By Paul Harrington

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Satopanth was Ciaran's brain child. He'd organised a successful expedition to Mera peak in Nepal a couple of years previously (himself and John MacEnri summited) and then immediately began a search for a slightly higher mountain with more substance. He was looking for a mountain which was objectively safe, had some technical difficulties, yet was still realistic for a young group of largely inexperienced mountaineers. Satopanth, a 7075m mountain in the Indian Garwhal Himalaya emerged from the fire. After more than a year of arduous planning, mainly by Ciaran, we left Dublin airport on Thursday September 22nd.

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78889);}()); September 29th: The approach was pleasant and the views magnificent. According
to PC (Paul Carroll), far superior to the leeches and rain of the Annapurna circuit. A few hours
from Gangotri and we were above the treeline. Superb open views with a fast flowing river
beneath us and the monstrosities of Shivling and the Bhagirathis ahead of us. Plenty of chai
shops to quench the thirst and refuel the cells. Appreciated also by the pilgrims who were
undertaking their holy journey to the source of the Ganges. Some source it was. Sources are
meant to be small but this one would have provided a very challenging paddle. Not surprising at
all though that it was nominated the 'source'. The huge glacial cave from which it burst out of
looked impressive. The cave through which it entered the glacier some kilometres upstream
looked even more impressive. An interesting cold and dark venture for those who are into
'firsts'.

The second approach day wasn't fun. Gangotri is at a little over 3000m and BC (base camp) at
4850m. We knew we couldn't keep walking on relatively flat ground and just arrive there. Nature
decided to give most of it to us in one go. We all love loose moraines and were blessed with
plenty of that also. The end of day 2 saw us in Nandovan at 4400m. There were plentiful open
pastures and a dry stream bed. A Japanese Bhagirathi expedition told us there were some
small pools a few minutes upstream. We wished we could stay there. I wished I could climb
Shivling. A shorter third day saw us to BC. It was October 1st and getting colder all the time.
There was a lake there which is meant to look beautiful in August. In October its content is
mainly mud. It was rapidly drying up and we hoped the water supply would last until the end of
the month. The vegetation consisted of small hardy shrubs. They say there are flowers there in
summer. We don't believe them.

October 2nd: First full day at BC. The say that above 3000m one should ascend on average
only 300m a day. (4850 - 3000)/3 is more than 600m. I was always good at maths. What
happens when you go high fast. We all had headaches. Well not all; our cook, his assistant, the
porters and our liaison officer were in fine form. These Indian people have no respect for
mathematics. PC had more than a headache. He reckoned he picked up a mild chest infection
from our bus driver. Mild infections can become severe at altitude. He went back to Delhi. I'm
glad I'm not a doctor. Breda also had more serious problems. We reckon she also had some
sort of chest infection. After a few days without recovering at BC she returned to Delhi also. Her

brother Sean accompanied her. Three down and seven to go. Not too bad. Especially after only a few days. If this rate continued we'd be off the mountain in no time. From now on we talk about 8 members instead of 7. The IMF said our liaison officer was to be treated as part of the expedition. He was a pleasant, easy going lad. His name was Utbal.

October 3rd: Six people tried to establish C1 (camp 1). Ciaran and Kevin were having a rest day. They went back down to Nandovan the previous day to collect equipment left by PC. Forty minutes after leaving BC we had our first view of Satopanth. It looked impressive. Before the expedition I'd been telling people it was non-technical. While not particularly difficult, one look revealed that it wouldn't be a plod either. A fairly long moraine approach, an equally long glacier approach, and we'd get to our C1 site. A heavily crevassed serac barrier, a 40-60 degree ice slope and we'd establish C2 on a col. A wide snow ridge followed by a narrow snow arete would see us to C3. Finally a technically easy broad snow slope to the summit. Quite easy, only 5 lines and your there.

A long moraine approach and an equally long glacier approach get longer when one isn't too well acclimatised. After 6 hours we dumped our gear on the glacier and turned back. We had the pleasure of catching an afternoon snow storm. Wet snow on moraine is great fun. The following day all 6 rested. Ciaran and Kevin went to establish C1. After a long day they installed it at 5400m in a sheltered and safe spot.

October 5th: Ciaran and Kevin busied themselves with going down the glacier to collect our gear dump from 2 days earlier. Six of us headed for C1 again. There were some weird formations on the glacier. Huge boulders were perched on top of ice pillars like lollipops. A little higher up there was even a weirder formation. Two bodies with clothes, tent and personal belongings wrapped around them were also perched on top of ice pillars. These lads obviously appreciated a good view. They were members of an '84 expedition who were avalanched while asleep. After years of living underground they emerged for a change of scenery.

