



The pass masters

Historic Auden's Col in the Garhwal Himal of Uttarakhand has defeated all but a handful of the most determined trekkers

Story & photography by Sankar Sridhar

PANTED AIR TREMBLES IN THE BOBBING LIGHT OF HEADLAMPS that scour the valley floor ahead for solid ground. Wary legs follow in their wake, measured strides picking a route across slivers of ice and jumbles of rock. The shadowy bulk of the Rabbit’s Ear rises where the massifs meet – Jogin to the east and Gangotri to the west. It looks a long way off and between us and it lies ground that few have ever crossed.

The Himalayas in India’s Garhwal region are famous for rebuffing the hasty and ill-prepared, but few routes turn back more trekkers than the one we are on – a crossing of Auden’s Col. At 5,400m, this snow-draped saddle connecting the Rudragaira and Bhilangana valleys is no Everest, but yet, in the decades since its discovery in 1939, it has offered more lessons in human failure than triumph. It still is, as geologist J.B. Auden (brother of the writer W.H. Auden) himself pointed out in his 1940 trip report, “not a col that could be crossed by unequipped parties”.

Auden made his audacious crossing from Gangotri at the end of a tiring two-month exploration of the region that left him yearning to end his “primitive way of life, keen to make a short route across the range, thereby saving several days”. This was a route, he wrote, that locals were aware of, though no one from their generation, or their father’s, had ever walked it.

News of his traverse of the near-fabled route spread rapidly and soon teams were setting out to leave their own footprints on the barely mapped

region. Each season began with hope but ended only in defeat – for more than 40 years. Incredibly, it took until 1983 for a team of two from Bengal to taste success. Only 11 teams have since equalled the feat.

The intervening seven decades have seen plenty of technological refinements – we are equipped with ropes, harnesses, carabiners, snow stakes, ice pitons, snow boots, crampons and ice-axes, far more than what Auden would have carried with him.

Our journey to the roadhead, too, was much more comfortable. We had taken an overnight train from Delhi to Haridwar and from there on proceeded by jeep to Gangotri, on the banks of the there-nascent Bhagirathi and one of the holiest pilgrimage spots in the country. Also, unlike Auden, we were hungering to get away from habitation, not craving to find it.

We left the exhaust fumes, blaring horns and bristling tempers of ‘civilisation’ behind, and shrugged off its last traces as we crossed the bridge over the Bhagirathi gorge to enter the pine forest on the other side.

Through the maze of massive trees, some of which may have witnessed Auden pass, we followed a dawdling track that shrank steadily as the underbrush crept in to reclaim little-trod ground. Three hills later, the track plunged into untrammelled grass. Then came pine forest, which surrendered to maple and oak groves, which were in turn supplanted by birch resplendent in the shades of fall. Surging rivers took over from whispering brooks,

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WEATHERING THE STORM
Clouds gather over an unnamed peak of the Jogin Massif. The sky clears after a sudden snowstorm near Auden’s Col Base Camp.





pebbles petered away to make way for boulders, birdsong died, vultures patrolled the sky. With every step, the mountains closed in further, asserting their dominance and, for good measure, throwing a few introductory obstacles in our way.

By the time we reached Rudragaira nullah, a stream bisecting a little plateau in a world verging on the vertical, we had crossed landslides, tenterhooked over a rotten log bridge and barely slithered unscathed across a rockfall at the edge of the treeline. Yet our mission to flee all signs of others would still have to wait, for behind a hunkering rock we spied a tent. Outside it stood a couple, cups of steaming tea in their hands. A halt was called, and after exchanging courtesies, we learnt they were from Mumbai, part of a seven-member team on an expedition to summit Rudragaira (5,819m), the peak after which the valley is named.

“So, where are you headed?” one of them asked.

“Ghuttu, across Auden’s Col,” Avilash Bisht, the leader of our group, replied.

“Oh! That’s a tough one. We attempted it in 2010, but could not cross it. And we had good weather, too.”

We cast our eyes up at the sky, now strafed with cirrus clouds, harbingers of bad weather. The information was disheartening, especially coming from people who were clearly fit, experienced climbers. They described the research they had done on the area before going, and the army of porters and guides they had march ahead and open a route for them. Most chastening of all, they were in their twenties.

We had a guide and porters, yes, but our five-member team averaged in the mid-sixties in age. They were more the sort of people who had weathered storms in the boardroom, more comfortable climbing the corporate ladder

than mountains. But that was not all. Sixty-five-year-old Sunil’s back had already developed a catch that made him wince through every ascent. Cancer survivor Ashok, 64, whose stomach had been sliced open four times, as a result of which he had developed incision hernias, could hardly be said to be at the top of his game, partly because he was also terrified of heights. Gurdeep, 66, was not acclimatising as well as Diamox’s reputation would have us believe.

Still, our tents were ready, and so was tea and popcorn. We retreated to the warmth of our kitchen tent as the sun set and the wind picked up. Dinner was a silent affair, a silence brought on by fatigue but also by thoughts of the unknowable fate of our trek. We turned in early.

