

A pilgrim's progress

Tracing a legendary Himalayan route that foiled even Shipton takes fortitude, and perhaps, the indulgence of the gods themselves

Story & photography by Sankar Sridhar



FAITH AND PROTEIN OFTEN DON’T GO WELL TOGETHER, but nowhere is this more evident than at 4,500 metres above sea level, in our kitchen tent. Which is being pummelled by hail. And slapped about and roughed up by shrieking winds. The glacier under us moans and rumbles, the hollow grinding sound of ice and rock flooding through our flimsy shelter.

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

Many might think of the Himalaya’s frigid higher reaches as godforsaken, but when our local guide Sundar speaks, the mountains seem very much alive. More alive in fact than we ourselves feel, dreary-eyed souls in down suits reflexively rubbing hands in a losing battle against steadily dipping temperatures.

Behind us – four days’ walk back over badlands of boulders, shifting

surfaces of sand and rock and across roiling rivers – lies Badrinath, the holiest of holy Vishnu shrines, from near which, at the village of Khirao to be precise, we began our journey. Ahead, awaits Panpatia Col, guarded by even more challenging terrain: soft snow, steep inclines and vast expanses of glacier riddled with crevasses that eventually give way to precipitous valleys, prone to rock-fall, that run all the way to Madhyamaheshwar, a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Together with Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva form the Trimurti, the Hindu personifications of the cosmic functions of creation, maintenance, and destruction respectively. We are, in a manner of speaking, seesawing between the preserver and the destroyer.

This range of mountains in Uttarakhand’s Garhwal region is rich in legend and history. The former speaks of a priest from Kedarnath who would walk all the way to Badrinath every day to light the temple’s lamps. His wife nagged him about spending more time at home with her and, when he turned a deaf ear to her pleas, she called on Shiva to help her out. It is said that Shiva placed the peak of Neelkanth in the way, and peppered the rest of the route with obstacles too great for humans to overcome.

What became of the poor priest no one knows, but the legend was enduring enough to whet the appetite of early European explorers of the area. In 1912, C.F. Meade reached a col on the Satopanth glacier but returned announcing that pilgrims could not possibly walk that route. Then in 1934, the famous pair of Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman set out to see just how insurmountable Shiva’s obstacles were.

Quite considerable, would have been their answer, considering that beyond a col on the Satopanth, in a place called Gandharpongi Gad (*gad*



means stream), they found themselves trapped between ice-walls on one side and bear-infested forests on the other. A trip they had expected to take two days extended beyond two weeks as they tried in vain to forge a way forward, running out of food in the process and just about managing to live to tell the tale, surviving on bamboo shoots for which, in Shipton’s words, they had to go “fighting with the bears”.

Even so, the duo was among the luckier pioneers. A party of two trekkers from West Bengal who tried to repeat the 1934 route in 1984 was never heard of, or seen, again. The mountains kept their secrets well, and with each disappointment or disaster on the trail, the route only grew more silent.

“It is a testament to my father’s very special approach to mountains,” wrote Shipton’s son, John, in the *Himalayan Journal* back in 1999, “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.”

Little wonder then that we find the success of our own mission stalled, though in our case Sundar believes it has less to do with glaciers, crevasses, inclement weather or bad health, and more to do with eggs and tinned tuna.

Between having no eggs and having egg on the face though, there is no

EARLY DAYS
Clockwise from above left: The campsite on day one; porters slog across the vast moraines of the lower Parvati Glacier; the source of the Khirao Ganga.





contest. My partners in this adventure, Avilash and Pawan Bisht, and I, are here as part of a project-in-progress to document the routes of the famous explorers of the 19th and 20th centuries. We don't need to debate our next step, Avilash simply asks Siri Dai, our cook, to make us a vegetarian dinner by way of a peace offering to Sundar. Pawan and I repack our eggs and tuna: the protein can wait until we reach lower, more mundane hills outside the Dev Bhoomi (Land of the Gods).

