

UK-German Nalakankar Expedition 2018

reported by **Christof Nettekoven** and **Bruce Normand**



Nalakankar Himal

While looking for expedition goals some years ago, both of us had stumbled independently over a fascinating group of peaks in Far West Nepal. Google Earth (see the Appendix) shows a circle of five pyramidal peaks around a single glacier basin, reminiscent of the points of a crown. To our mutual surprise, further research revealed all five peaks to be unclimbed: Til Kang (6369m), Takphu Himal (6395m) and unnamed peaks we labelled P3 (6422m), P2 (6521m) and P1 (6613m). They form part of the Nalakankar Himal, which stretches along the far northwestern border of Nepal and extends into Tibet, where one finds its highest peak, the famous Gurla Mandhata (7694m). The Nalakankar Himal lies immediately to the south of the holy Lake Manasarovar and Mt Kailas, which are sacred to four religions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Bön. Although parts of the range were explored by Japanese teams as early as 1963, and more recently in 2000 and 2008, the first approaches to the area around Takphu Himal were made by a Japanese team in summer 2016 and a German team in autumn 2016, both of which climbed smaller surrounding peaks.

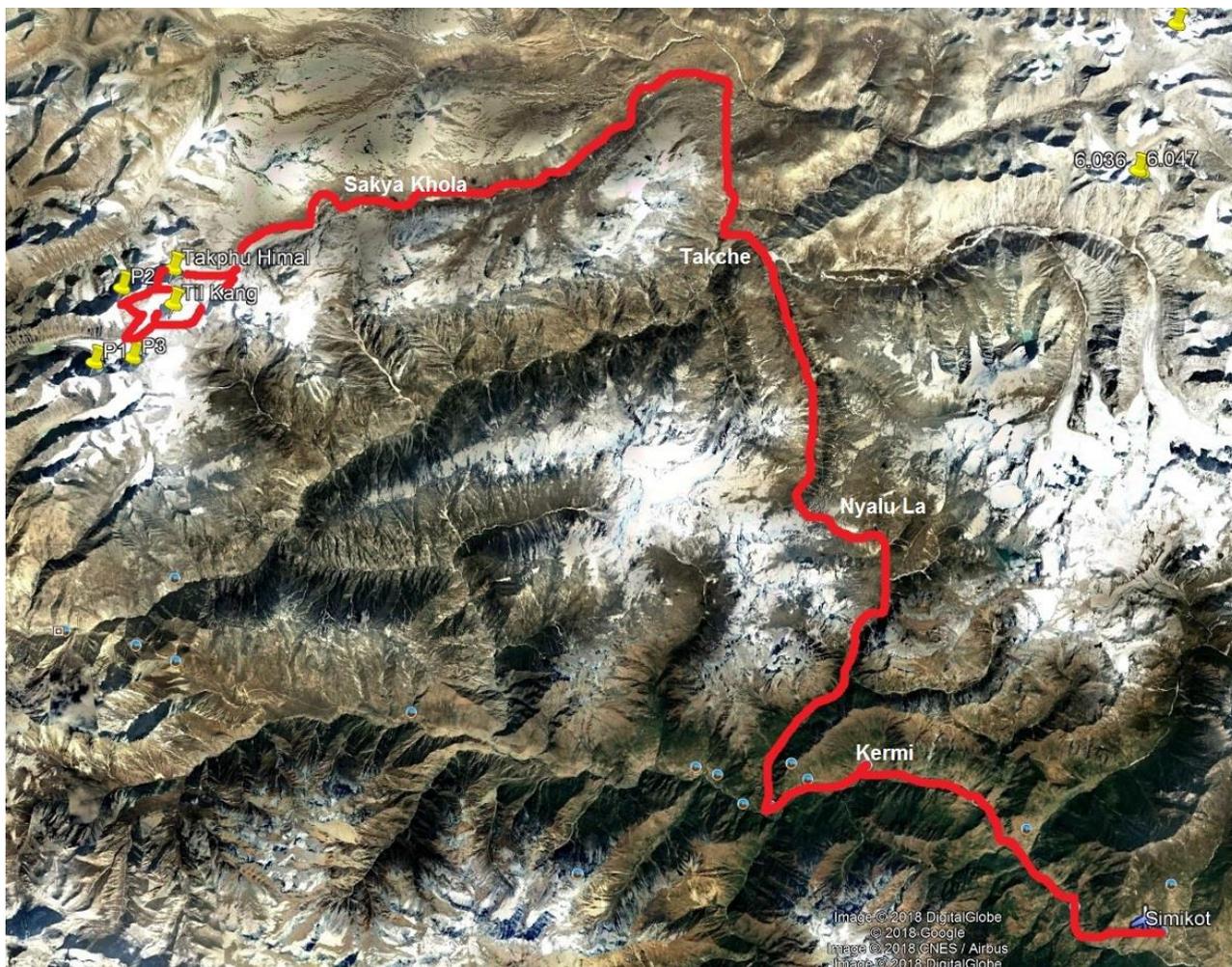
The Team

While preparing to visit the Nalakankar area in October 2018, we learned of a British team with the same ambitions, and everybody on both sides was in favour of joining forces rather than competing. The leader of the British team, Julian Freeman-Attwood, is a true expert on the region after nine expeditions to Far West Nepal, and his knowledge, connections and logistics were of invaluable assistance. Nick Colton is perhaps most famous for his Colton-McIntyre route on the Grandes Jorasses, but has also climbed new routes on Denali and in the Himalaya. Ed Douglas has summited Shivling (West Ridge) and made the first ascent of Xiashe in Sichuan. Christof is a serial explorer and expeditioner with experience in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Xinjiang and Nepal and Bruce has made many 6000m first ascents throughout High Asia.

Preparations

We arrived in Kathmandu on 23rd Sept and spent four days working on the organisation of trekking and climbing permits, with the help of agents Royal Mountain, and on the provision of food and supplies not available in the remote Far West of Nepal. For the latter task, we gathered

