

OVERSEAS MEET - LHAKHANG EXPEDITION

17th August - 13th September 2008 - Mick Borroff

Introduction

After Albert Chapman's successful 2005 YRC meet to Ladakh, Mick Borroff wanted to return to the Himalaya and began looking at possible trekking routes combined with a suitable mountaineering objective. Western Tibet was initially attractive, but the multi-day approach by jeep and the complexity of obtaining eight separate authorisations for a permit were off-putting.

The Indian Himalayas looked more attractive and the concept of a long traverse beginning in Himachal Pradesh and ending in Ladakh began to take shape. As the barrier of the Great Himalaya would be crossed into the high-altitude desert, sheltered from the rain-bearing clouds of the Indian monsoon, such a route would offer great contrast in terms of the scenery, flora and fauna and of course to meet different groups of local people and take in their culture.

The route eventually selected started close to the Satluj river in Kinnaur, the north-eastern region of Himachal Pradesh, then headed north up the Bhaba valley to cross the Great Himalaya Range by the Pin-Bhaba Pass to descend into the Pin valley in the rain shadow area to Kaza in the Spiti valley. The route would then take the old trade route north from the Spiti river over the Parang La and follow the Pare Chu river north-east to enter Rupshu, the eastern region of Ladakh. The Pare Chu would then be left behind close to the Tibetan border, gaining the road-head at Karzok on the shore of Tso Moriri lake. This area was closed until 1994, but now can be accessed with the appropriate Inner Line Permits. Both passes could be crossed by ponies and food supplies could be restocked part way in Spiti. We would meet Kinnauri, Spiti and Ladakhi people, including the Changpa nomads in Rupshu. Spiti is also renowned for its ancient Buddhist monasteries: Tabo, Dhankar and Ki Gompas, all over 1000 years old which would add interest to the trek.

A bit of searching on the internet and in the Alpine Club library revealed numerous opportunities for mountaineering in the tributary valleys to the Pare Chu, with well over a dozen unclimbed 6000m peaks in the vicinity. After further research, perusal of Google Earth and a very helpful exchange of information and photographs from Tsuneo Suzuki of the Japanese Alpine Club, the unclimbed 6250m peak of Lhakang "Place of the Deity" was selected as our goal, for which an Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) permit and Liaison Officer would be required.

Logistics

Rimo Expeditions were again engaged as our trekking company and as usual, Motup provided a first class service. We had an excellent, highly experienced seven-strong Nepali crew, under the very capable leadership of Nima Bhutia, as Sirdar. Two groups of 18 ponies were hired.

The first string was obtained in Kafnoo, the village at the start of our trek, with four Kinnauri ponymen who returned there once we reached Spiti over the Pin-Bhaba pass. The second string originated from Manali in the Kulu valley, but met us in Spiti at the road-head in Kibber for the leg over the Parang La, returning to Manali from Tso Moriri lake by a different route at the end of the trek.

YRC Members

Mick Borroff - Leader
Adrian Bridge
Richard Dover
Paul Dover

David Hick
Tim Josephy
Barry Wood

Nepali Trekking Crew from Rimo Expeditions

Nima Bhutia - Sirdar
Khem Sing - Helper
Norbu Tamang - Head Cook
Kami Sherpa - Climbing Sherpa
Manbadhur Rai - Assistant Cook
Sangbo Lama - Climbing Sherpa
Bishal Tamang - Helper

IMF Liaison Officer

Mast Ram Kapoor

Permits and Visas

This report would be incomplete without mentioning the Indian bureaucracy to be negotiated. Mountaineers wishing to climb peaks higher than 6000m need to hold an Indian "X" Mountaineering Visa (this is a type of Entry Visa). This Visa may only be issued in the UK on receipt of a clearance letter from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF), which in turn depends on IMF having approvals from both the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Defence. Expeditions also need to be accompanied in the field by a Liaison Officer.

IMF requires that applications are made no later than three months before the planned date of travel. Although this requirement was met, we did not receive our IMF clearance letter until 6th August, the week before we left! The Indian High Commission had also changed to a new on-line visa application process in June. We are indebted to Richard Dover for a last minute, high speed, cross-country motorbike journey from the visa offices in Birmingham to those in London to secure our "X" visas, just three days before travelling.

Once in India, the passports, visas and rescue insurance for each expedition member were checked by IMF during a mandatory briefing meeting. Copies of passports, visas and passport photographs were also needed for Inner Line Permits to enter the Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh and the Tso Moriri region in Ladakh.

Itinerary

17 Aug - Arrival in Delhi

We arrived in the capital to be met by our guide Nima, just before a torrential downpour marking the end of the monsoon part-flooded the roads. A coach slowly transferred us to Lutyen's Bungalow, a very pleasant guest house in South Delhi, with a shady garden populated by green parakeets and ground squirrels. Apart from Mick, who had to attend the IMF briefing, after an early dinner, the rest of the group travelled overnight on the sleeper train to Kalka. Delhi railway station was a seething mass of humanity and rodents all trying to escape the rains.