Next morning the mood was more buoyant as, stiff in limb but heady with the prospect of what lay ahead, we set out towards Rudragaira Base Camp. There was no trail, just the glistening peak in the distance leading us on. A scant 50m up, a solitary, stunted rhododendron bush marked the end of the tree-line, delivering a subtle message about the reduced level of oxygen in the air from here on, as well as dun terrain and dead-rock hills. We passed it silently, heads bowed to keep the gradient in our blind spot, trunks bent forward to counter the force of gravity, thumbs latched on rucksacks to take the sting off our shoulders.

These tactics became standard practice for the rest of the trip. We were to stay an extra day at Rudragaira Base Camp that night to acclimatise, before

BREATH-taking SCENES

Long ascents sapped muscles and killed conversation, while overnights got increasingly isolated and bonechilling.



making for Sukha taal the day after, our last camp on the way up from where we would launch our assault on the col itself. In this way we made peace with the pain, the altitude, the unforgiving terrain. Gradually, even without our noticing, our bodies began to change: the heart got better at squeezing oxygen from the thin air, the brain sharpened up its guiding of the legs over snow-dusted ridges and sun-crusts lake beds, the calves and thighs refused to balk. Our city carapaces were worn away by whiplash winds, rapier rain and a lancing snowstorm.

The gusting winds toyed with us even as we marched along the last ridge to camp, clouds closing in bringing visibility down to zero and the temperatures much below that. We strode on, stopping merely to zip up our jackets and pull on gloves.

We pitched our tents, a simple task made doubly difficult by the altitude – 4,900m – and the ravaged terrain. Rocks ground and broken by glaciers over millennia littered the ground, frozen pools of water in the shade between them. Leaning into the wind, we went about levelling the ground as best we could, withdrawing to the shelter of our tents as soon as they were up. By the time dinner was ready, the storm had died, but the clouds refused to leave, tantalisingly denying us a view of the col we would finally encounter the next day.

“We have a long day tomorrow,” Mangal Singh, our local guide, told us over dessert. “We’ll have to set out by 4am. That way we will have enough

time to cross the col, or return if we think we won’t make it.”

Mangal Singh had never seemed the sort to speak of failure. It was a check to our brimming confidence, just as we had begun to believe we were adapting well to the mountains. But not knowing what lay ahead, I had no way of challenging his judgment.

We were up at 3.45am, wrapping ourselves in down and performance fabrics, encasing our feet in snowboots and crampons. It was so dark that the blackness seemed to swallow the light of our headlamps. We shivered as much from excitement at what lay unseen above us as from the cold. We set out in single file, our world shrinking to just pallid lights pooling on the ice at our feet. Looking up though, it was possible to make out a jagged line of peaks impossibly far above us. There the earth met the vaults of space.

As dawn broke, we spied the Rabbit’s Ear for the first time and the route that leads to it – a landscape so cruelly white, even the wan light of morning failed to soften it. Marbled glaciers hung precariously from the flanks of the deliriously steep valley sides, crevasses flashing toothy grins down at the valley floor. Mercy is for lower climes. This is a land to make all ponder their mortality, to impress on them the insignificance of their lives and set the mood for mulling oblivion. At least we knew now why Mangal Singh thought we would not make it.

We covered the ground in measured inches, trudging through shin-deep snow one minute, over rock-hard ice the next, and across the chapped lips of

« We optimistically named the passage **Homo Horizontalis**, a reference to both its nature and its hoped-for status as the key to the puzzle. »



PROGRESS, DAY AND NIGHT
Picking through the penitentes of the Gangotri Glacier (left) and pacing out the last painful steps on the the final ascent to the col (above).

crevasses after that. Auden had claimed to have topped the col in a “couple of hours”. At 6am, I felt as though our efforts so far had only got us to the first rung of a steepening ladder of adversity. Ahead of us, the slope teetered at 70°, an impossible slog through soft snow.

As we rested, Mangal Singh studied each of us quietly, as if gauging our intent and fortitude. His eyes were questioning, as if waiting for one of us to request a respectable retreat. Yet, miraculously, no one talked about turning back.

“I think we should get going,” Sunil said, his grizzled face belying the pain he is battling.

“Yes,” Ashok agreed. “The sooner we get to the top, the better.”

We roped up and, breathing hard, set out again. Not long after, Avilash barked an order for us to stop. With light on our side and a clear day forming, Mangal Singh and I decided to break away from the rest of the team, to move ahead and beat down the snow to make an easier path. It was hellishly hard work. My lungs screamed for rest, my legs threatened to buckle, my heart banged suicidally against my ribs.

An hour later, when I turned around to look, Avilash and the rest of the team were reduced to dots below. But the dots were moving still, following the cursive trail chewed open by our crampons. It was 1pm when I crested the final hump at the tip of the col, just as the rest of the team disappeared into a gully sweeping up to the ridge.

