

## FROM BIG BLACK TO THE OCEAN MOTHER

*A trek traversing the high Himalaya from Makalu to Everest, 2011.*

*by Grant Dixon*



I don't recall when it first struck me there might be a feasible but challenging high crossing between Makalu (derived from the Sanskrit Maha-Kala – also a by-name of Hindu god Shiva - meaning Big Black) and Everest (known as Sagarmatha in Sanskrit, which means Ocean Mother), two of the more impressive of the world's highest peaks. It was probably while poring over maps prior to my first visit to the region almost twenty years ago and reinforced when gazing eastward while climbing high on a mountain in the Everest area. Of course, dreams often remain just that, and years filled with other adventures passed, but after discovering that Sydney friend Paul had a similar vision gazing west from Makalu in 2009, we started planning the trip.

With three of Paul's friends, the five of us was already, for me, a large party. However, a trip of this length, mostly remote from villages and with our desire to explore and perhaps attempt a peak en route, requires considerable local assistance, so after a low cloud-dodging flight from Kathmandu, we left hot and humid Tumlingtar, only 460 metres above sea level, with more than a dozen porters in tow.

Our porters were managed by the cheerful Pemba Sherpa but he soon left us, staying in Tumlingtar to sort out collection and carriage of missing gear; some of it hadn't made it onto the small plane and

storms delayed subsequent days' flights. It was almost a week before we saw Pemba again and almost a fortnight before the missing gear caught up with us. We didn't know how this would pan out at the time; however, merely receiving sporadic inconclusive messages that Pemba or the missing gear would catch us "tomorrow" or "soon", we trekked towards the mountains. It seemed to be only us who were frustrated by this at the time and was a lesson in the Nepali view of life.



Our route initially followed the mighty Arun Kosi, flowing from Tibet, but not near the river, instead traversing a high ridge for several days to avoid a series of gorges. A former major trade route to Tibet, it remains the main supply route to all settlements in the upper Arun Valley. Small settlements were strung

along the ridge with terraced fields cascading down the steep slopes either side, but considerable forest cover also remained on the crest and in steeper areas. It was the forest I remembered from this area almost two decades ago, but the section of narrow forest track of those days was in the process of being converted into a road so muddy that, when we passed, it seemed the only beneficiary of this development was the local owner of several tractors, the only vehicles capable of dragging freight through the quagmire.

Afternoon rain was the norm and, too warm and humid for a parka, the umbrella I hastily purchased leaving Khandbari that morning proved very useful. After passing through neat thatched-roof villages amongst terraced fields during the day, we stopped for the night in a ramshackle ridge-crest settlement with most structures built from rough boards and corrugated iron. The single small guesthouse provided shelter, keeping our tents dry, and a verandah from which to watch our porters skilfully play finger billiards.

We spent a couple of nights in Num, a substantial village perched far above a great bend in the Arun Kosi. A steep 1000-metre descent through terraced fields and forest led to a suspension bridge over the river, then with no respite we ground our way up the other side to the small village of Sedua, directly opposite Num. Reclining on a grassy terrace above the deep valley we had just crossed, waiting for the porters to complete a tough day, we had a panoramic view of the afternoon thunderstorm until rain drove us to the verandah of the nearby guesthouse.

A short uphill stroll on a stony trail the next day bought us to Tashigaon, the last permanent village in the valley but barely 2000 metres above sea level. The dark forest edge rose abruptly at the edge of Tashigaon's lush fields. After passing a colourful painted mani stone wall at the top of the village, we entered the forest and commenced a steep and sustained ascent to almost 4000 metres and an altogether different climate. This rate of ascent is rather greater than recommended for acclimatisation, but the steep forest provides only limited camping options.

An isolated teahouse halfway up provided a lunch break and time for our heavily laden porters to catch up (there is little point arriving at camp without gear). Porterage is a respectable profession in the Himalayas and, for most porters, a way to earn cash when not working on their farms. For trekkers like us, it provides a more direct interaction with local people than you would likely get otherwise. Thirty kilograms is a typical load for a trekking porter, but many carry more than this to earn extra money. Ours certainly did.

Substantial rough-barked trees sheathed in moss and lichen appeared as we ascended into the mist, then graded into subalpine rhododendron forest with stems growing out - rather than up - from the steep slopes. There was old snow underfoot and a cold wafting mist for the final trudge through rhododendron shrubbery to the small grassy terraces and dilapidated teahouse that was our night's stop.



