

KANGCHENJUNGA

GUARDIAN OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYA

Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow

TIM HAUF

Text by Conger Beasley Jr.



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KANGCHENJUNGA

AND SURROUNDINGS

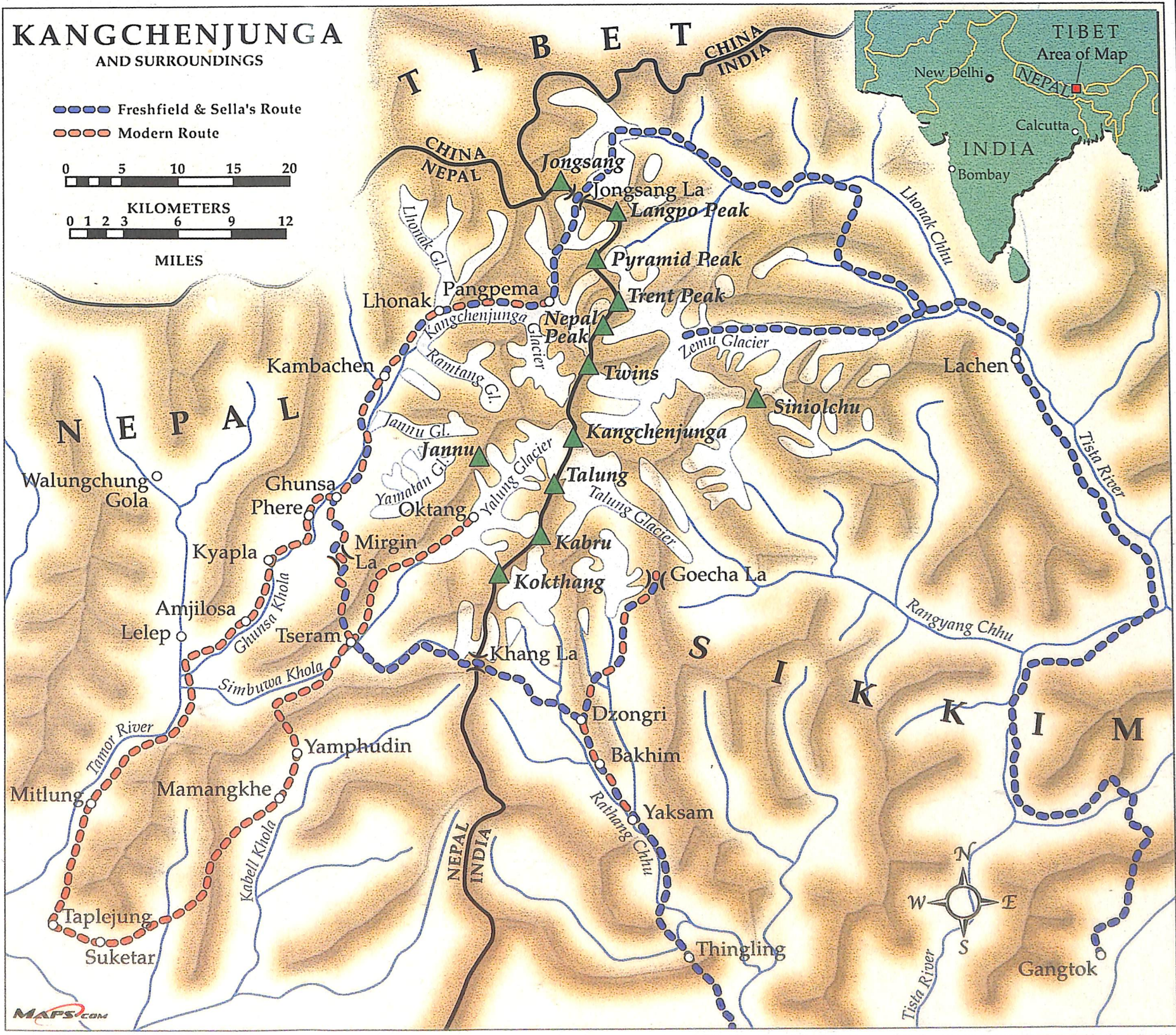
—●—●—●— Freshfield & Sella's Route

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KILOMETERS
MILES



Map based on Douglas Freshfield expedition (1899) during their circumnavigation of Kangchenjunga. The routes covered in this book, and the ones most frequently used by trekkers today, are marked in red.



