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Zumthul Phuk

Secrets of the Great South Ridge of Kangchenjunga, Part Two



Siniolchu south-east and east faces, from base camp in Zumthul Phuk valley.
(All photos: Anindya Mukherjee)

The second of two articles describing exploration of the glaciers on the south-eastern flanks of Kangchenjunga recalls the exploration of the Zumthul Phuk glacier and its legendary Rock Needles.

Background

John Claude White, the first British political officer to Sikkim, was also the first person to express an interest in exploring Zumthul Phuk glacier. He never mentioned the name or existence of a glacier but he did give the name of the river emanating from it, calling it Zamtu Chu. In July 1891, on his way to Lhonak valley, White took the Tholung Gompa-Kishong La-Thiu La route¹. During his journey he made the following observation:

Whilst on the first day's march I discovered that a large stream, the Zamtu-Chu, takes its rise on the eastern slopes of Siniolchu and joins the Rimpi² on its right bank, thus proving the survey maps to be wrong in showing it, as they have hitherto done,

running to the south.

I was much tempted to follow up this stream, as Siniolchu is the most lovely peak of Sikkim, and the views at the head of the valley must be magnificent, but it would probably have taken me over a week and I could not spare the time, as I wanted to go north across several snow ranges and so reach a drier climate.³

White was not able to return to fulfill his desire. Forty years later, in October 1931, after their daring attempt on climbing Kangchenjunga⁴,



Siniolchu Needles (5712m) on the left, Zumthul Phuk glacier and lake in centre, Siniolchu in backdrop.

Dr Eugen Allwein and Pircher⁵ crossed the Simvu Saddle from the Zemu glacier side into the Passauram valley. While entering the valley they were struck by a prominent mountain feature. Quoting Allwein:

On a ridge radiating south-eastwards is set a mountain strangely contrasting in character to the mass of Siniolchu, a kind of Dent du Geant, but vastly larger in scale, with a mountain character one would scarcely expect to meet among the icy giants of the Himalaya.⁶

This appears to be the first documented sighting of the Rock Needles of Siniolchu. Another German expedition followed in 1937, led by Dr Paul Bauer. During their expedition to climb Siniolchu from the Zemu glacier side, they also did some exploration in the Zumthul Phuk Valley⁷. They were able to cross a col from near their base camp in the Zemu glacier valley and enter the Zumthul Phuk glacier. They then crossed the water-



Rock Needles (5712m) and Brothers Tees Col (5250m) as seen from ABC 2.
Below: Rock Needles, in close-up.



shed between Passauram and Zumthul Phuk glaciers and reached a pass-like feature to the south-east of Rock Needles (or Siniolchu Needles). They named it 'Kukur La'. I quote Dr Karl Wein:

After crossing the Zemu glacier we climbed, on the 23rd August, a pass 5,300m. (17,387 feet) high to the south-east of our base camp. From there, when there was a gap in the clouds, we looked upon a rugged mountainous country traversed by glaciers of unexpected beauty. From the precipitous south-east flank of Siniolchu hanging glaciers plunged down to feed the Zumtu glacier, which, like the Zemu glaciers, was completely covered with debris. To the south of this glacier stood some rocky mountains of incredible steepness. They ranged even higher than the continuation of the south ridge of Siniolchu. The loftiest point was the Siniolchu Needle, about 20,000 feet high. Undiscovered land lay before us, for no one had previously set foot in this valley. Unfortunately we only caught a fleeting view of it in the morning; the rest of the time it poured in torrents.⁸

From that time, no party had gone near, much less attempted to go into Zumthul Phuk valley to have close look at the Rock Needles, these Needles of Siniolchu. In 2006, I went with Zamyong Lepcha, a boy from Lingzya village, up the Zamtu Chu (Zumthul Chu) gorge and reached above the tree lines, to the terminal moraines of the Zumthul Phuk glacier. Bad weather prevented us from getting any view of the mountains. In 2009, Thendup Sherpa and I partially entered the Zumthul Chu gorge and caught a clear view of the Rock Needles⁹. We could see how, starting with the German explorers of 1931 and 1937, the Needles with their distinct and unique features have become objects of fascination. They certainly were for us.

Expedition

In October-November 2014, led by Alan Tees, a past president of Mountaineering Ireland, our party became the first team to complete the traverse of the Zumthul Phuk Chu gorge as envisioned by White in 1891, and successfully reach the Zumthul Phuk glacier. The team was a group of seven, ranging in age from 45 to 75, and in experience from expedition rookies to veterans. We had a variety of aspirations, whose realisation depended on the entirely unknown terrain that lay ahead of us.

We arrived at the village of Be on 29 October. November tends to be settled in Sikkim but there was cloud on our approach, although it saved the rain until we started our trek in from Be. Three short days took us to Tolung¹⁰ via Tholung monastery, where we shared the campsite with a herd of yak. The main trail goes over the Kishong La, but we headed up the Zumthul valley towards Siniolchu, and into the unknown. Several of our porters were sent ahead to blaze a trail with machetes through the dense rhododendron, and two days of hard work by everybody brought us to a level area at about 3800m above the worst of the vegetation, ideal for a base camp. The porters left to go down.



Above: Panorama looking west from 'One Hand Peak'.

Below: Panorama of unnamed northerly glacier valleys of Zumthul Phuk.



