# In the Annapurna Sanctuary

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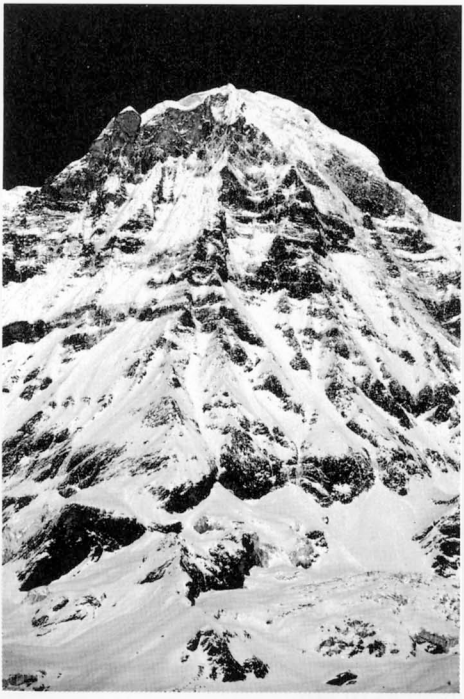
(*Plates 2–4*)

So you are planning a brief visit to the Himalaya? Then drive an hour or two from Pokhara along the dusty jeep track that rises gently to the north-west and stop at the wooden shanties of Suikhet. The five-day amble into the Annapurna Sanctuary from this point is one of the country's most popular tourist treks. Along the way you will meet the friendliness and hospitality that is typical of the very best in rural Nepal. You will also find it very difficult to walk for more than 1½ hours without stopping for a welcome brew in one of the many recently established, government-funded, 'Chai houses' that have sprung up along the trail.

What does Jimmy Roberts think now, I wonder? When he first penetrated this dramatic cwm, rimmed by the various peaks of the Annapurnas, the wonderfully named Machapuchare and Hiunchuli, he was the first person other than local shepherds to do so. It was 1956, and Chomrong was the last habitation. Three further days were needed to climb through the impressive gorge of the Modi Khola 'most of the way by dismal bamboo slogging'. Little had changed by 1970, when Haston and Whillans reached the summit of Annapurna I via the S face. By the end of that decade, however, the floodgates had well and truly opened. With an annual increase in trekking tourism of nearly 20%, demanding much more than the area can realistically provide, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project is trying hard to maintain the fragile environment. Supplies of kerosene (and also stoves, which can be rented by trekking groups) are stocked at Chomrong. Burning wood beyond this point is normally banned, although the recent Nepalese–Indian trade embargo has gone a long way towards causing renewed destruction to the rhododendron forests.

In the spring of 1989 I was able to explore a small corner of the Sanctuary thanks to the organizational ability of Jonny Garratt – a young upwardly mobile army captain who professed 'connections in the City'. The previous year he had reached the dizzy heights of the Hornbein couloir without supplementary oxygen; a feat that, he was quick to point out, arose from a complete mechanical breakdown in his set rather than from any ethical trait. Martin Doyle, Dave Harries, Mike Woolridge and Jon Tinker, with Kath Slevin as Base Camp manageress, completed this happy team.

