

A Journey through Zaskar

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I had originally planned to go with a friend to the Kishtwar Himalaya to trek and, I hoped, to climb a peak or two. Unfortunately, he could not go and that might have been that. But in my preparations, I had become immersed in the literature and was fascinated to read in Fritz Kolb's book of the rugged land of Zaskar and its Buddhist people to the north of the Himalayan divide. I was so stirred by the prospect that I decided to make the journey across Ladakh, Zaskar and Lahul from Lamayuru, near the Indus valley, to Manali in Himachal Pradesh. The route I was to take, was by well trodden ways but would nevertheless be a strenuous 300km journey over many high passes, some of 4800m to 5200m.

As an admirer of Shipton and his approach to travel and mountaineering I wanted to travel in the lightest and simplest fashion. So, by dint of rigid economy, I was able to reduce my gear and dried food to a rucksack and a carrier bag, leaving the balance of the food to be bought in India.

The journey really began from the green vale of Kashmir with its beautiful lakes and orchards. But all too soon, the truck from Srinagar bore me away from this lushness over the Zoji La into the magnificent but arid brown landscape of Ladakh, and after an exhausting day and a half journey, I reached Lamayuru.

I had been assured that there would be little problem in securing a horse to carry my baggage and so it proved to be. My first horseman was to be Nurbu. He was a lithe, shrewd Zaskari and a man who was to be a good friend to me as a guide, horseman, teacher and host. I had a few words of Urdu and he, a little English but neither was sufficient to converse with, so he rapidly set about teaching me Ladakhi which is a dialect of Tibetan, to enable us to have some basic communication. Nurbu besides having a horse, also had 3 donkeys and just as we were about to start, I discovered that I had a travelling companion, Lama Tashi Nurbu, who had hired 1 of the donkeys. He was returning to his monastery at Lingshed, some 6 days journey from Lamayuru. He was a very old man but an imposing sight in his saffron robes. He did not find my presence much to his liking, and his only concession to my presence was to count to 3 in English every now and then. We thus made a strangely assorted trio with the horse and 3 donkeys in contrast to the large, well supported French and American trekking parties starting from Lamayuru with their strings of mules, hen coops and sheep.

I was still recovering from my whirlwind journey across India and Kashmir, so I could not help feeling some trepidation about how I would fare on the long trek across the upland desert of Ladakh into Lahul. Certainly, the first morning over the Prinkiti La to Wanla was a sore trial as my body sought to adapt to the height and the intense dry heat, and I was greatly relieved to reach the green oasis of Wanla with its shady trees and apricots.

From Wanla, the next day, our way lay south through the Hunupatha gorge. After Panchila the valley soon closed in. I just concentrated on keeping going as I now seemed to have been afflicted with both diarrhoea and dehydration. The scenery was spectacular with vertical cliffs on either side of the river. In places, the path was hewn out of the face itself. We had to unload the horse and donkeys and lead them along the ledges and paths above the thundering river below and then pack the baggage through. This was followed by a double crossing of the glacier torrent. I have to admit that I was rather fearful, particularly because a friend of mine had been swept to his death in a much lesser torrent in Scotland earlier in the year. The shock of the intense cold water nearly knocked me off balance, but with a helping hand from Nurbu, I made it safely across. By the evening we were exhausted and so spent the night in a spacious but dusty cave. After supper, I sank into a troubled sleep. Later, awakening in the night, I had quite a fright finding the horse standing silently over me.

I felt lightheaded the next day as we slogged up the Hunupatha valley. Oddly for Ladakh it began to rain and cloud obscured the snow capped peaks. I felt rather reassured by the damp conditions—it was more like having a day out in Scotland. I was charmed by the profusion of beautiful flowers—of yellow orchids, dog rose and gentians. I was going slowly as we began to rise towards the Sirsir La, the first 4800m pass. I developed a splitting headache and was worried by Nurbu telling me that we had to cross the river again. But what a relief as we came to the river; there was a bridge, but what a bridge! It was 2 tree trunks with flat stones laid across between them. I tiptoed carefully across. The rain now eased and the sun came out and we could see fresh snow on the peaks. I could go no further and seemed to be wheezing rather badly, so I took some penicillin. I wondered if I was going to cope.

