



AAC Publications

Positive Vibes

The first ascent of Gave Ding in western Nepal

No matter how many times the Kathmandu baggage carousel went around, I knew my bags were not going to turn up. It's funny: You often joke about bags going missing at the start of an expedition, but now that it was happening for real I realized it could mean the end of the trip before it had really begun. On top of that came the minibus driver's comment that, due to India's blockade of fuel for Nepal, there might not be enough petrol in his tank to get us to Nepalgunj, and that the plane from there might not have enough fuel to fly us into Simikot. All this meant things were off to a bad start for the British 2015 West Nepal Expedition.

Mick Fowler is one of the most positive people I have ever met. We had traveled to Kathmandu separately—Mick from England, along with Steve Burns and Ian Cartwright, and me directly from work in Saudi Arabia, both planes amazingly landing within minutes of each other. Mick now stood next to the carousel, grinning and assuring me the bags would arrive on the next flight, and that fuel for the minibus would be available on the black market, and that aviation fuel must be stockpiled in Nepalgunj.

Mick's positive vibes obviously worked, as my bags did turn up on a flight later that day, petrol was available—at a premium—and the Nepalgunj airfield was indeed well supplied with aviation fuel. In the end we made it to the mountains more smoothly than usual. It's amazing how things just tend to work out if you persevere, especially in Asia, where the transition from chaos to smooth progress is totally unpredictable but nearly always around the corner, if you wait long enough.

We came upon this year's objective, Gave Ding (6,571 meters), by the typical contorted search for a suitable route. A British team, led by Julian Freeman-Attwood, had attempted the south side of the peak in 2011. Although they were unable to see the north face, they told Mick it had potential. We got our hands on a short video clip from a helicopter, taken by another team that was retreating from a valley to the northwest after heavy snow cut them off. From the video it was clear the mountain had a striking profile.

Mick suggested I spend some satellite time cruising the Tibetan border west of Gojung (a.k.a. Mugu Chuli, 6,310m), a peak he had climbed with Dave Turnbull in the autumn of 2011. Google Earth is a genuine revolution in exploratory mountaineering. While the images vary in quality to a huge degree, they do give a really good indication whether a particular valley is worth a visit. (Though, it can be misleading! In 2012 I climbed a peak in India with Mick called Shiva, which looks like a hill walk on Google Earth, but very definitely wasn't.) Once I got my eye in, it seemed that Mick was indeed correct about Gave Ding's potential, with one particular face producing an impressive shadow across the glacier below—a very good sign. Mick's definitely got a feel for these things.

I first met Mick in a rainy car park below Millstone Edge in England's Peak District in 1999. Our climbing partners had decided not to show up, due to the steady rain. After staring at each other from our respective cars for a while, introductions were made and we discovered a mutual enthusiasm for climbing in the wet. Bond Street and Great North Road were climbed in challenging but memorable conditions. It felt slightly odd, having read about Mick as a teenager and even going to one of his slide shows, to be enjoying foul conditions with the man himself.

From Millstone we moved onto new winter routes on Skye and our first Himalayan expedition, which

was a miserable failure. Stood at the bottom of that particular route, we decided, simultaneously, that it was too dangerous, and we simply turned around and went home. It's good to know that your climbing partner will try very hard but also knows when to retreat.

Fourteen years and eight expeditions to the Greater Ranges later, Gave Ding stood breathtaking above the end of a beautiful valley. The last village had been left behind after just one ridiculously hot day's walk from Simikot; beyond lay nothing but summer grazing in the occasional flat valley bottom between steep rock walls. On the fourth day we turned a corner into the Lachama Khola and got our first full view of the mountain, but we still couldn't see our intended face. Unfortunately, conditions under foot got worse and the mule men said this was as far as they were prepared to go, a day short of our intended base camp. We made camp there, at about 4,500 meters. We later learned that a Japanese team had attempted Lachama Chuli (6,721 meters) from this valley in 1983, but no one else had ever climbed here.

