

Audens Col Trek: Sep 2019

When the natural world talks to us, it's usually in whispers that are often lost in the din of our own noise. But sometimes, if you listen very closely, the unmediated drumbeat of nature's heart resonates so loudly in your own being, that you experience an intangible life-altering moment. I count myself fortunate to have experienced one such moment as I undertook the Auden's Col trek in September of 2019.

Preparation for a trek is important. It is also very exciting to beg, borrow or buy and get together all the necessary equipment to have a comfortable trekking experience. Suddenly, the most important thing in your life becomes waterproof shoes! To be at the peak of your levels of endurance and fitness is critical to how much you are going to enjoy your experience. One also needs to be fit for the other members of the group, so that everyone can reach the goal without worrying about the health of others. Ours was a motley crew, of which we were the oldies! On day 1, one of the young boys of our group informed us that this was not really a trek for people past the half century mark. With the spirit of typical youthful immortality, he informed us that 50+ people took a walk in Lodhi Garden! We then had to inform him of our age, whereupon we suddenly became "ma'am" and "sir".



Full of energy and fun!

A common interest group throws together diverse people who come together with a shared passion, regardless of their differences. In an internet driven world, it is so easy to find your tribe, people with shared interests and worldviews. The “cloud” allows you to cross age and social boundaries, to meet likeminded individuals from across the world. Of course, you may count yourself the most fortunate, if you find a life partner or friend who shares your dreams and choices, as it happened for me.

A Long Drive to the Trek Head

As I am often stricken by car sickness, I undertook the 6-hour drive from Dehradun airport to Uttarkashi in a drugged haze. In my few awake moments, I heard the roaring river deep in the valley below as

she wound her way down the mountainside. It was late at night that we reached our destination on the outskirts of Uttarkashi, a picturesque cabin resort surrounded by forests above the river Assi ganga.



River Assi ganga as it winds its way through Uttarkashi

The river Assi ganga begins from Dodital, a high-altitude clear lake in Uttarakhand. The trek to Dodital (which I had done after finishing high-school) is scenic and of moderate difficulty. The river is known for its plentiful trout and other species of fish, but the locals still speak of the flash floods and avalanches in Uttarkashi in 2012 that led to widespread destruction of biodiversity in the river (as also devastation in the town of Uttarkashi, due to rampant and unregularized construction). They claim that it has taken a whole decade for the river to replenish and restore itself after that calamitous event. The Assi ganga joins the Bhagirathi river near Uttarkashi.

The stop in Uttarkashi afforded the last opportunity to have a shower, which I later learned would not be possible for the next two weeks!

Gangotri

Given that the town of Gangotri has such deep religious significance to devout Hindus, it is surprising that the tourism and hospitality infrastructure here is not geared up to its full potential. A single street runs through the town, all the way up to the Gangotri temple, dedicated to the goddess Ganga. The temple stands on the banks of the river, as it tumbles down from its source glacier, 20 kilometres away. We attended the evening “aarti” and I felt myself drawn into the sanctity of the moment. I experienced a deep feeling of purpose of my existence and the grandness of the universe in which we live. I was very shaken by my fanciful thoughts and that (what I consider) the practical and grounded side of my temperament should be so touched.



Evening aarti at the Gangotri temple



Preparations for morning puja, which includes blessing the equipment



Ready for an icy dip

The Tendrils of Shiva

The guides who led us say that every time a trek leaves for Auden's Col, they do a small puja to the Ganga Devi to pray for a successful crossing of the col, free from mishap.

As we sat on the serene "ghaat" of Gangotri, our Panditji educated us on the reason that this area is called the land of the gods, "Dev Bhoomi". He recounted to us the story of virtuous King Bhagirath, whose ancestors were cursed, never to attain "moksh", and which could be only be achieved by submerging their souls in the Ganga. The river goddess agreed to leave her heavenly abode and descend to earth to wash the sins of the lost souls, but she was worried that the earth would not be able to withstand her mighty weight and be washed away. Bhagirath made great penance to the Lord Shiva to let Ganga fall on his mighty head so as to break her fall and allow her to flow down on the earth. The Lord agreed and trapped Ganga in his hair, and through his long tresses, Ganga descended on earth.

