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& BRUCE NORMAND

First Ascents in West Nepal



The east face of Til Kang above base camp in the Takphu Himal in far north-western Nepal on the border with Tibet. (*Ed Douglas*)

The Takphu Himal, *writes Julian Attwood*, is a delightful knot of 6,000m peaks in Nepal's extreme far west just 15km south of Gurla Mandhata (7694m), which towers over holy Manasarovar in Tibet. The holy mountain Kailas, sacred to Buddhists, Hindus and followers of Bon just a little further north. My companions on this journey were Nick Colton, deputy CEO of the British Mountaineering Council, Christof Nettekoven from Germany, a mountain explorer and chronicler, writer and editor Ed Douglas, of this parish, and last, but by no means least, the Scottish physicist and climber Bruce Normand. Bruce has possibly made more first ascents of 6,000m peaks than anyone alive and after this post-monsoon period on Takphu and beyond that is even more likely to be true.

Takphu is best approached via the Nyalu La (5001m), which we reached in late September after four days walking from Simikot with a mule train. It would have been three except for the disappearance of our mules in the Chungsa Khola. Until mules have crossed a threshold like the Nyalu La, their thoughts are of home. Our mule drivers gave chase and eventually found 14 of the 16 animals, meaning the others would carry a but more weight, no doubt unhappy with the shirkers who bolted.

From Nyalu La, our route dropped into the Talun valley, at the top end of the fabled Limi valley with its ancient monastery at Halji, founded in the 11th century by Rinchen Zangpo, and another at Til. Our plan was to



The Karnali river, flowing south-east through Humla during the approach.
(*Ed Douglas*)

approach Takphu via the plateau above the Limi valley, rather than from Til or Halji down below. Previous expeditions in this area in 2008 and 2016 had been prevented by villagers from entering the mountains or fined on their return. Our route thus took us past the grazing grounds of Traktse and up onto plateau proper. Wild ass and Tibetan antelope were seen. On 6 October, some 100km from Simikot, we established base camp at 4,982m in front of a glacial lake near the terminus of the Sakya glacier. Local herders had already abandoned summer grazing and gone down to their villages in the Limi valley.

As detailed in the previous article 'Karnali Country', the frontier at Takphu is oriented north-south, and this group of peaks is part of the longer Nalakankar range that runs up to the Lapche La in the north and down to the township of Hilsa on the Karnali river in the south. Hilsa has become the main entry point for pilgrims, mostly Indians, to Kailas, following the earthquake that severed the Friendship Highway. For now, the only way to Kailas was via air to Simikot and then, since most Hindu pilgrims from India weren't about to walk five days to Hilsa, being ferried in a fleet of helicopters to the border.

Our arrival at base was greeted with snow and some wind. I had a filthy hacking cough that never left me on this trip. Straight in front of base camp was unclimbed Takphu Himal (6395m) on the right and Til Kang (6369m), for which we had a climbing permit, on the left. It seemed there was no safe way onto Til Kang from this side: a band of seracs threatened the whole of the east side above the true left bank of the Sakya glacier and the east ridge wasn't accessible. It looked like this peak needed to be tackled from



The fluted bulk of Saipal (7013m) on the south side of the Karnali, trekking north towards the Limi valley. (*Ed Douglas*)

the unseen Tibetan side, starting from a glacial basin we knew to exist there.

As for Takphu Himal, that could be accessed via the Sakya glacier and turning right into what I called the Takphu North glacier. This had been ascended twice before, first by the Japanese in 2016 and a month later by a German team. Their activities are detailed in the earlier article.

On 8 October, Bruce, Ed, and Christoph did a recce up the Takphu North glacier, scouting a route up Takphu Himal from a col linking that to another mountain we called P2 (6521m), a high peak within Tibet; three of the five peaks within this group were unnamed, hence the 'P' tags in the process Bruce made the second ascent of the previously climbed 6153m.

The weather was not at all the settled affair you might expect after the monsoon, with the mainly westerly airstream punctuated with a less settled south-westerly flow. It also was abnormally cold. While the others were on the Takphu North glacier, Nick and I, with me coughing and spluttering, headed north to recce a remote pair of peaks (see p69) and dump a tent and gear at about 5,400m by a small moraine lake. After a day back at base camp, Bruce, Ed, and Christoph set off back up the Takphu North glacier on 10 October. Meanwhile, Nick and I returned to and occupied our tent by the lake.

