

Ardang/Limi 2019 Expedition

MEF: 19/38 BMC: 19/28

Written by Emily Ward

Photos by Mark Bielby and Emily Ward

Summary

Mark Bielby and myself (Emily Ward) spent 5 weeks of late autumn 2019, in Humla, a remote district in the far west of Nepal. We had an expedition permit to attempt Ardang (6043m) but also hoped to climb some peaks around the Nying Khola and Salli Khola. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in summiting any of our objectives. Although various problems with our mules and mule-men affected our itinerary significantly, we ultimately failed to summit Ardang due to poor snow conditions and high avalanche risk. Likewise, poor snow conditions in the Nying Khola also hindered our attempt on these peaks. Meanwhile, the air temperature and overnight lows had been far too warm for the icefalls in Salli Khola to fully form. Despite our failure to summit any new peaks/routes, we thoroughly explored 3 very remote valley systems. We had very little logistical information about any of



the valleys, including accurate maps, and had to find our own ways to access them. As we were unsupported and unstaffed for much of the trip, we got very good at carrying 30kg bags up and down steep terrain!

Ardang, however, did receive its first successful attempt in November 2019. Canadians Bryce Brown and Sunny Twelker summited just 7 days before our final attempt to climb the mountain. They climbed the obvious glacial slope on the north face and then took the north-west ridge to the summit. They commented on the less than ideal snow conditions; trenching their way up and down the mountain over a couple of days whilst ‘woomphing’ noises had been heard on the wider slopes during their ascent. With the predicted blizzard rapidly arriving with high west/south-westerly winds they estimated that the snowslope could take a week to stabilise again; two foot of fresh snow already covered their tracks. This condition report focused our ambitions onto the north/north-east ridge.

We cannot thank Narayan and Raju (Mac Trek and Travel Expeditions) and Rinjin Lama (in Simikot) enough. They provided an excellent service and went above and beyond to make sure we were safe in the mountains.



Ardang's east face viewed from the Nying Khola

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Team

Emily Ward

I began Scottish winter and alpine climbing in 2007 as a logical progression from indoor bouldering competitions! I have now climbed and skied well over 200 routes across Norway and the Western alps, including solo ascents of classic routes on 35 of the 4000m peaks. I have climbed over 20 new routes (and several variation routes) on peaks up to 5800m in the Pamirs, Tien Shan and Humla region of the Nepali Himalayas. Working as a freelance instructor, I hold Summer Mountain Leader, Rock Climbing Instructor and International Mountain Leader certificates.



Emily and Mark on a previously unclimbed 5400m peak, Nepal 2017

Mark Bielby

Mark learnt how to rock and alpine climb 7 years ago in New Zealand, whilst studying a 2 year-long Outdoor Guiding & Instructing course. Mark has always enjoyed the exploratory side of climbing rather than competition. He has now been on three new routing trips to the Greater Ranges and has summited two previously unclimbed 5600m peaks. In the last year, Mark has spent a lot of time in Norway, climbing water ice in Rjukan and Hemsedal, alpine routes in the Jotunheim and rock climbs in Lofoten. Mark enjoys

working with underprivileged young people and introducing them to the great outdoors.

Far Western Nepal, Limi Valley and logistics.

Humla is in the Western development region of Nepal and is one of the poorest districts. Unlike the Everest and Annapurna regions, Humla has not seen the same influx of tourism or international development. Schools, and indeed most other services in the area, are poorly funded by the Kathmandu government. Only about 30% of any permit royalty (trekking or expedition) paid to the central government will make its way to Humla. Unfortunately, very little external aid is currently invested into health care or local schools. Beyond Simikot, many pupils still walk 4 hours a day to attend school and leave aged 14. Many families who can afford to, will send their children away to boarding schools in the Terai or Kathmandu. Girls will often leave school at a much younger age than boys.



Although a rough, gravel road now provides truck access between Simikot and Hilsa (Tibetan border); to access Simikot from the south, tourists must either fly or trek in. Flying is the more logical option, although the 40minute flight from Nepalgunj is expensive (\$167 each way for foreigners) and can be unreliable. It is one of the more dangerous airstrips in Nepal, a plane crashed off the side of the runway when we were in Simikot 2017. The airstrip itself is small and easily affected by wind and poor weather. Flights can normally only take-off and land in the early morning before the thermals and orographic winds build. The first significant snow-storm of the season occurred as we were returning to Simikot on the 29th November 2019. After a delay of only one day we managed to fly out before the next weather system.

The lack tourism in Humla is partly due to geography; there are no 8000m peaks in the area and limited road access from the rest of Nepal. There is, however, a large influx of Indian pilgrims travelling to and from Mount Kailash throughout the summer months. Another factor that dissuades visitors is that everyone must have a special area permit. These are checked when you disembark the flight in Simikot those who don't have the correct paperwork are put on the next flight back to Nepalgunj. Unlike more popular trekking areas, special area permits

can only be arranged by registered trekking and expedition companies. Independent travelers can't apply for paperwork themselves.

As Humla remains off the beaten track for trekkers, you can expect to see very few foreigners in the region. However, the area is clearly increasing in popularity and we were surprised at how many other western climbers and trekkers we met. In Simikot at the start of the trip, we overlapped with two other British expeditions. However, we were most surprised to encounter two British trekkers (and their extensive entourage) in the Nying valley in the middle of November. They had just crossed a 5400m col that normally becomes impassable after the start of October. Interestingly, most of the foreigners that we encountered were British, except for the Canadian couple who summited Ardang just before our attempt.

For further comment on the Humla region, please see our previous report from: Ardang 2017, MEF 17/38.

Ardang itself has seen a previous attempt from a party of French climbers guided by Paulo Grobel. They approached Ardang from the Phuparka range, but being plagued by bad weather opted to traverse the main glacial plateau and descend to Halji instead of summiting. Mark and I visited the area two years ago and had a good reconnaissance trip to the south side of the mountain. We found that the peak had suffered significantly from global warming; the south face has become an unattractive pile of choss and is totally snow free! Having seen various images of the more inspiring North face, we decided to return to the mountain again.

The current permit process.

Although we named our expedition *Limi 2019*, prior to the trip, we were known as the *Ardang 2019* expedition in Nepal, so kept this new title to avoid paperwork confusion! Likewise, the authorities assumed that Mark was the expedition leader (being male). As our permits were hanging in the balance, we decided not to correct them!

The expedition permit system in Nepal is in a constant state of flux; new regulations and tweaked rules seem to be suggested every year. The government is currently digitalising the system, which should eventually be easier for officials, agents and getting paperwork in advance. However, there are currently teething problems as processes were not fully tested before implementation. We believe that the system will constantly evolve and new problems will arise for future expeditions. Although we had to jump through several hoops whilst in Kathmandu, we successfully received our paperwork.

