

## ACROSS THE HIMALAYAN AXIS

AC Irvine Travel Fund Report  
Seshadri Nadathur

It often happens that one gets an idea for next summer's climbing trip while already in the mountains somewhere else. It was while I was huddled over a bowl of hot soup at base camp in the Dibibokri valley in June 2005 that our cook Tek Chand first spoke of his home in the Miyar Nala and the Kang La pass at its head. At the time it was a passing thought, but I remembered the names again several months later when I read an account of a Scottish team which had made several first ascents of rock peaks in the area. The place sounded absolutely fascinating.

The Miyar Nala is an important tributary of the Chandrabhaga river system in Lahul district of the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, and flows through a large valley of the same name. The Miyar is no mean river itself: the glacier it issues from is massive – fully 28 km long – and it has dozens of large tributaries of its own. The main valley has large open meadows in the upper section, and is a favourite destination for the nomadic gaddi shepherds from the Kangra valley, but the numerous side valleys are filled with hundreds of peaks that are, by Himalayan standards, accessible and low in altitude, with very few exceeding 6000 m. As a result, Alpine-style routes are possible here that have a technical standard not normally seen in the Himalaya. The wealth of climbing possibilities here led Chris Bonington to describe it as “the Yosemite of India”; unlike Yosemite, however, it has seen very little exploration, largely because the road has only been forced through the gorges at the lower section of the valley within the last decade. As if all this were not inviting enough, the Miyar valley also lies north of the Pir Panjal range and therefore does not receive much monsoon activity – a very attractive feature for climbers who are unable to leave Oxford until the end of June!

Everything about the place called out for a visit. I was, however, unsurprisingly unsuccessful in my attempts to persuade other climbers in Oxford to drop their plans for the summer and come out to this remote and unknown valley with me. A significant change of tactics was required, since I was neither good enough nor foolish enough to attempt any climbing alone. I decided to focus on reconnaissance – I would investigate the feasibility of climbing peaks around the upper Miyar glacier as well as those in the Jangpara glacier to the east, which had been entered and explored for possibly the first time as recently as 2004 by the Scottish team led by Graham Little.

To extend this central idea into a worthwhile expedition which would justify giving up the opportunity to climb elsewhere over the summer, I decided also to attempt a crossing of the Kang La – the 5468 m high pass at the head of the glacier. The Kang La lies on the true Himalayan axis, so crossing it would take me into the Zaskar mountain system to the north. The Buddhist district of Zaskar, while culturally and ethnically very similar to Lahul, lies in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and is unbelievably remote: to travel from its capital Padum to Manali, a few hundred kilometres to the south, requires a four-day bus journey. Appalled by this prospect, I felt sure that weary legs would carry me southwards and over another 5000 m pass (either the Shingo La or the Phirtse La) back into Himachal Pradesh, from where road transport would be easier to organise.

Tek Chand's services as local guide and cook would clearly be invaluable, but he had already been booked for another trip elsewhere in Ladakh – by my father, Raghu. Negotiations followed, the upshot of which was that Tek Chand, Raghu and Kalyani, my sister, would all join me on my venture into Zaskar. It would be fair to say that this was a happy state of affairs for me, for Raghu – though now 56 and slightly overweight – has more than 30 years of experience planning and executing Himalayan expeditions.

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We left Delhi on a typically steamy evening at the end of June by the night bus to Manali. Fifteen hours later, we met Tek Chand and the select group of four porters he had picked out for us at the bus station, and began to plan for the long trip ahead. We spent the afternoon buying food supplies to last us until we reached Zaskar, and then hired a jeep at 4 am the next morning to take us to the village of Urgus in the Miyar valley.

Three largely undemanding days through wide, flat meadows took us from Urgus to a camp near several large pools at the snout of the glacier, in an area the Miyaris call Kesar Yonchup, and the gaddis Dali Got. On the way, we enjoyed the hospitality of Tek Chand's family in Khanjar village, where we imbibed substantial quantities of the not-altogether-disgusting local *chhang* (beer made from barley), and the less drinkable *arak* (distilled spirit). Imposing snow peaks loomed up in the many side valleys we passed on the way, unnamed and almost certainly unclimbed. The attention of the few climbing teams which have ventured here has invariably been focused on Menthosa, which at 6443 m is the largest peak in the area. Consequently the climbing potential of many of the side valleys have not been explored thoroughly – and though recent groups have been up the Gumba Nala to the east, and have also investigated the area near the Tarsalamu pass, the possibilities are endless for a team with enough time and money.

