

Kusum Kanguru,
A Lightweight Expedition

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Himalayan climbing has changed so much in the past ten or fifteen year that it is now almost passé to suggest that there is anything novel in lightweight climbing expeditions. Our trip to Kusum Kanguru in the autumn of 1983 was in itself of little consequence, except as providing continuing evidence of the ability of lightweight parties to make first ascents cheaply and safely with minimum of organizational hassle. This article is written in a similar vein; not as a chronicle of Himalayan achievement rather as an encouragement to others to do likewise.

Ours was a scratch team: neither Richard Backus, Guy Neithard nor Andrew Wielochowski had climbed together before, although I, as the common denominator, had spent considerable time with each, both on and off the hill. We were not committed to a particular route either; our trip was more a pragmatic response to the desire to return to the Himalaya and attempt a new route in as cheap and expeditious away as possible. Our uncertainty about the objective was balanced by a certainty about the weather; we knew it was going to be bad, because given our collective work schedule we could only go in September and that means rain. Despite these inauspicious portents we succeeded in making the first ascent of the North East Buttress of Kusum Kanguru when Guy and Andrew reached the summit on 16 September 1983. It was a little longer, a little more expensive and a little more trouble to organize than the traditional alpine climbing holiday-but not by much. This in itself is testimony to the flexibility and potential of lightweight Himalayan expeditions.

Kusum Kanguru (6356m) is situated SE of Namche Bazar, and its twin peaks and striking N face are well seen from the trail that leads up from the Dudh Kosi to Namche. Surprisingly few expeditions have succumbed to the lure of that view. The Kyashar glacier that lies immediately north west of Kumsum Kanguru is bounded by the flanks of Thamserku, Kangtega and a number of unclimbed and unnamed peaks of c. 6500m in height. This makes it an attractive base for lightweight expeditions. Peter Hillary's New Zealand expedition made a number of unsuccessful forays on the N side of Kumsum Kanguru during spring 1979. Doug Scott, George Bettembourh and Mike Covington were more successful when they climbed the N butterss of the W peak in a five day push during the autumn of the same year. It is an obvious and attractive line that had previously been attempted by the Japanese in 1978. Another Japanese expedition failed on the equally attractive N face in the 1980 post monsson season. The late Bill Denz descended that hanging glacier between the West and East summits after his remarkable solo ascent and traverse. A Spanish expedition recently attempted the NE buttress, the line we actually climbed, but they apparently retreated from below the final pyramid at a height of c. 6200m. Apart from these, and the local shepherds who us the alpine area for grazing, few others have been into the Kyashar glacier basin.

We had not intended going there either. But delay in obtaining permission for Thamerku, some late withdrawals from the team and the inauspicious timing of the trip, ie during the monsoon, climbed to make us look elsewhere. Mike Cheney suggested Kusum Kanguru and, after a cursory look at the relevant maps and some unrepresentative photographs, Kusum Kanguru it became.

It was an opportune if somewhat arbitrary choice. Through a clerical error, Kusum Kanguru had been put into the wrong category in the list of available peaks. It was a mistake that resulted in a reduced peak fee and the absence of a liaison officer. This fortunate error ensured that our trip was largely free of bureaucratic control both in and out of Kathmandu and was relatively cheap. Kusum Kanguru's proximity to Lukla and the Everest base camp autoroute meant relative ease of access despite the necessity, given the rains, of walking from and to Kathmandu.

It was very much a lightweight climbing expedition. I originally used the qualifier 'alpine style' but realized that despite our intentions it was not a true alpine style ascent. Although we climbed the route without support in a single push from Base Camp, we did descend from one camp to the other during the climb, and fix 150m of rope on one critical section. Our aspirations were, however, alpine style and our practice was much in keeping with the norms commonly associated with the term. If alpine style it wasn't, lightweight it certainly was. We used eight porters on the walk in – a modest enough number compared to the 350 on the Japanese expedition a few days ahead of us. We had cut our equipment down to a minimum, and throughout the trip ate Sherpa food and purchased supplies locally in the Khumbu.

