
Surveys



133. Simon Pierse, *La Grivola, first light, morning stars*, 2008-9, watercolour, 53 x 71cm.

ROGER PAYNE

Sublime Sikkim

Alpine Peaks Emerge From The Mist

The good thing about discovering you are wrong about something is that you get a chance for a new start. Prior to my first visit to Sikkim in October 2004, my impression was that it was difficult and costly to climb there. Having now made five visits to the former Himalayan kingdom in north-east India, I can say with certainty that this need not be the case.

My first view of the mountains of Sikkim was in the spring of 2004 with Julie-Ann Clyma during an ascent of Chomolhari on the Tibet-Bhutan border. With the remarkable backdrop of Kangchenjunga, the Sikkim-Tibet border peaks looked interesting and tantalizingly accessible from the Tibetan plateau.

Since that first view, I have discovered that Sikkim has countless rock walls, winter icefalls in high forests and mountain valleys, many interesting unclimbed 5000m and some unclimbed 6000m peaks, a clutch of virgin 7000m peaks, and the world's longest un-climbed high-altitude ridge. A very welcome recent addition is regulations for 'Alpine Peaks' that allow small teams to easily obtain permission in Sikkim and at modest cost. We had an input into this improvement of access for climbing, which is welcome evidence of a state government that is open-minded and committed to sustainable development in mountain regions. This example was mentioned as a model of good practice at the 2009 annual congress of the Adventure Tour Operators Association of India (ATOAI) held on 16-18 January 2009 in Dehradun, Uttarakhand.

Back in the mist, and the zenith of alpine climbing

The relatively easy to cross passes between Sikkim and Tibet are strategically important. Hence, they became the eastern gateway to the Tibetan plateau and the route taken by Francis Younghusband for the historic 'Lhasa Mission' of 1904 and all the early expeditions to the north side of Everest.

Later, during the period of the Sino-Indian border conflicts, these passes closed and became major points of tension between India and China. Hence, both sides of the border became heavily militarised. The military presence remains on the border; however, the Natu La (4310m), one of the main mountain passes between Sikkim and Tibet, is now open for limited local trade and may eventually open for tourism.

On the other side of this compact and diverse state is the world's third highest mountain. In two remarkable journeys in 1848 and 1849, the legen-



134. Looking east from camp on Brumkhangshe to Pauhunri and peaks on the Sikkim-Tibet border, 2007. (*Roger Payne*)



135. Brumkhangshe (5635m), one of the two Alpine Peaks in North Sikkim. (*Roger Payne*)

dary naturalist Sir Joseph Hooker climbed several 5000m peaks, attempted some 6000m peaks, and almost completed a circuit of Kangchenjunga. John Claude White, the Political Officer to Sikkim and later Bhutan (1887-1908), travelled widely. White was a very able administrator and a farsighted conservationist. He introduced protected status to vast areas of Himalaya forest, and created a remarkable personal collection of photographs of his travels on the north-east frontier and in Tibet. In 1899 Douglas Freshfield's famous expedition around Kangchenjunga included Vittorio Sella, who took some inspirational photographs, including the striking peak of



136. Chombu's east face – 'high in objective danger' – and the upper Rula Kang glacier. (Roger Payne)

Siniolchu, once vaunted as the most beautiful mountain in the world.

The most prolific early climber was Dr Alexander Kellas, who made several visits to Sikkim in the period 1907-21. He climbed many peaks, mostly with local companions, and in 1910 made 10 ascents including Chomoyummo (6829m) and Pauhunri (7128m). Kellas wrote several important papers on the effects of altitude, but sadly, wrote very little about his extensive climbing experiences. Kellas wondered if Everest could be climbed without supplementary oxygen, and because of his experience and knowledge, was selected as a member of the first Everest expedition in 1921. Tragically, after crossing from Sikkim to the Tibetan plateau he became seriously unwell and died of a heart attack. He was buried at Kampa Dzong looking towards the mountains of North Sikkim.

