

EMERGING FROM THE MISTS

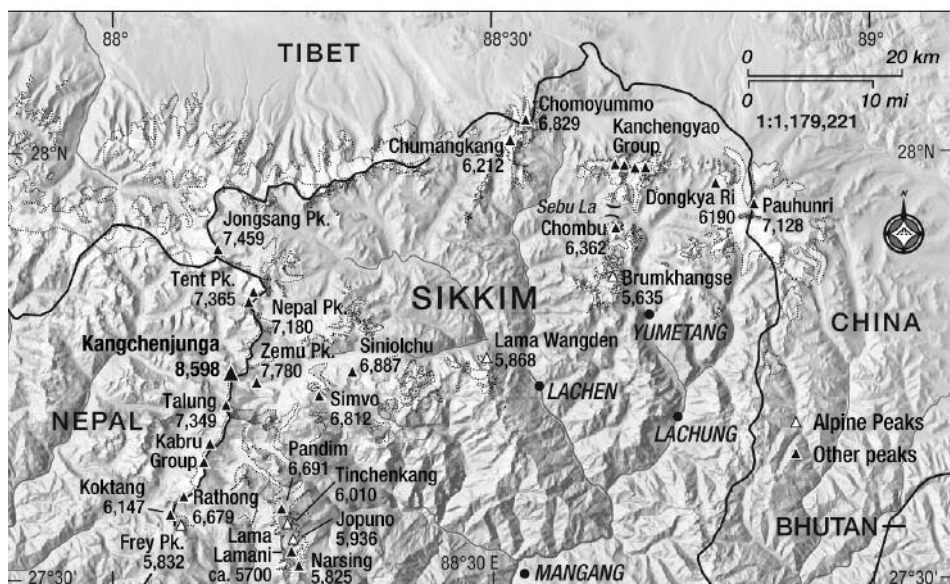
The sublime alpine peaks of Sikkim, India.

BY ROGER PAYNE



The south face of Rathong, as seen from the north-northwest ridge of Koktang during Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma's 2006 expedition. *Roger Payne*

The former Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim is one of the most varied, beautiful, and compact regions of the Himalayas. Now a state in the northeast corner of India, Sikkim pokes northward like a thumb jammed between Nepal and Bhutan, with Tibet to the north. From its western border it is a mere 70km to Sikkim's eastern border with Tibet and Bhutan.



Martin Gamache, Alpine Mapping Guild

Trapped within this diminutive 7,096-square-kilometer landmass is perhaps the greatest vertical differential in the world. The high point is 8,598m, on the summit of Kangchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world. The low point is less than 300m above sea level, where the Tista River leaves the steep tropical forests for the plains of West Bengal in the south, a region once legendary for malaria. Meanwhile, just over 100km to the north, drivable roads climb to more than 5,000m to reach the arid Tibetan Plateau. The culture and people of Sikkim are also diverse and extremely friendly. There can be few if any other places with such variety in altitude, climate, flora, and fauna in such a small and accessible region.

For climbers, Sikkim is a paradoxical paradise. My preconceptions about the difficulty of access to peaks and the high costs were completely overthrown when I first visited in October 2004—everything was much more accessible and easy to arrange than I had believed. This is why Julie-Ann Clyma and I have returned for three subsequent climbing trips and are currently planning another. There are countless rock walls, winter icefalls in high forests and mountain valleys, many interesting unclimbed 5-6,000m+ peaks, a clutch of virgin 7,000m peaks, and the world's longest unclimbed high-altitude ridge. A very welcome addition is new regulations for “Alpine Peaks,” which means small teams can easily obtain permission and at modest cost. We had an input into these new and improved regulations, which is welcome evidence of a state government that is open-minded and committed to sustainable development in mountain regions.

The climbing paradox is that despite a long history of mountain exploration, Sikkim does not have a reliable up-to-date record of first ascents. Some successful ascents have not been clearly recorded, some ascents have been claimed but may not have been climbed, and some summits have been reached but not recorded at all. I have had the strange experience of reading in a Sikkim newspaper about someone's “first” ascent of a summit that I had previously climbed myself (and that as a third ascent). Given this unusual and somewhat confusing background, and all that is

recorded in the *Himalayan Journal* and elsewhere, this article is not an attempt to clear and correct the historical record, but merely to highlight selected achievements and some of the excellent climbing opportunities that exist in Sikkim.

