

skied off the cornice as an aperitif for an adrenaline rush that we all shared skiing down the face we had climbed. A sporting descent to camp quickly completed our day.

Another fine day saw us skinning up towards Khrei Ra Jot, a double-summit exceeding 4500m on the long ridge to the east. A steep couloir led to a small bowl below the col between the peaks where we left the skis. A rocky scramble up the broken ridge of the higher summit included a delicate slab that proved interesting in ski-touring boots before we gathered on the pleasantly sharp summit. Derek and I tackled the short snow slope and earthy rock ridge to the lower top although there did not seem a lot of point to it. The snow showed a tendency to slide so we spaced our runs carefully on the descent. Not carefully enough as it turned out because Lee began to catch Derek up and his attempt to take a less direct line led to the release of a small slide. It may have been small but still had enough mass to sweep Derek off his feet as he skied straight into its path. No harm done, but a few choice words were exchanged.

Our last day also dawned fine for a rapid skin up to a nearby 4000m peak we had scoped out on the previous day. The sun was taking its toll on the snow though and we preferred to trust ourselves to grassy rakes sodden with melt-water rather than the suspect snows of the couloir we had started to ascend. The slopes eased above, before a steep icy ramp led to the final summit at 4375m. A traverse further north on the descent led to another couloir with a less southerly aspect that proved a safer, if steeper option before a fast and fun run down the familiar return to camp.

It was much warmer and cloud was building so we packed up as quickly as possible and returned to Beas Nala along the line of our ascent of three days' earlier. The snow was turning to slush and proved challenging with packs still heavy with camping gear, but the only mishap was when Derek fluffed a turn in the steepest part of the chute and found himself hanging upside down from the buried heels of his skis. His attempts to recover resulted in his rucksack heading off down the slope for me to intercept while Lee skied over to give him a hand. Good teamwork! Back at Beas Nala, amongst the madding crowds, bedraggled white butterflies lay dead on the dirty snow as heavy drops of rain signalled an imminent downpour.

Rain stopped play for our remaining days in the valley so we drove out early enough to organise a visit to the Taj Mahal on our return to Delhi, rounding off our visit to India with the classic tourist experience that somehow remained an anticlimax.

Summary: An account of a three-week ski-mountaineering expedition to the Kullu valley in India in April 2010 with ascents of Rohtang Ri (4697m), Beas Rikhi (aka Dashaur peak, 4631m), Khrei Ra Jot (4575m), an unnamed peak of 4805m and another of 4375m. Party: AC members, Derek Buckle, John Kentish, Dave Wynne-Jones, and ESC members, John Hayward and Lee Johnson.

ANDY HOUSEMAN

More Than You Can Chew?



35. Nick Bullock approaching the first bivvi at 6000m, Day 1 (Andy Houseman)

Bent over my axes, I threw up in the snow – ‘Not now!’ I silently screamed. We’d both managed to keep well on the trip so far. What if I blew our only weather window? Standing in the dark silence, I shouted up to Nick, dreading his reply. It came without hesitation or the slightest note of anger: ‘No worries youth, we can go down and give it a few days.’



36. Andy heading up the third pitch on Day 2, trying to find a way through the steep rock bands. (Nick Bullock)

There it was; a chance to run away. Was this what I'd been looking for? Was it all psychological? This was the biggest face I'd been on, and of course I felt nervous – anyone who says he doesn't is bullshitting. Nick's laid-back response almost made bailing too easy. It was our first day on the north face of Chang Himal. Out in front, Nick Bullock was zig-zagging up firm snow.

My climbing partnership with Nick had been forged over the previous few years, strengthened through friendship, mutual respect, and trust in each other in the mountains. Through the winter of 2006-7, we shared a flat in Chamonix, me the keen and inexperienced youth, Nick the wise old man. Conditions were favourable that winter and our route tally kept growing, the only problem being that neither of us had much enthusiasm for leaving a bivvi early.