Marco Pallis, Freddy Spencer Chapman, Paul Bauer, G O Dyrenfurth, C R Cook, John Hunt, and Eric Shipton were all among the climbers of what could be called the 'golden age' of mountain exploration in Sikkim. This period started with Hooker in 1848, and was arguably at its zenith in the 1930s on the peaks around the Zemu glacier in north-west Sikkim. Continuing the lightweight alpine-style approach that had been established, in 1936 Bauer, Adi Göttner, Karl Wien and Günther Hep made the first ascent of Siniolchu (6887m) and Simvo (6812m). The 'golden age' perhaps ended in 1939 with the ascents of Tent Peak (7365m) and Nepal Peak (7180m) by the Swiss-German party of E Grob, H Paidar and L Schmaderer. When Himalayan mountaineering resumed after the interruption of the World War II, the spotlight was on a different style of mountaineering and the 8000m peaks. In the case of Kangchenjunga, the focus was on



137. Chumangkang and Chomoyummo from Chombu's north-east ridge. An Indian attempt on the border peak of Chomoyummo (6829m) in 2004 ended in an avalanche tragedy. (Roger Payne)

the Nepal side of the mountain.

Despite a long history of mountain exploration, Sikkim lacks a reliable up to date record of first ascents. Climbs have been made but not clearly recorded, some ascents have been claimed but may not have been climbed, and some summits have been climbed but not recorded at all. I have even had the strange experience of reading in a Sikkim newspaper about a 'first' ascent of a mountain that I had already climbed myself (and that as a third ascent). Given this unusual and somewhat confusing background (and all that is recorded in the *Himalayan Journal* and elsewhere) this article is not an attempt to get the historical record clear and correct, but highlights selected achievements and some of the excellent climbing opportunities that exist in Sikkim.

Above the mists

Unlike some of the world's highest mountains, Kangchenjunga is easily visible from the lowlands and populated areas. It is an amazing sight from hill towns like Pelling and Darjeeling. Given its dominant size and shape, and magnificent appearance in early morning and evening light, it is hardly surprising that it has long been an object of worship and an inspiration to climbers. The remarkable first ascent in 1955 was from the Nepal side of the mountain. However, the Sikkim side had already seen two determined attempts on the northeast spur in 1929 and '31 by strong groups led by Paul Bauer. This dangerous and difficult route was eventually completed in 1977 by an Indian Army expedition led by the redoubtable Col Narinder ('Bull') Kumar, which was the second expedition to succeed on Kangchenjunga.

The ongoing history of climbing on Kangchenjunga has mostly been on the Nepal side of the mountain. This includes the remarkable alpine-style

ascent of the south summit by the south ridge (which marks the border between Nepal and Sikkim) in 1991 by Andrej Stremfelj and Marko Prezelj. That same year the State Government of Sikkim classified the main, south and west summits of Kangchenjunga as sacred, and banned the 'scaling of the sacred peaks'. This has been taken to mean that all climbing attempts on the Sikkim side of Kangchenjunga are prohibited. However, it may be possible to obtain permission from the Sikkim authorities to climb Kangchenjunga if the sacred peak restriction is respected, and the summits remain un-trodden. If so, this would open up the possibility of a traverse of the formidable unclimbed east-southeast ridge, which includes Zemu Peak (7780m). This is, without doubt, one of the major high-altitude mountaineering challenges.

In the West

South along the border from Kangchenjunga is Talung (7349m) and at least three 7000m summits in the Kabru group. In 1883 William Woodman Graham claimed an ascent of Kabru, but later this was dismissed and it was thought he was on some other mountain. Kabru North (7338m) was climbed in 1935 (C R Cooke and G. Schoberth) and Talung from its Nepal side in 1964 (F. Lindner and T Nindra). Kabru Dome (6600m) and the North and South summits of Kabru are classified as sacred. However, this has not prevented recent ascents by Indian and foreign groups (although it is not clear if the groups concerned had the permission of the authorities in Sikkim).

Further south again is Rathong (6679m) and Koptang (6147m). Both offer interesting opportunities for alpine-style first ascents (and which Sagar Rai, Julie-Ann and I explored in autumn 2006, climbing some adjacent 5000m summits). According to the Alpine Club's on-line Himalayan Index, Koptang has been climbed twice (via the SW face in 1982 and via the NE face and north ridge in 1991), and Rathong has had two ascents (in 1964 and 1987 via the West Rathong glacier and icefall).

Koptang has a long, corniced summit ridge and, according to the great chronicler of Himalayan ascents Harish Kapadia, 'the true high point, lying at the northernmost end, remains to be climbed'. In 2006, having climbed quite a bit of new ground, we made some progress on the northwest-north ridge of Koptang, but deep cold snow and unstable cornices stopped us. This route would probably be a more reasonable undertaking in the pre-monsoon spring period.

The steep mixed south face of Rathong looks interesting, but has some sérac hazards. Its south-east ridge is a technical challenge which Julie-Ann and I tried in 2006 but ran out of weather and time. In November 2008, I returned with Owen Samuel for a second attempt. We reached around 6300m, but were deterred from continuing along the exposed crest of the ridge by very strong winds and low temperatures.

