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Looking from P6261 over to Kyashar and Kang Taiga.

AACZ Kyashar Expedition 2003

Climbing new routes in the Himalaya isn't what it used to be. Gone are the grainy postcards, magnifying glasses for inspecting minuscule background peaks in shots of or from something more famous, and the rumours on the grapevine. Nowadays you get on the internet, open 2 browsers and surf; one of the browsers is a search engine and the other the BMC Himalayan Index, which lists every recorded attempt on every peak. In fact Bruce used the old approach sometime in the last century to find that Peak 41, also known as Real Mera, was still unclimbed, and that the W Face looked like it would go if one could get to the base. The new approach made its presence felt when a Finnish team which tried the peak in 2000 put much of their information on the web. In April 2003, just as we were getting serious about organising a trip there, the web informed us that the face had been climbed by a Slovenian party in Dec 2002.

Back at the drawing board, in the first window we opened the list of 103 "New Peaks Opened to Expedition" by HM Government of Nepal two years ago (the one which had told us that Peak 41 was at least now legal). Lurking under the name "Kyashar" was the long-coveted Peak 43, familiar to any trekker on the Mera La, although HMG Ministry of Tourism had helpfully muddied the waters by listing P6770 in the upper Hongu as "Peak 43". The back side of the mountain had never been explored, or at least never reported on and, to the best of our search engine's knowledge, never photographed. With the irrational conviction that something must be possible, we switched horses in mid-race.

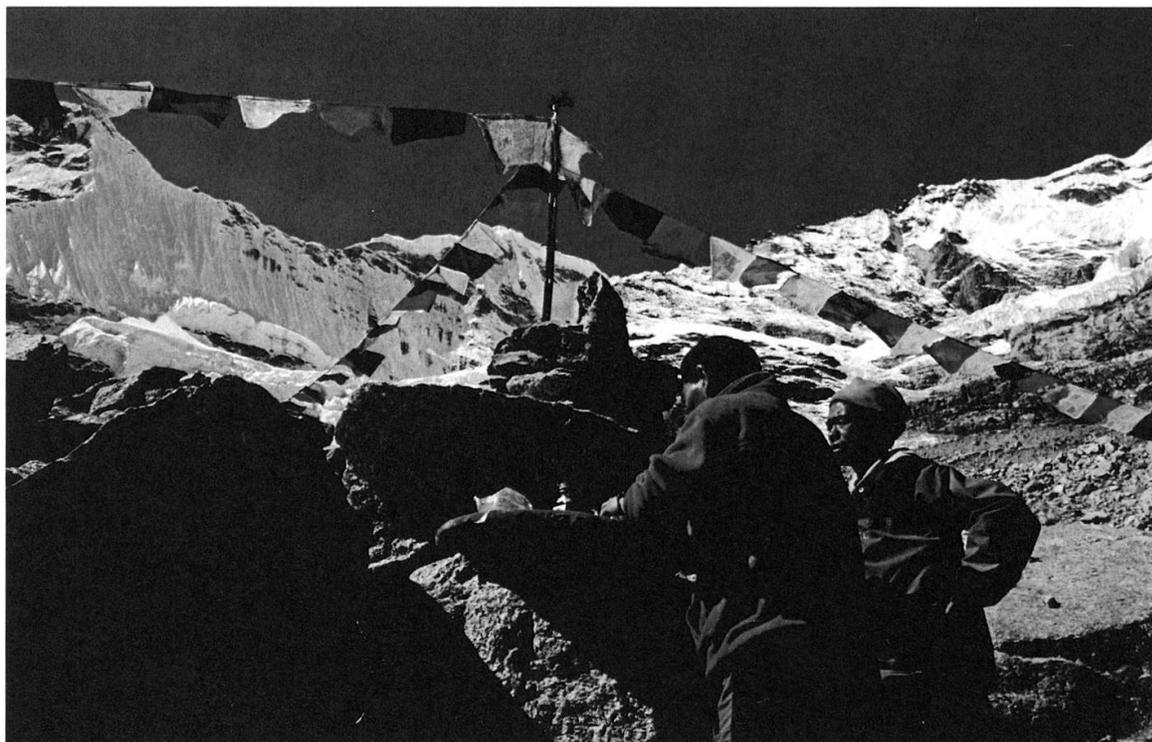
The internet has also taken all the uncertainty out of expedition planning:

months of waiting for exchanged letters, or hours of expensive attempts to obtain international 'phone connections to Kathmandu, have been replaced by e-mail. Ang Phurba Sherpa at Wilderness Experience had the reply to every minor detail within a day, and his instructions on all the major details assured us that our project was in capable hands. With the permit, the LO, the flights to Lukla, the sirdar and cook, the porter equipment and insurance for the staff under control, the expedition was free to worry itself about how many chocolate bars can be smuggled on a 20kg baggage allowance.

An expedition starts when the leader arrives in Kathmandu, essentially because the trekking agency needs a warm body to show to the Department of Tourism. Bruce's warm body was picked up at the airport, whisked to WildEx to be told when to present itself for this single, all-important appointment, and then delivered to our hotel to confer with Kevin, who'd been soaking up the atmosphere on a less compressed schedule. Within 10 minutes of arrival we were called by the irrepressible Elizabeth Hawley, who wanted a briefing the following morning on what we were up to. We wandered the streets of Thamel to find fixed rope, antibiotics, iodine and money: in modern KTM this comes from ATMs, but only in denominations unfit for showing to porters, so Bruce found himself changing greenbacks for stacks of cash rupees in the time-honoured fashion.

