
Menlungtse

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(Plate 12)

Cho Oyu, Gyachung Kang, Menlungtse, Everest, Lhotse, Makalu were all higher than us, but Menlungtse was the nearest and loveliest vision of all. A mighty white obelisk of snow and pale pink granite, whose shape matched that of the Matterhorn from the east.

Peter Boardman, describing the view from the summit of Gaurisankar.

I first saw Menlungtse in 1961 on my way back from climbing Nuptse. We had crossed the Tesi Laptsa pass and saw it quite close, steep, twin-summitted, encased in grey granite and ice, desirable, yet unattainable for it was entirely in Tibet. I gazed at it subsequently from the slopes of the SW face of Everest, from where it appears as a sharp pyramid almost lost in the greater mass of Gaurisankar behind it. It was in 1984 that I wrote to the Chinese Mountaineering Association to ask for permission to climb Menlungtse; this was a long shot, since it was not on their list of peaks that were open to foreign climbers, and I was pleasantly surprised when they gave me their permission.

No one had made a serious attempt on Menlungtse, though I had heard rumours of an illicit effort across the border which had reached a height of around 6000m. We were also told by the local people that they had apprehended an expedition in the Menlung valley to the south of the mountain and had confiscated most of their gear before sending them on their way.

The Rongshar valley had been reached in 1921, from over the Fushi La, by Howard Bury and Heron as part of the Everest Reconnaissance Expedition and then again, at the end of the 1924 expedition, by Bruce, Hingston, Shebbeare, Odell and Norton after the loss of Mallory and Irvine. Their wanderings show, incidentally, the more leisured approach of those pre-war days, when expeditions meant being away from home for at least six months. There was none of the mad rush to get back by the first plane available. Each party descended the Rongshar Gorge until it became precipitous; then they crossed the Nepalese frontier, but were stopped by a fallen bridge.

It was in 1951 that the Menlung valley was first reached by Europeans, when Eric Shipton and Mike Ward, on the way back from that year's Everest Reconnaissance, crossed the Dingjung La (which is so named in the Schneider map, used for all place references in this article, though Shipton and Kogan referred to it as the Menlung La) and descended the Drogpa Nagtsang. They named the impressive peak on the north side of the valley Menlungtse, unaware that its local name was Jobo Garu. On the way down the valley, near its head, they saw the tracks and produced the photos that have become the classic yeti

track picture. They went on down the Menlung Chhu to sneak past the Chua Gompa at night to descend the Rongshar Chhu into Nepal.

In the autumn of 1954 a Swiss expedition led by Raymond Lambert set out to climb Gaurisankar from Nepal. They decided that it was too difficult and turned their attention to Menlungtse, crossing the Menlung La. They explored the upper Menlung valley, thought that Menlungtse was also too difficult, so crossed the Dingjung La and tried Cho Oyu without success. It was certainly a remarkable journey.

In 1987 I invited to join my team Odd Eliassen and Bjorn Myrer-Lund, the two Norwegians who had accompanied me to the summit of Everest in 1985, and Jim Fotheringham, one of my regular climbing partners in the Lake District, with whom I had climbed Shivling in 1983. The team was completed by Helge Ringdal and Torger Fosse who were supporting us.

We crossed the Nepalese/Chinese frontier at the Friendship Bridge on 8 March and travelled by truck through Tingri to a frozen river about 24km north of the deserted village of Kyetrak, which is at the base of the Kyetrak glacier leading up to the Nangpa La. A road built by the Chinese crosses the Fushi La and drops down into the Rongshar Chhu to the village of Changbuijiang, but this is only open to tractors for about two months in the year, during July and August. We used yaks brought from the villages around Tingri to cross the Fushi La. The journey took five days to Changbuijiang, but should have taken only four; the official timing, for which we had to pay, was seven.