The following day was a cloud-scudding affair, cold and blustery, with visibility coming and going; one of those days that's too good to renege on a plan but too cold with the wind chill to have hands out of gloves for more than a moment. Nick and I had a fairly ruthless trudge of a climb, not technical at all but on one section surmounting some hideous scree and



Bruce Normand at the Nyalu La (5001m) and the start of a more Tibetan plateau landscape. For details of the peaks see top photo on p64. (*Ed Douglas*)

boulders, to get onto the south ridge of 6055m. There was no protection from a continuous south-west wind of perhaps 35 knots. We gained the rounded top in early afternoon and quickly headed down. Nick had slightly frost-nipped toes with his single-layer boots.

The others, meantime, had a hard slog from their tent in soft snow, taking some three hours to ascend 330m to the col at 6,130m below Takphu Himal. This brought them to the easy-angled west ridge, which they ascended in bad visibility. The top was reached about noon, and with no inclination to stay long they descended with some route-finding difficulty into their glacial basin and spent the night there, returning to base next day after a night of heavy snow. Christoph also had some frost damage to some toes.

After a rest day, Ed and Bruce started off for Til Kang on 14 October. The plan was to climb this mountain together and then Bruce might go on and solo what he could of the nearby Tibetan peaks. To reach the Tibetan glacial basin on the far, west side of Til Kang, they crossed the pass at the head of the Sakya glacier went over into the upper Sayogan Khola, keeping as much height as possible and traversing some tricky ground to camp at the Tibet border col at 5,700m. This col separates Til Kang, north of the col, from P3 (6422m) to the south of it. (P3 is the peak once called Nalakankar before the Nepal frontier was moved to the north and the name Nalakankar was applied to another summit on the new border. See p69.)

On 15 October they climbed the west spur of Til Kang, a little to the right of some large seracs. The route was serious rather than technical, mostly 45° to 55°, and they reached the top at 1.30pm. The weather remained cold,



Close-up of the north face of Ar dang, above the Limi valley. (*Ed Douglas*)



Bruce Normand setting out for Takphu, the peak on the right. (*Ed Douglas*)

Right: Ed Douglas and Christof Nettekoven on the summit ridge of Takphu with the elegant 'tuning fork' of P2 (6521m) behind. (*Bruce Normand*)



and now it was Ed's turn to sustain some frost damage. They both spent the night back at the col after a great effort. Ed returned next day to base while Bruce remained alone in the glacial basin, that morning heading south from the col to P1, the highest peak in the range (6613m), some 2km away. He climbed the peak by the north face, with some difficulties toward the top of the route. Views in the western distance included Nanda Devi in the Garhwal. The following day, 17 October, he climbed P1's neighbour P3 (6422m) and on 18 October mopped up the last of this tight group, Takphu Himal's neighbour P2 (6521m) before continuing on Takphu Himal itself, making the second ascent of the peak a week after the first. He then returned to his tent at the col and thence to base camp the following day. We had begun to get concerned but this had been a seriously fine effort by any standard: away for six days and out on a limb, alone in wild, high country. Even then he wasn't done, as Bruce himself now explains.



Sometime in 2015, *Bruce Normand* writes, I ‘discovered’ on Google Earth some unclimbed mid-6,000m border peaks going by the name Takphu Himal, in the furthest north-western corner of Nepal. At the time I was not convinced how attractive they were, given the long and expensive approach from Kathmandu, but I pointed them out to my friend Christof Nettekoven. Christof was excited, particularly that two of the Takphu peaks were on the Nepali Ministry of Tourism’s permitted list and unclimbed: Til Kang (6369m) and Takphu Himal (6395m). It didn’t escape my attention that the Takphu cirque contains three higher summits 6613m, 6521m and 6422m, the first two located on the Tibet side of the border. It hadn’t escaped Christof’s attention that British explorer Julian Freeman-Attwood seemed to have already visited every other valley in far west Nepal. So when when JFA contacted me in spring 2018 about something unrelated, I had to ask him about his autumn plans. Takphu, he said. To avoid disappointment all around,



To reach the west face of Til Kang, a day-long high traverse took Normand and Douglas around the base of the east and south aspects before climbing to a col in the upper right of this picture. (*Ed Douglas*)

I brought both sides together and a truce was arranged: Julian had the best logistics, Christof didn't have many committed people and I would come along as middleman. In the end, Julian's team consisted of old friends Nick Colton and Ed Douglas while Christof and I came alone, so five of us met around the JFA gear stash at the Marshyangdi Hotel in late September.

