

Kalanka, Alpine Style

Nick Kekus

Due to a mix-up on the part of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, the peak we intended to climb, The Fang (6401m), was double booked. In May of 1981 we were approached by the other expedition, namely the Franco-Italian Expedition to the Changabang Gal, to form a joint expedition. This we were forced to accept in view of the IMF's proposal to split the post monsoon season, the French and Italians being offered the early part and we the latter end. This at least gave us all an equal chance to climb the peak and claim a first ascent. This arrangement was accepted with surprisingly little difficulty by the IMF.

Phurbu Thering was the L.O., an interesting man, who had climbed many Himalayan giants including Nanda Devi. Being of Tibetan/Sherpa stock he had their passion for laughter and merriment.

We hired a bus for 24 August to allow the remainder of the party as little time as possible in the humid hell of Delhi, and headed N to the cool Himalaya. The journey was long and extremely tiring on poor roads. We left the plains behind at Rishikesh and ventured into lush green country. With the afternoon rains, the sights and smells reminded me of a wet summer's day in the Lakes. It was so good to leave the boring plains for this beautiful unfolding scenery. After 15 hours of driving we reached Srinagar Garhwal, the capital of the region, with the prospect of another 7 hours of travel the next day. The roads were very bad, narrow and winding, often high on the hillside with horrific drops to the Rishi Ganga. Josimath was reached on the 25th, and we could relax for a few days at the Hotel Nanda Devi before making a move towards the walk-in. After packing porter-loads we were ready to go into the mountains, hiring a lorry jointly with a Polish expedition who were going to attempt Changabang's N wall (an amazingly difficult route). We set off once again along hair-raising roads to the village of Surraithota where the porters were waiting.

The present route from Surraithota is a new approach, only opened up in 1980. The previous route, via Lata, was suffering from over-use, lack of wood and was usually over-crowded. The walk-in, steep and arduous, took 6 days. The monsoon rains were still with us, and each afternoon they would pour down, continuing through most of the night. After 2 days the going got much easier, as we followed close to the Rishi Ganga, and the weather improved which blew away the discontented feelings of the previous days.

On 1 September we left the Ramani river junction site. Andy Hyslop and myself set off ahead of the rest of the party to fix ropes on this next infamous section. The way is through steep cliffs which sweep 300m to



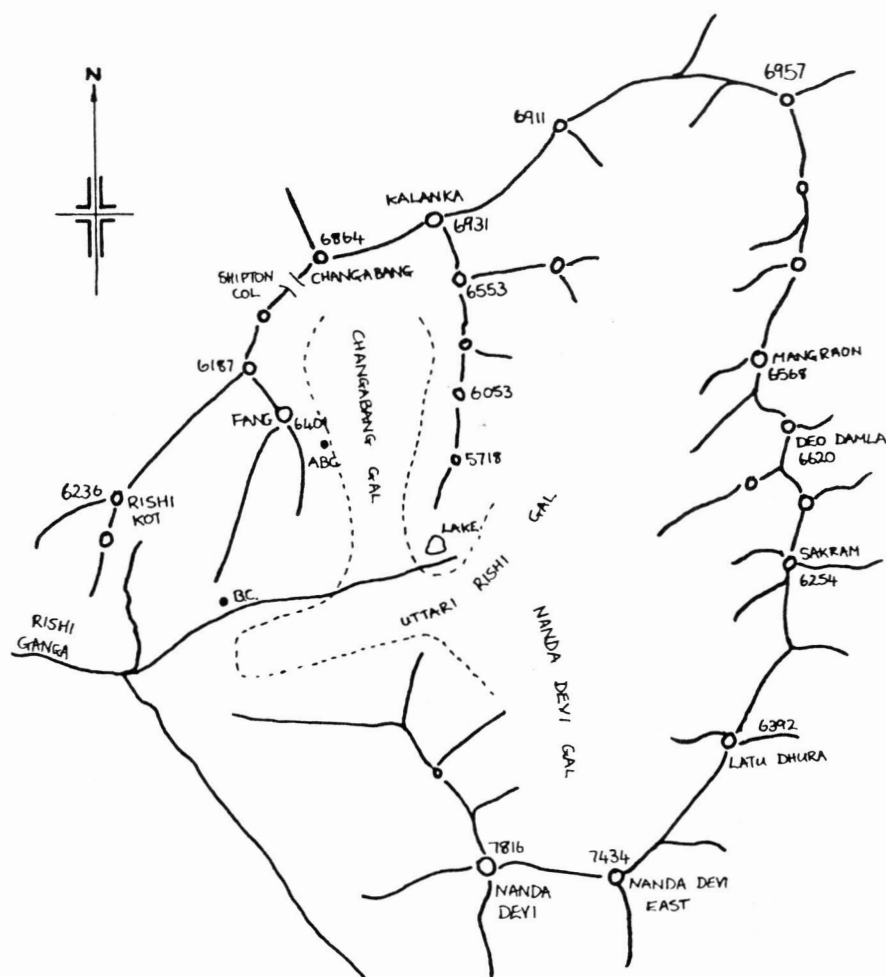
43 Looking up the Changabang Gal towards Changabang (left) and Kalanka

Photo: Nick Kekus



44 Kalanka South Face. The route takes the ice tongue between the 2 rock buttresses in the centre, through the seracs, then left to the col and up the W ridge

Photo: Nick Kekus



Nanda Devi Northern Sanctuary

the river below. Most of the sections were straightforward for us with only our light sacs, but for the poor porters with their 25kg loads there were some worrying spots. All went well, however, with no one lost, and at the end there was a high camp with beautiful views of Nanda Devi's



45 Bernard Domenech surveys the route up Kalanka. Nanda Devi is in the background Photo: Nick Kekus



46 Climbing in bad weather on the second day

Photo: Nick Kekus

W face. This is indeed a fine place, shadowed as it is by the great goddess. There, in the North Sanctuary, we could see Mangraon and Deo Damla.

