

MARKHA VALLEY – I

During breakfast on the following morning, a rumble in my tummy signals the return of the dreaded 'Delhi belly'. What a day to be sick! I am not the only one to be affected: Sarah also has the same dose and so has Nick, our tour leader. He is now seriously ill and very weak as a result. Before setting forth I dose myself with some more medication.

When ready, I go out with one of my trekking companions, who shows me the way to the post office, where I finally send off my postcards. While out and about, I also succeed in obtaining a replacement sun-hat – not a particularly good one, but it will have to do.

Back at the hotel, three jeeps have arrived and a Ladakhi woman is busy loading our luggage into them. We finally set off, bouncing along a dusty road, turn southwards towards the village of Stok, and come to a halt at Stok palace, which is perched on the top of a low hill. This building, which resembles a monastery from a distance, is about two hundred years old, and is the only Ladakhi royal palace that is still inhabited. The widow of the previous king, Raja Kunsang Namgyal (d. 1974), still lives here. We leave our luggage in the care of our pony-men, who are waiting for us nearby, and go into the palace to see its museum. Our guided tour is a rushed affair, though interesting. Because the rooms are small and dark, and the ceilings are low, the atmosphere is homely and intimate. The guide, who speaks reasonable English, shines his torch on the antiquities, so that we can feast our eyes on elaborate jewellery, precious old *thangkas*, robes, hats and religious artefacts. In one room is a stuffed yak. The last room we see is the meditation room, which is quite ornate and interesting. As our guides are anxious to be off at about midday, we leave as soon as possible.



Stok palace

However, as it is hot and we are hungry, we decide to eat our packed lunches now. We sit in the shade of some trees in a garden and relax. Deirdre, a young lady to whom we had presented a birthday postcard and had sung 'Happy Birthday' this morning, now produces bottles of apple juice and biscuits to celebrate. However, poor Nick eats nothing. Some of the local people and children appear; when we give the children some leftover food, they touch their foreheads in gratitude and say, 'Jullay'.

Afterwards I amble back towards the palace and take photographs from a quiet and picturesque spot. I return and sit in the shade of the trees between two *chörtens*, looking towards the mountains. Next I move towards the road, where I find Clare, one of the trekkers, with two lovely little girls and a young boy, who is proudly showing her his English book. He has a reasonable command of the language. Clare writes, 'Here is a pen for you' in the boy's notebook and asks him to read it. He pronounces all the words correctly, and is rewarded with the pen that Clare has used. I then ask him to pronounce the Tibetan syllabic characters, and make notes. He writes out the characters for me in an elegant hand; unfortunately I have no time to ask him to pronounce each one, for my companions are moving off – the trek has finally begun. I bid him goodbye and join the group.



Two girls, Stok

So at last we are trekking. The path is easy going, but at this altitude and in the heat we have to take it very easy. My heavy daypack bears down on my shoulders; fortunately my face is well protected by my sunhat, sunglasses and a newly-grown beard. Because of the awkwardness of shaving in the middle of nowhere, without my beloved electric razor, I have decided to grow a beard – something that I have been threatening to do for some considerable time, as I feel that it will hide some of my baby face.

On we struggle, our bodies still not fully acclimatized to the exertion of an uphill climb at high altitude. We skirt the fields of Stok village and slowly make our way up a rough path to more barren territory. Every now and then we stop for a rest and a drink. Because of Nick's poor condition, our aim is to only trek a distance of about

two and a half a miles (four kilometres) today. On the way we meet some locals, who greet us kindly. I photograph three lovely girls, who demand chocolates. They are in luck, as I have brought some sweets with me.

At last we reach our camp, which has been set up in advance in a wide valley beside a roaring river. I choose a large tent and bathe my feet in an icy stream; afterwards I join the others for tea and biscuits. Geraldine now appears, flustered. She and Peter, who had dallied behind, had got lost and had been walking around in circles. Nick, who had been unable to walk as he was so weak, had been put on one of the ponies, and had slipped off the saddle and hurt his back when the animal had gone up a steep incline. The relief party had no water. Another one of the trekkers, Giles, goes off with water and I make Geraldine, who is in poor shape after her experiences, a cup of coffee.

