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Traces of the Past, Trails of the Present

By: Ashesh Ambasta

The trek to Kanchenjunga's North and South base camps is far less travelled than to Everest or Annapurna, but this isolated and spartan trail offers breathtaking vistas and towering grandeur, while reminding us of the region's complex colonial history and the unsung heroes, the Sherpas.

In the mid-1950s, Kanchenjunga, standing at 8,586 metres, was the highest unclimbed peak in the world, following the acclaimed first ascents of Everest in 1953 and K2 in 1954.

Not surprisingly, the attention of Western countries was inevitably drawn to it, driven as much by the desire to push human boundaries as by intense European rivalries. Renowned climbers of the era were equally keen to pit their skills against the formidable technical challenges posed by this remote mountain, which, since 1905, had already claimed 11 lives without yielding the prized goal of its summit.

Finally, in 1955, a British expedition led by Charles Evans—who had served as the deputy leader of the successful 1953 Everest expedition—reached the top. Approaching from the Southwest Face, George Band and Joe Brown made it to the top on 25 May.. However, in deference to Sikkim's religious sensitivities, the summiters stopped just short of the true summit. (Doug Scot's *Kanchenjunga - The Himalayan Giant* (Vertebrate Publishing, 2021) has a fairly comprehensive portrayal of the Kanchenjunga region covering the people, ecology and, of course, the history of exploration and ascents.)

Behind this successful first ascent lay a century-old history of exploration and mapping of the region, primarily executed by Europeans. J.D. Hooker, a British botanist and close friend of Charles Darwin, was perhaps the first foreigner to traverse the Kanchenjunga range in 1848-49. Fifty years later, in 1899, another Briton, Douglas Freshfield, circumnavigated the mountain, mapping its glaciers and ridges, and was the first to set eyes on the western face of Kanchenjunga.



But the history of exploration was neither limited to nor defined only by pioneers from the West. Indeed, both the mapping and the ascents would have been impossible without the contributions of the "natives". Lama Ugyen Gyatso, a Tibetan teacher in Darjeeling, and Babu Sarat Chandra Das, headmaster of a school in Darjeeling, travelled extensively from Darjeeling to the northernmost point of Sikkim for the Survey of India between 1879 and 1881, producing a map of the district north of Kanchenjunga. Rinzin Namgyal (Bhutia), alongside another pundit, played a crucial role in W. Robert's exploration of the Talung Valley in 1883-84.

Sherpas, of course, have been the unsung, stoic heroes of every expedition to the Kanchenjunga summit, as they have been to the general history of mountaineering across the subcontinent. Who knows how many of them died assisting European climbers, since, in those early years, their lives were rarely considered worth documenting. The reckless and doomed 1905 Kanchenjunga expedition, for instance, claimed the lives of three Sherpas. Their names, however, do not feature in any document, journal, or database.

Of the renowned Sherpas central to Kanchenjunga's climbing history are Karma Paul, Dawa Tenzing, and Pemba Dorje. The former was the *sirdar* (head Sherpa guide) during the 1930 and 1931 British expeditions. Dawa Tenzing, who was also a *sirdar*, played a critical role in the successful ascent in 1955. Pemba Dorje, tragically, died just as the second duo made it to the summit in 1955, exhausted after carrying loads at high altitude.

Spartan Trail

Having trekked extensively in Nepal across the Everest and Annapurna regions, I find that the Kanchenjunga Base Camp trek easily stands out for its sheer beauty, magnificence, and geographic diversity.



The trail is spartan compared to more popular routes, primarily because it is far less travelled. This solitude is a blessing; the trails never teem with hundreds of trekkers. Ultimately, the minor hardships of rudimentary lodges and basic food pale in comparison to the breathtaking panoramas of the approach marches and the towering grandeur of the peaks at both base camps.

