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MICK FOWLER

## Far From The Maddening Crowd

The First Ascent of Gojung (6310m), Western Nepal



2. The west face of Gojung (aka Mugu Chuli) (6310m) in the Mugu area of western Nepal. The *Fowler-Turnbull Route* takes a leftward diagonal line from the obvious snow diamond at the foot of the face. (Mick Fowler)

**A**gitated screaming in a native tongue was mixed with shouts of increasing concern from Jonny Ratcliffe.

‘Watch out! What are you doing? The black one’s in that garden. And the white one is under that house!’

I ran frantically into carefully tended vegetable gardens shouting my best Nepalese mule commands. But the more I focused on bringing one animal under control the more the others would roam off to munch carefully nurtured garden produce.

The locals were not happy and the situation was beginning to feel madly out of control. Jonny and I were trying to drive laden mules through the village of Mangri in the Mugu district of western Nepal. It wasn’t as if we wanted to be doing this but the two muleteers we had employed had stopped for a drinking session and were nowhere to be seen. And we had



3. Gojung west face, showing the Fowler-Turnbull line and bivouacs. (Graham Desroy)

already been so badly delayed by landslides that three days had passed with us being barely a tenth of the way to base camp. We only had 30 days away from Britain so unless we could somehow speed up the mule travel we wouldn't stand a chance of getting to base camp let alone climbing

4. Painting the house (and herself) for Dashain. A girl in the village of Gamghadi, near Rara lake, prepares for the longest and most auspicious festival in the Nepalese calendar. (Dave Turnbull)



the mountain that we had set our hearts on for the last year. And so we had taken it upon ourselves to assume mule driving. Jonny was a star at it whereas my performance was less convincing.

The mountain we were aiming for is known locally as Gojung and stands at an altitude of just over 6300m on the Nepal-Tibet border. The probable first westerners to see it were a Spanish team in 2008. They christened it Mugu Chuli, decreed it as 'outstanding' and returned for an attempt in 2009. They were not successful but the same year a British team visited the area, after which Ed Douglas kindly sent me a photograph with the caption 'came across this face which might interest you'. And now, two years later, here I was trying to get there with climbing partner Dave Turnbull and fellow team members Graham Desroy and Jonny Ratcliffe.

Our 'trying' was not going very well. Gojung forms part of the remote Kapthang range on the border between far western Nepal and Tibet. It is not at all quick and easy to get to. To get this far we had flown to Kathmandu, endured a 16 hour bus ride to the town of Nepalganj and then flown to Rara airstrip. The precariousness of the flight leg was later emphasised to us when 'our' plane crashed and the only other plane owned by the airline broke down – fortunately without crashing. And now we were struggling to drive mules through landslide areas and counting the increasingly small number of days we might have at base camp. Agitation was beginning to run high.

The world through which we travelled gave the appearance of not having changed for generations. Subsistence farming dominated with electricity and generators in short supply and not a games console in sight. The religious environment changed from predominately Hindu in the lower reaches to prominently Buddhist as we rose into the mountains. The last settlement of Mugu, a couple of days short of the Namja La pass into Tibet, particularly charmed us with its unusual mediaeval-style buildings adorned with weighty accumulations of firewood. This accumulation had clearly gone beyond practicality and we were told it had become something of a competition which was rather obviously now challenging the structural stability of many houses. Our two muleteers livened proceedings here by having an impressive fight which resulted in one very swollen cheek,



5. Mick Fowler at the belay after pitch four on day one. *(Dave Turnbull)*

an apparently broken thumb and yet more delays. Throughout the entire walk-in we met just one western trekker. The whole Mugu area met with my approval. It is delightfully far from the madding crowds of Khumbu.

The peaks lining the valley of the Kogichwa Khola came into view as we approached a beautiful base campsite at about 4400m. Only Kojichuwa Chuli (6439m) had been climbed here and we could not fail to notice that Gojung was not the only fine looking unclimbed 6000m peak.