Late afternoon sunlight on Jannu.

Then he turned to the window and gazed out. The surrounding sky had cleared completely, and in the light of late afternoon there came to him a vision which, for the instant, snatched the remaining breath out of his lungs.

Far away, at the very limit of distance, lay range upon range of snowpeaks, festooned with glaciers, and floating, in appearance, upon vast levels of cloud.

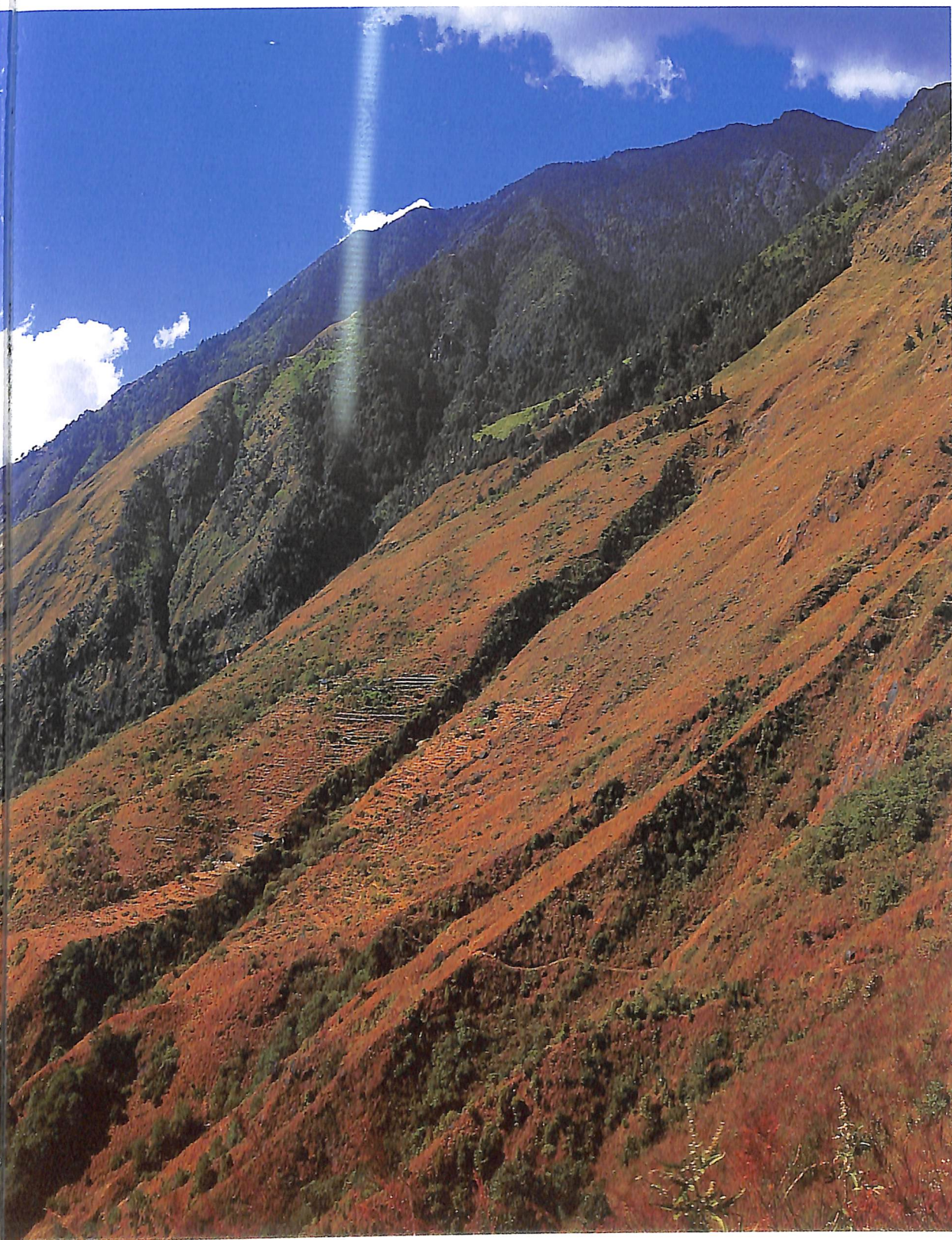
They compassed the whole arc of the circle, merging towards the west in a horizon that was fierce, almost garish in coloring, like an impressionist back-drop done by some half-mad genius.



