



40 Barnaj II (This and next photo: P. Nunn)

A hundred days in the Himalaya 1977 Pt 2

Baleful Barnaj

Paul Nunn

After 12 hours on the train from Delhi and a further 12 August hours crammed in the heat and humidity of the Jammu to Kishtwar bus the pleasure of stepping into the evening sun at Kishtwar (1800m) is overwhelming. From the old police fort a dusty lane leads down towards the polo ground and dak bungalow. Scattered dwellings alternate with irrigated fields and orchards. The old Indian hill station hangs on a shelf more than 300m above the mighty Chenab river at the end of the old road which capitulated here against the overwhelming odds of the greater Himalayan Chain. From this approach Ladakh can be reached only by hard foot sloggng for 10 days.

Solitary journeys have their advantages and the bungalow seemed crowded with expedition members and their chattels, quite apart from the endless stream of visitors. After a Spring in the desert wastes of the Karakoram my taste for solitude had been exaggerated and I was glad to escape with the mule train of equipment after only one day's delay in Kishtwar. Three expedition members accompanied the 20 mules and their 9 muleteers, while the others, awaiting a lost liaison officer, came on behind.

For 3 days the route follows the Chenab gorge. Its forests seem endless, massive coniferous trees sprouting from lichenous granite cliffs, the mule path meandering from the boulders of the river's edge to the high ridges. In places man-made platforms are extruded from cliffs which would delight generations of rock gymnasts in Britain. They allow the passage of endless mule trains and flocks of goats and sheep. Monkeys break a curious illusion of familiarity, as does the heat of the afternoon sun and the slither of the ubiquitous lizards. To Athole the gorge is a pedestrian M1, the main communication for the local administrators, Sikh grain traders and local people. There is even an 'hotel' under a monster boulder, supplying tea, rice and dahl to the travellers. Athole, where we leave the Chenab, is surrounded by several miles of verdant irrigated arable land, a far cry from the mica dust and aridity to be found only 30 or 40 miles N beyond the high mountains.

Already the semi-nomadic herders of goats and sheep are coming down to the winter pastures of the Jammu area. As I wait an old muleteer who drags several hours behind with his load, a column of a dozen women and girls ride or walk into sight. Dressed in black and red and replete with gold ornaments they are a bizarre sight. Their menfolk are already well ahead with the animals. An ancient wizened crone drags at my sleeve, her eyes imploring help not baksheesh. She is in tears, as are the whole company. A young woman virtually falls from her pony to the ground groaning with pain. Her face is ashen with sickness, fear and fatigue. One leg is grossly swollen and she is delirious. The medicines are ahead with our mule train and I have little expertise. One can only speak gently, provide token palliatives, recommend the Athole dispensary a half day's journey distant, and place faith in her youth. The old man and an even more antique mule eventually arrive. He requires help at every steep step in the path, but really he can manage, at his own pace. The other muleteers do not help as he is from the wrong village.

Below Machail (3000m) the air cools, a hint of the glacial wastes hidden above.

The village itself is a riot of colour. On Krishna's birthday the whole populace alternately congregates in the Hindu temple or parades around the village dressed in splendid finery. After 24 hours we awaken to the continuation of the ceremonials.

Geoff Smith and I set off to explore the 5200m Hagshu La 20 miles away while Jim Curran alternates between visiting everybody in the village, filming, and guarding our equipment. The last hamlet as snowy peaks emerge after a wet morning is unmistakably Buddhist in culture and people. Beyond are the 2 passes, the more frequented Umasi La and the more difficult Hagshu La, old trading routes connecting the area with the main trade routes N into Sinkiang via Leh and the Karakoram pass. Traditionally these people probably identified as closely with Ladakh as with the Indian plains far to the S.

High on a ridge at 4875m is a sapphire mine, said to be the only one in India. The early wintry weather is already stopping operations in the first week in September. The Hagshu (5200m), reached in 2 days walking, proves impractical for our purposes. Beyond are the yellow arid expanses of Ladakh, caught in the rain shadow. We retreat, heads pounding with quickly acquired altitude, aiming for Machail and the western approaches to Barnaj II. Not all the signs are propitious. . . .

Back at Machail we met our replacement liaison officer, Capt Amarjeet Singh Chabbewal—fit, 23 years old and a willing helper.

At dawn on 7 September, 27 porters and 7 mules began the 12 mile trek up the Barnaj Nullah, a steep and wildly beautiful valley.

At 6pm, from the glacier above, Geoff Smith and I at last caught a view of the W face of Barnaj, a mass of jumbled ice and steep rock walls. Overtaken by darkness we stumbled back across the glacier for 3 hours to a cold bivouac under a boulder, guided by torch flashes from Geoff Tier.

On subsequent days Base Camp was established on the glacier's edge, though, since few porters would trudge the final snowy section to the camp, we relayed much equipment ourselves and relied on a few hardy men to complete the job.

Above Base Camp a rock shelf cut through to the upper glacier and a feasible route was picked out. The S flank and ridge looked far more possible than any other approach, but other problems remained.

Bob Toogood, a Sheffield tool-maker and one of the most experienced climbers in the party, had been ill since the long overland drive and was unable to eat or retain food so that already more than 10% of his body weight had wasted away. This problem did not respond to treatment, and was compounded by a knee injury suffered on the walk in.

Nor was John Escott well, and Rick Walters—another climber from Sheffield—was slow to acclimatize. The effective party was reduced to 4 climbers, and the lateness of the liaison officer had left little time to spend waiting for people to become fit. At any time mere bad weather could be replaced by winter blizzards.

