CONQUEST

Hallowed Heights

After cancer and retirement, what do you do? How about climbing the Kilimanjaro and Himalayas, suggests

ASHOK MAHADEVAN

I'M TERRIFIED OF heights. Even if it's someone else up there. When the cable TV mechanic squats on my flat's narrow *chhajja* to check the wiring, with nothing between his bum and the ground ten floors down, I have to lock myself in the bathroom to hide my jitters.

Yet, here I am, on top of Auden's Col, 5,400 metres high in the Garwhal Himalayas, about to descend 250 metres down a steep cliff and with night almost upon us.

What gives?

SANKAR SRIDHAR

CALL OF THE MOUNTAINS
Auden's Col is a 'laborious route along small cliffs' from Gangotri to Kedarnath in the Himalayas, in the words of JB Auden, the British explorer—and brother of poet WH Auden—after whom it is named

MY FEAR GOES far back. Although I went to a school whose headmaster, a colourful Englishman, enthusiastically promoted high-altitude trekking and mountaineering—he'd climbed with Tenzing—I made very sure he didn't rope me into any such activity. But in the late 1990s, when I heard about the pilgrimage organised by the Government to Mount Kailas, Lord Shiva's abode in Tibet, I decided to sign up.

Not for religious reasons, I must confess. Nor for the scenery. The journey involved walking for a month with about three dozen pilgrims, all devout Hindus and mostly from small-towns. This, I thought, was the perfect opportunity for me—a dyed-in-the-wool big-city pseudo-secularist—to get to know some 'real' Indians. Moreover, I could finance the steep cost of the trip by writing a magazine article on it. I bought a copy of *Canterbury Tales* for tips on how to tell the story.

Alas, barely had we begun our *yatra*, when a landslide 40 km ahead of us killed 60 *yatris*. We were ordered to turn back.

I applied again the following year, but the day before I was to leave for the north, I was bitten by a stray and had to stay at home to take a course of anti-rabies injections.

Several times thereafter, I tried to go to Kailas, but was always forced to cancel, for reasons ranging from too much work at the office to, finally, colon cancer. My stomach was sliced open four times, much of my gut was removed, and I ended up with incision hernias peppering my abdomen. They were more unsightly than dangerous, but if they became constricted, only emergency would save me. Bye-bye Kailas.

Then in 2006, when I was 57, I took early retirement. I now had plenty of time on my hands to finally do only what I wanted to do.

Why not start with something totally different from placid, bookish, big-city life as a journalist?

My doctors had assured me that the chances of my hernias getting constricted were slight, so I suggested to Sunil Nehru, an also-retired friend, that we ride the rapids of the Ganga near Rishikesh. A former colleague, his wife and kids joined us, and we had an enjoyable even if not-all-that-thrilling time.

Then in 2008, after reading a newspaper article, Sunil suggested that we climb Mount Kilimanjaro, 5,895 metres high. I immediately agreed. Here was adventure with the right amount of bite.

A dormant volcano whose blunt white summit is called the House of God, Kili is among the world's great treks, attracting thousands of people every year. And for good reason. Climbing it is essentially a clamber up a trail, requiring no technical skills.

At the same time, it's no cake walk, and only about 60 per cent of trekkers make it to the top. The oxygen available at Kili's upper reaches is half that at sea level, and acclimatisation can be a major problem. Practically every climber suffers from breathlessness, headaches and nausea. It is dangerous to ascend too quickly, and, every year, over-enthusiastic trekkers even die.

Sunil and I initially thought of climbing Kili with just one or two more friends, but we eventually ended up with a group of 19, including four foreigners. Our average age was 45, with the oldest 66 and the youngest 25. We included stockbrokers, a waitress, a pilot, company directors, entrepreneurs, computer geeks and a top World Bank economist.

On the first evening of our trek, I had an upset stomach and was terrified that I'd contracted an infection that would force me to drop out. Luckily, two Imodiums—and, perhaps, the blessings of Shiva, grateful for my never dropping into his abode—did the trick.

We got to the base camp after five days. It was misty and cold and quite a few of the group were unwell. I was de-

PHOTOS COURTESY WHITE MAGIC ADVENTURE TRAVEL

AUDEN'S HEADSTART The ascent to the top of the Col could easily be a ten-hour trek; if Auden took two hours, his base camp must have been higher up

pressed. An hour earlier, we'd walked by the wreckage of a small white plane that had crashed there two years earlier. It resembled an animal's dismembered body, and I recalled Ernest Hemingway's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* which begins with the carcass of a leopard. That story about a writer haunted by all the time he has wasted always hits too close to home!

We started our final climb at 11 pm, in pitch darkness, and for hour after hour slithered up an endless slope of scree. Cold, bored and out of breath, I kept asking myself: *Why the hell am I doing this*?

FOURTEEN OF US made it to Uhuru Peak, the highest point on Kili (and in Africa), by 8:30 next morning. Of the rest, one dropped out soon after we began climbing, and four—including the oldest and the youngest—couldn't get beyond Gilman's Point, 300 metres below Uhuru.

I took a couple of swigs of whisky and smiled for the photographs, but unlike the other elated summiteers—some were even crying with joy—I felt nothing.

Then began the interminable slog down. Sunil, I and a couple of others got lost at one point and finally tottered into camp around 7 pm, 20 hours after we had first started walking the previous night. As we headed for our tents, someone said: "I'm sure this has shortened our lives by a couple of years."

I couldn't have agreed more. No more of this high-altitude trekking nonsense—after all, I'd proved to my wife that her old man still had some *dum* left in him. So, early this year, when Sunil started talking about us crossing Auden's Col in October, I put my foot down.