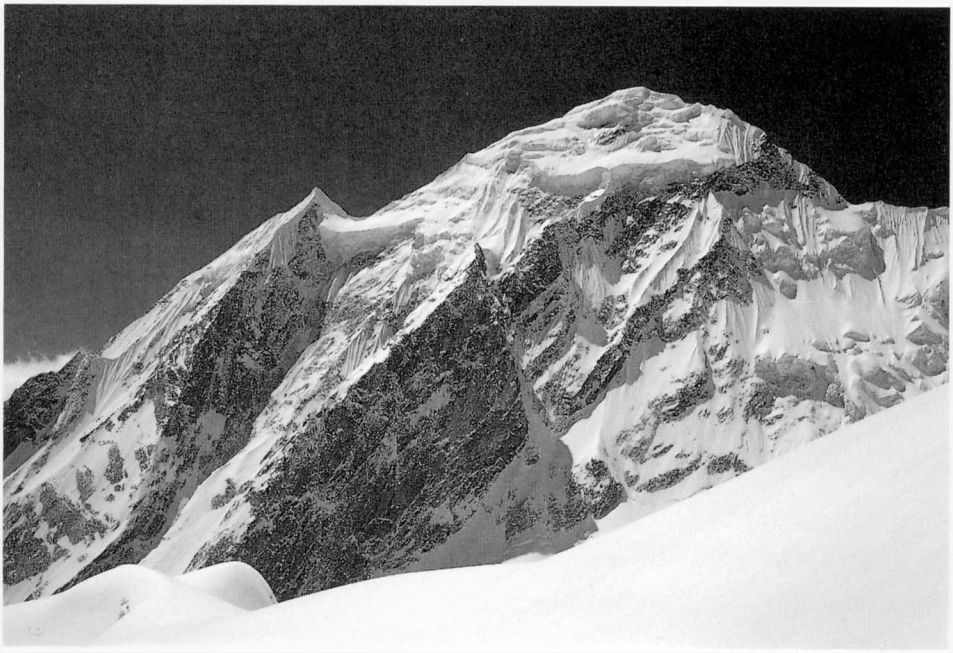
Our vote had been cast in favour of a fairly short but interesting approach to Base Camp; quick and easy access from the latter to the bottom of the route, which would lessen the load-carrying; an attractive unclimbed line with a certain degree of technical climbing throughout, so minimizing, we hoped, the occurrence of avalanche-prone snowslopes; a low seven-thousander and



2. *Annapurna South, 7219m: East Pillar.* (Lindsay Griffin) (p 13)



3. *Annapurna South Face: Top Buttress, British Route.* (Lindsay Griffin) (p 13)



4. *Annapurna South: unclimbed NW face of Hiunchuli from East Pillar.* (Lindsay Griffin) (p 13)

preferably an untrodden summit; and for Jonny, whose job it was to raise the cash, something with a familiar ring to it, like Everest! Well, that narrowed it down. In fact it only appeared to leave the E face of Annapurna South!

The first ascent of this previously unattempted 7219m peak fell to a young Japanese team making an inaugural visit to the Himalaya in 1964. They sited their Base Camp, at just over 4000m, in the ablation valley of the South Annapurna glacier – 'a very beautiful place, covered with green grass and pretty flowers, and with crystal-clear pools of fresh drinking water.' We would use the same idyllic location – or would we? The intervening years have taken their toll and the area has been graced with the splendid architecture of the 'Annapurna Base Camp Hotels' – two rather squalid tea shacks and widespread litter.

The Japanese owed a great deal to the considerable expertise of their climbing Sherpas (shades of Rum Doodle?). Massive amounts of rope were fixed up the jumbled depression on the left side of the E face. They finally gained the N ridge at a point between the N and central summits. The highest and S summit was reached on 15 October by Mingma Tsering and Shoichiro Uyeo. 'It was a narrow, snow-covered point that the two of us could not stand on at the same time.' Closer inspection proved that their route, at one stage envisaged as our possible descent, was a singularly unattractive line. The South Annapurna glacier, rising to a small plateau below the face, was far safer and much more straightforward than suggested by its tortured appearance. Above, however, no line seemed immune from tumbling ice. Serac debris of all shapes and sizes littered a vast area – too hostile an audience for our unrehearsed performance.

The safest route of ascent on this side of the mountain appeared to follow the watershed delimiting the left side of this face. Rocky towers just above the col at the base of the E ridge look quite tricky but can be bypassed by following one of the several steep snow ribs on the N flank. The continuation could be straightforward, given reasonable conditions and not the more usual Himalayan fare of windslab or deep unstable snow. It is a much easier proposition than the unclimbed W ridge of Hiunchuli which rises from the opposite side of the col. The E ridge has seen at least half-a-dozen attempts, but only once has it been completed. On that occasion, bad weather terminated the ascent at the central summit. In more recent years attention has focused on the S side. This is undoubtedly the most beautiful facet, and the purity of its ribs and ridge lines has been admired by most travellers who reach the magnificent viewpoint of Poon hill. Attempts, in both summer and winter – mainly by Japanese – have been many; successes have been few. The face rises from the depths of the Chomrong gorge, and access has proved both difficult and time-consuming for laden porters. Perhaps the least-known but most remarkable achievement belongs to the Italian Tessarin who made a clandestine ascent, solo, of a new route on the 2000m high SW face, over three days in August 1988.

