

Ronald Naar

BHUTAN
1991

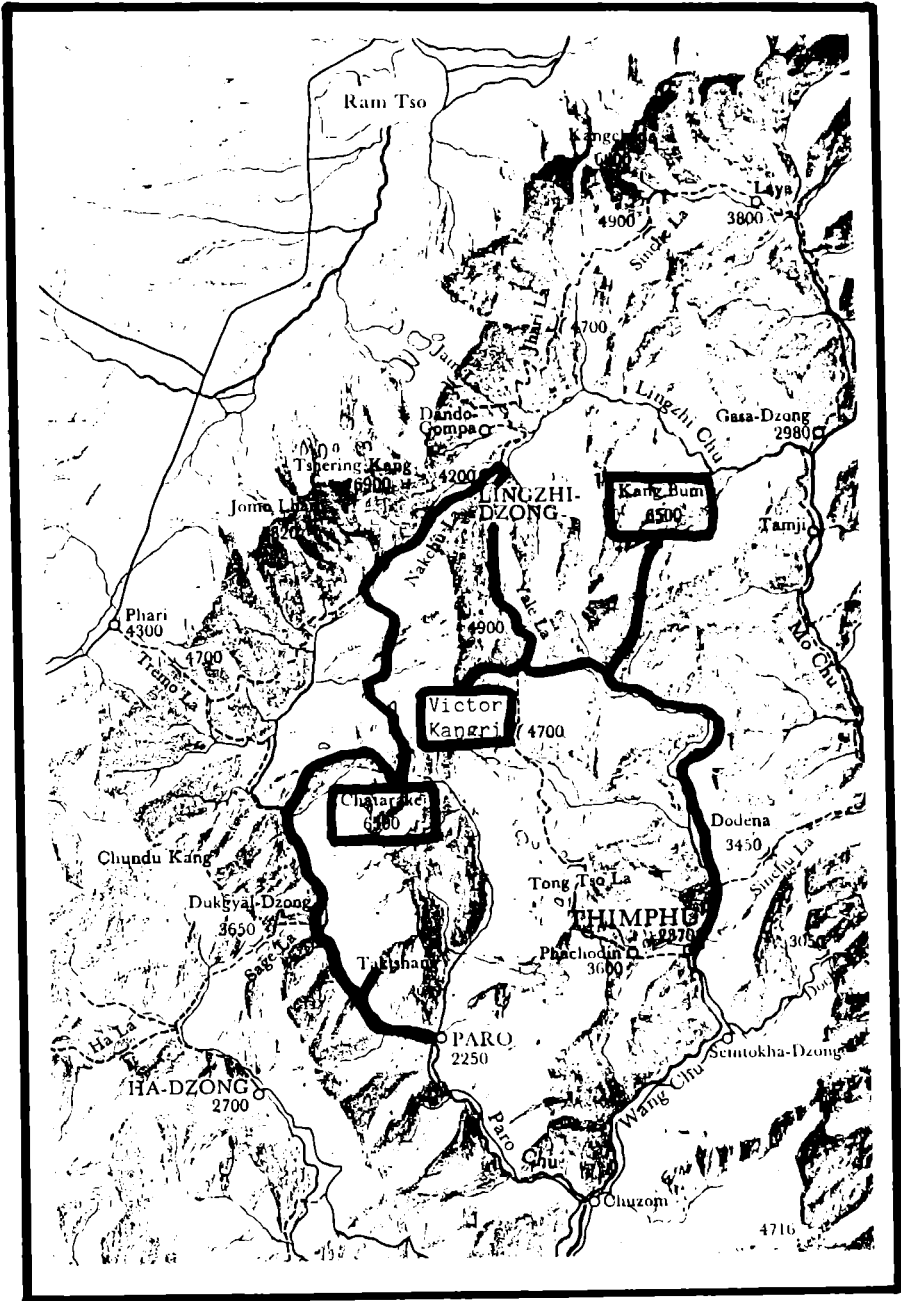
The official report on the
Dutch Bhutan Expedition 1991,
consisting of Bas Gresnigt
and Ronald Naar

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Report of the Dutch Bhutan Expedition 1991

Brief introduction to the Dutch Bhutan Expedition 1991

The Dutch Bhutan Expedition 1991 consisted of the two experienced Dutch mountaineers Bar Gresnigt, 46, living in The Hague, and Ronald Naar, 36, also living in The Hague.

