
JOHN HUNT

Kangchenjunga: Eastern Approaches

(Plates 6-10)

Throughout the 1930s Kangch was the magnet which lured me and Joy to Darjeeling and onwards into Sikkim. We seized every opportunity to explore that little kingdom. Kangchenjunga was always there – a magnificent background during our treks. We used to await that magical moment when the rains cleared the haze in October; in my district (Rangpur) in North Bengal we enjoyed an ethereal vision of the mountain, its snows yellowed by the distance of 100 miles, apparently floating above the foothills. We went to take a closer look, twice trekking along the Singalila Ridge, down to Yoksam, up the Parek Chu and on to the Guicha La. Across the Talung glacier we had close-up views of Kangchenjunga's southern buttresses and the dramatic Zemu La (19,000ft).

And so it was that, with C R (Reggie) Cooke, who had made the first ascent of Kabru in 1935, we set out as a very lightweight expedition to the Zemu glacier in October 1937. Our purpose was to inspect the east side of the North Col, and to gain experience of climatic and snow conditions in the early part of the winter, in particular in regard to cold and wind at high altitude. We hoped to advise the Joint Himalayan Committee on the prospects of climbing Everest after, rather than before, the monsoon. When we began our journeys up the glacier in late October, we enjoyed brilliantly clear skies, but met with appalling snow conditions. We ploughed and plunged through snow crust, wading knee-deep (and sometimes waist-deep) on the glacier and lower slopes. Most of the avalanches (windslab) had fallen, but Joy and I had a very 'near miss' in the second of two attempts on Sugar Loaf (21,300ft). We were eventually defeated by the wind on the summit ridge – only 200ft from the summit. Indeed, it was the ferocity of that west wind throughout November which persuaded us that this was not a favourable period for climbing at high altitude.

Reggie Cooke and I experienced it again on Nepal Peak (23,500ft). I made a solo ascent of the SW summit, but such was the force of the western gale that it was impossible to continue along the 300 feet (and 100 vertical feet) to the higher peak. Later, we were literally blown off our feet on reaching the 20,000ft Nepal Gap. Returning to our tents, we found them collapsed, with their metal poles broken.

The most important of these climbs was undertaken by Reggie Cooke, with Dawa Thondup, Pasang Kikuli and Kitar, in an attempt to reach the

North Col. In a remarkable *tour de force*, they climbed beyond the highest rocks, and Cooke was launched on the upper ice face, only 200-300ft below the Col, when he called off this hazardous venture; stones and lumps of ice were hurtling down from the edge of the col, detached by the west wind. It was clearly no suitable line of approach to the summit of Kangchenjunga.

Meanwhile, Pasang* (Dawa Lama) and I slogged our way through dreadful snow beneath the East Face of Kangchenjunga and made the third ascent of the Zemu La (19,275ft). Paul Bauer had last been there in 1931, prospecting a possible route to Kangchenjunga along its NE Spur (the 'Bauer Spur'). Yetis had also travelled that way. We followed their tracks to the narrow neck of the gap and traced their onward progress down the precipitous Talung side.

Cooke and I also made a first crossing from the Nepal Gap glacier over the ridge connecting the Twins with the Sugar Loaf. It was a particularly fine expedition, its outcome made uncertain by the rising mists.

