

5th Expedition to Papua: Attempt on Mount Yamin



Anthony, accompanied by IMG guide, Andy, and Steven, Sofyan and Brury from Indonesia, set off in January 2018 for the unclimbed Mount Yamin (estimated 4520 meters) in a remote part of Eastern Indonesian Papua. This photo shows the closest we reached to the mountain since delays caused by tribal issues, weather and much harder terrain than expected in the approach meant that we didn't summit. But we already have plans which include allowing a lot more time to repeat the attempt in future.

First Anthony, Andy and Steven headed for Wamena for some acclimatization, visiting the lively local market.



Wamena, in the heart of Papua, is a bustling small town where everything from supermarket groceries to construction equipment has to be brought in by air since there are no road connections to the major towns of Papua.

We were accompanied by old friend Nanang, who had lived in Papua for 16 years including some time in a traditional village where he was adopted by the chief. On return to our hotel, to our surprise and pleasure we found that chief waiting for us. He was in town for treatment for an old arrow wound and had learned of our visit.



With the traditional words of greeting “Wa wa wa wa” he was delighted to see Nanang (pictured in the middle with the chief and his nephew and successor), to see Anthony again and to meet Andy.

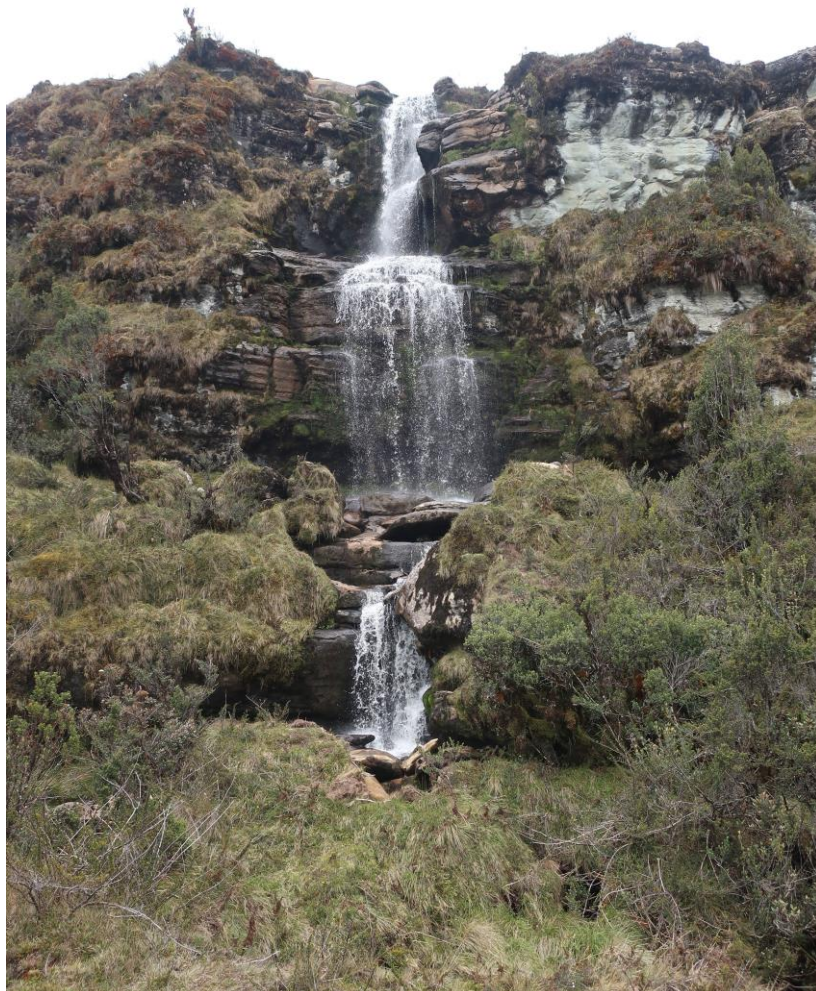
Next day we set off on our acclimatization hike which would take us up to 3,800 meters, heading for Lake Habema, driving first past Mount Trikora, rising up on the horizon, which we had climbed in October 2013.



Lake Habema is sacred to several tribes.



