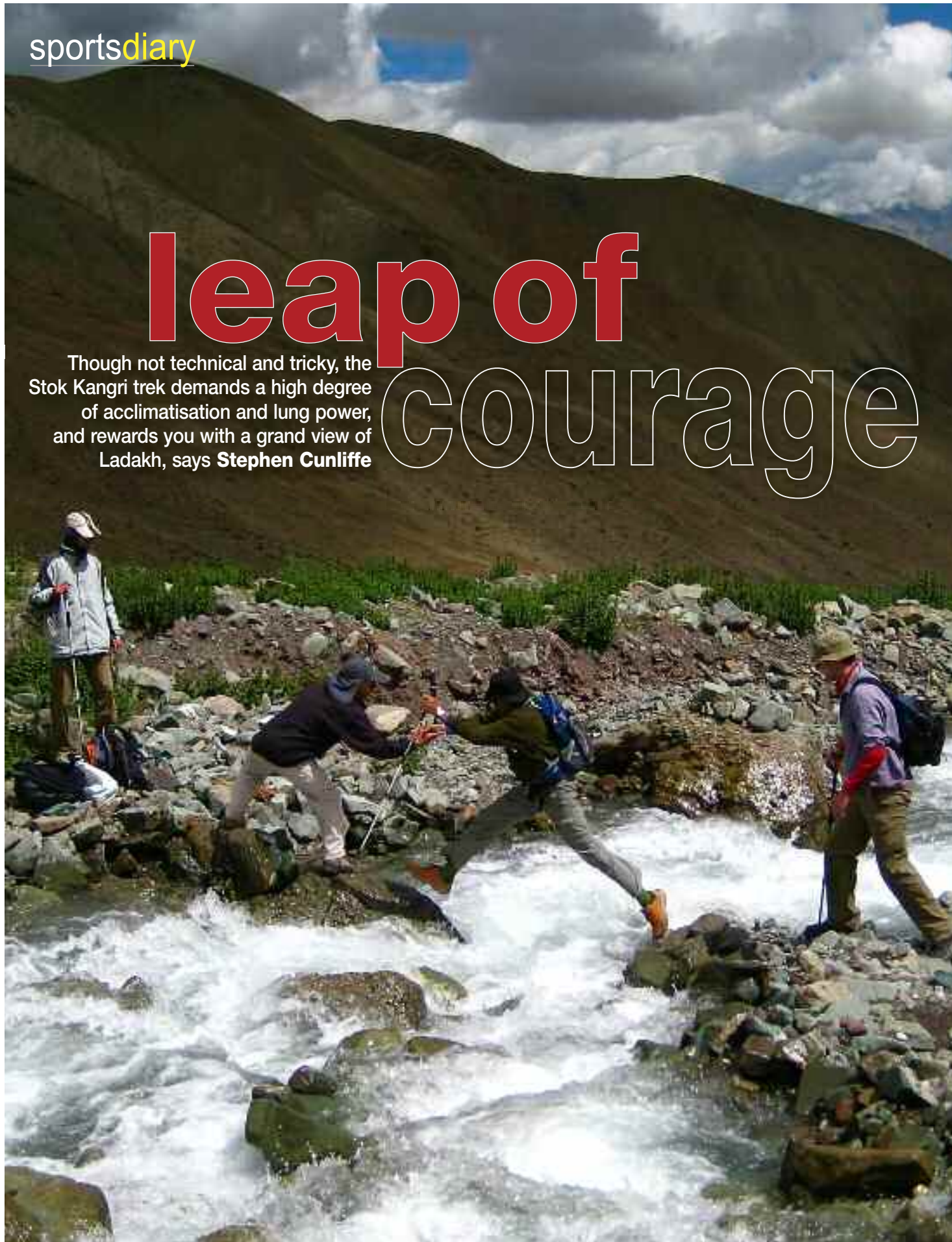


leap of courage

Though not technical and tricky, the Stok Kangri trek demands a high degree of acclimatisation and lung power, and rewards you with a grand view of Ladakh, says **Stephen Cunliffe**



BRAVING CHALLENGES: (Clockwise from facing page) The team crosses one of the numerous shallow streams during the approach trek; climber Ben Sheppard rests on the crest of the 4,890 m Stok La pass; breakfast time at the base camp



It felt as if I were floating through a dream. 'Slowly, slowly catch the monkey' was the bizarre mantra reverberating through my oxygen-befuddled brain as we neared 6,000 m above sea level. Vikram Hirani, one of our guides, had spoken these mysterious words of wisdom as we had fastened crampons onto our snow boots and roped up at the foot of Stok glacier five hours ago. The altitude and exertion of trudging up the steep snowy slope ensured it was a never-ending struggle to suck in sufficient oxygen to remain mentally sharp. I concentrated only on putting one foot in front of the other as our six-man climbing party plodded steadily onward and upward. As the first glow of dawn pushed back the inky blackness, we were all huffing and puffing like a gang of hardened *bidi* smokers.

Our second guide was the experienced Chain Singh Chawhan – a soft-spoken young man with 18 successful Stok Kangri summit bids under his belt. So, on the rare occasions that he opened his mouth, 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.'

