MICK FOWLER

Chombu Fever

The object of desire. Chombu (6362m) from the Sebu La. *(Mick Fowler)*

'My hotel is broken.'

The hotel owner's tour of his premises left us in no doubt. He was not exaggerating. Like a fifth or so of the buildings in the small village of Thangu, his hotel was indeed very broken. Victor Saunders and I had arrived in Thangu to spend the night, on our way to attempt Chombu in Sikkim.

'Seven feet of snow in one storm,' announced a bystander.

'Heaviest winter snow since 1995,' added another.

We had been warned that the winter snows had been heavy but nothing had quite prepared us for avalanches across the road and the damage to property. Clearly we were facing unusually snowy conditions.

Sikkim was a new area for both of us. The deep, jungle-covered and winding valleys of the foothills made for a grand and varied approach to the mountains. Our approach was along the 'short route' followed by the Everest climbers of the 1920s, 'short' of course being a relative term. The 1921 Everest team took 36 days to walk from Darjeeling to their base camp. The perseverance and commitment of those pioneers in just getting to and from the mountain was remarkable. It was almost enough to make me feel guilty that the approach to our base camp involved flying to Bagdogra airport, 40km south of Darjeeling, two days driving to Thangu and two days of walking.

'My hotel is broken.' Winter snow damage at Thangu in Sikkim. *(Mick Fowler)*

Chombu is in a sensitive area and the expense and uncertainty involved in securing all the necessary permissions has played a large part in its climbing history, which is relatively short. Bad weather and soft snow stopped Cooke and McPherson in 1944. Doug Scott's team experienced much the same problem in 1996, as did Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma in 2007. A widely discredited first ascent claim was made in 1961. The highest point thus far, still a long way from the summit, was reached by a Japanese team in 1992.

Noting the recurring mention of soft-snow problems, our plan was to attempt the west face. This we judged was steep enough not to hold snow and therefore give the sort of moving-one-at-a-time mixed climbing that Victor and I prefer. When we first started planning in 2016, we could never have dreamed that so many hurdles would arise.

After an initial refusal and much uncertainty, permits were promised for the post-monsoon season of 2017. But the promise was withdrawn as a result of a border skirmish with China. Then, out of the blue, I was diagnosed with cancer and rather than climbing in the Himalaya found myself experiencing the dubious joys of radiotherapy and chemotherapy. Pre-monsoon 2018 was spent recovering and preparing to go post-monsoon 2018. And then, that summer, a return of cancer resulted in an operation to remove my anus, which stymied any hope of Chombu that year. Argh! So it wasn't until in the pre-monsoon of 2019 that health and permit issues came together and we were finally ready to go.

Our team to walk in to base camp consisted of the two of us, four Sherpas, a cook, a kitchen boy and five porters. There was also a liaison officer who returned to Gangtok after ensuring we were underway. It felt an awful lot of people to support a lightweight two-man team.

Finding enough porters had been tricky. The local people were much more interested in searching for caterpillar fungus, the famous *yartsa gunbu* much in demand in China as an aphrodisiac and cure-all. The result was that our net had to be cast far and wide, the haul being five outrageously strong young men brought in from Darjeeling. Being as there were so few it was just as well that they were so strong.

The triple loads they shouldered must have weighed 70kg and matched the heaviest I have ever seen. Unfortunately this meant that as the day progressed and the snow softened they sunk in ever more deeply. The snow really was a problem and we were only able to make progress at all because the track was on the south-facing side of the valley where the winter snows were starting to thin. The north-facing side looked a lot like the Alps after a heavy winter snowfall.

The track was interesting. Those sections not completely covered with snow revealed rocks cemented into place with parallel sides. It was a tour de force. Later, when the snows had largely melted, we were to discover this amazing track did a loop of the valley, reaching a point only half an hour or so from our base camp. We never did get a clear explanation for its existence. Suggestions that it was built for military purposes or to take yaks up to a yak racing ground were dismissed in favour of it being some kind of tourist trail. Either way it would have been very useful had it not been largely buried.

It took two days and several ferries before we set up base camp by a clear stream 30 minutes short of the old Himalayan Club hut at the foot of the Sebu La. This pass connects the Lachen and Lachung valleys and back in the days of British rule it was a sufficiently popular crossing for the Himalayan Club to judge it worth building a substantial refuge either side. Nowadays the remains of the hut are crumbling quietly away in their summer yak-grazing grounds.

