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Snakes and Ladders on Cerro Kishtwar

Andy Perkins

Every expedition has its ups and downs; our trip to Cerro Kishtwar in autumn of '91 was just an extreme case - periods of deep depression when forward progress, let alone success, seemed virtually impossible followed by wild elation as we took a small step nearer that elusive goal - to climb a big wall in a Himalayan setting.

It all started inauspiciously.....

The Nightmare Scenario

I know you've imagined it in your worst dreams. There's the two of you there at the foreign airport at the start of your climbing holiday. You're waiting at the baggage reclaim for your two precious, irreplaceable rucksacks full of gear and only one appears. This was Brendan and me in Delhi, months of planning for our attempt on Cerro Kishtwar suddenly jeopardised by the disappearance of Bren's 'sack somewhere between London, Muscat and Delhi. I was torn between 'Thank God it's his 'sack that's missing, not mine' and the thought that, without it, our attempt was a non-starter in spite of 80% of the kit having already been freighted in with the advance party. The missing 20% included rucksack, pit, jackets, sunglasses, headtorch - all those things which are small but vital.

Instead of a couple of relaxing days of digestive acclimatisation (aka curry eating) in Delhi before our flight to Leh, we spent four days running backwards and forwards across town in rickshaws, hopes rising and falling amidst the scream of scooter 2-stroke engines and surrounded by exhaust fumes. The airline office and our agent produced no joy but, as always in India, someone somewhere has what you're looking for - at a price, of course. We tracked down Mandip Singh of Ibex in a quiet suburb and, in his air conditioned office and Western furnished house, our hopes rose again. He could hire us the kit and his own European gear at that, he would sell us a rucksack made by his own firm and so on.

This pattern of up and down, hopes raised and dashed grew to be a feature of our travels to and efforts on the mountain. One expects excitement, difficulties and reversals in Asia but this was an extreme version, a case of 'What can possibly happen next?'

The journey to Base Camp was correspondingly erratic in pace and nature - a flight away from the humid lunacy of Delhi delivered us to the comparative heaven of Leh, with its open blue skies and brown boulder slopes studded with old monasteries. Weathered Ladakhi faces of sunburned leather were split by beaming smiles while children tugged at our clothes, not begging but just interested. I almost resented the pressure we were under to move on towards the mountain; I could have stayed in Leh for a week instead of taking a bus the next morning. That journey ended in Kargil where the only onward transport to the Zaskar valley by truck-hitch took a day to find. A 36-hour bone rattling truck ride past the glories of Nun and Kun brought us to Padum. What should have been a good night's sleep turned into a surreal hell as a psychotic American with

'an anger problem' (sic) beat up his girlfriend who then staggered round the hotel clad only in a sleeping bag insisting he be thrown out or arrested!

A jeep ride to the road-head the next day ended with a wheel falling off as we reached our destination. Mental well-being was then restored by witnessing a Buddhist fire puja by a visiting Rimpoche before the three day walk over the Himalayan divide into Kishtwar.

The vanguard of the expedition had passed this way a week before and had done a sterling job getting all the porters and a horse (!) over the 5,300m Umasi La and finding a superb Base Camp site on the banks of the Haptal glacier. We breezed in to find our tents already pitched and brews waiting under the BC tarpaulin. We swapped tales of our adventures and took a welcome rest day.

Here was the accustomed normality of expedition life: familiar kit unpacked from barrels; chappati omelettes for breakfast; even a friendly and helpful Liaison Officer (wonders will never cease)! The sun beamed from a clearing sky onto the granite spires towering everywhere: Kishtwar Shivling, Dandagoporam, Chomochior.... Partially hidden, only the top quarter of our objective, the North West face of Cerro Kishtwar, showed itself, intimidating and yet enticing.....

From an advanced BC in a glacial bowl below the face, it looked just phenomenal. Mixed terrain up from the bergschrund to a Patagonian-style sweep of granite draped with ludicrously steep tendrils of ice here and there. We gaped through binoculars and worried whether our 17 days of food would last out, whether our 300m of rope would stretch between the ledges where we'd planned our camps, whether these would be big enough for our wall tent, whether the weather.... just stop worrying and GET ON WITH IT.

The Ideal Sport Climbing Venue

We'd ferried all the gear up the mixed terrain and moved our capsule up to the base of the wall itself. Here, 1,000 feet above the bergschrund, we'd hacked a ledge out and hung the bivy tent from the wall where it reared out of the mixed terrain in the form of ice-smearred slabs. Back in Britain, we'd pondered photographs, drawn diagrams and tentatively traced a line up this first section of slabs. There were no encouraging cracks or snow streaks on the photos to indicate how we were going to get up this first 300 feet of a 3,000ft wall. We'd just applied the Longstaff dictum - 'Rub your nose before you are certain it won't go.' (I doubt, however, whether Longstaff also said 'but pack the bolt kit in case it won't go') I racked a massive range of big wall armaments 40 pins, Friends, a triple set of wires - feeling distinctly apprehensive. Here was the point where we would find out just how presumptuous we were to assume we could climb this thing. Even using all the cunning gained from seasons of Scottish scratching, I'd only made 30m of progress in four hours: the tongue of ice I'd followed now shrank to one inch thick, eight inches wide. I stood in an etrier clipped to my axe and pondered the blank six metres to the next good ice and the dubious pegs and equal distance below.

