
Chaos

A V SAUNDERS

(*Plates 18-23*)

And then again, it might have started in the pub. Most expeditions do. Maybe a chance mention of the mountain led to a beery response. Perhaps this led in turn to increasing enthusiasm, or a position from which it was difficult to back down. One never remembers the details. Suddenly there is an expedition. Expeditions are like the full frontal storms of recent years, no one really knows how or where they start. A South Pacific butterfly flaps its wings in a particular way and a month later the entire south coast of England is devastated. If the insect had slept two minutes longer, we would have had perfectly clear cold winters, and the best ice climbing this century.

There is a theory going the rounds of the popular science magazines which describes this sort of thing. It is all about instability, apparently. The theory calls itself Chaos Theory, and its proponents are known as chaologists. I find this highly descriptive of our expedition . . . Instability . . . Chaos. So, back to the pub, for Probability Theory suggests that it was a pub. The expedition was Mike Woolridge's idea. The team would not be a team, but four or five pairs of climbers. Base Camp was to be a shared facility: Snell's Field under Makalu. Should be cheap and cheerful, and the climbers would book enough routes on Makalu to keep everyone occupied without getting in each other's way. In the event this would cost us no more than if we had booked only one route on the mountain. In fact we arrived in Nepal armed with permission to attempt no fewer than five different lines on Makalu I and II.

The team consisted (in no discernible order, of course) of Gill Irvine (doctor), Hamish Irvine, Ulric Jessop, Andy Fanshawe, Rob Collister, Lindsay Griffin, Mike Woolridge (leader), Calvin Torrans, Stephen Sustad and myself.

We were also fortunate to gain the support and sponsorship of Blackspur Plc, a Mancunian printing concern. The Blackspur T-shirts became instantly popular in Kathmandu; when lost, one only needed to ask the shopkeeper which way the last batch of T-shirts had gone. Naturally, part of the sponsorship package involved taking the media with us. There was a video team, Kees t'Hooft and Annette Carmichael, and a film crew, Peter and Harriet Getzels. The Getzels brought their daughter Rachel, who in turn brought much joy to our Base Camp, and two assistants, Annie the Nannie, a staff photographer at the Architectural Association, and Tsering the Sherpani. In Kathmandu we picked up our Base Camp staff, a truly wonderful group of cooks and assistant cooks, a sirdar and our liaison officer, Mr Khanal of Interpol. All a normal part of the Nepalese conditions of granting permission.

So now there were 10 climbers, the seven media persons and the six Nepalese staff – and bureaucracy. Already we were feeling the gale from the butterfly wings. We needed food and supplies for two months at base, and then there was the fortnight walk-in each way: three months' total food. That made about 120 porter loads, but the porters themselves needed food, and the porters carrying the porters' food needed food too, and so on *ad infinitum*. Actually not *ad infinitum*, otherwise Zeno would have been right. But our final porter-load tally seemed almost as large . . . 180, though we never had more than 140 porters. Round one to Chology.

Amongst the five routes booked on the Makalu massif, the prime objective was the traverse of Makalu. We never even got near to it: the early onset of the jet-stream and windslab high on the mountain saw to that.

Sustad, our Secret Weapon, had already once climbed to within metres of the summit by the nightmarish SE ridge (*AJ*90, 88–96, 1985). With Doug Scott and Jean Afanassieff, Steve had attempted a version of the SE ridge that involved dropping into the world's highest valley and, on retreat, trying to climb out of it again.

'It's like having to climb an 8000m peak just to get down', said Steve, who did not seem at all keen to repeat his 1984 experience. Nevertheless, he did agree to look at the possibility of a traverse in the opposite direction, from north to south. Always assuming, of course, that the weather allowed it and that we were sufficiently acclimatized.

Doug's 1984 expedition had acclimatized via a number of smaller peaks, including Baruntse and Chamlang. This plan had been highly successful, so we decided to emulate it; we, too, would acclimatize via a number of lower peaks on the outlying spurs of Makalu, climb Kangchuntse, then move on to Makalu.

Steve and I had completed the first part of our sports plan, including a new line on a 6400m peak on one of the southern ridges of Makalu, a climb we completed with Andy Fanshawe in a blizzard. Apparently we had looked into Tibet but I don't remember too much of that climb, what with the asthma, the altitude and the dysentery. A few days later, Andy and Ulric Jessop went on to climb a beautiful ridge to Point 6700m, a climb involving rock, mixed and ice climbing. Other members of the expedition climbed on the northern flanks of the Makalu massif and, in keeping with the original ambitions of the expedition, we finished up with 40 individual ascents of 17 peaks over 6000m.