In as much as she seems happy about anything, Miss Hawley seemed happy to see us; maybe any group which has maps and pictures to explain itself, and isn't among the 36 teams on Cho Oyu or 20 on Ama Dablam, is already guaranteed to meet with her approval. The next item of business was to equip the expedition: the leader's minimalist principles didn't permit leaving this to an agency which would bring the standard metal tables and chairs and canvas base camp tents, and his Scottish principles didn't permit paying for the privilege of carrying it all, so beyond renting a kitchen from WildEx we'd undertaken to deal with this ourselves. Our sirdar and cook would be Dhan Kumar Rai, whose first impression was quiet and whose second was competent. In 21st C Kathmandu one doesn't scour individual stalls for tea, rice, flour, sugar and the other staples, one goes to the supermarket at Bhat Bhateni and buys the whole lot in one go. Dhan Kumar had a clear idea of what we could leave until Lukla, and what we'd need from KTM despite the excess baggage cost. He took the 5 boxes of provisions back to WildEx before heading off in search of cheese, butter and kerosene lanterns, leaving us feeling mildly useless already. In the afternoon the leader was duly presented to the appropriate undersecretary at the Dept. of Tourism, the permit was printed, two signatures were exchanged, and the expedition was finished in Kathmandu within 24 hours of "starting".

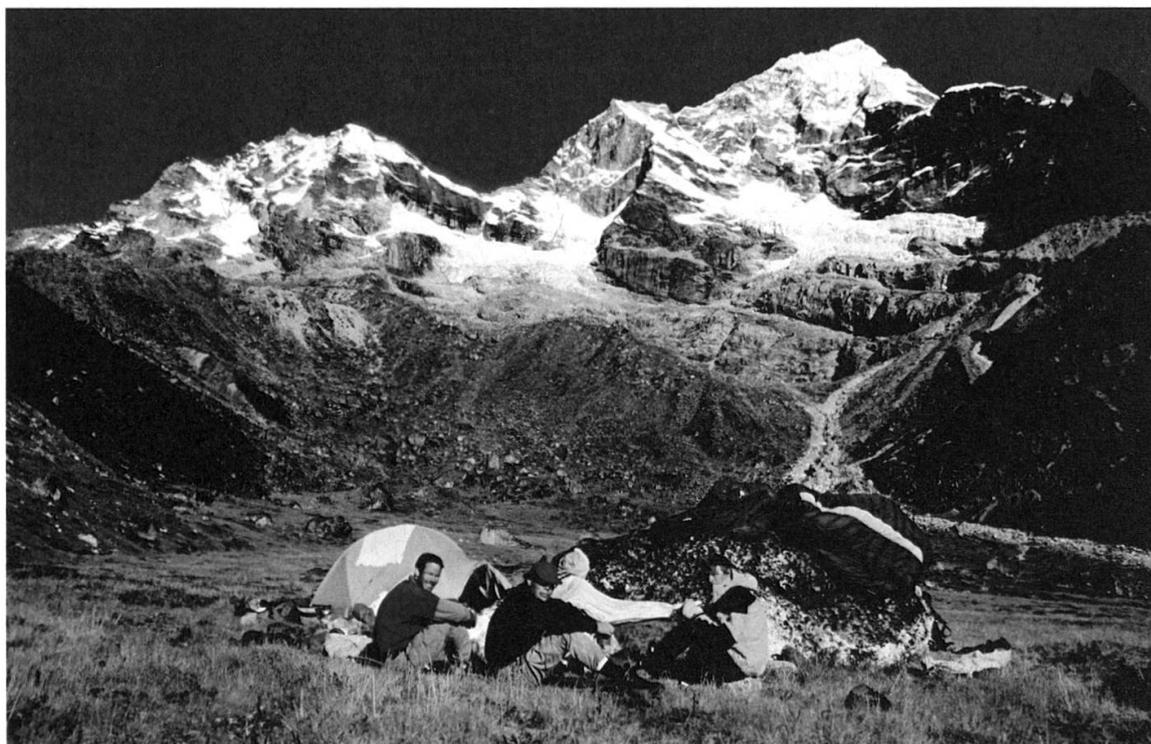
Bruce and Kevin were due to fly to Lukla the following morning, missing



Tenzing and Dhan Badr working on the puja after setting up the prayer flags.

the arriving Andi and Sam somewhere at the airport, but at night Kevin suffered an impressive attack of Kathmandu quickstep. At dawn Bruce found himself lining up alone for the Lukla flight, at least until Dhan Kumar appeared with the lanterns. To nobody's great surprise or disappointment our liaison officer (LO), who had shown his face at the Department the previous day, had reportedly gone missing in action. LOs are an endangered species, both metaphorically due to irrelevance and literally because, as government employees, they are persona non grata with the Maoist rebels who control most of the countryside. They have always been persona non grata with climbers, for whom the best solution is still when they stay in Kathmandu, thereby costing the expedition "only" 1500USD (i.e. no surplus for flights, food, shelter and portage).

The flight was as uneventful as any other roller-coaster ride in a prop-driven sardine can with touchdown on an inverted ski-jump surrounded by armed soldiers. Half the baggage was soon in WildEx's Lukla Base Camp, The Sherpa Lodge, and the mysterious disappearance of the other half was solved when our second staff member and assistant cook, Pasang Namgyal Sherpa, showed up - he'd intercepted it before Bruce and Dhan Kumar had left the



Basecamp with Kevin, Bruce, and Sam (from left).