At our first expedition meeting, Julian's usual cook Prem became severely unwell, an apparent stomach illness that was soon properly diagnosed as a heart attack. With Prem recovering in hospital we were lucky in quickly finding a replacement, the irrepressible Ngima, who joined our sirdar Lhakpa. The three of us travelled by bus to Nepalgunj while the rest of the team flew, and we all left together for the 45-minute flight from Nepalgunj to Simikot. (There's a reason west Nepal is expensive.) In Simikot I was introduced to Rinjin Lama, a kind of all-powerful factotum, baggage-handling contractor, airport facilitator, guesthouse owner, *cuisinier*, warehousing specialist, kerosene and egg-dealer, and muleteer discipline enforcer. He knows everyone. Despite some of our gear barrels arriving two days late, Rinjin soon had everything on the road to catch us up with the minimum delay.

The weather was miserable when we arrived at base camp but next day we woke to crystal-clear views of the east faces of snowy Til Kang and rocky Takphu. Even so, I was on my own for a glacier recce. The two problems that plagued our expedition were coming into focus. One was that



'The cirque of the conquerables': Til Kang's west face is on the right, Takphu centre and P2 left, from the summit of P1. Normand climbed all these peaks, plus P3 out of shot, in four days. (*Bruce Normand*)

Ed had given us all some kind of flu, and while he, Christof and I largely recovered, Julian and Nick were laid low for the entire trip. The other was weather: Nepal post-monsoon usually has cloudless blue skies, mild winds, firm snow and icy glaciers but 2018 saw a cold, moist and unstable airflow throughout October. In the far west this exacerbated the results of a major snowfall that hit the Indian Himalaya in late September, piling up 60-80cm of loose snow on all our glaciers. I slogged around the slopes above base camp discovering this while a cloud wall hung persistently over Til, as it did for the rest of the month.

Christof, Ed and I aimed first for Takphu North, ploughing a deep track up the glacier behind Takphu, up its north side and onward to the summit 6153m. As would become standard, the winds got up during the day and clouds moved in to ensure a less than photogenic finish. However, we did get a decent view of the north-facing slope leading to the col between Takphu and P2 (6521m), which would be our route to Takphu. Two days later we were back with the gear and rations for a night out, re-ploughing our blown-in track to set a camp at 5800m. Next morning was sunny but windy, and since we were in deep shadow and deeper snow for three hours, the resulting deep freeze damaging everyone's toes. Reaching firm snow and weak sun at the col (6150m), we strode up the west ridge with renewed enthusiasm, grabbing photographs of the spectacular backdrop: Til Kang,



P3 (6422m), on left and P1 (6613m) centre, seen from above west face of Til Kang with Normand descending the easier summit slopes. (*Ed Douglas*)

P3 (6422m), P1 (6613m) and the triangular east face of P2. Unfortunately, the wind and cloud closed in, and the summit photos show a grey and miserable moment. We beat a hasty retreat to high camp, where joy at a first summit was tempered by numb-toe concerns and several hours of snowfall. The snow stopped but the wind blew all night, causing us yet another slog to get back to base camp.

Julian and Nick had been to their 6,000m top but realised they were exhausted by illness. Christof's numb toes bothered him enough to stop climbing too. Only Ed and I, who had damaged our toes enough before, were ready to tackle our other targets, which meant hiking around the south side of Til Kang to gain the glacier basin ringed by all five of our peaks. First we crossed the col (5300m) separating the Sakya Khola from the valley south of Til Kang that drops to the village, finding reasonable snow conditions for all but the last 100m before dropping into a deep, rocky basin. At the 5,000m contour we decided to traverse a ledge in a rock buttress, and after some scrambling and a strange rock 'tunnel' were rewarded with a route straight into the glacier basin below our target col. Some snow-covered moraine walls, several hundred metres of lower-angle but crusty snow and a final steep gully at nightfall brought us onto endless flat ground, where we dug our tents into a metre of powder.



