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## WHY WE TRAVEL

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WE TRAVEL FOR  
ADVENTURE

# A RIVER OF STORIES

Manu Joseph treks the frozen Zaskar River in Kashmir and finds there is magic, beauty and humour even in the most arduous journey. Photographs by Olivier Föllmi



Frozen river, brown cliffs and other trekkers: this is a world that is



quiet. In places, a fluid strand of the river roars and vanishes below the ice

**H**e says magic is a lazy way of telling a story. It is reasonable, then, that he would have quarrels with supernatural tales,

like *The Famished Road* by Ben Okri, which opens with these words: “In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.”

How can a river become a global road, and how can it be hungry? As in sports, he says, doping should be condemned in literature, too. But there are times when even a person like him accepts that magic poetry may describe an irrefutable reality. A truth that can be framed by a poet’s hallucination has to be exquisite—or terrifying. At the moment, what he feels is terror. He is about to walk on a road; the road was once a river.

In the winter, the rivers of the Himalayas freeze. There is one that becomes a narrow, serpentine road of ice. Beneath the ice, the river trickles, flows, gushes, but the surface is hard and the mountain people who live near its banks have learnt how to walk on it. And they walk great distances for mundane reasons. Sometimes they burst into a run even though they have time for everything. They carry enormous things on their backs or in a sleigh on which, among the utensils and vegetables, sit their children, who have blood-red cheeks as though they’ve been slapped. The snow leopards and foxes, too, know how to walk on the ice road.

He has, after not much thought, decided to walk on the frozen river for eight days. Much can go wrong. Because the road was once a river, it would be always hungry.

When he told his wife about the walk, she took him to see an ancient astrologer. Is there a fault in his stars, Masterji, that indicates death by drowning? Or by falling hard on ice, perhaps? Such mishaps have occurred on the river. The old sage, wearing a shirt too large and billowing trousers, made some rough charts and said, as though stating an obvious fact, “He is half-man-half-horse.” Across the table, the half-man-half-horse imagined

himself as a creature with the upper half of an ass and the lower half of a Tamil software engineer. But a moment later, a more aesthetic, classical image came to him—of the upper half of a muscular man and the lower quadruped body of a horse. That was how he learnt he was Centaur.

Centaur was passing through a period of strife, the astrologer said.

“Is it then an inauspicious time for him to be walking on a river?”

“There is no such thing as inauspicious,” the astrologer said.

“There is only time.”

The walk is known as the Chadar Trek. ‘Chadar’ means blanket in Hindi. A trail on a blanket of ice over the moving waters of the Zaskar River in the Ladakh region. That is what it is. If the ice is not well formed on the river, the blanket is deceptively thin in places and one may fall into the cold waters. If the ice is obviously thin, the trekkers have to walk on the walls of steep cliffs to reach the firmer parts of the river. On some stretches of the river, the cliffs are too steep for humans to walk on, so they have to wait for days before hard ice forms. According to a legend, if a couple makes love on the Zaskar, the ice on the river would not be thick. Centaur has faith in the ability of women to abstain from sex in almost extraterrestrial conditions, but he does not trust men to be wise.

A week after Centaur realised he was Centaur, one cold night in Delhi, as he shuddered beneath four layers of clothing, he checked the temperature. It was 4°C. In the Zaskar region, the temperature can dip to -30 at night. The freezer of his refrigerator is at -18. What tropical Centaur had agreed to was a walk inside a gigantic freezer for several days and nights. He wondered if he should abort the walk. He needed an honourable reason to cancel the trip, like a fracture or a relative’s death.

But there were no misfortunes, and this morning he sits in a packed flight to Leh, a town in the Ladakh region of Jammu & Kashmir. This is his first trek.

As the plane soars over Delhi, he can see a small ridge below. The Delhi Ridge, just a few metres high, is the final, tame end of the oldest mountain range in India, the Aravallis, which are

believed to have formed close to 1.5 billion years ago. In their youth, those mountains may have stood thousands of metres high, but now they are mere mounds or city pebbles. Is this the fate of all great mountains?