Soon Nick appears, walking very painfully, supported by Giles. He is shown to his bed, which has already been made up in his tent. It now seems doubtful that he can accompany us, which will be a great pity.

Later in the evening, we are served dinner, which begins with a hot vegetable soup. The main course consists of chicken (which had been brought up alive and clucking on one of the ponies), dal (which I decline), cabbage and rice. We finish with a sweet pudding. Not exactly *haute cuisine*, but just the right type of food for lots of physical exertion. We finish with cups of tea and sit around a storm lamp, chatting. Unexpectedly, a birthday cake, made of flan and topped with custard, is presented by the kitchen staff to Deirdre. I notice that the spelling on the top is quite original. She sends half of it back to the cooks in gratitude.

A group of us now spend the rest of the evening singing songs and swigging fiery Indian rum, which Peter has bought. Despite my relative lack of interest in alcoholic beverages, I take several mouthfuls in the hope that it will kill a few bugs in my stomach. After a short moonlit walk, I return to the tent and settle down for a night's sleep. Thus ends our first day – albeit a short one – of trekking.

Once again, my hopes for a good night's sleep are dashed as I lie awake, listening to the roar of the nearby river. We are called at six, given tea and then a bowl of hot water for washing. Shortly afterwards we are eating a hearty breakfast, beginning with a bowl of porridge.

We set off without Nick, who is forced to return because of his injury. By now it is bright and quite hot. Here the scenery is wild: we are surrounded by stark, rugged brown mountains and little else. The rock formations are astonishing: I have never seen anything like them before. As we gain altitude and the temperature rises, the going gets harder; frequent stops and swigs of water are necessary because of exhaustion and dehydration. We are heading for Stok-la, the first pass that we will cross, but a decision has been made to stop just beneath it.

Slowly we approach the pass and eventually reach the place where we will camp: a barren valley close to a shepherd's hut. We collapse on to a large groundsheet that has been put down for us, and wait for lunch. The heat of the sun up here is intense; an umbrella that I have brought offers little or no shade. Our midday meal consists of bread, sardines, cheese, apples and a big kettle of boiled water containing salt and sugar. As we can do nothing in the heat, we improvise shelters and spend the afternoon resting. Rajiv organizes some tents for us; when they are erected, we

crawl inside, lie down and spend a lazy afternoon doing nothing. Some local children come to have a look at the crazy foreigners.

Sometime later I venture out, freshen myself at a cool mountain stream, and climb up to the ridge where I encounter the breathtaking view. When I finally tear myself away, I come down and join my companions for afternoon tea and biscuits. A few of us set off to explore the area; now that the sun has gone down behind the pass and the temperature has dropped, climbing is so much easier. Up higher is another astounding view of the mountains and the area where we had camped the previous evening. Sarah and I break off from the little group and make our way to the next ridge, which looks temptingly near. We are accompanied by a couple of young Ladakhi girls who laugh and joke with us. When we reach the ridge and I shout, '*Lha gyalo!*' ('The gods have won!'), the girls are delighted and point to the snowy Kang-ri range of mountains before us. The view is superb and everything is crystal clear in the evening light.



View from Chumik

We now ask the girls to teach us some words of the Ladakhi language, which they do. However, as I have neither pen nor paper to make notes, I quickly forget them. We return to the campsite, arriving in time for dinner, which is served in the large dining tent. When everyone has retired for the night, I chat to two members of the staff who travel with us: a Nepalese chap and a Sherpa who speaks Tibetan.

As Sarah had kindly given me half a sleeping tablet the previous evening, I sleep like a log and find it difficult to wake up the next morning when we are woken at five. Two hours later we start the upward climb to the pass. As it is hard going, we all have to take it very slowly. Soon I am last, trailing Clare. As both of us are the least fit of the group, I am happy to keep her company. I now begin to experience a slight

headache, a little dizziness and a touch of nausea: symptoms of mild altitude sickness. Fortunately I do not feel too bad.

We finally reach Stok-la. What a relief! Here we are at an altitude of 15,500 feet (4,700 metres) – no wonder I feel a little queasy! The view from here is dramatic; far below us stretches the winding Rumbak valley. Before moving off, I stop to examine the *latza*, the stone mound that marks the top of the pass.

