

OREAD PACHAS EXPEDITION TO PUNJAB HIMALAYA OF INDIA

(Pachas is Hindi for Fifty.)

4th October to 30th October 1999

by Paul Bingham

Participants

Bob Pettigrew – leader
Gordon Gadsby
George Reynolds
Chris Martin
John Welbourn
Colin Hobday
Uschi Hobday
Stuart Godfrey
Edith Colley
Paul Bingham

Porters

Prem Singh Bodh – sirdar
Prem Khan Amma – cook
Bir Singh
Dilip
Madan
Panchok
Jit Ram
Sonam Dawa
ano
ano

Horsemen

Kegi
Tschearring
Ano
Ano

22 Ponies/Mules

Guest Dog

“Pachas”



Objectives

To undertake a high mountain traverse of the Bara Bangahal in the Dhaula Dhar range between Bir in the Kangra valley and Manali in the Kulu valley via the Thamser and Kalahini passes.

To visit the sights of the “Golden Triangle” (Delhi, Agra, Jaipur)

Day 0 Sunday 3 October

2300hrs - Paul, Gordon, Stuart, Edith, George and John rendezvous at Colin and Uschi's house. Champagne and cake with spouses and a first sighting of the new Oread 50th anniversary book.

Day 1 Monday 4 October

0300hrs – Departure by minibus to Birmingham airport collecting Bob from Stanton by Bridge en route. 0415hrs arrive airport. Our first slight problem was convincing a rather grumpy check in girl that the baggage allowance should be treated as expedition baggage in spite of Bob's letter confirming this to be the case. Faced with Bob's persistence she gave up. Bob bought a portable TV in duty free, the rest bought whisky! The flight to Amsterdam eventually left at 0715hrs (scheduled for 1610) and arrived Amsterdam Schipol 0815hrs (0915 local). We soon met Chris who had flown from Stansted to be met with another problem. Initially the officials said there was no room for Chris because communications difficulties at Stansted had resulted in the flight being overbooked. Bob sorted it. Estimated flight time was 7hr 45min. (Delhi is +5 ½ hrs GMT). We duly arrived Delhi at 2245hrs. The baggage carousel was tardy to say the least and we spent nearly two hours waiting and searching for Bob's and Colin's missing bags to no avail. Leaving the airport without the two bags we had our first encounter with the quirky nature of Delhi traffic, arriving at Claridges Hotel at 0100hrs. There to meet us was Ravinder Sahib (Bob's agent). Luggage was quickly sorted and, after a beer we got to bed at 0200hrs.

Day 2 Tuesday 5 October

0830hrs breakfast. On opening the curtains, apart from the swimming pool the most notable sight was Black Kites cruising everywhere around the hotel. At 1030hrs we started our guided trip round Old Delhi. Local daily life was observed, open mouthed, from the bus – amazing roadside scenes – one man shanty “factories” and sellers of everything.



The first stop was at the 12th century Qutab Minar Tower of victory (at 72m high it is the highest stone tower in India) and Quwwatul-Islam Mosque. The courtyard contained a cast iron “pole” estimated at 2000 years old and not rusty (apparently this is because it is almost pure iron). Here we had our first encounter with hawkers – very persistent!



The second stop was at Humayun's Tomb, a smaller, Taj Mahal type mausoleum with a snake charmer outside and a big bees nest inside.

Lunch was taken at Maidens Hotel – very colonial and swish.

In the afternoon we visited St James' English church where lots of internal renovation was taking place. The bamboo scaffolding and ladders caused amused consternation for George and Stuart. Monkeys in grounds caused interest but they were rather camera shy; hopped over the fence and crossed the street completely oblivious of traffic and pedestrians. Also in the grounds were a group of children having organised games.

A short trip on the bus through Old Delhi led to the Red Fort and Pearl Mosque (inside fort). The chaotic nature of bus parking and the construction of a fair with its amazing tortuous bamboo scaffolding kept us agog. As a fort it was more impressive on the outside than on inside. Inside there was much open grassed space but with no "keeping off the grass". The dramatic impact of the entrance gate and arch was spoilt by its being occupied by gift shops. Inside the lawns provided eight Hoopoes and many Common Mynas.

Our final visit of day was to a Kashmir craft centre – compared with the surrounding area of Delhi, a very upmarket emporium. Carpet making was demonstrated and explained. This was accompanied by cups of Kashmiri tea and followed by hard sell! Eventually I bought one only to increase the sales pressure for another! Having failed to sell me a second carpet I was shepherded into the jewelry and other craft areas for more hard sell. Much fun was had equaling hard sell with hard Yorkshire resistance, especially with the lady trying to sell colourful papier mache pots. She claimed that buying one would remind me of her when I looked at it. I told her that sitting on my expensive carpet would do that.

A restful evening was spent in Claridges, dining in the Chinese restaurant. George's pudding came too late. Bob and Colin went to the airport and successfully obtained yesterday's missing baggage. The biggest disaster so far was that the bar was shut. A dry day had been decreed throughout the country because of the elections.

Day 3 Wednesday 6 October

Rain fell between 1000hrs and 1100hrs. Was this the normal weather pattern? George, Colin, Uschi, Stuart and Edith went into Delhi by taxi. Gordon, Chris, John and I sat in Claridges "garden shed" watching the world go by. The Delhi team returned at 1130hrs.



Gordon, George, Chris and I walked to and round the Jodi Gardens. On the way we encountered an ox drawn lawn mower, cows using traffic lights and persistent taxi drivers touting for business. The taxi drivers even claimed the Jodi Gardens to be shut in an attempt to dissuade us from walking! Walking round the 14th century ruins and gardens one Woolly Necked Stork, four White Rumped Vultures and numerous Black Kites were noted circling overhead. Plenty of Indian Tree

Squirrels, Common Mynas and butterflies (including Swallowtails) were in the gardens. The rest of the team joined us about 1330hrs and we walked back to Claridges where we had lunch in the Pickwick restaurant.

The afternoon was spent packing and looking round Claridges bookshop. Prices were about 60% of UK prices. We had an early meal and at 1915hrs left by bus for Old Delhi railway station. What followed was a most amazing journey – a seething mass of all sorts of jammed transport including one part where seven lanes of jumbled traffic went into one. A traffic pecking order became apparent with lorries and buses at one end and pedestrians, animal drawn carts and rickshaws at the other end. By The Red Fort the afternoon's preparations for a fair came to fruition and added to the problem. At its worst we moved about 50 metres in 50 minutes and eventually arrived at Old Delhi railway station at 2050hrs to catch the 2120hrs overnight sleeper to Pathankot. Bob had prepared us for the haggling, strength, speed and efficiency of the portering system. After 5 minutes haggling over pay the red uniformed porters each carried at least two 20kg bags on their heads with sundry smaller items under their arms. A very brisk walk through seething humanity took us directly to our compartment on the train already at the platform. A notice with our names (in English and Hindi) and sleeping berths was already posted by the carriage door. We settled into our surprisingly spacious compartments and the train left at 2130hrs. The first couple of hours were spent talking, relaxing, tea drinking and log writing before turning in at 2300hrs. A most unexpected comfortable night followed.

Day 4 Thursday 7 October

I rose just after first light for a first look at the landscape of the plains through the open train door. First sights were of intensive cultivation with people already working in the fields. Many birds were seen but, most frustratingly, unidentified. Positive identification was made of some larger species, eg White Throated Kingfisher, Red Wattled Lapwing, Little Egret and Black Drongo.



At 0950hrs we arrived at Pathankot about one hour late, but our narrow gauge “toy train” was waiting for us. The line was originally built to service the building of a hydroelectric scheme. After a quick transfer we were under way in our own luxury carriage. We each had a double aircraft type seat and were provided with newspapers, food and drink by five “flight attendants”

Over the 3½ hour, 120km journey we gradually climbed across the plains to the Himalayan foothills. En route the landscape gradually changed to rolling low hills cut by several huge, wide, mainly dry, river valleys reduced to narrow channels amongst boulders and shingle banks. At Kangra we passed the TB hospital and then stopped at Nagrota to let the down train pass. Shortly after leaving Nagrota the first real mountains appeared: the white rocked Dhaulta Dhar suddenly and impressively rose from the plain.

We reached Baijnath Paprola at 1345hrs, slightly earlier than expected and consequently spewed on to the platform in something of a blur of baggage, clothes and people. As we gathered ourselves the train started to continue up the valley hotly pursued by George sprinting along the platform, his camera still on board. We were most impressed when the train stopped, only for George to find his camera round his neck. At the top of the steps we were met by our drivers of the 4 four seater minibuses. Thirty minutes chaotic driving amongst the Indian Army convoys going to and from the Kashmiri border along very inadequate roads took us to the mountain lodge of Taragarh Palace (now run as a hotel by the owners, the royal family of Jammu and Kashmir). Situated in gardens with wonderful views of the Dhauladhar the hall, lounge and dining room were adorned with all sorts of ornaments, animal skins and photographs of big game and hunting dignitaries.

A couple of peaceful hours were spent relaxing and birding in the gardens. At long last there was time to begin to get to grips with some of the smaller birds such as Oriental Whiteeye, Himalayan Bulbul, Bank Myna, Spotted Dove and Fire Breasted Flowerpecker.

