
KEITH MILNE

Thalay Sagar

(Plates 42, 43)

I first became interested in Thalay Sagar when looking at Pete Thexton's photographs of the unclimbed N face in a *Mountain* magazine article. Several people from the Kunyang Kish trip in 1988 were interested in going to Thalay Sagar and we were fortunate in gaining the 1990 Nick Estcourt Award. I had now seen Rick Allen's spectacular photos of the south side of the mountain, taken when he made the first ascent of Kirti Stambh (6254m) in 1982. It featured a vertical, golden face of granite, accentuated by a tremendous snow cone. It looked like a fairy-tale mountain! I wondered if we could climb it. There was no record of anyone attempting the mountain from the south.

We arrived in India in September 1990. From the road head at Ghuttu, it took four and a half days of walking on good paths through splendid forests to reach an excellent site for Base Camp at about 3700m. The monsoon had just finished so we had not seen Thalay Sagar yet. That evening it cleared and we noticed an orange cliff suspended above the clouds to the north. Mountains always look much higher in the sky than you expect and this was no exception! We suddenly realised how much effort it was going to be to get to the base of the headwall.

Advanced Base Camp was established quickly at the head of the flattish part of the Phating glacier at about 4460m. It was a forbidding place. The regular sound of serac falls echoed around the rock walls, but we seemed to be far enough away from the obvious chutes to avoid the avalanches. There was a choice of routes ahead: looking up from ABC we could see a central rocky buttress flanked by steep crevassed glaciers on both sides. The right-hand glacier looked out of the question, involving 1000m of climbing through a maze of hundreds of crevasses. The glacier on the left was also crevassed and seemed to be threatened by seracs, so we decided to climb the buttress. There was a convenient moraine ridge leading up to where the rock steepened. We had to fix a few ropes on the steeper sections to allow subsequent load carrying. We moved up the ridge until we were surprised to find a camp excavated from the loose rocks. I picked up a remarkably fresh looking packet of Italian biscuits and was even more surprised to find that its sell-by date was August 1990! Had we been beaten to it? In view of the precarious nature of some of the loose rock we had encountered, the Italian team must have used a slightly different line to reach this point. We returned to Base Camp with mixed feelings. Our cook related in broken English that Italian teams had made two previous attempts on the S ridge, but had been forced to retreat.

Above Camp 1 was a steep snow arête which led to a relatively flat glacier with only a few crevasses. From here we became hypnotised by the face above in our search for possible lines up the compact granite. We made a diagonal