It had taken seven days to walk into base camp; that left us 12 days before the mules returned. With this timescale very much in mind Dave and I set off immediately to incur some altitude headaches. Acclimatising is not exactly my favourite aspect of a Himalayan trip and normally we get as high as we sensibly can and sit there until we feel that we have suffered thin air for long enough to stand a chance of success on the main objective. Here though it was slightly different in that the terrain immediately west of Gojung was rolling hills rising to just over 5400m. This meant that from our tent at about 5100m we were able to make a couple of walking forays over hilly summits and soak up marvellous views of the whole of the Kapthang range and the Tibetan plateau beyond.

We endured three nights at our 5100m camp before decreeing ourselves acclimatised and ready to attempt to climb to the summit of Gojung. Taking into account a day sorting everything out at base camp we now had just seven climbing days until the mules arrived. With the face one day away from base camp that left just six to climb the mountain's 1100m west face and get down. And our best estimate was that it might take all



6. Dave Turnbull in the lower couloir. *(Mick Fowler)*

six. Mmmm! Himalayan trips can pose challenging timescales for those of us on limited holidays.

The squeaky, white ice could not have been better. The heavy monsoon must have sent thousands of tonnes of spindrift cascading into the narrow lower couloir of our chosen line and compacted it to give perfect climbing conditions. Dave, enjoying his first climb in the Himalayas, expressed surprise. This was a million miles away from Himalayan soft snow plodding so often portrayed in the press. Clear skies dominated the horizon and spindrift was minimal. Desperate looking pitches succumbed with

relative ease and by the end of the second day we were about half way up the face. We were going a little slower than planned but all in all it couldn't get much better.

It was at this point that I was to demonstrate that 30 years of greater range experience doesn't make one immune from the most elementary mistakes. The decision to be made was how best to bivouac when faced with a uniform 50 degree ice slope and intermittent waves of spindrift. With the lessons learned from more bivouacs than I care to remember I should have insisted that we cut a bum ledge and sit together shielded from the spindrift by the tent fabric. But the temptation of a lie-down bivouac was too much and so I suggested nose-to-tail as my preferred option.

As it was Dave's first Himalayan bivouac in such conditions he was happy to defer to my judgement. The bivouac sack I was using was new to me and I was wary of suffocating if I zipped myself in completely. After a night of increasing spindrift and much squirming, enough snow got into my sleeping bag to make it distinctly damp for the top 12 inches or so. Noting that this had happened when there wasn't a cloud in the sky did make me feel particularly silly. In the morning Dave, relatively snug and dry, marvelled quietly as I sheepishly packed away my bedraggled looking sleeping bag.

Our third day on the face continued with more perfect white ice and much whooping up increasingly spectacular ground to finally reach a



7. Mick Fowler at first bivouac. (Dave Turnbull)



8. Dave Turnbull on the summit slopes. (Mick Fowler)

similar bivouac predicament. The slope beneath the headwall was smooth and icy and this time there was no hesitation in going for the 'cut bum ledge and sit in tent fabric' tactic.

It was only when I unpacked my sleeping bag that I fully realised the effect of the night before. That morning I had convinced myself that my bag was only a bit damp but now I could not deny that the whole thing resembled a frozen football and the upper section was heavy with blocks of ice. I unravelled it to the sound of cracking ice and tried my best to remain cheerful and get in.

I tend not to find sitting bivouacs very comfortable at the best of times but usually I am at least able to snuggle down and enjoy being warm. This time though I could not bring myself to wrap the upper section around me and was soon shivering badly. Meanwhile Dave had snuggled down, pulled his hat over his eyes, inserted enormous earplugs and was snoring gently.

I spent some time contemplating the coldness of late October nighttime temperatures and wondering whether to cut the ice lumps out of my sleeping bag and throw them away. It wouldn't do my sleeping bag much good, on the other hand they must have weighed at least one kilo and there seemed little point in expending energy carrying them up with me. I dithered badly, made a midnight brew, shivered more, and was incredibly grateful that my down jacket had somehow recovered from the dampness incident. My shivering must have been impressive as, at one point, I



9. Dave Turnbull on the 6310m summit of Gojung. (Mick Fowler)

managed to vibrate Dave into a state of semi alertness and get him to agree to share his sleeping bag with me if matters should get any worse over the days ahead. Regardless of how the situation had arisen it did seem potentially silly to have one climber using up all his energy shivering while the other snored blissfully.

