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IAN WALL

## Nepal 2019-20



During the first ascent of the west face Tengri Ragi Tau (6938m), for which Tino Villanueva and Alan Rousseau were awarded a Piolet d'Or.

As I sit down to complete my contribution to the *Alpine Journal* 2020, the Nepali government has just announced it has closed its borders to foreigners and ex-pat Nepalis alike 'from 20 March midnight and will remain in place until 15 April.' This is of course in response to fears raised over Covid-19 and the devastating effect it could have if and when it got into Nepal, a country with limited infrastructure capable of containing the pandemic. [Editor's note: Kathmandu was back in lockdown in mid August, despite the government announcing the country would be open for the post-monsoon tourist season.]

It is 70 years since Nepal first opened borders previously closed because of fear about the intentions of the East India Company and then the British Raj. In April 1950 Ang Tharkay, the Annapurna expedition's highly experienced sirdar, led French team-members into Nepal from India, continuing by truck through the jungle and terai to Butwal where the road at that time ended. From Butwal, the approach march began, in essence the start of mountain tourism in Nepal. How things have changed since.

From the mountaineering expeditions of the 1950s, the hippies in the 1960s, the Himalayan big-wall ascents of the 1970s, the development of

alpine-style ascents in the 1980s and the boom in trekking, and then commercial expeditions in the 1990s, tourism has flourished. Even through the difficult times of the insurgency, the royal massacre and the earthquake travellers continued to arrive in Nepal, with international tourists making a significant contribution to its GDP. Tourism provided a certain amount of financial stability to thousands of middle-hill families. Now, sadly, all that came to a standstill.

I have just returned from the remote region in east Nepal where communities in the lower Hongu valley provide over 30,000 workers to the mountain tourism industry in the Khumbu region alone: trekking porters, commercial porters, guides, lodge managers, cooks and other staff plus the people employed in the service industries, airport staff and the like. On the same day as Nepal closed its borders, Khumbu closed lodges and trails into the upper Khumbu valley. This essential lock-down policy will have had a crippling effect on many thousands of citizens living a hand-to-mouth existence.

### Winter 2018-19

A late report surfaced just after last year's *Alpine Journal* deadline reporting the successful first ascent of **Choppa Bamare** (6109m) in the Rolwaling. John Kelley (USA) and Benjamin Billet (France) named their route *Seto Hi'um*, 'white snow' in Nepali, and graded it TD (1150m, M4, WI4) with many pitches of WI3/3+. February and March 2019 were among the snowiest winter months in 25 years. Conditions made the approach to base camp hard going and added several days to the trek in. The team left base camp at 2am on 22 February, initially climbing a spur followed by a snow-filled gully and mixed climbing at M4. The bottom of the south face was reached at 6.30am and there followed a long stretch of WI3. At 5.30pm they cut a small ledge and endured a standing bivy subjected to numerous spindrift avalanches. The following day the weather prevented much progress and a second bivy was arranged on a slightly larger ledge. Day three, and a long pitch of M3/3+ took the team to the top of the south face where they again bivouacked approximately 150m below the summit. Thinking they would summit the following day, they woke to appalling conditions that kept them pinned down for a further three nights at approximately 6,000m. The summit was eventually reached on 28 February, the last official day of the Himalayan winter season. The descent was via 18 rappels down the south face to the team's high camp where they dug out their reserve supplies. Continuing down to base camp, they realised avalanches had scoured the whole valley; base camp and all their equipment had been swept away. They report there are still a lot of amazing lines that could be done on the south face as long as conditions are conducive.

### Post-monsoon 2019

American alpinists Tino Villanueva and Alan Rousseau climbed the main peak of **Tengi Ragi Tau** (6938m), establishing a new route up the hitherto unclimbed west face. The pair had attempted the west face before and in



The west face of Tengri Ragi Tau, with Villaneuva and Rousseau's line marked.

2014 they were forced to retreat just 400m short of the summit. Drawing on their previous experience, they finally topped out on 16 October at 9.30am after 'eight years of planning, effort and three expeditions'. The pair made their ascent in an eight-day push from Thame, taking three days to get to the base of the route and then another five up the face (1600m, WI5, M5+), which was consistently difficult with snow flutings below a summit that is almost 7,000m. They called their route *Release the Kraken*, which won them a Piolet d'Or (see *Alpine Notes*, p370). Rousseau and Villaneuva have formed a formidable climbing partnership, choosing technical 7,000ers rather than 8,000m giants. They claimed the first ascent in 2018 of the Zanskar peak **Rungofarka** (6495m). Tengri Ragi Tau was added to the permitted list in 2012 and was climbed that autumn by a Japanese team led by Koichi Ezaki.