18 Aug - Transfer to Shimla

The overnight train partly changed onto the narrow gauge "Toy Train" railway in the morning for the ascent to the old British hill station of Shimla, arriving in time for lunch at the Woodville Palace Hotel, followed by some sightseeing in the afternoon.

Meanwhile Mick was interviewed by Wing Commander Dahiya, the IMF Director, who introduced our Liaison Officer, Mast Ram Kapoor, a mountaineer from Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. Having satisfied IMF's requirements, Mick and Mast Ram were then driven by car to Shimla, arriving at the hotel some ten hours later in time for a very late dinner, after negotiating a procession of washouts, avalanches, accidents and roadworks fortuitously avoiding the kamikaze intentions of some Indian drivers.

19 Aug - Transfer to Kafnoo road-head

After an excellent breakfast, we headed along the ridge-top in three jeeps. The drive lasted some ten hours and took us through sections of forests with troops of black-faced langur monkeys, down long switchback descents, eventually reaching the swollen Satluj river which looked like liquid cement. We stopped for a lunchtime curry in a restaurant that grew its own Basmati rice before reaching Wangtu, where a bridge allowed access over the Satluj to the Bhaba valley and on to our first camp beside the hydroelectric intake lagoon at Kafnoo, complete with patrolling armed guard. Here Nima introduced us to the rest of his crew and we found out that our cook Norbu was the elder brother of Kumar, the talented cook on our 2005 trip, and being accompanied by their nephew Bishal for his first trekking season!

20 Aug - Kafnoo to Mulling

The crew woke us at 0600 with tea. After breakfast, we waited for the ponies to arrive and eventually left the intake installation behind in bright sunshine to follow the clear Bhaba river through the village orchards and bee hives up into a superb flower-filled steep-sided alpine valley. We watched a flock of eight Himalayan Griffon vultures circling overhead shortly before passing into an area of mature pine forest. We stopped at Mulling to camp beside the river in a

large grassy meadow, whilst the mist descended onto the surrounding peaks. Several members explored higher side valleys and some blue Himalayan poppies were photographed.

21 Aug - Mulling to Kara

Scotch mist swirled around us as we broke camp and made way for a large flock of sheep and goats heading down to Kafnoo from higher pastures, accompanied by two Kinnauri shepherds. Rain fell as we crossed the river by a natural stone bridge and took shelter under an overhang to avoid possible stonefall from an even larger flock of animals traversing the slopes above us. The campsite at Kara had a Scottish glen feel about it, aided by extensive mist and rain! Tim and Adrian followed a side stream and eventually ventured around the back of a long waterfall before returning just before it got dark.

22 Aug - Kara to Fustirang

After breaking camp, we had to ford the river. Whilst the flow had diminished overnight, we still had to wade across. We then followed the Bhaba river into a steep grassy valley to reach Fustirang, the last camp below the Pin-Bhaba pass. As this was a short day, the rainy afternoon was spent in exploring the upper Bhaba valley and the snow fields with their strange formations well beyond the camp, to aid acclimatisation.

23 Aug - Fustirang to Pin-Bhaba Pass (4866m) to Bara Bulder

An early start was made to attack the steep scree guarding the pass and after crossing several ridges and small snow-fields we reached the customary Buddhist prayer flags at the col overlooking the high altitude desert of Spiti. The contrast in scenery in crossing the Great Himalayan Range into its rain shadow could not be more striking. Gone were the greens of the grazing meadows and familiar alpine slopes, replaced by the multiple shades of browns and greys of the convoluted, thinly-bedded immature mountain ranges and their scree and moraines.

The descent from the pass crossed more scree slopes to pick up a river, which was followed for some distance to our next camp perched above the main Pin river. A track could be seen on the far side of the valley leading down from the Pin-Parbati Pass, which crosses to Spiti from the Kullu valley.

24 Aug - Bara Bulder to Mudh

The day dawned with full-on blue skies and unbroken sunshine. We followed the Pin valley on a meandering path through the multi-coloured landscape admiring the geology and eventually reaching the village mani walls and their inscribed stones leading down to the suspension bridge at Mudh. Threshing was in progress. The Spitiens used sets of donkeys, mules and yaks, attached in order of size, to a stout central post. These were driven round in circles to trample the barley stalks. The locals were very friendly and the crew took the opportunity to purchase some chang beer.