The Panditji invoked the blessings of the river to allow us to make safe passage over the mountains. The mountains all around us, had little rivulets and springs flowing down to join the river, evoking the image of Shiva's drenched tendrils.

The icy waters of the glacier, just a few kilometres away, gurgled and skipped under our feet, rushing towards the enormous Suryakund, a natural bowl made by the force of millennia of gushing water. The 80 foot waterfall is the only perennial waterfall of the river and it is believed that the water falls on a submerged Shivling, continuously bathing it in the holy water.



Bhagirathi flowing into the enormous Suryakund

Biodiversity at your fingertips

One of the realizations while trekking in the mountains is the recognition of how little one actually needs to survive, and even thrive! Good guides leading treks such as this are trained to learn about the devastating impact that man can have on nature. It was greatly stressed to us that no waste would be left behind. Not just this, our crew collected any garbage left along the way by previous trekkers. The responsibility of leaving the place as pristine as we had found it, was placed on each one of us, and had far reaching impact in making us realise that we are one with the cycle of nature, and not outside of it.

Over the next three days, we walked past dense birch forests, teeming with incredible birds and wild mountain sheep, on steep paths and crossed the river on precariously placed logs to over the tree line. All along, we were seldom out of sight of the Lord Shiva's tangled icy coils. The most incredible aspect of this trek is the complete isolation right from the start. There is no habitation, no nomadic people and no resultant sign of human deposits along the entire journey. It's just the upper reaches of the lush Himalayas, the way it's been since its very conception; bountiful mother nature with rich flora and fauna.



Precariously placed log bridge coming up..



Cross and climb



Dense forests with narrow trails

It was a steep walk to the Gangotri-1 base camp. The Gangotri range of mountains (not to be mistaken with the town of Gangotri or the Bhagirathi river glacier) are a series of three snow-capped peaks. Nestled between these peaks on one side and the Rudragaira peak on the other, is a beautiful meadow on which we camped for two nights to acclimatise. Surrounded by these giants and splendid views, we were exposed to the sounds and colours of nature in its most pristine form. Waking up in the early morning to be served hot coffee by our camp staff was a wonderful luxury. The entire support staff of this trek left me in awe with their initiative and commitment to our successful adventure. They undertook back breaking labour and they were always the first to arrive and settle the campsite and the last to leave, winding it up to leave clean for the next trekkers.



All the colours of the earth



A room with a view



Sunworshippers



When the clouds clear, you can see forever : Gangotri range



Aren't we lovely?

The Intricate Water System of Nature :

This part of the world is glacier country. The glaciers of Uttarakhand make perennial rivers of such depth and force that they are a source of life and livelihood for a large part of North India.

Before they become rivers, they are deadly ice and rock sheets, that seem to laugh at human machinations. They allow you to traverse them as long as they feel benevolent, and if in the blink of an eye they decide otherwise, you are left to the mercies of their moods!



Glacier country

The glaciers world over are shrinking. Human lifestyle, development and global warming are taking their toll and ringing a death knell for this life-giving source. It is said that The Gangotri glacier retreats approximately 15 metres every year. If affirmative and corrective action is not undertaken by governments and civil bodies alike, the 30 km (approx.) glacier may accelerate its demise in the years to come.

Walking over the glaciers is adventurous and fun! The irony is thick - ice collected over thousands of years forms the surface of the earth and prevents any form of life to survive on it, while at the same time,

it becomes the very source of life in its later avatar. The Himalyan glaciers form the largest storehouse of water in the world, apart from the polar caps. Several glaciers in this region trickle down and become tributaries to the Bhagirathi, making it an awesome sight when it finally joins with the Alaknanda river at Devprayag to become the sacred river.



Miles to go before I sleep..

Audens Base Camp

Experienced trekkers know how dreaded are the vagaries of weather in the mountains. Human arrogance and the “superman syndrome” pales into inconsequentiality when faced with the whims of the mountain. Weather reports are unobtainable and its only by experienced judgement that once decides whether to carry on.

Becoming a high altitude mountain guide is a highly specialized skill. It requires hours of fitness, training and study, to be prepared to lead people of varying abilities over arduous peaks. While on the mountain,

the guides rule! It is dangerous and foolhardy to not follow their direction, be it about nutrition, sleep or ascent and descent.