Having been pipped to the post for the west face of Tengri Ragi Tau, French-Swiss pair Symon Welfringer and Silvan Schüpbach instead made the first ascent of **Tengri Ragi Tau North** (6820m) later in October 2019. (The summit is located on the Finnish map not to the north of Lanmuche Kol (6552m) but to the south-east.) Another teammate Charles Noirot had to withdraw from the expedition due to illness. Their first attempt in mid October was curtailed by wind-slab risk at 6,100m. The team finally got back to work on 25 October, reaching their ABC at 5400m. On 26 October, they started up the wall with two pitches of steep ice, followed by moderate snow and ice slopes up to 60°. Wind and spindrift accompanied the pair all day. Welfringer and Schüpbach established camp on a small ledge at 6100m.



Symon Welfringer and Sylvan Schüpbach on the summit of Tengri Ragi Tau North (6820m) following the first ascent via the west face.



Bivouac on Tengri Ragi Tau North.



Steepening ground high on Tengri Ragi Tau North.

On day two the weather got better, but the steepening wall, technical pitches and thin air slowed progress. The pair struggled to find a bivy spot but having overcome a pitch of M6, eventually found a spot to pitch their tent at dusk at 6,450m. Next morning, they set out on a summit bid, leaving their bivy gear behind. Here they encountered the hardest but best pitches on the route, with a variety of steep ice, technical mixed terrain up to M6 and ice flutings of 70° to exit the face. They reached the north summit that day, the altitude of which was 6,820m according to their altimeter. Welfringer and Schüpbach rappelled back to their bivy using headlamps and spent one more night on the west face. The next day they rapped 1,000m, arriving back in base camp the day before the end of the expedition. They dubbed their new route *Trinité* (1500m, M6, AI5). It was noted in the expedition report that while the team was at Na they met a big group preparing to install a shelter near the Tashi Lapcha in memory of David Lama.

Also in the Rolwaling, a Spanish expedition climbed the south pillar of **Tengri Ragi Tau East** (6660m) between 2 and 19 October. This was the second ascent, following the first by a French team in 2005. Roger Cararach Soler, Alberto Fernandez Santiago and Marc Torallas established ABC at 5,100m below the start of difficulties on the pillar. Starting on 14 October, their approach was from below the west face consisting of snow and mixed climbing at approximately 60° to reach their first bivy site at 6,000m. The following day the team climbed



Left: The entry point on the face for the Swiss-French team of Welfringer and Schüpbach

Below: The line taken by Pemba Sherpa and Hiroki Nakayama on the north-east face of Hongu (6764m), following a long approach via the Hinku valley.



several pitches of 6a/b on solid granite followed by mixed climbing to reach the second bivy at 6,250m. On 16 October they started up slopes of poor snow before reaching rock and one M6 pitch before the final snow ridge at 6,400m. They bivouacked at 6,550m. On 17 October they continued to follow the snowy ridge, but with the late 2019 monsoon there was a lot of unconsolidated snow on the ridge resulting in this section being the crux of the whole route. The team summited at 8am and then abseiled and down-climbed to ABC, which was reached at 6pm on the 18 October.

An all-female team comprising Kanchhi Maya Tamang (Nepal), Margaritta Lucia Silvestre (Peru), Yin Hung Tsang (China) and Ma Soledad Castro Serrano (Mexico) made the first ascent of **Linku Chuli II** (6659m) in the Rolwaling, reaching the summit from the north at 10am on 28 October. Three support climbers, Nima Gyalzen Sherpa, Mingma Nuru Sherpa and Lhakpa Nuru Sherpa also summited.