On the E face a pronounced pillar leads straight as an arrow to the unclimbed N summit. The bottom bit looks all right: a nice scamper up there in a day from a well-stocked camp at the foot of the face; it might need two trips. The rockband looks hard, and that very steep ice arête above could be rather serious; we might take some rope for that – and I confess to you now, with no little shame, that we took a small amount of rope for fixing. In effect, triple the

amount would not have gone amiss! As somebody calculated the face to be 2000m high, it was suggested that acclimatization on Tarpu Chuli (which at 5663m sounds more exotic than Tent peak) and Hiunchuli (6441m) would prove most beneficial.

We reached Base Camp on 12 April and attempted to pitch camp. The 'pretty flowers' appeared to be buried under four metres of heavy winter snow. With no available running water and great difficulty in keeping food fresh, the kitchen became a continual source of chaos and lack of hygiene. Despite the unseasonable problems of access we had privacy rivalling that of Piccadilly Underground Station. Funny how the best-laid plans go astray, isn't it!

In the ensuing days a bright morning would make inroads into the snow depth. Unfortunately, by early afternoon the first flakes would be floating down from an overcast sky and the *status quo* would be fully restored by the following morning. It was easy to convince ourselves that any summits were out of the question for the time being, and instead we slowly began to establish a camp at the foot of the ridge. The long hours of upward toil through deep wet snow were rewarded by a subsequent descent of the same terrain via some monstrous glissades – the most inventive members perfecting a Waikiki surfing technique atop the removable stiffened backpad from a rucksack! Our tents were pitched beneath the overhangs of a rocky outcrop which conveniently deflected any snow-slides well over our heads. After a night there, officially to indulge in the head-thumping joys of premature acclimatization but mainly, I suspect, to escape the unremitting *dahl bhat* at base, we went up for a wee foray. Passing various pieces of old and abandoned equipment, such as obese deadmen of heavy steel plating and similarly constructed 'tent pegs', we came upon the first of the ropes.

Up to this moment we had been blissfully unaware of any previous sortie. Local information later suggested an unofficial attempt – a most unlikely breach of mountaineering regulations, in full view of the whole Sanctuary. This had obviously proved no deterrent to three Japanese climbers who had blatantly fixed the lower ridge with double 7mm hawser. Bleached and rotten, the sections that remained served only to remind us of the subsequent disappearance of the whole team somewhere on the mountain. The rest had either disintegrated or, more likely, had become well buried along with its owners. We progressed with a certain trepidation, afraid perhaps of what we might find.

Quite soon we were afflicted by that well-known ailment that Tilman often referred to as 'Mountaineer's Foot' – a total inability to put one foot in front of the other. An oxygen-starved brain rationalized the problem to be somehow connected with the fact that we were standing up to our thighs in snow. From below we had blithely dismissed this section as offering pleasant front-pointing. The sun had peered over the horizon only a couple of hours earlier, yet we were already too late. Suddenly the *dahl bhat* became wonderfully attractive and we beat a hasty retreat, realizing that we might just have to revise our strategy a little!

All our prior research and extensive photographic information had led us to severely underestimate the difficulties in the lower half. My only excuse

could be that, standing there in the raw flesh of post winter, it was hard to recognize the hill from any of those wonderfully bewitching pictures that it had been my misfortune to see. In order to make any headway in the very limited time available for climbing, we would be forced to leave ropes on the mushy snow-plastered slabs of the lower ridge. These would allow a safe descent during daylight hours and could be pulled up once we were all properly established below the middle wall. Already we were giving way to siege tactics and, at this early stage, I think a certain amount of enthusiasm was lost.

