Wild Treks Revisited

Andy Stewart

From my uncomfortable, squatting position in the ditch I flinched as the bus sounded its horn and then started slowly pulling away, my purple Karrimor rucksack just visible on the roof. Hastily pulling up my trousers, I anxiously legged it up the steep bank and onto the road, feeling weak and bemused at this farcical situation; shouting and gesticulating wildly to catch someone's attention. The driver thankfully stopped the bus and let me on, minus my dignity. It was just one of several embarrassing incidents that characterised my 1991 summer trip to Kinnaur, a deeply incised valley cutting into the Himalayan range in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

A local bus had brought me from the hill station of Shimla to the Kalpa/Kinnaur district bordering Chinese occupied Tibet. As I handed over my passport and Inner Line permit at a checkpoint in Wangtu, I felt a pang of excitement about visiting an area off the beaten track. With standing-room only on the bus I had to constantly crane my neck to see out of the window to glimpse flashes of a beckoning mountainous landscape. My destination, Rekong Peo, was host to an important Tibetan religious festival, the Kalachakra. The plan was to meet up with some Australian friends for the festival and do some trekking.

The road was a bit rough, putting it mildly; poised precariously above the raging Sutlej River, there was ample evidence of constant collapse and rebuilding. Sections of the old abandoned Hindustan-Tibet Highway, dating back to the British Raj, hugged the valley sides at a higher elevation, ending abruptly where landslides had removed whole sections. Our tortuous progress through this raw, elemental landscape was soon interrupted.

Out we all trooped in a small town and, despite the language barrier, it was clear that this was the end of the line; a bridge at the far end of town had been washed away during the night. A group of inquisitive locals crowded round while I considered my next move. As luck would have it a friendly face appeared and a local teacher invited me to spend the night with his family and continue my journey the following day. I was very thankful! He neglected to mention that a 30m cable with the equivalent of a low-sided shopping trolley attached to a pulley was the only means of reaching his house. I hung on very tightly while the weight of my rucksack threatened to topple me backwards, spurred on by the rumble of boulders on the riverbed below and the cold draught from seething glacial floodwater.

The following morning a bus ferried us from the far side of the broken bridge to Kalpa. At 2,300m and well above the valley floor, the town was located in a fine alpine setting, pine-forests stretching upwards to granite peaks and glaciers. The owner of the closest thing to a guesthouse welcomed me into his abode, full of grinning children and pressed a glass of whisky into my hand. Whilst I was touched by the friendly welcome, it soon

became apparent that Urgin, retired from the Indian army, had a problem with the demon drink. On the bottle at 7am, I politely declined his proffered spirits before breakfast. Being a week early, and more or less the first westerner in town, I endured short-lived celebrity status in Urgin's eyes. He proudly walked with me through the village, insisting on holding hands (before you get any ideas this is normal for male friends in India). It was cool at first, but during the ensuing days as westerners began to roll up on buses and hitching rides on lorries, or 4x4s for the well-heeled tourists, it felt truly cringe-worthy. Things came to a head soon after.

Urgin in a rare moment of sobriety.
Photo Andy Stewart

I awoke in the middle of the night from a pleasant dream of bathing in warm water, of which there was none in this guesthouse, to find Urgin urinating over the bed. In a drunken stupor, he had missed the toilet door and stumbled into my room. In the pitch dark I cursed him and fumbled for my head-torch; the electricity was off at night. As he came to his senses he was profusely apologetic, but I was in no mood for apologies. Washing was out of the question with the water supply off, so I relocated to the flat roof with a very damp sleeping bag. I had been in India less than a week and it felt like a good time to go trekking!

Hitching up the valley the following morning, glad to be away from my inebriated host, a truck picked me up. I jumped into the back and without thinking snapped a photo of the lads who were sharing the lift. They glared at me, bandaged, some with casts on and obviously in discomfort on the bare metal floor. The policeman riding with them informed me that they were part of a road working party hit by a truck. Feeling very guilty, I hastily unfastened my sleeping mat and tried to make them a bit more comfortable. Road workers, often from southern India were a common sight on the verges, breaking rocks with hammers by hand to create neat piles of aggregate for road building. I jumped off at a bridge beyond Khangi, heading up a side valley leading straight into Tibet. My intention was to complete a circuit of the Kinner Kailash Massif via Charang Pass at 5,266m.

The first day took me to Thangi, where I ended up at the local police post drinking raki (moonshine) and smoking marijuana (I kid you not). A bit worse for wear I was introduced to Dr Mukesh, who invited me to his home. It was a sturdy stone and wood structure built to withstand raiding parties of bandits from over the border. He showed me the flintlock muskets and swords that would have helped to keep his forbears safe in lawless times. Upstairs was more comfortable with a rooftop terrace and rooms well

insulated with wood for long winters when the valley was cut off by snow. That night the villagers were partying, dancing in a large circle around a fire. Joining in, my sense of cultural norms melted away; I was travelling again.