The local Golden Eagle beer was sampled before dinner and give the Oread seal of approval. Dinner was served at 1900hrs around a huge table decorated with two big silver stags and attended by several serious looking waiters.

Day 5 Friday 8 October

Planned waking was for 0600hrs for some pre breakfast birding. Bob woke me at 0700hrs but I made it to the garden at 0710. A glorious sunny early morning with one hour's garden birding produced, among others, White Browed Fantail.

At 0930hrs we set off to walk to Tashijong Gompa (Tibetan monastery) a couple of miles down and across the valley. Huge carp were cruising in a deep pool in the river below the bridge and darting about on the rocks were White Capped Water Redstart and Plumbeous Water Redstart. Along the lane to the Gompa we passed a small school where Chris's attempt to photograph two boys brought out all the school who followed us excitedly through the village.

The gompa was built in 1960 to cater for the Tibetan community fleeing over the hills following the exile of the Dali Lama. Whilst waiting for the monastery to open we visited the carpet makers and woodcarvers whose main role was carving religious text printing blocks. At 1000hrs the rhythmic drumming started, signifying some sort of action which turned out to be a lesson for the young boys – much chanting. We walked round the colourful buildings and



went in the very ornate temple. Outside a pair of Egyptian Vultures floated around before landing on the gompa roof. On the walk back to Taragarh we photographed the women working in the fields, one of whom gave Gordon a metal prayer disc.

After lunch Stu, Edith, George and I set off up the road past tea plantations to find the STD phone in the local village. Arriving at the place at 1500hrs we were told it would not open until 1600hrs so we continued to walk up the hill through the village. En route, much against our advice George bought a watch for the equivalent of £2 to replace the one he'd lost. Close inspection of lorry and bus tyres was inadvisable for the nerves of those about to use the road. After turning round at the end of the village Colin and Uschi caught up with us and we were invited to visit the local school whose children were sitting quietly outside in their classes waiting for the home time bell. Conditions were very primitive – even the headmaster had no paper on which to write the school's address for forwarding photographs and had to make do with the back of a letter. The STD place was still closed but we were assured someone was on their way. In the meantime the local NAAFI was open for, amongst other items, booze. Attempts were made amongst the various desks and paperwork for us civvies to partake of the facility. By this time Bob had arrived but even his silver tongue failed to meet with success. The STD opened at 1715 and enabled us to phone home. Jean was out so I left a message. We arrived back at Taragarh at 1730hrs and indulged in more garden birding followed by dinner at 1900hrs, packing and bed at 2200hrs

Day 6 Saturday 9 October

Up at 600hrs for garden birding before breakfast which produced Oriental Magpie Robin, Whiskered Yuhina, Asian Barred Owlet, Alexandrine Parrot and Black Bulbul. Breakfast at 0800hrs saw John in fine form. Concern had been expressed earlier about the little that John had eaten so far. When it was suggested that eating some porridge would put lead in his pencil his quick response was that he had nobody to write to!! At 0915hrs we met Prem, our trekking sirdar and a couple of the other porters who loaded the 5 small buses before departing for Bir.



A 30 minute drive took us through Kangra, a very interesting, bustling little town and up gradually rising roads to Bir (4940ft), the starting point for our walk. We settled in to “Bir Guest House” and met the team of porters.

Prem Singh Bodh	sirdar		
Prem Khan Anna	cook		
Madan	riding pony helper	Panchok	porter
Bir Singh	walking guide	Jit Ram	porter
Dilip	walking whipper in	Sonam Dawa	porter

Whilst the porters prepared lunch we were invited into the owner's house. The living room ceiling was most interesting (but apparently the norm round here) being panelled with small glass panels each painted with various religious and rural scenes.

At 1300hrs we sampled what was to be the first of many sumptuous lunches. After lunch we did our own things with some going into the village and the rest of us wandering round the local gardens and fields. Between 1600hrs and 1800hrs I walked into the village and met Gordon and Chris talking to the local shopkeeper who plied us with sweet tea and introduced the oldest resident, a 90 year old lady who was passing by carrying a bundle of firewood on her shoulders. The village contained many interesting buildings, children and birds. New additions to the bird list included Oriental Turtle Dove, Black Chinned, Red Vented and Mountain Bulbuls, Spanish Sparrow, Green Backed Tit, Spotted Dove, Grey Bushchat, Black Chinned Yuhina and Hume's Warbler.



The evening surroundings were more spartan than of late, but were nevertheless comfortable and prepared us for the forthcoming camp routines of soup at 1800hrs, main meal at 1900hrs followed by bed, although not at tonight's time of 2230hrs.

Day 7 (Trek 1) Sunday 10 October

Bir (4,940ft) to Billing (7,560ft)

The day began with what was to become the normal routine and timetable - 0600hrs chi, 0700hrs breakfast, 0800hrs start walking whilst the porters cleared up and loaded the ponies. After passing back through the village we cut off up through a wooded track and took several steep short cuts across the main track hairpins. On one of the hairpins a truck arrived and disgorged several people carrying rifles and cooking pots! Moments later, as we continued to climb, we came across about 30 people partaking in some sort of ceremony involving flute music and goat sacrifice. Unfortunately we arrived very soon after the decapitation of two goats so did not dwell to talk with the locals. Eventually we joined and stayed on the main, more gentle, track as it wound out above the tree line giving huge views of Bir, Kangra and the plains beyond to the south. At 1230hrs we rounded a grassy spur and had lunch. Shortly the ponies caught us up and continued for a few hundred yards to Billing which comprised one occupied stone house and a small locked hut in front of which camp was pitched (7560ft) on a grassy ridge overlooking the valley. So the first day was a steady leisurely 4 hour climb. To go further would have made for a long day as the nearest grazing was over in the next valley – our target for the following day.



Cap'n Bob advised us not to fraternise with the guard dog accompanying the horsemen as its major role would not be as a pet but to warn against and ward off bears which we may encounter in some of the later, more remote, camps. An afternoon lazing, photographing and easing in to camp routine preceded a glorious sunset and starry night.

Day 8 (Trek 2) Monday 11 October

Billing (7,560ft) to Palachok (8,440ft)

This turned out to be two scheduled stages in one and so compared with yesterday was a more substantial haul, gently up and over the ridge into and then along the next valley to the north.

0600hrs chi, 0700hrs breakfast, 0800 hrs depart. Continuing along yesterday's track we rose steadily for about 3½ hours through more open woodland to a col where we were overtaken by the ponies. This stretch with its steep vegetated valleys was quite reminiscent of Madeiran scenery.



En route we met several singles and pairs of gaddis (shepherds) and paharis (hill men) coming the opposite way – getting out of Bara Bangahal before the onset of winter. Shortly after lunch we went past our scheduled stop, Rajgunda. Although there were quite a few scattered settlements, in the main, the people had already left for the winter. The afternoon was spent gradually climbing the valley on a good track, apart from a couple of rough sections to avoid recent landslips.

On one of the more wooded sections we came across a brown snake coiled on the path. It soon went into the undergrowth pursued by Bob with camera. As weariness was setting in the tents were sighted under a spur on the opposite bank. Camp at Palachok Deota was reached at 1600hrs. This had been a quite hard day compared with yesterday.

Sharing the same site were four or five gaddis with their sheep scattered on the surrounding wooded slopes. Ominously our porters bought two sheep. A big fire was built and the temperature dropped rapidly to below freezing as the sun went. Chips for dinner!



Day 9 (Trek 3) Tuesday 12 October

Palachok (8,440ft) to Panhattu (11,300ft)

After the cheery faces of the chi delivery lads at 0600hrs, frost on the tents and frozen water was the next sight to welcome the day. At 0800hrs we started heading up the wooded valley which, beyond the camp site, became much narrower and steeper sided than those we had hitherto been following. Just beyond the campsite, in the rocky river bed, was a Blue Whistling Thrush. Being a deep valley we did not benefit from the sun until 1030hrs – somewhat frustrating as we had watched it warming the other side of the valley for the previous two hours. At the point where we emerged into the sun, we came across the first of what was to be several, almost daily, holy shrines decorated with ornaments, prayer flags and a small bell.

Leaving the tree line the scenery became rockier and more mountainous with interesting side gulleys and waterfalls. Tiffin was taken on a rocky knoll just above a small ice patch in the valley bottom. As we arrived a large chunk of ice calved off the edge to let us know we had arrived in the real mountains. Our first encounter with Alpine Choughs was soon followed by a close visit from a Lammergeier causing much scurrying from Gordon and the lensmen. Fortunately it provided several flypasts and photo opportunities during the lunch break.



Immediately after lunch we were subjected to Bir Singh's (our lead porter) first of many bouts of altitude sickness. Not the conventional type of malady but an inbuilt desire to go vertical. A landslide had obliterated the original path and whereas the pony team continued contouring on the edge of the glacier Bir Singh led us up the debris for a few hundred feet and back down again to the glacier, Duke of York style. The pony team having "gently contoured" were now ahead. It was during this manoeuvre that the guard dog role of the now named "Pachas" was called into question. She appeared to follow whichever group was in front and was oblivious to any guardian duties. Subsequent discussion with the porters revealed she was not their dog but had just tagged along for a walk at Bir, our starting point. After three days "walkies" the signs were that she had no intention of either going home or paying Bob for the honour of joining his expedition. Pachas, by the devious tactic of duping us of her guard dog role, had become very much part of the team.

