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CHUCK EVANS

## The Other Side of Nepal

(Plates 70–75)

*In memory of Carlton Freeman who was due to share this adventure, but sadly was killed in the Alps shortly before our departure.*

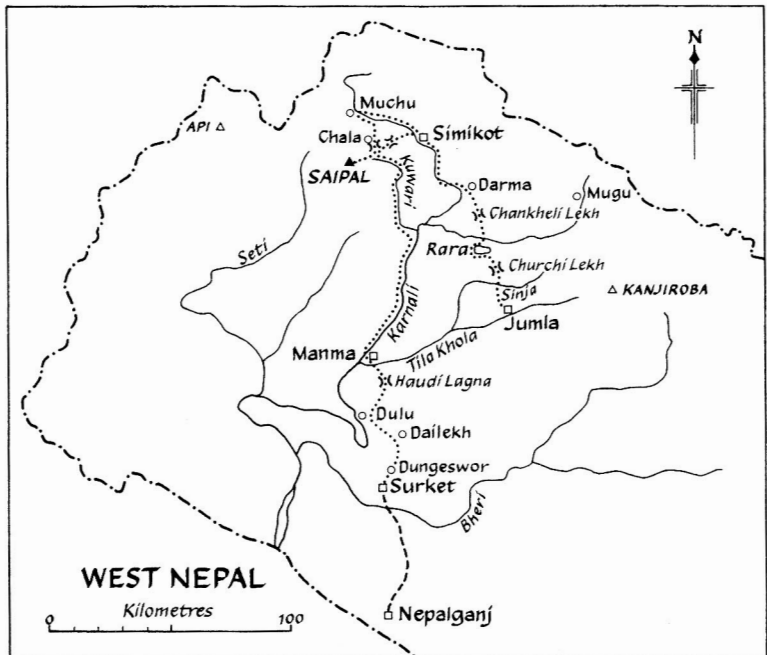
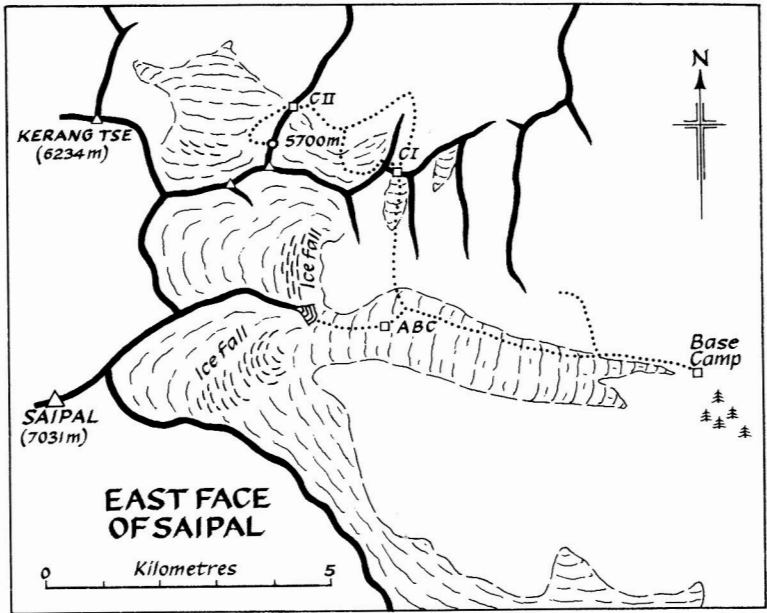
### To the Karnali