Normand on Til Kang's summit with P2 on left, Takphu Himal on right and Gurla Mandhata (7694m) behind.
(*Ed Douglas*)



The Dhaulagiri range seen from 6265m during Normand's second expedition of autumn 2018 to the Rongla of Mugu district. For more details of objectives in this area, see 'Karnali Country', p45.
(*Bruce Normand*)

Next day dawned bright and stayed that way. From Takphu we had seen that the 'walk-up' option on Til was the 45° snow face beside the west ridge. Ed and I traded painful trail-breaking duties to the base of the face, where I took over with some major wallowing. Fortunately the snow became firmer as we climbed, until the upper half was fine firm and we topped out at 1.30pm to enjoy excellent views of Gurla Mandhata to the north, far beyond across the Tibetan plateau to the northeast, to India in the west and over the known and unknown ranges of Nepal to the south and east. This was certainly the finest panoramic day of the expedition but the stiff wind soon pushed us down again. Our glacier trail had blown in completely and following it was possibly harder than making a new one.

Next morning, Ed was finished and headed back to base camp. I aimed for P1 (6613m), which would have to be climbed by its north face, skirting a serac zone on its left side, traversing towards a rock band at 6,400m and finding a way through that to exit slopes. The day started trail breaking down the flat glacier and avoiding some minor crevasses. The lower face was in excellent condition and progress was rapid. Deeper snow around the serac zone persisted into the middle face but conditions were mostly fine and the snow firmed up as I approached the rock band. The gullies to the left appeared almost vertical for 20m, so I kept traversing until I found that the shortest gully section had a rock ridge on its left side. Launching up this, I found myself doing 10m of vertical ice, which, thanks to the rock, was quite easy to stem. The problem was the exit, which was loose 60° snow over looser blocks. A different descent would be needed and the slopes to my right looked more promising. I finished the last 200m on good snow, crossed the mini-cornice at its narrowest point and walked 200m up low-angle firm to the summit. The views were extensive, but again the wind was strong and high cloud had blown across the region, making the light disappointingly poor. On descent, I found excellent 50° with a couple of sideways steps over



The real Kubi Kangri range from Rongla. (*Bruce Normand*)

rock bands to avoid my vertical section. As some afternoon sun returned over P2 and Takphu, I regained the glacier with daylight to spare but once again the wind had blown my trail in. I was back at camp well after dark.

The following morning dawned grey but I was in fact under Til Kang's usual cloud and the sky was otherwise clear. I headed down the previous day's trail, now rock hard, to stop beneath the col between P3 and P1. A mix of good, firm going and shin-deep post-holing took me to the col, from where I traversed around to south-west-facing firm slopes before zig-zagging to the summit of P3. Once again the wind was up and high clouds were spoiling the light, if not the views. This time my trail on the glacier was still in excellent shape, making for a quick hike back to camp.

With one peak left to complete my quintet, I was out early and quickly descended my trail before crossing the glacier to gain the scree below of the south face of P2. After 200m of shale, I made good progress up 35° firm and ice slopes, except when compelled to take pictures and then warm up my hands in the cold wind. This stopped when my camera shutter jammed at 6,000m, denying me photos from what turned out to be the best day of all. Just as I reached the summit crest, the wind died completely. Here the snow was steep enough that a front-pointing traverse was required in places, but the summit had a minor flat spot in the otherwise knife-edge ridge. I continued along and down the low-angle summit crest, dropping into our col from a week earlier. Being at heart a Scottish-trained Munro-bagger, I used the beautiful afternoon to carry on up to Takphu and enjoy the experience this time. The 360° views were indeed excellent, but there is no photographic proof. This time I descended more good firm slopes on the south face of Takphu to reach the basin beneath Til Kang, needing to cross



Kaqr from 6430m. Chandi is on its right. (*Bruce Normand*)

only a few hundred metres of deep powder to reach windblown snow and then our old track under the west ridge. This worked quite well for a change, delivering me back to the col camp at dark.

Next morning there was little left to eat and no reason to hang around. Intermittent clouds and wind accompanied me as I dropped down from the col, across the snow slopes and through our rock-ledge traverse. I had to dig deep to find some energy to climb the 5,300m col, where the winds were again strong and cold, then found firm going in the windblown remains of our old prints all the way to the bottom of the glacier. The guys were delighted to have me back so that now we could go home. The muleteers had already arrived, a day ahead of schedule, and Julian put up a spare tent to save me drying and pitching mine in the dark. Next day we packed up and headed down the Sakya Khola, trading over the next five days the high plateau for snowy peaks, alpine forests and then the terraced fields lining the Karnali back to Simikot. In one big clean-up evening, Rinjin inherited a lot of used gear and unused food and next day saw us enjoying breakfast and lunch in Nepalgunj followed by dinner in Kathmandu.

