

ACROSS THE INNER LINE

By ANNE DAVIES

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ON 15th June, 1958, Eve Sims, Antonia Deacock and I arrived in New Delhi. The journey from England had taken us six weeks. We had driven all the way in a Land Rover across Europe, passing through France, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia and Greece to Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and so to India. We had driven unescorted across mountain ranges, high plateaux and burning deserts to the midsummer heat of the Indian plains. Despite some grim warnings, we camped every night beside our vehicle and we met with nothing but kindness and curiosity. In Iran the people in the cities warned us of bandits in the desert and the few people we met in the desert warned us of thieves in the cities, but, if we met either, they treated us well, for nothing was stolen from us.

It was in September, 1957, that we had first decided to drive to India and to visit Zanskar (spelt ZASKAR on the map) which is in Ladakh, beyond the Greater Himalayan Range between India and Tibet. The fact that we could find very little written about Zanskar or the Zanskari people in the library of the Royal Geographical Society made it sound enticing, especially as my husband, who had twice been to neighbouring Lahoul, had heard strange tales about Zanskar. It seemed to be largely unknown and only vaguely surveyed.

Our husbands, all experienced mountaineers, from the outset seemed to be convinced that we could carry out our plans. Their support and encouragement did much to help us, and their financial aid made the venture possible.

The blessing of our Patron, Lady Hunt, wife of Brigadier Sir John Hunt, and the great enthusiasm of Dame Isobel Cripps, our Chairman (her husband was the late Sir Stafford Cripps), gave us the incentive and determination to make the expedition a success. It was Lady Cripps who introduced us to Mrs. Pandit, India's High Commissioner to Britain, who also rallied to our cause and helped us enormously with our various diplomatic problems, as well as introducing us at our Royal Festival Hall lecture in London on our return.

Our aims were fourfold: —

- (a) To carry out a survey into the domestic lives of women and children in Zanskar.

- (b) To learn as much as possible of the social conditions, way of life, customs, handicrafts and cooking recipes of the women and children in the countries through which we would pass.
- (c) To make a film of our experiences.
- (d) To climb, if possible, a virgin peak in the region of 17,000 ft. to 18,000 ft.

We planned the venture as three separate expeditions: the outward journey, the trekking and climbing in the Himalayas and the homeward journey.

Before we left England we had undergone a five-day maintenance course at the Rover Works at Solihull, which was to stand us in good stead. We also received much help from various food and equipment firms. The Land Rover carried as much as possible and the remainder we had sent by sea.

Travel-worn and weary we collected our mail from the Rover Agents in Delhi and called at the British High Commissioner's Office to report our arrival. The Y.W.C.A. kindly let us have their guest room and after a cold bath and a sleep we were ready to face up to our problems.

There was a dock strike in Bombay and our luggage there was held up. How long the strike would continue no one knew, but we could not proceed without our vital stores.

Our other problem was to obtain a permit to cross the Himalaya to Zanskar, for it lies beyond the legendary Inner Line. This line, drawn some 100 miles parallel to and south of the Tibetan frontier, creates a buffer state and only very rarely are travellers from the West granted permission to cross into this area. We were no exception to the rule and our application was turned down. We anxiously began to study the map for a fresh area to explore.

However, our enforced stay in this rapidly expanding city was by no means dull for so many people helped and entertained us. We were particularly thrilled to be invited by the Himalayan Club, of which I am a member, to a party to meet the members of the successful Indian Cho Oyu team of climbers who had just returned to the capital.

During our time at the Y.W.C.A. we were made welcome by the many lovely Indian girls living there and they did much to keep our spirits high despite the pre-monsoon heat. We sat talking about our plans with some of the girls, under the whirling punka, one evening when one of them said she was sure that the Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, would be pleased to meet us. She suggested that we should write and ask for an audience and she would

have the letter delivered. Rather unbelievably we carefully penned a letter. A few days later, to our amazement, we received an invitation to visit the Prime Minister in his house.

Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Mr. Nehru's daughter, greeted us when we drove up in our Land Rover. A few minutes later the Premier arrived from a Cabinet meeting. The delightful informality of our host and hostess soon put us at ease. Maps were called for and spread on the floor and we were soon pouring over a large scale map of the Himalayas. For the first time we were able to see the 'Inner Line' clearly marked, in green ink, on the map. Until now its exact position had been something of a mystery to us.