It is a gentle walk over the Fushi La, with magnificent views of Cho Oyu and of Cho Rapsam, the peak on the western side of the Kyetrak glacier. The pass itself is on the high rolling hills of the Tibetan plateau and the Rongshar valley begins almost imperceptibly, starting with open yak pastures before cutting down into the increasingly precipitous gorge of the Rongshar Chhu. This is on the southern side of the Himalayan divide, and the flora is similar to that of the Nepalese valleys of the Rolwaling. The village of Darzang at around 4200m is the highest village of the valley. It is built in the traditional Tibetan style with flat-roofed houses terraced into the hillside. About 16km further down the valley is the village of Changbuijiang which is more like a Sherpa village, with eaved roofs of wooden shingles weighed down with rocks. This is the district headquarters with a compound housing the small administration just above the village. We had to change our yaks here for those of the local villages for the final stage of the journey into the Menlung Chhu. In 1987, however, there were no yaks and we had to use a certain number of porters as well, most of whom were women. But in 1988 there were enough yaks from Changbuijiang alone to carry much more gear up to Base Camp. The reason for this was the timber boom that is certainly increasing the prosperity of the village but is threatening to denude the magnificent forests of the Rongshar Chhu and its side valleys; the timber is destined for construction work on the Tibetan plateau.

The Menlung Chhu comes into the Rongshar about eight kilometres below Changbuijiang at the site of the Chua Gompa, a beautiful little monastery and temple which at first sight seems hardly damaged but, sadly, on closer inspection the damage is seen to be extensive. Today the building is derelict,

though it would be comparatively easy to renovate. The Menlung Chhu goes steeply through bamboo, rhododendron and conifer forest, between Gaurisankar and the outer peaks of the Menlung basin. It took us two days to reach our Base Camp beside a huge rock under which the famous sage Milarepa is said to have sheltered. The height was 4000m. We reached base on 24 March and immediately began to explore. There is a glaciated open valley to the north of Menlungtse with extensive high pastures, bounded on the north by two attractive peaks of around 5800m. The NW and N faces of the mountain are formidable, guarded by sheer granite walls, threatened by seracs. The S face, overlooking the Menlung Chhu, seemed to offer more hope. A series of buttresses and ridges reaches down from the twin summits which are about a mile apart. We established an Advanced Base Camp on 1 April, just above the summer yak-herders' camp of Palbugthang, and chose the SSW buttress for our attempt.

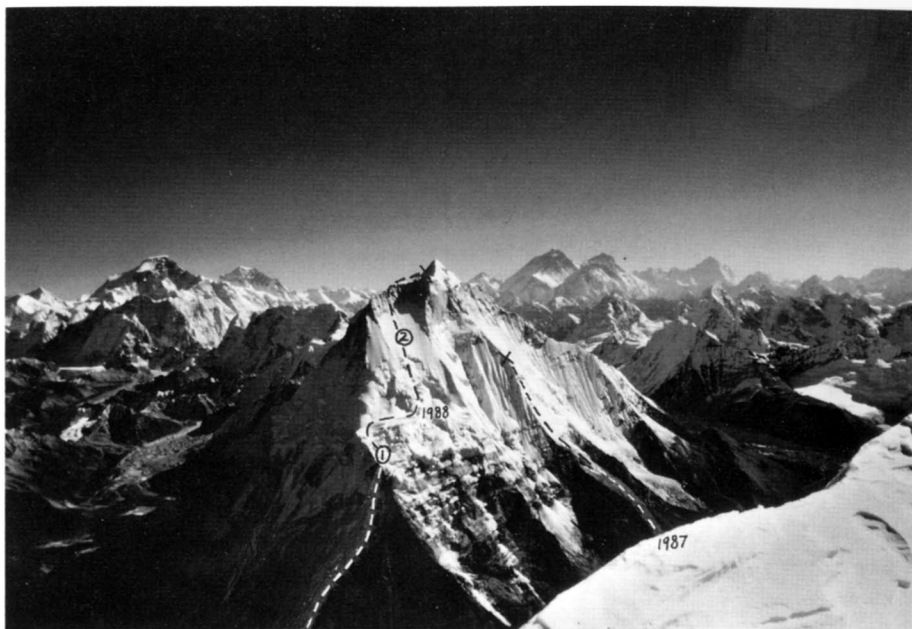
Having established a first camp at the bottom of the initial difficulties at 5450m, we started fixing ropes. For our first attempt we ran out about 600m of fixed rope up a broken granite ridge of frighteningly loose rock, before setting out on 6 April for our first alpine-style push. In three days we experienced exhilarating climbing up rock that improved in quality, with pitches about E1 Va in climbing standard. On reaching the intermediate snow section of the buttress, we were hit by a fierce storm that destroyed one tent and forced us to retreat. We made two further attempts but never managed to get higher, being hit by storms on each occasion. It was on one of the recesses in the Menlung valley that we photographed tracks which seemed to have been made by a two-legged creature.