The following day we crossed the river at Guba, and were fortunate to find a steel cable in place, left by the Czechs on their Nanda Devi N face expedition. At the 2nd river crossing, finding it in spate and the porters reluctant to cross, we waited until morning, paying off all but 8 porters to help with the crossing. A ropeway was rigged and all the team and supplies were soon on the far bank. It was decided to make base camp just a few hundred yards up the hillside on a large flat area above the river's flood plain—a pleasant site, spacious and with ample supplies of juniper for the camp fires. This was not the normal site used for base camp by expeditions to the Changabang Gal. However, it had certain advantages over the lake site further up the valley, though a major disadvantage was the extra walk to reach advanced base.

Two days later we made the first carry up the Changabang Gal, positioning the advanced camp on the least rocky piece of ground. It was probably the best spot around in an otherwise chaotic glacier. The Changabang Gal was far from what we had expected: it was such a maze of poised blocks and moraines that it was extremely arduous to walk over. On one carry I went up the glacier to take a closer look at our mountain. To my great disappointment the peak was free of snow and ice and extremely loose, as the sound of rock falls testified. This beautiful mountain had somehow degenerated into a pile of rubble, hardly recognizable from Hamish Brown's impressive photos. With this news we all returned to base camp, disheartened, to discuss the expedition's future.

It was decided to ask the LO to give us permission for Kalanka (6931m), the sister peak to Changabang. To our surprise he was quite willing to do this so long as we produced a letter freeing him from responsibility. As the French/Italian group had also permission to climb Pt-6187, next to the Fang, we retained permission for this peak as two of our party wished to attempt it.

Our plans for Kalanka were to attempt a direct line up the S face (left of the Barton/Fyffe line) with the option of diverting on to the original route via the W ridge (from Kalanka Col) if things got too difficult or bad weather forced us off.

On 13 September we collected all our supplies from Advance Camp and 4 climbers set off for the foot of the face. Sadly, Andy Hyslop became ill the night before we were due to leave, so reluctantly we left him behind. On arrival at the face, Derek Howard, who was having altitude problems, expressed concern about his ability to continue and decided to turn back.

After a day's rest, the 3 climbers, Bernard Domenech, Giuseppe Martellotti (Bombepo) and myself set out on the face. The team, by strange coincidence, was a fair representation of the nationalities involved in the expedition. We moved slowly under the weight of our

heavy sacs—so typical of these so-called lightweight ascents.

After reaching the central ice tongue we followed a frozen-in fixed rope, which led through all the most difficult climbing. It was possible to move left on to easy ground, but this was more exposed to seracs. We left the ice tongue by early afternoon and headed for the ever distant serac barrier. As time wore on we realised that we would not get through this before dark and we had to bivvy among the seracs.

The next day dawned fine, but soon deteriorated to cloudy and very windy conditions. Eventually it started to snow very heavily. Visibility was down to 10-20m and route-finding became extremely difficult. By 3pm we were lost. With seracs above and below, we had no idea where to go to get through this seemingly impenetrable barrier. Fortunately we were at a good bivvy site and were soon climbing into the bivvy tent out of the terrible conditions.

The weather was bad again in the morning, and progress was slow and difficult after a build-up of fresh snow. The way through to the upper part of the face was found during some brief clear spells, and a quick decision was made to go for the col. The climbing was certainly less steep on the obvious ramp across to the col, but dangerous as powder-avalanches poured down on to us. By mid-afternoon we had reached the spacious security of the col. The next day, 18 September, we set out for the summit, leaving most of our equipment behind in order to move faster.

Progress was hindered yet again by soft snow and worsening weather. We climbed the steep initial section of the ridge over firm ice, zig-zagging through rocks in the upper part; but soon our encouraging position changed as powder-avalanches poured over us. Gaining the top of this steep section, we could see the ridge sweeping away at a much easier angle towards the summit. We carried on for a short way, but because of the extremely difficult conditions we turned back at a point approximately 50m from the top. The return to the col was not without event, as more powder swept the slopes and the snow on the col had gained some 150mm in depth since we first passed by. We reached the bivvy tent with great relief.

The next day was abysmal: it snowed constantly and we descended to the foot of the mountain in a white-out. Our tracks of the previous days were obliterated, making route-finding almost impossible. With a great degree of luck, we managed to find the way down safely and reach the cache of food on the glacier. It was still snowing, and here we spent the worst night of the whole trip. All our down gear was wet through, even with the use of the so-called 'miracle material' Gore-Tex.

In the morning we descended to base camp to a somewhat mixed reception. Some wished to stay longer and go trekking, while those who had been very disappointed only wished to leave for home as soon as possible. We did not reach the summit in the fashion one would like, but we were happy with our lot on our first Himalayan peak. After all, what's 50m between friends?