Kusum Kangguru

DICK RENSHAW

(*Plates 3, 15, 16*)

It was an inauspicious start to the expedition to find, on arrival at Kathmandu airport, that three pieces of our luggage were missing. All efforts would be made to trace them as quickly as possible. That was Monday evening, and by Thursday the luggage was recovered; but we were unable to get transport out of the city as it was the height of the Durga Puja festival, during which many buffaloes are beheaded to commemorate the victory of Durga over the demon Mahisha. There was a tense, excited atmosphere which increased with twilight, as hundreds of kites were launched from rooftops and jostled for airspace. A few would break free and I watched them disappear into the dusk towards the distant mountains.

Despite the late-night celebrations, a bus turned up at 8 the following morning to take us to Jiri, where we would start the 12-day trek to Base Camp. Our party consisted of three climbers – Stephen Venables, Brian Davison and myself – and Henry and Sarah Day who would accompany us to Base Camp. Pasang, who had been sirdar on Steve's expedition to the E face of Everest, efficiently arranged transport and provided cooks and porters for us. The cook Jetta, with his assistants Dawa and Mingma, prepared the most delicious meals throughout the expedition.

The trek was enormously varied: over passes, through mature deciduous forests festooned with whiskery mosses, and down to intensively cultivated valleys with solid stone-built houses. It was a well-worn track – the road to Everest – and western tastes were well catered for with Coca-Cola stands, 'Swiss made' yaks' cheese, and tea houses. Smart, well-constructed guest-houses were springing up in expectation of the increase in tourism during the next decade, whilst, in contrast, many of the stupas and Mani walls seemed sadly neglected.

It was a relief to get off the main track at Kusum, where we could look up the Kusum Khola to the SW face of Kusum Kangguru which dominated the whole of that steep-sided valley. All the photos we had seen of this daunting face had shown broken lines of snow running up almost the entire face on which we had tentatively traced our route. But now the lower half of the face was bare rock, and I was also having serious doubts about the upper section of the face – a huge depression where we would be totally exposed to stone and snowfall. Just to the right was a line leading to the S ridge, which would give a safer and perhaps easier alternative. Three of us spent a day trying to find a way up the valley, but once we strayed off the thinly-defined track many hours were spent stumbling through thick bamboo undergrowth before we found it again.

The following day we set off with 12 porters and a young local guide, but it



The neighbourhood of Kusum Kangguru, 6369m

soon became apparent that he knew less about the way than we did. The first night we camped in a clearing in the forest. The villagers had obviously been up this far to collect bamboo and to fell large pine trees, which they cleaved up to make roof shingles, but after following the river for a short way on the second day, the trail just petered out. Further progress up the river became impossible as it narrowed and tumbled over a series of waterfalls. Back on the densely forested slopes each step involved hacking a way with *kukris*. Two of the porters, barely in their 'teens, were increasingly having problems with their loads, so it was a relief when they were paid off at midday. As dusk fell we still had not found a suitable place to camp. The porters left us to return to last night's campsite, promising to return early next morning. We made platforms for the tents out of bamboos, Pasang got a roaring fire going, and, despite the difficult circumstances, Jetta still managed to produce a three-course meal.

The porters arrived early next morning as we were getting up. They were a tough, cheerful crew and, despite being in difficult and untrodden territory, they worked without complaint. It was a relief to get out of the forest into the hot,



3. Kusum Kangguru, 6369m: Dick Renshaw near the summit. Twin summits of Gonglha behind. (*Stephen Venables*) (p22)

bright sunlight, and Steve and Jetta went ahead to look for a site for Base Camp. Beyond a patch of berberis, which tore at clothing and left tiny thorns in exposed flesh, we found a reasonable site which seemed flatter than anywhere else we had seen. After a couple of hours of platform-building, we put up the tents whilst Pasang built a huge fire of juniper and azalea-type shrubs as an offering, and prayed to the gods for our safety and success.

It was a marvellous position, perched on a steep hillside, flanked by a sheer granite cliff, but, despite its isolation, there were only a few signs of wildlife. By now we had accepted the S ridge as the most feasible route. Using a powerful telescope, we plotted a route up a snow-covered buttress which led to a horizontal section of the S ridge proper, just below a steep rock pillar. This looked the hardest section of the climb but, beyond that, mixed ground culminated in the final snow ridge: 5000 vertical feet of climbing in all.

Having established an Advanced Base Camp near the foot of the climb, we decided to make a recce of the lower section to find a way through the line of overhangs which barred the initial part of the buttress, and also to make a cache of food and climbing hardware. Henry came up with us and volunteered to cook breakfast at 3 next morning. Although he was not involved in the climb itself, he was always ready to help out and it was reassuring to have an experienced mountaineer around whilst we were on the climb. After soloing up the easy-angled slabs, we roped up beneath the overhangs. Steve and Brian took turns leading a weaving route through the steep rock which in places was precariously stacked up in loose blocks, requiring careful handling. As the sun hit the S face, a steady fusillade of stones rattled down and we felt vindicated in our decision to avoid the face. After finding a suitable place for a cache, we abseiled back down. We spent a couple of days at Base Camp sorting out loads, writing letters and reading. Dawa had collected bamboos from lower down, and we watched fascinated as he split them and deftly wove large panniers. We then returned to Advanced Base Camp for what we hoped would be the last time.