Having crossed the small glacier a glance back revealed the impressive snow bridge over a water tunnel which we had all crossed in the calm safety of ignorance. At this point we were joined by a local gaddi for the rather tedious flog up moraine to our camp situated in a large basin. Camp was reached at 1600hrs at an altitude of 11,300 ft. The gaddi informed us that the graffiti on nearby rocks was not the artwork of local yobs (nobody lives within two days walk of here, anyway) but commemorates a 1997 avalanche which killed two boys, fourteen horses and two hundred sheep. This explained the sightings of the odd hoof and bone along the latter stages of our route.

Fresh snow dusted the surrounding mountains and provided our first feeling of being in some awesomely big place. As anticipated the two sheep purchased the previous evening were reduced to one and tough mutton was on the menu. During dinner Bob cheerfully delivered what had become the nightly good news/bad news bulletin. The main item was that, after the most strenuous day so far, the rest and acclimatisation day scheduled for tomorrow was cancelled and that we were going over the top! What's more, because it was a big day ahead, we would be awoken at 0400hrs (eventually negotiated to the much more civilised 0430hrs) to start walking at 0600hrs.

Day 10 (Trek 4) Wednesday 13 October

Panhattu (11,300ft) to Mir (Jaralu Dhar) (12,540ft) via the Thamsar Jot (15,000ft)

0430hrs chi, 0500hrs breakfast, 0610hrs depart after hurrying George into what was to become some significant hasty packing.

All morning was spent on a long steady climb up the right side of a stream. From an early stage it was apparent that a combination of yesterday's walk, altitude and limited sleep was reducing the pace to "steady" at best. The views, however, were glorious – we were above the tree line and well and truly into the mountains with rocky peaks covered with light sprinklings of fresh snow. Was this a monsoon aftermath or did it herald the much more serious early onset of the first winter snows? Anxiety was detected in Cap'n Bob's demeanour. We took a bit of a breather mid-morning on a grassy spur before heading up into more rock terrain where tiffin was taken at 1130 hrs. During lunch the pony train caught and overtook us. Watching them steadily pick their way up the rocky route to the horizon it did not seem too far to the top of the pass. Our lunch time altitude of approx. 13,500ft did not tie in with the pass being at 15,000 ft but maps and heights in this region are notoriously flexible so lunch continued in a relaxed manner.

Following the route of the ponies after lunch we soon neared the cairn marked horizon to discover the reason for the altitude discrepancy – it was not the top of the pass. Before us stretched a sort of plateau cum crater which held an icy lake under one of its walls. At the back was another steep looking wall on top of which was the true Thamsar Jot. Morale slumped. Out of nowhere appeared two poachers armed with an ancient muzzle loading rifle and with a live Monal (very rare Himalayan pheasant) poking its beautiful multi coloured head and neck out of their rucksack. Now here was a dilemma. Monal was high on the list of target species. Could it be ticked? After a few sign language pleasantries and photographs we parted from the poachers and they continued down our ascent route. Crossing the fairly level plateau was a slow process with several of the team affected by tiredness and altitude. Little did we know (and it was a good job we didn't) that at this stage we were still a further six or seven hours from the campsite. A steep zig zag path wound up the shaley back wall of the cirque and we reached the top of the pass in dribs and drabs around 1500hrs. At 15,000ft it was noticeably cool especially as stiff breeze was now blowing from the other side and bringing with it light snow flurries. Edith was nominated to attach the prayer flag to the summit construction in the hope of being granted a safe passage down the other side of the pass.



The prospect in front of us was much more one of high mountain scenery – snow fields, glaciers and ice filled gullies. Gordon and Chris had not been going too well on the ascent but the start down an easy angled snowfield gave us all improved physical and mental momentum. A tricky little steep section dropped us on to a large, glaciated snow field which we descended diagonally. Unknown to us at the time was that three of our ponies had already fallen on this section but had come to no harm. Rounding a big black, rocky buttress the snow petered out on to a huge boulder field stretching down the valley as far as we could see. This boulder field

will remain in our memories and yarns forever. It was now 1630hrs with, at most two hour's daylight left. After ten and a half hours of hard walking at altitude four more hours of "interest" were to provide the sting in an already tired tail. At the time however we were not to know of the hardships to come as Bob was very vague as to how far away the campsite was. We should have been better able to interpret the vagueness coming from the silver tongue. How naïve we were; but this rapidly learnt lesson prevented our leader from any further wool pulling over our eighteen tired eyes.

Progress was tedious and slow. Gordon eventually took to the pony, but not without incident. A slipped girth turned his world upside down only to be followed by the porter assisted remount being too enthusiastic so that he was thrown completely over the pony instead of into the saddle. Darkness fell and we still were unable to ascertain how far we still had to travel. Gordon's pony descending steep ice and rock in the dark was impressive for spectators if not for the rider. Twinkles of torchlight coming towards us was a welcome sight. The porters, with tiny mouth held torches, were superb at route finding and helping the weary. At 2030hrs, after 14 ½ hours with the last 2 in the dark, the welcome sight of tents and wafts of soup aroma signalled the end of hostilities for the day. Despite really appetising food, including apple and custard for pudding, only Bob, George and Edith preferred food to sleeping bag. Before retiring we unanimously told the leader that tomorrow would be a rest day!

Whilst we were never in danger the day's events illustrated the need to be prepared for some discomfort, particularly the logistics associated with having 22 ponies. Whilst the loads they carry make for luxury camping and light loads on our backs it also means camping is dictated by the need for finding adequate grazing. Consequently, crossing high passes involves long ascents and descents.

Day 11 (Trek 5) Thursday 14 October

Mir (12,540ft) Rest Day

0830 chi, 0930 breakfast. Yet another glorious day becoming very warm in the sun once it rose sufficiently to take the night frost away. Much of the early part of the morning was a slow-motion affair and little clusters holding post mortems on the events of yesterday. George, with his Houdini chain festooned kit bag discovered he'd lost his padlock keys in the haste to get away yesterday morning. So this was the first day of learning to pack and unpack a chain encrusted bag.

Everyone took the opportunity to do some washing and gear sorting at leisure. By lunchtime, however, Stuart and George were showing symptoms of itchy feet. Stuart set off up one scree covered side of the valley heading for a spectacular looking rocky ridge. George was tempted more by an examination of some huge slabs (henceforth known as "George's Slabs") on the other side of our valley. The rest of the party stuck to more cerebral pastimes like bird watching, photography, letter and log writing. The porters and horsemen also busied themselves shoeing horses and building an impressive sheep dung fire. Stuart disappeared from sight in a scree filled gully whereas George who had been out of sight reappeared silhouetted on the top of the slabs. Both returned to camp in the late afternoon with tales of superb views. Following a beautiful sunset we had a few moments round the sheep dung fire

where Bob treated us to the benefit of his experience of such things by demonstrating the traditional stoking technique and promptly extinguishing it faster than a firefighter.

Day 12 (Trek 6) Friday 15 October

Jaralu Dha (12,450ft) to Bara Bangahal (7,860ft)

0600hrs chi, 0700hrs breakfast, 0800hrs depart. Downhill all day! Initially the path snaked down a steep moraine by a cascading stream under “George’s Slabs” which extended way down the length of the valley and became a dominant feature in our views for the next couple of days. Brown Dippers were spotted amongst the river boulders. Around midday, just above the tree line, the path crossed the mountain river by a wooden bridge which caused some of the ponies to hesitate somewhat. At this point we met four women with a young boy and a baby who were travelling in the opposite direction, ie were heading for the Thamsar Jot, with minimal gear, two goats and a big mountain dog. We had tiffin at this lovely spot and communicated with the ladies who were fascinated with our trekking poles. An afternoon of knee straining slopes took us steeply down to the main valley of the Ravi River, across an impressive cantilever bridge by the confluence of the Ravi and Kalmen Nala and into the settlement of Bara Bangahal, a fascinating place. As we waited for John, who was suffering with knee trouble, a Long Legged Buzzard circled overhead with lots of other birdlife in the bushes and trees.

Bara Bangahal is mainly a summer settlement of about 80 small houses, although some people remain through the winter. The only three ways of access are the Thamsar Jot over which we had come, the Kalaheni Jot over which we were to go and down the precipitous Ravi Gorge which is impassable for animals. Of the three routes our entry over the Thamsar Jot is the easiest. Consequently once the winter snows arrive there is no way out. All the gaddis we had met on previous days were evacuating their sheep from Bara Bangahal for the winter. All the housing is perched on the very steep north slope of the valley (presumably for the sun) and in their midst is the scar of a landslide which carried away several houses and their occupants two years previously. One or two remaining houses were precariously placed along a perforation which looks like being the next line of slip. Across another cantilever bridge, on the north side of the river, is a fairly flat area containing the school and doctors’ compound in which we camped. A dozen or so boys were playing in the school compound and were fascinated by our arrival, even more so when Chris produced balloons for them. Since the schoolmaster had just left and was not due to return for six months we used the school room as our mess tent. The compound buildings were mainly stone but with layers of wood set into the walls to give some flexibility since this is a known earthquake zone. During the remaining daylight a continuous stream of people moving like ants was coming down from the hill with backs bent with huge bundles of maize stalks,



crossing the bridge and going up to the houses on the other side of the valley. During our evening dining in the schoolhouse the locals gave us a bottle of chang. Despite warnings that it would be the colour, consistency and taste of metal polish what hit the taste buds still came as a revolting shock. No chance of getting drunk.

