MALCOLM BASS

Ten Days on Vasuki Parbat

As the rock flew past me I knew it was going to hit Paul. I'd heard it come banging and whirring down the gully, bigger and noisier than the others. I'd screamed 'rock!' but Paul, tethered on the open icefield below, had nowhere to hide. It smashed into the ice a metre out from my stance beneath a roof, and then spun out, arcing towards its target. The impact was a muffled thud. Paul crumpled onto the anchors. It was 3pm on day 3 and the sun was beating full onto Vasuki Parbat's west face. Suddenly it was very quiet and I felt acutely alone.

But then Paul began to move. Moans drifted up as he righted himself, then stood back up to the stance.

'Paul, Paul … are you OK?'

'I think so.'

'Can you climb?'

'Give me a minute.'

I was desperate for Paul to start moving. I wanted to shout at him to get a move on (or words to that effect). We were at the bottom of a gully overhung by a 700m leaning wall of variable quality rock. For the last hour rockfall had been steadily increasing. The objective danger meter was swinging between 'Unjustifiable' and 'Suicidal'. But Paul knew all that: any delay on his part could more reasonably be ascribed to having just been hit by a 3kg boulder that had fallen several hundred metres than to a lack of appreciation of the urgency of the situation. So I shut up. Paul collected himself, took out the ice screws, and began to climb towards me, slowly and stiffly at first. It wasn't an easy pitch; tenuous hooks on small dusty edges; hard, black ice of the shattering type, loose sections, and the occasional death-dealing falling rock. I'd hated it, torn between the need to move carefully, to find some scant protection, and the need for speed. But Paul is an old hand at doing the business despite injuries sustained during our joint adventures; he'd rallied remarkably quickly after I'd inadvertently pulled him over a 20m sérac some years earlier, and so he did on this occasion. He soon began to move more freely, and before any more rocks could fall he'd joined me under the safety of a roof in the gully wall. We agreed on a pause for refreshments (a brew and some anti-inflammatories), to let the sun leave the face, and to gather our wits.

It had been a trying day. Our team of three had shrunk to a pair around noon when Pat, struggling with her recently broken back and acclimatisation problems, had wisely decided to descend. This had been a fraught few minutes for all of us. For Pat, the end of her dream of climbing the face after all her hard work. For Paul and I, the break up of the team. For me,



14. The west face of Vasuki Parbat, Garhwal Himalaya, showing the line of Bass and Figg's nine-day ascent. (*Satyabrata Dam*)

the loss of my friend and partner from so many recent climbs. With the sun just moving onto the face, a few minutes was all we had to think and talk it through, heads buzzing with racing thoughts and awash with emotions, then quickly sort the gear. Pat had taken the haul line, some screws, V thread kit, gas, food and a burner and set off down the snow slope to our previous night's bivouac site. I had taken the rest of the rack and headed up that hateful, bombarded pitch. Half an hour later the rock had hit Paul. A trying day indeed, and it was by no means over.

By rights we should have been nowhere near Vasuki Parbat. Our original plan had been to have another go at Janahut, a 6800m peak near the head of the Gangotri glacier, which the three of us, accompanied by New Zealander Marty Beare and Brit Andy Brown, had attempted in 2004. But whilst the Indian Mountaineering Foundation had happily given us a permit, the state of Uttarakhand, which now administers the Garhwal and Kumaon areas, had been less obliging, and by three months before we were due to travel it was clear that the vital state permit was not going to be forthcoming. A rapid email debate followed. 'What about that face in Sichuan we've always talked about?' 'If we go sub-7000m in Pakistan can we afford to ditch your ticket to India?' 'What about Himachal Pradesh?' It soon became clear that financial and permit considerations dictated an open list peak in India with equivalent kudos to Janahut. Vasuki Parbat was on Uttarakhand's open list. Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden had got a permit for it in 2008. The IMF was supportive. And the west face had enough dramatic appeal to reassure grant-giving bodies that our new objective was worth funding. Administratively it was a winning plan. But as a climbing objective it made my blood run cold.

Firstly it was clearly very steep; try as I might I couldn't find a photograph which made the face appear to lay back even a little; it remained resolutely vertical. Secondly it didn't appear to be made of comforting Garhwal granite but of something much less pleasant. (Frankly I chose not to enquire too deeply into the geological question as Vasuki's proximity to the shale monstrosity of Satopanth didn't bode well). And thirdly it had seen off Fowler and Ramsden. Admittedly their 2008 trip had been dogged by ridiculous quantities of snow, but their *AJ* report (vol 114, 3-12) also spoke of challenging climbing, steepness, wild exposure, a rock fall (singular!), complex route finding and numbing cold. Such talk from alpinists of their calibre was somewhat daunting.