a few items of mountain food while our cook, Ngima Geli, and our sirdar/guide/helper, Lhakpa Sharpa, amassed large supplies of base camp (BC) food and equipment. From Kathmandu we left on the 27th by minivan and domestic flight to Nepalganj, and on the 28th we continued by Twin Otter to Simikot (2985m), the capital village of the Humla district. This mountainous region, with just 50000 inhabitants spread over 5600 square kilometers, of which 70% is above an altitude of 4000m, forms the most northwesterly tip of Nepal.



Approach

In Simikot we spent the 28th repacking our gear into mule loads, buying more items in the bazaar and waiting for baggage that didn't leave the ground in Nepalganj. Finally on the 29th our train of 16 mules, partially controlled by 3 muleteers, set out "up" the valley of the Humla Karnali, which in fact entailed first a high traverse above the river and then a long drop to meet it at 2300m. The Humla Karnali is one of the holy rivers rising in the sacred Kailas area and finally joining the even more sacred Ganges – Ganga Mata. As a result this route represents an important pilgrimage to Lake Manasarovar and Mt. Kailas for the four religions, although pilgrims who can afford a helicopter flight to the border at Hilsa can shorten a strenuous trek of several days to just twenty minutes. At the same time, this path has been an important trade route to Tibet since ancient times, and so we shared the way with spirited pilgrims from India and caravans of yaks, horses, donkeys and even goats loaded with staple foods or commodities ranging from Chinese housewares to Lhasa beer.





We followed the lush green valley of the Humla Karnali upstream through small villages in cascades of small fields carved out of the steep hillsides. The blaze of dark purple colours interspersed among walnut, cedar and pine trees indicated Amaranth crops ready for harvest. Balsam Apple, a kind of spiky cucumber, added to our local fresh food. The villagers were working hard to bring in both their crops and the straw for their cattle to last throughout the long, cold winter to come. We camped first at Dharapori (2600m) and then at Kermi (2800m).

Beyond Kermi the fields and villages are replaced by forests and the beautiful snow ridges of



mighty Saipal (7031m) appear to the southwest. At this point we left the Humla Karnali and turned north into the Salli Khola, entering a forest tinted in bright autumn colours. Low in the valley we met local women who were drying yak cheese as part of their preparations for the winter. The road rises steeply here the vegetation changes dramatically, thinning out above 3500m and disappearing beyond 3800m, where high alpine meadows dot the barren, rocky slopes.

