
MALCOLM RUTHERFORD

A Team Success on Island Peak

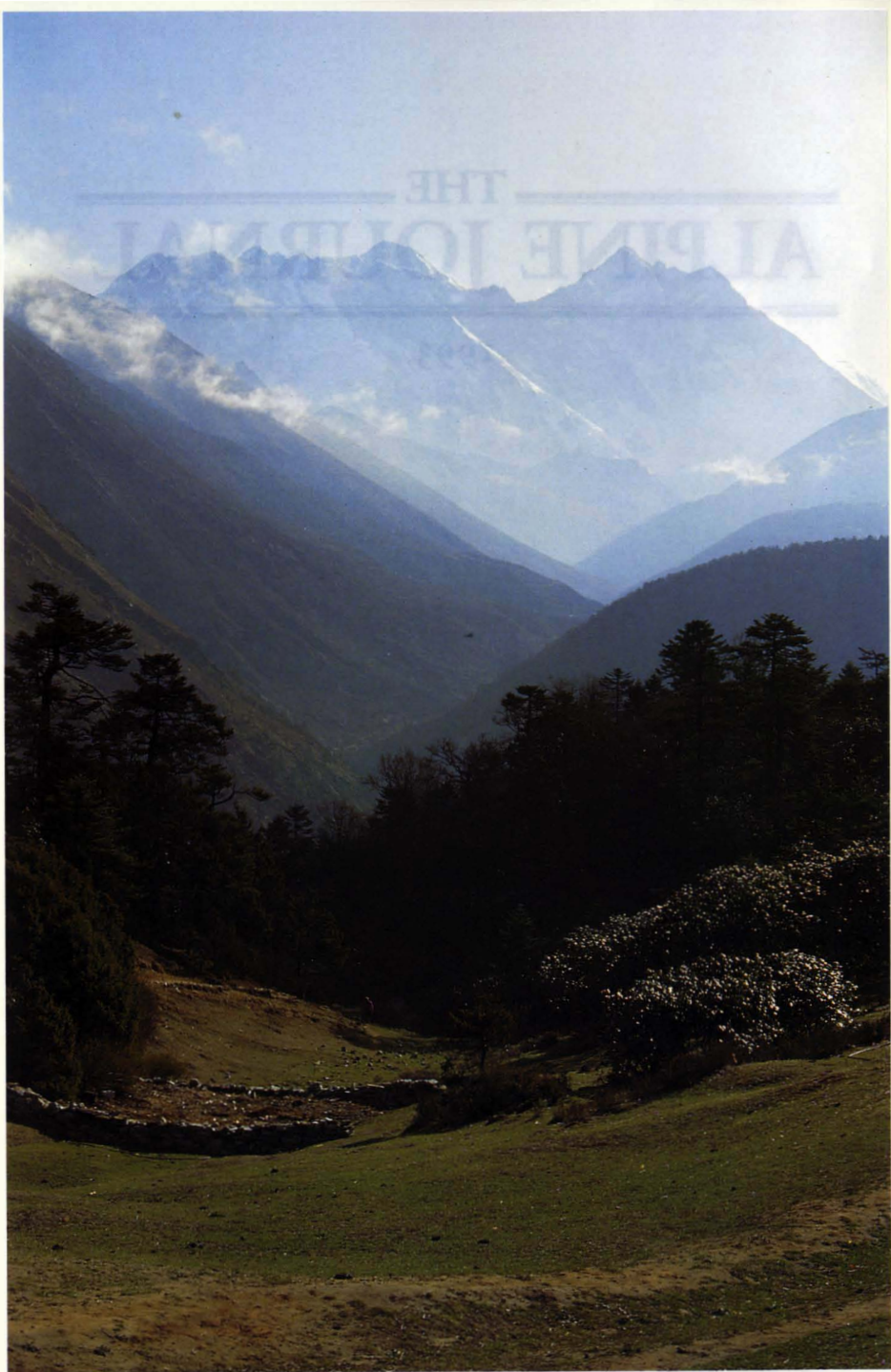
(*Plates 1, 73*)

What are we doing here? The mist is swirling in ominously, the altimeter has just gone round the clock at 6000m and my wife, son and daughter (front-pointing and hard-hatless) are being bombarded by large lumps of ice dislodged with chaotic abandon by frantic Italians. The sirdar has been hit and is in a bemused state. We are on Island Peak and life is exciting – but it all started many weeks before in a grey MoD office.