But we were committed and, bolstered by generous route finding tips from Mick in the form of photographs labelled 'Go this way to climb Vasuki', arrived in Delhi in lingering monsoon rain. After a two-day refresher course in the ways of Indian customs, a fine dinner at Mandip and Anita Soin's home, and an introduction to our prodigiously accomplished liaison officer Satyabrata (Satya) Dam (double Everester, both Poles on foot), we were on our way to the mountains. The roads were in terrible condition, a legacy of the horrendous summer of rain that had tormented the Subcontinent. The journey to Uttarkashi, normally a one-day drive,



15. Paul Figg and Malcolm Bass following the initial gully pitch on Day 1. (*Pat Deavoll*)

took two long days. We told ourselves that the frequent showers were the very last vestiges of the monsoon.

We had been travelling for no more than half an hour on the third day of the drive, from Uttarkashi to Gangotri, when, unbeknownst to us at the time, we encountered a Critical Moment. A mountain stream had washed away a section of the road ahead. A heavy truck had tried to negotiate the wash out, failed, and rolled onto its side, spilling its load of road repair gravel. The driver had escaped unharmed. We piled out of the bus and joined the crowd milling about in the heavy rain. After watching a few other vehicles attempt the wash out, our driver announced, with great foresight as it turned out, that he and his bus were going no further. What we didn't know then was that it was going to continue to rain heavily, and that the road up to Gangotri (the road-head) would close later that day and not reopen for over a week. Other climbing teams stuck in the traffic jam behind the rolled truck were to arrive in Gangotri a week later, or turn for home without ever reaching the mountains. But thanks to the quick thinking and local contacts of Khem Singh of Ibex Expeditions, we were soon on our way again, this time in two sturdy 4x4s. These were the last vehicles to make it to Gangotri before the road was closed.

Gangotri is normally a bustling place with a holiday atmosphere, crowded with pilgrims and tourists. But as the rain continued it grew to resemble an English seaside town in mid-January. Shops and cafés pulled

their shutters down in the absence of business. At first we were relatively buoyant; we had plenty of time and a couple of days spent acclimatising would do no harm. But on the third day of continuous rain, as we watched the snow line dropping by the hour and heard that the track up to the mountains had been closed by the local authorities, our spirits began to sink. An attempt on an unclimbed mountain face at 6700m began to seem rather improbable if the weather wouldn't permit a walk along a paved track at 3500m.

But the next day dawned sparkling and clear. Those who knew the right people (and we did) would be able to set off up towards the hills the next day. We were on the move again.

Four days later we were ensconced in a fine little base camp more often used as ABC for teams on the normal route up Bhagirathi II. The team consisted of Satya; New Zealander Patricia Deavoll, who'd just recovered from breaking her back five months earlier; Paul Figg, a man who can keep going for ever as he proved on a 10-day 'up and over' ascent of our new route *The Prey* on Mount Hunter; Paul's partner Rachel Antill, our artist in residence; cook team Chandar Singh Negi and Shankar Thapa; and myself.



16. Malcolm studies one of Mick Fowler's photographs at the second bivvi. Fowler and Paul Ramsden attempted the face in 2008. (*Pat Deavoll*)

The mountains were deep in snow, but sunshine and a well-broken trail up gentle slopes on the eastern flanks of the Bhagirathi made by an Indian Army expedition allowed for acclimatisation. Pat wasn't acclimatising as well as she would have liked and was plagued by an incessant cough, but otherwise we were nearly back on schedule. The plan was for Paul, Pat and I to attempt Vasuki's west face, while Rachel painted and Satya photographed. We'd realised by now that it was going to be a very cold climb. We'd tried our lightweight sleeping bags on the acclimatisation foray, and even though I'd previously used mine on open bivouacs in winter in the French Alps, they'd proved far too cold for use here. So we packed big down sleeping bags and inflatable mats, and because with these loads we weren't going to be moving fast, we threw in seven days' food and nine days' gas.

In the pale dawn light of our first day on the face we reached the top of a snow cone and confronted the first pitch, a thin ribbon of water-ice snaking down a gully leading to the buttress we intended to follow. I made the first belay, a nut and a tri-cam; I can remember their placements even now. The deeply familiar routines of making belays, uncoiling ropes, and tying on contrasted, as they always do, with the strange and terrifying magnificence of embarking on something that will last for many days, of which you have dreamt for months, and which might well change you for ever.

