

Nepal, Ghunsadhar 2023

7th October 2023 to 28th October 2023

Neil Cox

Leanne Dyke

Tom Harding

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▲ *The team on the glacier above high camp. Kabru (7,412m) on the far distance on the left.*

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The following gave invaluable advice and support: Scott Martin, Ben James.

Our thanks go to all of them.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Summary

For 3 weeks in October 2023 James Hoyes, Leanne Dyke, Neil Cox and Tom Harding visited the Kachenjunga region of northeast Nepal, attempting a first ascent of Ghunsadhar (5,740m). There are no other known attempts of this peak.

The team and their 160kg of food and equipment flew from London to Kathmandu, and then journeyed overland to Taplejung, a large district in the far east of Nepal. From here they travelled 50km on foot and via 4WD to Ghunsa, a small settlement near the foot of their objective.

In an 8-day push from Ghunsa the team climbed to just above 5,400m but were ultimately unsuccessful in their objective as a result of illness, poor rock quality and technical climbing difficulty.



▲ The team. Left to right – Tom Harding, Neil Cox, Leanne Dyke & James Hoyes.

1.2 Team members

Neil Cox, 35, British, Actuary (Expedition Leader)

Neil is an experienced caver, kayaker and mountaineer with a focus on self-organised and unguided expeditions. As well as organising or participating in the expeditions mentioned by Tom and Leanne, some examples of other recent expedition experience include:

2020 - first middle of winter crossing of Iceland by ski

2018 - descents of the Kitoy and Urik rivers in Siberia

2016 - found the connection from the Dachstein mountains to Hirlatz hole, helping uncover the 9th deepest cave in the world in the process

Neil has unguided mountaineering experience to 6,500m (Volcan Sajama) and regularly climbs in the European Alps, having summited c. 25 of the Alpine 4,000ers (D).

(Mynydd Climbing Club, The Climbing Clan, Arctic Club, Austrian Alpine Club, Alpine Club)

Tom Harding, 38, British, Cartographer & Aerial Photographer

Climbing is a big part of Tom's life. He has been on trips all around the UK and Europe including recent trips to Lofoten (up to N5), Dolomites (up to VII), Senja (up to WI4+) and Rjukan (up to WI4). Most winters he makes the pilgrimage from Bristol to Scotland at least once, and is making his way through the classics (up to IV 4). In 2017 he was a member of a successful expedition to the Borkoldoy range in Kyrgyzstan, making three first ascents including leading the final push on the expedition's 5,044m main objective peak. In 2018, as part of an unsupported group of 4 friends, he pulled a pulk 250km across Svalbard to climb its highest peak, Newtontoppen. In 2019 he organised and led the 'Renland, Greenland 2019' (BMC 19/06) expedition, making ascents of five previously unclimbed peaks and a number of long rock routes.

(Arctic Club, Austrian Alpine Club)

Leanne Dyke, 38, British/Irish, Scrum Master

Although it wasn't till later in life that Leanne found the confidence to tackle more extreme outdoor sports since then she has never looked back. In 2017 she became the first known female to traverse Nepal border-to-border from north to south unsupported via kayak, and in the same year her and Neil became the first British team to complete an unsupported crossing of Iceland via packraft with a source to sea descent of its longest river. In 2018 she helped organise a self-supported crossing of Svalbard via its highest peak alongside Tom. Outside of remote expeditions Leanne is keen mountaineer and has ticked off 8 peaks in the famous 'Alps 4000'ers' list so far. She has also been on trips all around the UK and Europe including recent trips to the Swiss Alps (AD+), Senja (up to WI4+), Rjukan (WI4+) and Cogne (up to WI4).

(Austrian Alpine Club)

James Hoyes Ree, 42, British, Engineer

This was James' first larger expedition, but he has extensive experience climbing in in the UK and Europe (to E1). He has also summited over 40 of the Alpine 4000ers (to TD), and has several long alpine ski-touring trips under this belt.

