

UP ABOVE THE WORLD SO HIGH



The climbers feel the strain, as they ascend in the swirling mist and snow of the oxygen-deprived environment at a height of 6,000 metres. PICS/STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

Type: **ADVENTURE**
Best from: **DELHI**
You need: **10 DAYS**

The year 2010 wasn't good for Leh. Torrential rains in Pakistan spilled over into the region causing floods and landslides that swept away parts of the area. And yet, STEPHEN CUNLIFFE and Leh's locals make a case for trekking to Stok Kangri, a Ladakh peak that stands at a majestic 6,152 metres

SLOWLY, slowly catch the monkey,' was the bizarre mantra reverberating through my oxygen-deprived brain as we approached 6,000 metres above sea level.

Vikram Hirani, one of our Aquaterra mountain guides, had spoken these wise words as we fastened crampons onto our snow boots and roped up at the foot of Stok Glacier, five hours earlier. The words had been bouncing around inside my head ever since.

The altitude and exertion of trudging up the snowy slope ensured it was a constant struggle to stick in enough oxygen. I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as our six-man climbing party plodded onward and upward. As the first glow of dawn pushed back the inky darkness, we were all huffing chain smokers.

Our second guide was the experienced Chain Singh Chawhan. He was a soft-spoken young man with 18 successful summit bids under his belt, so on the rare occasions that he

spoke, we all listened intently. "There is no rush, take your time, take small steps... like baby steps. This makes a huge difference and will help ensure you get to the top."

He finished with the cryptic advice: "The tortoise beats the hare up Stok Kangri every time!"

It almost never happened

A week before we were supposed to fly to Leh for our Stok Kangri climb, disaster struck Ladakh. The torrential rain that had uprooted millions across Pakistan spilled over the border into northern India. Massive thunderstorms and heavy rain triggered flash floods across Ladakh. Villages were washed away, landslides blocked roads, bridges were destroyed and hundreds of lives lost.

Tour operators and travel agents across India scrambled to cancel their Ladakh expeditions. Within days, however, the situation in Leh had stabilised. A massive relief effort was underway and we decided to

buck the cancellation trend and go on.

The sight of vehicles wedged inside buildings, massive boulders strewn along roads provided irrefutable evidence of the ferocity of the floods by the time they hit the downtown areas of the city. Higher up in the tourist zone, there was no indication of the calamity that had ravaged the city barely a week earlier, and the Ladakhi people were unanimously happy to see the few tourists who had stuck with their holiday plans.

Ladakh needs tourists

The words of a local shopkeeper summed up the local sentiment in the face of tragedy: "We all survive off tourists. Visitors come here and spend money and that is what sustains us during the long cold winter. Now everyone is staying away because of the floods and we don't know what we will do."

The bottom line is that the people who cancelled their visits out of respect for the Ladakhi

people, not wanting to burden them during a difficult time, were actually exacerbating the problem. Now is the time to go to Ladakh. It is safe, uncrowded and, by spending your money up there, you can help the locals get back on their feet.

The acclimatisation trek

After a couple of days acclimatising and exploring monasteries, we loaded up the vehicles and followed a bumpy jeep track across the Indus and west to Zingchen where the trek kicked off. The road was washed out before the trailhead, which necessitated a couple of bonus hours of hiking on day one, and plenty of ice-cold stream crossings.

After trekking to Rumbak and over the Stok La at 4,890 metres, we made our way to Mounkarmo and onto Stok Kangri base camp. The scenery was breathtaking and the wildlife, plentiful. Blue sheep picked their way across the steep valley slopes while Himalayan marmots scurried



Frequent stream crossings en route to Stok Kangri base camp necessitate removing hiking boots and roughing it out in the ice-cold glacial melt river water

GETTING THERE

BY AIR:

The only airport is in Leh, less than an hour's drive from the trekking trailhead at Zingchen or Stok village. From Delhi, a spectacular early morning flight (www.flyingfisher.com or www.jetairways.com) skims snowy Himalayan peaks before descending into the Indus Valley and landing at Leh.

RECOMMENDED TOUR OPERATOR:

Aquaterra (www.aquaterra.in) offers an all-inclusive package price for their Stok expeditions. This covers hotels in Leh, all meals, transport, guides and camping equipment, but not flights. Further information at: <http://www.indianhimalayas.net>.

QUICK FACTS

Best time to go:

Ladakh's tourist season runs from June to mid-October, although most people favour the warmer months of July to September.

Where to stay:

Two days acclimatising in Leh is recommended before setting off on the trek. Aquaterra provides hotel accommodation at the Mogol in Leh as part of the package. Thereafter, participants are accommodated in two-man tents. Meals are served as buffets. Hot showers are only available at the hotel in Leh. While on trek, toilets are in the form of rustic, environment-friendly, dry pit latrines.



