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Small is beautiful

In most places in the world, a 6000 m mountain would be a massive peak, dominating a range and towering over the surrounding landscape. The Himalaya, however, are filled with mountains in the 6000–7000 m range—hundreds of them. Although they are often overshadowed by their larger neighbours—and for that reason are sometimes overlooked by mountaineers intent on climbing as high as they can—the 6000 m Himalayan peaks often make up for in climbing quality what they lack in relative altitude.

Lower Himalayan mountains can be very attractive climbing objectives in their own right. Access is often easier than for some of the larger Himalayan peaks and because of their lower absolute altitude, they can be climbed in a shorter time—an important consideration for those busy climbers with a limited amount of holiday time. In addition, the risk of altitude sickness, exposure or exhaustion is often less. Routes on these lower peaks range from straightforward glacier walks or snow plods up gentle ridges to a couple of thousand metres of desperate ice or mixed rock and ice climbing on steep faces, so there is something for everyone.

The virtues of these lesser Himalayan peaks have not gone unnoticed in the Australian mountaineering community. While much of the media attention has focused on well-known climbers and their attempts on Everest and other Himalayan giants, many Australian climbers have been pegging away quietly at these lower targets, building up a solid base of skills and experience that underpins the Australian effort on larger mountains.

For many of these climbers, a smaller peak offers a logical first step into the world of high-altitude mountaineering, an objective high enough to experience the difficulties of altitude but well below the ‘death zone’ of 8000 m and above. Indeed, most experienced Himalayan mountaineers strongly recommend that novices begin on something about 6000–6500 m high.

Another attraction is a practical one. The major Himalayan nations—Nepal, India and Pakistan—have cut the expense and red tape for those wanting to climb lower peaks. The peak fees themselves are much less, there are no liaison officers and there is a lesser requirement for local staff. In short, expeditions to these lower peaks are cheaper, much easier to organise and less complicated to run.

Taken together, these advantages have made the lower Himalayan peaks one of the mountaineering world's best kept secrets. For the many climbers who eschew the 8000-ers and return time and again to their lower neighbours, the rewards are some of the Himalaya's most classic and technically demanding lines on beautiful mountains far removed from the tension and crowds of Everest, K2 and other popular giants.

The Kulu and Lahoul areas of the Indian Himalaya have long been favourites for those climbers aiming for 6000–6500 m peaks. In fact, Australia's first Himalayan expedition, to Mulhila IV in 1975, and the expedition that launched the southern Australian section of the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) into the Himalaya, to Dharamsura in 1979, both went into these areas. In each case, the objectives were considered ideal for a first mountaineering attempt for Himalayan newcomers.

Australian interest in the Kulu region intensified in the 1980s. Much of the activity was inspired by Australian climber Terry Ryan, who found the Kulu so to his liking that he established a company, Kulu—Indian Himalayan Journeys, based in Manali, to organise trekking, climbing and skiing holidays for clients.

Ryan himself remained an active climber through that period and, with various partners, made first Australian ascents of a number of Kulu summits: Kulu Makalu (5882 m), Corner Peak (6140 m), Tiger Tooth (5980 m), The Dome (5880 m) and Shigri Parbat (6640 m), to name a few. That these climbs, although of modest altitude, can offer the danger and deprivation associated with the true Himalayan experience is evidenced by a few cryptic comments by Ryan:

...attempt abandoned due to extreme cold.

...Terry Ryan badly injured after falling 100 feet into crevasse unroped—a difficult eight-day retreat followed.

...attempt abandoned due to technical difficulties.

...stopped due to lack of time and bad weather.

...John Burrow badly injured after 800-foot fall, much of it 'through the air'. Another difficult eight-day retreat followed. Nick Groves frostbitten on his toes.¹

1 T. Ryan, Personal communication, 4 September 1990.

If the Kulu has earned a reputation for enjoyable and less serious (despite some of Ryan's [mis]adventures) Himalayan climbing at moderate altitudes, the Karakoram is firmly associated with extremes—either of altitude, with K2 and its massive satellite peaks, or of technical difficulty, with the sheer granite walls of the Trango Towers and Lobsang Spire.

Away from the Baltoro Glacier, however, on which so much of the climbing and trekking in the region is centred, there is a very different side to the Karakoram. There are seldom-visited areas of long glaciers, high snow basins and scores of attractive peaks. Australians were again active in these areas decades ago. Geoff Bratt and Grahame Budd were members of one of Eric Shipton's exploratory expeditions in the Siachen Glacier region and Jon Stephenson became the first Australian to climb to 7000 m without the aid of supplementary oxygen during an attempt on K12.

Even into the 1990s, the off-the-beaten-path Karakoram offered some of the most enjoyable and exciting Himalayan adventures imaginable, not to mention challenging climbing. A classic example is a 24-day traverse of the 240 km-long Biafo-Hispas Glacier system by a pair of South Australian climbers, Wade Stevens and Damian Barrett, during the northern hemisphere summer of 1989.

The trip demonstrated the possibilities for exciting adventure right from the very start when the pair's camp along the Biafo Glacier was raided by a bear, as Stevens recounted:

We awoke early the next morning to a rustling sound outside the tent, and the knowing glances we exchanged confirmed our worst fears. Peeking out through the narrowest possible slit in the door zip, I saw a six foot bear dragging my \$300 Lowe pack off for breakfast.