Starting climbing together in 1975, they made many first Dutch ascents of hard climbs in the Alps, like the Eiger North Face in 1977 and the Freney Pillar in 1979. Later they concentrated on expedition-climbing, for example to the Andes in 1980 (Chacraraju and Alpamayo) and to the Himalayas (Nanga Parbat and many others). In 1990 they were the first foreigners to which the Mongolian government granted permission to climb in the remote Altai-range (Taven Bogd en Burged).

In 1991 they received via the San Francisco-based Bhutan-specialist Brent Olsen a permission to climb in the remote Himalayan Kingdom Bhutan "unclimbed peaks up to 20.000 feet".

The Dutch Bhutan Expedition 1991 from day-to-day

19 Oktober 1991: Departure from Amsterdam with KLM-flight Amsterdam-Bangkok which departed several hours too late.

20 Oktober 1991: Even though we had still one hour available to change planes, it was too short for us to transfer to the Druk Air-flight to Bhutan's sole airport Paro with our luggage. So we changed without, trusting the KLM-crew to send our 98 kilos equipment, including skis and paraglider, with the wednesday-flight from Bangkok

21 Oktober 1991: From Paro we drove by car to Bhutan's capital Thimpu for a meeting with our Bhutanese guide and kitchenstaff, some technical arrangements and sightseeing.

In Thimpu we have also met by coincidence a British team, members of the Alpine (Ski) Club, and some of them turned out to be old friends of Ronald: John Harding, president of the ASC, and George Band, former citizen of The Hague and first climber of Kantschenjunga. They told us to our complete surprise that they had just returned, successfully, from the "unclimbed" mountainarea of Shodu which was offered "virgin" to us, being an area of "unclimbed summits". Although this message was a disappointment, their information about the range proved to be so valuable that our initial disappointment faded away and made way for many new plans and ideas.

22 Oktober 1991: After a visit to a monastery, Bhutanese dancers and a painting school we drove from Thimpu back to Paro, where we were guided to the Olithang Hotel, a little bit depressive because of the missing luggage (ever seen a paraglider without his glider or a photographer without enough films to work with).

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23 Oktober 1991: Daytrek from Paro to the Taktshang-monastry, the so-called Tiger's Nest, a monastry which has been built on vertical cliffs high above the Paro-valley. It is a pleasant and impressive walk which made us feel to be already on 3.000 meters. Later we visited the bazar of Paro and returned than to the airport to collect our luggage.

Only late in the afternoon finally the luggage arrived. In the darkness we drove to Dukgyal Dzong where we camped. Here we have met our complete staff, consisting - besides guide Khiptchu Dorji - of cook Dorji and assistent Kaka.

In Dukgyal Dzong we decided that our first mountaineering objective had to be a mountain that on the Swiss trekkingmap of Bhutan is called Chatarake en is meassured as 6.500 meter high. Guide Khiptchu Dorji confirmed it was unclimbed, and that we were allowed to have a try.

24 Oktober 1991: On this first day of trekking we followed the classical Chomolhary-trekkingroute from Drukgyal Dzong to the small army post of Guni Chava where we camped just outside the village. We walked through a slenderly populated valley with slopes covered with partly virgin forest.

25 Oktober 1991: On the second day of trekking we left the classical Chomolhary-trekkingroute to follow a first forested, later very barren ridge, walking in seven hours to a wide alpine meadow called Thongbu (4.200 meter). On the way up we could catch a frist glimpse of Chatarake. The yakpeople we met on the way up and who are living since decades in the valleys at the foot of the mountain, confirmed we would be the first trekkers ever to reaching their valleys. We "survived" this day only due to Diamox, which we contined to use for the next couple of days.