JAMES HILTON, *Lost Horizon* (1933)

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Ghunsa Khola valley.



Abode of the Gods

It's up there someplace waiting for us. The big mountain with the unpronounceable name. The third-highest mountain in the world (28,169 ft./8,586m), after Everest and K2.

Kangchenjunga.

A shy, elusive mountain, perpetually shrouded in ice, fog, and snow. It reveals itself reluctantly at all times of the year, even to the most ardent devotee, especially in April and May when I went looking for it.

The length of its stupendous bulk is capped by five peaks, which loom over eastern Nepal and western Sikkim like a palm held up in perpetual blessing. The people who live there believe Kangchenjunga (literally, “Five Treasures of the Eternal Snow”) to be their patron deity, protecting them from harm. According to legend, the five peaks contain the five holy items deemed essential for life: minerals, grain, salt, weapons, and the holy scriptures.

The highest point of this complex subset of the mighty Himalaya was finally scaled in 1955 by a party of British mountaineers, two years after Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the top of Mount Everest. So fraught with power is the peak that the expedition stopped a few yards short of the summit in deference to the wishes of the *chogyal* (spiritual leader) of Sikkim, who feared that the presence of a human foot might violate the sacred mountain.

I didn't come to Sikkim to try and scale anything, let alone a legendary peak. I came to look at it, to view it in all its baffling majesty, to ponder its size and daunting shape from a safe distance. I left it to photographer Tim Hauf, my colleague in previous adventures, to attempt a closer look.

Tough, indefatigable Tim. A man with the pertinacity of a termite boring through solid wood. An uncanny photographer, with a gift for capturing indelible landscape images.

We went separately on this trip, each to pursue his own vision. Tim took the high road, and I took the low. I wanted to mingle with as many people as I could find in Darjeeling and the tiny Indian state of Sikkim—Bengalis, Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis, Tibetans. I also wanted to visit as many Buddhist monasteries as I could.

Earlier, Tim had been to North base camp and South base camp, both in Nepal. Now he wanted to tread the forbidding eastern slopes of the Kangchenjunga massif and see what he could record in the way of vistas and closeups. Considering the frustrations he had to endure, the exhausting climbs, the mercurial weather, what he came back with is nothing short of miraculous.



The High Road

Three countries engirdle the Kangchenjunga massif—Nepal in the west, Tibet (China) in the north, and Sikkim (India) in the south and east. Befitting its tremendous size and allure, the massif belongs within the boundaries of no single country. “No State can boast of this Monarch,” says Himalayan expert K. C. Bhanja, “which is surrounded on the Sikkim side by almost impenetrable jungles and on the other sides by a wilderness of mountains, and on nearer approaches most jealously barricaded by high glacier passes and strongly defended ice towers and pinnacles and even at some places by ice over-hangs, the very sight of which is forbidding and awe-inspiring in the extreme.”