25 Aug - Mudh to Tabo

Breakfast was enjoyed in the open air, again in bright sunshine. We said goodbye to the ponymen who were to return to Kafnoo and jumped in our jeeps for the journey past Sagnam village to the Spiti river and then downstream to Tabo and its ancient gumpa. After refreshments in a local café, we visited the 1600-year old monastery complex which had a very different construction and feel to the more fort-like gompas perched on hilltops, elsewhere in Ladakh. The Buddhist deities were preserved in near darkness and the guide's torch was needed to pick out the richly coloured thankas on the walls and the striking faces of the gods in the prayer hall.

After lunch camped in the garden of a local hotel, several of us visited some caves in the hillside formally used as monastic cells. One of these had been enlarged to form a temple where a party of Indian experts were planning the final stage of restoration of the ancient wall paintings. We were introduced to several professors and under the flood-lighting could closely inspect the work completed so far; it was very well done using the same materials and methods as the original paintings.

26 Aug - Tabo to Rangrik

Once the camp had been struck, we drove back up the Spiti valley and ascended a side road to Dhankar Gumpa. Established some 1200 years ago on a high ridge above the river, its setting was spectacular. We explored all accessible parts and took a myriad of photos. Meanwhile the crew stocked up with supplies in Kaza market and repaired to Kibber for a well earned rest day.

After lunch, we had to stop in Kaza to visit the office that issued Inner Line Permits. There we found that the requirements in Himachal Pradesh had recently been changed to match those in Jammu & Kashmir i.e. two passport photos, plus photocopies of passport and Indian visa were needed. Needless to say that we didn't all have the photos or photocopies with us, but the Indians now have the technology! The Border Police representative also informed us that as part of the approval process, they would be making an inspection of our baggage in the morning.

After a thorough test of the STD telephone service and the internet links in Kaza, we drove to the newly constructed Spiti Sarai Hotel upriver at Rangrik. At the hotel over dinner and a few beers, we chatted to Steve Berry from the Himalayan Kingdoms trekking company and some of his friends, who were in the final stages of their overland expedition from England to Mumbai in a pair of Toyota Land Cruisers.

27 Aug - Rangrik to Dumra

Breakfast was disturbed at 0715 by the arrival of the Border Police Sergeant, his boss and another colleague for the kit inspection. An introductory discussion about where we

were going and the age and medical condition of the team was followed by a check of our baggage - Adrian's ex-army kitbag was singled out for particularly close attention! Fortunately they were satisfied by finding nothing suspicious and we received our Inner Line permit for us and the crew to visit Rupshu.

Breakfast was completed and we drove to Ki Gumpa, the white buildings gleaming like a fairytale castle on top of a hill. The monks had just started to chant a mantra in the main prayer hall and we sat entranced for about half an hour until an intermission, when a novice brought in tea.

We left the Spiti river behind and ascended a side road to reach the white stupas guarding the entrance to Kibber, one of the highest villages in India. After a drink, we set off on foot for the second leg of the trek towards Tso Moriri, descending into the gorge of the Parilungbi river for lunch beside the clear sparkling stream. A climb up the other side soon had us at the next camp at Dumra.

The tributary stream led into a small gorge where Tim, Adrian and Paul climbed some routes on doubtful rock, whilst others watched from a safe distance. A herd of bharal (Blue Sheep) were observed on the hillside well above our camp. Dinner was followed by a huge iced chocolate cake baked by Norbu.

28 Aug - Dumra to Thalta

Another fairly short day took us to a camp perched high above the main Parilungbi gorge. Our trek was accompanied by great views of the snow-capped trekking peak Kanamo (5963m), climbed solo earlier in the year by Nima. Once the camp at Thalta had been reached, various excursions were made along the side of the gorge marvelling at the stupendous rock formations, as we observed the following day's intimidating ascent leaving the other side of the gorge. Another herd of bharal were seen and some smaller goral (a species of "goat-elope").

29 Aug - Thalta to Borigen

Watched by a lone marmot, we descended steeply into the gorge and followed the lovely clear river upstream crossing it on a couple of dodgy bridges, and cooled by a stiff northerly breeze. The rock architecture was amazing: contorted zig-zagged bedding planes, a series of ramps and pinnacles adorned the steep cliffs flanking the river. Adrian had succumbed to Delhi belly and enjoyed a free pony trek to the next camp at 5190m. There was just enough space beside a cliff to pitch the cook's tent and the mess tent, which became our dormitory amongst the scree at the foot of the pass. The ponies were tethered to a rope overnight and fed on barley using nose-bags, whilst other ponymen levelled the scree to provide the ponies small platforms to sleep on too.

30 Aug - Borigen to Parang La (5578m) to confluence of Pare Chu and Pakshi Lamur rivers

A reasonably early start was made to ascend the 500m of remaining steep scree to the Parang La pass under blue skies. At the obligatory prayer flags adorning the pass, the white slopes of the glacier led our eyes down into the Pare Chu valley and onto the snow-capped mountains above. One of the donkeys slipped over on the ice, but was fortunately unhurt. The rest of the glacier was descended uneventfully in deteriorating weather and we followed the trail down the flat grey valley floor penetrating into the brown mountains above, in a swirling snow storm. We set up camp at the entrance to the Pakshi Lamur river valley, close to its confluence with the Pare Chu.