I felt better the next day, having slept well. I resolved to go at the pass slowly and steadily. A cold wind blew from the west but as I ascended to the pass a widening panorama of snow topped peaks presented itself to my gaze. I wished that I could explore and climb these Zanskar peaks. From the Sirsir La, I could see the deep nick of the Singi La, some 30km to the south, the highest pass into Zanskar. We did not tarry but rushed down into Photaksar, with its green meadows and yaks. From there we pressed on over a minor pass to reach the huts of some yak herdsman who were friends of Nurbu. Ming, one of the yakherds, who told me he was 70, was fascinated by my tent. He introduced me to yak curds which



47 Chanba and his horse 'Ola' in the Yunnan Tso on the way to the Baralacha La, Lahul Photo: Ian Haig



48 Approaches to Baralacha La

Photo: Ian Haig

I found to be delicious. I was utterly weary after the long march over the Sirsir La. I fell asleep to the haunting sounds of the Lama playing a flute.

I walked on the following day, riveted by the Ladakh needle above the Singi La, speculating on possible feasible routes. I was amazed by the Lama's approach to the pass. He disdained the zig-zags, but took a direct line up the steepest line of slope. He would advance 40 to 50 steps at a time stopping to double over his staff every now and then and scurry on again. Reaching the pass, again over 4800m, I experienced a feeling of sheer delight as I saw spread before me the line of the Lahul Himalaya some 110-130km to the south. The Lama said a prayer and Nurbu illegally presented me with a scrap of a prayer flag as a memento. I have it still. Down the other side, Nurbu gathered herbs for supper. We pressed on and camped for the night by a tiny crystal cold spring. That night I slept among some rocks under a night sky full of a mass of brilliant stars.

Our way, the following day, led over 2 more dusty passes and through red and grey rocks before we reached the shady trees, irrigation channels, and houses and the fields of ripening barley of Lingshed. Here our Lama left us. We stayed with friends of Nurbu in a house in Lingshed. I tried chang for the first time and not knowing its potency got terribly drunk on it. Through my immersion in Tibetan life, I was becoming less and less inclined to talk to other trekkers along the road. In fact the next day I was heartily glad to pass swiftly through a French group's encampment which rather resembled a colony of Club Mediterrane complete with members in immaculate white singlets and shorts. This was our longest day with a tiring slog over 2 more passes, a descent down a long arid valley and an exit through a steep defile where we had to unload the animals and lead them down over a series of ledges. I was glad to reach the sparse meadow of Snartse just before dusk and after a hurried supper to bed down under the stars.

I was anxious to start in the morning because Nurbu had told me that we would reach the Zanskar valley that day, but first our way led along an airy path lightly incised in the hard sand above a large thundering torrent. I concentrated on stepping carefully and delicately along the path. Turning the corner, we saw the Omar Chu below us running through a defile towards the great Zanskar gorges. These gorges are impassable, but in winter, I was told, when the river froze, travellers walked on the ice down through the gorges to Leh. Ahead I could see an inviting green pass, the Purfi La which would take us into Zanskar. From the pass I had my first glimpse of the great Zanskar river cutting its way through the huge gorges to the Indus to the north. I relaxed for the first time for several days, I was over the major obstacles and now only had a two day march along the river to Karsha and Padam. The heat became oppressive and I was thankful to reach the farm of Hunumil, the first dwelling in Zanskar, by the late afternoon. It was a

pleasure to wash off the dust in the cool clear water of the river flowing down from the mountains and to refresh ourselves with chang and yak curds.

We made a slow start because Nurbu's horse, Abusah, had disappeared. It took 2 hours of searching to find and recapture him. The valley now gradually opened out and we passed through the village of Pidmo on the way to Nurbu's village, Pishu. I was to be his guest and had the pleasure of meeting and staying the night with his family. He was very hospitable and plied me with butter tea, tsampa and yak curds.

But my momentum carried me on and I was keen to be off the next day as I was starting to wonder whether the horseman Chamba I had arranged with in Lamayuru, 10 days ago would be there to meet me in Karsha. I was excited to see as we rounded the bend in the valley, the peaks on the northern side of the Kishtwar Himalaya and recognised some of them from the pictures I had seen. I yearned again to climb on some of those shapely spires. Karsha now loomed close with its great monastery climbing up the rocky red mountainside. Here, with much regret, I said goodbye to Nurbu; he had become a good friend to me and as a token of regard, he wrote a little valediction in Urdu in my notebook.

The next day, after some fresh negotiations with Chamba on the price, I crossed to Padam, taking the sensational rubber dinghy ferry across the brawling Zanskar river and spent a worried evening waiting for my baggage to come round the long way over the bridge at Tungri.

I suddenly realised how tired I was after 11 days continuous marching over rough country and decided to have a day's rest in Padam. But I found I could not really relax and so after a day's halt I was off again on the track to Darcha, the roadhead in Lahul, where I could pick up the bus for Manali.