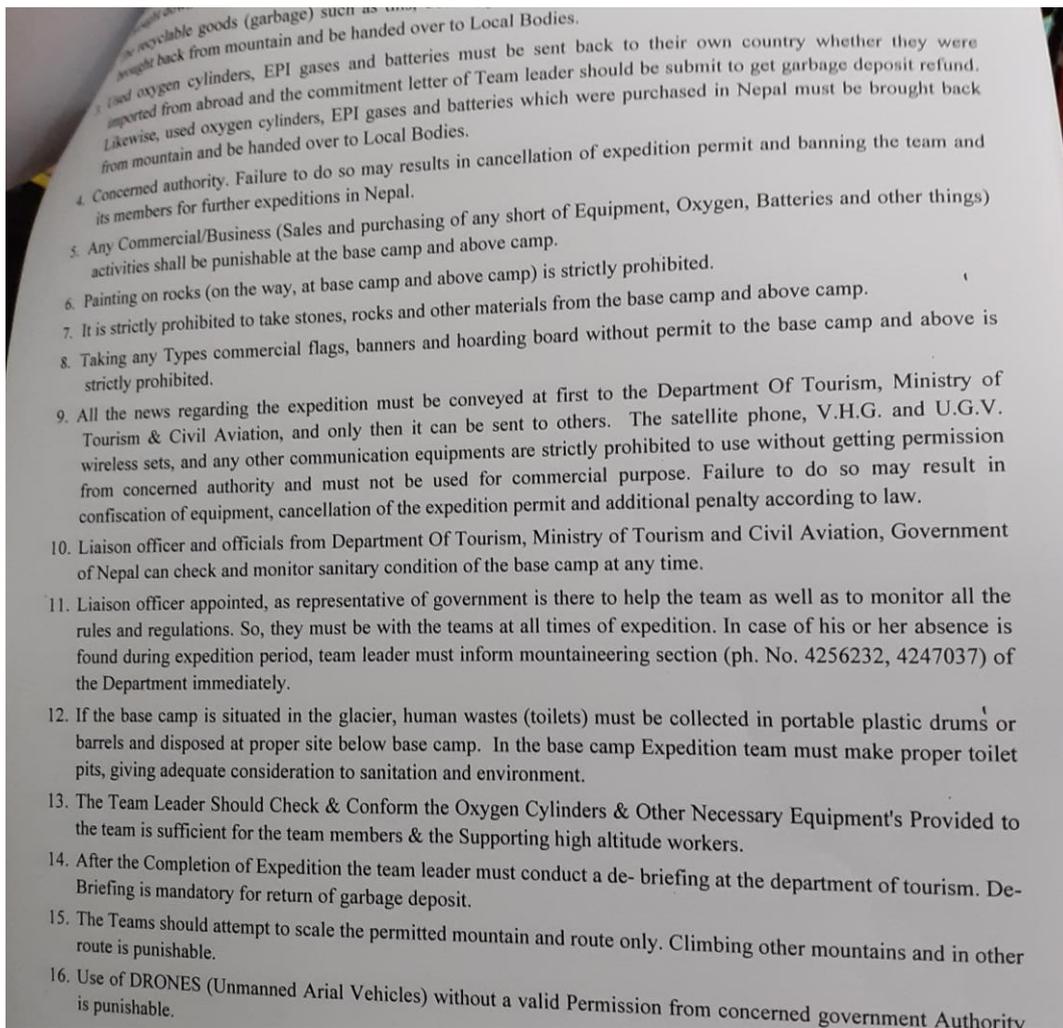
The company we used to get permits and act as an in-country contact was **Mac Trek and Expedition**. We cannot recommend and thank them enough. They provided an efficient, affordable service and understood our specific requirements perfectly. They realised that Rinjin Lama is an excellent contact in Simikot and allowed us to liaise with him to arrange our Humla logistics; other companies had previously tried to make us take their staff from Kathmandu. As we both believe strongly in 'fast and light' alpinism as well as the leave no trace ethos, we enjoy being unsupported and feel our trips can have a lower impact this way. Our Nepali contacts understood how we wanted to run our trip and facilitated it for us.

New issues that we encountered are as follows:

- All climbing expeditions now need to pay a \$500 garbage deposit. However, climbers should think of this more as a fee than a deposit! To have the deposit returned,

garbage must be signed in by the local authority at the end of the expedition. In our case the form was stamped and signed in Simikot where we left our garbage. The receipt is then submitted to the Department of Tourism (DOT) at the final debriefing. It took over 6 weeks for the ministry to send Mac Trek and Travel a cheque on our behalf; governments everywhere take money readily but are reluctant to return it! We were told to expect maybe \$200-\$300 back but we appear to have received an unusually high \$450.

- Peaks under 6500m do not require a liaison officer.
- The current rules state that all climbing expeditions must have a Nepali climbing guide on the paperwork. We had a couple of false starts finding a guide; initially Rinjin offered his services but his trekking license was not a good enough qualification for the DOT. Our agent Narayan found a climbing guide in Kathmandu but his license has lapsed and the ministry rejected our paperwork. The third guide ticked all the boxes and enabled us to get our permits; ultimately (with our consent) he did not join us on Ardang.
- All staff must be insured, including porters and mulemen. This is good as it means that all employees are guaranteed standardized insurance and benefits. It cost \$500 to insure the climbing guide and \$100 for the muleman. ***Importantly, mules are not insured!***. Insurance must be paid for the climbing guide regardless of whether/how long they spend on the trip.
- We had to pay for both an expedition permit (\$125 per person) and a special area trekking permit. Sometimes the ministry will only charge for the expedition permit



but as we were in the area for much longer than the 4 days the ministry believed that we would need to climb Ardang; we had to pay for the special area trekking permit too.

- Special area permits for Humla have increased in price since 2017. In 2019, it was \$50 for the first week and then \$10 per day after (previously \$7 per day).

Once we had completed and submitted the final paperwork we encountered a couple of nerve-wracking days to see if the DOT would grant us the permit. The ministry believes that all 6000m peaks are 'trekking peaks' and questioned why we needed more than 3-4 days to summit Ardang (one day from base camp to advanced base camp, another day to the summit and 1-2 days to descend.) We provided a detailed itinerary to justify our 5 weeks in the Humla mountains including a trek to explore the Nyalu La and time to acclimatise on other sub 5800m peaks. Fortunately, our plan was detailed enough to justify our time in the region.



As of the autumn 2019, all expedition members are now required to go to a briefing and debriefing interview at the DOT. Although we were concerned with the questions that we might be asked at the initial briefing, our agent dealt with them professionally. I (not Mark) was asked "have you even climbed before?". The ministry official dropped this line of questioning when I explained my job and previous experience! The debriefing was more of a formality. The Canadian team went to their

debriefing without their agent; much to the surprise of the ministry officials. Apparently, it was the first time that westerners had attended one of these interviews alone.

Local Permit Problems

We had relatively few encounters with authorities once beyond Simikot. On arrival at Simikot airport we were required to pay a 3000 NRP 'local tax'. After the airport, we only had to show our paperwork to the police once in Dharapuri. They asked us where our guide was but didn't seem to mind his absence.