I returned in the spring of 1988 with a different team. I was joined by David Breashears and Steve Shea from the United States and Andy Fanshawe from Britain. Charles Clarke and Jess Stock were to be our support team, and in addition we had with us a film crew from the BBC Natural History Unit and a journalist and photographer from the *Mail on Sunday* with Alan Hinkes, a very competent mountaineer, acting as their mail-runner – all bent on hunting the yeti.

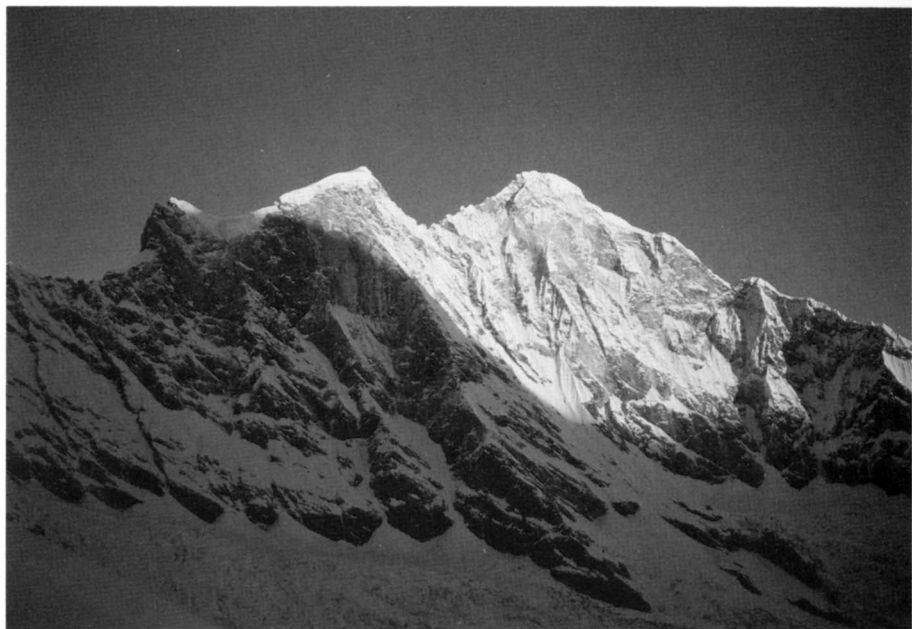
Since it had been very cold and windy in 1987, we set out slightly later, reaching Kathmandu on 31 March. We planned to cross the border at the Friendship Bridge on 5 April, only to receive a telex from the Chinese Mountaineering Association on the eve of departure to say that it was not convenient for us to climb Menlungtse. After a week of frantic telexes to Beijing we at last received the summons to cross the border. Later we discovered that we were pawns in a wrangle between the Chinese Mountaineering Association and the Tibetan authorities over who had the right to give permission for Menlungtse.