Pat, as the strongest ice climber, led, and Paul and I followed with big sacs. The climbing was only moderate, but it felt hard with the sacs and altitude and I was glad when it was time to break out of the ice gully and make a rising traverse to a saddle on the buttress crest where we planned to spend our first night. But we were still low on the face and the ground was none too steep, so the snow was deep. We ploughed on through the afternoon, dreading our spells at the front trail breaking, to be rewarded by a flat, safe campsite.

Day 2 provided uneventful snow climbing. The barometer dropped more than expected so we camped a little early on another good site on a ledge to the right of the fall line. Next morning we set off well aware that we would be climbing into the crux section of the route – 300m of steep mixed ground. The cold was intense. We began by soloing in deep, cold snow, but gradually the ground steepened as we were funnelled into a gully dropping from the left edge of the steep buttress above. Snow gave way to ice; we roped up and began pitching. Pat brought us up to her stance:

'I could easily get down from here on my own.'

'Are you joking?'

'No, I mean it.'

Two hours later a somewhat battered Paul and a rather dazed Malcolm are sheltering beneath the roof drinking herbal tea and waiting for the gully to go quiet. Pat is back at the second night's bivouac ledge, safe for now, but worried about the rest of the descent, and plagued by contradictory thoughts about her decision.

Eventually the sun leaves the face after a brief golden finale, and in the gathering gloom and deepening cold I edge out into the silent gully. The ice is dark and hard, polished by rockfall. Covered by a veneer of grey grit, rock and ice are indistinguishable in my torch beam. The gully walls are worn smooth and our sole consolation is that the ice takes screws. We've planned to lead in blocks, and this one is mine. We're looking for a diagonal pitch that will take us onto what Mick had referred to as 'great squeaky white ice traverse pitches' leading rightwards to the buttress crest. At first we're convinced we'll see it soon, and then we're convinced we've missed it. For lack of better ideas we keep on up the gully. The climbing is brutal and ugly. We kick and hit hard. It's a nasty black gutter to be in on this dark, cold Himalayan night, but I'm gradually aware of feeling that all is well. It might not be pretty, it might not be clever, but I've done this before, I can do it again, and I can do it all night if that's what it takes. It's a strange place to find my flow.



17. Paul and Malcolm in the steepening snow gully on Day 3, shortly before Pat turned back. (*Pat Deavoll*)

Eventually the gully ends at an overhanging step. Randomly I swing out right onto steep rock, dry tool round a tricky corner, and find myself on a very nearly flat rock ledge. It's midnight. 'Paul, I've found our bivvi.' I pull a couple of slings over my head to make the belay. Unluckily one of the slings is actually my camera, which in my tired and over-excitable state I manage to drop. I watch it skitter away. I know Paul doesn't have a camera with him. I notice that just now I'm really not that bothered. We do the right thing and melt lots of snow for drinks, then spend the night sitting beside one another with our boots on constantly trying to keep our sleeping bags from sliding down. We don't really know where we are. We are worried about Pat. But basically things are under control.

With the first light of morning we're excited to see that we're perched only a little way above the Fowler/Ramsden ice traverse. We quite fancy some squeaky white ice, so Paul leads a descending diagonal pitch that takes us neatly onto the traverse. From here we see Pat pass the first night's bivouac site and disappear into the initial water-ice gully. Over breakfast coffee we'd planned on having an easy day traversing across to the bivouac site that Mick and Paul had found on the buttress crest. I did have an easy day: it was Paul's block. And Paul would have had an easy day too if every single one of our ice screws hadn't been blunted by the previous night's escapades.

The bivouac on the crest was everything we hoped it would be: aesthetic and comfortable. There's a good picture of it in the 2009 *AJ*. We set off next morning with high hopes of making big inroads into the meat of the route. But it was not to be. I led off, moving back left along the last section of the ice traverse to the bottom of a mixed groove cleaving the vertical walls above. Placing a piece of gear on a long sling, I began climbing the groove. The ice was superb, the rock helpful, and I was feeling good. After a few metres I paused to place another nut. Rather a low nut in retrospect, about level with the top of my right gaiter. On reaching down to clip it I fell off instead, an awful clattering fall that scared me whilst it was happening; out of the groove: straight over the ice traverse and on over a horribly steep wall. I ended hanging upside down, one nut stopping a long, long fall onto the belay, dilated pupils trying to take in the drop below me. Terrified for my life, I scrabbled frantically to get up the wall back onto the ice traverse. The wall was too steep, the moves too difficult, and I sagged back onto the rope, gasping for air from reaction, effort, and altitude. I hung there sucking and scared until fit to try again. More thought, less pedalling, and a very hard pull and lock-off got me a placement in the ice, and then I was up. I tottered back along the traverse to Paul on the pinnacle bivouac belay. And burst into tears.