Our high point was these seldom visited waterfalls.



We had intended to fly out next morning to Dekai to meet our advance team Sofyan and Brury and pick up our helicopter there which would take us into our planned Base Camp for Yamin. But instead we heard the news that some local tribesmen insisting that our helicopter was really supporting illegal gold miners operating on their ancestral lands had created a major disturbance and all helicopters were ordered out of Dekai. We pondered various options to resolve the issue.

So the next day while Steven stayed behind to work on this, Anthony, Andy and Nanang explored further the countryside around Wamena

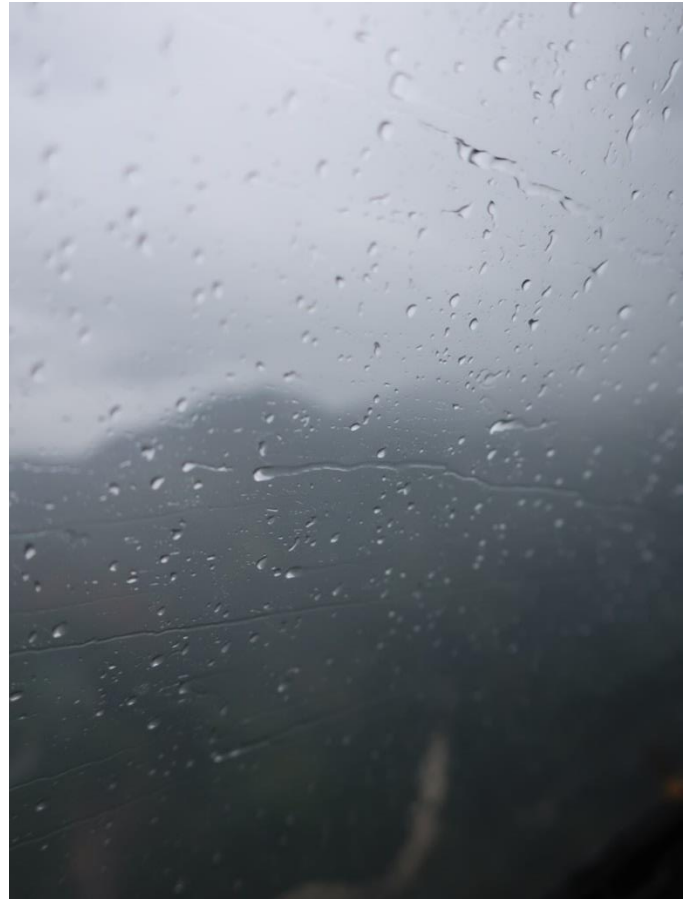


This included 2 traditional villages.



During the day with many phone calls by Steven and Nanang to the helicopter company and the authorities in Dekai and negotiation with the local tribal leaders, it was agreed we could proceed to Dekai and we asked Captain Fauzi our pilot to return from his base in Timika to the west, pick us up in Wamena and try once more to fly to Dekai and on to the mountain.

Wamena's weather had been surprisingly rain free for several days but as we boarded the helicopter the clouds to the east looked ominous. Sure enough not long into our journey the rain began to fall heavily and we were forced to retreat.



The next morning we all went early to the airport and as soon as the control tower permitted we took off in still cloudy skies successfully reaching Dekai, a small town that is however capital for a region with many villages and tribes. The plan was for us to fly in 2 teams straight to the mountain but the weather did not cooperate and we settled down to another day lost from our tight schedule. Meanwhile other members of the Una Ukai tribe who had not been a party to the agreement to allow us and our helicopter back raised objections and it needed all Nanang's diplomatic skills to resolve the situation.

Usually the best flying time of the day in Papua is early morning so it was depressing the next day to see heavy cloud hanging low over the mountains but it began to brighten a bit and we headed to the airport shaking hands with Captain Fauzi who said "we will try." Sofyan, Andy and Anthony set off as the first team. Our aim was to reach the base camp we had earmarked at 3,900 meters. This was looking unlikely as the helicopter came closer and closer to the cloud ceiling and eventually Fauzi put us down at the end of a long valley at just over 3,600 meters.