Neither of us wished to actually contest this gigantic beast, so we resorted to trying to scare the omnivore away with a mixture of plate banging and high decibel 'ra ra ras'. Of course this was followed rapidly by some serious cowering within the tenuous stronghold of our double skin nylon Trilogy bear fortress, as soon as our guest looked up. For a while, it seemed happy enough tugging at the double cordura, like lolly paper to its huge claws, and just as we were wondering if we were for dessert, it ran off.²

After the bear attack, their adventure assumed more traditional Himalayan dimensions as, carrying heavy packs, they battled thigh-deep soft snow up the head of the glacier towards the col between the Biafo and Hispas Glaciers. The reward for their hard work was a beautiful view from the col of a spectacular and remote part of the Himalaya: the vast 'Snow Lake', with the shapely Snow Lake Peak presiding over it, the Latok group of peaks, the Ogre and the Solu Towers.

² Stevens, W. 1991, 'Both ends burning', *Long Reach*, (journal of the Adelaide University Mountaineering Club), Summer, pp. 18–24.

Rising about 700 m directly above the col was a small mountain, Peak 5886, which would afford even better views of the surrounding mountains, glaciers and valleys. Taking advantage of the Pakistani regulation that no permit was needed to climb any peak less than 6000 m high, Stevens and Barrett decided to have a go at the peak as a day climb from the col.

Eschewing the standard route up the mountain's South-West Ridge, the two climbers headed instead for the imposing South Face. Suddenly the climb took on an entirely different character. Instead of a straightforward slog to the summit, it became a real Himalayan challenge of steep ice gullies and treacherous snow slopes. The reality of the long day's climbing lived up to its promise.

'I recall a montage of racing the sun, long runouts on spaced or marginal protection, exhilarating position, those marvellous views as we peeked over the summit ridge, and exhaustion on top,' Stevens recalled.³

The descent completed the genuine Himalayan mountaineering experience. Plagued by severe dehydration as well as exhaustion, the climbers alternately faced soft snow and green ice on the descent route, then had the frustrating experience of breaking through the thin crust of the glacier surface every few steps on the plod back to the tent.

The Stevens/Barrett trip was perhaps a forerunner of more Australian trips to the lesser known peaks of the Karakoram. Further to the south-east, in Nepal, Australians have been much more active in the past 15 years. There the possibilities for climbing peaks of moderate altitude are better known, with the procedures and regulations well established and publicised.

In addition to its larger peaks, Nepal makes available about 20 so-called 'trekking peaks' to climbers looking for a simpler, less expensive alternative to a full-scale expedition to a major Himalayan peak. The cost of peak fees is only a few hundred dollars, the mountains can be booked on the spot in Kathmandu and there is no requirement for a liaison officer to accompany the climbing group.

The term 'trekking peak' is, however, a bit misleading. That title, coupled with the ease of booking and low peak fees, conjures up images of small peaks that are simply 'walk-ups' for inexperienced groups of trekkers. They are thus often viewed as peaks a little higher than the traditional trekking hills of Kala Pattar or Gokyo Ri, perhaps with a bit of snow on top, but certainly posing no challenges to experienced mountaineers.

3 Ibid.

That impression is decidedly wrong. Nepal's trekking peaks range in height from 5500 m Tharpu Chuli (Tent Peak) in the Annapurna Sanctuary to 6584 m Chulu East north of the Annapurna Range. In difficulty, their variation is even more striking. Peaks such as Pisang (6091 m), Paldor (5928 m) and Mera (6476 m) are indeed straightforward mountaineering propositions (by the standard routes), but knowledge of safe glacier travel and basic snow and ice-climbing techniques, and the ability to judge mountain weather patterns, is essential.

At the other end of the scale, mountains such as Singu Chuli (Fluted Peak, 6501 m) and Hiunchuli (6331 m) are serious challenges for even experienced Himalayan climbers. The most difficult of all the trekking peaks, Kusum Kanguru (6369 m), is harder technically than the majority of expedition peaks and is therefore rarely climbed. Even Imja Tse (Island Peak, 6189 m), the most popular of the trekking peaks, can be difficult under some snow conditions.

Australians took an early interest in Nepal's trekking peaks, with the first successful expedition in 1977, only two years after the first Australian expedition anywhere in the Himalaya. That 1977 trip—by Tasmanian climbers Geoff Batten, Mike Douglas, Fergus Fitzgerald, Greg Hodge, Phil Robinson and Mendelt Tillema—made the first Australian ascents of Imja Tse and Parchamo, a 6187 m peak above Tesi Lapcha Pass, which separated the Khumbu and Rolwaling Valleys.

It was five more years before the next trekking peak fell to an Australian climber, then Kwangde Shar (6093 m), Mera and Pisang Peak were all climbed by Australians. Mick Chapman and Colin Pont ascended Kwangde's eastern summit—conveniently accessible from the Sherpa capital of Namche Bazaar. Eight climbers—Stephen Bunton, Tim Carroll, Jeff Crass, Ivan Desailly, Steve McDowell, Ron Miller, Mike Myers and Peter Webber—were successful on Mera and on neighbouring Nau Lekh (6363 m) as well. A group led by Fritz Schaumburg, who was a key figure in the early development of the Army Alpine Association (AAA) mountaineering program (see Chapter 13), made the first Australian ascent of Pisang.

An example of what Australian climbers had in store for them when tackling one of Nepal's trekking peaks was the experience of a group of Canberra-based climbers on a 1983 attempt on Kwangde. The party consisted of two husband-and-wife teams, Guy and Emma de Lacy and Richard Howes and Catherine McGammon, and Ray Vran.