After an overnight thunder and lightning show over the now-distant foothills, I rose early and climbed a nearby ridge to gaze east to the distant, half-imagined bump of Kangchenjunga, but the hazy air soon became cloud, the story for the remainder of the day. Later, we ascended into snow and crossed a series of small 4000-metre passes before descending back to the tree line to camp on snow for the first time. Where soft, the snow was hard work for both us and the porters, especially as we were still to acclimatise to the thinner air. En route, we sheltered in an isolated stone hut beside a frozen lake while waiting for the porters, and Dave and Ken warmed their wet cold feet by a small fire (they were still wearing sneakers, their boots buried in a porter load) as the afternoon storm manifested as snow flurries.

Leaving the snow (for now), we descended a rough and rooty trail into the Barun Khola Valley's conifer forest, eventually emerging onto scree fans just above the river itself. Clearly a glacial stream, we

followed its cold green rapids upstream, through mossy rhododendron copses, to the broad grassy river terrace of Yangle Kharka. This natural field is used for summer grazing, and stone houses indicated seasonal habitation, but we were too early for any livestock to be present. However, a large new teahouse was already doing business, its presence either indicative or hopeful of increasing popularity.

On arrival, low cloud hid Yangle Kharka's surroundings but a brief hole hinted at steep granite walls beyond the mani wall and prayer flags. We planned a rest day here, at 3600 metres, to progress our



acclimatisation, but the weather next day was much the same - cold, with rain or snow showers discouraging much local exploration. However, the following morning was clear and the view nothing short of spectacular: soaring granite walls with even higher snow peaks beyond. We were very much in the mountains now.

The ascent up the Barun Valley was steady, but adjacent mountains also got higher so it didn't feel like we were getting much closer. But above the tree line it was possible to look back down valley and see just how far we ascended. From here, an ascent of several moraine steps led to a lonely stone hotel at Yak Kharka. The wizened proprietor occupied a smoky downstairs room and was keen for us to take up residence in the upstairs guest room, but gaps in the floorboards meant that room was also filled with smoke so, while welcome shelter from the snow flurries and bitter breeze outside for dinner, we retired to the clear air of our tents for the night.

The valley was now broad and flat-floored, fringed with moraine ridges. We walked alone this day, lost in thoughts and at a pace to suit our respective levels of acclimatisation. Cresting the last rise I looked down on a barren glacial outwash flat, with a couple of stone huts and several tents from other expeditions – Makalu Base Camp. Low cloud had hidden the mountains all day and, while an icefall was visible below the cloud that filled the head of valley, it gave no hint of what lay above.

After a frigid night with light snow and frost, dawn revealed the shapely granite bulk of the world's fifth-highest mountain soaring 3600 metres above a part-frozen turquoise lake, cupped by dark moraines – a stunning view. It took two weeks to reach the foot of Makalu, with no preceding view

until we reached this spot, but its presence was to dominate the next week of our trek over the high passes either side of the Barun Glacier.

Our ascent to East Col took almost a week, largely because, due to a lack of porters with glacier experience (Pemba had discharged a number of porters at Makalu Base Camp), those remaining needed to shuttle loads. This gave us plenty of acclimatisation time as we ascended above 5000 metres for the first time, but was sometimes rather tedious.



We climbed steeply, traversing increasingly loose moraine slopes and separated from Makalu's bulk by a branch of the Barun Glacier, its ice invisible beneath the rubble. We each set our own pace, the trick being to find one that minimised a pounding heart and the need to stop and gasp for oxygen, although a short steep pitch or need for a more strenuous move invariably bought this on.

Camps for the first few nights were patches of gravel scraped amongst moraine boulders. We were now into the realm of rock and ice and beyond any sign of vegetation, but a group of black choughs hung around during the first couple of days, sometimes performing aerobatics but mostly perched on nearby rocks, beady eyes alert for anything edible.

We followed a small snow-covered glacier for the final but slow approach to the col, nearing 6000 metres. Strictly speaking, this was not East Col but a low point on a narrow broken rocky ridge to its north, chosen because it provides the least technical crossing, but still required the rigging of ropes for the ascent and descent to the snowfield beyond.

At this point, the Barun Glacier has a broad, almost flat snowfield, two kilometres wide, its expanse providing stunning views, dominated by Makalu behind and surrounded by steep snow peaks, and with the distinctive pyramid of Ama Dablam prominent amongst the serried peaks of the Khumbu region to the west.

A late start was not ideal, but it seemed everyone was waiting for someone else to take the initiative. Eventually I plodded off with Gombu, one of the stronger porters, plugging steps in soft snow to a small basin just below West Col, at 6135 metres the highest pass of our crossing. The consequence of

our late start and a wait for the remaining porters was rather bleak and cold conditions for attempting the descent of West Col, a very steep 150-metre icy snow gully between rock outcrops.