Ultimately I decided to leave the lumps and have the upper section of the bag hanging out of my rucksack the next day where it would hopefully dry a little in the anticipated afternoon sun.

The previous day had seen communication difficulties. Dave had been suffering from increasing throat problems which meant that he could only shout in a sort of strangulated cry. And I couldn't hear; firstly because I increasingly can't hear very well and secondly because the cold was such that I had spent most of the day with all three hoods up together. 'Pardon' had become the most used word on the mountain.

It was as we emerged from my shivering bivouac that Dave moved close and whispered in my ear. Initially I found this slightly disconcerting but it soon became clear that, much as he was in good condition in every other way, his throat problem had worsened to the extent that whispering at close quarters was now the only way he could communicate. Climbing communications would have to be in sign language from now on. At least that

meant we understood the limitations and wouldn't have to say 'pardon' to each other every few minutes.

Dave continued to whisper as we enjoyed our usual Snickers bar each for breakfast, after which I started signalling manoeuvres by giving a thumbs up when it became clear that good climbing conditions continued on the next section, a potentially difficult traverse towards the summit icefields.

These traverse pitches gave fantastic climbing and were much steeper and more spectacular than we had anticipated. What we had feared might be time-consuming powder snow on rock turned out to be superb mixed ground; solid rock interspersed with soft, white ice giving delicate traversing above awe inspiring drops. Gojung lies on the main Himalayan crest and the backdrop for the traverse was a magnificent sea of unclimbed peaks stretching into the distance.

Away to the south could be seen the lush mountain valleys of western Nepal whilst to the north the skyline was dominated by the arid brown plain of the Tibetan plateau. Along the crest we could see the conical unclimbed summit that we knew Graham and Jonny would be (successfully) attempting at that very moment. I hung from the belay and couldn't stop admiring the view. It really did feel a privilege to be there.

The end of the traverse marked the end of the technical difficulties. A few pitches of easier mixed climbing, a series of lung-gasping rope lengths up the final slopes and, just before nightfall, we breached the summit crest to find a perfect wind-scoured flat area for the tent. The summit itself was just 100m or so away and could wait for the morning. It was the first time we had managed to pitch the tent since the foot of the face and we both collapsed thankfully into its protective embrace.

Dave produced a pillow and spent some time levelling his sleeping mat by wedging bits of clothing under it.

'Important to be comfortable,' he whispered before falling asleep within seconds.

The spot was wonderfully sheltered and I lay there listening to Dave's slow, heavy breathing and contemplating the fact that my efforts at sleeping bag drying had slightly improved my ice lump problem. At least I had managed to get in the bag completely and was definitely shivering less than the night before. Mind you if things had been worse the chances of being able to wake Dave looked slim and the chances of successfully sharing his sleeping bag even less so.

The weather remained absolutely perfect, not a cloud in the sky, and I looked forward to standing on the unclimbed summit of Gojung early in the morning. A slight concern was that the face had taken a day longer than planned but I wasn't going to let that interrupt the sense of elation I felt at having reached the top of the face. Anyway with a bit of luck we would be able to catch up a day and still arrive in base camp the same day as the mules.

After 20 days of near-perfect weather we were somewhat taken aback to unzip the tent in the morning and find threatening clouds scudding across



10. A place of potential: Gojung is in the centre with Fowler-Turnbull line on its left side. Behind to the left is Kojichuwa Chuli (6439m), climbed by the Japanese in 2010 via the long left-hand (west) ridge. The prominent rock pinnacle dominates the unclimbed south-east ridge which drops to the col between Kojichuwa Chuli and Gojung. To the right of Gojung is unclimbed Churau or Kanti Himal (6419m) and on the extreme right is an unclimbed 6047m peak. (*Nick Colton*)

an increasingly grey sky.

The summit was gained quickly via a pleasing snow ridge but any lingering, as I normally like to do at this point, was out of the question. A biting wind was building fast and thoughts of the descent beginning to dominate.

