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The imposing peaks of the Trishul mountains loom over Bedni Bugyal, a lush meadow with a small lake in its midst. Bedni Bugyal, situated 3,354m above sea level, is an overnight stop on the trek to Roopkund. Courtesy of Saurabh Chatterjee

Tried, tired, retired

The scenery is spectacular but, as **Jola Chudy** found, Himalayan trails will test even the most dedicated of trekkers

My previous mountain experience is limited: a family holiday in Poland's Tatra mountains, where I, a grumpy teenager, squabbled with my sister and found hiking up hills a dull chore. The Hajar range in Oman has remained similarly undisturbed by my wanderlust; a weekend exploring potholes in the simmering heat left me reaching for the soft comforts of Dubai and I haven't been back since. I like to explore, but my usual mode of adventure tends to come with fluffy towels, miniature shampoo bottles and the refreshing clink of ice against glass.

So when I announced that I was undertaking an arduous trek through India's Himalayas, the response was universal concern, bordering on incredulity.

The idea had been hatched late one evening in Dubai, when a friend casually mentioned that she'd been invited by a newly formed hiking company to participate in the Roopkund Trek – and that friends were welcome. Somehow, the idea fired our imaginations; dull from the semi-hibernation of a UAE summer, we were cabin-fever ready to escape the city.

Mount Everest, K2, and Tibet all spring to mind when someone mentions the Himalayas. The Everest trek to the base camp at Kala Patthar is popular with seasoned climbers, while Kathmandu sees a regular stream of visitors; India-side, the mountain range offers a different trekking experience because it is still relatively unknown on the tourist trail. The trail to Roopkund, as we learned, is one of the least-visited and the four- to six-day trek is organised by Indiahikes, a company working to map and record all of India's little-known Himalayan trek routes.

Roopkund lies in the high reaches of the greater Himalaya mountain range in Uttarakhand. This relatively new state was formed in 2000; its proximity to neighbouring Tibet is increasingly reflected in the locals' appearance the higher up you go. The state contains India's second highest peak, Nanda Devi, and most of its northern area encompasses Himalayan mountains; the highest elevations are icy rock, with meadows, forests, woodlands and valleys lower down. This is the state where the Ganges begins as a trickle, with clear streams giving lifeblood to the remote villages that dot the landscape.

Late September offers one of the last opportunities to trek before the snows fall – treks start again next month. We are the first Westerners to undertake the trek with Indiahikes, and they seem anxious to accommodate us. Our journey begins in Delhi, from where we travel overnight by train to Kathgodam and then drive by car to Loharjung, our base camp, 10 hours away. From



Camping at higher altitudes is exhausting but the sunrises are unforgettable. Jola Chudy for The National

here, we begin our trek on foot.

"Call Pavan when you get into Delhi. He has a moustache and a side parting so should be fairly easy to spot," instructs the trek coordinator via e-mail, a few days before we leave. Thankfully, Pavan finds us at arrivals and guides us through chaotic Delhi to the railway station, where we meet the other participants: young Indian professionals from Bangalore, a honeymooning couple and a father-and-daughter team. As we fight our way onto the crowded train, any lingering illusions that this is a soft-option holiday fall swiftly away. We spend a fitful night on hard bunks and as dawn approaches, Kathgodam railway station slides into view. A convoy of 4x4s transports us to Loharjung base camp at 2,530 metres.

The rustic building is perched on a hillside overlooking a valley – a sneak preview of our route for the morning. We sit as Arjun, the trek leader, goes over the itinerary. We are introduced to the head guide, Narendra, and his team of local porters. Almost miraculously, a delicious dinner of *dhal*, okra, fragrant rice and pickles appears from a small kitchen tent and, suitably fortified, we retire to bed.

In the morning, we are divided into three groups: two trekking teams and the porters and mules. Arjun summarily separates friends and in place of my two companions, now in the other group, I am given a wooden stick. "The stick will save you up to 30 per cent energy, so use it, it will be your best friend on the trek," says Arjun as we set off on the first five

kilometres to the campsite of Didna at 2,600m. The first part is an easy downhill, through leafy forests and across babbling streams. We pass our first waterfall and cross the Wan river on an imposing iron bridge before climbing uphill – our first steep climb – for nearly two hours. Our lungs and legs rebel, but we finally reach the village of Kulling. The inhabitants are hardy and our soft, city faces must seem as alien to them; their children are beautiful and pose happily for photographs in front of their brick shacks, sweets their reward.

We make our first camp at Didna, a flat knoll just above the village. The sun shines, rewarding our efforts with a magnificent view of green pastures and mountainous forest. The porters erect tents and prepare another delicious meal of *dhal* and vegetables.