My memories of the rest of that day are fragmentary. I remember spending a fair amount of time repeatedly telling Paul how much I wanted to get up the route, how sorry I was to have fallen, how we mustn't let it stop us (which nobody was suggesting) and crying. Then I fell asleep like some boring drunk who'd finally passed out. Paul diagnosed a, hopefully temporary, brain malfunction of some sort and prescribed a rest day. In putting the tent back up he dropped a tent pole. I wasn't strongly placed to berate him: I was probably insisting we go on to a club by way of the kebab shop. It turns out that First Light tents really only need one pole; take note you super-light fiends.

We set off next morning with the same high hopes, but with Paul in the lead. This proved a more successful strategy, and we gained height steadily by way of a couple of pitches of enjoyable mixed climbing just left of the buttress crest. The disembodied voice of our President warned us away from a tempting snowy traverse back left, and I took over the lead for an imposing, steep, dry, loose rock tower. Our timing was good, the sun was on the rock and I could climb barehanded. We kept our crampons

on. Some very satisfying trundling (a 1000-metre drop, a personal best by far) removed the looser bits. I took my sac off for the rock pitches on the tower, so we slowed down dramatically as we hauled and cursed. It was getting dark as we reached the top of the tower to find a short sharp horizontal snow ridge leading to a little buttress. The next hour's climbing was intensely memorable.

Jan Babicz in his guidebook *Peaks and Passes of the Garhwal Himalaya* refers to 'the wild, vertical, West Face' (of Vasuki). This was the wild bit. Six days up a huge face; the dusk wind blowing strongly; vigorous *à cheval* progress with a kilometre drop either side; the world below, forgotten; the summit, forgotten; the only goal to move forwards to find a place to shelter and sleep.

As the cold intensified and the wind kept blowing, the need for shelter became urgent. We lashed ourselves to a rock outcrop and dug down into the sharp snow ridge. After an hour we had knocked enough off the top to make a narrow pitch, perfect for a one-pole tent. The nights in the little tent really worked well. Safe from objective dangers we were very mellow, Paul's calm presence a counterpoint to my greater exuberance. Warm in big bags we slept well and woke refreshed. We kept civilised hours, the early mornings being just too cold to get much useful done.

Day 7 began with a bit more horse work before the ridge ran into a short, steep barrier wall. Things looked grim as the initial section was smooth and overhanging, but a short traverse left found a steep groove that gave the technical crux of the route. Good nut cracks, sharp little edges on either side perfect for crampons, a long, locked-off reach to good ice, then a big heave and high kick and we were on the upper snow field. Bar a couple of short walls, we hoped the way to the summit ridge was open.

The altitude took its toll as we tried to move fast up the snowfield. Slacking, we stopped for an afternoon brew in a magical cave beneath a steep limestone wall. We stopped again an hour later because we'd found a perfect tent site under the overhanging limestone. It was like camping under Kilnsey.

Beginning our eighth day, a little rope tension allowed me to drop off the top end of the buttress/ramp into a gully. Perhaps we could have climbed this to the summit ridge, but it had hidden sections, so we crossed it and moved up and right. Even easy ground was hard work now, and our pace slowed noticeably. But we ground it out and late that afternoon reached the summit ridge.

It was a magnificent moment. As we crested the ridge our world suddenly expanded to include the Sundar valley on Vasuki's east side, the great pyramid of Satopanth and, to the north, over myriad mountains, the high brown plateau of Tibet. I was elated: the Himalaya hasn't granted me many summits, and to be on this untrodden ridge above such a compelling face felt glorious.