The group was certainly not short of mountaineering experience. The de Lacys were originally from New Zealand and had extensive experience in their home ranges. Howes and McGammon also had plenty of snow and ice-climbing experience, and Vran had made numerous trips to New Zealand as well. In addition, just before the Nepal trip, he had spent six months in Alaska, where he made three ascents

of Denali, by two different routes. The last trip to the top was particularly impressive, as he climbed from a camp at just above 4000 m to the summit, 6194 m, in a single 16-hour push.

Kwangde seemed the ideal first Himalayan mountain to attempt. At 6187 m, it was virtually the same height as Denali, and for a Himalayan peak it was easily accessible, just a few days' walk from the mountain airstrip at Lukla. Furthermore, it was inexpensive. Vran noted that the total cost for seven weeks in Nepal was only \$700—a very cheap 'holiday' by any standards.⁴

As for the climbing, Kwangde proved, like many of the other Nepalese trekking peaks, to pack more of a punch than its modest altitude or ease of access might have indicated. The team opted for a route from the south, up a striking ice ridge that led directly towards Kwangde Lho, one of the mountain's multiple summits. They planned to place only one camp above base camp and then climb to the top in a single push from there.

Once on the route itself, however, they discovered that Kwangde was certainly going to be no walk-up. 'The ice on the ridge was atrocious,' Vran recalled. 'We couldn't place ice screws at all. Every time we tried, the ice shattered and broke away. We couldn't get any protection in. We eventually got around the problem by soloing the ridge.'⁵

If the poor ice conditions and consequent soloing did not make the climbing serious enough, the weather added another element of risk. The usual afternoon snow showers of the pre-monsoon season slowed progress and, just as Howes and Vran had seemingly overcome all the obstacles and were only about 100 m below the summit, an unusually severe and prolonged storm, in the words of Vran, 'cleaned us up'.⁶ Kwangde had provided very close to the complete Himalayan experience.

Trekking peaks often serve as an introduction to Himalayan climbing for mountaineers who later go on to tackle higher objectives. Kwangde served that role for Vran and Howes. In fact, while climbing high on the South Ridge of Kwangde Lho, Vran looked across the valley and was taken by a larger peak that dominated the range of mountains to the south. Eighteen months later, he was back in the same valley to attempt the mountain.

The peak was Khartang, a 6853 m-high 'expedition' peak. Only one other mountaineer, Canberran John Lamb, accompanied Vran on the climb and they were attempting the steep North-East Face during Nepal's winter climbing season.

4 R. Vran, Interview.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

Vran and Lamb were two of the first four Australians to attempt a Himalayan ascent in the newly instituted winter climbing season in Nepal. The other two were Mike Rheinberger and Greg Martin, who attempted Kangguru in the winter season of 1984 (Chapter 16).

Like Rheinberger and Martin, Vran and Lamb quickly discovered why climbing in the Himalaya in the winter season was so difficult and dangerous: the deadly combination of cold and high winds. In fact, the pair got a good taste of what winter winds could do in the Himalaya well before they even reached the base of the mountain.

‘The wind was so strong that we regularly got knocked over just walking along the moraine to base camp,’ Vran said. ‘At one point a porter was physically picked up by the wind and carried along the moraine!’⁷

A massive rock fall added to the dangers of the approach to base camp. With the party pinned between the edge of a lake and a steep slope, a one-minute deluge of rocks the size of television sets cascaded down the slope and into the lake. Since Lamb, Vran and the local staff were all carrying heavy loads, they could not dodge the falling rocks. Miraculously, no-one suffered a direct hit and all escaped without serious injury.

The fierce wind conditions they experienced on the short trek to base camp were only a mild forerunner of what they would find on the face itself. After their tents were flattened at base camp, they realised that their thoughts of a quick, lightweight ascent were only wishful thinking. They would have to fix ropes on the face to ensure their safety. That would be a daunting task for a two-man team as there would be no second or third teams to come in and take turns.

At first the pair thought that the wind would make the mountain unclimbable, but as they took their first tentative steps up the face from a camp at 5300 m at the peak’s base, they realised that with care, and a lot of fortitude, they could make some progress.

‘The wind roared straight down the face,’ Vran recalled. ‘You could hear the intense gusts coming. You just dug in your tools and held on until it passed.’⁸

Even without the wind, the conditions on the face were desperate. Since it faced the north-east, the face received no sun at all during the day; the highest temperature the climbers recorded on the face was -25°C . To make matters worse, their gas stoves frequently malfunctioned and they had to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to cook and melt snow. As a result, they rarely started climbing before 10am.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

The pair battled on for 10 continuous days on the face under those conditions. They reached a high point of 6100 m—still 700 m short of the summit—before they decided to retreat. As Vran put it, ‘We were just burnt out.’⁹

The severe conditions had taken their toll, even in that short time. Vran suffered a mild case of frostbite and his sleeping-bag, which had a small slit in it, had pieces of ice the size of a hand inside it.

There was no question of going back up, even though they had plenty of time for a second attempt. ‘This was December,’ Vran said, ‘and when we thought of Australia, we thought of warm sand between our toes.’¹⁰ It was time to go home.