Although the descent looks intimidating, I set off with a German lad who has joined us for a while. The ground is soft and powdery; I jam in my heels, start skidding, and suddenly find myself slipping down the mountainside at a terrific speed. What a fabulous sensation! I let myself go, following the natural contours of the slope. Everyone shouts in encouragement as the German fellow and I go hurtling down. So, this is the way to tackle scree!

We come to a halt about halfway down and continue along a footpath. I soon leave everybody behind as I tramp on. The valley now levels out and I find myself in a barren region, surrounded by smooth, sandy-coloured mountains; one high peak to my left, possibly Stok Kang-ri, is snow-capped. Soon my companions pass me and once again I am last. As I am in no mood to march past such magnificent scenery at top speed, I go at my own pace. Finally we approach the tiny village of Rumbak and stop in a field to eat our packed lunches.



Rumbak village

We remain here a long time relaxing, and only move when the sky clouds over and we hear a threatening clap of thunder. We now walk towards the village: a humble collection of rather tumbledown stone houses with elaborately decorated wooden window frames, together with some farmyard buildings. A couple of hens cluck and peck in a garden. There is no sign of life here, save for one woman with a child, who comes out of her house to offer us a taste of *chang*, the local alcoholic beverage made from barley. I take a few sips of this rather watery brew and return the glass. When our men arrive with the ponies, they stop for a swig. Before we leave, I photograph a decoration made of paper or straw attached to the wall of one

of the houses. According to Rajiv, this signifies that somebody is about to be married. I could happily spend more time here, but we have started to move on. Once again, I am the last to leave, and soon the others are out of sight.

The German leaves us at the end of the valley. I turn to the left, where I can see my companions in the distance. This new valley, equally dramatic, is the approach to the next pass, the Gandha-la. I see everyone stop at a clearing and, assuming that this will be our next campsite, I do not hurry to join them. Then, much to my consternation, I see my companions beginning to move just as I approach them – it has only been a temporary resting halt, and I will therefore have to continue without any rest. By now I am becoming exhausted.

The river is wide here and has to be crossed. The Nepalese chap approaches me and offers to carry me across; I am on the other side in a matter of seconds. I am astonished at the stamina and strength of these mountain people, who must consider us to be very unfit and pampered. Somehow I struggle on, though I am fit to collapse, and soon I am very far behind. Finally I reach the top of the valley and, following the others, turn right. How far more do we have to go? I meet Peter, Geraldine and Clare; like me, Clare is finding this gradual climb hard going.

Hungry by now, I pull out a half-cooked potato left over from lunchtime and chew it, despite the disgusting taste. We approach a large, square house situated beside some bright green fields, from which Rajiv and some of the others emerge. I venture up some steps and peep into a kitchen full of brass utensils, but dare not go any farther. I leave and continue walking.

Later, Rajiv comes to meet me and very kindly takes my daypack and camera. At last we come in sight of the campsite. I retrieve my daypack and soldier on; when I finally arrive, I am greeted with a cheer. Clare then arrives, exhausted like me, and finally the 'young lovers' as I have christened them: Peter and Geraldine. I flop down on a rubber mattress and, together with Sarah, begin scratching inscriptions on some nearby flat stones. One of mine reads, '*Fáilte romhat*' (the Irish words for 'welcome') in the old Gaelic script. I wonder if anyone will find it and understand what I have written.

After tea and biscuits, I crawl into my tent and set about writing today's diary. This evening's dinner is tasty and, thankfully for me, lacking in spicy sauces. When we have finished, we gather in the dining tent to sing songs and drink some whiskey, courtesy of one of my companions. I turn my helping into a hot whiskey and drink it as a nightcap.

On awaking from a solid night's sleep – courtesy, perhaps, of the hot whiskey – I remember that today is my father's seventy-fifth birthday. He is the man whose interests and taste in literature have inspired me to travel to this remote spot. There is no way to get in touch with him now and wish him happy birthday: no telephones, no postal service and no electricity. How people here manage to eke out an existence without the modern conveniences that we take so much for granted amazes us, and yet, as we can see, they manage perfectly well; despite their hardships, they seem to be happy enough. Like the Irish, the Ladakhis seem to be outwardly cheerful, easy-going and welcoming. They are good-humoured because they have little and are content with their lot, and they do not seem to take themselves too seriously. Their religion teaches them to be kind to all sentient

beings, and encourages everyone to do good deeds so that when they are reborn, they may return as better people.