Day 13 (Trek 7) Saturday 16 October

Bara Bangahal (7,870ft) to Suni (10,560ft)

0600hrs chi, 0700hrs breakfast, 0800hrs depart. Despite a general consensus that a rest day exploring and photographing Bara Bangahal would be desirable, Bob was keen to push on and get over the Kalaheni as soon as possible before the weather broke. John's knees were causing trouble so, after cursory riding advice, took to the pony for the first time.

The route, having been heading more or less due north since we started now swung sharply to the east south east to follow the variously spelt Kalaheni River. Initially a steep but relatively smooth path took us up a spur out of the village and we soon began to encounter a series of path filling wide loads, women and a few young lads bringing down the cut stalks of maize and other vegetation from the terraced slopes to the village. This area, helped by the time, of day was the most productive so far for birds. Unfortunately they were so plentiful in the bushes that many escaped identification although a Besra was ticked as it flew swiftly like a Sparrowhawk over the terraces. Rounding the nose of the spur the path began to "gently contour" along the north slope of the valley several hundred feet above the fast flowing river. Behind us was a spectacular rugged mountain range with a huge smooth triangular slab on one of the faces. The further we progressed up our valley more of the lower part of the slab was revealed until it became diamond shaped with as big an inverted triangle of smooth rock below our initial base line of vision. as had been above it.



Clearing the tree line enabled extensive views up the valley which, unknown to us at the time, would be our route for the next four days. The scale of the place did not suggest anything like four days would be needed to reach the head of the valley. Every so often we had to contour (not always gently!) into subsidiary valleys which made for fairly slow progress relative to the main valley. The walking was interesting with impressive views across slabby and snowy peaks to the south. Small loose flocks of Rufous Necked Snowfinch and Rock Buntings were encountered frequently with Common Buzzard below us along the top of the tree line. An unidentified, dark Kestrel-like raptor was also seen in the vicinity together with Common Kestrel hovering over a grassy ridge. On entering one of these side valleys we came into an area of light soil covered with a low lying broad leaved plant. There was evidence of much excavation work by brown bears who found the small white radish-like roots very tasty. Lines of claw scratches in the soft soil were clearly visible and the possibility seeing bears created some excitement and a little apprehension.

Around mid afternoon we reached camp in one of these side valleys in the region of the place marked Suni on the map. The camp site sloped steeply to the valley bottom, but the porters had excavated superb level platforms for each tent, a tremendous piece of civil engineering in such a short space of time. Water came from a bubbling spring and plenty of sheep droppings indicated this to be a regular gaddi stop. Thoughts of nearby bears increased the sensitivity of our ears to the noises of the night!

Day 14 (Trek 8) Sunday 17 October

Suni (10,560ft) to Sini Kurd Dhar (11,940ft)

0600hrs chi, 0715 breakfast, 0810 depart. Because of the proximity of bears the porters kept watch during the night but no bears were seen. Yet another cold, frosty but clear morning. The sun hit camp just as we left. To avoid a long drop down we crossed the stream and climbed up the other side for about 20 minutes before contouring. Once again progress along the main valley was disrupted by the need to go in and out of several subsidiary entrants. Towards late morning clouds began to build up and the sun disappeared for the first time on the trek. We were now well above the tree line traversing a large open grassy basin with scattered juniper. Above us on the horizon a Black Eagle and six Alpine Choughs circled above craggy outcrops. In spite of all the ponies, porters and ten of us passing by, a Short Eared Owl remained crouched under a small juniper only about three metres from the path and was only spotted by our “sweeper”, Dilip. Gordon and I managed to get some decent photographs before it flew away.



The ponies passed through and tiffin was taken on a rocky knoll at 1230 hrs. It was decidedly chilly now that the sun had gone behind cloud and the rocks were giving off a noticeable amount of heat acting like storage heaters. We watched the ponies work their way down a steep gully to a green bolder strewn plateau by a stream where camp was made. Consequently, after lunch, it was only a 20 minute descent in light snow flurries to the tents. Across the main valley it appeared to be snowing heavily as the peaks were obliterated by bad weather which fortunately never crossed to our side of the valley. 1430 hrs chi and then the snow stopped about 1500hrs and gave way to clear, bright weather again but it was very cold. The early finish enabled some gear sorting, note writing and general recovery. Whilst I was wandering round the campsite doing a bit of unsuccessful birding Pachas appeared walking on three legs. One of her back legs was quite swollen above the ankle. She was last seen charging off into the boulder field after a stoat and probably damaged her leg amongst the rocks.



Above the camp and on the other side of the stream was a steep craggy area containing patches and ledges of lush green vegetation. A strange bubbling noise swept across the valley and heading for this craggy area were four large black and white birds. Three seemed to vanish on the hillside but one remained in the open for about 15 minutes giving good, but distant views. It was a Himalayan Snowcock, a large member of the grouse family and one of my target species. By 1600hrs it was already freezing and the weather over the adjacent mountains looked threatening once again. During the night there was a lot of animal movement by the tents. Was it the ponies or was it a visit from the bears? In case the latter I lay very still!

Day 15 (Trek 9) Monday 18 October

Sini Kurd Dhar (11,940ft) to Garthalagot (11,200ft)

0600hrs chi, 0710 breakfast, 0810 depart. On emerging, Stuart and Edith were faced with a huge bear excavation only about 3 metres from the back of their tent. That explained last night's noises.

By way of a change our initial direction was downhill before levelling out to, once again "gently contour". Almost immediately we started our traverse, a few hundred feet below us and about 600 metres away was our first sighting of that whose presence had been felt, the Himalayan Brown Bear. An adult (presumably mum) was galumphing down the slope with two half grown cubs and occasionally stopping to check on our whereabouts. Although they appeared like slow moving furry jellies the distance covered in a short space of time made our progress look pathetic. Reminder – don't ever think of being able to outrun even an unfit, three legged, half paced bear.

Our progress was mainly level or slightly downhill over easy terrain with fewer side valleys than yesterday to weave in and out of. All around was much evidence of bear scrapings for both food and shelter beneath boulders. Above one crag, high in the deep blue sky and beautifully lit by the early sun a Golden Eagle soared together with a Himalayan Griffon Vulture and several Alpine Chough. This was mountain birding at its best. After crossing one particularly steep side valley the route became ill defined.

Apparently a large landslide ahead had blocked the original path and so it became a bit of an Oread "do your own thing" in respect of path, rather than route, finding. John took to the horse and seemed to take a better route than the rest of us who followed Bir Singh. Would we ever cure him of the need to travel vertically? As we descended ever closer to the main valley floor a pale creamy stoat like creature attracted the attention of Pachas. In spite of only firing on three legs as a result of yesterday's injury she went ballistic in trying to get the animal which had taken refuge in a crevice in the boulders. Much stoat squealing and dog excitement eventually resulted in a stalemate. Having satisfactorily negotiated the landslide we continued up the valley not far above the river and below some interesting looking crags from which a Wallcreeper made a brief sortie above our heads.



Tiffin was taken on a rocky knoll where the path began to climb back up the valley side. Shortly after arriving the sky began to look threatening and the temperature dropped. Peaks previously visible up side valleys disappeared in snow clouds and we had brief flurries. This wintry weather spurred our leader to suggest lighting a fire in a small cave. Boy scouting had long since deserted us and so it was some time and several matches before success, by which time the ponies overtook us and it was time to be on the move again. Bir Singh went into vertical mode until we arrived at a convenient contouring level. From being really murky the weather cleared and, once more we were in sunshine. An hour's walking brought us to camp on a spur at Garthalagot.

Our arrival was greeted by excited whispers from Prem to keep quiet as three bears had been sighted over the other side of the knoll. Armed with binoculars, long lenses and film we eased ourselves into place overlooking a large basin. On the other side, about 800 metres away an adult and two half grown cubs were busying themselves in a patch of their favourite veg. Much film was shot and even the porters joined us to view through our optics. After about 15 minutes the wind changed, placing us upwind rather than downwind. Mummy bear rose on her hind legs, sniffed the air coming from our direction and gave the order to head uphill fast. With just a couple of brief stops to turn and look in our direction the family went up the slope and over a ridge into a side valley in next to no time. To be able to watch them for so long was a truly memorable experience.

From our camp, at long last, the head of the valley seemed much nearer and impressive icefields were apparent on the enclosing peaks.

Day 16 (Trek 10) Tuesday 19 October

Garthalagot (11,200ft) to below Kalaheni Pass (12,720ft)



0600hrs chi, 0700hrs breakfast, 0800hrs depart. We dropped down almost immediately to the valley floor (Kalaheni Ka Nala) and followed the river fairly closely all day. From being a narrow steep sided valley it opened out into a broad, almost Scottish looking, glen but on a vast scale. The opposite side of the valley rose to some impressive ice clad peaks with tempting ridges. On one of the peaks eagle eyed Bob spotted two Ibex. Tiffin was taken by an impressive Gaddi "stone igloo" which contained a variety of interesting items including a drum and a type of castanet. Presumably they were for ceremonial use at a small shrine a short distance up the slope.