Our choice of Chang Himal we owed to Lindsay Griffin and his contribution to the *Alpinist* article 'Unclimbed' (*Alpinist* 4). One of Lindsay's picks was the stunning 1800-metre north face of Chang Himal (6802m, also known as Ramtang Chang or Wedge Peak). Situated in the remote north-east corner of Nepal, it is one of many impressive mountains that form the Kangchenjunga Himal. We'd thought about going there in autumn 2008, but my attempt at a full-time job in the UK limited any time away. After a two-day jeep ride and 10-day trek to reach base camp, we would barely have had time to acclimatise, let alone attempt Chang Himal. Instead, we'd opted for the quickly accessed Hinku valley. And there, while resting at a teahouse down the valley, our base camp was robbed of everything apart from the garbage bag. We hadn't even tied into a rope.

One year later, luck seemed to be on our side. With no daily forecast



37. The 1800m north face of Chang Himal (6802m), north-east Nepal, showing the Bullock-Houseman route. (Andy Houseman)

being sent to us at base camp below Chang Himal, we had no way of knowing the good weather we experienced upon arrival would hold, but day after day it did. And we were lucky with conditions too. In 2007 a Slovenian attempt (the only proper shot at the face prior to ours) had failed at less than half height due to bad snow. We didn't have bomber, squeaky névé up the entire face, but we weren't complaining.

We had further good fortune in Buddy, our cook. Without a doubt, he made the trip. Day after day he produced pizza and chips, lasagne, fresh bread, apple pies, burgers – you name it, he'd cook it.

We arrived at base camp, situated at 5050 metres, above the Kangchenjunga glacier, in mid-October. The 10-day trek with three friends had been mellow and sociable; we could almost forget what we were there for. After our goodbyes at base camp, the trip suddenly took on a serious note; a kick up the backside, so to speak. The daunting north face of Chang Himal was just a couple of miles away over the jumbled chaos of the glacier. 'Umm... bitten off more than you can chew here,' I thought. From the time we woke to the end of each day acclimatising on the mounds of scree rising to 6000m behind base camp, Chang Himal was omnipresent – there was no escaping it.

For 10 days, we watched the face as our bodies slowly adapted to the altitude, Buddy producing tasty food day after day. With a route cairned across the glacier, the rack and food debate settled, and our kit stashed below the face, only an hour and half away, we were out of excuses. We spent a couple of days just eating, resting, and watching for any telltale signs of a change in the weather. None came and so, after a leisurely lunch, we took to our cairned path and settled down for the night in a small cave

below the face.

Sleep came surprisingly easy. After an early alarm and a quick breakfast, at 2.30am we entered the rocky gully that leads on to low-angled snow slopes at the bottom of the face. Climbing onto the snow cone, we felt silent relief as we stood on a crust of firm snow instead of sinking to our waist in bottomless powder as we'd feared. We zigzagged up the slope, avoiding front-pointing till the last possible moment, saving our calves for what was to come. But instead of running up the firm snow, I moved as slowly as if I were wading through powder; I could barely keep pace with



38. Andy chopping the bivvi ledge on Day 2 at 6200m – 'and no, the ledge did not get any bigger!' (Nick Bullock)

Nick as he kicked steps in front. I'd come out to Nepal not as fit as I'd have liked, but even so I'd felt better than this while acclimatizing.

In the anguished moments while throwing up, Nick's seemingly relaxed offer to go down was a temptation I had to resist. The drive was still there. 'I want to continue,' I shouted up. If Nick could kick the steps, I'd try to keep up.

We slowly soloed the steepening snow slope,

moving as quickly as my weak body would allow through what we had dubbed 'The Narrows', the most threatened part of the route. By dawn we had started up the broad gully that eventually would lead us back left onto the central spur that was our key to the face. The odd steep step or a few moves on unconsolidated bottomless snow limited my daydreaming. The vomiting had stopped, but my body felt empty. Nick thought *giardia*. I wasn't sure, but the excitement of the unknown climbing above had taken over, keeping me going.

