

The Nepalese-American Gaurishankar Expedition

AL READ

LONG THE UTTERLY wild and vaguely defined Himalayan frontier between Nepal and Tibet rise the massive twin summits of Gaurishankar. One of the most beautiful and formidable mountains in the world, Gaurishankar appears from the Kathmandu valley to be higher than any peak in the kingdom and was long thought to be the highest mountain in the world. Its two summits are revered and named for two of the most significant Hindu deities, the slightly lower southern summit for Gauri, Goddess of Love, and the higher northern one for Shankar, the much feared God of Destruction.* True to its name, Gaurishankar appears unapproachable, a giant mountain of staggering beauty but, unlike most Himalayan peaks of its size, it offers no reasonable route of ascent. The tremendous climbing difficulties of Gaurishankar, together with its remote location and unexplored approaches, has made its 23,440-foot summit sought after by the world's most ambitious climbers. Gaurishankar remained the last major unclimbed summit in the Nepal Himalaya.

In 1959 a Japanese expedition approached Gaurishankar but strayed into Tibet. Its members were promptly robbed by bandits. The expedition was forced to return to the safety of the southern valleys left with little more than their underwear.

The most important early attempt was a British expedition in 1964, led by Dennis Gray, which included Don Whillans, Ian Howell and Ian

*Gaurishankar, like so many other peaks of the Himalaya, has a deep religious significance both for the Hindus and the Buddhist Sherpas. The Hindu name is Gaurishankar. Gauri, the fair or golden goddess, is one of the many manifestations of Śiva's consort, which include Sāti, Parvati, Nanda, Kali and Durga. Gauri is the goddess of fertility and beauty. Śankar is one of the manifestations of Śiva, not only the god of destruction but also of reproduction and restorative power. (See *A.A.J.*, 1977, pages 24 to 29.) The Sherpas, who are Buddhists, call the mountain Jomo Tseringma. From the south they can see only the southern summit, which they revere as their most holy mountain.—*Editor*.



PEAF 20

Photo by Al Read

GAURISHANKAR's West Face.

The Northeast Ridge is the left skyline. The ridge to the South Summit is on the right. A=Ice Rib; B=Traverse; C=Niche; D=Ice Runnel; E=Ice Chimney; III=Camp III.

Clough. After a monsoon approach the expedition porters went on strike at Lamobagar, the last Nepalese village, and refused to continue. This forced the expedition to establish its Base Camp in a cave at the bottom of the Rongshar Gorge at only 7000 feet. Threatened frequently by Tibetan bandits, the expedition forced a route out of the Rongshar Gorge up the steep Chumal Chu, fixing ropes across rock buttresses and stretches of almost vertical jungle lining the walls of the canyon. Their porters gone, the climbers and their few Sherpas had to shuttle all expedition equipment and food up the muddy, leech-infested gorge. It was only when they reached 17,000 feet on a ridge crest that they finally saw Gaurishankar. Immediately opposite was the west face, described by Gray in *Rope Boy* as "nine thousand feet of precipice set at an incredible angle and swept by avalanches—this west flank a climbing proposition for generations to come." Considering the west face not feasible, the expedition turned north and after days of load carrying gained the northwest ridge. To their disappointment the ridge was knife-edged and badly corniced, more difficult than they were then prepared to attempt. They crossed the ridge and traversed the north face towards the north ridge which rises from Tibet in a series of snow bulges and ice gullies. In October, with the cold of the Himalayan winter advancing, and after narrowly escaping disaster from avalanches, Whillans and Clough, then in front, finally turned back.

Political conflict in Asia then precipitated a ban on climbing in Nepal. Even after the mountains reopened in 1969, Gaurishankar remained forbidden. But in 1978 Nepal opened several mountains to "joint expeditions," including the virgin Gaurishankar. My situation in Kathmandu as President of Mountain Travel Nepal made it possible to submit the first successful application under the new regulations. By July we had our formal permit for the northwest ridge. The regulations required that two Nepalese be included in the climbing team. Because Gaurishankar is revered in Nepal as a mountain of religious and historical significance, I decided to compose the expedition of half Nepalese and half Americans. As co-leader, I selected the famous Mountain Travel Nepal sardar, Pertemba, who climbed the south face of Everest in 1975 with Peter Boardman (and who later climbed Everest by the South Col). He chose a superior team of Sherpa members: Pasang Ongchu, Dorje, Ang Jangbo and Yong Tensing. All had climbed high on various expeditions, but none but Pertemba had ever been given the chance for a summit. The American members were John Roskelley, already America's leading Himalayan climber, Dennis Hennek, Kim Schmitz and Jim Morrissey, who became trip physician, financier and treasurer. I served as expedition co-leader. With the depth of Himalayan experience represented, success on Gaurishankar seemed at least possible.

