

# GET GOING

**108 ADVENTURE**  
Life lessons on a trek to  
Stok Kangri peak in Ladakh

**113 ACTIVE HOLIDAY**  
Walking the wild side in  
Nepal's Chitwan National Park



Descending from Stok Kangri peak is even more challenging than the climb up as the sun makes the snow soft and the path slippery.

## Mind Games on the Mountain

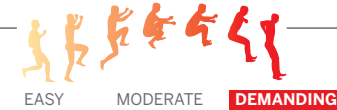
TREKKING IN THE MOUNTAINS IS ALWAYS SO MUCH MORE THAN A LONG WALK TO THE TOP  
**BY PRAVEEN SUTHRUM**

**T**his is a mind game, Dhruv Joshi, our usually reticent trek leader, tells me, before letting me steal some of the khichri that was cooked for the trek staff. He talks about how long a body can go without food and water. Ignoring his wisdom, I scoot off to the dining tent to share the spoils with my hungry trek mates. I had upset them earlier in the day with my slow hike from Gangpoche (14,173 feet) to Stok Kangri base camp (16,332 feet) in Ladakh. Home-style khichri with mango pickle should make up for my misdeeds.

Dhruv, who grew up in the Kumaon foothills, has the unperturbed demeanour of a climber who belongs in the mountains. He reveals the depth of his experience only when necessary by showing up exactly when someone needs assistance: at confusing turns, river crossings, and difficult rocks. At other times, he blends seamlessly into the Ladakh range of the

SAM DCRUZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

**INTENSITY** THE TREK IS PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY CHALLENGING AS PARTICIPANTS NAVIGATE THROUGH ROUGH TERRAIN IN EXTREME WEATHER.



Pack horses (left) carry tents, backpacks, food, and supplies up to base camp; Strings of Buddhist flags (right) are a common sight at passes. It is believed that wind carries prayers far and wide.



Karakoram mountains, climbing gently with a large green rucksack covering his back.

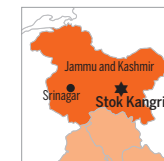
Base camps often have the vibrancy of anticipation, the energy of people ready for something big, but knowing they must wait for the right moment to make the final push. This one looks sparse. There aren't many tents except for an imposing blue-coloured one, where noodles, beverages, and climbing gear are sold. An awkward logo on the tent consists of an incomplete heart underneath different wise sayings. One advises us that "Worry dries up the blood sooner than age."

A stream flows unhurriedly on the side, and a sign near it warns people not to relieve themselves by the water. Yellow-billed choughs, members of the crow family that breed at a higher altitude than most birds, peck around the campsite. As with most base camps, we cannot see the peak we hope to summit because of how close we are to it. It is also snowing or raining continuously, and we are unsure if we should even attempt the climb scheduled for the next day.

Our trek started ten days ago, when we drove from Leh to Chilling, a village that appears from within a gorge running along the left bank of the Zaskar river, after it briefly meets the Indus. Accompanied by Dhruv and his staff, six of us started our journey on foot from one side of Chilling, after darting across the Zaskar on a pulley bridge. Ladakh's barrenness grew on me bit by bit, day by day. The dry desert winds, harsh sun, bitter cold nights, unexpected flower trails, thorns, rivers, rocks, snow-filled high passes—everything slowly moulded my being into something that was also becoming a part of this empty landscape.

ATLAS

**LADAKH,  
JAMMU AND  
KASHMIR**



Stok Kangri, the highest peak in the Stok Range of the Himalayas, with an elevation of over 20,187 feet, is almost 70 per cent the height of Mt. Everest.

I'd injured my back before this trek, but it seems to have magically healed since we started walking. On the day before our final climb, for which I had been preparing these past four months, there is some confusion caused by the less-than-perfect weather and an unexpected reduction in our group size. Two trek mates had decided not to attempt the climb after reaching base camp, and had returned to a lower altitude. They were the fittest and fastest among us on previous days, but Ladakh's adverse conditions can influence our minds and bodies in unpredictable ways.

That thought preys on me as I listen to Dhruv's instruction to "Dig your toes to climb and use your heels to descend," as we practice using snow shoes on a hill near base camp. The big white boots are also used by the Indian army while guarding our highest borders. They have a soft inner layer that lets you wiggle your toes, and an outer, rock-like layer that lets you dig your foot into snow. I feel as though I'm walking with weights around my ankles. Additionally, my harness, the purpose of which I'd rather not think about, keeps sliding down like ill-fitting underwear. I fall multiple times and can't decide whether I find this practice exercise fun, annoying, or worrisome.