Near the snout of the Rathong glacier is the mountain base camp for the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling. Groups from HMI



138. Frey Peak (5830m), one of the permitted Alpine Peaks of West Sikkim.
(Roger Payne)



139. On Frontier Peak, 2006.
(Roger Payne)



140. Right: on the north-west ridge of Koptang. (Roger Payne)



141. Koptang north face. According to Harish Kapadia, the true high point of this 6147m peak still remains to be climbed. (Roger Payne)

Darjeeling train on the glaciers and peaks thereabouts, including the technical Frey Peak (5830m) that has had numerous ascents with the aid of fixed ropes. It is one of the peaks designated by the Government of Sikkim as an Alpine Peak, and on which other technical climbs would be possible. In 2004 two Spanish climbers (Alain Anders and Garo Azuke) were active in this area and climbed two technical routes on peaks they referred to as Tieng Kg (c6000m) and Phori (5837m) (see *American Alpine Journal*, 2004, Vol 46, p385).

Running parallel and to the east of the above peaks is the route of Sikkim's most popular trek: a five-day journey from the historic village of Yuksom to the Gocha La (Heaven's Gate). The other well-known trek in Sikkim is to 'Green Lake' on the Zemu glacier in north-west Sikkim. Although not actually green or much of a lake, the views of glaciers and high peaks are spectacular. Of historical note in this area are the journeys of Kekoo Naoroji in 1958. Naoroji, a former president of the Himalayan Club, made an excellent photographic record of his pioneering lightweight treks. Today, there is the enticing challenge of linking the Gocha La and Green Lake treks in a continuous journey via the Zemu Gap, which would be an interesting and adventurous journey around the south-east flank of Kangchenjunga. The crossing of the Zemu Gap developed some notoriety after a visit in 1938 by W H Tilman, and was attempted as a south to north crossing in spring 2008 by Adrian O'Connor, Colin Knowles and Jerzy Wiczorek.

Back to the west, as you rise above the dense forests above Yuksom and head towards the Gocha La, there are excellent views of Kangchenjunga, and to the east a group of fine looking alpine-scale peaks. The first of real note is the technical looking Narsing (5825m, first ascent Kellas, 1921) that is another sacred peak. Just north of this is Lama Lamani (c5700m),



142. On Koptang, 2006, with Rathong in the background. Both peaks offer opportunities for alpine-style first ascents. (Roger Payne)

Jopuno (5936m, first ascent Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association [SAMA], 2002) and Tinchengkang (6010m, first ascent Indo-British Army expedition 1998); the latter two being Alpine Peaks, for which it is easy to obtain permission.

In spring 2005, with Sagar Rai and Kunzang Bhutia (friends in SAMA who had climbed Jopuno in 2002) we made the first ascent of Lama Lamani, then made the third ascent (and first alpine-style) of Tinchengkang. Jopuno had its second ascent in spring 2008, and the first by its west ridge. The ridge was climbed in a day from a camp at c4200m by an American team of Josh Smith, Jason Halladay, Sam Gardner and Sarah Demay. These peaks offer good alpine-style ascents of around AD to D standard, and are destined to become classic climbs of the eastern Himalaya.

Further north again is the dramatic peak of Pandim (6691m), which attracted the attention of the early explorers, and more recently has had some confusingly reported attempts. Pandim has a superb looking technical west



143. Narsing (5825m), climbed by Alexander Kellas in 1921 and today designated a sacred summit. (*Roger Payne*)

ridge, but is another sacred summit. It is actually a group of summits, so perhaps in the future it may be possible to climb one of the lower peaks.

In West Sikkim, as in other areas of Sikkim, Indian mountaineers have been very active. Instructors from the mountaineering institutes, military groups, and members of the Himalayan Club and SAMA have all made important climbs. Some ascents have been accurately documented in the *Himalayan Journal* and elsewhere, others less well recorded, and some not recorded for security reasons. If Sikkim ever has a definitive guidebook of climbs, it will have been the outcome of some very diligent research.

