BILL O'CONNOR

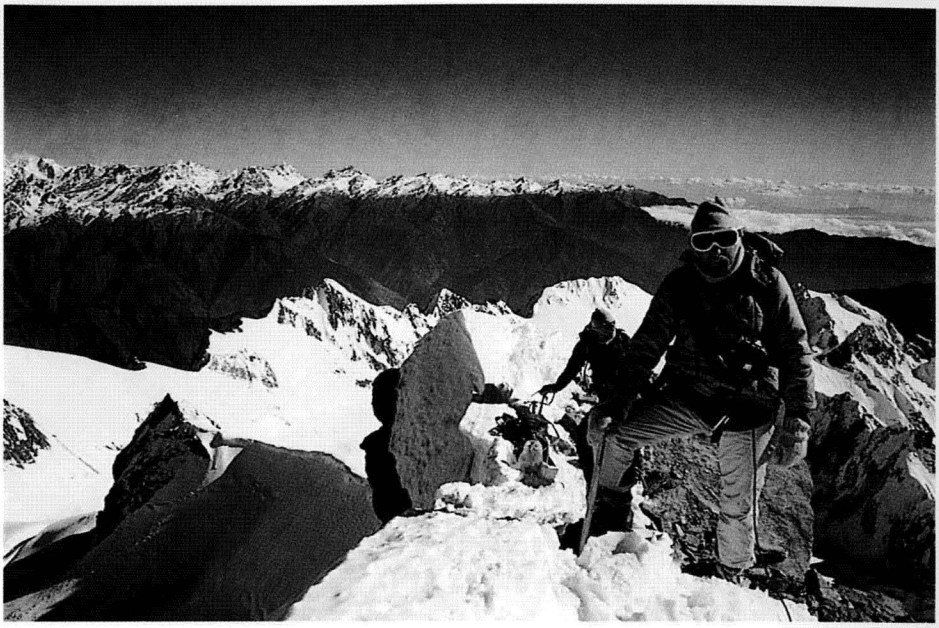
Trekking Peaks – By any Other Name

(*Plates 64–70*)

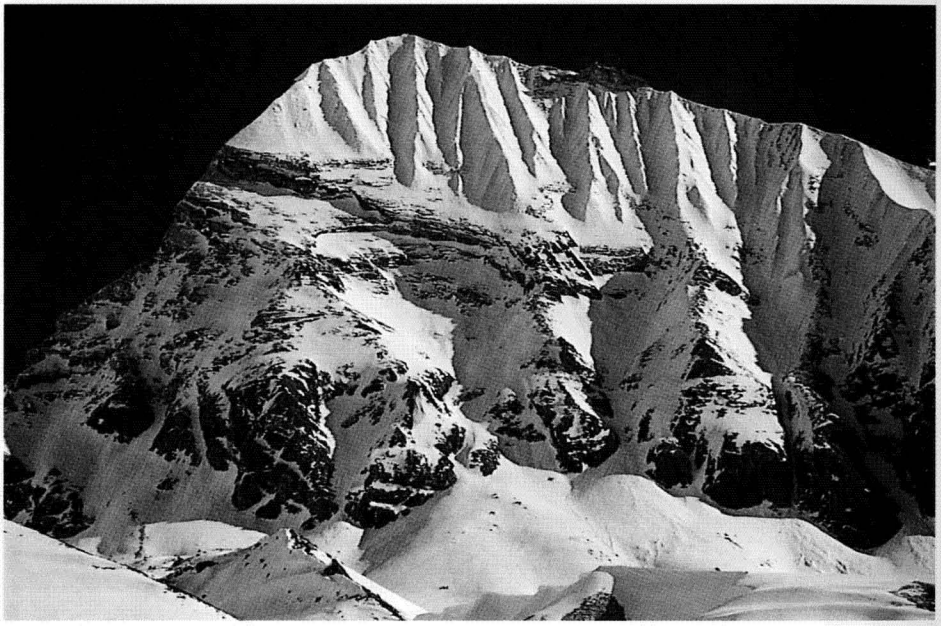
The tragic avalanche accident on Pisang Peak (6091m), in the Manang region of Nepal during the 1994 post-monsoon season killed ten trekkers and a Sherpa. This and other accidents on the so-called 'Trekking Peaks' highlights the dilemma of giving any Himalayan mountain such a misleading prefix. The name Trekking Peak implies something non-technical, somehow suggesting that they are wholly suitable for non-mountaineers climbing without an experienced leader or qualified mountain guide to look after them. It is a name that seems to suggest that they can be climbed by any strong walker/trekker. Not so. The truth is they are all serious undertakings and given the wrong snow or weather conditions, or a lack of skill, can be as difficult and dangerous as any 'real' mountain.