In the morning, having breakfasted on *roti* and chai so sugary it would horrify any dentist, we set off to Bedni Bugyal. The woodland trail immediately gets steep. We fill our precious water bottles from a stream and carry on, sticks seeking out stable footholds in the roughly worn path. As will happen daily from now on, the convoy of mules and porters overtakes us after an hour and disappears upwards from view. The mules, laden with backpacks, wear bells to warn us to step aside and the porters, in flimsy moccasins, leap past us, putting our careful efforts to shame. It is a challenging climb to Ali Bugyal at 3,300m, where a stunning mountaintop

clearing reveals itself as the forest falls away beneath us. Here, we gasp at the views, with undulating, flower-filled meadows, an old stone cottage and wild horses grazing in isolated serenity. We also experience our first small hardships; blister kits are shared and extra socks put on. The group continues to Bedni Bugyal, 3,354m above sea level. As we eat and rest, taking in our dramatic surroundings, we are warned that in the morning we will be entering higher altitudes.

As oxygen thins around you, everything seems to take double the effort. Unfolding a sleeping bag becomes a mammoth task; you lose your appetite, so have to remind yourself to snack. Even the delicious food cooked by the porters becomes harder to eat. Preparation for high altitude means being fit: having a larger lung capacity equips you to deal with low oxygen levels. But all hikers, regardless of fitness, must walk slowly now in order to acclimatise. This proves a challenge for the group's impatient alphas, who are constantly told to slow down. In the end, Arjun asks the slowest walkers to lead. "You must respect the mountain," he admonishes. "This is a medium-difficulty trek and the emphasis is on the 'difficult'." I guarantee that at some point, everyone will cry." He regales us with tales of past travellers so unfit they had to be carried down the mountain near-comatose. We all silently hope we will not be making an appearance in future anecdotes.

Day three begins with overhanging cold and cloud, but the magnificence

of our surroundings lifts our spirits: the scale of the mountains, rolling away in every direction as far as the eye can see, is unforgettable. Tired, with few clothes that don't seep with damp, we ascend to Ghora Lotani, an isolated campsite wreathed in mist. Resting on a flat plain of grass, it is open to the elements, and by early afternoon it is already cold. We see our first glimpse of snow-peaked mountains glinting tantalisingly in the distance. Our mobile phones receive only intermittent signals. We really are alone out here.

In the morning, several people, including myself, begin to experience headaches as the altitude begins to take its toll.

"You didn't train enough," says Arjun, my laboured breathing giving me away. He gives me mountain sickness tablets and I determine to go on. We pass a shrine and stop to give offerings, prayers and sweets before continuing. The landscape begins to take on an other-worldly quality, with the green beneath our feet giving way to a rough path of rocks and boulders, laid centuries ago by traders. We see a hand-painted sign for Roopkund and after several hours arrive at our final camping site, Bhagwabasa. From here, we will attempt the snowy trek up to the mysterious lakes of Roopkund.

It is late morning and the ground is hard with ice. It is bitterly cold. We huddle together in the unforgiving environment, surrounded by snow peaks. Above the treeline, there are no plants. At this point, Arjun's prophecy begins to come true. My headache becomes blinding, a super-migraine that renders me unable to move without sending blasts of agony wracking my head. The girl travelling with her father is in an equally bad way, weeping silently in her tent. Her father's knees, meanwhile, are beginning to protest in no uncertain terms. One friend from Dubai is on the way to losing her toenails, the other is also aching. Arjun decides that the rest of the group will climb after lunch, so we can descend that afternoon, rather than waiting until tomorrow. He peers at me through the fold of my tent. "Your Roopkund is over," he says, zipping me in shut.

Everyone else begins a tough, plodding ascent to 4,434m. At the summit, they photograph the snow, the lake and the 600 human skeletons discovered in 1942. Carbon dated in the 1960s, they are several centuries old, but no one is entirely sure exactly how they came to make Roopkund their final resting place.

When the trekkers come back down again several hours later, my friend, a serial adventurer who regularly pushes her body to its limits, says it was the hardest thing she has ever done.

Lying in my tent, I agree.

I've survived days of walking, without hot water, a phone or flushing toilets. I haven't showered in days. My head is in unimaginable pain. But I have no regrets. I've been to a place few people will ever visit. Before I left, I set up a page on www.justgiving.com to collect money for a small Polish charity that looks after the elderly and those who cannot afford hospital bills. I may not have appreciated the mountains in that country, but returning to civilisation, I do appreciate how much I take for granted, from the fluffy towels and running water in my bathroom to being able to see a doctor without having to walk for 12 hours to do so.

if you go



Source: Google

The flight Return flights on Etihad Airways (www.etihadairways.com) from Dubai to Delhi cost from \$472 (Dh1,735) including taxes

The hikes The Roopkund Trek (www.roopkund.com; +91 934 383 1803) costs \$214 (Dh785), inclusive of transport from Kathgodam and drop to Haridwar, food, permits, equipment, guides and porter charges. There are usually about 20 people per group. A list of required equipment will be sent to you. Indiahikes (www.indiahikes.in) provides tents, sleeping bags and specialised equipment such as pick axes. A minimum level of fitness is required – participants must be able to jog 4km in 25 minutes. The next available trek to Roopkund starts on May 24.