

Ask the expert: Paul and Tanzin answer questions on Zanskar

Why did you do this trip to Zanskar?

We wanted to experience the splendour and grandeur of the world's most imposing mountain range – The Himalayas – and the excitement of a journey through a frozen gorge deeper than the Grand Canyon with temperatures as low as -30°C. Tanzin was returning in winter for the first time since he left aged seven and a half to pursue full-time education whilst Paul was interested in the Journey that represented a connection with the past so widely ignored in the modern world.

We also wanted to see if it was possible to improve the educational situation in Zanskar by creating a radio-schooling network that would increase the provision of schooling in winter and in the most remote villages of Zanskar.

What equipment did you need for the trip?

We had a total budget for the trip of £6,200 – this covered all our travel arrangements, accommodation and food.

More than £1000 of this budget was spent on equipment which was

The most of the products we used for the expedition were compatible to 0 to -30c temperature and lower in weight. For our base layer we used Woolpower base layer made from 100% wool - one of the best base layers that we used – generally we weren't working hard enough to sweat a lot, so the wicking properties of modern fabrics were not so important, followed by light fleece jacket and primaloft jacket which are wind stopper insulated jackets. We also have our thick down jacket, Rab Summit Jacket. Paul also wore waterproof over trousers for protection against the chill wind and against splashes from the icy water.

We took a long time to choose our boots. We were asked to get the Baffin winter boot which withstands temperatures to – 80c but it is hard to find these in London. After long discussion about boots Tanzin managed to contact his father in Zanskar and asked for his suggestion about the boots. He said to Tanzin “well today's Chadar is a much easy Chadar in his time, so just get a pair of wellington boots!” In the end Tanzin got a hard sole Scarpa boot which is rated at only -9C, while Paul bought North face chilcats boot rated up to -30C, this was a wise choice. Chilcats boots have a soft sole that works well on a shiny glassy ice. Tanzin's hard sole boot was not good on ice and had lower ankle support than the chilcats. Just before we started our trek we were told, that we still needed wellington boots in the places where water is deep. So we started to bargain with the French trekkers who had just finished their trek. Tanzin who wore UK size 7 had to compromise with UK size 11 wellington boots. It did work but he ended up with lots of blisters all over the feet. Paul also wore gaiters, which proved a very successful combination with the Chilcats – his feet never got wet. Thick gloves, a hat, sun cream, lip-balm and sunglasses were also essential. A large rucksack was necessary to be able to share communal items – we needed food for five days on each trip, and even though our Zanskari companions insisted on carrying most of it, we managed to share at least part of their load. We should also mention sleeping bags and mats. These were very important, not least because they could ensure comfort as a last resort if we had become wet, cold, isolated, injured etc...

What other preparations did you have to make?

The timing and weather was the most important part of the expedition during the trek. Generally it is assumed January and February are the best months, with the aim for most tourists being to leave as soon as the Chadar is deemed to be in condition. For many locals, however, the best Chadar is considered to be at the end of the season when the route has become well-worn and a good thickness of ice has built up. Of course, this runs the risk of leaving yourself stranded in Zaskar, so a balance has to be struck.

About a month before the trek we started to ask the locals about the perfect time for the trek. The timing for Chadar trek consider to be best when temperature drop its minimum -15 to -30 so it was very hard to predict which part of the month can be coldest month. However, since we started to prepare our expedition we asked each and every person we know about the right time for the Chadar trek. When we were in Ladakh we asked every person about the situation of ice and the weather. A little change in temperature can put you in very difficult situation. Such as the ice can defrost while you are in the gorge and can trap you in one place for more than few weeks. There is story that people got trapped for a month. If there is heavy snow fall then there is a constant avalanche threat and sometimes the avalanches can break the ice and it can create dams in the gorge that can be very dangerous.