And with good reason. Crossing the Col—a saddle-like depression between two peaks—involves four to five days of hard trekking from Gangotri to base camp. Then you trudge for more than eight hours through snow to the top, before coming down a near vertical cliff using ropes onto a glacier. For two nights you have to camp on ice as you walk past huge crevasses to the glacier's snout. In fact, it's one of the most difficult treks in the Garwhal Himalayas and much tougher than Kili.

At least Kili, I pointed out to Sunil, has some cachet—when you boast about having climbed it, people are impressed. But nobody's heard of the Col, named, incidentally, after an obscure geologist who also happened to be the elder brother of the poet WH Auden.

But Sunil would not relent. This was the last chance we two geezers had to get a sense of real mountain climbing, he argued. We were not getting any younger, and very soon all we'd be capable of would be gentle walks with our wives. In any case, even if I didn't accompany him, he was going.

That would have made him permanently one-up on me—and, naturally, I couldn't allow that. But it took a lot of persuasion to get our wives, who hadn't been too happy about our climbing Kili, to give us the okay.

UTTARKASHI IS A typical insalubrious small town, but 11 km away is a hostelry called Kuflon Basics, which, despite its unattractive name, is a charming place. Its owner, a gentle fellow even though he went to Doon School, likes to be called Pele, and is happiest when drinking rum (provided by him) with his guests around a fire. After a night at Kuflon, we drove to the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in Uttarkashi, hired snow boots and crampons, and snapped Sunil at the foot of a statue of his illustrious ancestor Jawaharlal.

Since Uttarkashi is a pilgrim town, no meat or alcohol can be consumed there. But we were able to get a delicious *shuddh* vegetarian lunch in a dingy restaurant in the town centre. Its signboard, like those of all the other establishments in town, proclaimed it was located in 'Uttarkashi (UK)' throwing me off for a second, before I realised the initials stood for Uttarakhand.

Next stop, Gangotri. As we drove up, we passed the village of Harsil, where shortly after 1857, an English adventurer named Frederick Wilson set himself up and made a fortune exporting skins, fur and musk and selling timber to the Railways. He declared himself a *raja* and minted his own coins, some of which were still in use in the area in the 1930s. Another of Wilson's dubious legacies is the Charleville Hotel, which he built in Mussoorie and which now houses the IAS training academy.

Wilson's mansion in Harsil is supposed to be an attractive ruin. But we didn't check it out—we'd already been delayed by a landslide, and needed to get to Gangotri before dark.

Although Gangotri is traditionally described as the source of the Ganga, the river here is known as the Bhagirathi. Only at Devprayag much further south, where the Bhagirathi joins the Alakananda, does the holy stream become the Ganga.

Perhaps because the pilgrim season was about to end, Gangotri wasn't crowded and was extraordinarily clean by Indian standards. We ran into a bunch of four Mumbaikars who were going to climb Rudragaira, a mountain 5,820-metres mountain on the way to Auden's Col. They'd tried to make it across the Col the previous year, but failed. Since two of them were in their 20s, that didn't sound very encouraging.

There were a number of foreigners around too, most of them planning to walk to Gaumukh, 19 km away, where the river emerges from the Gangotri glacier. Most of them seemed to be going for religious reasons, although one Frenchman, a nuclear physicist, said he was merely tagging along with his wife.

Gangotri is at a height of 3,000 metres and we spent two days there getting acclimatised. I also began taking diamox, which is supposed to speed up the process. Diamox, oddly enough, is mainly used in the treatment of glaucoma, but is useful for climbers too. Another drug that helps acclimatisation is Viagra, but that's less commonly recommended, perhaps to ensure that all one's energy is reserved for the trek.

We left Gangotri on 5 October, and reached the Auden's Col base camp five days later, utterly spent. For me, the hardest part of the journey was not the endless trudge upwards, but walking across landslides, full of boulders and scree. While traversing such sections, one instinctively leans into the mountain, but that actually makes you more likely to slip. You're much better balanced if you stay upright, but that's the last thing your mind and body want to do. It was petrifying.

Coming down from Auden's Col—the part I'd been dreading the most—was, strangely enough, exhilarating. Given my fear of heights, that made no sense, but I enjoyed descending, harnessed to others

Sunil, too, had had his own problems. Every so often, he'd get an agonising catch in his back and be forced to stop and stretch to alleviate the pain. So by the time we got to base camp, both of us had decided: *Never again.*

We started the final climb to the Col at 4 am, in pitch darkness, wearing snow boots and crampons. Without thinking, I'd worn a pair of socks that reached only up to my ankles, and the tops of the boots rubbed my skin raw. We finally got to the top after ten hours of walking. In the account of his crossing, Auden said he took just a couple of hours, but perhaps his base camp was closer to the Col. Moreover, in 1939, when he did it, he was in his mid thirties.

Coming down from the Col—the part I'd been dreading the most—was, strangely enough, exhilarating. Given my fear of heights, that made no sense, but I enjoyed descending, harnessed to the others and holding onto a common rope.

Alas, that good feeling rapidly dissipated during the next couple of days as we stumbled and fumbled our way on the moraine of the Khatling glacier. Only on the last two days before we reached civilisation in the shape of the town of Guttu did the scenery become beautiful as we walked through some of the lush forests of Uttarakhand.

WHAT GIVES? I haven't a clue. But it's been more than a month since we returned home, and Sunil and I are planning to climb Stok Kangri (6,153 metres) in Ladakh next July. Care to join us? ■