

STRIDER

A photograph of a hiker with a large blue backpack standing in a mountainous landscape, looking at a herd of reindeer crossing a stream. The hiker is seen from the back, wearing a black jacket and dark trousers. The reindeer are in the foreground, some wading through a shallow stream. The background shows rolling hills and mountains under a blue sky with some clouds. The overall scene is a scenic, natural landscape.

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Mountains, Marigolds and Mindfulness

Anne & Vaughan Wade

AS familiar as we are with our LDWA 100-mile events, here is a 100-mile event with a big difference – it's in the Himalayas!! Furthermore, it's a stage event, so well within the reach of LDWA walkers.

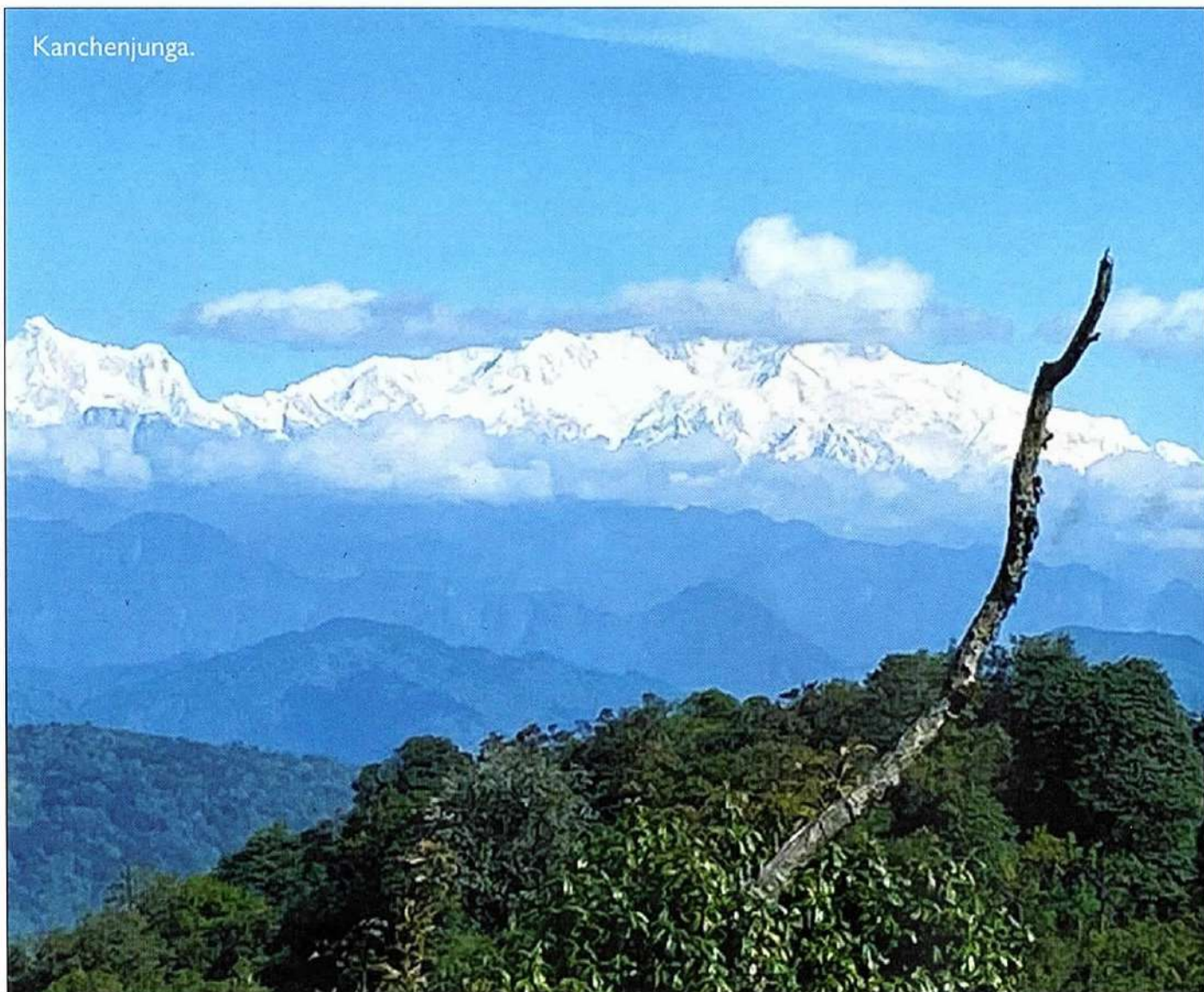
The Himalayan 100-mile Stage Race (don't be put off by the word 'race', you can walk or run, there are no age limits and no cut-off times) is wonderfully organised by Himalayan Run and Trek – a well-respected and highly regarded tour company based in India. The event takes place along the Singalila Ridge in the Darjeeling District of West Bengal in November. It's a little-known area along the border of India and Nepal with few foreigners and the blissful feeling of a road less travelled.

