

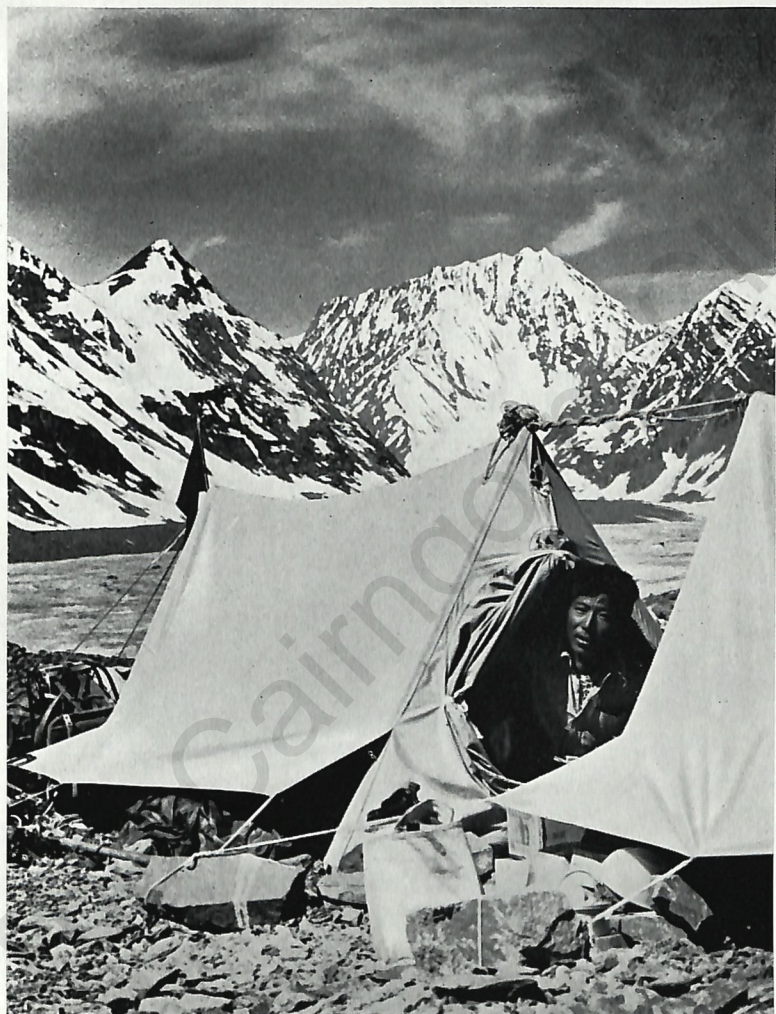
HIMALAYAN HOLIDAY

MILLCENT MCARTHUR

WE had heard at various times that there had been small private expeditions to the Himalayas, and the thought gradually grew in our minds that if others could go, why not us? Having made up our minds, not without misgivings, that we meant to go, the next thing was to find out as much as we could, and to make up a party. It did not take us long to choose our area. Central Lahoul was largely unexplored, enjoyed a dry climate during the monsoon period—the only time we could go—and was easily accessible. It lies in northern India just south of the Kashmir border and a little to the west of where it joins the frontier of Tibet. The area itself forms a rough triangle with its apex in the north at the Bara Lacha Pass. The triangle is bounded on two sides by the Chandra river and on the third side by the Bhaga river. Our intention was to go up the Chandra valley for several days' marches, then to cross the river and explore the inside of the triangle.

One evening we rang up Frank and Babs Solari and invited them to accompany us. They asked for time to consider such an astonishing proposition, but took less than an hour to decide that they were coming. As both of them are now members of the Cairngorm Club our expedition might almost be counted as a Club Meet. With the party arranged, the work of preparation went ahead. We read with avid interest the hitherto neglected appendices of Himalayan books detailing costs, equipment, food, and medical supplies. We talked to people who had been, all of whom were generously ready to help. Our friends rallied to the cause, giving away their winter underwear and their war-time kit-bags, while we made out endless lists, haunted the junk shops, sorted and packed, underwent inoculations, and, at times, wondered whether the Himalayas were worth so much work.