The experiences of Vran and his colleagues on Kwangde and Khartang are a graphic illustration of what climbers can face on Nepal’s trekking peaks and other mountains of modest altitude. Not all smaller Himalayan peaks, however, treat their aspiring ascensionists so harshly. Some afford the type of experience such mountains are supposed to offer: delightful climbing in pleasant surrounds free from the expense and bureaucratic hassles of the bigger mountains.

A classic example of such an experience is the 1986 climb of Langshisa Ri by Australians John Goulstone and Steve Upton and New Zealanders Simon Cox and Marty Hunter. Langshisa Ri is a striking mountain, a small spike of fluted ice set in the Langtang Himal directly north of Kathmandu. Although technically an expedition mountain, it has much in common with the more difficult of the trekking peaks. It is 6437 m high and its classic ridgelines and steep faces would have even the most experienced Himalayan mountaineers drooling at the possibilities for technically demanding routes of the highest standard.

The four Antipodeans picked a plum—a line directly up a couloir on the mountain’s south side and then straight up the steepening South Face. The logistics were simple, almost like a climb in the Southern Alps. Above base camp, the climbers placed a single camp on a snow plateau at the base of the peak and from there went for the summit in a single push—no load carrying to stock camps and no fixing of ropes, just climbing.

Once out of the couloir, the climbing was hard but very rewarding, as Cox reported:

Out on the face we were much more exposed, and the view around us steadily grew more impressive as we climbed...

About 20 metres out onto the slope, the sun snuck around the face and hit me. Instantly I started sweating, my head started spinning and my mouth felt like a packet of muesli. I managed to place my ice tools deeply and hang on them while I gingerly removed some clothing and waited for my heart to stop racing.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

From then on, it was desperately hard work as the slope got progressively steeper. Place a hammer, then an axe, kick, kick, puff puff puff puff, uurrghgh, place a hammer, then an axe...At 12.30 pm, after seven pitches, Marty and I stepped out onto the summit. We were followed a bit later by John and Steve. The view was amazing. The clouds, which typically rolled in at about this time, held back and left Langshisa Ri and us in a clearing.¹¹

The four climbers abseiled down the face to the top of the couloir, climbed down that and traversed back across the snow plateau to their camp. They had therefore completed a beautiful climb on a moderate Himalayan peak in a single day—not unlike a hard day's climbing in New Zealand but in the highest mountain range in the world. It is experiences like this that are attracting increasing numbers of mountaineers to the 5500–6500 m Himalayan peaks as worthy objectives in their own right.

No account of Australian Himalayan climbing in the 1980s would be complete, however, without considering peaks in the 6800–7800 m range, many of them in the more remote parts of the Himalaya. These mountains, particularly at the higher end of the range, are more serious objectives because of their higher altitude than the peaks whose ascents have been described earlier in this chapter. Accounts of Australian expeditions to these higher peaks include some fascinating adventures: climbs of some of the world's most aesthetic mountains, danger in the far corners of the Indian Himalaya, a wild trek across the entire width of Nepal and an astonishing ascent of one of the Himalayan giants. The account will eventually lead back to the 8000-ers, and to 1990, when Australians recorded a most impressive string of successes, including ascents of the world's two highest mountains.

Remoteness can be a strong lure for climbers. The desire to visit an out-of-the way place and climb far from the throngs of trekkers and climbers that frequent the well-worn paths in Nepal and the Karakoram can be as strong an attraction as the absolute altitude of a mountain or the aesthetics of the proposed line of ascent. Despite the dramatic rise in popularity of Himalayan mountaineering in the past two decades or so, there are still many exceedingly remote ranges and valleys for mountaineers to explore and climb. Australian expeditions have found their way in the past 15 years into some of these areas, with mixed success but never without interesting incidents, and some nasty surprises in one case.

Until recently, the Pamir Range was arguably the least known of the great ranges of Asia—at least for climbers from Western countries. Stretching in an arc between the Karakoram and the Tien Shan Mountains to the north, the Pamirs straddle the border between China and Tajikistan, a former Soviet republic. Most of the high peaks, including the highest mountain in the range, Pik Kommunizma, lie on the Tajik side of the border.

11 Cox, S. 1986, 'Bumblies abroad', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 39, pp. 60–3.

Australians have made occasional forays into the Pamirs with Chris Curry's ascents of Kommunizma (7495 m) and Pik Korzhenevskaya (7105 m) the most notable achievement (Chapter 18). The first Australian-led expedition to the Pamirs, under the guidance of Steve McDowell, attempted Kommunizma in 1986. It was McDowell's fifth Himalayan expedition, having taken part in both Australian attempts on Annapurna III, been a member of the first Australian team to climb Mera Peak (6476 m) in 1982 and attempted Mustagh Ata in 1985.

Of a much wilder nature than the Pamir journeys, however, was a 1986 expedition to the far north-eastern corner of the Karakoram, a trip that started with the promise of a once-in-a-lifetime adventure and ended in extreme danger, far from the mountain itself. The mountain was Rimo, a 7395 m unclimbed peak not far off the old Silk Road that snaked through the Karakoram between India and China.

The expedition to Rimo was the brainchild of Terry Ryan and his brother, Brett. As noted earlier, Ryan had a long association with mountaineering in the Indian Himalaya. It was through these long-time connections with the Indian mountaineering bureaucracy that Ryan was able to get permission to mount an expedition to Rimo. The mountain is located in a very sensitive position, near the disputed border between India and Pakistan and not far from the Chinese border as well. One of the conditions of the trip was that it be a joint expedition with Indian military climbers, with an Indian officer as leader.