Since John Shipton wrote what he did, two expeditions have succeeded in making this crossing. In 2000, Martin Moran, an English mountaineer, led an expedition that summited Neelkanth, then went on to climb the dangerous Panpatia icefall. Exiting at Kedarnath, they became the first to crack the elusive mystery of a route between the temples.

Then, in 2008, a man known simply as Debuda, from West Bengal, managed a successful crossing, employing Google Earth to find a route that didn't call for Moran's derring-do, skirting the deadly icefall altogether. This route followed Khiraon Ganga, a stream that emerges from the base of the glacier and flows through a valley parallel to the one used by Shipton-Tilman and Moran, a valley which Indian explorer Harish Kapadia said in 1997 might offer an easier crossing.

Still, maps, research, preparation, and even the knowledge of previous success, do little to make a journey any easier on the ground. Flying low on Google Earth is one thing, walking the terrain itself is a whole different . . . well . . . kettle of fish.

« **Gnarled and broken, it tumbles layer by insurmountable layer all the way down to the valley floor in front of us, looking every bit as dangerous from below as it had to Shipton who'd viewed it from up above.** »

The next morning dawns bright, bathing the disorienting jumble of peaks, ridges and hanging glaciers in cheery early light. Sundar, too, is upbeat, obviously mollified by our climb-down over last night's dinner.

To our west towers the main icefall of the Parvati glacier. Gnarled and broken, it tumbles layer by insurmountable layer all the way down to the valley floor in front of us, looking every bit as dangerous from below as it had to Shipton who'd viewed it from up above: "We gazed down upon the head of a very formidable icefall. It was appallingly steep and for a very

COMMANDING VIEW

With no set trails, team members chose either a lower, easier route or else a higher route that offered views of the surroundings. The rocky peak in the centre of shot bottom left is Neelkanth.





long time we could not see any way of tackling it which offered the slightest hope of success.”

We thank our stars for the advantages of modern technology, for the gully that Google Earth threw up for Debuda, a thin line of possible success that winds its way up next to the now sun-kissed bulk of Neelkanth. The peak rises boldly and straight, piercing a few errant clouds, an unmissable landmark in this Himalayan labyrinth. Taking this line allows us to skirt the icefall entirely.

That’s not to say it is trivial. Save for the orderly mass of Neelkanth, the landscape seems in total disarray. Gigantic boulders are strewn across the serrated surface of the glacier. Hissing streams snake their way atop the ice. Gaping crevasses await any false steps. Thankfully we cross it all without incident – only to be confronted by the next obstacle.

A minor hill rises wave-like, carrying at its crest a knife-edge ridge exposed to manic winds. We make slow progress on this stretch, huffing, puffing, resting and threading our way to the point where the ridge melts

« All around us rise great walls of rock so steep there’s no place even for snow to cling. Debuda’s route leads us to the flank of the mountain that rockets up at about 70° ... »

anticlimactically into a seasonal snowfield on the flank of the next hill. That hill marks the end of anything close to horizontality. All around us rise great walls of rock so steep there’s no place even for snow to cling. Debuda’s route leads us to the flank of the mountain that rockets up at about 70°, disappearing into the indigo dome of the sky.

This isn’t the best place to camp – the snow being steadily chewed into by underground streams, but it will have to do. We hurry through dinner and call it a day.

We set out early next morning, hoping to steal a march before the sun rises and softens the snow, making the climb more difficult and dangerous. We make good time, beating the rays on the western flank of the climb then entering the shadow on the eastern side – a place of deep snow and steep drops – by the time the warmth of the rays kicks in.

We plough on in slow, steady fashion, digging our ice axes in, taking turns to open a route by beating down the snow and waiting for drifting clouds to clear to return visibility to more than five metres. As each layer of cloud clears away, it reveals yet another hump of snow to be climbed.

At midday, we finally surmount the last of the mounds, beyond which the land flattens to a tabletop, bringing with it a kind of disorientation. The flatness and fullness of snow makes the area one huge, perfect campsite, but the nothingness also gives few clues to help with directions. It is easy to imagine travellers losing their way on this stretch: climbing down the wrong

STEEP AND BLEAK
The near-never-ending climb up to Parvati col (above), gives way to a blank expanse of snowfield (right).



valley to find their advance blocked by an armada of crevasses, or beaten back by winds too difficult to battle against.