The north-east face of **Hongu** (Hongku, Sura, 6764m) got its first recorded ascent on 25 October from Pemba Sherpa and Hiroki Nakayama (Japan), who approached via the Hinku and Hongu valleys. Their base camp and camp one shared the same location as camps used to climb Baruntse. The pair crossed the west col, south of Baruntse, descended the top section of the west Barun glacier, the lower Barun glacier and then entered the glacier bay



The Georgian team below Pangpoche I before the first ascent.

to establish a final camp at around 6,360m immediately below the north-east face of Hongu. The final 350m section was steep snow and ice with serac barriers. The pair left the top camp on 25 October with minimal gear and alternating leads climbed nine pitches. Some of the ground was steep and the snow was often poor. They reached the top at 3.15pm in a strong wind and snowstorm and after only 10 minutes began their rappel descent, using snow stakes and, when these ran out, an ice screw and Nakayama's Nomic axe. They reach camp at 8.30pm. The history of climbing on Hongu is not completely clear; most ascents have been made by parties either without permits or on permits for other summits. The easiest and logical way to climb the mountain in good conditions would be the north-east face. The first known ascent was in October 1983 by Sepp Egarter and Volker Klammer, who climbed the south-west ridge.

Dawa Yangzum Sherpa a 27-year-old woman from the Rolwaling valley has become the first Nepali woman to stand on the summit of **Makalu** which she achieved on 29 May 2019. Dawa is the only Nepali female IFMGA guide.

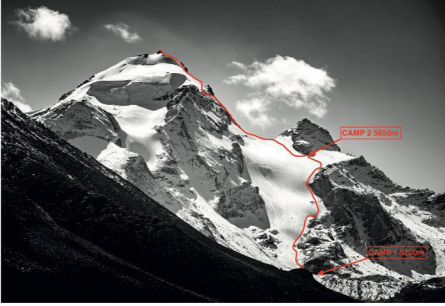
To the east of Samagoan in the Manaslu region is the Pangboche Himal. A Georgian expedition lead by Archil Badriashvi with Bakari Gelashvili and Giorgi Tepnadze made the first ascent of **Pangpoche II** (6504m). Base camp was established on 18 September at 3,900m two hours walk from Samagaon. During 20 and 21 September the team followed the south-west ridge from



The summit ridge proved serious and committing.

BC to a suitable bivy location. Leaving their bivy on 22 September at 5.30am they reached the summit at 5pm. The weather throughout the expedition was bad resulting in quite dangerous climbing conditions; the summit ridge comprised loose rocks with few options for belays. Although the ridge is not vertical it is very steep with minimal protection. From the bivy they traversed onto the south-west face, which was then climbed to the summit via a steep 80° snow face. From the summit, a six-hour descent was made to a bivy site. The descent was on a slightly different line on the south side, down a couloir with bad snow and steep sections. The majority of the route was soloed due to the lack of solid protection and belays.

After a few days rest in Samagoan the same team turned their attention to **Pangpoche I** (6620m). The first bivy was established at 5,600m, the second at 5,850m and the third at 6,380m. Leaving the top bivy at 5am, the team reached the summit at 2pm following the north ridge but then turning to traverse a wide plateau just east of the ridge. Tough snow conditions resulted in quite dangerous avalanche risks. The summit ridge was narrow and dangerous with sharp cornices and no possibility to place protection. Due to the poor snow conditions it took about four hours to reach the summit. They descended the same route back to their third bivy. The descent line was a reversing of the whole route to BC.



The route taken on the first ascent of Ardang, starting up a glaciated section then through the rock-band as shown.

Located in the northern section of the Annapurna Conservation Area, **Lugula** (6889m) stands between Bhrikuti Sail (6361m) on the left and Chako (6704m). Paulo Grobel (France) climbed a new snow route on this peak at PD, describing the route as pleasant with the concentration of the difficulties at the start of the route.

A Sherpa climber, Sanu Sherpa from Sankhuwasabha district Nepal, scaled **Dhaulagiri** in autumn 2019 thus becoming the third Nepali mountaineer to complete all 14 mountains above 8,000m after a two-member team of rope-fixing Sherpa climbers opened a route to the summit on 3 October 2019.

