

# Seven Weeks in Nepal

Last autumn, a six-strong group of IC students headed for the mighty Himalayas. With a little help from sherpas, cooks and porters they succeeded in trekking through the Rolwaling valley and climbing peaks in excess of six thousand metres. Jeremy Thomson reports on the success of the expedition.

It's half past five in the morning, ten degrees below zero and we're camped on rubble at 5700 meters above sea level. You try getting out of bed.

The thought of all the effort we've put in so far, coupled with several cups of warm tea, provide just enough

and take a rest. Concerned about getting frostbite I whip off the boots and begin massaging my toes. The sherpas join in and in no time they're pink and happy again (the toes, that is).

We traverse around into the sunshine and follow an elegant ridge line that swings around onto the horizon. The crest is narrow and fragile, so we follow some tracks a little below passing sparkling ice caves and snow formations straight out of a seismology textbook. Presently, the summit ridge looms into sight, a handsome broken snow-line stretching away ahead. After negotiating a few steep sections the top is suddenly in reach. All fatigue drops away to be replaced by a silly and intoxicating sense of euphoria. We've done it! 6225m high in the middle of the most beautiful mountains in the world. The weather's perfect (as Pasang's Lama predicted), the air is ludicrously clear and the sky's so big it's black around the edges. I

Photo: Jeremy Thomson

Farm houses in Rolwaling valley

momentum to shed the lovely down sleeping bags and prepare for the climb. After four weeks of trekking and climbing, today we hope to reach the summit of the mountain Parchamo. At about 6225m or 20,800 feet it is taller than Mont Blanc and Ben Nevis combined and a greater altitude than any of us have ventured to before.

As we prepare, nervous glances shoot back and forth amongst us and the hill above, bathed in watery dawn sunlight. Unlike Alpine climbing, we have neither reliable maps nor guide books, nor even an accurate value for the mountain's height, so we're apprehensive about what may lie ahead.

The climb starts by heading back to the pass we crossed the day before, which at 5700m is one of the highest regularly used in Nepal, and affords superlative views of both the Khumbu (Everest) valley ahead of us and the Rolwaling valley from where we came.

We rope together into two parties of four and our expedition leader, Alan, leads up the gentle snow slopes at a good steady pace. The lack of oxygen at this height makes everything feel twice as steep as it really is, and it's important not to fatigue yourself early on.

The sun has not yet reached us and it is deathly cold, especially on the feet. I'm climbing in leather boots rather than the warmer plastic ones and my toes are soon numb. Mercifully, after a steeper climb on which someone has left behind fixed ropes, we reach a little plateau

throw my arms around Tom, who has just arrived, and nearly break his nose with my helmet.

From our eyrie we can see a hundred miles each way and have a clear view of Mount Everest, Makalu (the fish-tail mountain), Amadablam and many more. In fact, our incredible panorama includes eight of the earth's fourteen 8000m peaks.

## From Small Steps...

It all started more than a year ago, when after a good day's climbing in Wales Alan turned to me and unceremoniously said "let's go on an expedition". At the time I wasn't keen, feeling the same way about mountaineering as drunk driving - great fun but unacceptably dangerous.

By last Christmas though the plans were starting to condense and we had five people interested, all of us IC students. We bought a map of Nepal, fashioned the 'trekking peaks' from blu-tac and stuck them on the map. (Trekking peaks are a set of apparently randomly selected medium size mountains with affordable peak fees). One area stood out - the Rolwaling valley - which includes three trekking peaks, gave sensible acclimatisation and a good varied trek.

The prospect of travelling half way across the globe to climb in the world's highest mountains still seemed more of a fantasy than an intention, that is until we wrote a detailed prospectus and applied to the IC Exploration Board for funding. They approved the plan



Photo: Tom Padgham

Twenty thousand feet up on top of Parchamo

and gave us £3000. We found a sixth climber, contacted an agency in Kathmandu and there was no going back.

## Trekking in the Valley

We departed at the end of September, in order to trek in the dry post-monsoon season. A long and complicated journey took us to Nepal's capital Kathmandu, where there was so much to buy and organise that we forgot to suffer from culture shock, and even diarrhoea. We bought enough food and equipment for an entire regiment of the Gurkha army, hired two sherpas, two cooks, eight porters and a bus and headed towards Tibet.