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

“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.”

Then he adds a more sobering note. “Just make sure you keep an eye out for the crevasses.”

Perhaps our supposed dietary transgression has even helped here though. The storm that had Sundar so worried two days ago has dumped enough snow on the higher reaches to seal off the crevasses, much simplifying our trek.

And there is more good news. We are already above 5,000 metres, leaving us only a further 400 metres to reach Panpatia Col itself. We are mostly done with climbing.

The col signals the start of the long downhill, leaving the rarified world of white for greener vales. But the weather remains unpredictable. Over the

next two days, as we climb up to, then traverse the col, we are drenched by rain, battered by hail, baked by sun and blinded by whiteouts. Still the obstacle is a nursery hump we hardly need take notice of in comparison with what has gone before. As we

OUT OF DESOLATION . . .

After a long walk out, a discovery on the final leg from Madhyamaheshwar to Raansi gave the chance for a joyful and much-needed soaking.

descend, only the stump of a rope and the precipitous drop on the other side remind us of what slim odds the col offers to parties that attempt the route from the other side.

We begin the slow march downhill to a valley patterned by wind and rivulets of water towards our destination for the day: our porters have gone ahead and set up a clutch of yellow tents that leap out of the otherwise off-white surroundings.

With the dreaded sections of the trek behind us and the adrenaline levels lower, all we crave for now are dry socks and views of carpets of grass in more merciful valleys. But even these are hard-won, for rain and cloud and moraines litter the onward journey. We slide across gentle slopes of snow, boulder across gigantic rocks and negotiate a slew of streams until, at last, we spot the forests of pine and oak far below us. Hidden somewhere within lies the temple of Madhyamaheshwar.

We reach it the next day over a disarmingly gentle track that bends to meet a rather nondescript structure. There is little sense of divinity here, especially as the door leading to the sanctum of Lord Shiva is locked. With the lone priest away, there is no hope of gaining an audience with the lord and we pass on our final stretch out to the roadhead at Raansi with just a simple nod of respect.

As often happens on a hard trip, the final kilometres, with the goal all but assured, seem the hardest. Still, unlike Shipton and Tilman, we won't have to survive on bamboo shoots and wild mushrooms stolen from under the paws of bears. We have enough eggs and canned tuna stored up to last us an eternity. **AA**

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The main window is from early May to mid-June. Daytime temperatures hover around 18°C, with night temperatures as low as -10°C. Expect rain, snow and bouts of bad weather at any time. The post-monsoon period around the end of September is also possible, though temperatures could easily be 5°C lower.

How to get there

The closest international airport is Delhi. From there, fly to Dehradun or take a train to Haridwar in Uttarakhand. A jeep to Joshimath (270 kilometres) takes eight-nine hours. Continue to Badrinath the following day – another two hours. Start the trek from where Khirao Ganga meets the Alaknanda (about 12 kilometres short of Badrinath). If you begin at Badrinath itself, you will need to cross Holdsworth’s Pass/Neelkanth Khal (4,650 metres) first.

What to take

This is a full-on expedition so you’ll need mountaineering boots, crampons, ropes, some anchors (snow bars, ice- and rock-pitons) as well as good quality three- or four-season tents, sleeping bags, and clothing suitable for low temperatures. You can hire equipment from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in New Delhi.



Contact and further info

The route across Panpatia Col is not offered commercially. The author thanks White Magic Adventure Travel, www.whitemagicadventure.com, for their support on his trek.

Trekking permits are available from the Forest Department in Joshimath, tel: (91-1389) 333 179. There is an entry fee of Rs150 per person and Rs100 per tent per night.

Porters are also organised in Joshimath. Equip them with good gear and sleeping bags to ensure they don’t abandon you midway through!

There are no settlements between Khiraon and Madhyamaheshwar. Inform officials at Joshimath, and friends and family, of your proposed itinerary in case rescue is needed.