A chest infection, contracted either in Pokhara or during the trek, was proving troublesome, though I naïvely assumed that it would clear up in due course. General illness worked through the team on a rotating basis, so that we never seemed to have more than two people on the hill at a time. When Jon and I next climbed the diminishing ice gully at the start of the ridge, a waning moon threw long shadows across the frozen slopes above. We cramponned several hundred metres to reach the first of our recently placed ropes which led up a succession of steep slabs to the crest. Almost immediately we were unhappy, despite reassuring multiple anchors. There would be 10 or 20m gaps in the ropes in order to eke out our minimal resources. That was all right in theory, as the climbing was straightforward, but, in practice, what of these apparently solid lumps of stone hidden under the snow? There was little need for discussion – our philosophies were far too similar. The ropes were rearranged to form one continuous chain, and we felt much happier for it. Unfortunately there were others who, at the time, felt this unnecessary and, at a later stage, the original configuration was restored – with near tragic consequences. The incident occurred on a section I remember well. A 100m rappel, well positioned high above the approach couloir, began with a smooth five-metre slab. This lay above a short slope rapidly turning from névé white to ice grey. Below, a steep gully plunged through a rocky barrier to gain the long wet snow slopes that resembled a giant Nordic ski-jump on to the distant South Annapurna glacier. It was just before passing the base of the slab that one member found himself airborne, describing a graceful backward somersault over that memorable view. The anchors, under the melting influence of the noonday sun, had ripped. With an almost inconceivable piece of luck and agility he landed 'front-points down' on the ice and came to an ankle-wrenching halt, spread-eagled across the slope. I suspect the next few minutes must have been somewhat precarious and mentally absorbing as he carefully slid off his sack, even more carefully balanced it on his head and extracted both ice tools. Not without some further difficulty did he crampon up to refix the anchors, before continuing the rappel in a more traditional style!

Above the ropes, we were left to deal with a steep triangle of rock. Once through this barrier, bizarre formations of snow and ice, admittedly at a more amenable angle, would lead to the middle wall. I remember some awkward balance climbing and a curious little move off a jammed axe shaft. Then I saw it up to the left. I was surprised; perhaps less by the existence of a stainless steel bolt, presumably of Japanese manufacture, than by its placement in a rather wobbly oversized block on a rather undersized ledge. Had I been a modern rock-jock it would have sparked an 'overhead clip' before 'cranking out left on

dinkies'. As it was I grovelled up to the right on sloppy mixed ground and reached a section that might well have delighted those *aficionados* of the Kentish coastline, but seemed most inappropriate 5000 miles distant. Remembering my instructional manual, I adopted a technique of 'Piolet Punishment'. Jabbing wildly into the mud above I made a mental note to give Hastings a wide berth!

As the rope went tight I became a coughing wreck, slumped over a rounded snow boss on the ridge. Above, the spine thrust upwards again in a short section of poor conglomerate. I hacked furiously with an adze at a shallow depression on the left side of the rib. The resulting hole accepted a No 2 friend reluctantly – until the hammer was applied (no you're right, it wasn't mine). Selecting the two largest blade pegs, I drove them straight into the mud somewhere above. Was it good enough? Strength and patience had all but gone. I was ill, and I knew it. Gingerly I applied my weight, ever so cautious now but then with more and more abandon until my body convinced my mind. Burrowing my lower limbs into the boss, face down on the snowy pillow, I croaked to Jon to climb.

By the following evening I had begun a course of erythromycin, kindly donated by a trekking physician, and had descended to 3200m. With this powerful combination I found myself learning, yet again to my cost, that rules are not there to be broken. Why should it have been so hard to convince myself that a drop of six or eight hundred metres would make that much difference? The two teashacks that constitute the developing conurbation of Bagar provided a welcome sanatorium. Almost immediately the inside of my chest and sinuses began to smile. Within two days things were well on the mend and a quick reascent on the evening of the third did nothing to retard this improvement.

Alas, it was all in vain. Repeating illnesses throughout the team and persistent snowfall allowed us to get no further than the base of the middle wall at 6000m. Above, the way looked intensely forbidding – black, vertical and mud! We hadn't even scratched the main difficulties, which we now realized to be quite substantial, and the summit was a long, long way off. Heavy monsoon rain beat on our leech-infested legs as we scampered down to Pokhara at the beginning of June.

The line remains to be climbed, and it is a good one. Go late in the year when less snow and lower temperatures should allow climbing for most of the day. In fact, given the easterly aspect and middle range of altitude, it is possible that early winter might provide the most favourable conditions for an ascent. But my advice to you is to take along a few dozen titanium snow-stakes and a big hammer for that middle 'rock' band!