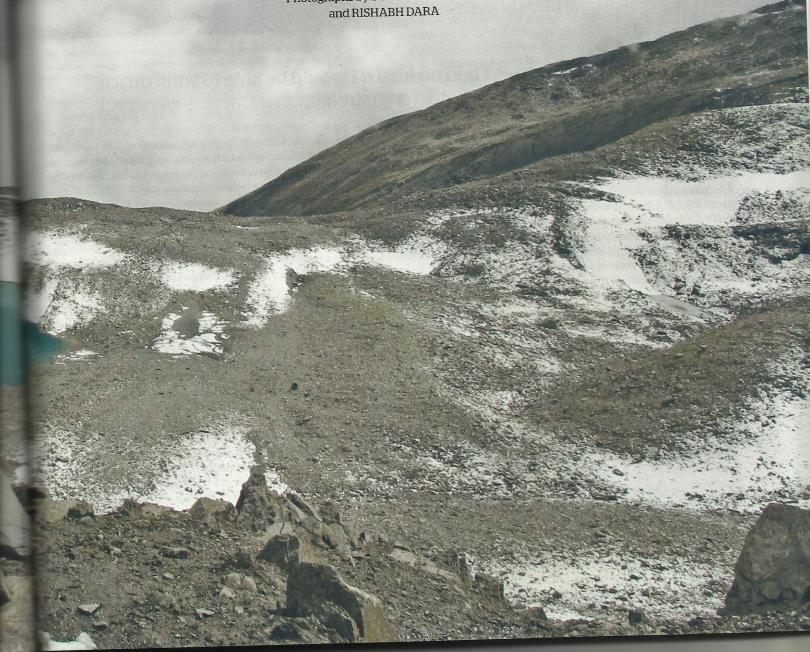


STEP BY STEP TO Banghal Bara Banghal

Anyone can go on a high-altitude trek office-goers with erratic fitness routines included

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INFOCUS

> The Himalayas

limbing a mountain is hard work. Climbing a mountain only to go down the other side, leap across a stream and then start climbing again seems a special sort of sadism. Until, that is, you turn around the next bend to drink in a mountainside dotted black and beige by sheep or a valley full of yellow and blue flowers.

I'm on an 11-day Himalayan trek in the Kangra district. The goat paths we're walking on reveal striking new scenes every few minutes. I see wide, soft meadows rolling as far as the eye can see. I sit by a dull green glacier lake amidst black rock and white ice at Thamsar Pass. Still and cold, it perfectly reflects the peak above it. I taste the tiny blue berries that drape a mountain-side—they're minty—and walk through fields of wild spinach. I have silent conversations with furry gaddi (shepherd) dogs, with their immense poise and voluble eyes. These moments make me understand why I have to work hard to be here: I have to earn the right to enjoy such beauty. They justify each drop of sweat, the pain under my right knee, the blister on my left foot.

A cup of tea—handed to me by the cook the moment I trudge into the campsite—never tasted so good. Never was thirst quenched as satisfyingly, as by the water filled near the top of the pass. I can smell the grass. Even when we sweat, we don't stink; the air, the water, the food are just so clean. And I sleep deeply, restored and ready to start walking again when I wake up each morning.



Until I went on that trek, I had no idea if I would be able to walk on ice,

find a foothold on a landslide, ford a cold stream, or leap across giant rocks.

FINDING SECOND WIND

They say that the first step is the hardest one. That's silly. The first step is easy, as is the last. It's all the ones in between that are hard work.

It's tough to remember that when working out in an air-conditioned gym, counting the seconds till your 20 minutes on the crosstrainer are up. But the thought had been drilled in my head from the moment I decided to go on the Bara Banghal trek, so when I'd start huffing five minutes into my run on the treadmill, I would still keep going.

Bara Banghal is a tiny village in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh, tucked between two passes in the Dhauladhar range. Kalihani, the first pass, is 4,600 metres high and like a gateway through which one must enter to reach the village. The second pass, called Thamsar, is higher (4,800 m) but far easier to climb because a gradual snow-covered slope leads up its north side. Guarded by these two sentinels is this isolated village on the banks of the Ravi, inhabited by shepherds who eke out a living tending to their flocks and growing the vegetables and grain they need. They are still a largely nomadic tribe. The men live away from home for six months each year as they travel with their animals in search of the best meadows. Bara Banghal is a curious mix of the old and new. The extent of modernisation depends on what can go up on muleback. They have a satellite phone, but not enough medicines nor a medical professional to administer them.

I was an office-goer with a shoddy fitness regime and weighed ten kg more than I should have. But I wanted to do this trek. I had four months to be ready, physically and mentally, and I was convinced it was possible. The getting fit plan was simple. The focus was on stamina. I needed to have enough energy to keep going. I would be trekking with my brother and my fiancé, and the last thing I wanted was to give the two boys a chance to call me a whiner.

