



## **Takphu 2018: British Expedition Climbs Seven Peaks**

Nepal, Far West Nepal, Takphu Himal

**THE TAKPHU HIMAL in Nepal's extreme far west is only 15 kilometers south of Gurla Mandhata (7,694 meters), which towers over holy Lake Manasarovar in Tibet, with the holy of holies Mt. Kailash just a little further north.** Takphu is best approached via the Nyalu La, a 5,001-meter pass, which we reached in late September after four days of walking from Simikot with a mule train. It would have been three days except for the disappearance of our mules in the Chungsa Khola. Until mules have crossed a divide like the Nyalu La, their thoughts are of home. Our mule drivers gave chase and eventually found 14 of the 16 animals, which meant the others each would carry an extra 10 kilograms. They were not going to be happy with the shirkers who had bolted.

My companions on this journey were Ed Douglas, editor of the *Alpine Journal*; Nick Colton, the deputy CEO of the British Mountaineering Council; Christof Nettekoven, a great mountain chronicler and climber from Germany; and last, but by no means least, the Scottish climber Bruce Normand. Bruce has possibly made more first ascents of 6,000-meter peaks than anyone alive, and after this post-monsoon period on Takphu and beyond, that is even more likely to be true, as will be seen.

From Nyalu La, our route dropped into the Talun Valley, at the top end of the fabled Limi Valley with its ancient monasteries at Halji, founded in the 11th century by Richen Zangpo, and another at Til. Our plan was to approach Takphu via the plateau above the Limi Valley, rather than from Til or Halji down below. Previous expeditions in this area, in 2008 and 2016, had been prevented by villagers from entering the mountains or fined upon their return. Our route thus took us past the grazing grounds of Traktse and up onto plateau proper. Wild ass and Tibetan antelope were seen. On October 6, some 100 kilometers out from Simikot, we established base camp at 4,982 meters in front of a glacial lake near the termination of the Sakya Glacier. The Tibetan herders had already abandoned summer grazing and gone down to their villages in the Limi Valley.

The frontier at Takphu is oriented north-south, and this Himal is part of the longer Nalakankar ranges that run up to the Lapche La in the north and down to the township of Hilsa on the Karnali River in the south, the entry point for pilgrims, mostly Indians, to Mt. Kailash. Until 2015, most devotees had crossed into Tibet east of Kathmandu and then driven west to Kailash, but the earthquake that year flattened the area around that border crossing. At this point, the only way to Kailash was via air to Simikot and then a five-day walk to the Hilsa border crossing, but since most Hindu pilgrims from India weren't about to walk five days there and back, a fleet of helicopters has ferried the faithful between Simikot and Hilsa in recent years.

Our arrival at base was greeted with snow and some wind. I had a filthy hacking cough that never left me on this trip. Straight in front of base camp was unclimbed Takphu Himal (6,395m) on the right and Til Kang (6,369m), for which we had the climbing permit, on the left. It seemed there was no safe way onto Til Kang, as there was a band of seracs across the whole east side above the true left bank of the Sakya Glacier, and even the east ridge could not easily be attained. It looked like it needed to be tackled from the unseen Tibetan side, starting from a glacial basin that we knew to exist there. As for Takphu Himal, that could be attained up the Sakya Glacier and then up right (true left bank) into what I called the Takphu North Glacier. This glacier had been ascended twice before, first by a Japanese expedition in 2016 that climbed a peak of 6,153 meters at the far back of the glacier, followed a month later by a German team that made the first ascent of Takphu North (6,142m) from a col linking

that peak with Peak 6,153m.

On October 8, Bruce, Ed, and Christoph did a recce up the Takphu North Glacier, and in the process Bruce made the second ascent of Peak 6,153m and scouted a route up Takphu Himal from a col linking that to another mountain we called P2, a high peak in Tibet of 6,521 meters. We needed to give these peaks easy identification numbers as there were at least three unnamed mountains in the group.

The weather was not at all the settled affair you might expect post-monsoon, with the mainly westerly airstream often punctuated with a less settled southwesterly flow. It also was abnormally cold. While the others were on the Takphu North Glacier, Nick and I, with me coughing and spluttering, headed north to recce a remote pair of peaks and dump a tent and gear at about 5,400 meters by a small moraine lake. After a day back at base camp, Bruce, Ed, and Christoph headed back up the Takphu North Glacier on October 10, putting a tent in at around 5,750 meters. Meanwhile, Nick and I returned to and occupied our tent by the lake.

The 11th was a cold, blustery, cloud-scudding day with visibility coming and going. One of those days that's too good to renege on a plan but certainly too cold with the wind chill to have hands out of gloves for more than a very short moment. Nick and I had a fairly ruthless trudge of a climb, not technical at all but on one section surmounting some hideous scree and boulders, to get onto the south ridge of Peak 6,055m (30°20'12"N, 81°26'54"E). There was no protection from a continuous southwest wind of perhaps 35 knots. We gained the rounded top in early afternoon and quickly headed down. Nick had slightly frost-nipped toes with his single-layer boots.

