Kashmir to Kulu Ski Traverse 1991

HUW KINGSTON and CAROL ANKERS

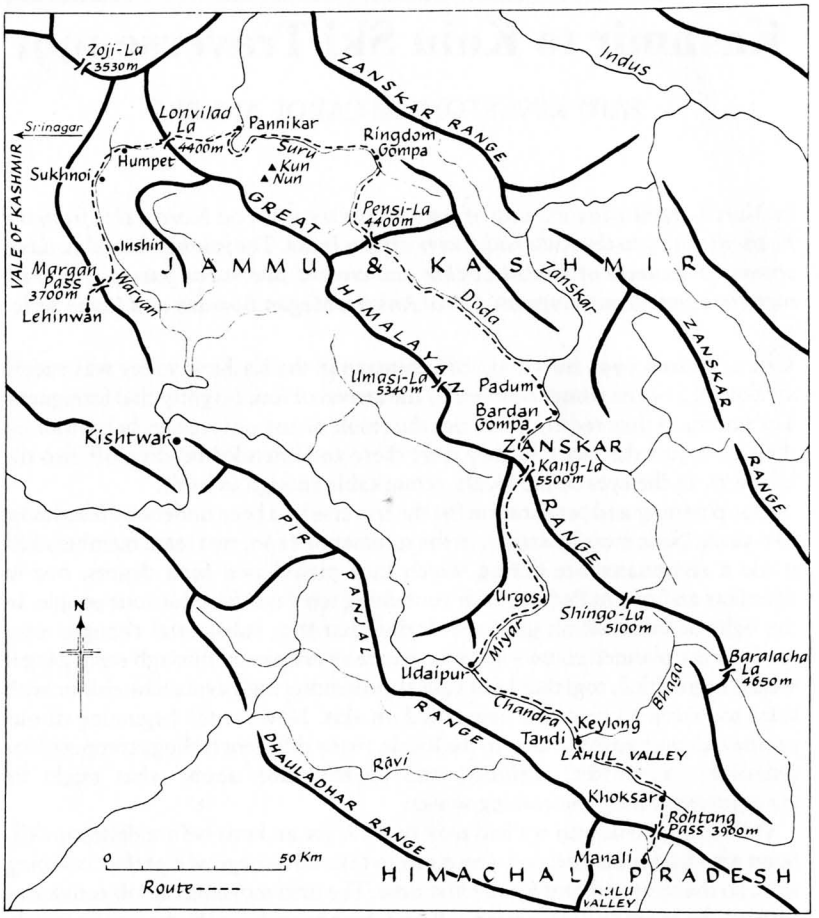
In March–April 1991 a group of four people travelled on Nordic skis from the Kashmir valley to the Kulu valley in northern India. The journey lasted 32 days, covered a distance of almost 600km and crossed five major passes. The team members were Huw Kingston, Carol Ankers, Megan Bowden and Jamie Serle.

On 21 March 1991 the village of Lehinwan in the Kashmir valley was rudely awakened from its winter slumber by the arrival of four brightly clad foreigners. The attention they received was not the result of any outrageous behaviour on their part. Just the fact that they were there and intended heading off into the hills was, in the eyes of the locals, remarkable enough in itself!

Our planning and preparation for the traverse had been underway for almost two years. Nine months earlier, in the summer of 1990, two team members had made a reconnaissance during which they placed two food depots, one in Pannikar and one in Padum, each containing ten days' food for four people. In the light of information gathered during that trip, substantial changes were made to the planned route – sections where rivers passed through steep gorges would be avoided, together with valleys presenting high avalanche risk or with sides too steep to be safely negotiated on skis. Now, at the beginning of our journey, as we paused to chat to the locals, many different feelings competed for attention: excitement, curiosity, and apprehension about what might be encountered during the coming weeks.

On leaving Lehinwan we had only to walk for an hour before donning skis. Soon afterwards the decision was made to take advantage of a perfect camping spot, so the tents went up for the first time. The next morning our objective was to cross the Margan Pass (3700m). It took four hours to reach the pass in slowly deteriorating weather. What had started as a few light snowflakes was now a whiteout. As we descended, visibility improved although it was still snowing heavily. We were in a fairly narrow valley and were concerned by the potential avalanche danger; so we hurried along, never stopping to rest and hoping to reach the wide, open Warvan valley before too much snow accumulated on the slopes above us. After four hours of exhausting skiing, picking our way over old avalanche debris which placed great strain on the skis, it was with enormous relief that a relatively safe spot below some trees was reached. It would have been foolish to go any further, so a platform for the tents was dug and a restless night spent listening to avalanches up and down the valley.