The trip promised much in the way of adventure. The trek in along the old Silk Road would be fascinating. In fact, the last Westerner to travel the route was the legendary mountain explorer Eric Shipton, on his way to a diplomatic posting in Kashgar in the late 1940s. Then there was the mountain itself—one of the few unclimbed 7000 m peaks left in the Himalaya. To top it off, the team planned to return by rafting down the Shyok River, which would be the highest river ever rafted.

Joining the Ryan brothers on the trip were Roddy Mackenzie and Peter Hillary. MacKenzie, one of the original members of the International Turkey Patrol (Chapters 19 and 20), was making his return to the Himalaya after the tragic Everest West Ridge expedition in 1984. Hillary, now settled in Melbourne, was climbing more and more with Australians in the Himalaya. Dave Read, originally from the United Kingdom, and American Skip Horner completed the climbing team.

At first, the adventure went without major problems. Despite a two-week delay in Leh at the start when last-minute snags in the Indian bureaucracy had to be overcome, the trek to the base of Rimo proved to be every bit as rewarding as it promised.

Once at the base of the mountain, however, a few problems began to arise. The Western contingent favoured an alpine-style approach to the climb, while the Indians would not contemplate any route that did not allow for a copious amount of fixed rope. A joint expedition is fine in theory, but friction often develops in practice, as Hillary recalls:

This conflict of climbing styles was complicated by the politics of international expeditioning and the limited time we had available, particularly for a conventional, fixed-rope/large-logistics approach to climbing the mountain. Compromise was to be the name of the game and, as is so often the case with compromise, it is seldom as satisfactory as a clear-cut decision.¹²

Nevertheless, the team worked amicably together to make a sustained attempt on the difficult peak. In the end, Hillary, Mackenzie and Horner were forced to retreat from high on the South-East Ridge by a combination of exceedingly dangerous snow conditions and deteriorating weather. The ridge suffered from the very unusual condition of being very narrow, double corniced and deeply crevassed all at the same time.

The ridge might have been frightening, but it turned out to be nothing compared with what lay ahead on the return to civilisation. The climbing team descended to discover that base camp had been abandoned with virtually no food remaining. The Indian leader and all of his climbers had left, leaving the Westerners to fend for themselves in the extremely sensitive border area. Furthermore, the climbers learned from a note left behind by one of their colleagues that the leader of the rafting party had been arrested as a suspected Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent by the Indian Army and was being marched at gunpoint back to Leh.

Against this very disturbing backdrop of developments, the Ryan brothers, Mackenzie, Hillary and Horner shouldered their 45 kg loads—virtually none of which was food or fuel—and started back out towards Leh, in hopes the main party would wait for them a few days' march from base camp.

Winter was descending on the Karakoram and the cold conditions made the trek out even more difficult for the weakening climbers. Hillary recounted the pain and danger of fording the icy Shyok River:

It had been an exceptionally cold night and the evidence of this lay on the banks of the river. Ice reached two yards out into the swiftly flowing water and, to our astonishment, we could see that a sludge of large ice crystals was already beginning to coat the round stones in the bottom of the river. Another few days of these low temperatures and the Shyok would certainly freeze completely, but not soon enough for us. We sat down on the river flat and removed our shoes and socks and marched towards the rushing clear ribbon of water.

12 Hillary, P. 1988, *Rimo. Mountain on the Silk Road*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, ch. 7.

The pain was excruciating. It was about twenty below as I followed Skip across the shelf of ice that bordered the river, my skinny white feet radiating much of my body heat to the frigid air and the slick ice underfoot. Stepping off the ice into the knee-deep water, my right foot found the slushy ice of the river-bed which moved around it like thick mud. As I moved cautiously forward the streaming water leeched all the remaining warmth from my feet, and I could no longer sense where my feet stopped and the ice began.

Using a ski pole to aid my balance I stumbled across the ice-shelf on the far side, threw down my pack and sat heavily upon it. The bitterly cold air attacked the wooden stumps that were my feet as I rubbed them with some gloves and pulled on my socks.¹³

Encounters with the Indian military were just as chilling. Not long after they had left base camp, the unaccompanied Westerners were detained by a military patrol, the leader of which had them and their packs thoroughly searched and all of their film confiscated. Later, just when it appeared they might escape back to Leh before their expedition permits expired, Hillary had a narrow scrape with death or at least serious injury.

The expedition caravan, which they had managed to join shortly after their first encounter with the Indian military, had abandoned ponies for trucks, which were winding their way towards the top of the last high pass before Leh. It had been snowing heavily and avalanches blocked the last section of road before the pass. The expedition members were forced to shoulder loads yet again and haul the gear up to the pass itself to be transferred to another truck on the other side.

On one such load haul to the pass, Hillary suggested to the expedition's liaison officer that he pitch in and lend a hand. The liaison officer took extreme exception to Hillary's suggestion and screamed that no-one could talk to an officer of the army in the way that Hillary allegedly had. The liaison officer then stormed off in a rage, threatening Hillary with a quick and violent end if he dared suggest anything like that again.

A short while later, Hillary went into the construction shed at the top of the pass, to which the liaison officer had retreated, to discuss their confrontation. But the liaison officer, who was still incensed, grabbed a loaded rifle and held Hillary at gunpoint and threatened to bury him outside the door. Some minutes later, which no doubt seemed an eternity to Hillary, the liaison officer finally removed the weapon from point-blank range and the ordeal was over.

