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DAVE WYNNE-JONES

## Pokharkan South Face, Nepal

'Hey, *bhaje!*'

Kaji, our sirdar and the fastest man up Everest, was waving to us from up ahead. We'd arrived at base camp, and by now we were all hailed as *bhajes* or grandads. I knew I'd just turned 50 but what was I getting myself into? I suppose Dick Isherwood was responsible for starting it. With a full white beard, he bears more than a passing resemblance to Father Christmas, especially with his red woolly hat on. Speaking Nepali, he quickly recognised the joke and was quite able to hold his own in repartee with the Sherpas, but that just gave the whole thing currency. In fairness, his wasn't the only white or grey head amongst the team; at least two admitted they actually were grandads. It was just that some of the team were of an age where grandfatherhood hadn't occurred to them, never mind the female contingent who also seemed to have become honorary *bhajes*. In a funny way it was a term of respect, perhaps affection, and reflected the care the support team took of us. Of such things are relationships made.

We were in the Damodar Himal, just north of Phugaon, moving up to find a base camp. What had begun with Steve Town suggesting to a bunch of AC veterans that they might like to do a trekking peak or two had developed into a fully-fledged expedition after the Nepalese authorities released 103 new peaks from the restricted list. The complication was the Maoist insurrection, which deterred at least two potential members of the team. David Baldock had kept a record of reported 'incidents', mapping them to ascertain 'safe' areas. Ultimately he gave the thumbs up after NMA advice recommended Pokharkan (6350m), lying north of the Annapurnas and west of Manaslu.

Numerous teams had explored the Peri Himal, which lies to the east and includes Himlung, Gjanj Kang and Kang Guru. Similarly the Chulu trekking peaks to the south are frequently climbed, but research showed that very little had been climbed in the Damodar. Apart from Pokharkan there were at least five other unclimbed peaks including Amotsang, Jomsang, Chhib and Saribung, all around 6300m. Of course, Tilman had done some exploration hereabouts in 1950, attempting to circumnavigate the Damodar. He was forced to retreat and eventually made his way west via the Pukhung to the Kali Gandaki. Our best efforts turned up neither photographs nor anyone who had visited the area since. Still, with a couple of centuries climbing experience between us why should we worry?

The approach to the Damodar follows the Annapurna circuit from the Besisahar roadhead as far as Koto. There we had some bad news. A descending Sherpa told us that he had climbed Pokharkan from the north

two weeks earlier with a lone Japanese client even older than most of us. Subsequently some doubt has been expressed as to whether the highest of the three summits was climbed, but in any case the report of waist-deep snow-plodding decided us to attempt the peak from the south.

The Naur gorge, north of Koto, turned out to be less formidable than a French expedition report had suggested, with new bridges erected and gallery paths quarried into the sheer sides of the gorge. Once off the tea house trail, villages were deserted. Thus far, John Fairley had been a focus of attention whenever he sat down to sketch with his watercolours. Children jostled to look over his shoulder as he worked and he would delight them by going through sketchbooks in a very grandfatherly manner. Now he mostly sketched alone.

After three days we reached the village of Phugaon, passing through a landscape of soaring rock walls, ruined forts and gompas, stupas, chortens and mani walls, whilst high above shone the cold peaks. Phugaon itself was busy enough, but there were abandoned buildings and fields on the periphery. At a temple complex on the ridge of a moraine hill opposite, the gompa was locked and empty. From camp in Phugaon's dusty fields we spent a day reconnoitring Pokharkan which proved to be a much more complex mountain than maps had suggested.

My first foray to 5200m took me to a pass west of Phugaon crossed by Tilman. But although there was a little lake just below the crest which could provide a good campsite, the ridge to the north, falling from Pokharkan, was barred by cliffs. The vast screes beneath them did nothing to inspire confidence in their solidity. Those who had gone east returned with better news, and the evidence of John's sketches and David's digital camera screen. There seemed to be a moraine ridge that would give access to a deep col on the south ridge, enabling a traverse onto the east face. This looked to have a feasible snow and ice route winding up around sérac barriers towards a summit – perhaps *the* summit.

On the way to establish base camp at 4800m below this face, we set up an overnight camp below an apparently deserted village. Dick and I were walking up to enjoy the last of the sunshine when we encountered a lone yak herder, muffled against the cold. With a face the colour and texture of old leather, he seemed tough as old boots and of equally indeterminate age. Dick chatted away to him in Nepali, but we declined an offer to share potatoes at his home since there was a meal waiting for us at camp. Sadly, at base camp, illness and the bitter cold meant that we lost Steve and David who decided to head for lower, warmer trekking. And then there were eight.

The rock and moraine ridge to the south did indeed prove to be the key to gaining the deep col, where advanced base camp was established. On that first trip to ABC, Toto Gronlund and I climbed the easy north ridge of the peak to the south of the col. It began as an attempt to confirm the feasibility of traversing from the col on to the east face, but by the time we had a clear view, the subsidiary summit was barely half-an-hour away.

