

British Mugu Expedition 2011

Supported by:

**Mount Everest Foundation
Alpine Club**

**Berghaus
Black Diamond
Mountain Equipment
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DMM
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Cascade**

**Approved by the British
Mountaineering Council**

Acknowledgements

The expedition would like to record its grateful thanks to the following for their invaluable support.

Financial Assistance

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Particular thanks is due to Ed Douglas, Julian Freeman-Attwood and Nick Colton who visited the area in 2009 and inspired us to go by being so helpful in sharing photographs and information.

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The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that all or any of it may be copied and used for the purposes of private research.

Aims of the Expedition

- 1 To make the first ascent of Gojung (Mugu Chuli – 6,310m) by the west face.
- 2 To explore the further mountaineering potential of the area and make other ascents as possible.

The Team

Mick Fowler (55) British. Civil Servant.

Regular climber in the greater ranges since 1982. Taulliraju South Face (Peru, 1982), Spantik NW Pillar (Pakistan 1987), Hunza Peak (Pakistan, 1991), Cerro Kishtwar (India, 1993), Taweche NE Pillar (Nepal, 1995), Changabang N Face (India, 1997), Mt Kennedy N Buttress (Yukon, 2000), Siguniang NW Face (Sichuan, 2002), Kajaqiao (Tibet, 2005), Manamcho (Tibet, 2007), Sulamar (Xinjiang, 2010).

Dave Turnbull (46) British. CEO British Mountaineering Council

25 years climbing experience at E5/E6. Numerous new lines throughout Britain. Scottish winter climbing to VI since the late 1980s. New climbs to 600m at E4/E5 in Mali, Mozambique and Venezuela. Mt Gruetta (original route), Comici Route on Cima Grande. Zodiac, Half Dome NW Face in Yosemite. FFA Longhope Route, Hoy.

Graham Desroy (56) British. Climbing Equipment Consultant

Climbing since 1968. Extensive experience in Britain, Europe, USA, Nepal and Krygystan. Rock, mountain, winter, alpine. Lyngen Alps, Norway 1974, 1976. 1970s and 1980s – many summer alpine ascents including 3rd ascent of Colton/Brookes on Droites N face. Ak Su/Kara Su Krygystan 2008. Mt Abi Nepal 2010. Ganchenpo Nepal 2010. Kusum Kanguru Nepal 2011.

Jonathan Ratcliffe (37) British. Climbing Wall Manager

15 years climbing. Over 30 first ascents on rock and ice up to E6 and Scottish VII. 8a sport climbs. Four Alps trips. Aig, Argentiere, Aig. Tour, Aig. Verte etc. Ak Su Krygystan – one multi day ascent and one first ascent at E4.

Preparation

Access restrictions to West Nepal have been much relaxed in recent years.

Our preparation consisted of contacting an agent in Kathmandu and asking them to arrange the necessary permits. We chose the following agent because we knew that he has successfully arranged the logistics for the 2009 expedition to the area led by Julian Freeman Attwood:

Shiva Dhakel
Royal Mountain Travel

PO Box 8720
Lal Durbar Marg,
Durbar Marg,
Kathmandu,
Nepal

www.royalmt.com.np

In fact though there is no reason to suspect that any other agent could not provide an equally good service.

Separately we also employed 'Prem' as our cook (nirkajit333@hotmail.com) and Purbah (no contact details) as our kitchen boy. 'Prem' was chosen because we knew that he had been to the area before with Julian Freeman-Attwood's team.

We paid the cook \$15 per day and the kitchen boy \$10 per day.



Gojung – Unclimbed NW Buttress



Gojung – West Face - route climbed

Visas

Visas were purchased on arrival at Kathmandu airport for \$40 per head.

Food and Gas etc

All gas and food can now be purchased in Kathmandu. As we had a 35Kg baggage allowance (Air India) we took some favourite foods from the UK.

Gas cannot be flown on the internal flights in Nepal. Baggage checks are not very thorough but we played safe and asked our agent to arrange for gas to be bought in Kathmandu, driven to the roadhead and portered to Rara airstrip. This worked with no hitches.