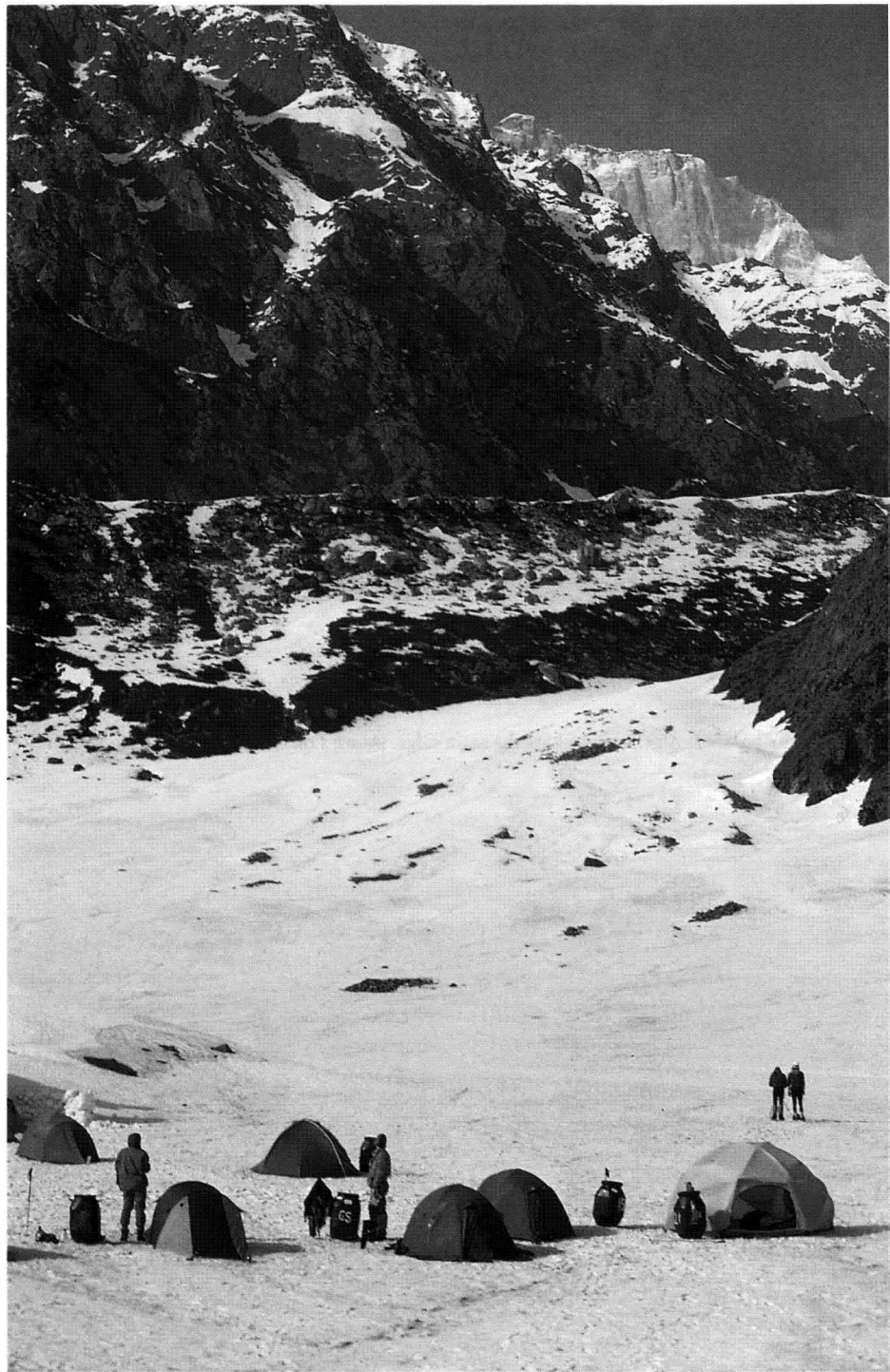
line to the right to reach the 55 to 65 degree snow and ice slope below the headwall. Our two porta-ledges weighed 7kg each, were unstable to carry and were very cramped for two people. After some deliberation we decided to carry them up, as they might well be essential on the face; but this was an exhausting task and it was all we could do to reach 6100m, making Camp 2 at a small rock band. The next day the weather rapidly deteriorated, but with a tremendous effort we got all the haul bags to the base of the cliff and set up the ledges as it was getting dark. I had mild frostbite on my fingers from handling the tent poles. There followed a terrible night of continuous avalanches down the face. We thought the winter had started and that it might last for days. I knew I could not continue for more than two more days before my finger tips would come up in blisters. The spindrift eased at about 11am the next day and we decided to climb down to the safety of Camp 1.

We discussed the situation: time was running out, we risked missing the porters and the plane if we continued. Annoyingly, the weather was now clear, although it remained windy on the tops, but we were too tired to contemplate another attempt without a rest. It was all we could do to retrieve the equipment from our high point at about 6200m. The mountain had beaten us.

