

# British Arjuna Expedition 2017

## Expedition report

11/9/17- 16/10/2017  
Kishtwar Himal, Kashmir, India

**1 - Name of Expedition: British Arjuna Expedition 2017**

**2 - Expedition Leader/Organiser:** Ben Silvestre  
e-mail address: bensilvestreisnow@yahoo.co.uk

**3 - MEF reference: 17-16**

BMC reference: 17/14

**4 - Country/Region: Kishtwar, India**

**5 - Names of all expedition members,** indicating leader, climbing members, and support:

Leader- Ben Silvestre  
Climber – Pete Graham  
Climber – Uisdean Hawthorn

**6 - Original objective(s) of expedition** – mountaineering / scientific / medical, include location of objective (or study area) with indication of special points of interest (e.g. ‘first ascent of NW Ridge’) and heights of peaks:

Mountaineering- to climb Arjuna South (6100m) via the arête of it’s west pillar, a new route.

**7 – Dates of expedition include travel times etc:**

11/9/17 – arrival in Delhi, briefing at IMF  
12/9/17 – arrival in Manali  
13/9/17 – 14/9/17 – drive to road head near Gulabgarh  
15/9/17 – 17/9/17 – approach to BC via Kijai Nullah  
18/9/17 – 1/10/17 – exploration and acclimatisation  
2/10/17 – 6/10/17 – ascent of Arjuna south via our primary objective  
10/10/17 – 13/10/17 – descent and drive back to Manali  
16/10/17 – arrival in London

**8 – Budget:**

Expedition Costs:  
Travel and baggage - £1386  
Hill food and fuel - £300  
Agent fee, including:  
LO and LO equipment  
local guide and personal equipment  
BC food and cook tent  
staff insurance  
cook

porters  
road travel and accommodation from and back to Delhi  
peak fees  
IMF/ local state government fees –  
£11,370 (\$4,600 p/p)  
Insurance - £960  
Extras (medicine, batteries, etc) - £400  
TOTAL: £14,416

Expedition Income;  
Grants:  
MEF - £2,400  
BMC - £1,250  
Austrian Alpine Club - £450  
Alpine Club - £1725  
Total: £5,825  
Amount of Personal Contributions - £8,591  
TOTAL: £14,416

## **9 – Acclimatisation and ascent:**

After arriving at BC we had a rest day, then spent two days finding a route up the ice fall to the upper glacier and the base of our intended route. This allowed us to acclimatise a small amount, and we moved most of our gear to the bottom of the route, ready for an attempt.

We then acclimatised on an unknown peak directly above BC, approximate height of summit - 5400m. Acclimatisation took place over the following dates: 21-27/9/17. We walked up a low angled ridge to 5000m then descended. A few days later we returned to our high point and set up a camp. The following day we tried to summit but the ridge was made of very bad rock, which was okay whilst it was low angled, but we reached a point at 5200m which was steeper and would have been quite dangerous to descend. We sat at 5200m for a while, then descended to our camp where we spent the afternoon and another night. The following morning we descended. During this whole period the weather was quite stable, with clear mornings, a small amount of cloud build up in the afternoon, followed by a tiny bit of precipitation at around 4pm, and it would then clear again by night.

Ascent of Arjuna South: On 2/10/2017 we walked with light bags the 11km to the base of Arjuna south, where we had created a gear cache. We spent the afternoon eating and got an early night. We had a week long high pressure forecasted, following a severe three day storm a few days previously. We had had to delay our ascent by a couple of days due to Pete getting a little ill, but thankfully the forecast was staying good.

**Day 1** – We left the tent at dawn, after forcing a large breakfast down. Straight above camp was a large snow cone, leading to a gully which we intended to descend if the ascent was successful. We followed this a short way, until loose, but low angled ramps lead leftwards, to the crest of a ridge. On the north side we gained snow ramps, and soloed a short way up these until a rocky steepening demanded a rope. Uisdean climbed the steepening in a pitch, and we found lower angled snow ramps above, deciding to put the rope away. We traversed

leftwards, which allowed us to gain a gully which we spotted from the glacier. We soloed a short way up this, until it steepened, and Uisdean climbed a long pitch to reach a notch, which marked the start of the real climbing.

Whilst we put the snow and ice gear away, and whilst Pete got ready to lead the rock pitches, I melted some water and topped up our bottles. Pete then led a pitch rightwards on ledges, to the bottom of a steep, blank looking wall. He surmounted a ledge on the left to gain a crack we had spotted from the notch, which provided a full 60m pitch, at around E1, to a large ledge. Pete raved about the quality throughout this pitch, claiming it was the best pitch of new rock climbing he had ever climbed, and we all became very excited about the prospect of climbing more pitches like this one. Sadly, the rock was too steep to second with our large bags, so rather than enjoy the climbing, Uisdean and I had to struggle with jumars.

