

MOVED BY THE MOUNTAINS

Lyndsey Steven embarks on a rousing, high-voltage trek through India's youngest, and the world's highest, mountain range



AUGUST 2009

"Dear Lyndsey, we are looking to invite travel writers to Roopkund in the Indian Himalayas (www.roopkund.com). As you will see from the website, it is a hiking destination to a 16,000ft mysterious lake tucked in the inner reaches of the greater Himalayas. The journey to the lake is fascinating, with hikers experiencing the best of the Himalayas in a short time. Would you, or any other journalists you know, be interested in a FAM trip?

Regards, Arjun Majumdar, Indiahikes"

My heart begins to pound as I excitedly visualise myself and a couple of friends running amok in the Himalayas... unrivalled, unspoiled mountains, the opportunity to get fit and to embrace new cultures. A monumental challenge... a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"Dear Arjun, many thanks for the invitation, but I'm afraid I won't be able to get the time off work." I chicken out.

BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER 2009

Two journalist friends and I, spurred on by a few glasses of bubbly, have dedicated ourselves to the mission. The next day no one wants to be the first to back out (although Zoe is secretly smug her editor probably won't let her go) and so my emails to Arjun resume.

It is a month filled with titillation and trepidation: I'm thrilled by the prospect of air so fresh my lungs won't at first know how to process it, by seeing, and tackling, the most famous mountains in the world, and the chance to engage with people from all walks of life. But I'm also in turmoil: I am NOT a happy camper and I'm terrified of getting mountain sickness. My fiancé has visions of me being pushed down the aisle in a wheelchair courtesy of a nasty fall.

MID-SEPTEMBER 2009

Arjun has sent a comprehensive list of our trekking requirements, including a medical certificate and I've managed to borrow most of it. (Apart from the certificate.) He's also set up an online forum in order to meet fellow hikers and relay fears to one another. While the general concern is fitness – you should be able to run 4km in 20 minutes, so my competitive streak ups the ante and makes my goal 5km – I seem to be the only one freaking out about the camping and the fact that there's not going to be any running water.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2009

My backpack is 2kg heavier than it should be. I blame the 11 packs of wet wipes. Jola, my third partner-in-dementia has returned from London with a burglar-esque balaclava to protect her nose and ears. Zoe calls to ask if it's too late to cancel. We eat burgers at the airport in defiance of what lies ahead.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2009

We're welcomed to utter pandemonium at the heaving, steamy Old Delhi station. An overnight sleeper train where pre-booked beds have no meaning as strangers try to climb in with us, is followed by a whole day's drive to Loharjung base camp, 2,530 metres (8,000ft) high.

Arjun has promised that we will experience a "tingle" when we pull into Kathgodam station and spy the sun coming up over the mountains. I feel chilly and sticky.

The long, winding and incredibly scenic drive has been worth it. We are spending the night at one of the most beautiful base

Nanda Devi is as controversial as it is awe-inspiring. Already a debate is raging as to whether it is India's highest or second-highest peak



camp in the world where the snowy peak of Nanda Ghunti juts out to the left, while miles of twisting forest falls away before us. Behind this, but not yet visible is Nanda Devi, as controversial as it is awe-inspiring. Already a debate is raging as to whether it is India's highest or second-highest peak. Apparently it got relegated to second after Sikkim joined India. Not open for negotiation is the fact it's regarded as the patron goddess of the Uttarakhand Himalaya.

"Unless your hearts are all hard, you will cry at least once – not from pain, but from sheer wonderment and joy," Arjun assures us, in between insisting no alcohol is to be consumed on the trek and that we should be respectful to both nature and our sherpas (mountaineering guides) at all times. The last two points are a given, but we're not convinced by the first.

We learn the Indiahikes philosophy of finding new routes and growing their team of researchers to document expeditions to facilitate further off-the-beaten track expeditions. Up until recently it hasn't been easy to hike on the Indian side of the Himalayas as there's limited information, approval is needed from forestry officials and there are only about 10 known routes – not necessarily the best ones – so tourists turn to the overcrowded slopes of Nepal. Indiahikes is changing this.

After a tasty meal of dhal, rotis and okra curry, we turn in for an early night and to psyche ourselves up for an early start. Thankfully there's no sign of Jola's balaclava, but she does, bizarrely, rub my stomach during the night.