I've never felt easy about the name 'Trekking Peaks'. In the introduction to my book *The Trekking Peaks Of Nepal*, I stated that it was a misnomer and that Non-Expedition, or even Himalayan/Alpine peaks, would be a better name, one that would differentiate them from the higher permitted expedition peaks such as Ama Dablam, Everest, Annapurna, Makalu and the rest, all available at a price. Expeditions to these peaks must pay a high peak fee, equip and pay for a liaison officer and sirdar, and find a route through a bureaucratic maze. The joy of the Trekking Peaks is that they are ideal for small groups wishing to enjoy some interesting climbing, perhaps a new route, at relatively low cost and without a lot of red tape. What's more, the scale of the Trekking Peaks makes it possible to enjoy a good trek (walk-in) and climb more than one mountain in the course of a one-month holiday.

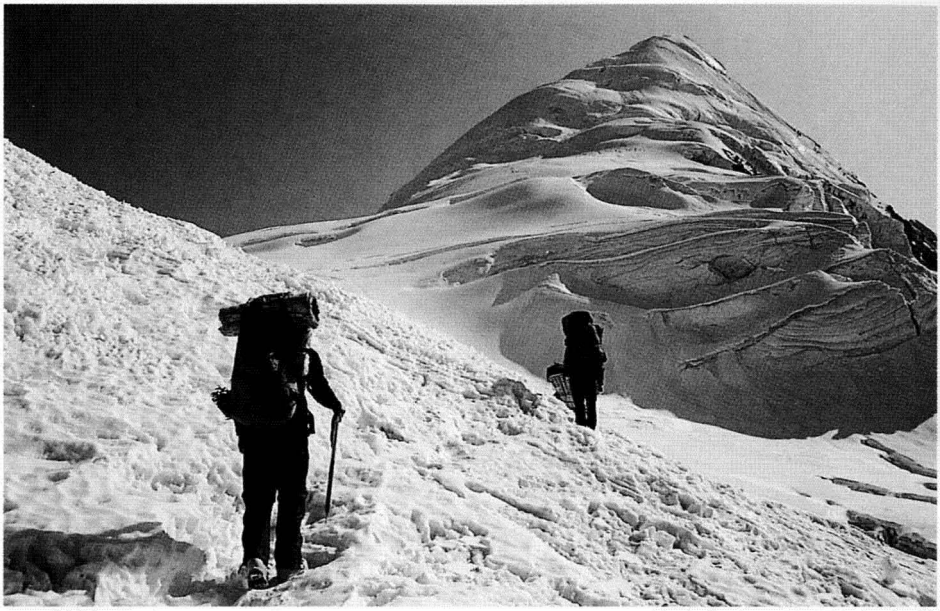
The trouble is, the 18 Trekking Peaks (first opened in 1978 by the Nepal Mountaineering Association) are often confused in the minds of trekkers and commercial trekking companies with high viewpoints found on many of the great treks. Gokyo Ri and Kala Pattar on the Everest Trek and Poon Hill on the Annapurna Circuit are the best-known examples of such viewpoints. In fact these are low hills or the ends of ridges, not peaks at all, albeit splendid places that deservedly become the highlight of many a trekker's achievement. Unfortunately they are often, erroneously, referred to as 'Trekking Peaks' in books and brochures. In reality they are no more nor less than fantastic viewpoints where yaks graze and gorals scrounge



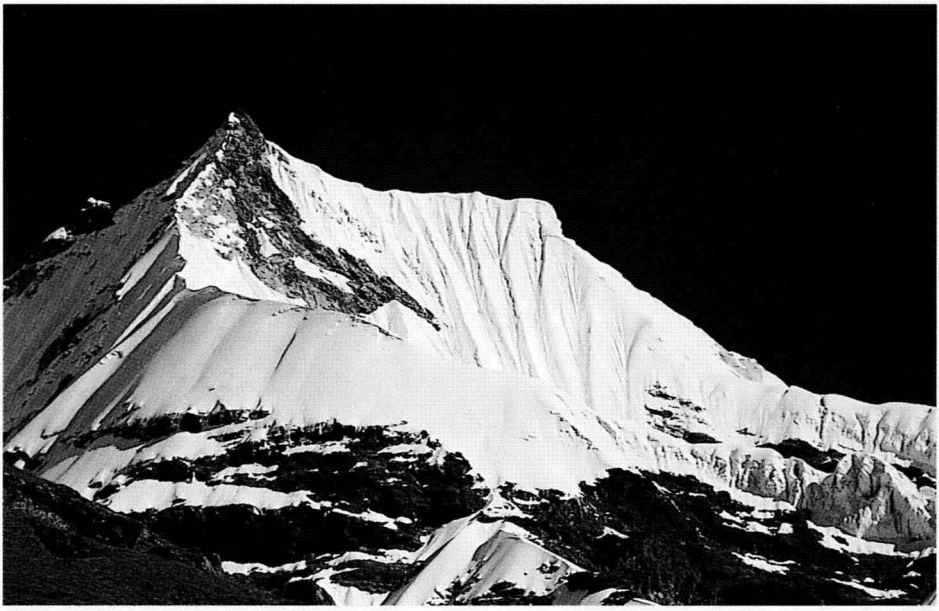
64. Nearing the summit of Paldor, 5928m, on Tilman's Ridge. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)



