
Climbs & Expeditions



'Everest group from the Singalila Ridge', T Howard Somervell,
oil, 29cm x 36cm, 1943?. (*Courtesy of Tony Astill*)

TIM MILLER

The Phantom Line

A First Ascent in Nepal's Jugal Himal



Tim Miller starting on the crux section of steep chimneys on Jugal Spire's *The Phantom Line*. Sacks were hauled as the climbing required getting inside the chimney and squirming. (Paul Ramsden)

One thing we knew for certain on our trip to Nepal was that at some point each afternoon there would be snow, usually hail and often thunder and lightning. Every day for a month without fail we encountered an afternoon storm. Frequently it would cloud over from 9am onwards, affording us only a couple hours of sun in the morning. So as we sat in our little tent in base camp after completing our climb as the heavens opened and thunder raged, we couldn't believe we had managed to snatch such a brilliant route from such improbable conditions.

The adventure began two years earlier when Paul Ramsden invited Richard Kendrick and me to a Gritstone Club hut nestled under a cliff in the Lake District. Inside, Paul swore us to secrecy before showing us a few of his highly



Below the wall of chimneys, the key to the face. (*Tim Miller*)

confidential new route ideas on his laptop. We discussed them, then picked one and started to make plans for a trip. Not long after, Covid-19 hit and scuppered plans for that autumn – and the following autumn as well. The route we had planned was climbed in the meantime and Richard then had to drop out due to other commitments. By this point Paul and I were frustrated at having our plans fall through so often despite all our efforts at rearranging. We decided on a new objective and planned to go in spring; we didn't want to wait another year.

I first met Paul one winter's day about eight years ago while climbing on Ben Nevis by myself. I was at the CIC hut getting ready to head down at the end of the day. Two other climbers were also packing bags so I asked them if they would be driving past Glasgow and could I get a lift. They were heading all the way to middle England and so they sped me back to Glasgow in double quick time. Paul was one of them and he told me how he had once witnessed a murder while hitchhiking to the Alps when he was younger. One of the lovely things about the world of climbing is how it is so small but welcoming. There are few sports where you can read about your heroes in books, the next day bump into them and a few years later be on a trip together.

We arrived at Kathmandu airport and after the slight panic of not finding our bags (another team had removed them from the conveyor belt) were met by our tour agent with a garland of flowers and driven to our hotel. Paul showed me around the sights of the city while we picked up our permit, gas canisters and other last-minute supplies. We were introduced to our team of porters and then we all jumped on a bus and were off out of the city. The roads got smaller, steeper, became single track and then turned to lumpy dirt tracks.



Paul Ramsden squirming. *(Tim Miller)*

Before long, the bus was bumping and swinging round hairpin bends while clinging miraculously to the edge of steep mountainsides. At the end of the road we arrived in the small mountain village of Bhotang, surrounded by rice terraces and humid jungle.

What's interesting about our objective is that it hadn't seen a previous attempt or any interest at all despite being only a six-hour drive and four-day walk. It's one of the closer 6,000m peaks to Kathmandu. Its obscurity may lie in the fact that its face is hidden and the peak sits in front of the bigger and more famous Dorje Lhakpa so it doesn't stand out on the skyline.

It was obvious on the first day of the approach that there was quite a divide in experience among the porters. Chatting to them in broken English, we discovered a few had never portered before but had previously worked as hotel clerks in Dubai, before Covid-19 had brought an end to the tourism industry there and they had lost their jobs. Now forced to take whatever work they could get, it must have been quite a contrast to their previous lives. They started to lag far behind the fitter porters up front, who hadn't understood where we wanted to stop for the night and carried on to the next stop, forcing us all to continue.

It was now that we were introduced to the regular weather pattern with an afternoon thunderstorm. Tired and bedraggled, the last porters arrived in camp 12 hours after setting off on what should have been a two-day journey. We had gained 2,000m of ascent and were concerned the porters, who were from Kathmandu and not acclimatised, might suffer from the altitude. Luckily for us, next morning everyone woke up well and was able to continue. A much shorter day took us to the famous Panch Pokhari religious shrine, a pretty collection of five mountain lakes at 4,100m a popular pilgrimage site.



