On Trekking

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What is it about trekking that makes sensible, seemingly normal people undertake a long and tiresome journey to outlandish parts of the world in order to endure sleepless nights on hard camp-sites, to eat indifferent food, usually sitting on the ground, not to mention dealing with the calls of nature in some barren but overpopulated place which is totally devoid of cover? There are other hazards facing the trekker: extremes of cold and heat to be coped with; sometimes unfriendly natives who look longingly at the apparently rich possessions of the foreigner, and who might be tempted to go in for a bit of tent-slashing in the night. And what about those long days when it seems that camp will never be reached, or the river crossing late in the day when the water level has risen because of snow-melt, resulting in soaking kit and clothes?

Trekking is usually undertaken in mountainous terrain, and consequently there is the miserable business of acclimatization to be endured. Today's trekker never allows sufficient time to acclimatize properly; the result is that, for the first week or two, he or she is struggling against headache, loss of appetite, insomnia and the indignity of getting out of breath after the most moderate exertion.

My wife Pat and I have been on trek together several times and, after this catalogue of misery, it is hardly surprising that I have to give thought to how to persuade her to accompany me on another such adventure. Indeed it might be appropriate to ask if I am a little crazy even to consider going again myself. Happily there are wonderful compensations to make up for the discomforts, about which I remind her from time to time.

I started to compose this essay on the penultimate afternoon of a 14-day trek through Ladakh and Kashmir. That day we had had an exhilarating walk through some breathtaking scenery to arrive at our camp-site around mid-afternoon. Tea was produced soon after we got in and, refreshed, we unpacked our kit and relaxed each in our own way. I usually take a karrimat and find some sheltered rock against which to sit; there I may read awhile or write letters, or even try my hand at sketching, from time to time breaking off to gaze at the mountains towering high above the camp-site, with only the occasional marmot cry or birdcall to interrupt the background sound of a river. That afternoon the sky was cloudless, and although the sun had gone behind the hills it was still warm enough to sit outside even though the altitude was around 3700m. Soon it got cold and I retreated to our tent to put on my after-dark clothing – longjohns, ski-trousers, a thick shirt and an extra sweater; supper was served about seven o'clock and we huddled into the snug warmth of our cook's tent. I can't remember what we had that night – probably hot soup, something faintly curried and chillied, a dessert of tinned fruit, washed down with mugs of

fragrant Kashmiri tea. Back in our tent we played a game of cribbage and then read for a few minutes before snuggling down in our sleeping bags for the night.

The afternoon I have described is typical of any day on trek; there is an age-old rhythm in the trekking day – 'bed-tea', wash, breakfast, walk, arrive, tea, relax, supper and sleep. If I didn't keep a diary we would certainly lose track of the days, for time nearly stands still. New sights are seen each day, a different village, different people, a bird or plant not seen before is observed, an exciting bridge is crossed or a high pass overcome; all stimulating experiences, and yet the traveller is free from the pressures that are part of everyday life at home. The rhythm of the journey imparts a kind of inner tranquillity that enables one to become attuned to the feel of the mountains and heightens the sensitivity to the wonders of nature. The contortions of the rock formations from which the mountains are made tell of the immensity of the forces involved in their creation and emphasize how puny are the efforts of man, an impression made even stronger by a glimpse of a lammergeyer floating effortlessly around a peak that would take a man days to climb.

Trekking is made up of experiences like these, and that is why I will not have too much difficulty in persuading my wife to try it once again.