SEPTEMBER 21, 2009

I am in my element as we tumble down the valley, cross rivers, spot playful mongooses and tubby marmots, ascend the thick mossy forest and emerge onto a plane of flame red wheat fields >



Clockwise from top right: A room with a view, gorgeous local kids, ambrosial forests, trek leader Arjun and guide Narendra, and Nanda Devi



with one lone wooden house: simple and yet, given its surroundings, splendid.

Himalaya means “the valley of snow”, but it really should translate into valley of melting snow since the waterfalls here are in full flow all year round thanks to the thawing caps, compounded by the abundance of rainfall.

We’d been warned that the local hill people are humble and “do not trust threatening city people,” but when I approach a family with a smiling “namaste”, they shyly and sweetly return my greeting, while the giggling children pose for photos.

It is not far from here, in Didana, that we set up camp after a good six-hour trek. It’s a gorgeous spot with huge gnarled trees and a smooth rugby field of verdant grass on which our tents have already been pitched. My body is in two minds – half of it is champing at the bit to continue what we’ve started, while the other part is happy to lie back and appreciate the sunset.

SEPTEMBER 22, 2009

Uncle, the oldest member of our group, is up before the birds and ensures that everyone is aware of this. When hot, sweet bed tea is delivered by a grinning sherpa – yes, to our beds – we are already wide awake, if not fully rested. Vandana, his daughter, has shoe bites – the endearing Indian name for blisters – but there are no further casualties thus far.

To Bedni Bugyal via Ali Bugyal the scenery changes from forests to undulating hills to shapely corn-coloured knolls with no vegetation, to staggering mountain peaks dipped in snow. If these were backdrops in a film, you’d swear they had been digitally enhanced.

Arjun lectures us about the importance of walking in our ropes – we’ve been split into two groups and told to walk in single file, never overtaking the leader with a sweeper at the back to ensure no dilly-datherers get left behind. With varying levels of fitness, it’s a little frustrating and a few are yanking to break free...

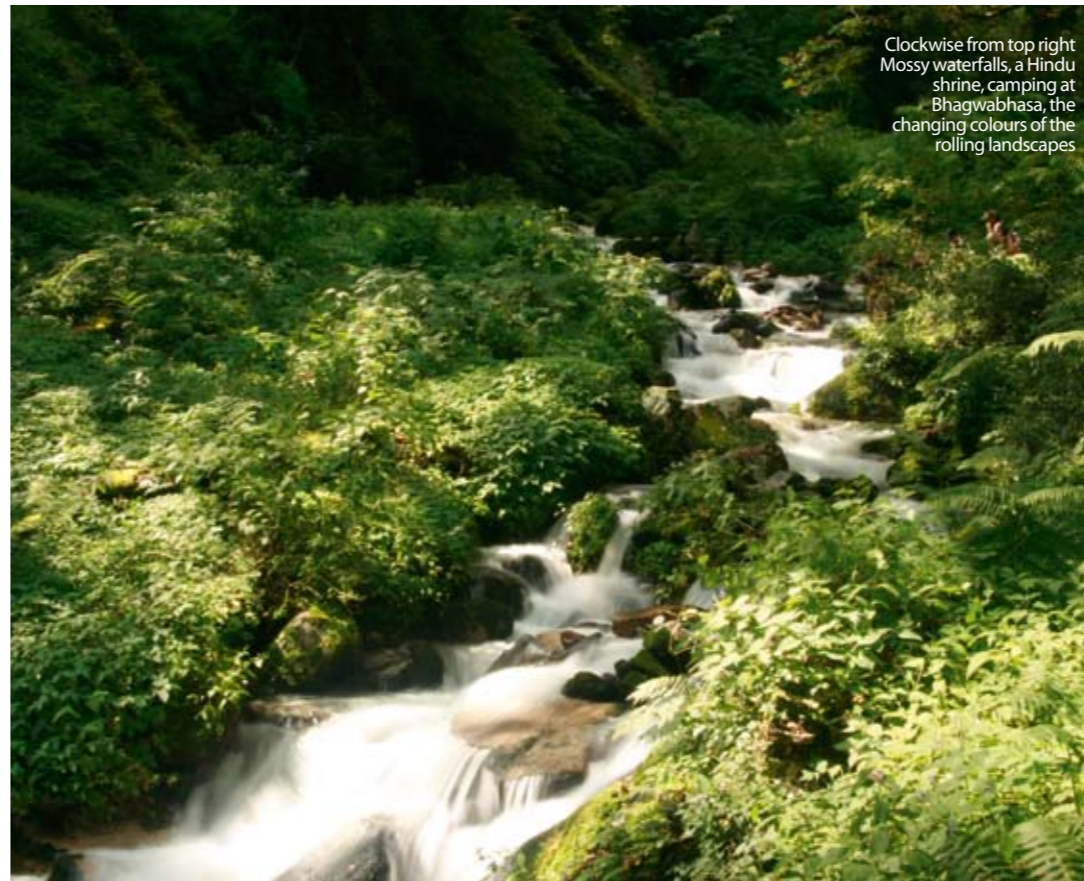
Fits of hysteria make sleep hard to come by as we listen to a mule who’s also feeling rebellious. There must be something in the air. The sound of a clanking bell is followed by thundering hoofs as the uncooperative animal is chased by his sherpa, who in turn shines his torch onto our tents trying to pinpoint the insurgent. The mule manages a good few laps of the campsite before calling it a night.

