

Paldor

H. G. Nicol

Plates 29–30

It was Tilman who put Paldor on the map in his book *Nepal Himalaya*. He did his best to take it off again by dismissing it as a modest 19,451ft peak (5929m), whose only claim to distinction was that it actually had a name. Tilman and Lloyd climbed Paldor during the course of an expedition in the Langtang Himalaya but they were only seriously interested in the views they might obtain from its summit of the higher Ganesh peaks to the north-west.

What happened after it was climbed by Tilman in 1949 is not certain. John Cleare climbed Paldor in 1974, and Sir George Bishop climbed Paldor West, but not the main summit, in 1980. There is no mention of Paldor in any editions of the *Alpine Journal* or of the *Himalayan Journal* in the last 35 years. Eventually it became one of Nepal's 'trekking peaks'. There are 18 of these and the name simply means that they can be climbed with a trekking permit and on payment of a modest fee. Its low altitude, (below 6000m) considerably reduces its interest for the serious expedition climber. Was it too difficult for the packaged tourist on a four weeks holiday from London? Had it been climbed more than twice?

Paldor stands out impressively from the larger Ganesh mountains behind it, and on a good day can be seen quite easily from Kathmandu airport. The SE ridge looks inviting and not too difficult. The distance to it from Kathmandu, as measured out on the inaccurate trekking maps of Langtang and Helambu is about 65km. It seemed a suitable objective for a party of middle-aged but experienced mountaineers.

The easiest way to approach a mountain in the Himalaya from the point of view of time, comfort, and convenience is to make all your own arrangements through a trekking company. It will obtain your air tickets to Kathmandu, book a comfortable hotel, arrange trekking permits, advise on Nepalese and Indian visas, and in many ways ease your passage to the kingdom. It will supply tents, sleeping bags, mattresses, porters to carry them, cooks, Sherpas to point out the way, food and all manner of unobtrusive expertise. It is difficult to see how else one could do it on a short holiday, and within the strict limitations imposed by a 20kg baggage allowance (economy class) on all international airways. Moreover it is not as easy now as it used to be in the 1960's to disperse ice axes, crampons and karabiners within one's clothing or in a day bag on an aeroplane. It costs a lot to travel in style but for us it was worth it.

Our party comprised Malcolm and Barbara Gate, Terry Leggett, Roger Salisbury, Alan and Janet Wedgwood, my wife, Mary and myself. We left London by jumbo jet on Saturday 20 October 1984 and arrived in Kathmandu via Delhi airport the next day, minus half our baggage which was lost in Delhi and came on a day later. Had it not been for determined action by Mary and Roger, it would have been much worse for, as in previous years, there were 500

trekkers fighting for 125 seats on the Kathmandu plane, all with OK reservations, but very few with names on the official passenger list. 'Sit down Madam, I come to you' the little brown man kept saying as he shuffled his lists about kneeling on the floor of the transit lounge and surrounded by furious tourists. This was the way it was done in India and this was the way it had always been done, but Madam refused to sit down and we got the last eight places on the plane, ten minutes after it should have left on its flight to Kathmandu.

Our departure date had been carefully chosen to avoid the Dasain festival which occupies the first three weeks of October in Nepal. During this time it is difficult to hire porters because they are all celebrating. The monsoon rains should all have finished by mid October and the only climatic problems would be the cold at high altitude and the short days. It had seemed to me in England that the best way to approach Paldor was from the east, if possible over a high col which would give the party some much needed acclimatization. There were three possibilities, the Ganga La 5120m, Tilman's col 5486m, or the Laurebina La 4608m, near the Gosainkund lakes. The first two were dismissed by Mountain Travel as too difficult and too high. Perhaps it is just as well that they were, because our selected route along the Tiru Danda ridge to the Laurebina La proved hard enough.

