A Scramble in the Kishtwar Alps

ROGER EVERETT

The Kishtwar region of the Indian Himalaya is an ideal venue for the mountaineer who relishes unclimbed peaks of moderate altitude in an uncrowded environment. Lying between Kashmir to the west, Lahul to the east and Zanskar and Ladakh to the north, it is just to the south of the main watershed. Compared with these other well-known areas, Kishtwar is relatively unfrequented by tourists and trekkers, and has been less extensively explored by mountaineers than many of the other Indian Himalayan ranges. This is particularly true of the eastern part of the Kishtwar range, where the majority of the peaks remain unclimbed. Why this should be so is not clear. The valleys are strikingly beautiful, the people are friendly, the climate is relatively dry (the region being close to the deserts of Ladakh), and the mountains provide a wealth of objectives at all levels of difficulty and at amenable altitudes.

Simon Richardson and myself, together with our wives Christine and Dairena, were searching for an objective for a family expedition of the type I had often enjoyed before. Kishtwar seemed a suitable possibility with its unclimbed peaks and excellent trekking, and we were particularly attracted by a mountain photographed by Steve Venables from his highest bivouac on Kishtwar Shivling (which he climbed with Dick Renshaw in 1983). This prominent peak displayed a striking steep ridge line leading from a glacier to the summit snow ridge about 1400m above. As far as we could judge from the map, the peak lay close to the elusive Muni La; the only peak marked on the map in this region was unnamed and given as 5900m. Therefore officially our objective was UNP5900m, but since this height was clearly an underestimate, we renamed the mountain Chomochior (from the name of a glacier on one of our maps) and guessed the height, with surprising accuracy, as 6300m. Thus the British East Kishtwar Expedition 1988 was born.

We managed to escape the numbing heat of Delhi so rapidly that our liaison officer was unable to keep up. After the overnight train journey to Jammu we maintained the momentum with a taxi ride to Kishtwar and the bus the next day to Galhar. One of the advantages of small expeditions is their mobility. The walk to Base Camp was to take five days. The first two days took us up the Chenab gorge, which some years before had presented a really splendid walk through wild scenery, with the mule path sometimes built out from steep rock-walls with amazing exposure. Now a motorable road is being blasted straight through the cliffs; next year it may well be possible to take a bus all the way to Athole. This blasting almost caused a premature end to our trip when faulty communication nearly sent us – along with a sizeable mule train – on an aerial trip into the river. We reached Athole on the second day (where our

liaison officer, much to our mutual surprise, caught up with us), and then turned north along the Bhut Nullah. The walking became more interesting and strenuous as the path meandered up and down steep wooded hillsides with occasional villages. We stopped for our third night at Kundail (2300m). Our fourth day saw a steady increase in altitude through some spectacular scenery. Cliffs reminiscent of Colorado's Eldorado Canyon rose above the torrent, while we wandered through pine-woods, crossed some huge avalanche debris and had the odd glimpse of 6000m peaks far above. After passing through Chisote we continued to Machail (2954m), the major town of the region, and camped a little further on. The last day of the walk-in was very exciting, as we gained height and left the main valley to reach the foot of the Haptal Nullah at Sumcham (3450m). There were superb views of Agyasol (which Simon and I had climbed in 1981) and Shivling, and then, for the first time, we saw our objective at the head of the valley. The view was encouraging: it didn't look totally impossible. We came to a halt at Bujwas (3480m), where our donkeys could not cross the river at the foot of the Hagshu Nullah, and found a delightful site for Base Camp.

Our intended route, the steep NW spur of Chomochior, rose from a glacier basin about 600m above the head of the main Haptal glacier. This basin was guarded by a substantial ice-fall; despite various explorations, we failed to find a way round it. Being married men, Simon and I took our responsibilities seriously and, making no attempt to overcome our fear of a direct assault, we decided to try elsewhere. It seemed that we could reach another glacier below the W ridge of the mountain by a circuitous route which skirted two smaller ice-falls to the south-west. We judged that, once under the W ridge, we could either cross some broken ground to reach our original objective or, failing that, make an attempt on the W ridge itself. This appeared to be a feasible line, although the final tower looked formidable. Our first problem was the huge distance between Base Camp and the mountain. Although an ideal sunny spot suitable for the LO, and for Dairena and Christine to start their traverse of the Umasi La, Base Camp was two days' walk from the foot of the serious climbing and almost 3000m below the summit. Our attempt was to be in alpine style, implying an ascent in a single push from Base Camp. Obviously, the length (and therefore in part the difficulty) of an ascent depends on where Base Camp is situated. Since ours was so low, it seemed reasonable to keep our ascent within the rules of alpine style by simply moving it progressively uphill.