Mick and I rarely spend more than a few days in base camp on any expedition. Our plan was to explore the approach to the north face before heading up a nearby, less challenging peak to acclimatize. Progress from base camp was relatively straightforward up an ablation valley to the side of the glacier, and once there you couldn't deny that the north face of Gave Ding dominated the area. As we studied the face through the binoculars, it was clear the choice of line was going to be trickier than expected. From the satellite images I had gained the impression that the left side of the north face held some impressive ice lines, which it did—however, most led into large snow basins and looked like really bad places to be should the weather turn. To the right, seracs threatened all the lines to varying degrees. The only really safe line was the center of the north buttress, but smooth granite bands promised very hard climbing, unless we could find a sneaky way through.

Ruminating on how best to climb the mountain, we headed northwest up a side valley, hoping to find a nice peak around 5,800 meters on which to acclimatize. Despite the fact that the north side of Gave Ding was very icy, we soon discovered that everywhere else was totally devoid of snow, making a high camp very difficult to sustain—if you wanted to drink water, that is.

After the acclimatization had been deemed suitably long (that is, we got bored) we headed back down to base camp for a few days' rest and relaxation before the main event. This is always a pleasurable phase of any expedition for me—eating, sleeping, and fiddling with kit as the anticipation builds for the route. It's at this stage, after seeing the face and realizing just how much food and gas we will have to carry, that the rack tends to get seriously pared back. Wires get thinned, pegs and cams are set aside, and the number of screws to take is earnestly debated. In reality, less rack just makes for potentially shorter pitches, but that is no bad thing at altitude, as it's a good excuse for a rest. Luckily, Mick and I have compatible runout tolerances. The biggest worry at this stage is that the binge eating might result in stomach upsets, which would potentially jeopardize the whole trip. Fortunately, our cook was scrupulous about his food hygiene, with nobody getting any dodgy guts until we hit civilization again at the end of the trip.

Steve and Ian had accompanied us on the acclimatization outing and decided to go for a peak just to the south of Gave Ding that offered an interesting north face. They planned to set off the day after us. On our expeditions, time constraints due to home and work commitments effectively mean there is only enough time for one attempt on a route. It either would go this time or not at all. It's a committing feeling but certainly increases motivation to the maximum, and this might be a key reason why Mick and I, as a team, have achieved a higher than normal success rate in the Himalaya.

We packed seven days of food and four gas canisters. The plan for the first day was to reach a position below the main difficulties of the first rock bands. Studying the face in the evening sunlight had indicated that a small pillar stood proud from the wall, with the possibility of a bivy on the little col behind it. Reasonably amenable climbing and occasional exhausting, bottomless powder in a shallow gully system brought us to the foot of the rock barrier. Here, a very exposed and poorly

protected traverse led left in several pitches to our home for the night.

The small col provided the only real bivy option, but it wasn't going to be comfortable. The snow was soft and weak, collapsing constantly as we tried to chop a ledge. Mick's idea of pissing on the snow to add to its stability once it froze seemed questionable. It's times like this, preparing a difficult bivouac for the night, that I'm grateful for how long we've been climbing together. Both of us knows what needs doing, and each gets on with it without much discussion. Once in our sleeping bags, the discomfort is just accepted—any moaning is usually meant as a joke. After all, what can you do about it?

Things started to get interesting the next day. From below we had identified the best line and several alternatives, but now that we were in position it was clear there was no Plan B—it would be Plan A or nothing. A complicated line led across smooth, snow-covered slabs before turning the overhangs up steep mixed grooves.

Swinging leads, we slowly made our way diagonally across the smooth rock walls. Mick led a suitably challenging steep groove. Squeaky blobs of perfect névé, clearly produced by a monsoon's worth of spindrift falling down the face, showed the way. However difficult, the climbing was exhilarating, with increasing and occasionally disturbing exposure. Mick led another particularly fine pitch up a vertical groove, climbing without a rucksack, and even heel-hooking in places. Unusually, he was heard to shout out with pleasure at how good the climbing was. Seconding with a big sack was pretty much impossible for the puny Ramsden body. Much pulling ensued from Mick. The second bivy emerged from a snow bank below an overhang. Surprisingly, we ended up with a perfectly pitched tent, good anchors, and a beautiful sunset as well—bliss.