Being a small two-person team, we could travel under the radar and our expedition wasn't questioned by locals from the Jang valley. The Canadians were not quite so lucky and had a visit from the village elders. Fortunately, they had a Sherpa guide (and friend) with them who successfully negotiated on their behalf. Initially they were told that Ardang was sacred to the people of Jang and that they couldn't set foot on the mountain. They were eventually given the blessing of the elders in exchange for a 'local tax' of c.\$150. They were told that they could only attempt the mountain from the north-west side as a snow-leopard lives in the valley to the east of Ardang. The locals were concerned that the Canadian group would anger the leopard, making it come to the valley and hunt the livestock. Mark and I could see the logic in this argument; if climbers are up in the mountains and disturbing the blue sheep and ibex then of course the snow leopards will go looking for prey elsewhere!

This is the third instance in Limi (that we have heard of) where locals have not recognised a permit from the central government. The 'local tax' or post ascent fine seems to be of a variable amount from \$150-\$600! It is an issue that is being addressed by the community tourism board in Simikot.

Detailed summary and route attempted

On the 23rd October 2019, we flew into Simikot from Nepalgunj. We had arrived in Kathmandu early on the morning of 13th October (our flight having been delayed for a day by President Xi's visit to Nepal!). This left plenty of time for the predictably slow bureaucracy as well as an acclimatisation trek in the Langtang valley. After another day of acclimatisation in Simikot, we trekked for 6 days over the 5000m Nyalu La to establish our first base camp in the wide valley of the Nying Khola.

Our trip was unsupported except for 2 mules (and mule man) to carry our equipment and supplies to and from the Nying Khola. Our first mule man was a 20 year-old agriculture student, Rajan. His main interests seemed to involve taking unlimited *selfies*, smoking and lighting fires with plastic wrappers for fire starters. He refused to speak a word to me but spoke quite good English to Mark when I was out of ear-shot. He was told in Simikot by Rinjin Lama (our local contact) to be self-sufficient, as we were wild camping. However, Rajan did not appear to understand this and therefore brought no food or cooking utensils with him,

including no water bottle! He only revealed this to us when we were a day's trek from the last settlement so we had no option but to feed him from our carefully calculated supplies. Feeding an extra person for so long had a significant effect on our gas supplies. I also developed a bad fever on the third day of the trek, fortunately Rajan understood this situation! Consequently, we took an extra short day before going over the Nyalu La, meaning that we were a day behind schedule. With the weather deteriorating and the mules low on food, we therefore decided to let Rajan go home a day early. This enabled him to get over the Nyalu La before any possible snowfall. We had chosen a bad place to cross the Nying Khola to access the upper Nying valley that final morning, and wasted a lot of time in doing so. This meant that we were at **30.25260, 81.72298**, over 10km away from our planned base camp for the Nying Glacial basin. Impressively, Rajan (and the mules) walked the entire 50km back to Dhandafayad that day. He met the Canadian team in the Salli Khola and managed to get lunch out of them too.



Rajan, 'King of the Selfie', below the Nyalu La.



The path/road between Dharapuri and Kermi. Top is in 2017, below is the same section in 2019. It has been destroyed whilst blasting a route for the 'new road' to Simikot. Passing through this section in 2019 was impossible for mules (they took the long way up and around to the village above). It was passable but very dangerous for us! The worst section was protected by a length of nylon cord attached to a partially buried steel rod fixed rope.



It turned out that our neighbours in the Nying Khola were a large and active pack of wolves. Although the main group stayed about 1km away from us, chattering to themselves throughout the night, 3 larger animals would come and investigate us not long after dark each night. They didn't seem particularly perturbed by our presence, which is surprising as on previous trips the wolf-packs have stayed well clear! On the second morning, we realised that the daytime howling must be coming from an immobilised wolf relatively close to our camp. When we went to find it, we discovered that the wolf was across the river from us and very well hidden in the hummocky terrain. We

also realised that we didn't know what to do if we successful found the creature... The howling deteriorated to barking, followed by whining as it got weaker over the next few days. Eventually it became silent and the rest of the wolf pack moved on.

After we had done 2 days of load carrying up to our first base camp (**30.26164, 81.78471**); the weather forecast changed and a storm system came in for 4 days. We realised that we didn't have enough time to wait for the snow to settle on the Nying peaks, climb there and have a good attempt on Ardang. As we had gone to the effort and expense of getting a permit for Ardang, we decided it was best to change location in the bad weather; giving us the best chance at Ardang. We knew that another storm system was forecast for a week later so hoped to establish our Ardang camp before the next blizzard came.



After 6 days of load carrying (including 2 days of 30kg bags!) we established our new base camp underneath the north face, the night before the next 3-day snow storm. Other than another encounter with the wolf pack at Takche, our journey was unremarkable. We decided to cross the Karnali near Takche, before more tributaries joined the flow. Conveniently we crossed the glacially cold river at an area of thermal hot springs! On the final day of load carrying, we initially chose a poor route up the steep hillside from the Karnali river to our Ardang base camp. We found a faint path up a spur further west (**30.241044, 81.636781**) which made the second carry and descent more pleasant. My knee popped¹ on a wobbly rock whilst scrambling along steep traverse above the Karnali, nearly sending me into the Karnali! Finishing our final carry in the dark (we knew that the blizzard would start the next day), I was surprised to see what appeared to be 2 headtorches moving on the wooded hill above us. Believing we were alone in the area we dismissed these as bright satellites or possibly local hunters.



Our Ardang Base camp: 30.23478, 81.63318.

The following day; the heaviest day of the blizzard, we were surprised to hear ‘whooping’ calls on the ridge above us. Using our camera zooms, we were even more surprised to see two western climbers descending the ridge line above our camp; they were Canadians Bryce and Sunny Twelker! They had received their permit a few days after us in Kathmandu and therefore knew we were in the area already. Indeed, the Nepali officials had shown them our permit application file including passports, proposed itinerary and contact details! They had successfully summited Ardang the previous day (13th November 2019) and had descended from their high camp that

morning. Their route goes via the obvious glacial ramp on the north face and takes the mixed ridge/face to the summit (see photo topo). They described the snow slopes as being ‘woomphy’ and heavily loaded: a good two foot of snow had already covered their old tracks by the time of their descent.

Armed with this knowledge, and our desire to climb a new route, we decided to attempt the less avalanched threatened, potentially more technical, NE ridge. My torn meniscus had been

¹ I tore my medial meniscus and partially tore my MCL (again) in June 2019. Since then I have been undergoing extensive physio rehab to avoid reconstructive surgery. we chose to delay our trip to Nepal this year to give me a greater chance of recovery. I had been told to carry bags less than 20kg to reduce the chance of blowing my ACL; this obviously went out the window in week one of the trip!!



aggravated by my close encounter with the Karnali, so we moved our camp as far up the boulder field as I could manage **30.22527, 81.62868** (4650m). The boulder field was not the most difficult that we have experienced in the Himalayas, but it was covered in variable amounts of snow! From two inches of slush to a foot of wind-blown crud covering man-eating holes. Although boulder hopping with a climbing bag was ok, I struggled when loaded up with food/camping gear too. From our high camp, the snow cover 'improved' and we trenched a path up to a small col at 5100m (18th November). Here, we left a stash of technical gear to make our summit day easier. The track left by the Canadians was obvious in places as it had mostly filled in with thick, solid wind-slab. The snow out of their tracks was unaffected, and was bottomless powder. Although this didn't bode well for snow conditions further up, it provided a welcome relief to the uphill swimming employed when we lost their tracks! On the 20th November, after a rest day, we hiked back to our stash and continued up a broad snow rib towards the north-east ridge.

