

Raru Valley 2011 Preliminary Expedition Report

23rd August – 28th September 2011

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On the 23rd of August The Raru valley 2011 expedition team departed from Heathrow airport bound for a remote valley in the Ladakh region of India. The Raru Valley 2011 team members were Jonathan Moodie (leader) Dominic Southgate, Kunal Masania, Virgil Scott, Joe Prinold, Robin Jones and Jonathan Bull. Four of whom were PhD students, with two research associates and one alumni (all engineering) of Imperial College, London.

After landing in Delhi the team took in the sights of the city before heading to the IMF to pay fees, receive a briefing and meet our liaison officer Anupam Mekherjee. We then flew from Delhi to Leh the following morning. We met our head porter Pema (Pekma Lama Bhote) at Hotel Snowland. Pema took us to meet a Swiss team led by Yannick Flugi that had just completed two ascents in another part of the Raru valley. Whilst in Leh we purchased provisions and explored the local area.

We left Leh at 8am by minibus to Kargil where we stayed for the night, the journey took under eight hours, hindered by one member temporarily losing his passport at a checkpoint for 40 minutes. We left Kargil at 4.30am and drove to Padum, after having tea at Rangdum and driving over the Penzila pass at 4,300m. After a night in Padum we transferred into taxis and completed the 1.5 hour drive to Raru village. The Rimo team had already arrived and set up a camp outside the school.

The destination for basecamp was a in subsidiary valley to the main Raru valley, which locals told us was called Teteleh valley. The following morning yaks and ponies arrived from the village and we began our approach up Raru valley, stopping to camp at Onkar (the confluence of Raru and Teteleh valleys), for one night before heading up Teteleh valley. The final stretch of the approach to the basecamp site was hindered by a scree barrier that prevented access by the animals. The animals were unloaded and the loads were carried along the steep banks beside the river by both ourselves and the Rimo team. We established basecamp at 4,616m (33° 16' 27"N, 76° 54' 20"E) on the 1st of September, eight days after leaving London.

On the 2nd of September three team members reccied the large rock face above basecamp whilst the remainder of the team walked up the valley and onto the glacier, to an altitude of 5,200m, with the foot of the glacier at 4,848m (33° 14' 50"N, 76° 53' 22"E). The team took the opportunity to establish a glacier camp at 5,000 m and cache some equipment. After returning to basecamp and taking a rest day, the team and liaison officer returned on the 4th of September, with four members (JM, JP, DS, AM) moving the camp from the cache up to 5,100m. The following day the first team continued up the glacier, then up scree slopes to establish a high camp on a plateau at 5,600m South-South-West of the summit of Lama Jimsa Kangri (pk 6177m) with the intention of climbing the South-West face. The second team (RJ, VS, KM, JB) left the glacier at 5,000m and headed straight on to the scree slopes South-East of the summit of Lama Jimsa Kangri, establishing a camp on the rocky slopes at 5,300m, with the intention of climbing a gully on the East face.

The first and second teams started the summit day at 3am. The team attempting the South-West face encountered a continuous snow slope of 50-60° with good snow conditions which led to a rocky summit ridge, the summit was reached at approximately 10.30am at a height of 6,276m (33° 15' 09"N, 76° 52' 01"E). Descent was by the same route of ascent. Meanwhile, the team on the South face encountered more consistent difficulties of grade II (Scottish winter) for 800 m which lead to a rocky summit ridge. The summit was reached by the East face at noon, descent was also by the South-West face. Both teams reported finding a cairn and weathered tat placed at the summit, which no member of our expedition had placed. Despite believing it to have been previously unclimbed, it now seems that it had received a previous ascent, most likely from the valley to the North. Both teams returned to basecamp on the 7th of September except KM and JB who remained at the cache to attempt another objective.



South West face of Lama Jimsa Kangri (6,276m)

KM and JB set off from Glacier cache camp (5,100m) at, 6am on the 8th of September. The objective was a 5,700m mountain on the South side of the valley. Approach was by a scree slope to gain a col at 5,381m, they cached their axes and crampons at this point. The main ridge at 5,570m was gained via rock. The intention was to continue to the top, some 100-200m higher. Access to the summit required tackling a steep snow slope without axes and crampons. Due to difficulties in the climbing and heavy fatigue, the decision was made to descend. Descent was by abseil, crossing back through the col and descent of the scree slope returning to glacier cap at 6pm, then back to basecamp on the 9th of September.