SEPTEMBER 23, 2009

Guide Narendra employs the oral tradition so important in the region to enlighten us to the spirituality surrounding Bedni Bugal. Sucking on delicious gol gappa sweets, which taste like Bounty chocolate bars, we discover that when Parvati, the goddess of power, went to visit her parents, her husband missed her so sent demons to taunt her.

Retaliating she turned into the goddess of death to drink the demon’s blood, thwarting regeneration. She then returned to Bhagwabhasa, our next stop after Ghora Lotani, where Shiva (a Hindu deity) transformed her back to her original form. Romantic? It seems a bit destructive to me.

The landscape becomes a sparkling sepia colour as mica dominates our surroundings. This shiny smooth stone from the sea is a valuable commodity used for spark plugs and conductors, so one of my IT trekking partners informs me.



Clockwise from top right Mossy waterfalls, a Hindu shrine, camping at Bhagwabhasa, the changing colours of the rolling landscapes

Our camping spot tonight is sensational: a grassy plateau high in the sky which dramatically peels off before us prior to running up again to create the tops of the Himalayas. To the left we can spy our final destination: the enigmatic Roopkund.

SEPTEMBER 24, 2009

As delicious as our dhal, chipatti and okra meals have been, my stomach groans at the prospect of yet another plate of lentils so I breakfast on an energy bar. The plan for the day is a three-to-four-hour trek before resting up for the big hike tomorrow. The air is starting to get noticeably thinner and, compounded by aching limbs and a couple of fevers, the going is getting visibly tougher for the group. When I reach the campsite, gone are the greens and reds of the first couple of days: the pervading colours are the browns of the mountains, the electric blue of the skies and the angelic looking snowy white peaks. It’s sunny but cold. Jola gets mountain sickness.

Zoe and I can’t stand our unwashed selves any longer so leave Jola and her splitting headache in peace while we stroll to the inviting looking waterfall in the distance. It’s too cold to even squeal. I feel a tingle. Ready for a leisurely afternoon of reading and thawing out, we see Arjun wildly waving his arms and before we’re even up the hill he’s barked at us to grab our warmest clothes and hurry up. Apparently the weather is changing and if we don’t leave for Roopkund now we won’t make it. Zoe’s reproachful look signals I’m the one to blame for an extra two hours of exercise just before our biggest challenge. At least we’ll tackle Roopkund smelling like roses.

We’re breathless with every step and for the first time I feel pushed to my limit. This is before we’ve even made it to the rocky part of the mountain where it just gets tougher. It’s so steep and icy now that we have to cling onto a rope hinged by our sherpas. I’m flailing, but having been quite cocky about my fitness, can’t afford to fall back now. Besides, I’d rather be at the top of the pack than behind some big guy who could at any minute slip and fall on top of my head. I suck more energy sweets and soldier on.

LATITUDE 30.2625 °N. LONGITUDE 79.7315 °E.
ALTITUDE 16,000 FT.