More ice appeared during our third day on the wall, but more route choices led to an outbreak of dithering. In the end we plumped to continue the rising diagonal traverse, which led again across steep, thinly iced walls and one very run-out pitch, requiring me to ditch my rucksack on an ice screw. It was one of those steep groove lines with good but thin ice that just draws you upward, until the ice turns to crud and you realize just how far above the gear you are, and just how hard it would be to reverse the last few moves. This scary lead broke onto an icefield approximately halfway up the route.

As the technical difficulties eased we scampered toward the side of a serac band that offered the chance for another good tent pitch inside a crevasse. Comfortable, yes, but very distressing when a loud crack shook the tent in the middle of the night. Nearly continuous spindrift buried us nicely by morning. But what can you expect if you camp in a crevasse?

A long fourth day saw us progressing nicely up the upper buttress, which consisted mostly of a sharp ice ridge, like the Peuterey on Mont Blanc. Hard blue ice and patches of powder snow made for difficult work, but at least we were moving, and for the first time in four days we were in the sun, though it continued to be very cold. The end of the ridge brought us to another serac band that had looked challenging from below, as it ran across the ridge and appeared to overhang alarmingly. Fortunately, a fin of vertical ice in a wildly exposed position, right on the crest of the buttress, allowed us to reach another perfectly flat camping spot in the ocean of powder snow filling the basin directly below the summit.

That night it snowed heavily, and though the summit looked close, it wasn't going to be easy to reach. Plowing a trench across the hanging basin was one of the most exhausting things I have ever done, with the snow chest-deep in places. A steep bergschrund and several pitches of bulletproof ice, climbed with very blunt ice tools, gave access to the summit ridge. Then a short traverse brought us to the top. Any first ascent is a privilege, but to climb a virgin summit from a little-known valley via a demanding route, up a steep north face, was a real joy.

After a very cold night near the summit, we descended the southwest ridge, which was quite broad

and glaciated on its southern aspect, allowing us to weave an almost pleasant route through benign-looking seracs. By late morning we had arrived at the col on the ridge from which we planned to descend to the north. However, it was a nice flat spot and it was sunny, so we decided to stop for the day, though it was only late morning.

I have noticed that as we get older Mick and I take longer to descend. It's not that we are moving slowly, but if the weather is nice and the camping good, we seem to find any excuse not to go down. After all, it's far nicer on the mountain than it is at base camp, and we both understand that it will be at least another year before we could find ourselves in a similar position. As the afternoon wore on, we relaxed with endless brew-making and idle chatter. (Mind you, when a tax inspector and a health and safety consultant are sharing a tent, you can't expect the most thrilling of conversations.) In the morning we continued down a prominent couloir, which initially was very steep. I have developed a certain degree of skill with Abalakov anchors, so we have fallen into a routine of me setting up the anchors and Mick following behind. It's quicker for one person to carry all the rack and gear than changing over all the time. I also think Mick likes the snooze while waiting. About 25 threads later, we crossed the bergschrund, having only left one nut.

Several hours later we stumbled into base camp. Steve and Ian had not been quite so lucky with their objective, but we all agreed it had been a very fine trip as we walked back out to Simikot. Now back at work in Saudi Arabia, it feels like a long time ago and an awful lot warmer! Time to focus on next year, I think.

Summary: First ascent of Gave Ding (6,571 meters) in the Changla Himal of western Nepal, via the north buttress (1,600 meters, ED+). Mick Fowler and Paul Ramsden (both U.K.) left base camp on October 17, started climbing the next day, and spent five days on the route. They bivied once near the summit and once on the way down, and returned to base camp on October 24.

About the Author: Paul Ramsden, 46, calls Nottingham, England, home. Between work and family, he says, "I hardly ever go climbing, sometimes not wearing crampons between expeditions."

Images



Mick Fowler low on Gave Ding, with the daunting north wall overhead. It would take Fowler and the author five days to climb the 1,600-meter face.



After flying to Simikot, the team trekked four days up the Dojam Khola and Lachama Khola valleys. A British team attempted Gave Ding's south side in 2011, but no climbers had tried the peak from the north.



Mick Fowler (left) and Paul Ramsden: a 14-year Greater Ranges partnership.



The author at the precarious first bivy site, which Fowler attempted to improve by urinating on the snow and letting it freeze.



Fowler starts a difficult lead on day two.



The 1600-meter north buttress of Gave Ding, climbed with four bivouacs on the ascent and two on the way down

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