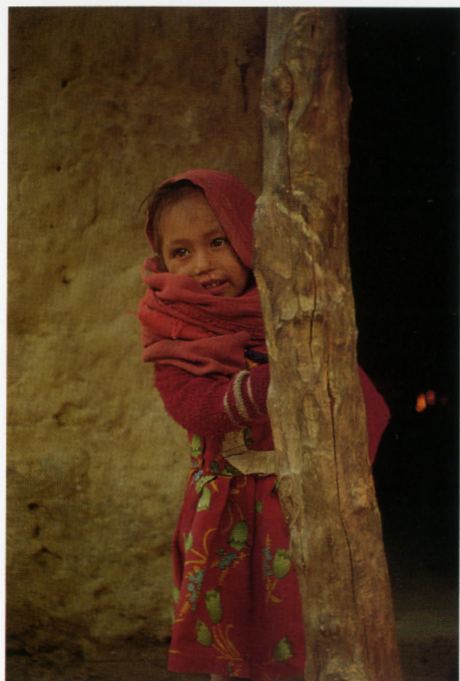
Across the Terai long stretches of road lead into the warm smell of Indian night. I am awoken as our bus lurches to the side of a bumpy ungraded track and we stop on a bridge over the Babai Nadi to let the drivers sleep before venturing into the hills. The stars are bright and mosquitoes are abroad. Taking a stroll to stretch my legs, I beat a hasty retreat at the sound of uproar from the local village dogs, and then, with each returning step, wonder if I have turned my back on a tiger.

The road ends at Surkhet and early in the morning of 9 April 1992 we begin our trek. The first day is an eye-opener; no breakfast and a 5000ft climb, with the thermometer on John's sack reading 40°C. We struggle awkwardly between patches of shade and curse the descending mules, which kick up dust and aggravate our already parched throats. There is little water and only one tea stop all day, but *daal baht* works wonders and the songs and laughter of our 63 porters help us up to a ridge-top village at about 7000ft. We experience the joy of the first camp fire, eat masses of food and then settle down to what, for me, is the best sleep I've had for months.

A day of deep red rhododendrons and a knee-wrenching descent leads down to Dungeswor in the Koltila Khola. Caroline and Julia muster an audience of 20 or 30 children as they go for a swim whilst Matt, John, Frank and I are left to wash in relative peace! No requests here for sweets, for 'one rupee' or 'school pen'. We learn that back home John Major is re-elected, but domestic politics slips the mind; it has no relevance.

Over the next few days we gain height gradually, passing west of Dailekh and east of Dulu, site of the winter palace of the ancient kings of Jumla. We get to know our Sherpas (Tenzing Tashi from Khumjung and Nuru from Solu) and also our mobile kitchen. This is led by Nawang Kharsang from Rimishung with Mila from Ghorka and two Rai boys. Their names are difficult so we call them Jimmy and S-B. Roshan Sharma from Terai acts as general factotum. We settle into the freedom of expedition life, where all is new and of the moment. Uncomplicated by the events of yesterday or the troubles of tomorrow, there is no meaning beyond the next horizon. Our preoccupations are confined to food and porters, with





70. Local child below Hardi Lagna pass in the foothills of W Nepal. (Chuck Evans) (p81)



71. Bhotia girl outside Simikot, capital of Humla. (Chuck Evans) (p81)



72. Humla shepherd descending from Sankha Lagna to the Kerang Khola. (Julia Wood) (p81)

Saipal remaining, beyond comprehension, 14 days' walk to the north. Only the occasional Mugu man and his goats hint of another world beyond the mountains we can't yet see. Even the Karnali river is a dream.

To reach Manma, district capital of Kalikot, we must climb through dense jungle over the 3000m Haudi Lagna. In contrast to the heat of the day, the cool of the woods on the skin is refreshing and revives senses numbed by sun and dirt. I often wonder at the age of the paths through these hills, and here the creepers, white orchids and hanging lichens add a primeval quality. In 70 days away from roads we meet only one Westerner: a Dutch eye surgeon who works in the Karnali zone for three months each year. She tells us that here in these woods she has met a nomadic jungle people. Keeping themselves apart from the local Nepalis (who don't regard them as human) they wear few clothes and build no villages. They live in small encampments for two to three months at a time before again vanishing into the trees. In a land already primitive by Western standards it is strange to be confronted with shadows of yet older times.