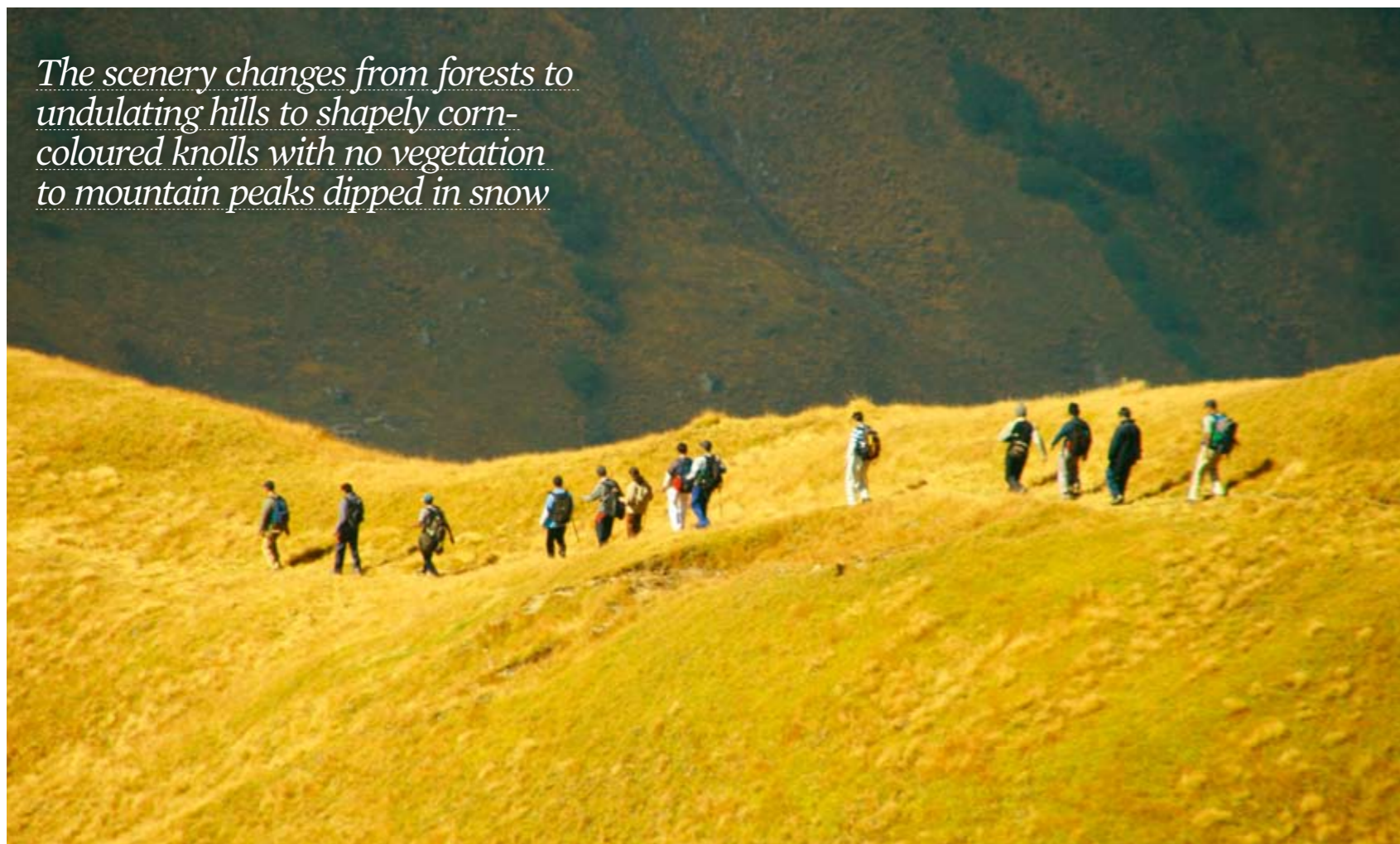
We’ve made it! High-fives, handshakes and hugs all round as we revel in the splendour of our magnetic surroundings. Roop means beauty and kund is lake, and the frozen lake with its unsolved mystery as to why hundreds of corpses were discovered here 60 years ago, sends shivers down our already chilly spines. Gloriously happy, we take it in turns to slide down the banks on our backs and take silly snaps. It is this moment that will be embedded in our memories forever and we forget about the hardships of the trek and refuse to think about the ones that lie ahead. I don’t care that a badly timed skid will almost result in an ice pick slicing off my foot or that descending the mountain at breakneck speed the following day will mean losing a few toe nails. I forget about the cold and refuse to think about it being so bitter that we’ll be deprived of sleep that night. For now, we are making history in one of the Himalayas’ most historical and esoteric spots and we’re all feeling very pleased with ourselves. Pleased as punch. ☺

Smooth as silk

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The scenery changes from forests to undulating hills to shapely corn-coloured knolls with no vegetation to mountain peaks dipped in snow



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