Following the crack pitch, Pete gained a corner which led to a large ledge on the arête. A short, steep wall above led to lower angled territory as we gained the arête proper. A further two pitches on low angled ground, which me and Uisdean were able to second without jumars, led to a large bivouac site at around 5300m. This required some clearing, so whilst Uisdean took on the task of making us comfy for the night, Pete and I fixed a pitch up a wide chimney, to belay below a large right facing corner. We hoped that we might warm up by jumaring in the morning, and climb the corner in the sun, given that we were now on a south facing wall.

Uisdean did a fantastic job of clearing the ledge, and there was lots of room for us to enjoy sleeping in our three man bivy system, consisting of two lightweight down sleeping bags, which we zipped together, inside a three man custom bivy bag which Pete's dad had made (Rick Graham Designs, Sufferbag V3.0). We had stopped quite early, so we spent a while eating and hydrating whilst the sun went down. The sun set in grand style, and we went to bed feeling very contented with our first day, despite the altitude headaches we were all experiencing.

**Day 2** – We woke at dawn, after a fairly restless night, partly due to the headaches. We spent a while hydrating, then I started jumaring the fixed line, whilst Pete and Uisdean packed up camp. Our plan worked perfectly, and by the time I was ready to lead the pitch, the sun was just hitting the corner. The corner provided a fantastic technical challenge, at around E2, ending in some steep pulls around a large roof. Above this I found excellent cracks which led to a good belay on a small ledge.

We had reached the blank looking section earlier than anticipated, and the cracks above seemed to lead nowhere. At first I was disheartened, though one of the cracks did seem climbable, although it looked very hard. But as I waited for Uisdean to follow the previous pitch, I noticed that the rock hosted lots of 'chicken heads', which made face climbing feasible. There seemed to be two options: a traverse rightwards would land us in the middle of over hanging territory, though there did appear to be some sort of ramp dissecting the steepness. A traverse leftwards would lead to the arête itself, and possibly cracks around the corner, that I couldn't see.

After some discussion with Uisdean, I chose to investigate the left option first. I traversed out to the arête and climbed around it, enjoying the exposure as it dropped down into space below me. About two metres to the left of the arête I

found a thin-hand sized crack, and managed to climb this, with one hand on the arête, until I reached a position above the hard looking crack. Above this, a roof system on the left face formed a menacing squeeze chimney on the right. Intimidated by the chimney, I looked for other options, having seen cracks above the roofs when looking at the left face through binoculars on the glacier. After using the tag line to retrieve some extra gear from Pete, I decided to try and climb the chimney, to get above the roofs. Thankfully, there were holds on the face to the right of the chimney, and I climbed these delicately, in a fairly run out position, to gain a small ledge. Again, I was uncertain of which way to continue the pitch. Above me, a short but overhanging hand sized crack seemed to lead nowhere, and I was apprehensive about taking this option. Traversing around the arête didn't seem to lead anywhere either, and after some discussion with the boys I decided that I could just abseil off if the steep crack didn't come good. Some high cams protected me as I swung out into the crack, and a few desperate pulls, with screaming forearms, landed me at a small stance a short way above. This long pitch had tested me thoroughly, and provided the crux of the rock climbing, at around E3 5c.

Whilst Uisdean jumared the pitch, I gave myself a loop of slack, and investigated options. Above us the wall began to over hang severely, but if we could find a way up the left face, we would soon reach easier angled ground. I traversed around the arête on small nubbins of rock, and was extremely pleased to find a steep crack about 4 metres left of the arête. It was hard to see if this crack was continuous, but it seemed that there was another crack about 2 metres left again, and I figured I could pendulum between them if absolutely necessary. After retrieving the gear from Uisdean, I followed this option. About 35m up the initial crack, it began to close up. But just as I was beginning to feel disappointment at the prospect of aid climbing, a line of holds led leftwards into the second crack, which I followed to the belay, just below the top of the West face of the pillar. This full 60m pitch was without a doubt the most enjoyable pitch of new rock climbing I've done, reminding me in places of the Strand at Gogarth, and at a similar grade. Above this I led a long pitch on easier ground to a large ledge, where I gladly handed the lead to Uisdean.

