Western Nepal: New Peaks and Exploratory Opportunities

Nepal, Western Nepal

As new elections of Nepal's parliamentary assembly approached in the fall of 2013, the minister of tourism asked the ministry's mountaineering section to propose a list of new peaks to open to foreigners. Much later, in the fall of 2014, 104 new peaks were officially opened, 31 of these in West Nepal. The ministry also announced that no permit will be required for peaks under 5,800m.

Chosen quickly and without much thought to the development of mountaineering and tourism in the Himalaya, a significant number of the 104 new peaks will disappoint climbers. A number of these newly opened peaks, both in West Nepal and elsewhere, were probably chosen for their political significance. Lying on the border with Tibet, they clearly mark Nepal's territory with its powerful northern neighbor.

All that said, West Nepal is a huge area of unspoiled nature, with a mosaic of fascinating culture. A few peaks rise over 7,000m, and there are numerous peaks over 6,000m that are still virgin. From west to east, from the district of Darchula to Dolpo, the ranges along the Chinese border are: Guras, Nalakankar, Chandi, Changla, Gorakh, Kanti, Gautam, and Palchung. In the interior they run from Api through Saipal, Limi, Kanjiroba, Putha, and Churen.

It is a long, complicated, and expensive journey to reach the mountains of West Nepal. (There are four airstrips: Jumla, Gamgadhi, Simikot, and Juphal.) Everything is more difficult to acquire, including information, which makes success less certain. On the other hand, an expedition here will be a great adventure. There will be exploration and the pleasure of making a first ascent, as well as contributing to the local economy. The following introductions to key areas of West Nepal are organized roughly from east to west.

Mukot Himal

Newly opened is a peak named Mukot Himal (6,087m HMG-Finn map), north of Dhaulagiri I and on the ridge between Sita Chuchara (6,611m) and Hongde (6,556m). Here is an idea for an original excursion: Trek across the Dhaulagiri Group to the village of Mukot, climb the new summit (which does not appear to be too difficult and was most likely climbed in 1967), then continue onto Dolpo and return via either Juphal or Jumla.

West of Dhaulagiri (Churen and Putha Himals): Dhorpatan is now reachable by road, and soon it will be possible to drive to the village of Gurjakhani (Gurjagaon) to the south of the Churen and Putha Himals. The standard Putha Hiunchuli base camp can be used to access the newly opened Peak Hawley (6,182m, first climbed in 2008), a tribute to a great lady.

North Dolpo (Palchung)

The airfield at Juphal was recently expanded and paved, and a road is now progressing slowly toward Dunai. This allows access to the Kanjiroba Himal via Hurikot, or Phoksundo Lake and the Palchung Group north of Pho. East and west of the Lunchhun Kamno La (5,393m), north of Saldang at the head of the Khun Khola, there are two rocky summits on the frontier. Though these don't appear to be particularly interesting for alpinists, Lungchhung (6,043m) and Khung (6,024m) were climbed in the

summer of 1999 by a small Japanese team from the Osaka Alpine Club.

Kanjiroba

Jumla has become the most reliable airport in West Nepal, and allows quick access to the south side of the Kanjiroba Himal. This area was explored a long time ago by Herbert Tichy and John Tyson. Dhud Kundali (6,045m), climbed by Tichy from the west in 1953, is now on the permitted list. The east ridge, climbed in 2008 and called A Torch for Tibet (III/AD+), is a classic alpine snow route. The main peaks of the Kanjiroba Himal have much character; most access routes are now known and were documented in a Trek magazine article ("The Kanjiroba Sanctuary"). In 1999, a British team, including two members on their honeymoon, discovered an adventurous route toward Kanjiroba base camp over the "English Col". Later we completed the "Honeymoon Trail" and found this base camp to be an ideal location for attempts on Kanjiroba North (6,858m) and Sanctuary Peak (6,207m).

Let's not forget the peaks in this area that were opened many years ago, like Kande Hiunchuli (6,627m), Patrasi (6,450m), or Kanjiroba South (6,883m), the highest peak in the range. On the northern fringes of the range, Lhasa Bhulu (6,102m) was climbed by Tyson at the end of an extraordinary journey. Lha Shamma (6,412m), north of Kagmara La in the southeast sector of the range, was first climbed in 1962 by an all-women British team, during an era when this region was little known.

On the western side, Bijora Hiunchuli (6,111m), visible from Jumla, is a small, snowy pyramid that captures the eye on landing at the airstrip. We have so far failed to climb the west ridge, but it is a great project for a team wanting to discover the joys of the "wild, wild west" for the first time. This is now a permitted peak, as is its larger neighbor, Kasi Dalpha (6,386m).