Along the border, North and East

North of Kangchenjunga is Jongsang (7459m, first ascent by its north ridge in 1930 by G O Dyrenfurth's international expedition to Kangchenjunga), which is at the junction of the borders between Nepal, Tibet and Sikkim. The Sikkim-Tibet border runs to the east following the watershed over high peaks and passes to Pauhunri (7125m, first ascent in 1910 by Kellas) in Sikkim's north-east corner. Just south of Pauhunri are two virgin 7000m summits, then a ridge of un-named 6000m summits. Further south again, the peaks become lower and lead to the historic passes of Natu La (4310m, between Gangtok and Yatung in Tibet) and Jelep La (4374m, between Kalimpong and Yatung).

Permission to access the peaks and passes along the Sikkim-Tibet border has been extremely limited since the start of the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962. However, you can pick almost any mountain along the Sikkim-Tibet border and find an interesting climbing objective. In September 2004, a strong team organised by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF)

in New Delhi attempted the border peak of Chomoyummo (6829m). The leader was the highly respected and hugely experienced Dr P M Das, a vice president of the IMF, and included experienced instructors from the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute in Gangtok. The attempt ended in tragedy when Das and four others were killed in an avalanche.

At some stage access to the peaks on the Sikkim-Tibet border will become easier, which could launch a new 'golden age' of first ascents and new routes in this part of the Himalaya. Meanwhile, just away from the border is a ring of peaks that are easier to access, and offer very interesting climbing potential from the valleys of Lachung and Lachen.

Within the border

During World War II, British climbers were able to take leave in the region of Lachung and Lachen, and members of the Himalayan Club, including Trevor Braham, explored the area. It is a fascinating journey up from the steep, forested slopes of the Lachung valley, to reach open plains typical of the Tibetan plateau around Yume Samdong (4624m), and then cross the Sebu La (5352m) down to the open part of the Lachen valley, to then descend back south to steep valleys and forests. Such was the interest in making this journey that the Himalayan Club built huts either side of the Sebu La (both of which are now in ruins).

After 1962, apart from military expeditions, this area was closed. Then in 1976 Harish Kapadia and Zerkis Boga obtained permission to do the Sebu La trek. Twenty years later in 1996, an expedition led by Doug Scott (including Lindsay Griffin, Julian Freeman-Attwood, Skip Novak, Mark Bowen, Paul Crowther, Michael Clark, Col Balwant Sandhu and Suman Dubery) obtained permission for Gurudongmar (6715m) and Chombu (6362m).

Gurudongmar and the other peaks in the Kangchengo group have steep southern aspects; they are approached more easily from the north and have shorter ascents. While returning from the 1936 Everest expedition by crossing the Naku La (5270m), Shipton, Warren, Kempson and Wigram, in less than perfect weather, made what they thought to be the first ascent of Gurudongmar. Having read their account, it seems that they reached the lower west summit of Gurudongmar (6630m), which would make the first ascent of the main peak in 1980 (Assam Rifles led by Norbu Sherpa). However, to confuse matters, some Sikkim mountaineers think of the lower west summit as being the main summit (presumably because it was climbed first) and think of the higher summit as Gurudongmar East.

Chombu is described by Doug Scott as 'the Matterhorn or the Shivering-like peak of Sikkim'. It was explored in the 1940s and 1950s by members of the Himalayan Club. Apparently, there was an attempt in 1961, but according to Harish Kapadia, 'A definite ascent of this peak is yet to be established.'

A large part of Scott's article 'Exploration and Climbs in Northeast Sikkim' (*HJ*, 1997, Vol 53, pp53-66) is about the difficulty, high cost, and



144. Padim (6691m) attracted the attention of early explorers - a 'superb-looking' technical west ridge but a sacred summit. (*Roger Payne*)

uncertainty they experienced in connection with obtaining permission for the peaks. The team members were enterprising in their explorations, in what was then considered a high security area, but somewhat thwarted by bad weather and heavy snow on their efforts to climb Gurudongmar and Chombu. As an indication of how things have changed since 1996, the expedition's base camp at Yume Samdong (4624m) is now a very popular day trip by jeep from Lachung. While on a trip to the area in October 2007, in one day during a public holiday, 93 tourist jeeps and one motorcycle registered with the last police post to drive up to Yume Samdong (or 'Zero Point' as it is usually called locally).

Above Yumtang in the Lachung valley members of SAMA and groups from the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute have made a number of ascents. In the winter of 2004, the Lachung valley was also the scene of modern icefall climbing. Richard Durnan and friends from Colorado, Canada and Austria climbed many easy-to-access routes up to 180m long and up to WI5 and M5 in difficulty (see *AAJ*, 2004, Vol 46, p384.). As Durnan says: 'There is great potential for further development of ice climbing in this area.'