Canadians Sunny Twelker and Bryce Brown made the first ascent of **Ardang** (Chyoro Ri, 6034m) via the north-west shoulder from the Limi valley in north-west Humla. Their route followed a major moraine-drainage outlet via an obvious glacier feature to a col. A rocky ridge was then followed to the summit snowcap. Camp one was established on 11 November in a protected spot below the right side of the glacier tongue at 5,200m. The glacial snow ramp was difficult: trail breaking in unconsolidated facets and waist to chest deep in some areas restricting height gain to only 450m above camp one the following day. Avalanche risk on the lee-loaded 35° slopes was too great so they took a route to the right-hand side, trying to stay close to the safety of the lower-angled edges and rock walls. Camp two was established on 12 November at 5,650m just below the right edge of the col. An early start was made on 13 November for the summit, now only 450m above the climbers. A loose, rocky cliff-band to reach the upper snowcap provided some exhausting climbing in unconsolidated snow conditions. The rock-band was mostly lower angled at c40° with only one steeper mixed section requiring a few pieces of protection (50m, 60°, M4, AI3). The upper snowfield, in poor condition, led to a final steep snow ridge and then a loose rocky summit block that required delicate mixed climbing for 10m to reach the top at 2pm.

### Project Possible

One of the big mountain stories here in Nepal in 2019 was the ascent of all 14 of the world's 8,000m peaks in six months by Nepali mountaineer Nirmal



In the rock-band of Ardang, high above the sacred Limi valley.

'Nims' Purja, dubbed 'Project Possible'. A former British special forces soldier, he completed the project in just six months and six days: 189 days. He climbed them in the following order, with the summit date in brackets: Annapurna (23 April), Dhaulagiri (12 May), Kangchenjunga (15 May), Lhotse (22 May), Everest (22 May), Makalu (24 May), Nanga Parbat (3 July), Gasherbrum I (15 July), Gasherbrum II (18 July), K2 (24 July), Broad Peak (26 July), Cho Oyu (23 September), Manaslu (27 September) and Shishapangma (29 October). He would have done it sooner had visa issues with China not required resolution.

Not surprisingly, a project of this kind raised interesting debates in the international mountaineering community. Issues regarding the use of helicopters, bottled oxygen, established routes, fixed ropes and of course a large support team have all been discussed, scrutinised and even criticised by world-class and well-known mountaineers. The general feeling seems to be that although this was a record-breaking feat of stamina and logistical planning it was not historically, in the true context of the term 'mountaineering', that important. Purja's style was so completely different to the ideals of established alpinism that it failed to impress the present-day elite. But it can be argued that Project Possible was set against completely different criteria. Nirmal Purja was completely open from the outset and never claimed he wouldn't take advantage of existing technology to help him achieve his



High on Ardang in the western Nepali district of Humla.

goal, a speed completion of all the 8000ers. The bar has now been set if others want to take on the challenge in a more lightweight or ethically clean way, for example without oxygen. However, in Nepal Nirmal Purja is regarded as a mountaineering legend and on return to Kathmandu received a public ovation during his motorcade through the capital's streets.

Robert Anderson 'soloing' towards the summit of Everest in 1988 having climbed the Kangshung face.  
(Ed Webster)



## Everest

As usual, the world's highest mountain hit the headlines in May when several climbers posted Purja's images of a traffic jam of climbers heading towards the summit. On 22 May it was reported that over 200 climbers and clients were heading towards the summit after a second weather window opened up. The first two-day weather window that allowed 150 climbers to reach the summit closed on 16 May and the backlog began to build up. Three Indian climbers made false summit claims for Everest while a Kashmiri woman, Sharad Kulkarni, produced a doctored image of herself on the top to claim her summit certificate. Mountaineers have suggested difficult weather conditions, a lack of experience and the growing commercialisation of expeditions as contributing factors to the backlog. Kami Rita Sherpa, 24 times a summiteer, added that one of the main considerations for the 'jam' was that the 'cheap expeditions' only provide inexperienced guides and that they were not always capable of dealing with 'difficult clients' at altitude as opposed to 'difficult conditions' and that they are the main cause of the problems.

'Climbers can turn stubborn and uncooperative, insisting on climbing even when they are likely to not make it,' Kami Rita said. 'At times like these, Sherpa guides are well within their rights to scold, harangue, yell and berate their clients – and in case the clients are especially obstinate, even slap them. We [should] ask them [clients] to sign a document at Base Camp, agreeing that they will not sue us if we yell at them or slap them. At high altitudes, we can't afford to spend a lot of time dealing with stubborn clients.' Sadly, by the end of the season 20 mountaineers had perished on the slopes of Nepal's 8,000m peaks.

