

Failing to Climb Big Mountains in Nepal

Will Harris



Jon Gupta at high camp.

Photo Will Harris

Following on from last year's storm-frustrated Patagonian big-walling mission I was keen for a more leisurely alpine expedition for 2015. My long-time climbing partner Jon Gupta (of BBC 2's *India: Nature's Wonderland* fame) came up with the goods, suggesting a five-week trip to attempt unclimbed lines in Nepal's Khumbu Valley. What the Khumbu lacks in untracked wilderness it makes up for in technically interesting alpine objectives within striking distance of excellent teahouses. Coupled with the fact that Jon knows the region well, having visited ten times over the past five years whilst guiding on big mountains, it sounded like an easy life was guaranteed.

Jon and I met in Kathmandu, and after a day of shopping we boarded the morning flight to Lukla. For the first time it became obvious that the trekking season was much, much quieter in Nepal this year, following from

the negative publicity arising from April's earthquake. Whilst it was nice for us to experience quiet trails, the impact on the local economy was noticeable. The trails are all intact, the lodges are open and the peaks are good to go, so if you are thinking of heading to Nepal in the near future please don't be put off by the bad press.

From Lukla we spent eight days trekking through villages to Lobuche Village, spending a couple of days acclimatising in Dingboche, and hiking up Chhukung Ri (5,500m) to enjoy some thin air. Whilst I can definitely hold my own when charging around in the Alps, it quickly became apparent that the altitude was going to hurt me a little more than Jon, whose pedigree at high altitude is well established with various ascents of 7,000 to 8,000m peaks. I was pleased to find that by taking it easy I adapted to the lower pressure reasonably well, and by the end of the trip felt good camping at 5,800m, which bodes well for future trips to bigger mountains.

On reaching Lobuche we settled into the Peak Fifteen lodge before heading up to Lobuche East (6,119m) high camp. The views from high camp were stunning, and after a reasonably comfortable night camping at 5,200m we set off at 3am for the summit. The normal route on Lobuche East is a pleasure, with easy scrambling leading to steeper snow-slopes and the final exposed arête. The views from the summit were spectacular, with us enjoying sunrise before heading back down for a second breakfast at high camp.



Lobuche East Summit Ridge.

Photo Will Harris

Lobuche East is easily climbed in alpine style from its high camp in a shortish day, and is technically no harder than Alpine PD. We summited on day nine of our trip in a little under three and a half hours from high camp, which itself was an hour and a half's walk from Lobuche village. I can't recommend it enough to anyone who wants to enjoy a Himalayan summit with relatively little faff or expense, and right on the popular and well catered for trekking circuit.

After warming up on Lobuche East we were keen to get stuck into something a little more involved, and ideally unclimbed. Richard at the Himalayan Database had tipped us off about an 'unclimbed' peak, Kangchung (6,061m), located to the north-west of the Cho La Pass. The peak was 'opened' by the Nepalese Government in 2014, as part of the 104 new peaks released and sounded like it could offer some interesting climbing. Richard let us know that two permits had been issued for the peak in the previous year, and through our agent in Kathmandu we contacted the agents who had arranged the permits and discovered that neither team had been successful. After searching the Himalayan Index and the Internet, and finding no records of attempts, we decided to give it a go.

Two days walk from Lobuche village saw us deposited at Kangchung basecamp (5,250m). We realised that East Ridge of the mountain, which appeared to be fairly chossy but worth a shot, and stashed our gear at its base. Two nights earlier we had experienced a dusting of snow in Lobuche, which Jon dismissed as an unusual anomaly. Apparently over the last five late Octobers/early Novembers there had been no significant snowfall, or so Jon assured the attentive trekkers in the lodge. We were quite surprised to wake the next day to a foot of fresh snow outside our tent, with more continuing to fall. A hasty retreat was beaten down the hill to an equally snowy Dragnag, where we decided to sit out the bad weather in the comfort of a warm teahouse.