Centaur is going from the tip of India’s oldest mountain range to its youngest, the Himalayas, which are believed to have formed about 50 million years ago.

Leh is a tiny human settlement in the Himalayas, about 11,480ft above sea level. The air is clear, the sun harsh, the day lit like afterlife. Centaur feels as though his eyesight has improved. The eye sees great distances in Leh and what it sees are vast flatlands and desert mountains and many hues of brown. A notice in the tiny airport dissuades new arrivals from any exerting activity. It reminds him of an unfamiliar fatigue in his chest, as though he is in the embrace of a large, invisible woman. The fatigue grows as he reaches the hotel in the heart of Leh, a tourist district that is filled with cafés and shops on narrow lanes, most of them shut for the winter. Somewhere an ice hockey game is underway; two girls with long, flailing hair glide with the boys.

In the modest hotel, a small team of trekkers is assembled on the lawns, drinking hot tea. Among them are two men who suspect they are alphas. They are an uncle-nephew pair separated by less than 20 years, who possess the absolute Punjabi confidence in their assumption that everyone is interested in their anecdotes. All conversations are about their previous and future treks. After Chadar, they say, they are flying from Leh to Srinagar to snowboard on the slopes of Gulmarg.

The uncle is in his mid-forties and has a large paunch, which should reassure everyone that adventure need not be the privilege of the fit alone. Everyone calls him Mamu because that’s what his nephew calls him. Mamu manufactures crankshafts in Aurangabad, where he lives. His nephew is Bhanja, who imports chemicals. Bhanja, who is bearded, stylish and lean, with a mop of silky hair, is in his late twenties. He is asthmatic, but the condition does not dissuade him from long arduous treks. He once walked to Stok Kangri, one of the few summits in the Himalayas →



that can be reached without rock-climbing even though the peak is over 16,400ft above sea level. He realises that his achievement is diminished by the fact that he could get a mobile signal on the summit. "Very faint signal and only in one spot," he says. After over 10 days of trekking, when he finally reached the summit, he took out his phone and called his girlfriend, who said, "Can I call you back? I am in a meeting." After he got off the mountain, he broke up with her.

He is on Tinder, and observes that there are some women in Leh who are on the dating app. "But they are girls from Delhi who are probably here for the Chadar Trek."

Among the trekkers are two farmers. One grows rice and genetically modified cotton in Haryana. The other was once an insurance executive. ("Housewives are not insured for high sums because they

The trekkers would carry only a daypack and their boots. They are in the care of one of the finer adventure companies in India, Aquaterra Adventures, which is expensive. The company charges about ₹84,000 to take a person on the trek. Most outfits do the job in under ₹20,000, but as would be evident in the days to come, their trekkers would get what they paid for.

Aquaterra's trekkers would stay in Leh for two nights to acclimatise in high altitude before setting out. They would take two or three hours from Leh to reach the part of the river where the trek begins. Long before that, they would lose mobile signal. From there, for eight days and eight nights, as they walk about 80km on the river, they will be completely cut off from the outside world. If they suffer a serious injury, they will have to be carried in the arms of villagers for hours, or even days, to a vehicle. If anything bad happens back home, they

ashamed, because he has read that the sickness can strike even Olympic athletes. In a few hours, Laughing Buddha, too, is struck. The next day, Cleo falls.

But on the third morning, everybody appears to be in good health. They are on the phone, saying goodbye to their families. After this moment, they would not be speaking into a phone for over a week.

They leave Leh in cars. On the way, they see a group of men burning something on the back of a pick-up truck to warm the frozen fuel below. It is that cold, but it is day, the sun strong. It is many degrees warmer than a normal winter night on the river.