31 Aug - Pakshi Lamur valley

Accompanied by the ponies and more snow fall, the stony Pakshi Lamur valley was ascended via a barely visible path traversing the lateral moraines. Base Camp was established at 5153m on a flat area well below the glacier snout at N 32° 28', E 78° 09' remarkable for the unusual volume of large red pebbles in the vicinity.

An exploratory walk, partly in another snow storm, up the benign glacier to about 5370m was undertaken but further inspection of the lower parts of the north-west faces of Dhhun and Lhakhang peaks was cut short by the deteriorating weather.

1 Sep - Pakshi Lamur valley

The same weather pattern predominated again. After a bright start, Advanced Camp was established on the lateral moraine to the west of Dhhun at about 5400m by the full team and crew. Signs of a previous tent platform were observed but no litter or rubbish was seen. After a snow storm had blown through, the snow covered glacier was ascended to a point below Lhakhang's north-west face, where it was obvious that the whole range was well-plastered with fresh unconsolidated snow.

Two possible lines up Lhakhang's face were examined. The first was a very steep climb up an ice wall to the left leading to easier angled snowy ridge to the summit. Fixed ropes would have been needed for this route. The second was a more serpentine excursion skirting the extensive central seracs, to gain the steep north-west ridge to gain the summit. This route looked more feasible in good conditions but too dangerous under the blanket of new snow.

On the preceding two Japanese expeditions, which climbed the adjacent peak of Dhhun, their fixed ropes were swept away on the first ascent by an avalanche and on the second ascent, they had to escape down the back of the mountain, as their ascent route had become too unstable. We therefore reluctantly took a decision to abandon the attempt in the face of the obvious avalanche risk and possible consequences.

However our disappointment was somewhat mitigated by the magnificent scenery. The upper cirque above the Pakshi Lamur glacier was a really spectacular place with five 6000m

metre snow peaks nestling around its rim, three of them supposedly unclimbed. Adrian, Richard and Paul returned to BC, leaving Mick, Tim, Dave and Barry, with Nima and the two Sherpas to spend the night at AC.

2 Sep - Pakshi Lamur valley

After a cold night, a leisurely breakfast was enjoyed in glorious sunshine, soaking up the warmth like lizards and whilst admiring the panoramic view across the cirque! AC and BC were removed and the Pakshi Lamur valley descended to the confluence with the Pare Chu river, which was then followed by a good path to our next camp at Kharsa Gogma.

3 Sep - Kharsa Gogma to Galpa Buze

After breakfast in the warm sunshine, we set off for a spectacular day's trekking along the wide-floored valley of the Pare Chu. Although the clouds gathered and the north wind returned, the scenery drew us on. Lines of incised lateral moraines were passed, then sequences of conglomerate towers with frequent views to snow-capped mountains beyond accompanied the ever present river. Fossils abounded in the limestone cobbles at our feet and infrequent flowering plants clinging onto life added extra interest. Our next camp was rather cramped beside the river at Galpa Buze.

4 Sep - Galpa Buze to Norbu Sumdo

The flat floored valley widened - up to two kilometres across, with the blue river snaking from side to side over the grey pebbles. More conglomerate towers and more incised moraines and more afternoon snow showers heralded our arrival at Sumdo, the Ladakhi word for confluence. Here we waded across the braided Pare Chu before climbing out of the valley to enter Rupshu. We emerged on a flat area of moraine, where the stumpy ruins of an old fort used as in the past a British tax collection point, looked out over the Pare Chu flowing onwards into Tibet, before returning to India to join the Satluj. The tributary valley was followed upstream to the lush water meadows at Norbu Sumdo, where the ponies enjoyed their well-earned grazing. Barry was in his element as the bird-life changed again with the different environment.

5 Sep - Norbu Sumdo to Kiangdom

The wetlands in the wide valley were traversed on a good path with more snow-capped peaks hovering into view. Several recently vacated Changpa camp emplacements were passed with small mani walls. The expanse of tussock grass, which provided grazing for the Changpa's herds of pashmina goats, eventually petered out to be replaced by a wide expanse of bare gravel which after some miles led past the rocky Chumik peak (5660m) guarding the entrance to the Phirse Phu river and its trekking route to Pangri and Manali. Shortly afterwards, the improbable sight of the turquoise Tso Moriri lake shimmering in the heat haze, could have been a mirage. However the twin snow peaks of

Chhamser Kangri (6623m) and Lungser Kangri (6666m) beyond and to the east were definitely real. The camp at Kiangdom was established on the south-western corner of the lake, where the view along the lake was stunning. Over a dozen large, sleek marmots grazed in the sun, enjoying their last months of food before the winter hibernation. More deserted Changpa camp sites overlooked the marmot colonies and a lone Kiang (wild Tibetan ass) was seen close to the lake shore.