C1 was not too unpleasant. It had running water on the glacier during the afternoon. It was sheltered from wind. It was also sheltered from the sun until about 10 in the morning. It lost the sun early in the afternoon.

The following morning 8 people and 3 tents held a conference. Ug was going up, Gug was staying put, Dug couldn't make up his mind, Mug was waiting to see what Zug and Yug were doing. Then Ug was staying put and Gug was going up. Zug was going down, and so was Mug.

Yug was scratching his head, then Zug was staying put.

We eventually engineered an even split. Utbal, Michelle, Declan and myself stayed at C1. Ciaran, Jason, Alan and Kevin pushed on up to C2. The four of us who stayed put fed ourselves on food and water. We also watched the show. We'd spot the others on top of a ridge of ice. They'd then vanish - presumably into the jaws of a crevasse. Half an hour later they'd reappear again. To us it appeared to be more or less the same spot. For them they'd wound their way through another complicated section of glacier. The spectacle was amusing. The following day we'd be picking a route through the maze. After some hours they established themselves on the ice slope. Progress was quicker now and they soon disappeared from view. Quite late in the evening they radioed to say that they'd established C2 at about 5800m.

October 7th: Our turn. We were up at dawn. We wanted to get as much as possible done before the day got too hot. Taking down the tent (we were leaving one there) and packing up was quite an effort. The pegs were frozen solid. They came out with imaginative technique. Some would call it brute force. The ground sheet was also frozen. Less force was used here. The gas cylinders were well stuck. The adze of an axe combined with some vicious hacking worked. We were soon well ensconced in the depths of the glacier. We saw a marker flag left by the previous months Japanese expedition. We were where we were and it was where it was - a few metres above us. There was an overhanging ice bulge in between. I like direct lines. One hour later 4 rucksacks and 4 persons were sitting by the flag. We wouldn't be descending that way. Unless one wants to risk a jump. We were nearly through it now. Just one long and exposed ice bridge left. We were glad it wasn't snow. Don't look down, sing a song, keep moving and you're across in no time. On to the ice slope. Not too steep though the ice was hard. And sometimes quite bare. Some of us had 2 ice tools. Others only one. There was a fixed rope to clip into. That's if you trust it. I didn't. Complements of the previous month Japanese expedition. Or rather complements of their high altitude porters.

We got to C2. Where were the others? We knew they wouldn't be going to C3 that day. I dumped my rucksack and wandered a further kilometre or two up the slope. There they were on a higher Col at about 6000m. They decided to advance C2 a little. Lovely campsite, excellent view and it gets the sun for practically the whole day. And it would be fun in a storm. I couldn't think of a more exposed place. However the weather did look settled and it was very calm.

October 8th: We had a lazy morning and then moved on up to advanced C2. We took it easy and arrived there after about an hour and a half. Ciaran and Alan had left earlier that morning to establish C3. We could see them moving carefully on the snow arete. They radioed later to say that they had established C3 at 6400m. They were going to make a summit bid the following

day. We could spot them using the zoom facility of the video.The campsite couldn't be described as paradise but it would suffice. The remaining 6 of us discussed plans that evening. Jason and I were going to go for C3 the following day. Declan felt his best chance was to have a rest day. He would then strike directly for the summit from C2 the day after. Anybody else who was feeling up to it would join him. The altitude was having a considerable affect on most people.

I'd a good nights sleep that night. One is never lonely. First you have a lovely cold water bottle to snuggle up to. It helps keep you nice and cool. Then you import your inner boots to help fill the acres of free space in your sleeping bag. To keep your boots company you introduce a lovely cold epigas cylinder. It also helps keep you nice and cool. Make sure it's the one you intend using the following morning.

We woke up early the following morning. Jason's leg took a small knock between C1 and C2. It was hurting him a little but wasn't too much of a problem. He drank some water and threw it straight up. That was more of a problem. After about an hour of walking he coughed up some blood. Now that was a real problem. If one climbs and runs away then one lives to climb another day. He returned to C2. I decided to push on. The wide snow slope soon turned into a narrow, exposed and sometimes steep snow arete. I swear I never complained about the Japanese fixed ropes. They provided security and gave confidence. On occasion they would be buried and you'd have to clip out of them for some metres. Not a good time to go asleep. After some distance the arete moulded back into the mountain. A short distance, a deep crevasse to negotiate, and one is at C3. There stood a lone Bibler tent. Ciaran and Alan weren't back yet. Only 400m higher than C2 but it was a little like going from the Alps to the Arctic. I snuggled up inside the tent and waited. Some time later the lads returned. They'd got to within a 100m of the summit cornice and turned back. They looked tired. They had veered right and the final snow slope beneath the cornice was getting quite steep. Ciaran reckoned there was an avalanche risk. They advised me to head to the left. I took their advice. There were 3 of us. The Bibler is a tight squeeze for 2. Alan didn't enjoy the previous night at C3. He was anxious to get down to C2. He gathered his belongings and descended. Ciaran was well exercised. He preferred spend the night at C3. He would descend the following morning.

