

Brave expedition

A group of youngsters from Bengalooru trek to the treacherous Sarpass Peak in Himachal Pradesh.
By Hema Narayanan. Photos by Raghavendra K S



The group had to prepare itself well for the trek

My friend from Bengalooru proudly exclaimed: “I surpassed the Sarpass!” He had just come back from an 11-day trek on a Himalayan trail to Sarpass. The once-in-a-lifetime experience he had, have been encapsulated in his photographs here. Sometimes merely walking for endless hours and miles together can be one of the best journeys of one’s life. And this trek to Sarpass seemed like one, for my friend who went along with a group of 50 others.

Travel means different things to different people. While some like to play it safe (heard of ‘Known devils are better than unknown angels?’), others prefer the unknown and

unpredictable. Trekking up any mountain is certainly a journey into the unknown terrains in extreme conditions.

Their plan to trek up to the Sarpass happened over a casual cup of coffee, when they decided to get out of their comfort zones to climb up the hi-altitude trails to witness the Himalayas.

They contemplated if they could do it. And wondered if they needed to be trained in mountain climbing or be extremely fit? Well, like Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Every artist was first an amateur”. So being the first timers did not deter them from the attempt.

After unlimited research, they decided to go on the trekking expedition with the Youth Hostels Association of India (YHAI) – a reputed organisation offering many such

trails in India for over 40 years. Speaking to ex-trekkers of this route, it was clear that every gram of weight on oneself can make the climb harder.

This is where ‘Discipline’ made an entry – everything about this trek had to be meticulously followed. It started with the discipline of preparing physically and mentally for about three months to improve endurance. Carrying a loaded mock rucksack on his back, my friend walked each day on roads and alleys of Bengalooru, some steep, some low and some narrow – climbing up and down – doing mock treks. Others trained by swimming or running for couple of hours.

Next came the discipline of ‘adopting minimalism’ – things to be carried need to be



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light, just right and not an ounce more than required. Ever travelled this way? The rucksack had to be light, water resistant and climate compliant. Clothes included warmers and ponchos. Eatables consisted of energy lending snacks like bars and condiments. Footwear had to be light but also needed to sustain various kinds of terrains.

The designated base camp for Sarpass trekkers, Kasol, is located at 6,500 feet around 8 km from the Kullu-Manali highway. One can take the road from Manali to get here via Bhuntar. The sense of adventure began right from here, even as each of them had to trek down tricky and narrow carved out steps to reach the actual camp.

With trekking picking up rampantly on these trails, Kasol base camp almost signified a miniature India – one could see people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, ranging from all age groups and walks of life, apart from visitors that throng from outside.

Welcoming the trekkers with a hot cup of



(Top to bottom): A herd of sheep on Manikaran Road, the group's guide to Fual Paani and locals in Shila village

tea, YHAI organizers allotted a tent to a group of them, bringing in a sense of teamwork. It is said 'If you need to know one's character, then travel with them'. And here the trekkers did more than that – they stayed together too.

Acclimatisation is the key to any hi-altitude

climbs. So over the next three days the group went through a set of daily routines. They woke up before sunrise and trained for physical workouts and breathing techniques for two hours and cleaned their camps. It was interesting to form human chains to send off batches of people who were leaving for the trek on that day. This built camaraderie among the trekkers.

There was an eating discipline too that campers had to follow. Breakfast had to be at 8.30 am, dinner at 7.30 pm and everyone ate what was served – with no exceptions. They were served potatoes, boiled eggs and kheer, in lieu of the fats and proteins it offered.

Fear and nervousness engulf trekkers as they head out on a Himalayan challenge. But isn't why they are here - to go through it?

The trek started from Manikaran, 30 odd km from Kasol, a place with hot water springs. The first few miles of the trek raised false hope as it was a descent and they felt the trek would be easy. But soon reality crept in as they were faced with real steep ascents, giving them a true taste of what the Himalayan mountains had in store for them.

Each day, they walked a certain distance to reach the next camp, where they rested in a tent for the night. This mandated walk needed strong determination and perseverance to keep going from dawn to dusk. However, their extreme fatigue often evaporated like thin air, each time the marvelous Himalayan landscapes revealed themselves to their weary eyes.

Every camp en route had its high altitude



The group poses at the end of the expedition and (top) Sarpass viewed from Tila-Lotni

and high points. Their first camp was Guna Paani at 8,000 feet – the place where they saw the snow-clad mountains amidst the dense range of deodar and alpine trees, giving them a feeling of being deep inside a forest.

Fual Paani, next, at 9,500 feet not only took a toll on the climbers' endurance, but also had scary looking tilted tents, as they were built on running slopes. Zirmi Thatch, at 11,000 feet gave them the first glimpse of the Sarpass peak from a distance.

It was interesting how the forest cover gradually thinned out as the group trekked up to Tila-Lotni at 12,500 feet. Thin air got their heads a tad bit dizzy due to the scarcity of oxygen. But the 360-degree view of the snow-capped Himalayas filled their lungs with well-etched memories to cherish.

The final stretch is always the most unnerving and so it was, for this group too. Leading up to the Sarpass at 14,400 feet, this trail had sheets of snow all over. Miles of sheer whiteness

made them almost colour blind. In addition, it started to snow as they walked. Finally, they reached the topmost point of Sarpass. As they stood watching the massive expanse, they felt a moment of absolute liberation and accomplishment – the moment of truth.

It takes endless courage to walk on steep cliff edges, holding on to whatever comes ones way, in a state of fatigue and fear. And just when they thought it was all over, they had to slide down two large stretches of snow, which brought them down from 14,400 to 11,500 feet within a few minutes.

People in these regions survive the odds to earn a living. How else could this group enjoy a bowl of Noodle and hot tea atop Sarpass? The Sherpas earn money by carrying rucksacks for those who need help. It is amazing how they can climb these mountains like a breeze – they can humiliate the mighty Himalayas too.

The climb was over, it was time to trek down. Looking straight at the peaks seemed like a tete-a-tete with the magical mountains. Heavy heartedly, they trekked down eventually to Manikaran, to enjoy a shower after eight days. They had left marks not only on the fresh snow but the whole exercise had also boosted their confidence. They had truly surpassed the Sarpass. 