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Kangchenjunga Revisited 1955–1995

(*Plates 2–5*)

After the success of our nostalgic return visit to the Everest area in 1993, forty years after the first ascent, I was encouraged to suggest a similar trip in Spring 1995 to the slopes of Kangchenjunga. So I wrote to the other members of our 1955 team. The leader Sir Charles Evans (who, sadly, died in December 1995) was enthusiastic about the idea and invited us, on our return, to a reunion at Pen y Gwryd close to his home in North Wales, where he had long been confined to a wheelchair. The response from the others was not unanimous; it would be a long and committing trek involving at least a month away from the UK. Joe Brown confessed that, while still rock climbing at a high standard, 'he didn't really like walking'. John Clegg, our doctor, was now keener on sailing. But Norman Hardie from New Zealand and Neil Mather, with their wives, were keen to join Susan and myself. Tony Streather, while unavailable for the trek, was able to fly out with us to Kathmandu. After some local publicity we ended up with a party of sixteen, including our own travelling artist, Lincoln Rowe, and seven ladies. I was grateful that John Older, a distinguished surgeon and friend of Michael Ward, agreed to come as 'expedition doctor'.

I was keen that, as far as possible, we should retrace our 1955 approach route to the mountain, which had started from Darjeeling and crossed over the Singalila Ridge between Sikkim and Nepal. At present, however, foreigners are not permitted to cross the border at this point so we decided to remain entirely in Nepal. This precluded a repetition of Freshfield's celebrated circuit of Kangchenjunga in 1899 which has only been repeated twice: by members of the 1930 International Expedition (including Frank Smythe) and by a party led by Dorje Lhatoo of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, in only 21 days in 1992. In addition to visiting the Yalung or SW face, by which the mountain was first climbed, we planned to cross the Mirgin La and trek up the Ghunsa valley to Pangpema, base camp for the spectacular NW face climbed by Doug Scott and party in 1979, thus completing the western and probably the most interesting half of Freshfield's circuit.

We planned to fly from Kathmandu to Biratnagar in SE Nepal and then take advantage of a new road from there to Gopetar, stopping overnight at Ilam. We would then trek north for two stages, joining our 1955 route at the village of Khewang. We would conclude the 25-day trek by descending

the Ghunsa khola to join the Tamur river and then, leaving the valley, go up south across country to Suketar, the airport for Taplejung, where we would take a charter flight directly to Kathmandu.

We travelled from 70m to over 5000m through an immense variety of country and people, flora and fauna: terraced hillsides, friendly Hindu, Buddhist and Tibetan villages, dense and unspoilt forests of bamboo, rhododendron and ancient pine, and steep gorges cut by powerful mountain torrents. Then, above the treeline, there were yak pastures, desolate moraine-covered glaciers and, on the hillsides, occasional herds of wild blue sheep, the whole dominated by some of the most spectacular mountain vistas in the world.

We left Kathmandu on 15 April sporting 'KANGCH 1955–95' embroidered T-shirts designed and made up in 24 hours in the Thamel bazaar. We were met at Biratnagar by our sirdar Pemba Sherpa, from Beding in the Rolwaling. We transferred to a bus and it was a relief to leave the heat of the terai and head up into the foothills, passing an occasional tidy tea garden. We had planned to start walking on Easter Sunday, 16 April, but failed to allow for the vagaries of mechanical transport. A broken rear axle was replaced by the driver at the roadside and a little welding was needed in Phidim to repair a front leaf-spring retaining shackle. As a result it was 5pm when we arrived in Gopetar – too late to begin walking the first stage. We had lost a day in our trekking schedule before we had even started! The 4000ft descent to the Khabeli khola next morning was followed by a similar ascent to Sinam during the heat of the afternoon. This proved a rigorous start for those who were trekking for the first time.

I was looking forward to arriving at Khewang, as we had been royally welcomed there in 1955 with an archway of flowers and young girls scattering rose petals in our path. We had stopped for tiffin laid out on a large tarpaulin with the whole population watching. As the crowd pressed closer, some of our more officious Sherpas had swept them back with waves of the hand: 'Gently there, not too close, crowding makes them restless and difficult' (as if we were some kind of endangered species!). I had brought some fresh prints of the photographs I had taken on that earlier occasion and now produced them and asked whether any of the original people could be identified and might still be here. This evoked at first disbelief and then great interest amongst several aged matrons ready to claim that they were the young maidens of 1955. Our investigation was terminated abruptly by a violent thunderstorm, with hailstones the size of mothballs soon covering the ground like snow, but luckily they did not pierce the tents.

