

Base Camp



The sound of my heavy, rasping heart beating way too fast fills my ears. Nostrils flaring, heart pounding and lungs bursting, I contemplate the moves ahead. The harsh mountain light and the texture of the rock here remind me of the infamous Red Walls on Gogarth. I think of Mick, the landlord of The Heights and his cool approach to the challenge of Gogarth's head games. Some of Mick's supreme smoothness is what is needed here but I'm feeling wasted from the lack of oxygen. At over 5000m we're already climbing near the stratosphere. Maybe I was a little out of my depth.

A "Go on Olly, I KNOW you can do it" is shouted across from the Belay. Mitch is hanging quite still and he looks relaxed in his shades. The day is clear and warm with a few wisps of cloud to the East. Below me a Lammergeyer circles like a vulture. With a wingspan of fifteen feet it looks like a brown paraglider. Its wings flutter noiselessly in the wind. I thought how I wanted to be like it.

I find a rest point for my feet and stop hyperventilating. "Read the rock, focus and don't make any sudden movements." I tell myself.

It was my first proper expedition and I'd been planning it for nearly a year.

We'd gone to Peru last summer to get a bit of experience of climbing at altitude. I was now getting used to being on the road, negotiating with locals, bartering, and eating strange food. Shortly after I got my team together for the expedition I got some bad news. Polish Olly couldn't make it. And Jean Yves had failed his re-takes. I sent out a few emails: 'Men wanted: for

hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long nights of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success...' Michel van der Spek was up for it. He was a jet setting investment banker with a cheeky grin and we called him The International Playboy. He'd done some impressive stuff: trips to Pumori, Aconcagua and a new route on Siula Grande. His climbing partner Jeremy Frimer was up for it too and he asked his partner Sarah Hart to assist us at base camp.

Sarah had a broken arm in full plaster after

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falling into a crevasse but she didn't let this stop her making a full contribution to the trip. She was as tough as Ellen MacArthur and I never heard her complain. Soon she was sporting Sonia Ghandi style clothing, complete with red dot on her forehead. She was popular with the young street urchins who would pursue her up the road shouting "I sandle you fix!"

We took the train to Shimla, a small hilltop town that was like the Aspen of India. There were expensive shops everywhere and these beautiful colonial buildings. Everywhere there were wealthy

Indian families enjoying their holidays.

Every now and then we would be approached. Where are you from? What is your income?

The place was over-run by aggressive brown monkeys. I felt something brush my face and looked round. One of the monkeys had snatched my glasses. Our eyes met. It sprinted up a nearby tree, still holding them. I didn't have a spare pair. I picked up a rock. "Hey", I heard a shout. The owner of a nearby shop was running towards me holding a bag of peanuts. He threw the nuts at the monkey and the glasses were dropped. I handed him some cash: "Softly softly, catchee monkee."

Then I felt a terrible looseness in my bowels. I'd been treating my water with iodine, not realising that the stuff I had was only 10% iodine and not strong enough. I sprinted towards away from the road and pulled down my trousers. There were three men walking down the road and they grinned at me:

"Good morning sir," they shouted "How are you today sir?"

In the few days before the trip we started packing. We had this spreadsheet with communal gear lists on it and we emailed it back and forth working out who was taking what. It was difficult to pack. We couldn't take too much stuff but we needed to be completely self sufficient for 21 days. We had to get it right. We took a Sat Phone and Jeremy had these hand held digital radios that sent out a signal along a line of sight. Our food consisted of muesli or cornflakes for breakfast,