Nut hunting on *The Phantom Line*.
(Paul Ramsden)



Ramsden's patented homemade snow-hammock allowing the team to pitch a tent on a steep slope. (Tim Miller)

Up to this point we had been walking on well-constructed paths that allowed pilgrims and tourists to visit the lakes. These now stopped and we were on to rough tracks over passes and round mountainsides. A few of the porters decided at this point to switch from flip-flops to trainers. White rugged peaks pierced the crisp blue skies, rocky ridges led steeply down to misty green valleys below. And from the top of one pass we got our first view of the mountain we hoped to climb.

We trekked for two more days, sometimes in the fog and occasionally getting a brief glimpse of our peak. Just before arriving at base camp, and not having seen another soul in days, we noticed a solitary figure a few hundred metres behind the group. He must have been following us in the shadows. Despite the snowy passes we had crossed, he arrived with only the clothes on his back, flip-flops on his feet and no bag. Our sirdar spoke to him and declared him 'a mad man' who was on some sort of religious journey. He hadn't eaten for days, so that night we fed him and he was walked back down with the porters the following day.

Base camp was situated in a valley of lateral moraine that was quite muddy from the frequent rain and not a place we felt inspired to hang around for too long. So we set off straightaway, with light bags, on a reconnaissance mission. Our aims were to find a practical route through the maze of the glacier leading to our peak and try to get a view of the face if we were lucky enough for it not to cloud over before we arrived.

Travelling across highly crevassed and moraine-covered glaciers is always an extremely slow and awkward task. Paul pointed out that it was often at these points that injuries happen and the most important thing for us to do now was stay fit and healthy. As soon as he said this, I slipped on a wobbly boulder, fell backwards and put my hand out to catch myself. In doing so I bent my fingers into an unnatural position and tweaked some of the ligaments in one of the fingers. I didn't want it to affect the expedition but for



The route's second 'White Spider' where Ramsden and Miller spent their third night on the wall. The steep headwall pitches loom above. (*Tim Miller*)

days after I struggled to hold a knife and fork and tie laces with that hand. I just hoped I would still be able to hang off an ice axe when the time came.

The rest of that day we continued up the glacier, eventually climbing an embankment of moraine that brought us to a little alpine lake surrounded by grass and large boulders with views of the peak. It was an idyllic spot. But our first view of the face blew us away. Looking at it in profile we realised it was much steeper than we had thought. The one photo we had seen of the face was from a Spanish team that showed it straight on. We also realised our photo had been taken after a storm, making it look very white and leading us to believe there were lots of lower-angled ice fields on the face. Now we realised it was made up primarily of vertical granite with the exception of one long scar of ice across it. We couldn't see yet if this ice linked up all the way but walking back down the glacier we knew we had discovered an incredible face. Yet there were several big question marks as to whether it was climbable. On the plus side we discovered a brilliant path that took us down a grassy moraine valley straight back to base camp. Both tasks for the day were complete.

With fresh motivation, the following day we launched straight into the acclimatisation phase. With huge bags packed with food for seven days and all the kit we would want for the climb later, we set off up the moraine valley. Plodding slowly under the weight of the bags and our unacclimatised lungs, we arrived eventually at the 'hanging garden' of the little alpine lake. We had hoped to lounge around, here stretching and relaxing in sunshine on the grass but the weather had different plans and we found ourselves reading in the tent all afternoon while it snowed around us.

Next day, we stashed under a boulder all the kit that we knew we would



Paul on the breakfast pitch, day four. (*Tim Miller*)

need for the climb but wouldn't want for the acclimatisation. Then we continued up a large flat glacier. Our acclimatisation generally involved slog-ging for a few hours each morning to gain an extra 400m of elevation and then putting up the tent up and lying there for the next 18 hours mostly reading and sleeping and occasionally eating and getting up to pee. We continued thus to 5,700m and with splitting headaches decided to stop and stay an extra night before descending. What took five days to get up took us a morning to get down.