We pitched our tents in a meadow at 4100m beside a camp of Tibetan yak herders, who were at the end of their season and were driving their animals down-valley as the temperatures fell. The muleteers left our mules grazing freely overnight as usual, but in the morning realised their mistake: the animals were easily smart enough to know where the warmer forest was, and it took most of the day to round up the escapees. In the end, Ed was ill and the fact that we moved up only a short distance – to a final lake camp at 4500m below the Nyalu La (5001m) – was not a big loss.



The next day we crossed the windy pass, marked by rock cairns and the prayer flags of all the travellers sending their wishes to heaven. Impressive unclimbed peaks of around 6000m rose to the east. On the northern side we descended far into Talun valley, setting up camp at 4300 in storm-force winds that brought some snowfall in the night. After a cold and sunless start to the next morning, we trekked past the beautiful Talung Tso (lake) and forded two of its tributary streams before descending a curious steep sand dune into Traktse. This broad meadow at the confluence of three rivers marks the northeastern end of Limi Valley, and its trails are lined by mani walls, the eroded engravings of mantras, prayers and stupa symbols reflecting the importance of this place to the people (mani stones provide protection from evil spirits and bad karma). Li-Mi means “people living between two rivers” in Tibetan and the language and



culture are entirely Tibetan in origin. The altitude, harsh climate and infertile fields allow only subsistence agriculture, while yak are the basis for cross border trade with Tibet, mostly via Hilsa or the Lapche La. This isolation, combined with the close proximity to the sacred sites of Lake Manasarovar and Kailas, have preserved the ancient buddhist and shamanist traditions, and the monasteries in the villages of Til, Halji and Jang are more than a thousand years old.



From Traktse we climbed the Phulgong La (4775m), another pass marked with prayer flags, mani stones and yak skulls, where bitterly cold winds welcomed us onto the Tibetan plateau. Geographically this is Tibet, but politically the area has belonged to Nepal since border regulations were agreed in 1961. The temperatures were significantly lower than usual for the time of year: the post-monsoon season has the advantage of stable weather, but the disadvantage is the sinking temperatures of late autumn. Still, the cold on the high plateau gave us

a good idea of what to expect higher up. The rounded hills of the plateau to the north and east contrast with steep, sharp peaks and the gigantic summit of Gurla Mandhata to the northwest. We turned west into the wide, flat Sakya Khola, where we set up a camp at 4750m.

Base Camp

Early on the final morning of our approach (6th Oct), the spectacular icy spire of Til Kang broke through the veil of clouds at the end of Sakya Khola. However, it was still a long and somewhat troublesome route, with some flooded swampy areas and some points where the river has cut deep gorges into the soft rock. Some



passing snow squalls made our kitchen porter and muleteers try to revolt, claiming that the end of the valley was impossible for their animals to reach. The simple expedient of sending the money to our desired BC with Bruce convinced them to continue on the flat, broad trails, and finally we were able to reach a glacial lake 1km before the snout of the glacier itself, where we set up our BC tents at 5000m in another snow storm.



While most of the climbers took a rest day, Ngima and Lhapka worked to improve the BC and Bruce went out to reconnoitre the glacier. Behind the lake he ascended the glacier snout and continued up the main Takphu glacier, then turned north over snow-covered moraine to reach the Takphu North glacier, which is the gateway to the north side of Takphu Himal and P2. Very unusually for the post-monsoon, the weather was intermittently cloudy and the snow on the glaciers was knee-

deep. This seems to have been the result of a major snowstorm in late September that was centred in the Indian Himalaya, and now it is too late in the year for the new snow to transform. Instead it blew around filling up our tracks, so that every day a new trail had to be broken. On the following day, Bruce, Christof and Ed set out for a proper acclimatisation climb of the “Japanese Takphu North” (6153m). Bruce made it to the summit and everybody got good views of this side of Takphu Himal and P2. Another afternoon snowstorm accompanied the climbers back to BC, where everybody rested on the next day.