The road built by the Army runs dead straight for many miles through wasteland towards barren mountains. In about two hours, they are driving beside the winding Zaskar River, on a road carved out of cliffs. The river is frozen, but they still have some way to go before the trek begins. The

## Their world is now simple. Bare, conical mountains, sheer cliffs, frozen river, ravens in the clear blue sky. And them

would get murdered.") All through his working life he saved, never bought a car ("I never buy anything that depreciates in value.") and accumulated over 100 acres of land in Andhra Pradesh where, in a portion, he grows eucalyptus trees.

And there is one middle-aged Gentleman from Delhi. ("It is politically incorrect to use the term 'Eskimo'; 'Inuit' is better.") He procures organic produce from villagers and sells it to the urban consumer.

A young woman, an ad film-maker from Mumbai who was once a state-level rower, is missing at the table. She enters the scene a few minutes later, without disturbing the air around her. She exhibits the amused acceptance of a woman who has always been regarded as 'one of the boys'. And she plays the part. ("I never use sunscreen.") In a few days, an old Dutch trekker on the frozen river, struck by her face, would call her Cleopatra.

Cleo, Mamu, Bhanja, Bt Cotton Farmer, Eucalyptus Farmer, Gentleman and Centaur would be led by two guides, one of whom is stout and jovial, and closely resembles a Laughing Buddha. There would be three cooks, and 19 porters to carry the luggage and provisions that would include over two hundred eggs and meat. As required by law and common sense, the porters would be locals of the Ladakh region.

may not know for about a week. The handlers do not have the licence yet to use satellite phones, banned in India for civilian use.

As night falls in Leh and the temperature dips, a mountain gloom fills the air. And there is the miasma of fear. On WhatsApp, the news coming from the frozen river, through trekkers who have just returned to other hotels in Leh, is grim. The ice is not well formed. (People have been fornicating on the river, surely, Centaur mutters.) The ice is so slippery, many trekkers have fallen. A triumphant middle-aged woman reveals that she had fallen badly thrice. It appears that a fall is inevitable. What happens after that is a matter of luck. You may rise and pat your buttocks, or you may not rise. There is a white woman stranded in a village on the frozen river, who has dislocated her shoulder and is awaiting a helicopter rescue. Sooner or later, everyone realises a simple fact about the Chadar Trek — the smallest misfortune would escalate into a serious condition.

After dinner, Centaur throws up. He has acquired altitude sickness, which is an impact of low air pressure on the body. The other trekkers are a bit worried because they wonder if Centaur is one of those fragile people who would be a burden on the rest. But he is not

road turns into a broken road, which leads to a dirt track, which begins to narrow. Their world is now simple. Bare, conical mountains, sheer cliffs, frozen river, ravens in the clear blue sky. And them. That's it. At least as far as the eye can see.

The trek will begin where the motorable dirt track ends. The government plans to build a road that would stretch all along the river. It would transform the region, enrich children and bring jobs—but it would end the Chadar Trek. "Who would want to walk on a frozen river watching trucks go by?" Laughing Buddha says. But he has faith in the incompetence of the government. "They may take more than 10 years to build that road. They may even take forever."

Down a bend, all of a sudden, the seeming isolation of the trekkers ends. There is a long line of vehicles carrying other trekkers and there appears to be a traffic jam on the narrow track. The trekkers get off the vehicles and begin to walk. To their left, many metres below, is the frozen river. Scores of trekkers are already on the ice, shuffling along. Centaur sees a boy fall on his back. "There must be a thousand trekkers on Chadar right now," someone says. Someone else says, "I hate to say this, but the government should make this trek expensive; that is the only way to save Chadar." →





The seven trekkers reach a point on the bank where, if they wish to proceed, they have no choice but to walk on the frozen river. And just like that their Chadar Trek begins.

The river is solid. It is, without doubt, firm ground. But the ice is wet and the slightest loss in concentration would result in a fall. They walk slowly, trekking poles stabbing hard ice, boots scraping the ground in a slow penguin shuffle, as though the penguin is searching for its lost house key. So this is what it is. It has begun, they accept. They walk upstream. They would be walking upstream for another three or four days, covering over 40km and

have just begun their trek wonder if this is their fate, too.

