
Kharcha Kund North Ridge Expedition

ROBIN BEADLE

The Gangotri has been visited by a number of British parties recently, and there is ample information available for the prospective visitor. The major summits have been climbed, but there are still many good routes awaiting an ascent. These facts, coupled with the relative ease of access and the scale of the mountains (6000–7000m in height) made the area attractive to us as Himalayan first-timers.

We were a four-man team (Robin Beadle, Bobby Gilbert, Rob Tresidder and Pete Scott, all of the Oread Mountaineering Club), planning an alpine-style ascent of Kharcha Kund's N ridge, an objective brought to our attention whilst viewing Neil McAdie's excellent slides of the area. From the photos the ridge appeared long, sustained and committing, so, in addition to the usual gear carried on this type of ascent, we took along some extra rope and a bolting kit. This was intended for fixing rope to facilitate retreat around the many pinnacles, should it become necessary. The bolt kit was, however, deemed too heavy to carry, and was left at Base Camp.

We were much more fortunate with weather and conditions than previous teams who had attempted the ridge. The monsoon itself never materialized, so the rock pitches were completely clear of snow. We encountered conditions ranging from unconsolidated powder to very hard ice, but on the whole the snow was good.

The sky was generally clear during the day, although cloud built up early behind the ridge at the end of the glacier, and poured over it as the day progressed. Nights were also clear and cold. On the mountain the minimum night-time temperature was -15°C , but generally it was -7°C . The worst weather we experienced was an afternoon of mist and light snow showers at the N col.

Base Camp was usually warm and sunny enough for sunbathing, but night-time temperatures were also low here (generally -5°C).

September, then, is perhaps the optimum time to visit the area. The monsoon has passed, and the cold weather and snow experienced later in the year are also avoided.

We made two reconnaissances before embarking on the route. The first was a foray from Base Camp to assess conditions, and to observe the ridge from both sides in order to plan the route. The second involved a pair of us ascending the ridge to the Five Pinnacles, carrying only day-sacks. We thus established the route past the first major difficulties and left ropes on the hardest pitches. These preliminaries ensured that we had acclimatized quite well before starting on the route. Also the sheer length of the ridge meant that we gained height gradually:

we had made six bivouacs between 5000m and 6000m before our summit day (18 September 1987).

The initial difficulties, on rock, were encountered in reaching and traversing a group of five pinnacles. This provided a number of good pitches of standard up to Grade V. Subsequently, difficulties were encountered on both ice and rock, and were separated by much easier stretches on snow. A detailed route description follows.

Route description: Kharcha Kund North Ridge

Alpine rock grades and Scottish winter grades have been allocated to rock and ice pitches respectively. 120m of 7mm rope was carried by the expedition and fixed where stated to facilitate retreat, had it been required. Five rock pegs were also left.

Base Camp was at Sundaban (4700m), and from there the mountain was reached by crossing the Ghanohim Bamak. On a reconnaissance we discovered a comfortable bivouac at the foot of the ridge, at an altitude of 4925m.

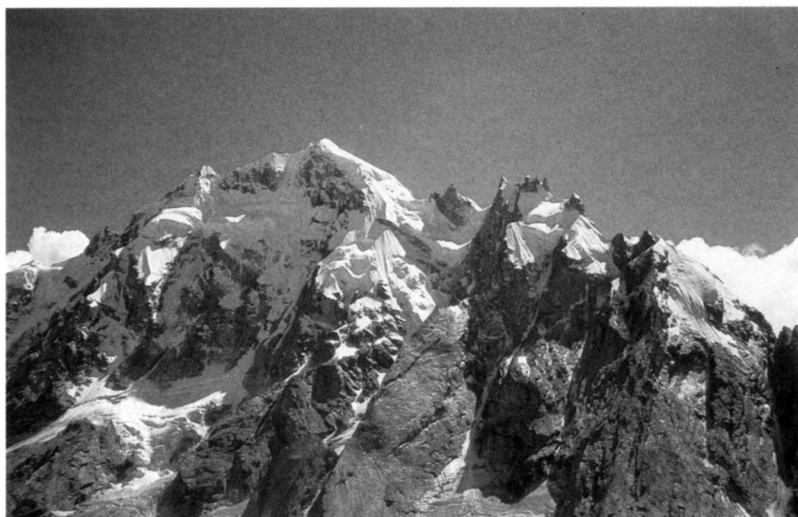
Scree slopes on the W side of the ridge were climbed to meet the ridge at a notch, at the start of the difficulties. The first bivouac was made here. The same point could be reached by scrambling up the ridge itself for about 250m, as on the reconnaissance, but this alternative was found very loose.

