

AN ADVENTURE WITH KAPADIA

SIR CHRIS BONINGTON

There are rituals in a trip with Harish Kapadia, all of which are memorable and delightful. Over the years Harish has invited a series of climbers from different countries to join him in mountain exploration throughout the chain of the Indian Himalaya. I've now had the privilege of going with him on four adventures, the latest of which was to Kullu in June 2003. This was more an extended trek than a climb but it had all the rich ingredients of a Kapadia experience.

It started in Mumbai, Harish's home base, being met in immigration by a member of the Himalayan Club who works in security at the airport and who whisked us through all the procedures. Divyesh and Vineeta Muni, old friends from previous trips, were there to greet us and took us to the homes of Harish and Ravi, another friend of Harish.

But Harish himself was not there – indeed I'd seen him only a couple of days before at the Everest 50th Anniversary Celebrations in London. He was staying on to receive his very well earned Patron's Medal from the Royal Geographical Society and as a result would join us in Delhi. This meant we missed one of the great rituals in Mumbai – the early morning walk/run round the Mumbai Race Course followed by Yoga and delicious Melba toasts with ginger tea for breakfast.

But we had the train journey from Mumbai to Delhi in the Rajdhani Express. It brought back memories of my first visit to Mumbai back in 1960 when I'd sailed out from the UK in the *SS Cilicia*, and had then travelled on top of all the expedition gear in a non-air conditioned compartment all the way to Patna. It was hot sweaty and yet a wonderful adventure made sweeter by the hot curries delivered at regular intervals. This time though we were in a fully air conditioned sleeper – but the food was as good as ever.

We were met at New Delhi station by Harish who had flown out direct from London and then went to see the final member of our team, Suman

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Dubey, bureau chief of the Asian Wall Street Journal in South East Asia. Our team was now complete – from the UK, my brother Gerald and ex-secretary of 25 years, Louise with her husband Gerry, from Kenya Rajal and Radha Upadhyaya and from India, Vijay Kothari, who had been with me on two previous Kapadia expeditions. After an excellent lunch we took the train to Chandigadh, spent the night there, having dinner with our old friend Gurdial Singh and next morning drove to Sainj (via Aut) some miles south of Kullu.

It was good to get under canvas and join up with our support staff provided by Rimo Expeditions even though we tender Europeans were struck down by those almost inevitable gastric complaints, something we got over in a few days. We set out on our trek on 7 June 2003 with a drive up to the roadhead at Neuli and then the gentlest of walks to a delightful camp site in the forest. The following day our trek truly began in earnest. Harish believes in starting slow and steady to allow every one to get fit in a comfortable way. It certainly suited us. The walk was magnificent through unspoilt forest of mature Chestnut and Silver Oak with creepers leaping from tree to tree and the dappled pattern of sunlight filtering through. There was a profusion of wild flowers, the most I have ever seen in the Himalaya. We covered about 16 km and by ten thirty in the morning had reached our camp site to laze away the rest of the day with cards and good conversation. We were trekking in the Great Himalayan National Park, covering three valleys and large area. Some token fee had to be paid for entry and photography at their headquarters near Kullu, but all was worth it looking at the protection it offered to nature.

This was to be the pattern for the rest of our walk. The mornings were fine and the afternoons cloudy, usually with some rain, so we always started early at around 6 a.m. We reached Shakti, a National Park rest house, on the 9th. A group of cheery students, who had been trying to reach the Garagarasan Dhar, were in residence. Another two days gentle walking and we were at Parkachi Thach (3040 m), in the heart of the mountains. Snow peaks peered over the Conifer filled valleys on either side and the next day we broke up into small parties to explore the area. Harish, Suman, Gerry and Louise walked up the riverbank to try to find a bridge marked on the map. Sadly, it had been swept away, denying us access to the peaks to the south. Rajal and Radha climbed the slopes to the north of our camp while Vijay with one of our Kumauni porters climbed the crest of the ridge to get superb views of the peaks to the north. Gerald and I were interested in climbing one of these peaks and therefore set out to find the best route up the Parkachi valley.

We now knew where to go, which was just as well because the cloud rolled in once more and the mountain vanished once again. As the slope steepened, Rajal and I started to belay each other, sharing the lead. A rope length led to the foot of the steep snow ramp leading up through sheer black rock. The exposure was dizzy, for we had traversed out from the col on to the upper part of a steep face that dropped down to the glacier a thousand metres below. The snow was deteriorating and there seemed a distinct risk of avalanche. In addition, we were running out of time. It was now early afternoon and the top of the ramp glimpsed through breaks in the cloud, seemed a long way away. I even turned back, reversed my kicked steps for a few metres, but then was reassured by how solid they seemed – to hell with it – we had a summit within our grasp and my courage returned. I ran out the full length of the rope, belayed, and Rajal led through. The top wasn't as far as I had thought, and he was able to reach the top of the ramp before he ran out of rope. The last few metres were truly nerve wracking, seemingly bottomless crystalline snow that he had to swim up. He hammered a rock peg into a crack and with this security, struggled up to a little shoulder just below the summit block.