When we return to our tents, I notice that my big toe has developed a blister from the snow boots. Padding it up with blister tape only makes me more conscious of it. The climb, if it happens at all, will begin after midnight. Racked by fatigue, backache, and a new blister, I desperately need to perk up. I have climbed other difficult mountains like Kilimanjaro before, but somehow that fact doesn't encourage me. I find



Dhruv’s words from the previous day resonating in my head: This is a mind game. Yes, it is.

Overwhelmed by the constant tumult inside my head, I sit down to meditate. Taking deep breaths is difficult at high altitude, but it helps me calm down and accept the situation for what it is. I finally manage to sleep despite a noisy group playing football, a dangerous choice of game at this elevation.

It’s 2.30 a.m. when the weather miraculously becomes conducive to a climb, and the full moon shines like a flashlight flagging-off our expedition. Getting ready to scale over 3,000 feet in the next several hours we don our gear, which consists of multiple layers of clothing, harness, snow boots with gaiters, crampons, and a backpack with water and food.

In just a few minutes we encounter our first steep climb. With the additional gear, ascending the nearly 60-degree incline feels robotic and unnatural, adding to the challenge. I use a mental count (one, pause, two, pause, one...) to impel me slowly upward, thereby maintaining my heart rate at a steady pace.

Through my adult life, I have lived with hypertension. In the initial years, after I was diagnosed with the condition, I passively accepted medications and stress as part of a genetic deal that my body inherited. Through my 20s, I was slowly consumed by a sedentary existence that made the years roll by. And then, just like that at age 33, I bought an Enfield motorcycle and drove all the way from Mumbai at sea level to Khardung La at 17,582 feet, which is one of the highest roads in the world.

The journey woke me up from within, and made me reflect on everything differently. I perceived the short shelf life that our bodies have for the many possibilities this world offers. Encountering various people in remote India allowed me a glimpse into the magnificence of the human condition. It appeared foolish to trap myself into imaginary little boxes. When I returned, I quietly went about doing the things that I knew my heart desired but didn’t insist on because of pointless fears. That’s when I started climbing mountains. That’s how I’m here, almost at the top of the highest trekking peak in India.

By around 5.43 a.m., the sun hides behind the clouds, but our surroundings are more visible now. Buddhist prayer flags mark the beginning of the glacier. The climb to the ridge begins here and it is hard not to be aware of the milky whiteness encompassing us. I feel both nauseous and heady with appreciation for where we are.

Soon, the sun is out, shining brightly against a deep blue sky. White clouds move at a leisurely pace, and they seem to be the only things moving besides us. Everything else is still or subtle. Cool winds blow on and off. Our shadows dance against the white surface of the snow as we keep plodding on. Other than two trekkers who went ahead of us, our group is quite alone on the entire range this morning. I get a sense of being lost in time.



Cups of hot tea are passed around as soon as the kitchen tent (top) is set up at the day’s campsite; Kneeling on the snow near the peak, the writer (bottom) absorbs the sight of the snowy mountains all around.

I shake away from one mood to another, suddenly remembering the actress Sridevi in her role as a celestial nymph in a 25-year-old Telugu movie that an entire generation obsessed over as teenagers. She meets the movie’s earthly hero during a song sequence set in the Himalayas. In a more innocent era, the director played to the imagination of the masses by creating the mountain ranges with plastic bags, cotton globules, and plants illuminated with green lights. Just like she did in the song, I visualise Sridevi swaying on godly white wings, up on Stok Kangri. Perhaps she’s summoning me, or urging me to shut up and climb on. The fleeting thought comforts me and I keep moving on, step by step.

Dhruv and Chain Singh, our supporting guides, help with our harnesses. A rope unites the entire group as we climb a steep and deadly 75-degree incline. While the harness safeguards us from falling off, it also increases the risk of a single mistake taking everyone down. Using a pickaxe, Dhruv leads us higher and higher. I resume my mental counts to climb

PRAVEEN SUTHRUM



slowly but the gaps between counts become longer as I take time to catch my breath. The thin air and rough weather make it an exhausting exercise, demanding every ounce of stamina. The responsibility of the interdependent climb makes the mind even more alert and focused.

After ten hours of steady climbing, we reach a high point of the range, after which the ridge begins. At over 19,850 feet, it’s the highest point I have climbed so far. Given the time we have left, we take the hard but sensible decision not to risk continuing to the summit though it is only another 330 feet or so away. I see the massive Himalayan ranges of Karakoram and Zaskar around us, intermingling gently with clouds. It is a view that I have often seen on flights to Leh. Realising that we are standing above most of life as it exists on Earth, I’m enveloped by a sense of gratitude for my long journey.

“Sit in the middle of the group, otherwise you’ll drop all the way down and take us along,” Dhruv says smilingly, but with obvious concern, jolting me from my thoughts. I realise I am sitting on the edge with my backpack weighing in the wrong direction. So I kneel down and blissfully absorb the scene around. But the precious few moments escape all too fast and we decide to descend so that we can return to base camp before dusk.

