

MARKHA VALLEY – II

We start this morning soon after seven. Tired after yesterday's long tramp – my leg muscles are still aching – I slow down to a ramble, not caring if I get left behind. Today I am determined to enjoy myself, even if it means holding up the others. I intend to give myself time in order to drink in the magnificent scenery and wallow in the peacefulness of the valley, which now reveals itself in all its glory. Although the sun shines brightly, it is not as hot as yesterday, for a gentle breeze cools the air.

This region is more cultivated, especially around the small villages and houses here and there. Chaluk, the first, is a tiny hamlet where I manage to photograph some children. As I have done on previous occasions, I reward them with sweets.

We have to cross the river several times today; fortunately there is a sturdy bridge at the first point. The young Nepalese lad lifts me over the river the second time. At the third crossing there is a rickety bridge constructed with just three horizontal logs, at different levels, which I manage to negotiate on my own. The next three crossings involve wading through the strong current, with the water coming up to our knees. At the first attempt, I lose my balance and keel over, only to be saved at the last second by the Nepalese chap. Although my shirt has become soaked on one side, it dries very quickly. Rajiv helps me when I wade across for the second time, and I manage on my own the third time, saturating my trousers, which I have not bothered to remove. Again, they dry out within a short space of time. Unsurprisingly, I am the most inept wader – the others fare much better than I do.

Somewhere between these various crossings is the picturesque village of Markha. The approach to this is dramatic: as I draw near, I can see a high hill with a gompa on top. A short, steep climb brings me to the building, where I meet Rajiv, Sarah and Clare. I rest, looking out over the bright green and yellow fields to the mountains and a solitary farmhouse. I then wander towards some adjacent stone houses, where three children appear; I photograph them and give them some sweets. I then make my way to the farmhouse. In a field nearby I see some women and children. One of the women greets me with the customary '*Jullay!*', points to her hat and then to the ground. Looking around, I understand what she is drawing my attention to. A toddler is hanging over a wall, his hand dangling downwards in search of his cap, which has fallen on the ground. I pick it up and hand it to him. The woman smiles at me in thanks; with another '*Jullay!*' I am off.

We walk for a good five hours this morning, and stop for lunch at a rather desolate sweep of the river bed. A hot meal is served: rice, meat, vegetables, then cheese, grapefruit, oranges and nuts. How the cooks manage to produce all the hot food using just one tiny stove puzzles us all.

We now set off for our campsite which, we are told, will take us about an hour and a half to reach. The scenery becomes truly magnificent; on either side the mountains rise heavenwards to a cloudless, indigo sky and in the distance can be glimpsed snow-capped peaks. Here and there *chörtens* mark the route; when the

path leads directly to them, we follow tradition and walk around them in a clockwise direction. This is the type of scenery that I relish: wild, noble landscapes with just subtle hints of human habitation. Everything man-made in these remote regions blends in perfectly with the surroundings and looks as though it has been here forever. The sounds that we hear are the sounds of nature: rushing water, the faint rustle of a gentle breeze, or distant voices borne by the wind. I saunter along, enchanted by the breathtaking views. The locals, who pass these scenes day after day, pay no attention to them whatsoever – for them it is just a normal backdrop.

I climb a low hill, reach a *mani* wall and am rewarded with a tantalizing view of a new valley and a single lofty peak bearing a dazzling, icy crown far ahead. From here I can see our ponies and the men stopping. So this will be our campsite – what a superb location! I whoop with joy and make my way downwards.

Back with my companions again, I bathe my feet in a stream and wash my hair before the afternoon tea and biscuits. I then saunter off in the direction of the snowy peak, sit on a rock and write my diary. This done, I return to the campsite and, as nothing much is happening, I decide to take a walk back along the way we have come. I return to the *mani* wall and stop to admire the junction of four magnificent valleys. By the time I rejoin my companions, dinner has started and somebody has kindly saved a bowl of soup for me. Our meal this evening consists of chicken in a white sauce of some description, instant mashed potato, French beans and chapattis (thin pancakes of unleavened bread). We chat for a while afterwards and go to bed early.

After a night of rain, we continue our way along the Markha valley. As before, I do not hurry, but stop occasionally to admire the impressive views and take photographs. At one point, the valley takes a sudden sharp turn to the left. Instead of following the river, we now scramble up a steep path that brings us to a couple of *mani* walls and, to our right, a tall, almost conical pinnacle with the ruins of a fortress perched on top. How anybody has managed to build it in such an inaccessible place is something of a mystery.



Markha valley near Hankar

While a couple of my companions scramble up to the fortress, I go down to explore the old stone buildings in Hankar village. As in other villages that we have passed, there is hardly any sign of life, though I can see smoke coming from one of the chimneys and hear voices in the distance. The path that I follow through the fields is bordered by a variety of colourful wild flowers.

By now, everybody is taking their time: Rajiv is ill, Sarah is still sick and out of sorts, and a couple of the others have succumbed to the runs. One of my companions, too weak to walk, is put on one of the ponies. Are we mad to have paid money to come here, walk and climb to the point of exhaustion, eat dodgy food and fall sick? The locals must think that we – and all the other trekkers – are crazy. Nobody living in this part of the world goes walking for the sake of walking and admiring the view – walking is just a way to get from A to B if there is no other form of transport. However, the locals who are guiding us during our trek will have the last laugh, for they are making money out of us. A fool and his money are easily parted.

We begin another slow, painful ascent after we have left Hankar; as we gain altitude, I suck in as much air as I can and match my steps to my breathing. At one point we all stop for a break, and are given orangeade and biscuits to boost our energy. Rested, we then continue the climb. The scenery becomes more dramatic, and dazzling white peaks begin to appear on our left. When we reach the highest point, we look down over a long, deep valley with unusual pillar-like rock formations along one side. As dark clouds have appeared and it threatens to rain, I don the waterproof cape supplied by the travel company.

The rain begins in earnest as we tramp over the mountain; here it is bleak and boggy. This stretch, which seems to go on forever, soon becomes tedious. By now, my trousers have become quite wet. On and on we go. Suddenly the weather clears and the sun shines. We stop at a *mani* wall, rest and remove damp clothing. I gobble a few peanuts and raisins – it has long gone lunchtime – and take photos of the remarkable valley and mountains to our left. The snowy peak that we had seen in the distance yesterday now reappears over a ridge to our right.

Off we set again; by now only three people are ahead of me. The path brings us downhill a little and the scenery becomes more picturesque. As we round a corner, I wonder if the campsite is nearby.

Indeed it is. We have now reached Nyimaling – the Meadow of the Sun – and are at an altitude of 16,500 feet (a little over 5,000 metres). A wide valley, surrounded by a spectacular panorama of mountains, brilliant in the bright sunshine, now appears before us. Although exhausted, the thrill of discovering views like this makes our mad escapade worthwhile. We are not the only people who have chosen this wonderful spot as a campsite – there are the Germans whom we encountered earlier, and also the Americans whom we had met on the abortive flight to Leh.

When we sit down to lunch, some filthy-looking children come to watch us eating. Afterwards I rest, claim a tent, wash and wander off to a spot that overlooks the view in order to write my diary. I can feel the effects of the high altitude: a certain amount of queasiness in the stomach and shortness of breath. When the sun sets, it turns quite chilly – quite a contrast to the heat earlier in the day. After dinner, we sit around talking before retiring to bed.

The following day is a lazy rest day; we are not roused from our slumbers until seven in the morning – what a luxury! Breakfast is a curious concoction of cornflakes with warm milk, spicy doughnuts on which we plonk a spoonful of curds, hot chapattis and finally, rather soft ‘hard-boiled’ eggs.

My belly full, I ramble back towards where we came from yesterday, sit down to admire the view and promptly fall asleep. I am awoken by rain and return to the campsite. When the rain clears, I wander over to some shepherds’ huts and sit down to survey the scene. A young girl comes along, spinning wool – a common enough sight in these parts. She shows great interest in my umbrella and wants to take it, but as I need it, I refuse to part with it. Nearby, three scruffy little children play in the dirt; despite their miserable condition, they are very good humoured. Like many other children here, they run around barefoot, despite the cold.

When I see several members of our party ascending a nearby hill to enjoy the view, I join them. The two main peaks that should be visible are now covered in mist. Although it begins to drizzle again, I set off with Peter and Geraldine, climb a little higher, sit on a stone and chat to them. By and by, the mist disappears and the mountains become visible once again.

After lunch I have a nap. We while away the afternoon chatting, taking photographs, riding one of the ponies, and throwing sticks and plastic plates to one another. A rainbow appears when we stop for tea and biscuits. When it begins to rain again, we retreat to our tents and relax until dinner time.

Today’s trek – the last major one – starts early in the morning. Although Rajiv predicts that the going will be easy – two hours up to the last pass, the Gongmaru-la (17,500 feet or over 5,300 metres) and two hours down – I demolish a hefty breakfast: two full bowls of porridge, pancakes and an omelette.

As we have to cross the river, a couple of ponies are put at our disposal. The pony that I am given brings me straight over, but some of my companions are not so lucky as the ponies decide to canter around in circles. Off we set for the pass: just a climb up a hill to our left. Although the incline is not particularly steep, it is tough going because of the altitude. Once again I synchronize my breathing and footsteps: inhale deeply – step, exhale slowly – step. The brochure describes this last climb as ‘surprisingly easy’. The farther up we go, the colder and mistier it becomes – I am glad that I am dressed warmly.

At last we reach the prayer-flags and *mani* wall of the pass. *Lha gyalo!* We collapse and regain our breath. Suddenly the mist clears and we gaze down into another spectacular valley. I am the first to move off, but soon I am overtaken. As Rajiv has predicted, the descent is easy enough. At last, I think to myself, the worst is over – from here onwards all will be downhill.

On we go and turn a corner. Before us is the entrance to a narrow gorge, with a raging torrent of water swirling along its base. An Indian guide belonging to another group leads the way; we are obliged to jump from the near bank to a stone in the middle of the water, and from it to the far bank. For those with long legs and plenty of nerve, it is easy; for me and my short legs, it seems impossible. I make the fatal mistake of gazing at the rushing muddy water and becoming hypnotized by it; in doing so, I lose my nerve. I can’t do this, I say to myself, but I’ll have to get to the

other side. It takes a lot of coaxing and assistance from the others before I finally manage to jump across.

We now have to make our way down this dark, gloomy gorge and follow a path that continually crosses and re-crosses the powerful torrent, caused no doubt by the recent rain. Because we have not expected this, we are not properly dressed and soon we are soaking wet; my trousers become sodden and my boots and socks full of icy water. My feet and my legs then become numb and I begin to shiver uncontrollably. I feel utterly miserable and panic-stricken as we experience one cold ducking after another. Twice I lose my balance on wet stones and am nearly swept away; on both occasions I am saved by one of the immensely strong porters. Others suffer the same fate; for a moment we think that one lady is done for when she jumps to a stone, slips, falls into the water and is rapidly swept downstream by the powerful current. A porter jumps in after her and stops her hurtling to her certain death.

On and on we tramp, edging around rocks and wading through the water. Just to make things worse, it now begins to rain. We make an attempt to stop for lunch, but the porters are determined to carry on.

Slowly we progress until we come to a very treacherous spot. We stop and watch as the porters experiment with various possible routes. How they manage to negotiate such difficult hurdles amazes me: they wear ordinary clothes and old, worn shoes or sandals. What they have, however, is knowledge, familiarity with the terrain, and a terrific amount of strength and stamina.

All of a sudden, the leader of the other group that has joined us announces that we must go back in search of a village as further progress is impossible. The ponies have already become stuck farther upstream. Everyone turns back, but our group mutinies. There is no point in going back, we argue; nothing will be achieved and we will have to cross and re-cross the raging torrent to retrace our steps, and repeat the process to go forward.

Instead, we go back to the river, sit down and huddle together to keep warm. We decide to stay put until Rajiv returns and some definite plan is made. Squeezed under our umbrellas, we sing songs to pass the time. (My umbrella was broken this morning by a strong gust of wind that had blown it inside out; rendered useless, I gave it to the girl who had asked for it yesterday.)

Eventually Rajiv appears and explains that as the ponies are stuck and can go no farther, we must walk back a little and camp somewhere for the night. With a bit of luck, the level of the water may decrease by the following morning. Back we trudge; although we have been told that we will not have to cross the river again, we have to.

At last we reach a reasonably level spot and we set to, clearing the site of stones so that we can erect the tents. Slowly but surely the tents and luggage begin to arrive by hand, courtesy of the porters. We all assist and finally set up a minimum number of tents. Four of us manage to squeeze into a large one: Peter, Geraldine, Clare and me. I am invited to join some of the others in another tent, which will mean less of a squeeze, but Clare pleads with me not to go as it will be 'ever so much warmer' with me. She is obviously relying on all of us to generate heat! Laughingly I give in and stay put.

Soon cups of hot tea and a plate of biscuits appear. I change into some dry clothing and while the ladies do the same, Peter and I sit with the porters in the

kitchen tent by the blazing kerosene stove, drinking tea and eating more biscuits. In the evening, a meal is served in the tiny but cosy kitchen tent. We squeeze around the stove and eat a meal of rice, potatoes and pilchards. We wash this down with more hot tea and then return the tent to its rightful owners, who are standing outside in the rain. In our tent we settle down for a night's sleep. I make Geraldine giggle by wiggling my toes against hers while she lies at right angles to me and beside Peter, who will undoubtedly keep her warm.

Mercifully, conditions are better today; it no longer rains and above the gorge we can see blue sky. Today I have taken the precaution of donning shorts, an old pair of shoes and no socks. Fresher after a sound night's sleep and in better humour, I no longer care about crossing the river (which fortunately has subsided overnight). We trudge on, in and out of the water.

At last we emerge from the tedious gorge and find ourselves at a large, open junction of rivers and valleys. We finally stop for a rest near a house near Chuskirno. Basking in the morning sun, we soon dry out and cheer up. We move on and stop briefly at another house, where a dog barks and we are offered *chang* by one of the locals. It is quite picturesque here, with stone houses surrounded by cultivated fields.



Mountains at Chang Sumdo

On we plod and enter a wide, uninteresting valley, where the tedium of river crossings is resumed. As the river bed and valley in general are strewn with rocks, progress is very slow. Eventually we reach a proper path, turn a corner and find ourselves in more civilized surroundings. This is Chang Sumdo. I look down and discover that the horses have stopped in a grove – obviously we will rest here and have lunch. When we arrive, there is an animated discussion between our porters and guides. Although our final destination, Hemis, is only a short distance away, the porters refuse to go any farther as a river, now in flood, is too dangerous to cross.

Reluctantly we decide to stay here for the night and review the situation in the morning. Lunch is prepared and we set about relaxing and drying our wet clothes by hanging them on the branches of the trees. A group of local children appear and stand around, watching us. A lady brings *chang* and *tsampa* for the porters and also for the other trekking group that has caught up with us and is sharing the campsite with us. I try a little of the *tsampa* mixed with *chang*; it tastes reasonably good.

Later I go for a gentle walk. At the end of the grove, some young men and a monk are building a small stone house. They stop frequently to swig from bowls of *chang*. I watch as the lady of the main house next door leads her animals to stables situated on the ground floor.

This is one of the occasions where I am able to savour in full the peacefulness and beauty of such a scene; by now splashes of evening light are illuminating the mountainsides. I wander around, enraptured, and finally return to the campsite, where we devour a large meal; the cooks are obviously using up unused provisions as today will be our last full day on the trek. By now I yearn to return to more 'normal' conditions.

It is dark when we are woken at 4.30 a.m. Breakfast is at dawn, outdoors, an hour later. We start soon afterwards and wade across the river to the other side of the next valley. Then comes a repeat of what we had done yesterday: a slow, tedious walk down a valley full of boulders and stones and more crossings of the river. Once again, I lag behind as I am forced to stop in order to wash gravel out of my shoes.

After about two hours, we come to the end of the valley and arrive at the village of Martseland and, by the looks of it, a military base in a wide, fertile stretch of land. We are now back in the Indus valley and therefore the trek has come to an end. We stop, relax, change clothes, say goodbye to the members of the other trekking group and discuss how much we should give in tips to our porters and helpers.

Next on the schedule is a tour of Hemis monastery. We are offered the use of a jeep, but as we are told that the gompa is not far away, we decide to walk. The largest and one of the most important monasteries in Ladakh, Hemis was founded some 350 years ago. It once housed five hundred monks, but most of them had left for other monasteries. The gompa is now financed by tourism. The abbot or Rinpoche (literally 'precious one') is a *tulku*: a recognized reincarnation of the seventeenth-century founder. The previous Rinpoche had left to undergo training in Tibet, but after the Dalai Lama had fled in 1959 and the Chinese had replaced the Tibetan Government with a military dictatorship, all connections were severed. The new Rinpoche, now in his twenties, is training in Darjeeling, and the brother of the late King of Ladakh now acts as the *chakzot* or manager.

The monastery is farther away than we thought, and the path is mostly uphill. We climb into the mountains, following electric pylons and cables – confirmation that we have returned to the so-called civilized modern world. We pass the Hemis Hotel (a tiny shack) and finally stop at a parking lot where there is a restaurant. Here all our luggage has been taken off the ponies, which have been led away. Gone are the clanging of the bells around the ponies' necks and the cheerful singing of the pony-men. One chap had quite an operatic voice and had often sung a breathless melody of just two notes. We had heard this strange music frequently when the men were loading and unloading their gear.

When we have tipped our guides, bottles of beer are produced from the restaurant, and cups of the refreshing drink are offered to us. Many of us have been dreaming of this for some time. We thank Rajiv, who has been a very tolerant guide, and also the cook and a fellow whom we have named 'Blue Max' after the slogan on his sun visor.

We now set about visiting Hemis gumpa. We climb up a path in the shade of some trees and approach a large conglomeration of Tibetan-style buildings, some big and some small. It is a huge complex – we will only be able to see a fraction of it. The whitewashed stone walls are dazzling in the strong sunlight. I buy a ticket from a small group of lethargic monks in a souvenir shop, and enter the main courtyard. It is large and impressive; along a low wall to the left is a wooden cloister and dozens of paintings of various deities, all executed by unknown artists who had lovingly created these works of art not for their own glory, but to depict the sacred images and inspire the believers. The style of art here is Tibetan: a distinctive enough style, albeit an obvious synthesis of Indian and Chinese elements.



Courtyard, Hemis gumpa

In the courtyard, a well-known festival is held every year in June; once every twelve years a gigantic *thangka* or religious painting is unfurled and displayed to the public. On the other side of the courtyard is the brightly coloured main entrance to the monastery. Although there are some tourists about, the place is very tranquil.

Having looked around briefly, I follow some of my companions down some shady corridors and alleyways. It is wonderful to explore these rather dilapidated but atmospheric corners – I could poke around here forever. We now climb upwards and find ourselves near the roof. Although this is off bounds for tourists, a couple of us venture on to it. It is flat and has bright golden spires. A spectacular view of the valley and the distant white peaks, which we photograph, can be seen from here.

When we come down from the roof, I see some of my companions following a chubby monk into a small chapel. I go with them into the darkness and we examine

the altar, the images, and the books in silence. There is a large statue of Chenrezig, the Lord of Compassion, with eleven heads and one thousand arms. We emerge into the bright sunshine and are conducted into another small chapel with more images. Finally we are brought into a larger and brighter room, which contains various statues, *thangkas*, books and photographs of the Dalai Lama. The monk leaves us and we find our way back to the main courtyard. I visit two more rooms in the main building. In the first one, I encounter a monk chanting and gaze at a painting of the Buddha. The second room is quite large, and I guess that it must be the assembly hall or *dukhang*.



Rooftop, Hemis Gompa

Back at the parking lot, we discover that our luggage has been spirited back to Leh in taxis. We sit in the shade for a while, talking, and soon a large converted lorry bearing the inscription 'Exodus Expeditions' drives in and comes to a stop. Our tour leader, Nick, and his wife jump out. They are delighted to see us again, for they have heard about our problems and have been concerned. Nick, who is much better, is glad that he has not attempted the trek because of his back injury. He and his wife tell us that they have done little in Leh as it has been raining quite heavily.

We assemble in the restaurant to discuss future plans; these will not affect me as I will now be on my own for ten days, awaiting the next trekking group. We then set off in the lorry for Leh. On the way, we pass Thikse gompa. We had planned to visit this, and also Shey gompa, but have decided to skip these as we have run out of time.

The journey goes quickly and we are soon back in the familiar streets of the capital, among the hustle and bustle. We stop at the Hotel Ibex and pile out. While the others freshen themselves up and have lunch, I go in search of a guesthouse recommended by Nick but cannot find it. I return later and explain my predicament to him; as I am a little concerned that I may not have enough money, Rajiv says that he will fix me up with a cheap place that he knows about.

When everybody is ready to leave, they climb into the lorry and I wish them goodbye. Geraldine is in tears. Sarah and I had more or less parted company after I had innocently passed a comment on what she ought not eat when she had been sick – the message I had been given was that I should mind my own business. Although I have got on well with everyone, I am now looking forward to the next stage of my stay here, when I will have absolute freedom. I am relieved that the trek is over; it is not something that I have really enjoyed – I have endured it. However, I have appreciated the experience, for it has enabled me to enjoy the wild local scenery, and has brought me into direct contact with the hardy, yet cheerful people, who live with so little in such harsh conditions. The trek has taught me not to take everything for granted in this technically advanced world in which we pampered Westerners live, not to envy those who own more than I do, and to appreciate everything that I have the good fortune to possess.