(Mynydd Climbing Club, Austrian Alpine Club, The Alpine Club)

2 PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

2.1 Research and previous expeditions

The objective was identified via several long evenings cross-referencing a database of unclimbed Himalayan peaks against accessibility. For this trip the team were only able to devote 3 weeks, and so many peaks were immediately ruled out due to altitude and time it would take to trek to a base camp. Eventually a shortlist of three potential peaks were identified, for which the logistics and technical difficulties (to the extent possible) were researched in more detail.

The team ultimately settled on Ghunsadar. There was very little photo imagery of the mountain, that which was obtained predominantly coming from trekking trips. However, the logistics appeared feasible, and the technical difficulties were anticipated to be around 200m to 300m of vertical climbing at around 50 degrees average gradient near the summit.

The team are unaware of any previous attempts on this peak, nor of the immediately adjacent ones. This is likely to be due to the presence of other higher and more attractive peaks just slightly further north.

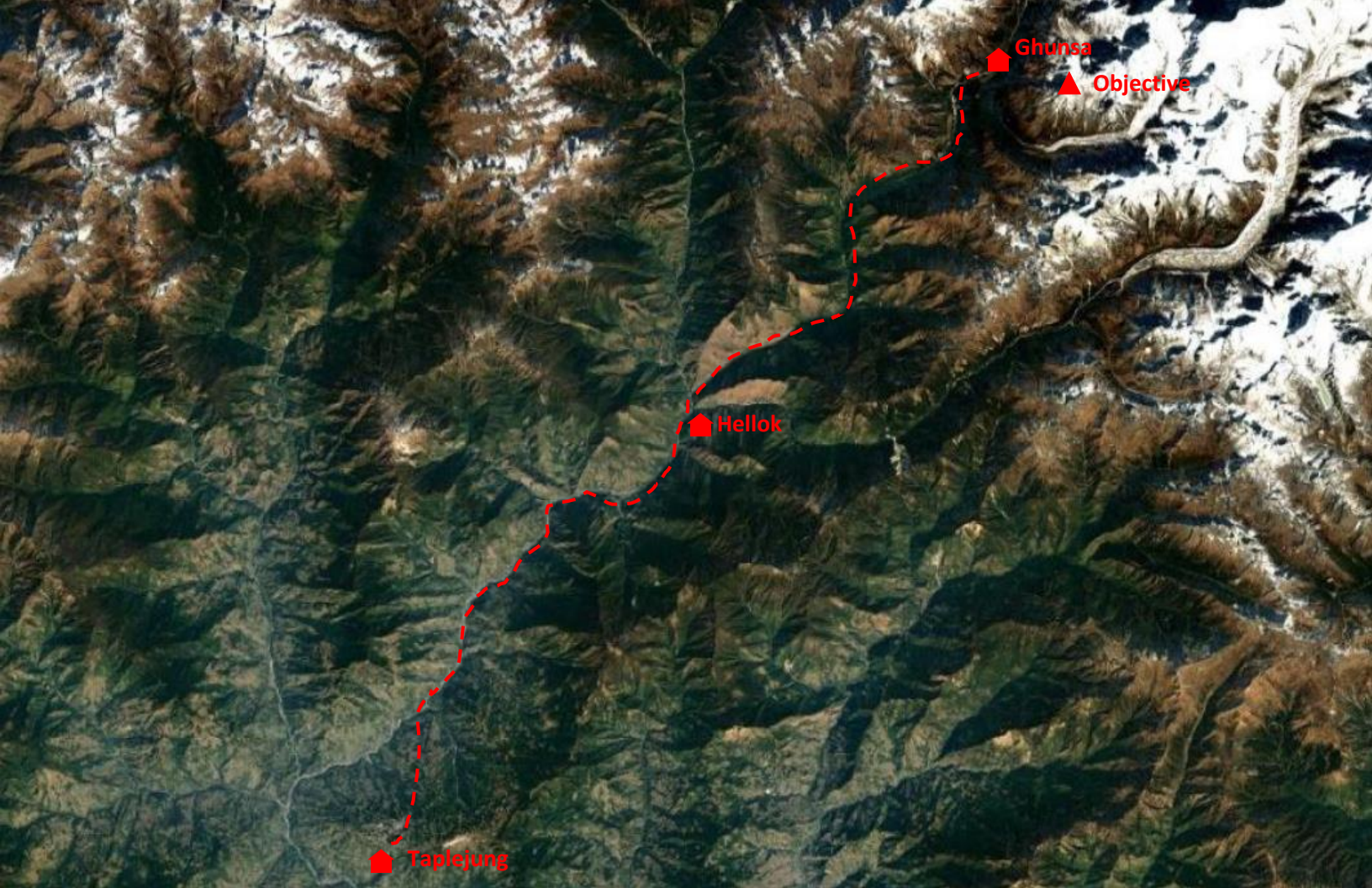
In 2014 there was an expedition into the same valley which achieved a first ascent of the central top of Boktoh (6,074m), one of the peaks on the southern side (our objective was on the northern side). This was undertaken by Jonathan Crison, Helias Millerioux and Remi Sfilio.