Night falls and, the temperature dips so low that when Centaur spits on his sunglasses to clean them, he only scrapes saline icicles on the glasses. The gadgets that the trekkers have brought to measure the temperature are not working as they should because of the cold. The guides guess that the figure is probably -20°C.

In a high canvas tent, the trekkers sit in a huddle around a steaming kettle. Mamu and Bhanja talk about their favourite topic: Mamu and Bhanja.

Gentleman has assumed the role of their fan. Eucalyptus Farmer, whom

suffering. Camping is abject poverty. There are two people in every synthetic tent, which is about 4ft high. One has to crawl in, leaving one's feet outside to remove one's shoes, crawl further in, try to unzip the sleeping bag with numb lifeless fingers, remove some layers of clothes, wear a thin sleeping bag liner, and entomb oneself inside the bag, parts of which may feel damp. To urinate, men may aim at a pee-bottle unless they wish to crawl out into the extreme cold and head towards the toilet-tent, which is a hole in the ground with a toilet seat on top. Women, too, can use a pee-bottle, but they have to then urinate into a funnel.

## The Chadar Trek is as much about fellow trekkers as it is about the frozen river. Much can go wrong

climbing a few hundred metres in the process; then they would begin walking back downstream. Often, they are overtaken by a current of porters, carrying huge backpacks or pushing sleighs, yelling to each other in a good-natured way or singing to themselves. It is as though the porters are walking on a very different terrain. On occasion female porters would glide past as fast carrying objects as massive.

The first day is going to be light. A few hundred metres after they begin the trek, they reach their campsite. They would walk no more for the day. The porters and cooks, who had reached ahead, have set up tents. The rocky bank is littered with dozens of tents. As evening grows, there is a steady stream of trekkers who are going downstream, which means they are returning to the finishing line. Their trek is over, but there is no euphoria on their faces. They look as though they are walking to a lecture on 'Does the Subaltern Speak?' After over a week of walking, falling, sleeping in tents, defecating in extreme cold, as their ordeal ends, nothing shows on their faces. Centaur wonders if most known human expressions are, in fact, inventions of melodramatic actors. What if the truth is that humans, in their deepest moments, do not make faces at all?

Among those who are returning is one young man whose hand is in a sling. He is in pain. As he walks slowly on the frozen river, a hundred pairs of eyes observe him from the bank. Those who

Mamu and Bhanja have pronounced team jester, gets deeper into the part as he narrates stories of his global travels, which includes his stay in a luxury tent that had a "swimming pool inside". Bt Cotton Farmer is a quiet listener whose opinions are not known. Cleo thinks it is polite to laugh at the jokes of the men.

Centaur watches everyone with hawkish eyes and a face that never smiles, probably to masquerade hysterical laughter deep inside his being. He hopes that they don't start singing, or worse, playing antakshari. He dreads the sight of men drinking, licking pickles, nibbling junk and singing badly. He particularly loathes the moment when a quiet social underdog unleashes his soaring voice for his imagined moment of fame.

The Chadar Trek is as much about fellow trekkers as it is about the frozen river. Much can go wrong, not only on the river in the daytime, but also in the tents in the night. In stressful conditions, people tend to gang up and find someone to bully. Or drunken fights can break out. There is news from another campsite that a few Kashmiris have begun to annoy their teammates by raising slogans against India. Centaur shakes with laughter.

The trekkers step out to see the night sky, which always startles city people. For several minutes, they are unable to take their eyes off the stars. Someone sees a falling star. Another claims to have spotted the International Space Station. This is joy, everything else is

Centaur is distraught at having to share a tent. He says you go into a tent as trekkers and come out as spouses.

As the night grows, everyone sleeps listening to discreet farts, triumphant farts, animal snores and fully formed sentences about deep wishes. But they are in the lap of luxury compared to most of the other trekkers on the bank. The cheap operators have stuffed three or more per tent. At least the sardines have a tent. An hour ago, Gentleman had met a group of young men and women who were lost because they could not find their guides and porters. They were wandering on the bank of the frozen river with no food or shelter or any idea what they were going to do in the night. Hundreds like them, who had paid low-budget operators, would spend the next few days falling on ice because of poor guidance, and subsisting on Maggi and eggs. Team Aquaterra, on the other hand, would be served chicken biryani, cheese omelette, pasta, pizza, dal-rice and even desserts, including rasgulla.