We now begin the slow and tiring climb to the Gandha-la, a pass with an elevation of 16,400 feet (5,000 metres). Our approach to this is up a zigzag path that offers spectacular views, especially when the snow-kissed peaks of the Kang-ri range come into view. Half way up we meet a Sikh gentleman whom we have met before; he greets me with the elaborate show of respect so typical of his persuasion. His German group, who had camped higher than us, had gone on at great speed earlier this morning, even though some had left so much later than us.



Mani stones, Gandha-la

On we climb and finally arrive at the wind-swept pass. *Lha gyalo!* Prayer flags flutter in the wind above a large pile of *mani* stones: flat stones with the mantra *ōm māni pādme hūm* inscribed on them. This repeated phrase or mantra, which can be seen everywhere in these parts, is directed at Chenrezig (Lord of Compassion, incarnate as the Dalai Lama), and means, on a superficial level, ‘hail to the jewel in the lotus’. Buddhist monks, however, know that the formula has many deeper meanings.

The view from here looking down into the valley that will lead us eventually to the Markha region is breathtaking: dazzlingly white peaks hover above sandy-coloured mountains that sweep downwards towards a winding green ribbon of fertile land far below us.

I am one of the first to leave, but soon am last. Everyone, especially the German group, walks at a relentless speed. While the others barge on, I stop, admire the wonderful scenery and take photos. Now the pony-men and their animals pass me and I am completely on my own. At last I reach the tiny hamlet of Shingo: a collection of about three or four houses huddled together. The scene, complete with a man and some donkeys, looks very picturesque in the sunlight, but I curse when I discover that I have run out of film.

I find everyone at lunch just around the next corner and join them. As we have decided to camp here, we enjoy a relaxing afternoon. I sort my luggage, wash myself and some clothes in the river, and amble around. The dirty, run-down hamlet is lifeless; an old woman leaves it as I approach. Nonetheless, this wild place in the middle of nowhere has a pleasant atmosphere. We are pampered with the usual afternoon tea and later, after I have taken another stroll to an isolated farmhouse and back, we have dinner, which includes curds brought from the farmhouse. A generous topping of this on our dessert of halvah makes it deliciously creamy.

I write my diary until the light fades. A bonfire is lit and we stand around it, but it is a lifeless gathering. Perhaps everyone is too tired. However, I am not too surprised to observe this silence, for over the last few days I am beginning to notice a typical English phenomenon: the Awkward Pause. When together in the evenings, we chat, tell jokes and sing songs (the Yorkshire folksong *On Ilkla Moor baht 'at* is a favourite), but once a joke has been told, a song is sung or a topic has been discussed, an awkward pause ensues while everyone tries to think of something else to say or do. Place a group of Irish people in a similar situation, add a modicum of alcohol – or even tea if it is not available – and the conversation will flow, overlap, rise in volume and culminate in loud laughter. The Irish are irrepressibly ebullient, whereas the English tend to be reserved. As is well known, English people in large cities can live next door to neighbouring families for years and never get to know them. In Ireland, a situation like this was very uncommon until fairly recently. Being half English (my mother was a Londoner), I can stand back and observe this awkwardness with a certain amount of amusement. Peter, Sarah and I are the only non-British members of the trekking group. They, like me, must notice these awkward pauses, which only seem to happen when we are all together; while walking with one or two people, conversation flows naturally.

We are woken at dawn the next morning and set off at seven. We follow the Shingo valley: a pleasant walk downhill in the shade. The path skirts a gurgling, shallow river and clumps of small, stubby trees. Ahead we can see tall, rugged brown mountains bathed in bright sunshine. Overhead is a clear, dark blue sky.