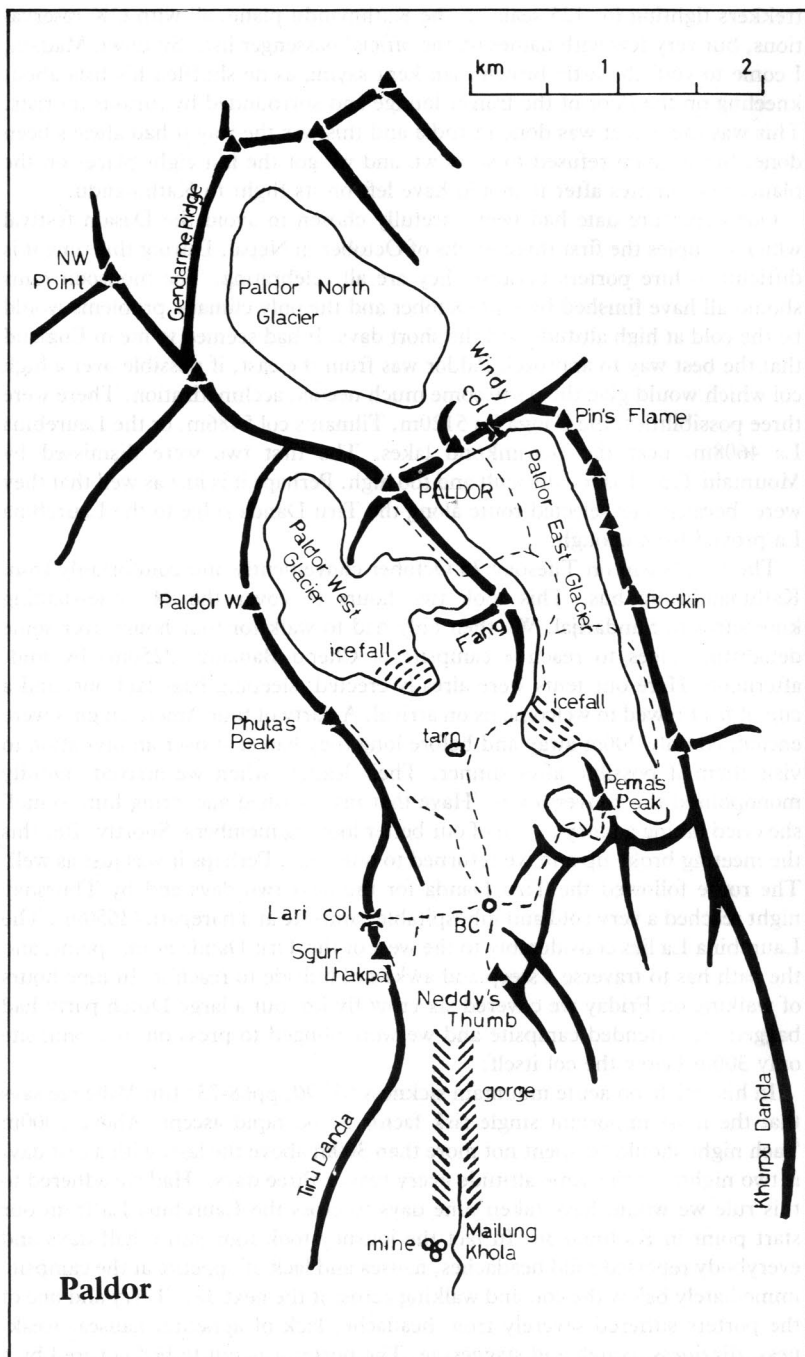
The trek began on Tuesday 23 October conveniently and comfortably from Kathmandu by bus. This took two hours to cover the 24 bone-shaking kilometres to Sundarjal. We then only had to walk for four hours over some delightful ridges to reach a campsite at Chepu Banjang (2250m) by mid-afternoon. Here our tents were already erected, sleeping bags laid out, and a cup of tea brewed to welcome us on arrival. A party of four American girls were encamped only 200m away and before long they had sent over an invitation to visit them if possible after dinner. Their leader, when we arrived, rapidly monopolised the conversation. 'Have that man washed and bring him to me!' she cried taking a fancy to one of our better looking members. Shortly after this the meeting broke up and we returned to our tents. Perhaps it was just as well. The route followed the Tiru Danda for the next two days and by Thursday night reached a very cold and inhospitable campsite at Tharepati, (3650m). The Laurebina La lies considerably to the west of the Tiru Danda at this point, and the path has to traverse a steep and awkward hillside to reach it. In nine hours of walking on Friday we covered six crow-fly km but a large Dutch party had bagged our intended campsite and we were obliged to press on to a campsite only 300m below the col itself.

In his article on acute mountain sickness (*A790*, pp68-73) Jim Milledge says that the most important single risk factor is too rapid ascent. Above 3000m 'each night should be spent not more than 300m above the last, with a rest day, *ie* two nights, at the same altitude every two or three days.' Had we adhered to this rule we would have taken nine days to cross the Laurebina La from our start point in Kathmandu. In fact the journey took four and a half days and everybody reported mild headaches, nausea and lack of appetite at the campsite immediately below the col, and walking across it the next day. Terry and one of the porters suffered severely from headache, lack of appetite, nausea, weakness, dizziness, cough and staggering. The porter was put to bed covered by a



29 Paldor seen from the E Paldor glacier.

Photo: Hamish Nicol



space blanket, but Terry was so reticent about his symptoms that nobody realized how ill he was. There were of course four medical doctors and two PhD's in the party!