Cost

The costs are set out on the accounts page of this report.

UK to the start of the walk-in

We flew from Heathrow to Kathmandu with Air India who were not only the cheapest but also gave a 35Kg baggage allowance.

From Kathmandu we caught the regular nightbus to Nepalgunj which took 16 hours and arrived at c11.00am. A short taxi ride then took us to a hotel by Nepalgunj airport.

Flight from Nepalgunj to Rara airstrip are weather dependent and despite arriving at the airport at shortly after 5.00am mist delayed our flight and it was 15.30 before we finally took off. The flight to Rara is only about 45 minutes.

Rara Airstrip to Base Camp

Our agent had arranged for 10 mules to meet us at Rara airstrip and after due negotiation we started the walk-in at 11.30am on the morning of 3rd October.

The monsoon had been very heavy and we were much slowed by landslides which involved us ferrying loads while the mules crossed unladen. By the end of the third day we were not far over one tenth of the way to base camp and seriously discussing whether we could afford to change to porters. As luck would have it the landslide situation improved and we eventually made it to base camp in 7 days. The majority of the walk-in was on a good mule track leading up to the Namla La and across into Tibet. We left the main track a few hours beyond the interesting summer village of Mugu and crossed a single plank bridge to gain a rough track leading up to meadows at 4,400m where we established our base camp.

Weather

It rained a little when we were in Kathmandu on 30th September but from there on we had more or less completely clear skies apart from two days of bad weather on 20th and 21st October. We left Kathmandu to fly back to the UK on 29th October.

Much as the weather was generally clear the temperature dropped rapidly while we were at base camp and it was very cold (perhaps minus 20 degrees centigrade) and rather windy above 6,000m.

Mountaineering Potential

The hills to the west of Gojung are rounded, rise to c5,400m and are excellent for hill walking and acclimatising. All of interesting potential for serious mountaineering is on the west and north facing sides of the Kojichuwa Khola. Possibilities are limited because of numerous seracs on these faces but a few obvious possibilities stand out:

- the NW buttress of Gojung bounds the west face on the left and would provide a fine, safe objective. The upper section is extremely steep but could probably be avoided by difficult climbing on the north side.
- the peaks on the border between Kapthang and Kojichuwa Chuli (one of which was climbed by Graham and Jon) provide non-technical climbs accessible via the upper end of the Kojichuwa Chuli.
- the south ridge of Kojichuwa Chuli looks to give a good climb crossing an impressive forepeak well before the summit. Access to the ridge would be via the descent route taken by Mick and Dave.
- To the south of Gojung are largely serac threatened faces rising to over 6,000m. The summits look to be accessible via the fine looking, narrow SW ridge which looks to be accessible from the glacier not far above base camp.

Achievements of the Expedition

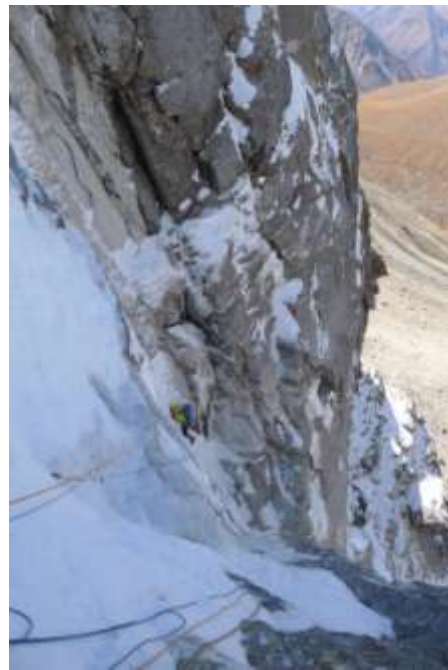
Mick Fowler and Dave Turnbull made the first ascent of the west face of Gojung (6,310m) and descended by traversing the frontier ridge over pt 6,246m and descending by abseil and glacial terrain from the foot of the south ridge of Kojichuwa Chuli.

Graham Desroy and Jonny Ratcliffe made a successful ascent of a summit on the Nepal/Tibet border, approximately 5,800m. The summit lies on the ridge that leads roughly NE of Kojichuwa Chuli 6,439m. Approximately 4km from the summit of KC immediately to the NE of the obvious rocky col, where presumably the Japanese accessed the ridge for their ascent of KC – an impressive looking undertaking. The summit was non technical and involved a little snow work but mainly a rocky scramble.

Graham and Jonny also made an unsuccessful attempt on the rock summit point 5623m on the ridge running SW from Kanti Himal. From the NW side of the ridge the route attempted to reach the col to the immediate NE of point 5623. Attempt aborted just short of the col by very loose rock. Would have been a doddle in good snow/ice conditions.



*Unclimbed S. Ridge of Kojichuwa Chuli.
Rocky peak is unclimbed forepeak.*



*Dave Turnbull climbing on west
face of Gojung*

The following article was written by Mick Fowler:

Gojung 2011

Agitated screaming in a native tongue was mixed with shouts of increasing concern from Jonny Ratcliffe.

‘Watch out! What are you doing? The black one’s in that garden. And the white one is under that house!’

I ran frantically into carefully tended vegetable gardens shouting my best Nepalese mule commands. But the more I focused on bringing one animal under control the more the others would roam off to munch carefully nurtured garden produce.

The locals were not happy and the situation was beginning to feel dangerously out of control. Jonny and I were trying to drive laden mules through the village of Mangri in the Mugu District of West Nepal. It wasn’t as if we wanted to be doing this but the two muleteers we had employed had stopped for a drinking session and were nowhere to be seen. And we had already been so badly delayed by landslides that three days had passed with us being only a little over a tenth of the way to base camp. We only had 30 days away from Britain so unless we could somehow speed up the mule travel we wouldn’t stand a chance of getting to base camp let alone climbing the mountain that we had set our hearts on for the last year. And so we had taken it upon ourselves to take over mule driving. Jonny was a star at it whereas my performance was less convincing.

The mountain we were aiming for is known locally as Gojung and stands at an altitude of just over 6,300m on the Nepal/Tibet border. The probable first westerners to see it were a Spanish team in 2008. They christened it Mugu Chuli, decreed it as 'outstanding' and returned for an attempt in 2009. They were not successful but the same year a British team visited the area after which Ed Douglas, kindly sent me a photograph with the caption '*came across this face which might interest you*'. And now, two years later, here I was trying to get there with climbing partner Dave Turnbull and fellow team members Graham Desroy and Jonny Ratcliffe.

Our 'trying' though was not going very well. Gojung forms part of the remote Kapthang range on the border between Far Western Nepal and Tibet. It is not at all quick and easy to get to. To get this far we had flown to Kathmandu, endured a 16 hour bus ride to the town of Nepalgunj and then flown to Rara airstrip. The precariousness of the flight leg was later emphasised to us when 'our' plane crashed and the only other plane owned by the airline broke down – fortunately without crashing! And now we were struggling to drive mules through landslide areas and counting the increasingly small number of days we might have at base camp. Agitation was beginning to run high.

The world through which we travelled gave the appearance of not having changed for generations. Subsistence farming dominated with electricity and generators in short supply and not a games console in sight. The religious environment changed from predominately Hindu in the lower reaches to prominently Buddhist as we rose into the mountains. The last settlement of Mugu, a couple of days short of the Namla La pass into Tibet, particularly charmed us with its unusual mediaeval style buildings adorned with weighty accumulations of firewood. We were told this accumulation had gone beyond practicality and become something of a competition which was rather obviously challenging the structural stability of many houses. Our two muleteers livened proceedings here by having an impressive fight which resulted in one very swollen cheek, an apparently broken thumb and yet more delays. Throughout the whole of the walk-in we met just one western trekker. The whole Mugu area met my approval. It is delightfully far from the madding crowds of Khumbu.

The peaks lining the Kojichuwa Khola valley came into view as we approached a beautiful base camp site at about 4,400m. Only Kochiwala Chuli (6,439m) had been climbed here and we could not fail to notice that Gojung was not the only fine looking unclimbed 6,000m peak.

It had taken seven days to walk into base camp which left us 12 days before the mules returned. With this timescale very much in mind Dave and I set off immediately to incur some altitude headaches. Acclimatising is not exactly my favourite aspect of a Himalayan trip and normally we get as high as we sensibly can and sit there until we feel that we have suffered thin air for long enough to stand a chance of success on the main objective. Here though it was slightly different in that the terrain immediately west of Gojung was rolling hills rising to just over 5,400m. It meant that from our tent at about 5,100m we were able to make a couple of walking forays over hilly summits and soak in marvellous views of the whole of the Kapthang range and the Tibetan plateau beyond. We endured three nights at our 5,100m camp before decreeing ourselves acclimatised and ready to attempt to climb to the summit of Gojung. Taking

into account a day sorting everything out at base camp we now had just 7 climbing days until the mules arrived. With the face one day away from base camp that left just six to climb the mountain and get down. And our best estimate was that it might take 6. Mmmm. Himalayan trips can pose challenging timescales for those of us on limited holidays.

The squeaky, white ice could not have been better. The heavy monsoon must have sent thousands of tonnes of spindrift cascading into the narrow lower couloir of our chosen line and compacted it to give perfect climbing conditions. Dave, enjoying his first climb in the Himalayas, expressed surprise. This was a million miles away from Himalayan soft snow plodding as so often portrayed in the press. Clear skies dominated the horizon and spindrift was minimal. Desperate looking pitches succumbed with relative ease and by the end of the second day we were about half way up the face. We were going a little slower than planned but all in all it couldn't get much better.

It was at this point that I was to demonstrate that 30 years of greater range experience doesn't make one immune from the most elementary mistakes. The decision to be made was how best to bivouac when faced with a uniform 50 degree ice slope and intermittent waves of spindrift. With the lessons learned from more bivouacs than I care to remember I should have insisted that we cut a bum ledge and sat together shielded from the spindrift by the tent fabric. But the temptation of a lie down bivouac was too much and so I suggested nose-to-tail as my preferred option. That would have been all very nice but for the spindrift and the fact that the bivouac sack I was using was new to me and I was wary of suffocating if I zipped myself completely in. After a night of increasing spindrift and much squirming enough snow got into my sleeping bag to make it distinctly damp for the top 12 inches or so. Noting that this had happened when there wasn't a cloud in the sky did make me feel particularly silly. In the morning Dave, relatively snug and dry, marvelled quietly as I sheepishly packed my bedraggled looking sleeping bag away.

Our third day on the face continued with more perfect white ice and much whooping up increasingly spectacular ground to finally reach a similar bivouac predicament to the previous night. The slope beneath the headwall was smooth and icy and this time there was no hesitation in going for a 'cut bum ledge and sit in tent fabric' bivouac.

It was only when I unpacked my sleeping bag that I fully realised the effect of the night before. That morning I had convinced myself that my bag was only a bit damp but now I could not deny that the whole thing resembled a frozen football and the upper section was heavy with blocks of ice. I unravelled it to the sound of cracking ice and tried my best to remain cheerful and get in.

I tend not to find sitting bivouacs very comfortable at the best of times but usually I am at least able to snuggle down and enjoy being warm. This time though I could not bring myself to wrap the upper section around me and was soon shivering badly. Meanwhile Dave had snuggled down, pulled his hat over his eyes, inserted enormous earplugs and was snoring gently.

For my part I spent some time contemplating the coldness of late October night time temperatures and wondering whether to cut the ice lumps out of my sleeping bag and

throw them away. It wouldn't do my sleeping bag much good but on the other hand they must have weighed 2Kg and there seemed little point in expending energy carrying them up with me. I dithered badly, made a midnight brew, shivered more, and was incredibly grateful that my down jacket had somehow recovered from the dampness incident. My shivering must have been impressive as, at one point, I managed to vibrate Dave into a state of semi alertness and get him to agree to share his sleeping bag with me if matters should get any worse. Regardless of how the situation had arisen it did seem potentially silly to have one climber using up all his energy shivering while the other snored blissfully.

Ultimately I decided to leave the lumps and have the upper section of the bag hanging out of my rucksack the next day where it would hopefully dry a little in the anticipated afternoon sun.

The previous day had seen increasing communication problems. Dave had been suffering from increasing throat problems which meant that he could only shout in a sort of strangulated cry. And I couldn't hear; firstly because I increasingly can't hear very well and secondly because the cold was such that I had spent most of the day with all three hoods up together. 'Pardon' had become the most used word on the mountain.

It was as we emerged from my shivering bivouac that Dave moved close and whispered in my ear. Initially I found this slightly disconcerting but it soon became clear that, much as he was in good condition in every other way, his throat problem had worsened to the extent that whispering at close quarters was now the only way he could communicate. Climbing communications would have to be in sign language from now on. At least that meant we understood the limitations and wouldn't have to say 'pardon' to each other every few minutes.

Dave continued to whisper quietly as we enjoyed our usual snickers bar each for breakfast after which I started signalling manoeuvres by giving a thumbs up when it became clear that good climbing conditions continued on the next section, a potentially difficult traverse towards the summit icefields.

These traverse pitches gave fantastic climbing and were much steeper and more spectacular than we had anticipated. What we had feared might be time consuming powder snow on rock turned out to be superb mixed ground; solid rock interspersed with soft, white ice giving delicate traversing above awe inspiring drops. Gojung lies on the main Himalayan crest and the background for the traverse was a magnificent sea of unclimbed peaks stretching into the distance.

Away to the south could be seen the lush mountain valleys of western Nepal whilst to the north the skyline was dominated by the arid brown plain of the Tibetan plateau. Along the crest we could see the conical unclimbed summit that we knew Graham and Jonny would be (successfully) attempting at that very moment. I hung from the belay and couldn't stop admiring the view. It really did feel a privilege to be able to be here.

The end of the traverse marked the end of the technical difficulties. A few pitches of easier mixed climbing, a series of lung gasping rope lengths up the final slopes and, just before nightfall, we breached the summit crest to find a perfect wind scoured flat

area for the tent. The summit itself was just 100m or so away and could wait for the morning. It was the first time we had managed to pitch the tent since the foot of the face and we both collapsed thankfully into its protective embrace.

Dave produced a pillow and spent some time levelling his sleeping mat by wedging bits of clothing under it.

‘Important to be comfortable.’ he whispered before falling asleep within seconds.

The spot was wonderfully sheltered and I lay there listening to his slow, heavy breathing and contemplating the fact that my sleeping bag drying efforts had slightly improved my ice lump problem. At least I had managed to get in completely tonight and was definitely shivering less than the night before. Mind you if things had been worse the chances of being able to wake Dave and share his sleeping bag looked slim.

The weather remained absolutely perfect, not a cloud in the sky, and I looked forward to standing on the unclimbed summit of Gojung early in the morning. A slight concern was that the face had taken a day longer than planned but I wasn’t going to let that interrupt the sense of elation I felt at having reached the top of the face. Anyway with a bit of luck we would be able to catch up a day later and still arrive in base camp the same day as the mules.

After 20 days of near perfect weather we were somewhat taken aback to unzip the tent in the morning and find threatening clouds scudding across an increasingly grey sky.

The summit was gained quickly via a pleasing snow ridge but lingering as I like to was out of the question with a biting wind building fast and thoughts of the descent beginning to dominate.

Possible descents had provoked much discussion in Britain. Abseiling back down the route lacked aesthetic appeal and we always knew that it might not be possible because the lower couloir would be exposed to avalanches in bad weather. But the summit snowfields on the Tibetan side were the key to all other options and as wild expanses of high level glacial terrain they required good visibility for safe progress. And the fast approaching clouds looked likely to rob us of that just when we needed it most.

The option we had chosen was to traverse the Nepal/Tibet frontier for a kilometre or so over an unclimbed 6,000m peak and then descend a complex abseiling and glacier route back to the glacier at the foot of the face. We had judged that, in good weather, gaining the top of the abseiling section should be an easy day moving together from the top of Gojung.