Once again we were in luck, the cloud cleared for a few minutes as we took turns to stand on the truly magnificent summit rock. We had made the first ascent of Jaraun peak.

We descended to the camp site late that afternoon to find Raj Kumar and Supsinh waiting for us with soup and a huge bowl of noodles. We carried on down and got back, very tired but happy, to our camp at Jaraun Thach just before dark. The following day we walked all the way back down to Shakti, where Harish, Suman and Gerald, with the rest of the porters were awaiting us. It was a delightful reunion but our adventures were by no means over.

Harish planned an interesting trip out over the hills to the south of the Sainj river. This led us up a roller coaster route through magnificent unspoilt forest in heavy rain. We had employed a guide but it quickly became apparent that he had never actually been this way before and consequently kept getting lost, until Harish firmly told him to stay behind, and took the lead himself. That night we stopped in a rain- drenched clearing, called Bhedi Thatch, in a steep little valley with a wonderful clear stream tumbling down through it. By morning it had cleared and we had a superb walk through the forest up onto the high Alpine pastures of Dhel, 3650 m on the Garagarasan Dhar with views of the range in which we had been climbing. The lush grass was ablaze with flowers and it was as lovely a viewpoint as I have ever experienced in all my years

of Himalayan climbing. We spent the night at Rakhundi, just below the crest of the ridge and on 21 June we all climbed to a grassy peak on the crest at 3954 m, which Harish called Rakhundi after the ridge. Our descent on the steep northern scarp of the range remained a mysterious challenge. Our guide knew nothing and there was no obvious path. We ended up making a precipitous and somewhat nerve-wracking descent (via Ghumtarao and Nara Thatch of two thousand metres to the Tirthan river valley at Ralla. We followed the Tirthan valley down to the little town of Gushaini in company of a pilgrim procession.

It had been a wonderful trek and climb – great company, good conversation and a profusion of wild flowers and superb trees above which towered some lovely peaks. This part of Kullu is a hidden jewel that deserves much greater popularity.

With Harish and Me

A poem by Louise Wilson

‘Oh Lou,’ said Chris, one day after tea,
 ‘Come to the Himalaya with Harish and me.
 ‘Next June’s the time that we should go.’
 And we accepted then without further ado.

The team consisted of nine in numbers,
 Three Indians, two Kenyans and four Brits are the members.
 Harish was our leader and he had just been
 Way over to London to meet with the Queen.

Two brothers we have with the same name for one,
 Sir Christian and Gerald Bonington.
 Rajal we soon learnt has a ‘Gerri’ obsession,
 But it’s for Gerri the Spice Girl, not Gerry Wilson.

And Radha, his wife, is pretty but not at all silly,
 And she has a secret addiction to chilli.
 We meet up in Delhi with Dow Jones’ Suman Dubey,
 Who does a great job of directing the movie.

Finally Vijay makes up our number,
 But catch him quick or he’s off on a wander.

To Mumbai, Delhi then Chandigadh,
Liberally lubricated with Kingfisher.
Up early next morning and all feeling frisky,
Except for Chris, who's forgotten the whisky.

Toyota and cars get us to Sainj.
At last we're almost in touch with our range.
So onwards and upwards with porters galore,
Towards Denga and Shakti and even Maraur.

When camping at Kudal some people got ticks,
On their arms and their legs and even their dicks.
At Parkachi Thach we settled the train
But the afternoon was spoiled by rain.

Don't worry my friends, Chris is on form,
'The weather will clear with a really good storm.'
Harish gives us music each morning at seven,
This isn't a trek, it's much more like heaven.

CB's getting twitchy to get at a peak,
So up to Camp 1, an objective to seek.
To recce we set out in three separate ways,
And agreed on a summit to fill the next phase.

The weather's not perfect but still, off we set,
And it's not very long 'fore it's hailing and wet.
But Chris is still hopeful and true to his form.
'The weather will clear with a really good storm.'

It snows on the tent until it all sags,
And, oh no, the next morning Chris's forgotten the flags.
Our heroes set off in a bit of a hurry,
While the rest of us wait trying hard not to worry.

They both return safely, much to our relief,
With *a point on the ridge* successfully reached.
Back down to Shakti to meet Harish and Suman,
And Chris managed to leave his watch in the bathroom.

Rain the next morning but on with phase two,
 Slogging up and then down, we carry on through.
 Dhel was so pleasant we stayed there two nights,
 And then towards Ghumtarao we turned our sights.

The route was not certain and caused so much chat.
 Should we go this way, or should we go that?
 In the end we went 'that' way and what a descent.
 I'll swear that my knees are now permanently bent.