Two months prior to our departure our hopes were dashed when the

PLATE 21

Photo by Al Read

**West Face of GAURISHANKAR.
North Face in shadow.**



Nepalese, having finalized the border delimitation with the Chinese, informed us that the northwest ridge of Gaurishankar had been drawn inside Tibet. We would have to climb either the southwest ridge or the west face, both exceptionally difficult. Although now very concerned about our chance of success, we decided to give the route possibilities a look and do the best we could.

The American members obtained clothing and technical equipment in the United States, including 12,000 feet of rope for fixing. In Nepal, Pertemba went to the Rongshar Gorge and located a site for Base Camp. An additional 8000 feet of fixed rope was found in Nepal as well as hundreds of snow pickets and ice screws.

With the best Base Camp Sardar and staff that Mountain Travel Nepal could assemble, on March 26 the expedition set out from Barabise with 107 porters. Five days later we entered the restricted zone at the Tibetan-populated village of Lamobagar. From the bottom of the Rongshar Gorge within sight of the bridge marking the Tibetan frontier we began bushwacking up the Chumal Chu. Although the British in 1964 had used the route, all traces of their expedition were obscured except a few patches of faded red paint. After only an hour from the base of the gorge we were immersed in nearly vertical grass, heavy bamboo and thick coniferous forest. We had to fix ropes and sometimes belay our heavily laden porters. The walls of the Rongshar and Chumal Chu gorges were so steep that we could see nothing above—only more bamboo thickets to hack through and more steep vegetation and rock to fix with rope.

Base Camp was finally established on April 6 at 16,200 feet at the snout of an unnamed glacier, ten thousand feet above the Rongshar Gorge. The next day we climbed the glacier to a col at 17,200 feet. Immediately across from us was Gaurishankar's 9000-foot west face. It fitted Dennis Gray's description and looked completely out of the question, partially because of the summit ice bulge, a hanging glacier thrust out over the only feasible route. The southwest ridge* looked no better. Several miles long and leading to the south summit, it was a knife-edge of blue ice dropping 8000 feet to the north and 10,000 feet south into the Rolwaling valley. From the south summit there was a series of towers and complicated cornices leading over one-half mile to the main summit.

From our col viewpoint we rappelled down the north side and climbed to a point opposite the base of the southwest ridge. Hennek expressed his concern about the complex traverses on fixed ropes that would con-

* This was climbed to the south summit by a British expedition after the monsoon. See *Climbs and Expeditions* section.

tinuously have to be done on the ridge. Roskelley commented that the route looked far more difficult than the knife-edged ridge on K-2 that he had climbed nine months before.

Our attention turned toward the west face and an ice rib first noticed by Pertemba on an early reconnaissance flight. The rib was steep but led to some icefields and rock bands directly underneath the summit. We could see no place for camps on the face, but reasoned that there must be some ledges or, if none, we could dig snow caves. The great hanging glacier at the summit was worrying, and it appeared that when it broke off (we knew it would when the warm weather arrived), it would come down just to the right of our route. With luck it would miss us.

Pertemba's comment on being faced with the prospect of climbing the route he originally suggested was, "I think see Gaurishankar and die." But we all agreed that the face, although obviously technically very difficult, was more feasible than the southwest ridge. The decision to try the face was made.

Advanced Base was established about 800 feet below the rappel from the ridge above Base Camp and immediately opposite the west face. A barren and intimidating place, the terrain prevented radio contact with Base Camp.

Camp I was established at 17,000 feet at the top of a gully at the foot of the face in a sheltered notch behind a rock pillar. Roskelley and Schmitz then began work on the rock slabs and ice runnels above, finally gaining an ice rib at over 18,000 feet. At 20,000 feet there was a small crevasse crossing the rib. Two days of chopping enlarged the crevasse to permit the erection of two tents and one additional tent about 30 feet above in a smaller crevasse. Perched 4000 feet above the base of the face, ropes were fixed from below right to the tent doors. This was Camp II. Above, the ice steepened for 2000 feet, finally merging into a rock buttress at 22,000 feet. On both sides of the ice rib were only featureless smooth slabs of blue ice descending 6000 feet to the moraine below. It was now necessary to traverse across the ice and smooth rock slabs to a small ice niche about 800 feet to the left. Climbing as high as feasible on the ice rib, Roskelley and Pertemba led across the face. In a series of magnificent leads, laybacking and using some aid across the smooth slabs, protected in part by pitons driven head down under expanding flakes, Roskelley and Pertemba arrived at the niche. They were at the bottom of a narrow ice runnel splitting the rock band which had prevented their continuing directly on the ice rib above Camp II. We had hoped to find a place to chop a platform for a camp, but the runnel base which looked like snow from below was hard blue ice overlain by a thin snow crust. The entire traverse had been done using front points only. In the days of load carrying that followed, calves were burning after making the traverse.

