




Adventure

Walk in the Clouds

Cloudbursts aside, Stok Kangri in Ladakh offers mountaineering opportunities that will shake up the core of any adventurer. And indulge the soul of any weary tourist.

Text & photographs Stephen Cunliffe



“Slowly, slowly catch the monkey” was the bizarre mantra reverberating through my oxygen-deprived brain as we approached 6,000m. Vikram Hirani, one of our 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 inside my head ever since. The altitude and exertion of trudging up the snowy slope ensured it was a constant struggle to suck in 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 and puffing like chain-smokers.

Our second guide was the experienced Chain Singh Chauhan, a soft-spoken and mild-mannered young man with 18 successful summit bids under his belt. So on the rare occasions that he spoke, we all listened intently to the sage advice he shared. “There is no rush, take your time, take small steps ... like baby steps. This will make a big difference and help ensure you make it to the top.” He finished with the cryptic statement, “The tortoise beats the hare up Stok Kangri every time!”

▲ Every vista in Ladakh offers a picture to remember. With many opportunities for trekking, Stok Kangri is one of the popular ones.



The weather plays truant

A week before we were supposed to fly to Leh and embark on our 2010 Stok Kangri climbing expedition, 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 trips.

Within days, however, the situation had stabilised. A massive relief effort was underway and we decided to buck the cancellation trend and head to Ladakh anyway.

The sight of vehicles wedged inside buildings, massive boulders strewn along the roads, and collapsed structures provided irrefutable proof of the scale and ferocity of the floodwater by the time it reached 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 all the locals we spoke to were unanimously happy to see the few tourists who had stuck with their holiday plans and come to visit at this uncertain time.

"Ladakh needs tourists."

The words of a shopkeeper summed up the local viewpoint in the face of the terrible ordeal that had befallen them. "We survive off the 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 flood and



◀ Left (top and bottom): The trek from Stok Kangri passes through hauntingly beautiful river valleys and landscapes of parched high-altitude desert in Ladakh.



▲ Above: After the summit, one can descend the mountain in the daylight and enjoy spectacular views of the glacier bowl.

Below: Last year, Stok Kangri had seen two avalanches, adding yet another difficulty to the gruelling trek.

we don't know what to do." The bottom line is that the people who cancelled their visits out of respect for the Ladakhi people, not wanting to burden them at a difficult time, inadvertently exacerbated the problem and perpetuated their woes. Now, more than ever, is the ideal time to plan a visit to Ladakh. It is safe once again and by heading there you'll be helping the Ladakhis get back on their feet after the challenges of last year.

Getting used to the weather

After a couple of days exploring monasteries and acclimatising to the rarefied air, 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, which necessitated a couple of extra hours of hiking on Day One and wading through plenty of ice-cold stream crossings.

“Climbing Stok Kangri proved a seriously exhilarating and exhausting adventure and our reward was the privilege of entering the realm of the gods as we stood on top of the world.”





▲ Clockwise from above: Donkeys help transport the equipment, tents and food to the Stok Kangri base camp at 4,000m; The idyllic campsite on the outskirts of Stok village is the perfect place to begin or end your climbing expedition; Spending a couple of days visiting *gompas* (monasteries) in the Indus valley and interacting with Buddhist monks is the ideal way to acclimatise to Ladakh's weather.

After trekking to Rumbak and over the Stok La pass at 4,890m, we made our way to Mounkarmo and Stok Kangri Base Camp. The scenery was breathtaking and wildlife plentiful. 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 snowy peaks. This campsite became our base for the next four days as we adjusted to the challenges of walking and climbing at this altitude. We used the Stok Glacier camp to test our climbing equipment and practise walking in snowshoes with crampons. It was an important preparation for the summit bid that lay ahead.

The climb is not technical, but the challenge is the altitude and lack of

oxygen. A reasonable degree of fitness is important, but acclimatisation is the real key to success for any climb going above 6,000m.

As tough as it looks

On 20th August, we set off from camp on what would prove to be a 14-hr round-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 our two seasoned Stok Kangri climbing guides, our group of four intrepid amateurs felt quietly confident as we jumped across a small crevasse. It was an unforgiving terrain of snow and slippery ice interspersed with patches of exposed rock. Throughout the night we climbed with only the dim glow of our headlamps to light the way. Eventually, shortly





before dawn, we reached an exposed ridge with precipitous drops on either side. After a careful traverse of the ridge and a scramble over some treacherous rocky outcrops with loose scree, a final push up a steep icy slope brought us to the 6,153m snow-drenched crest of Stok Kangri.

Standing on top of the world

Climbing Stok Kangri proved a seriously exhilarating and exhausting adventure, but slowly, slowly we caught that monkey and reached the summit. Our reward was the privilege of briefly entering the realm of the gods as we stood on top of the world.

Our celebrations on reaching the peak were anything but raucous as everyone collapsed exhausted in the snow. It took a real effort simply to rally the tired troops for a victorious summit photo. After a half hour on the top, we departed the summit and retraced our steps in search of a more hospitable altitude. Descending in the daylight, I couldn't help but notice that our route back down weaved its way between the debris of two recent avalanches. Mountaineering is certainly not for the faint-hearted.

Whereabouts

Best season to visit

Ladakh's tourist season runs from May to mid-October, although most aspiring mountaineers opt to tackle Stok Kangri between June and September when the weather and snow conditions are optimal.

How to go

Jet Airways has regular flights from Delhi to Leh. From Leh, it is less than an hour's drive to the trekking trailhead at Zingchen or Stok village.

Where to stay

A minimum of two days' acclimatisation is strongly advised before setting off on the trek. Trekking packages often include accommodation in Leh as part of the deal. We stayed in the Mogol Hotel (www.hotelmogol.com) which was comfortable and pleasant. Thereafter, participants are accommodated in two-man dome tents. All meals are served as buffets and hot showers are only available at the hotels in Leh. While on the trek, toilets are in the form of rustic, environmentally-friendly, dry pits.

Trekking technicalities

No prior climbing experience is necessary. Reputable operators such as Aquaterra Adventures (www.aquaterra.in) arrange all permits, technical climbing gear and porters. In addition to personal items and toiletries, bring a good pair of boots, wind/waterproof jacket, and headlamp as well as a hat, sunblock and sunglasses. Warm clothing, thermals and a cosy sleeping bag are essential.

What to do

Aside from the acclimatisation trek that is built into a Stok Kangri ascent, visits to *gompas* (monasteries) and villages add a fascinating cultural dimension to any Ladakh expedition.

Upcoming fixed departures

21st – 30th July and 13th – 22nd August 2011

For more information

www.aquaterra.in
www.jktourism.org