
Basingthang Peaks – Exploring in the Hidden Kingdom

PETER MOULD

(*Plates 28, 29*)

My special interest in Bhutan can be traced back to 1979 when I was introduced to Dago Tshering, now Home Minister but at that time Bhutan's first ambassador to Bangladesh, and had convinced him that Spencer Chapman really did ascend Chomolhari in 1937. It was not until seven years later that a consultancy assignment fortuitously took me to Bhutan. One part of the assignment involved assessing domestic grain production for which I needed detailed maps, and I gained access to the restricted Indian survey series. I had a hidden agenda: to look for modest, alpine-type peaks, accessible by a short trek from Thimphu the capital, in the hope of organising a trip at the end of my assignment. The Basingthang peaks seemed ideally located, being three to four days' walk from Thimphu, just off the route to Lingshi which now forms part of the popular Chomolhari Base Camp tourist trek.

It soon became evident, however, that the Basingthang peaks were not accessible to a spur-of-the-moment solo jaunt aided by a local porter! Movement of foreigners was, and still is, strictly controlled by the police/immigration authorities and by army and district administrations. Tourists were welcomed (in limited numbers) on standard cultural or trekking package holidays organised by the Bhutan Tourism Corporation (BTC). Mountaineering was even more controlled, being restricted to two or three named peaks at any one time. Since 1983, when regular mountaineering was first permitted, the only 'open' peaks over 6000m have been Jichudrake, Masakang, Kangbun and Gangkar Punsum, of which all but the last have been climbed.

Fortunately, on a subsequent consultancy assignment in 1988, I found myself sharing a tourist lodge with the Director of BTC, and over dinner I tackled him about an expedition to Basingthang. 'For you,' he said 'I will grant permission. We will treat you as a tour operator visiting trekking peaks along the Chomolhari Base Camp trek.' Obviously I had to do something about such a concession, especially as Basingthang had not previously been visited by climbing parties.

Initially my idea was to invite a few climbing friends who had recently been on treks to Nepal, and to set aside October 1989 for the trip. Initial enthusiasm evaporated somewhat on counting the cost – BTC's daily rate charges for hotel and trekking nights, plus the air fare, being much higher than for a similar excursion to Nepal. The solution seemed to be to upgrade the idea of an active holiday into a fully-fledged expedition which might qualify for a grant. Thus an application was made to the Mount Everest Foundation for approval and a

grant in 1990. Reflecting the growing ecological awareness of the times, the expedition acquired the unoriginal label of 'Green Expedition to Bhutan'. The 'green' image would fit in with my offer to the Director of BTC to prepare a report for his government, based on our experiences, about improving services while minimising adverse environmental and cultural impacts of trekking and mountaineering. It might help in getting financial sponsorship, or so I thought, and it was an issue close to my heart. The MEF did offer us a grant but of the 13 members six withdrew, including the doctor, so the expedition had to be postponed.

The four 'hard core' members were determined that lift-off really would occur in 1991. The workings of the grapevine ensured that we had no shortage of interested persons and a successful reapplication was made to the MEF. As preparations advanced, there were further changes in composition, but both the membership and the itineraries eventually jelled. The option of an extended trek for non-mountaineers during the climbing phase of the expedition, and a bit of cultural sightseeing at the beginning and the end, had always been part of our plans. The trekkers split off at Lingshi, a day's walk before Basingthang, and continued along the strenuous, but spectacularly beautiful, Laya-Gaza trek to Punakha and Thimphu, arriving the same day as the mountaineers. The final line-up was:

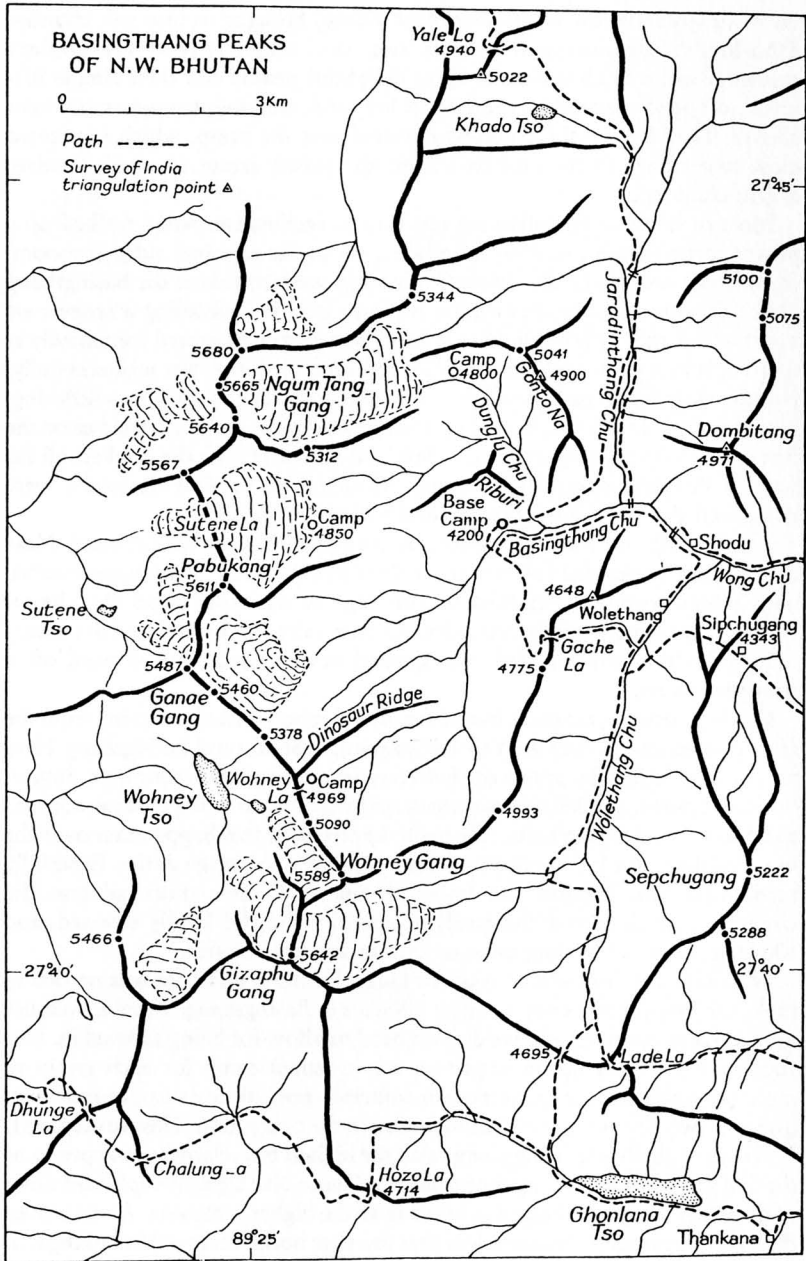
Mountaineers George Band, John Blacker, John Innerdale, Jonathan Innerdale, Eric Langmuir, Jerry Lovatt, Peter Mould (leader), John Nixon (doctor) and Steve Town.