65. Tent Peak (Tharpu Chuli), 5500m, from Hiunchuli. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)



66. Climbing Parchamo, 6273m, from the Tesi Lapcha between Khumbu and Rolwaling. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)

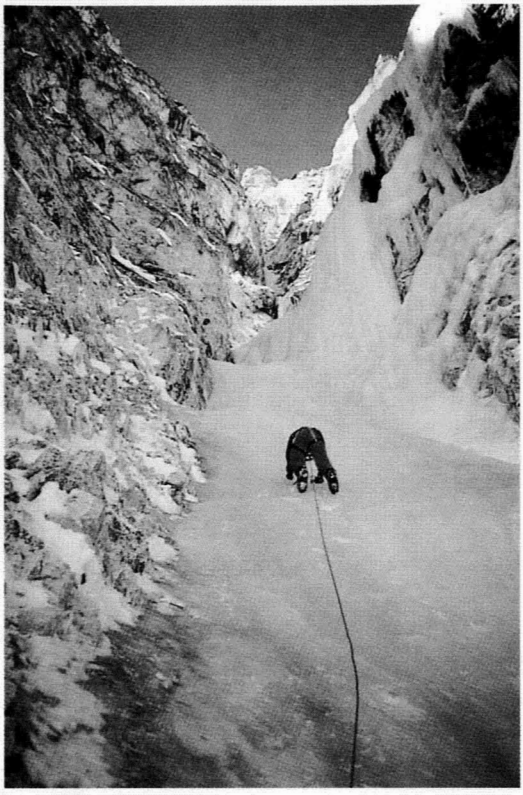


67. The classic South Ridge of Kwangde, 6187m, from Lumding: a beautiful AD/D route. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)

leftovers from packed lunches. Trekking companies with a non-mountaineering background perpetuate the myth by publicising the real Trekking Peaks as being suitable for strong walkers without mountaineering experience. Certainly there have been plenty of non-climbers on top of Island Peak, Tent Peak, Chulu East, Mera and Pisang. I know because over the years I have guided many of them. But then in recent years, with the growth of commercial expeditions, even Everest has attracted non-climbers to its summit.

The fact is there has been a huge increase in the numbers of trekkers in Nepal since the peaks were first opened, and this has produced a highly competitive scene on the commercial trekking market. The early companies helped pioneer the trekking routes, they carefully planned itineraries to ensure the health, safety and enjoyment of trekkers. They also used highly-skilled and professional staff to guide them. When I first became interested in the trekking peaks there was only one agency (founded by Jimmy Roberts) capable of running climbing trips in Nepal. The policy was to employ highly-skilled Sherpa staff and Western leaders with a track record of Himalayan climbing. This approach ensured optimum safety and a high probability of success. Things have changed. I now see too many agencies, with little understanding of mountaineering hazards, offering trekking peak climbing. They imply in their literature that an ascent of an Island Peak, Tent Peak, Ramdung or Paldor is well within the grasp of a fit walker, and often include these peaks in ill-conceived itineraries that allow little time to acclimatise and even less time for poor weather or difficult snow conditions. What's more, the responsibility for leading is often in the incapable hands of an untrained, lowly-paid Western leader or an obliging Sherpa.