The runnel was climbed for several hundred feet to where just off to the left lay a small two-by-four-foot platform. There was no other ledge in the area and we had no choice but to call this bivouac site at 21,300 feet Camp III. A tent was draped over the area, suspended by only one pole and held by pins and a Jumar attached to the fixed line running above. One person could sit against a boulder and another could lie with part of his body on the ledge with the rest against the tent wall suspended over the gulf below. Above was a vertical crack filled with ice, a steep icefield, then the final rock band.

May arrived and with it came clear days of beautiful weather. Gone were the daily blizzards of April and the climbing in foul weather that we had come to expect. The climbing conditions were perfect, but we knew that this could change in hours. If clear weather persisted, the sun would begin melting the upper face, loosening the fixed-rope anchors, causing serious rockfall and eventually the collapse of the summit hanging glacier, possibly producing a tumultuous avalanche over our route.

From the discomfort of Camp III, Roskelley and Schmitz began work on the terrain above. A ribbon of water-ice two to three feet wide varying from 70° to 90° became the key to the difficult upper section. Aid in an expanding crack and moderate free climbing ended under a protective roof. Continuously difficult mixed climbing for 300 feet and the base of the final icefield was reached. Schmitz and Roskelley fixed ropes up the 55° to 60° ice for 700 feet. Only the final rock band remained, split by a diagonal chimney blocked with overhanging bulges and chockstones.

Roskelley had by then spent four nights sitting at Camp III, one night alone. Both he and Schmitz were suffering from dehydration and lack of food because of the difficulty of carrying loads from Camp II to Camp III and the necessity of bringing up heavy technical gear at the expense of fuel and food. We realized we must make a summit attempt soon or Roskelley and Schmitz would have to come down.

Meanwhile, Hennek, who had never fully recovered from the bronchitis which had struck almost all of us, was forced to descend from Camp II to Advance Base. Although his bronchitis had apparently disappeared he suffered from malaise, shortness of breath and a persistent headache. His legendary climbing skills were needed and he was frustrated by being unable to help with the difficult climbing above. On the morning of May 5, Morrissey noted that Hennek's respiration rate was unusually high. It was decided that he must go down. Hennek, Morrissey and I returned over the col to Base Camp. When we arrived Morrissey again examined Hennek and heard pulmonary rales, indicating almost certain pulmonary edema. Within hours, Dennis was on his way down towards the Rongshar Gorge, 10,000 feet below. It was frustrating and disappointing for Hennek, one of America's finest climbers; Gauri-



PLATE 22

Photos by John Roskelley

**Kim Schmitz at Camp III on
Gaurishankar.**



PLATE 23

**Pertemba on the traverse below
Camp III.**

shankar was the only one of his many expeditions where he has not reached the summit.

Dorje, who had shown considerable technical ability and had not been sick with the ubiquitous bronchitis, was in position to go to Camp III. Pertemba, the co-leader, was asked if he wished to go to the summit in the first ascent party. Although the most technically qualified and most experienced of Sherpa climbers, Pertemba said he would rather give Dorje or the rest of his team the first opportunity. Although Pertemba had climbed Everest by its most difficult route, most of the other Sherpa members had been denied the chance for summits such as Everest and Kanchenjunga. They had carried loads to the highest camps only to be told to wait or go down while their "Sahibs" went to the top.

Schmitz, now suffering from the exhaustion of trying to live at Camp III, descended to Camp II while Dorje climbed above to Camp III to make the attempt with Roskelley the next day. It was planned that Schmitz would rest at Camp II for a day then climb to Camp III with Pasang Ongchu to make the second summit assault. When Schmitz arrived at Camp III, he said that he could not feel his feet. He removed his boots and Pertemba instantly realized his toes were frozen. After a positive diagnosis, Morrissey put Schmitz on oxygen. The normal areas of his feet turned pink, while the frostbitten areas remained white. There would be no summit for Schmitz—only descent to Base, warmth and rest to prevent complete loss of his toes.

As Dorje climbed to Camp III, the once glass-hard ice that he recalled climbing across before was soft on the surface. The rock slabs were streaked with frozen verglas and much more rock had been uncovered. The mountain was deteriorating and unless the summit was reached soon, the west face could become alive with rockfall and ice avalanches.