My generous hosts sent me on my way with homemade pickles, neoza (pine nuts) and a bag of tsampa locally called sattu (roast barley flour, which is a Tibetan staple food and not available in shops). The Mukesh's were going to the Kalachakra too; for locals, this important Buddhist festival was a major cultural event on their doorstep. Walking along pine-scented trails it struck me how different this area was to Nepal where I had enjoyed trekking along popular trails amidst a whole infrastructure to accommodate and cater to tourists' needs. There was none of that here, yet the people were friendly and welcoming which made it very special.

Dr Mukesh's family. Photo Andy Stewart

Stopping to cook a meal in the late afternoon, I found a pleasant sunny spot amongst trees. I soon realised I was on a steep learning-curve when after an hour of boiling a pan of rice and lentils on a Primus stove they were still hard! I made a fire and boiled it some more, giving up eventually to crunch through an unappetising al dente curry. In the absence of a pressure cooker, the lower boiling point of water and a crap, temperamental stove had put paid to anything but soup and porridge.

In the early evening, beyond the treeline, I was joined by a local man on his way back to his home village of Charang. He spoke some English and we chatted as we walked. I spotted an army post on the valley side and asked him whether I needed to show my documents, but dismissing the idea he pressed on. Soon after I heard the sound of boots as two soldiers ran up to us and angrily berating my companion for not showing his papers, roughed him up in front of me! I stood there helplessly, caught between wanting to intervene and stay neutral. What was I to do? He lived in a militarised border zone and by walking past the post had presumably flaunted some protocol. It contrasted to the frequent but easy-going police checkpoints in Nepal. We continued to his village, but he seemed upset and distracted. It had a forlorn air of neglect, half ruined buildings and the odd solar street-light with an empty battery compartment, showing that development is a reversible

process. Ahead was Tibet, closed to foreigners along this route. My route led me back past the checkpost and up a tributary valley. I stopped soon after at a small Buddhist temple, mulling over the day's events when a woman invited me in, blessed my rucksack with a silk ribbon and kindly let me stay in an ante-room. No sooner had I cooked some soup with tsampa and dried vegetables and was just settling down for the evening, when there was a knock on the door. In walked the same soldiers with broad smiles and a bottle of raki! Seeing me obviously ill at ease they informed me that my travel companion had been spying for the Chinese!

My hangover clouded the next morning's trek, a steady climb up the side valley. By afternoon the weather was looking increasingly unsettled and I was beginning to question the wisdom of not carrying a tent. To my left a series of steep north faces were avalanching frequently, causing me to steer well clear and cross a boulder field. It was here that around dusk a boulder suddenly moved, trapping my foot, and although I soon freed it, I had a sudden realisation of vulnerability, alone in this uninhabited valley; not a place to have an accident. I found a reasonable bivvy spot near the head of the valley, partly sheltered from chilly winds. I had a great view of the nearest 6,000m peak, an easy-looking walk up a gently sloping glacier. An Australian friend I had bumped into in Delhi on arrival in India had told me I was mad for going trekking with nothing more substantial than a pair of sandals. This had prompted me to buy a pair of trainers in Shimla. The snow slope up to Charang La looked challenging enough in fresh snow without contemplating a glacier crossing. I would give the peak a miss!

Charang La. *Photo Andy Stewart*

I had acquired a stick on the way up, which came in very useful next morning for ascending the snow slope, which was soft enough to kick steps after a cloudy night. I soon reached the obligatory faded prayer flags flapping about in the wind. It was not a place to linger. The 1,831m descent to Chitkul in the Baspa Valley at 3,435m was uneventful. That evening the villagers were circle dancing around a fire. They welcomed me in and I joined them, despite sore feet and aching legs. I felt privileged to be accepted unquestioningly into an ancient, tribal tradition.

Back in Kalpa I bumped into Orly, an Israeli-American woman I had shared a room with in Shimla. The young guy at the hostel reception had leered at me when I suggested a twin double rather than two singles, presumably thinking I was a fast mover and had chatted her up during the ten-minute walk from the railway station. My intentions were entirely dishonourable; I just wanted to save a few quid! The following day monkeys ransacked the room after I foolishly left the window open, scattering muesli, torn clothes and malaria tablets, dextrously unscrewing the childproof lids first.