From the Himalayan hut, it could be seen, in sharp contrast to virtually everywhere else, that the mountain was surprisingly devoid of snow. It did though look exciting, with uncompromising steep slopes leading to an enticing, curling summit snow ridge. I almost felt emotional, finally seeing the object of my dreams for the last three years.

We climbed an easy 5,600m summit, spent a couple of days and nights lying at 5,500m sucking in thin air and returned to base camp in high spirits. We had chosen our line and the weather looked reasonable. All we had to do now was spend a day eating and then start climbing. Life was good.

By the next morning 10cm of snow had fallen, the temperature was hovering around freezing and base camp was in the cloud. Another day of eating was judged appropriate; we had a time cushion of about a week so could afford to be relaxed and wait out some bad weather. The next day dawned the same but, feeling the need to be in position at the foot of our intended line, we trudged up through the falling snow, pitched our little tent at the foot of the face and set the alarm for an early start. But the weather would not play ball. In the early hours it was still snowing and the temperature

was clearly too warm for a good freeze. Days passed with little change. The boredom level grew. There is only so much time that can be spent in a two-man tent without going stir-crazy.

In between reading and brewing we stared at the tent fabric, righted the wrongs of the world and discussed the pros and cons of colostomy bags on constricted bivouacs. This was my first expedition with a bag and while a small tent was not the harshest of testing grounds, my experience thus far suggested that having control over when to empty the bag could be an advantage: no urgent exits into snow-blown nights for me. Victor, who had endured a nasty incident being caught short on our last Himalayan climb together, looked mildly envious without going so far as to wish he could have the operation. The trickiest problem for me was not being able to sit down properly. The operation had involved plastic surgery across both buttocks. While sitting in a well-cushioned environment is bearable, a sitting bivouac would require very careful planning. With endless hours to waste we whiled away the time discussing laughable possibilities interminably.

The weather still wasn't getting any better. Every day, come 3pm or so, it would start to snow and continue right through until about 6am. The avalanche risk was high and the underlying snow soft and exhausting. Despondency levels were rising. I had never experienced Himalayan weather quite like this. All in all it developed into the most frustrating wait that either of us had ever experienced. Eventually, all reading material had been read, all conversation topics exhausted, time was fast running out and conditions on the mountain remained awful. It became increasingly clear that we had failed without even crossing the bergschrund.

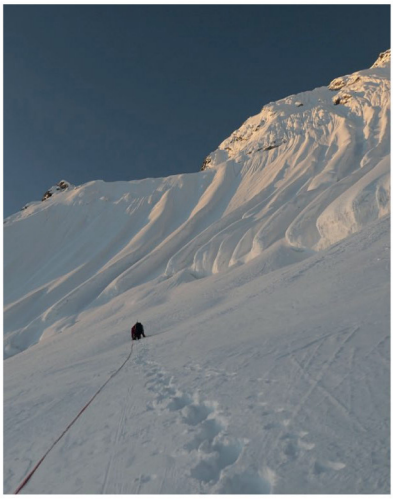
Ultimately the pre-monsoon 2019 British Chombu expedition accepted defeat and trudged forlornly back to base camp: a most disappointing outcome.

Victor and I must have very short memories, because back in the UK we somehow convinced ourselves that the weather and climbing conditions might be better in the post-monsoon season. Even so, I was almost surprised to find us back in Sikkim in September 2019.

Throughout the two days we spent in Gangtok it rained incessantly. During this time we were informed that a crucial bridge had been washed away and only locals were being allowed along a route through a sensitive army camp, which was now the only access into the Thangu valley. The expedition was dead in the water if we couldn't reach the village of Thangu and getting foreigners there when Indian tourists were banned seemed an almost insuperable problem to us.

That task was entrusted to Baichung, our liaison officer who was to drive us to Thangu in his Jeep and arranged to meet us at 8am next morning. At 9am he arrived explaining that his vehicle had been rendered un-driveable following a hit and run in the night. Being a devout Buddhist he was sufficiently concerned by the way things were going to suggest that we seek advice at Gangtok monastery to ensure he and the expedition were not to be plagued by bad karma. Fortunately a monk decreed that all would be well

Approaching the foot of the face was tiring. *(Mick Fowler)*



But at least the snow flutings proved enticing. *(Mick Fowler)*

Except the flutings proved to be an exhausting and insecure battle with unconsolidated snow. *(Mick Fowler)*

and we continued on our way. I'm not sure what would have happened if he had sensed less positive vibes.

