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Drahmo Expedition 1999

The Drahmo Expedition was conceived as a lightweight bid on an unclimbed 6000 m peak in Nepal, to be carried out by a team largely composed of AACZ members. The selection of Drahmo was based on a list published by the Nepal Mountain Association late in 1998, which included 9 “new” summits to be free of both peak fee and the requirement for a liaison officer during the 1999 season. Drahmo, at 6855 m and situated in the far East of the country, directly opposite the North Face of Kangchenjunga, offered by far the tallest of these peaks, the most interesting location, and perhaps the only summit which could be guaranteed to be unclimbed. Literature searches in AACZ, BMC and SSAF archives revealed the 1930 exploration by the Dyrenfurth expedition, with accompanying map by AACZ member Marcel Kurz, as one of the few useful sources. The S Face of the lower, E Peak of Drahmo, was climbed directly by British climbers the previous season, after the party had performed a partial reconnaissance of the W side of the mountain. No information was available concerning the E and N sides, accessible from the Jongsang Pass route to Sikkim and Tibet.

The party was assembled of AACZ members and acquaintances, with experience of climbing together in the Alps. The equipment and techniques used in standard alpine practice would be applied by 2–3-man rope teams on the Nepalese peaks. The team members were Bruce Normand (leader), Karsten Kunze (deputy leader), Luke Arnott (doctor), Henry Lickorish (treasurer), Salim Mohamed (communications), Manuel Bonnet and Brad Guthrie. Luke and Brad had no direct AACZ connection, and were invited to participate as well-qualified acquaintances. The primary pre-departure

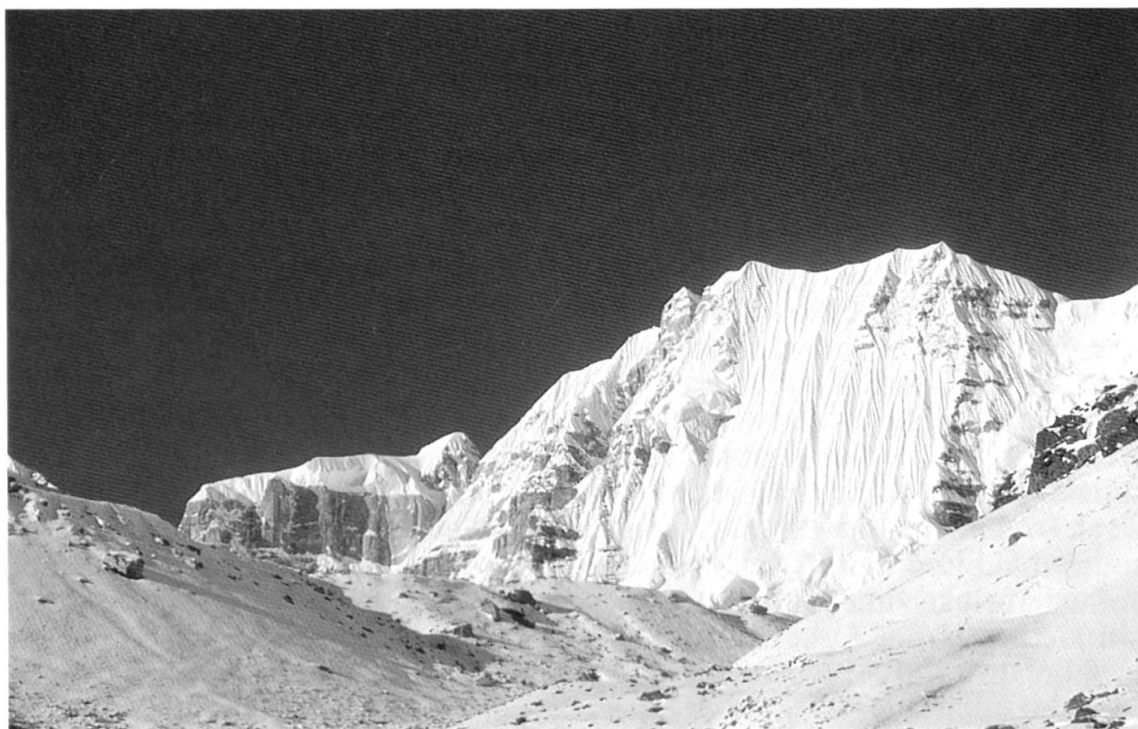


Foto: AACZ

Unser täglicher Blick auf die Südwand des Drahmo (6850 m) vom Basislager Pangpema in etwa 5000 m Höhe. Der zentrale Pfeiler führt auf den Ostgipfel und wurde 1998 von D. Scott und R. Mear erstbestiegen. Der Hauptgipfel ist links dahinter und bleibt bisher unbezungen.

preparations involved contacting and negotiating with a trekking agent, Asian Trekking, to organise the peak permit, permanent staff, staff insurance, in-country travel and agreements concerning food and porter arrangements. Luke was responsible for assembling a comprehensive field medical kit. In addition, the team members undertook group tours, and refined food and equipment planning. During the preparative stage, the original deputy leader, Richard Ackerley, was killed in a fall while climbing with Bruce and Henry in Pakistan. His loss is sorely missed.