The Higher Management Committee of the British Services 1992 Everest Expedition (BSEE) decided to take an active part in Nepal during the closing stages of the main expedition. We were hoping, as a long shot, to be at Base Camp during assault bids, and so this aim was a priority. But we also hoped to reach the rock peak Kala Pattar on Pumori's SE ridge and to make an attempt on Island Peak at over 6000m. An assorted 12-strong party gathered at Gatwick on 1 May, with ages ranging from 18 to 58 and experience from nil to considerable. There were two Air Marshals, Dougie Keelan (who led the British Services West Ridge expedition in 1988) and myself, and our respective wives, friends and families. The whole team staggered onto the Royal Nepal Airlines flight for Kathmandu with multi-kiloed 'hand luggage' and anoraks bulging, but were still over allowance. (It subsequently transpired that one of the Air Marshals had packed a portable shower; my daughter Kim had packed a banned 'Snoopy', somewhat lighter, which was later to reach over 6000m – by Sherpa.) However, ground staff were sympathetic, no excess charges were levied, and soon we were slumped in our seats, heading over Hungary to Dubai, gin and tonic in hand, no more planning to do, a great feeling of release.

I can thoroughly recommend the Summit Hotel in Kathmandu. We were looked after very well during a two-day sojourn, sorting out kit and organising trekking and mountaineering permits, and the hotel staff did all our logistic planning for us. Kathmandu was quiet, very quiet, everything shut and a sullen feeling in the air. Four weeks earlier several demonstrators had died in riots and a big protest march was planned during our time there. This was in total contrast to the hustle, bustle, and colours of our visit in 1988 and hammer and sickle banners looked incongruous. In the event the day passed peacefully enough but we were glad to return to the sanctuary of the Summit Hotel whence we should not have strayed.

The flight to the mountain airstrip at Lukla fulfilled our worst expectations. After a five hour wait at Kathmandu airport while rumour and counter rumour abounded (no official information), it transpired that no planes could get in through low cloud and rain. A bad omen: only three weeks before, no



1. The Everest massif from Thyangboche meadows.
(*Malcolm Rutherford*) (p170)

planes had got in for 10 days because of smoke haze from forest fires and an angry backlog had built up at Lukla, which has no road out. This included a group who had gone to Thyangboche monastery to find peace, solace, and love for everyone in the world – but five days' wait at Lukla had destroyed their serene state of mind and this flower party were described as murderous. Oh well, back to the Summit pool, more beer, and try again the next day.

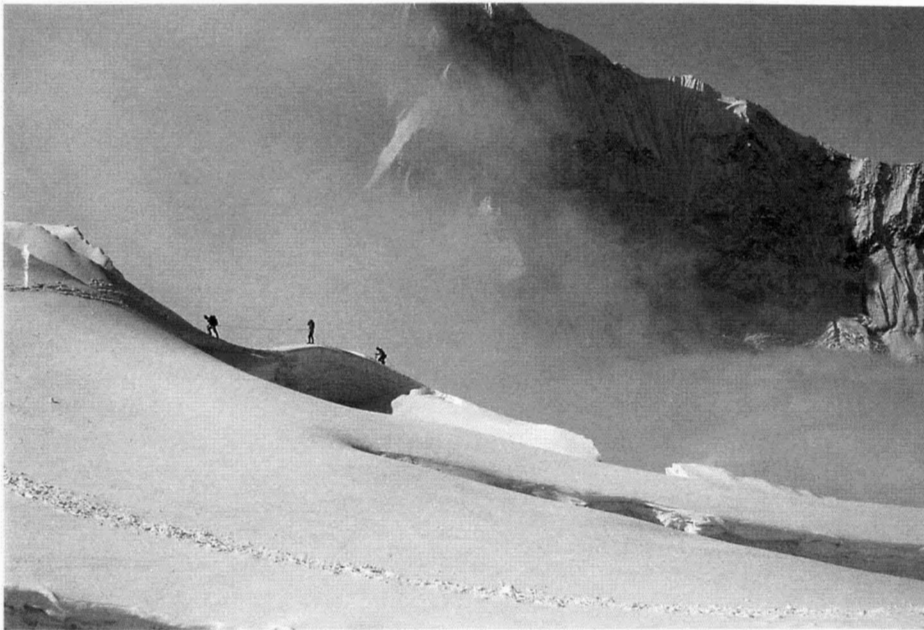
Glorious morning on the 5th, looking good, and soon we were approaching the Lukla strip. Angled at 10° upwards, 400m long (at most) and with a sheer cliff instead of run-out, it was pretty committing but exciting, and we disgorged with relief to meet our sirdar, Sonam, and (wait for it) 12 yaks, 18 porters, 6 cook boys! Did we really need all these? It soon turned out that we did, and two hours later, after a lot of shouting, ropework and mud over everything, the motley caravan set off for Phakding in the Dudh Kosi valley.

At this point I will spare the reader the somewhat tedious chronological sequence of events which can stultify expedition reports. Suffice it to say that within the next ten days all but two of the party (one of whom had a mild form of pneumonia) reached Everest Base Camp at 5400m – on different days, since the variation in our ages and fitness resulted in radical discrepancies in 'speed of advance'. I feel the achievement of the Base Camp goal was of great credit to several members of the party, one of whom had never even *camped* before, let alone climbed or trekked. However, one or two had misjudged the Himalayan scale and had a miserable first few days: it pays to get fit in advance.