At last the day came when the baggage went off to the docks, and a week later Hamish and I, as the advance party, flew to Cairo in time to give us the opportunity for some sightseeing in Egypt before joining the ship which was carrying our equipment at Port Said. At Bombay we spent much time in complicated negotiations with the Customs authorities, but after a day and a half we were safely through. We collected the rest of our food, which had been ordered from a firm



Hamish McArthur

OURKIEN AT ADVANCE BASE CAMP

in Bombay, and set off for Delhi and the north. The sight of an impressive string of red-smocked coolies carrying our luggage through the station at Bombay made us feel rather important, but we felt less so twenty-four hours later in Delhi, where we changed trains, when we found that all our possessions had disappeared. Just in time the van containing them was found shunted off on to another line. Another overnight journey and we reached Pathankot, the railhead. The station wagon we had arranged to take us on to Manali eventually materialised, but much of our baggage had to go on the roof of the ordinary bus. The monsoon had broken early and the 200 miles took us five days. The road was blocked in various places, a vital bridge had been washed away, and our vehicle broke a spring. Our two Sherpas who had remained behind from the R.A.F. Mountaineering Association Expedition came to meet us, and were an enormous help in dealing with our mountain of baggage. Various bits of it had to be left behind, and as we had to walk a stretch of 6 or 7 miles we ended up with little more than a change of clothes for ourselves. We stayed in great comfort at Major Banon's bungalow at Manali, and with his help engaged two Ladakhi porters and arranged for horses. After a week our luggage all turned up, and shortly afterwards Babs and Frank arrived, having flown to Delhi. We had asked for an Indian Army officer to accompany us, and the Bengal Engineers, who are building up a mountaineering reputation, sent us Captain Kailash Goswami and, more surprisingly, his wife Tara as well. Neither of the Goswamis had been in mountain country before, but they were a great acquisition and we enjoyed having them. They were invaluable as interpreters, and we learnt much about India in talking to them.

At last the great day came for our departure. The horses turned up—twenty of them, including a mule or two and a donkey and a foal, both of which apparently came for the fun of it, as neither ever carried anything. Three men and a boy came to look after the horses, so that with six sahibs, two Sherpas, and two porters we made quite an impressive if rather ragged procession as we set off from Manali. A short march took us to the rest house at Kothi where we spent the night. Next morning was wet and misty—the horses had wandered off into the mist: the horsemen had fearful tales of deep snow on the pass of over 13,000 feet we had to cross, and it took all our determination to get the party on the move. Once over the pass, which presented no difficulty, and a little way down the other side the promised weather miracle worked and we came into bright sunshine. Our

first camp was in a delightful meadow above the Chandra river not far from Khoksar, the highest village in the Chandra valley, and the last permanent habitations we were to see for over four weeks. After a rest day we moved off up the valley in stages determined by camp sites, *i.e.*, places where grass was available for the animals. We soon had another rest day because we had a day and a half's rain and it seemed pleasanter to stay in shelter. After this we had no further trouble with the weather and the more susceptible members of the party had difficulty in protecting themselves from sunburn.

At first the going was quite good, but at the bend of the Chandra river the river which issues from the Bara Shigri glacier proved unfordable, and we had to cross the snout of the glacier itself. It was littered with debris and gravelly sludge with hard ice underneath and it was a very arduous crossing for man and beast, so we were all very weary by the time we reached the camp site.

The next day the going was easier, and because of the many halts to admire and photograph the stupendous view of icy peaks the horses got far ahead of us, and we found to our dismay that they were following a sketchy track which led up and out of the Chandra valley into the next valley of Spiti. The pass at the top was over 15,000 feet high and our efforts to chase the pack train at that altitude were unavailing, so we could only follow them. However, down the other side was a delightful camp site with ample grass for the horses who had been on rather short commons, and we decided to spend a few days there. We found a small rocky peak of about 15,500 feet which gave an excellent view of the way we were to go, and we did some survey work—having been lent some instruments by the Indian Survey. The men of the party and the Sherpas also climbed a snow peak of over 18,000 feet previously unclimbed. While they were away a party of nomads visited the camp. To our great delight they had yaks with them. The matted, shaggy appearance of the yaks was reminiscent of Highland cattle, and they seemed similarly mild-mannered. We were sorry to leave this camp site, especially as the drifts of edelweiss around it were growing bigger every day, but once more we crossed a high pass back to the Chandra valley. We now reached the point where we meant to cross the Chandra. We met some shepherds who thought we should certainly fail, especially as it was already afternoon and the glacier-fed river would be higher than in the morning. We found a place where the river split into several channels, and success with the first few emboldened us to attempt the worst one, and we made the crossing successfully. The



AFTERNOON TEA AT CAMP II (17,800 feet)

Frank Solari

water was not deep, but immensely fast-flowing and extremely cold, and we only realised later how lucky we had been to cross without misadventure. We set up Base Camp on a grassy meadow with a clear stream flowing through it. The place was so thickly carpeted with edelweiss that we had to dig it up to get even floors for the tents.