Those not taking Diamox were the most seriously affected. Each member of the party had been asked to record their symptoms of altitude sickness every day on a special form which I had given them. Minor symptoms such as loss of appetite, weakness, irritability, counted one point each on the form, and more severe symptoms like severe headache, frothy sputum and the staggers counted three points. Over the first part of the trek, from 23-29 October the three people who were not on Diamox collected a total of 35 points, an average of 11.7 points per person. The remaining five were all on Diamox and scored an average of only 4.4 altitude sickness points per person. After 29 October everybody except Alan, who puts no faith in pills, was on Diamox, so no further comparisons could be made. During the first week of the trek there could be no doubt that Diamox, in a dose of 500mg per day, had proved its efficacy.

On 27 October, we left the campsite at 4100m at 6am and reached the top of the Laurebina La by 9am. For those who could appreciate it, the view was magnificent. In the foreground lay the Gosainkund lakes all sparkling in the sunshine, surrounded by easy rocky mountains going up to about 5000m. In the distance to the west, Himalchuli, Peak 29, Manaslu all the Ganesh peaks and eventually even Paldor itself could be seen clearly.

On the W side of the Laurebina La the descent to the Trisuli river is easy and delightful on carefully graded wide paths built for the thousands of Hindu pilgrims who visit the shrines of Gosainkund in August. In October we passed huge parties of trekkers toiling uphill under enormous sacks loaded with firewood. They were not enjoying themselves, for pleasure on mountains is inversely proportional to the weight of one's rucksack.

Syabru is a friendly little village perched in startling fashion on a ridge overlooking the Trisuli river. We walked steeply down to it from Sing Gompa, stopping frequently to inspect the magnificent peak of Langtang Lirung (7224m) on the N side of the Langtang valley, whilst nearby all sorts of strange birds twittered in the branches of the rhododendrons — the grosbeak, the white winged crested tit, the little pied flycatcher, each one identified carefully through the binoculars and then a second time in the pages of Fleming's *Birds of Nepal*. All this must have driven our patient sirdar Pemba Norbu to distraction, but he never showed it. Anyway it did not matter because Syabru was going to be an 'off' day well earned by our porters on the high col. Most of us could do with the rest, especially Terry, who was still not going well. A short walk down the village street and back up again made him look blue, ill, and short of breath. I listened to his chest with a stethoscope and to my astonishment heard lots of fine crackles at his lung bases. He had pulmonary oedema.

Luckily, the next few days of the trek would be even lower lying as the track crossed the Trisuli river at Syabru Bensi. So with the assistance of Frusemide tablets (a stronger diuretic used in cases of cardiac failure) he pressed on with us, and over the next four days made a steady recovery.

At Syabru Bensi the tourist parties abruptly ceased and for the next 21 days



30 *The summit of Paldor seen from the Tilman ridge.*

Photo: Hamish Nicol

we were on our own and saw no trekkers, and very few local inhabitants. We camped at Thanjet, Gatlang, twice in the Mailung Khola, and on 2 November, 11 days out from Kathmandu, reached Paldor Base Camp.

Base Camp is at 4500m in a pleasant hollow surrounded by moraines and boulders below the confluence of the E and W Paldor glaciers. From our tents we had an excellent view of the S face of Paldor, and its SE ridge leading to the Fang stood out beautifully, especially in the setting sun.

It was obviously essential to climb Paldor as soon as possible but there was no point in rushing up it before the party was properly acclimatized. So on 3 November we climbed Phuta's Peak (5110m) while three of the Sherpas went off to reconnoitre the SE ridge of Paldor (the Cleare ridge). From our vantage point on the summit of Phuta's Peak we were astonished to see our three Sherpas already half way up the S face of Paldor on a new route! Tactfully they turned back without actually reaching the summit and made a very late arrival at Base Camp that night. They had shown that the Cleare ridge cannot be reached easily from the W Paldor glacier.