Unlike in India, Nepal has "tea-houses" or lodges on all of its trekking routes, doing away with the heavy logistics of a camping trek. These are largely family-run (often by women) establishments that offer basic boarding-rooms with cots, mattresses, and quilts-and a central dining room that is mercifully heated from 4 pm onwards.

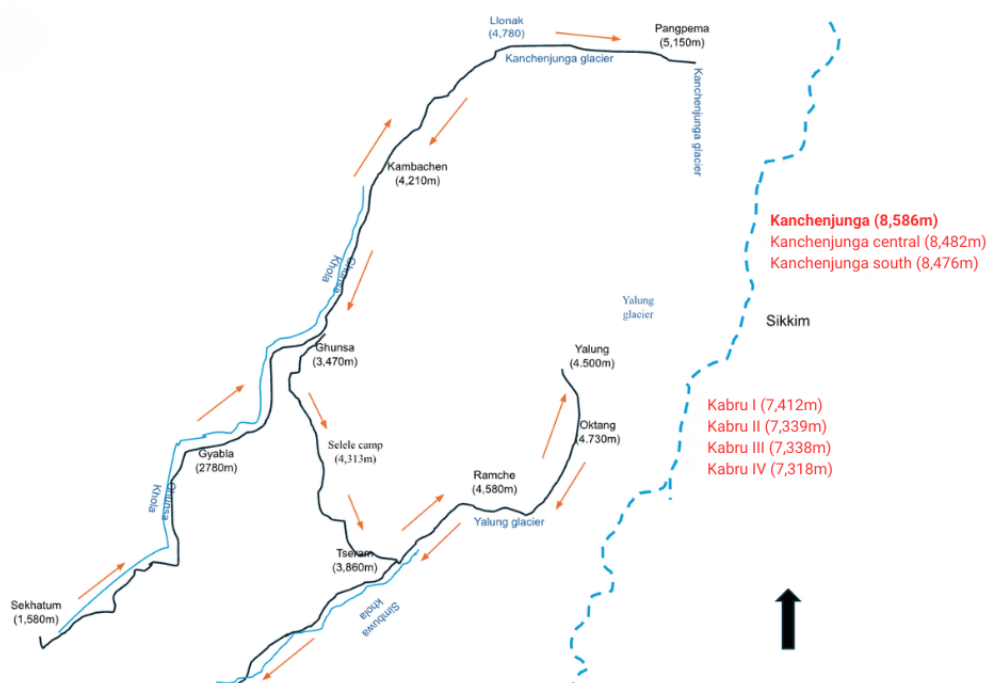
Depending on the route, the food choices can be truly international, reflecting the origins of trekkers from all over the world. This leads to the question of the supply chain that keeps these lodges provisioned throughout the trekking season.



Yak and mule trains ambling along the trails are a familiar sight, carrying everything from bare essentials to luxury items like beer and rum, which can be found in even the remotest lodges. Humans, of course, play an equally vital role, especially on stretches impassable to animals. It is commonplace to see porters weighed down with every kind of item imaginable. For us, it is an Instagrammable adventure; for them, it is arguably the only source of employment, albeit one that ages them prematurely.

To Base Camp

Our route in Nepal covered both the North and South base camps—a long grind of about 18 days through steep ascents and descents at high altitudes.¹ I would break the trek into four distinct segments, defined by the topography and the nature of the ascent.



First is the strenuous four-day climb to Kambachen at 4,210 metres. Second is the march to Pangpema at 5,150 metres to view the North Face. This leg is significantly more taxing, as we were now operating well above 4,000 metres, making every breath markedly

laborious. Third is the hike to Oktang at 4,730 metres for a direct view of the massive South Face. Finally, the fourth segment is the rapid nosedive back down to the Ranipal roadhead at 1,700 metres.

On the first leg, the trail follows the Ghunsa River, which emerges from the confluence of the Llonak and Kanchenjunga glaciers. It cuts through narrow, forested gorges and criss-crosses the river several times on both suspension bridges and rickety wooden planks—both absolute staples of Nepalese trekking.