So, by late September, when we had been acclimatizing for a month, Steve and I decided that we were ready for Part Two of the sports plan: the W face of Kangchuntse. Kangchuntse (7640m), sometimes called Makalu II, lies north of the Makalu La, and was first climbed in the autumn of 1954 by Jean Franco, Lionel Terray, Gyaltsen Norbu and Pa Norbu. The first ascensionists followed what was to become the normal route to Makalu I as far as the Makalu La, and then climbed the short S face of Kangchuntse directly to the summit ridge. Steve's researches revealed only one other route to the summit, the fine N ridge (S Nara and Lhapka Norbu, 1976), as well as a number of attempts at the W face which seem to have been repulsed by stonefall.

The W face of Kangchuntse was a natural secondary objective for the Blackspur Makalu Expedition. It looked like typical TD country, about 1000m



18. *Makalu S face.* (A V Saunders) (p 17)



19. *Stephen Sustad and Andy Fanshawe.* (A V Saunders) (p 17)

high, with a central snow-field, a rim of summit cliffs, and granite slabs seamed with ice gullies in the lower half. The left side of the face had big black and red cliffs, from which we supposed the stone fall emanated. The right flank was guarded by a large serac. There was a possible line through the mixed ground, a faint depression slanting from the bottom right corner up to a narrow gully in the centre of the face. We had watched the face and noted that the sun reached the central section soon after 9am. We reasoned that, if we could pass the centre of the face before 9.30am, we should avoid the worst of any stonefall. That was about as much as Steve and I could agree on. Where to bivouac, how much gear to take, who would take the tent, whether to add bivibags to the sleeping-bags, what food and gas . . . all these things became so controversial that we gave up the idea of a so-called alpine-style ascent altogether. We would not take any of the gear. Just a water bottle each. Sort of Scottish-style, I suppose. Five Russian ice-screws, half a dozen pegs, a 9mm- and a 7mm-rope, a few slings. We would have a pretty good chance of returning to our tent the same day. Or so we thought.

It was the night of 26 September 1989, and I was sleeping alone at 6500m, just below the W face of Kangchuntse. Perhaps sleeping is the wrong word. I lay semi-comatose in our hopelessly tiny tent, wishing for my Blackspur umbrella to shed the snow-storms of ice rime that fell from the material with every snore. I should explain: Steve Sustad sleep-talks and I snore, or so I am told; I have never actually heard myself snoring. So, after a couple of experimental nights early in the expedition, we never shared the tent again. Next door Steve had installed himself in a comfortable Swiss tent, the Swiss Camp 2, on the normal route to Makalu I.

My alarm watch blattered dutifully at midnight; I turned it off and went back to sleep. An hour later, pricked by guilt, I wriggled out of the sleeping-bag, cursed the snow-storm of condensation and unzipped the entrance. It is a unique property of our tent that the entrance is designed for 18-inch dwarfs: anyone fractionally larger than a midget has to belly-crawl through the frozen soup and discarded noodles. The tents also have something called a valance, designed to catch snow and dump it down your neck as you emerge. This time the valance also grabbed my head-torch. It made me gargle with rage: neckfulls of snow, frozen soup, noodles, and somewhere in the icy mess was my torch . . . it was horrid. Funny name for a torture device, valance; it should be called a neck-trap. Outside, the sky was clear. It was sufficient excuse to abandon the tent. This was the moment of chaological instability. Had it not been for the neck-trap, a chaologist might argue, Steve and I would have slept peacefully till dawn, then walked down to base in time for lunch and an afternoon kip. Instead, by 1am that night, we were plodding up towards the bergschrund, following the track we had made the evening before. It was dark. There was no moon. Like an evil shadow, the W face blotted out the stars. The only noise was the shuffle of our snow shoes and my asthmatic wheezing as I struggled to keep up with Steve.