It was from Kesar Yonchup onwards that the valley took on a more serious nature. We left camp in the morning on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July up a rib of the lateral moraine on the true left bank of the glacier. The terrain consisted entirely of boulders piled upon each other, and the walking got progressively tougher as they increased in size and instability. Some were as large as a car; all were dreadfully unstable. Clambering over and around them required extreme care to avoid breaking an ankle. On we trudged for hours through this inhospitable terrain, the monotony only broken by the occasional sight of a Himalayan blue poppy – a rare flower which appears to flourish only on glacial moraines.

By afternoon we had reached the point where the Jangpara glacier merged with the mighty Miyar, bringing vast quantities of rock debris with it. We negotiated a hair-raising descent down a loose scree slope, and then proceeded over more rubble on the glacier itself. Solid waves of ice towered around us obscuring the view, covered with mud and stones that periodically and noisily slid off. It was getting late in the afternoon but we carried on and on until we found a flattish spot which could be cleared of rocks to an extent that would allow at least the hope of pitching a tent. A small pool of muddy glacial melt provided a trickle of water.

The next morning, while the others rested in camp, I set off up the Jangpara glacier with Tek Chand and his two strong nephews, Rinchen and Lal Chand. We moved unladen and fast, over the glacier itself and then quickly gaining a rib of the lateral moraine on the

northern side of the Jangpara. I was keeping an eye on the peaks around me, hoping to spot a possible project for next year, but most of the summits here looked much too hard; these were technical challenges for big wall climbers. The Scottish team from two years ago seemed to have already taken the pick of the easy unclimbed routes. I was curious about the Orange Tower (5200 m) though – it had looked from their photographs like a magnificent spire. They reported having been beaten off it by 5a climbing, though perhaps an easier route was possible from a different direction. From where we were, the Tower appeared side-on, looking like a dinosaur's spine. It would have been magnificent in isolation, but its larger neighbours dwarfed it and robbed it of its splendour.

We arrived at the base of the Tower by 11 am, and from here one could truly appreciate its shape. It looked a very hard climb, but an optimistic eye could detect a more amenable line of ascent around the back. Ahead of us, grander peaks were guarded by a large icefall which blocked access to the upper section of the eastern branch of the glacier. Little's team had identified other walls and towers on the western branch too, including such fantastically named features as 'The Devil's Horns' and 'The Gates of Mordor', but from my point of view further exploration was pointless.

We moved on from our uncomfortable camp on the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, walking along yet more of the terrible rubble before finally, gratefully, reaching some clear ice. The harsh sun was melting the ice around us, and several large rivulets running between the rocks demanded careful crossing. Soon, however, we managed to clear the side moraine of another large tributary glacier entering from the left, and then we were on the Miyar glacier proper, which ran for miles like a flat white highway. Fantastically shaped peaks appearing on either side of the valley relieved the monotony of the walking. Eventually we found a place with a large number of flat rocks on which to pitch a tent, and Lal Chand set about building a kitchen shelter. He ran about like a happy child, searching for exactly the right shape of boulder to heave into a gap in the wall or to use to make a comfortable seat for the cook, apparently totally unaffected by the altitude of close to 5000 metres.

Our plan was to cross the pass in one long day from this camp, but already Raghu was beginning to have doubts about whether he could push himself so hard at this altitude. Nevertheless, we left early and made good ground on ice covered with a crisp layer of snow. Progress slowed by mid-morning and soon the crevasses were no longer small enough to step over safely, and we had to bring out the rope and tie in. Whether it was the rope that broke our rhythm and tired us out, or whether it was just the rarefied air, the net result was that movement became painfully slow and rests became more frequent. The pass could be seen in the distance, but it began to appear ever further away. Eventually we reached the bottom of a daunting slope at its base and decided we could move on no longer. Pitching the tents required a supreme effort, but soon we were able to relax with mugs of tea and soup.

After warm fluids had revived us, the evening still stretched out long and beautifully clear, so Rinchen and Lal Chand set off up the snow slope to investigate the route we would take. Being nothing if not competitive, I forgot that I had been tired and rushed up as well to cut steps in the steep snow for use the next day. Soon I bored of this and pressed on, leaving behind the indefatigable Lal Chand, who appeared to be labouring under the impression that a small tent was required to be pitched in each step. From here the views of the peaks forming the head wall of the glacier were superb, and many of them appeared to be feasible climbing objectives, were a climbing group willing to

expend the energy on the approach march. We returned to camp having made it most of the way to the top.