The next day was devoted to reorganisation, and then we made a reconnaissance of the glacier which faced us. First we had to cross wide stony flats to reach the ice, but the glacier itself proved easier than we had dared to hope, and we were able to take horses on to the ice without any trouble. Advanced Base was set up on the left lateral moraine at about 15,000 feet and daily contact was maintained between it and Base Camp.

Hamish and Frank remained there and the rest of us took turns to stay there. Another new peak of over 19,000 feet was climbed direct from Advance Base, more survey work was done, and then, with time running short, a move had to be made to find and climb, if possible, a twenty-thousander. It was decided to explore a side glacier which had been discovered. The two sahibs and the Sherpas, carrying very heavy loads, camped on this glacier and then found what they were looking for. The mountain, 20,430 feet in height, was one of the very few marked on the map, accurately with regard to position and height, but it was surrounded by peaks and glaciers which did not appear on the map. The first side glacier giving access to the peak needed only a cursory inspection to be rejected, but the next was more promising. A very steep ice-fall had to be climbed and took six hours of exhausting toil. Camp was pitched about 17,800 feet on a shelf which presented the first possible place, since no one was anxious to go a step farther with heavy loads in the great heat. At night the temperature fell sharply and boots froze even inside the tent. Next morning a start was made in bright moonlight, and although there was steep snow there was no real technical difficulty, although altitude made the effort tiring. After the last of a seemingly endless series of ice bulges the party reached the summit between 10 and 11 A.M. They could see into Tibet to the east, Kashmir to the north, and the monsoon clouds far to the south in India. Weather conditions were ideal, and all the party felt very well.

The descent on steep softened snow was a little tricky, but all went well. After arrival at camp a debate as to whether the party should go farther down was ended by an ice avalanche which fell over the proposed route. Well rested and making an early start, the party went all the way down to Base Camp the next day, arriving

in time for lunch. Everyone was happy to be reunited, and Tara, always an inspiration to Ourkien, our Sherpa cook, invented a new sweet compounded of chopped dates, custard, drinking chocolate, and Kendal Mint Cake. The bones of the sheep we had bought ten days before from a nomad shepherd once again made soup thickened with dahl—a kind of lentil—and if the smell was a bit “high” the flavour was rich and “gamey.” Sports were held of which the favourite was a tug-of-war with the two teams on opposite sides of the small stream. Since somebody was bound to fall in, this was a sure-fire success with the Sherpas and horsemen. A special dinner celebrated the leader’s birthday, and with remarkable foresight he had remembered to bring a white tie. Worn with a red and black checked shirt and a dense black beard, the effect was undoubtedly arresting.

Next day we rather sadly packed up and prepared to move back to Manali. We had lived together as a self-contained and inter-dependent community in this empty, enormous country, and the experience had made us feel that we belonged together. Perhaps especially at night, if one stood on the little slope above the camp and looked down on the cluster of lighted tents surrounded by mountains glittering in the moonlight, one was conscious of how much our safety and comfort, and even our lives, depended on the willingness of everyone to work together. This was the sort of life we had looked forward to 7,000 miles away in England, and the realisation had not disappointed us. Our Sherpas, porters, and horsemen did all that could have been expected of them, and far more. We were constantly being surprised and touched by the things that they would do for us. Bunches of flowers would always appear on our table, a hand would always be ready to take any spare clothes we shed, and the mem-sahibs were treated with a gallantry that they rarely meet at home.

We had intended to return the way we had come but our first look at the Chandra river made us think again. The unbroken fine weather had melted the glaciers and the river was far more formidable than before. Nevertheless we made the attempt, and it looked at first as if it might succeed and then suddenly one of the Sherpas lost his footing. Although still clinging to the rope handrail that had already been placed across, he was quite unable to get on his feet again. Hamish went to his help, but the same fate befell him, and now there were two people helpless in the water, and liable in a very short time to be overcome by the cold. The horsemen dashed in in a body and after a struggle managed to get both the victims to the bank.