Takphu Himal and P6055

With Julian and Nick recovering from heavy colds, on 10th October Bruce, Christof and Ed set off again with overnight and climbing equipment. After a full day of hard trail-breaking they set up a high camp at the top of the Takphu North glacier (5700m). Low temperatures suggested a rather



late (8:00am) start, and again knee-deep trail-breaking in the deep shade made progress very slow. With a lot of extra time needed to warm up toes and fingers, it took three hours to reach the col at 6130m between Takphu Himal and P2. Initial joy at the warming sun and expansive views to the north, of Gurla Mandhata, and south, of the Takphu cirque, was soon tempered by cold wind and incoming clouds. The conditions deteriorated to near-

total white-out, but navigation along the West Ridge was not difficult. The team continued to push forward and finally reached the summit of Takphu Himal at an altitude of 6395m.

The wind and cold did not allow much of a summit celebration and the climbers quickly headed back down. At one point Ed began to head the wrong way into the South Face, but a clearing in the clouds revealed the problem. Safely back at high camp, Christof discovered that his toes were numb with cold damage, while Ed’s fingers were also frost-nipped. Yet another afternoon snowstorm set in, which persisted well beyond dark, and winds blew the snow around all night. By the next morning the approach tracks had been completely erased and the climbers had to break a new trail all the way back down to BC.



At the same time, Julian and Nick had been using this “window” of poor

weather to start their acclimatisation by climbing a rounded peak 5km north of our base camp. Although they reached the summit of P6055, Nick suffered some frostnip on his toes and Julian finally succumbed to a proper respiratory infection. He was forced to take antibiotics and had to give up any further plans of climbing on this expedition.



On a day of rest and recovery in BC, Bruce prepared to go round to enter the Takphu cirque from the south side of Til Kang. Ed was ready to go with him and packed accordingly, but Christof decided not to risk further damage to his toes. The weather continued unsettled and cold, with clouds around the summits every day and occasional snow showers on persistent winds.