We also have to think that what kind of food we will be carrying, because the food has to be low in weight and enough for the expedition. Also we have to make sure we have enough fuel for cooking. We found lots of dry wood that had been brought to the area by water in summer and some willow and juniper trees on the way. If this ran out, other wood can be wet and difficult to dry. Paul also wanted to learn as much as possible about the place he was going and the people he was going to meet. We had to make plans for emergencies, and arrange contacts to facilitate the rest of our journey. Also, preparing ourselves for such extreme conditions – by speaking to other people who had been in similar environments, for example – was essential.

How long did it take to plan for the trip?

We first spoke about the idea of visiting the Chadar nearly 18 months before we actually went. With such a big undertaking – especially one where you're not just booking onto a pre-arranged trip – it takes a lot of time just to make the decision to go, even before you have to start thinking about the practicalities of the trip. We started to ask question about the timing and weather few month before the trip. Some of the important questions that we asked a few months before the trek were what kind of dangerous things we could experience in an extreme case. There were so many questions regarding to health and safety, such as what will happened if we fell in water? How likely were we to get frost bite? What will happen if we get trapped in one place for long time? Many of these questions have no real answer so in order to avoid the risk we asked as many questions as we could to avoid these accidents, which was why we started so early.

How extreme was the environment that you were trekking through?

The temperatures could reach as low as -30°C and the surrounding environment consisted of a gorge deeper than the Grand Canyon. We walked across frozen ice and scrambled over rocks along the journey

During walk we only rested a little, we always walked constantly so it kept us warm. We had some snow fall, just before the village of Neyrak. As we arrived close to the village the snow fall became heavier. We spent night in a village huts, we were worried if we would be able to travel next day or

not. We were told by our companion Dala, Nyntak and Stanzin that we should not go further if the weather stayed like that, because of avalanche threat. On our way between Tsarak-Do and Pishu we saw the remains of few small avalanches.

There was also danger of stone fall in some places of the trek. We were asked to travel in these areas during morning time while stones are still frozen to the ground. There is also danger to fall in water if the ice is not thick enough. We were told few years ago a porter got sucked by the water current that flowing fast beneath half a meter thick ice with his luggage and was never found again.

The Chadar is also extremely isolated. There are very few locations in the gorge where a rescue could be affected by helicopter if there had been an accident or someone had become sick.

How did you survive in this extreme environment?

As we mentioned, we have been very lucky with the weather so we did quite well. The key thing is taking a good amount of time for preparation. We took good time to understand the geographical location of the region where we were trekking. We took a long time in preparation and we were relatively well equipped. We got very good clothing to keep us warm in these temperatures and we read the weather every day and kept ourselves vigilant about the coming danger, such as cold, stone fall, week ice and avalanche. We stocked up on enough food to survive until we arrived in Zanskar, where we bought some more food. We also had a satellite device so we could signal to our insurance company and friends if we fell into danger. The bad thing about Chadar is there are not many places where we can get rescued by helicopter because the gorge is quite narrow in most places. We also recognised the importance of using local knowledge to help us on our trip. A 'western' approach makes it quite possible to survive in climates/environments even more extreme than that of the Chadar, though the experience might not have been quite so comfortable. For example although we were fortunate enough to be able to buy some very good modern equipment (coupled with some clothing we already owned) we quickly adapted to the Zanskari way of doing things – namely finding a camping spot/bivvy/cave that had a good supply of firewood, so instead of cowering in a sleeping bag round a small stove, we could be outside appreciating the stars and general majesty of the Himalayas in winter.

Was tourism evident to see whilst you were on your trip? And in what form?

