



Fowler and Ramsden arrive back at base camp eight days after leaving.

The hard blue Himalayan ice here was of the kind that only those who have experienced it can fully appreciate. By now our axes and crampons were blunt and bounced ineffectually off the ice. At one point the enormous effort required to get secure placements saw me reduced to clipping into the base of my axe and hanging sack-like against the ice. Exhausting stuff this Himalayan climbing. And the cold was so intense that this turned into the only climbing day ever that Paul, who seems largely immune to cold, wore a down jacket all day.

The summit crest came suddenly. After five days of hard climbing on the steep and inhospitable north side it felt like something of a release to pull into the sun, have a whole new panorama open up and be able to walk about freely on the relatively amenable southern slopes. The summit was easily reached and a firm summit hug felt to be in order.

We pitched our tent in a good spot just below the top and enjoyed spending the last few hours of daylight soaking in the wonderful view of unexplored terrain and relishing the feeling of having completed the climb that we had dreamed of for the last year. We wondered how close the nearest other climbers were and concluded that it was a very long way. The remote grandeur of our position felt very special.

All we had to do now was get down. That took a further two days involving complex glacier travel on the south-west side, 25 abseils from abalakov threads on the north side and four absolutely exhausting hours crossing the glacier and descending to base camp. Once down I soon fell asleep and spilled my dinner in my lap. Before that, we agreed it had been one of the very best climbs we had done together. And as we walked down through the changing seasons of old growth deciduous forests I knew already that the retrospective pleasure of such a fine trip would stay with me for many years.

Adventures in the remote Himalaya are difficult to beat.

TOM RICHARDSON

Mukot Peak



Mukot Peak from base camp during the expedition puja. (Tom Richardson)

Not having made the first ascent of a Himalayan peak since 1979, I decided the time had come to do another. I say 'first ascent', but unless someone builds a cairn, sticks a flag on it or writes about it somewhere, you never know whether you are really the first and I'm not sure that it matters all that much anyway. It's not a competition.

These days the Nepali government are keen to encourage climbers to visit new areas and have consequently opened up new peaks of moderate height and difficulty, trying to tempt people away from the honey pots of the busy Khumbu area into the rest of the country. It's a good policy.

KE Adventure Travel, one of my several employers, has always had the spirit of mountain exploration at their heart, and for autumn 2015 they made a plan to make the first official ascent of Mukot Peak (6087m), located in a remote and wild corner of western Nepal, nestling on the flank of the rarely seen but phenomenal Dhaulagiri 2 (7751m), in Lower Dolpo.

The plan was to have three groups, A, B and C, attempt the peak. Using Sherpa support, we would fix ropes on the steepest section leading to the summit ridge. I was to lead group B and while excited at the prospect some-



The magnificent Dhaulagiri 2 from high on Mukot Peak. (Tom Richardson)

how doubted that following group A, with leader Ade and sirdar Phanden having done the reconnaissance, we would get to make the first ascent.

They left a week ahead of us and we followed in their footsteps. The approach to Mukot Peak is quite complex. The first stage is a flight from Kathmandu to Nepalgunj, the regional airport hub on the Terai, close to the Indian border and very hot. Next day is another flight, nearly as impressive as the famous flight to Lukla that takes you to the landing strip at Juphal. It's a sharp contrast, set amid steep wooded hills with just a dusting of snow on them. Unusually though, the trek begins by descending to the valley bottom at a mere 2,510m and after four hours walking in the heat we made camp at Dunai, the last village where there is a shop.

After five days of wonderful trekking along the river valley, encountering wide sandy plains, narrow trails above huge drops, spectacular bridges and mountain vistas, we reached the final settlement of Mukot village. People here have a very tough life eking a living from their animals and fields in the high cold atmosphere. Here we also learned that four out of 12 members of group A had climbed the mountain with Sherpa support but none of the summiteers were English or American. We were, so first English and American ascents were still available.

Next day our camp was on a flat strip of land called Nani Goth, the view dominated by one of the most truly dramatic and rarely seen peaks in the world, Dhaulagiri 2, the Dhaulagiri range containing not just an



Looking down at base camp, just visible, from the summit ridge of Mukot Peak. (Tom Richardson)

8,000m peak, Dhaulagiri, but five other family members, which, though slightly lower, are equally breath-taking.

Base camp at 5,000m was another dramatic spot right at the base of the north face of Mukot Peak. It's traditional to have a Buddhist ceremony of blessing before setting off up a mountain and fortunately one of our Sherpas, Dawa, was an ex-monk so could oblige with the formalities. Base camp was a cold place, especially at 3am the following day when the whole team – Pasang, the sirdar, climbing Sherpas Dawa and Dorji and seven members, including Janet, my wife, and myself – all headed off to the mountain. We had planned to climb as two roped parties. At the point where we needed to put on crampons, one member turned back and returned to base camp with Dawa. The rest of us continued. Snow conditions were good and we made good progress on the easier-angled slopes. At two-thirds height the terrain steepened considerably as did the exposure. Fortunately we were able to use the fixed ropes set up for group A.

The wind picked up as we closed in on a col from which we would ascend the ridge to the summit. On the ridge it accelerated, sapping energy and breath from the already tired team. We moved slowly along to reach a small col. The summit lay just above us but the cold and wind were fierce. Some of the party decided they couldn't go on. It was out of the question for anyone to hang around in the conditions so we began our descent. It had taken six hours from putting our crampons on.



Though the dangerous trail described by Karna Sakya, Peter Mathiessen and other travellers no longer exists as such, it still demands courage in some places. (Gerda Pauler)



The following photographs are taken from Gerda Pauler's new book *Dolpo: People and Land*. Pauler, who wrote a charming account of her trek along the Great Himalaya Trail, explores the individuals, communities and culture that make Dolpo one of the most fascinating regions of the Himalaya. It includes compelling interviews with local people that reveal a complex world which retains much of its traditional allure while facing up to the changes, good and bad, imposed by an encroaching world, as well as setting Dolpo in its historical and ethnic context. This photograph above shows the old part of Chharka Bhot, located on the map in eastern Dolpo. Mukut Peak and Dhaulagiri 2, which feature in Richardson's article, are roughly to the south of here. (Gerda Pauler)

Descent was, initially, a bit quicker; we were able to use the fixed ropes and descend with prusiks and slings as a back-up. When the angle eased things became more tiring as adrenalin abated and real exhaustion set in. We finally reached base camp after nine and a half hours of climbing. The team was done in. Some members had given everything and just collapsed in the doorway of their tents still wearing their boots, stirring only to endure spasms of coughing brought on by the effort and breathing thin cold air.

Next day we descended from base camp with the aim of carrying on the trek, crossing several high passes, including the first one at over 5,700m. It would be a tough challenge to any trekking party but we were severely weakened by our climb. Kala Pattar, the well-known highpoint above Everest Base Camp is only 5,545m. Many of the team were struck down with coughs, sickness, bad stomachs and exhaustion too.

The camp below the pass was at 5,000m, cold and windy. I was concerned we would have a lot of difficulty getting over this first col, let alone the subsequent ones. We had been blessed with the weather up to now. It hadn't snowed. But if it did, we could be left stranded or at least late in making our rendezvous at Kagbeni from where we would trek to Jomsom and fly to the regional hub of Pokhara.

In the morning my decision became easier, but not in a good way. One of the mule men who had been with us all the way from Jupal was in a state

Right: A yartsa gunbu collector's camp at Danigar. This caterpillar, *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, infected with a fungus is highly prized in Chinese medicine and commands huge prices. Increasing wealth in China has driven demand, causing environmental problems and sometimes violence. (Gerda Pauler)

Below: Handmade felt boots replace modern sneakers from China as soon as winter arrives in Dolpo. (Gerda Pauler)



Pupils from Crystal Mountain school. (Gerda Pauler)

of distress. One of his precious mules had died from the cold in the night. Everyone was upset. It would have been unfair to ask him to go on. We attempted at least to recompense him financially for his loss, sorted out tips for the staff, and I called up a helicopter to take the sick and their partners to hospital. The remaining members flew out too. Conflicting feeling of slight disappointment and relief were overridden by the ride of a lifetime in the helicopter, passing our route on Mukot Peak and the Dhaulagiri range and down to the airstrip at Jomsom.

Back in Kathmandu, officials in the ministry of tourism weren't bothered we were just below the summit and handed out certificates accordingly. We may have been the second ascent and first English and first American ascents. It doesn't matter much, what is certain is we had a hell of an adventure.

If you are wondering what happened to group C, they followed us but as soon as they reached base camp, an enormous storm blew in. Overnight they had more than a metre of snow. It was all they could do to evacuate base with all their equipment and retreat back along the trek towards Juphal from where they flew back to Nepalgunj and Kathmandu.

If the outcome was certain, it wouldn't be an adventure and would be hardly worth doing.