

Hob Nobs and crackers for lunch, and then pasta or rice with sauce for dinner. Jeremy had brought along a pressure cooker to make cooking at 4000m easier.

Apart from the occasional trekking group, foreigners are rare in this area and we got used to people staring at us. The locals were kind to us. They gave us a big bag of peas and hand knitted socks. The strangest people we saw were the Sadhus. Sadhus are holy men who have renounced the material world to devote themselves to spiritual practice. They wander from place to place and own nothing. Becoming a Sadhu is a difficult. Sadhus are considered to be dead unto themselves, and they may be required ritually to attend their own funeral before following a guru for many years. Some live in the mountains alone for years at a time, eating only bananas. Others walk around with one arm in the air for decades until the fingers withdraw into stumps. Still others partake in the religious consumption of charas, a form of cannabis and contemplate the cosmic nature and presence of God in the smoke patterns.

There was a trekking group who left on the same day as us and they went at a fairly relaxed pace. We were amazed at their caravan of 40 porters and all the Gucci kit they had with them for their base camp. "They didn't go travelling" said Sarah. "They took the west with them."

Jeremy had a couple of songbooks and some nights we had a singing session. We went to bed at seven or eight and got up at six. The sun was just beginning to creep over the hills and the air was fresh. After breakfast we started the days climbing. We spent a lot of time hiking the surrounding countryside and working out where to climb. Jeremy had a pair of ultra powerful binoculars and he'd shout with delight when he saw cracks. "I can SEE the cracks", he'd shout, "that means we need the Camelot five."

Everywhere we went we carried rucksacks and were starting to understand why previous parties had employed porters to help them out as they trekked to the start of the routes.

We wouldn't see a soul for days and then in the

middle of absolutely nowhere we would come across a local herder who would stare at us.

"Climb when ready." Deep breath. My heart was racing and my stomach felt hollow. I thought, this is it! I'm finally getting down to business. It seemed surreal. Here I was so far from home in a foreign country about to make an ascent of an unclimbed mountain. I could see base camp far below and my tiny red tent.

I looked at my watch. 5100m. I'd never done technical climbing at this kind of altitude before. As I led up and left Mitch disappeared and I found myself alone above a steep ramp. It was completely silent and we were climbing under a denim blue sky. The gear was good and I was swinging from hold to hold. I felt the 60m ropes get heavier and heavier and heard Mitch's shout of '10m'. I sank in a couple of nuts, equalised them with the cordillette, and clipped in with my daisy chain. First pitch over and I stood in the sun watching Mitch speed up the rock. The climbing was not too hard and if anything went wrong we could be back on the scree slope in a couple of abseils. It was no more committing than the Papillons Arête in the Alps.

The third pitch was the crux and then the angle kicked back. Normally when you're on an alpine route it is mega serious and you're feeling scared. This wasn't like that. "This is good" I thought, "I'm really enjoying this." We untied and I followed Mitch, panting like a racehorse as he motored to the summit. The highest point was unmarked and I rested while Mitch built a cairn. I looked around and saw the mountains in the distance. What a feeling. I felt like nothing else mattered. I'd poured what was left in the breakfast tea pan into a Sigg bottle and mixed it with drink powder. It tasted deliciously refreshing and I felt alert and for ready for the descent.

Four abseils later and we were back at the scree. There was a bit of tricky down climbing to get

down to the scree. "Don't blow it now, don't blow it now" I said to myself through clenched teeth. We stopped to eat and then began the long walk down to the tents. Mitch was going fast; "Bit slower if you can Mitch" I shouted after him, glad we had the ski poles with us. Night fell quickly and we got the headtorches out. We turned the beams on and there was an answering glow from the tents, followed by the red flare of the MSR being primed. A final few steps over the glacial moraine and we were back in camp. We glanced down and saw that Jer and Sarah had got our chairs out and there were a couple of bags of dehydrated food sitting in front of them with steam coming out of them. We sat down, and shovelled down the pasta, telling Jeremy and Sarah about the route in between mouthfuls. It had been a long, hard day.

The next day we packed up base camp and began the walk out. As we got closer to the road-head people stopped to shake our hands and ask us what we'd done. It had been a hard three weeks. I will never forget it but we couldn't wait to get back to Manali to sleep in a real bed and have some good food.



Photos:

Left: Sarah Hart, sporting arm in plaster, crosses the river Nala

Above: Mitch van der Spek

Goya Peak, Miyar Nala: 'SW Ridge', Oliver Metherell, Michel van der Spek, 400m, D-, F5c

The team also made first ascents of other routes in the area, including 'Gateway Ridge' (up to 5.9) by Michel van der Spek and Jeremy Frimer

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