Kathmandu in late September is bustling, noxious and wet. Man Mohan Singh of Asian Trekking provided the basic orientation, the paperwork and the expedition and trekking permits. He introduced the team members to Dilip Rai Sunawar, who would be sirdar, and Jalaf ("Shree") Singh, who would be cook. The team had chosen to arrange food and base-camp material independently, a fascinating exercise which saved \$ 4000. With guidance from Dilip and Shree, the members set to scouring the marketplaces not only for food (60 kg rice, 30 kg sugar, 18 kg lentils ...), but for porter baskets, fuel canisters, polyethene sheeting, a toilet-digging pick, and so forth. Key items included the rental of a full kitchen with stoves, and dining/storage and kitchen tents. Everything was shipped to the Asian Trekking store in a suburb, where the local workers packed 30 kg loads of food and technical gear. After 4 days of groundwork, the expedition was ready to board its rented bus for an evening departure to the wild East. On board were 2 drivers, 7 members, c. 750 kg of equipment (augmented by member loads of 15–20 kg each), the 2 permanent staff, and 2 additional members: the "cook boys" Ang Chiring Sherpa and Chotra. The latter, we soon learned, were workaholics who would unstintingly undertake all the dirty work and heavy lifting required to keep the kitchen and camp in operation.

The bus journey went smoothly overnight, across the Terai (Ganges plains) to the Ilam road. Things deteriorated rapidly when the expedition fuel, 140 l of kerosene, was taken on board, and proceeded to leak copiously as the bus negotiated the first snaking climbs and drops to Ilam, tea capital of Nepal. Relief came very soon thereafter, in the form of an unmetalled, hopelessly muddy road, where it was quicker to walk, and admire the skills of the drivers from without, at least until the afternoon rains started. Night fell in Phidim, and the journey continued the next morning to the road end in Kaberi, a small village on the Tamur River at 500 m above sea level. This would be the end of the line for another day, as Dilip required the afternoon and evening to amass 25 porters. The team volleyball and hacky sack were put into action, to the delight of the local children and candidate porters.

The trek began early the next morning, and the opening day through terraced fields to the regional centre of Taplejung was blessed with bright sunshine. The following days, however, were largely grey and wet, for a full week to Ghunsa, the centre of the upper valley, and the only village on the route inhabited mainly by Asiatic peoples. The trek was enlivened by much volleyball, leach encounters, a local woman with a snake-bite, practical first-aid lectures from Luke, and gratuitous consumption of Shree's excellent cooking. The Kaberi porters were paid off in Ghunsa, and a new team formed with the assistance of some dzo (cow/yak hybrids). An acclimatisation day in Kambachen involved ascending into a snowstorm, but on the next morning the monsoon had magically lifted, exactly on schedule for far East Nepal. The final two days to Lhonak, then to base camp at Pangpema (5000 m) were

made in perfect autumn weather, and against the backdrop of snow-capped peaks in all directions, including the Himalayan giants Jannu, Kambachen and finally Kangchenjunga.

Pangpema was already inhabited by a massive Korean expedition, with 20 climbers, 22 broadcast personnel, a \$ 2M budget from KBS (the national broadcasting agency), a diesel generator running from dawn to dusk and 10 satellite dishes pointing at the mountain to monitor the progress of Mr. Om, trying for his 13th 8000er. After a failed attempt to assert squatters' rights anywhere on the main plateau, our team was forced to establish its base camp (BC) in a small, dry and dirty drainage near the generator, but the staff were quite happy with the four stone walls of a seasonal hut. After too many consecutive nights on the chang, Dilip presented himself very late and spitting blood, and had to be sent back to Ghunsa to recover from pulmonary oedema.

With good weather in place, the priorities were acclimatisation and reconnaissance. Drahmo is an East-West fin from 6000 to 6800 m; the main (W) peak has SW and NW ridges. Below the S Face are 5 ridges running down to the glacier, all of which have minor summits around 6000 m. In the course of the next 3 days, the middle ridge was climbed by Salim and Karsten, the centre-right ridge by Luke, Manuel, Salim and Henry, and the right ridge, the most challenging, by Brad and Salim. Bruce and Manuel found that the centre-left ridge would require a long pitch of rock-climbing in the VI range, and that the only approach to the left ridge, the trekking peak Tengkongma, would have to be made from lower down the main valley near Lhonak. Salim and Karsten were best able to survey the feasibility of Drahmo W by the S Face and SW ridge: difficult, but not impractical. Bruce and Brad established the high road around the moraine edge above the Jongsang glacier as the optimal way to access the N side. They found a good location for an advanced BC (ABC) at the glacier fork, which offered access to Drahmo N Face, and to a host of unclimbed, mostly-snow peaks around the upper Jongsang Glacier to the NE. Drahmo N Face was found to be steep and rocky, with objective danger in the main couloir and a steep rock step blocking the NW ridge. Across the Jongsang Glacier from Pangpema, the daily view contained on the right the very steep N Face of Pyramid peak (6900 m), in the centre the Kangchenjunga Glacier leading back to the gigantic N Face of Kangchenjunga, and to the left a trio of peaks descending from the NE Ridge. Bruce and Manuel climbed the lowest of these, the Cockscomb (5932 m) to survey Pyramid, Ramtang (6700 m, another open peak) and Jannu, Drahmo and Pangpema, and the bulk of Jongsang (7400 m) rising on the Tibetan border to the N of the glacier fork where ABC would be established.