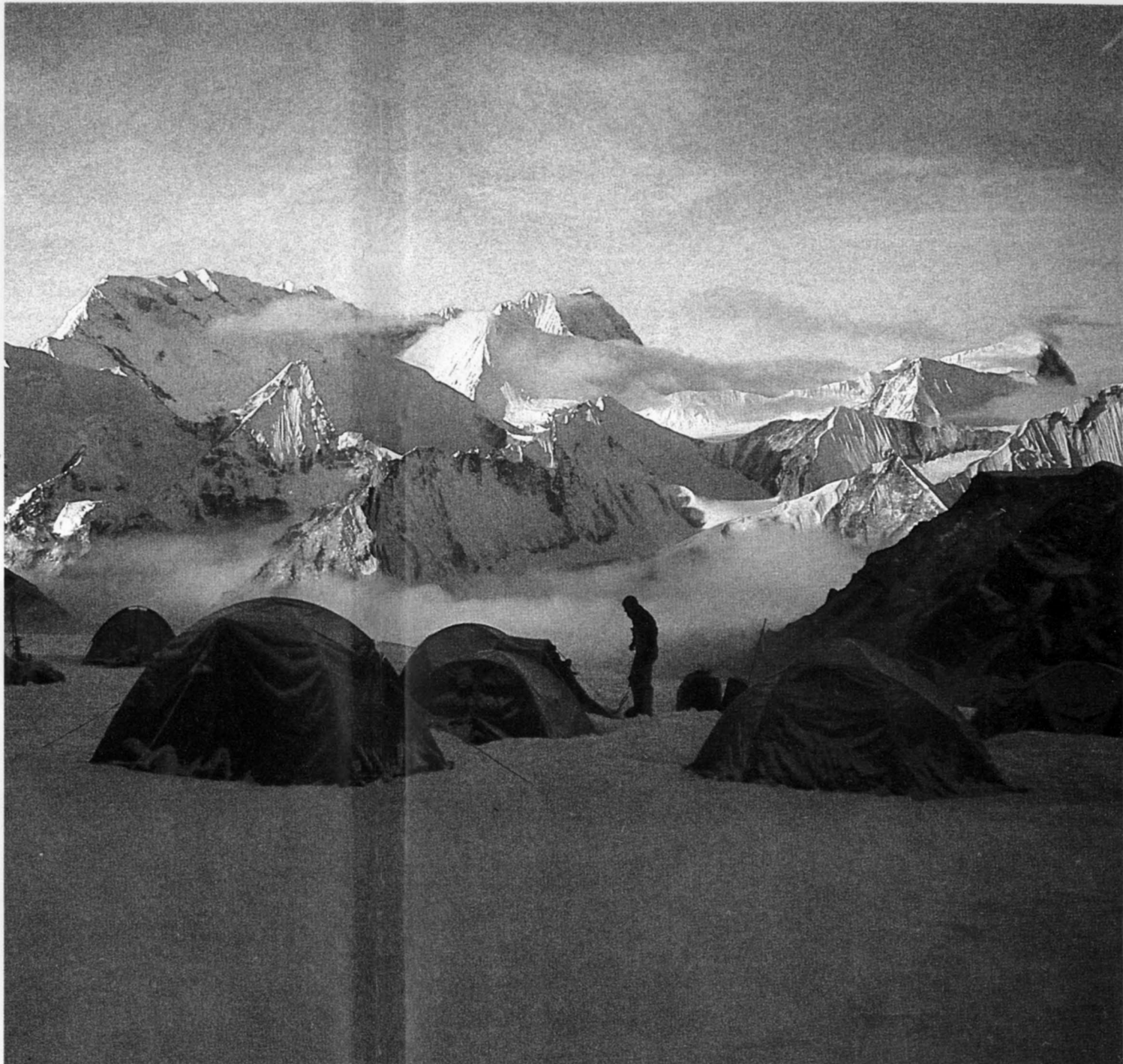
A fragile bridge crossed the bergschrund, above which we untied the ropes, trailing them behind. My rope only stuck among the rocks once, and Steve's only jammed when I trod on it. Immediately above the bergschrund the

climbing was easy, low-angle ice ribbons weaving between granite outcrops. Our main problem was to pick the continuous line. This was done by switching off the torches and peering at the dark until the faintly luminescent ice appeared to glow around the buttresses. By 5am we reached the end of the ice ribbons, there were rock walls to negotiate, usually by steep ice bulges, or hidden ramps and grooves. Soon the climbing became quite technical: we needed to see to find the route, and runners, so we were pretty self-satisfied when, just when we needed it, the sky lightened. So far things were going to plan. Two pitches later we witnessed dawn flooding the Kangchung face of Everest and Lhotse Shar. A sea of cloud filled the Barun Valley below us, lapping against the islands of Chamlang, Baruntse and Tutse. In every climb there is a moment when it all seems worthwhile, and dawn on Kangchuntse was our moment. It lasted about 10 minutes. Then the constant front-pointing began to hurt. The ice was wintry, hard and glassy. Axes and points teetered on half-sunk placements, and it became important to gain that central gully before the stones came rattling down the face.