Back at base camp it was sinking in that months of planning and weeks of in-country preparation was now coming to a climax. We meticulously went through gear, cutting out anything that would add extra grams to our bags and triple-counting our rations. Then it snowed for two days and we were forced to rest in the tent reading books while the thought of the mountain hung over us. With apprehension building it was a funny thing to be tent-bound while so mentally ready to go. Then a nice morning came along and off we went.

Our first stop was at the stash we had left under the boulder. We repacked and with bags now overflowing continued gingerly up the glacier, each of us struggling over boulders while wondering how on earth we were going to climb a face that is 1.5km high. That evening we set up camp not far from our planned descent route, leaving two meals and a handful of bars stashed under a rock for the likely scenario that we would be starving hungry and needing a break when we got to this point after the route.

The following day we continued up the glacier right beneath the face. It towered over us looking monstrously steep and imposing. We dumped our



Steep climbing on day four. (*Paul Ramsden*)

bags and walked up to the bergschrund. All we could see above was a sea of granite, our line of ice totally obscured from below. Paul seemed slightly subdued at this point and I can understand why. At the time I didn't know what to make of such an impressive wall other than that I was in awe of it. I went to sleep looking forward to giving it a go but I sensed Paul had doubts over it being possible, having seen the wall up close. Had all our weeks and months of preparation been for nothing? Had we bitten off more than we could chew?

At 3am next morning our alarms beeped and we were tugged from our dreams to the monumental task at hand. Without a word we packed our bags in the cold morning air and retraced our steps from the previous afternoon across the glacier just as the sun started to light the tops of faraway peaks. Not yet in a rhythm, I struggled under the weight of my pack while I fought my way up steep snow over the bergschrund. I would stop every so often to pant furiously and warm my numb fingers. As soon as I could, I stopped to make a belay to give myself a rest and pass the work over to Paul.

The route started to steepen, the snow turned to ice and we now fell into a rhythm that worked. Climbing in lots of quick 40m pitches allowed each of us a frequent rest and prevented the belayer getting too cold. After 13 pitches of this we had climbed a huge third of the face, admittedly the easiest portion. On one of the last pitches of the day I arrived at a belay ledge and kicked the ice with the side of my crampon to make a small stance. As I did so the metal loop connecting the ankle strap to the crampon base popped off. The crampon was no longer attached to my foot and skidded down the ice a few meters, then stopped precariously in a patch of snow.



Loose mixed climbing at 6,200m. The snow mushroom in front of Miller fell off a few seconds after this picture was taken. (*Paul Ramsden*).

As Paul climbed up towards me, he was able to simply pluck it out the snow and hand it back to me without any further drama. We marvelled at the ease with which the situation was solved and grimaced at the thought of the complex retreat that might have followed had it disappeared for good, spelling the end of the trip and months of planning.

Having arrived at a potential bivy site we had spotted earlier through binoculars, to our surprise we discovered an overhanging rock cave with snow beneath that we were able to flatten off and pitch a tent on, albeit with the edges hanging in space. We couldn't have asked for a better place to stay on such a steep face. Still clipped in and with harness on, the rest of the evening passed quickly with snow melting for tea, juice, dinner and finally tea again, all with the familiar routine to prevent spills, promote efficiency and avoid too much steam condensing on the walls of the tent.

The main task for the following day was to tackle the so-called 'crux chimneys'. These were a gap in the line of ice and formed one of the bigger question marks that separated us from success. After packing up camp we rounded the corner and our eyes met a 100m steep wall of rock split by an ugly curving chimney. This was the wall's only line of weakness and we had to get up it. Leaving my rucksack at the belay allowed me to get inside the chimney at points and squirm my way up, feet peddling on small edges and my chest grating against its walls causing several ragged tears to open



Paul seconding with plenty of exposure. (Tim Miller)

in my jacket. Loose rocks clattered down as I struggled to hook anything with my axes. I was grateful for my Scottish winter apprenticeship; it had prepared me well for this type of climbing.