We finally crossed the border on 12 April to be met by Fan Xiachan, our very competent and friendly interpreter who told us that our Tibetan liaison officer had been forbidden to join us. Francis, as he asked us to call him, made up for this with his efficiency, taking on the role of liaison officer himself.

We reached the roadhead a few miles short of the Tibetan side of the Nangpa La on 16 April and set out on the 18th, with 89 yaks, for the Fushi La,



12. *S face of Menlungtse from E peak of Gaurisankar. (p 26)*



13. *Gaurisankar (7134m) from Base Camp. (p 34)*

the pass leading into the Rongshar valley. We arrived at the village and district headquarters of Changbujiang on 21 April and changed yaks there, to make Base Camp at 4585m at the yak-herders' camp of Palbugthang on 27 April. This was close to the site of our Advanced Base of 1987 and had the advantage of being higher than our previous Base Camp, on a flat grassy valley bottom, surrounded by superb peaks.

The most attractive route up the mountain seemed to be the E ridge which leads straight up to the main summit. On 28 April David Breashears, Steve Shea and I walked up the valley to a viewpoint from which we could examine this ridge. It looked formidable, very long, bristling with cornices and obviously steep on either side. We therefore decided to attempt the W ridge, which seemed more straightforward though it did entail crossing the W summit and making a high, but seemingly easy, traverse of a mile to the main top. On 1 May David Breashears, Andy Fanshawe, Steve Shea and I climbed Point 5753m to the immediate south of Base Camp topping the south retaining wall of the Menlung valley, in order to acclimatize and to get good views of the W ridge.

After fixing 180m of rope on mixed ground on the lower part of the ridge, we set out on 7 May to make our first attempt on the mountain. That day we reached 5800m, after climbing up a steep open ice-gully, with a covering of snow that barely gave support, to the crest of the W ridge. We found a good camp-site and, although very tired, we had a relaxed night.

The following morning, a long easy traverse across the hanging glacier that covers the centre of the W face took us to a wide scoop leading into the centre of the face. There was a pitch of good Grade 3, first led by Andy Fanshawe, and then some hard green ice leading into a wide, filled crevasse below a huge bergschrund that stretched across the face. This gave another good secure camp-site at 6250m.

That night I led out a single rope-length up 50-degree green ice, and the following morning we set off, hoping to reach and climb the head-wall. It was bitterly cold with a biting wind and, as the morning wore on, clouds built up over Nepal threatening to engulf us. A storm appeared to be coming and, since we had reached another bergschrund with a perfect camp-site, we decided to stop there at a height of 6600m. The threatening clouds stopped like a huge tide on the south retaining wall of the Menlung valley, but we enjoyed the afternoon's rest and David Breashears ran out our two ropes over towards the gully we had seen from below that appeared to lead through the head-wall.

We set out at 7am, just after dawn, the next morning (10 May). A diagonal traverse of five rope-lengths, at first on *névé* and then on green ice, took us to the foot of the head-wall. We reached it at midday, but it looked very much more formidable than from Base Camp. We were already short of rations and weighed down by our loads which included filming gear. It certainly didn't look as if we could get through that day. We were tired and not sufficiently acclimatized, and so we decided to retreat, getting back to Base Camp on the 19th.

After four days' rest we had another look at the E ridge, this time going round on to the glacier at its E flank, but this aspect appeared even worse than the view we had already seen. At this point, David and Steve felt that they didn't

want to return to the W ridge. I was very tired still and so suggested to Andy, who was keen to have another go at the W ridge, that he ask Alan Hinkes, who had just returned from taking the *Mail on Sunday's* story and film back to Kathmandu. Although he hadn't been over 5400m on this expedition, Alan was certainly extremely fit and had a very good track record, having made a new route on Xixabangma the previous year.

Alan had just been preparing to attempt, with Jess Stock, an unclimbed peak of 6301m on the south retaining wall of the Menlung La, so I agreed to take his place. This climb, in fact, proved to be a lot harder than it looked, and Jess and I were forced to turn back about 100m below the summit. Nonetheless, we had a great day's climbing lasting 20 hours and got some good views of Menlungtse.