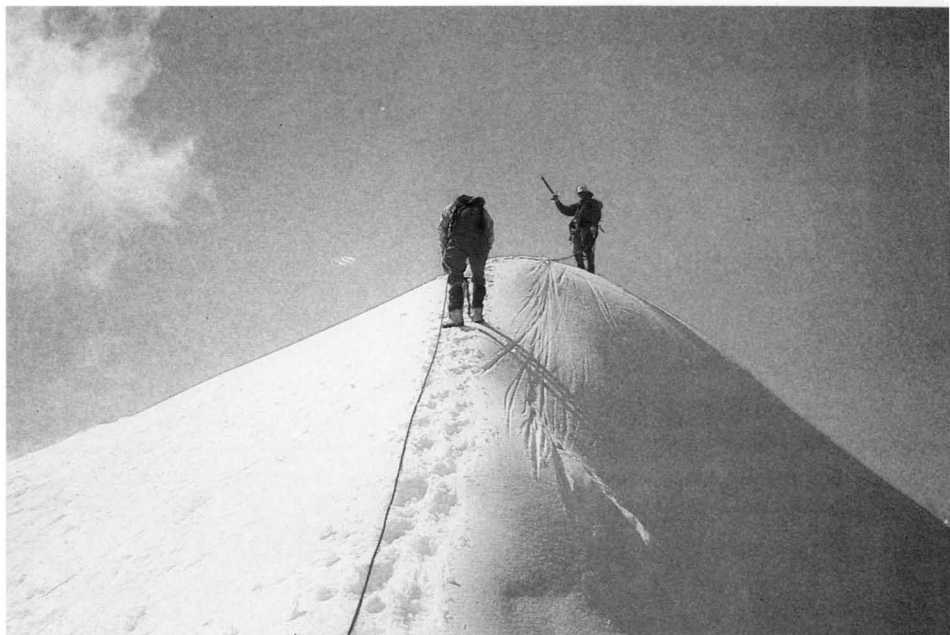
Trekkers Susan Band, John and Georgina Harding, Diana Innerdale, Peter Lowes (trek leader), Kristina Malmberg, Tim and Sue Powell and David Seddon (doctor).

It will be noted that even a hard man like John Harding succumbed to the reputed (and very real) attractions of the trekking route.

Although Basingthang is nearer to Thimphu than Paro, I had asked Etho-Metho, the newly formed trekking company to which BTC had sub-contracted our expedition arrangements, to take the longer walk-in in order to maximise both acclimatisation and overlap with the trekkers. The walking started at Drugyel Dzong, a burnt-out shell of a castle that once housed Bhutanese armies doing battle with Tibetan invaders. Today it is the country's number one pony terminus. Our caravan was fairly small compared with the pony trains that meet the regular needs of the big Indian army training camp, one day's walk away. Nevertheless, we required 35 ponies and 6 horsemen. The trail took us through the cultivated fields and tiny hamlets that occupy the upper Paro valley as far as Gungichawa, our first night's campsite.

The next day we still followed the river, now a tumbling torrent, passing through thick forest and the occasional flower meadow to Soi Thangthanka. Here we camped around the first of a number of purpose-built 'community halls' commissioned by the BTC. Although excellent in concept, providing shelter for 20-25 people, most suffer from serious design faults that prevent the coexistence of live fire and remotely smoke sensitive humans. The next section,





28. Bhutan: the summit of Ngum Tang Gang III, 5640m.
(*George Band*) (p55)



29. Wohney Gang, 5589m (L) and Gizaphu Gang, 5642m (centre R)
seen from the S summit of Ganae Gang, 5460m. (*George Band*) (p55)

on to Jangothang, or Chomolhari Base Camp, brought us into yak country. Etho-Metho had organised a lunch stop at a rather palatial yak herder's residence as an introduction to these delightful people and their simple lifestyle, so heavily dependent on the yak for food, clothing, transport and even shelter. The SE face of Chomolhari towers over the camp, which is situated close to a ruined fortress set on a rock, the easiest ascent of which involves V Diff climbing.

Most of us used the following rest day to acclimatise. Some walked up a flower-carpeted glen, passing twin lakes, on to the terminal ridge (c5000m) from which we viewed the dramatically steep western side of the Basingthang peaks. On our return to the glen the marmots were still whistling whenever we approached, the herds of blue sheep (more like grey deer) grazed contentedly at a safe distance from the path, and George Band, patiently but unsuccessfully, continued casting for trout with his telescopic rod. And all the time a little dog, christened 'Chomolhari', trotted faithfully by our side. She had joined us on the first day as we walked past an army hut, and remained with the trekkers all the way to Punakha effectively warding off all intruders. Our horsemen were convinced she was the reincarnation of a deceased trekker.

The next day took us to Lingshi over the barren Nilela Pass (4700m). Near the campsite were some yak herders' tents or *jha*. Courtesy callers were received with warm hospitality marked by offerings of tasteless, bullet-like cheese. Although seemingly totally dependent on their yaks, our hostess and her family looked healthy and well fed. She sported new trainers, and showed off a transistor radio.