For the next 3 days, I tramped rather wearily through the heat along the river, the Tsarap Lingti Chu, visiting the monasteries of Barden Muni and Phugtal on the way. I had another stomach upset and felt rather sorry for myself. I now fell in with a British trekking party. Chamba found it quite congenial travelling with the men managing the British group's mule train. But I gradually found that my progress was being determined by theirs as Chamba preferred to travel with their horsemen. I decided, therefore, by the fourth day to hold back and let them move on so we could travel in a less regimented fashion. This, as it turned out, was quite easy because Chamba's horse 'Ola' ran off and took 3 hours to recapture, so we started well behind the mule train. I was thankful to see them go, even though it had been pleasant to talk with compatriots. That night we stopped in Tanze, the last scattered village before we diverged from the main route. During the evening, the school teacher, Tsiring, who was a friend of Chamba's, came to visit and we all crammed into my little Tramp tent. We drank innumerable cups of tea and talked late into the night in a mixture of English, Ladakhi and

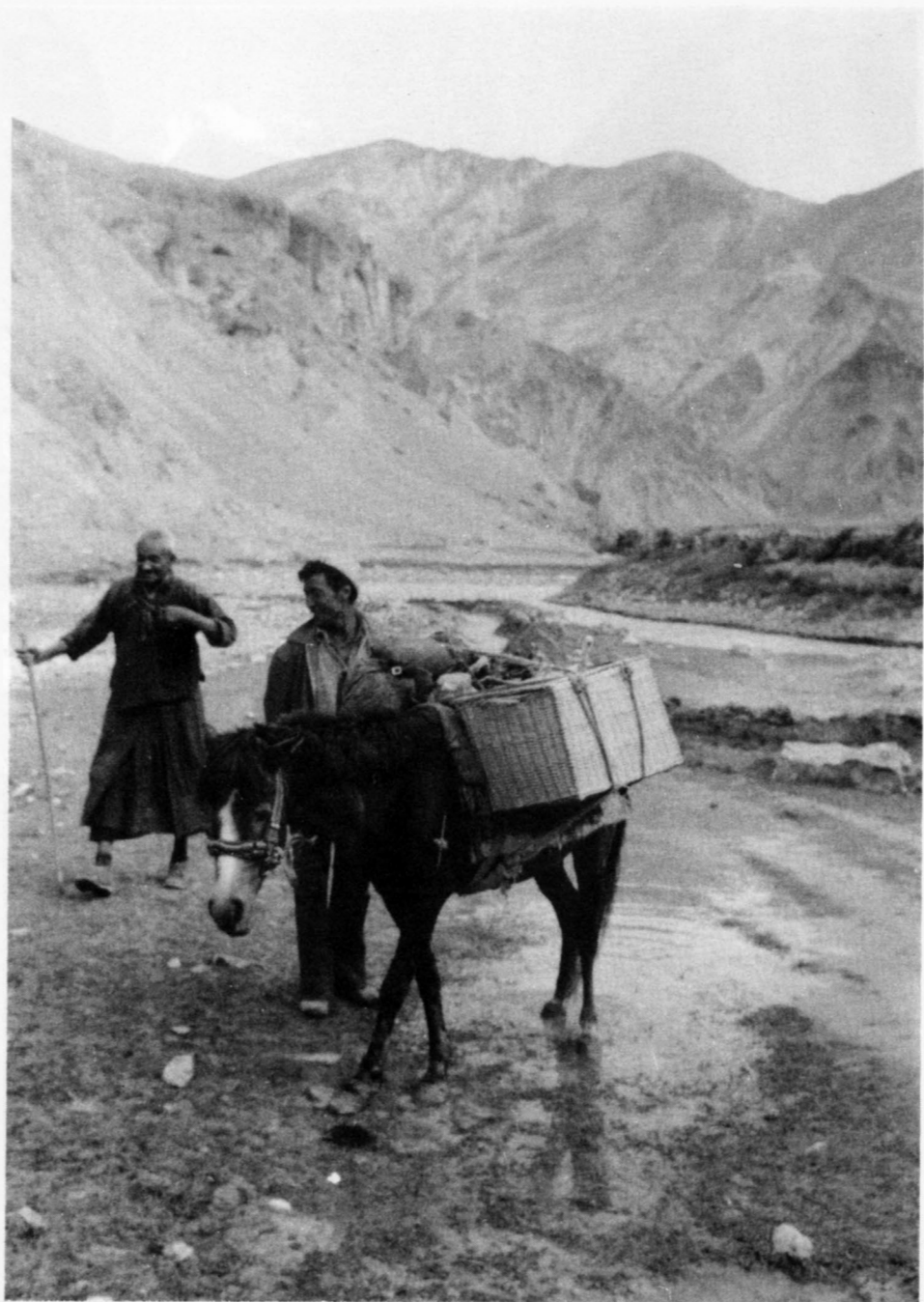


Photo: Ian Haig

Urdu.