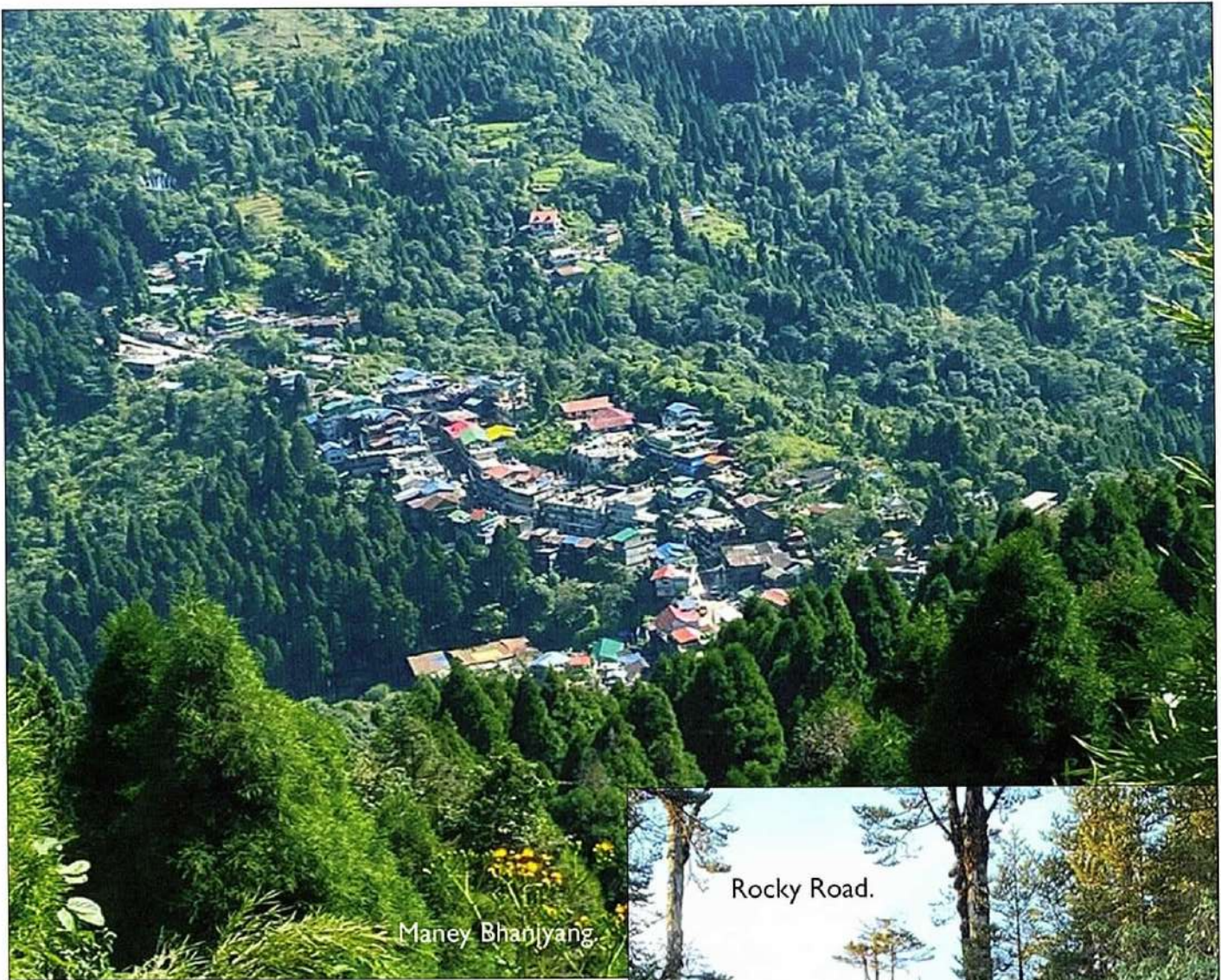
We arrived in Delhi in a whirl of colour, hooting, jostling vehicles, throngs of people, street stalls and a multitude of animals. Top tip 1: do a sightseeing day in Delhi first, rather than last, but don't