6 Sep - Kiangdom

Mick, Dave, Adrian and Tim decided to walk back towards Norbu Sumdo keeping to the western bank, but then turned sharply west into the major side valley containing the Phirse Phu river, to have a look at Chumik on the south side. After following the river for several kilometres, plans for Chumik were abandoned and Dave and Adrian returned the same way. Meanwhile Mick and Tim ascended the rock ridge to the north-east, traversed to a fine viewpoint at 5434m and then descended a steep loose gully back to the camp beside Tso Moriri.

7 Sep - Kiangdom to Karzok road-head

The last day of trekking was a long journey along the pebbly shore of Tso Moriri. The view back down the lake was topped by Gya (6794m) while Kangris Chhamser and Lungser were slowly passed. The waterside path eventually led to a sequence of a score of mani walls, then a cremation platform and a prayer flag bedecked stupa overlooking Karzok village and our final camp. The village was a real contrast to our previous nights in the wilderness and the chorus of dog barking in the night would have led to some machine-gunning had the armaments been available!

8 Sep - Karzok

The day at Karzok before the jeeps arrived allowed us the opportunity to visit the tented encampment of the Changpa nomads in a wide valley some distance above the village. The Changpas live in four-sided black yak-hair tents, which are moved between grazing areas in the summer whilst yaks and pashmina goats crop the grass. Changpas are devoted Buddhists and the two central objects of a nomad's tent are a stove and an altar. Many nomads carry spinning prayer wheels or strings of amber prayer beads. Mid-morning, the whole tented village emptied into a large canvas tent to attend the day's prayers led by monks from the gumpa in Karzok. Nima told us that they were now seven days into a two-week prayer cycle.

It is a hard way of life for the Changpas and may now be starting to die out. There were no older children or teenagers in the camp, as they were either away at school or having gained an education, had left to seek work in the towns, rather than returning to Rupshu. The younger kids were as inquisitive as ever and always interested to see themselves on our digital camera screens or to look through Barry's binoculars. They will undoubtedly see great changes in their lifestyles compared to their parents.

The rest of the day was spent wandering around Karzok and down to the lake shore. Our last night's dinner was prepared by Norbu and several courses were enjoyed including an enormous freshly-baked cake with the message "Happy Trek Ending 2008" in chocolate icing!

9 Sep - Transfer to Leh

Our three jeeps arrived at 0715 under a clear blue sky which heralded a welcome break in the weather pattern. After leisurely packing up the camp, we thanked each of our crew members for their unstinting efforts and said our farewells. After having our permits checked at the police post, we set off for Leh. The first leg on an unmetalled road took us past yak herds to another blue lake - Kiagar Tso and over the prayer flag bedecked Nakpokoding La (4990m) to the Mahe Bridge spanning the Indus river. The metalled road then followed the spectacular Indus valley all the way to Leh.

The drive passed through seriously impressive rock scenery through gorges and across steep hillsides, with the Indus never far below. We arrived in Leh some seven hours later and were soon enjoying tea and biscuits with freshly picked apples in the flower garden of the Omasila Hotel, admiring the Stok Kangri range, glistening under a coating of fresh snow. After walking round to the Rimo offices to see Motup, we had a brief wander around Leh, followed by a really good Indian buffet and a few beers in the hotel restaurant.

10 Sep - Leh

Tim joined a Rimo white-water rafting trip down the Indus. Adrian and Mast Ram went in search of some rock climbing on the cliffs below Leh Palace, while everyone else explored Leh. We all met up in the late afternoon to watch a polo match, where two local teams fought a somewhat frenetic game in front of a large crowd of locals and tourists. Afterwards, we joined Motup and Nima for a chat over an excellent tandoori dinner. Motup told us that plans were well advanced for the Ministry of Tourism, supported by the IMF, to designate a further 100 peaks as trekking peaks, a very welcome development.

11 Sep - Transfer to Delhi

The morning flight to Delhi was uneventful (must have been Barry's prayers) and we were soon back at Lutyen's Bungalow, chilling out in the garden. Another Indian dinner was enjoyed at Pindi in Pandara Market, after a rather lengthy perambulation of the streets of South Delhi.

12 Sep - Delhi

Richard and Paul left early for their flight back to the UK. The remaining five hired a car and driver for a tour of Delhi taking in the Parliament buildings, Delhi Gate, New Delhi, the Jama Masjid mosque, the Red Fort, the Raj Ghat, where Gandhi was cremated, finishing up at Quth Minar Complex and its soaring sandstone minaret deeply inscribed with verses from the Koran. Swagath, a southern Indian

restaurant in Defence Colony market was chosen from the Rough Guide for dinner. We took advantage of their fortuitous two-for-one offer on Tiger beers, to wash down Mangalore-style seafood and other tasty curries.