Rongla Himal

I had plans for a mini-expedition after Takphu but a confluence of circumstances led to all three of my partners having to cancel, leaving me in Kathmandu fully acclimatised, fully alone and with four weeks to kill. This solo situation hadn't come as a complete surprise, and some Google un-Earthing had, even with the required margins of safety, revealed Rongla Kangri as a worthwhile target. Christof and Julian were quick to provide positive reinforcement. After a few days to round up paperwork, a few hours to

work out the transport and a few minutes to pack what I could carry, on 31 October I headed on my way back west.

This second venture started with two and a half days on public buses: from Kathmandu to Surkhet to Manma and thence to Gamgadhi, with one total gearbox failure and two punctures spicing up the experience. My pack leaving Gamgadhi was about 25kg but given my agenda, the added complication of a porter seemed unwise. I set a conservative pace up the pretty canyon of the Mugu Karnali for two days, then on the third day the valley turned north and at Mugu village opened out into high pastures either side of the river. I found the grazing trail through a cedar forest up the Koji Khola and ended the fourth day at the lake at 5,000m directly below the Koji La.

Next day was one of partial rest, of moving my camp out of the howling wind and of visiting the Koji La (5470m). Despite this being an entirely off-limits crossing into Tibet, it sported quite a well-marked trail to the flat, icy glacier. The south face of Rongla was vertical, banded red rock and from a distance the entire cirque offered no obvious ascent routes. So in the morning I set off underneath the south-west face, planning to cross the west ridge and find out if a route could be followed up the north-west face. However, this ridge turned out to be vertical mud, so I returned to a valley fork and climbed the next peak west from Rongla. A glacier hike to 5,800m, a 400m face of 45° firn and 500m along the north-east ridge brought me to a summit I measured at 6,265m. The wind was moderate and the sky cloudless, affording spectacular views across both Tibet and Nepal. The north-west face of Rongla had a steep, rocky finish, so the south-east-facing cirque was going to need a more detailed inspection after all.

With the weather remaining excellent, I set off early next morning intending to summit that day. I met the sunrise on the Koji La and continued north-west. High-altitude cloud streamers started blowing by but evaporated again within two hours. The glacier flattened out and met the cliffs at 5,800m, but there was indeed an option on the far left side of the cirque: climbing 45° firn all the way to the top of the sub-peak Rongla South (6516m). From there I dropped about 75m down a low-angle ridge and then hiked up snow slopes to the true summit of Rongla Kangri (6647m) at 1.45pm. I was treated to views from Gurla Mandhata to Annapurna, far out over the red plateau of Tibet and across the jagged white carpet of Nepal.

The eighth day was a rest day, which turned cloudy and cold. For the ninth day I had considered climbing a peak above the southern wall of the Koji Khola, but I had no desire to push my soloing luck on north-facing snow-covered glaciers, as opposed to south-facing icy ones. Instead I climbed just high enough to recce Churau (6419m), the somewhat dramatic, double-peaked mountain west of 6265m. Then I moved my camp an hour down-valley. Sunrise next morning found me well on my way up, but a hidden glacier trench forced me to change plans from the direct south face to the east ridge. On another perfect but significantly windier day, I reached the ridge with only a little heavy trail-breaking then followed it over a sub-peak to a final 45° snow climb. The views once again stretched north-

west across the many unclimbed border peaks and south to the Dhaulagiri massif. From this angle, several peaks in the Dolpo ranges were visible beyond the impressive Kaqur Kangri (6859m), reinforcing my earlier thoughts of giving these a closer look.

Day 11 brought cloud and snow showers on a strong wind and so I walked out to Mugu. This meant a 2,000m climb to cross into Upper Dolpo, and the canyon was unrelentingly steep. Locals were moving their families, animals and bags of a root-like plant down for the winter. Beyond the treeline it was cold and windy, and parts of the river were frozen completely solid. I no longer had the time or energy to get to the peaks east of Kaqur, nor did I have enough body-fat left to stay warm, even at 4,000m. On the thirteenth day I reached the Chyargo La (5150m) and stared across to Kaqur, Chandi Himal (6623m), aka Lalung Kangri, and the Upper Dolpo ranges, seeing no trace of a trail below me. Despite the attraction of the unknown, with three 6,000ers already under my belt and only three days of food left, this was clearly a target for a later expedition. I retraced my steps, arriving in Gamgadhi at the end of my fifteenth day out and spent the next 55 hours relaxing on another scenic bus tour back to Kathmandu.

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