succumb to the sales pitch! Flying out to Bagdogra, we had our first majestic and mesmerising views of the mighty Himalayas. Everest or Chomolungma (8848m), Makalu (8485m), Lhotse (8516m) and Kanchenjunga (8586m) were unmistakable in their magnificence and magnetically beckoned us towards them. Since childhood, I have longed to see the highest mountains in the world and now my dreams were about to be fulfilled.

The journey from Bagdogra to Mirik was characterised by endless tea estates, cows and switchback mountain roads. The clear air and far-reaching views gave a stunning backdrop. Luckily, I had my anti-motion sickness wristbands, which are nothing short of miraculous (top tip 2). We had arranged an acclimatisation trek prior to the actual event (top tip 3). This not only enabled us to get used to the altitude, but also allowed us to

Kanchenjunga.





Maney Bhanjyang



Rocky Road.

experience the area at a leisurely pace, enjoying the rural villages, mountainsides and way of life.

The first stage of the event was 24 miles from the hillside village of Maney Bhanjyang (2000m) to the highest point of the ridge at Sandakphu (3636m). It involved relentless ascent: first on a tarmac road, then on a rough jeep track. Top tip 4: remember your walking poles! Kanchenjunga (the sleeping Buddha) accompanied us the whole day and, despite thumping hearts and laboured breathing, the warm sunny weather spurred us on to the summit. Mountain pastures with yaks and goats, forests of trees dripping in lichen and colourful villages with the friendliest of people all added to the spirituality of being in this surreal environment. Along the way, we were treated to checkpoints offering bottled water, boiled potatoes with salt, bananas and sweet biscuits. Having our kit bags transported for us meant that we could enjoy the event just with daypacks. And, when the sun goes down and the temperature drops dramatically, we could snuggle into our warm sleeping bags in the basic, but clean, trekkers' huts.

Waking up to a frost, we walked up to the sunrise viewpoint. What a spectacle! The Everest massif in all its glory. I could see its classic pyramid shape and bands of rock – everything I had read



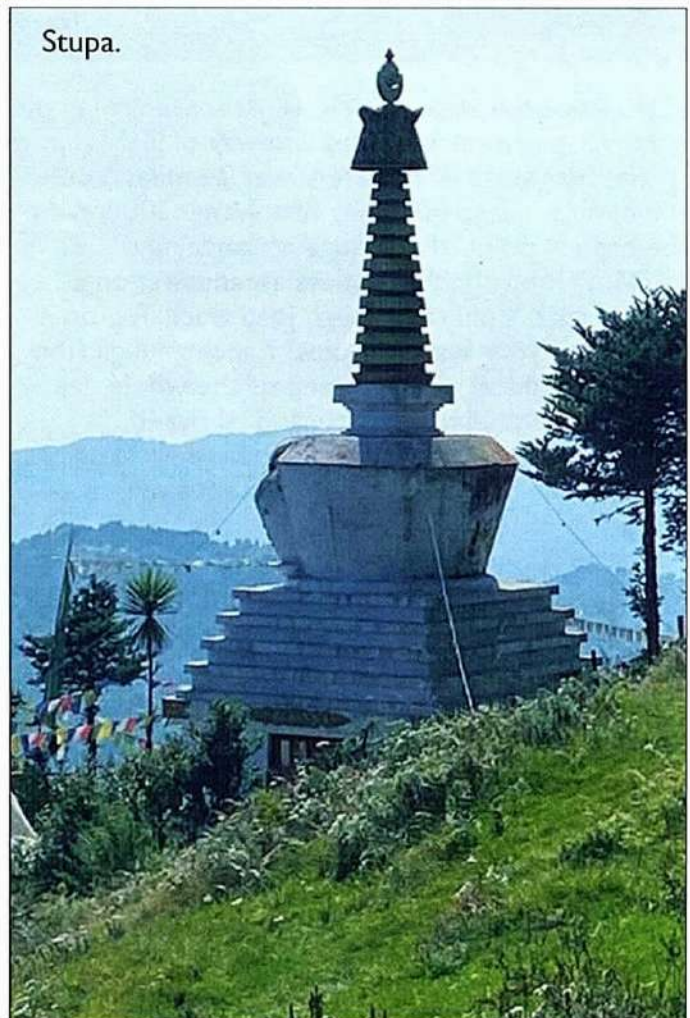
Phalut checkpoint.