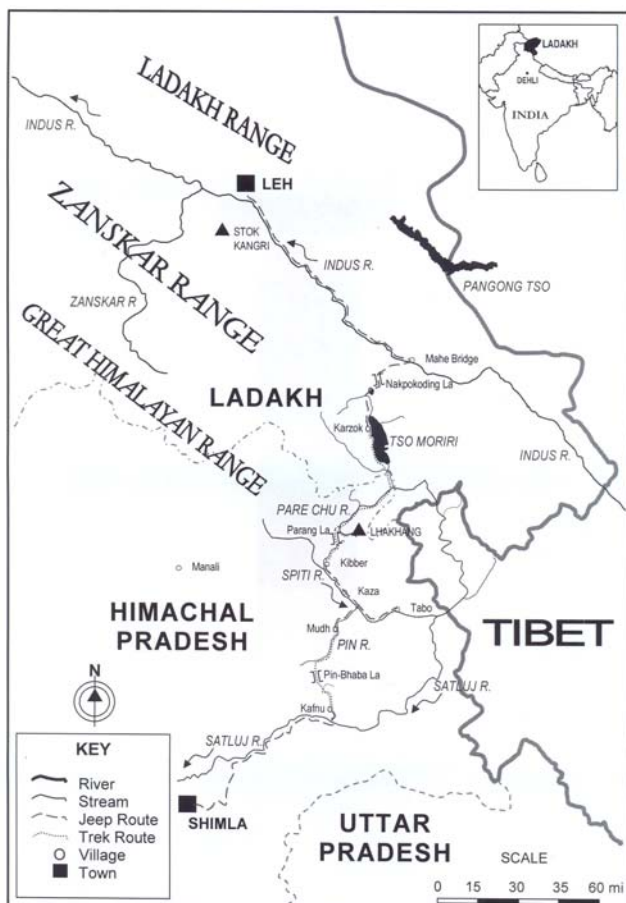
13 Sep - Transfer to UK

Mick, Adrian and Dave crammed in a tut-tut to visit the Jantar Mantar, the open-air observatory built in 1726 with its unusual geometrical measuring instruments, before stopping for a last-minute purchase of some top quality Darjeeling tea and an intricate painted thanka.

We had booked an evening flight back to the UK and as we were driven to the airport were shocked to hear the news that at least 20 people had been killed and 90 injured when five bombs tore through a Delhi shopping district. Four more unexploded bombs were found by police in the area and defused. Fortunately the airport was not disrupted and we departed after Adrian bought a round of ice creams.

Conclusion

From the trekking perspective, the expedition exceeded our expectations. Both the alpine valley on the Kinnaur side and the rugged beauty of the high altitude desert in Spiti and Rupshu were fantastic. None of us will forget the mirage-like panorama across Tso Moriri. We arrived at Base Camp to schedule in a fit and well-acclimatised condition. Only the unseasonable snowfall and the attendant avalanche risk were not expected. The mountains around the upper Pare Chu valley and Pakshi Lamur valley certainly deserve more exploration and there are still well over a dozen unclimbed 6000m peaks in the area.