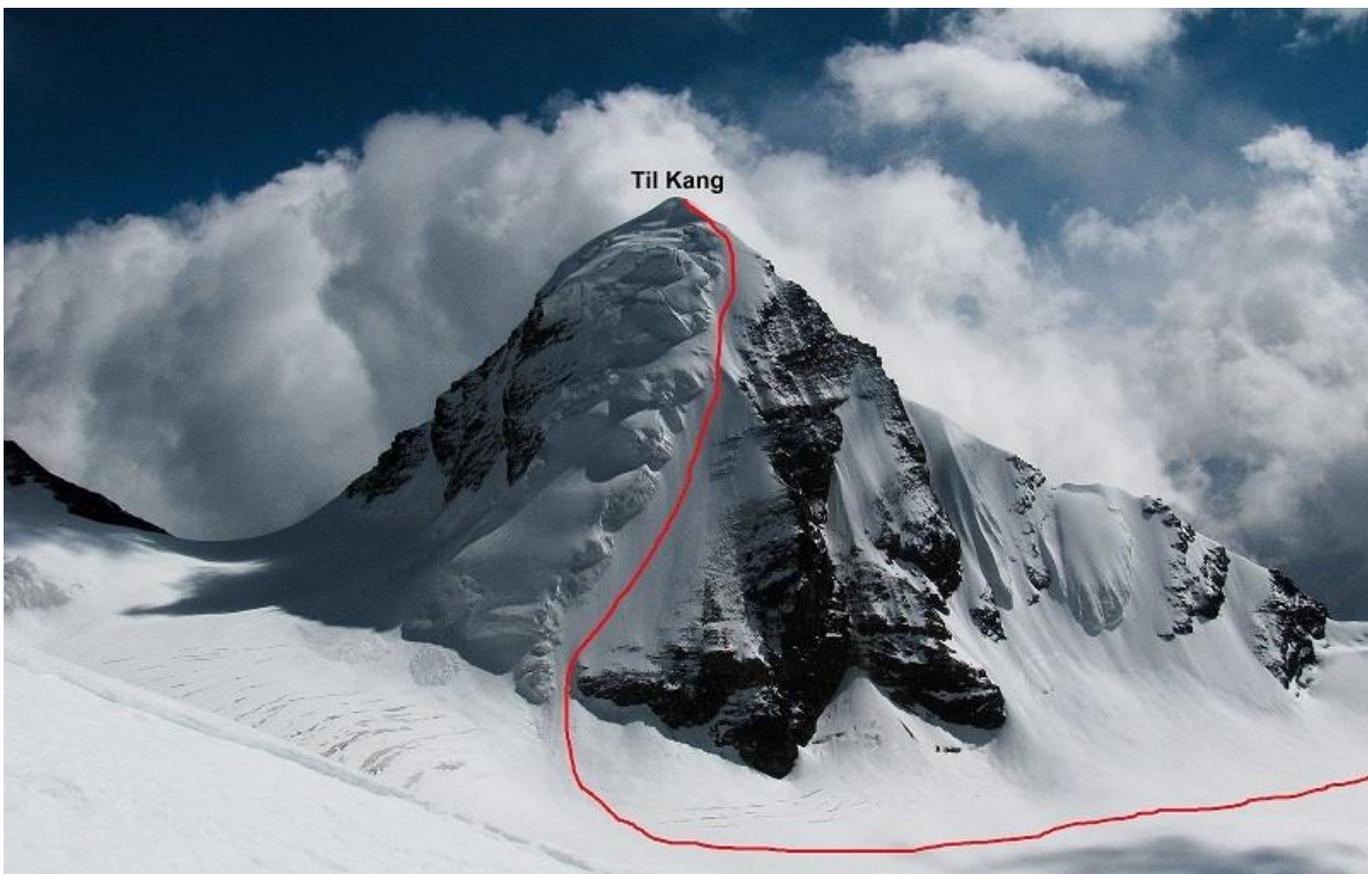
Til Kang

On the next day (14th Oct) Bruce and Ed set off to Til Kang, heading southwest beside the Takphu glacier to reach the 5358m pass over to the Syogang valley, on the south side of the mountain. After 400m of descent they discovered a rock ledge allowing a scrambling traverse to a tiny glacier at the base of the South Face, from which they could begin to climb again over moraine and snow slopes. After a long traverse beneath a corniced rock band, at last light they reached a steep final climb into the col between Til Kang P3, which is the entry point for the Takphu cirque. The climbers dug into deep, soft snow directly on the col at 5800m.



On a cloudless but very cold morning, the two started their climb of Til Kang with a long traverse through deep snow to reach the West Face. This steep snow slope has seracs on its left side, but no debris beneath; the snow was at first deep but improved as the height increased, and the upper half was mostly good firn. After 700 vertical metres the climbers reached the

6369m summit and were rewarded, finally, with full panoramic views in all directions: north past the commanding bulk of Gurla Mandhata to the red plateau lands of Tibet and south over the jagged white carpet of Nepal. Again the cold wind was persistent and the climbers soon headed back down their route. Again their trail across the flat glacier had been blown in and needed to be rebroken, delaying their return to high camp until after dark.



P1
Ed was exhausted and ready to return to BC. Bruce had every intention of climbing all five “points on the crown” and continued the mission by heading down the glacier, past the foot of P3, to the North Face of the highest peak in the cirque, P1. The right part of this face is broken by a large serac band, causing him to follow an old avalanche track to enter the left side of the face at 5600m. Above the seracs he traversed through the middle of the upper face to the crux rock band, where he found a gully that could be surmounted with only 10m of vertical rock and ice moves. Beyond this the climbing was again 50-degree firm slopes to the summit ridge, where he crossed the cornice at its smallest point and finished up an easy ridge to the summit at

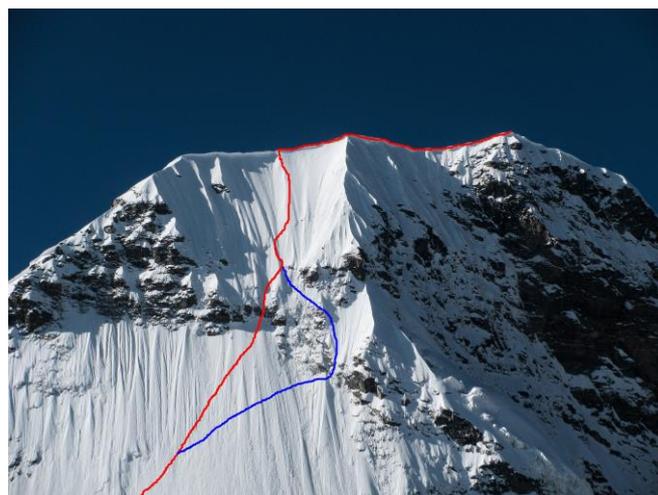
6613m. Despite the sunny morning, high clouds had moved in again and the extensive views