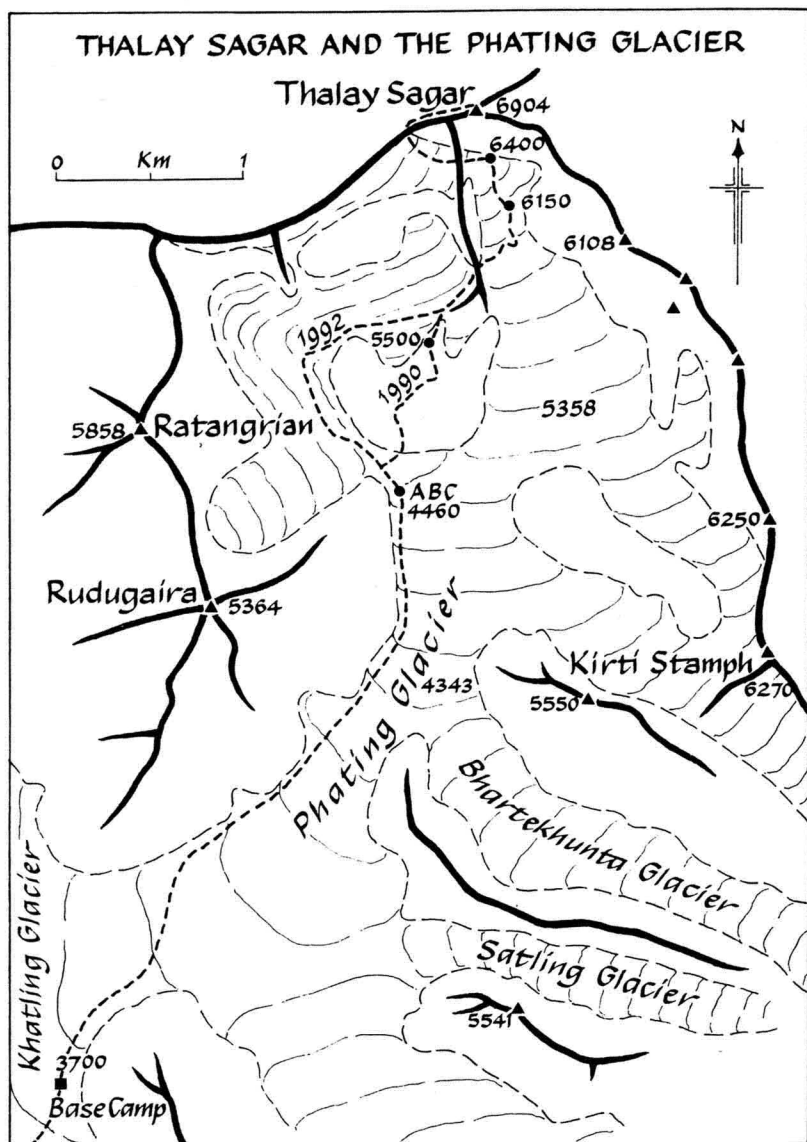
After six months or so, you forget the arduous and uncomfortable times on an expedition and remember only the best moments. We decided to attempt the S face of Thalay Sagar again, but with no porta-ledges (at least for the first attempt) and using minimal fixed rope. We were welcomed at the airport by Gorvind, our liaison officer from 1990, and his boss, Mr C S Pandey, of Trade Wings Ltd. They helped us in many ways and soon we were again walking up the familiar valley. At Kharsoli we discovered that there was a tremendous amount of snow, so it took several extra days of hard work to get all the loads to Base Camp.

It was 12 May and the mountain tops were clear. We spent some time examining the headwall through binoculars and could see small ledges at half height. The plan was to fix ropes to the ledges from a camp at the base of the cliff, pull the ropes and fix them as far as the ridge. We anticipated two main load carries: one to take the equipment and one to take the food. We wanted to reduce the carrying to a minimum, while recognising that it would not be possible to climb such a difficult headwall entirely in alpine style.

The Phating glacier, being covered in snow, was very easy to travel this time and, after establishing ABC, we acclimatised on the snowy peak of Rudugaira (5364m) and other climbs. We had noticed the glacier to the left of the lower buttress, which we had climbed in 1990, now looked a simpler option because it was covered in snow. This would allow us to reach the snow dome at about 5700m without carrying heavy ropes for fixing, and so avoid time-consuming climbing on the lower buttress. Charlie French, Tom Prentice, Julian Fisher and I were keen to try the headwall and we planned to carry all the rock-climbing equipment as high as possible in a two-day push from ABC and then return to Base Camp in a day. We plodded up the steep glacier above ABC until everyone became too tired with the altitude to carry on. It was misty and we decided to camp on a small level area, but we had not reached the safety of the top of the snow dome.



42. Base Camp for Thalay Sagar, 6904m. The headwall is visible behind Rudugaira, 5364m. (*Keith Milne*) (p119)



An early start the next day proved that it was no warmer in May than in October. We quickly climbed to the top of the snow dome, crossed the broad glacier and started up the steep slope. We reached some rocks near the site for Camp 2 and tied the equipment sacks to a piton. The afternoon snow and spindrift started and we descended exhausted to our camp to rehydrate and eat some food. We crashed out early and looked forward to reaching Base Camp the next day.

