

Adventure sport



WITH THE MOST DREADED SECTIONS OF THE TREK BEHIND US AND THE ADRENALINE LEVELS LOWER, ALL WE CRAVE FOR NOW ARE DRY SOCKS AND THE VIEWS OF CARPETS OF GRASS IN MORE MERCIFUL VALLEYS. BUT EVEN THOSE ARE HARD-WON

we can easily identify Chaukhamba, the he adds a more palace of Shiva, under whose gaze and in whose direction we will be walking the he adds a more make sure you keep the crevasses."

That will be the crevasses of the crevas of the crevas

There is no hurry any more. We will be traversing the plateau, and in its flatness and 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 a more sobering note. "Just make sure you keep an eye out for the crevasses."

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

There is better news still. The Panpatia col itself, at 5,400 metres, will

not be a cause of great grief. We are already above 5,000 metres.

The end of a climb

We are mostly 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. 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, so 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 poses 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 for now are dry socks and the views of carpets of grass in more merciful valleys. But even those are hard-won. For rains and clouds and boulders litter the onward journey. We slide across gentle slopes of snow, boulder across gigantic rocks and negotiate a slew of streams until we, at last, spot the forests of pine and oak far below us. Hidden somewhere within it is the temple of Madhyamaheshwar.

By the time we get to
Madhyamaheshwar the next day, I am
assailed by depressing thoughts of just
about managing to limp across the
finish line to the roadhead at Raansi.

And then I remember: There will be a well-marked village trail we will follow and, more important, unlike Shipton and Tilman, I won't be surviving on bamboo shoots and wild mushrooms. We have enough eggs and canned tuna to help us all sail across with breath to spare. Even Sundar, I am sure, will agree.

RAILBANDHU | 142 | APRIL 2013

Adventure sport Adventure sport



suit, reflexively rubbing hands in a losing battle against steadily dipping temperatures.

TOT_TIO_DIMNUM(TE): MAGE TOTO 1:20 III I LUGE TOT

Behind us — four days' walk over badlands of boulders, shifting surfaces of sand and rock, meadows abuzz with insects, some capable of stinging and biting, and across roiling rivers — lies Badrinath, the holiest of holy Vishnu shrines, from near which, Khiraogaon 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 Madhyamaheshwar, the temple dedicated to Lord Shiva.

We are, in a manner of speaking, at Middle Earth, caught in the crosshairs of the preserver and the destroyer. As daunting as it may sound, the baby steps towards this unearthly realm was made in the airconditioned comfort of the Delhi-Dehradun Shatabdi, on board which we were plied with non-vegetarian fare that, on hindsight, felt as a wonderful way to build up on protein reserves that would perhaps stand us in good stead when our bodies would crave it most. The train also provided us with the last proper night of rest up until Haridwar, where we reached at the crack of dawn to set out on the bone-rattling journey to Badrinath.

Legends hold true

132_13_81MMM(12):4MM 2/13/130 /:23 III 1490 133

sure, this neck of the mountains between the holy shrines in Uttarakhand's Garhwal region is hallowed as much in legend as in history. The former speaks of a priest from Kedarnath, who would walk all the way to Badrinath every day and find out for themselves how to light the temple's lamps. Even in that good Shiva was at setting up age before time, though, he had a wife who nagged him about spending more time at home with her. When he turned a deaf ear to her pleas, she called on Shiva himself to help her out. After the mandatory tathastu (so be it), 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 humans to overcome.

Nobody knows what became of the poor priest though the legend was enduring enough to whet the appetite

of explorers of the mettle of C.F. Meade. In 1912, he reached a col on the Satopanth glacier but returned from there announcing that it could not possibly be a route pilgrims could walk. In 1934, explorers Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman set out to try insurmountable hurdles.

They would have given the god an AAA rating, considering that beyond a col of the Satopanth Bank, in a place called the Gandharpongi gad, they found themselves trapped between icewalls on one side and bear-infested forests on the other. A route they had expected to cover in two days extended to 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. They survived on bamboo shoots

for which, in Shipton's words, 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 were only the documented stories. The mountains kept their secrets well, and with each disappointment or disaster on the trail, the route grew only more silent.

"It is a testament to my father's very special approach to the 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," Shipton's son John wrote in the *Himalayan Journal* in 1999.



RAILBANDHU | 134 | APRIL 2013 RAILBANDHU | 135 | APRIL 2013 Adventure sport Adventure sport



PRACTICALITIES

When to go: Early May to mid-June. Daytime temperatures hover about 18C and night time temperatures can fall to -10C.

How to get there: The Delhi-Dehradun Shatabdi offers the most comfortable way of getting to Haridwar in Uttarakhand. From there on take a jeep to Joshimath (270km/8-9 hrs) and then continue to Badrinath the following day (50km/2 hrs). One could start the trek either from Badrinath or from the point where Khirao Ganga meets the Alaknanda (about 12 km short of Badrinath). If you start from Badrinath, you will need to cross the Holdsworth's Pass (also known as Neelkanth Khal/Pass at 4,650m to descend to Panpatia glacier)

What to take: This is a proper expedition-style trek, so one needs to be really well equipped mountaineering boots, crampons, ropes, some anchors (snow bars, icepitons and rock-pitons) apart from

regular trekking gear such as good quality 3/4-season tents, sleeping bags and good clothing for low temperatures are essential. This is not a trek for the ill-prepared. You can hire equipment from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation in New Delhi.