The others, meantime, had a hard slog from their tent in soft snow, taking some three hours to ascend the 330 meters to the col at 6,130 meters below Takphu Himal. This brought them to the easy-angled west ridge, which they ascended in bad visibility, near whiteout at times. The top was reached about noon, and with no inclination to stay long they descended with some route-finding difficulty into their glacial basin and spent the night there, returning to base next day. Christoph also had some frost damage to some toes.

After a rest day, Ed and Bruce started off for Til Kang on October 14. The plan was that they would climb this mountain together and then Bruce might go on and solo what he could of the nearby Tibetan peaks. To reach the Tibetan glacial basin at the far (west) side of Til Kang, they crossed the pass at the head of the Sakya Glacier and went over into the upper Sayogan Khola. They kept as much height as they could, traversing west across some tricky ground, to reach the Tibet border col at 5,700 meters; this separates Til Kang, north of the col, from Peak 3 to the south of it. (P3 was the 6,422-meter peak once called Nalakankar before the Nepal frontier was moved to the north and the name Nalakankar applied to another summit by the new border.) Bruce and Ed camped at this border col.

On the 15th they headed to the west spur of Til Kang, climbing a little to the right of some potentially problematic seracs. The route was serious rather than technical, mostly 45–55°, and they reached the top at 1:30 p.m. The retreat required a good deal of careful downclimbing. The weather remained very cold, and now it was Ed's turn to sustain some frost damage. They both spent the night back at the col after a great effort.

Ed returned to base in early evening of the next day by the same route as the outward journey. Bruce remained alone in the Tibetan glacial basin, and that morning he headed south from the col to P1, the highest peak in the range (6,613m), some two kilometers away. He climbed the peak by the north face, with some difficulties toward the top of the route. Views in the western distance included Nanda Devi. He returned to the tent on the col that night and then, on the 17th, headed south to P3 (6,422m), which he climbed from the col between it and P1, essentially via the mountain's west ridge. (This mountain historically has been called Takphu's highest peak, but it is the highest only if you are counting peaks on the frontier ridge rather than

the group as a whole, including the Tibetan mountains.) As if these climbs had not been enough for

the supremely energetic Bruce, on October 18 he continued to mop up the range by heading northwest from his tent to climb P2 (6,521m) by its southeast face. Rather than retreat the same way, he traversed over and down to the P2–Takphu Himal col, and then went back up Takphu Himal's west ridge (thus making the mountain's second ascent, a week after the first) before descending its untrod south ridge back to the col tent. Bruce returned to base camp the next day, October 19, via the same pass linking the head of the Sayogan Khola and Sakya Glacier. We had begun to get concerned. This had been a seriously fine effort by any standard—away for six days and really out on a limb, alone in very wild, high country. The mules arrived the same day. We left for Simikot on October 20, carrying all our garbage—nothing was left at base camp or on the mountains.

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– **Julian Freeman-Attwood**, United Kingdom

## Images



The east faces of Til Kang (6,369m, left) and Takphu Himal (6,395m) from base camp.



Ed Douglas on summit of Til Kang.



Til Kang and the line of ascent. Takphu Himal at is at back.





Peak 3 (6,422m) from high on Peak 1 (6,613m).



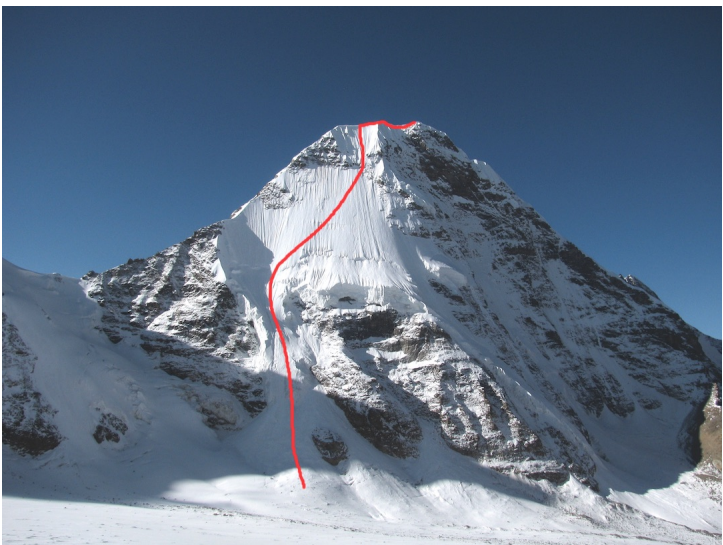
"Peak 3" (6,422m) and "Peak 1" (6,613m) from Til Kang to the north, taken during the first ascent of Til Kang in October 2018.



Mule train taking a break en route to base camp in the Takphu Himal.



“Peak 2” (6,521m) seen from Takphu Himal.



“Peak 1,” showing the first ascent by the north face.



The “supremely energetic” Bruce Normand on Til Kang, with Gurla Mandhata (7,694m) far back.

## Article Details

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