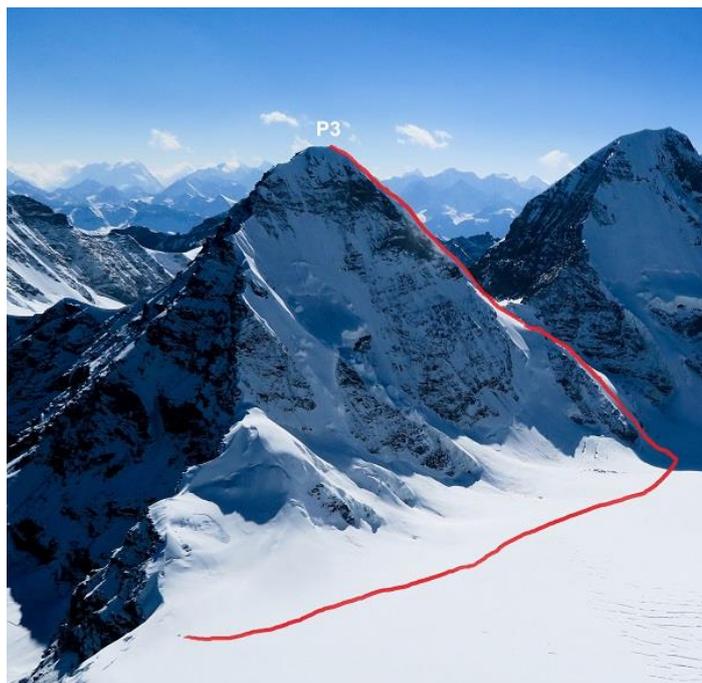
were somewhat spoiled by low light. The usual cold southwest wind was blowing across the summit, but had not been a problem on the face. For the descent he bypassed the vertical section by finding some 50-degree firm slopes slightly to its right, and otherwise retraced his steps to the base of the face. There a familiar scene played out, with the approach trail fully blown in by the day's winds and a slow ascent to regain the high camp after dark.