After three pitches of this, along with the exhausting job of hauling rucksacks, we re-joined the ice ramp. Hauling was a much harder job for Paul, who not only had to climb the pitch but also simultaneously dislodge the rucksacks with one hand, as they seemed to jam every few metres. Had the face been unlocked? Could we celebrate? Not yet. We knew there were further challenges up ahead but solving the problem of the chimneys was a big step forward.

We completed another few pitches that brought us to a feature we dubbed the 'first white spider', one of two circular snowfields reminiscent of their namesake on the Eiger. The hard labour never stopped and after a quick brew we set to work preparing our accommodation for the night. This involved Paul's very own homemade snow hammock, an invention that when fastened to an anchor at either end can be filled with snow while a ledge is also cut to form a platform big enough to pitch a tent on. That's quite an unexpected luxury on a 60° ice slope. But as we lay in the tent after dinner, content at having finished a day of good progress, Paul, who had his back to the slope, found himself forcefully pushed forward. A large amount of snow had fallen down the gap between the tent and the face. This was not good news.

I jumped from my sleeping bag, threw on my down jacket, boots, gloves and head torch and stepped outside. Unbeknownst to us, it had been snowing while we were in the tent. The face was too steep to be of any avalanche danger but streams of spindrift were cascading down and accumulating behind the tent, threatening to push it off its perch. We had to work constantly,



Tim Miller and Paul Ramsden
celebrate on the summit.

one at either side, to dig out the snow before the next assault came. Wind-whipped snow, reflecting the beam of our torches inches from our faces, and the outline of the other were all we could make out for several hours. After struggling for a while, we realised this wasn't sustainable. So we pulled the tent in towards the slope and the spindrift fell on its side, flattening it into the platform. Before long it was buried under a meter of snow but at least this way we wouldn't lose it off the cliff. All we could do now was stand with our backs to the slope while intermittent torrents of snow poured down on us deep into the night. We turned our torches off, slipped into a trance state and embraced the grim position we found ourselves in: standing in a snow storm, strapped to the side of a mountain at 6,000m in the middle of the night.

After an immeasurable amount of time the volume of spindrift partially subsided and we became too cold. So we uncovered the tent, removed the poles and sat inside it like a double bivy bag. Whenever a shower of spindrift fell on us, we pressed our backs against the slope to stop it accumulating behind us and using our arms raised the tent fabric in front of us to help the snow slide off the tent. This prevented us being buried but also kept us busy all night.

Eventually, to our huge relief, the sky started to lighten and brought a bit of warmth with it. We packed up our kit and set off climbing for the day. Having had virtually no sleep our progress was noticeably slower. A couple of pitches got us across the 'white spider' and then the ground started to drop away wildly to our left. Below us lay a huge 700m sweep of granite while our ramp continued across the top of it in a brilliantly exposed position. Then the good ice disappeared to be replaced with large amounts of unconsolidated snow on top of rock slabs. Once again I left my bag at the belay and led a pitch of Scottish-style tenuous mixed climbing up a groove that led to just below the second 'white spider'. More hauling faff followed, made worse by our exhausted state. We had only climbed 150m higher but were in dire need of a rest. Who knew where the next possible bivy spot lay? Once again, the snow hammock saved the day and allowed us to pitch the tent. At one point we were given a scare when a flurry of spindrift came down; we thought we were about to have a repeat of the previous night but thankfully it was a one-off. That evening we were even treated to a glorious sunset but were so knackered we hardly appreciated it. We were asleep instantly despite our cold and cramped sleeping quarters.