Remote Himalayan adventures do not have to be as hair-raising as the Rimo expedition. The 1988 Australian Baruntse expedition is a good case in point. Set in the well-travelled eastern part of Nepal with a mountain in the Everest region

13 Ibid., ch. 11.

as the objective, the Baruntse trip proved that even in that geographical setting a surprisingly little-travelled trekking route could be found into a marvellously remote high valley a stone's throw from Everest, Lhotse and Makalu.

The trip was a throwback to the early days of Himalayan expeditioning, when road access was virtually nonexistent and marches began from the Kathmandu Valley or from the plains of India. The Baruntse team started its wild trek from the little southern Nepalese village of Chatra, where the very first of the Himalayan foothills rose from the Gangetic Plain. The subsequent 25-day journey took the climbers through steamy river valleys, along a gloriously open ridge with stunning views of the high Himalaya, through some of the last stands of undisturbed rhododendron forest in eastern Nepal, across a high, storm-lashed pass into the wild Hinku Valley and finally into the upper Hongu Basin, surrounded by a magnificent array of icy peaks and guarded by high, difficult passes and impassable gorges.

The Baruntse trip had other links with Himalayan history. Its leader was John Finnigan, one of the members of the landmark 1978 ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC) expedition to Dunagiri, the most significant of the early Australian expeditions to the Himalaya (Chapters 6 and 7). Indeed, the Baruntse trip was somewhat of a Dunagiri reunion. In addition to Finnigan, Ken Baldwin, the organisational driving force of the Dunagiri trip, John Armstrong, Ken Bell and Theo Hooey were all old Dunagiri hands who joined the Baruntse team. And Charlie Barton, who had to drop out of the Dunagiri expedition at the last minute, finally made it to the Himalaya. Indeed, even Tim Macartney-Snape was involved, as he suggested the trekking route and his company, Wilderness Expeditions, provided logistical support for the expedition.

The expedition's links with the past go back much further even than 1978. One of the Baruntse team members was then fifty-nine-year-old Tom Barcham, a New Zealander who had nearly been a member of one of Sir Edmund Hillary's early expeditions to Nepal. Until internal politics in the NZAC bumped him off the trip at the last minute, Barcham was a member of Hillary's 1954 New Zealand expedition to the Barun Valley. Ironically, that team made the first ascent of Baruntse (7168 m).

Barcham's dream of climbing Baruntse 34 years after his first potential encounter with the mountain did not quite come true. He pushed hard to carry loads to camp two on the West Col, at just above 6000 m, but problems with altitude prevented him from going higher. It was, however, the highest Barcham had ever climbed. Indeed, all 10 members of the expedition set personal altitude records; ironically though, none reached the summit.

Despite a valiant effort by Finnigan, Hooy and American Peter Hodge, unstable snow conditions high on Baruntse's narrow summit ridge blocked further progress only 100 vertical metres below the top. A second summit attempt, by Baldwin and expedition doctor Peter Lane, was stopped at the same point.

Baldwin, Barton, Hodge and Hooy then completed their journey across nearly the entire width of Nepal by crossing the Amphu Lapcha and trekking on to Everest base camp, where they visited the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) climbers just days before the dramatic conclusion to their expedition. The Baruntse trip was perhaps a modest forerunner of a much more remarkable journey—from the Bay of Bengal all the way to the summit of Mt Everest itself (see Chapter 29).

One of the most exotic of the remote corners of the Himalaya visited by Australians lies in far western China, near the old city of Kashgar. This was the city where the legendary Eric Shipton was posted for two periods, immediately before and after World War II. Near Kashgar rise two most impressive, isolated mountain massifs: Kongur (7719 m) and Mustagh Ata (7546 m).

Mustagh Ata, in particular, is a rather unusual mountain. Rising like a giant, white-backed, beached whale, it looms over the parched seasonal grazing country of south-western China, a land of camels and nomads. Its western ramparts—formally the West Face—form a long, very gently angled arc of snow that leads eventually to the summit. It is one of the technically easiest routes of any mountain of comparable size in the Himalaya.

Mustagh Ata could, however, be surprisingly difficult to climb, as Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman discovered on their attempted ascent during a break in one of Shipton's sojourns at Kashgar. The easily angled West Face route means that climbers must spend much time and cover a lot of distance plodding through often deep snow at high altitude. It was just this deadly Himalayan combination of altitude, exhaustion and dehydration, rather than technical difficulty, which forced such experienced climbers as Shipton and Tilman to retreat before they reached the summit.

In recent times, skis have made the ascent of Mustagh Ata much less arduous, as they allow the climber to move more quickly and to remain on top of deep snow. The descent, of course, is decidedly quicker, and a good deal more exciting, on skis.

An Australian climber added a new twist to the style of Mustagh Ata ascents in 1989. Mike Rheinberger, the most active Australian Himalayan mountaineer of the 1980s, joined New Zealander Shaun Norman to guide a group of four clients up the standard West Face route. The two guides and two of their clients, both British climbers, reached the summit. Norman and the two clients used skis, as had become the normal mode of ascent in recent times, but Rheinberger opted for snow shoes. It was a wise choice, as Rheinberger, in a tortoise-and-hare-like story, beat the three

skiers on the descent. It turned out that the broad slope was sufficiently crevassed to allow the steady plod of the snow-shoer to outpace the stop-and-start skiers, who could not gather speed or maintain a rhythm on the cut-up slope.