Dairena carried a load for us to the site of our Advanced Base Camp, in a splendid ablation valley near the head of the Haptal glacier. This proved to be beside a shepherds' hut which was guarded by three aggressive dogs. Our regular battles with these beasts, at all times of the day and night, gradually changed from terrifying experiences to a bit of harmless fun. For all their threatening behaviour, we discovered that they would not actually attack us and, like 'Fido' on Brighton beach, they playfully chased the stones we hurled at them.

With ABC established it was time for Dairena and Christine to start their trek, leaving Simon and myself to climb. Since they would be returning to Britain via Padam, Kargil and Srinagar, we wouldn't be meeting again until

after the end of the holiday; a poignant moment. During the next two days we carried all our food and equipment from ABC to a camp below the W ridge at 4900m. Our Base Camp had now become Super Advanced Base Camp. Reaching SABC involved a six-hour trip from ABC, first crossing the main glacier, then avoiding one ice-fall on moraine and skirting most of a second one near the bergschrund on its left bank. The second ice-fall had a frightening section, crossing steep serac walls above a collapsed area of deep holes. Above this the glacier was straightforward, with easy walking in a magnificent setting.

A short way above SABC an ice couloir led through the rock-walls below the W ridge. This was such an obvious line that we shelved the idea of traversing to the NW spur, which was still out of sight and a long way away. On 6 September we made a very early start, carrying five days' food, in order to be as high as possible before the sun could create a risk of stonefall. The couloir was easy at first, but it gradually steepened and turned to hard uncompromising water ice. Although never very steep, the ice made sufficient demands on arm and calf muscles to necessitate belaying. In any case, as we gained height, a rope-length's climbing was quite far enough without a rest! Higher up there were a couple of tricky sections where the ice was not continuous, but after climbing for six hours we gained easy ground leading to a col on the W ridge. Although it was still quite early, we decided to stop as the next possible tent site was clearly a long way above. We were rather surprised and pleased to find the altimeter reading 5600m; we had come quite a long way. An excellent tent platform was easily made on a ledge of broken rock, and then we settled down to a cooking marathon while gazing at the superb views.

Above us a snow ridge led to a band of slabs before mixed ground went up to a shoulder below the final tower. This still looked very hard; success was still in doubt. The weather continued excellent, but our rapid progress was causing acclimatization problems, so we had a rest day. That night an electric storm far to the south kept up a continuous illumination. Although we were under clear skies the storm was a little worrying. Would it come our way? Was this the start of some bad weather?

After the rest day we made a fairly early start and quickly climbed the snow to the foot of the slabs. A series of cracks and grooves gave enjoyable delicate climbing for a pitch, and then a short steep icy corner led to mixed ground on the crest of the ridge again. Whenever the ridge steepened we took the snow, ice or mixed slopes to its left. The climbing was never very hard but always interesting and well protected. Again we gained height quickly, only to slow down as the increased altitude made itself felt. After a six-hour shift we reached a shoulder in rapidly worsening weather. The totally unrealistic idea of making a dash for the summit was quickly discarded for the less adventurous but safer course of digging out a tent site. Once inside the tent we tried to imagine that it wasn't snowing, and we also tried to forget that we had earlier spent a whole day of perfect weather doing nothing. Had we lost our chance? We were at just over 6000m, so the summit could not be too far away. However, the final tower still looked extremely formidable, although there was just a hint that there might be a route round behind it. The evening was spent discussing theoretical mountain topography.