Next morning was lovely. The clear skies and our wonderful location left us euphoric as we contemplated a rest day, with some local exploration and lots of sunshine. Half an hour above base camp was a big and beautiful lake¹¹ with the Zumthul Phuk Glacier calving lumps of ice into the far side, and the snowy ramparts of Siniolchu dominating the valley behind. To the left were the Rock Needles, their upper slopes still partly shrouded but then there was nothing, as cloud rose from the valleys below. It snowed in the afternoon, but some of us climbed a gully above base camp to pass the day.

The following morning was again lovely, and we set off to carry gear and find an advanced base camp (ABC). This took us around the lake and up onto the glacier, to the base of a big buttress at the bottom of the first needle. We were surrounded by steep and spectacular peaks, all unexplored and with their still-hidden route possibilities. By the time we had returned to base camp it had clouded in, and soon it was snowing.

The remaining group moved to ABC where they spent two days. One of these days was used to search for a route to a high camp on the shoulder of the Rock Needles. Their eventual line led up a gully of Scottish III or IV on thin ice and névé, giving access to easier angled slopes; high camp was established at 4740m. The following day, three hours of hard labour led to the col above (5250m), which we named 'Brothers Tees Col', from where there were magnificent views of the Upper Talung Valley and western Sikkim peaks. We were standing on a watershed between Passauram and Zumthul Phuk glaciers. Most prominent were Pandim (6691m), Kabru,

Talung, Kangchenjunga, and Simvu. We could also see the Tongshyong glacier and section of the South Simvu glacier. There were snow leopard tracks on the col.

We returned down the newly named Thendup and Tenzing Gully to ABC. The following day ABC was moved to the other side of the moraine, as a better base from which to explore the northern side of the Zumthul valley. Next day some tents were packed, and we followed a moraine to a junction of two higher, unknown glaciers, and a second high camp (ABC2) was established beside a shallow lake at 4768m. This upper valley is much wider than was indicated on the map. Weather continued to be unsettled with sporadic rain and snow. Thursday 13 November dawned with another covering of snow, but we managed to climb a col at 5046m (named Mari Col), which was a narrow opening on a sharp ridge. From there we discovered a new, massive glacier stretching intact up to the Siniolchu ridge, with a series of unclimbed peaks at the end of it. A small peak at 5100m was ascended and named 'One Hand Peak' before descent to ABC2 and ABC. This was the hottest day so far, and clouds were starting to build again at lower altitudes.

The next day ABC was packed up and retreat made to base camp via the shores of the Zumthul Lake. This required a tricky crossing of the river but avoided exposure to the stonefall problem of the south bank. The weather was cloudy and miserable again at base camp, but our fantastic porters arrived on schedule for the walk out the following day. A tough seven-hour



Martin Bonar on One Hand Peak, with Peak 6020m and an unnamed glacier in the background.

walk through the mist and rhododendron brought us and porters to the Forest Department's¹² hut at Tolung (Temrong).

Summary

An account of exploration of the Zumthul Phuk glacier in October-November 2014, with first ascents of the col between the Passauram and Zumthul Phuk glaciers, and of One Hand Peak (5100m) overlooking unknown glaciers and endless unclimbed peaks. Team members were Jack Bergin, Martin Boner, Kevin Higgins, Ursula McPherson, Keith Monaghan, Anindya Mukherjee, Thendup Sherpa, Alan Tees (Leader) and Jimmy Tees.

Notes

1. Kishong La is also known as Yumtso La.
2. Ringi Chu.
3. *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty One Years on the North-East Frontier 1887-1908*, J Claude White p67.
4. Under the leadership of Paul Bauer.
5. Along with three Sherpa companions.
6. The Passauram and Talung Valleys, Sikkim, Dr. Eugen Allwein, *Himalayan Journal* Vol.5, p-58-64).
7. Zumthul Phuk Valley, spelled differently as Zamtu or Zumtu by different authors.
8. The 1937 German party were the first to see and photograph these unnamed glaciers as they were looking for a passage on the watershed of Zumthul Phuk and Passauram glaciers. They found their passage (Kukur La), but could not complete the journey, and retraced their steps back to Zemu glacier. Source: *Himalayan Journal* Vols 5, 7.
9. The Rock Needles or Siniolchu Needles are also marked as Singyel Lhu, 5712m in some maps.
10. Known as Temrong nowadays.
11. Interestingly, the German party that had entered Zumthul glacier from north in 1937 and ascended Kukur La did not mention a lake. Perhaps a sign of global warming speeding up in the last decades? It is difficult to pinpoint the exact timeframe in which this lake was created.
12. Kangchenjunga National Park.

PAUL KNOTT

Undiscovered Granite

In the Alaskan Fairweathers



South side of Pk 8290ft from the high bowl overlooking the Johns Hopkins glacier. We reached the summit pyramid via the extended south-east ridge on the right skyline, and on the granite top climbed the arête dividing light and shade. (Paul Knott)

In April-May 2014, Kieran Parsons and I were fortunate to make the first ascents of three summits between Mt Abbe and Mt Bertha in south-east Alaska's Fairweather range. The most exciting of these was Peak 8290ft (2527m), whose top sports a tantalising pyramid of clean granite. Peak 8290, like many summits in this area, is unnamed other than its spot height on USGS maps. The quality of the granite we climbed augurs well for the potential of steeper pillars on this and adjoining summits.

As is often the case with fickle coastal climbing, Peak 8290 was not our original plan. Base camp was 20km away by the east ridge of Mt Crillon (3879m) – a longstanding challenge Bradford Washburn first put forward back in 1941. Mt Crillon dominates Glacier Bay's West Arm peninsula, and its east ridge presents a very exposed 10km-long route. Route of this