SIDNEY NOWILL

Adventures in Zanskar and Lahul

(*Plates 51–53*)

In mid-June 1983 the land route over the western Himalaya from Kashmir to Ladakh was still closed by snow. I had been trekking in Kashmir with my wife Hilary and we had wanted to move over to Ladakh to watch the Tibetan Buddhist rites and dances at the Hemis Monastery. But buses were not yet able to get through. We decided, therefore, to hire a horse and a ponyman from near Baaltal, and proceed on foot. At the Zoji La the local roads people were starting to cut through the drifts, and we found ourselves walking with 50ft walls on either side. Later, it became a matter of selecting the hardest snow for the horse to walk on.

After various vicissitudes, we reached the grim locality of Kargil at 2am, in utter darkness, after a 21-hour day. Three days later, feeling rather smug, we watched the Hemis Festival in the company of the other visitors who had flown in from Delhi. (The Zoji La was opened a fortnight later.)

After some travels in Ladakh, we returned by bus to Kargil via Lamayuru, and patiently made our presence felt there by letting it be known that we wanted a horse, to undertake a short expedition in northern Zanskar. On our outward journey, with the help of the Baaltal horse, we had made a dump in Kargil of a wooden packing case of stores bought in the bazaar in Srinagar, including the fuel and a cooker (plus the all-important 'pricker'). Patience was eventually rewarded after three days, when a young man approached us saying he knew of a ponyman with a horse in Pannikar (or Suru); he would effect the introduction – and it was only three hours by jeep from Kargil.

The prospect of penetrating the wild lands of northern Zanskar held great allure. We felt an agreeable tingle of excitement as the jeep bumped south on its way to Suru, and glaciated Himalayan peaks hove into view. After locating the horse and its owner, we undid the packing case and tipped the contents into two orange tarpaulin bags with eyelets and padlocks, previously made for the purpose in Istanbul. As the ponyman was not a linguist, means of communication were minimal; but I pointed up to a high ridge, saying 'Pukartse La', having resolved to enter Zanskar by the shorter (in miles) but more exacting, and higher route (also known as Parkatchik La).

We were not disappointed. After a tedious and seemingly never-ending ascent, which made me wonder what we were doing, a final crest became discernible. Then suddenly, bursting into view without warning, surged

the 7000m peaks of Nun and Kun, across the intervening Suru Valley, rising 3000m higher than where we stood. It's one of the great views of the Himalaya – I had read about it, of course – but nothing prepares the traveller for the sudden revelation.

The descent to Parkatchik was steep, and the day was far spent. There was little visibility in the dim crepuscular light. We were not yet properly organised in a travel mode and had to spend the night on the sooty floor of a flea-ridden hovel. Domestic hens and cocks had settled down singly for the hours of darkness in small niches in the wall above our heads, emitting the odd unpredictable squawk. There was a whirlwind in the night, and a few flakes of snow.

Next day we were confronted by the passage of the Suru Gorges, made hazardous by the need to traverse slopes of hard snow which had completely buried what we believed must be the track to Rangdom, the Pensi La and Padum (jeepable only in midsummer). Twice we had to unload the horse and make a portage, returning to cut steps for the animal which the ponyman, walking backwards, encouraged and pulled forwards by the bridle, while I advanced uphill from behind, holding the horse's tail. Hilary watched this bizarre performance with horror. One slip could have precipitated our pack-horse into the roaring Suru, thundering along 200 feet below us, with waves five or six feet high. Luckily we had our ice-axes, but missed the reassurance of crampons.

The rest of the trip passed without incident. Every night we would put the tent up and marvel at the extraordinarily clean, moistureless atmosphere. There was no recession of planes to be discerned. Peaks that were 30 miles away stood out with the same intense sharpness and gradation of colour as landscape features only three miles distant. Towards sunset the fierce frost drove us into our tent early. We would retire to deal with the paraffin cooker, prick the cooker holes, and hope that it would work. The ponyman had warm equipment, but slept out, at or under whatever exiguous shelter could be found. Minimum night temperatures were typically between minus 10° and minus 12°C.

Studying the rudimentary map which was all we had to guide us, we had been intrigued to notice that there was a locality called Gulmatangze on the way east along the Suru Valley to our goal at Rangdom. Having expected to come upon three or four houses at least, we were surprised to find that the great metropolis of Gulmatangze had no houses or dwellings of any kind. It just consisted of a few large boulders and a wind-break, surrounded by Himalayan peaks, and inhabited by a single family and their animals.