- ◀ *Google Earth imagery of our objective, this was probably the best visual representation we found ahead of the trip*
- ▶ *A photo from a trekking trip of our planned base camp*

2.2 Travel and logistics

We flew from the UK to Kathmandu, with in-country transport and logistics organised by Dawa Sherpa of Dream Himalaya Adventures (<https://dreamhimalayaadventures.com/>). Dawa listened to our needs and was happy to provide a customised package for the logistics support we wanted, whereas with some other agents we contacted it was difficult to move them away from 'all inclusive' packages which were considerably more expensive. Dawa also grew-up in Ghunsa (the settlement close to our objective) and was very familiar with the area.



▲ *The approach through Kachenjunga Conservation Area*

After an overnight flight landing in Kathmandu around midday we were able to grab a few hours sleep first before catching a bus to Taplejung, a district in the north-east of Nepal, early the following morning. This was a 28 hour bus ride (4 hours longer than expected), and from there we immediately transferred to a 4WD vehicle to travel over 25km up the road to a tea house. These first few days of pretty much non-stop travel were tiring, but necessary due to the short window we had for this trip. We arrived at the teahouse after dark, met our porters and set-off early the next morning for the two-day trek to Ghunsa (3,420m).

We used a rest day in Ghunsa to acclimatise and recce a potential approach to our objective from the north/west side, rather than the planned south/east side. The route disappears into a steep sided glacial retreat. One member of the team continued solo to around 4,200m before turning round due to altitude and a harder climbing section. From what they could see this approach would be possible, though wouldn't be suitable for porters and so would increase the effort of establishing a base camp. However, it would allow much earlier access to the glacier, and therefore presumably make for easier progress at the higher altitudes.

The following day we started the trek to base camp (4,900m), reaching it after 3 days. The porters and one of the team needed to climb to base camp on the first trek day to drop gear before descending; this was a pushy day and both the team member and at least two of the porters experienced moderate altitude sickness.

The return journey happened was much the same in reverse, descending slightly quicker as a result of not needing to factor in acclimatisation. From base camp we walked all our equipment down to a trail at c. 4,400m that the porters were familiar with. We left the bags here and the porters, who were arriving later, were successfully able to find them and bring them back down to Ghunsa for us.



▲ Ghunsa and the local area

Ghunsa is well-equipped given its altitude. There is phone signal and so we were able to communicate with our contact there via Garmin satellite messenger devices whilst attempting the summit. We were also able to source liquid fuel, which had been difficult to find in Kathmandu, for our stoves there – that said our contact was adamant we take 10l as that was the container he had (and was much more than we wanted).

Other than this liquid fuel and a few medical supplies, all equipment and food was flown in as hold baggage from the UK.

2.3 Permits

Only standard trekking permits (and conservation area access permits) were needed for this trip, meaning that no guide was needed. That said, during 2023 there had been announcements by the Nepalese government that all trips would require climbing permits and/or guides. Fortunately this wasn't enforced for us, but the general situation on the ground in relation to this matter seemed unclear. The agents arranged and collected all permits in advance for us.