The Kalachakra was a colourful affair, drawing crowds from Kulu to California, with teachings by HH the Dalai Lama, amidst a myriad of maroon-robed monks surrounding a venerable entourage of lamas. Thousands of people sat on terraces, refreshed periodically by monks carrying huge teapots of butter tea (salt and yak butter rather than sugar and milk). A huge golden statue of the Buddha beamed beatifically from an elevated position. Apart from the butt-ache brought on by hours of sitting cross-legged, one memorable event stands out from the daily journey back to lodgings for the thousands of pilgrims/festival goers. A Tibetan man with a small child on his shoulders surrounded by a crowd of smiling people, their arms held out in reverence, murmuring 'Tulku!'

I tried my best to get a group of Americans to the local teahouse I frequented, but they were having none of it, their hygiene concerns overriding any desire to eat with the locals. Slightly disappointed, I returned to the tourist camp I had booked for the week of the festival. The presence of two international journalists opened my eyes to the significance of this event, tucked away in a remote corner of the Himalayas. My discomfort with being in a tourist enclave was vindicated when a group of locals performed dancing and drumming one evening. This time we watched as spectators and soon after the performance a fight broke out between the organisers from Delhi and some of dancers. It was time to move on.

Next morning I caught the bus to Spiti, part of India but very reminiscent of Tibet; arid and very much in the rain-shadow of the Garhwal region to the south. My intention was to trek from Pin Valley to Parbati Valley. Walking down from Kalpa to the valley bottom I was beginning to feel ill, to add to the slight sense of foreboding. Jim Duff an ex-pat mountaineer living in Australia had warned me about the complex glacial area I would have to cross.

Later that day, I skipped a visit to Dankhar Gompa and headed south-west along a substantial track leading up this partly inhabited valley, barren

Nothing to eat but peas. *Photo Andy Stewart*

apart from fields of green, unripe barley and peas irrigated by meltwater streams. I was with two locals from the bus journey and we stopped at a small house. With what little English they spoke I gathered that they didn't have much food, but I was welcome to browse in the pea field. I noticed a pressure cooker on a shelf, so donated 2 kilos of rice and lentils, which were of no use to me. It left me with a couple of packets of biscuits and some soup ingredients, but then I wasn't feeling too hungry!

Last village in Pin Valley. *Photo Andy Stewart*

The bare rock of an uncompromising landscape had replaced the relatively lush pine-forests in Kinnaur. Small villages of substantial flat-roofed adobe houses clung to the edge of flatter river terraces perched above the Pin River, with whitewashed stupas bordering the fields where the path wound its way up the valley. I was knackered. Debilitating stomach cramps were becoming more regular, along with bloody, watery stools, bringing back unpleasant memories of previous dysentery episodes. Maybe the American tourists had got it right after all! Seeing me weakly, staggering about, one of the villagers took me in and I ended up lying in bed for a couple of days, only venturing out to squat and relieve myself at the edge of the fields.

I was feeling lighter, and thanking my hosts for their kindness headed up the valley to the Pin-Parbati Pass at a mere 4,802m. In my weakened state, I did question the sanity of continuing the trek when I could have headed back to where the bus dropped me and travelled on to Manali where I could pay to see a doctor. But no, that felt very much like a cop-out and instead I entertained the insane notion that with altitude my condition might improve!

Leaving the village behind, my only company was an occasional shepherd with whom I would always share tea and biscuits. There weren't many left, but that didn't stop me! A friendly dog followed me and I was pleased to have him as company, ending up at a stone shelter built to provide protection from the elements. I could see several possible las (passes) through breaks in the cloud, but which one? There was no obvious path and I only had the energy to drag myself up one; I was worried about taking the dog too. The dog, which I named Sattu, was showing an unhealthy interest in the blood and mucus I was passing, necessitating rolling large stones to cover it up. It was a thoroughly miserable scene.

The following morning I crossed a fast-moving stream, wracked with indecision about which route to take and what to do with the dog. Out of nowhere a flock of sheep appeared from behind a ridge of moraine, along with a shepherd who took the dog and pointed out the route to the la. I was gobsmacked! By early afternoon I had climbed to the glacier at a snail's pace and finally reached the rocky crest of the watershed. It was misty and the sun's glare was so intense that I couldn't see more than a few metres, which didn't bode too well for dealing with crevasses and serac barriers in a complex glacial crossing. Taking a slatey rock I dug a small snow shelter and decided to sit it out for a few hours. I climbed into my sleeping bag and lit a beedi (a thin Indian cigarette wrapped in a leaf and tied with cotton). I'd not touched the things since getting a sore throat and bad chest after my previous trek.