We stopped and tarried with these hardy people, unable to communicate except by signs, but conscious of receiving from them an unmistakable flow of benevolence, friendship and welcome. They even offered us food, of which they had very little. We offered in return a little salt, which was happily accepted. It was difficult to leave Gulmatangze. We felt relaxed and exhilarated by these fellow human beings. They lived in unimaginable

privation and poverty, yet seemingly in harmony with their surroundings and the universe – asking for nothing but the temporary gift of life, in the great wheel of Buddhist existence.

On the fourth day of our leisurely journey, with the glaciers and snow peaks of Nun and Kun behind us, we saw ahead the half-dozen houses of Juldo, their prayer flags fluttering in the late afternoon light. Suddenly we felt the pull of Zanskar. It had become real. The rest of the world had vanished. Here was a country of seven or eight thousand souls, half of them monks, living under conditions scarcely imaginable to the average Westerner. This remote land is one of the highest and coldest inhabited areas on earth. In endless solitude and silence, it lies sundered for two-thirds of the year from the rest of the planet. No crime of any sort had been recorded there. Imbued with the quietude, non-aggression and respect for all life implicit in ancient Buddhism, these people laboured for the few months in summer when nature was benign, to garner the crops that would sustain life during the rest of the year – an activity in which all who could participated, including the monks from the monasteries.

We erected our tent at a certain remove from the houses. After a discreet interval we received the welcoming visit of a couple of Juldo ladies wearing heavy clothing against the evening frost. The next day we walked over rough terrain to the Monastery of Rangdom, almost invisible under the huge scarps of a stratified mountain which towered above it. We spent some time with the Gelupta or yellow-cap monks who lived there. While making the passage of a wide area of shallow glacial rivers lying across our route, we came across the only folk who crossed our path during this 1983 journey into Zanskar. They were Elaine Brook and a Sherpa companion, carrying huge packs. Unlike the elderly Nowills, these people were real travellers, beholden to no one, unsupported and free. We saluted their endurance and physical strength with admiration.

Our whole 1983 expedition, from Kargil to Kargil, had cost us a total of £80, including numerous items donated to the ponyman upon our return to Parkatchik and the cost of the stores and fuel bought in Srinagar. It was the remotest travel we had ever accomplished, and left us determined to return to these haunting landscapes, but with bigger ambitions, for a more serious enterprise. As it happens, this was just about the time when trekking groups began to change the ethos of the Zanskaris under the assaults of Il Turismo over the Shingo La (from Himachal Pradesh). But you cannot change the world. Hilary and I remained under the spell of Zanskar, and resolved to come back.

Impediments began to emerge shortly afterwards, including cancer of the lip and the start of single vessel coronary heart disease. The two consultants threatened to forbid solar radiation, on the one hand, and conditions of anoxia (if upward movement was included), on the other. But the resulting delay was only temporary, as our wish to return to Zanskar had become a compulsion.

By 1985 I had decided that the following year would see us back in the western Himalaya for a much more ambitious programme. Invited to join us were Francis Meynell, an old friend living in Capetown, and Robert Jones, a highly experienced American alpinist, and my occasional companion of more than three decades of mountain endeavour. The suggested programme was a crossing of the icy desert lands of northern Lahul via the Baralacha La, starting from Darsha, to be followed by entry into Zanskar over the 5300m Phirtse La; from there we would seek to reach the uniquely impressive and semi-troglodytic monastery of Phuktal before moving back into southern Zanskar, with exit over the Shingo La.

There were two prior necessities: firstly, good research and preparation, and secondly (in my case), a long, thorough and slow training and acclimatisation programme. The former presented no problem for a hardened old expeditioner, and we soon agreed a 22/23-day chart of movements. As to the latter, one obviously had to grow the mandatory three-month beard to satisfy the dermatologist and spend six prior weeks of mountain activity to head off criticism from the other consultant.

After a few snowy weeks in the Aladag mountains of southern Turkey, I solicited the company of an admirable cicerone from Skye. Jean Thomas led me up classic trips like the Tour Ronde, carried through in the slowest of slow motion. This was no hardship for Jean, who was also a watercolour painter of some repute, and able to enjoy the mountain scene quietly. I had climbed the Peuterey Ridge of Mont Blanc 19 years previously, and now we looked at leisure towards this incomparable sweep of mountain form. But Jean had never actually seen the summit of Mont Blanc. So I said 'all right, I'll take you.'