The rib ended at c.5350m leaving a short (c.150m distance), steeper, snow-slope below the start of the mixed climbing. As the snowpack had felt weird underfoot during our uphill wade, we hesitated before leaving our last island of safety. The open slope and gully to our left was already dotted with chunks of avalanche/serac debris as tall as us. After digging a couples of pits and an Extended Column test, we were even more reluctant to start across it! The top 50cm of snowpack had 3 significant layers of windslab sandwiched in it; whilst none of these layers were thick enough to fail easily on their own, the whole snow pack was sitting on 10cm of very well faceted depth-hoar. If the slope failed at any point under our weight, the entire face would slide.





Above: A topo of the North Face of Ardang, the red line shows the Canadian Route, with their first and second camps. The blue line shows our high point, below the North-East ridge.

We weighed up our situation: if either of us were buried, we had little chance of rescue. Even if we successfully made it across the slope; our wallowing up to this point had cost us almost 3 hours. We had a good weather window (the forecast was settled for another 48 hours) and equipment to survive a night out on the mountain. However, we had pushed our supplies to the limit already. By giving ourselves an extra day of rest, hoping for better snow conditions, we had 1 freeze-dried meal left each and just about enough gas to cook it. We didn't have enough gas to melt more snow so would also need to get down to the stream for more liquid. A further time pressure; we needed to meet our mulemen with our kit in less than 30 hours. The complication being that the rendez-vous was over 17 km away, with 1700 m of involved descent followed by 700 m of steep height gain! Mark and I had literally pushed our attempt on Ardang to the limit of our time and food supplies.



Arriving back at our Nying Khola stash after dark the following day (21st November), we were unsurprised to see no sign of the mules. At dusk, we had seen a large amount of the hillside burning further south above Selima Tso Taal (the big lake). We dismissed this, knowing that burning the vegetation for better grazing is a local practise at that time of the year. It turns out it was our mulemen in the wrong place after all!

One muleman (Rajan's uncle) walked up and met us the following morning. There was one significant item lacking; the mules!

After a badly mimed conversation, we used the sat phone to phone Rinjin for his translation services. Basically, the muleman refused to bring the mules up the hill to us. Rajan, in spite being the *King of the Selfie*, had failed to tell his uncle how to safely cross the Nying Khola and follow the good path up from the Limi valley. The new muleman was concerned about the snow forecasted for following days evening and said that getting the mules now would take too long. In hindsight, we should have said "no mules, no pay". Locked in stalemate and realising that we had no choice, we repacked our baggage so that 3 of us could carry a single, heavy load down. Carrying a 25-30kg bag again is particularly horrific when you are expecting an easy day!



The total farce continued as it became clear that Rajan's uncle was extremely incompetent; a much less able muleman than Rajan! The new muleman told us he could carry 50kg but he struggled with half the weight. When his camp was in sight, he got his brother (possibly Rajan's dad?) to send the mules across the most dangerous section to carry his load for him. The mules barely made it across but were terrified by the experience and trying to bolt for home. The muleman managed to tie some gear on to the lead mule, but his knots came undone twice - nearly losing a bag to the river! The mule bolted the second time the bag came loose, leaving a trail of our possessions as well as shedding its bridle and packsaddle. It made it a good way up the valley before it was caught and brought back! Meanwhile, as the muleman chased after the lead mule, Mark was trying to wrestle and calm down the second animal; holding it in a head lock as long as he safely could! Realising he was in danger of getting trampled he eventually let it go to chase the lead mule. I meanwhile had left my first load by the safe river crossing and had gone to fetch the technical gear from the stash a mile away by Takche.

Eventually the 2 mules and 2 mulemen joined us by the safe river crossing to load up the animals. It took an additional while to gather the various items that had come off the terrified animals. By the time they were loaded up it was early afternoon, what should have been an easy hour of down-hill walking had become a ridiculous 5 and a half hours of hard work! Following this debacle, we still had a 15km hike over a 5000m pass; all in all, a pretty long day!

Our third base camp of the trip was beneath the Nyalu La in the Salli Khola (**30.12846, 81.72787**). Our mulemen left us at this point with a slimmed down amount of climbing/camping kit and enough food for 5 days. From here we hoped to climb some more of the gully icefalls that come into the Salli Khola valley. They had already started forming when we had trekked through the valley at the start of our trip, unfortunately they were still in poor condition a month later. We approached the two most appealing (and fattest) routes 3 times, getting progressively earlier in the day each time. The night-time temperatures were just not low enough to safely climb the steep routes; we were very unconvinced that we would be able to build abalokovs to retreat off the ice-falls if we couldn't top out. Whilst

climbing some WI2 steps below one of the steeper falls, we found sections of hard, fast frozen 'glass ice' half a meter away from slush 20cm deep.

In one final, last ditch attempt to do some technical climbing, we decided to move camp up into one of the valleys to the north-east of the Salli Khola. Camping at **30.146943, 81.731238** we had a super early alpine start to attempt an un-named peak (c. 5900m). Although we made good progress to the lake at 5000m, from here the snow-covered talus/boulder field became extremely difficult and time consuming. Realising that we were over-stretching ourselves through end of trip fatigue and hunger, we turned back before an injury happened.

Packing up our high camp, we returned to our lower Salli Khola campsite that day. We checked the icefalls early the following morning, but as they were still not 'in', we packed up and hiked down to a camping spot near the junction with the Karnali. We descended just in



time; heavy snow was already falling on the Nyalu La when we left the Salli Khola camp. The snow had become constant to low altitudes by the next morning. By the time, we reached Kermi for lunch we had descended below the snow-line and fortunately the rain became more intermittent. The fixed rope through the road construction site had been extended, making the loose descent through the blasting area slightly less dangerous! We spent the night in Dharapuri, which had less food shortages than on the way out. Our friend in the tea house told us that the new, high road was 'derry ramro' so we decided to return to Simikot using it. We were totally sandbagged by the recommended short-cut to get to it! Cutting up the hillside through dry paddy fields and thick, steep scrubland with 25kg bags was horrific. Returning to the road upstream from Dharapuri, (towards Kermi) would have been a greater distance but would have been both easier and faster! We made it back to Simikot through a few short showers, before the precipitation became constant.