I went to the gym four times a week. The routine was unchanging:

20 minutes on the treadmill, jogging for as much of it as I could; 20 minutes on the crosstrainer, which worked my arms and legs together and 30 minutes in the pool. I avoided the weighing scale. This was not about losing weight—this was about finding my second wind.

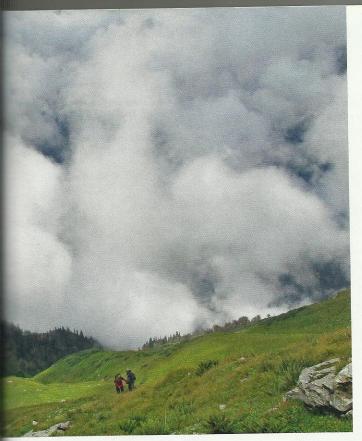
The theory is that even when you feel you're exhausted, you have the capacity to do more. The trick is to continue past the exhaustion until you enter the zone beyond, where you can keep going on and on.

As the days wore on, and I pictured a mountain pass in my head as I ran on the treadmill, I had found myself running longer, swimming faster, and finishing my 20 minutes on the crosstrainer without breaking a sweat. My legs became stronger and my lungs more used to the demands made on them. My belt sat a notch tighter.

AT THE BEGINNING

Our trek began in Manali. There was a lot of unseasonal rain and our guide had heard a report that a flash flood had washed away a crucial bridge across Kalihani Nala. Till the last minute, there was some confusion about whether we'd be able to go. We decided to take the chance. In all likelihood, the *gaddis* would rebuild the wooden bridge in the seven days it would take us to reach it.

Since this was my first time on anything longer than a day hike, my fiancé had made special arrangements. There was a guide and a cook, mules to carry our bags, and even a toilet tent, should I need it. Since the horses moved faster than we did, the kitchen tent would be set up at the campsite when we reached. After tea and biscuits, we'd scoul for the best spots for our tents and set them up. There was usually a stream close by, but after the first day, the water was just too cold attempt washing up or rinsing clothes. The closest thing to a bath had in those 11 days was a wipe down with a damp hand towel. On the coldest days, I did what I could with wet wipes. One night, I even were



The mountains are moody and a sunny morning can quickly turn cold and misty. It's practical to dress in layers so you can quickly add or shed as the weather demands.

to sleep without brushing my teeth. It was oddly liberating.

For the first two days, we packed sandwiches for lunch, which we ate at the flattest spot we could find along the way. Then the bread ran out. The eggs lasted another four days. One day, for breakfast, the cook gave us tuna-stuffed *paranthas*. (I never want to see a can of tuna again.) At Bara Banghal, we got locally-grown *rajma* and potatoes. Those french fries tasted better than anything the labs at McCain could spin out. The *rajma* was as organic as organic gets, grown in soil that had never seen pesticides. One of the village women took a liking to me and gave me a dozen apples from a tree in her yard. They were small and very sweet. I ate like a cow, gulping down a small bar of chocolate every day. With the number of calories I was burning, I could do that without a second thought.

CAMARADERIE

Stuck together, the three of us laughed, fought and helped one another. We borrowed socks, called each other names, and gave encouragement when one of us lagged behind. When heavy rain forced us to stay a night longer at our very first camp at Lama Dugh in a meadow surrounded by fir trees, we played cards and made jokes about all the horrible things that were going to happen to us. When altitude sickness struck at the base of Kalihani, we went on silent walks together, climbing a little higher and then returning to camp to ease the headache.

I got to know the man I intended to marry a little better: his love and respect for the mountains, his impatience with stupidity, his high threshold for pain and the fact that he almost never complained. I learnt that though we fought a lot, we were good at making up quickly. At an ancient Shiv temple along the way, near Dal Marhi, we stopped to pray for a good life together. We talked about coming back ten years later and how different we'd be then.

We also got to know the men who accompanied and supported us, on whom our safety and well-being depended. Dorje, the veter-

an of many treks, understands the many and sudden mood changes of the mountains. Tenzing, our shy, good-looking cook, and goofy Tashi, constantly kept us amused. Besides the six of us, the only other people we encountered were the occasional shepherds. We'd stop to ask about the way ahead. Their weather-beaten faces made them look old and wise. Spending months alone in the mountains with just a flock of sheep for company takes its toll. They'd be glad to exchange a few words. Often, they asked us for medication for a cold, fever, pain or body ache. Then wished us well on our way.