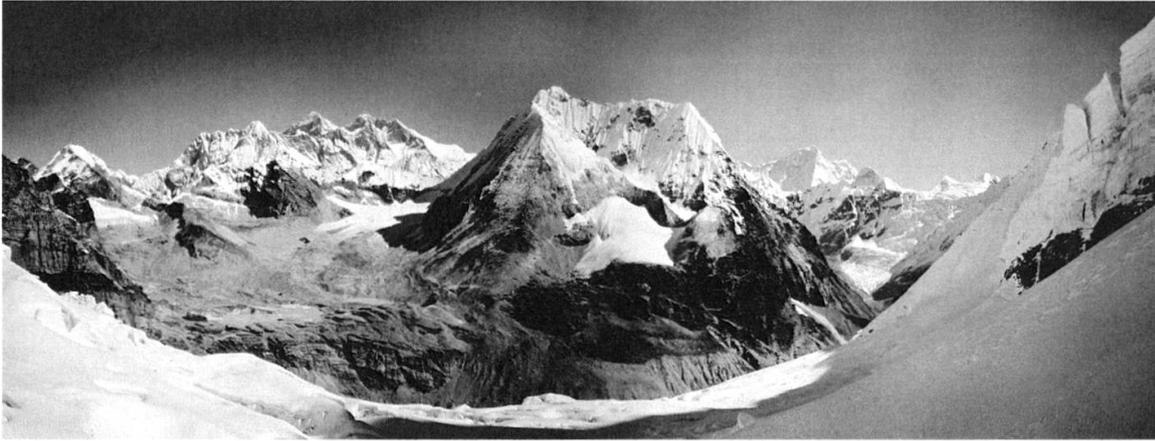
tarmac. As a sunny morning lapsed into a cloudy day, the three wandered the street of Lukla buying the rest of the food and vegetables, kerosene, baskets and polyethene strips for porter “raincoats”, and finally the essential prayer flags. As it became more obvious what he was doing, Dhan Kumar was surrounded by men looking for porter work, and soon had “enough” carrying capacity. On the following morning Andi, Sam and a recovered Kevin were on the second flight, so the team united for the first time on Nepalese soil in an orgy of equipment, packing and repacking. Dhan Kumar couldn’t think of any reason to stay where we were, apparently because the porters were anxious to get started, so the expedition was on the trail by early afternoon, a mere 30 hours since Andi and Sam had arrived in the country.

The trek to the Hinku begins with a steep climb of the 4600m Zawtra La. Our acclimatisation policy was to get over it at speed and worry about the altitude nearer base camp; this seemed just fine for our 13 porters too, despite their 30kg loads being about twice what we were carrying. Clouds on the first afternoon lapsed into mist, and finally to rain after dark, by which time we were camped on the only flat spot on the hillside not already occupied by a herder’s hut. The following morning we awoke in four water-beds un-

derstanding why. This day repeated the weather pattern of its predecessor as we walked into mist at the pass, then rain by early afternoon. A sodden and bedraggled crew descended upon Tuli Kharka, the first herder's hut-cum-teahouse on the Hinku side, to while away the day listening to the rain fall. Aspertions were cast on Bruce's statement that the monsoon didn't need to finish before 1st Oct, now 30 hours away. Even to the most discerning eye the next day was no different, except in that the route led us down slippery trails and across rushing streams in a moss-hung cloud forest. Although in principle the second half of the day was on the valley floor, the trail continued climbing and dropping steeply on the west bank of the Hinku until finally we arrived at the river in Tashing Ongma, a small village by a terrace offering a few fields. The houses were decorated with Maoist grafitti, more, it seemed, for appearances than out of conviction. Dhan Kumar brightened the evening by baking a cake for Kevin's 32nd birthday.

The leader's prophesy was vindicated when 1st Oct arrived with blue skies, although these soon clouded up as cumulus obscured the peaks. The trail wound through the boulder-strewn river bed, scoured by a moraine collapse which had released most of the water from the Sabai Tsho (lake at the eastern base of Kyashar) 7 years previously, and then up onto real, grassy meadows. Here we were greeted by real sunshine, which warmed the bodies and spirits of the party immeasurably: smiles had been in short supply among our porters in the last few days, but broke out now along with piles of soaking wet gear needing to be dried off. The basking was even interrupted by one fleeting glimpse of the very summit of Kyashar, which towers over this part of the valley, but the show was not to be repeated that day. We wandered on up to the village of Tangnag (meaning: black rock), at the foot of a huge, black rock buttress which forms the lower half of Kyashar, known in the Hinku as Tangnagtse. Half of the porters played cards with Dhan Kumar while, to the delight of the local children, the other half played volleyball with us.

True post-monsoon weather arrived with a spectacular sunrise on Kusum Kanguru and Kyashar. The summit of the latter, approximately 2.5km straight above us, consisted of a set of seracs breaking over the vertical walls of the upper S and SE faces, whose huge, compact buttresses instantly showed both the appeal of the peak and the reason it was still unclimbed. The morning's trek took us over the glacial outwash zone of the Sabai Tsho and up to a cirque below the N face of Mera, dominated every step of the way by the triangular SE face of Kyashar. Our enthusiasm was somewhat muted by the view of the NE face as it came briefly into view: steep snow flutes and mushrooms, with not inconsiderable sections of bare rock. At this point our route diverged from the Mera La trail, heading N along the lower Hinku Nup glacier. The western moraine provided easy going but no good camp sites, leading us



Our acclimatization peak P6261 just in front of Malanphulan (P6571), to the left of it is Lhotse, Everest, Amadablam and Nuptse, to the right of it is Makalu.

to spend our last night before base camp (BC) rather higher and drier than intended, but with beautiful views of the Malanphulan group at the head of the glacier, the Peak 41 group across it and Mera to the S.

We were also left high and dry by the western moraine, which ceased to exist at the corner from which the upper glacier, BC and the full, commanding bulk of Kangtega were visible. None of the porters had been here before, and none were quite ready for the steep, loose descent to and uncertain route-finding through the last 2km of the glacier. However, any hint of mutiny was avoided, if only because the money was with the leader and the lists with the sirdar, both of whom were at the front making a trail. A slightly muted but evidently relieved team pulled into Kangtega BC, flat and with abundant running water, by early afternoon, and spirits were restored in short order by the big rupee payout: 4500Rs (c. 70USD) each for a nominal 10 days of work, 6 up and the rest back. We tried to thank the porters as much as they thanked us, hands were shaken, pictures taken, and 11 of them left to make it back to Tangnag in daylight. Two of our porters were evidently more equal than the others: Tenzing Sherpa, who was in fact an expedition cook by trade, and Dhan Badr Rai, who seemed to be the eldest and the de facto boss. They had helped with the kitchen work during the trek and now stayed to help set up BC. Soon five small, coloured flecks were decorating the otherwise stark landscape.