We were due to fly from Simikot the following morning (29th November), but as 6 inches of snow fell overnight; the air-strip was very much closed for the day! Although it continued to

snow throughout the day, the next morning was sunny and calm so the air-strip could be cleared. We flew to Nepalgunj and then Kathmandu that same day; we were still 35kg over the baggage allowance but were not charged on either flight.



As the Ministry and our agents' office are not open on Sundays; we had a whirlwind morning of meetings on Monday (2nd December). Our debriefing at the ministry was short and sweet (fortunately) and we were not asked why our guide didn't join us; just to explain why we failed to climb Ardang. Sunny and Bryce (the Canadian climbers) attended their debriefing without their agent, much to the surprise of the Nepali officials! We had left our garbage in Simikot and had paperwork from the local authorities, however the new online permit system was having teething problems and Narayan was unable to submit our receipt to return our Garbage Deposit. Although the day was somewhat rushed, we managed to make it to our afternoon flight and the return trip to Birmingham via Doha went smoothly.



Equipment, food and medicine

This trip we took a rack that would be suitable for water ice, rock and mixed climbing on granite. We opted for a set of icelines, technical axes (nomics), double boots and technical crampons (G20 and G22). As one of the zips on my Phantom 6000s keeps breaking, I brought along a spare pair of La Sportiva G5's just in case! Fearing temperatures in the mid -20s again, I was concerned that G5s alone wouldn't be warm enough but in fact they were great! As the temperatures were much milder on this trip, reaching -15C at night rather than -27C, we were also able to leave a lot of our warmest layers in equipment caches; making bags marginally lighter. We didn't take snowshoes, but they would have been useful for repeating the Canadian route.

For camping equipment: we had an MSR Remote 3 and a Black Diamond. We had a Jetboil and multi-stove, but only took the Jetboil with us to Ardang. The kerosene didn't agree with the multi-stove in 2017 so we only brought LPG canisters in 2019. As you can't fly into Simikot with pressurized gas Rinjin organised our supply. We bought 10 cans at \$20 per unit and were given 2 partially full canisters by another departing Alpine Club expedition. For most of the trip we had a source of flowing water readily available and only had to melt snow during the 3 nights at Ardang ABC. The many springs, hot or slightly warm, in the Nying Khola and the Limi/Karnali valley meant that rivers never completely froze over and we were always able to fill our 10 litre bottle. We chose to ignore the hint of sulphur!

Food

In 2017, Mark lost 15kgs of weight - about a fifth of his body weight. To prevent this happening again, we calculated a more generous amount of food. As we knew we'd be load carrying between Nyalu and Ardang, we opted to bring some freeze-dried expedition meals with us from the UK. Other items flown out with us included dried vegetables, freeze dried berries, soya mince, condensed milk and 170 high protein energy bars! Rinjin also gave us a lot of the spare freeze dried packets he had acquired from previous trips. As we had to feed our mule man Rajan for 4 days, these extra meals from Rinjin really saved the trip!

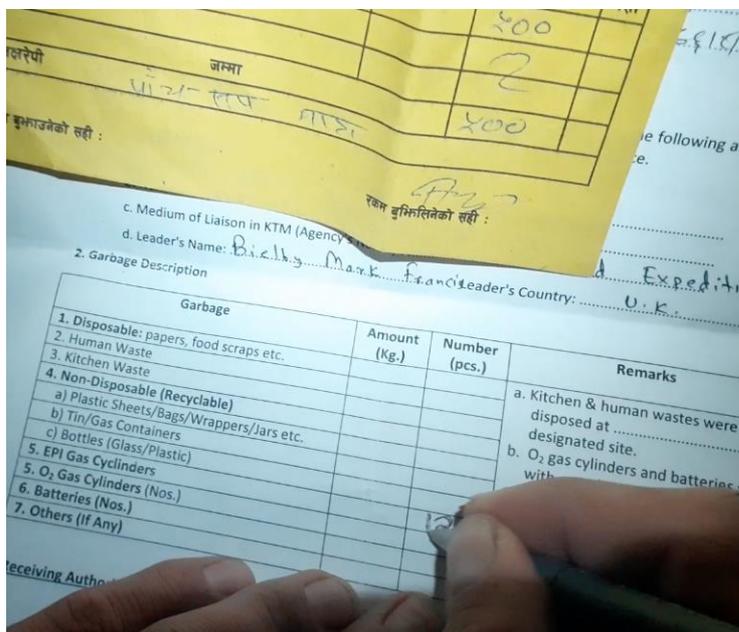
Most of our expedition food was bought in Kathmandu; we even found 2 cheese shops! There appeared to be a lot less food available in the Humla region, partly due to the long monsoon season. Although we ate well in Simikot, there was a lot less fresh fruit and veg available in the shops. Meals were a lot harder to buy in Dharapuri and Kermi, even Wai-Wai noodles and coca-cola proved elusive! The tea-house in Dharapuri was unable to give us breakfast on the trek to the mountains due to these food shortages.

First Aid, Medicines, Sickness

I am still undergoing hormone therapy for breast cancer. As there is a theoretical chance that Tamoxifen increases chances of blood clots at altitude and on long haul flights, I once again decided not to take my daily pills for the duration of the trip. Mark has a peanut allergy and carries epi-pens. As well as a large supply of trauma supplies (bandages, gauze, steri-strips etc), we took a comprehensive selection of drugs for the trip. Neither of us are allergic to any medication. We managed to restock a lot of out of date anti-biotics and altitude drugs at a hospital pharmacy in Kathmandu.

We had no first aid situations on the trip and totally avoided travelers' diarrhea. One of my cartilage ear piercings became infected towards the end of the trip, so I took a dose of Ciprofloxacin. As my post-chemo immune system is poor, I became very unwell with a fever

on the hike from Simikot to Nying Khola. Although this fortunately didn't develop into a chest infection, I was unwell enough to need an extra day in the Salli Khola. Rajan was happy to fit in with this if we fed him! Although my condition improved, I didn't completely recover for the duration of the trip and deteriorated significantly on returning to the UK.



Environmental impact/Toilets

Our expeditions strictly follow the 'leave no trace ethos'. Although we flew to Nepal and then to Simikot, we travelled together, with as small an amount of kit as possible; c.50kg pp in equipment and food for 5 weeks. Other than taxis to and from Kathmandu airport or with our agent to the DOT we walked everywhere in Kathmandu. To cut down on waste, we discarded all unnecessary packaging prior to leaving Kathmandu and condensed dried food into large resealable bags. We collected the remaining paper and cardboard waste to burn at the end of the trip. All plastic and metal was carried to Simikot for disposal. Here it was exchanged for a receipt to take back to the

Ministry of Tourism. We weren't too sure how the new garbage disposal scheme would work and neither were the Ministry! They said that our climbing guide would know whether to dispose of waste in Simikot or to bring it back to Kathmandu...