We first tried to visit North Sikkim in 2006 to attempt Gurudongmar (6715m), but could not get all the necessary clearances. However, in the autumn of 2007 we got permission for Brumkhangshe (5635m), which is one of the two Alpine Peaks in North Sikkim (the other being Lama Wangden (5868m) in the Lachen valley). We had such an enjoyable trip climbing three summits and exploring three glaciers that in autumn 2008 I returned with a larger group.

On both these trips we used a roadside base camp near the police post at

Shiv Mandir (marked as 3905m on the Swiss map 'Sikkim Himalaya'). In 2007, Julie-Ann and I climbed the north ridge of Brumkhangshe and what we called Brumkhangshe North (c5450m). The former is a very good snow climb with some avalanche considerations; the latter is easier angled with a short mixed step. In 2008, our group (Claire and Simon Humphris, Owen Samuel and Tom Midttun) repeated the north summit, and climbed a rocky summit above the glacier, which we called Ta (horse) Peak (c5300m) because to reach the summit required some 'a cheval' technique.

In 2007, Julie-Ann and I explored the Rula Kang glacier and took a close look at Chombu. We found the east face high in objective danger, and the northern aspects under too much 'interesting' snow (the north ridge of Chombu could be a good route in the pre-monsoon season, and the west face may offer an interesting challenge from the Lachen valley). Immediately east of Chombu's north-east ridge is what we called 'Eagle Peak' (c5540), which has a very good mixed south-west ridge and from the summit awesome views of the peaks in the Kangchengyao group. Of the other peaks around the Rula Kang glacier instructors from the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute have climbed Pheling (c5500m), an easy snow climb that we repeated in 2007. This peak is just south along the ridge from Chombu 'East' (5745m) which Doug Scott and team climbed in 1996 (crux of V with limited protection).

In 2008, we turned our attentions to the western branch of the Rula Kang glacier. Samuel and Midttun made the first ascent of a rocky peak we called Changma (bride) Peak (c5000) just above our camp. Then next day (with C and S Humphris and me) made the first ascent of Marpo (red) Peak (c5400m), which is a shapely peak of red rock to the south east of Chombu.

Into the light

There is a growing realization in India that the considerable potential for adventure travel and mountain tourism is being restrained by outdated regulations and bureaucracy. I hope that the interested organizations and government departments can work together and make better use of the potential for adventure tourism to support sustainable development, to learn from experience and best practice in other regions, and remove unnecessary obstacles to adventure tourism. It will not be easy to achieve this, but there are grounds for optimism.

The future for mountaineering and climbing in Sikkim looks very promising. The State Government has made it easier for foreign visitors to get access to some interesting peaks that are away from the borders. Meanwhile, the border areas are becoming less sensitive, and hopefully in the future tourism and mountain recreation can resume. The tourism service providers in the capital Gangtok are very friendly and reliable, and are being supported by the Ministry of Tourism and the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association. Together, they are expanding their capacity to provide services to international tourists and mountain recreationists, and at the same time promoting sustainable development in mountain



145. Rathong south face and south-west ridge. (*Roger Payne*)

regions. Hence, climbers and mountaineers in Sikkim are developing their skills and knowledge, helping with local guide training, and giving opportunities to young people in Sikkim to enjoy climbing and mountaineering. With limited resources, SAMA has been doing an excellent job.

For so long enveloped in the mists of border tensions and access restrictions, happily, the sublime mountains of Sikkim are now very definitely emerging from those mists, and the future looks bright.

The Alpine Peaks of Sikkim:

West Sikkim: Frey Peak 5830m (Chaurikeyang valley)

Tinchenkang 6010m (Thansing valley)

Jopuno 5936m (Thansing valley)

North Sikkim: Lama Wangden 5868m (Lachen)

Brumkhangse 5635m (Yumthang)

Regulations for the Alpine Peaks are published in the Sikkim Government Gazetteer, No 83, 29 March 2006 (go to http://sikkim.gov.in/asp/Misc/sikkim_govtgazettes/GAZ/GAZ2006/gaz2006.pdf and scroll to page 90).

Reports of Julie-Ann Clyma's and Roger Payne's trips to Sikkim can be found at www.rogerpayne.info/climbing.htm (these contain contact details for Sikkim Holidays, Treks and Expeditions and the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association).

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146.

Yume Samdong. A sign of changed times. In 1996 Yume Samdong was the base camp for Doug Scott's Sikkim expedition. Today it is popular picnic spot for jeep-borne day-trippers from Lachung. (Roger Payne)