The days had settled into a loose routine: 'bed tea' at 0530, washing water at 0600, porters shake snow off tents (several inches overnight on occasions), shivering start; massive breakfast three hours down the trail ('do not overtake the cook boys!'), finish walking day between 1400 and 1700, climb quickly into sleeping-bag to thaw out, supper, bed at 1900, bedsores, rock hard ground.

The mornings were generally sunny and pleasant, the afternoons overcast or cloudy, cold, and frankly a bit boring. The lasting memories, though, will be of the superb colouring of hillsides and ravines glowing luscious pink with thousands of rhododendrons and other flowers, multi-tinted and tuneful birds, smiling Nepalis (at last looking a little more prosperous), the bells of hundreds of yaks plodding their stoic way with huge loads, and the Buddhist reveille in the Sherpa capital, Namche Bazar. The latter consisted of an extraordinary cacophony of sound, starting at 0500, which we originally assumed to be from a pneumatic drill or generator with worn bearings. It turned out to emanate from a batch of alpenhorns protruding from the monastery window, at the other end of which could just be discerned inscrutable monks with an interesting sense of humour.

We had two rest days at 4000m and 5000m to acclimatise, but several members of the party went climbing during them. It is very important not to bash straight on up. We saw people suffering badly from altitude sickness, and indeed one American party was down to 50% of starters by its fifth day. Some of us took Diamox to aid acclimatisation. If anything, those not taking it appeared to fare slightly better than those who did, but the sample was too



Above

73. Large crevasses on Island Peak. Baruntse's fluted ice in the background.
(*Malcolm Rutherford*) (p170)

Facing page, above

71. Kackar Dag: Avucor valley. (*J G R Harding*) (p154)

Facing page, below

72. Refuge at Bulut Dag. (*J G R Harding*) (p154)



small to be significant. It was, however, useful as an antidote on the few occasions when symptoms of altitude sickness developed.

Base Camp on 12 May was extraordinary. Placed a few metres from the Icefall it was a colourful place with at least twelve expeditions from a variety of countries strewn around the rocky glacier. *Not* as messy as made out; far from it – tidy and cheerful. It was quite a day to be there, too. Somewhere between 36 and 42 people reached the summit that day (queuing at the Hillary Step, and several having paid £20,000 as commercial ‘clients’), and all round the camp spontaneous cheering would break out (and in the Russian tents more vodka-slurping) as news came in of recurrent successes. But lest anyone should conclude that Everest had been tamed, it should be mentioned that parties on the South Col had to pass the frozen stiff bodies of two Indian climbers who had recently died of exposure.

At Base Camp we were received by Bronco ‘Rottweiler’ Lane (who reached the summit in 1976) and BSEE members, and I was able to talk to the Services on the mountain by radio – right into the Hornbein Couloir where good work was being done setting up ropes above Camp 5. (Modern communication methods are undoubtedly useful – but I wonder if they encroach too much on the traditional solitude and independence of mountaineers?) We had to get out of their hair the next day, and yomped down to Gorak Shep and up to Kala Pattar at 5650m, a stupendous viewpoint possibly unmatched anywhere. It was a delight to watch the changing hues and cloud formations on the highest peak in the world.

Our final objective was Island Peak (Imja Tse) at 6189m. This was a mini-expedition in itself: we established our Base Camp in a snowstorm (the traditional site for this has been changed following a tragic accident by a freak avalanche to an RAF party a few years ago – we rebuilt the memorial en route) and pressed on next day to Camp 1 high on the mountain flank. What a plod – 1000m of steep (but easy) ground with the thin air unfriendly to middle-aged lungs! But it was well worth the effort to reach this high camp at over 5800m, since its outstanding position gave glimpses of Ama Dablam (not much higher), Makalu (much higher) and Baruntse (miles of fluted ice).

Easy scrambling on rock following a pre-dawn start saw us onto the glacier by 0700, and soon we had roped up and were negotiating enormous cavernous cravasses before the final 100m ice slope came into view – but so did the Italians, making a noisy and dangerous meal of it. Not technically hard but certainly steep, the ice did not appreciate the flailing Latins. This is where my story started. With less than 80m to the summit a difficult decision had to be made; with some of the party very tired from the climb and altitude and with deteriorating weather, it was clear that to enable a small strong team to make the summit safely some would have to forego the opportunity. Thus it was that four of the party retreated, leaving Dougie Keelan, his son James, and my son Sam (who started his alpine career, aged 10, with a climb of the 4000m Allalinhorn) to climb unroped quickly along the exposed knife-edged ridge to the top in a whiteout. Objective achieved – a team success!