Possible descents had provoked much discussion during our planning in Britain. Abseiling back down the route lacked aesthetic appeal and we always knew that it might not be possible because the lower couloir would

be exposed to avalanches in bad weather. But the summit snowfields on the Tibetan side were the key to all other options and being wild expanses of high-level glacial terrain they required good visibility for safe progress. The fast approaching clouds looked likely to rob us of that just when we needed it most.

The option we chose was to traverse the Nepal-Tibet frontier for a kilometre or so over another unclimbed 6000m summit and then descend a complex abseiling and glacier route back to the glacier at the foot of the face. We judged that, in good weather, gaining the top of the abseiling section should be an easy day moving together from the top of Gojung.

But by nightfall we were perhaps one third of the way along the frontier traverse, visibility was zero and the wind was howling. The next morning steady snowfall was adding to the challenge and by the next evening we had managed bursts of activity between the clouds totalling perhaps two

hours. A memorably undignified crawl through deep snow had also slowed progress on one section. Along the way we used the semi-clear spells to take photographs with our digital cameras in the hope that they would aid progress in reduced visibility. They proved laughably inadequate and ultimately, in knee-deep snow and a white-out, we had to acknowledge that the only safe option was to stop, pitch the tent and wait until we could see something.

We were now two days behind schedule and the niggling concern about being late was beginning to grow. The mules ought to be leaving base camp the next morning if we were to get to Rara airstrip in time to catch the plane. So what would Graham and Jonny do? We felt guilty about causing them so much worry and inconvenience but didn't think they would leave without us. The last walkie-talkie contact had been from our bivouac on the summit ridge so they knew we were at least one day behind schedule. And, much as we had not been able to get in touch with them since, they could see the weather was bad so it seemed reasonable for them to suspect that we could have lost another day. On balance we reckoned that we had three days before they would start to get seriously concerned.

Unsettling as these thoughts were, there was nothing we could do but continue with the descent as quickly as possible as weather windows allowed. At least we had plenty of gas, a Snickers bar and a fair bit of surplus fat. I took out my book to pass the time, only to note with displeasure that it had somehow got damp and turned into a block of ice. Perhaps surprisingly we both slept well.

Dave pulled his head back in the tent and turned with a big smile on his face. It was morning again and he whispered that cloudless skies had returned. It was time to spring into action. For the first time we could properly appreciate the immensity of our surroundings. We were tiny figures, insignificant in a huge expanse of glacial whiteness. Steep ice cliffs and gaping crevasses dotted the landscape and were all too obviously a risk for the unwary. Stopping and holing up when we did had all too obviously been the right thing to do.

The atmosphere was so different from the last two days. Being able to see is amazingly useful. Suddenly we were walking easily down a gentle slope, jumping a bergschrund, feeling the warmth of the sun on our faces and then sweating uncomfortably whilst descending south-facing slopes. By evening we were on the glacier we had started from and the next morning we met a relieved Graham who had come up with Purbah, our kitchen boy, to meet us, carry our bags and deliver assorted goodies to eat. Life felt good.

As it transpired, the snowfall had stopped the mules arriving on time and base camp had only been moved down to the main valley the day before. And we had been monitored more closely than we realised. When the weather cleared Jonny had come all the way up to below our descent route and spent the day watching us through binoculars. And now, the next day, Graham and Purbah had walked all the way up from the main valley to meet us. We were incredibly grateful. It's good to have good friends.



11. Down safely. Fowler (left) and Turnbull after eight days on the mountain. (Fowler collection)

It turned into one of those occasions when everything worked out just right. The muleteers drove their mules through the night to make up the two days we had lost, a plane miraculously arrived to replace the crashed and broken-down ones, a vehicle somehow materialised at the sleepy airstrip we were flown to, and we were in London on the Sunday in time for Dave and I to be back in our offices on the Monday morning.

We had been away 30 days and in action every day. It is satisfying to feel that one's annual leave is being used to the full.

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of Gojung (aka Mugu Chuli) (6310m) in the Mugu area of western Nepal by Mick Fowler and Dave Turnbull, 15 – 23 October 2011 (1500m of climbing, ED). Whilst Fowler and Turnbull were on Gojung Graham Desroy and Jonny Ratcliffe made the first ascent of Pt 5800m on the frontier ridge to the west of Kojichuwa Chuli.

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