2.4 Finances

Expenditure	
Travel – Flights UK to Nepal	£3,870
Travel – buses, jeeps & taxis	£530
Porters (incl. tips & insurance)	£1,290
Food	£980
Agency fee	£650
Permits & visas	£440
Accommodation	£230
Insurance	£190
Equipment hire & purchases	£180
Incidental expenses	£40
Total	£8,400
Grants	
Mount Everest Foundation	£3,500
British Mountaineering Council	£350
Alpine Club	£500
Total	£4,350
Team member contributions	£4,050
Team member contributions (per person)	£1,012.50

2.5 Insurance

Cover through the Austrian Alpine Club's was used for this trip. This was a highly cost-effective option. It excludes expeditions but contains the following note:

"In accordance with the exceptions stated above, all mountaineering activities and trips that are undertaken with the aim of climbing a mountain featuring a summit height below 6,000 m and that do not visit the stated Arctic or Antarctic regions or Greenland are nevertheless insured even if these are designated as expeditions by an organiser."

As such we understood our trip would be covered. Basic cover is provided with Austrian Alpine Club membership for European trips only, and offers €25,000 search and rescue, €10,000 medical treatment abroad and medical repatriation to the UK if necessary. An upgrade for enhanced worldwide cover for our 3-week trip cost around £45 per person, and increases the medical treatment abroad cover to €500,000. The Austrian Alpine Club insurance is not a general travel insurance policy and does not cover risks such as lost baggage. No specific additional insurance was taken out for these risks for the expedition, but most team members already had annual travel insurance policies in place providing the necessary cover.

2.6 Food

Overall the team took 3,100kcal per person per day for the 9 days of the expedition planned to be above Ghunsa – for all other days food was available from tea houses or restaurants. Menus based on cost, weight and calories were planned in advanced and a 10% weight uplift added for packaging (the 10% is based on previous experience).

3,100kcal proved more than enough for this expedition. Due to acclimatisation needs most days were short and low intensity (compared to say a pulk hauling trip), and we were only out in the field for a short time before being able to refuel on Dhal Bhat at tea houses. The 9 days of expedition food purchased amounted to around £12 per person per day, the cost managed in part due to a discount we had available on the freeze-dried meals.

Broadly speaking the menu was:

	Items
Breakfast	Porridge sachets (golden syrup) and sultanas
Lunch	One of: 1. Flatbreads with garlic/peanut butter/honey/butter/olive oil 2. Super Noodles 3. Nuts
Dinner	1,000kcal freeze-dried meals
Snacks	Cheese, chocolate bars and cereal bars
Treat	Oreos and custard (only available a few days)
Drinks	Coffee, protein shake and squash'd



- ◀ *Making flat breads, an enjoyable rest day distraction*
- ▶ *Breakfast at base camp*

2.7 Environmental impact and waste management

Before setting off excess food packaging was removed to reduce waste in Nepal. While in Nepal all rubbish was fastidiously collected, compressed and given to the agent in Ghunsa on departure in the hope it would be disposed of responsibly, unfortunately this can't be guaranteed. No equipment or tat was left on the mountain. Human waste was buried in deep holes and all toilet paper burned.

2.8 Communication

The team carried two Garmin InReach satellite messenger devices, these can send tracking data and satellite text messages to a home contact while using very little battery. A home contact was put in place throughout the expedition, and they were well briefed on all expedition plans and logistics prior to setting off. They had access to the InReach tracking data during the trip. Communication protocols were setup for the team to 'check-in' each day and others were agreed for loss of communication with one team or with the entire team. The same system has been used on a number of previous expeditions and it strikes a good balance between safety, effort, and the desire to be self-sufficient. The home contact would also provide weather forecasts for the next few days on receipt of the team's 'check-ins'.

2.9 Medical

All team members were recently first aid trained with two refreshing their qualification during 2023. The remote nature of the expedition and the flight weight limit meant both short-term and long-term medical care had to be catered for efficiently. Lightweight first aid kits were carried whilst mountaineering with a comprehensive kit at base camp. These lightweight kits centred around trauma injuries; some notable inclusions were various pain reliefs, a SAM splint, military trauma dressings, and haemostatic agents. The base camp kit contained a selection of drugs, ointments and dressings. Due to the rapid acclimatisation profile acetazolamide was taken preventatively from the first day of trekking.