In the morning, the trekkers set out wearing cheap gumboots that they had bought in Leh for ₹400 a pair. The fancier trekking boots they had brought along are tied to their backpacks, adding to the weight they carry. The news is that the river is slushy in parts, hence the cheap gumboots. What they do not know right now is that they will be walking in gumboots all through the trek, except for a short stretch on the →

final day. That would mean, according to Centaur's calculation, he would have carried the trekking boots more than the boots carried him.

Before they start the walk, they sit on the rocks and wear crampons, which is probably the ugliest word in the English language. Spikes that are fitted to the shoes, these vastly improve one's grip on ice, and most people who fell may not have fallen if they had been wearing crampons.

The arch-guide on the trek is a local named Dorjee, who is now introduced to the team. He is about 40, beautiful and has red teeth. He is in several layers of tattered clothes and is carrying a huge backpack that may weigh about 20kg. He walks ahead carrying a stick, with which he strikes the river to deduce from the sound if the ice is as hard as it appears. He does not wear a crampon, none of the locals seem to respect it.

They begin to walk in a file behind Dorjee. They are now accustomed to the fact that their world is just the frozen river, brown cliffs and other trekkers. And this is a world that is quiet. In places, a fluid strand of the river roars and vanishes below the ice.

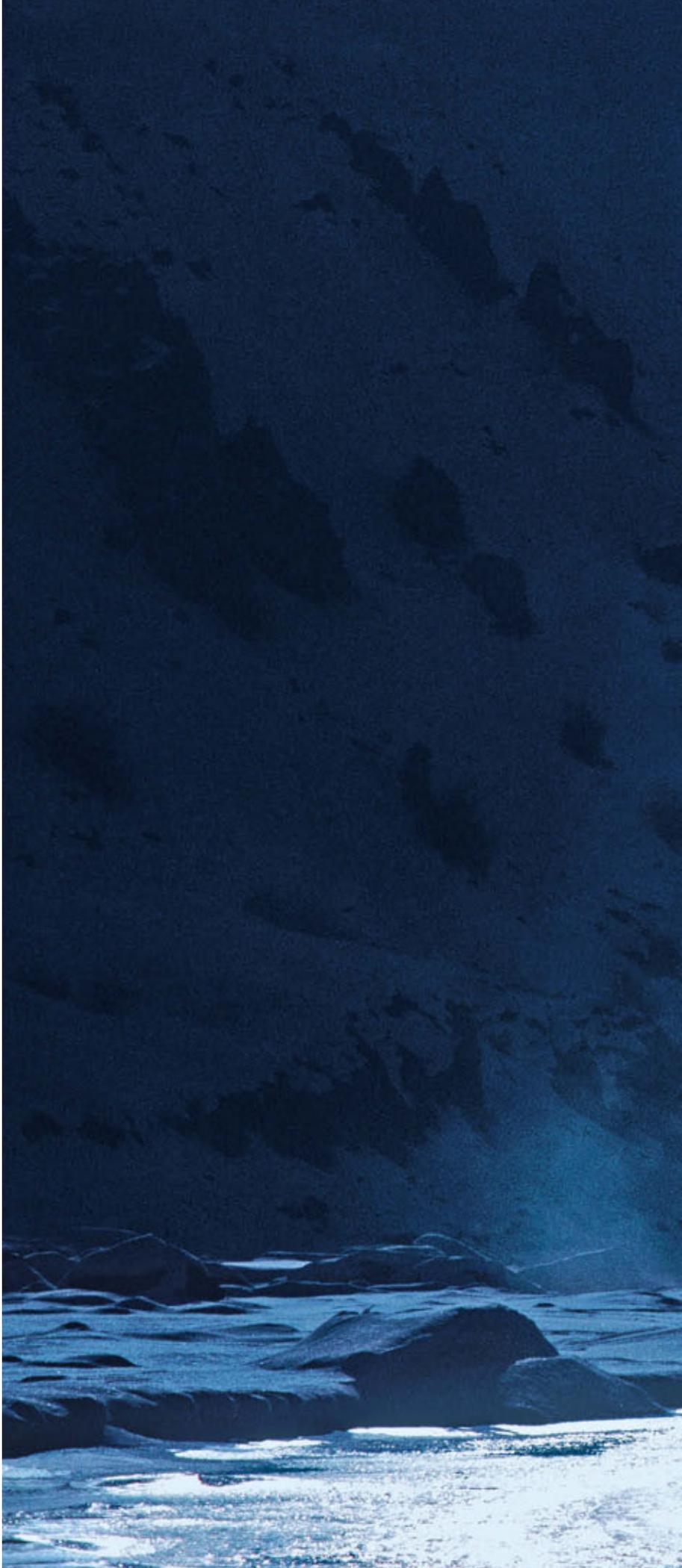
Their peace is shaken when they reach a bend in the river. There are scores of trekkers on the wall of the cliff. The ice on the river is too thin and everyone has to scale the foot of the cliff and walk across the slope until they reach firm river again. The cliff wall is steep and the trekkers move along a narrow path with great care. A slip can send them tumbling 50ft below, into the river. There are trekkers in both directions. The path is so narrow and there are so many people that someone screams, "Odd-Even please!" That is the only moment of mirth. Otherwise, the situation is tense. A young man screams, "Let us pass, my cousin is bleeding, my cousin has fallen, he is bleeding!"