The first order of BC business on the next day was to make sure the gods would look fondly on our presence in their mountains: Tenzing took charge of the puja, for which he first erected a small chorten with the help of Dhan Kumar and Dhan Badr. Some of our delicacies - sweets, biscuits, apples, Aus-

tralian power bars and Kathmandu-bought Toblerone chocolate - were produced for the tray of offerings, as was a bottle of Mt. Everest whisky. Dhan Kumar had brought some sprigs of juniper from the last stand of vegetation, and these were now burned to appropriate incantations as the prayer flags were sanctified by the smoke. After a break to set up the 3 strands of prayer flags, the process was repeated for the offerings while a little holy water (the whisky) was sprinkled around. Tenzing then offered the edibles all around, while nobody noticed what had happened to the drinkables. After the ceremony Tenzing and Dhan Badr took their leave, the former to join a trek as the official cook and the latter to round up 7 porters and return on the 20th. We spent the rest of the day unpacking and inspecting equipment, and rearranging it in the dining/storage tent ready for imminent use. Andi decided to give the gods one chance fewer to annoy us, by performing some excavation works on the river to reduce the flood risk on our gravel bar. Bruce and Sam took a short walk up the moraines leading towards the Kangtega Glacier, which formed the access to our route.

Andi's first acclimatisation suggestion lay across the glacier from our target, where P6261 offered the single quickest way to inspect the NE side of Kyashar. Thus the next morning found us picking our way up the extremely steep and unstable moraine to the east of BC. Having separated to avoid kicking rocks on each other, we then displayed admirable team spirit and communication by splitting into 2 pairs, with Bruce and Kevin heading across a pocket-sized glacier to the SE Ridge while Andi and Sam went straight up the SW Ridge. While the second pair were eventually turned back by steep terrain and a lack of conviction that going so high so soon was intelligent, the first pair were unable to resist an open road to the top after climbing a short but unexpectedly steep and loose rock band. All of us got a good, long look at the impressive E face of Kangtega, the daunting NE face of Kyashar and the unstable N Face of the col marked 6034m which we'd have to climb to get to the base of Kyashar. Bruce and Kevin got the added bonus of looking over to Ama Dablam, Everest and Lhotse, just visible past Malanphulan. On the descent the pair negotiated the rock band and steep moraines without problems, but on the least steep talus slope Bruce scraped a little finger across a boulder while jumping off a turning rock, somehow sustaining a completely displaced fracture of the tip which would later require surgery to repair. Back in BC he taped it to the neighbouring finger and went on with the expedition.

The next item on the agenda was to get to a high camp suitable for inspecting the N Face of col 6034m, and for a more serious acclimatisation exercise on the slopes on Kangtega. With Bruce and Kevin resting, Andi and Sam undertook a lightly loaded reconnaissance trip up the moraines W of BC, S across a snow ramp and onto the rock arete from which they could look



Clouds on Kusum Kanguru. (Bruce Normand)

down on the Kangtega Glacier icefall. By a careful mixture of luck and good judgement they found a straightforward access ramp which led across the slope of the arete and onto the glacier exactly at the top of the icefall, thus unlocking the door to the upper slopes. They took a short walk on the glacier to be sure that there were plenty sites for a camp, and were back in BC for dinner. The very next day, with Bruce still trying to shake a cold and Sam opting for a rest, Andi and Kevin returned to high camp with enough food and equipment to spend a comfortable night. They were up at the crack of dawn for an inspection of the upper Kangtega Glacier, going far enough to get a clear view of the summit, but not managing to see any more of the N or W side of Kyashar. Bruce and Sam shouldered the rest of the gear and joined them at high camp, both pairs arriving simultaneously at the exact moment that the thickening clouds began to drop snow. High clouds had been gathering for the previous two days, indicating increasing moisture in the air, so we waited only a token 30 minutes to establish that this was no shower, and descended to BC to dry out and wait.

The snow continued overnight and for much of the next day. Although only 5-10cm landed at BC, impressive avalanche sounds came ripping out of the clouds from all angles. Dhan Kumar had no problems lifting morale under the circumstances, plying us endlessly with hot fluid and coming up with a high-altitude pizza for dinner. He also put an end to our surreptitious debate about whether the staff would object to a technically illegal climb of Kangtega while we were right under it: "Guys - since your mountain looks so hard why not climb Kangtega instead ? An LO might be concerned, but it doesn't matter to me ...". Evening saw some shafts of sun through the clouds. The next day was bright and blue again, but would have to be a camp-bound one while the snow began to melt and stabilise. Significant amounts of laundering and eating were accomplished, and the snowline had receded impressively by late afternoon. However, some of the fluted snow faces around us, which seemed to change on a daily basis, also began to show a disconcerting tendency simply to peel off the rock beneath. The following day saw us breaking trail back to high camp, where 30cm of new snow had collapsed the tent, albeit with minimal damage. We spent a lazy afternoon in the reflector oven of the glacier, and were in bed by sunset.

Dawn found Bruce and Andi breaking a new trail through 30-40cm of new snow, first to the back of the flat section of the glacier below the impressive N end of the Kyashar ridge, and then more steeply up through a zone of large crevasses. At one which appeared to cut the entire 1km width of the glacier they climbed a short, steep wall through its left end, only to see a bridge at its right end for Kevin and Sam to use. The teams reconvened on a shoulder at 6400m with the day's first view of Everest, Lhotse and Ama Dablam, whence



Kevin with Kyashar behind. (Bruce Normand)

