

# Rokapi 1974

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To climb a virgin peak in a relatively unexplored part of the Himalaya; that was the aim of the 5-man team which attempted the S peak of Nampa in the pre-monsoon season of 1974. To find a suitable area in highly organised, expedition-orientated Nepal was difficult. Our research led us to contact the Manchester expedition to Nampa of 1970. We were shown photographs of several beautiful-looking peaks clustered around Nampa itself, chose one of 6830 m, called it Nampa S Peak (we now know this is locally called Rokapi) and began the rounds of obtaining permission. Since the attempt by the Manchester expedition in 1970, Nampa has been climbed by the Japanese, who have also had an unsuccessful expedition to a mountain of 6920 m, S of Nampa itself but N of our peak. All these expeditions have approached from the SW via the Chamlia river. We decided to have a look at the range and in particular our chosen peak from the E via the Seti Valley and the Salimor Khola. To the best of our knowledge the last mountaineering expedition to penetrate the upper Seti was the ill-fated Welsh expedition of 1955 when 2 of the team were arrested by the Chinese (see 'Prisoner in Red Tibet' by S. Wignall). John Tyson had also descended the Seti during his circumnavigation of the Api-Nampa range in 1953. The area was thus not without interest. The Salimor itself had never been visited by a mountaineering team as far as we knew and our venture took on something of an exploratory nature which was much to our liking.

It was a wet day in February when 4 of the team left England in an old ex-army ambulance. Despite recent fuel price increases this is still the cheapest way to transport men and equipment to the Himalayas. Time-consuming it is, but to all of us the journey E was very much a part of the expedition. For 3 of the members this was the second such journey but it had certainly lost none of its fascination. We arrived in Kathmandu on 26 March and were joined a few days later by our fifth member, Tom Leppert, bringing with him the news that our doctor had injured his hand just before departure and was unable to join us. On 6 and 7 April, after completion of the necessary formalities, men and equipment were transported in 4 shuttles to the tiny airstrip of Bajang on the Seti river. The flight in the small Pilatus Porter of Royal Nepal Airlines was an adventure in itself and afforded us our first exciting glimpses of the Nampa range.

We were now 7 in number, having collected in Kathmandu our Liaison Officer and Pema Sherpa, who was to help with our porters and cook for us. In fact Pema did much more and we are all very grateful to him. His cheerful face and unbounded energy were an inspiration to us all. At Bajang we collected our 40 porters and after 4 days of haggling began our 60 mile walk-in. After 5 days of walking, endlessly gaining and then losing height, through superb forest and crag scenery, we reached Dhuli, the last permanent settlement, situ-

ated at a height of 2900 m. It was the remotest village any of us had ever seen, the people here being of Tibetan stock contrasting strongly with the Indian-looking people of Bajang. Once clear of Dhuli, we saw no-one, for the Tibetan traders do not come down the Seti until the snows have almost gone from the 5950 m Urai Lekh in June. The track straggled on and after another day the entrance to the Salimor Khola stood before us looking grim and menacing in the dark evening light.

The next day dawned, grey and murky. Tom Leppert and Barry Smith went ahead to reconnoitre and soon returned with the news that the Salimor was impassable for our porters 2 miles ahead. At this point, however, a tributary valley led off to the W into the Nampa Massif. We marched off into the gathering gloom with the porters now lagging, uneasy on this unknown terrain and in worsening weather conditions. We finally pitched Base Camp at around 4000 m on the snow line. It was raining hard now but, once paid, the porters went happily running down leaving us to the mountain.

The next day we saw our mountain clearly for the first time. The skyline ridge looked an obvious, though long route. Soon, however, clouds gathered and by lunchtime it was raining. Throughout the afternoon the odd glimpses of dripping-wet, snowy cliffs towering above reminded us of a typical Scottish winter. On the 19th we made a reconnaissance and decided to attempt the skyline ridge. Barry Smith and Bob Junkison established Camp 1 on 20 April at an altitude of 5200 m on the glacier just beneath the real climbing difficulties. The next day they came down and Tom Leppert, John Barron and myself went up and began to work above Camp 1. The initial gully was climbed and equipment for Camp 2 carried on up. A definite weather pattern seemed to be emerging at this stage. Although the day would usually have a clear start, it would cloud over and snow after midday. We found this annoying as new steps had to be made each day. As we were a small team and could not afford the luxury of high-altitude Sherpas we had decided to acclimatise whilst working on the mountain itself. This, of course, meant that progress in the early stages was fairly slow.

On 23 April a rather unstable snow slope was climbed to gain a subsidiary ridge leading to a possible site for Camp 2. The weather had deteriorated once again so we roped down, leaving a cache of equipment. It was obvious that the new snow every afternoon and the steepness of the ground would necessitate fixed ropes for a large part of the route to Camp 2. We had with us only 2000 feet of fixed rope which soon disappeared so we decided to keep just 3 ropes for climbing and use the rest as fixed rope. Five days after our first attempt we finally established Camp 2 on a snow arête at around 5800 m. The position was tremendous. The weather in the meantime had been consistently bad. The depth of snow caused us a further problem—that of freeing the fixed ropes which were frozen in, before they could be used. The ice sticking to the ropes also made it difficult to use prusiks. The setting up of Camp 2 and again the worsening weather had taken its toll so we returned to Base Camp for a rest. Illness was to deal us a crippling blow at this stage. We missed our doctor. Tom Leppert suffered from an increasingly severe stomach complaint and although

battling on courageously was never fully able to realise his capabilities. John Barron was confined to Base Camp with an abscess on his thumb at a crucial time and I had a nagging cough, fortunately more annoying than debilitating.