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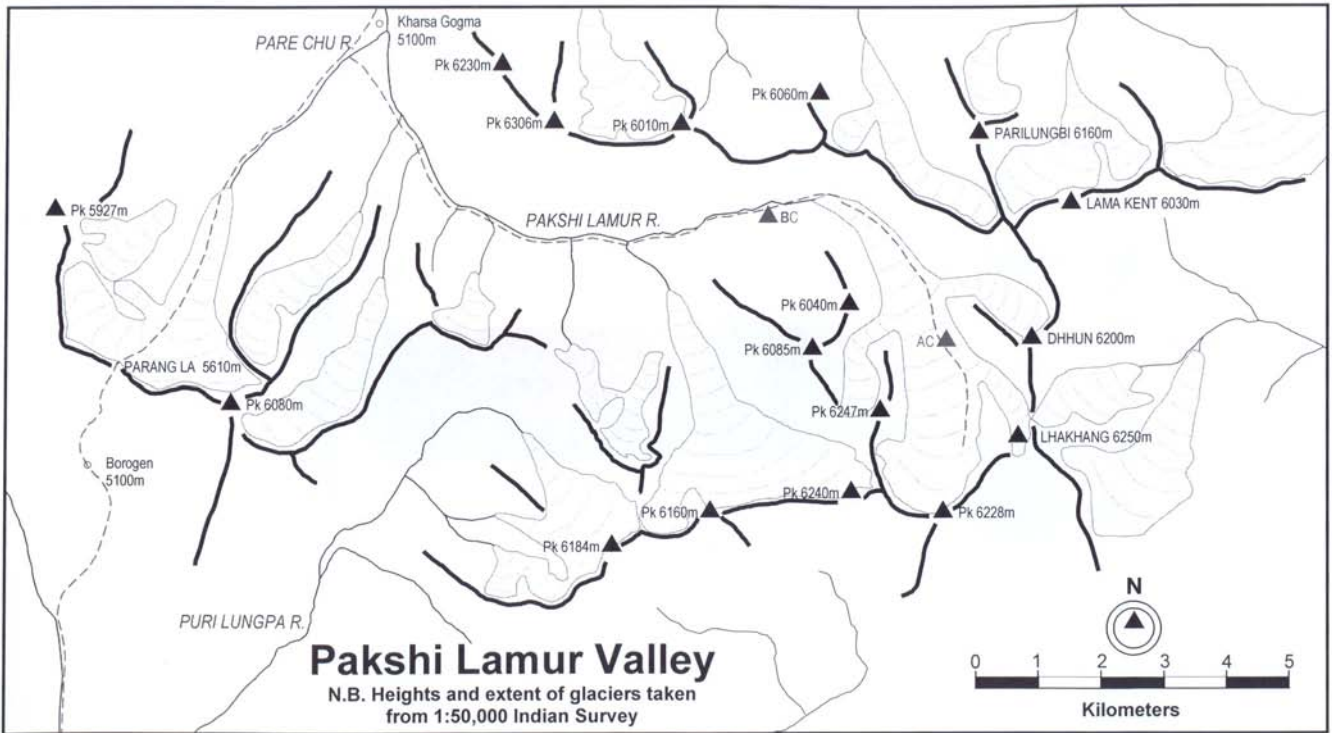
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Four pictures of the Locals

Goats & sheep in the upper Bhaba valley, Kinnaur

Pony train in the Pin valley, Spiti

Lakhang Peak (6250m) from Pakshi Lamur glacier, Spiti



Photos
 Tim Josephy, Barry Wood and Mick Borroff

SPITI KINNAUR TRAVERSE A PARALLEL VIEW!

It was clear from the outset that Mick had put in a tremendous amount of time and effort in planning/organising the trip - also as we got involved with it, that, had he not done so, we could not have gone where we did and seen the magnificent sights that we did.

The rest of us were amazed at his command of the names and relative geography of the whole plan; for me it was only after we'd been to each place along the route that such details began to stick.

Near to departure, the frantic visa application process threatened to drive us to drink - Richard proved to be the hero and saviour of the hour with a motorbike dash to London.

The end of the monsoon was still in progress when we arrived in Delhi - hundreds (thousands?) of locals were out in it as we drove away from the airport. Some sought shelter from the heavy rain, others just carried on uncaring about being soaked. The authorities are building a metro in the city due (to be completed in 2010 for the Asian Games). Large disruption, extra slow progress, plenty of mud and big machines occupied large sections of the roads they are tunnelling under. The dense traffic grinds around it, leaving tissue paper thickness gaps between vehicles.

At Delhi train station the squalor was remarkable. It appeared some people were living there, squatting and keeping out of the rain. Unsavoury food vendors, surrounded by even more unsavoury dogs and plenty of rats kept us company during the extra time we waited for the delayed train. There was hardly a square yard of space anywhere - we sat on our kit to stop it walking. Once on the train, it was very smooth and sleep was easy. Beside the Toy Train line, which we joined after dawn, there was a chap with a whistle every mile or so; he saluted and blew his whistle as we passed; (possibly the Raj introduced that practice as they moved to the cooler mountain town for the summer and it has carried on ever since?).

At the Woodville Palace hotel, we were met by a severe old soldier - still in uniform. He saluted each of us in a very elaborate and stylised way, picked up three bags and marched off to our rooms. Each bag was nearly 20kg and one was as much as we could carry. He did wobble a bit on the steps.

Money changing in Shimla was a real performance; we had to give in our £ or \$ in one little shop and were given a carbon copied scrap of semi legible pink paper then had to follow a chap to another shop where eventually the rupees arrived (we got 79.5 Rs to the £1). The second office had electrical installations that looked like a Frankenstein set, with about a dozen clerks jammed into the small room.

How they survived is a mystery.

The drive from Shimla to the beginning of the first trek was often alarming; three 4x4s were engaged for us seven and our gear, Nima, his crew and their gear. The drivers were very aggressive: it seemed mandatory to pass whatever was in front, no matter whether there was space to get into or not or if anything was coming the other way. To begin with, whilst the roads were very crowded and full of puddles/mud, it wasn't scary, but later, traversing roads cut into steep valley sides with several hundreds of feet/metres of drop only inches away, it became alarming. Heights don't generally bother me but I was very glad to see the end of that drive.