As soon as the stronger climbers felt ready for the next stage, the weather turned less stable. Bruce, Brad, Manuel and Karsten carried equipment and minimal food to ABC, to be joined 1 day later by Luke. The next acclimatisation/reconnaissance plan was a snow-peak labelled 6456. Bruce and Brad climbed the NW Face, but were beaten to the summit by the weather, and so were unable to inspect further climbing options. Karsten and Manuel turned around at the snowline on the SW ridge, not before obtaining an improved perspective of Drahmo N Face. On the next day the teams returned to BC to rest and collect a week's supply of food. The stay in BC turned out to be longer than envisaged: 2 days of unstable weather with 10 cm of snow-fall turned to 3 more days of major snowstorm, which piled up 70–80 cm of

snow. Attractions during this period included playing cards, shovelling tents, taking incongruous photographs of Korean pineapples, more shovelling of tents, and the grand Draho chess tournament, where a thrilling final saw Manuel's careful tactics triumph over Bruce's cut-and-thrust approach.

With 80 cm of unconsolidated snow on the ground and on the mountains, the expedition priorities shifted sharply. Two days of sun brought little consolidation. Goals on the N side were out of the question, and the ABC equipment had to be rescued. Luke was becoming ill with an unknown ailment, and Karsten had a persistent cough. The Koreans flew out in two ex-Soviet military helicopters, leaving behind two memorial plaques, some equipment "for next Spring" and a small mountain of garbage. Bruce and Brad reached ABC after a long day of trail-breaking, but had to leave the equipment again after Bruce cut his arm falling into a snow-covered hole on the return trek. Bruce took the first-aid kit to Lhonak, where Luke and Karsten had begun their descent, for Luke to perform a minor stitching operation, to the consternation of a German trekking group and the total unconcern of the local yak.

Shree was developing increasing signs of a problem in his left leg, which Luke feared might be thrombosis. Dilip was instructed to round up enough porters to start the march out. Henry and Salim decided to make a last bid on Tengkongma, but were eventually thwarted by the theft of part of their gear, and by the deep snow. Manuel and Brad rescued the remaining equipment from the ABC trail, and the same night porters began arriving at BC. On the next morning, camp was struck, the garbage burned, and the expedition began its return. Despite his protests to the contrary, Shree was clearly very ill and unable to walk; with the signs finally obvious, a helicopter was called to evacuate him before the thrombosis could move to his heart. One day later, with the expedition in Ghunsa, except for Brad with Shree in Lhonak, a 4-seat helicopter arrived in Ghunsa, left its spare fuel and copilot, lifted Shree from Lhonak and returned to Ghunsa. Luke had selected Bruce to accompany Shree, not least because of frostnip blisters from the ABC day, and so 1.5 hours later the pair were in a Kathmandu hospital, embarking on the long process of having Shree admitted.

For Bruce the expedition ended with debriefing formalities (at the Ministry, as well as with the venerable Himalayan historian Elizabeth Hawley), urban sightseeing and daily visits to Shree in hospital. Despite sometimes rudimentary facilities, the standards of medical knowledge were good, and after one week Shree's condition had improved to the point where he was to be sent home. For the remainder of the team, the trek out to Taplejung was made in excellent autumn weather, and took 3.5 days with a set of turbo-charged porters. Manuel, Karsten and Salim flew back to Kathmandu from the airstrip at Suketar, incurring a day's delay due to malicious morning cloud activity, but sampling a village festival as compensation. Brad, Henry and Luke took the overland route back with Dilip, Ang Chiring and Chottra, a bumpy, dusty experience better, if not readily, forgotten. The expedition's final official act was to split the remaining supply of rupees between Ang Chiring and Chottra as pay for their 5 weeks of tireless labour.

In conclusion, the expedition did not achieve its climbing goal, but in travelling 95 % of the way to this goal saw and learned a huge amount. While each individual recorded a wide variety of memorable experiences, the members performed as a team when the going was smooth, and when it was rough.

The Drahmo expedition was carried out on a total budget of US\$ 11000, which covered 7 members and 4 staff for five weeks out of Kathmandu. The members would like to take this opportunity to thank the AACZ for its generous support.

Bruce Normand