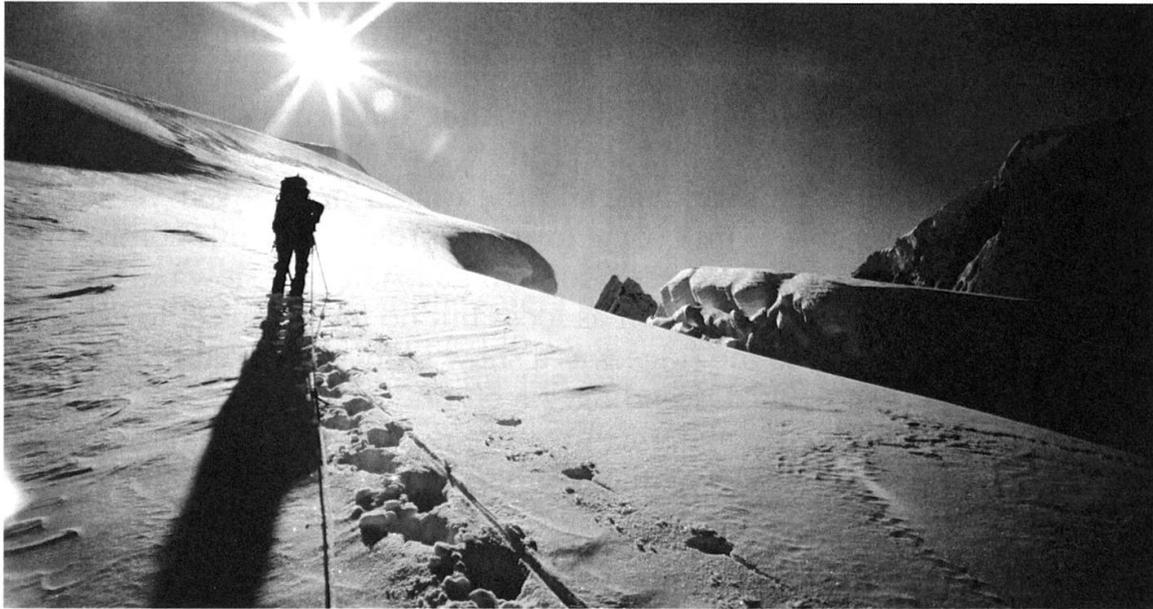
Andi led the most miserable, thigh-deep section of the day to a saddle below the summit pyramid. At this point Kevin decided he was not happy with the prospect of technical climbing above 6500m, so he elected to watch the rest of the show from here. Bruce led the 4 pitches of 60 degree ice and firm snow in a small avalanche path, belaying the others to the upper shoulder from the security of a deep hole in the powder snow. On the grounds that permits are in any case issued to be on a route, not a summit, there didn't seem to be any redeeming value in stopping here, so the team then finished the last 100m up the summit ridge, arriving on the top at 3pm. The only cloud up in the sky was a wisp over Everest, so the 3 were treated to panoramic vistas in all directions: on the northern skyline every 8000er from Shishapangma to Kangchenjunga, in the middle distance landmarks like Taweche, Pumori, Baruntse and Chamlang, by our feet Thamserku, Ama Dablam, Malanphulan and Kusum Kanguru, and an endless sea of clouds out over the Terai. The summit pictures all used the Everest/Lhotse/Makalu backdrop. Still, the bulk of the attention was focussed on Kyashar, dominating the view to the S and looking as forbidding as ever from the N and NE. Andi spent some time glassing the W Ridge, now visible almost in its entirety for the first time. After 30 minutes of this the three retraced their steps down the ridge and snowface, then were happy to follow as Kevin rebroke the blown-in trail down the glacier and back to camp shortly after nightfall.

The morning after featured a crack-of-noon start, before which there was time for plenty discussion on Kyashar. Our consensus was clear: the N side might be climbable but it certainly isn't protectable in post-monsoon snow conditions. To put a final nail in the coffin, Andi and Bruce walked over from high camp to inspect the N face of col 6034m, failing even to get to the start of the steep stuff due to unexpected avalanche danger on the final slopes below the face, which was washed by a steady and worrying stream of ice spicules. This game was over. We packed up and headed down to BC, where Dhan Kumar had baked a Kangtega cake with some of the expedition apples.

The next day was a rest day, which we used to consider the options and refine a plan. Andi, Bruce and Sam had no problem with the idea of trying the W Ridge. Logistically, this would mean a single, alpine-style bid from Tangnag, leaving the clearing of Kangtega BC to Dhan Kumar and Pasang, whom we would meet with the porters in Tangnag at the end. Legally, Bruce thought that changing routes on the same mountain required a 25% surcharge on the permit, which was something we were prepared to face (this regulation was probably rescinded in the early 90s when too many teams used it as a loophole to get onto the regular route on Everest). However, in the absence of an LO to consult, we'd climb first and ask questions later, or just wait until people asked us.



Andi and Sam in the summit snow face. (Bruce Normand)



Rest stop from trail breaking. (Andreas Frank)

The following morning was filled by a slow and careful packing exercise, at the end of which we shouldered distressingly heavy packs and left BC in Dhan Kumar's capable hands. The upper Hinku Nup seemed even worse in the other direction, and a test of the high road via the moraine (Andi and Bruce) vs. the low road via the glacier (Kevin and Sam) proved only that both were equally malevolent. We descended to Dig Kharka, the meadow below the N Face of Mera, for our first night on grass in 2 weeks. In the morning Kevin set off for Khare, where he joined an Australian trekking group as stand-in assistant guide and made an ascent of Mera. Andi, Bruce and Sam made good time down to Tangnag, stopping only long enough to stock up on kerosene and milk powder, then made excruciatingly slow progress up the morainal slopes to the west of the village, finding a bivouac spot on the only flat rock in a boulderscape around a miniature lake. The next day began at 1am with a hurried breakfast and a disorientated stagger across the last boulder fields to the base of the huge S Face. The sole aim was to climb 800m of snow slopes directly under this face, despite the crippling weight of the packs, before the sun came up and rocks began to fall. Sunrise found the group climbing out of the last narrow ice gully between the face and the seracs of the neighbouring glacier, emerging onto low-angle, sunlit slopes below the 5800m col separating Kyashar from Kusum Kanguru. A flat, windless spot 50m below the col made the ideal location for a rest stop, for the new high camp, and for admiring the S Face and W Ridge. The part of the ridge