We unloaded and waited anxiously to see if our remaining 2 comrades would make it in safely before the weather closed in.



They arrived and we set up our Base Camp, later named the Swamp Camp reflecting the nature of the terrain.



After lunch cooked by Brury, Sofyan and Andy set off to reconnoiter the route ahead and carry some of the loads higher. There were rivers to cross and here we see Andy checking anxiously that his rubber boots are going to prove long enough.



They arrived back about 4 hours later after a significantly harder trip than expected and encouraging us to leave us much as possible at the Swamp Camp. The evening was the best visibility of the day and if we had been flying then we would definitely have reached our originally planned Base Camp.



Steven had called our helicopter planning if the skies were still clear for it to return and take us up to 3,900 meters avoiding the loss of a further day. But we learned in the morning that Dekai airport closes on Sundays so shouldering large packs the team set off.



There were some rivers to cross and hills to climb, clutching the vegetation firmly to move up safely.





After about 2 km the ground leveled off for a long stretch before gently rising up. To our north was a long range of cliffs which blocked the direct route to Yamin. We needed to go around them.



Water was plentiful with many small lakes in this valley and we found a very pleasant site for Camp 1 at 3850 meters. We had come just under 6 km in 7 hours and 20 minutes.

It rained much of the night but was clear when we arose. We now made another effort to cut down our gear and supplies and with the exception of Brury decided to ditch the rubber boots in favour of climbing boots. We moved on higher up the valley and as expected (courtesy of Google Earth) came to a hill which we felt would provide a way up to and through the cliff band.

Unexpectedly we found a trail leading up which we named the Hunter's Trail as though we had seen no animals or people during our trek we did notice some old traps.



We moved steadily up to the pass at 4063 meters.



We descended the pass about 100 meters still going east and noticed the trail continued. But we needed to find a way to climb back to the north west and get behind the band of cliffs. Andy found a route which was steep and tricky as some holes appeared and the grass and vegetation often gave way. Again we made our way up gripping plants and trees. It began to rain.



We battled on with both Andy and Sofyan trying to find a better route, aiming to get us as close to our planned High Camp as possible.

But eventually with everyone cold and tired after almost 8 hours covering just under 6 km we decided to look for a reasonable campsite, which we found almost at once.