On the following morning five of the nine climbers parted company from the trekkers and set off, over the Yale La (4940m), to Shodu and Basingthang. Here we chose an idyllic flat grassy site between the river and two stone huts. Singye, our suave guide, and his six assistants rapidly set up our 'village' of mess, cook, toilet and five sleeping tents. We really appreciated this happy team over the next ten days, not least because of their volunteer portage duties. Especially memorable was Phunzo the imperturbable cook (the more adverse the circumstances the better the meal), Chime the cheerful kindly steward, and Chorten the minute young assistant but mighty load carrier.

With four climbers still en route at Lingshi, careful planning was needed to make the most of our seven or eight full days in Basingthang. The fine weather looked set to continue and we did not need to allow for being snowed in. Our strategy was to set up, in sequence, a two-tented camp for each group of mountains and arrange for as many members as possible to attempt routes over a one- or two-day period before moving on to the next group. This worked well.

We chose the Ngum Tang Gang, with the highest but relatively easy peaks, as the first group. Our route up the prominent Gonto Na ridge gave splendid views of the whole range and helped in locating all the higher campsites. As we neared the top of the ridge, it became clear that the 1km horizontal section linking it to the glacial plateau was too serrated and rotten to 'go'. The alternative traverse across steep scree was exhausting but led to a good site in a rocky cwm from which an intricate line of ramps and gullies breached the 200m wall below the glacier. The next morning Band, Blacker, Langmuir, Mould and Nixon quickly

gained the gently-inclined glacier and snaked up its 3 km length to the foot of the snowy E ridge of Ngum Tang Gang III, the lowest of the three peaks. (The rocky E ridge of Ngum Tang Gang I, the highest peak, would, we judged, be dangerous and unpleasant.) Tackling the ridge in two ropes, we enjoyed pleasant straightforward climbing despite some steep sections up to 65°. The minuscule summit (5640m), looking towards Chomolhari, Jichudrake and Tsheringang, gave the most magnificent mountain views that I had ever seen. A narrow, gently-inclined ridge led on from the summit to Ngum Tang Gang II (5665m) but, sadly, it was too late in the day to go further, given the need to descend to base that night.

The next day we shifted our attention to the Wohney Gang group. The Innerdales and Lovatt set up a Camp 2 just below the Wohney La and reconnoitred routes for the following day. Rejecting the steep, rocky N ridge, they crossed the La and descended to and crossed the Wohney glacier in the hope of being able to find a way up the rocky buttress that bastioned the NW/W snow ridge. They ran out of time and returned to Camp 2 where Band, Blacker, Langmuir and Mould were waiting, ready to plan the next day. The Innerdales would immediately descend to base and take a rest day in preparation for an attack on Ganae Gang. Band and Blacker would go to Point 5090 on the N ridge and a 'strong' party of Langmuir, Lovatt and Mould would make a second attempt on the NW/W ridge of Wohney Gang.

On a cold clear morning we set out across the glacier towards the foot of the rock buttress but, through an unspoken consensus, we veered south and made for the least steep of the snow gully/ribs on the N face of the ridge at the head of the glacier. Our route gave us eleven rope-lengths of fine climbing up to the slightly corniced crest and on to the summit. An infinity of peaks and imagined valleys lay all around us. I had to pinch myself – was this real? I had gazed on the majesty of God's creation in the mountains many times but this view surpassed all my memories. Yes, it was 2pm on 15 October 1991 and we were on the summit of Wohney Gang (5589m), the most prominent of some twelve peaks that form the western watershed of the Basingthang Chu. Nearest, and to our south, were the fluted white peaks of Gizaphu Gang (5642m) and its three outliers. To our north the rocky N ridge of Wohney Gang dropped sharply to the La we had crossed that morning, while beyond the col lay the NS band of peaks, clustered round three separate glaciers, that form the rest of the Basingthang chain. In an easterly direction we could glimpse our Base Camp at the head of the grassy levels of Basingthang ('hidden fields') and, beyond that, the jumble of the Lunana peaks punctuated by the snow dome of Kangbum and the isolated white towers of Masakang, Gangkar Punsum and Kula Kangri. To our west the ridge we had just ascended fell away in sinuous undulations, curving NW and leading the eye on to Chomolhari, Jichudrake and distant giants beyond. We could clearly distinguish Kangchenjunga and, at 260km distance, Everest.

