



A climbers' party on way to the Rohtang Pass.

# Winter Crossing Of The Rohtang Pass

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We were a party of eight—Tshering Dorje, Rana, two peons, three dak-runners and I. On the first day we expect to do the five miles to the Tandi confluence and then another four up the Chandra river to the village of Ghondha. During the night there was a light snowfall and the sky was overcast. In the previous 10 days we had recorded 10-12 feet of snow at Kyelang. But I was determined to go.

We walked down-hill along the jeep track which is buried deep in snow. On our right were sharp cliffs, their loose soggy flanks crumbling under the weight of ice and snow. The Lahaul mountains are composed of stones buried in mud—sure indications that they rose out of a sea or river bed in some cataclysmal upheaval. Rolling stones constitute the greatest danger once the sun is up.

Boulders hang precariously over the path, the water oozing out of the soft mud that holds them in place. Below us the slope was littered with stones that might have come hurtling down the previous day or a few moments before. We picked our way gingerly over the bad portions hoping for the best.

## Giant Snow Bridges

Sometimes we walked along the edge, looking down at the Bhaga river, a couple of hundred feet below us. Gone was the brash mountain torrent of the summer. Avalanches sweeping down from both sides of the narrow valley had choked it completely. Giant snow bridges had formed at places. Snow and ice had piled up along the banks, then cracked under pressure of new avalanches, the blocks leaning crazily, like the cement ones around river bridges in Punjab, after the monsoon floods.

We reached the Tandi Sangam after about two hours. The flat ground around the confluence was one vast snow field; in the background the giant Gushal peak rises in a series of sharp ridges. After a little rest on the new bridge we started across the vast snowfield on the right bank of the Chandra river. It was getting warm and the snow had lost its early morning firmness. The



The climbers on top of the Rohtang Pass.

step sank in a foot or more; occasionally one of us went in unto the thighs, floundering angrily to get a firm foothold. Progress was slow.

At the end of the snowfield there was a sharp climb. From the top of the 17,000 feet ridge to the river bank it was one vast avalanche swept slope. Boulders—some clothed in snow, others bare—lay everywhere.

We were half way up the slope when the first avalanche came. It was not on our slope! Across the river a mass of snow, ice and boulders was pouring off, one of the lower ridges of the Gushal peaks; thunder filled the air. Fascinated, I watched this spectacle of nature's power. Soon avalanches came down with monotonous regularity; so far they were all on the opposite side of the river. We toiled up the slope, trying to get clear of the danger area. My two peons began to



Lahauli women beating straw for "poolas" (straw shoes).

The Rohtang Pass (13,050 ft.) is the sole gateway to the border district of Lahaul-Spiti. The Lahaul valley consists of a mass of glacier-filled mountains, engirdled by the Chandra and Bhaga rivers. The word Rohtang means "place of bones". The Pass has claimed many lives. Lahaul is completely cut off for about four months in the winter. In fair weather, Lahauls attempt a winter's crossing of the Pass.

tire. They flopped down every now and then gasping for breath. I hurried them on, knowing that it would be fatal to leave a straggler.

## Endless Maidan

At last we were out on the flat Karga maidan. A little rest, a few photographs and we were off again. In single file we struggled on through the soft snow. The sun shone in a clear blue sky and the snow sparkled with a million uncut diamonds. White needles pierced the dark glasses and pricked the skin. The "maidan" seemed endless.

Near the journey's end we ran into another bad patch. The route was dominated by an overhanging cliff, which bombarded the path with stones, rubble and snow. The danger zone was about 100 yards. I noticed that there was a distinct interval between falls. One by one we made the dash for safety, each one carrying his own luck. At about 3 p.m. we climbed the last slope to Ghondha—after 7 hours of continuous slogging.

The next morning we were up at 3-30. The Ghondha peak looked superb in the dawn light. Dropping sheer for five thousand feet to the Chandra river bed, it is the most awe-inspiring mountain massif to be seen anywhere.

Along the way we came to a lonely house—a single brown cube on a field of white. Some girls were on the roof collecting straw from a stack. I stopped to take a picture. They obliged with blushes and giggles! Sissu lies at the foot of the Gephong Masif—the abode of the Gephong devta, lord of all Lahaul. The three peaks of Gephong stand directly opposite the Rohtang Pass and can be seen from Simla.

In Lahaul villages the houses are clustered together to provide easy inter-communication in the winter. The roofs form a series of terraces, and it is possible to walk over from house to house.

A little beyond the village we

came to the Sissu nullah which flows down a narrow gorge from the Gephong peak glaciers. Avalanches had evidently hurtled down the Tunnel, sweeping everything before them. We had to go down, down to the very bed and then climb up the opposite slope. I prayed that Ghepong Devta, the lord of the mountains would let us pass. We dare not rest till we are out of the danger zone.