The trek into the mountains passes through some stunning scenery, marked by razor-sharp ridges juxtaposed against colourful landscapes

down their burrows as we approached.

The base camp had a picturesque setting on a high altitude meadow surrounded by towering snowy peaks. This campsite became our base for the next four days as we adjusted to walking at altitude. We used the Stok Glacier above the camp to test our climbing equipment and practiced walking in snowshoes with crampons. It was necessary preparation for the summit bid that lay ahead.

The climb is not technical, but the challenge is the altitude and the lack of oxygen. A reasonable degree of fitness is important, but acclimatisation is the key to a 6,000-metre climb.

Entering the realm of the Gods

On a Friday, at 10 pm, we set off from camp on what would prove to be a 14-hour-long trip slog to the summit. We reached the foot of the glacier at midnight and stopped to attach crampons and rope up for the journey across the ice. Under the expert guidance of two seasoned climbing guides, we intrepid amateurs felt quietly confident as we jumped across a small crevice, and struck out over the ice. It was an unforgiv-

What to do:

Apart from an acclimatisation trek that is needed for the Stok Kangri ascent, visits to gompas (monasteries) and villages (like Stok) add a fascinating cultural dimension to any Ladakh expedition.

Trekking technicalities:

The trekking camp in Leh should provide all technical climbing gear. In addition to personal items and toiletries, bring a good pair of boots, wind/water-proof jacket, and headlamp, as well as a hat, sun block and sunglasses. Warm clothing, thermals and a cosy sleeping bag are essential.



Arya Kapadia with his father at one of the many Antarctic islands

FIRST PERSON

Take your kid to the South Pole

Six-year-old Arya Kapadia has gone where few kids his age do — the Antarctica. You and your kid can do it too. Just pack anti-nausea tablets and a camera to capture penguins, whales, and of course, blinding white ice

AMRITA BOSE

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ARYA Kapadia isn't like most six year olds. During a holiday this January, he wasn't reading books, playing, or taking classes. The Juhu resident was unfurling the Indian tricolour on the far-flung, snowy terrains of Antarctica, along with his family.

His mother and commercial artist Rima Kapadia has travelled to various corners of the globe with her family. Ask her why Antarctica for a family vacation and she says, "We (her parents, sister and husband) always wanted to travel to the South Pole after watching shows on National Geographic channel. That was the inspiration."

No strangers to globe trotting, the Kapadias did their homework online, and booked themselves on the Prince Albert II cruise liner, one of the only cruises that allow children as young as Arya to be onboard. "Children below the age of eight are usually not allowed to travel to Antarctica because of extreme weather conditions. They are not allowed to set foot on the islands, but we were keen that Arya should experience it. We made a request and it was granted," she says.

After making pit stops in Brazil and Argentina, the family flew to Ushuaia, the southern most Argentinian town in the Southern Hemisphere, from where they set sail on a 10-day cruise. The first challenge was



WHEN TO GO: The ideal time to visit Antarctica is between March and November (summer months). This is the season when there is sunlight for most of the day (20 hours), icescapes are on view and you can spot whales and watch penguins hatch.

GETTING THERE: The closest land mass to Antarctica is South America which is about 620 miles (nearly 1,000 km) away from the Antarctic Peninsula. You can fly to any of the South American countries (Brazil, Argentina, Chile), then to Ushuaia in Argentina, from where you can sail on a cruise liner.

Alternatively, you can fly into Antarctica from Punta Arenas in Chile to Frei Station on King George Island, the largest island on the South Shetland Archipelago. However, children are not allowed on these flights.

Air: Master Holidays, 114, 22 D, Wadia Building S A Berli Road (22048050/22856297) arranges flights from Mumbai to Argentina, Chile and Brazil and then further on to Antarctica.

Sail: It is best to do your own research on the Internet, read blog reviews and recommendations and book online for cruises. Log on to www.silverships.com or www.alaskabysea.com

WHAT TO PACK: Since temperatures run in extremes even in summer (minus 40 degrees), dressing up in layers of woollens is a must. You'll need two thermal layers (foundation layer) under tops, pants, socks and gloves, two light knits for the middle layer (insulating layer) and two pullovers (outer or shell layer) topped by a parka usually provided by the cruise liner. Invest in sturdy boots and special sun deflecting sunglasses since the sun will pierce your eyes thanks to the depletion of the Ozone layer.

BACHCHA PARTY: If you are travelling with children, carry hand and foot warmers, anti nausea wristbands and anti nausea shots. Nutribars can be carried along with medicines and a first aid kit. Yellow Fever shots need to be taken before flying to South America.