For most readers of the AJ, the Goûter route must be regarded as a 'wearisome plod' ; but for the writer, on his final visit to the mountain, it had reverted to the status of dreamland. It would be unthinkable to participate in the morning rush. So Jean and I slipped out of the Goûter hut at exactly midnight. First party out, we stepped into a universe of upper glaciers picked out in the last rays of a setting moon, now retreating behind the ridges of the Bionnassay. The slopes ahead of us glinted sharply. Our crampons squeaked as the prongs bit into iron-hard snow.

In old age ambitions begin to fade. Finally they are muted. One becomes more receptive then – more open – to the immanence of the planetary firmament. At these great heights, the slow rhythms of a night march under the stars provided unalloyed pleasure.

It took us all of fourteen hours to climb to the summit of Mont Blanc and return to the Goûter. Could this be a record?

Some days later Hilary and I were on a flight to India and bound for Kashmir, where further activity followed in the shape of ten days of high-altitude trekking. If the writer had not reached his optimum of training and acclimatisation by then he obviously never would. So we moved over to Himachal Pradesh.

Francis, Bob, Hilary and I emerged from a 13½ hour journey from Manali to Darsha, over the Rothang Pass (it's only 140km, but we had a breakdown on the way), to erect tents in the dark on a stubbly field at Darsha. It was an inauspicious start, and precursor of more troubles to follow. But THE EXPEDITION HAD BEGUN!

We had agreed in advance for two riding horses, with riding saddles, to be provided. But the next morning, when we asked to see the riding saddles after the ponyman had made an appearance, the request was greeted with derision. There was only one riding horse, equipped with a wooden saddle reinforced with protuberant iron slats. Darsha has an unfortunate reputation, and our unco-operative ponymen confirmed it. One pack-horse was loaded to the exclusion of all else by their enormous and tattered communal tent. However, we packed up and set out for Patseo at 4300m – an easy stage of 15 kilometres.

The second day we moved on to Upper Zing Zing Bar, 300m higher, and put up our tents by the old Shiva temple, following the route of a military road, still under construction, to Leh. Sharp stones and rocks littered the site, so we had an uncomfortable night. The next morning, however, the brilliant mountain light and the peaks around us started to lift our spirits, which improved further when we saw that the last monsoon clouds were being left behind. Crossing the 5000m Baralacha La was part of our next stage. This pass is the gateway to the frozen wastes of northern Lahul, and it turned out to be the gentlest and easiest we had ever traversed. Only the prayer flags and the sheets of edelweiss, never before seen in such profusion, told us that we had reached the top. We were now above the summit of Mont Blanc.

After the Baralacha La we turned left and north, off the route of the military road, and finally north-west into vast landscapes tilting upwards, with small glaciers all around. The sky had turned to the darkest of deep blue. The air was implausibly clear. Again, no recession of planes. One morning we saw the moon rise with the same blaze of blue-diamond effulgence as a moon riding at the zenith. The humidity must have been virtually nil. It was hot at midday, in conditions of extreme solar radiation, but very cold at night. Of snow there was not a sign anywhere except on very high peaks. This could perhaps represent the highest snowline in the world at, say, 6000m, or slightly higher.

In the mornings the cook would get up early but the ponymen were slow to stir. They often didn't strike their tent until 10am. We sometimes left before them and struck out on our own, having agreed on a general direction to follow. When we departed together they would immediately roar off ahead of us in a cloud of dust. But they were co-operative when it came to rivers. At any serious river crossing they would wait to help us. Rivers are the only serious risk in this area. The only fatalities to travellers have occurred as a result of the hazard of drowning; or of being ground to pieces in glacial torrents.

One of our predecessors on the trek had told me that we should on no account spend just one night on the Lingti Ground. 'Spend two,' she had said. 'It's Paradise. So why not savour it?' Lingti was perhaps the highlight of our journey. We felt like Tennyson's Lotos Eaters, looking well on the beautiful world, surrounded by the wonder of the mountain scene and untroubled by doubt. The sky was blue and nearby diaphanous cloudlets looked like the backdrop of a stage. Several days of travel separated us from all other humans. It *was* paradise, and we did stay two nights.

The next day we started a difficult march to the locality of Khamerup. It was a hard stage, with complicated route-finding and numerous deep nullahs to cross and climb back out of. Despite resort to Diamox, I began to find the exertion troublesome and breathing difficult. When we finally arrived at Khamerup in the warm afternoon, this reputedly most dangerous of the rivers was thundering along and looked quite impassable. We didn't even attempt it, but put the tents up and awaited the morrow. By early morning and after a night of severe frost the flow of water from the glaciers had considerably diminished, and the water level had gone down two feet. For once the ponymen got up early. One of them made a trial crossing, mounted. I was next. Eventually everyone was over, plus all our food and equipment.