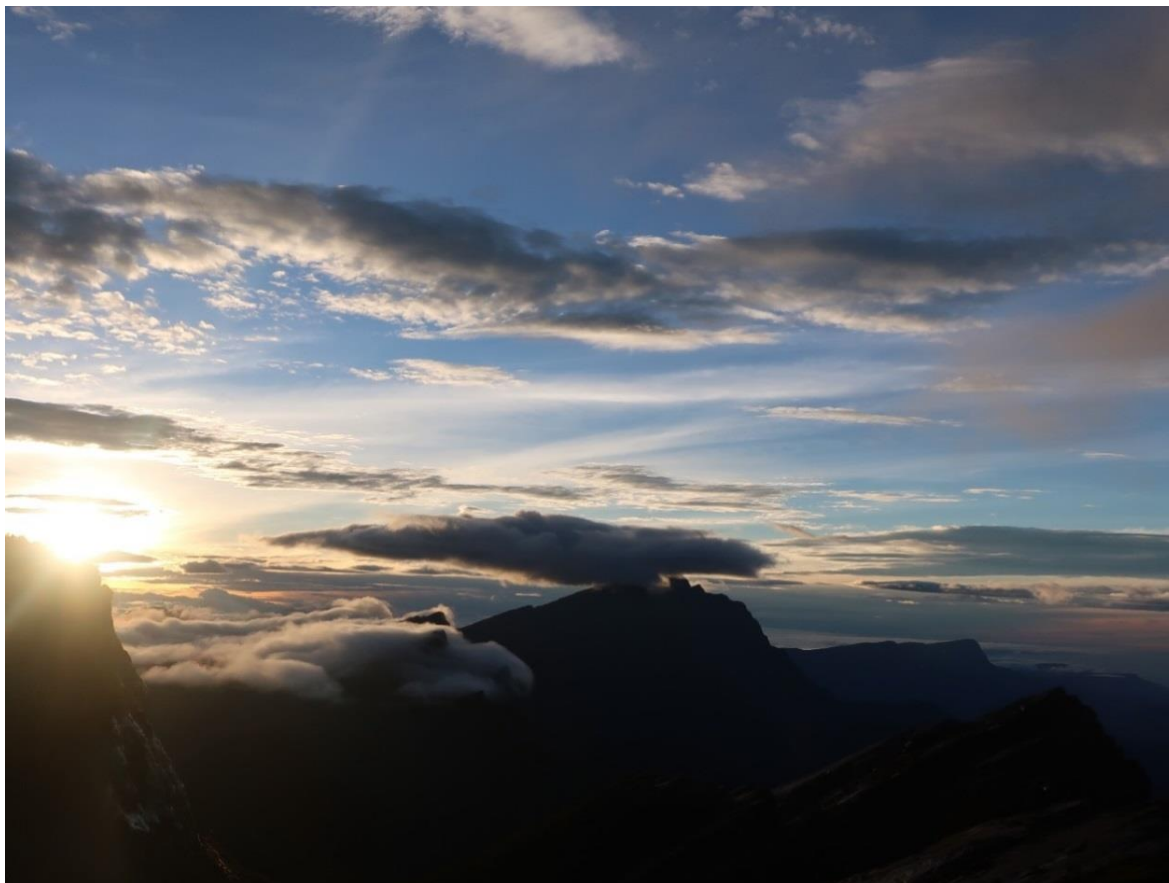


Camp 2 was at 4350 meters and in the evening we had a beautiful view over to Mount Mandala which Steven and I had climbed in 2013.



In the night it rained heavily with a strong wind which put pressure on the tents but they held up well, though the tarp outside the tent of Steven, Brury and Sofyan collapsed and Steven needed to rise from his warm sleeping bag to secure it and prevent it disappearing away.

By morning the rain had gone and we had a lovely dawn lighting up Mandala to our south east.



We were optimistic that the worst of the terrain was behind us and we would reach our High Camp relatively fast. And indeed for the first one and a half kilometers or so we made good time. But then it all became a lot more tricky and it began to rain fairly constantly.

The ground was mostly soft with plants that easily gave way revealing hidden holes beneath. These were sometimes small but easily able to twist a knee or ankle for the unwary.



And sometimes they were of “man-eating” proportions.



There were some sections with sloping rock slabs which in the rain became slippery requiring extra care.



And there were rock ribs running down from the top of the cliffs which we had observed on the other side yesterday. These could sometimes be climbed up and slithered down and sometimes needed long detours to go around.



There were also sharp rocks which demanded attention some having bizarre shapes like this one resembling a prehistoric fish lunging towards its prey.



Eventually the ground began to slope more sharply downwards and trying where possible to angle across the hill to the North West, we made our way down with the ground still every bit as treacherous, reaching the valley rather lower than we had planned at 4050 meters. Mount Yamin appeared mistily above us as we made camp.



In the evening and again in the early morning Steven, Andy and Anthony debated what to do. The mountain was only 500 meters above us and the distance did not seem too far. It all depended on the ground conditions and the extent of technical difficulties if any. If it turned out like Mandala or most of the other many Papuan peaks we had climbed it should go well. But conditions had been very tough so far and we were out of time already with no possibility of adding in a day for recovery. We were low on food and knew the way back would be long and precarious. Wisdom prevailed and decided to turn back.



We had a few ideas on how to tackle the mountain another time but needed now to concentrate on the journey back. We set off somewhat later than usual at 0815.

The slope up from our High Camp was steep and we moved slowly up with a careful rest step on awkward ground, with plants that tended to give way underneath, holes to avoid and the occasional bush to manoeuvre past. Andy rigged the rope in several places to help us move up.



Sofyan ranged ahead scouting the way forward pausing to take some photos. Here we see Brury bringing up the rear with his helmet. Although he had insisted on bringing his rubber boots high, he had economized on hats so his helmet was his only headgear.