The plan was now to climb Paldor in two days from Base Camp, using a high camp on the Paldor E glacier at about 5200m. The six climbers set off at 8.30am next morning accompanied by all five climbing Sherpas and a number of porters. It was an easy walk up boulders and scree and then up the lower icy E Paldor glacier. The altitude of the Advanced Base Camp was 5170m and Ang Kami the cook and all five Sherpas were already there when we arrived. The porters had dumped their loads and were already on their way down. Within minutes tents were erected and sleeping bags unrolled. From the tents the NE ridge could be seen easily (Tilman's ridge). The route to Windy Col from the south was cut off by a steep bergschrund, so three of the Sherpas set off in the afternoon to fix ropes for our eventual descent of the Tilman ridge down this difficult slope. It had been decided that the whole party would climb the Cleare ridge and if possible descend the Tilman ridge, thus making a south to north traverse of the mountain. Roger and I meanwhile took a short walk up the glacier to reconnoitre the eastern approaches to the Cleare ridge.

The tents shook and flapped all night in the wind but with three in the two-man tents anchoring them down they did not blow away. Pemba got us up at 4.45am and we were off by 6.15am on 5 November. Fortunately the E Paldor glacier is gentle and uncrevassed and we made excellent progress. To my surprise, however, I found that the main party were heading straight for the fixed ropes on the Tilman ridge. Obviously Pemba had decided on a change of plan without consulting anybody.

Roger and I were very keen to climb the SE ridge so after a rapid shouted consultation we broke off from the others with Lhakpa. Alan and Janet, Terry and Malcolm with their Sherpas continued in the direction of the fixed ropes.

The Cleare ridge was as good as it looked. The snow was hard and perfect and our crampon points bit into it cleanly. It was never necessary to cut steps but Lhakpa found it steep enough to front point the last 150m to the summit. We moved continuously, slowly but without stopping. Base Camp could be seen 1200m down between our legs and there was not much in the way. Was it wise, I mused, for gentlemen in their fifties to risk their lives like this?

Fortunately Lhakpa, who was leading, quickly put a stop to such introspection with a quick pull on the rope. Quite suddenly he shouted, 'We're on top!' and shortly after 10.00am Roger, Lhakpa and I sat together on the summit. There was not much room and on the N side a prodigious overhanging cornice blocked the way for our friends, who were still little dots on the NE ridge 150m below. Lhakpa set to work on part of the cornice, hammered in an ice stake and suspended a fixed rope from it. By this time Pemba and Terry had arrived. Janet, Alan and Karsang quickly followed, and there were eight on the top. Malcolm with his two Sherpas was a short distance behind. Lhakpa, Roger and I now descended the Tilman ridge, whilst the others went down the Cleare ridge. All of us eventually traversed the mountain in both directions. It was a hard day.

Next day Advanced Base was dismantled and we returned to Base, spending a pleasant, lazy afternoon talking and taking photographs. Alan and Terry however, not content with the amount of exercise they had had already, climbed Neddy's Thumb by its S face in two hours from Base Camp. They found a pleasant route up it at about Difficult standard, almost certainly a new route.

Paldor is surrounded by many easier little mountains most of which look climbable. On 7 November Alan, Terry and I with Ang Danu climbed Pema's peak (5300m) on the E side of Base Camp. A cold wind blew across its summit chasing heavy cloud with some mares' tails. It looked as if the long spell of good weather was going to break. Next morning was colder and windier, a day better suited to reading than to climbing. However, after lunch Terry, Roger and I with Ang Dale and Lhakpa decided to explore a low peak on the Tiru Danda, which looked a bit like Sgurr Alasdair in the Isle of Skye. It looked fine on the western skyline from Base Camp but, instead of the fine gabbro of the Skye ridge, it was composed of rotting gneiss. Large pieces came away in our hands and from beneath our feet, and only Terry, Lhakpa and I, unwisely perhaps, completed the traverse. The summit was 4750m and on it we erected a tottering cairn, assuming I think with some justification, that a ridge so unpleasant would not have been visited before. We called it Sgurr Lhakpa: he said he did not mind.

On 9 November the bad weather turned to snow and it was time to leave. It was a very cold night, and face flannels froze inside the tents and so did water bottles. It would have been possible to reach Trisuli Bazaar in five days along the Tiru Danda and this had been our first plan. However by this time most of us had had enough of high altitudes and cold and were much attracted by an alternative proposal. This was to return via the Ankhu Khola, along the twisting and rarely visited valley to the west of the Tiru Danda. It took seven days to do this and to find a way back over the Tiru Danda to Trisuli Bazaar. The next day a chartered bus took us back to Kathmandu in four hours.

Near Kathmandu on a high ridge all the Ganesh peaks could be seen, Pabil, Lapsang Karbo, the Bat and Paldor too. Paldor was the smallest and the easiest but in such exalted company it was not disgraced: we were glad to have climbed it.