IN THE HEAD

A large part of the trek was spent in the head, as we walked in a single file, conserving our breath at high altitude. Imprinting images in the mind that the camera could not do justice to. Thinking about the path ahead, the smell of the red flowers, how the smoked lamb meat bought from the *gaddis* will taste, or how far the campsite is. I observed the small things like the moss on the side of a tree, an odd mushroom, the way the grass gave way to blackish sand as we climbed higher, and the streaks of colour in the grey rock.

The day we reached Kalihani Pass was one of revelations. I crossed a 4,600-metre-high glacier-covered pass. The ground was a sheet of hard, treacherous ice but I learned to walk on it confidently, trying to imitate Dorje's dancer-like grace. I felt triumphant, every cliché about being on top of the world ringing true.

The next day was different. As we came down the pass, the ice gave way to moraine, the giant black rocks left in the wake of a retreating glacier. Each leap on the massive rocks sent a jolt up my knees and poked the soles of my feet. Several little landslides had wiped out sections of the trail and even the campsite at Dal Marhi we were to stop at. There was no choice but to continue walking. The last half kilometre, we walked by the light of our head lamps as the mountains turned dark and scary.

When we finally reached a suitable campsite and I released the vice grip in which my head held my body, the tears just poured out. They were tears of relief and of satisfaction that I had been able to hold my own. I had discovered new potential within myself. Until I went on that trek, I had no idea if I would be able to walk on ice, find a foothold on a landslide, ford a cold stream, or leap across giant rocks. Could I focus my strength and put one foot ahead of the other till the end? I did. And somewhere, in that process, I stopped thinking about each step, and started looking around and enjoying the experience.



A steaming cup of tea awaiting you at the campsite is a luxury.



THE GUIDE

Route Manali-Bara Banghal-Bir Duration 11 days Season September-October Grade Moderate to strenuous; prior trekking experience preferable Maximum Altitude 4,800 m/16,750 ft

Day I Manali-Lama Dugh

(3,017 m/9,898 ft)

Manali quickly fell behind as we climbed through the forest, and phone signal became intermittent. The path led through a field of shoulder-high sweet-smelling flowers, ending at the Lama Dugh meadow surrounded by maple, oak and spruce trees. It started pouring heavily in the evening and through the night. Dorje decided the next stretch would be too dangerous in the rain, so we camped here a second night.

Day II Lama Dugh-Riyali Thach

(3,400 m/11,154 ft)

The climb got steep, and the paths narrower. Glad Dorje insisted we wait for the rain to ease. Even with just a drizzle, this section was tricky. Great views of the upper Kullu valley from the top of the ridge. Also the last place where we could make a call home before being phoneless for over a week. The second half of the day's trek was through rolling meadows.

Day III Riyali Thach-Base of Kalihani Pass

(4,010 m/13,156 ft)

Day started with a pleasant walk through meadows, only to descend steeply down to a stream, across it and then up again. We encountered the first patch of permanent ice, which was a good chance for me to learn how to walk on it. There was a lot of climbing to do until camp at the base of Kalihani Pass, where I spent the evening contemplating the steep climb awaiting us the next day. Looked the other way, literally, for a great view of the valley.

Day IV Kalihani base camp-Devi ki Marhi (3,850 m/12.631 ft) via Kalihani Pass (4,725 m/15,501 ft)

We knew we were high up because all the green was gone. The ground was hard and rocky, and the air finally seemed really thin. The climb up to the Pass was tough, but oddly satisfying. At the pass we got a 360 degree view of the Pir Panjal and Dhauladhar ranges. A steep descent on the other side of the glacier, a lot of leaping over moraine, and four glacial lakes later, we reached the campsite.



Lambs travel with a shepherd on his mule, tucked into a slot in front of the saddle, where they are safe and warm.

Day V Devi Ki Marhi-Dal Marhi

(3,900 m/12,795 ft)

We crossed Kalihani Nala and spent the morning leaping over more rock and moraine. The knees lodged a strong complaint. The day turned out tougher than expected because unseasonal rain had caused landslides that washed out sections of the trail. There was a steep climb before the Dal Marhi campsite. It was covered by a landslide when we went, so we had to look for an alternate spot in the area.

Day VI Dal Marhi-Bara Banghal

(2,882 m/9,455 ft)

We walked along the side of the hill, overlooking the Ravi river. There were depressing signs of deforestation. A long descent led to Bara Banghal village. We'd caught a rainy day, which meant cold winds on the exposed path and a trail like a mud slide. But there were some lovely stretches through pine and birch forests before the descent began. The first glimpse of Bara Banghal was exhilarating.

Day VII Bara Banghal

Spent the day exploring the village. Considering how little they have, the village people are very generous. Dorje used the satellite phone to call Manali and let the organiser know we were safe. The lady in the neighbouring house invited me home for tea. Later, she sent her granddaughter to our

campsite with potatoes and apples. We visited the village's Shiv temple to say a prayer; the mountains made me feel grateful.