Yamphodin, our next stage, was the last village on this approach to Kangchenjunga and a decision-point for anyone in our party who felt they might not last for the whole circuit. Sadly, two members had to drop out and take the gentler four-day trek across to Suketar and thence to Kathmandu. Fortunately they suffered no lasting ill effects and were able to fill in the time until our return with a package trip to Lhasa.



2. The SW (Yalung) Face of Kangchenjunga, 8586m. From the Great Shelf at 7500m, the first ascent was by The Gangway, to the right of The Sickle, then up (in the shade) to the small sunlit snow arête leading to the West Ridge. (*John Older*) (p36)



3. Telephoto of the NW Face of Kangchenjunga. Doug Scott's 1979 party followed the North Ridge from the North Col, until finally joining the 1955 route on the upper part of the West Ridge. (*George Band*) (p36)

On our seventh day of walking we came up the ablation valley beside the Yalung glacier and arrived at the yak grazing ground of Ramze where there are now two stone huts used by yak herders from Ghunsa. This was a stage beyond the 1955 Acclimatisation Base Camp at Tseram and was known to us then as Moraine Camp. It had been the last point before we climbed over the lateral moraine to cross the desolate stone-covered Yalung glacier on the approach to our Base Camp site at Pache's Grave. There was no point in retracing this abominable route; instead we hiked two hours further up the valley to a splendid viewpoint called Oktang at 15,250ft where there is a cairn decorated with prayer flags and trisuls on the crest of the lateral moraine just before the small Tso glacier joins the Yalung. On our way up, just after we had enjoyed our first exciting glimpse of the mountain, in a rocky defile we came across numerous cat-like prints in the fresh overnight snow, possibly made by a snow leopard with cubs. Then suddenly under a sheltering boulder Tony Astill spotted a recent 'kill' of a partly-eaten blue sheep. We had an eerie feeling that we were being watched.

Continuing in high spirits we arrived soon after 8pm at Oktang. Our trek's first objective had been achieved. Cameras clicked repeatedly as we stood beside the cairn with the vast panorama of Kangchenjunga and Yalung Kang as the backdrop. We had a magnificent, clear view of the SW face, sidelit by the early morning sun: the Upper Icefall, the Great Shelf at 23,000ft, the Gangway beside the Sickle, and the final pyramid, with a little snow crest leading up behind the shattered pinnacles on the West Ridge which, on 25 May 1955, we had climbed to the summit. Joe Brown and I, followed the next day by Norman Hardie and Tony Streather, had kept Charles Evans's promise to the rulers of Sikkim not to desecrate the final sacred cone of snow. It was this that gave Charles the idea of calling the expedition book *Kangchenjunga: The Untrodden Peak*. The second and third successful expeditions, in 1977 and 1979, also honoured that pledge.

We now had a choice of two routes over to Ghunsa, a charming isolated mountain village of about thirty wood and stone chalets created by settlers from Tibet some 300 years ago, and where, in 1955, we had been most hospitably received. As before, we chose the route over the Mirgin La (14,900ft) which meant losing some height at first by having to descend nearly to Tseram, but it was a lower pass than the alternative Lapsang La (16,750ft) and I was assured that it offered better views.

That evening we camped in thick cloud, in a rocky cwm 150ft below the pass. During the night the wind blew fiercely and I was concerned for the stability of the tents, getting up to search for heavier stones to hold down the guy lines.

The morning was clear as we crossed over the col to look westward towards a cluster of distant peaks. Slowly it dawned on us that they were the highest peaks in the world: Makalu and Chomolönzo and beyond them, 70 miles away, Lhotse and the icy Kangshung face of Everest. There was more to come. As we trudged through fresh snow to the Sinion La (14,750ft)

and peered round the corner, there was a stunning view of the majestic South Face of Jannu (25,300ft) like a throne for the gods. In 1955 its near-vertical North Face had dominated our view from the Great Shelf and we could hardly imagine how it would ever be climbed. Of course it was – in 1962 by a strong team of French guides, taking broadly the right-hand sky-line ridge we could now see. In 1978 their bold route was repeated, in Alpine style, by Roger Baxter-Jones, Rab Carrington, Rob Hall and Alan Rouse.