- ◀ Neil feeling the effects of altitude after his bounce trip to 4,900m with the porters for the gear drop
- ▶ Tom and James taking a break during the ascent to base camp

3 EXPEDITION REPORT

3.1 Write-up

The first 4 days of the expedition was pretty much non-stop travelling. We flew overnight from London to Kathmandu, catching a few hours sleep in a 'quiet' area of Delhi airport. We then then boarded a 28-hour overnight bus ride (4 hours longer than expected) to Taplejung before immediately transferring to a jeep for a 4-hour ride to Sekathum.



- ◀ Our well loaded jeep from Taplejung ready to make the bumpy 4-hour journey to Sekathum/Hellok.
- ▶ Our porters up in the Yak pastures near Ghunsa.

The trek from Sekathum/Hellok to Ghunsa was outstanding. Over two days we followed the valley for a little under 30km, gaining around 1800m of altitude in the process. We trekked through craggy mountainous landscapes, forested areas and small settlements, almost entirely without coming across other tourist groups. The trek itself follow the Tamur river, regularly commercially rafted in its lower stretches below Taplejung. This high up however it was a raging inaccessible torrent, though just a couple of weeks later during our descent flows had lowered, and it had transformed into a continuous class IV+/V (VI) journey that would provide a worthy challenge to an expert group.



- ◀ Neil's termination on the northern recce at around 4,200m. Wet rock made the climb cave or canyon-esque.
- ▶ The outstanding Tamur river that the trekking route runs alongside. Water levels changed significantly over the trip.

On a 'rest' day a Ghunsa we explored northwards, performing a recce of an alternative route into our objective. Most of the team stopped shortly after the branch from the valley, partly due to altitude and partly due to the route above,

but Neil continued to around 4,200m. His conclusion was that this route appeared to go (though the difficulty of the final ascent to reach the glacier is unknown) but that is more of a caving than mountaineering nature.

Over the following three days the team then trekked from Ghunsa (3,400m) to our base camp, Dudh Pokhari (4,900m). Dudh Pokhari is a lake but please be aware there are two lakes in the same area for which the locals use the same name for – one (the target base camp) is 500m higher than the other so care is needed. The trek continued to provide dramatic scenery, though it was disheartening to see the scale of the glacial retreat of the Yamatari glacier. The plan was for our bags to be dropped near our base camp by the porters on the first day of this trek. However, they were unexpectedly unclear on where it was, and so Neil was asked to accompany them. The bounce trip to 4,900m was challenging with Neil and at least two of the porters experiencing moderate altitude sickness. However, the impromptu plan proved successful, and we successfully reunited with our kit at base camp.

Base camp was far from the snowy plateau we were hoping it would be. As we arrived as far as the eye could see was ankle-breaking moraine. The approach was south facing and clearly, as with the Yamatari glacier below, global warming had taken its toll. Over the next three days the team gradually shuffled kit over the moraine to a high camp on a col just below 5,400m. Between base camp and high camp water source were limited, though two of the team did spend an overnight on the route – sourcing gritty water from a minor run-off from the small amount of glacier remaining.



- ◀ *Base camp at 4,905m. Nyukla Lachun (an unclimbed 6,015m) peak in background.*
- ▶ *Neil looking for a route through the endless moraine above base camp. There were a couple of glaciers such as the one in this picture coming in from the east that might provide access to Nyukla Lachun. However, the mapping and what we saw indicate these glaciers are likely to terminate in steep rock faces.*

High camp was spectacular, situated by a lake on a col receiving plenty of sunlight. Looking northwards the top of the Nyukla Lachun glacier (our alternative route we'd recce'd around a week previously) beckoned, protected by the mountains and showing to be a far better shape than the dissipated glacier on our route.



▲ Gearing up at high camp (5,365m). Rathong (6,678m) in the far distance and Boktoh (6,030m) on the right.