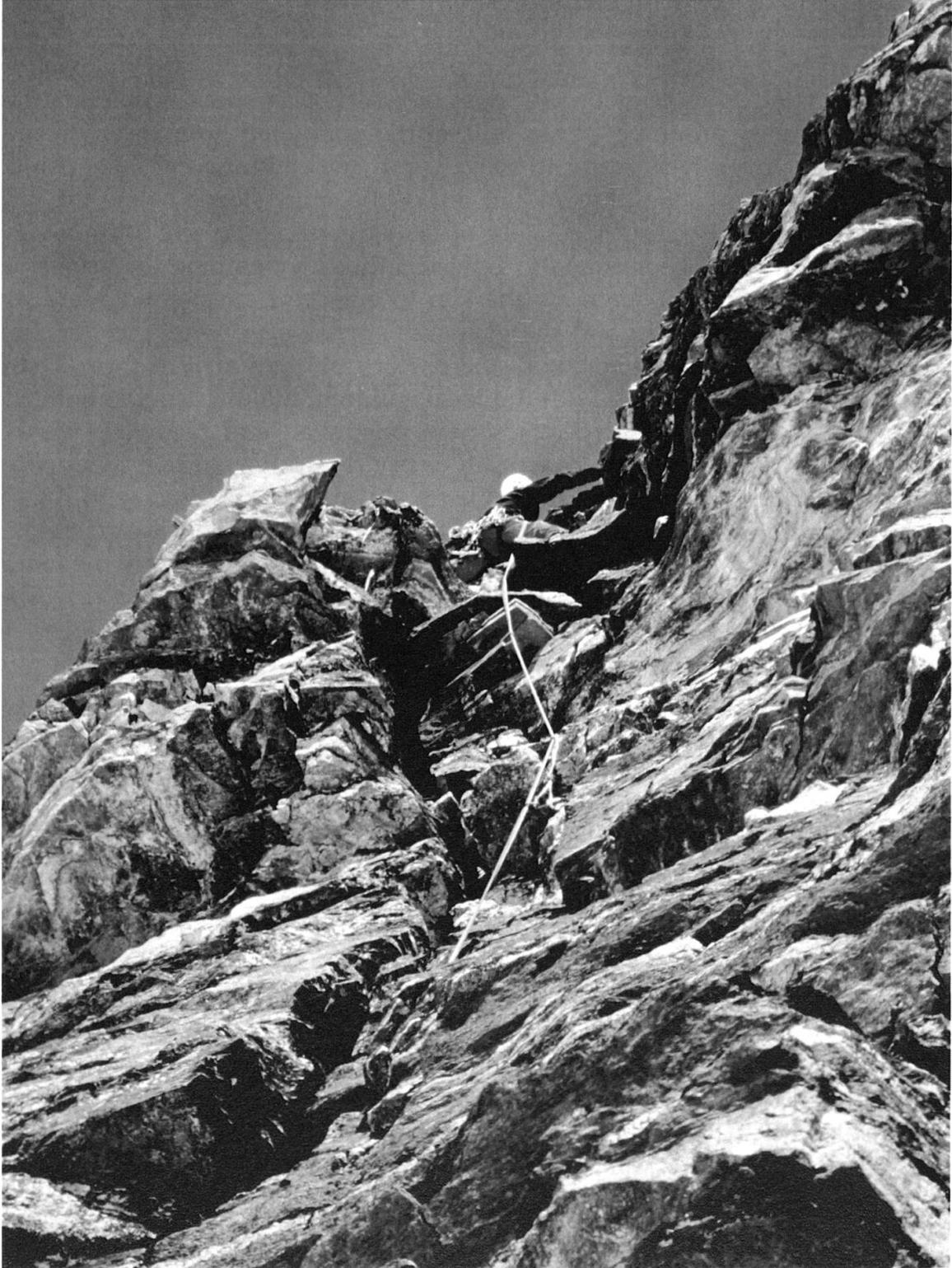
visible from Kangtega was separated from the col by a 100m rock step, definitely vertical in places and of decidedly dubious-looking quality. Leaving Sam to recover from the morning's work, Andi and Bruce saddled up with the 2 ropes and the rock rack and set off for a look at this obstacle. The rock quality turned out to be execrable, and the easiest line indeed vertical for 25m, but Bruce was able to find some forms of protection while contributing liberally to natural erosion processes for two painstakingly slow pitches. The two climbed a third pitch, every bit as loose but no longer steep, to establish that the rest of the way to the ridge was a snow gully, then fixed the ropes on the first two pitches while descending. As on previous days, rising cumulus on a cool west wind was making its presence felt on the S side of the mountains, but was gone by sundown; the weather looked to be set fair for summit day.

This got off to an inauspicious start, with the team taking twice the expected time to jumar the fixed ropes, but by 8am it was on the W Ridge and reconfiguring for a snow slog. The ridge looked corniced and unpleasant, but turned out to be relatively straightforward: strong melting on the S side meant that the footing was mostly firm, except where it was simply too steep and tracks had to be made on the deep, soft N side. Bruce broke trail and found snow-stake protection for the long, steepening traverse, bringing the party to 6400m shortly after noon. At this point the W Ridge becomes steep and rocky, and the route lies in the couloirs of the W Face, reached by crossing left and stepping over the bergschrund. The couloir began as soft snow for one pitch, but turned to perfect neve for most of the next three, letting Bruce, leading on a single line, find good ice-screw protection (and later Andi, leading the descent, set good Abalakov anchors). The couloir turned back to firm snow to pass the narrowest point between the exposed rock sections of the upper face, and then finished by broadening into a (painfully) long, 50 degree summit snow slope. As Bruce kicked the final steps onto the flat summit ridge he found himself 20 horizontal metres from the highest point, and brought up Andi and Sam, who caught their breath while the leader probed his way gingerly onto the true summit. It turned out not to be a cornice, so the team gathered on the highest point. Time-check: 4pm. Ritual handshakes were exchanged and photos taken, but enjoyment of the view, which was every bit as impressive as from Kangtega, was curtailed by the cold, west wind and by the sure knowledge of being only half-way there as regards safety. One look down the NE Face was enough to be certain that the final route choice was not a mistake. After some compulsory food and drink the team headed back into the W Face and the lowering sun. Night fell in the couloirs of the upper face, but the footprints on the ridge were clear to follow, and the anchors in the rock band were in place. At 1am the group was back

at high camp, where Sam manfully kept the stove alight until hydration and thawing had been achieved all round.