Traversing sketchy snow slopes on Kangchung's West Face. Photo Will Harris

After a few days of watching it snow, and all of the procrastinating that we could manage, we headed back up to our tent. It was clear that the rocky East Ridge was going to be in pretty poor condition, so we elected to head for the snowy West Ridge instead. Collecting our stashed gear and moving it around to the other side of the mountain involved more snow-covered moraine and boulder-field scrambling than I've ever had the displeasure to experience, all made worse by the fact that being at five and a half thousand metres adds being out of breath to the joys of the escapade.

Next morning it was a chilly 4am start, with more steep choss leading across a hanging ramp and onto snow slopes. It soon became apparent that the recent snow had not settled, with steep sugary snow on ice/névé giving insecure and potentially dangerous conditions. After a couple of hours of wallowing we admitted defeat, down-climbing from around 5,750m.

As for the unclimbed nature of the mountain, we saw signs of the passage of previous climbers, including cairns and old water bottles. We have subsequently heard of three ascents by the West Ridge (all without permits), and one attempt on a route from the glacier to the north. This didn't detract from our experience on the mountain, but is perhaps a pointer to the fact that unless you are trying something technically quite difficult, in the popular Khumbu area someone has probably beaten you to it, whatever the folks at the Nepali Ministry of Tourism claim.



Kyajo Ri from Machermo.

Photo Will Harris

With plenty of time left to try something else we walked across to Gokyo, towards Pharilapche, our main objective for the trip. As we headed towards Pharilapche it became apparent that its North Face looked much drier than in photos that we had seen, and our attention was instead drawn to the impressive unclimbed North-East Face and North Ridge of Kyajo Ri (6,186m). We decided to switch mountains, heading round Machhermo for a few days of R&R to get over a nasty cough and cold that we had both developed. Whilst there, we had the pleasure of bumping into Andy Tomlinson; it's a small world, as ever.

I've failed on a lot of alpine routes over the years for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes you fail because of conditions, or because it's too hard, or because you just don't want it enough. I failed in Patagonia because of the apocalyptic weather. I failed on the North Face of the Dru in winter because we didn't take big enough gear to get up the snow-chocked wide cracks. I failed on the Super Couloir by not paying attention to the soaring temperatures, and then abseiling like mad to escape the shit raining down on us. I once failed on a route on the Blatière because my partner and I couldn't even find the start of it. I felt as though we failed on the Colton-Macintyre on the North Face of the Jorasses because, even though we got over the top, sketching wildly in a raging storm as we went, being that out of control definitely can't be success.

A friend of mine summed it up nicely when we were loafing around in Chamonix after yet another beating in the mountains. He noted that there are plenty of routes that we could saunter up, but if you try hard enough routes often enough, then failure will be a familiar companion. I try to be philosophical about it, some of my best days in the mountains have been those when we didn't make the summit, and these have certainly been the episodes from which I've learnt the most. That said; it's pretty good to get to the top every now and again.



High on Kyajo Ri's North-East Face.

Photo Will Harris

On Kyajo Ri I managed to fail in a totally new and somewhat novel way. After two days spent ascending 700 metres of previously unclimbed snow, ice and rock on the best objective of my career I managed to drop my rucksack. I had larks-footed a sling to my sack, or so I thought, and clipped it to the belay. As I started to pull in the ropes leading down to Jon I turned to watch in disbelief as my bag sailed through the air, bouncing its way down the mountains impressively large and steep West Face. After a quick assessment of the situation, and the realisation that we now lacked a stove without which we had no water, we started abseiling and down-climbing.

Trips away to big mountains tend to be expensive, time consuming, cold, scary, potentially dangerous, bad for your technical climbing grade and often without tangible success. However, there's something about the whole process that is addictive: the adventure, camaraderie, excitement in the planning, and pleasure in the recollecting, seem to counterbalance this. After the second summitless trip in two years I returned home to Chamonix, and booked my flights for next year's expedition to Alaska.



Jon heading up technical ice low on Kyajo Ri.

Photo Will Harris