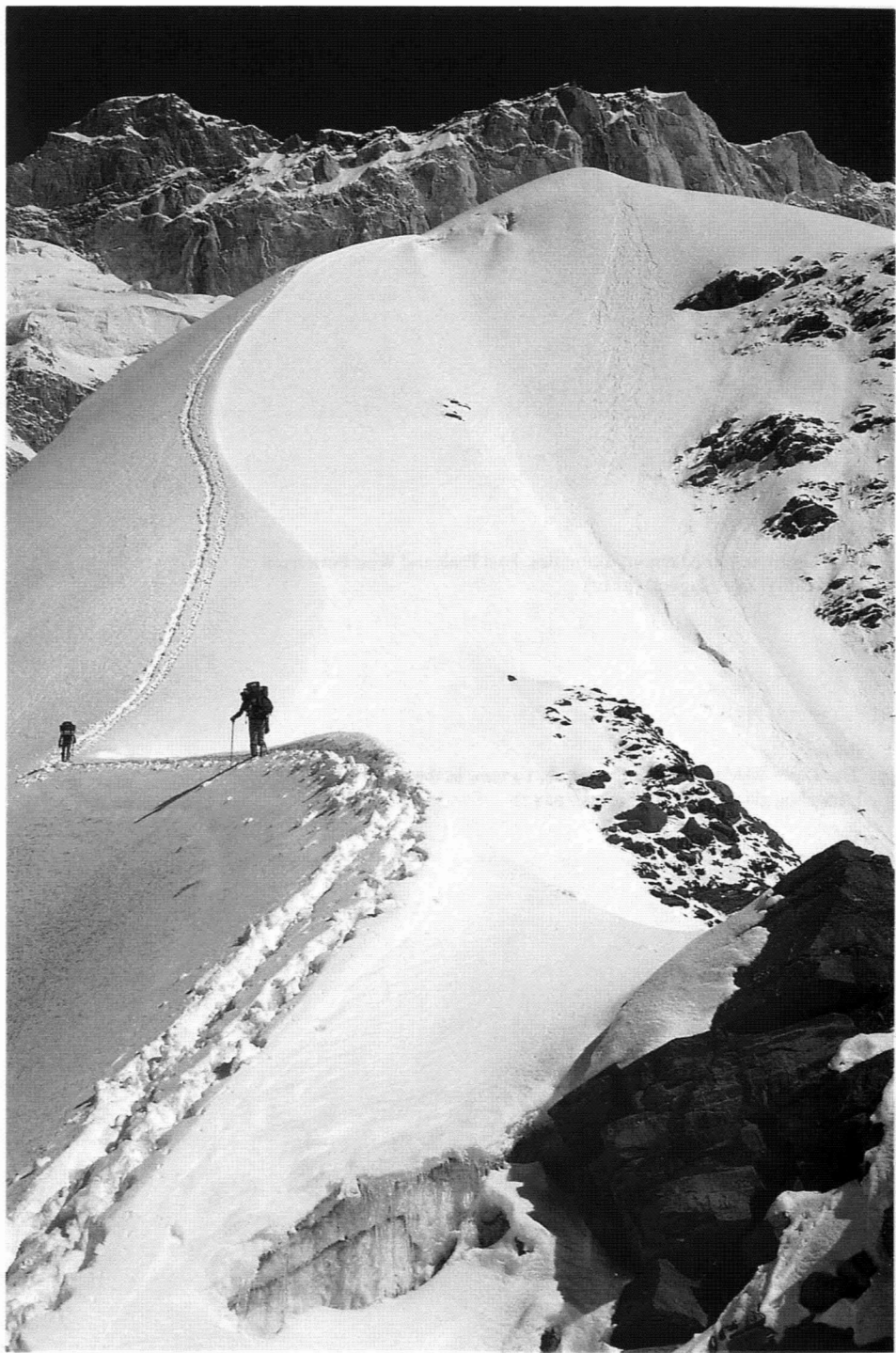
However, the day was not finished yet: that evening we had the most frightening experience of our lives. By 8pm it had started to snow heavily again and I was awoken by the dreadful rumbling of a slab avalanche rapidly approaching. It hit the tents and we careered down the steep slope for what seemed like a long time; then we were falling in space. I thought 'We've gone over the main seracs; this is it – next stop ABC'. Crunch. Charlie said 'We've stopped!', holding his hands up to brace the tent and waiting for a second burst of snow. Disorientated and with heart still racing, I twisted round and luckily found a headtorch. Looking outside, I saw that it was still snowing but we seemed to be in a stable position. I gradually realised that our blind toboggan ride had fortunately stopped in a wide trench, about 8m deep.