October 10th: The tent was flapping wildly all night. Or at least it sounded bad. The bark is probably worse than the bite. Ciaran assured me that it was like the previous night. And that it would cease around 7 a.m. It didn't. Maybe it would calm down around 8 a.m. No. Well perhaps 9 a.m. No.

I wasn't venturing out in wind like that. Good excuse for a rest day. I could practice my

sunbathing in the tent. Ciaran went outside to get the stove. It was a gas burner sitting in a Trangia. The burner was connected to an epigas cylinder by a rubber hose. The system was frozen solid. Surprise, surprise. He pulled. The hose broke. Oooops. He tried to fix it. I tried to fix it. I was never good at mechanics. No stove means no food. Or no water. What about snack food ? Our agency looked after that one. They insisted they had bought plenty of chocolate. We asked them how much. They didn't know the exact figure. But they insisted that it was enough. Our idea of enough was 300 bars between 11 people. There's was 30. So we never had any lunch food. Can you have a rest day without food ? I know I can't.

The others were evacuating C2. We could see them. Ciaran was worn out and also wanted to get off the mountain. So C2 meant base camp. Base camp meant Delhi. I've no great love for Delhi. I wasn't looking forward to going up. I definitely didn't want to go down. I'd a good feed yesterday evening. I'd also melted snow so had enough water. Nothing to lose by trying. Quite a lot to gain. So up it was.

The sky was blue. But the wind was fierce. It whipped up snow. It then blasted it around the mountain. We could see this effect from below. It appeared as though the upper mountain had its own 3 metre thick atmosphere. Beautiful to look at. Bitch to be in. There were no sit down rests. Standing rests were kept short. There was no opening the rucksack. The video camera wasn't coming out to play. I'd all my clothes on. I was moving fast. Out of necessity. Nearly as fast as an 80 year old granny going up stairs. Sometimes this works out well. Sometimes it works out bad. I topped out in three and a half hours. The wind finally died down. The views were magnificent. The summit ridge was knife edged. I took out the video camera. Did a couple of 360's for good measure. Careful Paul. You're not doing a twirl on a dance floor now.

Time to go down. I was back to C3 in no time. Good occasion for a short rest. I then dismantled it. Going down to C2 was more difficult. It was more taxing than on the way up. I was more tired now. I didn't want to slip. I got to our lower C2 site in the evening. Ciaran was waiting there for me. He fed me with lots of food and water. He told me he'd slipped that morning on the arete between C3 and C2. He went rocketing down the slope. He tried to arrest but the axe wasn't biting. After about 10 metres the fixed ropes came taut. They held. He swears he never complained about the Japanese fixed ropes.

October 11th: It took the whole day to get back down to base camp. At the bottom of the glacier who met us but Paul Carroll. He took much of our loads which made the trudge back to BC far easier. He was very disappointed. He had gone back to Delhi and spend a night there. He heard about the plague. He felt Delhi was more of a hazard than the mountains. He felt he was better and raced back up to Gangotri. He walked from Gangotri to base camp in a day. It had

taken us 3 days. He arrived in BC the previous day to find that the expedition was finished. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was only October 10th. We were meant to be there until the end of the month.

A few days later the porters arrived as expected. We all walked out. That's the end of a happy little story. Good bye.

THE END.

Expedition members:

Ciaran Clissman (leader), Michelle Dempsey, Declan Doyle, Paul Harrington, Jason Aherne, Sean O'Driscoll, Breda O'Driscoll, Paul Carroll, Alan Conway, Kevin Clarke.

Sponsors:

Mountaineering Council of Ireland - 800 pounds and a loan of equipment such as axes, crampons, snow shoes and avalanche transceivers

Irish Himalayan Trust - 500 pounds

Sony - Loan of a top of the range video camera

Philips - Loan of 2 portable solar panels and 3 top of the range short wave radios

Erin - Instant soups and little dinners

Bausch & Lomb - Top of the range Ray Ban sunglasses

Cascade Designs - Inflatable camping mattresses

Boots - Sun block, Suncream, Aftersun, Strepsils, Nurofen, Malarial tablets and many other useful small items

Great Outdoors, Wild Country, Rab Down, Phoenix, BCB (Raven foods), Fuji - all gave us products at special discounted rates