By next morning it had stopped snowing and the day was clear and sunny. We stayed put and dried our gear, while the snow had a chance to settle and any avalanches to come down. The following morning saw us skiing by 6.30, hoping to escape from this menacing valley before the sun could undo the delicate bond that joined snow and slope. It took nearly four hours of



clambering over avalanche debris, climbing up and down the sides trying to select the best route, and crossing the river several times before we finally reached the safety of the Warvan valley. We were drinking a celebratory brew and exchanging miniature Easter eggs when we heard a huge avalanche come down where we had skied perhaps 20 minutes earlier.

At the village of Inshin, across the Warvan river, we were welcomed and invited to stay at the rest-house. Attempts to light a fire only succeeded in filling the whole place with smoke, and the sight of the four of us sitting outside, coughing and spluttering, caused much amusement. Between Inshin and Sukhnoi we skied up a wide and open valley, with a few sections where the sides dropped more steeply to the river. In places, avalanches had wiped the slopes clean of snow and we picked our way gingerly across the mud and loose stones, humbled by the sure-footed locals who trotted across with none of our dithering. Several villages lay along the valley, and in all of them we attracted a large crowd of interested followers who ran alongside us for a while. We

camped just before reaching Sukhnoi, the last habitation we would see before reaching Pannikar.

The next day our route took us north up the beautiful Kaintal valley. After a while it closed in, and although we would have liked to make further progress we decided to camp. The valley would be negotiated more safely in the early morning. For the first few kilometres it was steep and narrow, vindicating the decision made the day before. There were many sections where the valley sides dropped steeply into the river, which we had to cross and recross in an attempt to find the easiest route. Later, we removed our skis, roped up and cut steps across a particularly icy section. This was quite frustrating, consuming as it did so much time and energy for so little progress. Eventually we reached Humpet and our spirits soared. Here the valley was wide and flat – a real paradise after our previous encounters. We camped by an open section of the river and relaxed in the sun. The feeling of space was tremendous – a magnificent pure white wilderness.

A magical morning's skiing, followed by an afternoon skinning up the glacier, saw us poised just below the Lonvilad Pass (4200m) – a stunning camping spot enhanced at dusk by the appearance of a full moon. We delayed starting the next morning whilst waiting for a cold wind to drop. Unfortunately it didn't, so at 7.30 we set off for the pass. Our packs felt much lighter, partly because we were now carrying less food, but also because we were wearing most of our clothes! 45 minutes later we reached the pass, our first crossing of the main Himalayan Divide. Strangely, the wind had almost vanished. It was an exhilarating ski down to Pannikar, dropping 1100m, although patches of breakable crust (the skiers' nightmare) caused a few tumbles.

On arrival we found the custodian of our food depot, who organised a room and some tea before presenting us with the two boxes which he had been carefully storing for us since last summer. We were delighted to discover that everything was intact and nothing had perished. We spent a most enjoyable rest day in Pannikar, recharging our batteries and having a much-needed wash (although one bucket of water doesn't go far between four dirty people!).

It was then back to waking at 4.30am and getting away by 6. This was our routine throughout the trip, as the snow deteriorated rapidly once the sun was upon it. The route from Pannikar was straightforward, as we could follow the line of the summer road which traverses the northern slope high above the river. Our aim that day was to reach Parkachik, so it was a pleasure to round a spur at mid-morning and see the village not too far ahead. But distances are deceiving and it was another two hours before we reached a suitable camping spot just beyond Parkachik, with a superb view of a jumbled icefall dropping to the river, and the slopes of Nun and Kun rearing above us.

During the next two days the route presented few problems, although on the second day there was a strong wind and it snowed heavily. Whiteout conditions made navigation difficult and we were happy enough simply to reach Ringdom Gompa. We had not expected the marvellous hospitality that awaited us. The lamas found us a room, brought us tea, and showed us around their main prayer room. We were able to help them, in return, by taking a letter to a village on our route and delivering it to the brother of one of the lamas.

From Ringdom the skiing was virtually flat as we headed towards the Pensi-La (4400m). The intention had been to camp below the pass, but we were making good progress so decided to continue to the pass itself. Though the climb was relatively short and not too steep, there was a sense of achievement as we reached the fluttering prayer flags at the top. Marvellous views surrounded us as we pitched the tents and looked forward to the ski down into the Zanskar valley next morning. We were not disappointed – it was another glorious day and we had an exciting but all too short ski down on firm snow, followed by a long and gradual descent where one stride on the skis produced several metres of 'free' glide. It was great to make such quick and effortless progress. We camped high on a terrace overlooking the confluence of the Hagshu and Doda rivers. The surrounding peaks, ridges and valleys looked stunning in the evening light.