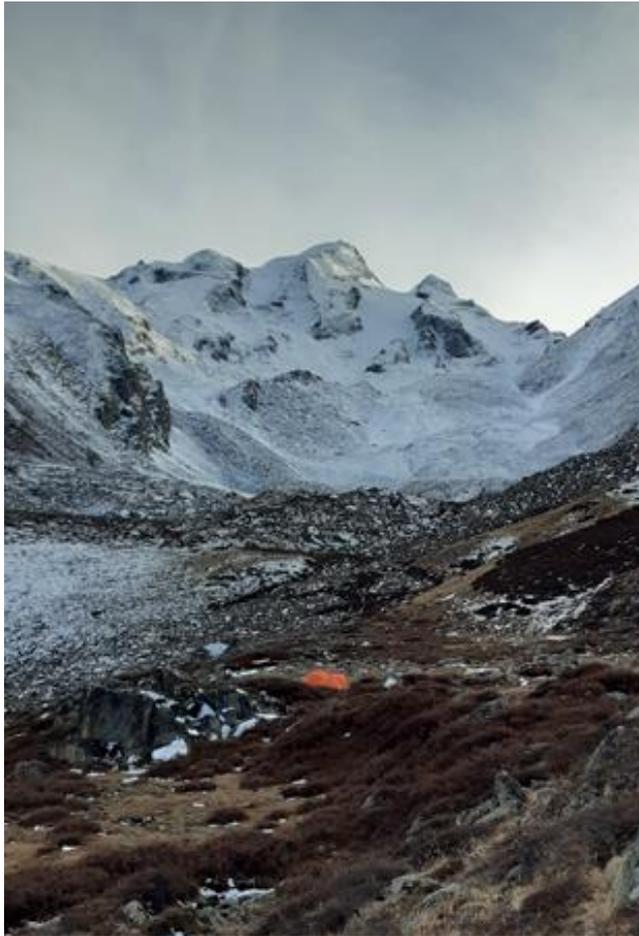
Although there is still a great deal of rubbish strewn across the landscape in Humla, the situation near the road has improved slightly; there seemed to be less about than on our previous trip. However, most of the stone house settlements are still surrounded by an endless supply of shoes, clothing, Wai-Wai noodle packets and Mega-Shree.

Toilet facilities

Being a small expedition, we each chose a toilet spot near our camping sites, downstream from camp but well over 50m away from any water sources. We would then burn toilet paper and thoroughly bury the toilets before moving on.

Weather and Snow Conditions

In general, the weather was not dissimilar to our previous trip; high pressure (with diurnal cycles) dominated between weekly storm systems. The temperatures throughout the trip were very different; being on average, 20 degrees warmer. In 2017, the night-time low hit -27C twice and was regularly below -20C in the tent. In 2019, the overnight, outside temperature reached -15C a few times but generally sat around -10C. During the storm that we sat out at Ardang Base Camp (c.4400m), the temperature hovered around freezing for a 48hour period!



Although the winds were much stronger than our 2017 trip, we had very little changeable weather; it was either clear/sunny or snowing. We sat out 2 significant snow storms, one that lasted 4 days in the Nying Khola and another that lasted 2 and a half days under Ardang. A final, more significant blizzard started as we were walking out from the Salli Khola to Simikot. Although we spent an unpleasant 2 days walking through heavy sleet/rain showers, if we had still been over the Nyalu La we would have been trapped there by the heavy snowfall! After we arrived back in Simikot, the freezing level dropped and 15cm of overnight snow stranded us there for an extra day. After this final storm, the forecasted temperature dropped to -35C on the summits and -20C at both of our base camp locations.

The high winds created some exciting wind loaded slopes on northern aspects. Where slopes weren't being cross-loaded, the high pressure, cold temperatures and relatively thin snowpack created depth hoar and well faceted snow. Our final pit on Ardang showed that the top 50cm of snow alternated between thick wind-slab and powder. This snow pack was then sat on 10cm of well-developed facets, scary stuff with no sign of stabilisation!

Diary

11th October: Fly Birmingham to Doha

12th: Day in Doha

13th: Early morning flight to Kathmandu

14th: Meet agent, admin day arranging paperwork to visit Langtang.

15th -19th: acclimatisation hike to small peak above Kyanjin Gompa

20th-21st: logistics and food shopping in Kathmandu, including a meeting at the DOT.

22nd-23rd: fly Kathmandu – Nepalgunj – Simikot

24th: Day in Simikot, buy final bits of food supplies

25th-30th: Hike into Nying Khola.

25th: Night at a teahouse in Dharapuri, invited to an evening birthday party.

26th: Night at a teahouse in Kermi.

27th: Rajan (and mules) mysteriously disappear for 3.5 hours in the morning, making for a very late start. Trekking in the midday sun was not fun! Camp at c.3700m in Salli Khola valley, lower than planned as we are very late and Emily has a fever.

28th: After a very short day, camp at 4100m in the upper Salli Khola.

29th: Over the Nyalu La to camp beyond Talun, near the large lake

30th: A short day up into the Nying Khola, via bad river crossing. Rajan goes home.

31st-1st November: rest days at **30.25260, 81.72298 camp**, sorting food/equipment into Ardang and Nying stashes, building a stash into the cliffside, looking for dying wolves etc.

2nd-3rd: Load carrying up to our Nying base camp. Two British trekkers and an entourage of 7 staff and more mules pass us. They have come from Simikot via the **Nying La**, passing Julian Freeman-Attwood and Nick Colton on their way!

4th: Rest day

5th: Recce hike up to **30.24340, 81.85992**. Weather deteriorated faster than forecast, mountains are already in the cloud, the wind is strong and the snow is falling!

6th-7th: We sit out the worst day of the storm. Our camp is oddly protected from the worst of the weather, although a lot snow is falling on the Nyalu Lek peaks!

8th: We decide to abandon the Nying Khola and head to Ardang. We take a load down to our intermediate camp, then hike up a hillside to the north, to c.5000m.

9th: Walk last load down to camp 1km above wolf camp, just in case they are still around!

10th: Carry the remaining load down from the intermediate stash.

11th: Repack kit, go down to our main stash and swap in the Ardang supplies. Walk down the hill to the main valley and northwards towards Takche and the ruined village of Yala. Set up camp at dusk just in time for the wolf pack to emerge. They had spent the day hiding under boulders 200m across from us. They were close enough to see by headtorch, one of the louder and bigger howling animals came within 50m to inspect us. It ran away fast when we shone our torches on it. This was the last time that we had close contact with the pack.

12th: Trek westwards from Takche, along the southern side of the river. We cross the Karnali at the confluence with **30.26547, 81.66378**.

Conveniently our choice of crossing has boiling hot springs on the opposite bank. We camp for the night at **30.24152, 81.64088**.

13th: Hike up to find base camp at **30.23478, 81.63318**, splitting our gear into 2 carries. Our first attempt (lookers left of stream), proved to be a nightmare. The terrain is hard going with a traverse through a complex boulder field. We notice a faint path (lookers right) on our ascent, which fortunately proved to be significantly easier to fetch the second load!

14th: First day of the next blizzard, we sit it out for a rest day. We see

Bryce and Sunny descending and hike up to meet them.