Being as we were destined for a tourist free area it struck us as unfortunate that the vehicle secured to replace Baichung's Jeep had 'Tourist' embla-

Above: The vast quantities of snow at least made for easy tent placements. *(Mick Fowler)*

Right: Wonderful mountain, awful conditions. Day two. *(Mick Fowler)*

zoned on the side. I have no real idea what miracles occurred during our drive to Thangu. Approval from yet another senior official was secured, a special pass of some sort was granted, the guard at the army camp gate let us through and the villagers of Thangu couldn't believe it when we arrived. No Indian tourists were allowed and yet these two westerners had arrived in a vehicle with Tourist on the side. Maximum respect to Barap, our agent, and Baichung: I have no idea how they did it.

The weather looked reasonable, the snow line was high and with our porters only weighed down by 50kg loads this time we started the walk to base camp in high spirits. We hoped we had learned lessons from our April attempt and felt we were in with a good chance of success.

Fourteen days later Victor and I were sat in our tents at base camp listening to the rain. After much debate we agreed that in a combined 75 years of expeditioning, this was the longest spell of properly bad weather either of us had ever experienced. We had managed to acclimatise by spending a

couple of nights at 5,600m but wading through soft snow to get there had been utterly exhausting and the frequent big avalanches coming down the west face had been enough to put us off our intended line. We had also managed to break a pole in our mountain tent and drop one of our walkie-talkie handsets into a lake. But we were ready to climb. Our reconnaissance had focused our minds on what might be done safely and all we needed now was a good enough window of weather to try and climb our newly preferred line on the north side of Chombu.

The rain continued. Days at base camp passed slowly. After bed tea at 6am the only reason to emerge from our sleeping bags was for breakfast at 8am, lunch at 1.30pm, afternoon tea at 3.30pm and dinner at 6pm. Each meal lasted perhaps 20 minutes. And so, much as we tried to force ourselves to stroll around occasionally, the total time outside our sleeping bags each day was often around 80 minutes.

On 10 October the weather suddenly improved. After three years and so many setbacks it seemed the time had finally come for us to try and climb Chombu. Two days of energy-sapping wading saw us camped below the face peering up at striking snow flutings and snow-cloaked buttresses.

'Have you ever tried to climb a face with this much snow on?'

'No,' said Victor. This would be a new experience for both of us.

The exhausting nature of deep powdery snow was such that we were reduced to moving one at a time from well below the bergschrund. As the ground steepened it became clear that everything, almost regardless of angle, was plastered with perhaps two feet of the stuff. Beneath it there was more snow that was only slightly firmer. Making upwards progress was painfully slow and insecure. Victor, being a very light chap at about 55kg, preferred an approach that stayed on the surface as much as possible. Whereas I, at a relatively porky 70kg, was reduced to clearing the top two feet away and trying to fashion steps from what lay below to support me. This meant I spent much of my time standing on 70° ground clearing away a snow overhang above my head before teetering up. My mittens froze like a couple of claws while the snow I swept away inevitably found its way down my neck.

Midway through the afternoon, Victor, who had been out of sight in the cloud, suddenly hurtled into view. He ended up dangling over a vertical cliff having fallen a good 60ft. There was quite a long silence and then:

'My first ever Himalayan fall.' He seemed rather sheepish about it but in 39 years of Himalayan climbing that struck me as rather a good record. It also said a lot about the terrain we were trying to climb. Grading it was impossible. It was like a powdery early season Cairngorms grade V route times 10. Even the easy-looking sections were exhausting and desperately insecure. We moved at a snail's pace.

After two full days of this kind of terrain we reached the base of smooth slopes leading to the north summit. At the foot of the face I had looked up at the flutings and wild snow mushrooms and felt our chances of success were slim. Now, though, we were above these obstacles. The weather was reasonable. The summit was only 250m above us and the open slopes ahead

Confidence began to rise as the team gained height. Gurudongmar on the left and Pauhunri on the right above morning clouds. *(Mick Fowler)*

looked likely to give easier and quicker climbing conditions. Much as the climbing itself had been a million miles away from the technical ground I love, we had reached 6,100m. I could sense enjoyment and confidence levels rising.