The renown botanist Sir Joseph Hooker was the first European to probe the region. In 1848 he reached Dzongri via the Rathong valley with the intention of slipping into Nepal but was stopped by a furious blizzard and had to turn back. Later, he ascended the Poki River and tried to reach Zemu Glacier, northeast of Kangchenjunga, and was likewise stymied.

The 1870s and 1880s were the heyday of the Pundits, native Indian surveyors and explorers who ventured boldly into unknown Himalayan territory with their delicate measuring instruments. In 1879 Sarat Chandra Das crossed the Kang La (pass) from Sikkim into Nepal; he then toiled up the valley of Kangbachen, where, crippled with a bad case of altitude sickness, he hobbled over the stupendous Jonsong La.

In 1883 a mountaineering party led by W. W. Graham reached Dzongri, where they climbed several peaks on the Singalila Range. In 1896 Major (later enthusiastic Tibetologist) L. A. Waddell of the Indian Army Medical Corps poked and probed around the Kangchenjunga foothills, gathering data about the natural and cultural features, which he later compiled into an impressive sourcebook entitled *Among the Himalayas* (1899).

The most laudable effort carried out to that point in the Sikkim Himalaya was that of the Douglas Freshfield party in 1899. Leaving Darjeeling on September 5, they ascended the Teesta valley and Zemu Glacier; they then crossed into the head of the Lhonak valley and traversed the Jonsong La. Heavy snow hampered their progress, and they were unable to make a serious attempt on Kangchenjunga. Nonetheless, the Freshfield party was the first to examine the great western face of the world’s third-highest mountain; accompanying the expedition was famed Italian photographer Vittoria Sella, who took some of the most beautiful alpine photos ever recorded.

Preeminent among the early Himalayan climbers was a Scotsman, Dr. A. M. Kellas, who not only scaled more peaks in a single season than most people attempt in a lifetime but who was the first person to train Sherpa and Bhutia porters in the techniques of mountaineering. Kellas had an absolute mania for climbing,

and for nearly two decades he drove himself beyond the limits of his endurance. The effort ravaged his body, and he died of heart failure while on the Mount Everest expedition in 1921.

In 1905 an expedition led by an Englishman, Aleister Crowley, attempted to scale Kangchenjunga, with disastrous results. A misstep by one of the guides triggered an avalanche, which buried the lead climbers and three Nepali porters. When informed of the catastrophe, Crowley, a notorious libertine with a mammoth ego, reportedly replied that “a mountain accident of this sort is one of the things for which I have no sympathy whatever.”

Kangchenjunga remained untouched until 1929, eleven years after the end of World War I. During the 1920s, British mountaineers were absorbed with conquering Everest, and it was left to other nations to try and scale Kangchenjunga.

In 1929 an American named E. F. Farmer made a quixotic attempt to reach the elusive summit. Farmer’s previous high-altitude climbing experience was limited to the Rocky Mountains. Accompanied by three porters who were poorly shod and lacking crampons, the party started up on May 26. The weather turned foul; the porters tried to dissuade Farmer from going on, but he persisted, disappearing into the fog and mist. Late that afternoon he was seen again, waving his arms and staggering blindly, before the clouds swirled around him.

Also in 1929 the famed Bavarian expedition—an elite group of German climbers led by Dr. Paul Bauer—mounted an epic assault on the mountain. Their home base was Munich. Well-organized, amply provisioned, and superbly led, they were determined to become the first Europeans to scale Kangchenjunga.

Initially, they attacked the mountain from the northeast, where they ran into bad weather and daunting tactical problems. A route on the north face appeared doable, so they switched to that direction, only to find it barricaded by towers and pinnacles and deceptive névé slopes that looked open and easy to negotiate but that were actually coated with layers of treacherous ice.