15th: Second day of the blizzard. We walk up the broad ridge to the west, hoping to get a better view in a lull. The approach to the north face is an involved boulder field by any route.

16th: Better weather today. We go for a recce hike through the boulder field.

17th: Move camp up to ABC, **30.22527, 81.62868**

18th: Put approach track in for our attempt on Ardang, stash technical kit at c.5100m

19th: Rest day, we melt a lot of snow ready for tomorrows climb.

20th: Final attempt on Ardang; turn back at c.5350m. Descend to Base Camp (and flowing water) via a terrible rising traverse through a difficult boulder field to the easier ridge.

21st: We make the long hike back to Nying c.20km away. After a long day, with darkness (and wolves) approaching we leave a stash of technical equipment at the bottom of the hill. No sign of muleman. At dusk, a large fire is engulfing the hillside east of the big lake.

22nd: We are woken up before 8am by a coughing man and no mules... a confusing mime conversation follows so we phone Rinjin to translate. Muleman (Rajans uncle) is refusing to bring mules up the hill. We repack bags so they are carriable down to the animals where total mule chaos (with a second muleman) ensues. We are extremely angry at how poor a job they did for a lot of money (10 days pay for 4 days of work). As Rinjin had already agreed the payment with the mulemen, we were unable to dock their fee. We eventually make it the 21km back over the Nyalu La.



23rd: Mules leave us in Salli Khola after we rearrange/pack our equipment. We move our camp to a better and sunnier spot 1km up the eastern branch of the valley. Recce the ice climbs; they aren't fully formed but an alpine start after a clear night will help.

24th: The two ice falls are still not in great condition. The temperature is -5C at dawn, not -20C as in 2017. We move camp **30.146943, 81.731238** to attempt an alpine peak.

25th: A proper alpine start! We get to the frozen lake at 5000m after dawn. Progress is painfully slow through the boulder field; difficult for my knee and our general expedition fatigue! We decide to turn back, collect our bivvy kit and go down to our Salli Khola camp.



26th: One last early attempt on our ice falls. We climb some short WI2 steps on the approach to one. Sections of hard frozen, glass-like ice are there but often 2 foot away from complete mush. Neither of us are confident that abalokovs would be safe if we had to use them to descend. We are also out of time as a big snowstorm is rapidly approaching. We pack up our camp and hiked down to the bottom of the Salli valley.

27th: Constant sleet turns to rain as we hike to Dharapuri. Very few locals around. Mark sees a bear near Kermi and the fixed line by the blasting has been 'improved'.

28th: Our friends in Dharapuri tell us that the 'new road' up the hill is much better than walking to Dhandafayad. However, the 'shortcut'

to the new road is exciting and steep. There is a lull in the weather at least. We get to Simikot in time for a late lunch and just before the blizzard hits properly.

29th: We are due to fly out today, but 6 inches of snow fell overnight and it's not stopping! No flights leaving today

30th: Some delays at the airport, but we make it out eventually. A long wait in Nepalgunj for the evening flight to Kathmandu.

1st December: Rest day, eating, souvenir shopping.

2nd: A day of rushed meetings before our flights! Mac Trek to hand over some paperwork and have a catch-up and then off to the Ministry for the debrief. Fly to Doha.

3rd: Fly Doha to Birmingham and then drive back to Manchester.

Finances

Outgoings

Travel Costs

Flights to KTM		£1428.38
Internal flights	\$585pp	£968.93
Costs to Birmingham		£46.70
Taxis in KTM		£41.13
Excess baggage (internal flights)		£103.91
TOTAL		£2589.05

Personal Insurance

Club Alpine Francais		£362.00
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Income

MEF	£2900
Alison Chadwick	£1500
AC/Montane	£1700
Jeremy Wilson CT	£1000
BMC/Julie Tullis	£350
Personal contributions	£1239.49
TOTAL	£8689.49

Paperwork

Visas	\$125pp	£249.06
Expedition Permits	\$250	£207.04
Garbage Deposit Fee	\$500	£414.07
Special Area permit	\$720	£596.26
Guides Licence	\$150	£124.22
Insurance for Climbing Guide	\$500	£414.07
Insurance for muleman	\$100	£82.81
Agent fee/taxes	\$700	£579.70
Simikot tax		£22.30
TOTAL		£2689.53

Humla logistics

Muleman	\$17per mule per day	£543.09
Gas Canisters	\$20 per can	£144.82
Teahouse and trekking food (for muleman on trek to Limi too)		£50.47
TOTAL		£738.38

Accommodation

Doha		£154.78
Kathmandu		£127.83
Nepalgunj		£16.44
Simikot		£113.69
TOTAL		£412.74

Food

Dried food, protein bars (UK)		£249.67
Mountain food (Nepal)		£189.28
Other food (Nepal)		£213.04
TOTAL		£651.99

Comms

Sat Phone		£78.30
Spot 3 PLB		£190.87
Local sim, credit		£5.07
TOTAL		£274.24

Gear/Equipment UK

Ropes		£256.00
First Light tent		£264.15
Jetboil		£96.00
Other Camping gear		£47.88
Solar panel/electronics		£96.93

Gear/Equipment Nepal

Tat/cord		£7.24
Extra clothes, trekking shoes		£61.91
Bespoke Sat Phone charging cable		£8.69

Peak Permit	-	USD	750
Guide Insurance	-	USD	500
Immigration	-	USD	360
"	-	USD	360
Guide Licence	-	USD	150
Company Service	-	USD	700
Flight tickets	-	USD	600 + 82 / 600 + 82
Trek guide + muleman insurance	-	USD	100
		USD	3602
			<u>1490</u>
		USD	2112
			<u>150</u>
			1962
			x 113.94
			<u>223550.28</u>
			<u>77707.08</u>
			<u>301257.36</u>

68

New 'Very Good Fake' TNF Hold All	£25.34
TOTAL	£863.14
First Aid Kit	£13.01
Fees to withdraw NRP (500 NRP per ATM transaction)	£94.41
OVERALL TOTAL	£8689.49

Notes on Finances

Travel: This year our agent booked our Yeti/Tara flights for us, managing to get a \$100 discount pp on 'through' flights. Somehow, we once again managed to avoid any excess baggage charges on our international Qatar Airways flights despite being significantly over the limit for both legs!

Learning from our previous trip, we bought more food in Kathmandu; you don't have to pre-book excess luggage on the internal flights. In total we had about 80kg of luggage. We were only allowed 15kg pp (free) in the hold on all 4 of our internal flights. The Kathmandu-Nepalgunj flight didn't appear to have a limit on cabin bag weight but for the Simikot leg it was 3kg; everything else was excess. In Kathmandu, we had to pay 165NRP per kg over but were given a significant discount for the first 30kg of excess. In Nepalgunj, our 80kg of luggage miraculously gained weight to be just under 110kg! At 140NRP per kg this was the most expensive leg.

We had 35kg of excess baggage for the return trip (Simikot-Kathmandu) but were not charged at all for this.