That we made the expedition during September at the end of the monsoon was unavoidable given our work commitments. We were banking, however, on catching the short spell of good weather that usually occurs towards the end of the monsoon for making the ascent. Fortunately, we had a relatively clear six days for our final push. As for the rain the leeches, well we had plenty of those, as well as a long walk to and from Kathmandu, but at least going at this time we avoided the hordes of tourists. It was that thought that comforted us on the long, wet, leech-ridden days that preceded our arrival at Kusum Kanguru Base Camp.

We left Europe on 20 August and arrived in Kathmandu a day later. Smooth progress was made through the Kathmandu bureaucracy, and the walk-in began on 24 August, with a bus ride to Kirantichap. From there our small caravan of four climbers, three sherpas and eight porters made its 12 day journey to Base Camp which was established on 5 September (c. 10km vertical ascent and 250km to Base Camp). The journey was wet, muddy and leech ridden, yet for all that it possessed (at least in retrospect) a charm and integrity that is lost on the short flight to Lukla. We had the inevitable porter revolt and innumerable uphill flogs, but we also enjoyed the warm Nepalese hospitality and views of staggering beauty when the clouds occasionally parted. We had the opportunity to develop a sense of community between

ourselves and the sherpas, to attune ourselves to the idiosyncrasy of the Nepalese landscape and to the ebb and flow of lives so very different from our own.

After a day spent relaxing at Lukla, we split up. Guy and Andrew together with the sherpas and porters went on the Base Camp (4280m) which was situated in a grassy, rocky hollow at the snout of the Kyashar glacier. It is reached in two days (or one long day) from Monjo (2800m) a small village situated some four hours walk north of Lukla.

Meanwhile Richard and I made a detour to Namche Bazar and Thyangboche. Our purpose was ostensibly to purchase supplies and obtain cash. (We failed in the latter task, however: American Express cards do not have quite the same currency in the Khumbu as they enjoy in the West.) We also had a hidden agenda that we fulfilled at Thyangboche; here we invoked various Gods for the success of the expedition and the well being of friends, reconnoitred Ama Dablam for a future expedition and enjoyed spectacular views of Everest and Lhotse. It was an evocative two days. Away from the discipline of the expedition, we felt as if we were on holiday; we walked, saw the sights, and for a few moments in the gumpa lost our western pretension.

We paid for it the following day, though, when we effectively did a three day walk in one. I wrote at the time:

'A long walk! Left later than intended on walk down from Namche. Saw Kusum Kanguru. North Face looks very daunting-steep, quite serious at top with some objective danger. Tea at Monjo; left there c. 10am. Steep uphill through enchanting forests, then we lost path in the cloud and rain. Long, long contour around hillside in rain – eerie, mysterious, and alarming at times with sudden ravines and unexpected passages, like waterfall and bolt pitch. Many, many leeches, few bivouac spots and me in shorts. Very cold and wet. Eventually arrived at dusk at what we thought must be Base Camp. It was. Andrew guided us in through the gloom. They fed us and put us to bed cold, by soon warm.'

We were only two weeks at Base Camp (4-18 September). The first week was spent prospecting the route, acclimatizing and attempting to stay dry. The daily weather pattern was predictable – clear at dawn with clouds moving in by 8 or 9am and the beginning of rain which continued all day. During the 'good' weather period when we made the ascent (10-16 September), the pattern was similar but less severe. In an expedition of six weeks' duration there were perhaps four days without rain.

Our first problem having reached Base Camp was to decide on a route! Andrew wanted to attempt the N face, Guy a buttress to the east. Richard and I were undecided, but tended to side with Guy as his objective, although less elegant, appeared a lot safer. The N face, although a compelling route, seemed unjustifiable at the time. After considerable wrangling, or what the Americans call 'creative group discussion', we compromised on the NE buttress which to our knowledge had not been previously attempted (although

we found out later that a clandestine Spanish party had reached c. 6200m). From Base Camp the route fell into six distinct sections: first, the SE moraine of the Kyashar glacier was followed until a steep ascent was made up towards a Col between Kusum Kanguru and Charpati (6769m) and a bivouac was established (Cave Camp 5180m) under a large boulder on the E side of the moraine emanating from the glacier at the foot of the Col: second, the small but complex and troublesome glacier deriving from the Col was climbed leading to a flat basin below the Col: third, a 250m snow rib (45° – 50°) was climbed to the Col, this section being fixed with 150m of rope and a camp established on its narrow and precipitous low point, (Col Camp, 5654m): fourth, the NE ridge from the Col to the base of the summit pyramid (6160m) presented rock and snow difficulties first following ledges on the SE, then in the centre of the ridge; fifth, the steep face leading to the summit of the NE buttress (6215m) provided more concentrated difficulties and complex route-findings on loose rock and variable snow; finally, the knife-edged snow ridge was followed precariously and spectacularly to the E summit (6356m). The major difficulties were on snow and rock, and the route receives an overall grade of Difficile, serious.