The ridge was followed with no great difficulty (III) for about 250m until a short crack led to a 6m traverse across a slab (IV, fixed rope). A short descent was made to scree-covered ledges which were followed leftwards. (These ledges lie at the top of a couloir falling to the foot of the ridge on its left-hand side.) Unprotected, loose rock (III) was then followed diagonally up leftwards, to a point on the ridge ahead above the first tower (Robin's Flake).

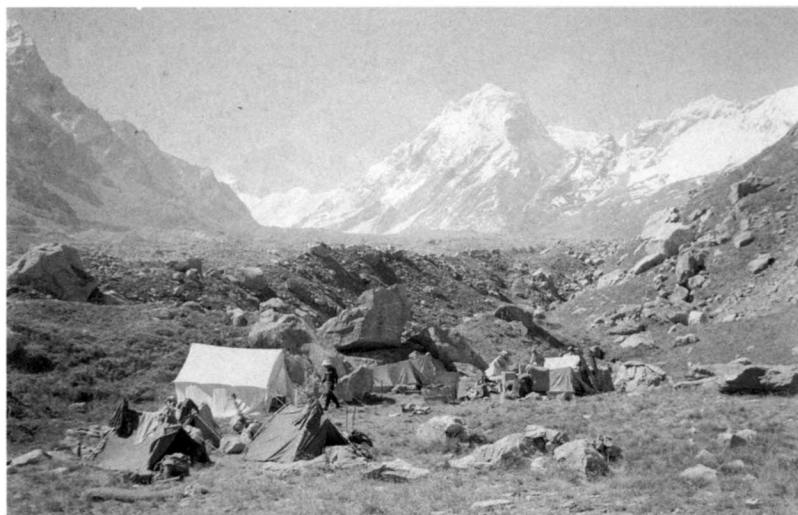
The right arête of a slab above (V, fixed rope) was taken to a dièdre. An exit on the left by a short, steep corner crack (V) led to an excellent platform on the crest of the ridge. The compact boss of rock ahead was surmounted (IV), and the ridge then followed easily for a pitch. A line keeping to the left of the crest was followed until an icy gully was reached. Here we found it easiest to move back right on to the rib, and continue upwards until a 6m leftward traverse led to a snowpatch (III).

The snowpatch was climbed (50m). This led to a steep section of rock from which a leftward exit led to a shoulder on the ridge (V). A sentry-box was climbed to a belay. A flaky crackline followed (V, 50m), leading to the top of the first of five pinnacles (at 5500m). This pinnacle was descended by abseil, as was the second (fixed ropes). The third small pinnacle was crossed with no difficulty, and a bivouac made on a ledge system on the eastern side of the fourth.

A descent on the eastern side bypassed Pinnacle 5 to reach the foot of a snow-slope. This was climbed for two rope-lengths to a rockband which was passed by a leftward fault (Scottish III), giving access to the upper snow-ice wall. The wall was climbed for 250m to the right of a large serac band. An excellent bivi site is available at the top of this wall. The snow-ice arête, conspicuous from the glacier, was taken easily to its end on top of a pinnacle (5874m). A scramble and abseil (fixed rope) were made down the back of this pinnacle, and a steep



18. *Kharcha Kund N ridge and NE face.*



19. *Base Camp on Gangotri glacier, June 1947. Kharcha Kund behind. The photo illustrates the calm and isolation experienced 40 years ago, compared with the highway that the area has become today.*

snow-slope on the immediately following 'Bifurcated Pinnacle' was ascended. We passed through the gap in this pinnacle to reach the eastern side, traversed some flakes and made a diagonal abseil (fixed rope) to bypass the bulk of the pinnacle. A short climb up a dièdre (10m) regained the ridge, and the third bivouac was made at the col behind the pinnacle (5840m).

A steep snow-ice crest was climbed, almost to the foot of the next impressive rock buttress, Longland Buttress. A traverse left on soft snow gained mixed ground on the east of this buttress (Scottish IV). From here, a steep snow-slope was ascended diagonally back right to gain a corniced ridge. This gradually steepening ridge was followed to the foot of the initial pinnacle of the Great North Tower (GNT), where a traverse right led to a good belay. Two excellent ice-pitches (Scottish IV) on the right of the pinnacle regained the crest of the ridge. The ridge was then followed for three pitches towards the main part of the GNT (rock move IV, mixed move Scottish IV). At a large bergschrund, a leftward traverse across snow was made to the eastern edge of the tower. Here a system of grooves led for one pitch to a snow-patch on the summit of the tower (VI, A1 3 points of aid). We made our fourth bivouac here (6085m).