After lunch our route followed the rocky, sandy river bed in which we noted both fox and bear tracks. Pachas was not going too well and her ankle appeared more swollen

than yesterday. After three and a half days walking south east up the valley a dramatic change of scene occurred when the valley narrowed once more and swung east. Here were big mountains.

The mountain on the opposite bank rose abruptly in a series of buttresses and ice falls with a frozen stream coming out of a huge ice cave at mid height. From the big ice blocks spilling down to our path in the main river bed it was obvious that this was the path taken by avalanches breaking off the hanging glacier. So we stopped for a rest to admire the scenery! A thunderous rumble came from an avalanche about a mile further down the valley and gave a clear indication that we should not linger.



A long, rather tedious, two hour plod up the boulder strewn river bed then ensued only enlivened by seeing a Robin Accentor and a flock of about 40 Alpine Chough. At 1530hrs it started snowing steadily and visibility deteriorated. All were feeling quite weary and the gloomy weather didn't help when we had become so used to permanent sunshine. Just as it seemed we were going to get a good going over by the weather the tents appeared suddenly amidst the boulders – a welcome sight. Horse borne John was already well ensconced. A fire had been made in the Gaddi shelter and with much pushing and pulling Pachas was persuaded (and tied) into the shelter which we thought preferable to her chosen bed out in the open and getting covered in snow.

On leaving the mess tent and turning in for the night we were met with a completely clear sky containing a bright half moon, the swathe of the Milky Way and stars everywhere. The omens looked good for our big day crossing the Kalaheni Pass tomorrow.

Day 17 (Trek 11) Wednesday 20 October

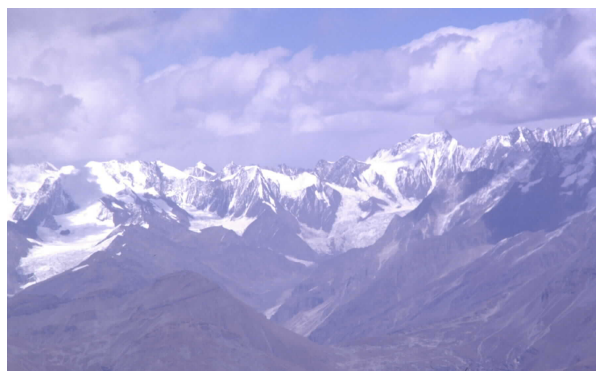
Below Kalaheni Pass west (12,720ft) – Kalaheni Pass (15,400ft) – Below Kalaheni Pass east (12,600ft)

0400 hrs chi, 0500 hrs breakfast, 0600hrs depart. The big day. Continuing up the boulder strewn river bed interspersed with small sandy beaches we made good progress in the early morning frost, not stopping until we reached a steeper moraine and boulder field at 0815hrs. As the sun rose we had a brief refuelling stop before climbing steeply up the north slope. Progress became much slower as the gradient increased and Bir Singh went vertical once again. Where the angle eased we arrived on to a huge plateau like basin. Gordon took to the other pony again as the route crossed the stony plateau, skirting round three partially ice covered lakes. In front of us was a vast snowy ice field which rose to form the back wall of a long curving cirque atop of which was the Kalaheni Pass lying between rocky peaks. Tiffin was taken at 1115 hrs at the base of the gentle ice slope whose height and length was difficult to estimate.



That was until Prem set off up it to be shortly followed by the pony train. Twenty two ponies climbing an ice slope was a most unusual and impressive sight. Pachas was now beginning to fire on all four legs more often than not. The sun was hot and the air was still as we started up the ice field at 1200 hrs in a traditional Oread scattered straggle with John and Gordon on horseback. Progress was steady with stops forced upon us, not by tiredness but by a need to drink in the fantastic mountain scenery. Mid height presented an easily crossed crevasse before the slightly steeper upper section. At 1300hrs, after one hour on the ice, the pass was reached and what a pass it was.

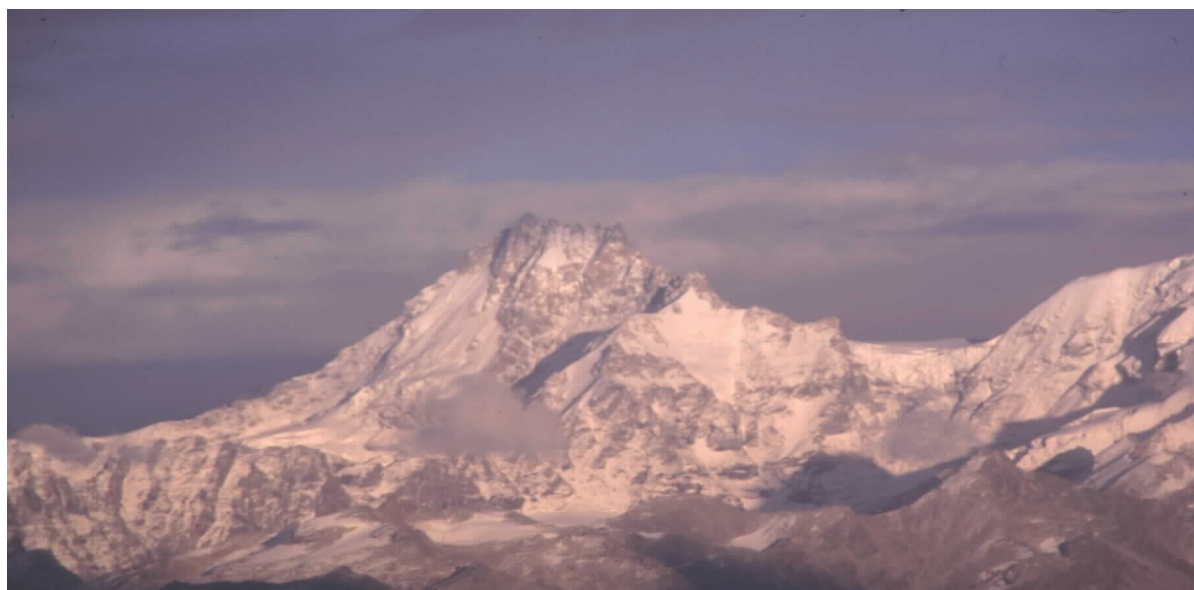
The col was really a ridge only about three metres wide and crossable for about twenty metres of its length. The rest of the ridge curved round on both sides in a series of peaks. The view to the north and east was breathtaking.



Before us, across the Kulu Valley, lay the great Himalayan Divide stretching away in a series of fading infinite horizons. Mountains familiar from photographs and literature became reality – Deo Tibba (19,450ft), Indrasan (20,410ft) and Ali Ratni Tibba (18,013ft) had all featured previously in the history of the Oread and were now part of our present. The magnificence of it all, the vastness, the clarity of the air and the achievement of our major objective cranked up the emotions and made for several lumpy throats.

Drinking it in for half an hour drew to a close as cloud rapidly built up, firstly on the big mountains but soon on our immediately surrounding peaks and suggested it was time to be off. Initially the descent was steep, too steep for horse riding, so John came with us carefully tended by Stuart and Panchok. Conversation on the descent consisted entirely of the wonder of our situation. Himalayan Snowcock droppings were scattered around one of the first vegetated patches we came across only for a calling bird to be heard but not seen shortly afterwards. Soft hail and light snow started to fall at 1515 hours adding a light covering to the campsite which we could see being erected on a spectacular prow overlooking the Kulu valley. Somewhat

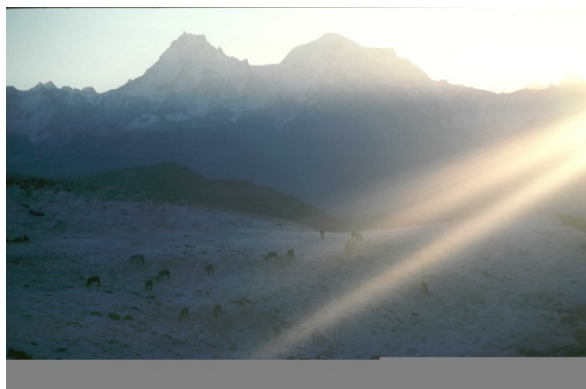
wearily but elated and punch drunk we reached the tents at 1600 hours. The hail and snow stopped almost immediately and the skies cleared again to give us the best mountain views so far – the changing light of sunset on Indrasan and Deo Tibba. So ended a superb mountain day.



Day 18 (Trek 12) Thursday 21 October

Below Kalaheni (12,600ft) to Dur Nullah (10,970ft)

0600hrs chi followed by watching sunrise over the main range in anticipation of good photographs. Having roused Gordon, Chris and George we stood in the frosty dawn watching a clear but not colourful sunrise. My popularity was not high amongst the sleepers. 0700 breakfast, after which “Jacobs Ladders” cutting across the hillside with ponies did provide good photography. 0800hrs depart without Stuart who had opted



to experience a day with the horse team. The first few minutes were spent crossing a vegetated plateau thinly coated in fresh snow and frost which glinted in the low early morning sun. Then the route went steeply down a slope made slippery by the melting snow having created a thin skimming of mud before funnelling on to a narrow vegetated moraine ridge formed between two small rivers. We were now back down to the tree line and the sound of mountain streams, the feel of sunshine and the sight of passing Snow Pigeons made for a return of the less rugged sensations lacking since leaving Bara Bangahal. The moraine ridge eventually forced us to a confluence, shortly after which we were overtaken by the ponies and an impressed

but hot and breathless Stuart. The path became a more substantial track which gently rose up the valley side until, at the top of a spur, an obvious Gaddi stop provided the ideal lunch spot with good views all the way back to the top of the Kalaheni Pass where we had been but 24 hours ago. In the other direction, across the Kulu Valley the big mountains were beginning to fade into the midday haze.