However, the climbing was not to be. On our first gloriously sunny day since arriving at base camp, we made the short trek across the glacier to what we anticipated would be a 50-degree average gradient 300m vertical summit ridge. Instead we were met with a series of steep 300m+ faces on loose rock. The climbing looked harder than pretty much anything we'd attempted before, and so with two of the team suffering with severe colds and collapsing into their tents at the end of every day, it wasn't a difficult decision to conclude this wasn't a feasible or safe objective for us.



▲ The final 300/400m of Ghunsadhar as seen from high camp at 5,365m. We believe the left-hand peak is the true summit. Steep loose rock, no obvious approach and too little snow meant we had to turn around. The left-hand ridge looked most promising though is accessed lower given a ridge climb of some 1,000m.

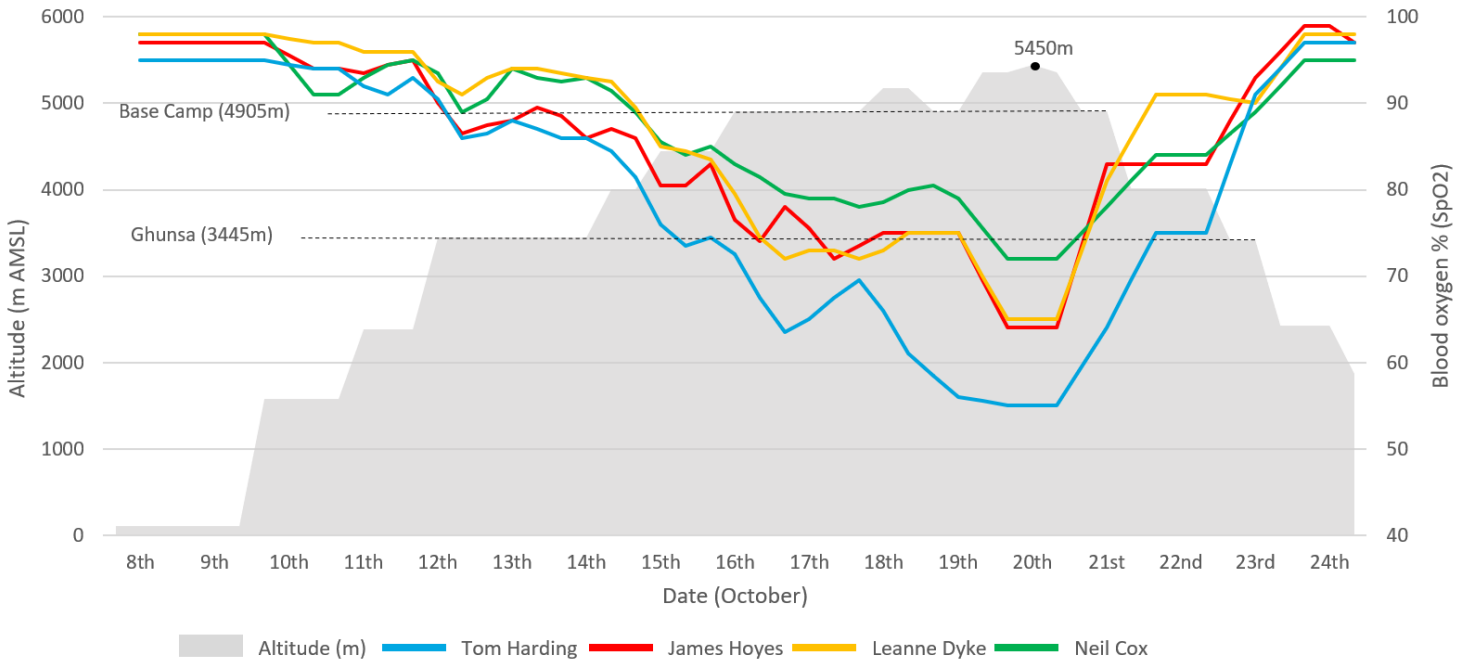
We'd still planned to be on the mountain for one further day, and had supplies for another additional day beyond that if needed, though that would have removed contingency for our return journey. However, given what we'd observed, we decided to head back to base camp the same day, thereby buying ourselves an extra day and more leisurely trek out and bus ride back to Kathmandu.