At one stage, a Ladakhi family with two donkeys appear in front of us, and serve as guides. Walking directly behind them at a nice, easy pace, I am able to observe them. One donkey is laden with goods; on the other one sits a handsome little boy, dressed colourfully and looking around calmly with eyes wide with wonder. Daddy is a cheerful, dark-skinned man dressed in typically dirty robes and wearing a high Ladakhi hat. Around one shoulder hangs a rather incongruous and ancient transistor radio in a leather case. Mummy is a pleasant person, dressed in local costume and carrying a baby on her back. The child, who is fast asleep most of the time, wears a bright red cap, in contrast with her mother's dark costume. The lady's trousers, however, are bright green.

In order to follow the path, it is necessary to cross the river several times; this means jumping from one stone to another. The Ladakhi family finally leave us and we continue on our own.

After a long brisk walk, we finally emerge from the shade into the hot sunshine at Skiu, where the valley ends and becomes part of a T-junction. To the left is our destination, the Markha valley. We have been travelling roughly southwards and are

now about to turn eastwards. At this spot we see a number of *mani* walls and a row of *chörtens*, the different layers of which represent (upwards from the cube at the bottom) earth, water, fire, air and ether: the five elements. On the top of a rock to the right is the tiny monastery of Skiu. I take out my camera and climb up the steps to take a look. Inside the door are a tiny courtyard and two little rooms. The first of these, the larger, undoubtedly is the *dukhang* as it houses an altar; the inner room, behind the altar, contains a large statue of the Buddha and some other figures. On the walls can be discerned faded and flaking paintings. Back in the *dukhang*, a monk demonstrates the big drum, a bell and a *damaru* (an hourglass-shaped drum with strikers attached to leather cords so that the surface can be struck by a twisting motion of the hand). When he asks for rupees, I leave a small donation and depart.



Skiu valley

We now set off along the fertile Markha valley, skirting the river of the same name. The heat makes it difficult to walk, and once again I slow down. I stop to photograph some picturesque farmhouses that form the tiny village of Skiu. The view back to where we have come from is tantalizing, with snow-capped mountains in the distance, but the others have set off again at a breakneck pace. At this speed we are seeing very little and experiencing nothing. I am beginning to realize that the only way to savour a place like this to the full is to have too much time on one's hands, relatively little to do, and the freedom of being able to wander off the beaten track. It is only then that one can meet people, talk to them and delight in everything that is on offer. Perhaps I should not have joined this trek!

As we progress along the valley, we leave cultivated land behind and enter a wilder and more barren landscape. Eventually I catch up with some stragglers; Clare is battling on heroically. I fear that we will never stop for lunch, but at last, at around midday, I am rewarded by the sight of Deirdre in her swimsuit, standing beside a

stream. I find the others a little farther on, lying in the shade of some small trees. I throw myself down on the ground, exhausted, and accept a cup of orangeade.

After a short rest, I walk to the stream, where I strip down to my swimming togs (which I had donned this morning in preparation for a possible river crossing) and immerse myself in the freezing, rushing water. I yell – the effect is electrifying – though soon I am enjoying the sensation. Refreshed, I return to the shade and join the others for lunch.

Soon we are on the go again, walking in the boiling heat. Mad dogs and Englishmen. We start off fairly briskly, all together, but soon the slowest are left behind. About an hour later we come to the spot where we have been told that we would have to wade across the river, but are delighted to discover a wooden bridge. Apparently it had been swept away some time previously and in the meantime had been rebuilt. A couple of the ladies are nervous about crossing it, but it is strong and safe. Once everyone is on the opposite bank, we move on. Sarah and I walk together for a while, but she has nothing to say today. It turns out that she is sick; later she waves me away as she feels that she is about to throw up.

On and on the valley goes, twisting and turning. It is all much the same: green on either side of the river and flanked by the ever-present brown mountains. When it begins to cloud over, it becomes cooler and more comfortable for walking. How many miles have we done so far, I wonder? Today's walk is long, since we must do two days' journey in order to make up for lost time earlier and to bring us back on schedule.

I turn a corner and spot our campsite. We have arrived earlier than expected. As it now begins to rain, I put up my umbrella, which I have used earlier to ward off the sun. At the campsite we rest, drink more orangeade and claim our tents. I wash in the cold water of the river and feel refreshed afterwards. Afternoon tea follows, and then dinner. A bonfire is lit, but most of us go to bed early. I read a little and go out like a light.