Through the haze from Haudi Lagna we are elated by our first and only view of Saipal during the walk in. We place pink rhododendrons on a little shrine and plunge into the Tila Khola. Our excitement leads to renditions of French climbing songs and 'Hills of the North Rejoice' – which are answered by all manner of hoots and catcalls from the Sherpas far below. Food is scarce from now on and so at Manma we buy government rice for our porters. It isn't available to the locals and, although of inferior quality, costs the same as in Kathmandu (20p/1kg). For a week we follow the west bank of the Karnali northwards. At times we walk close to the river for hour after hour, now deafened by a roaring torrent, now a little astonished as 1000 tonnes of glossy blue-green water slide silently by. On other days we traverse hillsides, 1000m above the golden ribbon which, far below, carves relentlessly down to the Ganges plain. It is hot, arid cactus country and somehow claustrophobic – we can't see where we are going nor where we have come from. We turn in on ourselves and have the sense of passing through an underworld. The people are poor but high-caste Hindus and the villages have flat-roofed Tibetan-style houses. We take an occasional swim or watch monkeys prowling the cliffs on the far bank, and one morning an owl the size of an eagle is chased by crows out of an enormous banyan tree.

At last we come 'down to a temperate valley', the Kuwari Khola, our secret back door to Saipal and Humla. We leave behind the Karnali zone and enter fragrant pine forests and, deep in the river valley, a wet and wonderful jungle of walnut and bamboo. This constricts to a narrower gorge before opening out into a mythical land of alpine meadows with one or two small Bhotia settlements. Here the goats, previously seen through clouds of dust and laden with bags of rice, are grazing contentedly on green grass. Potatoes, chang and curd are available. There is a freshness in the air and for me a sense of homecoming.

## The Mountain

In 1963 the Japanese climbed Saipal by its S ridge and in 1985 the Spanish by the SW face and the W ridge. Both these and previous expeditions had approached the mountain from the Seti river system. Following exploration by Denis Bertholet in 1988 two separate expeditions, Austrian and Swiss, flew to Simikot, capital of Humla, and managed to establish a base camp on the NW side of Saipal from which they succeeded in climbing the N ridge.

We were the seventh expedition to reach the mountain, but the first to approach from the Karnali. Base Camp was established in front of the E face on 26 April at the foot of the terminal moraine of a short flattish glacier which led to broad open meadows. It was low (3650m) but very beautiful; trees covered the hills on either side and the Sherpas were quite as taken with the place as we were.

The summit was seven miles from Base Camp and at 7031m was still 11,000ft above us. Whilst distant and ethereal, this massive cascade of icefall and rock seemed at the same time immediate and compelling. It had already taken hold of our imagination and now stood no longer a dream, but a tangible barrier between us and our aspirations. To our left the serrated E ridge extended towards us for two miles at over 6000m and then dropped sharply to a col. On our right two peaks at 5940m and 5760m were joined by a complicated ridge system (the NE spur). Ahead, a massive cornice stretched along the N ridge, surmounting a magnificent double-backed amphitheatre.

We made Advanced Base at 3850m in the middle of the glacier and directly below two large icefalls, which were separated by a rock buttress. A continuous barrage of sérac avalanches from both sides and stonefall on the buttress rendered any direct assault on the face inadvisable. We therefore turned our attention to circumventing the right-hand icefall to the north, and climbed a gully and bowl to reach Camp 1 (4800m) on a hitherto uncrossed pass. From here our attempts to reach the main N ridge along the NE spur proved unfruitful, and so we decided to push further into Humla.

From Camp 1 we descended into a bowl and, skirting west round Peak 5760m, were forced to climb avalanche-prone slopes up to a ridge on which we placed Camp 2 at 5200m. Progress from here was blocked by an arête running between the mountain and Kerang Tse (an unattempted 6000m satellite of Saipal). We traversed towards this, but retreated at the prospect of another descent and reascent under an unpleasant icefall. Our final effort was to climb to a high point of 5700m on the N side of the mountain.