We shared a freeze-dried food pack that evening. Both of us commented that it didn't taste right. There was a nasty chemical smell and flavour to it. But tastebuds can be erratic at altitude, preparing food is a hassle and we were both tired and keen to get our heads down. Victor eats remarkably little and after just two or three spoonfuls he handed over to me. I persevered and ate the rest. It was grim but I think we just sort of assumed our bodies would cope and extract some energy from the awfulness.

It was about an hour later that it became clear that all was not well.

Victor was first to feel sick: a minor accident was followed by a rushed exit and a just-in-time explosion. Soon both of us were suffering repeated unpleasant chemical-flavoured burps. As Victor rushed to exit for a second time, I became aware that my colostomy bag was becoming uncomfortably full with liquid. No problem. I could simply change it without the hassle of getting outside the tent. It pleased me greatly to point this out to Victor.

I lay on my back in my cosy sleeping bag, removed the old bag and set about attaching a new one. Unfortunately those of us with a stoma find it impossible to tell when a discharge might occur. Having gloated over the inconvenience Victor was enduring the tables were suddenly turned when an unexpected fountain of poo erupted. A remarkable quantity of liquid

The morning after the night before. *(Mick Fowler)*

poured forth. With both forearms containing the lake forming on my stomach I found myself unable to take any constructive action to resolve the growing problem.

'Help.'

It was the only thing I could think to say.

Poor Victor must have thought I had exploded. As the initial shock subsided emptying the poo pool became top priority. Toilet paper was in limited supply and soon ran out. Victor's book came next. The pages were not very absorbent but at least there were a lot of them. Spare clothing was the backstop. Remarkably the pool was emptied with minimum spillage but in my enthusiasm to apply a new bag, I quickly wasted several of my carefully calculated stock. The more serious on-going problem was increasingly severe nausea and frequent diarrhoea. The night developed into what felt like a non-stop session of bag emptying (me), rushing outside (Victor) and dry retching (both). By morning I was oozing transparent liquid, felt completely drained and had only two colostomy bags left. Victor too was suffering badly, albeit not so spectacularly.

I felt absolutely awful. What to do? After so many delays and so much heartache here we were within striking distance of the summit we had dreamed about so much and for so long. And yet this wasn't a little spot of the runs. We had clearly poisoned ourselves. Seldom had I felt more physically drained and nauseous. In eating something to give ourselves energy we had clearly had exactly the opposite effect. We discussed our predicament at length.

After all we had gone through to get to this point the temptation was to continue. But big mountains can be dangerous places. The wind could be seen to be whipping over the summit ridge and the temperature was well below freezing. Not only did I feel weak and exhausted, I would definitely run out of colostomy bags if we continued. But then little comes out in normal high mountain circumstances. And what's a little poo compared to achieving your goal of the last three years? We discussed various possibilities but in truth we didn't dither long. The decision came quickly, if painfully. I really did feel a sense of despair after all we had gone through to get to this point. Particularly after the health challenges of the last couple of years, I had wanted to prove to myself that I could still climb great Himalayan

Older and wiser? *(Mick Fowler)*

objectives. And, much as the reason we were going down had nothing to do with those health issues, they added to the sense of failure somehow. I was very aware of all the effort medical professionals had put into getting me back in good condition, not to mention the unfailing support of my family and Berghaus. We had overcome so much and I felt I had let everyone down because of one gone-off freeze-dried meal.

It was 48 hours before either of us was able to eat anything again. We abseiled slowly down the line we had come up, both of us surprised at how steep the ground was. By the time we arrived in base camp I could hardly put one foot in front of the other. I regarded that as confirmation, if confirmation was needed, that we had made the right decision. Another attempt was out of the question. The army would not allow us to extend our permit and bad weather had returned anyway. It was time to begin the long journey back home. Chombu had won.

Back in the UK, struggling with heavy bags, I managed to fall completely down the gap between the train and the platform at Cromford station. It somehow seemed a fitting end to the year's mountaineering efforts.

And so how do I feel now about Chombu? Well, in two trips not once did I crampon up any firm snow or swing my axe into any firm ice. The weather was rubbish, the climbing conditions were rubbish, the permit situation was rubbish. As we left base camp we both vowed that enough was enough and we would never go back to Chombu.

But time has passed. Bad memories fade. And, well, you never know.