The weather had been remarkably good so far, but on the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> a front of the monsoon was obviously breaking far down behind us, and ominous clouds began to roll up the valley. We moved as fast as we could but still got caught by a white-out by the time we reached the top of the slope. Finding the correct point to cross was a tricky issue, and being unable to resolve it in zero visibility we sat on the snow and waited for the cloud to lift. Eventually it did, and we carefully skirted yawning crevasses to the foot of a prominent rock peak until we could finally look into the mountains of Zaskar. It was an exhilarating moment, made more so by the gigantic fairy-tale cascades of ice around us.

Exhilaration was quickly tempered by the onset of exhaustion. We soon got off the crevassed glacier on the other side and back onto a steep descent over loose boulders, but this required, if anything, more concentration to negotiate. Raghu stepped on a boulder which rolled under him and deposited him on his back, spraining his ankle. He continued with difficulty at a much slower pace.

Finally we arrived at a very windy campsite, and Tek Chand got the stove going. A large river near the campsite came down from a handsome cirque of peaks to the west, over which a pass called the Poat La (5490 m) gives access to the region of Kishtwar. A herd of yaks across the river grazed, as only yaks can, on a precipitous scree slope, before bravely plunging into the icy torrent and swimming over to investigate us.

After eight long days' march over 110 km of difficult terrain, we had crossed the Kang La and arrived in Zaskar.

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Zaskar is big. There were many things about it that I didn't like – the sun was too sharp and hot, it was arid and dusty, the flies were large and bothersome, the mountains were high but rounded and had no snow – but the thing that I liked least was that it was too big. We had just crossed what is possibly the highest and toughest non-technical mountain pass in the whole of the Western Himalaya, and I desperately wanted a rest. Legs ached even inside a sleeping bag, and toes longed to be free of big boots; but Zaskar was too big. We were less than half-way through our planned trip, and we were running out of time and money. We had already exhausted our small stock of fresh vegetables, and were subsisting primarily on rice and lentil soup. The only way out (other than the defeatist solution of the nightmare bus ride from Padum) was over another 5000 metre pass, which would involve another nine straight days of walking. A rest day was out of the question, and yet Raghu's ankle was also a concern. Home seemed very far away.

And yet, as we trudged down to Mune, then on to a delightful campsite at Ichar and past fantastic loess deposits to Purne, our moods mellowed and we began to enjoy ourselves again. (The Lonely Planet guide says it is possible to go from Mune to Purne in a single day, but the author must have had wings – or at least a team of mules to carry his packs.) Tek Chand and our Buddhist porters from the Miyar valley had relatives in almost every

village on the way, so we received a lot of wonderful hospitality. We stayed in a monastery where a group of boy monks played cricket with an old football, and two French university students taught English at a local school, to people with whom they had no language in common. And along the way we developed a taste for the local tea – sweet, black, and with a touch of cardamom. From Purne we took a small detour to the magnificent monastery at Phuktal before branching off up the Kargiak river. Built high up on sheer limestone cliffs, it was a breathtaking sight, and had obviously provided an excellent defence against ancient enemies whilst also inspiring suitable awe in the local villagers. In this last it had obviously succeeded admirably, for no-one questions the legend that it was built overnight 2500 years ago, by a solitary disciple of the Buddha.