Steve led a pitch up and left out of the Spider, an Eiger-like feature we had identified during the process of writing our 'route description'. (We had spent the hours watching the face drawing out the features, estimating the pitches and time required, and setting down compass bearings for the descent. All of this was supposed to aid us in case of bad weather. Its real purpose was to divert our thoughts from the consequences of coming unstuck.) Down and to the left again lay the entry to the steep ice gully. It sported vertical steps, brittle stalactites capped with powdery cornices, so we climbed a buttress to the left; at least there we could get fine spike runners. By 1.30pm we reached the large central névé. Our difficulties should have been over, but the snow was high-deep and had been softened deep below the surface by raw, high-altitude sun. The original plan had been to climb to the main summit by a series of linked snow-fields, but now we could barely move. In one hour we plodded no more than 100m, so we chose a line that exited through the summit cliffs, to the right of the main summit. The perfect weather of the morning began to deteriorate through the afternoon. By 3pm we were only able to spot our route through intermittent clearings. We were aiming for a vertical chimney, blocked by a blank-looking boulder which appeared to lead on to a couple of pitches of slanting snow ramps. We reached the chimney pitch at 5pm. The next two pitches were the hardest of the day. First there was a little gentle rock-climbing, swinging about on a poorly frozen-in spike, then in order to avoid doing anything too intimate with the jammed boulder I followed a friendly-looking but deceitful corner filled with ice. The filling fell out about half-way up. Actually it wasn't much good anyway – the red rock grinned through, giving it an unsettling pink sort of colour, nor did the filling conceal any ledges or cracks. Not long after the ice fell out of the corner, I noted my last runner was too far away. The corner ended with a blank wall, and still no runner. There was another groove over to the right. It was a long stride. Wheezing a little, I watched a trembling leg stretch out towards the groove. The body, also trembling, followed the step, then a delicate traverse across thinly iced slabs and, thankfully, to a patch of snow. It was darkening quickly. Belaying took ages, the cracks were blind. The only usable



20. *Victor Saunders on Yaupa, 6433m.*
(Andy Fanshawe) (p 17)



21. *Chamlang, 7319m, Camp 1 – ordinary route.* (A V Saunders) (p 17)

flake was loose. I placed a couple of pegs behind the loose flake and dug a small stance.

When Steve followed, it was without a head-torch, groping for the ice. We thought we had cracked it. Only snow ramps above. But again we had been misled by the snow. Steve's pitch was a horror-show. It was on 60-degree granular powder, like a hill of salt. The snow was waist-deep generally, but would occasionally become much deeper, and then Steve had to struggle to make any kind of progress. He sank deeper with each effort to move up. The deepest powder lay below rock steps, which he had to mantle-shelf, having first cleared a vertical trench. There were no runners, of course. In the dark I saw none of this. All I knew was that I was shivering on the stance. I could not understand why Steve was taking so long. I shouted things I should not have shouted. But when my turn came, I understood why I had been left freezing for two hours.

A couple of slightly easier pitches led to the summit ridge. It was 9.30pm, pitch-black, and blowing a snow-storm. We had arrived at the point marked 7600m on the excellent Schneider map. A sort of South Summit. Turning left would, we knew – in so far as we knew anything – take us to the main summit. Turning right would take us down. We turned right. It cannot be said that we lost our way coming down; we never knew it. The map showed the Makalu La as being due south; it did not show the band of cliffs across the face. We had no idea of their existence until we almost fell over them. Heading due south, we moved roped together, first down a knife-edge with a cornice undercutting it, then a broad gully. Steve slipped down a powder-filled chimney which looked like an innocuous snow gully, but the snow fell away as he stepped into the chimney and left him dangling. Below the chimney slope was cut across by a blackness which swallowed the torch-light. In tiredness and despondency we turned to the left, and followed the edge of this thing – a long cliff or an enormous bergschrund. After a while we found ourselves confronted with a broad easy ice ramp which cut across the black thing and led us down to the plateau of the Makalu La.

The next part of our story is a little confused. We were tired and hungry and the water in our bottles had frozen. Ice berries formed in jangling bunches on our moustaches and, though irritating at first, later proved a useful source of water when licked. We needed to follow compass bearings. But facing into the storm, which blew from the south, was unpleasant. So we measured the wind direction and walked into it. But whenever I put the damn compass into my pocket the wind changed direction; it must have, because twice we checked our bearings, only to find we were heading north, away from the Makalu La. My brains had become quite addled. I remember saying to myself that I really did not want to go down Five Finger or the Steall Gully again, as I had done so often before. Trying hard, I managed to recall the consequences of descending the wrong way off the Makalu La. It would take us into Tibet, via the seracs of Chomo Lonzo. We would finish up on the Kangchung glacier.