Many 'mail-order mountaineers' remind me of skiers who have learned their skiing within the safe environment of well-groomed slopes. Protected from the real mountain environment by the lift company and resort managers, they need only consider what to wear and when to stop for lunch; they remain shielded from the true mountain environment. Occasionally tempted by 'real snow' they duck under the ropes and find themselves off-piste and out of their depth in a savage environment. It's the same on the trekking peaks. They may seem small in the context of an eight-thousander, but most are close to or over 6000 metres which, in my book, makes them worthy of respect. All of the 18 Trekking Peaks are glaciated and exposed, which makes them serious. Combine all these factors and you have Himalayan mountains that demand mountaineering decisions which only the experienced can make. I accept that some by their *via normale* involve little technical climbing other than to crampon along an exposed ridge or kick steps up a steep slope – simple skills. But as members of this club know, that's only part of the game. What about crevasse rescue, avalanche assessment, dealing with altitude and the myriad obstacles that are part and parcel of high mountain life? Many trekkers, beguiled into going for a

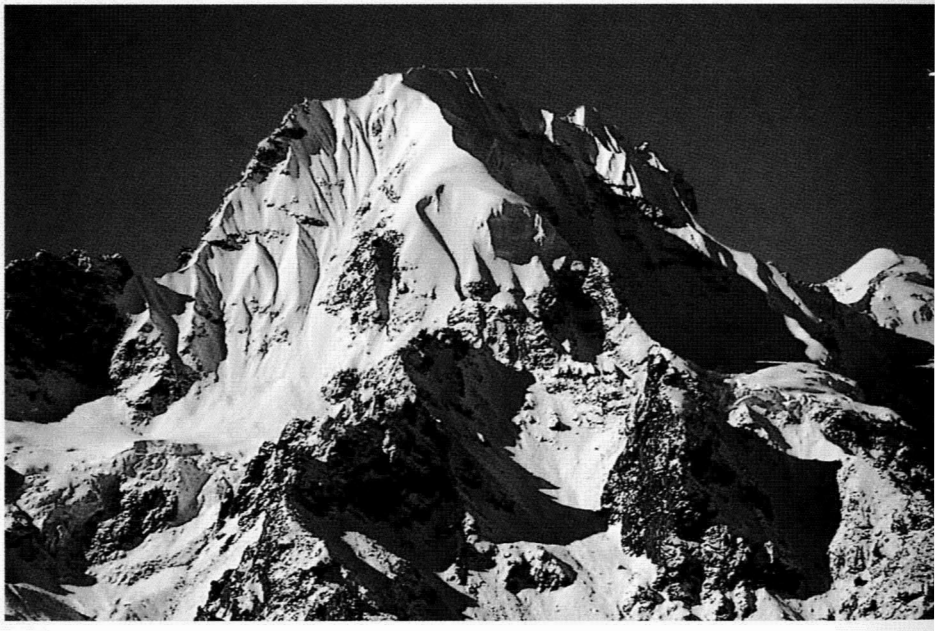


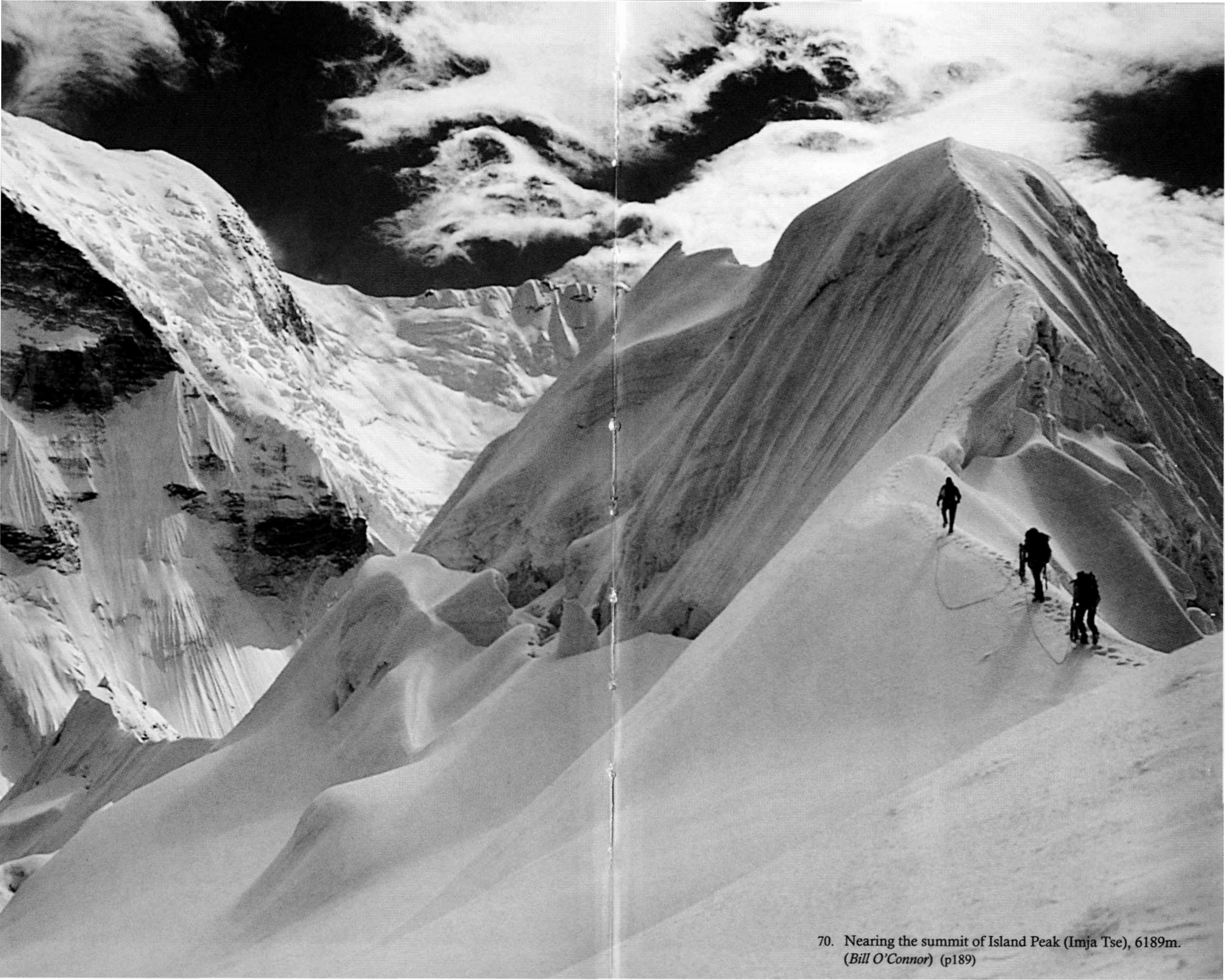
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68. The Lowe/Kendal Couloir (Scottish III/IV) on Lobuche East, 6119m. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)