That night we slept (if that is the right word) probably higher than either of us had done before. (I had been higher once, but then I definitely didn't sleep.) We woke before dawn and started melting snow. The stove (an MSR Whisperlite International), which had been a complete disaster from the outset, produced its most stubborn performance yet, and after an hour we only had half a cup of cold chocolate each. Both of us felt rough, but as the weather was obviously threatening it was clearly important that we should make an immediate attempt on the summit, or the chance might be lost completely. In any case, neither of us contemplated another night at this height with any enthusiasm. We packed a day-sack and, sandwiched between layers of cloud above and cloud below, climbed mixed ground towards a rocky ridge leading to the final tower. Just below the ridge the rock reared up steep and smooth. Obviously suffering from lack of judgement induced by altitude, I threw myself at a difficult crack leading to a large overhang. As the time raced by and the clouds gathered, I vainly struggled upwards until what should have been obvious finally dawned on me: I couldn't climb it. But Simon had a moment of real inspiration and suggested a diagonal abseil to reach an easier line down to the left. At the cost of this point of aid we arrived on more mixed ground which brought us up to the ridge. The new view generated much excitement, for not only could we see into Zanskar for the first time, but it was clear that in the space of a few moments we had gone from a situation of likely failure to one of almost certain success. The tower was avoidable. Leaving the rucksack, we set off on the last stage to the summit. Moving freely, we kicked steps in good snow up to the summit ridge, and then wandered along through patches of mist (but with very atmospheric views of the nearby summits which still protruded from the cloud) towards the top. Just below a prominent mound I stopped so that we could reach the summit together, but it turned out to be a false top. So much for the emotional gesture! The ridge continued to curl away, until suddenly there was no more; the ground fell away steeply to the east. We had climbed the mountain.

After so much good weather it was frustrating to be peering through the mist for glimpses of the mountains which had been our neighbours for the previous week. Occasionally the highest summits (such as Agyasol) would break clear in the west, while the lower hills in Zanskar to the east were frequently clear, but a fine granite peak (Cerro Kishtwar) just across the glacier remained hidden. As we had looked forward to this trip for so long it seemed odd to start going down, but we were several days from the nearest village and, with the cloud all around us and snow beginning to fall, descent suddenly seemed a good idea.

We reversed the snow slopes, scrambled along the rock ridge to a position from which we could abseil to retrieve the gear abandoned in the difficult crack, and reached the tent in increasing cloud and snowfall. We hurriedly packed all the gear and then continued down. The tent site above the couloir eventually appeared through the gloom, and we settled down to a relaxed evening, battling with the stove and feeling quite pleased with ourselves. The weather remained poor throughout the night and it was still gently snowing in the morning. After abseiling down the couloir, we got back to SABC early in the afternoon; a

combination of real tiredness, lethargy and the weather dictated that we should stop there for the night. The glacier, with its ice-falls, was no place to be wandering about exhausted in poor visibility, and we now had so much spare food that it seemed a good idea to eat some rather than carry it down.

We woke to a brilliant morning, rather wishing that we could go back and enjoy all those views which we had missed on our summit day. With regret, we packed all the spare gear and food into the heaviest sacks that we had yet carried, and struggled down through the new snow on the glacier. We arrived at the ice-fall zone; only a short trip through this, and all major difficulties and dangers would be behind us. But first, Simon had to climb down a steep wall to make an awkward step above a huge void. As he made the necessary pick placement, there was a resounding cracking noise followed by a chain reaction of frightening cracks, as the whole mass appeared to be rearranging itself. Somewhat shaken, we retreated and were confronted by the problem of finding an alternative route. This took another two hours as we climbed down steep ice walls, in and out of crevasses, and followed intricate, almost subterranean routes between rock and ice. Finally, a short abseil took us over the last of the major holes to the safety of the flat glacier below.

We were quite looking forward to the inevitable battle with the dogs at ABC, as a mark of our return to the world at large, but they had gone. Autumn was well established; in our short absence the grass had turned yellow and the annual plants were beginning to die back. The shepherd had obviously decided to begin his long journey to winter pastures, some 150km away. We were too late to follow him and had one more night at ABC.

The next day we followed the trail of destruction made by the large herd of sheep and goats as it descended what the Americans would call the fragile tundra. Our arrival back at Base Camp was marked by a superb chicken curry with chips; the chicken had been bought for 25 rupees in Sumcham (only about an hour away) by our enterprising cook, and he sold it to us for 75. We had arrived back in the real world.