It only took an hour's walking after lunch through a mixture of open alps and small clumps of forest until, at 1400hrs, we reached camp at Dur Nullah. Yet again this was a spectacular site on the end of a ridge looking down a deep forested valley. The weather was superb and shorts saw the light of day again after six days of warmer gear. Washing and birding occupied a couple of hours before a chi session during which Bir Singh produced a bag full of colourful socks and gloves made by his wife. Sales were brisk and I bought two pairs of socks at 200 rupees each.

Pachas was now back to full four legged mobility, helped, no doubt by the warmth of lower altitudes.

Day 19 (Trek 13) Friday 22 October

Dur Nullah (10,970ft) – Khanpara Tibba (12,400ft) – Lama Durg (9,500ft)

0600hrs chi, 0700hrs breakfast, 0800hrs depart. Our penultimate trekking day and a feeling of being back in the lower hills. However, the first part of the day was spent on a track rising to a col on a ridge before cutting back into a pleasant, open grassy valley very reminiscent of the Peak District with Dovedale-like towers of rock jutting from steep green slopes. On the skyline we saw cows! At the head of this new, but fairly short, valley a steep pull (with Chris sampling the delights of horseback) took us to a veritable motorway of a track which appeared to run the length of Khanpara Tibba, a long ridge rather than a specific mountain.



On reaching the track, and whilst taking a few minutes breather, an immature Lammergeier came close by on a couple of inspection flights and caused much shutter flutter. As the ridge began to descend our path flipped over the crest (big team photo session) into a subsidiary of



the main Kulu valley. At this point we could see the road winding up to the Rhotang Pass and from here our route would be downhill all the way to Manali. Behind us the Kalahini Pass was in cloud as were the bigger mountains around Indrasan to the east. The terrain immediately to the north west looked formidably rocky and rugged and had provided Bob with some sport during his youth. Remember, all Bob's stories are true.

Lunch was taken on the good descent path where we met the upper fringe of the treeline. The descent path was good but gradually became rocky and muddy as it wove through rhododendrons to our final campsite at Lama Durg, reached at 1500hrs.

This was obviously a frequently used site with raised stone platforms built for tent bases and in an idyllic situation by a small lake nestling in a basin in a forest clearing. The lake had been enlarged by damming to supply some (but not much!) of Manali's water. A short shower was followed by an hour's birding in the woods. Birdsound was everywhere but the light (and skill) was not too good and so, somewhat frustratingly, positive identification was made only of the colourful Orange Flanked Bush Robin and Blue Fronted Redstart. Towards the end of our final evening meal Prem appeared in the mess tent to present us with a bottle of whisky and a bottle of home made chang which two of the porters had been all the way to Manali to collect. Given our Bara Bangahal experience of metal polish chang we gazed on the two litre coke bottle of white fluid with apprehension. Prem assured us that our previous experience would not be repeated since this was fresh and the Bara Bangahal brew had been way past its drink by date. Now we were camped at 9,500ft and this chang had been bottled in Manali (5,900ft) and rushed up the hill on a porters back.

With complete disregard (ignorance?) of physics captain Bob seized the initiative and the bottle and with a grand gesture (as only Pettigrew can make) unscrewed the cap. At this point a new way of decorating the inside of tents was discovered. With fire extinguisher ferocity chang sprayed everywhere and was not helped by the opener trying to stem the flow by inserting a digit in the bottle neck. By the very act of breathing we all had chang whether we wanted it or not and discovered it to be much more pleasant (but still not wonderful) compared with the dreaded brew of Bara Bangahal. Much jollity ensued and when we turned in for the night at 2030hrs it was obvious, from the noisy fun in the porters' tent, that supplies of alcohol and tales of the aptly named mess tent had reached other quarters.

Day 20 (Trek 14) Saturday 23 October

Lama Durg (9,500ft) to Manali (5,900ft)

0500hrs chi, 0600hrs breakfast. Our final day dawned like every other day, cloudless, cool and glorious. Bob announced that Pachas had slept in his tent A few minutes in the surrounding woods after breakfast compensated for failure with identification of last night's bird calls. Two of the culprits proved to be Spot Winged Grossbeaks and Black Fronted Laughing Thrush.

0700hrs depart. The last day's walk started with mixed feelings; a contradiction of a sense of achievement combined with a reluctance for it all to end. The first part of the path down had been disrupted to also provide the route of a new pipeline from the lake. Walking steeply down through trees we began to hear the buzz and traffic noise from Manali. Was it as loud as it seemed or had our fourteen days away from such noise sensitised our hearing?

Descending one particular clearing provided an unexpected sight. Ahead of us a monal flew low down the slope and into the trees. Even at this late stage another target species got a tick. In the same area were also Slaty Backed Flycatcher and the resplendent Long Tailed Minivet flying between the pines. Through a clearing we got our first view of Manali nestling noisily

in the valley below. It took us longer than our eyes suggested to reach the valley floor but it was a pleasant walk through big pine trees and clearings. The man wending his way towards us along the path was the first person we had seen since leaving Bara Bangahal seven days previously. We may not have been in the monster mountains but they were far less populated than the more popular trekking areas.



Eventually a little path took us between two buildings to our first piece of tarmac since Bir. We were in Manali.

Concern about Pachas's background and ability to cope with urban life together with not wanting to lose her and leave her to fate, caused a lead to be fashioned for her. This was a problem. She would not cooperate. With some trepidation we let her free but she stayed with us in spite of several detours to investigate some of the very many smells. Weaving down the roads and a short cut through a curiously fenced off type of park led us to Jimmy Johnson's café. Our fourteen day walk finished at 1000hrs

A couple of bottles of Golden Eagle went down a treat and then it was time to sample Manali's version of civilisation. Money was a priority for several of us in order to give the team of porters and horsemen well deserved tips at a farewell arranged for 1400hrs at the café. First stop was the bank and what an experience that was. Apart from the guy at the door with the polished double barreled shotgun it was impossible to distinguish between staff and customers, both seemed too use either side of the counter.



Bureaucracy dictated that a form was completed giving all serial numbers of all notes to be changed. Those of us changing dollars were unfortunate if we had low denomination notes as the list of long serial numbers was tedious to concoct in the midday heat. The form passed slowly through many bureaucratic hoops before our token number appeared at the payout desk and rupees were handed over. The process lasted well over an hour. Phoning home was quick and simple!



Now, armed with rupees we really hit the town, or to be more accurate, the town hit us. Bustle and chaos are watered down descriptions of life in Manali. We were grateful of our experienced gained on the boulder fields of Bara Bangahal when it came to avoiding the man eating holes in the pavements. Electricity poles were covered in the knotted spaghetti that somehow successfully powered the town. All manner of dubious food was being

cooked in all manner of dubious pots by all manner of dubious characters. Nevertheless most of us did manage to buy a variety of gifts and souvenirs without physical or financial damage. Credit card purchases at the Kashmiri clothes shop required being taken down the street to a basement containing an outdoor adventure centre in order to use their credit card verification system.

We all managed to reassemble at the café on time to say farewell to our team of minders who had looked after us so well during the trek. Whatever they did, not matter at what time and under what hardship, it was always accompanied with a broad grin. We also said farewell to Pachas who was going to be adopted by the horsemen. Little did Pachas know that, after bravely crossing the mountains for fourteen days, this was the last trip of the season for the ponies and in a few days she would be walking with them 190 kilometres in six days down the road to their winter quarters.

Minibuses duly arrived to take us to the much talked about Jimmy Johnson's at Raison, a few miles down the Beas valley. Although we had travelled by road before in India it had been through gridlocked Delhi. That had been an experience but it was nothing compared with what we were about to receive over the next couple of days. Driving through rural India is either a memorable or a fatal experience! By the time we reached Raison, about 20 kilometres down the main valley road, confusion still reigned as to whether India drives on the right or left.



The Jimmy Johnson experience was all Bob had cracked it up to be. Leaving the main road through iron gates a track led for about half a mile to a large, almost ranch like complex, amid 17,000 apple trees. Within a few minutes we had been returned to peace and tranquility. After meeting Jimmy, a real character, we settled in to our quarters in the chalet style wooden building converted from the old apple stores. Space, showers, flush toilets and beds were a welcome change from camp

life of the previous two weeks. Jimmy invited us over to his house, a few yards across the luxuriant garden, for pre dinner drinks at 1900hrs. Inside the house our eyes roamed everywhere. We were back in the last century; huge wooden lined rooms, ornate ceilings, shooting trophies, old photographs, ornaments, servants. Pre dinner drinks had the emphasis on the plural and lasted a good ninety minutes before we settled down to a sumptuous meal. Food was supervised by Jimmy's attractive daughter, Pia, who managed the café in Manali, whilst drinks were very definitely still in the hands of generous Jimmy. We all slept well.