Where were Julian and Tom? I put on my inner boots and got gingerly out of the tent, shouting into the night. I was greatly relieved to hear a reply from above. But it was still snowing, the tents were damaged and all the equipment stored outside the cramped Geminis had been swept away and buried, including our outer boots, rucksacks and ice axes. Luckily we had all put our inner boots in the tents. We dug another ledge for the tents and got back into our sleeping-bags, anxiously waiting for first light and holding our breath at the slightest sound outside.

When dawn came it had stopped snowing heavily and we were relieved to find our boots and two rucksacks after an hour of searching. We then used a plastic plate to dig out a big hole where the tents had originally been sited. The ice axes had been holding the tents, but they had just snapped the tape off the corners, leaving the axes in the snow. Eventually, after three or four hours of digging and prodding with poles, we gave up the search for the missing rucksack and two ice axes. We made our way down and related our story to the others at Base Camp. They commented 'So that's why you were climbing up and down an avalanche slope for three hours!'

Meanwhile, Gordon Scott, Sue Grimley and Jordan Campbell had teamed up to attempt Ratangrian (5858m), an attractive peak NW of ABC and easily accessible. They almost reached the summit after an interesting climb up the S ridge; they turned back because of suspect weather and apparent lack of time, not realising that they were close to the top.

The weather continued to deteriorate and Thalay Sagar became increasingly white as more and more snow fell in the afternoon. After five days we decided to return to the mountain, although the weather was still unpredictable. Gordon, Jordan and Sue left to attempt Ratangrian again. We were delayed at Camp 1 by bad weather, then moved loads up to Camp 2. The next day we returned to Camp 1 and were pinned down by a storm, worried that we would get struck by lightning. An inter-tent game of battleships kept morale up.



43. Climbing the snow ridge on the lower part of Thalay Sagar.
(Keith Milne) (p119)

A sudden clearing of the weather and an early start saw the team at Camp 2. The next day the ropes were pulled below Camp 2 and moved up to reach a site for Camp 3, naturally avoiding the site which had been hit by so much spindrift in 1990. Tom and I cut a ledge in the 60 degree slope but hit rock and ice. The afternoon snow soon turned into major spindrift and when Charlie and Julian arrived it was filling in the ledge faster than it could be dug. Things were looking grim. We managed to get a small ledge for the second tent, but Charlie and Julian had little sleep. The Geminis were squashed even smaller than usual by the weight of the snow.

We were now slightly higher than we had been in 1990 and had all the equipment we needed. There seemed to be two lines up the face above. The left line was more broken, but was covered in loose snow. The right-hand line started up steep snow and then onto steep difficult rock. Tom and I started up the right-hand line the next day and fixed two ropes after difficult mixed and aid climbing. Progress was slow; cracks were thin and discontinuous. The afternoon spindrift was a shock, as if things were not difficult enough already. It was all we could manage to abseil off safely.

In a short space of time we had all come to the same conclusion – that the granite headwall was too difficult in the prevailing conditions. We had already been delayed and we did not want to fail to reach the summit a second time. Charlie and Julian decided to go down, partly because they had come on the trip to climb the wall, not snow plod. Charlie also wanted to return to his job in Britain, rather than extend his 'holiday'. Charlie and Julian had a hard time carrying the big wall gear down to the bottom of the slope. Julian fell in a crevasse, but luckily landed on a snow bridge and was rescued by Charlie.