Next morning we reached the top of the icefield below the slabs just as dawn broke – in time to catch the first pink glow on a distant pass we had crossed two weeks ago. The mixed climbing was not too difficult but, with heavy sacks, progress was slow. Ledges big enough to put up our small tent seemed few and far between. Towards the end of the afternoon we feverishly started looking around and had to settle for a small ledge one pitch lower down. After two hours' strenuous excavating, we had made a reasonable sized platform. During the night it started to snow and continued next morning, so we decided to stay put for the day. The heavy dump of winter snow which we expected never materialised, and the clouds dispersed that afternoon to reveal blue skies once again. The following morning a chill wind blew as we scrabbled up snow-covered rocks, and we longingly watched the sun's slow progress across the face. The climbing became more difficult and we took a meandering line to avoid the steeper sections.

Once again it was dusk before Brian spotted a snow-covered slab as a small but feasible bivvy site. After extensive excavation we produced a platform just big enough for two people – the third, which happened to be Steve, having to

spend the night with legs lolling over the edge supported only by the tent floor. It was a great relief, at the end of the next day, suddenly to stumble across a large ledge just below the horizontal section of the S ridge. As we put up the tent it started to snow and we were grateful to be in the lee of the wind, sheltered by an overhang. Next morning it was cloudy and unsettled and, rather than press on, we decided to look at the lower part of the rock pillar. Once on the horizontal ridge we could look down into the Hinku valley and make out Jannu and Kangchenjunga in the distance. The third rope, brought for sack hauling, was fixed up the mixed ground leading to the base of the huge detached block which leant against the rock pillar.

The following morning we were ready earlier than usual, eager to get to grips with the crux of the climb. But as we left the ledge Brian's movements seemed ponderous and laboured. His health had been slowly deteriorating over the last two days, and when he mentioned a periodic pulsating sensation in the eye (which had suffered a retinal haemorrhage earlier in the year) we had no choice but to descend. As we started the long series of abseils, I wondered whether I would ever summon up the necessary strength and commitment to face the long haul back up here again.

The descent went smoothly and we arrived back at Base Camp that night. After two full rest days Steve and I decided to give it one more try. Brian had realised that it was the end of the climb for him and stoically settled into his new role as climb manager. Although it must have been a bitter blow, he cheerfully and selflessly gave us every encouragement and support.

During the last week it had turned wintry: as I was enjoying the first burst of morning sun and breaking the ice in the stream to do my washing, I suddenly experienced a great surge of confidence and felt fitter than at any other time on the trip. Although we had only ten days left before we were due back in Kathmandu, I felt we had a good chance of success.

Ominous looking clouds formed in the west the morning we started the climb. It was 2am but we decided to press on and were blessed with a fine day and made good progress. We had lunch at our first bivvy site and by considerably straightening out the route we made it to our second camp in good time. The second day was beautifully clear and we looked down on a sea of mist which engulfed Base Camp in the afternoon. We had a relaxed night on the spacious ledge and, in the early morning sun, scrambled along the horizontal ridge to our fixed rope. The climbing was steep enough to justify sack hauling and whilst Steve led up the steep jamming crack, hauling up the sack at the top of the pitch, I jumared up with a lighter sack. It was another pitch to the top of the block, and we were hoping for a good sized ledge where we had seen a small patch of snow. It turned out to be disappointingly small and, as the wind increased in strength, we settled for the claustrophobic confines of the chimney which at one point was bridged by a jumble of boulders.

It was an uncomfortable night and we were late getting started next day. In bitter cold we climbed the steep crackline which continued above the block but, once in the sun, we could really enjoy the climbing up an elegant crack which brought us onto mixed ground 300m below the summit. As we huddled on a tiny cramped ledge, bodies distorted by large boulders, it was some consolation



15. Kusum Kangguru, 6369m: Stephen Venables adjacent to Camp 5 on mixed ground above rock pillar. (*Dick Renshaw*) (p22)



16. Stephen Venables on middle section of buttress. (*Dick Renshaw*) (p22)

to think that tomorrow, all being well, we should reach the summit.

We set off early next morning with light sacks and soon reached the final snow section – a contorted landscape of sagging ridges, ice towers and walls through which we picked a way. A knife-edged ridge led to the tiny summit on which we took turns to stand. Looking down the precarious-looking ridge leading up from the N buttress, we could make out partially snow-filled tracks. In the distance was the black wind-blasted mass of Everest.

The descent back to the tent was a demanding combination of abseiling from snow bollards and down climbing. It took 30 abseils to get off the mountain the next day and we arrived at Advanced Base Camp just as night fell. We stumbled down in the dark and mist, spurred on by the thought of Jetta's culinary delights.

As we left Base Camp a day later, we looked back to see two mountain goats, mother and kid, standing motionless on a grassy ridge, as if waiting for the intruders to depart.

Summary: The first ascent of the S ridge of Kusum Kangguru (6369m) was made in November 1991, approaching the mountain up the Kusum Khola. Stephen Venables and Dick Renshaw reached the summit on their second attempt, having abandoned their first attempt when the third team member, Brian Davison, became ill.

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