The 1989 Mustagh Ata expedition illustrates a growing trend towards guided climbing in the Himalaya. Once the standard mode of climbing in the Alps, guided climbing has had something of a renaissance in the Himalaya. By the early 1980s, many adventure-travel companies, particularly those operating from Britain and the United States, were offering 'mail-order mountaineering' trips to the Nepalese trekking peaks—particularly Imja Tse (Island Peak) and the peaks in the Annapurna Sanctuary. The number of widely advertised guided climbs increased rapidly in the late 1980s, with the objectives becoming larger, and sometimes more difficult, 'expedition' peaks. The Nun Kun massif in Kashmir and Mustagh Ata were particularly popular targets. By the end of the decade, Everest itself was being advertised in climbing magazines; with enough money, any fit climber with a modicum of experience could have a go at the world's highest mountain.

Experienced Australian climbers have occasionally mounted a guided climb in the Himalaya (see, for example, the attempt on Trisul in Chapter 10), but it was not until the late 1980s that Australians, as guides and clients, became involved more frequently in guided climbing.

Guiding relatively inexperienced clients in the Himalaya is serious business, as Geof Bartram can affirm. Bartram, who had much experience guiding in South America, was through the 1980s Australia's most experienced high-altitude guide, and the only one to have guided three Himalayan trips. The outcomes of those trips touched the extremes of the Himalayan climbing experience.

The Trisul attempt was a near disaster when a vicious storm demolished two of the expedition's tents at a high camp and left one of the novice climbers wandering around on the side of the mountain. It was all Bartram and colleagues Lincoln Hall and Tim Macartney-Snape could do to get all their clients down safely. On the other hand, Bartram's ascent of Pumori in 1984 was a resounding success. Not only did all seven climbers reach the summit, they climbed a new route on the steep South-East Face. It was the ideal guided climb.

Bartram's third guided expedition—an attempt on Nun (7135 m) in 1988—again demonstrated that any Himalayan expedition was a serious undertaking. Guiding six American climbers, Bartram had his team established at a camp at 6000 m when a three-day snowstorm lashed the mountain with more than 2 m of fresh snow. Bartram was able to get his charges off the peak in dangerous conditions, but the epic turned into a tragedy when the expedition's liaison officer was lost during the descent and died of exposure.

Despite risks such as these, the trend in guided climbing in recent years has been towards more difficult routes on higher mountains. In the Australian context, the best example is the 1989 ascent of Himalchuli West (7540 m) by a small team led by Paul Bayne of ABEE fame and New Zealand guide Russell Brice.

The Himalchuli West climb would have been a notable achievement even by an expedition of very experienced mountaineers. The peak had been climbed only once previously, and the new route climbed by the Bayne/Brice team was technically difficult and physically demanding. It is a testament to the guiding skill and stamina of Bayne and Brice, and to the tenacity and determination of the clients who summited—Australian Campbell Mercer and Norwegian Jan Gangdal—that they achieved success on such a daunting objective. Indeed, it could be argued that the South-West Ridge of Himalchuli West was no place for a guided climb.

To be fair to expedition organiser, Steve Bell, Himalchuli West was not the first choice. The original target, Everest's northern outlier Changtse, was of nearly the same height but far more tractable technically. Political unrest in Tibet, however, put Changtse out of bounds and Bell was forced to go to Nepalese authorities for a last-minute replacement. Himalchuli West was the most viable alternative.

In addition to being a stopgap alternative, Himalchuli was very much an unknown as far as climbing difficulty, and even the route itself, was concerned—just the sort of uncertainty that added spice to a trip of veterans but could give guides ulcers and clients nightmares.

'All we had was a postcard taken from the Indian plains,' Bayne said. 'We got information on the trekking route into the mountain from local villagers as we walked in. We didn't even know which valley to go up.'¹⁴

The full implications of what they had taken on did not become clear until the party began climbing on Himalchuli, as Bell recounted:

From base camp we could see very little of the line we had selected, but after climbing 900 m to a point on the southwest ridge we were confronted with a spectacle that left us in no doubt of the enormity of what we had taken on. Between us and the mountain lay a three kilometre ridge, bristling with no less than eleven major pinnacles, all of which would have to be climbed or bypassed. The far end of the ridge butted into the main bulk of Himalchuli, at an altitude of 5,790 m, a mere 900 m higher than the start of the ridge. Above this lay 1700 m of snow slopes and ice cliffs.¹⁵

¹⁴ P. Bayne, Interview.

¹⁵ Bell, S. 1989, 'The international Himalchuli West expedition, 1989', *Himalayan Journal*, vol. 46, pp. 35–8.

As it turned out, every one of the pinnacles—which the climbers christened with names such as ‘The Castle’, ‘Graham’s Knob’, ‘The Fortress’, ‘Jon’s Icecream’ and ‘Brice’s Buttress’¹⁶—turned out to be a major climbing challenge. Only after some extreme climbing by the guides, plenty of solid support work by the clients and more than 3 km of fixed rope was the ridge finally climbed. In fact, at one point the expedition’s cook was sent back to Kathmandu to buy more rope!

After Brice surmounted a 100 m ice cliff higher on the mountain, the way was clear to the summit. Bayne and Gangdal then pushed on to the top, followed by Brice and Mercer a day later. The Himalchuli ascent was an astounding success against heavy odds, particularly for a ‘mail-order’ team. It proved that Bayne’s heroics on Everest the previous year were no fluke and that he was a well-rounded Himalayan mountaineer with skill and stamina of a very high standard.