Dave and Steve very gallantly carried gear for Andy and Alan up our fixed ropes on the W ridge on 18 May and, at 2am on the 19th, Andy and Alan set out from base to reach our first camp at 5800m that afternoon. They were very tired, however, and so decided to have a rest day. On the 21st they had a very long day, moving through to our third camp at 6500m. That night they were caught by a severe thunderstorm; their tent was tucked into a wide crevasse, but during the night it was nearly covered and they were forced not only to dig it out, but to shift it to a safer place. Next morning they discovered that their ropes had been buried and it took them four hours to dig these out. By that time it was too late to set off, so they had another rest day.

The morning of the 23rd dawned cloudy and threatening. They delayed setting out until they could see that the weather was settled, leaving at around 9am. They had decided to travel light, leaving behind their tent and sleeping-bags, but taking down-jackets and a stove in one rucksack so that the leader could climb unladen. Instead of traversing to the gully we had looked at on our first attempt, they climbed straight up towards the head-wall, reaching it around midday. The rock on the wall was both loose and difficult, giving mixed climbing on thin slabs alternating with icy runnels. Andy described much of the climbing as Scottish Grade V. The top provided the crux up a frighteningly loose overhanging chimney. It was Andy's turn to lead and for a moment he didn't think he was going to be able to make it, when Alan, the perfect supportive second, suggested: 'Take your sack off, take your crampons off and pretend you're doing a pitch on Stanage in the wet.'

It did the trick. Concentrating on the few feet in front of him, Andy struggled up the chimney and pulled out over the top. They had overcome the rock band.

But, once on the ridge, their troubles were not over. Powder snow covered smooth slabs for a further 40m and they had to pick their way precariously across before they reached firm snow. By this time it was nearly dark, but they kept going by the light of a head-torch to reach the summit at 10.30pm Beijing time. Before dark they had superb views of Cho Oyu, Gyachung Kang and the E summit of Menlungtse which was about a mile away across a broad easy saddle that led to the knife-edged summit ridge of green ice.

They had already been on the go for 13½ hours, so they decided to be satisfied with the W summit. After a precarious descent in the dark they got

back to their camp in the bergschrund at two in the morning, to find that their tent had been holed by one of the rocks they had dislodged during their ascent of the rock head-wall. They returned to the bottom the following day to join the rest of the team who had already started the return march with their yaks and yak herders.

We had climbed the West Peak of Menlungtse, had found some more intriguing tracks around the base of the mountain and, most important of all, we had enjoyed a happy and cohesive expedition. It is a wonderful area, with the main prize still waiting to be won and a host of smaller peaks still unclimbed.

Summary

Area:

The Menlung valley on the Nepalese border of Central Tibet in China.

Ascents:

First ascent of W peak of Menlungtse (7023m) on 23 May, by Andy Fanshawe and Alan Hinkes.

First ascent of Point 5753 on the S wall of the Menlung valley on 1 May, by Chris Bonington, David Breashears, Andy Fanshawe and Steve Shea.

Attempt on Point 6301, reaching within 100m of the summit on 20 May, by Chris Bonington and Jess Stock.

Personnel:

Climbing team: Chris Bonington (leader), David Breashears (USA), Andy Fanshawe, and Steve Shea (USA).

In support: Charles Clarke (doctor and catering) and Jess Stock (base manager).

BBC Natural History film unit: John-Paul Davidson (director), Nigel Meakin (cameraman) and Arthur Chesterman (sound).

Mail on Sunday: Iain Walker (journalist), David O'Neil (photographer) and Alan Hinkes (courier).

Cook staff: Krishna Bahardur Rai and Nima Chotor Sherpa.

Chinese: Fan Xiachan (liaison officer and interpreter).