At a little town called Barabise we tipped everything out onto the road and watched helplessly as chaos ensued. Out of the maelstrom emerged thirteen porters with fully loaded carrying baskets attached by a rope around

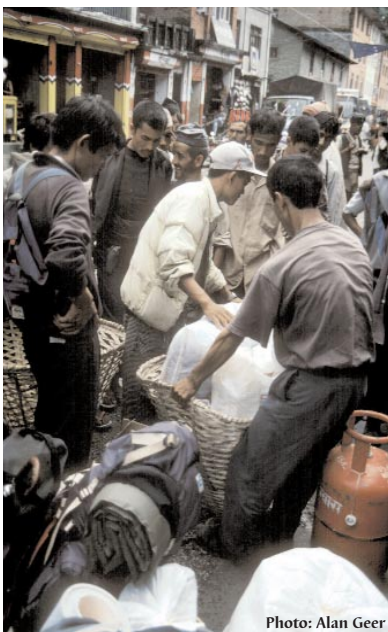


Photo: Alan Geer

Head sherpa Pasang checking the weight of one of the porter's baskets

their foreheads, and we were off.

The busy trail headed steeply upwards through green paddy fields and past little houses and villages. Already we had encountered three unexpected problems - intense heat, inaccurate maps and very irritating little children.

The next few weeks were spent gradually climbing through lush green valleys to reach the Rolwaling proper. The trail crossed dramatic suspension bridges, passed gigantic waterfalls and plunged up and down slippery rock faces. The giant rolling hills were covered everywhere with little terraced fields and the tiny houses of the farmers. The locals were curious, but friendly and very helpful and our sherpas treated us like royalty until it became embarrassing.



Photo: Jeremy Thomson

Kwangde seen from the Everest valley

drons and juniper. Few tourists visit here, and it is as authentic a sherpa settlement as you will find. The houses are small and simple and the locals cultivate potatoes and raise yaks. When we reach the highest village, Na, we are well above the tree line and the residents have deserted for the winter.

From this airy spot, we launched an excursion to climb two peaks - Yalung Ri and the unfortunately named Ramdung. While the first went well, our progress on the second was hampered by deep snow and misleading maps, and it was summited only on the second attempt by the expedition 'B-team'.

Buoyed up by our successful attempts on our first real Himalayas, we started the gruelling trek to the top of the valley across broken and stony glaciers. Camping in precarious spots, we had to be wary of stone fall and were lucky enough to

witness a dramatic avalanche just far enough away not to pose any danger. By the time we reached the high Tesi Labsta pass we were exhausted and confused from the altitude and sunlight, but had made it over the notorious crossing without incident.

After the Parchamo climb, we quickly dropped down into the Khumbu (Everest) valley which in contrast is teeming with mostly American trekkers armed with flailing ski poles. The Khumbu has done well from mountaineering (Everest attempts pass through here) and the houses are large and strong. Tea houses, shops, schools and even surgeries are plentiful on the well built trail and it was with a slight sense of disappointment that we re-entered civilisation with its cafes, electric lights and real toilets.

We still had one more peak to try, which lies high up on the west of the trail in a little-visited valley called Lumding Karka. An infuriating few days spent getting lost and hacking through rhododendron forest finally took us to our destination, towering above which was the triple mountain Kwangde. By now, winter was setting in and the nights were getting cold and the days shorter. After some debate, only two members wanted to attempt the climb which was the most difficult so far. They found the geography massively changed since the map was written, with a new lake blocking the way to two of the three peaks. Turning their attention to the third, Kwangde Nup, Alan and Tom set up an even-yet-still-higher camp and went for it.

On the day of the climb, Alan was ill leaving just Tom and sherpa Pasang. They made a bold attempt, but found the glacier badly crevassed. After having negotiated several very steep ice steps, they were finally thwarted

by a huge crevasse just a hundred vertical meters from the summit.

## Reflections



Photo: Tom Padgham

Avalanche on Bigphera Go Shar

Flying back to Kathmandu from a minute airstrip in an aging Twin-Otter left us some spare time to reflect on the trip. It's difficult to imagine a country less similar to England than Nepal, socially, culturally and geographically. While climbing in the Himalayas was a wonderful experience, it's the friendly, uncomplicated attitude and infectious cheerfulness of the Nepalese that I'll remember. The respect and tolerance generated by Hindu and Buddhist worship, the happy attitude of locals who were poor but not worried about it and the truly different art and culture of Nepal - these are what set the experience apart. Will I return to Nepal? You can be sure of it!



Photo: Alan Geer

Approaching the col near Ramdung

Find out more on our website: [www.geocities.com/colosseum/park/7885](http://www.geocities.com/colosseum/park/7885)  
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