Descent below the S Face would require a 3am start, so safety as well as torpor dictated a 24 hour break, most of which was spent semi-comatose and in distinctly prone positions. Still, at the appointed hour the following morning the group was ready to strike camp and, with two abseils, passed the serac narrows to walk down and out of the snow slopes below the face, admiring the sunrise from the safety of the earlier bivouac site. With a view to breakfast the three continued to Tangnag, thus condemning themselves to a frozen 1.5 hour wait there for the sun to emerge from behind Mera. By the time the sun was up and the gear was spread everywhere to dry, first Kevin and then Dhan Kumar with the porter train had arrived from Khare. We passed the day playing with the local children, making trouble with the volleyball and talking with Kevin's new Australian and Nepalese friends. From them we learned that practically every expedition in the valley after our one had been met near Tashing Ongma by some gentlemen with AK47s to be hit up for a "donation" to the Maoist cause: 1000Rs per foreign trekker and 500Rs per porter. Popular support was not in evidence among the locals. Sam's hand, injured by a well-placed stone from Bruce during the abseils in the rock band, had started to swell, stiffen and hurt, and was diagnosed as broken by a stream of attentive female doctors; however, after 10 days of care it had effected a considerable recovery, and was later found to be "only" a contusion. We planned to finish our expedition by trekking over the Mera La and Amphu Labsta to the Khumbu, and thence back to Lukla, so spent the afternoon reconfiguring our loads and those of the porters. They and Dhan Kumar were in any event leaving the next morning to get back to Lukla, and thereafter either home to their families for the Diwali (New Year) holiday or straight out on another trek to earn more high-season income. Dhan Kumar marked the occasion with a Kyashar cake, featuring icing-sugar snow and seracs over steep, red-walled sponge.

The next morning we had our last hearty breakfast from Pasang, bade farewell and distributed tips all around, then, some time after the very late sunrise, shouldered packs which still seemed painfully heavy. The perfect weather and views of Kyashar were some consolation to our ill-rested frames as we made heavy weather of the Mera La, stopping to camp just beyond it on the first rocks of the Hongu side. For our sightseeing detour to Mera we elected to start at dawn, rather than at 3am as the guided groups seem to prefer, and so enjoyed the warmth and spectacular vistas, as well as the singular delight of walking on a beaten trail, all the way. Passing the first trekking team just below the summit, Bruce arrived on top to find to his disgust that the "trekking summit" Mera E is fractionally lower than Mera



Bruce exiting the vertical section of the rock step. (Andreas Frank)



Sam cleaning gear on W Ridge. (Andreas Frank)

W, which hides Kyashar completely; without breaking step he carried on down and across the last half km to the true summit. Mera is indeed worth its billing as the viewpoint of the E Nepalese Himalaya, and we burned a shameful amount of film on everything from Kyashar, at eye-level just across the way, to Kangchenjunga. Again the stiff wind forced an eventual retreat, and back at camp we definitely had time to pack up and head further into the Hongu in search of greener pastures.

The Hongu was not quite a world apart from the crowds of the Mera trek, as the loop over the Amphu Labsta to the Khumbu is becoming quite popular (although it remains to be seen how long this will last as melting snow causes the pass to become too difficult for porters). We met a successful team returning from Baruntse, and passed an Anglo-Italian trekking group with 28 porters, but reserved most of our interest for the view back to Mera, the fluted E Face of Peak 41, the impressive bulk of Chamlang, and then the view in the upper valley to Everest and Lhotse beyond the pass. However, the last were soon disappearing again in clouds and obviously high winds sweeping in from the west, and as Chamlang and the false Peak 43 (P6770) beside and behind us vanished, our optimism was waning. A cold night didn't help, but in



Sam and Bruce show our gratitude to the AACZ. (Andreas Frank)

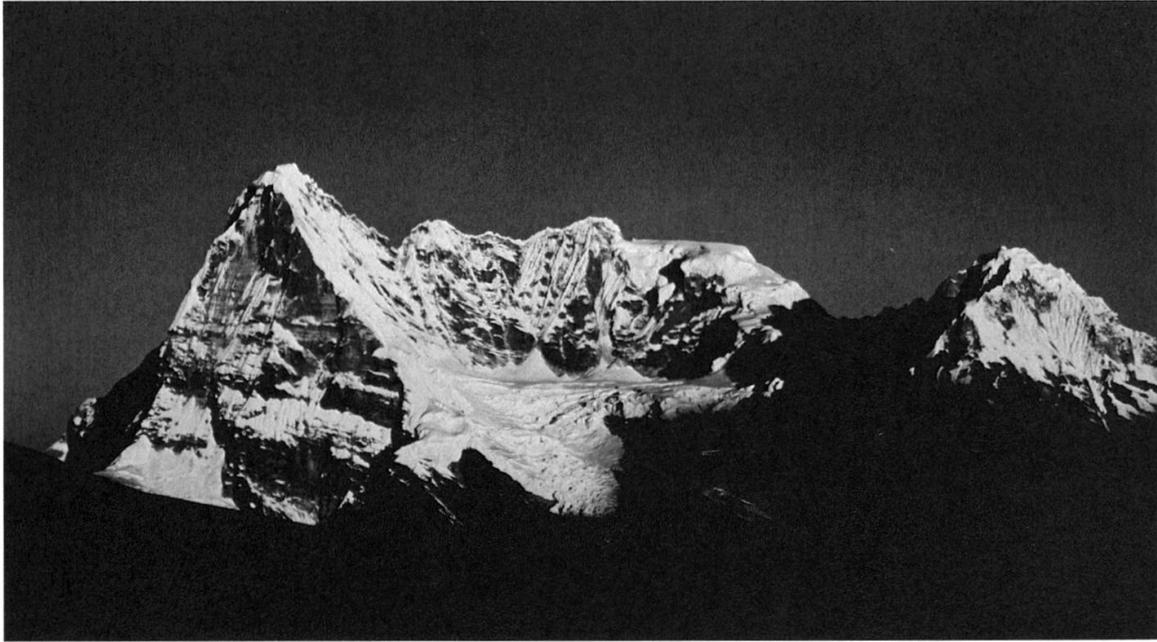
the morning there were only 5cm of snow on the ground. The Anglo-Italian porters came by on afterburn, clearly not at all enthusiastic at the prospect of being caught on the wrong side of the Amphu Labsta with, as it turned out, only a day's supply of food remaining. We weren't too entranced at the idea either, especially after their sirdar had given us his forecast "it is end of old moon - three, four days bad weather", and were soon breaking trail for their team in returning snow. While the valiant porters were ultimately stymied by their weak clients, we pushed on to something which seemed like the pass but was certainly not porter terrain. Andi and Kevin broke trail through much loose snow on loose boulders, and from the top Bruce was dropped on a rope to clear off the avalanching overlayer. At nightfall we were off the manifestly unsafe slopes N of the pass, and pitched camp on what looked to be a lake bed.