Mr. Nehru had recently returned from an enjoyable holiday in Kulu and showed obvious enthusiasm as we discussed our plans and traced out our proposed route on the map. After nearly an hour of nostalgic discussion—I had been to school in the Himalayas and also on two small expeditions there—he suddenly said, 'Well, I can see no objection to you young ladies carrying out your plans to visit Zanskar. I will see my Foreign Secretary about the necessary permits in the morning.'

We were asked to renew our applications and two days later the Foreign Secretary granted us our permits. To us it seemed unbelievable that such busy people as the Indian Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary could have found time to help our venture. We were thrilled and elated.

I flew to Bombay by Viscount in 3½ hours and managed to get our boxes through Customs, free of duty, and on the train in six hours. The 36-hour journey back by train was uncomfortable and extremely hot. Antonia and Eve drove the Land Rover to Patankot where I joined them from the train.

What joy it was to wind our way up through the lush green foothills of the beautiful Kangra valley. We spent a cool night in the Palampur rest-house, with only the howl of jackals to shatter the peace. The next morning we met some of the girl students from the college nearby. We mistimed the opening of the barrier on the one-way traffic road through the Beas gorge at Mandi and so spent a pleasantly cool afternoon at the rest-house there where the cook prepared omelettes and apricots for our lunch. Late that night we reached Sunshine Orchards, Manali, and met Major Henry Banon, the local Himalayan Club Secretary, who had a room and a meal ready for us.

After a good night's sleep we greeted the day and gazed in wonder at the beauties of the Kulu valley. Our two Ladakhi porters, Namgyal and Nowa Ram, were waiting there for us. They had both been

with the 1955 R.A.F. Himalayan Expedition of which both Eve's husband, Flight-Lieutenant John Sims, and my husband, Squadron-Leader Lester Davies, had been members. Namgyal had also been with Mrs. Joyce Dunsheath's Abinger Hammer Expedition in 1956. We all set to with a will and repacked our stores into suitable mule loads and ten mules were booked for the expedition. However, on the morning before we planned to depart, Antonia developed a fever. Fortunately, in the Mission hospital in Manali village was Dr. John Watson, a Scot, and his kind administrations had Antonia on her feet again in four days.

Major Banon kindly let us have a garage for the Land Rover while we were away. A riding pony was ordered for Antonia for the first day and we began our trek with our two porters, ten pack animals and the ghorawallah and his two youthful assistants. The second part of the expedition had started and we were happy to be on our way again.

The first day's march was on a jeepable road beside the tumbling Beas river. As we climbed higher Namgyal tempted us to take a few short cuts, but we found the going so steep and exhausting that we soon learnt our lesson and stuck to the main track. We camped the first night above Rahla, at the foot of the 13,050 ft. Rohtang La. It rained hard during the night and the clouds were low when we set off the next morning. Antonia had found the day riding the pony painful and decided that she preferred to walk, so the pony and his attendant were sent back to Manali. The climbing of the Rohtang showed how tired we were after our wait in Delhi and the weeks of travel in the Land Rover, and we were exhausted by the time we reached the pass. Namgyal met a friend who ran a tea shop in a tent near the top of the pass and we were given tea. Although the glass was far from clean it was the best drink I have ever tasted.

Dropping down into Lahoul on the other side we could see the Kulti valley that our husbands had explored three years before. Having seen their numerous photographs we felt that we were with old and familiar scenes again. We crossed the Chandra river at Khoksar and proceeded down the hot dusty valley to Sissu. Here we had intended to spend one night on the lawn of the rest-house, but one of the ponies had wandered away from the grazing ground on the mountain-side and could not be found, so we had an enforced rest-day. However, it was a good opportunity to write letters and to catch up on our diaries. Gondla was our next stop. I had sore feet and limped painfully into camp long after the others. Small boys and girls came to meet me from the village and one charming lad insisted on carrying my