Our skilled and experienced guide, Vikas from Aquaterra Adventures

Our walk up to the base camp was steep and long. We had to traverse several ridges, climbing through deep gorges and vertical ascents, all the while accompanied by cold and sleet-like rain. The base camp itself was perched on a tiny outcrop of icy rock with no place to spare, certainly not the place for a sleepwalker!

Our guide took a call: on the mountains, its safety first. He informed us that he would determine from looking at the sky at midnight whether we could proceed that night. We awoke to a clear sky and pushed forward in the darkness over ice and moraine to reach the col.

We trekked through the night with the Gangotri Range to the North and Jogin range to the South, and at dawn we reached the steep ice sheet that we would have to climb to reach the top of the pass. The weather gods had plans for us, and a thick snow began to fall as we

attained the summit, surrounded by overpowering peaks shrouded in pristine white. From the top, Auden's Col offers a panoramic view of the mountain peaks of Jaonli, Kedarnath, Jogin & Gangotri and the deadly Khatling Glacier which lies below.



Steep ice sheet leading to the Col



Walking in thick snowfall, an aerial view

I believe that whenever we test the limits of our individual human endurance, the result is always a surprise. What seems insurmountable is often only fear of facing what lies ahead.

A quote from Elif Shafak comes to mind: “Fret not where the road will take you. Instead concentrate on the first step. That's the hardest part and that's what you are responsible for. Once you take that step let everything do what it naturally does and the rest will follow. Do not go with the flow. Be the flow.”



Audens Col: a mountain pass at 5490m connecting Rudragaira valley and Bhilangna valley.

What came next was a surprise! Unlike a smooth overpass, the Audens Col abruptly ends in a cliff. One needs to rappel down near-vertical walls of ice on the sheer face of the massif, to land on the heavily crevassed Khatling Glacier. We stepped onto the glacier in the midst

of a grand blizzard, heavy snowfall and an operatic roaring of thunder, lightning and wind.



The mighty Khatling glacier



Riddled with deadly crevasses

The Khatling glacier is the womb of the beautiful Bhilangana river. However, before the forbidding glacier gentles into the bubbling river, it is nothing short of the tiger mother enfolding its soon to be born young in her tight embrace. As we traversed the glacier, we were warned to tread cautiously, and keep each other in sight, lest we separate from the group. It was here that we were engulfed in the fury of the Himalayas in all its majesty.

The ancient poet Kaalidas describes the Himalayas in his poem “Kumar-sambhave”: “On the northern frontier of this country that

forms the heartland of gods, inserting himself into eastern and western oceans like a measuring stick of earth, there stands the sovereign of snowy mountains renowned as Himalaya.”

Staycation on the Khatling

Imagine a white-out on a mighty glacier, endless snow and freezing wind, no connectivity with any place on earth and no power except that of a moody and elusive Sun. Well, there was nothing to do but wait for the weather to improve so that we could walk off the frozen river. Every so often, we had to step out of our tent and give it a shake, to dislodge the snow off it. It was difficult to get out of cosy sleeping bags and one had to marvel at manmade inventiveness, that allowed us to be warm and comfortable in such an inhospitable environment. Our cheery guides who had “been there and done that” many times over, were quick to reassure us that this was nothing out of the breadth of their experience and that this would surely be a tale to tell our families.



Let it snow, let it snow

But the snow refused to abate and two mornings later, we could wait no longer. Sturdily tied to each other we started walking downwards in deep fresh snow. It was incredible scenic beauty as we crossed rocky moraines, smaller glaciers, troughs and valleys of the mountain over a sixteen hour walk to our next camp. And dramatically, the snow line was left behind us. The earth was green once more, the sounds of birds could be heard and signs of a lush ecosystem were everywhere. As dawn awakened in the valley where we had camped the next day, we frantically chased the sun to find spots to warm ourselves and laid out all our wet gear on outcrops of rocks so that it could dry out.



Mind the gap!

The Birth of a River

We were now following the birth of the Bhilangana and watching her temperamental moods as she rushed down the mountain. At times bubbling, skipping and sometimes falling over high rocks, she resembled a young girl taking head on, the travails of youthful exuberance and folly, all the while sparkling with joy at her release from her formidable parent.