On top, cloud lowered and obscured the view, but not before we had realised that Pokharkan had not one south ridge but two. A south-west ridge, long with rocky steps in it, led down to Tilman's pass, but a huge glacier bay separated that from a south-east ridge, terminating in the summit we had climbed. We promptly christened it Pokharkan South-east (5700m). The east face route would go, but the weather was worrying. Snowflakes drifted past throughout our descent and by morning base camp lay under six inches of snow, putting paid to any further load-carrying to ABC for a day. After much dossing around, we turned out for tea to find the cook team had built a snow stupa just outside the mess tent.

Next morning most of us helped break trail up to the ridge so that another carry could be made to ABC, but cloud and cold deterred us from any further efforts. The following day's fine weather was encouragement enough to pack up for a summit push from ABC before the winter snows arrived in earnest.

While the team settled into ABC, our sirdar, Kaji, and two other Sherpas went on to scout the huge glacier bay between the south-west and south-east ridges. They returned bubbling with enthusiasm for an attempt on the south face. There was some very grandfatherly humming and chewing of beards before we decided to go for it. Keeping the east face in reserve, we decided to place another camp at 5600m in the glacier bay and try the south face first.

Cold and illness was taking its toll. Pete and Sara Spillet had been forced to descend to base camp feeling distinctly unwell, leaving only six of the original 10 members of the expedition dug in at high camp for the summit attempt. Next morning, as I left high camp in the biting before-dawn air, I called 'See you' to John and Dick, but when John caught up at the crampons stop he was alone. Dick had succumbed to a chest infection that had long troubled him and wisely decided to descend.

The route first climbed a glacier ramp rightwards from the lower left edge of the face, where it abutted the buttresses of the south-west ridge. The ramp steepened to reach a shelf with sérac barriers above. Climbing up through the séracs at about 5900m, I found Kaji backing off an ice cliff that barred the way. I borrowed his ice hammer and Kaji belayed while I led a 10m pitch of steep ice that proved to be the crux of the route. Ngima Sherpa took the route on into a huge crevasse, bridged with debris, up a second easier-angled ice cliff, breached by a crack just wide enough for some nice crampon bridging moves and out on to another glacier ramp. This led rightwards again in a long rising traverse, steep in places, to reach the south-east ridge at about its mid point.

The only drama was when Bill Thurston went through into a crevasse, managing with *bhaje* tenacity to hold himself on the brink while Kaji got a rope to him. Buffeted by strong winds on the narrow south-east ridge the situation suddenly seemed more serious. Ngima's glove was snatched away and he headed down for shelter until the ever-resourceful John dug a spare



12. Kaji and Martin Scott on the summit of Pokharkan (6350m), Nepal.  
(*Dave Wynne-Jones*)



13. Descending through ice cliffs following the first ascent of Pokharkan's south face.  
(*Dave Wynne-Jones*)

out of his rucksack. The nearer summit was just a totter away, but I had a nasty suspicion it was lower than another about a kilometre further across a windswept saddle. There was only one way to be sure. I climbed the ridge. The summit of what we christened Pokharkan 2 was definitely lower at 6250m. There was nothing for it but to go on.

I broke trail across the saddle while the rest of the team ascended Pokharkan 2. From a scrape of shelter at the base of the summit ridge I could see the others descending. It suddenly seemed a very lonely place until Kaji and Martin Scott began following my trail across the saddle. 'They've had enough,' Martin said when he arrived. The three of us swung out into the wind, bending to the slope of the final summit ridge. Even Kaji was gasping at times and there was no way he was a *bhaje*. Heads down against the wind, with crampons biting into ice or crunching snow, it was almost a surprise when the angle eased. Looking up I found myself surrounded by a fantastic panorama of snowy peaks. There was another, slightly lower, snow peak just to the north, but we were there, on the summit. To the south-west the view was dominated by the Annapurna range, dazzling in the sun, while to the north shining peaks stretched way into Tibet.

After some unreserved handshaking, backslapping and photography, we turned to the descent. By ploughing straight across the saddle we could traverse beneath Pokharkan 2 and meet the line of ascent lower down the ridge. Retracing our steps all the way back to high camp took just two hours now we were no longer fighting altitude, but this was 17 November and the light was fading. Another night at our high camp was inevitable. Next day we descended to ABC for a large late breakfast, before continuing to base camp where consensus graded the route at AD+, reflecting the ice pitch and objective dangers.

We had intended to carry out a reconnaissance of other peaks in the area, but our disabilities had mounted with Martin's frostbitten toe, and the cold was getting into our old bones. We retreated to Phugaon where John could sketch the children and sing folksongs to them while their faces registered complete incomprehension. Finally came news that our planned exit via the Kang La, a high pass leading to Manang, was impassable owing to snowfall. Concerned that there might be further heavy snow, we retraced our steps to Koto where the tea house did us proud with a bonfire and pitchers of chang. Climbers, Sherpas, cook team and porters danced in a very un-*bhaje* way, in the moonlight under fluttering prayer flags.

Next day, John and I defected with Ngima for a rapid completion of the Annapurna circuit while the others returned to Besisahar to find a heavy army presence. The Maoists had given notice of their intention to attack the town so our party left quickly next morning, returning to Kathmandu via some recovery time in Pokhara.

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of the South Face of Pokharkan, Nepal, by a group of mature AC members, November 2002.