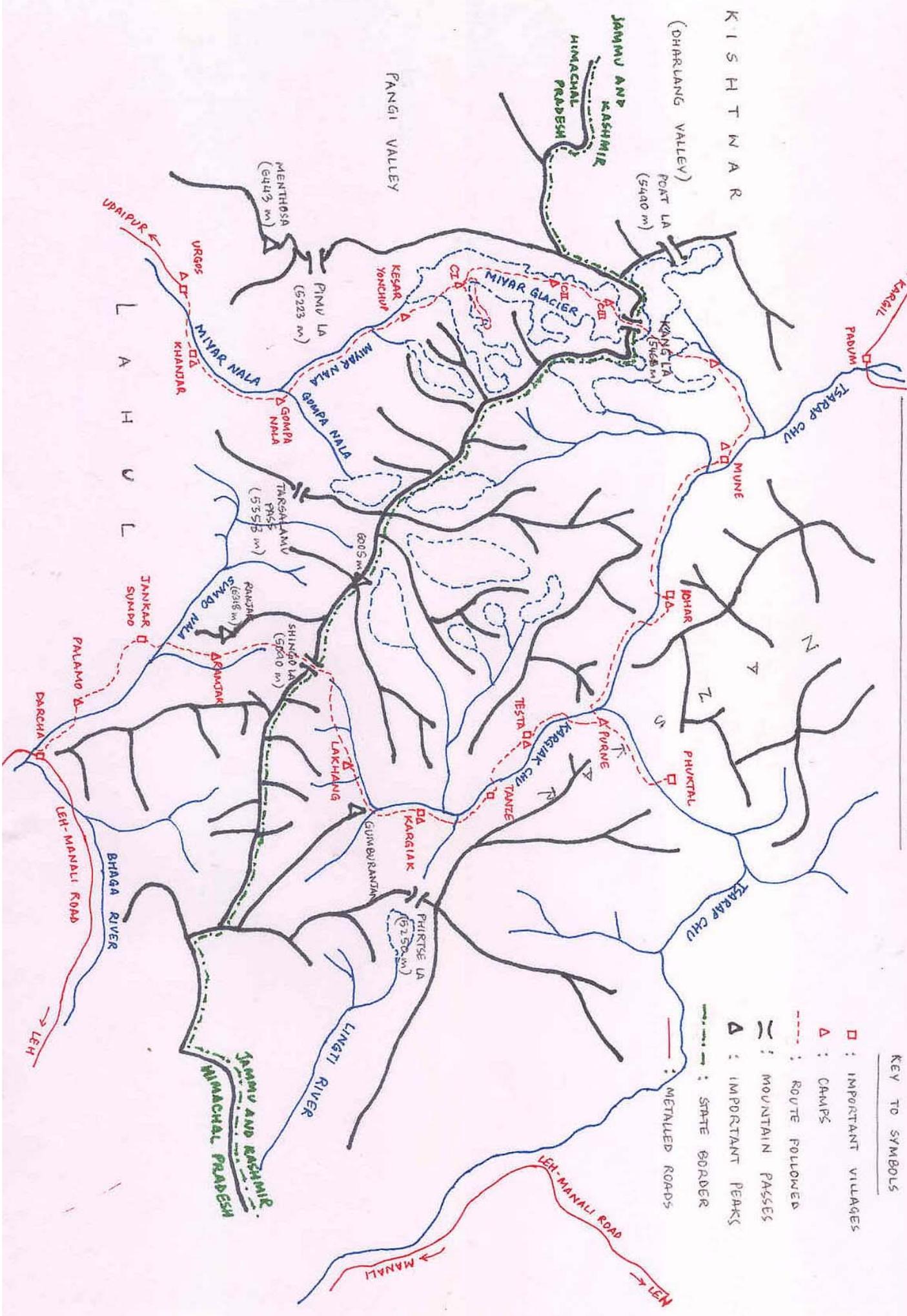
The Kargiak valley was even prettier and more geologically interesting than the rest of Zaskar. Beautiful sedimentary strata were visible in the bare hillsides around us, and the rocks on the path took on ever stranger colours – red, orange, pink, purple, green and blue were all visible. The river itself was smaller than the Tsarap Chu we had left behind, and the valley was flatter, but we were still well above 3500 m and were now gaining height again. Ahead of us stood the majestic granite monolith of Gumburanjan (5800 m), marking the beginning of the Himalayan chain again.

We reached the top of the Shingo La on the 16<sup>th</sup>, and were met by dozens of foreign trekkers, mostly French, on their way to Padum. They were carrying nothing and were followed by excessively long trains of laden mules: the ethical equivalent of top-roping at Stanage. Luckily we were past them quickly and none were moving in the same direction as us. We camped that night on some steeply angled meadows at the foot of a mighty peak called Ramjak (6318 m), and reached Palamau the next day. From here a short couple of hours in the morning took us to Darcha and the road. It was the first day we had descended below 3500 m since leaving Urgus seventeen days earlier.

The rest of the journey was by jeep once again, over bumpy roads through hot and dry Lahul, and then – suddenly and magically – over the Rohtang pass and into the damp coolness of the monsoon in Manali, where every leaf glistened with rainwater. Manali provided some of the minor luxuries of civilization that we had missed (chocolate in particular), but also all the noise and dirt and crowds. After the high-altitude paradise we had just come from, we just could not wait to get out of there. We stopped only long enough to pay off our porters and visit Tek Chand's family before jumping onto a bus and hurtling overnight towards Delhi. It was a sad end to a great adventure.

# LAHUL - ZASKAR EXPEDITION 2006

K I S H T N A R



KEY TO SYMBOLS