Beyond the narrow pass, the river is solid, but the ice is very slippery. A young woman falls hard and sits on the ice in shock or pain. Cleo slips into a puddle of cold water. Mamu, too. Laughing Buddha, too. Centaur walks with great care behind Dorjee watching people fall every now and then. A porter, who is running, overtakes him and says something to Dorjee, gesticulating that someone behind us has fractured his hand. After a few minutes, Dorjee careens and falls. But he rises. Several hundred metres later, Centaur finds a cluster of red spots on the ice. Laughing Buddha appears behind him and says, "It's nothing, just tomato juice."

"Would someone be walking on the river drinking tomato juice? Wouldn't it be frozen?"

"It's tomato juice. Keep walking."

There are two choppers in the sky. Centaur wonders if they are on a rescue operation. "Just sorties," Laughing Buddha says. "Keep walking." →





A file of young men overtakes them. They are in smart gear and walking fast on crampons. They are a gang of winter studs in dark glasses. One of them is a short, bearded man who takes a long look at Cleo. The stud gang races ahead. Later, as they are resting by the rocks, Bearded Stud would approach the men of Team Aquaterra. Just a friendly chat in the hope that they would introduce him to Cleo. But Indian men don't easily introduce a feral stud to a woman in their caravan. Over the next few days, the Bearded Stud would surface a few times; he would approach the men and throw long glances at Cleo, but she would not come to know of his existence. She is often preoccupied with adjusting her inner gloves, outer gloves or cap, or studying the display of her serious camera.

Everybody on the banks thinks, or hopes, they are going to fall. They don't.

The trek has the quality of family life; your opinion on whether it is beautiful or miserable can keep changing in the course of a single day. The trekkers have figured out how things are going to be. In the day, the trek would be nervous, thrilling and beautiful. The trek would be the easy part. The nights would be tough.

They slowly make their way into the hypnotic visual monotony of the gorge, watching cliff faces, stunning waterfalls, gushing waters that appear to dive into the ice, and strange ice formations as though Superman has hidden Kryptonite here. On the days when the ice is dry and easy to walk on, they chat as they go. Cleo is telling someone that the toughest part of shooting a hair-gel

survey him. Still, nobody introduces them. Centaur cannot take it anymore. He is about to introduce them when Eucalyptus Farmer walks into the tent. When he sees Stud in their midst, he lets out a laugh, looks at Cleo and smiles at Stud. Stud is shamed. He leaves without a word. But in the days that follow, he finds the courage to return, he finds ways to greet the trekkers and he throws glances at Cleo, who would be fighting with her gloves or cap, or shooting pictures.