The next few days were a descent through the mountains, each day adding back a layer of natural diversity into the earth. All the while, our constant companion was the Bhilangana, providing us pure and

clean water for all our requirements. Her gurgling sounds made a music in tandem with the sky which will continue to resonate in my mind, anytime I choose to turn inward and listen closely.

The Bhilangana river is a major tributary of the Bhagirathi river. As she carves her way down the mountains, she widens and matures. In the middle Himalayas, she is dramatically changed from her higher incarnation, and her joyful spirit assumes the illusion of a grand dame at the point of confluence with the Bhagirathi river at Old Tehri, merging with the source stream of the Ganga.



Signs of green emerge



Bhilangana skips and dances





Our wet gear dries

A Man-Made Marvel

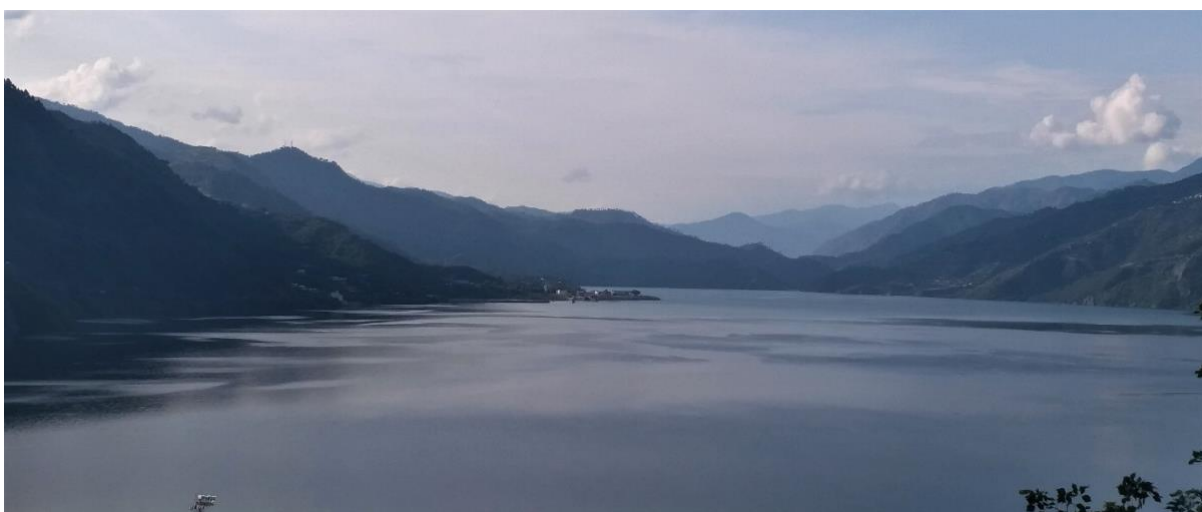
The damming of the river at Tehri represents manmade engineering at its pinnacle. There are many criticisms to its existence, mostly relating to environmental degradation, it also represents human audacity to build such a massive water reservoir on a major geologic fault zone. A calamitous earthquake in the region has the potential to submerge several towns that lie in its wake downstream. Therefore, there is a constant watchful eye kept on the structural strength and stability of the construction. The resultant lake has led to a plethora of tourism opportunities in the region.

The debate on how to achieve synergy between environmental concerns and infrastructural development throws up few and far

between solutions. It's only when the world collectively adopts measures, that the freefall in the extinction of species of the natural world can be stemmed. This was apparent in our downward journey, where there has been rampant cutting through the mountains to widen roads, leading to soil erosion, loss of trees and avalanches. There is also a massive negative impact on the biodiversity of areas where thoughtless habitation has compromised fragile ecosystems.



Tehri Dam



The lake at Tehri

There was jubilant excitement on the completion of the trek amongst all of us. Bruised in parts, aching in many, I was inconsiderately delighted that of all the treks in the region, we were one of the few to complete our adventure. Many had been abandoned due to poor weather. I also came back to over a hundred missed calls and texts from friends and family, who had been following the harsh weather pattern in the region.

Arriving back to civilization was a double edged sword. It was nothing short of sublime to come back to creature comforts, the most being a hot bath! Having a lie-in and a lazy breakfast while soaking in the sun in Rishikesh was lovely. However, I did feel a sense of loss of having left the serene and rugged mountains behind. I know that one of these days, I will go back to feast on these massifs again, which take up so much of the space of the earth and even more of the human imagination.