P3

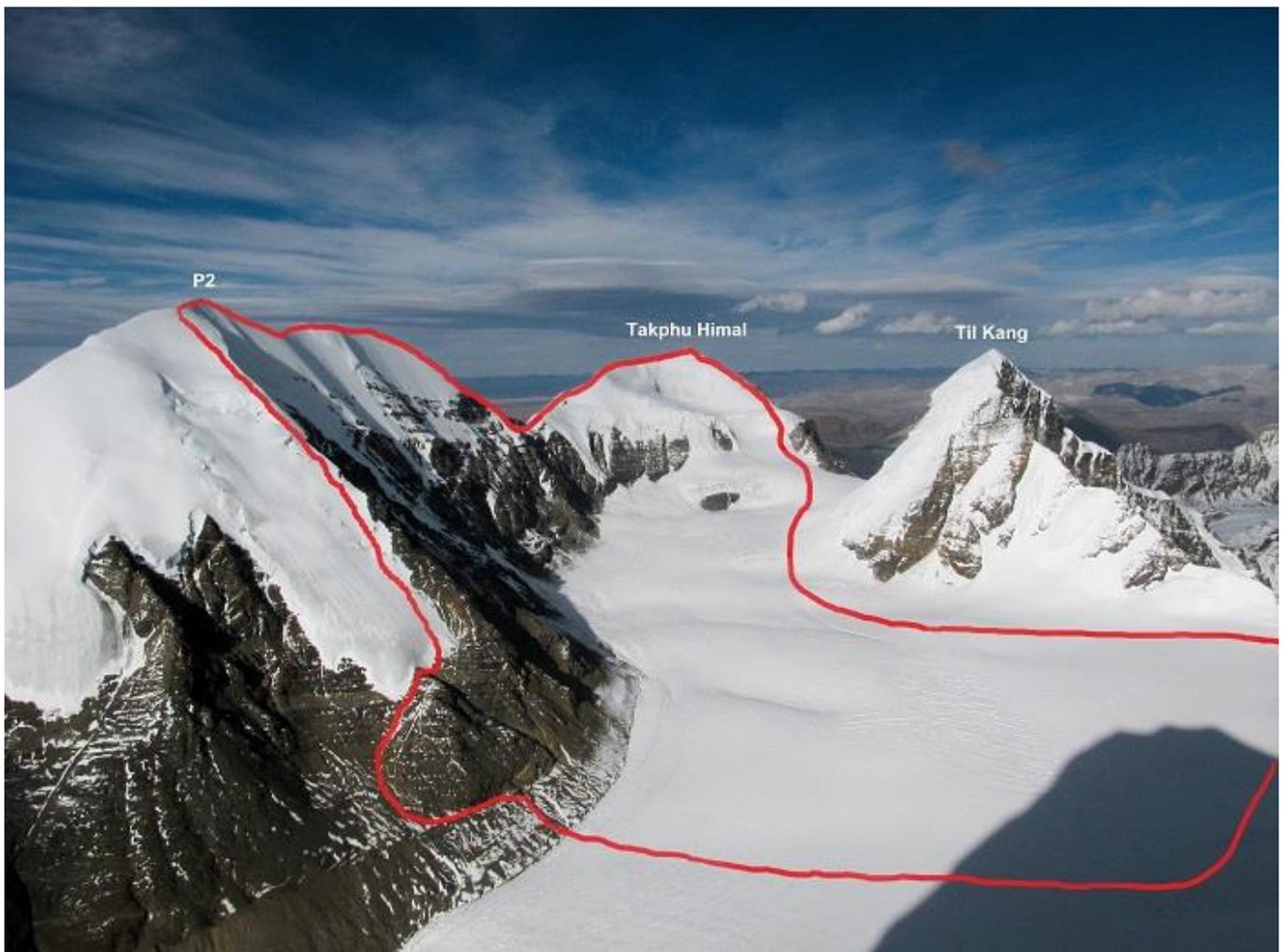
With P3 clearly a shorter and less technical peak than P1, Bruce opted for a later start. Yet again the morning was fine, apart from the usual cloud on the south side of Til Kang, but high clouds moved in during the day. Bruce followed the previous day's trail beneath the North Face of P3 and then headed up towards the col separating it from P1. The first 150 vertical metres were straightforward 45-degree firm, but the next 250 were soft snow that in places was knee-deep.



From the 6000m col the going was solid, and he zig-zagged up southwest-facing slopes to



the summit at 6422m. The summit vistas were a rerun of the previous day, but with significantly lower winds. The descent was also quick and unexpectedly easy because, for once, the trail on the glacier had survived the daytime winds.



P2

With only one peak left to complete the set, early on the morning of 18th Oct Bruce crossed the glacier basin one more time to reach the south flank of P2. Starting at 5600m he climbed a scree slope to reach 40-degree snow slopes at 5800m. The winds were cold, but on this day the skies remained cloudless and the only disappointment was a camera failure. Enjoying views far into the Indian Himalaya to the west, and of the Takphu cirque behind him, he zig-zagged up the snow to top out on the very sharp west ridge at 6460m, then side-stepped across to the 6521m summit. The other half of the vista, to Gurla Mandhata and even Kailas in the far distance, was for once crystal clear all afternoon. With the wind suddenly dying, restoring “proper” post-monsoon conditions for the first time all month, Bruce decided to continue down the long East Ridge of P2 to the col with Takphu Himal. From the point where he, Christof and Ed had stood 1 week earlier, the easiest and most aesthetic route was to carry on up and over Takphu Himal, then descend to the cirque by its southern slopes. Both the snow and the vistas were excellent all the way to the col with Til Kang, but the demise of the camera meant that the experience went unrecorded. Back in the cirque, Bruce was able to limit the deep-snow work to a few hundred horizontal metres, before finding a wind-scoured route around to his and Ed’s old access trail to Til Kang, which he followed back to the col camp at sunset.



Gurla Mandhata and the peaks of the Takphu cirque viewed from the south. Here P4 marks Til Kang and P5 marks Takphu Himal.



Image of the Takphu cirque showing P1, P2, P3, Takphu Himal and Til Kang viewed from the NE (Google Earth).

Acknowledgements

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