

Mountain high

Zoe Cairns puts her stamina to the test on a strenuous five-day trek in the Himalayas and lives to tell the tale, albeit with aching muscles, missing toenails and a newfound respect for mountains.

I remember a few years ago looking out over the Himalayas from Shimla, thinking how far those mountains were from everything and especially how cold it must be with all that snow. Looking back on that now, why on earth did I think walking up them would be a good idea?

A few months ago, a friend mentioned that she was planning on trekking in the Himalayas in eight weeks' time. By the end of the conversation, and with limited trekking experience based solely around a school Duke of Edinburgh trip to Bognor 15 years ago, I had pledged to join her on her mighty quest. Two months and a good few gym sessions later, I found myself in the Himalayan foothills.

BEFORE THE TREK

About a month before our trip, the trek organisers, India Hikes, emailed all the participants with a kit list and a list of what not to bring (for example, no slow-drying denim, no makeup), and encouraged us to visit their online forum. It was great to be able to introduce ourselves to each other and to discuss similar concerns and training issues. The most talked about topic was the toilet facilities that would and wouldn't be made available (luckily, there is a toilet tent set up at every camp). The forum conversations enabled us to prepare mentally and physically for our challenge, together as a group.

GETTING TO BASE CAMP

Meeting everyone (there were 20 of us) at Old Delhi train station was like a game — trying to put faces to names. At this stage nobody realised how close we would all be by the time we returned to the station, ten days later. Our train arrived two hours late, and we boarded for our overnight journey to Kathgodam.

Kathgodam is in Uttarakhand, one of India's northernmost states. We were collected from the train by four-wheel-drive vehicles and driven even further north to Lohajung, which was our base camp and our accommodation for the night.

We reached Lohajung in the dark and were warmly welcomed by our trek guides, Arjun and Narendra. After settling into our rooms in a rustic, mountain-side cabin, we met for hot chai (tea), and a briefing, followed by a scrummy supper of sabji (vegetable curry), chapattis (handmade flat breads) and a good singalong to Uncle's harmonica.

THE TREK: Day 1

Lohajung, 2,500m to Tolpani, 2,900m
Waking up in Lohajung and drinking in the morning view was definitely worth the trip. Snow-capped mountains in the distance and lush green valleys in the foreground — it was like a painting. Mules were being packed up as we tucked into a hot breakfast. We filled our water bottles from a tap that ran directly from a river and set off... downhill, which was disconcerting. With the mules doing most of the carrying, we only needed to carry a small backpack with a sweater, water, torch and emergency snack pack.

We passed through gorgeous valleys with thick carpets of grass, stopping only to fill up our water bottles from clear, icy waterfalls. So far, nothing too strenuous. I must admit, I did have a smug little chuckle to myself at this point for ever doubting my fitness ability.

After a few hours, we started the long and slow climb up. And up. And up. For two hours we climbed steadily and breathlessly. Just when I thought I would buckle and give in, we topped out at a little village called Didna, which was

surrounded by flowers. The sun shone and villagers dressed top-to-toe in extreme colours went about their life. Children stared at us and ran about as we emerged bright red and panting.

By early afternoon, we had reached our camp. The porters had sped up the hill with mules and had everything set up by the time we got there. We felt very spoilt! We passed the rest of the afternoon with games of cards, exploring the area and lots of tea. Our view from camp was breathtaking and we were lulled to sleep that night by mules milling around with bells clonking about their necks.

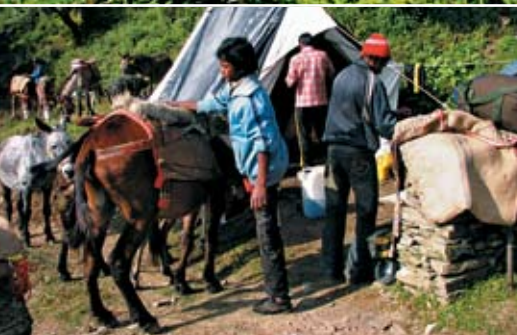
Day 2

Tolpani, 2,900m to Bedni Bugyal 3,350m

The horror of being woken at 5.30am was softened by a very smiley porter and a mug of steaming hot, sugary chai and aloo parathas (potato pancakes). By 7am we had packed up and set off on a tough climb to break through the tree line. We walked through an oak forest worthy of its own Disney movie. We clambered over giant oak tree roots using them as steps to help us through the steep ascent. As we climbed higher, the clouds started to make beautiful, eerie shadows through the trees.

We all kept a better pace today and walked together, which meant the group banter became more relaxed and casual. Eventually we broke the tree line and the rooted ground gave way to green pastures that seemed to go on forever.