BACK IN THE MIST

The original inhabitants of Sikkim were the Lepchas, who were food gathering people speaking a language of uncertain origin. They worshipped the spirits of nature and mountain summits, and had an oral history. The first major in-migration of Tibetan and Bhutanese (Bhutia) people occurred during the fifteenth century. Then, toward the end of the nineteenth century, major migration from Nepal led to increased cultivation. The relatively easy-to-cross mountain passes between Sikkim and Tibet gave it great strategic significance during the British Indian period, and in 1817 Sikkim became a protectorate of Britain, a responsibility assumed by India in 1947. During the Sino-Indian border conflicts and the era of the Cold War, the passes were closed and turned into major tension points between India and China; both sides of the border were heavily militarized. In 1975 Sikkim became the 22nd State of India (the smallest except for Goa). Today, Sikkim is an integrated multicultural society, and India and China have given each other mutual recognition on the status of Sikkim and Tibet. Despite continued heavy military presence on the border, the Natu La—one of the main passes between Sikkim and Tibet—is now open for limited local trade and may soon open for tourism.

Sikkim's known climbing history begins in the British period. In two remarkable journeys, in 1848 and 1849 the legendary naturalist Sir Joseph Hooker climbed several 5,000m peaks, attempted some 6,000m peaks, and almost completed a circuit of Kangchenjunga, thus launching a "golden age" of mountain exploration in Sikkim that lasted almost a century. John Claude White, the Political Officer to Sikkim and later Bhutan (1887–1908), was another early seminal figure. White introduced protected status to vast areas of Himalayan forest, and created a remarkable personal collection of photographs of his travels on the northeast frontier and in Tibet. In 1899 came Douglas Freshfield's famous expedition around Kangchenjunga that included Vittorio and Erminio Sella, who also took some fine photographs, including of the striking Siniolchu—once vaunted as the most beautiful mountain in the world. And because the high passes of Sikkim comprised the eastern gateway to the Tibetan Plateau, Francis Younghusband crossed this way on his historic "Lhasa Mission" of 1904. So did all the early expeditions to the north side of Everest.

The most prolific early climber was Dr. Alexander Kellas, who made several visits to Sikkim between 1907 and 1921. He climbed many peaks, mostly with local companions, and in 1910 made ten ascents including Chomoyummo (6,829m) and Pahunri (7,128m). Kellas wrote several important papers on the effects of altitude, but sadly, he wrote very little about his extensive climbing experiences. Kellas wondered if Everest could be climbed without supplementary oxygen, and because of his experience and knowledge, he was selected for the first Everest expedition in 1921. Unfortunately, after crossing from Sikkim to the Tibetan Plateau he became seriously unwell and died of a heart attack at Kampa Dzong.

The "golden age" of mountain exploration that began with Hooker in 1848 arguably reached its zenith on the peaks around the Zemu Glacier in the 1930s. Continuing the lightweight alpine-style approach that was established early on, in 1936 Paul Bauer, Adi Göttner, Karl Wien,

and Günther Hep made the first ascent of Siniolchu (6,887m) and Simvo (6,812m). The era perhaps ended in 1939 with the ascents of Tent Peak (7,365m) and Nepal Peak (7,180m) by the Swiss-German party of E. Grob, H. Paidar, and L. Schmaderer. Other influential people during this pre-World War Two period were Marco Pallis, Freddy Spencer Chapman, G. O. Dyrenfurth, C.R. Cook, John Hunt, and Eric Shipton. When Himalayan mountaineering resumed after the interruption of the Second World War the spotlight was on a different style of climbing and the 8,000m peaks. In the case of Kangchenjunga, the focus turned to the Nepal side of the mountain.

ABOVE THE MISTS

Unlike some of the world's highest mountains, Kangchenjunga is easily visible from the lowlands and populated areas. It is an amazing sight from hill towns like Pelling and Darjeeling. Given its dominant size and shape, and its magnificent appearance in early morning and evening light, it is hardly surprising that it has long been an object of worship to locals and an inspiration to climbers. The remarkable first ascent in 1955 was from the Nepal side of the mountain. However, the Sikkim side had seen two determined attempts on the northeast spur in 1929 and 1931 by strong groups led by Paul Bauer. This dangerous and difficult route was eventually completed in 1977 by an Indian Army expedition led by the redoubtable Col. Narinder "Bull" Kumar, which was the second expedition to succeed in climbing Kangchenjunga.