Between 9 and 11 September we received little encouragement. As we ferried loads to Base Camp over the steep moraines it snowed and rained incessantly; on 10 September no real activity was possible. A hard frost on the night of 11–12 September preceded a good day, and 6 of us carried crippling loads and opened the route to Camp 1 at 4975m.

Bob Toogood made a mighty effort, and despite his sickness carried a load not only to the rock island high on the glacier where this camp was established, but out



41 Camp 1 with S Peak of Barnaj II behind

on to the snow plateau beyond. Initially we hoped to push further in one attempt, but an ice-gully above the plateau now came into view as an unavoidable obstacle between us and our ridge. In the night the storms renewed, and up at Camp 1, everyone was busy knocking thickly deposited snow from the tents. Next day they retreated to Base to conserve Camp 1 supplies.

There followed 3 more days of continuous snow at Base Camp and we resorted frequently to the camp library and the larder. The evening meal became the highlight of a humdrum existence. Early on 16 September came a brilliant clearance and Geoff Tier and Geoff Smith, and the fourth Sheffield climber, Jim Curran, were off early to Camp 1, while I followed. Camp 1 had to be re-excavated, since the 3 tents had all collapsed under feet of snow. The first sun for days set off avalanches everywhere and we spent several hours in the late afternoon replacing broken tent poles and drying equipment.

The ice-couloir above the plateau was the next major obstacle. It took 2 days to reach and climb the gully and to rig a continuous fixed rope from bottom to top of this 200m of avalanche chute. Gas and food for 4 days survival were dumped at the top in a tiny cave before we fled through falling snow for fear of extinction. Jim, our cine expert, filmed from the plateau when he was able to see anything through swirling snow-clouds.

The blizzards pinned us down in Camp 1 for another day. But 20 September dawned fine and frosty, and by midday all 4 climbers were near the top of the couloir on the best day of the expedition.

Above, a great ice-ramp cut towards the ridge, which promised access, with only modest difficulty, to the summit. Both pairs of climbers accumulated larger loads by picking up extra food and gas from the cave, and it was 6pm before all 4 assembled at the site which became Camp 2, perched high on a serac only 180m from the ridge. The sunset was outstandingly beautiful. To the W the jagged profiles of Flat-top, Eckpfeiler and the Brammah area were visible and pervasive icy blue-tinted cloud formations welled up from the valleys.

Amazingly, the next morning was also fine, and we set out to climb a steep slope leading to the ridge. Out of nowhere came the customary blizzard, at a point only a few feet from the ridge. Geoff Smith, who was carefully fixing rope below, disappeared from view and so did everything beyond a few metres. Clouds of thick spindrift snow wiped out the steps and descent, alone and ill-protected, was a painstaking and lonely affair.

Next day, the 2 Geoffs set off upwards to push on to the ridge and fix rope all the way while Jim and I sought to revive frozen toes before bringing up the last dump of food and fuel in worsening weather from the slope below the ice-couloir.

I was back at the Camp first and brewing tea when an avalanche thumped down the gully—but Jim's head popped into view a moment later, gasping with relief. The forward team came into camp several hours later, snow-covered and not a little battered by the storm. They had reached the ridge and climbed it for a rope length or 2, and left an advance dump of supplies.

By the 24th, even retreat was a thoroughly hazardous prospect and without much better weather further advance was not possible.

We awoke to the sound of a storm which was howling into its third day. At 5am I shouted through the blizzard to Jim Curran in the tent next door: 'What are you thinking, Jim?' 'I am thinking about my life,' came his answer through the continuous gale.

There were 4 of us in the 2 tents, perched on top of a serac at 5765m on Barnaj II, an unclimbed peak in N India, and we were all thinking much the same. The night before, 23 September, we had deliberated about our half frozen feet, the pervading dampness which chilled our sleeping bags, the thick layer of frost which covered the interior of the tents. For the 2 days we had dug the tents out of the snow every few hours, battered their roofs constantly to get rid of snow build-up which could collapse them, while the deepening snow on the slopes above threatened to wipe out the camp in one mighty avalanche. An advance dump of food, fuel and gear was already established ahead of us on the ridge. All we needed now was a couple of fine days to reach the summit at 6100m.

But on baleful Barnaj, that was asking too much. The persistent storms which had dogged us for a fortnight were the worst weather I had encountered in 21 years of climbing, but they were only the last of our problems.

The tents were packed, the food and fuel abandoned, as we tied on to ropes frozen into white barbed wire and set off to plough through a sea of deep snow to the downhill lifeline of fixed rope half a mile away. Our attempt had run its course and gone far enough against the odds. Even crossing the plateau with all but the largest crevasses covered in deep new snow was hazardous in the white-out. In such circumstances it was enough to withdraw without loss of life or limb and live to fight another day. The storm hardly relented as we withdrew with Rick and Amarjeet from Camp 1 and returned to the luxury of food and dry sleeping bags in Base Camp.

Comparable expeditions to Brammah (by a Polish team) and Flat Top (British climbers Martin Boysen, Malcolm Howells and Bill Barker) in the same region met the same problems with the same result—except 2 Polish climbers suffered severe frost-bite.

Between us there were only a few frost-nipped toes, one case of serious altitude sickness and Bob's troublesome dysentery, and the irritation of a tent fire which removed our sleeping bags.

We had escaped lightly and made respectable progress, in conditions so bad as to be almost laughable!

Postscript

At Base Camp John Escott, Jim and I left the others and walked the 75 miles to Kishtwar in 3 days. Within the week we were at work in Britain. Porters we had arranged brought the expedition back to Machail and it took time to assemble mules sufficient to evacuate the equipment to Kishtwar. Geoff Tier, Geoff Smith and Rick Walters then travelled in the Sherpa van to Leh to see the unique Buddhist culture of Ladakh before setting out on the extended drive back to Britain.