At our second campsite, one of the ponies needed a re-shoe at the back. A novel technique was adopted. A piece of rope was tied to its tail which was then wrapped around the ankle and tensioned so its hoof was in the air at the right height for shoeing. It realised it had to stand on three legs so was quite docile and didn't writhe around - they heated the shoe up on a gas ring before fitting.

In one of the several flocks of sheep and goats we passed, there was a donkey with four tiny kids in a pouch on its back; they had the softest ears imaginable.

The ponies were very sure footed - it was amazing how they coped with the rough terrain loaded with all the stuff. Difficult enough for us with only two legs. I walked behind one and watched closely (and discovered probably what any horsey person knows). They do watch where they put their front feet, then the back feet go to almost exactly the same place as they move forward.

Just before Mudh, we came across a couple of family groups threshing barley by having horses and donkeys tied to a pole and walking on it in a circular path. The man of the family walked behind, not only to urge them on, but also to pick up and throw away the poo they dropped before it got trodden in.

In Kaza, we had to get an additional Inner line permit to allow us to go where we intended, and already had permission for, from the IMF. The office we had to visit was quite something. On the third floor of a dismal cement building two 'clerks' were crammed into a hot tiny office with no ventilation, plenty of flies and two desks piled high with papers. There was no telephone, no filing cabinets, no typewriter, no copier - and not surprisingly, little function! One imagines this is repeated thousands of times across the country.

The mountain scenery in the Pin and the Pare Chu valleys defies adequate description; the vast scale and steepness of the multicoloured, continuously varied, layered, fractured and friable rock was quite amazing. You have to see it to know - great that we could.

Some time after crossing the Parang La and visiting Lakhang, I took a picture looking back to the pass. One would look at the picture and think - a good day's walk to the pass; it had taken us three days! It's a big country.

Between leaving Kibber Village and reaching Karzok, we saw just two groups of trekkers: some Polish folk and a couple of Belgians, going back the way we'd come. There was one additional chap on his own, by Tso Moriri, who said he was going to Kibber - no support, no tent, not a very big rucksack, 'going to sleep in caves on the way' - we'd seen no caves. He turned back we heard. Apart from these, we saw no others for the twelve days we were on the trek. Its fortunate that we had no difficulties - getting out quickly wasn't an option.

There were wild horses at Kiangdom and we saw several, generally more than a km away. At one point, Manbadhur decided to try and catch one, so, (carrying a rucksack full of the party's lunch), he set off running across the stony plain. He didn't succeed, but to think of this at 4600m left us breathless. I later learned he'd been born at 3300m, so perhaps was a little better prepared than we were.

When we visited the Changpa yurt encampment above Karzok, I felt quite uncomfortable - a bit like a voyeur - looking at these people who were so different in all respects. The little children were all snotty nosed and demanded money or pens, the mothers were certainly not pleased to see us. I suppose many trekkers visit just to look at their way of life and they are fed up with it.

The final drive from Mahe Bridge to Leh alongside the river Indus must rank as one of the most scenic in the world. Steadily descending for over 100 km, through a huge gorge of largely granite rock, with fantastic colours, shapes, enormous scree fans and intriguing narrow valleys joining, it was really spectacular. Should anyone fly through and make an Imax film, I doubt it could be watched without white knuckles, fear and perspiration!

ADB



Pare Chu panorama (L) and Paralungbi River gorge, Spiti
Photos - Dave Hick



At base camp (L)

Upper Bhaba valley, Kinnaur



Descent into the Pin valley, Spiti

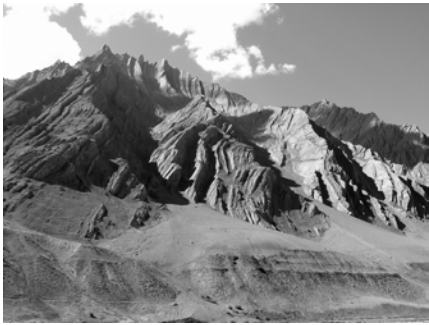


Camp at Kharsa Gogma, upper Pare Chu valley (L)



Ki Gompa, Spiti valley

Photos Mick Borroff



Folded strata, Pin valley,
Spiti



Descending the Parang la
glacier, Spiti



Dave Hick inspecting
Lhaxhang Peak (6250M)
from Pakshi Lamur glacier,
Spiti



Pony train by eroded tower,
Pare Chu valley, Spiti



Paul & Richard Dover
crossing the Pare Chu



Base camp, Pakshi Lamur
valley, Spiti



Phirse Fu river valley,
Rupshu



Mentok Peak above
Tso Moriri, Rapshu



Camp beside Tso Moriri,
Rupshu



Pare Chu valley, Spiti



Chhamser Kangri & Lungser
Kangri above Tso Moriri

Photos Mick Borroff