Below

69. Naya Kanga, 5844m, a delightful trekking peak in Langtang. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)





70. Nearing the summit of Island Peak (Imja Tse), 6189m. (*Bill O'Connor*) (p189)

peak on their 'trek of a lifetime', have never considered the risks of high-altitude mountaineering. It's a serious game, one of the most serious that climbers play, and one that the epithet 'Trekking Peak' dangerously disguises.

Commercial companies and many mountaineers seem to have missed the point and real pleasure offered by the Trekking Peaks. Many 'mail-order' mountaineers arrogantly approach them as though they are little more than bumps along the way, timetabled for Thursday, followed by Mani Rimdu at the local gompa; whilst too often 'real mountaineers' dismiss them as unworthy because they are labelled 'trekking'. In fact they offer a wonderful opportunity to enjoy affordable Himalayan climbing amongst the finest mountains in the world within a time scale that fits annual holidays. Surely this is what the NMA realised when they made them so readily available.

These peaks also hold the potential for new route exploration at an altitude that will allow technical climbing of a high order. New routes on Kwangde, Lobuje, Mera and Kusum Kangguru have shown this and some leading mountaineers have taken full advantage of the no fuss, low bureaucracy climbing on offer. Jeff Lowe, Doug Scott, Reinhold Messner Stephen Venables, Dick Renshaw and many other world-class climbers have attempted new routes on trekking peaks, not always successfully. Shipton's team failed on Parchamo, Doug Scott missed the summit of Kusum Kangguru, and Alex MacIntyre turned back on Hiunchuli. But that is the nature of mountains and adventure; the outcome is never certain – which is why they are so desirable, so addictive. For the enthusiastic amateur there's plenty of a more moderate nature to go for – unclimbed lines just waiting for those with vision to see them.

It's worth remembering that many Trekking Peaks (before they were so called) were first climbed by the leading mountaineers of the day, including several noted members of this club: Tilman and Lloyd on Paldor in 1949, numerous members of John Hunt's Everest team on Island Peak and Pokalde, Jimmy Roberts on Mera, Alf Gregory's team on Parchamo and Noyce and Cox on Singu Chuli shortly after descending from Machapuchare. They undoubtedly recognised them as worthy mountaineering objectives and treated them with due respect. Some were done in preparation for higher things but others were chosen because they were unclimbed and there.

Of course, even on the best-run expeditions (and every trip to a Trekking Peak is an expedition) things can go wrong, errors can be made and a price has to be paid. Perhaps it's time for a rethink, perhaps accessibility has made us complacent. Perhaps it's time for a change of name? Perhaps trekking agencies should re-evaluate what they have on offer, including the staff they employ and the serious nature of Himalayan climbing – even when it's ONLY on a 'Trekking Peak.'