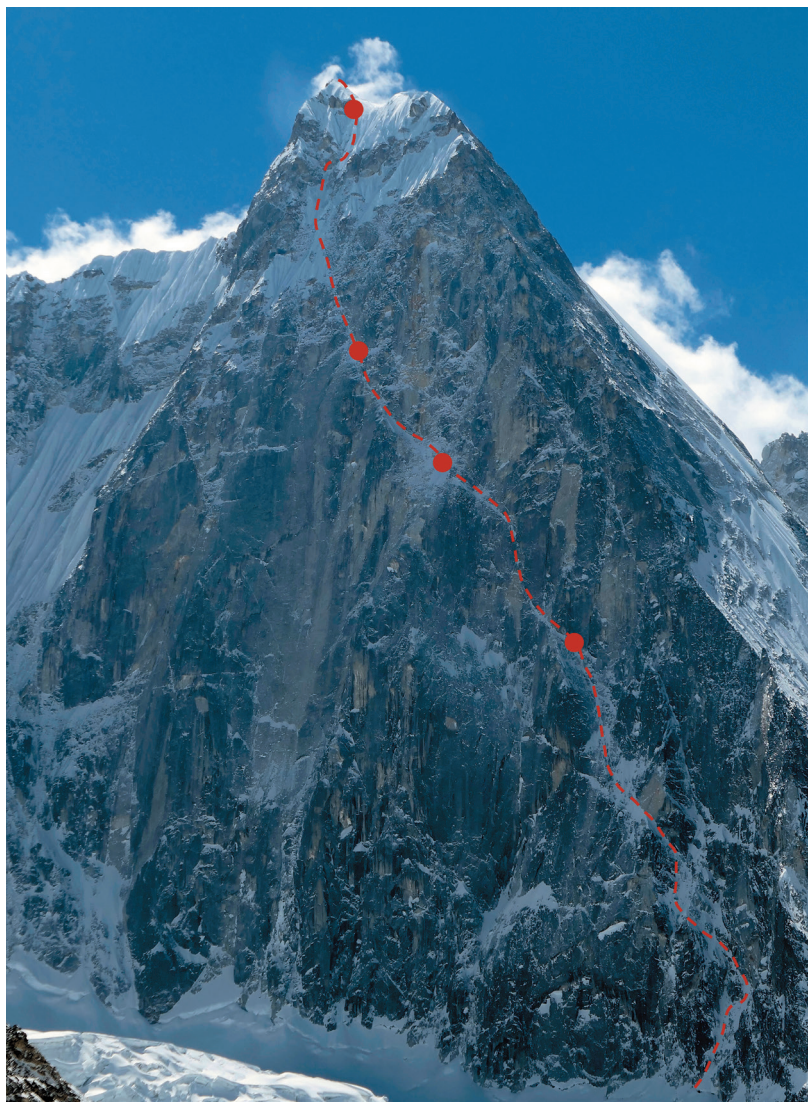
Three very steep and looming pitches on the headwall lay between the final snow slopes and us. Paul started on these next morning; the ice was good and squeaky and the first two pitches proved to be very enjoyable. On the third, the ice thinned out, then disappeared as the groove system moved left around a protruding bulge of rock. Once again, this required bag-free climbing and all my Scottish winter experience of choss before I finally collapsed onto the bottom of the summit ice slopes. It was only 11am so we decided to press on and aim for a shoulder we had spotted just below the summit where we would be able to pitch the tent easily.

By now the altitude had truly caught up with us. Our pace reduced to a few steps before we were forced to stop for air. The ice required a frustrating amount of force before it took pick placements, sapping further our limited remaining energy. Then the sun burst from behind a cloud and, reflecting off the snow, started to boil us in all our layers. Each pitch was taking longer and longer. Even talking became a big effort so conversation was reduced to short, measured bursts squeezed between bouts of heavy breathing. Then the sun set and our saturated gloves froze immediately around our hands as the temperature plummeted. We went from being cooked alive to being forced to warm our hands and swing our feet every few paces to keep them from frostbite.

The top of the slope was getting close and I led a pitch to the bottom of a small rock band. As I approached this, I realised it was an overhang with a perfect cave formed beneath with a lip of ice protecting it. I rolled into the cave and lay there panting for several minutes, utterly exhausted and extremely relieved we had found a suitable spot for the night. The cave was only a few feet high, and all our bulky jackets made it tricky to move around, but we managed to create a flat sleeping platform. Just as we were having dinner and laying our sleeping bags out, snow began to blow into the cave and circulate around, settling on our kit. This required an urgent reset to keep things as dry as possible. All this had to be done in bitter cold and simple jobs like opening packets and eating required gloves on. During the previous few days Paul had been developing an altitude cough and exacerbated by the extreme cold and elevation it now became alarmingly constant and rasping. He didn't tell me till later, but at the time he was concerned it might develop into HAPE and we would have to go down immediately, missing the summit.