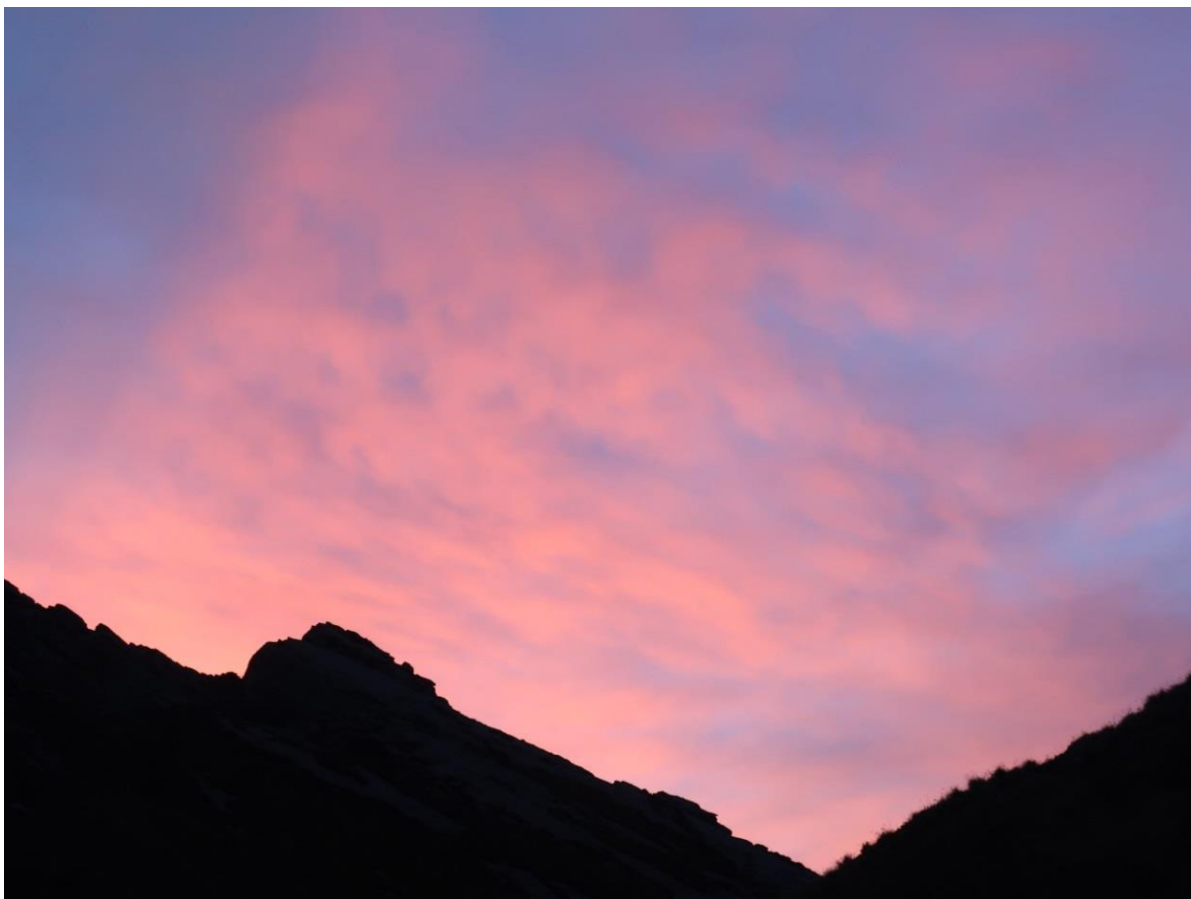
On one occasion the jumar proved useful.



It became easier after the first long section but still challenging. We were able to make more use of the sloping rock slabs today as it generally kept dry. At one point the sun came out and we caught a great view back to Yamin.



We tried once or twice to see if we could find an easier way but overall we followed closely the route we had taken the day before. Finally with some relief we reached the easier ground and as the day was ending came back to the site of our Camp 2. Overall it had taken us 10 hours to cover the 5 km distance. We were rewarded with a great sunset.