To even things up we climbed at such length,
 By the end of next day I'd used up my strength.
 You know the saying, 'What goes up must come down.'
 Well, descent to the Tirthan went on and on.

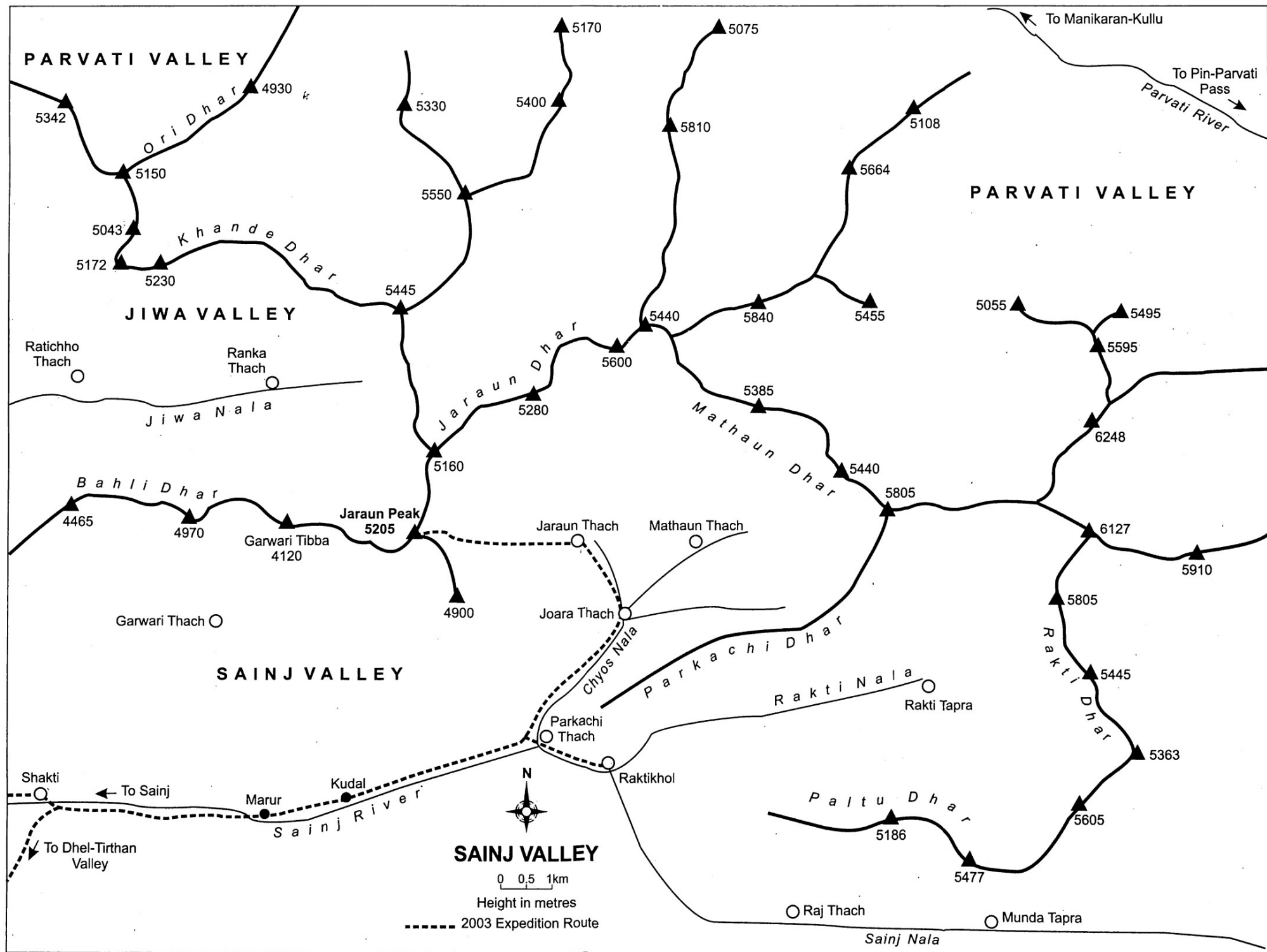
Just a short day to Gushaini should hold no fears,
 And the sooner we get there, the sooner there's beers.

Thank you to all our new-made friends
 For your help and support right through from Sainj.
 To Harish, thanks a million in every way,
 And what about Lahaul for another day?

So there's memories of forests and flowers and ridges,
 Of mountains and gorges and torrents and bridges,
 Of singing and laughter and new friends we've met,
 All making a trip we shall never forget.

SUMMARY

A walk in the Sainj and Tirthan valleys, Kullu, by group of Indian and British friends, in June 2003.





Article 12

(Rajal Upadhyaya)

46. Kand Mahadev peak.



Article 12

(Sir Chris Bonington)

48. Traditional offerings of iron to local *devtas*.



Article 12

(Sir Chris Bonington)

47. Climbing Jaraun peak.