Barry Smith, Bob Junkison and I returned to dig out Camp 1 and the next day to make a carry to Camp 2. On 3 May Bob and Barry began on the route above Camp 2. A difficult gully and steep snow, calling for almost all the remaining fixed rope, led finally on to the main ridge. A steep, icy, heavily-corniced ridge wound away into the mist. It was more than a mile to the summit and would present difficulties most of the way. Progress along the ridge was slow, precarious work but nevertheless immensely exhilarating. Edging along with crampons biting the snow crust or scraping hopefully at the hard ice below, looking down the 50 ft of steep ice and then the sheer 2000 ft drop to the glacier; this was climbing at its best. Six pitches along the ridge brought us to slightly easier ground and we soon disposed of the next few hundred feet up to a prominent rock gendarme at around 6200 m. This proved awkward and led on to an even more difficult section. Again the afternoon snowstorms sent us scurrying down, leaving the gear at a high point.

Since leaving Camp 2 we had not seen a suitable site for a tent. Having to ascend each day from Camp 2 was so exhausting that for further progress to be made Camp 3 had to be established. The descent was also very dangerous when attempted late in the day during the snowstorms. Barry Smith and myself had now spent 7 consecutive nights high on the mountain and the effort was telling on us. Bob Junkison was fresher and this combined with the improving weather was an opportunity not to be missed, although we could not hope for any help from the members ill in Base Camp. As my cough was getting worse I descended and Bob and Barry continued up to hack out an airy snow step below the first rock gendarme for a mountain tent; Camp 3. It was a pitiful site, but had to suffice. Barry then returned to Base Camp for a well-earned rest. Tom had managed to make Camp 2 but found himself unable to partner Bob on a further push. The weather at this point deteriorated once again and 10 May saw the party united in Base Camp.

We still had 3 weeks left. Three camps were up and the first 2 well stocked. The summit was still a long way off and the climbing looked difficult, but we were all optimistic. Another camp or bivouac and then the summit; that was our plan. After 2 days the weather improved a little and Barry and I began the struggle back up the mountain. Everywhere was plastered in new snow and the fixed ropes were buried. Avalanches swept down all around, the noise at times quite unnerving. We had just dug out Camp 2 when it started to snow again, this time with thunder and lightning. After three days of continual snowfall giving us plenty of time for contemplation in between bouts of digging, we retreated yet again, glad of the fixed ropes. Sitting in Base Camp that night I think we all felt the odds were now against us. Time was running out.

On 18 May in fine weather John, now recovered, went up with Bob to break the trail. Giving them two days start, the remaining three, Tom feeling slightly

better, set off for the final push. Again unbelievably the weather closed in and on the 21st the 2 groups crossed at Camp 1, John and Bob having only managed another few hundred feet above our previous high point. Morale was low but we had to try. Up we went to Camp 2 only to be pinned down for 2 more days. Finally on 25 May we pushed on to Camp 3. It was in a sorry state, having collapsed under the snow. We dug it out and Tom and Barry crawled in whilst I hung my bivouac tent on the snow slope below. That night it snowed and thundered non-stop. We felt very small and helpless. The death knell had sounded and with each crash of thunder the summit receded further into the distance.

In the grey dawn we began sadly to collect our gear together. Barry and I waded up to the high point at 6400 m to retrieve equipment and the retreat began. The snow fell away from beneath our feet in great waves. Progress was slow, painfully slow. We had just reached the first of the 6 pitches back to the top of the fixed ropes and safety when the snow gave way and Barry hurtled 60 ft down the ice. The rope held and we climbed on, more slowly now. Night fell. By a miracle it was fine. A bivouac here could have been disastrous.

At around 4am we were in the vicinity of Camp 2. It was now snowing heavily and visibility was virtually nil. The tent was nowhere to be seen. Half an hour of frantic searching revealed a buried tent, partially collapsed beneath the snow. We were soon on our way down and at 11pm that night after another full day of gruelling descent we staggered into Base Camp, exhausted. A descent which usually took 6 hours had taken about 35. The climb was over.

We had not reached the top. Sad we were, yes, but glad to have formed a harmonious group and to have given of our best. Adventure had been ours and treasured memories of visiting such a beautiful part of the world and climbing on a tremendously impressive mountain will be with us for ever.

### Summary

Attempt on Nampa S peak (Rokapi, 6830 m) by British Nepalese Expedition 1974: A. Kellas, J. Barron, T. Leppert, R. Junkison, and B. Smith. Highest point reached on the S Ridge 6400 m.