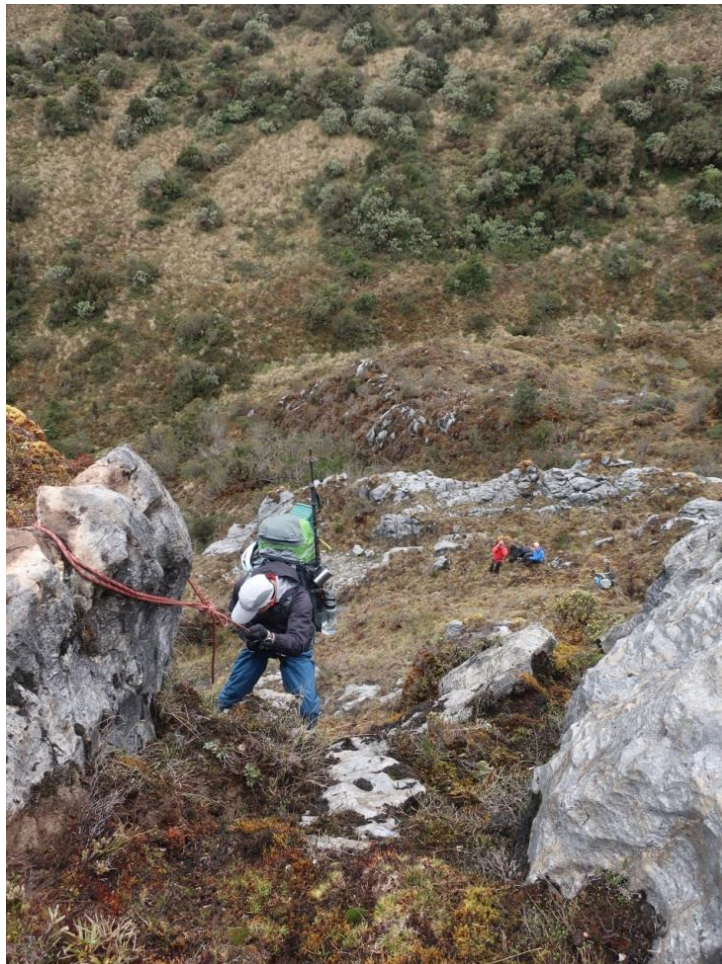
Next day was cloudy and we put on the rain gear though in fact it stayed mostly dry. We began the descent and generally the going was easier than on the way up.



Sofyan was still ranging ahead.



Andy had usefully spotted on the way up a place that might go well for a rappel, cutting out a steep descent through treacherous ground and indeed that proved very useful.



We had a short steep section after the rappel to negotiate but soon we were down to the area of the “Hunter’s Trail”.

Sofyan had suggested a cup of coffee, a welcome idea, so we sat down and relaxed knowing the hardest ground was behind us. As we were planning to set off, we heard voices in the distance, and were a little anxious not knowing how whoever it was would react to discovering us.



Shortly afterwards Libi (wearing the boots) came into view followed by his son and then his family group, pictured below with us. He was very friendly speaking excellent Indonesian. We learned that our Hunter's Trail was actually the route between Beme and Langda, 2 villages which Libi and family would take 4 or 5 days to do. Their very light bundles contrasted with our heavy packs. He told us the mountains to the north west including Yamin were called by his people Lim and the mountains to the south east including Mandala were Apun.



Libi's group departed and we began to trudge up the hill to the pass when we saw Libi and his son coming down. They offered to take some of our packs which we declined but he stayed with us till we reached the pass. There his family had built a fire and they gave us some nuts while we gave them some chocolate and other items.



We then descended the trail eventually reaching more level ground with its many lakes and tufts of flowers.



With our longer breaks it had taken us a similar time to the ascent to descend from Camp 2 to Camp 1 and we travelled a slightly longer distance, 6.3km in 7 hours and 22 minutes with 268 meters up and 807 meters down. We were happy to see Camp 1 and optimistic that if the weather held our helicopter could retrieve us from there.



Captain Fauzi was up early but needed to wait for the Control Tower Staff unaccustomed to operating at such hours. But the weather held and the helicopter approached. Anthony, Steven and Andy set off first while Brury and Sofyan followed pausing at the Swamp Camp to retrieve the gear there and we were all soon back in Dekai after yet another great Papuan adventure.