▲ The glacier above high camp. Phole Sobithonje (6,645m) in the background and Khabur (6,294m) on left.

3.2 Scientific measurements

The team took a blood oximeter and took bi-daily readings throughout the expedition. The graph below shows a plot of how the team’s blood oxygen levels varied over time and altitude. One of the interesting observations is that whilst Neil typically had the highest blood oxygen levels throughout the expedition, he recovered the slowest and had the lowest levels by the end of the expedition.



▲ The team carried a blood oximeter and took regular readings throughout the expedition. This graph shows the blood oxygen (SpO2) against altitude (m AMSL).

3.3 Expedition timeline

- 7th Oct – Flight from UK (LHR) to Delhi (DEL).
- 8th Oct – Flight from Delhi (DEL) to Kathmandu (KTM). Last minuet shopping. Meet agent.
- 9th Oct – Bus from Kathmandu to Taplejung (28h).
- 10th Oct – Arrive Taplejung. Jeep journey to Sukathum/Hellok (4h).
- 11th Oct – Walk in. Sukathum to Thyanyani (13.4km).
- 12th Oct – Walk in. Thyanyani to Ghunsa (3,420m) (15.9km).
- 13th Oct – Acclimatisation day. Recce of the ‘Northern route’.
- 14th Oct – NC to 4,900m and back with porters to drop equipment. Rest of the team to 4,005m.
- 15th Oct – Move camp to 4,445m.
- 16th Oct – Big day moving up to our main Base camp (BC) at 4,915m.
- 17th Oct – Rest and acclimatisation day. NC & JH scout, JH to 5,225m and NC solo thereafter to 5,365m.
- 18th Oct – Gear haul to ‘Scree camp’ at 5,225m. JH and LD camp there with NC & TH returning to BC.
- 19th Oct – Whole team move to ‘High camp’ at 5,365m.
- 20th Oct – Cross the glacier to recce final summit route – unfeasible. Whole team descend to BC.
- 21st Oct – Whole team descended to Ghunsa (3,420m). Left gear for mules to pick up.
- 22nd Oct – Rest day. TH walked up to Jannu base camp.
- 23rd Oct – Walk out. Ghunsa to Amiljosa (20.2km).
- 24th Oct – Walk out. Amiljosa to Sukathum/Hellok (9.5km). Jeep to Taplejung (4h).

25th Oct – Bus to Kathmandu (24h).
26th Oct – Tourist day in Kathmandu.
27th Oct – Tourist day in Kathmandu.
28th Oct – Flights from Kathmandu (KTM) to Delhi (DEL), Flight from Delhi (DEL) to London (LHR).
29th Oct – Arrive London.

3.4 Weather conditions

During the days at and above Ghunsa the weather tended to be overcast in the morning and evenings, clearing slightly and temporarily during the afternoon. As a result, it was cold, though there was no precipitation or strong winds. That said we suspect temperatures easily stayed above -10 degrees Celsius, even overnight at high camp.

During the climbing phase there were a few clear sunny days, and the trek days in to and out of Ghunsa were in brilliant sunshine.

3.5 Future objectives

It is thought this objective offers limited potential for future climbing. The approach is aesthetically and technically unrewarding, with the only climbing being the 300 to 400m vertical summit pinnacle. Attempting this is in itself unattractive due to the loose rock. In short this trip amounted to a long a walk to a difficult (for us) and dangerous rock climb.

There are other unclimbed peaks and routes that were accessible from our base camp. We didn't investigate any of these in detail due to time constraints but believe there are better climbing and mountaineering opportunities available elsewhere.

4 CONTACT INFORMATION AND THANKS

Thanks go to all those that helped or supported the expedition - the assistance we received was invaluable. Particular thanks go to; Mount Everest Foundation (MEF), British Mountaineering Council (BMC) & the Alpine Club (AC) for their generous support.

For further information please contact Neil Cox.

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- ▶ *Arriving at a Nepalese village during the trekking.*
- ▶ *Nepalese prayer flags.*
- ▶ *Wildflowers spotted during the trek phase.*