Skiing on down the Zanskar valley for two more days, we passed through many villages where we received a warm welcome and offers of food and tea. We arrived in Padum (3600m), the 'capital' of Zanskar, on 6 April. The village paths had been cleared of snow and were now wet and muddy. We squelched our way to the Greenland Hotel to find Abdul Salam, the guardian of our second food depot. Here we were extremely well looked after, a room was provided and we were invited to eat with the family.

We rested up in Padum and had another wash, but this time with only a flask of hot water to share between four! The only drawback was the intermittent wailing from the mosque – we had never heard such a tuneless sound! Abdul Salam borrowed skis and boots from us and went fishing. He returned with a huge catch but admitted he had caught only 10 by line and the other 30 by blasting. Our image of a tranquil fisherman was ruined when we pictured him tossing dynamite into the water. The idea of wading waist deep in the icy water to collect the stunned fish didn't sound too appealing either.

On leaving Padum we felt as though we were on the final leg of our journey. That night we camped in the Temasa valley on a shelf high above the river. Using skis, ice-axes, ropes and pans, we created a Heath Robinson contraption to collect water from the dripping icicles suspended from the cliffs that towered above. It snowed a little overnight but by the morning there was only a moderate wind to slow our progress. Around lunchtime the snow started falling again, the wind increased and the cloud closed in. We really needed to get a good view of our route, as we had to turn SE off the main valley. As visibility decreased, it seemed wise to camp where we were. No sooner was the site stamped down and the tents pitched than the snow stopped and the sun reappeared! But we didn't tempt fate by taking the tents down again – nothing would have been more likely to cause the sun to vanish! Instead we enjoyed a lazy afternoon.

The first real route-finding dilemma now faced us. We had two maps of limited accuracy and their respective representations of this area were completely different. An account by Guy Sheridan, who had skied this section of our route 11 years previously, said we should turn left at the bluff which looked like the Buchaille Etive Mohr in Scotland's Glencoe. Jamie and Megan, our two Australian companions, did not find that information very useful, but

we two Brits were pretty sure that the peak we were looking at was the correct one. After some hesitation, we opted for the valley up to the left, although there was still some element of doubt. After climbing for almost two hours we reached an altitude of 4580m at the glacier tongue and hoped to be able to cross the pass next day. It was only then (11 April), as we approached the pass, that all our remaining fears of being in the wrong valley disappeared.

The climb up the glacier was straightforward except for one steep section which had several exposed crevasses. We picked a route up the right-hand side, and were glad to get past the crevassed section and back on safe ground. At 5500m it became a real battle of mind against body, forcing ourselves to go on for another 20 steps, and another . . . Our efforts were rewarded, as we reached the pass, with the most spectacular views we had yet encountered. The peaks seemed so close. All our senses were more receptive than usual; emotions were more intense. It was a hard place to leave, but the ski down the Miyar glacier was also breathtakingly beautiful. Everywhere we looked there were huge hanging glaciers, reflecting the brilliant blue of the sky and apparently defying the laws of gravity. It was a tired but elated team that sat enjoying the last rays of the sun that evening, marvelling at the grandeur of their surroundings.

A frustrating day followed. Our skis sank into the soft surface of the snow, making progress slow on the almost level ground we were crossing. Later we were skiing through horrendous snow-covered moraine and, not knowing what lay ahead, we had difficulty choosing a route. After lots of side-stepping up and down, retracing our tracks and hoping for intuition, it was with great relief that we eventually reached the end of the moraine and could see the valley stretching out smoothly below us. A small section of the river here was exposed, and we pitched camp beside it as the first snowflakes fell.

It snowed heavily and continuously for three days, depositing half a metre of snow and keeping us tent-bound. On the third day, although the snow was still falling and visibility was poor, our dwindling food supplies made it necessary for us to move on. After four hours of being unable to see anything, the weather cleared and our spirits lifted. We had hoped to reach Khanjar, the uppermost village in the valley, that day; after 12 hours' skiing it was still not in sight, so we had to concede defeat, put up the tents and eat the last of our food, saving just a packet of biscuits for breakfast.