Day 21 Sunday 24 October

A rest day in Raison. Nevertheless this being a potentially good birding area I rose at 0600hrs and went birding in the orchards and down by the river before breakfast at 0900hrs. Yet another gorgeous early morning around the orchard produced many Yellow Billed Magpies, White Throated Redstart, Scaly Bellied Woodpecker, Common Babbler and Long Tailed Shrike, whilst the boulder strewn river bed held Little Forktail, Brown Dipper, and much potential.

After breakfast Stuart and Edith went down the valley in search of a man who gathered and sold interesting pieces of driftwood. Prem and his family arrived bearing gifts of socks and Tibetan greeting scarves. In exchange we offloaded several items of (dirty!) clothing for the porter team. Many postcards crammed with news of our exploits were written on the balcony and stamps affixed with saliva lubricated by more bottles of Jimmy's beer. After lunch people continued in the leisurely vein and at 1600hrs I walked down to the village post box with Gordon and John before walking back by the river.



Gordon and I sat on the boulders peacefully watching the river birdlife and antics of the traffic on the road above us. A bird which I initially thought to be a grey duck hurtled down the river before, fortunately, perching on a big boulder in the main stream. Duck my foot! It was a magnificent 45cm Crested Kingfisher. After creeping closer we watched the bird for forty minutes in the fading light, taking photographs at hopelessly slow speeds (and yes, they did turn out to be useless – even Gordon's!). As we were

thinking of wandering back to Jimmy's a disturbance in the top of a riverside tree turned out to be a Lesser Fish Eagle.

Back at the lodge Stuart and Edith were contemplating how to get their tree trunks, purchased down the road, on the small plane which, tomorrow, was going to provide a spectacular flight from the local airfield, over the Himalaya to Delhi. Warnings of not being allowed to take batteries on to, or photographs from, this plane were met by subdued, furtive discussions of how to meet these challenges.

More lengthy pre dinner drinks preceded a sumptuous feast during which talk of tomorrow's flight dominated. Jimmy and his daughter hovered on the fringe of this conversation but were strangely not very forthcoming about times, airport procedures or wonders to be seen en route. Gradually they slipped in little elements of doubt about our flying out. The plane had not flown for the past few days. The one and only pilot was ill. The aircraft required some repairs. As the evening went on their jocularly increased in inverse proportion to our decline. Finally Bob's concern resulted in a late night flurry of telephone calls and string pulling to no avail. There would be no flight. To make matters worse we had to be in Delhi the next night in order to embark on our trip extension to Agra and Jaipur the next day. A telephone call at 0700hrs tomorrow would be the last hope of flying and provided food for sweet dreams as we turned in for the night.

Day 22 Monday 25 October

A memorable day! Breakfast was dominated by the news that there would be no flight. Thus arose a true test of captain Bob's silver tongue. In 22 hours we were due to leave Delhi by train for Agra. Phone calls were made out of our earshot. Bob's demeanour was judged by the thinness and straightness of his lips. This was no time to pull his leg – unless, of course, your name was Jimmy Johnson who revelled in our plight. The cunning plan was to casually mention to the taxi drivers, who were booked to take us on a 40 minute trip to the airport, that

perhaps they might like to go to Delhi, variously described as 10, 12 or 15 hours' drive away. Even that was cutting it fine for or Delhi to Agra departure 24 hours hence. At the appointed hour of 0900hrs the three small jeep taxis arrived and fortunately so did Prem. Huddled discussions incorporating worried looks from Bob continued in the garden. At 0915hrs we climbed aboard, still unsure of the arrangements.

An hour's white knuckle drive brought us to the seething market town of Kulu. If ever a vision of chaos is needed go to Kulu. Having squeezed through the centre we halted on the other side. The troops were initially kept in the dark, but it transpired we would be going all the way to Delhi provided a replacement driver turned up for one of the originals who, understandably, was not prepared to accept a two day trip as a replacement for his scheduled two hour run. The other fly in the ointment was that our drivers were only licensed to operate within Himachal Pradesh and would need to acquire the relevant papers to progress beyond Kulu. Obtaining paperwork from Indian officials does nothing for the nerves when speed is required. The local state border official was unable to oblige and sent the drivers back into Kulu to get the vital stamp on their driving documents from his superior.

We waited on a street corner, marvelled at the traffic and bought bunches of bananas from roadside shack, the owner of which could not believe his luck in increased annual sales.



After 1½ hours the drivers returned: no permits. The official was not in residence in Kulu. Our hearts rose and dropped simultaneously. The good side of it was that nerves would be spared from more hours Indian driving experience. Already blood pressure and nerve ends were at their limits. The bad news was that we would miss or seriously curtail the tourist bit round Agra and Jaipur.

More discussions between Prem, Bob, the drivers and the local border official eventually resulted in Bob emerging in “peace in our time” fashion with the vital stamped documents. After all, the border official decided he did have the authority to give permission. What magic had the silver tongue wrought? Did money change hands? Were sexual favours involved? Bob was unusually quiet on the happenings in the little dark hut.

Loins were girded, selves were steeled and at 1130hrs engines were started for the Kulu to Delhi rally. Ability at mental arithmetic is not always a good thing. We had come less than 10% of the distance in 3 hours and our next transport appointment, the early morning train to from Delhi to Agra was in 18 hours during which time it would be nice to have a bed and the opportunity to sort gear into tourist mode rather than mountaineering mode. Much as we tried to adopt the local shoulder shrugging mentality it was only a charade. Inside our guts there was tension rising not only from the tight schedule but also from the excitement experienced during the first hour's drive. Still, perhaps as we got nearer to the plains both roads and driving

techniques would move marginally closer to the desired western standards. Some hope!

Every second of what turned out to be a fourteen hour drive held some sort of interest. At times it was breathtaking scenery such as the deep Beas gorges; at others it was the towns and villages through which we passed; at others it was the wildlife; but always it was the driving. Being in the third of three vehicles is interesting when, for some reason, all vehicles are required to retain tight convoy formation. This includes overtaking manoeuvres – one goes, all go. Sometimes it was tight even for the first vehicle. After each incident grinning, but relieved, faces were seen peering from the back of the vehicle in front. Road surfaces were also different: “sleeping policemen” were a natural phenomenon. Once on the plains we joined better surfaced roads and even dual carriageways. Now dual carriageway driving is also something different.

Local traffic, including ox and camel drawn carts, use which ever carriageway is more convenient. Hurling down the outside lane was frequently livened up by head on encounters with such oncoming impediments. On one occasion we met not cats eyes but cows eyes as a slumbering beast in the fast lane caused yet another swerve. Somehow most things survive including tempers. Having gently nudged a motor cyclist out of the way whilst overtaking he caught us up and whilst overtaking started to give our driver a mouthful.



A brief but courteous “very sorry, sir” was all that was required and all parties were satisfied. The Indian way of life is not conducive to engendering “road rage”

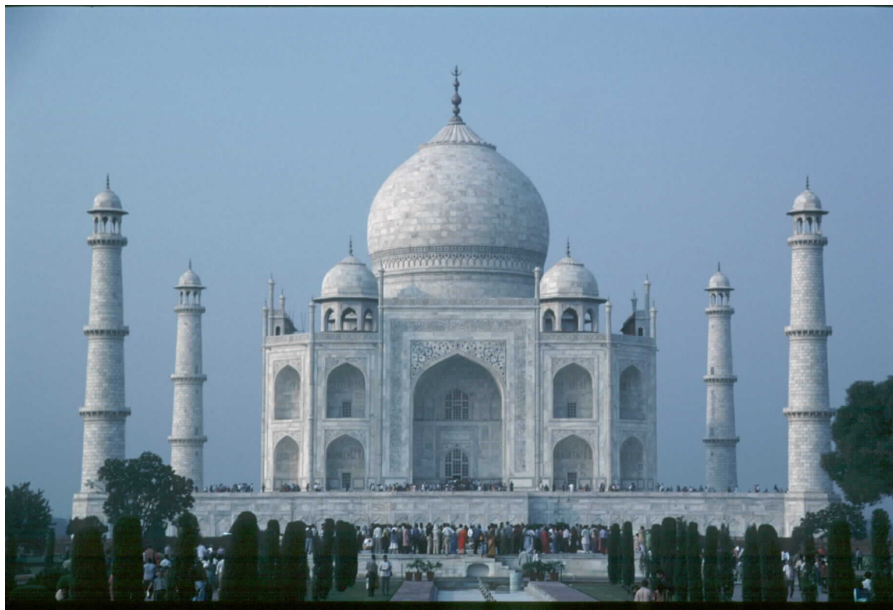
On reaching Delhi at midnight none of us were sure of how to reach Claridges so we “hired” a taxi, but not as one does in Britain. Three vehicles boxed in this motorised rickshaw, police style, and forced it to stop. The driver appeared to have little option to guide us to our hotel. There then ensued a comic rickshaw led convoy through the fortunately relatively quiet suburbs of New Delhi. We seem to have hijacked not only the GT version of rickshaw to follow but also a driver who also had no idea of the whereabouts of Claridges. Again, being tail end Charlie for the convoy had its moments at junctions, traffic lights and roundabouts where all written and unwritten rules were ignored. More by good luck than good management we found ourselves in a familiar area and were able to overtake our taxi leader who then followed in hot pursuit for his payment! Claridges and relief came at 0100hrs.