Contact and further info:

Trekking permits are available from the Forest Department in Joshimath. +91-1389-333179. There is an entry fee of ₹150 per person and Rs100 per tent per night. There is a forest department checkpost at Khadara, halfway between Madhyamaheshwar and Raansi, on the last day of the trek. Porters for the trek can be organised from Joshimath. It is important to equip the porters with good equipment and sleeping bags to ensure the success of the expedition. Without proper gear, there is a high chance that they will abandon the team midway through the trek.

Mapping our way

Little wonder then, that in a near-vertical land of thin air and sub-zero temperatures, we find the success of our mission stalled not by glaciers or crevasses or inclement weather or bad health, but by measly eggs and canned tuna.

Thankfully, Avilash and Pawan Bisht, my friends, fellow trekkers and guides who run White Magic Adventure Travel, know eggs and egg on the face, there is hardly any contest — this trek is part of our project-in-progress to document in images, text and maps the routes hailed by the high and mighty explorers of the 19th and the 20th centuries.

Avilash asks Siri Dai, our cook, to make us a vegetarian dinner. It's a silent offering of peace to Sundar, a hint of our menu for

as long as we remained in the realm of Dev Bhoomi (the land of the gods). Pawan and I repack the eggs and tuna to drive home the point —the protein could wait until we reached lower, more mundane hills.

To say that we are treading where no one else ever has would be a lie. The quest for Panpatia first bore fruit in 2000, when Martin Moran, an English mountaineer, led an expedition to summit these problems only too well. Between no Neelkanth. After the successful ascent of the peak, Moran and his team managed to climb the dangerous Panpatia icefall, a feat made possible in no small part by the equipment they carried with them, and then went on to exit at Kedarnath, becoming the first party to manage to lay to rest the elusive mystery of the route between the two temples.

India notched its success in 2008, using

TOZ_TIO_BINNIGHT(TZ): QNG Z/TO/TOO /:20 III IGGC TO





Google Earth. A man known simply as Debuda, from West Bengal, managed to mount not only a successful crossing but one that did not call for Moran's derring-do, skirting the deadly icefall altogether to find a, relatively speaking, less dangerous way up. This was a

an unlikely ally to achieve the feat — route that followed Khiraon ganga, a not successfully find a route. stream that emerged from the base of the Panpatia glacier and flowed through a valley parallel to the one used by Shipton-Tilman and then Martin Moran, and which Indian explorer Harish Kapadia in 1997 said might offer an easier crossing — though he could

Maps, research, preparation, and the knowledge of previous success, though, rarely help in making the real slog any easier. Flying low on Google Earth is one thing, walking the aftermath of seismic upheavals is a whole different ... well ... kettle of fish.

Vertical limit

The next morning arrives bright and cheery, quite like Sundar, bathing in light the disorienting jumble of peaks, ridges and hanging glaciers all around us.

To our west, within spitting distance, rises the main icefall of the Parvati glacier. Gnarled and broken, it tumbles this Himalayan labyrinth. down layer by insurmountable layer all the way to the valley floor, every bit as dangerous as Shipton described it: "We gazed down upon the head of a very formidable icefall. If was appallingly steep and for a very long time we could not see any way of tackling it which offered the slightest hope of success."

We thank our stars for the advantage of technology, for the gully that Google Earth had thrown up — a thin line of possible success that winds its way up from next to the now-shiny Neelkanth. The peak rises hefty and straight, piercing the errant clouds that float too low, an unmissable landmark in

Beyond what is visible from our camp is a landscape in total disarray. Gigantic boulders strewn around the serrated surface of the glacier. Hissing streams snaking their way across the ice. Gaping crevasses waiting patiently for one false step. We cross it all without incident only to stare at the next the sky.

obstacle. A minor hill that rises like a wave, carrying as its crest a knife ridge exposed completely to manic winds.

We make slow progress on this stretch, huffing, puffing, resting and threading our way ahead to the final point where the ridge melts into a seasonal snowfield on the flank of the next hill. It's also the end of horizontality. All around us rise great walls of rock so steep there's no place even for snow to cling. It is also the safer route proposed by Debuda. We spot the flank of the mountain that offers us salvation, rocketing up at about 70 degrees, disappearing into the indigo dome of

RAILBANDHU | 139 | APRIL 2013

visibility to return to more than 5 metres. Where we are isn't the best place to As each layer of cloud clears, they reveal camp — the snow being steadily chewed by underground streams. But it would have yet another heaving hump of snow waiting to do. We hurry through dinner and call it to be climbed. At midday, we finally climb the last mountainside, beyond which the land Flat out flattens to a tabletop, bringing with it a We set out early the next morning, hoping different kind of disorientation — a desolate nothingness with little to lead us to steal a march before the sun rises and on. Many a past traveller may have found softens the snow. We make good time, beating the sun on the western flank of the himself lost on this stretch — climbing down the wrong valley, finding his advance climb and entering the shadow of the eastern side — a place of deep snow and blocked by an armada of crevasses and steep drops — by the time the effects of beaten back by winds too difficult to battle against — keeping him from connecting the solar warmth kicks in. the final dots joining the Parvati and We plough on in slow, steady motions, Panpatia cols. digging our ice axes in, taking turns to open a route by beating down the snow But today the weather is clear, windless and in the peaks that ring in this plateau, and waiting for drifting clouds to clear and