Ropes were rigged and the lowering process commenced but, as the evening approached with little progress, we decided to camp atop West Col. The porters continued their descent to relative warmth camping on moraine 800 metres lower where, after a leisurely start, we joined them next day. The start

was leisurely partly because we didn't want to leave the view. It is challenging to find superlatives for the view back to Makalu, the atmosphere enhanced by a dust of glistening ice crystals wafting in light breeze.

We spent ten days in the head of the Hongu Valley, establishing a base camp below the fluted west face of Baruntse. During this time we made an unsuccessful attempt on this high peak (another story) and I undertook an overnight foray to the Panch Pokhari lakes. Amongst the highest lakes in the Himalaya, the largest is more than a kilometre long. Surrounding dry brown grass was just emerging from beneath winter snows but would become lush and green during the coming monsoon.

Most parties heading towards the Khumbu exited the valley via the 5800 metre Amphu Labtsa, but we had designs on the Mingbo La. It was similar in elevation to Amphu Labtsa and first crossed by Hillary and Shipton, but now much less travelled due to the increasingly broken glacier on its western side. Only four strong porters (including Pemba) were retained for this final pass, and we all carried full loads. The route again traversed steep moraine before a gently rising glacier towards the pass. We camped on ice, coaxing a meal from our gas stoves as the temperature



plummeted and golden light lit the summit of Chamlang down-valley.

Sensing another clear dawn, I left camp before three in the morning and found my way to the pass using the tiny light pool thrown by my head-torch in the moonless night. I was not disappointed. I arrived at the narrow snow crest just before the pink pre-dawn tones lit the sky and had a grandstand view across the Imja Khola valley, past the pinnacle of Ama Dablam. However, then I had quite a wait; the others waited for the sun to warm camp before packing and plodding up the glacier. After they all arrived there was the rigmarole of descending a steep 200-metre ice slope with only 150 metres of rope. The afternoon was well advanced by the time we reached the glacier, too late to tackle the crevasse field below, so we camped again.



The glacier surface was comfortably hard-frozen as we wound past gaping crevasses next morning, fluted walls rising to icy peaks to the south and soaring Ama Dablam opposite. There was a divergence of views as to the best route, and the porters were inclined to follow Pemba into the icefall. It was certainly interesting, threading gleaming seracs and at one

point rigging the rope to sling loads across an icy chasm. With the glacier behind us, it was slow going over boulder moraine for a couple of hours until sporadic cairns led us to a clear trail and the start of a long descent - over 1700 metres for the day. Building clouds hid the surrounding peaks as we descended, but our tired bodies weren't much interested in views by the time we reached Pangboche, on the main Everest trekking route.

It's always good to fulfil a dream, and in that sense reaching the Pangboche teahouses and their varied menu was the end of our crossing. This valley has changed dramatically, especially compared to the Barun, since Ed Hillary visited them both almost 60 years ago. It was then only a couple of easy days' trek to Namche and Lukla to flights home for the others and two more weeks trekking for me - but that's another story.

### **The area**

The Makalu-Barun National Park and surrounding Conservation Area is Nepal's largest protected area, with most of the landscape above 2500 metres lacking permanent habitation. It is wild and remote, somewhat wetter than the Everest country to the west, and the damp climate promotes the growth

of 25 types of rhododendron and almost 50 orchids amongst the more than 3000 plant species. With many species of birds and mammals present, the area is considered a biodiversity hotspot. The established trail to Makalu Base Camp from the south is thought to be one of Nepal's tougher trekking routes and is far less travelled than the approach to Everest. To link this remote and undeveloped area with the popular Everest region involves crossing three very high glaciated passes with a sustained period at altitudes more than 5000 metres.

Western exploration is relatively recent. In a foray away from their main game during the 1951 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition, Ed Hillary ventured into the upper Hongu Valley with British explorer Eric Shipton, climbing to West Col and noting the impressive view across the broad Barun Glacier towards Makalu before returning to the



Everest area via the Mingbo La pass. Hillary returned in 1954, leading a New Zealand Alpine Club expedition to the Barun Valley. In recent years a route from Makalu to Everest was promoted as the most demanding section of the epic Great Himalayan Trail. There has been growing trekking use, with several commercial trekking companies offering the Three Col's Trek as a challenging option and sporadic crossings by a few tough independent trekkers.

*First published in [Wild](#) magazine, issue 128 (2012).*