From the snow-patch the crest of the GNT was climbed for two pitches. It was blunt at first, but after a notch it became a classic knife-edge ridge (III/IV, 1 rope move). Two 50m abseils were made into the unknown down the impressive S face of the GNT, to arrive at the N col inf (5957m). From the col a steep ice-slope was climbed up leftward for two pitches, followed by a difficult traverse left on ice, bypassing a gendarme on the ridge (Scottish V). This gained a cave below a chimney (V, A1 2 points of aid) and led to the very summit of the Tower in the col (6068m). One abseil was made down the far side of the tower, and poor snow was climbed and traversed for one pitch (Scottish III/IV) to a notch before the next small pinnacle. Here the fifth bivouac was made in a 'V' between ice and rock on the crest of the ridge (6020m).

The traverse along the ridge was continued for 10m, and a 20m diagonal abseil was made on the E side to a snowy ledge (where we left a jammed abseil rope). A traverse on poor snow (25m, Scottish IV) was made to the N col sup (6000m). We bivouacked here in a snow-hole, but a rock-ledge is also available.

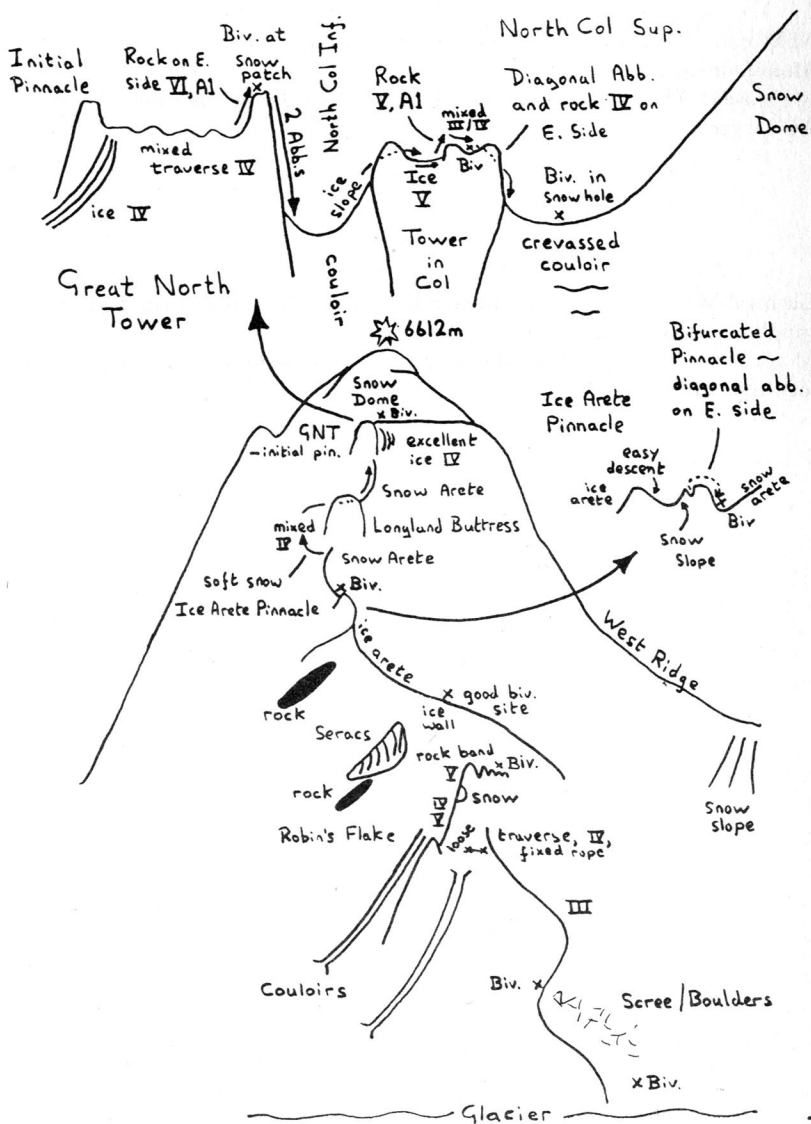
Easy snow-slopes were climbed to the summit (6612m, approx 3 hours).

Descent description: Kharcha Kund West Ridge

From the N col sup the big steep couloir to the west was descended. This was achieved by 10 to 12 awkward abseils, keeping to the rock on the north of the couloir to avoid the heavily crevassed centre. Fixed ropes led to a snowfield, which was crossed to a shoulder and our seventh bivouac.

From the shoulder a second ice couloir was easily descended until the crest of the W rib could be gained. This was descended (scrambling, some fixed ropes/abseils) until a snow-slope on the N flank was reached and descended to the Ghanohim Bamak.

Topo of Kharcha Kund North Ridge



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Mountain 84, 22-27, 1982.

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MAPS

Garhwal-West, 1:150,000, Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research. (BMC may supply a photocopy on request.)

Mountaineering Maps of the World, p217, has a Japanese map, excellent for identifying peaks.