use of their time, crossing into the Yang Valley, to the west of Sepu Kangri, to get views of that aspect of the mountain before coming down to meet us at Khinda to make arrangements for our walk-in. All the bridges had been swept away and we were warned by the village leader that no yaks or horses were available because of the harvest.

We finally got away from the roadhead on 10 September, having hauled all the expedition baggage across the river on a wire pulley, and established
base camp on 13 September, by which time the weather seemed to have settled. Our four-man climbing team included Graham Little, Scott Muir, Victor Saunders and myself and we also had with us a media team planning to film a fly-on-the-wall documentary of the expedition and send news reports back to ITN by satellite. We had taken satellite communications the previous year and run a web site from base camp and were planning to do the same in 1998. All of us had had mixed feelings about such instant communication, but the trip had been so expensive that sponsorship was essential and that meant television coverage. A web site is also attractive to sponsors. We ended up enjoying the satellite link, both as a way of keeping in contact with home and also as a means of communication over which we had full creative control. Everyone took a turn at supplying stories and pictures for our web site.

I was climbing with Victor and we both wanted to have a further look at 'Fotheringham's Ridge and Corridor' as a possible outflanking route. While Graham and Scott made an unsuccessful attempt on Chomo Mangyal, the Wife of Sepu, Victor and I invited Elliot to join us on a recce. From a camp on the moraine just below the ridge, we reached the crest on 20 September. It was a perfect day and we could see a straightforward, relatively safe route up into the Western Cwm of Sepu Kangri and on to the summit. At the same time Graham and Scott had discovered that snow conditions on steep ground were particularly dangerous, a strong disincentive against attempting the Frendo Spur.

After a rest we all set out on our first attempt, Victor and I inviting Elliot to join us. The route through the seracs and crevasses of the Corridor proved fairly straightforward and we camped at the edge of the Western Cwm at a height of 6150m. The Western Cwm was an easy walk and we decided to tackle the West Ridge of the final summit mass, since the NW Ridge leading down to Seamo Uylmitok showed signs of windslab avalanche. That night we camped at 6530m. We were within striking distance of the summit and needed just one more fine morning to make a successful bid but once again we were out of luck. It started snowing that afternoon and kept on for the next three days and we retreated on the second day.

A week later we returned to the fray, but discovered that over a metre of snow had fallen and that the going was difficult and slow. We only had three pairs of snow shoes between us and, as I was going slower than the others, we decided that Elliot and I should drop back to enable the other three to make a final attempt for the summit. They set out on 10 October from our second camp. It was a fine clear dawn. Graham was worried about the amount of snow and consequent risk of avalanche and therefore opted to turn back just short of our original top camp. Once on his own, his eyes were drawn to the back of Seamo Uylmitok, which beckoned from the other side of the Western Cwm and he decided to snatch it before going down. It provided a straightforward climb.

In the meantime Scott and Victor reached the site of Camp 3 and since it was still early and the weather was clear, they carried on up the mountain.
9. Base Camp at Sepu Kangri, reflected in the waters of Sam Tso Taring. (Chris Bonington) (p23)
The quality of the snow improved dramatically and they made good progress over a large bergschurnd and up to the crest of the final summit ridge, reaching a height of 6830m, just 150m below and about a quarter of a mile from the top. But now the weather rolled in. Visibility was reduced to a few metres and the wind was savage. On our radio call we had just given them an up-to-date forecast from the Met Office in England that the following morning was going to be fine. In view of this they decided to return to Camp 3, hoping to make it to the summit early next day. Once again we were out of luck. The weather never recovered and after two nights they descended to base camp.

By then we had run out of time and, so close to success, we were forced to give up. At least we had discovered a reasonable route to the summit. There is a wealth of other climbs to be had in this fascinating area, both on the north and southern sides of the mountain. The site of base camp is particularly attractive and our neighbours became good friends. It is an area I would strongly recommend to anyone attracted to exploratory climbing.

**Summary**

**Objective** To explore the area and make the first ascent of Sepu Kangri (Sepu Kunglha Karpo) (6950m), 93.8°E, 30.9°N in the eastern Nyenchen Tanglha in central Tibet.

**1996 Recce** Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke made a recce of the northern and southern approaches of the Sepu Kangri massif in August.

**1997 Expedition** Chris Bonington, Charles Clarke, Jim Curran, Jim Fotheringham, Jim Lowther, John Porter and Duncan Sperry attempted the mountain from the north reaching a height of 6150m on 16 May.

**1998 Expedition** Chris Bonington (leader), Charles Clarke, Graham Little, Scott Muir, Elliot Robertson and Victor Saunders. Film Team: Martin Belderson, Jim Curran, Greig Cubitt.

Peaks climbed: Thaga Ri (5930m), first ascent by Graham Little and Scott Muir on 22 September. Amchhi Inje-ne (5850m), first ascent by Charles Clarke and Victor Saunders on 23 September. Seamo Uylmitok – The Turquoise Flower – first ascent by Graham Little on 10 October. West Shoulder of Sepu Kangri (6830m) first ascent by Scott Muir and Victor Saunders on 10 October.
Eastern Nyenchen Tangilha

Motor road
Journeys on foot