Whilst a little disappointed at our inability to find an acceptable route, we were looking forward to a big feed at Base Camp and hoped to explore the approaches to the E ridge on the S side of the amphitheatre. Unfortunately, descending with heavy sacks from Camp 2 on 16 May, Nuru Sherpa and I were involved in separate falls down the same gully. We gathered speed on unstable snow, hurtled down an avalanche runnel and flew over a large bergschrund to land painfully on its lower lip. Relieved not to be



73. Saipal E face, looking S from above Chala. (*Chuck Evans*) (p81)



74. Visitor to Saipal Base Camp in the Kuwari Khola. (*Chuck Evans*) (p81)



75. Man with prayer wheel in Chala, a remote Humla village. (*Chuck Evans*) (p81)

seriously injured, I hobbled across to Nuru who had broken his ankle and cracked a vertebra. With some difficulty and suffering considerable pain in his back, Nuru was lowered and then carried down to an emergency camp. From here, John Holland and Roshan made a marathon journey over the Chote Lagna (4700m) to Simikot in order to radio for a helicopter. Five days later, Nuru was evacuated from the N side of the mountain and, back in Kathmandu, had an operation to pin his ankle.

It was perhaps fortuitous that we were delayed by this accident, as at some time on the same day a huge avalanche thundered down our route between Camp 1 and Advanced Base. Having fanned out 200yds onto the main glacier, the tumbled blocks of ice still involved us in a 20ft climb down to our old trail to Base Camp.

## **Humla**

When we left the Kuwari Khola on 26 May it was covered in spring flowers, and yaks from the nearby Humla village of Chala were grazing in the summer pastures at Sain. However, the north-facing slopes of the 4560m Sankha Lagna were still deep in snow. We struggled down through mist into a canyon and next day crossed the Kerang Khola to reach Chala – a primitive collection of flat-roofed houses huddled together below a broad ridge separating the Humla Karnali and Kerang Khola rivers.

Enjoying being on the move again, we travelled deeper into Humla and rejoined the Karnali at Muchu, a village of apple orchards on the Tibetan trade route. The region was much more alpine and less arid than we had expected. A panorama of several unnamed 6000m peaks was visible to the north of the Karnali and we had exceptional views back to Saipal and on to the S side of Gurla Mandhata in Tibet.

Humla was also less poor than we had been led to believe. The people clearly led a subsistence life-style, but the Bhotia settlements we passed following the Karnali back east to Simikot were well ordered and prosperous compared with the Thakuri villages further down river. We waited a week for our Chala porters to recover from festivities following a local election and complete the journey from Base Camp. Their in-bred characteristics did not impress our kitchen boys, who called them 'spider-monkeys', and when finally they arrived at Simikot they seemed ill at ease even in this remote outpost of Nepal.

## **Return via Rara Lake**

We paid them off and succeeded in air-lifting most of our gear direct to Nepalganj to enable us to travel light on the walk out to Jumla. On 8 June we dropped back into the Humla Karnali gorge, and followed it south and east for three days, slightly disconcerted by reports of cholera further downstream.

At Darma we left the river and began a climb to the Chankheli Lekh, a delightful pine-forested pass leading over into Mugu. After a long hot day we reached Rara on the evening of 13 June just as it was getting dark. Whilst not particularly impressive by European standards, Rara, at an

altitude of over 3000m, is the biggest lake in Nepal. Its isolation gives that restful tranquillity which, after weeks in the hills, can only be provided by a mile or two of level water. It is fresh and clear and surrounded by wild roses and pine trees. A strange feature is that hardly any streams flow in or out, despite a 4000ft drop to the Mugu Karnali as it bypasses the lake on its N and E flanks.

From Rara a day and a half took us over the Churchi Lekh and down to the Sinja Khola, where we were eaten alive by midges. Another day over a final pass and a long descent brought us to Jumla, a veritable metropolis. We camped by the airfield and gazed with mixed feelings at the Kanjiroba Himal.

**Summary:** In April-May 1991 the six members of the British Saipal Expedition, led by Chuck Evans, carried out a first reconnaissance of the NE side of Saipal (7031m), reaching 5700m on the NE spur. They also travelled through the little-known region of Humla.