Gamgadhi and Mugu (Kanti and Gorakh Himals)

There is now road access to Gamgadhi and the Rara Lake area. While the airstrip at Gamgadhi is far less well served than Jumla, it gives more rapid access to the mountains on the Chinese border, between Dolpo and the Limi Range. In the east, four newly opened peaks close to Mugu now make the Koji Valley one of the most attractive in the region. Though ministry officials chose these peaks from the map because of their strategic position on the border, not for their interest to alpinists, they allow climbers official access to the valley systems and the discovery of more exciting mountains. Kaipuchonam (6,329m), Kojichwa Chuli South (6,264m), Chandi (6,623m), Kanti Himal East (6,516m), Kogi Khang North (6,275m), and Takla Khang (6,276m) lie in the Mugu and Koji valleys. Some have already been climbed, occasionally under a different name (Tibetan or Chinese). They are generally much easier from the Tibetan side. British teams led by Julian Freeman-Attwood and Mick Fowler, as well as Japanese and Spanish, have climbed or attempted technical lines on the Nepalese side.

To the east are other new peaks: Mayung Thang Khang (6,449m), Tankya I (6,305m), Mariyang West (6,455m), and Yara Chuli (6,236m), as well as the previously permitted border summits of Danphe Sail (6,103m) and Mariyang (6,528m). There is still much exploration needed here to ascertain the best base camps and interesting routes to the summits

Gamgadhi airfield also provides access to the Gorakh Himal via the Tanke Khola. This long valley leads to the Kang La (5,358m), an old pass used for trading with Tibet. To the northeast work is in progress on a drivable track connecting the Mugu Valley with Tibet over Namje La. Farther west, accessed via Piplan and the Bolbihan Khola, lies the Gorakh, with peaks such as Assajyatuppa (6,265m) and Absi (6,254m). A British team has plans to climb in this area in the spring of 2015.

Limi and Nalakankar

Imagine the Écrins Massif in the French Alps before the arrival of English alpinists. All the summits in

the Limi Himal are unclimbed—and there are 15 over 6,000m. Simikot is the closest airstrip. Obtaining a permit for Achvin (6,055m) would allow a base camp in the heart of the massif, but climbing any other summit in the range would require a certain bending of the rules. For a first visit to Limi the unclimbed Ardang (6,034m, AAJ 2014) would present an excellent choice, perhaps from the north via Toling, a somewhat technical ascent. Then there is the large glacier leading west to the virigin top of Tirawa Himal (5,876m). Some distance to the northwest, in the Nalakankar Group, above the village of Haiji, is the newly opened Takphu North (6,142m).

The Far West (Guras Himal)

The district of Darchula, north of the Api Himal, is one of the poorest in Nepal and is little frequented by climbers or trekkers despite elegant mountains above 7,000m. In 1953 Tyson and Da Norbu climbed a border peak from the Yokanadi Khola (now the Yarwa Khola on the HMG-Finn map), the southerly branch of the Tinkar Khola. This peak was designated as part of the Yokopahar Himal, northeast of Nampa, but today is referred to as the Guras Himal. Although the location of this summit is unclear, Tyson looked down the far side into the Seti Valley. A difficult peak named Yokopahar (Nampa VII, 6,466m HMG-Finn) was brought onto the permitted list in 2002. There are now four more new peaks close by: Guras Himal (6,744m), Yarwa (6,644m), Jyachhun (6,388m), and Lasa (6,189m), all on the border and all looking rather technical, with complex, unknown access. Tyson’s mountain bears some resemblance to Peak 6,330m (sometimes called Nampa V) on the rim southwest of Yarwa. Not far west lies the Indian border. Many photos and more information about these areas can be found at the author’s website: www.paulo-grobel.com.

Images

A 2013 attempt on the unclimbed north-northwest ridge of Bijora Hiunchuli.

In the valley of the Takchhe Khola (the upper Limi Valley), looking southwest at (left to right) the snowy shoulder of Point 5,490m, Ardang (6,034m), and Peak 5,519m.

The north-northwest face of unclimbed Peak 5,905m on the long northwest ridge of Kasi Dalpha.

Unclimbed summits of the Kanjiroba Sanctuary: Peak 6,313m (left of twin tops) and Kanjiroba Northwest (6,289m, right top).

The northern aspect of unclimbed Kasi Dalpha.

Limi: From the Nyalu La, the view northeast into the Takh Himal shows several unknown 5,000m mountains.

Looking northeast up the Jagdula Khola to the elegant, pointed Peak 6,294m and behind and to the left Tripura Hiunchuli (6,553m). Mountain on the far right is Shey Shikar (6,139m).

Crossing the large Ardang Glacier basin/Phupharka Plateau south of Ardang in the Limi Himal, with the elegant, unclimbed Phupharka (5,630m) to the southeast . Although this peak lies south of the main Phupharka ridge, and is not the highest in the group, it was so named because it is the most important and beautiful summit seen when walking up the Phupharka Valley.

Limi. Looking just south of east over the Nyalu La (4,988m) from the Ardang Glacier/Phupharka Plateau to the unexplored mountains due north of Simikot, the eastern Limi summits. In the center of the picture, the steep rocky face in shadow is most likely Peak 5,975m, while the higher snowy summit behind and left is Peak 6,265m, the highest in this group. Over to the right are Peaks 6,248m and 6,028m.

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