AN ADVENTURE THAT ALMOST NEVER HAPPENED

In August 2010, 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. Entire villages were washed away, landslides blocked roads, bridges were destroyed and hundreds of lives were 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 our group of intrepid mountain climbers decided to buck the cancellation trend and travelled to Leh anyway. Ladakhi people were happy to see the trickle of die-hard tourists who had stuck with their holiday plans and had come to visit Ladakh.

TREKKING AIDS

Most mountaineers opt to tackle Stok Kangri between mid-July and early September. The Aquaterra team in Leh provides all technical climbing gear. However, in addition to personal items and toiletries, you must bring a good pair of walking boots, wind/waterproof jacket and headlamp, as well as a hat, sun block and sunglasses. Warm clothing, thermals and a cosy sleeping bag are essential.



VARIED EXPERIENCES:

(Clockwise from top)
Climbers at the knife-edged ridge take in the Stok glacier down below; a Buddhist monk chants in Ladakh's Thiksey Monastery; after being nearly 12 hours on their feet, the team collapses in the snow to rest awhile



TOURISTS FOR LADAKH

The words of a Ladakhi shopkeeper summed up the local viewpoint in the face of the terrible calamity that had befallen them: 'We rely on tourists to survive. Visitors come here and spend money and that is what sustains us during the long, cold winters. Now everyone is staying away because of the flood 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 and perpetuating their woes.

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 for the start of our trek. The road was washed out before the trailhead, and meant a couple of 'bonus' hours of hiking and crossing numerous ice-cold streams on day one. After trekking to Rumbak and over the Stok La pass at 4,890 m, we made our way to Mounkarmo and onto Stok Kangri base camp. The scenery en route was truly breathtaking and the wildlife plentiful. Blue sheep picked their way across the steep valley slopes while Himalayan marmots scurried down their burrows as we approached.

The base camp had a picturesque setting on a high altitude meadow surrounded by towering snow-capped peaks, and it became our adopted home for the next four days as we adjusted to the challenges of hiking and climbing at altitude. We used the Stok glacier above the camp to test our climbing equipment and practice walking in snowshoes with crampons. It was essential to heed to the training and advice of our instructors as we prepared for the tough summit bid that lay ahead. The climb is not technical; the challenge is the altitude and lack of oxygen. A reasonable degree of fitness is essential, but acclimatisation is the real key to the success for any mountain climb going above 6,000 m.

WHAT TO DO

Beside an acclimatisation trek that is built into a Stok Kangri ascent, visits to *gompas* (monasteries) and villages (like Stok) add a fascinating cultural dimension to the expedition

OPERATOR

Aquaterra Adventures (www.aquaterra.in). For further information, you can also log on to www.indianhimalayas.net or contact Fay Singh (fay@aquaterra.in) for reservation enquiries.





MISSION ACCOMPLISHED: (Clockwise from facing page) The doughty mountaineers savour the conquest of their first major obstacle — the 4,890-m Stok La; climbing guide Chain Singh Chawhan and the author stand alongside the knot of windswept prayer flags; climbers descending after a successful summit bid

ENTERING THE REALM OF GODS

At 10 pm on Friday, the 20th of August, we set off from the base camp on what would prove to be an exhausting 14-hour round trip to the summit. We reached the foot of the glacier at midnight, and stopped to attach crampons and rope up for the precarious journey across the ice. Under the expert guidance of our two seasoned Stok Kangri climbing guides, our group of four intrepid amateurs felt quietly confident as we jumped across a small crevasse and struck out into an unforgiving environment of snow and slippery ice interspersed with patches of exposed rock.

Throughout the night, we continued climbing in the dim glow of our headlamps. Eventually, shortly before dawn, we reached a knife-edged ridge with steep drops falling away on either side. After a careful traverse of the ridge and a scramble over treacherous rocky outcrops covered by loose scree, a final push through fresh calf-deep snow carried us onto the 6,153-m snowy summit.

STANDING ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Our celebrations on reaching the top were anything but raucous as everyone collapsed in the snow worn out and gasping for air. It took real effort simply to gather the tired troops for a victorious summit photo. After a half hour on the top of Kanglacha, we departed the realm of the gods and retraced our steps to a more hospitable altitude. Descending in the daylight, we enjoyed spectacular views down onto the glacier bowl, and I couldn't help but notice that our route descended between the debris of two recent avalanches!

Climbing Stok Kangri, the most accessible trekking peak in Ladakh, proved a simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting adventure, but slowly, slowly we caught that monkey and our reward was the privilege of briefly standing up above the clouds so high. 🇮🇳

GETTING THERE

The Leh airport is less than an hour's drive from the trekking trailhead at Zingchen or Stok village. Kingfisher and Jet Airways fly to Leh.

Where to stay and eat:

The tour operator provides hotel accommodation at the Mogol in Leh as part of the package. Thereafter, participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents. Meals are served as tasty buffets. While on the trek, toilets are in the form of rustic, environmentally friendly, dry pit latrines.

Best time to go:
July to September