After the second balls-up Steve turned to me and relieved himself of a great outpouring of spleen which, I would guess, consisted of mostly unprintable Americanisms, but the friendly gale took the words away before I

could hear. I gave him the compass. We plodded on, knee-deep, thankful for the snow-shoes, the compass-bearer shouting directions to the trail-breaker, but all I could hear was the wind. By 2.30am Steve's toes had begun to freeze and he needed to loosen his boots. Also, we were a little lost. Perhaps dawn might bring new information. Our bivouac was a pair of holes in the snow. The idea had been to dig deep enough to get out of the wind, throw the rucksack into the bottom, and sit out the night; but the sack filled the hole and projected us into the weather. Steve slept well, his head thrown back, muttering peacefully. I spent the time shaking with cold and cursing the frozen water, while trying to melt the chips of ice by breathing into the neck of the bottle. 5am brought light, clouds and more snow, and that familiar conversation.

'Have you got the compass?'

'No, I gave it to you.'

'I don't think so . . .' We just looked at each other.

'Perhaps I put it down beside me . . .' Steve began to sift through the powder, but it was no use. An arm's depth of snow had fallen in the night.

'Let's wait.' We had no choice. 'Perhaps there will be a gap in the clouds.' There was no arguing with that.

After an hour a dim outline which we guessed to be Kangchuntse gave us a rough bearing. Keeping the full 50m of rope stretched out, we managed to steer a straightish line till we stumbled on the three empty tents of the Catalan Camp 3, and knew that we had joined the ordinary route again. That was the last we ever saw of the ordinary route. The tents were at 7500m; we had overshot the La. Somewhere below us were drifted-over tracks leading to fixed ropes and Camp 2. Stumbling and down-climbing, sensing that we were slowly losing height, we passed down buttresses, broad gullies and avalanche slopes. We became involved in a small avalanche; it took us 50m further on our way. Steve's only comment, brushing the snow-dust out of his hat, was, 'I hate avalanches . . .'

By late afternoon we began to recognize the contours of the seracs and the shape of the slots. It had taken all day to reach our tent; at first we could not see it. Standing 10 metres from it, I shouted to Steve that the tent had gone. Then I realized that the small pyramid of fresh snow was the tent. We had been away just 46 hours, and in that time over a metre of snow had fallen.

The next day, still dehydrated enough to produce dark brown pee, we packed the tent, sleeping bags, stove and our rubbish. The rucksacks were heavy, and the snow feathery. When we sat down we didn't stop till the sacks had dragged us beneath the surface.

The descent to 6000m should have taken an hour. It took five. In the blank whiteness, wheezing and gasping under the squeeze of the monstrous loads, we waited for clear patches to drift our way. Then one of the Catalan marker flags would appear briefly. To fix the direction before the flag disappeared, one of us would hurl a ski-stick in the right direction. It was a halting procession. In one place, where the way lay down the steep side of a serac, a hissing noise came out of the snow as I stepped on it. And then, as if a knife had been drawn across it, a slice opened across the slope. Shaking with fear I drew my foot back. I suddenly felt sick and sat down, forgetting about the feathery snow.



22. *Stephen Sustad on Kangchuntse (Makalu 2), 7640m. (A V Saunders) (p 17)*



23. *Kangchuntse (Makalu 2), 7640m – Camp 1 after the storm. (A V Saunders) (p 17)*

'What's it like?' asked Steve, addressing a pair of boots sticking out of a hole in the snow. 'I think we might be stuck', I muttered, trying to clear my face and glasses of snow.

The problem was that the only way down was this slope. Bivouacking there was uninviting, and uphill retreat unthinkable. The solution was a small crevasse above the slope, and the job of belaying from inside the crevasse fell to me. I tied the two ropes together to lower Steve, whose job was to set off the avalanche by descending in the clumsiest way possible. He was up to the task and had soon set off a magnificent chest-deep slab which took the entire slope before it. Unfortunately he lost his way in the whiteness and had to traverse the vertical face of a serac, front-pointing his snow-shoes, to regain the avalanche cone. We had had enough of such novelties by the time we reached the deserted tented village of the ordinary route's Camp 1, at 6000m.

It took another full day to reach Base Camp, wading with snow-shoes through thigh-deep snow for six miles of broken glacier. But the weather had changed again. The skies were clear: a thin wisp, like a ragged prayer-flag, trailed from the summit of Makalu. The storm had ended and, like good amateur chaologists, Steve and I tried to make sense of it all.

'Easter Island,' suggested Steve.

'Pitcairn,' I countered.

'I bet it was Vairaatea.'

'No, no, no. Hereheretue, for sure.'

'Tongatapu?'

And then again, it might have started in the pub.