"It's no good send me up the bolt kit." All those outraged letters to the magazines about the value of adventure climbing and there I was placing 8mm self-drillers in Himalayan granite. How easy it is to trample over your own morals in the pursuit of goals! I'd never placed one before and felt very guilty at first, as if the BMC Ethics Sub-Committee would jump round the corner and catch

me at it. Half an hour later with bleeding hands and totally wasted I wished I'd brought a Bosch! Then, attempting to hook the existing rugosities, I took a fall in a scrattle of pegs, axes and hardware. Not content with placing a bolt, it seemed inevitable that I should have to dog it out! Brendan hung off the belay 30 metres below and barked in delight. From then on the gloves were off and progress was by bat-hooking, another new experience. (Do you know how deep to drill a bat hook hole?) By close of play we'd made it to the next ice smear and, abbing to the tent, reflected on the day's climbing: 'The ideal sport climbing venue: afternoon sunshine, best quality granite, bolt protection and a cafe at the base of the crag!'

Over the next few days, we pushed out our 300m of fixed line, gradually instilling ourselves with the rigid discipline of the clip-on, clip-off mentality necessary in such a merciless unforgiving environment. On the third day, I was in the middle of passing a belay point, when I suddenly found myself hanging one-handed from an ascender, an instant away from a blurring tumbling death. From then on concentration was absolute, procedures were religiously followed, we acknowledged we had hold of items passed over. Even inside the tent, theoretically safe, a routine developed to maximise safety with minimum effort. Constant concentration just accelerated the attrition we'd already started to feel.

Life at the Kishtwar Hilton

6.00am: beep-beep-beep-beep alarm off. Reach out of the pit. Keerist it's cold, lighter in top pocket, light the tower stove, hand back in pit again. 6.20am: unzip door, back outside for more snow for the pan, check the weather. John Kettley says it's another good day: let's go climbing. 6.40am: boiling water and we're ready for chocolate and another grope outside for snow and, careful, don't let any spindrift in. Sit up, trying not to tangle up in Brendan's safety leash from his chest harness to the tent tie-in points. Chocolate finished, time for muesli, then boil it again for a brew. Spin this out till the last possible moment to avoid the worst part of the day - God, it's awful - getting dressed. 7.20am: reach into the pit for inner boots and socks (it smells like something died in there overnight). Down boots and dry socks off, yesterday's socks and inner boots on, Goretex salopettes on, chest harness off, jacket on, chest harness back on again, outer boots on and we're ready for the big bad world. 7.40am: tent door open, clip onto fixed line, step out to immediate 500 metres of exposure to the glacier and temperature of -15°C. Now another extremely unpleasant part of the day - the morning dump. Hang off the chest harness, fumble with a myriad of zips and flaps, try not to drop your bog paper, zip it all back up again, round to the other end of the tent on the safety line, sit harness on, hill food in left pocket, water bottle and ropes in rucksack. 8.00am: Right I suppose we'd better go climbing, though maybe it's not quite sport climbing!

The climbing above the Kishtwar Hilton centred on the major feature of the route, 200m of corner formed where a massive buttress abutted the wall. Intermittent runnels of perfect ice gave some of the best Scottish gully climbing either of us had ever done. Where these ran out, progress by aiding was steady but, oh, so slow. On one particular day, I spent five hours shivering on a stance while Brendan was totally absorbed in a sustained corner on blades, small wires and Friends. On the following day the roles were reversed as the climbing continued at an unrelentingly difficult level. One section of the route required one

foot becramped while the other boot smeared on rock. Then, at an apparent impasse where the corner became a hideous powder-choked off-width, a tension traverse out onto the overhanging right wall led to a perfect Friend crack and access to the upper sections of the corner where angle and difficulty eased (comparatively). Every pitch was a microcosm of the route total despair (this one'll never go) to vague hope (I'll just give it a try) to elated incredulity (I don't believe it! Its going!)

Reaching the top of the corner, we pulled the ropes up, had a hideous bivvy, then managed to site the tent on a perfect ledge below the Texas Flake, the next impossible-looking feature of an impossible-looking route.

Friday the Thirteenth

It was a Friday and our thirteenth day on the route but neither of us were superstitious - just very, very cold. The morning temperatures were the lowest we'd had yet and even getting geared up required underarm hand warming every five minutes. Trying to lead out a pitch directly above the tent on steep rock and ice was excruciatingly cold on the fingers. Every move I'd have to stop and warm them but at least I was moving. Brendan hung uncomplaining on the belay and shook quietly.