Main photograph: View before the steep ascent to Didna. **From left to right:** Packing mules from base camp; Trek leader Arjun; Fresh springwater to fill our bottles; Children in Didna; Sharing the water with the local livestock; A familiar sight of the mules climbing ahead of us.



The temperature seemed to drop at this point and as we reached our camp we began donning long sleeves. As we watched the sun go down, we feasted on a snack of hot vegetable fritters and felt utterly content.

Day 3

Bedni Bugyal, 3,350m to Ghora Lotani, 3,900m

By day three, I couldn't imagine ever starting a day again without a steaming, sweet cup of bed tea — perfect for kicking off the night's chills. This is supposed to be a rest day, so we were only scheduled to walk for three hours. As we set off, Narendra told us all about the importance of the area. The place where we camped is steeped in mythological history and we were all engrossed in stories of love and battle. While we were listening to Narendra, we witnessed lambs being born in a field across the river. I felt very close to nature.

We walked up to a saddle and over a pass that literally stole the air from my lungs. We looked out over rolling valleys, as the clouds came and went around us. It was possibly the most stunning sight I have ever seen and we all stood very still for quite some time to take it all in. At this point, we started to notice the effects of our high altitude.

Day 4, Trek 1

Ghora Lotani 3,900m to Bhagwabasa 4,400m

The day kicked off early with tea and a quick pack-up before we started the ascent to Bhagwabasa — our last camp before the Roopkund summit. Our guides told us that although day four is also a three hour trek, the gradient is steady and winds around the edge of dramatic mountains. We would start to really feel the cold and our pace would become slower as we got higher and the air got thinner.

We passed a shepherd, whose animals were grazing on slopes so steep that you can't imagine how they don't topple off. By then, we were well above the cloud line and were surrounded by soaring eagles and the snowy peaks of India's



Zoe Cairns (centre) with two friends, close to Bhagwabasa, with Roopkund in the distance.

tallest mountains. The pathways were very narrow and stony, the wind was howling and it started to rain. That decision that we had made only eight weeks back started to feel like a very foolish one. I was craving tea and toast at home under a blanket.

Once we hit camp, a fellow trekker and I ventured off in search of a waterfall we had spotted on the way up, armed with a bar of soap and warm clothes. After about 20 minutes of climbing over boulders and through rain-soaked long grass, we arrived at the foot of the waterfall. Below us was a flat area, which looked perfect for bathing. We climbed down, excited about having our first wash in four days. It felt incredible and exhilarating, but we looked and felt like walking ice cubes. My hair actually froze into mini ice dreads!

As we arrived back at camp, an over excited Arjun broke the news that we would try for Roopkund that afternoon. He said that there was a forecast of heavy snow, making a summit the next day too difficult. We were all a little shocked and I was regretting my icy shower and unnecessary hiking back and forth to the waterfall. We stocked up our energy stores with a carb-heavy lunch of spicy rice and, armed with a light day-bag, trudged off into the snow. Sadly not everyone joined us on the ascent to Roopkund. A few people were suffering from altitude sickness, which usually means a blinding headache

and nausea. The only cure is to move back down to a lesser altitude. There is no reason why some suffer from this and others don't — and it doesn't seem to have anything to do with fitness levels.

Day 4, Trek 2

Bhagwabasa, 4,400m to Roopkund, 4,850m

The scenery en route to Roopkund is dramatically different compared to what we had seen on previous days. There is no green and beyond the shale there is only snow and brown grey rock.

Roopkund itself is ridden with folklore and there is a 'mystery lake' at the top (usually frozen) where in 1942 a forest guard found the skeletons of hundreds of people. Anthropologists date the bones back to sometime between the 12th and 15th century and believe the cause of death could have been a freak hailstorm while on pilgrimage in the Nanda Devi mountain range. Others speculate that the skeletons belong to the King Jasdhawal of Kanauj and his party celebrating the birth of an heir. According to local belief, their singing and dancing might have angered the local deity and caused them to be thrown into the lake.

After two hours of trekking in the snow, my feet and nose were frozen. It was terribly cold and the light was dropping. Most of us were feeling pretty low as we

struggled for air — and though it was hard to stay motivated, the guides were full of encouragement and smiles. Quite a few people turned back on this last leg, unable to keep going.