The landscape was now tilting inexorably upwards. We were being hemmed in. The next stage was the penultimate stage in northern Lahul. We were bound for our highest camp at Chumik Marpo – the summer site (I had read) of a group of yak breeders. But when we arrived at Chumik Marpo there was no trace or sign of their previous presence. These are lonely lands, and during the whole of our trek we had only met one shepherd and one itinerant Zanskari on a horse.

On the way up to Chumik Marpo one of the horses had fallen. It was carrying the fuel tank, and also the flour sack. But after checking the tank and detecting no damage, I had it re-loaded. Next morning we had a very unpleasant surprise. We were seated as usual on stones, waiting for our morning chapattis to appear. But when they did, the first mouthful revealed that disaster had struck. There had been an invisible pin hole in the tank and the constant jogging of the horse had allowed the fuel to seep away. The flour-sack was now useless, impregnated with paraffin. And we had no fuel left. Worse was to follow. A full-scale search revealed that some of our stores had been plundered by the ponymen. Other items had succumbed to the high noonday temperatures and become inedible. There were, however, biscuits left, and some tins of cheese.

Furthermore, Francis was feeling unwell and unable to move. Bob and Hilary, though, were in excellent form and represented a positive asset on our balance sheet. Bob's reaction was a tonic to morale. 'Let's leave Francis in camp for a quiet day. And the rest of us can nip up to the Phirtse La. Perhaps we'll glimpse K2! The La is only five or six hundred metres above us.' We took one horse, which I mounted for spells of 10-15 minutes, or until the iron crossbars became intolerable to bruised thighs. In a little

over 2½ hours we were up at the La. Our two double-dial 7000m Thommen altimetres gave an adjusted height reading of 5300m +/– 50m. It's a 17,000ft pass, anyway.

Hilary and Bob went up a small peak east of the pass hoping to catch a glimpse of the great peaks of the Karakoram, but remote clouds obstructed their view. As we went down back to camp, I began to consider our options: we had little food and no fuel. The view from Phirtse La was impressive, but the way off the La and down into Zanskar lay over a tilted glacier that looked uninviting. I reckoned we needed seven to eight days more to complete the journey via Phuktal and back over the Shingo La. This looked problematical, to say the least, given the fuel and food situation.

We had been given the opportunity, thanks to Bob Jones, of getting a decent Satellite map from the Library of Congress; but I had decided to refuse it, as the risks from being caught with something like that in such an area were unacceptable. Our rather rudimentary 1:200,000 map indicated an escape route over a very high pass to the west. If surmounted, this could save several days of food and travel and land us in Zanskar at Kargiyah, only a couple of days from the Shingo La, on a route which commercial trekking parties were now using.

I decided it was that or nothing. The next day we struck camp at Chumik Marpo, beginning already to feel hungry; and attacked the climb to a rarely attained goal, the Surichun La. Francis and I took turns on the 'riding horse'. Slowly we gained ground, mounting to the highest rim of the upsweeping landscape. It took 6½ hours of strenuous activity before a panoply of peaks and glaciers started to meet our gaze. The horses were stopping to pant, with rasping breath, every minute or so; only a prodigious effort, with pounding hearts, landed us finally, in the late afternoon, on the actual pass of Surichun La, 5760m (18,900ft). On our left and lower down was a wall of ice about 250m high, which we skirted on the descent, to establish camp at 5210m on the Zanskar side. Otherwise we had walked on dry rocks or stones.

Next morning all the streams had frozen solid. It was our highest campsite ever. And we had no fuel. From there we went down on bad ground to a valley which led us in to Kargiyah in southern Zanskar. Our first glimpse of houses and chortens brought us an emotional feeling of reunion. And also a sense of deliverance.

I sent two ponymen to Purne to seek fuel and food. They returned twelve hours later with a little fuel, but no food. A day later we stopped for a midday rest, and exiguous snack, at the spring under the cliffs of the holy peak of Gumbaranjon. All around us were blue poppies. It was an Anniversary – and the day when this traveller was entering the second half of his seventh decade. We celebrated the occasion with one last tin of shrimps and a few biscuits.

Three days later we all made Darsha again, each losers of between 20 and 25lbs; but gainers of memories to bank for ever.

51. Stratified mountain and Rangdom Monastery, Zanskar, 1983. (*Sidney Nowill*) (p228)

52. Tikse Gompa, Ladakh. (*Sidney Nowill*) (p228)

53. Elaine Brook and friend near Rangdom, Zanskar, 1983. (*Sidney Nowill*) (p230)