But by nightfall we were perhaps one third of the way along the frontier traverse, visibility was zero and the wind was howling. The next morning steady snowfall was adding to the challenge and by the next evening we had managed bursts of activity between the clouds totalling perhaps two hours. A memorably undignified crawl through deep snow had also slowed progress on one section. Along the way we used the semi clear spells to take photographs with our digital cameras in the hope that they would aid progress in reduced visibility. They proved laughably inadequate and

ultimately, in knee deep snow and a white out, we had to acknowledge that the only safe option was to stop, pitch the tent and wait until we could see something.

We were now two days behind schedule and the niggling concern about being late was beginning to grow. The mules ought to be leaving base camp the next morning if we were to get to Rara airstrip in time to catch the plane. So what would Graham and Jonny do? We felt guilty causing them so much worry and inconvenience but didn't think they would leave without us. The last walkie talkie contact with them had been from our bivouac on the summit ridge so they knew we were at least one day behind schedule. And, much as we had not been able to get in touch with them since, they could see the weather was bad so it seemed reasonable for them to suspect that we could have lost another day. On balance we reckoned that we had three days before they would start to get seriously concerned. Unsettling as these thoughts were was nothing we could do but continue with the descent as quickly as possible as weather windows allowed. At least we had plenty of gas, a snickers bar and a fair bit of surplus fat. I took out my book to pass the time, only to note with displeasure that it had somehow got damp and turned into a block of ice. Perhaps surprisingly we both slept well.

Dave pulled his head back in the tent and turned with a big smile on his face. It was morning again and he whispered that cloudless skies had returned. It was time to spring into action. For the first time we could properly appreciate the immensity of our surroundings. We were tiny figures, insignificant in a huge expanse of glacial whiteness. Steep ice cliffs and gaping crevasses dotted the landscape and were all too obvious a risk for the unwary. Stopping and holing up when we did had all too obviously been the right thing to do.

Now the atmosphere was suddenly so different from the last two days. Being able to see is amazingly useful. Suddenly we were walking easily down a gentle slope, jumping a bergschrund, feeling the warmth of the sun on our faces and then sweating uncomfortably whilst descending south facing slopes. By evening we were on the glacier we had started from and by the next morning we had met a relieved Graham who had come up with Purbah, our kitchen boy, to meet us, carry our bags and deliver assorted goodies to eat. Life felt good.

It transpired that the bad weather had stopped the mules arriving on time and base camp had only been moved down to the main valley the day before. And we had been monitored more closely than we realised. When the weather cleared Jonny had come all the way up to below our descent route and spent the day watching us through binoculars. And now, the next day, Graham and Purbah had walked all the way up from the main valley to meet us. We were incredibly grateful. It's good to have good friends. It turned into one of those occasions when everything worked out just right. The muleteers drove their mules through the night to make up the two days we had lost, a plane miraculously arrived to replace the crashed and broken down ones, a vehicle somehow materialised at the sleepy airstrip we were flown to and we were back in London on the Sunday in time for Dave and I to be back in our offices on the Monday morning.

We had been away 30 days and had been in action every day. It is satisfying to feel that one's annual leave is being used to the full.

Accounts

In £ sterling with Nepalese Rupees exchanged at 120rs to £1 and US dollars exchanged at \$1.5 to £1.

Expenditure

£

2,467	Flights (4) from London Heathrow to Kathmandu
2,050	Flights Nepalgunj – Rara - Surkhet (6 incl. excess baggage)
832	Permits
107	Visas
267	Cost of gas and delivering gas to Rara
65	Bus Kathmandu – Nepalgunj (4 climbers plus cook & kitchen boy)
327	Insurance of porters/mules/muleteers
1108	Food and kitchen equipment.
300	Agent fee
745	Insurance (climbers)
241	Kerosene
1575	Mules/Muleteers
60	Porter
350	Cook for 30 days
250	Kitchen boy for 30 days
292	Vehicle from Surkeet to Kathmandu
500	Contingencies: Hotels (Rara, Nepalgunj & Kathmandu), meals, taxis etc.

11,536

Income

2,000	Mount Everest Foundation
600	Alpine Club
2,184	Personal Contributions (DT, GD & JR)
2,384	Personal Contribution (MF)

11,536