On the final day, 10 days after they landed in Leh, they walk the final stretch towards the end of the trek. Centaur tries to imagine his own face. He accepts that there is no expression on his face, nothing that shows his happiness at having witnessed extraordinary beauty, walked on a

## When night falls, the temperature dips so low that when Centaur spits on his sunglasses to clean them, he only scrapes saline icicles on the glasses

In the night, Team Aquaterra seeks refuge in the high tent. They sit in a huddle around the steaming kettle. And they talk, chiefly, of course, about Mamu and Bhanja.

"I am done with one-night stands," Bhanja proclaims. "I want a steady relationship."

"Why do you want to bring home a cow when you can get milk in the shop?" Mamu asks. Centaur finds it amusing that the boy's uncle must make this statement, which is an old Hindi saying.

Bt Farmer, in one of his rare utterances, says, "But a time comes in the life of a man when he needs his own cow."

"Guys," says Cleo, who has had enough of the masquerade of 'one of the boys': "What's going on?"

The topics change through the night. They try to keep talking as long as possible to delay the misery of sleeping in these conditions. But the mornings are exquisite. A golden light falls on the cliffs. The river glows. A tall Dutchman walks by, whistling, hands in his pockets. A girl walks downstream with a porter—she's had enough of the trek and is going back home. A newly married couple on the river is taking a selfie. The man, in pink trousers, carries the woman in his arms. She yelps, more than she needs to. Look, she is so happy.

ad is anticipating hairstyles months in advance, because the ads are shot that much before they are released. Often, the styles of actors and Indian cricketers who endorse gels are decided by their contracts with corporations. If they ever shave off their hair, as one actor did, when their ads are released, they lose a lot of money.

Finally, after four days of walking, they reach a village called Nyerak. Here, on the slope of a mountain, there is a huge campsite where scores of trekkers have pitched their tents. Team Aquaterra will stay in a small house, which smells of jaggery. It seems like an exceptional luxury to sleep under a concrete roof.

When day breaks, they begin their retreat. By a frozen waterfall, Centaur is struck by the face of a young man. There is something wrong with that face, but Centaur cannot figure out what it is. Finally, it occurs to him. He goes up to the young man and says, "You shaved? You shaved in this cold? How?" The man, a bit wounded, walks away mumbling, "I used hot water."

Bearded Stud stalks the gang, but he still does not manage to alert Cleo to his existence. One evening, as Team Aquaterra is huddled around the steaming kettle, Stud walks in on the pretext of chatting with the men. Cleo is in the huddle and finally, her eyes

treacherous, frozen river for eight days and completed the expedition without becoming crippled. He wonders, once again, if most human expressions are farces invented by actors.

In a few minutes, they step away from the frozen river onto a dirt track. And just like that, the Chadar Trek is over.

When they reach Leh, they will be reacquainted with their faces, and naked bodies that they have not seen in full length for over a week. And they will bathe and bathe and bathe. They will check their mail and realise that their lives have not been transformed in the days they were away.

At the Leh airport, Bearded Stud, now clean-shaven, finds Cleo. This time, he does not waste time with the unreliable medium of men. He goes up to her and talks. At some point, it appears he is taking down her number. He grins wide. Not every face is the invention of actors. 🍷

### GETTING THERE

Fly to Leh with GoAir ([www.goair.com](http://www.goair.com)) or Jet Airways ([www.jetairways.com](http://www.jetairways.com)) from New Delhi. The 11-day trip with Aquaterra costs ₹84,000 per person, and includes airport transfers to the hotel, three nights in Leh, all meals, guided sightseeing and porter fees for up to 15kg of baggage.