Nearly halfway up the face we stopped just to the right of the spur, chopping a small ledge for a rest and refuel. Feeling wasted but no longer ill, I asked Nick if he'd mind taking the first technical pitch of the route while I tried to down as much food and liquid as possible. I was feeling stronger with each bite. Above, Nick battled with steep snow and rotten ice, interspersed with time-consuming searches for gear in the shattered and blocky granite. This would be the norm for the rest of the route.

Feeling I should at least kick a few steps, I took the lead for the first time and ran out the ropes another 150m over steep snow to reach the crest of the spur, just over 1000m up the face. It was early, but we'd covered a lot of ground and were both tired. We set about chopping a ledge, knowing that



39. Nick coming up to a belay after a long section of simul-climbing on Day 3 before searching for an exit into the flutings that would eventually lead to the summit. (Andy Houseman)

a bivvi here would catch a welcome few minutes of warming sun at dawn. 'I'll head up this, I think. Looks straightforward.'

Nick smiled knowingly, but all he said was, 'Okay.'

Some minutes later, breathing hard, I looked a long way down at my last bit of decent gear as I searched for an axe placement at the top of the corner. Nick's sly grin filled my memory. After finding a good cam, I swung left and felt the reassuring 'thunk' of a pick in sound névé. Legs bridged wide to take the weight of the pack off my arms, I pulled a few moves over the bulge and the cam disappeared far below as I reached easier ground and started the hunt for a belay.

Pulling over the steep step, Nick glanced up with an I-told-you-so look

and said, 'Umm, bet that was stimulating.' My payback was to hand Nick the rack for what turned out to be the crux pitch of the route – a long, steep corner with a capping overhanging of rotten ice. 'Watch me, youth!' That was daunting; I'd never heard Nick shout that in the mountains before. But the rope slowly ran through my belay plate, the jerk of a fall thankfully never coming. Dismantling the meagre belay, I started following as Nick moved up easier terrain, trying to find a belay. I pulled through the bulge on what usable thin ice remained, arms screaming and lungs bursting. An impressive lead.

The next four pitches were less steep but just as slow going as we tried to unearth protection and belays in the shattered rock. Leaving Nick's belay and a possible bivvi site, I started a long traverse to the right under a huge roof that had been obvious from base camp, a feature we hoped marked the end of the steepest section of the face. The ropes came tight, and while I waited a few minutes for Nick to start moving I got out my headlamp. Moving again, I passed the end of the roof but the beam from my headtorch showed no sign of a belay stance. I kept going towards a slight rib just discernible in the gloom, hoping to find snow deep enough to carve a bivvi ledge. But the rib proved useless and after placing two screws into bulletproof ice barely inches below the snow I slumped onto the anchor and brought Nick across.

Through the darkness we could just make out a snow arête above the roof we'd passed. Nick quickly led upward, hoping for a comfy ledge. But in the end we settled for a foot-wide stance just off to one side of the spur. A fitful night's sleep was ensured, though the hope that the hardest climbing was behind us made it slightly more bearable. We had climbed only 200 vertical metres that day.

Packing away one rope, we began the next morning moving together up a broad, right-trending snow ramp. Good névé and easy-to-find gear were a nice change. Soon we'd covered as much ground as we had the entire previous day. After traversing a couple of flutings, only one unconsolidated, rotten snow arête remained to negotiate before we'd reach a deep gully that we knew would lead to the easy-angled west ridge below the summit. Two attempts of levitating around the arête proved useless – clearly I needed a longer Peruvian apprenticeship!

Plan B was a short, rotten mixed step to reach one of the flutings directly above – more direct but, unlike the deep gully, with an unknown end. The rock step led into unconsolidated snow and a grovel over a few bulges before horrendous rope drag stopped me about 20m below the fluting's vertical headwall. Nick quickly took us up to the top of the fluting where we dug the biggest bivvi ledge of the route. (But still not big enough for the single-wall tent we carried and never used.) Brewing up that evening, just 300m below the summit, we feared we might have climbed ourselves into a dead end; the thought of rappelling and trying to find another way into the deep gully to our right wasn't too appealing.

