

# Extra Masala

## LEGENDS OF THE COL

Badrinath to Madhmaheshwar is one of the most difficult treks you can set out on in India; the thrills on offer become all the more memorable thanks to the risks and tales of caution that pepper mythology.

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**F**aith and protein never sit easy, but nowhere is it more evident than at 4,500 metres above sea level in our kitchen tent. Which is being pummelled by hail. And slapped and roughed up by shrieking winds. The glacier under us moans and rumbles, the hollow grinding of ice and rock flooding our flimsy shelter.

“You shouldn’t have brought the eggs and canned fish,” Sundar says. “Now the gods are angry.”

You might think the Himalaya’s higher reaches are godforsaken places best left alone, but when Sundar, our local guide, speaks, they seem more alive than us dreary-

eyed souls in down suits reflexively rubbing hands in a losing battle against steadily dipping temperatures.

Behind us—four days’ walk over badlands of boulders, shifting surfaces of sand and rock, meadows abuzz with insects that sting and bite and across roiling rivers—lies Badrinath, the holiest of holy Vishnu shrines, from near which, Khairo *gaon*, to be precise, we began our journey. Ahead, over four full days, awaits even more challenging terrain: soft snow, steep inclines and vast expanses of glaciers riddled with crevasses that give way to precipitous valleys of rock and rock-fall all the way to Madhmaheshwar, the temple dedicated to Lord Shiva.



**UPHILL BATTLE**

Porters make their way up to Parvati Col, at 5,200 metres; the going is tough, crossing channels dug out by water melted by the sun's heat.

We are, in a manner of speaking, at Middle Earth, caught in the crosshairs of the preserver and destroyer.

For sure, this neck of the mountains in Uttarakhand's Garhwal region is hallowed as much in legend as in history. The former speaks of a priest from Kedarnath who walked all the way to Badrinath in a single day to light the temple's lamps. Even in that age before time, though, he had a wife who nagged him about staying home longer. When he turned a deaf ear to her pleas, she called on Shiva himself to help her out. After the mandatory *thathastu*, it is said, Shiva ordered Neelkanth, a peak, to rise on that route, and then carefully peppered the rest of the way with obstacles too great for a human to overcome.

What became of the poor priest after that no one knows, or cares about, although the legend endured enough for explorers Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman to try and find out for themselves how good Shiva was at setting up insurmountable hurdles.

They would have given the God an AAA rating, considering that beyond a col of the Sato-panth Bank, in a place called the Gundarpongi *gad*, they found themselves trapped between ice-walls on one side and bear-infested forests on the other. Then, as they tried in vain to forge a way forward, they ran out of food and just about managed to live to tell the tale, surviving on bamboo shoots for which they had to go "fighting with the bears".

The duo was among the luckier explorers. A party of two trekkers from West Bengal who tried to repeat the 1934 route in 1984 was never heard of, or seen, again. And these are only the documented stories. The mountains keep their secrets well, and with each disap-



Little wonder then, that in a near-vertical land of thin air and sub-zero temperatures, we find our fate held hostage by eggs and canned tuna.

Thankfully, Avilash, my friend, fellow trekker and guide who runs White Magic Adventure Travel, knows these problems only too well. Between no eggs and egg on the face, there is hardly any contest. He asks Siri Dai, the cook, to make us a vegetarian dinner. It's a silent offer of peace for Sundar, a hint of our menu for as long as we remained in the realm of *dev bhoomi*. The eggs and tuna would have to wait until the circuit was completed.

To say that we are treading where no one else ever has would be lying. The quest for Panpatia first bore fruit in 2000, when Martin Moran, an English mountaineer, led an expedi-

#### SNOW SCIENS

Porters (right) thread their way around a gaping crevasse on the Panpatia snowfield and sherpa Ang Dorjee (above) celebrates the successful crossing of the Panpatia Col.

speaking, less dangerous way up.

Knowing the route, though, does not make the trek any easier. Flying low on Googlemaps is one thing, walking the aftermath of seismic upheavals is a whole different...kettle of fish.

The next morning arrives bright and cheery, bathing in light the disorienting jumble of peaks and ridges and hanging glaciers all around us. But amid all of it shines Neelkanth, hefty and straight, piercing the errant clouds that floated too low. That is the direction we will be walking in. Beyond what is visible from our camp is a landscape in total disarray. Gigantic boulders lying strewn around the serrated surface of the glacier. Hissing streams snaking their way across the ice. Gaping crevasses waiting patiently for one false step.