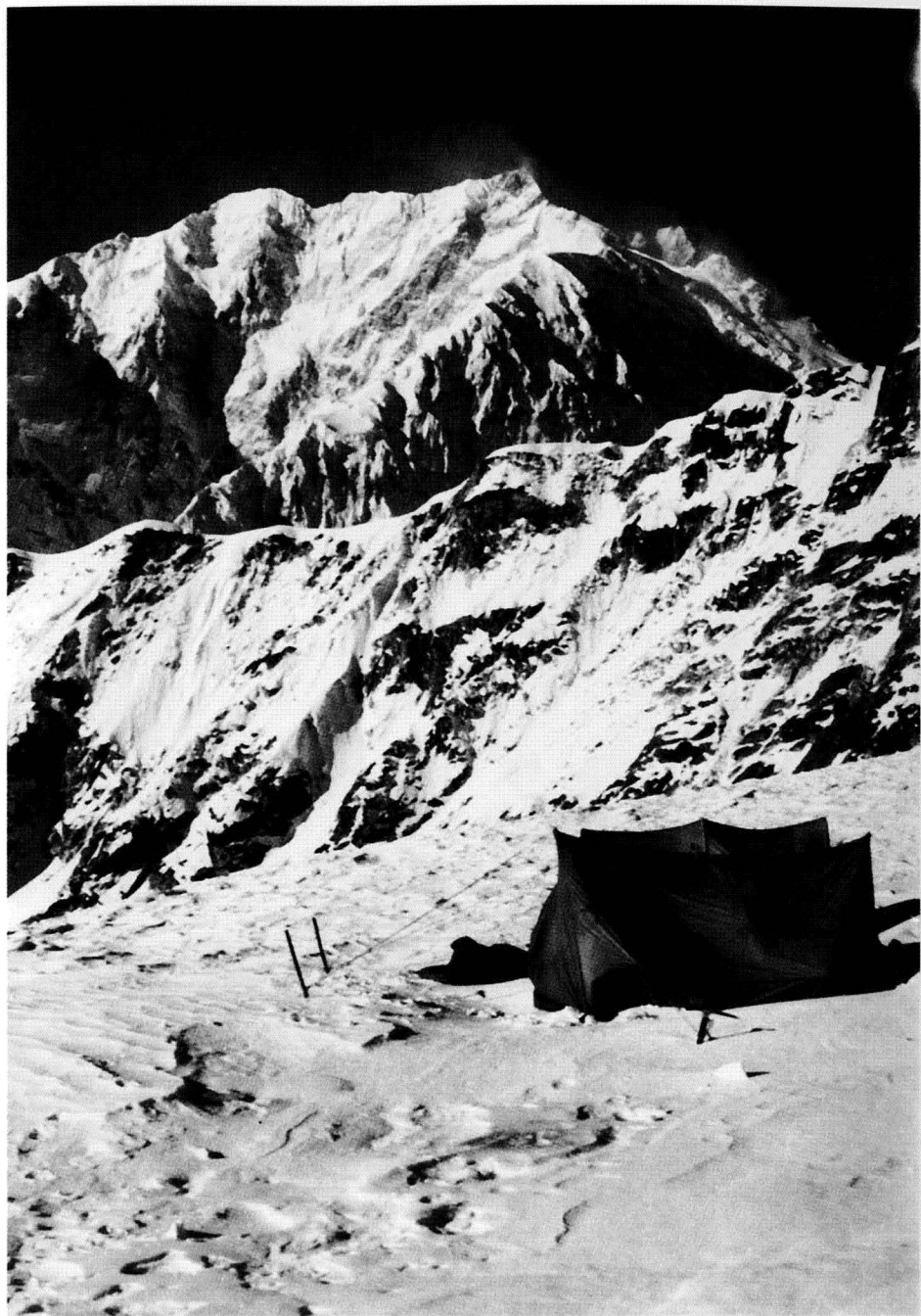
Finally, Cooke and two of our Sherpas crossed the Simvu La (17,000ft) into the Passanram valley, rejoining the Teesta at Gezing – a very arduous and adventurous journey.

My abiding memories are of that 10,000ft precipice of the East Face of Kangch and the remarkable ramp of its NE Spur on which Paul Bauer had made two bold attempts to reach the North Ridge in 1929 and 1931. Unforgettable, too, was that most elegant of peaks: Siniolchu (22,600ft), which dominates the lower part of the Zemu glacier. At Lachen we met a Swiss and two delightful Germans, Ernst Grob, Herbert Paider and Ludwig Schmaderer, elated after making the second ascent of that peak. Over many bamboo jars of *marwa*, they gave us a graphic account of this achievement and of their unfortunate experiences on Nepal Peak and other summits owing to the conditions of late monsoon snowfall.

(* In 1937 he was known as just 'Pasang'. Although he had recently climbed Chomolhari with F Spencer-Chapman, he had little experience and was nervous on steep ground.)



10. Siniolchu and, in the middle distance, Sugar Loaf from the West Ridge of Nepal Peak. (*John Hunt*) (p31)



6. The East Face of Kangchenjunga, showing the NE ('Bauer') Spur, seen from a camp on Nepal Peak. (*John Hunt*) (p31)



7. The North Ridge of Kangchenjunga from the SE Couloir on Nepal Peak. (*John Hunt*) (p31)



8. Coming through the cornice onto the SW Ridge of Nepal Peak. John Hunt and Reggie Cooke had climbed the big SE Couloir and had made an ice cave bivouac just below where Dawa Thondup is standing. The ridge beyond connects with the Twins. (*John Hunt*) (p31)



9. Siniolchu, 6887m, 'the most beautiful mountain in the world', seen from Sugar Loaf, 6492m, lying between the Twins and the Nepal Gap glaciers. (*John Hunt*) (p31)