Paperwork: In advance of our trip, we TransferWised Mac Trek \$1500. We paid an additional \$150 in Kathmandu with the remainder in NRPs. As Sterling was extremely weak against the US dollar, we decided to withdraw rupees from cash machines in Kathmandu rather than flying in with a lot of currency to change. Our visas were paid in USD cash on arrival, hence the expensive cost in £! Our agent was unsure whether the Ministry would charge us for a special area permit as well as our peak permit; but they did! Unsurprising as it was significantly more expensive than the expedition paperwork: \$50 pp for the first week and \$10 pp every day thereafter. This cost has increased significantly since 2017 when it was \$7 per additional day.

Accommodation: As we had long layovers in Doha, we opted to take advantage of their free visa system; spending a night there on the way out and back. A good night's sleep definitely helped alleviate jetlag. Doha accommodation costs include food: x2 nights. Kathmandu costs include breakfast: x8 nights (although we only stayed for 6 nights due to flight delays). Nepalgunj costs include dinner: x1 night. Simikot costs were to stay at Rinjin's excellent guest house, including all food for 4 nights.

Gear/Equipment: In addition to the group kit purchased for the expedition; Emily bought a new pair of La Sportiva G5 boots, down filled sleeping mat and waterproof salopettes. Anticipating extremely cold temperatures (as in 2017), Mark bought a big down jacket, new GTX hard-shell, synthetic-insulation jacket and trousers. Typically, the average temperatures

were about 20C warmer than previously! As all of these items are for personal use, we have not included them in the expedition finances.

Langtang acclimatisation: Our acclimatisation trip cost an additional £115 each for paperwork, transport, food and accommodation. We have not included these costs in the overall expedition finances.

Acquiring Nepali Rupees: Nepali Rupees are a protected currency and are unavailable to exchange outside of Nepal. The GBP was still very weak to USD in the autumn of 2019, but for some reason stronger against NRP. Therefore, we decided to withdraw cash mainly from ATMs in Nepal, rather than transferring money into USD in the UK, to then exchange to rupees in Nepal. We had varying success at withdrawing cash from ATMs in Thamel, generally they had more money in them first thing in the morning! Some wouldn't work with my bank cards but would with Marks and vice versa. All of them charge 500NRPs for the privilege.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to those funding bodies that gave us grants, without them we would not have been able to go on our trip:

Mount Everest Foundation

Alison Chadwick Memorial Grant

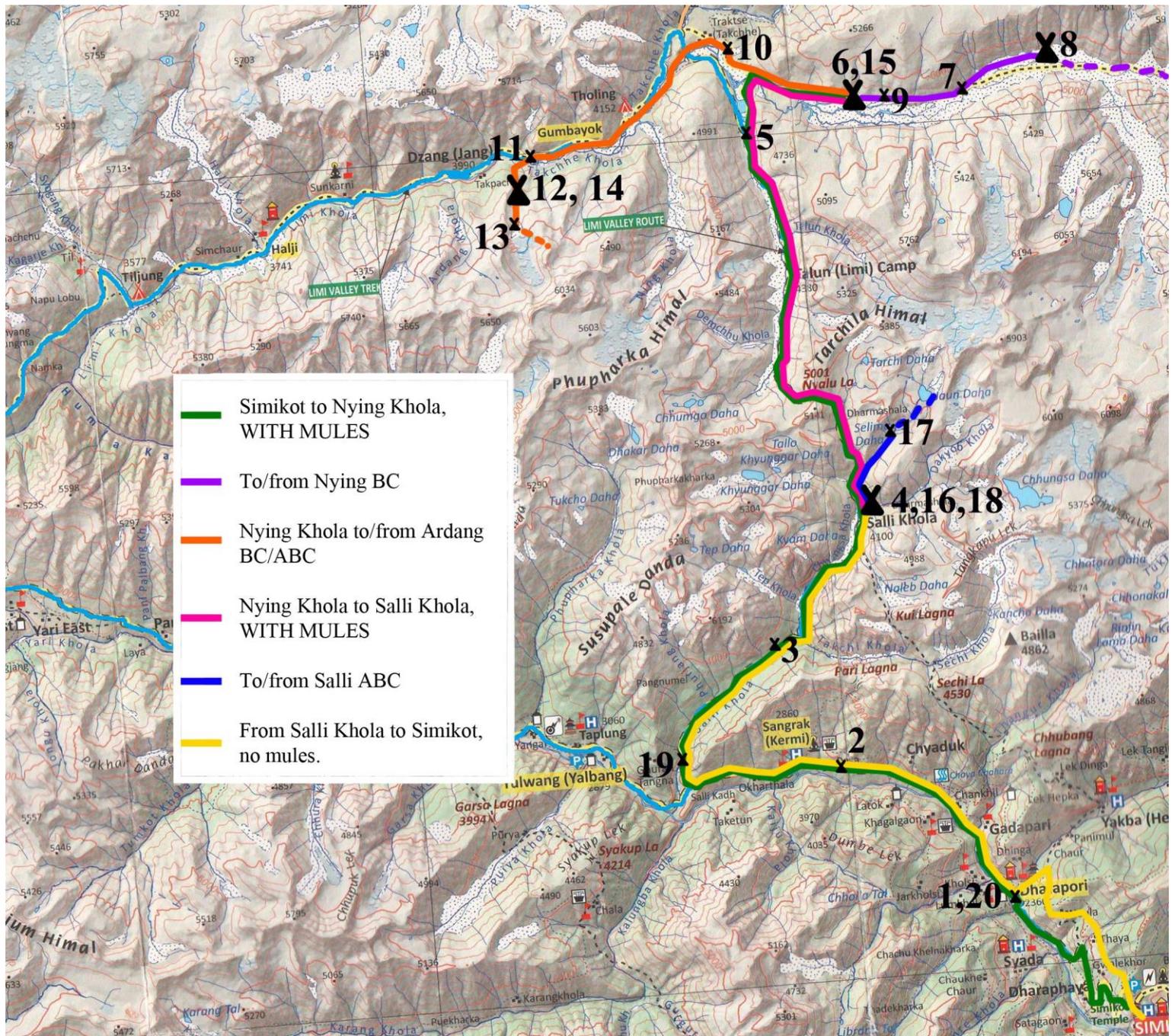
The Alpine Club/Montane Climbing Fund

Jeremy Wilson Charitable Trust

British Mountaineering Council/Julie Tullis Memorial Award

Thanks to our agents: Narayan and Raju from Mac Trek & Travel, as well as Rinjin Lama in Simikot. Without their help and understanding, our expedition would have been significantly less enjoyable! Karl Bielby, Mike Howard, Margaret and Simon Ward kindly kept us up-to-date with weather forecasts throughout the expedition. Thanks also to all those who have previously given us information on the area!





Above is a map showing our routes to and from Simikot. Overnight stops are marked with a small tent and more substantial camps with a larger tent. They are numbered in the order that we camped in from 1 to 20, with multiple stops listed by the camping spot.