Beyond that lies one last problem. A minor hill rising like a wave, carrying as its crest a knife ridge exposed completely to manic winds.

From where we camp that evening, on a seasonal snowfield being steadily chewed by water underneath, Debuda's proposed route feels no less dangerous. The flank of the mountain rockets to the sky at about 70 degrees to within touching distance of the col, and then disappears in the indigo dome of the sky.

We set out early the next morning, hoping to steal a march before the sun rises and softens the snow. We make good time, beating the sun

## WE ARE DRENCHED BY RAIN, BATTERED BY HAIL, BAKED BY THE SUN AND BLINDED BY WHITEOUTS....

pointment or disaster on the trail, the route grew only more silent.

"It is a testament to my father's very special approach to mountains that, with the Himalaya crawling with climbers of ever-increasing technical ability, not one in the 64 years...has even looked at the possibilities of mountain reconnaissance in this area. Indeed, as far as we know, the Panpatia glacier and other possible routes to connect Badrinath and Kedarnath are still untouched," John Shipton wrote in the *Himalayan Journal* in 1999.

tion to summit Neelkanth. After the successful ascent, Moran and his team managed to climb the dangerous Panpatia icefall, made possible in no small part by the equipment they carried with them, and then went on to exit from Madmaheshwar. India notched its success in 2008, using an unlikely ally to achieve the feat—Googlemaps. A man known simply as Debuda, from West Bengal, managed to mount a not only successful crossing but one that did not call for Moran's derring-do, skirting the deadly icefall altogether to find a, relatively



fullness of snow, the area seems one huge, perfect campsite.

"There's no more need to hurry," Avilash says. "These are the promised views for which we have gone through all this trouble. Let's enjoy them."

And then he adds, on a more sobering note, "Just make sure you keep an eye out for the crevasses."

That will be the only danger, but having eggs at the lower altitudes now proves a boon. The storm that had Sundar worried has dumped enough snow on the higher reaches to seal the crevasses well, making our journey a cakewalk.

There is better news still. The Panpatia col itself will not be a cause of great grief. We are already at 5,200 metres, about the same height as the col.

We are done with climbing. The col, when it comes, will only be a signal for a downhill roll, a sign of leaving this rarified world and heading to greener vales. But, that is if we discount storms.

The weather remains unpredictable throughout after that. We are drenched by rain, battered by hail, baked by the sun and blinded by whiteouts over the next two days, all the way to the Panpatia col, now reduced to a nursery hump we hardly take notice of. Only the stump of a rope and the precipitous drop on the other side reminds us of what great odds the col might have posed to parties that attempted this route from the other side.

We begin the slow march downhill to a valley patterned by wind and thin channels of water towards our destination for the day: the unmissable yellow tents that shine in the otherwise white surroundings.

With the most dreaded sections of the trek behind us and the adrenaline levels lower, all we crave now are dry socks and the views of carpets of grass in more merciful valleys. And by the time we get to Madhmaheshwar, I am assailed by thoughts of just about managing to limp across the finish line to the roadhead at Raansi.

And then I remember: I won't be surviving on bamboo shoots and wild mushrooms. We have enough eggs and canned tuna to help us all sail across in high spirits.

Even Sundar would agree. □

*A photographer and travel writer, the writer specializes in documenting remote regions of the Himalayas by living with the tribes that call these spaces home.*

on the western flank of the climb and entering the shadow of the eastern side—a place of deep snow and steep drops—by the time the effects of the solar warmth kick in.

We plough on in slow, steady motions, digging our ice axes in, taking turns to open a route by beating down the snow and waiting for drifting clouds to clear. As each layer of cloud clears, they reveal yet another heaving mountain waiting to be climbed.

At midday, we finally climb the last hump, beyond which the land flattens to a tabletop, bringing with it a different kind of disorientation—a desolate nothingness with little to lead

us on. Many a past traveller may have found himself lost on this stretch—climbing down the wrong valley, finding his advance blocked by an armada of crevasses and beaten back by winds too difficult to battle against—keeping him from connecting the final dots joining the Parvati and Panpatia cols.

But today the weather is clear, windless, and among the peaks that ring this plateau, we can easily identify Chaukhamba, the palace of Shiva, under whose gaze and in whose direction we will be walking the next two days.

There is no hurry any more. We will be traversing the plateau and, in its flatness and