The ongoing history of climbing on Kangchenjunga has mostly been on the Nepal side of



Kangchenjunga (8,598m) at sunrise. The third tallest mountain in the world is also Sikkim's highpoint and its western border, with Nepal. The line of shadow and light marks the south ridge (Prezelj and Stremfelj, 1991) the right-hand skyline is the formidable unclimbed east-southeast ridge and Zemu Peak (7,780m). *Roger Payne*

the mountain. This includes the remarkable alpine-style ascent of Kangchenjunga's south summit by the south ridge (which marks the border between Nepal and Sikkim), which was climbed in 1991 by Andrej Stremfelj and Marko Prezelj from Slovenia.

In 1991 the State Government of Sikkim classified the main, south, and west summits of Kangchenjunga as sacred, and banned the "scaling of the sacred peaks." This has been taken to mean that all climbing attempts on the Sikkim side of Kangchenjunga are prohibited. However, it may be possible to obtain permission from the Sikkim authorities to climb Kangchenjunga if the sacred peak restriction is respected and the actual summits remained untrod by climbers originating in Sikkim. If so, this would open up the possibility of a traverse of Kangchenjunga's formidable unclimbed east-southeast ridge, which includes Zemu Peak (7,780m). This is without doubt one of the major high-altitude mountaineering challenges.

IN THE WEST

South along the border from Kangchenjunga is Talung (7,349m) and at least three 7,000m summits in the Kabru group. In 1883 William Woodman Graham claimed an ascent of Kabru, but later this was dismissed and it was thought he was on some other mountain. Kabru North (7,338m) was climbed in 1935 (C.R. Cooke and G. Schoberth) and Talung from its Nepal side in 1964 (F. Lindner and T. Nindra). Kabru Dome (6,600m) and the North and South summits of Kabru are classified as sacred. However, this has not prevented recent ascents by Indian and foreign groups, although it is not clear if the groups concerned had the permission of the authorities in Sikkim.

Farther south again is Rathong (6,679m) and Koptang (6,147m), which offer interesting



Kangchenjunga (far right) climaxes a string of 7,000m peaks, including the Kabru group and 7,349m Talung, the highest of this collection. *Roger Payne*



The south face of Rathong (6,679m) rising above the East Rathong Glacier. The col at the head of the glacier was crossed for the first ascent by the southwest flank and west ridge. The southeast ridge drops from the summit toward the camera, and was attempted in 2006 by Clyma and Payne. *Roger Payne*



Frey Peak is the rocky summit on the left, while Kaktang (6,147m) is the snow-clad high peak, whose true summit may still be virgin. *Roger Payne*



The west face of Narsing (5,825m) seen during the first ascent of Lama Lamani. Apparently the first ascent of Narsing was by Kellas in 1921 before he joined the Everest team in Darjeeling. Currently Narsing is designated a sacred peak, and thus off limits. *Roger Payne*



Along Sikkim's most popular trek, from the village of Yuksom, rise from left to right: Tinchekang (6,010m), Jopuno (5,936m), Lama Lamani (ca 5,700m), unknown, and Narsing (5,825m). *Roger Payne*

opportunities for alpine-style first ascents. Julie-Ann and I explored in this area in autumn 2006 when we climbed some adjacent 5,000m summits. According to the Alpine Club's on-line Himalayan Index, Koptang has been climbed twice (via the southwest face in 1982 and via the northeast face and north ridge in 1991), and Rathong has had two ascents (in 1964 and 1987 via the West Rathong Glacier and icefall). The steep mixed south face of Rathong looks interesting, but has some serac hazards, and the southeast ridge is a technical challenge we tried, but



During the third ascent (first in alpine style) of Tinchekang, in 2005. Tinchekang is designated an "Alpine Peak." *Roger Payne*



Pandim (6,691m) has been attempted several times, but is currently designated sacred. However, the peak has multiple summits, and it may be possible to get permission to climb a lower highpoint. *Roger Payne*

we ran out of weather and time. Kaktang has a long corniced summit ridge and, according to the great chronicler of Himalayan ascents Harish Kapadia, "the true high point, lying at the northernmost end, remains to be climbed." Having climbed quite a bit of new ground, we made some progress on the northwest-north ridge of Kaktang, but deep cold snow and unstable cornices stopped us. This route would probably be a more reasonable undertaking in the pre-monsoon spring period.



Jopuno (5,936m) is designated an "Alpine Peak," which makes it easy and economical to get permission to climb. The only ascents have been by the right-hand skyline and the spur descending left of the summit. *Roger Payne*

Near the snout of the Rathong Glacier is the mountain base camp for the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling. Groups from the HMI Darjeeling train on the glaciers and peaks thereabouts, including the technical Frey Peak (5,830m), which has had numerous ascents with the aid of fixed ropes. This is one of the peaks designated by the Government of Sikkim as an "Alpine Peak." In 2004 two Spanish climbers, Alain Anders and Garo Azuke, were active in this area and climbed two technical routes on peaks they referred to as Tieng Kg (ca 6,000m) and Phori (5,837m) (see p. 385, *AAJ 2004*).

Running parallel and to the east of the above peaks is the route of Sikkim's most popular trek: a five-day journey from the historic village of Yuksom to the Gocha La (Heaven's Gate). As you ascend, you get excellent views of Kangchenjunga, and to your east a group of fine-looking alpine-scale peaks. The first of real note is the technical-looking Narsing (5,825m), which is another "Sacred Peak." However, just north of this is Lama Lamani (ca 5,700m), Jopuno (5,936m), and Tinchengang (6,010m), the latter two being "Alpine Peaks," for which it is easy to obtain permission. In spring 2005 with Sagar Rai and Kunzang Bhutia (friends of ours in the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association), we made the first ascent of Lama Lamani, then made the third ascent (and first alpine-style ascent) of Tinchengang (see p. 400, *AAJ 2006*). Jopuno has apparently just had its 2nd ascent (Sam Gardner and team, spring 2008). These peaks offer good medium-grade alpine ascents, and are destined to become classic climbs of the Eastern Himalaya. Farther north again is the dramatic peak of Pandim (6,691m), which attracted the attention of the early explorers, and more recently has had some confusingly reported attempts. Pandim has a superb-looking technical west ridge, but is another sacred summit. It is actually a group of summits, so perhaps in the future it may be possible to climb one of the lower peaks.

Indian mountaineers have been especially active in West Sikkim. Members of the Himalayan Club, instructors from the mountaineering institutes, and military groups have all made important climbs. Some ascents have been accurately documented in the *Himalayan*

Journal, the *AAJ*, and elsewhere, while others are less well recorded, and some were not recorded for security reasons. If Sikkim ever receives a definitive guidebook of climbs, it will be the outcome of some very diligent research.

ALONG THE BORDER, NORTH AND EAST

North of Kangchenjunga is Jongsang (7,459m), which sits at the junction of the borders between Nepal, Tibet, and Sikkim. Its first ascent came in 1930 via its north ridge, by G. O. Dyrenfurth's international expedition to Kangchenjunga. The Sikkim-Tibet border follows the watershed over high peaks and passes to Pauhunri (7,125m) (first ascent in 1910 by Kellas) in Sikkim's northeast corner. Just south of Pauhunri are two virgin 7,000m summits, then a ridge of unnamed 6,000m summits. Farther south again, the peaks become lower and lead to the historic passes of Natu La (between Gangtok and Yatung in Tibet) and Jelep La (between Kalimpong and Yatung).

Permission to access the peaks and passes along the Sikkim-Tibet border has been extremely limited ever since the start of the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962. However, you can pick almost any mountain along the Sikkim-Tibet border and find an interesting climbing objective. In September 2004, a strong team organized by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) in New Delhi attempted the border peak of Chomoyummo (6,829m). The leader was the highly respected and hugely experienced Dr. P. M. Das, a vice president of the IMF. The attempt ended in tragedy when Das and four others were killed in an avalanche.



Peaks along the Sikkim-Tibet border, including Chumangkang (6,212) on the left and Chomoyummo (6,829m) on the right, as seen from below the northeast ridge of Chombu. Roger Payne

At some stage access to the peaks on the Sikkim-Tibet border will become easier, which could launch a new “golden age” of first ascents and new routes in this part of the Himalaya. Meanwhile, just away from the border is a ring of peaks that are easier to access, and offer very interesting climbing potential from the valleys of Lachung and Lachen.