I'd chosen to avoid the Texas Flake itself and started up a crack system in its front face. Climbing thin ice-choked grooves and cracks presents such a dilemma. Do I leave the precious little ice there is and try to ice climb (it's quick and I can keep my hands in my mitts, a good plan at -20°C) or smash it off and torque/hook it. (Much more secure and I can get pro as well). But then I'll have to strip my mitts to handle gear and what if the crack's blind? There's never a perfect solution to this dilemma but somehow progress materialised slowly and after two hours I'd scraped and hammered my way up 20m of some of the hardest mountaineering I'd ever done.

Higher up the pitch, the ice ran out and I was hooking and torquing to make progress on every move. Now this involves taking hands out of wrist slings and it's VERY IMPORTANT to remember to put them back in when the axe is retrieved from foot level. Inevitably there came a sequence where I dropped the axe to let it dangle on the wrist loopand watched it spin away and down into the void. In those few seconds, there was sudden hope as it appeared to be heading straight for the ledge where our wall tent was pitched, then sheer horror as the axe plunged from 30m, straight through the roof of the tent. Thirteen days out, within striking distance of the summit and daily afternoon spindrift swirling around. I abseiled to Brendan, full of contrition. He typically remarked that it was 'just one of those things', and we set to assessing the damage. In the end, we just turned the tent upside-down and laid our Karrimats over the hole. It looked a bit of an odd shape and the poles didn't quite fit right but what the hell - it worked and gave us a name for the doss: The Upside-Down Hotel.

Finishing the repairs, we returned to the fray with Brendan in the lead. My morale was at a record low, having wrecked the tent and it also looked as though I'd led us into a blind alley where the crack system we were in widened into a hideously unprotectable off-width. However, Brendan was firing on all four cylinders and the next morning, after some wild pendule action, whooped in delight as a thin crack materialised to lead us to the top of the Texas Flake.

That afternoon, another desperate spindrift-lashed torquing pitch brought us to within striking distance of the Scissors, two intersecting ramp systems from where we hoped the terrain would ease. Would the mountain finally give us a break?

The End Game

It was make-or-break time (for the nth occasion of the route). Brendan had traversed to the left hand end of the Scissors and was peering round on to the north east face. I joined him and we contemplated powder-covered slabs and broken rock, a total contrast from the clean compact granite of the previous 15 days. I led a pitch leftwards towards a vague gully line floundering in the powder which filled my wrist dangling mitts and brought Brendan across. We stared up at the gully which, after 100m, disappeared from sight at a cornice which we guessed indicated the summit.

100m between us and success - all that effort, to have come all that way (that oft-used quote by Southerners going on to the Ben in evil weather and conditions). I made the final few moves across to the gully, wading in powder, screaming with the cold in my hands. Have you ever noticed how hideously cold powder can be? More than that, the inner voice screamed 'NO!' as well - what was it? We were 100m from success on a great route, state-of-the-art climbing. We would be like Boardman and Tasker on Changabang (so we'd imagined in our naivety) but something about the situation was all wrong: we'd been climbing for 15 days and the attrition had been intense and unrelenting. There was no way we could replace all the calories expended during such hard climbing and we were feeling leaner and meaner every day. We'd had no sunshine for a week and afternoon snow was gradually permeating our kit. My sleeping bag was frozen into useless clumps of down, so I wasn't getting much sleep. On one particularly memorable night (for Brendan), I'd taken two Paracetamol and two Halcion (those sleepers that have now been withdrawn from sale). Apparently, I'd had Brendan very worried with violent Cheyne-Stokes breathing, switching my headtorch on and off, moaning in apparent pain from frost-nipped fingers and mumbling unintelligibly. When asked if I was okay, Brendan tells me I muttered 'My minds gone!' Hmmm.

In addition to all this excitement, the mental concentration we needed to remain safe had started to slip. I'd fallen seven metres off a nominally safe belay through not being tied in properly. Brendan had nearly dropped a climbing rope. It was only a matter of time before one of us made a fatal error. Finally, we only had a couple of days food left, which was allocated for the descent and, while our rations were meagre anyway, the prospect of eating nothing and drinking water did not fill either of us with enthusiasm.

It was a terrible decision to make, particularly being so close to success but the chances of frostbitten fingers, the complexities of the descent and that final fatal error were getting uncomfortably high. It was with great reluctance and frustration that we finally decided to jack it in and, two days later, after a complicated descent that went like clockwork, we finally rapped over the bergschrund as night fell.

Ten days later we were touching down at Heathrow and had to start answering that inevitable question: "Why on earth did you stop so close to the top?" from

people both inside and outside the Himalayan game. A convenient metaphor is that it was a bit like snakes and ladders and the dice didn't quite fall our way.....

Summary

An account of one of the best non-routes in the Himalaya, a 17 day capsule ascent of the North West Face of Cerro Kishtwar by Andy Perkins and Brendan Murphy. The expedition was supported by the British Mountaineering Council and the Mount Everest Foundation and is dedicated to the memories of Steve Hillen and Mirek Lasotha.



Day 7 on Cerro Kishtwar. Photo: Andy Perkins