During the trip we passed other expedition groups and camp sites, whilst in nearby areas such as Leh and Padum the spread of tourism was evident in the number of hotels and guest houses available. However tourist infrastructure is lacking – or at least quite basic, though that's probably to be expected on a trip to such a remote area

Many things such as communication are very poor. There is satellite phone in Padum which hardly works. We think the tourists who were in the valley while we were there had come to experience two key tangible and intangible experiences. One is to experience the natural environment of the Zanskari where we live in such a harsh environment with very little connection with the other parts of the world for most of the year. Thus we think many tourists come to experience the wild nature of mountains and environment in winter and how a community survive in such a harsh conditions in the high Himalaya. Also to experience the unique culture that preserved thousand years due to isolation. The way people live, eat, drink and every days activity. The tangible and visual experiences such as mountain, ice, rock, monasteries and building. The intangible experiences were the tourists themselves in this environment surrounded by this natural environment and cultural experience that they get while they are with Zanskari in Zanskari House.

There tourists in Leh – the capital of Ladakh – who were there for a variety of reasons, from schooling to visiting the sites out of season to skiing (one or two adventurous souls). We met several groups of trekkers who had returned from the Chadar – French, German, and Indian. We also encountered maybe 60 or 70 trekkers, in groups of up to 15 or so, in the gorge itself, often accompanied by a very large number of trekkers, and almost all carrying no more than a day-sack (including one 72 year-old Japanese lady). All of these were met on the way in to Zanskar. By the time of our return journey the trekking season was over and we shared the gorge only with those returning to live or work in Zanskar or Ladakh.

How do you think local people feel about tourism?

Traditionally local people rely on agriculture such as Barley, Black Pas and Yak meat. Therefore, the spreading of tourism provides alternative income for the local people, which is welcomed to improve their quality of life. I (Paul) only encountered a positive reaction to tourism, though there was a slight sense in some of the trekking groups we met that the interaction between locals and trekkers was not as warm as the interaction we were experiencing.

What impacts do you think tourism is having and/or will have in the future?

We think there will be a mix impacts from tourism in future. One of the positive impacts is as it will help to improve the quality of life in the valley and may provide more wealth. However, at the moment due to poor communication and skill the economical leakage in the valley is one of the problems; the revenue that is generated through the tourism goes back to the neighbouring towns of Zanskar such as Manali and Leh.

The thousand year old culture and way of living may gradually dissolve as communication and transportation of the valley improved. There will be more competition within the community. Beside, environmental impacts are one of the biggest threats in the valley. The valley is environmentally very fragile; tourism may threaten the environment of the valley.

Many Zanskaris I met were very keen to embrace tourism as a means to try and secure their long held and highly prized independence. The influence of western visitors – or Indian visitors – was feared much less than that of being at the behest of more powerful neighbours over whom they have little economic or political influence.

Do you think tourism will increase in the future?

Yes, the new road that is being built will allow all year round access to the area therefore opening up the area to tourism all of the year rather than just seasonal tourism in the summer months. The regions environment is spectacular and as more and more people seek the “once in a lifetime experience” this area will attract more adventure tourists. However the new road could take 10 years or 3 or 4 years to build whilst some locals questions as to whether it will ever be finished.

Local people, as well those from neighbouring regions, including Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh, are increasingly aware of the opportunities afforded by tourism, which is another reason tourist activity is likely to continue to grow.

Biographies



Tanzin Norbu was born in the remote Himalayan kingdom of Zanskar. When he was seven he left to attend school in Manali in northern India. He has since attended university in India as well as in the UK. Tanzin currently lives in the UK, where he is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and a member of the International Association for Ladakhi Studies. Tanzin has been involved since the outset with the Himalayan Documentary Foundation, a collaboration that culminated recently in the documentary film 'Walking in Circles', and has worked with the Royal Geographical Society's 'Hidden Histories' project.



Paul Howard is a geographer, journalist and writer. He has written three books about cycling and travel . He has an MA in Geography from St Andrews University and is a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. He has had a long interest in development, whether at home or abroad, and also in remote, mountainous environments, their inhabitants and cultures. He lives in Sussex with his wife and four children.

Tanzin and Paul won the 2011 RGS Neville Shulman Challenge Award. One of the aims of the trip that the award funded was to set up a radio school in Zanskar (see www.radiozanskar.com).