We then endured an extremely cold night trying to keep our numb digits from freezing. Waking in the morning, we wrapped ourselves in all the layers we had and stumbled out of the cave. Two pitches of easy snow brought us onto the shoulder and then up to the summit. Dazed by the morning sun and the desperate cold, we fumbled to take a few photos and absorb the view. Any emotions were largely suppressed by a stifling sense of exhaustion. We had summited an unclimbed and unnamed peak via an exceptional route over five days and 37 pitches.

Retreating back to the shoulder, we put together a plan of descent. We had spotted an obvious couloir on the opposite side of the mountain that



The Phantom Line on Jugal Spire.

ran from a col 500m below the summit straight back to the glacier. All we had to do was abseil on V-threads down the ice slope and into the couloir yet even this was knacker for our tired bodies in the morning sun. We developed a routine making sure no mistakes were made at this late stage in the game. Once we were halfway down the couloir the angle eased enough to allow us to down-climb the rest of the way with a final abseil over the bergschrund and onto the glacier. What had taken five days to climb had taken five hours to descend.

By now the cloud had rolled in for the day and snow was starting to fall. Feeling utterly drained we stumbled across the glacier in the fog. The crampons I was wearing had steel front points and aluminium bases to save weight. On the climb they had been great but now, after days of being worn down, I was forced to front-point backwards down any slightly steep decline. Despite this we made it back to our much-appreciated food stash where we decided to stop for the day since we needed the rest and crossing the moraine-covered glacier with an extra layer of snow on the boulders was too much to handle at that point. Finally able to relax, we felt the relief of being down safe and the satisfaction of our achievement began to wash over us. I wasn't able to get to sleep for a while despite being warm and having a flat bed for the first time in several nights.

We woke to grey skies and with snow still covering the moraine the going was slow and our steps clumsy with fatigue. With a bit of guesswork we crossed the glacier in thick fog to the grassy moraine valley on the side of the glacier. Every so often, while we walked, we would whistle into the mist to tell base camp we were on the way, being a day late by this point. A few hundred metres from base camp our cook crew came out to greet us with an extremely welcome flask of hot juice, a KitKat and some cheese that provided the essential energy to stumble the rest of the way to camp. We threw our bags down and collapsed into our tent feeling weak but happy.

The next few days passed in a blur of eating the many brilliant meals provided by our cook and sleeping. Our thoughts drifted back to the climb and we simmered in satisfaction. The porters arrived a day later and we started the slow march home. On the first day of the walkout a hailstorm blew in that then turned to snow making the going hard work. Since descending the peak, Paul's cough had continued and now with this added fatigue he suddenly collapsed. He picked himself back up and was able to walk to our camp for that night where he took antibiotics for a chest infection and over the following days his condition dramatically improved.

We spoke to several locals to ask if they had a name for the mountain that we had climbed, but none did, only referring to the whole group as Jugal Himal. So we settled on Jugal Spire. We then named the route *The Phantom Line* as we were never sure whether the line would have ice all the way and several big question marks lingered right up to the end. Was it there or was it not? Did it exist as a climbable entity?

There were two essential ingredients that allowed this trip to be a success: the first, discovering such an amazing and improbable route on an immaculate, unclimbed face that leads to an unclimbed summit is extremely rare and very special. Finding these gems takes a lot of cunning and knowhow. The second ingredient was the tactical understanding that allows such big routes to be climbed safely and successfully: where to stop, how to bivvy, how much food and kit to bring, when to pitch and so forth. Both these ingredients are Paul's specialty and it is thanks to his experience in these areas that we were able to succeed. I can't thank him enough for inviting me along on another of his brilliant adventures.