

Himalayan dreaming?

A trek from Badrinath to Kedarnath

by Susan Jensen



View of Nilkanth looking down (east) the Panpatia Glacier - Susan Jensen

In May 2016 I went to India for an expedition in Garhwal, Uttarakhand (India), intending to get to the top of several unclimbed peaks in the Vishnugarh Dhar. The name means “the Ridge of Vishnu’s Fortress”.

The expedition was cut short due to the illness of my climbing partner so I can’t write an article that raves about the success of the trip. But I did learn a few things, including a trekking itinerary that you may find interesting.

The ancient Hindu shrine of Kedarnath is dedicated to Shiva, while the shrine of Badrinath is dedicated to Vishnu and, since time immemorial, both the gods had their own sects and followers. In an attempt to unite the devotees a story was formulated by the priests: the temples of Kedarnath and Badrinath had one common priest. He would perform puja in the morning in Badrinath and then travel to the other valley and perform puja in Kedarnath.

Puja rules require that one has an empty stomach before the puja ceremonies. One day the priest got too hungry and ate a few wild berries en route. The gods were not too happy about this and a high mountain range was raised between the shrines, creating a formidable barrier of which the peak Nilkanth is the most

prominent feature. Nilkanth, meaning “blue throat”, is another name of Shiva, whose throat turned blue after drinking poison, threatening to destroy the whole of creation. Anyway, our priest could not perform his twin temple puja anymore.

As interesting as this mythology is, the parallel story is even better: about a traditional pass that connects the two valleys of Kedarnath and Badrinath.

This parallel story was first documented in the west by Frank Smythe in his book *Kamet Conquered*. On page 317 he writes, “he told us something about a traditional pass said to exist between Badrinath and Kedarnath. By this pass it was, he affirmed, an easy day’s walk of three miles between these two places.” CF Meade was probably the first to look into this curious case in 1912. And, needless to say, this raised great curiosity in the minds of Shipton and Tilman whose explorations included a quest for this traditional pass.

Since then, Indian mountaineers have been exploring for a possible path between the two shrines for a few decades, and in 1999 Anindya Mukherjee and Sundar Singh stood on Panpatia Col, which was the key. In 2000, Martin Moran and his team were the first to cross that col, linking Badrinath and Kedarnath.

Mukherjee, still an avid explorer of the area, later also crossed the col, and went back to Kolkata to write about the trip as a trekking destination. It isn’t an easy one – some pretty exacting moraine to cross, and over an icefield to get to the col – but it sounds to be very rewarding. Our expedition base camp was in one of the prime spots along the trekking route, but only two teams went by during the week we were there: it was high season. The usual Indian trekking group takes 11 days to do the complete trek, which does require acclimatisation to 4200m at the col. A fit European group would be happier to do it a bit more quickly, I think.

I have not done this trek myself (except the first two days that brought us to our base camp), but wanted to share more widely the possibility of something that is on every inspired Indian trekker’s to-do list.

Best time of year:

Late winter/early spring would mean that the icefield would have lots of winter snow covering the crevasses, making life a bit easier – depending on the year, of course. There will also be a profusion of spring flowers in the green valley parts of the route.

Logistics companies:

Grand Adventures India – I had spent some time speaking with the Joshimath office and spoke with some returning clients. The company seems quite good, and the English in the Joshimath office was excellent.

<http://www.grandadventuresindia.com/index.htm>

Anindya Mukherjee himself will be licensed to lead trekking groups in this area from 2017. He can be contacted on anindya.adventuremania@gmail.com I’d be happy to give references about him, as he was my sick climbing partner on our expedition. Honest, he is better now – he has done peaks since our trip!



Panpatia Col from Panpatia glacier (eastern side of col) (A Mukherjee) - Susan Jensen