Unnamed mountain attempted by KM and JB (c 5,700m)

On the 10th of September JM, RJ and DS departed basecamp to attempt Moel Kangri (pk 5930m). The route took 800 m of ascent over loose rock up a moderate gulley, a brief climb out of the gulley at 5,600 m was followed by an abseil off the East ridge onto a neighbouring glacier, where camp was established at 5,500 m. The following day the team departed from camp, crossed the glacier to the South ridge of Moel Kangri. The team encountered a boulder field with a modest gradient, this circled the mountain leading to the summit at 5,930 m. Descent to glacier camp was by the same route.



Moel Kangri (5930m)

JP and VS attempted the 650m rock wall situated beside Basecamp on the south side of the valley. They started on the 10th of September at 6am climbing the right hand side of the wall on nicely featured slabs. The first 4 pitches were very high quality, around VS or HVS in difficulty. The rock then became a little less consistent with broken and loose sections, but greater variety – with a nice chimney pitch through a squeeze-hole and a couple of good corner pitches. For the final twelve pitches they traversed out right onto the ridge of the wall and followed to the summit. A short walk and then traverse brought a final steep section over suspect rock to the summit at 5385m. In total around 20 pitches, summiting at 6pm and then descending down the scree gully to the left of the wall, and returning to base camp at around 8pm.



Basecamp Bigwall (route length 650m, ascent in red, descent in blue)

KM and JB returned to a higher glacier camp on the 10th of September. The following day they set off from camp at 4am to attempt a rock route on a 5,900m mountain on the south side of the valley. As they approached the base of the route, ominous looking clouds were coming in from the head of the valley. So they changed objective to a route they perceived as more rapid, which took a mixed line to an attractive snowy summit. They avoided a large bergschrund by approaching a buttress from the left of the base of the route at 5,250m, then crossed back right across the buttress and took a line between the snow and rock. A direct line may have been possible, but with no ice screws, they crossed back onto the buttress to gain the upper 80° snow slopes to reach the summit (5,985m) at 3.45pm. The gradient and difficulty was harder than expected, the route was mixed III/IV and an overall grade of about TD, 700m, they named the mountain Bhaio aur Bheno ki Khushi. Decent was via the West facing ridge by abseil. A snow face was traversed left then followed more abseils. Both climbers were back at their tents by midnight, returning to collect ropes stuck on final abseil the following day.



Bhaio aur Bheno ki Khushi (5,985m)

On the 14th of September JP and VS attempted one of the Eastern spurs of R4. They camped near the base of the spur at around 5000m and started climbing at around 3.30am. After 200m of scrambling they arrived at the main spur just after sunrise and moved together, occasionally belaying short sections. Most of the climbing was around HS-VS, with occasional trickier sections. After about 800m of climbing on absolutely superb rock the spur steepened and they set up a belay. JP set off on a tricky HVS pitch which turned out to be about 75m long due to the difficulty of finding a belay. This brought them to just below 6000m, but still at least 4-5 long pitches from the summit. JP and VS observed poor weather systems moving down the valley and snow began to fall, they decided to descend. After a cold and snowy night on a ledge at around 5750m they continued the descent the following day, returning to the base of the spur in the mid-afternoon.



East Spur of R4 (c 6,000m)

On the 14th of September JM, RJ and DS left basecamp to attempt a subsidiary peak West of pk 6060m, camping first on the glacier at the cache camp, then at the foot of the peak at 5,550m on the 15th. Overnight approximately one foot of snow fell rendering the peak unsafe. This snow forced the return of all parties to basecamp.

The remainder of the days were spent resting and assessing the weather system before deciding to leave the valley. Yaks and horses arrived on the 18th. We packed up camp and departed on the 19th walking to Raru village in one push. During our stay in the valley the Rimo team had built a path beside the river to enable pack animals to reach base camp for our departure. This enabled the locals to access this area in the future for grazing. The locals told us that their ancestors used the valley to travel to a temple over 100 miles away, but we were the first people to visit the area in a long time. The following morning we drove in two jeeps from Raru to Rangdum and stayed at a tourist campsite. The following morning we drove to Lamayuru stopping in Kargil to switch taxis. On the morning of the 22nd we finished the last small stretch of the 300 mile drive to Leh. The remaining time was spent in Leh and also exploring a bouldering venue 30 minutes cycle (downhill) South-East of Leh.

The team flew into Delhi on the 26th of September and headed straight to the IMF for a four hour debriefing. The 27th was again spent sightseeing in Delhi. The team returned to Heathrow airport on the 28th of September, having completed three first ascents and one official first ascent, with a total of 7 routes completed. For all team members a new maximum height of 6,276 m was reached.

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