
BILL O'CONNOR

Nepal 1992

With contributions from Józef Nyka

A year of triumph and tragedy both on and off the mountains – 1992 was undoubtedly a 'horrible year'.

Dhaulagiri 1 – NE ridge A Russian expedition from Krasnoyarsk led jointly by Nikolai Smetanin and Vladimir Musyenko climbed the NE ridge (normal route). After establishing five camps along the route climbers Nikolai Zakharov, Peter Kuznetsov, Nikolai Smetanin, Valeri Kokhanov and Aleksei Gulyayev reached the summit from a camp at 7700m on 30 April. Having switched their objective from another route without permission, both leaders were punished by the Nepalese authorities for violating the rules. Neither will be allowed to climb in Nepal for the next five years.

Everest – South Col Sagarmatha continues to attract the attention of expeditions from around the world. The large number of newly independent states will undoubtedly mean continued interest and income from the Baltic to Bosnia. I'm not so sure that the Sherpas will continue to accept titanium ice screws as part payment for their labours!

The Russians it seems are taking more than full advantage of their new found freedom. A Siberian expedition, sponsored by the Togliatti car factory, led by Vyachaslav Volkov and Ivan Dusharin controversially climbed the South Col route. Originally they had permission for the W ridge, but changed their objective to the South Col route despite their request to do so being turned down by the Nepalese authorities. Their first summit attempts on 2 and 4 May failed because of poor weather. However, conditions improved and four climbers reached the summit on 12 May. Two days later another four reached the summit. Some teams used supplementary oxygen. One of the summit climbers was Fyodor Konyukhov, a well-known Russian traveller and adventurer, but not a climber. It was his first time in high mountains! Once again the Nepalese responded to this violation of the rules by banning the eight climbers and the expedition leader from Nepal for five years.

On 15 May a Spanish expedition was also successful on Everest. They climbed the more difficult but safer 1981 American combination which links the Polish S Pillar with the upper part of the South Col route. TV cameraman Ramón Portilla and army officers Capt Francisco Gam and Major Alfonso Juez with two Sherpas reached the summit from Camp 4 (8000m) in ten hours using bottled air.

A Dutch expedition led by Ronald Naar reached the summit on 12 May. Naar and Edmond Öffner with Sherpas Nima Temba and Dawa Tashi reached the top from Camp 4 on the South Col. Ronald Naar has now joined the growing band who have climbed the highest summits on all seven continents.

Pierre Tardivel became the highest skier in the world – his 40th ‘first’. On 27–28 September 1992 he skied down 3200 vertical metres from the South Summit (8760m).

Annapurna – S face A Slovene expedition led by Tone Skarja hoped to repeat the British route. Having established their Base Camp on 29 September they made little progress owing to poor weather. A two-day long blizzard deposited 1½m of snow after they had established Camp 2 (5900m), but five days later they returned to the mountain, establishing a further camp at 6600m in appalling conditions. Progress was reduced to 100m a day. On 21 October Filip Bence and Iztok Tomazin reached a high point of 6700m. They made a further attempt at the Swiss route on the right-hand side of the S face.

Pierre Beghin died attempting the face. His partner Jean-Pierre Lafaille was given medical help by the Slovenians. Both expeditions left the mountain on 28 October.

Annapurna and K2 are the only 8000ers not to have been climbed by Slovene expeditions.

Cho Oyu – normal route A six-member Slovene expedition climbed the mountain by the normal route on 21 September. Five climbers reached the summit. Conditions on the mountain were very cold and all members of the expedition had frostbitten hands and feet. The Slovene climbers did not use oxygen or Sherpas. The mountain was also climbed by Japanese, Italian and Spanish expeditions using oxygen and Sherpas.

Manaslu – normal route A large international group led by Polish climber Krzysztof Wielicki climbed the mountain on 28 September by the normal route. The team, which included Polish climbers, Italians, Bulgarians and a Belgian, made a further attempt on 2 October. Using fixed ropes left by a Korean expedition, Polish climbers Dmowska and Sprutta with Vermeiren (Belgium) attempted to establish a third camp above 6600m. Caught out by darkness they attempted to reach a Canadian camp already in place. Miss Dmowska fell to her death from the fixed ropes before reaching the tent. The following day Vermeiren attempted to descend to Camp 2 but also fell, dying later from his injuries.

Ama Dablam This most beautiful mountain continues to attract a lot of attention. Quick access (it is only a week from Lukla airstrip to Base Camp) means the S ridge attracts a large number of expeditions, both private and commercial. Sadly, it also accounts for many fatalities. Belgian climber Karen Van Dooren was killed on 26 October. Her body was not recovered.

Saipal (7031m) – NE spur A party led by Chuck Evans explored remote NW Nepal and carried out a reconnaissance of the NE side of Saipal reaching 5700m on the NE spur.

Kathmandu Air Crash Tragically, a PIA aircraft carrying a large number of British climbers and trekkers crashed in poor visibility on its approach to Kathmandu. Several members of the Alpine Club were amongst those killed – their obituaries appear in the In Memoriam section of this volume.

Trouble on the Trail There were several reports of groups trekking into the Rolwaling being harassed by villagers, and at least one group was turned back. However, this does not appear to be a common occurrence and without

full details it is hard to draw conclusions. Some incidents appear to have occurred close to the New Year festival and *chang* was mentioned in more than one account.

The Rising Cost of Climbing The really disturbing trend in Nepal is the rising cost of climbing. Everest in particular is fast becoming the preserve of the fabulously rich or well sponsored. Arguably it is a reaction to the growing number of commercial expeditions attempting 8000m peaks. With clients willing to pay a lot of money (£15,000 plus) to have a holiday on Everest and organisations willing to provide six-figure sponsorship (eg. British Telecom's sponsorship of a recent attempt on Makalu) mountains are big business for third world countries. But who can blame them when permits have been sold on for a big profit whilst expeditions have been known to charge 'loads of money' for others to use 'their' route through the Icefall. It seems that market forces are catching up with us and, true to Thatcherite principles, peak fees, like the Himalaya, are rising. The Nepalese along with Bhutan and China are cashing in on their assets and charging highly for the glory of climbing their highest, or highest unclimbed, mountains.

The downside of this is that it discourages small, lightweight expeditions that want to climb high mountains by difficult routes in good style. Sponsors and clients have more interest in success and risk free adventure than in style.

The Price of Adventure The price of adventure doesn't come cheap. Leo Dickenson made a dramatic film of the first balloon flight over Everest for Channel 4. Even so a peak fee still had to be paid – in this case twice. The air space on the Nepal side of the mountain cost a mere \$2000 plus \$2000 in trekking fees. The cost of the landing on the Tibetan side however really hurt, not just in terms of broken ribs. In this case the air space cost \$100,000, the filming fee \$110,000 and the transport out a further \$55,000! On the ground the fee for Everest has also risen to \$50,000 for up to five climbers. Extra climbers are charged \$10,000 per head up to a maximum of seven. Surprisingly the peak fee for the N side comes cheaper, the Chinese charging \$500 per head, but beware the land costs. Nepal is not yet the most expensive 'adventure playground'. The fee for Namcha Barwa (7782m) is said to have cost around \$1,000,000, whilst it is rumoured that unclimbed Gangkar Puenzum (7541m) in Bhutan is even higher and there is no refund for failure!