With commendable efficiency we were greeted by Bob’s agent, Ravinder, who had used his initiative, worked out our plans, rearranged tomorrow’s transport and schedules and had a drink waiting for us. Tomorrow we would not be catching the 0600hrs train but would leave at 0900hrs by coach for Agra. The prospect of three hours more sleep was tempered somewhat by steeling ourselves for another day on the road! Although the journey had ended for our weary bodies it was another two hours before our twirling brains allowed us to go to bed.

Day 23 Tuesday 26 October

After four hours sleep and with yesterday's excitement still coursing through our veins like some stimulating drug (what was in that bedtime drink?) we were up at 0700hrs, breakfasted and on the luxury coach by 0915hrs heading for Agra and the Taj Mahal. Sitting observing Delhi life from gridlocked traffic we were grateful for the luxury of air conditioning and a double seat each. By noon we were moving freely through the Indian countryside when we stopped for a break at an upmarket roadside restaurant/gift shop. Immediately alongside the car park was series of muddy pool spattered fields which were alive with birds, especially waders. To hell with the café!

Several exciting dual carriageway diversions, official and unofficial, and head on encounters confirmed that yesterday's excitement was the norm. Unscathed physically we arrived at the Trident Hotel in Agra at 1430hrs. From 1545hrs to 1730hrs we had a guided tour of the Taj Mahal.



In spite of the crowds it is a place to concentrate the mind. Apart from the romantic connections of its being a mausoleum built in the 16th century by Shah Jahan in memory of his second wife, the architecture, method and precision of its construction are impressive. The subtle glow of the start of sunset added another dimension to the marble and atmosphere.

Back at the hotel we were able to relax over pre dinner drinks in the bar before sampling the delights of the dining room and its extensive menu. That night we slept soundly.

Day 24 Wednesday 27 October

The day started at 0600hrs. John was already in the self service buffet breakfast as George and I went for an early morning pre breakfast birding walk in the vicinity of the hotel. Birds were very plentiful and we made a good team with George finding birds faster than I could identify them. Amongst those we did identify were Asian Pied Starling, Coppersmith Barbet, Greater Coucal and Peafowl in trees. We also had a nervous encounter with an equally nervous pack of a dozen stray dogs. On returning to the dining room John was still doing laps of the buffet tables and continued to do so for the next hour.

An hour's drive after breakfast took us to the fascinating deserted red sandstone city of Fatehpur Sikri. Built in the mid 16th century it had to be abandoned because of a shortage of water and lay undiscovered until the 19th century. Considering its age, the intricacy of the carved sandstone was virtually as new and the contrasting marble tomb in the mosque was impressive despite having to walk barefoot across the massive scorching stone courtyard.



At 1315hrs we left for Jaipur. With stops the journey took five hours but crossing the plains provided interesting scenery and rural sights, camel transport becoming more common. At 1830 hrs we pulled in to the Jal Mahal Palace Hotel, named after the palace situated across the road in the middle of a large lake. Birding potential suggested another early morning walk would be in order before tomorrow's excursions. Yet another evening was spent in luxury.

Day 25 Thursday 28 October

Drama day. 0630hrs – 0815hrs a pre breakfast birding walk round the causeway encircling the Jal Mahal palace in the lake across the road. Though now empty and deserted the palace structure seemed sound as it glowed in the early morning sunlight. The shallow lake teemed with birdlife. In the distance flocks of unidentified duck silhouettes bobbed on the reflected sunlight whilst close by Black Winged Stilts waded by the causeway edge. Roosting on, and occasionally flying from, the palace walls were over one hundred Indian Cormorants and loafing in the water below was a snake-like Darter. There were also more familiar European species such as Common Kingfisher, Little Gull, Coot, Lesser Crested Tern, Common Sandpiper and Pied Wagtail. George joined me and together we completed the causeway circuit and returned to the hotel for breakfast.



At 0930hrs we departed by bus on the ten minute journey to Jaipur's Amber Fort. After the obligatory tourist photo stop with the snake charmer we joined the short queue for the elephant ride up the ramp to the fort. All was going well, hot sun, good light and lots of photographs although the ride was very rocky. Suddenly all stopped and the elephant in front carrying four of our party only held three. Chris, inexplicably had fallen off and was lying unconscious on the



ground between the elephant's back legs. The elephant remained motionless whilst a groggy Chris was carried to a gift shop at the side of the ramp. We decided to continue to the end of the ride at the fort and await



news from Bob. We waited with the monkeys until Bob came to tell us that Chris was conscious but groggy and was being taken back to our hotel where there was a doctor.

We completed our tour round the complex but fascinating fort and then went into Jaipur for the compulsory visit to the carpet factory followed by the Palace of the Winds. By the time we had been round the City Palace and Museum it was mid afternoon, very hot and we were flagging. Our guide's offer of a trip to the observatory was politely turned down in favour of a return to the hotel. Air conditioning is a great reviver and on seeing an interesting Shrike in the garden. I went out on to the balcony and into the garden (ground floor room!) to investigate further. On my return I found that George had inexplicably locked the balcony door. Despite much knocking and trying to prise open the door I got no response from George and so had to traipse right round the hotel to make the more usual room entry. En route I passed Stuart and Edith and agreed to have a walk into town. On returning to the room I found a puzzled George and the balcony door wide open. I had been trying to gain entry to the wrong room. Fortunately I had not succeeded as my explanation may have seemed somewhat feeble.

The four of us started walking into town, past the palace lake, and it was obvious from the locals that not many westerners walked down this road. Two young lads with mischief all over their faces tagged along and made poor attempts to distract us whilst working out how to remove George's wallet, just visible in his pocket. When it was obvious that our diligence was defeating their attempts they took to using us as target practice for their stone throwing. Despite universal sign language indicating what I would do to them the occasional barrage continued for some time. Stuart and Edith engaged in conversation with a chap who guaranteed to take them to a place where they could buy a genuine brass water carrier, the object of their shopping trip.



The three of them disappeared into the bowels of Jaipur and George and I had visions of an international kidnap incident. On reaching the town centre we engaged a motorised rickshaw to take us back to the hotel. Before going into the hotel we joined most of the rest of the party on the lake causeway just in time to witness Gordon swapping watches with a young boy. Both claimed to have got bargains.

Chris was not well and went to hospital for a brain scan. Amazingly he was back in a couple of hours, scan completed. A nurse (male!) stayed the night with him in his room.

Day 26 Friday 29 October

Chris emerged after a late breakfast and was declared fit enough to travel back to Delhi with us. The inevitable fascinating bus ride took us to Neemrama Fort for lunch. What a fascinating place. A stroll through a small, poor village gave no indication of the magnificent fort hidden on the tree covered hillside above. Entry through huge studded wooden gates led to a courtyard and dining room. Over a very pleasant lunch the conversations tended to be end of trip affairs, recalling the highlights and tinged with sadness that all was about to come to an end. One last minute success story was Stuart and Edith finding their water carrier at a fraction of the price discovered in the company of the Jaipur kidnapper.



The rest of the journey to the Taj hotel in Delhi was, by recent standards, uneventful. Delhi was reached in late afternoon and we disgorged into the hotel. Two rooms should have been allocated for our use until departure for the airport later in the evening. None were. The silver tongue, laced with acid soon rectified that! The two couples had one room and the remaining six single men made use of the other. During the repacking, washing, changing process the room boy came to turn the bedclothes back! On seeing six semi naked old men he turned tail, politely! Six of us returned to Claridges for a spot of last minute shopping before our last supper in the Chinese restaurant within the Taj Hotel.

Departure for the airport was orderly but at the airport we had fun when George had a battery and his boarding card confiscated! The rest of us, sprouting batteries, were unmolested.

Day 27 Saturday 30 October

Departure from Delhi was only about 30 minutes late at 0130hrs and we landed in Amsterdam more or less on time at 0700hrs. Time in the camera shops went quickly and we said farewell to Chris whose flight to Stansted was before ours to Birmingham. We landed at Birmingham at 0945 and captain Bob escaped in the arms of Alison. For the remaining eight our minibus was waiting and we were in Derby late morning. Having dropped off John at daughter Lisa's house the final leg was to Colin and Uschi's where our wives (and Lisa!) were waiting with bunting and balloons.



The man who, despite Ernie Phillips' dire warning that taking us on this trip would be like herding cats, got us all there and back safely. All stories tripping off his silver tongue are true.

After such a trip there was no way to end it satisfactorily. It has still not ended: our memories won't allow it.

Trekking Statistics

Duration:	14 days (93 hours walking)
Distance:	80 miles? (130km?)
Total Ascent:	22,957ft (6995m)
Total Descent:	23,637ft (7202m)
Maximum Altitude:	15,210ft (4634m) This was the altimeter reading on the Kalaheni Pass. However maps and literature variously put the height between 15,500ft and 17,000ft.
Temperature Range:	-10c to +23c
Weather:	Almost continuously settled with virtually no wind and Approx. 3 hours total hail/light snow otherwise virtually permanent clear sunny skies.