Going downhill, the powdery snow makes it easy for us to slide rapidly down several hundred feet. We hold the trekking poles like a scooter handle and use our legs to slide. It feels like I am part of another joyous Telugu film fantasy. In the sliding, our group has

Trekkers have to use snow shoes with crampons to walk up the steep glacier section of the trek.

separated and I can see others in the distance as small specks on a huge sheet of white. I still find it hard to believe that we are all alone for hundreds of kilometres all around, an impossible occurrence in cities.

Clouds gather again. Dense cumulonimbus formations are about to drench us when at 3.35 p.m., 13 hours after leaving base camp, we reach the Buddhist flags that marked the start of our glacier walk.

I’m walking back with Dhruv and ask him his views on the virtues of trekking slowly at a steady pace at high altitudes. He responds by narrating the story of a Japanese man who climbed over 22,900 feet at the age of 70. He would start earlier than the rest of the group and reach camp much after them. He went on the trek to keep a promise to his friend who had passed on, and for whom he wanted to perform a sacred ritual on top. Mountains have the ability to bridge the gap for many people in unique ways. Well, in the end it is a mind game.

The sun has made the snow loose and powdery, making sections of the track more treacherous than they were earlier in the day. My leg keeps dropping into orifices two feet deep. I use my walking sticks to dig myself out and keep going. At sunset, I finally reach camp, and the sight of the tents triggers the happy feeling of returning home.

From the window of the van driving back to Leh, I see a range of mountains zoom by. In the far distance is Stok Kangri, easily recognisable by its jagged edges. It sits still while we keep moving. These transient images seem to reveal something about how life keeps on changing, and yet it never really does.

ROBERT PRESTON PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE



## The Guide



Sure-footed pack mules carry the trekkers' gear and other camp supplies. Though the staff and animals leave after the trekkers, they quickly overtake them.

**Orientation** Stok Kangri is the highest mountain in the Stok range of the Himalayas in Ladakh. The Stok Kangri base camp (16,322 feet) lies southeast of the summit and can be approached through various routes. However, it is best to take the longer route as it helps ease acclimatization. The closest airport is Leh, which has daily flights from Delhi.

**Maximum altitude** 20,187 feet

**Grade** Challenging; prior experience in the Himalayas is preferable.

**Cost** From Delhi, a 15-day trek via the Markha Valley costs ₹74,400 per head. A shorter, 11-day version of the trek costs ₹52,300. The writer travelled with White Magic ([www.whitemagicadventure.com](http://www.whitemagicadventure.com)).

**Season** End-June to mid-September

**What to expect** The trek begins in Chilling (60 km/2 hr from Leh), and passes through Ski (11,155 feet) and Mounkarmo (14,370 feet) over seven days before reaching Stok Kangri Base Camp. After a day of rest, trekkers finally begin the ascent to Stok

Kangri (20,187 feet). You could be trekking for 3-7 hours a day.

**Weather** In the valleys, the temperature is 15-30°C during the day and 10-15°C at night. At the base camp, the night-time temperature can be as low as -5°C. It might rain or snow occasionally. The sun is pretty harsh at higher altitudes.

**Terrain** The route goes through rivers and high passes. In June and July, the mountain is covered in deep snow and trekkers must be equipped with climbing shoes, harness, crampons, and gaiters. By mid-August, the snow melts and most of the climb is over rocky terrain.

**Gear** Good gear is key to enjoying the trek and helps prevent injury. Ensure you have plastic double mountaineering boots or well insulated, four-season mountaineering boots. You will also need crampons with front points, trekking sticks, climbing harness, karabiners, a four-season sleeping bag (at least 0°C). Invest in a good pair of walking boots, waterproof jacket and trousers, fleece jacket or similar, a down jacket (optional), warm hat and gloves,

sunglasses, a day pack, headlamp, water bottles, and the all-important sunscreen.

There are several shops in Leh that sell all outdoor and camping gear at reasonable prices. You could also rent the climbing gear in Leh itself, which costs at least ₹400-500 a day for the boots, crampons, harness, karabiners, and poles.

**Fitness** Your fitness levels will make all the difference between enjoying this trek and merely enduring it. Begin training at least a month before the trip, and incorporate aerobic training such as running, cycling, or swimming. For strength training, go for long hikes or climb stairs with a heavy backpack a couple of times a week.

**Acclimatization** Set aside two days for acclimatization in Leh. At any stage during the trek, the average gain in sleeping altitude should not be over 1,000 feet.

**Climbing Permit** Trekkers need a permit to climb Stok Kangri. Permits are available at the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's office in Leh for ₹200 for Indians and ₹2,000 for foreign nationals. This is usually arranged by the trekking company. ●