In Hindu mythology Lord Vasuki is the king of snakes, so it's no surprise that his mountain has a long, serpentine summit ridge. The summit lay



18. Paul and Malcolm (circled) on the upper section of the face on Day 9. (*Satyabrata Dam*)

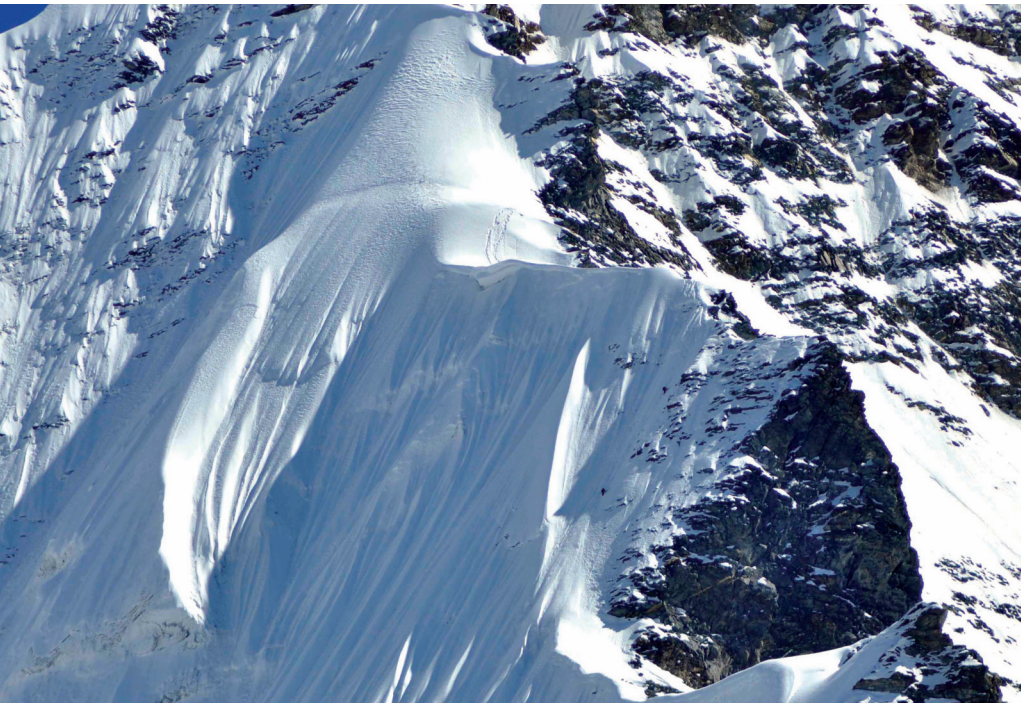
north of where we'd topped out, so we moved off in that direction and camped in a little col between rocky towers, just short of the top. After a scanty meal (stretching our seven days' food to an eighth now) we discussed descent options. The east face is moderately angled snow and ice, but it was hard to read from above, covered with séracs and steepenings. Our blunt ice screws confirmed our instinctive Scottish winter climbers' wariness of wide expanses of snow and ice. The ascent route would have eaten our rack, so we opted for a long traverse of the summit ridge and descent by the north-west ridge, which we'd had a good look at from base camp. It's possible this ridge has been climbed to the summit. The Indo Tibetan Border Police claim to have climbed Vasuki in 1973, route unknown, and the scant details they provided have cast doubt on the claim. If they did make the summit it seems most likely it was by the north-west ridge as it's the most accessible route, and a natural for siege-style climbing (big ledges for camps). Since then there have been unsuccessful French and Welsh attempts on the ridge, and a successful Japanese climb of the east face, using fixed rope on its lower part.

The next morning began with a pitch of easy rock, a short section of snowy ridge, then the summit, an unspectacular hump in the ridge. As we climbed towards it I said, 'Paul, is it OK with you if we don't actually go to the summit? I've sort of promised Lord Vasuki that we wouldn't.'

'Funny you say that. So have I'

So we didn't.

The rest of the day moving north along the summit ridge was spectacular.



19. Descending deep snow on the north-west ridge, Day 10. (*Satyabrata Dam*)

The ridge was knife-edged, but not corniced. It had undulations and short, steep steps: the former wore out our legs, the latter wore out our psyches. We stayed roped and moved together, except for particularly nasty steps where we belayed. Often we had our tool shafts planted on the east face, our crampons on the west face. We were in deep snow most of the day and struggled to keep hands and feet warm even in our huge 'storm' mitts.

By late afternoon we had reached the junction of north-west and north-east ridges, and abseiled a couloir on the side of the north-west. As darkness fell we traversed a ledge onto the ridge proper and dug a poor tent site. Not much tea for us that night. For the first time, the cold prevented us from sleeping. We were going downhill in more ways than one.