As might be expected, we made a slow start. The faint track now ran up into a ravine and climbed high above the valley taking us into the tangle of mountains that we would cross by way of the Phirtse La, into Lahul. It was a long grind and I was glad to stop for a breather from time to time and admire the rugged mountain grandeur. We did not reach water till 2 in the afternoon. It was but a trickle and took time to collect in our pans. I then discovered to my dismay, I had managed to lose all my cutlery and was forced to make do with a tin lid as a makeshift implement for the next 5 days. By 5 o'clock we had stopped at the last place before the pass, where there was water, forage and dung for our fire.

The night was bitterly cold and I slept badly because Chamba kept jumping up to check that the horse had not wandered off. I also discovered the next day that Chamba had bad diarrhoea so I gave him some of my anti-diarrhoea pills.

We plodded off rather slowly and turned into a long bare, rocky valley with snowy tops at the head of it. I felt exhausted and stumbled along over the loose stones. Poor Chamba was having to squat every quarter to half an hour. I found that my progress improved a little, by munching an apple as I went along. I kept asking where the pass was and Chamba just gestured vaguely to the left at the top of the valley. By one o'clock we reached a small grassy patch at about 4800m in the amphitheatre below the pass. Chamba was now in such a bad way that he was unwilling to move. So I gave him half a dozen pills. This seemed to do the trick and after a bit of cajoling I was able to get him moving again. It took us 2½ hours to get to the summit of the Phirtse La, at a height of 5330m.

I was excited now to catch my first full view of the mountains to the south after seeing them in the distance some 10 days before from the Singi La. Chamba suddenly became a new man and we happily snapped pictures of each other against the barren background of Ladakh. It was now 5 in the evening and as the sun was westering, we had to hurry down the other side and just make it to a camping ground by a small stream at dusk.

Our way now lay down the Lingti Chu valley. That day was enlivened by 2 incidents with the horse. The first occurred when he decided that our usual walking pace was too sedate and he suddenly set off at a gallop with all the baggage on his back. It was so unexpected that he left us both standing and it took some hard running before we could catch him. The second incident happened as we crossed the Lingti Chu. This is a broad, cold, glacier stream with the water running fast and deep. As usual when crossing rivers we sent the horse ahead, to test out the depth and we would follow behind. Just as we reached half way, the horse who had arrived at the other side stopped for a little nibble, then turned round and before we could do anything crossed back again. Chamba

gave a great shout of anger and while I waded on, he was forced to go back and chase the horse back across the river while I doubled up the other side to catch him.

As we marched on during the afternoon over the grassy plain by the Lingti Chu, I revelled in the solitary peace of that lonely country. The only habitation we found between Tanze in Zanskar and the Baralacha La in over 6 days journey were just a few temporary shepherd dwellings; otherwise nothing.

The next day, I sensed I was entering the Lahul Himalaya, at last. As the mountains closed in, they carried more snow showing that we were now closer to the edge of the monsoon. I found the turn into the Yunnan Tso valley and the long plod up it, very wearisome. But now Chamba began to point in answer to my insistent questions to a distant cleft which was the Baralacha La, our last 4800m pass before we began the long descent of the Bhaga valley to Darcha. As the day wore on, so the scenery became more grand and far in the distance I caught sight of a high snowy peak which I reckoned from my maps was either Mulkila or one of its outliers. We covered 26km and slept that night in a peaceful place by the Yunnan Tso lake.

It was a cold night so we were slow to start but as soon as the sun was up we were off. The track snaked slowly and gently up towards the double pass of the Baralacha La, so we found ourselves there almost before we expected. I thought I espied the tops of some of the Kulu peaks peeping over the pass to the S. But now we turned over the western pass and fell in with a mule train carrying wool from Leh to Manali until we allowed them to go ahead. We hurried kilometre after kilometre down the stony valley on the other side. 'Ola' the horse sensing the journey's end speeded up causing us to gallop along beside him. As we turned the corner of the valley, I caught sight of the odd dwarf pine tree, the first I had seen for several weeks and was overjoyed to catch the scent of pine again.

The last night of the journey was spent by the river at a place called Potsio. Chamba and I chatted, he of his life in Zanskar and his beloved horse and I of my dreams of further travel in the Himalaya.

On the last morning I awoke to the patter of rain on the tent. When the rain eased, we packed up for the last time in a leisurely way and plodded slowly down the last 16km into Darcha. Now after 3 weeks, there were trees and shrubs everywhere. I had come back from the desert.

I bade goodbye to Chamba saying I would send him some photographs. He flashed a smile and with a courteous 'julay', was gone, back to Zanskar.