The Nepal government, through the media, stated that overcrowding was not to be blamed for the deaths on Everest. That is true to an extent: other concerns include clients feeling over confident with the support systems installed on the mountain, the safety net of Sherpa support and fixed ropes, the lack of personal accountability on the part of the clients, their lack of experience, ego and greed – the list goes on. However, we are also told again and again that Everest belongs to the nation and that the government 'manages' the mountain on behalf of the nation, so ultimately whose responsibility is it to sort out problems on Everest?

In late July an article appeared in the Nepali newspaper *Republica* stating that a powerful group of liaison officers (LOs) pocketed millions of rupees and helped award summit certificates to climbers through a complicated collusion between LOs and expedition agencies. The newspaper exposed the ghastly story behind the scam. Politicians and those in powerful positions vouch for individuals to be LOs, who often have little mountaineering experience. The majority of those selected never stay at Everest Base Camp during the climbing season. Some readers may have seen Nepal's prime minister K P Oli discomfited during a live BBC interview during his UK visit in May when journalist Matthew Amroliwala asked tough questions on anomalies in Nepal's mountaineering sector.

The National Geographic Society announced on 13 June 2019 that they had successfully installed the world's highest operating weather station on Everest to provide researchers, climbers and the public with near real-time information about mountain conditions.

The autumn season saw a return of expeditions attempting **Everest** at this time of year, but on 23 September Mountain Hardwear Everest expedition members Joe Vernachio and Tim Emmett called off their bid after witnessing the lethal 300ft serac overhanging the Icefall; an unsettled weather forecast added additional risk. In a similar development, Polish climber Rafal Maciej Fronia also abandoned his bid to climb Everest as did another Polish team, Andrzej Leszek Bargiel, Andrzej's brother Grzegorz Bargiel and Jakub Poburka, along with their five base camp staff and filming crew. All 10 members of the **Lhotse** expedition led by Marcin Piotr Kaczkan also decided to return due to freak bad weather conditions in the Everest region.

After the spring season's issues of overcrowding on Everest, which resulted in 11 deaths the Nepal government introduced new rules for the 2020 season. However, the government later stated these new rules would not be imposed for the coming climbing season, which should have begun in April 2020. Despite international scrutiny and intense pressure from climbing groups around the world to tighten operations on Everest, officials say the rules need further review before they can be put in place.

The local administration in the Everest region introduced a new law that came into operation in January 2020 banning all single-use plastic containers less than 30 microns.

### **Winter 2019-20**

Jost Kobusch set himself the extremely ambitious goal of climbing Everest solo and without supplementary oxygen via the infrequently climbed west ridge and Hornbein couloir on the north face. He ended his expedition after two months on the mountain; conditions did not allow him to climb to the summit but he reached a highpoint on the west ridge at 7,300 m.

Due to a heavy amount of deep unconsolidated snow, Alex Txikon's Everest winter expedition called an end to his winter project at 6,479m, stating that the imminent expiry of his permit would not provide sufficient time for conditions to improve for another attempt. Although no one

succeeded in these purist approaches in winter, their efforts did recall a time, not so long ago, when Everest was a true expedition of exploration and not just conga lines and controversy.

Tashi Lakpa Sherpa was also on Everest attempting to complete a five-day winter speed ascent. His team wanted to reach the summit by 29 February without bottled oxygen. The Sherpas had pre-acclimatised while on expeditions in the Argentine Andes, however conditions on Everest were not conducive for their attempt.

On 13 March the Mountaineering Sports Administration of Tibet and Mountaineering Association of Tibet issued a joint statement restricting foreign mountaineering expeditions on Everest in the 2020 spring season. However, there is confusion as China has just announced that, as a contradiction to previous 'closure' reports, it has now opened Everest up to allow its nationals to attempt the summit from Tibet. This will allow the Yarla Shampo expedition with at least 26 members, including six female climbers onto the mountain, the confusion being: nationals resident in China or more widely, Chinese nationals?

On 13 March Nepal also suspended all permits for mountaineering expeditions that have already been issued and has put a restriction on new permits for the spring season 2020.

Sadly, as I draw to a close, Nepal has just registered its first case of Covid-19. None of us know for how long this situation will last. It is reported that over 1.5 million Nepali citizens left Kathmandu to return to their villages. Looking on the positive side, city pollution has been reduced and hopefully the mountains, and the Everest deity in particular, will have time to breathe. I'll leave you with an image of what it was to climb Everest in 1988 and the thought that the mountain people of Nepal need your continuing support.