With characteristic diligence, the Germans chipped and pulled and hauled their way up the side of the ferocious massif. It took them 20 days to gain 3,500 feet (1,000m). After nearly three weeks of herculean labor, they finally reached an altitude of 24,272 feet (7,350m)—their maximum point of ascent—with 4,000 feet (1,200m) yet to go to the summit. The route was impossibly arduous, compounded by every sort of high-altitude obstacle. Each day, all day, while they scraped and toiled, a terrible wind blasted their exposed bodies.

Despite the hardship, they were still confident they would make it to the top. A heavy snowfall on October 14 buried their food supplies and cut off communication between the support camps. That morning an ominous cloud bank hovered overhead, signaling the onslaught of yet another blizzard. The men were rapidly losing their fortitude and resolve.

So much snow fell that day [an estimated 7 feet (2m)] that the entrances to the ice caves where they spent the night were completely obstructed. Now they were faced with a choice between starvation or freezing to death. The next day they made the decision to head back down. Every step they took in the thigh-deep swales

of fresh snow seemed to trigger a new avalanche. It took four days, plowing through massive drifts, for the party to return to base camp. “One of the epic struggles for Kangchenjunga was now over,” says K. C. Bhanja. “It had been an adventure terribly exacting and desperate to the last degree. Though futile, it was none the less a glorious failure.”

The Dyhrenfurth expedition in May 1930 consisted of another international team featuring climbers from Germany, France, Britain, and Switzerland. Prominent among them was F. S. Smythe, a veteran mountaineer.

There were problems from the start, chiefly concerning equipment. Seasoned mountaineers had discovered that multiple layers of light clothing provided more insulation from the cold than a single layer of heavy clothing. The climbers were also fitted with the wrong kind of crampons, which poked holes in their boots, letting the ice leak in. The climbers also failed to bring along the right kind of face cream to protect their exposed skin from the severe ultraviolet rays at high altitudes. Instead, they used ordinary face creams, which literally mummified their flesh and turned it black.

Influenced by *Round Kangchenjunga* (1903), Douglas Freshfield’s account of his 1899 trek, the Dyhrenfurth expedition sought to scale the mountain from the north. Tremendous glaciers and moraines stood in their way. “Ice, not ordinary ice, sharp-edged and unbroken,” Smythe wrote in *The Kangchenjunga Adventure* (1933), his classic account, “but ice hacked and tortured by the winds, clings to the ridges; thin flakes of ice through which the sun gleams with a cold fire; pinnacles of fairy-like delicacy, elegant busts, daring minarets, extravagant mushrooms, a strange goblinessque procession, drunken and tottering, frozen in a downward march.”

Again and again the climbers experienced a phenomenon known as “glacier lassitude,” wherein the limited quantity of air in a confined area at the higher elevations is absorbed by the surrounding ice, making it even harder to gulp down a good lungful of oxygen. The terrain was pocked and scored with crevasses; icy avalanches, loosened by the burning sun, spilled down the steep cliffs. Tramping across the center of the glaciers and moraines exposed the men to the effects of the scorching sun. “On those concave snow slopes,” Smythe remarked, “we were like flies in the middle of a burning glass.”

A huge avalanche thundered past within 200 yards (180m) of their camp, killing one of the porters. The climbers then turned to the infamous northwest ridge that had so bedeviled the Bavarians the year before. They drove pitons and secured ropes to the sheer rocks and ledges. For awhile it went promisingly. Then they began to dislodge unstable rocks that crashed down below, loosening other rocks until “a perfect torrent of crags” (Smythe’s phrase) set off round after round of tremendous vibrations, which in turn shook loose a whole new deluge of rock and snow slides. Enough was enough. On May 17, 1930, the expedition abandoned all hope of further ascent.

Smythe summed up the frustration and failure of the hard-fought effort in a single sentence: “Kangchenjunga is in everything but actual height an infinitely more difficult mountain than Everest.”



Ghunsa Khola valley near Sakanthum.



Campsite, Ramche.



Farmhouse and family near Kunjari.



Porters ascending Deorali Danda.



Prayer flags, Tashiding monastery.



Chortens, Tashiding monastery.