We were now on the lower angled section of ridge above the arête proper, though the ground remained reasonably complicated, with lots of options to choose from. Uisdean lead a short pitch to gain a rib of rock, which he then climbed to below a couple of corners, doing a good job of avoiding some loose rock on the ledges. He chose the left of the two corners, which seemed to give enjoyable climbing on snow and rock, to an icy ledge above, which necessitated a change into big boots. It was starting to get late, and the need for a good bivouac site was beginning to feel pressing. Uisdean quickly climbed a long pitch up moderate ground to below a notch in the left skyline, which we hoped would provide a traverse line round the top of the pillar, avoiding the need for an abseil. Climbing into the notch we were disappointed to find a very steep wall, but it did provide a fairly good bivouac site on a snow arête, at around 5800m. Dark was arriving, and we hurriedly chopped a ledge and got into the sleeping bags. Unfortunately, this bivy site was rather exposed to the wind, and the night was extremely cold. Pete, who doesn't usually seem to be affected by such things, started to shiver uncontrollably, and whilst he refused my offers for the middle of the three man spoon, I eventually insisted that he take it when we had to get out to pee.

**Day 3** – Dawn arrived after much shivering, and we left the bivouac gratefully, though it would be a lot longer before the sun arrived today. Pete took the lead and did a long pitch, first on huge chicken heads, then on snow, to belay below a narrow wall, which marked the top of the pillar. With no other options, he climbed this wall, thankfully finding more huge chicken heads, and enough cracks to protect it well. This landed us on a large snowy ledge atop the pillar, and Pete surmounted a bulge to see if he could find an anchor, to abseil into the notch. Whilst digging in the snow, he uncovered a peg and some old gear, no doubt from the Polish route which climbed the West/ North West face of Arjuna South in 1983. We backed this anchor up, and abseiled into the notch after spending quite some time wondering whether or not to leave a rope fixed. Pete and I used this tactic in Alaska, which reduces the commitment significantly, but commits you to descending that way. Having seen that a descent down our approach gully looked safe enough, we were apprehensive about leaving this excellent face covered in gear, and eventually decided that we could probably climb back up to the top of the pillar via some thin cracks if necessary. So we pulled our ropes and committed to the headwall above.

Pete led a short pitch on snow to the bottom of a steep crack system, and I took the lead, donning my rock shoes again. The wall was a lot steeper than it appeared to be from the glacier, but thankfully it was infested with chicken heads, and whilst one section of the following pitch was quite run out, the holds were big enough to climb it confidently. I stopped early, below some large roofs, and waited to recover the gear from Uisdean, who got himself into a bit of a tangle, and educated me in a wide variety of Scottish swear words.

The roofs above were fairly daunting, but there was an obvious notch which seemed to offer a fairly straightforward passage. I reached this, placed an assortment of gear, and then pulled through on enormous holds, with all the exposure one could ask for. Above this I stopped to catch my breath, haul up my pack, and changed into my big boots. I finished the pitch on snow, and then led a long pitch on snow and ice to reach a bivouac at 6000m. This was markedly smaller than the last two ledges, but our tiredness more than made up for it, and we stopped gladly. We had time to hydrate lots in the evening sun, and it was a pleasure to watch the sun set over the range, which we could see very well by this point.

**Day 4** – We rose after a fairly good night, and set off with high hopes, in the morning cold. We had slept below the left of two ‘horns’, which dominated the top of the mountain. The gully in the left one was full of extremely steep ice, so Uisdean traversed over to the right one in two pitches. (We later found that the Polish route had taken the left gully so we were glad to have continued climbing new ground). Entry to the right hand gully was guarded by an extremely strenuous mixed step, at about M5, which then led to the summit ridge in two pitches, via some excellent ice climbing. A final pitch landed Uisdean on the South summit, where he hooted with joy. Pete and I joined him, and we sat there a while in the late morning sun, enjoying views of endless mountains, stretching far into the distance.

After eating and drinking a while, and inspecting the descent options, Pete traversed to a point above the Southeast face, where he made the first of many V-threads. He led us bravely down the face via 12 abseils, some of them extremely committing, until we reached a glacier, just after dark. On one of the abseils the rope got stuck when we were pulling it, and the steep, blank nature of the rock meant that we would have been unable to climb back up to retrieve

it. Thankfully, a three to one pulley system freed it, and we continued without further hiccups. We walked down the glacier for a few hundred metres, until a steepening required a further 5 abseils into a col, at the top of our approach gully.

Here we decided to stop and brew up, and we spent a good couple of hours melting water and hydrating. Eventually we realised that we were rather tired, given the 20 hours or so on the go, and we decided that it would be unwise to stumble down the continuation gully in the dark. We found a good ledge and decided to sleep until dawn.