26 Oktober 1991: From Thongbu we crossed two nameless, low passes to a yak-refuge, called by the local herdsmen Jhim Din. On the way we got our first view of our objective: Chatarake. The view of the western glacier was from a distance quite positive, but on a reconnaissance tour later in the afternoon we discovered to our surprise that this easy looking, but very crevassed glacier terminated in an abyss of almost thousand vertical meters.

Bas used this trekkingday to make some short flights with his paraglider.

27 Oktober 1991: Before sunrise we left, heavily loaded, our basecamp. After climbing a few hundred meters over freshly snowed and quite complicated terrain we saw our Bhutanese staff following us, shortly after overtaking us and soon braking the trail to a pass on 4.800 meter at the bottom of the northeast-pillar which looked climbable. Here we made camp. During nightttime it snowed rather heavily.

28 Oktober 1991: Very cold departure on 07.00. Outside increadible view towards Chomolhari, but also to the Shodu-area, our real objective.

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Above the saddle we climbed a faint slope of loose rocks, later a snowy couloir with one pitch in steep, broken rock of grade IV. A few hundred meters up the northeast-pillar we left the gulley. Here we reached the steep upper slopes with four mixed ropelengths of snow and ice up to 65° as well as rock up to grade IV. After this we gained the sharp final ridge which brought us at 13.10 on the unclimbed summit of Chatarake, by locals also called Djodrake. The height was a little bit disappointing: on the Swiss map 6.500 meter, in reality "only" 5.570 meter!

The descent went quickly, with only one incident: Ronald fal-
led over his own crampons on a very steep slope, bringing him-
self with his ice-axe within only four meters to a stand
still, just ten meters above a vertical cliff....

29 Oktober 1991: Very early descend to basecamp in Jim Dhin. The horses and their drivers, which had descended to their villages after arriving in basecamp, had already arrived and everything was made ready for the next stage. After breakfast and packing we left in the direction of 4.600 meter high La-lung La and descended to the picturesque village of Shuchu (3.800 meter), a few farms and houses surrounded by heavily forested slopes and sheer cliffs, almost like Adelboden.

30 Oktober 1991: With still the same horses and drivers we left Shuchu for the 4.850 meter high Bhonte La. On the way we saw large herds of blue sheep. Not using Diamox any more we reached the pass, stoned by the lack of oxigen. On the way down we got an astonishing view of Chomolhari, Jitchu Drake and Tserim Kang, possibly one of the best views of a mountain area ever seen. On the way down we passed also two beautiful turquoise lakes and hundreds of grazing yaks. In the late afternoon we reached the Bhutan Tourism Lodge in Cheoteganmethang.

31 Oktober 1991: As we had to change today from horses to yaks, we got some time to look around and to let Bas making an incredible paraglider-flight from a nearby hill, soaring just in front of Chomolhari... After the impressive yesterday-crossing of Bhonte La, today was a little bit disappointing. No turquoise lakes, no wild yaks, no great views; only barren, deserted valleys. In the late afternoon we reached the Bhutan Tourism Lodge near Linghzi Dzong, a fortress close to the Tibetan boarder. We slept in a Bhutan Tourism Lodge.

1 november 1991: Today an unexpected "restday" which we used for sightseeing in Linghzi Dzong, the centuries old fortress just a 30 minutes walk from the camp. Eager to get remarkable photographs of himself, Bas used the "restday" to climb almost 1.000 meter on top of the camp to make a very turbulent flight just over the Dzong.

2 november 1991: As local yakdrivers were still quarelling who

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had to deliver the yaks, we had a late departure, with only four horses (we needed seven of them) and with only part of the staff and the luggage. The long valley to 4.920 meter high Yale La was again a very beautiful part of the route, with sometimes male yaks and blue sheeps on the trail. After the col the weather changed to pretty grimmy, but no shower was following.