Ghunsa had changed little in 40 years, except for a corrugated iron-roofed school, a police post, a modest shop and a recently-built 'hotel' where attractive locally-woven carpets were displayed over the balcony. We had now joined a recognised trekking route from Taplejung to Pangpema, but still far less frequented than the Everest trail. I had brought copies of my earlier photographs of the headman and his wife with whom we stayed in 1955, but nobody remembered them. Their traditional Tibetan dress was now only worn by the women, but with much less jewellery. Universal T-shirts, trousers and trainers clothed the men. Our artist Lincoln Rowe decided to stay here, sketching pastels of local life, while we continued the three further days to Pangpema. Soon rhododendron and larch forest gave way to high cliffs with waterfalls. As we reached the snout of the Kangchenjunga Glacier, 7000m peaks marking the border with Sikkim came into view: Pyramid, Tent and Nepal Peaks. As we continued along a shelf beside the lateral moraine, the view to the south slowly opened up revealing The Twins and finally the great northern precipices of Kangchenjunga and Yalung Kang. Our second objective was achieved. But how good a view would we get? An Australian group had been here recently for three days, we were told, and had seen nothing. That evening, drifting clouds gave only occasional tantalising glimpses of the final summit pyramid but we could trace Doug Scott's route up the North Ridge, via the Sugar Loaf and the Croissant, to the point where they traversed up snow slopes to reach the West Ridge just beyond the Pinnacles, joining up with the route Joe Brown and I had found 24 years previously.

We stayed a further night at Pangpema so that those who wished could walk up behind the camp to get a better view of the face. We were blessed with a fine sunny day. There were two obvious ridges to take and by chance we chose the longer one to the east. Instead of topping out at a viewpoint just under 19,000ft we found ourselves potentially able to continue to a spot height of 6225m (20,400ft) marked on Marcel Kurz's excellent map which he had made during the 1930 expedition. In fact the last few hundred feet changed from straightforward scree and boulders to a sporting snow and ice ridge for which we were not properly equipped. This stopped the front runners, Norman Hardie and Gijs Verspyck , and their two Sherpas in trainers. Lethargy gradually overcame the rest of us so that John Older, Neil Mather, Tony Astill and I called it a day around 19,000ft and just sat there soaking in the glorious view.



4. Young girls welcoming the 1955 team at Khewang. (*George Band*) (p36)



5. Elderly matrons of Khewang in 1995 – the maidens of 1955? (*George Band*) (p36)

Our return downhill gave easier going, but the stages often seemed extra-long when there was so much of interest to pause and enjoy along the route. South of Ghunsa we were on new ground and the hour to Phole beside the river was of outstanding beauty, with the rhododendrons at their very best. Phole was a relatively new Tibetan refugee settlement, approved by the Dalai Lama, with a small monastery and friendly resident lama. It was the first place we were offered Tibetan jewellery for sale. Below Phole the gorge of the Ghunsa khola is impressively steep, with dense forests of bamboo and rhododendron. Although the trail remained relatively close to the river, there were plenty of ups and downs. The path was quite exposed in places until we arrived at the confluence of three rivers, the Yangma, Simbua and Ghunsa kholas, which form the headwaters of the Tamur river. The valley then started to open out, with cultivated terraces and the occasional village with the smarter smallholdings often owned by retired Gurkha solders.

We arrived early at Suketar, so there was plenty of time to sort out our gear and present the porters with a selection of clothes, together with some well-earned baksheesh. I was forced by public opinion to discard a cherished yellow balaclava which was immediately commandeered by one of the men. After supper our Sherpa team dispensed *rakshi* and we danced in the moonlight. Of our nine staff, only three were true Sherpas: the sirdar Pemba, Amsang, handsome and smartly dressed, and Sarki who could show a real burst of speed uphill. Apart from Himalsing, a former Indian army Gurkha who was a Magar (and who as 'Mr Tally-ho' always led the way), the others were Tamings and, to our surprise, all were Christians.

Climbing expeditions to Nepal often include a trekking group to help their finances or just for the company. I would have liked do the reverse: to attract a British party to climb Kangchenjunga in our 40th anniversary year. But in Spring 1995 Kangchenjunga was strangely deserted. John Barry was not able to assemble a 'commercial' party; only a small Italian group attempted the mountain, unsuccessfully, by the SW face.

Kangchenjunga has had far fewer expeditions than Everest and K2, possibly because of its assumed difficulty and remoteness, although of all the 8000m peaks it is the one most easily visible – from Darjeeling. I am filled with admiration for anyone, like Reinhold Messner, who braves the bands of ice cliffs protecting the NW face. The beauty of our route on the SW face was its relative freedom from objective danger. After viewing it through a telescope from Darjeeling, Frank Smythe rejected that face because of its frequent and dangerous avalanches. But the approach from Pache's Grave circumvents the most unstable part of the Lower Icefall, and the Upper Icefall leading to the Great Shelf at 23,000ft has a convex aspect that channels avalanches down the slopes on either side. Profiting from that discovery, in 1983 Pierre Béghin climbed it solo and without oxygen – a remarkable achievement.