**Day 5** - The sleep was profoundly deep, and we were woken neither by first light, nor the water bottle which we failed to close properly, and which soaked our sleeping bags. We woke before the sun was in the gully, however, and left immediately. Some rubble led to a slight steepening, and we were glad to be able to see where we were going, as we might have missed it in the dark. We started abseiling, and after a further 4 abseils, pulled the ropes a final time, and stomped down the snow cone, straight back to our tent.

I arrived back first, and let out a shout of relief, as the pressure of commitment was finally released. We sat around for a few hours, enjoying the balmy temperatures, drinking lots of water and eating the many meals we had stashed in the tent. We were shocked by how much the glacier had melted – the platform our tent had made was raised several inches, and the V-threads we had secured it with had all melted out, indicating several inches of melt in the 3 days since we had left.

Once recovered, we packed up all our gear, and started the long walk back to base camp. We chose to abseil one section of the ice fall, and then stumbled along moraine, stopping frequently. The temperatures were extremely high and moving at all was hard work given our exhaustion. Once on the lower glacier, we decided that we couldn't be bothered to carry everything back to base camp, so we left our gear in a cache, and walked the rest of the way with light bags, enjoying the evening sun as it set on Arjuna behind us.

We called the route Gandiva, after the mythological bow that the creator god, Brammah, gives Arjuna in Hindu mythology. We thought this fitting as the pillar faces the Brammah massif, and the arête is bow shaped. We graded the route as follows: 1400m 5.11 (E3 5c) M5. We felt an American grade for the rock pitches was more appropriate given the nature of the crack climbing on the crux sections.

### **10 - Accidents/Illness:**

No accidents/illnesses to report, apart from a slight fever in Pete, most likely caused by exhaustion, just before we climbed the route. This healed itself well with a couple days of rest.

### **11 - Logistics:**

Shopping:

Most of our food was bought by our agent, but we did some last minute shopping in Manali, where it is possible to buy most items one might require.

#### Permits:

Our permits were sorted through our agent, but the process was slow, and it is worth making sure this process is started early. We were the first party to receive permits for Arjuna itself – previous parties have received permits for a mountain called Bobang (which actually doesn't exist – or there is confusion about it being in this valley).

#### Visas:

The Indian visa process is quite lengthy and complicated and it is well worth starting the process quite early, although not too early as they are awarded for a time period commencing from approval. It probably took us about 3 months to complete the process. We were awarded a mountaineering-x visa.

#### SAT Phone:

We used an InReach to send messages to loved ones, and to receive weather forecasts. Proper Sat phones are illegal in India and not recommended.

#### Travel:

We travelled between Delhi and Manali in coaches which were perfectly comfy. Between Manali and Gulabgarh we travelled in a 4x4 minibus, which was fairly traumatic at points given the quality of the roads. All travel was organized by our agent.

#### Gas:

Our agent sorted gas canisters for us, these worked fine and were a similar price to Europe.

#### Waste Disposal:

All rubbish was walked down and disposed of, or burned. Human waste was buried around base camp, away from water.

#### **12 – Agency/ Cook/ Liaison officer**

On Mick Fowlers recommendation, we used Kaushal Desai at Above 14,000ft. His service was very good, we were more than happy with how the expedition panned out. The cook he provided was excellent, and we were never at fear of getting ill from the food. We ate predominantly vegetarian food, of incredible variety, and inconceivable quantity. Our liaison officer, Tara, (who Kaushal requested) was a lovely young man, and more than helpful in all situations.

#### **13 – Other potential:**

There are many other possible objectives in the valley, from 300m rock routes on quality granite, to 8/900m big walls, to more typically alpine mixed objectives (predominantly ridges) of all difficulties. Arjuna itself is a very large mountain with a huge amount of potential (much like the NF of the Grandes Jorasses) and many more quality lines. I suspect it will become popular in years to come, given the quality of the rock. It would be too much to include photos of all the potential in this report, but if any one is interested they can email me at [bensilvestreisnow@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bensilvestreisnow@yahoo.co.uk) and I can send a document full of photos.

#### **14 – Photos:**

A full photo blog of Uisdean's can be found at:  
<https://www.uisdeanhawthorn.com/arjuna/>

ABC and the route, green line showing bottom of the descent:



The rock section of the route, showing bivouacs:



Uisdean Jumaring the crux pitch, with myself visible above the steep hand crack.



Myself on the 'strand' pitch:

