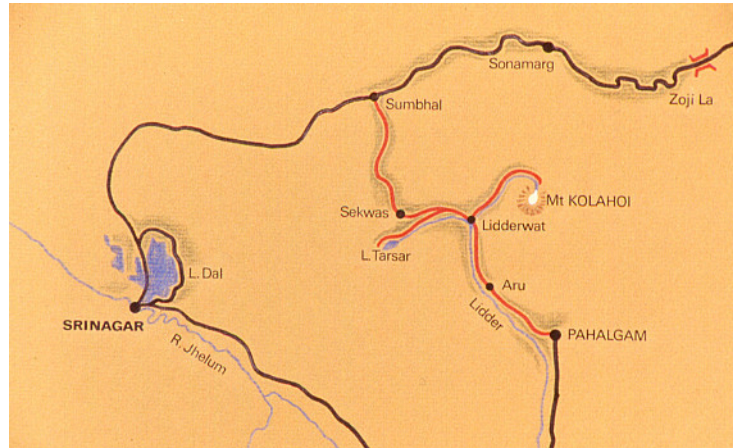


KOLAHOI GLACIER AND HOMEWARD BOUND



Our journey in the truck ends at Sumbhal in Kashmir, where we camp and begin our final trek. This, as usual, involves exhausting marches over hill and dale, sweating, shivering, getting soaked, camping in all sorts of conditions and, of course, falling sick.

In this beautifully lush section of the Himalayas, the scenery is positively alpine, with green, pleasant valleys, forests, attractive wooden cabins and glimpses of distant snowy peaks. Here we greet the locals with '*Salaam*'; the greeting is always solemnly returned, and we are saluted with the right hand. Some of the men, with thick beards and voluminous headgear, look quite magnificent. The children hold out their hands, begging for *baksheesh* or asking for 'one pen'. They run around in the dirt in bare feet. Women with head scarves and nose rings carry heavy loads on their heads.



On our first day, a family invite us to take tea with them, and spread blankets on the ground outside their simple hut for us to sit on. After we have rested, we are invited inside, where we see corn bread being baked in a simple oven fired with logs. The local variety of tea is being made. This is a long, slow process during which all

the ingredients are boiled together: water, tea, ginger, salt, sugar and milk. Although fortifying, it does taste a little odd. On the other hand, the corn bread, crisp and warm from the crude oven, tastes delicious. Our refreshments over, a young man produces a battered tin whistle and blows a tuneless melody on it. I request the instrument and play a couple of Irish jigs. We thank our hosts, saying '*shukriya*', and depart.



Sumbhal, Kashmir

On our second day, we pass a small lake, then various attractive plants and flowers, which the ladies stop to admire. By now the weather is changeable and it rains on and off. Our guide Narput encourages us by telling us that our destination is not far away, though nothing can be further from the truth. We camp in Sekwas valley, where we lunch and spend the rest of the day relaxing. In the afternoon some of the locals come to look at the mad foreigners; sturdy fellows, they are enveloped in warm blankets. We guess that they are probably nomadic Gurjars (people of the mountains), who differ from the Kashmiris in both race and language. With them they carry a *kangri*, a circular wicker basket containing an earthenware bowl full of glowing wood embers. This is placed between their feet; once their woollen blankets are drawn around them, they are heated all over. The *kangri* is passed to us; as we are all bitterly cold, it is a sheer delight to avail of its heat. We while away the rest of the day playing cards and eating.

The following day dawns bright and sunny. As we can take an optional rest, I take advantage of it as I have hurt my right foot. Some of my more energetic colleagues set off for two glacial lakes, Tarsar and Marsar; I go walking along a nearby valley during the afternoon, but do not go far.

On the following day I decide to join some of my companions and take a detour to see the two lakes as my foot now feels better. By all accounts, the previous day's trek there and back was very successful, and we were told that the scenery is magnificent. Following directions that have been given to us, four of us set off and take a route that involves much clambering over boulders. We finally discover Lake Tarsar. As lakes go, it is fairly ordinary but the water, which is crystal clear, is calm and reflects the deep blue of the sky. I go off in search of the second lake, but as the

path eventually disintegrates and I am unable to scale a ridge, I give up the attempt and turn back. It transpires that I have approached my destination by walking along the wrong side of Tarsar. I join the others and we continue our journey towards the magnificent Mount Kolahoi, which we eventually see in the distance. At last we reach a hamlet and our campsite. After the usual tea and biscuits, I purchase the last bottle of beer that is on sale in a little shop ('All Things Available') for Anne's birthday party this evening.



Lake Tarsar, Kashmir

The cook excels himself at dinner and produces an enormous meal. Anthony suddenly appears wearing Indian trousers, a tee shirt and a headband with feathers; he recites a short poem to wish Anne a happy birthday, and presents her with a posy of flowers wrapped in a piece of paper taken from a hotel bathroom. On the paper is printed, 'Disinfected for your use'. Anne is both charmed and amused. After the meal, a birthday cake, complete with candles, is presented to her. We then have some music: lively songs sung by our Nepalese porters, accompanied by improvised rhythm instruments, such as a large plastic container, spoons, forks, a tin box and metal soup bowls. We also sing some songs and later dance around in a circle.

Because of the previous evening's revels, we are woken later than usual the following morning. Today we will trek to the Kolahoi glacier, the high point of the trek. This we approach by walking down the Lidder valley, following the icy river that flows from the glacier. On the way we are greeted by the locals, some of whom request photos, then *baksheesh*. However, the women do not want to be photographed – a pity, as many of them are dressed so colourfully. The farther we go, the more difficult the going becomes as we frequently have to negotiate boulders, ridges and hillocks. At last the mountain and glacier loom into sight. A magnificent tongue of ice sweeps down from the peak to the water and glistens brightly in the sunshine. I finally collapse at the source of the river and demolish my packed lunch.

As we have reached the end of this valley, we now have to retrace our steps in order to return to our campsite. As most of the journey is downhill, I make good



Kolahoi glacier and river

speed. However, the journey becomes unpleasant when it starts to rain and I begin to slip and stumble on the wet rocks. Now and then a shepherd, his full beard dyed red with henna, greets me with a solemn ‘Salaam’. One individual, riding a horse, salutes me cheerily and gives me a hearty handshake. Those who speak a little English ask me questions such as, ‘Where are you from?’ and ‘What is now the time?’

Feeling quite exhausted by now, I reach a forested area and collapse; my feet feel as though they are about to fall off. Just as I am about to resume, Sheila, mounted on a horse and accompanied by a horseman, rounds a corner. As she has enjoyed a long relaxing ride, she dismounts and begs me to avail of this very welcome form of transport. Although I protest, I accept her invitation and continue the journey in comfort. When we approach the campsite, I dismount, and Sheila and I continue on foot.



Lidder Valley

On this last evening of our trek, we sit around a bonfire at dinner time. Afterwards, we draw closer to the fire with our mugs of tea, coffee or cocoa and begin telling jokes. Finally we retire to our tents for a good night's sleep.

On the following morning we set off down the Lidder valley again. We encounter more Gurjar nomads and their bony buffaloes, some of whom have extraordinary white eyes and make a very mournful, eerie sound. We finally reach the village of Aru, where we find ourselves back in the outside world again. We enter the rather seedy-looking Fimi Hotel which, among other wonderful things, boasts video film shows and an 'underground disco'. We go into the hotel garden, where we sit on real chairs at real tables and order cool drinks. What decadence! After having roughed it for so long, this feels positively luxurious.

When lunch is ready, we move to a nearby field where the kitchen has been set up. I assume that we will be collected here, but it turns out that we will have to continue walking until we reached Pahalgam. Off we go again and soon it begins to rain. Several of the pony-men march along happily under a groundsheet borne aloft with sticks. Most of the rest of us have to make do with our rain gear; by now I feel thoroughly fed up. At last we see the Exodus Expeditions truck in the distance; to reach it we have to wade through a sea of mud. Wet and miserable, we wait in the rain until all the luggage has been put on board, then clamber inside. Mercifully, the trek is over. We bid farewell to the pony men and leave.

We drive to Pahalgam, passing numerous guest houses and hotels. It comes as quite a shock to be thrown back into the chaotic world of a touristy Indian hill station. We stop for some afternoon tea, then continue on our way. At last we find ourselves approaching Srinagar's noisy and filthy suburbs. At the boulevard five of us pile into a *shikara* and are rowed to our houseboat, the 'Hero of the Day', which turns out be located near the 'Argunut'. We now have the luxury of washing ourselves properly in hot water. We relax on the veranda until dinner time and, unsurprisingly, are pestered by numerous unwanted traders.



Lake Dal, Srinagar, Kashmir

We spend the next three days exploring Srinagar and its environs on bicycles (when we cycle around Dal Lake, we visit the famous Moghul gardens and the

Hazratbal mosque), are brought to the old quarter and a Hindu temple on Shankaracharya Hill, and visit the vegetable market early in the morning. We discover that once we leave the uglier streets and get away from the noise and bustle, it is a fascinating place. The off-the-beaten-track areas around the lake are particularly beautiful, especially in the late afternoon when the sun begins to sink and it becomes cooler.

On the third day we leave the city and fly back to Delhi, arriving in the middle of the afternoon. We step out into the hot, sticky heat and are driven to a large and impressive hotel, where I notice that most of the smartly-dressed Indians speak English among themselves. It is pleasantly cool in the lobby and my room. Some of my companions decide to go to a *Son et lumière* show, but because of delays caused by malfunctioning lifts, I and some of my companions decide not to bother; instead we join the others later at a restaurant. Although everyone pronounces the food to be excellent, I find it rather indifferent. While waiting for a taxi afterwards, one of the girls decides that she wants to return to the hotel using a more traditional mode of transport: a bicycle rickshaw. As nobody has any inclination to share the rickshaw with her, I – much to my shame – volunteer. I say much to my shame because, once we begin to negotiate with the emaciated cyclist, clad in rags, I realize that we are about to use him as a beast of burden. My guilt on visualizing this unfortunate fellow's effort to transport two wealthy tourists back to their posh hotel becomes justified when we set off and the poor man pedals furiously along the main roads amid the heavy traffic, sweating profusely and standing on the pedals. I notice people staring and feel their eyes glaring at us critically. The only redeeming factor is that we will be paying this poor, hardworking man, and that the payment will help support both him and his family. Consequently, when we reach the hotel (I want him to stop before we get to it, but he does not seem to understand), I pay him more than he asks for and refuse to take any change. Never have I seen such a smile of gratification light up a man's face. He joins his hands in thanks, bows to me, and offers to come again in the morning with the change, but I will have none of it.

I am now aware of our Indian guide looking at us searchingly. His gaze relaxes out of politeness as I greet him uneasily and enter the luxurious lobby of the hotel. The sharp contrast with the squalor that we have witnessed outside is very disturbing.

By midnight our luggage has been put into a coach and we are driven off to the airport, where the usual chaos reigns. Soon after 3 a.m. we are taxiing down the runway. When we take off, I wish India goodbye. I am not sorry to leave Delhi.

When I finally arrive in Dublin, I collect my luggage and march cheerfully through the customs. For the first time in my life I am stopped and my filthy bag is searched. Small wonder, for by now my hair is long and my unkempt beard extends from my cheekbones down to the bottom of my neck – I am scruffy and undoubtedly look like a hippy or a terrorist. I explain to the lady that I have been trekking in the Himalayas. Inwardly I vow that I will never attempt another trek; although it has been a wonderful experience, I have received quite enough torture for the time being.