We woke to a very cold morning, and Nick went for an exploratory



40. Andy Houseman coming up the final snow slope to the 6802m summit. (Nick Bullock)

'poke your head around the corner' look to the left. He returned to the bivvi ledge 10 minutes later with a grin that said it all. Another fluting appeared to lead straight to the west ridge. Stashing the bivvi gear, Nick left the ledge again, moving quickly with no pack. Following, I removed a screw from the last bit of ice we would find on the route and reached Nick, belayed to his axes and a not-so-inspiring bollard. As I took over the lead, I forgot the joy of being close to the summit and instead started contemplating down-climbing this Peruvian-style fluting on our descent, as it appeared that any chance of finding ice for rappel anchors would be fruitless.

Moving together, the rope between us pointless but for some reason still there, we pulled onto the ridge and into the full force of the wind that had been blowing long plumes off Kangchenjunga during the past two weeks. For the first time in four days we could see our summit, barely 150m away. I followed Nick's boot track up the 45-degree slope and quickly joined him on the knife-edge top.

What a feeling as we embraced and took in the full panorama: the gigantic north face of Kangchenjunga towering behind us, Jannu's impressive north face poking up in the distance, base camp a tiny dot below. After only 30 minutes on the summit, the cold and our anxiety about the descent forced us to leave. Easy down-climbing brought us to the point where we'd exited onto the ridge. Hoping to avoid the insecure snow flutings, we started digging as fast as the thin air allowed. However, after 20 minutes we'd found only rotten snow. Accepting defeat, I started down after Nick, plunging each tool as far as possible into the snow, holding my breath each



41. The much comfier bivvi at the end of Day 3 at approximately 6550m. (Nick Bullock)

time I weighted a foothold, expecting it to collapse. Finally we reached ice and quickly drilled a V-thread. A single 60m rap brought us back to the previous night's bivvi ledge. It was late in the afternoon, and since neither of us had the energy to chop another ledge lower down the face we spent a while on enlargement and settled in for one last night on the face.

After 14 hours of rappelling the next day, we crashed out in the cave at the base of the face, our rack gone but at last the true feelings of success sinking in. It was almost like standing on the summit again – but this time there were no niggling thoughts of unknowns still to overcome, just pure satisfaction.



42. Down safe! Bullock (left) and Houseman at the base of the face on Day 5 after 14 hours of ab-seiling and down-climbing. (Andy Houseman)

Summary: Alpine-style first ascent of the central spur (1800m, ED+ M6) on the north face of Chang Himal (6802m) (aka Wedge Peak or Ramtang Chang), Kangchenjunga Himal, Nepal, 29 October – 2 November 2009, by Nick Bullock and Andy Houseman. The pair bivouacked at the base of the wall before and after the climb, making a total of six nights away from base camp.

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MICK FOWLER

'Mind the Gap'

Steep and Deep in the Tien Shan

After 35 years of mountaineering, to find myself dangling deep inside a dark crevasse came as a new and unwelcome experience. Paul Ramsden and I had been descending an unnamed glacier in the Xuelian area of the Chinese Tien Shan. The range had been visited by mountaineers just twice before and the glacier just once. I find unexplored terrain and remoteness great attractions when I am pondering objectives in comfort back in the UK – but somehow such criteria felt less appealing now.



43. Daylight beckons or taunts. From within the crevasse. (Mick Fowler)

I had been probing cautiously when, suddenly, the snow around me collapsed and I felt as if I was being sucked into the dark bowels of the glacier. I came to a halt 10m down, rotating slowly among dripping icicles. As these broke off like organ pipes, it struck me that wearing snowshoes and with only ski poles in my hands, making a quick exit would be on the challenging side. I dangled forlornly, eyes slowly adjusting to the limited light filtering down through my small entry hole. Above me our single 7mm rope cut deeply into the overhanging eaves. I had learned about crevasse rescue techniques on an Austrian Alpine Club course back in 1969. Perhaps now was the time to see how much I had retained.

Below, a fragile-looking ice bridge hung between apparently bottomless voids whilst above, the walls converged in such a fashion that climbing up the side wall and bridging out looked a possibility. That, though, would require crampons and axes both of which were attached to the back of