Some of the most visually spectacular mountains in the world—such as Shivling, Ama Dablam and Pumori—are not as remote, yet all of these peaks have played a part in the story of Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya. All have been climbed by Everest aspirants at one time or another before their attempt on Everest itself. These magnificent mountains have, however, also attracted other groups of Australian climbers, with a few more notable successes.

Shivling—climbed earlier by Jon Muir (Chapter 20) and Greg Child (Chapter 24)—was attempted again in 1988 by a large group led by Nic Deka and Jim Duff of Hobart. Duff was the doctor for the first Australian ascent of Mt Everest in 1984. Their goal was a climb of Shivling’s South Pillar and although heavy snowfalls put that route out of condition, 11 Australian members climbed nearby Kedarnath Dome (6831 m). The expedition also marked the return to the Himalaya of Andy Henderson, who came so close to climbing Everest in 1984.

There was another Australian ascent in 1989 of Everest itself that deserves mention. American Karen Flerhoff organised the 15-member Snowbird International Everest Expedition for climbers who had failed previously on the mountain—a *repechage*, as it were, for Everest climbers. One of the 15 members was Roddy Mackenzie, who was on the ill-fated 1984 West Ridge attempt.

This time luck was with Mackenzie. Climbing on the South Col route with Colorado-based Briton Adrian Burgess, he became the sixth Australian to reach the highest point on Earth. Mackenzie was modest about his achievement, preferring to comment on the view rather than the climb:

16 Ibid.

Getting to the summit means more to people who don't climb than to people who do. The most glorious thing about reaching the top is the view...You can see for about 300 miles. The sky is very blue. There are a lot of clouds below and around you...It looks like a Landsat photo—you almost feel that you're out in space.¹⁷

Unfortunately, Peter Hillary was not as lucky as Mackenzie. Deteriorating weather just one day after his colleague's success forced him to abandon his summit attempt at a point well above the South Col.

While Australians were battling their way up and down Everest by various routes in the 1980s, many of their colleagues were having a bash at three stunning Everest acolytes: Changtse, Pumori and Ama Dablam. The first of these provided a small group of Australians with some very tense moments during a 1987 trip, before political turmoil closed off the mountain for a while.

The Australian Changtse traverse expedition, as it was called, provided the springboard for a pair of adventurous New South Welshmen, Glen Nash and Rod Turner, to launch a successful assault on the North Face of Changtse (7560 m). The climb, done in a four-day, alpine-style push, was not for the faint-hearted. The moderately angled face was, in the parlance of mountaineers, 'loaded' and the two climbers were lucky not to have been taken by a slab avalanche, particularly on the descent.

Turner recalled:

It's bad, worse than the ascent, with fresh slab debris everywhere, but there's no choice. We plunge down, absolutely exhausted but very much on edge. Finally we stop with 200 metres to go. The slope is obviously loaded and we're the trigger. There's no real choice but we decide on going leftwards. I take five steps and the whole slope goes, slowly dissolving into slabs that disappear down in an ominously slow and quiet motion. The fracture line runs clearly a metre behind me. The only piece that didn't go is the piece I'm standing in.¹⁸

The experiences of Turner and Nash on the North Face of Changtse are another reminder that moderately angled snow slopes are often something to be feared. So, if there is relative safety in steepness then Pumori (7145 m), another of Everest's satellite peaks, is a much better bet. Rising as a beautifully symmetrical spike of ice to the west of Everest, Pumori is a mountain much admired by trekkers and climbers heading for the base camp of its more famous neighbour. Trying to climb Pumori seems to have become a biennial event for Australian mountaineers.

17 R. Mackenzie in Duff, X. 1989, 'On a high', *Sunday Herald*, 12 November 1989, pp. 30–7.

18 Turner, R. 1988, 'Australian Himalayan climbs. Changtse', *Wild*, no. 28 (Autumn), pp. 33–6.

In 1986, two years after Geof Bartram and his clients had climbed the mountain, Australian Steve MacDonald was attempting Pumori with a group of New Zealand climbers. A string of illnesses, however, including dysentery, cerebral oedema and an abscessed wisdom tooth, forced a retreat from about 6500 m on the South Ridge.

Two years later, again in the post-monsoon season, an Australian expedition had another go at the South Ridge, which rose in spectacular fashion directly above the popular trekking hillock Kala Pattar—and this time they made quick work of the peak. Only four weeks after their arrival at Tribhuvan Airport in Kathmandu, they had organised their gear, marched to the bottom of the mountain, established base camp and climbed to the summit.

The organiser and leader of this most efficient group was Jeff Williams and his climbing team included American guide Scott Woolums and Australians Ray Vran and Richard Howes, who had climbed together on Kwangde several years earlier. Armando Corvini, Ken Lock and Matt Godbold, also Australians, were the other members.

For forty-eight-year-old Corvini, who along with Woolums, Vran and Howes reached the summit, the climb fulfilled his dream of reaching the top of a 7000 m peak before his fiftieth birthday. The achievement was not without its costs, however. Corvini and Howes were forced to bivouac on the way up and, as a result of the cold night out on the mountain, Corvini suffered frostbite and eventually lost parts of several toes on his return to Australia.

The base of Australian Himalayan climbing had indeed broadened to include a large number of climbers. Virtually all of them, however, were men. Where were Australia's female mountaineers?

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