They were so cold and numbed that they were unable to stand or do anything for themselves, so all our efforts had to be turned to restoring them to life. The funny side of the near disaster was that both victims had their trousers washed off them by the force of the water! The next morning very early we had another look, and without much discussion it was decided that the risks of crossing were too great: Our only alternative was to go the long way round to Manali, going first northwards to the Bara Lacha La—a pass of over 16,000 feet and thence joining the trade route between Tibet and India and Kashmir. Although there was a track on the far side of the Chandra valley leading to the Bara Lacha, we had no idea what difficulties might lie in store on our side. In addition to that we knew that we were likely to cross the "Inner Line." The Indian Government does not allow foreigners to wander in the frontier area bordering on Kashmir and Tibet, and has marked off a line on the map a certain distance inside their own frontier. A permit is needed to cross this Inner Line and we had none. However, we had no alternative; we had no way of telling anyone of our intentions and we knew that the longer route would mean a late arrival anyway, and that sooner or later someone would start to worry about us. We explained to the horsemen that we must go as fast as possible, and they promised that the horses would do whatever we could do! This promise was faithfully kept and we achieved marches of up to 20 miles a day. Until we got to the Bara Lacha La the going was very arduous, and we constantly marvelled at the ability of the horses to pick their way through long boulder-strewn stretches which were trying enough for us. We had more trouble with river crossings and we met a police patrol who wanted to turn us back. Fortunately Kailash was able to convince them that we must be allowed to continue and we all became quite good friends in the end. At last we reached the pass, and oddly enough the only creature to suffer from the altitude was the foal. When we stopped to take pictures of the beautiful snow and ice peaks which had come into view, he lay down, pillowed his head on a stone, and looked ready to expire. However, as soon as we began to lose height he recovered and became his usual skittish self.

Once on a good track we made good speed, passing through some of the grandest scenery any of us had seen, and came to the first outpost of civilisation—the summer settlement of Patseo. Here we found some traders, mostly from Tibet, with temporary shops which are set up during the summer to serve the passing caravans bringing wool to India and returning with tea and sugar and other necessities.

I was able to buy a vacuum-packed tin of English cigarettes which consoled me through a long interrogation by a police inspector who wanted to check on our movements. Next day we crossed a fine new bridge and thought our troubles with rivers would be over, but the very next bridge was down and the only way to cross was by means of a pulley slung on a wire rope. The horses were unloaded and departed miles upstream to find a ford, while we dispatched all our baggage, piece by piece, across the river. Each of us in turn was trussed like a fowl, attached to the pulley, and hauled to the other side. In the middle the rope sagged and the grey foaming water was unpleasantly near. The jerking of the rope and the constriction of our bonds meant that each of us arrived in a battered and breathless state, but by now we had learnt to take this sort of thing in our stride. Apart from the anxiety we felt over such delays, the flowers and the scenery were so wonderful that we were not sorry to linger.

The first village we came to, Keylang, was not much of a place, but it seemed very sophisticated to us. There were proper shops where we bought tinned pineapple and a tin of Scott's Porage Oats—the only one. There was a wireless station, and we sent off long messages to say where we were. Three more days took us back to Manali and the bliss of fresh bread for tea followed by quantities of plums, pears, and apples. Hot baths were appreciated as never before, and seldom needed as much, judging by the glacier-like sludge that we left behind us. The journey to Pathankot was by no means uneventful. The bridge which had held us up before chose the night of our return to fall down again. Mud avalanches fell over the road, and one piece of road slipped a couple of feet down a steep hillside.

Finally we reached Delhi and the acme of comfort in the Hotel Cecil. Hamish and I made a quick trip to Agra to see the Taj Mahal while the others flew straight home. Brief sightseeing in Beirut was followed by four days in Istanbul, then by Athens and Rome back to England.

Undoubtedly it was the best holiday we have ever had, and in addition we have contributed a little in knowledge by mapping and survey. The party kept extremely fit, and our medical supplies were used only for minor injuries, although we were able to give a little help to people we met on the way. Apart from our memories, the main thing we have brought back is the desire to return.