The morning had brought 40cm of new snow, and special misery to the self-sacrificing Kevin, who had again bivouacked outside rather than try to squeeze 4 into the tent. Andi led the unexpectedly long and tedious process of breaking a trail down to the main valley and along to Chukkung, during which we admired our feet and the heavily falling snowflakes rather than

the grandeur of the Lhotse Wall, Ama Dablam and Taweche. When at last we found another trail it was in places perilously slippery, and we spent the last km into Chukkung helping a porter with treadless rubber boots and no raincoat back to his feet with his monstrous, head-mounted load every time it pulled him over. The second half of the day was spent drying out in a lodge in Chukkung, avoiding thinking about our missing out on final views from Island Peak, and then hoping that the evening clearing spell really meant better for the next day.

In fact the sirdar had not been far wrong, and early morning sun soon disappeared. Still, nobody felt like waiting for a day to see what would happen, so we continued through snow and into mud at Dingboche, where we stopped to soak up some sun and a festival of songs by the local schoolchildren, who were gathering funds to expand their school from one classroom to two. More mud and rain followed us down to Pangboche, where right on cue the clouds evaporated to reveal the standard view of Ama Dablam in all its glory, to be followed by Everest and Lhotse reappearing at the head of the valley. We lingered for long enough that the clouds had returned by the time we reached a cold, damp Tengboche. However, the morning revealed the temple and its location in their true autumnal colours, with sharp, blue sky highlighting every detail of the monastery architecture and the surrounding peaks. We took in the morning service, watched monks at work and saw a surprisingly fit-looking "injured" trekker jump into a helicopter for evacuation before taking to the trail again. The hike down to the river and up through Khumjung was, finally, classic Khumbu trekking, with a wide trail through beautiful forests, a rushing river below and a ring of white peaks above, supplemented by prayer walls, solid, stone-built Sherpa houses, potato fields and a gompa in the villages. We made a detour to Khunde for a look at the hospital, set up and maintained by the Hillary Trust, which cares for the medical needs of the entire valley, and finished the day in a lodge in Namche.

On the last day to Lukla we began for the first time to appreciate the meaning of crowds on the trails, seeing long queues when counterflowing yak trains tried to pass. The lower Khumbu seemed unduly warm and green, with blooming flowers and ever-present tiny children staring at the Foreign Trekker show. Andi and Bruce made a bid to climb the valley side to see the well-hidden W side of Kyashar, but Bruce took the wrong goat track and Andi found only half a view before clouds moved in. Back at the Sherpa Lodge in the evening we had closed the circle, and much lemon tea was drunk to mark the occasion. However, the expedition was not over: first, if a team wants its 1000USD "environmental deposit" back, the expedition garbage must be burned with due certification and the recyclables returned to Lukla; Dhan Kumar had dealt with all of this, and delivered the necessary form to Wilder-



Sunrise over Kyashar. (Andreas Frank)

ness Experience without our intervention. Then, as the final move, the same warm body as at the outset (if this is no longer warm it should have been disposed of according to the corresponding regulations ...) should be displayed at both the Department and the Ministry of Tourism.

For Bruce this pleasure would be delayed by a further 2 days: while Andi and Sam flew back to Kathmandu for a quick look at the snowless regions and lowland cultures of Nepal, and to fabricate a post-expedition report for the authorities, he and Kevin returned to Khunde hospital with a medical donation. Eike Mrosek, climber, trauma surgeon, Everest summitter and friend of Andi, Bruce and Sam, had provided us with some equipment and medicine, most notably broad-spectrum antibiotics in liquid form which "save the lives of children with pneumonia". Sam had sweated blood to have this included as free "humanitarian" excess baggage by Emirates Airlines and now, in a pleasantly lightweight trek, it had to be delivered to Khunde. Dr. Kami Temba Sherpa, long-time assistant Mingma Sherpa, and the other staff would like to thank all concerned, especially Eike.

Back in Kathmandu we were reintroduced to the pace of life in the big city. The leader had made it only as far as his hotel reception desk when Miss Hawley called to schedule her post-expedition debriefing. Definitely below this on the priority list was HM Government, where in an astounding display of bureaucratic efficiency, WildEx's faithful minibus driver Tenzing



*Bruce and Kevin on the beach, upper Hongu valley; behind are Everest and Lhotse.
(Andreas Frank)*

steered Bruce through the Department, the Ministry and the Central Bank of Nepal, at 3 different places in town, requiring the attention of 5 different government employees and the disbursement of 1000USD in hard foreign currency, within the space of 1.5 hours. Back at our hotel, the last official item of expedition business was to transfer some of this currency directly to Dhan Kumar: in 5 weeks of work he hadn't put a foot wrong, whether moving our equipment, arranging our food and fuel supply, cooking our food, spending our money, ensuring the safety of the porters or dealing with bureaucracy (including evading Maoist surcharges on the trek out). He'd done it all with or without our "oversight", with good humour and a steady stream of helpful advice, and as far as we could see from the bill had received 200USD for it all as direct salary. It isn't hard to see why tipping is standard practice. He bade us farewell with his customary good grace, presenting us all with katas (traditional silk scarves) "until next time".

Bruce Normand



Drangnagri (6801m).