



Rugzak.nl



Himachal Pioneer expedition 2011

These days it is easy to imagine that there is no exploratory challenge left in the world's mountains. Our trip to the remotest peaks of Himachal in the Indian Himalaya in Autumn 2011 proved otherwise. We found hundreds of square miles of untouched mountain country, completely empty of people with scores of magnificent unclimbed 6000m peaks to savour. Our team of 9 climbers and 4 Indian support staff successfully completed a circuit of three difficult 5000 metre passes on the borders between Lahaul, Zaskar and Kishtwar regions, surveyed the wealth of technical peaks in this area and climbed a beautiful virgin 6000er on the way. The journey over the Kang La (5450m), Poat La (5490m) and Sersank La (5130m) was 150km in distance with 6300m of ascent and took 18 days.

After journeying from Delhi to Manali and over the Rohtang Pass by train and minibus, our trek commenced at the provincial town of Udaipur at 2640m in the Chandra Bhaga valley. For five days and 85km we followed the Miyar valley to the Kang La - at first through cultivations and villages, then by open grasslands and alluvial flats, and finally by 26km of rough glacier. We used 20 low-level porters to get our food and kit to 5000m glacier. Hereafter, we were entirely on our own with big loads for 12 days in empty lands where to carry unnecessary equipment could critically slow progress, but to forget something vital would be catastrophic!

Throughout the trip we were blessed with wonderful clear and settled weather. Snow conditions were generally excellent, with a foot of monsoon snow sticking to the glaciers above 5000m. The Kang La is a fairly benign pass in slope angles, but one member soon discovered hidden dangers when he found himself hanging 5 metres down a crevasse slot. We extricated him with a pulley hoist. Beyond Kang La we looked into the arid ranges of Zaskar, but immediately my eye was caught by a shapely snow peak 10km distant. While we recovered at a camp at 4425m in the Tidu valley we pondered our escape option if anything went wrong - a 25km northward trek to Padum village, 300km jeep drive by Kargil to Leh in Ladakh and a flight back to Delhi. As we were operating in the ankle-snapping territory of stone-clad ice moraine it was a sobering prospect. However, the lure of the "snow queen" that we had spotted proved too strong to resist.

We made a bivouac at 5060m under the peak, and dawn found us high on the south face. Some pitched ice climbing took us over an ice serac, then we side-footed up endless slopes to a final bergschrund and short ice slope leading to the summit ridge. After a 10 hour climb from our bivouac we teetered along the corniced crest at 11.15am. On all horizons were an array of unnamed, unknown peaks, many of them over 6000m and most of them of spectacular dimensions. We named our own peak Eva's Peak in honour of one of member's baby daughter and established its height as 6119m (20,075ft).



Rugzak.nl

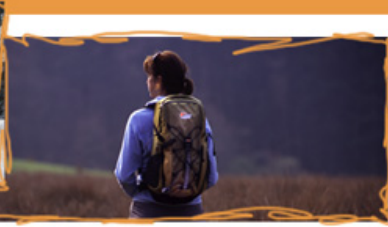


We now moved camp to the glacier under the Poat La, our second pass. Our schedule was tight – there were no spare days and the nearest village and road was over 50km away. The team crossed this splendid 5500m pass with loads of well over 20kg and descended the Zanskar-Kanthang Glacier amidst an impressive array of virgin peaks and rock walls. Progress ground to a halt in the ocean of live moraines that covered the lower glacier. Having carried huge loads all day we were all getting exhausted and a little fractious. Yet, so tight was our onward schedule that we had to keep pushing until nightfall. We bivouacked in the open on the moraine but our amazing staff soon had a "dahlbhat" cooked up. A new moon rose as we settled on to our gravel beds and all seemed well with the world again. We now had just four days to get over the last pass, Sersank La. All we knew about the pass was that it harboured a formidable icefall and had repelled an Indian team five years earlier. If we couldn't get over it our only option was to pioneer an alpine route over 5500m peaks on the southern rim of the Darlang valley. Any margin of error and we'd be missing our flights home!

Next morning, my deputy leader Robin Thomas and I left soon after dawn to forge a route over the ZK Glacier and recce approaches to the Sersank. We climbed into the Sersank valley and beheld a crumbling icefall that was patently impossible to scale, unless possessed of suicidal inclinations. However, there was a line of ramps crossing the mountain wall on its right side that might outflank the ice cliffs. We put all our money on this line and at dawn next day set off on a vital scouting mission. We threaded a line up shale screes and rocky bluffs, followed the ramp high above the icefall. We then weaved round crevasses above the first icefall and made a frontal attack on a second icefall. After a couple of ice pitches threaded our ropes through a criss-crossed crevasse field to arrive below the pass. Our escape was assured and next day the whole team moved up to a high camp at 4850m under the mighty north wall of 6000m Shiv Shankar.

At 10am on the 6th we surmounted a slope of vertical shale to gain the Sersank pass at 5130m and looked down the gentle wooded folds of the Sural valley. After a last day back-packing 20kg loads we reached the village and roadhead of Khangsar, to meet the first people we had seen since leaving our porters under the Kang La. Clouds had now gathered, and after 22 days of dry sub-zero weather we put on our shell jackets for the first time as we loaded the jeeps for the long drive home.

As a self-supporting pioneering venture we had achieved a memorable result, and the outcome was in doubt until the last two days. No party is known to have made the circuit of these three passes in recent times and Eva's Peak was a notable first ascent - a beautiful 20,000' mountain, discovered, admired then climbed - all within five days. Mountaineering doesn't get better than that!



Rugzak.nl

Conclusion

As we carried big loads throughout the trip the performance and comfort of our rucksacks was of vital importance. Two members (leader Martin Moran and Allan Isherwood) used the **Lowe TFX Expedition 75:95 Rucksack**. This sack had a huge internal capacity and extendable external straps to allow tents and ropes to be strapped on the outside with ease. Attention to every detail of design provided the most practical and comfortable big sack I have ever used. With 25kg on board I could carry comfortably for 2 or 3 hours before feeling any strain or ache in my shoulders. Thereafter, I could carry happily for 30 minutes at a stretch through to the end of 12-14 hour days on incredibly rough terrain. No other rucksack I have used has come close to that performance on expedition. Why is it so good? The adjustable back length allows the user to get a perfect positioning of the sack, so that it sits clear of the hips and buttocks. The shoulder strap adjustment keeps the sack's weight in line and close to the body's centre of gravity and the hip belt takes a significant portion of loading. When carrying smaller weights, as on our summit climb, it was easy to stow the lid inside the main sack to create a neat compact load.

A common complaint with big sacks is that they weigh several kilos themselves before any kit is loaded. The Lowe sack caters for this issue by incorporating two alternative hip belts – a thick padded one for comfort-lovers and a slim one for the weight-conscious. By opting for the thin belt I saved a kilo in weight, and never suffered any chafing or discomfort. **Without doubt the Lowe TFX Expedition proved to be the ultimate expedition sack, ensuring pleasurable appreciation of every incredible situation in which we found ourselves in this amazing country.**

MARTIN MORAN

www.moran-mountain.co.uk