Two hours later Avilash’s head finally bobbed into sight. A 50-metre

snowfield was all that remained. I saw wide smiles, heard some sore-throated shouts of joy. Twelve hours of walking had taken its toll. Everybody looked ragged, their skin worn, their lips dry. But in their eyes was a gleam.

At that moment I realised fully what Auden had meant. All teams on this route have to be suitably equipped in terms of gear, but we boasted one piece of equipment that’s not for sale or hire anywhere. The underdog spirit had got us over the col – though none of us was on the trek to be a hero, none was in it to back down either.

We walked to the col together, serrated cliffs dropping away either side. It was a moment both humbling and celebratory in the same frosty breath, but with only two hours of light left, we knew this was no time to uncork our emotions. We had an icefall to negotiate.

Unlike most treks, which are won at the highest point, this col delivers a parting blow, just when trekkers are grappling with the euphoria of at last standing taller than it. And the IED in its arsenal is the Khatling glacier.

“It was an extremely tedious march,” Auden had written, with “icefalls of a severity that cannot be indicated on maps.” He was not exaggerating. The Khatling, considered one of the toughest glaciers to negotiate in the Indian Himalayas, stretched out like a desert of snow 250m below us. A deep, vertical gully fell away into thin air from right under our feet, long creases of blue marking a collection of crevasses where the icefall finally reached horizontal ground.

WONDER AND DANGER IN ONE

Traversing the glaciers demanded care and patience at all times whether we were edging around crevasses on the way up (right) or, the end seemingly in sight (below), on the way down across the Khatling Glacier.



Avilash got busy fixing ropes, one eye on his next footing, the other on the steadily lengthening shadows thrown by the peaks. It took two 150-metre coils to cover the distance and by the time the party were ready to set out, twilight was threatening to engulf us.

Avilash guided the porters down first, instructing them to set up camp a short distance away. Then it was our turn. A full moon had started to rise. Stoves now burning inside the kitchen tent marked our destination for the day, the only sure landmark in the now-darkening valley. We double-checked our harnesses and carabiners as we prepared to descend, my mind rummaging through lessons learnt during mountaineering courses. Avilash had his own spin on that, summing up in two sentences the crux of what my instructors had revealed over 30 days: “Hold tight, don’t walk into the crevasses and you’ll be fine.”

One by one, following these sure instructions to the last word, we clambered down. It was 7pm when we found ourselves standing on solid ground again.

Here, the wind had licked the snow dry, the cold had packed it harder. Even in our condition though it was an easy trudge to camp, where tea was ready and a special dinner was in the offing.

For the first time in the day, we loosened up. We had two more days on the glacier, the path winding through further crevasses, past penitentes and ice falls where Auden himself came dangerously close to a mishap, his ice axe saving the day. “It was largely through the fearlessness and athletic balance of Juin Singh [Auden’s guide] that we managed to get down through the maze of blocks, wedges and crevasses,” he had confessed.

Beyond that we’d have to tackle verglas-laced streams and moraines and boulder zones. Then, for two more days, we’d be moving into jungle, before finally finding welcoming meadows on our way to Ghuttu and civilisation.

Yet we felt huge relief, and no little pride. We shook hands and hugged each other. We had crossed to the other side. Turning back would no longer be an option. We were team 13. **AA**



PRACTICALITIES

When to go

It is possible to try the trek in the post-monsoon season from June to October, but you’ll have better chance of clear weather in the window of October 1-20. Daytime temperatures in this period are about 15°C. It can drop to -10°C at night.

How to get there

The closest international airport is Delhi. From there, either fly to Dehradun or take the train to Haridwar in Uttarakhand, a five-hour journey. First-class tickets are Rs.900 (US\$18) one-way. From either place, hire a jeep to Gangotri, a two-day drive, breaking the journey at Uttarkashi.

What to take

Tents and gas stoves for cooking (building fires is prohibited). Much of this region is at an altitude of 4,000m, so warm gear and a good sleeping bag are necessary. Climbing rope, snow boots, crampons, harnesses, ice axes and rock and ice pitons are essential for any chance of success. This equipment, in good condition, can be hired from Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in Uttarkashi. The area is uninhabited so bring all your food with you.

Contacts and further info

Trekking permits are issued by the Forest Department in Uttarkashi. There is an entry fee of Rs.150 and a camping fee of Rs.100 per tent per night which is collected at Ghuttu. There

are government resthouses in Uttarkashi, Gangotri and Ghuttu. All have superlative locations, but not the service to match. At Uttarkashi you could also stay at Kuflon Basics, a comfortable and beautifully located resort (Rs.1500 for a twin with three meals).

Many agencies offer treks to Auden’s Col, though besides the severity of the route, the routine outsourcing may be one reason they are rarely successful.

The author used White Magic Adventure Travel, www.whitemagicadventure.com, run by veteran mountaineer and guide Avilash Bisht.

Other well-known operators in India include: Aquaterra Adventures, www.treknraft.com; and Ascent Descent Adventures, www.ascentdescentadventures.com