It was −30° when we rose the following morning for the two-hour ski to Khanjar. Here we sat on a terrace and were brought tea and bread by the very friendly villagers, followed by rice, vegetables and *arak*. It was tempting to stay longer, but time was not on our side and we bade farewell to our hosts and skied off down the valley. After crossing and recrossing the river, and refusing numerous offers of *chai* (otherwise we'd still be there now!) we arrived in Urgos. Tashi Phuntshog invited us into his home, and we spent an enjoyable and somewhat alcoholic evening with him and his family.

The easiest route down the valley from Urgos was not obvious – the snow cover was thinning and it was hard to decide which side of the river looked best. It was only possible to cross the river by bridges which were few and far between. Some sections required strong nerves, as we scrambled over loose rocks and boulders where a slip would have resulted in a long, steep tumble to

the river below. Our skis were on and off until about 10km before Udaipur, where we joined a newly-built jeep track. At this stage we strapped skis to packs and walked the rest of the way. Along the track we encountered a wide stone-shoot down which boulders were continually falling from way above, some the size of tea-chests. Trying to pick the right moment, and then watch where we put our feet and at the same time look out for falling rocks, was pretty frightening. One rock, the size of a loaf of bread, landed on the top of Huw's pack. It was almost 6pm on 17 April when we reached Udaipur in Lahul district and saw our first vehicle for 28 days. We were delighted to see a sign 'English wine and beer shop' – that beer must rank among the finest we had ever tasted!

The next morning was spent trying to send a telegram to the Singapore Airlines office in Delhi, informing them that we wished to change our flights. We were due to fly to Sydney from Delhi on 21 April; today was the 18th and it would take us at least three more days just to get to Manali. We sent one telegram from the Post Office and one with an army Major who was flying to Kulu by helicopter that afternoon – we hoped that somehow the information would reach its destination. A telegram did arrive, but we never knew which one.

The road up the Chandra valley from Udaipur had been cleared of snow for much of its length, but it had since been blocked by landslides, rockfall and avalanches. Transport was provided for about 15km, but it wasn't just any old transport: our Major had made available his own jeep. After that we had to walk, although we did manage to hitch a ride on a truck for a few kilometres. Our destination was Jalmer, where we stayed in a forest rest-house. Finding somewhere to eat was a problem until the brother of the local shopkeeper invited us to eat with him and his sister. They gave us a delicious meal, and we were reminded once again how generous and hospitable these people are.

From Jalmer we walked for seven hours before reaching Tandi, at the confluence of the Bhaga and Chandra rivers. Rumour had it that trucks were operating along this stretch of road, transporting groups of snow-clearers, and we were lucky enough to hitch a lift. The truck was going the opposite way first, but picked us up on its return journey. Thus we found ourselves bouncing along in the back with only the occasional shaft of light from a crescent moon giving a brief glimpse of our surroundings before we were plunged into darkness once more. The truck stopped just past Sissu and we all climbed out. Tents were pitched for the last time on a snow bank beside the road.

A very early start the next morning meant that the first hour, walking along the road, was in darkness. We started skiing as the sky lightened, and made excellent progress on the firm surface. Negotiating enormous cones of avalanche debris, some over 1km wide, slowed us down; we had to remove skis and pick a way carefully across, trying to select the easiest route. After four hours we reached Khoksar, and after enjoying another meal of rice and dahl (our staple diet of the last few days), we set off to climb up to the Rohtang Pass (3700m). The local people had been walking this route for the previous two weeks, leaving a good line of footprints for us to follow. Many of them stopped for a chat. 'Where are you going?' they would ask – but there weren't many places we could possibly be going to except Manali!

It seemed to take forever to reach the pass – the final barrier between us and our goal. It was too windy to spend much time celebrating so, saving that for later, we began our descent. We may have dreamt of carving graceful telemarks down to Manali, but that was not to be. The snow was like porridge, impossible to turn in and all too easy to fall into! It was 3.30pm when we arrived at the rescue post at Mahri where the offer to spend the night there was gratefully accepted after an 11-hour day.

Next morning the skiing was no better, but our spirits were so high it didn't matter. As the snow thinned and then disappeared, skies were strapped to packs and we had the chance, during a pleasant hour's walk, to prepare ourselves for the shock of returning to 'real life'. As we reached the road, a tractor and trailer fortuitously appeared, and half-an-hour later we were in Manali! It seemed so long since we had left Lehinwan – and so much had happened in the meantime – that it was hard to absorb it all at once. But after a much-needed bath in the hot springs, and a few delicious meals in our favourite restaurant, we at last had the time to reflect on our experiences and to relive some of the memorable episodes of our month-long traverse.