The morning of May 8 dawned clear and cold. Roskelley and Dorje were off from their perch by five A.M. Jümaring rapidly up the difficult ice ribbon and following the fixed ropes to the middle of the last icefield, they climbed towards the ramp cutting the final rock band. Roskelley thought the climbing starting below Camp III had been more difficult than he recalled on the north face of the Eiger. He led up mixed rock and ice to an overhanging bulge. The overhang, suspended above the entire 9000-foot west face, was done using aid (A3) on shifting pins. Beyond, the climbing remained steep but the difficulties eased. Soon Dorje and Roskelley stood on a rock platform at the foot of the summit snowfield. While Pertemba and I watched through binoculars from Advanced Base, Roskelley and Dorje climbed the last ice slope and disappeared over the summit ridge only a few hundred feet from the top. I turned to Pertemba and we shook hands. A Nepalese and an American had reached the summit of one of Nepal's most famous unclimbed mountains on an expedition jointly led and composed equally of Americans

and Nepalese. Everyone was alive and everyone remained the best of friends. A feeling of comradeship at the joining of our two diverse cultures, forged in the mountains, surged in both of us as we saw Dorje and Roskelley appear over the summit ridge and begin their descent. Reaching Camp III at five P.M., Roskelley confirmed by radio that he and Dorje had reached the summit at 3:15 P.M.

The last great Himalayan summit in Nepal had been climbed.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Rolwaling Himalaya, Nepal.

FIRST ASCENT: Gaurishankar, 23,440 feet, via the west face, summit reached on May 8, 1979 (Roskelley, Dorje).

PERSONNEL: William A. Read and Pertemba, *co-leaders*; Dennis P. Hennek, James D. Morrissey, M.D., John F.C. Roskelley, Kim Schmitz, *Americans*; Pasang Oncho, Dorje, Ang Jangbo, Yong Tensing, *Sherpas*.

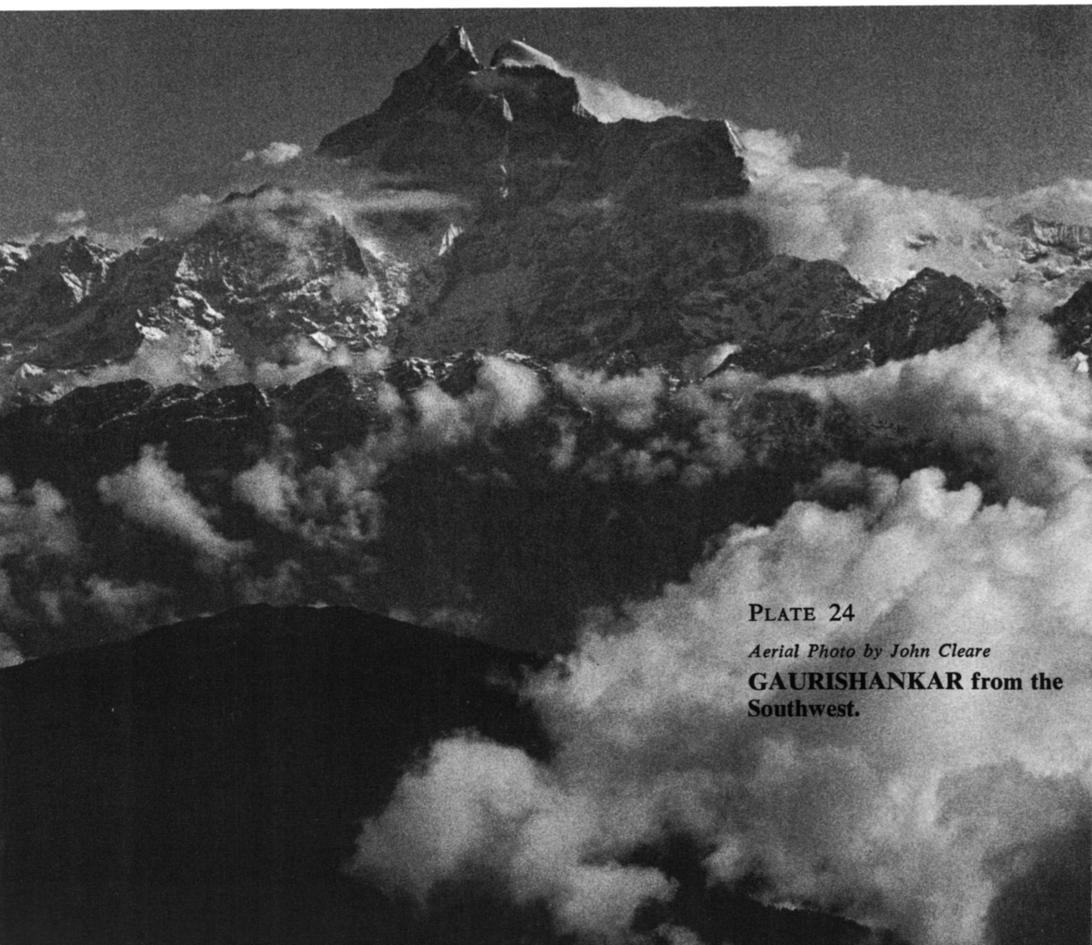


PLATE 24

Aerial Photo by John Cleare

GAURISHANKAR from the Southwest.