After a week of exploring the route up towards the col between Kusum Kanguru and Charpati we felt confident enough to pack our sacks for the last time and leave Base Camp until it was time to return. We were hoping for a period of more stable weather for the ascent. It took us three days to reach the Col at 6000m where we chopped out platforms for our small tents. It was a precarious eyrie, but the views were superb. We spent all our walking time there melting water for brews and food. We were compulsive about maintaining a reasonable level of fluid intake each day.

On the fourth day we climbed the NE buttress to where it abuts the final rock pyramid that led to the summit ridge. It was like any other alpine day: the rock was loose, the views spectacular, the position exposed and the climbing of a strenuous but not particularly sustained or difficult nature. We had all acclimatized well, so headaches were virtually non-existent (although I had the recurrence of a particularly sore throat). From that high point we could see that the route was feasible although the final rock pyramid looked a little steeper and looser than the ground we had already covered. We returned to our eyrie encouraged but apprehensive.

So we came to the summit day. Guy and Andrew left earlier than Richard and myself and moving, more rapidly, reached the previous day's high point and were embroiled in the rock pyramid when the bad weather came in. When Richard and I reached the high point the weather had deteriorated. We heard the others on the face and they shouted across that the climbing was loose and serious so we waited, perhaps using the weather as an excuse. Fortune favour the bold, and when the weather cleared, Guy and Andrew were virtually at the top of the buttress, their way clear to the ridge and the E summit. Richard and I, realizing we had left it too late, returned to the tents where the others joined us exuberantly some hours later.

The mountain was evacuated in appalling weather conditions the following day, and all impedimenta cleared from the hill. After a day at Base Camp, that too was evacuated (and that site thoroughly cleaned) and the ensuing somewhat ragged descent to Lukla took two days in dreadful weather. This involved an enforced bivouac for a beleaguered Backus and Hopkins who, engrossed in conversation, became hopelessly lost in the dense forest high above the Dudh Kosi. After a futile two-day wait in Lukla for a plane, we decided to cut our losses and walk out. We left Lukla on 22 September and a marathon three day epic ensued (including one 20-hour, 60-mile effort). We were fortunate to get a ride from Yarsa, but the truck took a day and a half to make its painfully slow, dirty, claustrophobic way to Kathmandu. We, and our remaining 11 rupees, were rudely and unceremoniously deposited in a Kathmandu suburb in the early hours of 26 September. Further flights delays ensued (ameliorated somewhat by the genteel surroundings of the Hotel Malla), but we were all 'home' somewhere by the end of the month.

The expedition was successful, if unspectacular. We flew to Kathmandu, walked to the mountain, climbed the route, walked out again and flew home. It cost comparatively little, took exactly six weeks and provided us all with a memorable climbing holiday. And that is the point of the article. Himalayan climbing has changed so dramatically, that such expeditions are now becoming commonplace. Lito Tejada –Flores' notion of the democratisation of expedition climbing and the elevation of the alpine climbing game is alive and well. But at a cost: and two particular. First, it is a dangerous and committing game, far more so than the climbing media suggest. We all returned safely, many of our friends and acquaintances have not. Second, the environment is being destroyed. The autoroute analogy used earlier was intentional. On this trip we were alone. A few weeks later, however, the trails were pounding under the strain of heaving bodies and the ecology was suffering. 'Is it worth these costs?' is an important and necessary question. For us, last September, it was, and for many it will continue to be for we now know that it is possible. But the caveats of a continuing increase in fatalities on small expeditions and (perhaps more important) the rapid destruction of the Himalayan environment still need to be entered.