WITHIN THE BORDER

During World War Two, British climbers were able to take leave in the region of Lachung and Lachen, and members of the Himalayan Club including Trevor Braham explored the area. It is a fascinating journey up from the steep forested slopes of the Lachung Valley, to reach open plains typical of the Tibetan Plateau around Yume Samdong, and then cross the Sebu La down into the open part of the Lachen Valley, to then descend back south to steep valleys and forests. Such was the interest in making this journey that the Himalayan Club built huts on either side of the Sebu La (both of which are now in ruins).

After the Sino-Indian conflict broke out in 1962, this area was closed apart from military expeditions. Then in 1976 Harish Kapadia and Zerkis Boga obtained permission to do the Sebu La trek. Twenty years later, in 1996, an expedition led by Doug Scott (including Lindsay Griffin, Julian Freeman-Attwood, Skip Novak, Mark Bowen, Paul Crowther, Michael Clark, Col. Balwant Sandhu, and Suman Dubery) obtained permission for Gurudongmar (6,715m) and Chombu (6,362m).

Gurudongmar and the other peaks in the Kangchengo group have steep southern aspects;



Looking northeast from the open plains of Yume Samdong (4,624m), which is now a popular day trip by jeep from Lachung. The track at left is heading towards the Dongkya La (5,495m) above which is the technical-looking Dongkya Ri (6,190m). The other peaks are 6,233m, 6,346m, 6,517m, and 6,626m; concealed behind these is the border with Tibet and Pauhunri (7,125m). *Roger Payne*



Looking down toward Sebu Cho. At the extreme left is Yulhekang (6,429m), then Gurudongmar West (6,630m), Gurudongmar Main (6,715m), and Sanglapu (6,224m). These peaks in the Kangchegyao group have steep southern aspects, but are approached more easily from the north, where the ascents are shorter. *Roger Payne*

they are approached more easily from the north and have shorter ascents. While returning from the 1936 Everest expedition by crossing the Naku La, Shipton, Warren, Kempson, and Wigram made the first ascent of Gurudongmar. However, having read their account, I feel it is more likely that the summit they reached was Gurudongmar West (6,630m), which would make the first ascent of the main peak in 1980 (by the Assam Rifles led by Norbu Sherpa).

Chombu was described by Doug Scott as “the Matterhorn or the Shivling-like peak of Sikkim.” It was explored in the 1940s and 50s by members of the Himalayan Club. Apparently,

there was an attempt in 1961, but according to Harish Kapadia, “A definite ascent of this peak is yet to be established.”

A large part of Scott’s article “Exploration and Climbs in Northeast Sikkim” (p. 53, *Himalayan Journal*, 1997) concerns the difficulty, high cost, and uncertainty of obtaining permission for the peaks. The team members were enterprising in what was then a high-security area, but somewhat thwarted by bad weather and heavy snow on their



Brumkhangshe (5,635m). This Alpine Peak has only one recorded route, on the right-hand skyline. *Roger Payne*



The glacier camp on the descent from Brumkhangshe, looking across to Pauhunri (7,125m) in the distance and unclimbed peaks along the border with Tibet. *Julie-Ann Clyma*



Looking south toward Julie-Ann Clyma and a cloud inversion in the Lachung Valley from the northeast ridge of Chombu. Rising to the left from the crevassed area of the Rula Kang Glacier is the lower part of the southwest ridge of "Eagle Peak" (ca 5,540m). On the skyline to the right is Brumkhangshe (5,635m). *Roger Payne*



The east face of Chombu and the upper Rula Kang Glacier. *Roger Payne*



Roger Payne on a rock step on the excellent southwest ridge of “Eagle Peak” in 2007. *Julie-Ann Clyma*

efforts to climb Gurudongmar and Chombu. As an indication of how things have changed since 1996, the expedition’s base camp at Yume Samgong (4,624m) is now a very popular day trip by jeep from Lachung. On one day in October 2007—a public holiday—93 tourist jeeps and one motorcycle registered with the last police post to drive up to Yume Samgong (or “Zero Point” as it is usually called locally).

Above Yumtang in the Lachung valley members of the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association and groups from the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute have made a number of ascents. In the winter of 2004, the Lachung Valley experienced its first modern icefall climbing. Richard Durnan and friends from Colorado, Canada, and Austria climbed many easy-to-access routes up to 180 meters long and up to WI5 and M5 in difficulty (see p. 384, *AAJ 2004*). As Durnan wrote, “There is great potential for further development of ice climbing in this area.”