Day VIII Bara Banghal-Madh

(3,830 m/12,565 ft)

The climb towards Thamsar Pass began, with the trail winding up through meadow and patches of pine, deodar and birch forests. We crossed Thamsar Nala twice, once over a bridge, the second time through the cold, fast water. The campsite at Madh was near the base of the glacier. Saw the Milky Way for the first time that night, like a silver path through the sky.

Day IX Madh-Plachak (2,721 m/8,927 ft) via Thamsar Pass (4,800 m/16,750 ft)

It was a tough start to the day, climbing moraine and scree. The rocks by the glacier lake that feeds Thamsar Nala made for a great resting point. There was fresh snow at Thamsar and the climb was gradual compared to Kalihani. We tossed around a few snowballs. There was a little cairn on top with an idol, trinkets and a red flag that broke the white and grey of the terrain. Said a prayer of thanks for a clear day. On the other side of the pass, there was a steep, long descent till the campsite.

Day X Plachak-Rajgundha

(2,440 m/8,005 ft)

The trail descends across a series of permanent ice bridges. After lunch, we knew we were getting near the end of the trek because the path became easy. It was like the trekking equivalent of a highway, passing through pine forests and many mountain streams. The campsite is just after the small village of Rajgundha where we bought and wolfed down wafers like they were the greatest delicacy. Phone signal returned.

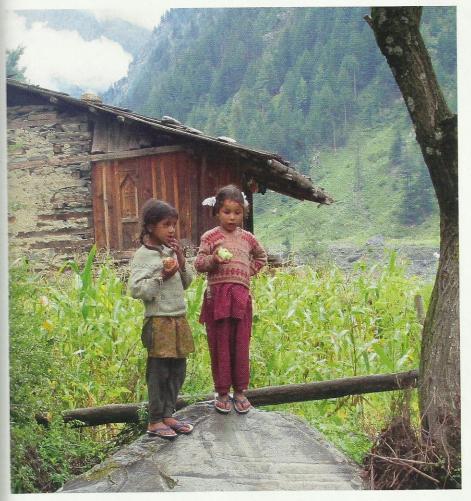
Day XI Rajgundha-Billing

(2,310 m/7,578 ft)

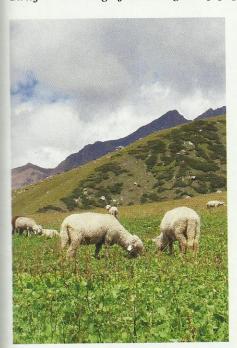
This was another easy day of walking through pine forests over a wide track. We were almost sad to see the prayer flags and paragliders at Billing that indicated the end of the trek. A waiting car took us to Bir, from where we caught a bus to Dharamshala.



Himachal Pradesh



Girls from the village of Bara Banghal enjoy apples plucked from a tree in their yard.





The gaddis (shepherds) live a nomadic life for half the year, travelling with their flocks in $search\ of\ pasture\ (left).$ Mushrooms growing on the side of a tree became dinner (right).

PLANIT

Vary depending on size of group and degree of comfort desired. All costs given below are for a group of six doing the trek over 12 days with horses, guide and a cook.

Top Rock Adventures

Jean Luc Jubert, better known as Titli, runs a tight outfit, advises the tourism authorities on setting norms for adventure activities, and assists in search and rescue operations (98167 92444; www. toprockadventures.com; ₹32,400 per head).

Mountain Voyages

Vijay Bodh, who's part of this company. organised our trek. Except for an excess of tuna, we had a fabulous trip (94180 59192; www.dustytrails.in; ₹28,500 per head).

White Magic Adventure

This Delhi-based organisation is a little more expensive, but will provide you a lot more small comforts during the trek (011-41076073; www.whitemagicadventure.com; ₹39,021 per person).

Himalayan Adventurers

Run by Roop Chand Negi, who is also president of the Himachal Pradesh Winter Games Association, this is one of the older outfits in Manali (98160 23004; www.himalayanadventurers.com;

₹42,000 per head).

Mainak Travels

Suneel is a Kullu boy who has been trekking in the Himalayas since he was 15. Now he runs his own adventure travel outfit (98160 75309; www.mainaktravels.com; ₹25,000 per head).

GEAR UP

Good gear is important for you to enjoy your trekking experience. Look for boots that are waterproof, have ankle support and wear them in on short hikes. Invest in a 3-in-1 jacket that has a waterproof (water repellent is not good enough) and breathable exterior with pit vents. Ditto for pants. Borrow or buy down sleeping bags that are good up to -10°C. Don't forget your walking stick. Carry camera and spare batteries in your pocket while walking and put them in the bottom of your sleeping bag at night, or the batteries will not work properly.