By early evening the mist had lifted a little and the sun's glare had lessened, so I hastily packed my damp sleeping bag and headed off into the unknown. I had been told that a guided trekking group had passed this way six weeks ago, and it wasn't long before I came across little signs of their passing: a cigarette butt, the odd match and even an empty box. In the gloom, I clung to these clues as signs that I was on the right path, but as the

light began to fade they stopped appearing; I was heading downhill quite steeply near the snout of a glacier, and suddenly unstable rocky debris replaced ice. My elation at crossing the glacier so easily was suddenly checked by a strong tingling on the back of my neck, and a strong sense of presence just in front of me. There was nothing to see, but I was spooked and decided to put as much distance between myself and it before the last light went. I was in a small glacial valley strewn with rock and boulders; it was with relief that I found a reasonable bivvy spot in the lee of a slightly overhanging face and tried my best to fluff up the down in my 'Diemor' sleeping bag. They certainly were light, because there was nothing in them! I remember Bill Deakin joking about the name; just the thing to have on a mountain with a name like that.

Breakfast saw the last two biscuits and remaining tea-bag finished. It didn't matter; I was only hours away from the town of Manikaran. What was all the fuss about? A kilometre on and, to my dismay, the valley ended abruptly, as steep slabs dropped hundreds of metres down to a confusing scene of jumbled moraines and lakes where the glacier had retreated. I realised that I was in a hanging valley perched high above the main Parbarti Valley. To my left the snout was just visible; that is where I should have been. To my right the terminal moraine gave way to greenery beyond.

Upper Parbati Valley. *Photo Andy Stewart*

I studied the slabs for a way down, connecting grassy ledges until I had figured out the optimum route. Some trickier sections I climbed first without my rucksack until I was sure I could climb down. A few hours later I looked back up from the valley floor with a palpable sense of relief and followed an arduous cairned trail until I reached an impasse. The moraine ridge was cut by what can best be described as a lagoon and on its far side the ridge continued with a cairn marker. Wading into it I soon had the sickening sensation of sinking into quicksand, so beating a hasty retreat I painstakingly picked my way around the shore until I reached the ridge again. By the time I reached terra firma at the top of a steep rock step I was exhausted, pausing briefly to look at the array of metal tridents placed by Hindu sarddhus. It was obviously a holy place, the edge of a world poised between the forces of creation and destruction. I'm sure Shiva would have been quite happy there.

I pressed on, passing a huge boulder with a shelter beneath. A man ran out to me shouting 'charas!' (Indian for marijuana). From my wild-eyed perspective he looked insane, so I walked on.

The valley was like a huge Scottish glen, with wild horses galloping about. It looked starkly beautiful, but my eyes were set on the horizon looking for the treeline and civilisation beyond. By dusk the stomach cramps set in, forcing me to squat by a stream, wet through and utterly dejected. The valley stretched on, magnificent and devoid of trees. My gear was soaked, I had no food and nowhere to spend the night. Scanning the path along the valley side, I noticed it climb, leading up to another huge boulder. That could surely mean one thing, and my spirits lifted at the prospect.

The side of the boulder formed an overhang with a sheltered platform beneath. A stack of firewood covered in dust lay in a dry alcove. Sat in front of a roaring fire, I may as well have been in a 5-star hotel. I was warm, I dried my gear, and even though I only had hot water to drink, it felt great! Next morning was a different story as I focussed on putting one foot in front of the other, completely drained of energy. I had passed a boulder-bridge upstream that enabled a river crossing. I could see that I should have taken it, since this side now climbed upwards to skirt a line of high cliffs, whilst any easy trail lay on the other side. Progress became agonisingly slow as I was running on empty. I came across a herd of sheep and goats on one of the narrow ledges. They were so tame that I had to push past them which was bizarre, but as soon as the shepherd spotted me he built a fire, milked a ewe and made the most amazing milky brew which he served with flatbread. My gratitude can barely be expressed; suffice it to say that I took off my trainers and handed them to him to replace his tattered, shabby footwear. They were two sizes too big, but he didn't mind, and I set off in my sandals with a spring in my step, descending to lush meadows of gorgeous flowers. Two Indian mountaineers passed me carrying ice-axes, but they weren't interested in striking up a conversation when I tried to engage them, babbling on about the 'out there' adventure I'd just had!

By early evening I was flagging, but there were signs of a village ahead through plantations of marijuana (I was still off the beaten track). I can remember feeling emotional as I trudged, disconsolately, past closed doors and no welcoming faces. Eventually a young lad returning from working in the fields beckoned for me to follow. A hydro-engineer was staying at his family's house, and he spoke English. The thrill of watching someone prepare a simple meal, and the anticipation of eating chapattis and dahl has never felt quite so poignant! Next morning I left and descended to the River Parbati, considering that this valley could be dammed within a few years. I washed off the dirt in a clean pool and entered the world of teashops, hennaed beards and the roadhead to a town thronged with aggressive, drunken Israeli tourists fresh from military service. Skinny and wasted, I felt like a fish out of water.