Late in the afternoon we reached our planned basecamp in Shodu which proofed to be no more than a very unpleasant place with ruined buildings, so we suggested the horsedriver to return on the trail and make camp on a beautiful meadow higher up, close to a lovely yakrefuge near a place called Basiothang (4.180 meter).

3 november 1991: Early in the morning the missing members of our Bhutanese staff as well as the luggage arrived with three horses after a cold nightmarch over Yale La. Directly after the arrival of Kiptchu, Bas and Ronald left for their second "first ascent". The British team, we met in Thimpu, climbed three weeks earlier a 5.589 meter high peak at the southern end of the Shodu-ridge. They suggested that behind "their" peak was a hidden "Andean-type of mountain" which was probably the highest of the complete Wohney Ghom-group. So we chose that peak as our second objective. But after a few hours slope climbing it turned out that we had chosen the wrong valley, not leading to the nameless "hidden Andean mountain". As a result of that we had to make a bivouac on flat swampy ground on the place a glacier had in recent years melted away (5.050 meter).

4 november 1991: After our bivouac, Ronald succeeded in finding a col, that could be passed, and within two hours and one more crossing of a col, we finally saw the "Andean mountain". Indeed, it was splendid. To reach this mountain however, we had to descend in a another valley with a turquoise, almost green lake: Wohney Tso, where we put up our camp.

5 november 1991: After a very early depart and a twilight crossing of a steep slope of debris we reached a very crevasse-d glacier which asked for some very risky manoeuvres under a steep rockface and detours around wide open crevasses. After only four hours of climbing we reached, surprisingly easy, the 5.780 meter high summit of the "Andean mountain" which we gave the name Victor Kangri after Ronald's one-year-old son Victor. But even Victor Kangri was not the highest of the complete Wohney Ghom-group. This proved to be a sharp rock needle, further south. After a very narrow iceridge this rockneedle was climbed by Bas Gresnigt, belayed by Ronald from below.

6 november 1991: After another very early departure we re-climbed the col and traversed back to the Basiothangvalley. At the foot of the slopes we heard a wistle and to our surprise a few minutes later our Bhutanese staff-members appeared from nothing, to give us a hearty welcome. After the climb in Shodu's Wohney Ghom-group we decided to

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climb a real 6.000 meter peak. The most recent Bhutanese trekkingmap quoted a nearby peak, called Kang Bum, as 6.494 meter high. This was the only really high mountainpeak in the Chomolhari-area which we were allowed to climb (the very climbable 7.314 meter Chomolhari and the harder 6.900 meter Jitchu Drake were "forbidden" to us).

According to our guide Khipitchu, Kang Bum was two days walking from Basiotang, and in order to change basecamps we send a message to Barshong to send horses for transportation.

7 november 1991: Again an unexpected restday. The horses from Barshong would arrive only late in the afternoon. This gave Bas opportunities to fly with his glider and Ronald to take pictures from a solitary monk, living in a simple rockshelter high above the valleyground. Bas took off for a flight of almost two hours!

8 november 1991: A very early departure from Basiotang brought us in the gorge of the Thimpu-valley. An absolute surprise after days on arid mountainplateau's: a mediterranean gorge with sheer cliffs, partly overgrown with virgin forest consisting of silver pines as well as Himalayan pines. After a few hours we reached a valley at the left-hand side which - according to our horsedriver - had to lead us to the foot of Kang Bum. Although he had also said it was two days walking, we arrived already early in the afternoon at our new basecamp, welcomed by a herd of blue sheeps.

9 november 1991: Kang Bum proved to be an impressive massif with a huge rockface on the south, crowned with impressive icecliffs on top. Although the most recent Bhutanese trekkingmap claimed for Kang Bum an altitude of 6.494 meter, the mountain looked lower, but anyhow 6.000 meters. To reach the main summit we could see that we had to traverse a ridgeglacier for several kilometers. Our horsedriver, who also accompanied the Japanese expedition which claimed the first ascent of Kang Bum, could explain us the route this team followed. Accompanied by Kiptchu, Dorji and one horse, carrying Ronald's skis and Bas' paraglider, we left basecamp and reached the foot of the glacier three hours later. Compared with the other days the weather today was quite bad, with even snowfall in the evening.