Julie-Ann and I first tried to visit North Sikkim in 2006 to attempt Gurudongmar (6,715m), but we could not get all the necessary clearances. However, in the autumn of 2007, we got permission for Brumkhangshe (5,635m), which is one of the two “Alpine Peaks” in North Sikkim (the other being Lama Wangden, 5,868m, in the Lachen Valley).

With help from Sikkim Holidays in Gangtok and the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association, we found the registration with police and army posts very straightforward, and the police and military personnel were friendly and helpful. We situated our base camp by the road close to the police post at Shiv Mandir (marked at 3,905m on the Swiss map of Sikkim Himalaya). We arrived in low cloud and rain, and hence it appeared a rather miserable spot. However, our moods improved as the weather lifted and the peaks and nearby cliffs revealed themselves. The north ridge of Brumkhangshe turned out to be an easy and very good snow climb, which gave excellent views of many peaks of a similar altitude on both sides of the Lachen Valley. We explored the unnamed glacier to the north of Brumkhangshe, which has a number of peaks around it (which are presumably unclimbed). We also took a close look at Chombu, but found the east face high in objective danger and the northern aspects under too much “interesting” snow (the north ridge of Chombu could be a good route in the pre-monsoon season, and the west face offers a worthy challenge).

There are many peaks around the Rula Kang Glacier under Chombu’s east face. Instructors from the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute have apparently climbed Pheling (ca 5,500m—easy snow climb), which is just south along the ridge from Chombu “East” (5,745m), which Doug Scott and team climbed in 1996 (crux of V with limited protection). Immediately east of Chombu’s northeast ridge is what we called “Eagle Peak” (ca 5,540), which has a very good mixed southwest ridge and from the summit awesome views of the peaks in the Kangchengyao group.

INTO THE LIGHT

The future for mountaineering and climbing in Sikkim looks very promising. The State Government has made it easier for foreign visitors to get access to some interesting peaks that are



Evening light on Kangchengyao (6,889m), Yulhekan (6,429m), Gurudongmar West (6,630m), and Gurudongmar (6,715m), as seen from a camp below the northeast ridge of Chombu. *Roger Payne*

away from the borders. Meanwhile, the border areas are becoming less sensitive, and hopefully in the future tourism and mountain recreation can resume there as well. The tourism service providers in the capitol Gangtok are friendly and reliable, and are being supported by the Ministry of Tourism and the Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association (SAMA). Together, they are expanding their capacity to provide services to international tourists and mountain recreationists, and at the same time promoting sustainable development in mountain regions. Hence, climbers and mountaineers in Sikkim are developing local skills and knowledge, helping with local guide training, and giving opportunities to young people in Sikkim to enjoy climbing and mountaineering. With limited resources, SAMA has been doing an excellent job.

In the past Sikkim has been enveloped in the mists of border tensions and access restrictions. Happily, the sublime mountains of Sikkim are now very definitely emerging from those mists, and the future looks bright.

The “Alpine Peaks” of Sikkim are:

West Sikkim

Frey Peak, 5,830m (Chaunrikiang valley)

Tinchenkang, 6,010m (Thansing valley)

Jopuno, 5,936m (Thansing valley)

North Sikkim

Lama Wangden, 5,868m (Lachen)

Brumkhangse, 5,635m (Yumthang)

The regulations for the Alpine Peaks of Sikkim are included in the Sikkim Government Gazetteer, No 83, 29 March 2006 (http://sikkim.gov.in/asp/Misc/sikkim_govtgazettes/GAZ/GAZ2006/gaz2006.pdf; scroll to page 90). This is a very large file, but the Alpine Peaks section alone can be found at www.AmericanAlpineClub.org/AAJ.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Expedition reports for Julie-Ann Clyma and Roger Payne’s trips to Sikkim can be found at <http://www.rogerpayne.info/climbing.htm>. Roger, 52, is a Brit with decades of new-routing experience in Asia, Europe, and one long new route in the Grand Canyon of Arizona. He and Julie-Ann live in Leysin, Switzerland, where they work as Alpine guides. They would like to thank all the organizations that supported their explorations in Sikkim, including the Government of Sikkim, Sikkim Amateur Mountaineering Association, Sikkim Holidays, British Mountaineering Council, Mount Everest Foundation, UK Sport, Beal, DMM, Julbo, Lyon Equipment, MACPAC, Outdoor Designs, Petzl Charlet, Rab, Terra Nova and The Mountain Boot Company.



Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma on Rathong in 2006.