We walked through heavily wooded expanses profuse with pine, bamboo, rhododendron, and oak. The boulders and rocks, coated in thick carpets of moss and lichen, brightened our path with a vibrant medley of colours and hues.

The panorama on the walk from Gyabla to Ghunsa became, if possible, even more stunning. The foliage on the larches had turned to brilliant shades of gold, rust, and orange, set against a spectacular background ringed by snow-capped mountains. The near-total absence of other trekkers or tea-houses made the journey feel remarkably peaceful.



Views from Pangpema

The walk to Llonak from Kambachan required extra vigilance. The trail twisted and curled through frozen streams, past the occasional thundering waterfall, and across several landslips on sharp inclines, where creaking wooden bridges spanned swift waters below.



Occasionally, the path dropped down to the river itself, which required us to negotiate daunting boulder fields—a task made worse when the gaps between the rocks were masked by ice.

Due to the heavy snowfall of the previous two days, the walk to Pangpema from Llonak—along the banks of the Kanchenjunga glacier—took us through a thick, unbroken layer of snow.

The trail snaked across rockfall and landslip areas on the lateral moraine, bordered by ramps of rocky hills to our left. Often, the path plunged abruptly toward the glacier where the moraine had eroded and toppled away, forcing equally steep ascents to retrieve lost height.

Although Pangpema provides a commanding view of the high mountains, the allure of even more breathtaking panoramas from the slopes of Drohmo Ri was too tempting to resist. We climbed for an hour, buffeted by icy winds on a snow-covered track littered with stones, rocks, and boulders, eventually ascending to 5,281 metres.

The view from the top was awe-inspiring, dominated by a formidable row of summits: Kanchenjunga at 8,586 metres, Yalung Kang at 8,505 metres, and Kambachan at 7,802 metres, with Wedge Peak rising to 6,802 metres to the right.



Other Side of Kanchenjunga

The second phase of our trek to the South Base Camp began from Ghunsa, requiring us to cross three high passes. We found ourselves once again immersed in pine forests, which gradually gave way to gorgeous rhododendron and juniper thickets. Picture-perfect meadows were interspersed with an enchanting landscape of streams and wooden bridges, all suffused in the perfect light of the morning sun.

The first pass, Selele La at 4,480 metres, revealed the hazy shape of Makalu to the north. Sinion La, the third pass at 4,640 metres, offered particularly spectacular views. The slope fell away from us abruptly, plunging down to the Simbuwa Khola (river), which emerges from the snout of the Yalung glacier in the west. From the valley floor rose mighty, snow-covered ranges playing hide-and-seek with thick clouds that were gathering rapidly.



Kanchenjunga became visible in all its glory about a kilometre away from Ramche to the north, its snow-covered wall shimmering in the sun. The path led us to the bank of the moraine, granting us a sweeping aerial view of the Yalung glacier—a tortuous river of ice, boulders, glacial lakes, and debris.



Up ahead on the ridge stood a stone memorial, swathed in prayer flags fluttering furiously in the strong wind and lined with plaques dedicated to climbers who never made it back. It was a sobering reminder that the mountains can be deeply unforgiving.



While a recent landslide ultimately blocked our path to the South Base Camp itself, we were not too disappointed. The sky was a vivid blue and the high peaks stood out with remarkable clarity. To the northwest, in a perfectly straight line, stood the two Yalung Kang peaks, followed sequentially by Kanchenjunga Main, Central, and South. It was a rare, majestic alignment of such formidable peaks.

What more could we ask for?

If you want to see more photos with explanatory notes, visit <https://photos.app.goo.gl/QPHbCH7XxFn9Q29d8>.

All photos by Ashesh Ambasta

Ashesh Ambasta is an avid trekker and enthusiastic photographer. He has trekked widely in India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

Footnotes:

1 For a more detailed account, see Sujoy Das's (2019) and Ashesh Ambasta's (2025) blogs.