That same day Nixon soloed the highest point (5487m) of the next group to the north, which we nicknamed Saddle Peak ('Ganae Gang' in Bhutanese). It was the only one that merits the title 'trekking peak', being safely accessible to a guided party of mountain walkers. The day after, Band, the Innerdales, and Town repeated the route and bagged both Ganae Gang I and II.

There was just time to explore the last group of peaks clustered round the Pabukang snowfield and glacier. Access to a beautiful grassy campsite up the Riburi ridge was direct but steep. The prominent moraine, on the S side of the rapidly retreating glacier, ended close to Camp 3 and turned out to be a veritable animal motorway. The post-monsoon sun had hardened the traces of the more recent passers-by into cleanly-cast footprints. We could clearly distinguish the hooves of blue sheep, the pugs of snow leopard with claw marks 'frozen' in the fine gravel, and the bigger imprints, with thicker claws, of bear. Then there was one line of marks, slightly bigger and broader than that of the bear, with toe rather than claw marks, and what seemed to be a biped gait. In response to our description, Singye's verdict was 'mountain gorilla, or yeti'.

The following morning we lethargically ascended the Pabukang glacier following the recent marks of a snow leopard, mother and young, which had skilfully negotiated the crevasses. At the col (5220m) we second-breakfasted in the sun while weighing up the planned routes. The snow/ice couloirs up the tooth of Pabukang (5611m) to the snow summit ridge looked desperately steep. Closer inspection of the easily-inclined scree-like S ridge of Peak 5567 revealed that the rock step would be more formidable than we had thought. Lassitude won and we retraced our steps to Camp 3 and returned to base.

As we bade farewell to Thinley Dorji and his family, his yaks thundered past like bison on the prairies. The long, hard two-day walk-out to the roadhead at Dodina took us through more beautiful country. Most dramatic was the 12km gorge section, very similar to Verdon.

Reunited with the trekkers, our last week in Bhutan involved celebratory meals, shopping, visits to spectacular dzongs and monasteries, a drive half-way across the kingdom to Bumthang to witness traditional dancing at an annual festival, and Bhutanese hot rock baths. But all that is another story. In Thimphu we met Ronald Naar, a professional climber, and Bas Gresnigt of the Dutch Bhutan Expedition 1991 who were about to set off to tackle 'unclimbed peaks up to 20,000ft in NW Bhutan'. We told them about our experiences and lent them maps. On our return to the UK we learnt that they had made first ascents of Chatarake (5570m) some distance to the SW of Basingthang, and two of the Gizaphu Gang peaks, which they propose to christen 'Victor Kangri' after Ronald's son.

A few days before our arrival the BTC was abolished; the newly-established Tourism Authority of Bhutan will regulate tourism in its place. Fortunately, our expedition report coincided with their need to publish new trekking regulations, and should be of help to them in revising those for mountaineering and in preparing guidelines for cultural tourism. Our report also mentioned the scope for many more 'trekking peak' expeditions in other parts of Bhutan, especially the Lunanu area. In Basingthang itself there is, of course, unfinished business on Gizaphu Gang, in the Pabukang group, and on Ngum Tang Gang; and there is ample scope for those (in limited numbers, please) who simply wish to absorb the beauty, peace and harmony of Basingthang: its peaks, the wildlife and its people.

Summary: Green Expedition to Bhutan. October 1991. The nine climbers on this 18 member expedition explored the western watershed peaks (5000m–5700m) of the scenic Basingthang valley some 25km SE of Chomolhari. They made what are thought to be first ascents of Wohney Gang (5589m), Ngum Tang Gang III (5640m) and Ganae Gang I (5487m) and II (5460m). The expedition submitted a report to the Government of Bhutan on widening opportunities and improving services for trekkers and mountaineers, while minimising adverse environmental and cultural impacts.