The north-west ridge had looked easy except for the steep rock towers. In the event, abseiling the steep rock towers amongst rotting fixed rope was the easy bit. The level sections however were thigh deep in unconsolidated snow and we really struggled. Twice we climbed down steep gullies on the north flank. I dropped a stuff sac with my head torch, map and compass. We abandoned the ridge and committed to the lower part of the north face, needing steeper ground to maintain momentum. The snow got deeper. We plunged on down, rolling over little bluffs, glissading in our own powder avalanches. The angle was such, and the snow so deep, that we were virtually throwing ourselves down. As we reached the foot of the face the snow got deeper and progress slowed to a crawl. Hours later in darkness we reached Vasuki Taal, the lake whose shore is used for Satopanth base camp.

The stumble back over moraine ridges on steep, narrow paths with just one headtorch was purgatorial. We worked out that the best tactic was for Paul to walk on a few paces, stop, then turn around to light up the path as I walked up to him. I kept stumbling and falling, forcing me to use my hands to steady myself. I hated doing this, as we knew by now that we had some cold injuries.

At about ten o' clock on the night of the tenth day we saw the lights of base camp below us. Having only one torch showing we began shouting:

'There are two of us.'

'We've lost a torch.'

'We're both here.'

'Tea!'

Headtorches appeared from tents below. I was consumed with anxiety that everyone was OK.

We staggered down the moraine towards the lights. Rachel climbed up the moraine towards us, and we met with tears and hugs:

'Is everyone OK? Did Pat get down safely?'

'Everyone's fine.'

At that moment I finally relaxed. It was over. A few moments later we were down at camp, everyone hugging everyone else in the glow of a celebratory bonfire of rubbish. The smell of paraffin, the taste of tea, friendly faces, and everyone with their stories to tell; we sat in the mess tent talking long into the night. One by one people drifted off to bed. I was left alone. I tried to make some sense of the immensity of the experience. I couldn't. I smiled to myself, stood up stiffly and shakily, and tottered off to bed.

Postscript

When we unpacked Paul's sacs we found that one gas bottle had been crumpled by an enormous blow. This propane-butane air bag had saved him from significant injury or worse from the falling rock. We both had frost nip in 80% of our digits resulting in some blistering and a couple of months of numbness.

20. Malcolm Bass, exhausted, at base camp after the climb. (*Rachel Antill*)





21. Paul Figg and Malcolm Bass looking worn after 10 days on Vasuki Parbat. (*Rachel Antill*)

Summary: An account of the first ascent of the west face of Vasuki Parbat (6721m), Garhwal Himalaya, by Malcolm Bass and Paul Figg. Descent by north-west ridge; 4 to 13 October 2010, 1600m, rock-climbing of Hard Severe (loose), mixed climbing of Scottish VI. Expedition members: Patricia Deavoll, Malcolm Bass, Paul Figg (climbers), Rachel Antill (artist), Satyabrata Dam (liaison officer), Chandar Singh Negi (cook), and Shankar Thapa (assistant cook).

Acknowledgments: The team would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council, the Alpine Club, W L Gore (Shipton-Tilman Grant), Mountain Hardwear, DHL (freight), and Wayfarer meals for their support.
The ascent was one of six climbs shortlisted for a *Piolet d'Or* in 2011.

DEREK BUCKLE

In The Realm of The Bear and Snow Leopard

Most national parks positively teem with visitors but one of India's more recent additions, the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) does not fit into this category. Created in 1984, the park comprises a total of 1171 km^2 including its eco buffer zone. Prolific wildlife has attracted trekkers and bird watchers, but difficult access limits the aspirations of all but the very hardy to easier valleys such as that of the Sainj river to the south. While searching for a suitable venue for a joint expedition with the Himalayan Club in 2010, Harish Kapadia suggested that we should explore



22. Laura Millichamp arriving on the ridge of Snowcock Point. (*Derek Buckle*)

the remote Jiwa Nala region of the GHNP. In contrast to more peripheral areas, this valley has not previously attracted mountaineers and only the valley floor is well known. Prior to the establishment of the park, local villagers occasionally exploited the valley for grazing and for medicinal plants but neither is now permitted.

The Jiwa Nala is one of the three watersheds that comprise the GHNP - along with the Sainj and Tirthan further south. It is confined by steep mountain ranges to the north and south and by a glaciated, crenulated cirque to the east. A steep-sided, forested valley restricts entry from the west. Thus, the upper reaches of the Jiwa Nala can only be accessed via the southern Kandi Galu pass (3627m) or the northern Phangchi Galu pass