We reached Khoksar at about 10. Even by Lahaul standards it is hardly a village only four or five houses clustered together for warmth and security. The chowkidar welcomed us. A few girls were beating straw for "poolas" (straw shoes).

## Summer Visitors

The Rohtang pass dominates this little village. In summer the pass lets in a flood of visitors—engineers, labour gangs, tourists, mountaineers official and a host of others. Tents, tea-shops and labour huts sprout around the rest house. With the first hint of winter in

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# ROHTANG PASS

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September the visitors depart and all is silent save for the moaning wind that howls down from the pass, like some demon in agony.

Next morning we packed our rucksacks hoping for a break in the weather. But the dawn came grey and murky. By about six it began to snow. Disappointed, I unpacked my sleeping bag and prepared to kill the day in the little cell. The snow continued to fall with a maddening steadiness. How much more snow on the pass above us! I brooded over the possibility of being snow-bound in tiny Khoksar. Manali seemed a world away.

But the Lahaulis are in tune with their environment. They know that one must be patient with mountains.

## False Dawn

For the third successive morning we were up at three. Millions of fireflies seemed to float in the dark void above. The false dawn reflected by the snow bathed the sleeping village in a soft soothing light.

We were out at about five. Topdan led the way out of the silent sleeping village and down the ridge to the river. It was still dark and the slope was steep. We picked our way with care, for a slip could have nasty results. The new snow had not packed properly yet, and gave way easily. It had obliterated the path beaten out by previous parties. We were evidently in for a strenuous day.

For about three furlongs Topdan led the way upstream along the river. The river was choked with snow, and one might cross anywhere, but Topdan was looking for a really safe snow bridge. At last we were at the foot of the climb. Gallantly Topdan tackled the first slope. Leaning into the slope for balance, he probed the snow with his stick, and moved forward sinking in up to his thighs. Then another step and another and another... up, up, up. His breath came in short gasps and his chest heaved with the pressure on his lungs. Slowly the slope sank below us. Near the top there was an awkward bit of rock with a thin film of ice on it, slippery, dangerous.

We halted for a breather. The scene was superb. The sun, still hidden from view, was lighting up the distant Spiti peaks. There was a touch of gold on the three Gephong peaks.

We continued to climb steadily, taking turns at the lead. At each step the leader sank in up to the thighs. We halted every hundred yards or so, panting for breath. Traversing one particular slope was a terrifying experience. The land fell almost sheer for a thousand feet below my steps. I dared not look down. Using my walking stick as an ice axe, I inched my way across balancing carefully in the steps made by the leader.

## Steep Climb

The climb up the Harchu gully to the top of the pass was steep, very steep. The snow was deep and soft. Each step required an effort. Every time I looked up the mass poised on the ridge it made my flesh creep. At last, we were on top—a huge snow field sloping gently towards Manali. Behind us were the three Gephong peaks, guardians of the pass. Other peaks of superb beauty—hitherto hidden—then came into view.

I felt no hunger. I wanted only to devour the beauty around us; to carve out mountains in the memory for the day when the step will be no longer light, nor the muscles firm.

By the time we started again, the famous Rohtang wind had sprung up. It blew off the pass towards Lahaul, driving tiny granules of snow into our faces with such force that they stung like

sharp needles. I had to lean into the wind to keep my balance. Every one hurried on. The green valleys visible in the distance beckoned us.

We had to go down to the source of the Beas and then walk along the slopes on its right bank. We raced down the hill; occasionally the snow gave way and I sank in, floundering and laughing at my predicament.

And then we came to the Rani Nullah. It cuts across the route before joining the Beas. As at Sissu, we had to climb down into its bed, walk across and climb up the other side. It is known for its sudden and fearful avalanches.

We picked our way gingerly down the slope to the nullah bed. The upper crust of the snow was firm and Rana had a brilliant idea—to go sliding down on our trouser seat! A little distance beyond the nullah we found a stick stuck in the snow. It was the type which a villager carried on such journeys. We poked about in the snow but found nothing. The Rohtang is a cruel pass. Who knows!

At Marhi we rest for a little while. The stone enclosures which serve as tea shops in the summer are full of snow.

The gaddis are experts at tobogganing. They go glissading down all grades of slopes using sticks with pointed ends as brakes. Rana goes glissading down the slopes to Rahla. I follow. Surprisingly, the Lahauls cannot do it! Old Topdan continues to plod doggedly down the slopes.

Laughing and shouting, we tumbled down the slopes. At last the P.W.D. huts came into view. We were across.

There was only one casualty—the seat of my trousers!!