10 november 1991: Lucky enough the snowfall produced no more than a layer of a few centimeters of fresh snow, but on the surrounding mountains it left a thick white blanket of winter-snow.

Just above our camp there rose huge ice cliffs, ready to fall down. In order to reach the upper glacier we had to traverse below the ice cliffs for several hundred meters. The base of the bastion was however formed by some rock ribs which gave some shelter. Here we met one pitch of difficult rock-climbing, grade IV, and some short pitches of steep ice-climbing. Climbing fast from one safe spot to the other, we crossed the almost one kilometer long and very dangerous section.

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After gaining some height on the upper glacier, we established a second camp just below the first pre-summit of Kang Bum.

11 november 1991: In order to have a clear view from the top, we left camp 2 before sunset. After another steep section of ice-climbing we reached the pre-summit of Kang Bum. Almost one kilometer ahead we saw another summit, the real summit we thought. But after reaching this "summit" we had an astonishing view of what was the real summit of Kang Bum, still a few kilometers ahead. To get to the summit we had to descend 200 meters to a narrow col, from there we had to climb a sharp ice-ridge of which it was not clear if it could be passed or not, and then again climbing 300 meter up to the summit of Kang Bum. Climbing without rope and without a ice-hammer (we thought the last part was easy), we mastered the key-passage and got entrance to the summit-plateau which we reached at 09.00 p.m.

On the way up we had the most incredible panorama we had ever witnessed. In the depth we saw the sparkling roof of the fortress Gasa Dzong. On the horizon we could see from Kantschenjunga and Everest in the west to the unclimbed 7.000 meter peaks of Bhutan's Lunana-district in the east; from the Tibetan plateau in the north to the foothills of the Himalayas in the south, undisturbed by any haze or clouds.

After the stay on the summit we descended the mountain as fast as possible. We wanted to traverse the ice-cliffs with visibility and Bas also wanted to fly down to BC, where he arrived at 02.00 a.m. and Ronald two hours later.

That afternoon Bas wanted, overenthusiastic after all the experiences of the day, to make another flight. This time bad luck was on his side: he crashed and injured his leg very badly. Never try too much!

12 november 1991: At nighttime in basecamp 15 centimeters of snow had fallen. We awoke in a white fairy-tale world, all the rhododendron-bushes being covered with snow.

After loading the horses we started for the descent. Bas walked slowly with ski-poles, following the caravan on a distance. The return-march to the Thimpu-valley was so beautiful that time passed by without notice. That night we slept in the Bhutan Tourism Lodge near Barshong.

13 november 1991: After visiting the family of our horsedriver we continued descending the Thimpu-valley. After a few hours we climbed again on the slopes of a ridge, continuing - as the day before - through virgin pine-forest, later through forests of rhododendron, daphne, heather and Himalayan pine.

14 november 1991: From our forestcamp near Dolamkencho we continued descending to Cheri Gonpa. On the way the forest changed to deciduous trees. Some trees were more than a meter in width. Crossing this forest looked like entering Gullivers Travels.

At Cheri Gonpa, just below the Chenri monastery, a monastery from the 16th century, appeared. Here a car took us to Thim-

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pu, and the relative civilisation of Bhutan's capital. In a few hours we returned from a virgin forest to a small town with possibilities of communication to all over the world.

15 november 1991: After a visit to the traditional dancing school in Thimpu we drive to Paro where we bring a short visit to Ta Dzong, the National Museum. Both of us, we have some problems to get accustomed to sleeping in beds and the moral obligation to take showers, especially if they are not working, like in the "international" Paro Olathang Hotel, a former guesthouse of the Bhutanese Royal Family.

16 november 1991: After visiting the temple Kyichu Lhakhang, just outside Paro, and a farewell to our guide Kiptchu, we depart - in time - with Druk Air from Paro via Bangkok to Amsterdam. In Bangkok luck is with us again: also KLM is in time! From now it's just ten hours hardship to home.....



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