Tom and I spent a day traversing left through deep snow, then ice and up a gully, avalanching with spindrift, to reach a level spot for the tent. A small but frightening avalanche blasted the tent during the evening. The next morning Tom led a difficult icecliff (with only two ice screws) to reach the upper snow slopes which we knew led to the summit rock pyramid. I noticed I had superficial frostbite on my fingers again. I seconded with the pack, struggling to release the haul bag from the overhangs. Next was a deceptively long plod through deepening snow which slowed progress to a snail's pace.

The next day we were very tired and only managed a reconnaissance for the summit push. A 3am start the next morning saw us over the bergschrund at first light and into a difficult chimney. We traversed right, trying to find a route through diagonal snow patches to reach the E ridge. However, the snow was superficial and the rock very poor. Directly above was a vertical face like the Dolomites. Traversing back left I saw a snowy ledge leading left and some abseil pitons.

I followed Tom across the traverse, moved up, and unexpectedly found myself on the arête between the N and S faces, an incredible position, with a new view northwards to Gangotri. We had now joined the line taken on the first ascent in 1979 by Roy Klingfield, John Thackray and Pete Thexton. There was still a long way to go and the climbing looked a lot steeper than I had expected. The rock was loose, but runners could be found after clearing the snow. My frostbite had got worse and was now quite worrying. After four

pitches it was mid-afternoon and we knew we were in danger of being caught in the dark. Tom carried on up the arête and I had my cine-camera ready to take some spectacular shots of him climbing up with dry snow blowing from his hands and feet. Luckily the heavy thunder clouds stayed in the valley, only light snow fell and we climbed quickly. I led a short, unexpected traverse on steep ice (with only one ice axe, as the other was rather inconveniently in my pack), followed by an overhanging chimney which turned out to be quite worrying in crampons and badly protected. Tom climbed up the chimney and then led some difficult moves under an overhang on very loose rock and moved up to find a belay. Above was the snowy arête, disappearing into the mist. It looked a long way, but suddenly there we were at the top after only two more pitches. I was incredibly relieved that we had reached the summit after so much hard work on two expeditions. There was hardly any time to take pictures. It was 7pm and time for the radio call!

Abseiling in the dark requires a lot of concentration and I forced myself to go carefully. We then had to reverse the short ice pitch and do some difficult diagonal abseils down the arête, with danger of swinging across the icy N face. A geologist by trade, I was determined to collect some rock samples (later, at ABC, Julian wondered why my pack was so heavy!). We plunged down the final snow gully into our camp at 11pm and found the tent squashed by spindrift avalanches and no energy to dig it out, so it was an uncomfortable night.

The 7am radio call brought us round and forced us to get ready. The descent was like a nightmare, with half the slope awash with deep spindrift and small avalanches. Eventually we staggered into Camp 1, trailing the ropes. The next day we met Gordon and Jordan coming up from ABC and it was handshakes and smiles all round. They continued up to Camp 1 and did a tremendous job clearing the rest of the gear, including empty gas cylinders and snow stakes. Soon everyone was safely back at base celebrating in the big tent.

Julian helped me walk-out and get to hospital in Delhi in only four days; my fingers have since recovered. The main expedition left with only 22 porters and heavy loads, but they still managed to carry 50kg of non-burnable rubbish (by the way, don't tell the porters that they are carrying rubbish!). They arrived in Delhi a few days later to enjoy the luxury of the four star Park Hotel. It had been an immense effort by the whole team and I was glad that everyone had done some significant climbing. Altogether, we had climbed two peaks, two rock routes and had almost reached the top of a third peak. But at the back of our minds we still wondered, could that wall be climbed?

Summary: The British Thalay Sagar Expedition 1990 attempted the unclimbed S face of Thalay Sagar (6904m), Garhwal Himalaya. A high point of 6150m was reached at the base of the headwall before bad weather forced a retreat. During the Thalay Sagar Expedition 1992 Keith Milne and Tom Prentice reached the summit on 6 June by a new route from the south. The snowy peak of Rudugaira (5364m) was climbed on 13 May by Gordon Scott, Susan Grimley and Tom Prentice. The summit of Ratangrian (5858m) was almost reached by Gordon Scott, Jordan Campbell (USA) and Susan Grimley.