There was one final steep, slippery bit to climb, which has a rope leading up it so you can find the way and heave yourself up. This gave way to a snowy plateau. It was breathtaking and the sense of enormous achievement made the struggle worthwhile. After a few moments to take it all in, we started bombarding each other with snowballs. Everyone was struggling to breathe the thin, cold air so, before long, we turned and headed back down the mountain. Exhaustion set in, but luckily porters were there at the ready to help us down safely. Back at camp, there was a buzz of storytelling and reliving the best and worst moments on the trek, all of us desperately trying to warm up with hot tea. Not many sat down for supper that night as the altitude and exhaustion had zapped our appetites. We soon fell into deep sleeps, interrupted only by the odd altitude-induced stomach-churn.

Day 5

Bhagwabasa 4,400m to Lohajung 2,500m (via Wan)

We woke to a crisp, white morning. Even our mules had a thin covering of frost and they snorted plumes of steamy breath as they rummaged around for something to eat. We were supposed to trek down to Bedni Bugyal but, feeling strong, we decided to make it back to base camp. Arjun and Narendra thought we were crazy, but said it was possible if we were up for a tough day. We were so used to walking uphill that we thought walking downhill would be a breeze. Further tempted by the prospect of no more camping, we set off at a fast pace down the mountain.

We made it to Bedni in record time, relaxed for a while and took off our shoes to let our toes breathe. After lunch, we headed down a steep pass to Wan. This was when I realised why our guides had thought we were crazy. The path made Wild Wadi's Jumeirah Sceirah seem like a

baby slide! The pressure of the weight on the front of your toes is extreme, and one hour felt like three — this was definitely the lowest point of the trek for me.

My toes were in agony and the exhaustion of the week's walk left me incapable of coping with it. The only thing that kept me going was the thought of sleeping in a proper bed, in an actual building, rather than in a sleeping bag in a tent. As Wan came into view, we picked up the pace and headed down to flat land. Every one was shattered, but happy and excited at the same time. Four-wheel-drives came to collect us and take us back to base camp. I hardly remember climbing into bed, but I know that I slept soundly.

COMING DOWN

Base camp was full of new hikers arriving — all with the same nervous excitement that we had bubbled with less than a week ago. It was hard to imagine that we had experienced so much and walked so far in such little time. Due to our hasty descent, we had a day to ourselves in Lohajung. All I wanted to do was have a bath (even if it was in cold water), get into clean clothes and curl up with my book in a tranquil spot overlooking Didna.

After breakfast the next day, we bid an emotional farewell to our trek guides and friends and clambered into our transport to Haridwar. We zigzagged on roads running parallel to the River Ganges, following its path through vast valleys and colourful villages. That evening, we stopped in Rishikesh, a Hindu holy city and popular with ageing, European yoga fanatics.

We moseyed down jostling streets and back alleys until we found a lovely little cafe right on the banks of the Ganges. As we sat there, we talked about how the trek had broken us physically in many ways. One of my friends had suffered terribly from altitude sickness and was simply relieved not to have a crown-splitting headache any longer. I was starting to lose toenails and my leg muscles ached with every single step and movement. Was it all worth it? Most definitely. Would we do it again? In a heartbeat. But perhaps with a blow up mattress next time! ☺

NEED TO KNOW

>> **The trek:** To find out more about India Hikes visit www.indiahikes.in. For information specific to the Roopkund trek, visit www.roopkund.com. The trek costs Rs9,750 per person (approximately Dh950) and includes all food, tented accommodation, pick up from Kathgodam and drop off in Haridwar. Bookings can be made online. India Hikes has a wonderful policy that if you don't make it to the summit, you are welcome back as many times as it takes (free of charge) for you to reach the top.

Getting there: Air Arabia flies from Sharjah Airport to Delhi daily. Ticket prices start from about Dh1,000.

GETTING PREPARED

The trek organisers advise that to be fit enough for the trek, participants should be able to run at least four kilometres in 30 minutes. As a self-confessed gym-phobe with less than two months to go before embarking on the trek, this was a terrifying concept. I scoured the internet for a fitness schedule that seemed doable and downloaded a running plan from Nike. It was a six-week plan and seemed exactly what I needed. Next stop was the mall for some running shoes.

Week one started me off with 20 minutes of one-minute walk/one-minute run intervals on a treadmill. It was a breeze and I supplemented this with some other core training exercises. By week three, I was jogging for 10 minutes without even breaking a sweat. Where it had once been a real struggle to get myself into the gym, I was starting to really look forward to going and I didn't even feel like I needed to hide myself away at the back anymore.

By week six, I was running for 40 minutes four times a week. During the last two weeks of training, I increased the incline on the running machine to prepare my muscles for the uphill onslaught.



Vignettes from the trip, from breathtaking views of oak forests, snow-capped mountains, and the frozen Mystery lake, to the campsite and fellow-campers.