about and seen on documentaries. I thought about the pioneering mountaineers and their summit bids, the failures and successes, and those who are still there... the highest mountain in the world. I felt privileged and awe-struck.

Our second day was 10 miles out along the ridge to Molle (3550m) and 10 miles back again. The route was an undulating jeep track. I decided that I would never look at 'rocky road' in quite the same way ever again. We had views across the forested mountains of Nepal to Everest all day. On our return to Sandakphu, we were treated to hot hearty soup, warm chapatis and the camaraderie of fellow international participants with tales of derring-do, followed later by the usual amazing buffet of tasty Indian dishes. The food during the whole event was absolutely fantastic, filling and plentiful. Definitely up there with the LDWA trademark!

The third stage was the Mount Everest Challenge Marathon with more varied terrain and scenery. We retraced our steps to Molle, continuing along the ridge to Phalut (3600m), returning to Molle, then descending paths through beautiful forest with birdsong and colourful flowers, crossing the river and along the road to Rimbik (1950m). Here, we had the luxury of a shower and salty chips. Navigation was never an issue – painted red arrows showed us the way.

Stupa.



Except I failed to cross the river and continued up the 'road' on the wrong side. I was busy eating biscuits and being pestered by a dog and did not notice the bridge, never mind the red arrows. By the time a man appeared on his motorbike, I'd already walked around 5kms uphill. Bah! I tried to persuade him to give me a lift on his bike back down to the bridge, but he would not oblige. So, I had to run all the way down again. Needless to say, I finished the day rather later than anticipated!

The next day, stage four, seemed ridiculously easy. It was only 13 miles, mostly downhill and at lower altitude. The extra red blood cells, including from our acclimatisation trek, were working wonders. I could feel why athletes train at high altitudes. We ended at Palmajua and returned to Rimbik by bus. In the evening we experienced a cultural exchange of music, singing and dancing. There were Tibetan and Nepali folk dances, Hawaiian chants, American popular songs, Indian spirituals and, hmm, the British Hokey Cokey. Haha!

Our fifth day began with a bus ride back to Palmajua, then 17 miles, initially of ascent to 2600m, and a final descent through forest with Kanchenjunga at our sides, returning to Maney Bbhanjyang. The greetings by cheering schoolchildren and the congratulations by Mr C. S. Pandey of Himalayan Run and Trek were quite overwhelming. Mr Pandey and his staff, including medical professionals, worked tirelessly throughout the event to ensure that all participants were well-looked after, healthy and happy. In the evening, there was an Awards Ceremony. All participants received a commemorative plaque and said a few words about their experience of the event. It was clear that everyone had found the time in the mountains very moving and mindful. A spiritual journey on foot. A pilgrimage.

Our time in India concluded with a trip around the Golden Triangle to Agra, Fatehpur Sikri and Jaipur organised again by the indefatigable Mr Pandey. The Taj Mahal was certainly a wonder to behold, as were all the other palaces, forts and temples. Whilst we felt that this additional tour was not to be missed, it was hard to sit for hours on the journeys and being with hundreds of other tourists was suffocating. We missed the mountains!

Take a look at www.himalayan.com. You will be amazed by the excellent value, superb organisation and trip of a lifetime!!



Finish line with Tony Hobbs (fellow LDWAer) & Mr C S Pandey.