shoes as I continued in my stocking feet past the many Mani walls and the prominent house of the Thakur Sahib. Our tents were under willow trees with a babbling brook nearby. The next morning a party of young women carrying large stones on a special frame of wood on their backs stopped and chatted to us. Many were beautiful, but good looks and shyness seemed to go hand in hand and they fled when a camera was produced. Just as we were leaving a message was sent by runner from Tandi that the bridge there was being washed away by flood waters. On arriving at the bridge we found gangs of men and women carrying stones to repair the breastwork that was being torn from the bank. No one was allowed to cross the suspension bridge with loads, so we pitched our camp under the willows on the bank of the river and spent the day watching the repair work in progress. However, to our amazement, although the work was incomplete, the workers all disappeared at five o'clock and left the river to do its worst during the night. Throughout the hours of darkness it poured with rain and the river was higher in the morning. Namgyal called us at dawn and told me his plan of carrying all our stores over the bridge before the engineers arrived on the scene. The mules were sent some seven miles up the river to Kyelang, where they could cross by a bridge and then trek the seven miles down the other side to rejoin us to pick up their loads again. This was quickly carried out and I waited with the loads and the porters on the other side in pouring rain.

Here we left the Chandra river and continued up the valley of the Bhaga to Kyelang, the capital of Lahoul, passing the impressive Gompa perched high in the cliffs outside the town. In the bazaar we purchased umbrellas which proved most useful both for the rain and to keep off the intense rays of the sun. The march from Kyelang to Jispa was steep and beautiful. In places the path had disappeared in landslides but our sure-footed animals negotiated all obstacles. The village people we met greeted us with the Lahouli word 'Namesta' as we walked between the terraced fields. They talked happily in Hindi with me and were most curious to know who we were and what we were doing in their country. The older women in particular intrigued us with their hair plucked back from their foreheads into a sort of inverted widow's peak and decorated with a large yellow ball on either side of their temples. Their hair was plaited in numerous small braids and held in position at the waist with a large silver ornament.

Just before sundown we met Thakur Purta Singh of Lahoul in his village at Bagnai. He was returning from a devil-dancing ceremony in the temple there. He asked us to join him in a drink.

Shawls were spread on the path and we sat for a short while and drank with him our first cup of Cháng, or barley beer, whilst he talked of his time in the Dogra Regiment.

It began to rain again and we said our farewell quickly and proceeded along the rough track over a river to Jispa. The route took us round the edge of a lake. When we returned this way several weeks later the lake had disappeared, obviously whatever had blocked the river and caused the lake, some years before, had been dislodged by the flood waters. The wireless operators from the Jispa police post checked our passports and Inner Line permits in the morning. A Sikh doctor and his assistant, who were touring Lahoul dispensing medicine to the villagers, told us much about the health problems of the district. He was obviously a dedicated young man who felt he had a mission among these lonely villages.

Darcha is on the Inner Line which runs along the south bank of the Barsi. The bridge was under construction and the only way to cross the river at this point was by Chula, a box suspended by pulleys from a wire rope spanning the gorge. The mules were unloaded and sent a further eight miles up the river to cross by a bridge and then down the other side to rejoin us. Whilst waiting on the north side for the mules we watched Tibetans and local Lahouli merchants exchanging goods at a market set up for the purpose. The Tibetans had trekked over high mountain passes from the Salt Deserts of Tibet, taking two months to reach Darcha. Each animal carried a total of 10 seers (20 lbs.) in two miniature panniers slung across its back. At the Inner Line it was exchanged for Indian grain and flour, which was loaded into the panniers before the long trek back to Tibet.

That afternoon we met a young Sikh P.W.D. engineer, who was constructing the bridge, and he gave us the news of the revolution in Iraq and the Lebanon. On his portable battery radio we listened to President Eisenhower's speech and wondered if there would be a war in the Middle East. We were a little anxious that our return overland route might be cut. However, after some discussion, we decided to press on and see how the political situation had progressed on our return. From Darcha onwards we were out of touch with the outside world for several weeks.

As we climbed up towards the Bara Lacha La, trees ceased to grow and the path was a mere track worn by the feet of animals and men. In places we stumbled over glacial moraine. Zing Zing-bar, on the map, had sounded such an exciting place but all we found there was one building, a deserted tumbledown doss house.

Camp was pitched just below the pass. A gadhi (shepherd)

joined the two porters for the night and, long before dawn, we de-camped and were heading for the pass. The first snow glacier gave the mules some trouble for it was slippery and steep, but with careful handling by the muleteers we reached the top safely. At 16,057 ft. we were on the true watershed of the Greater Himalayan Range. To the north lay Central Asia. The track down to the Lingti Chu was treacherous and hard work for men and animals. In places it seemed as if whole mountains had disintegrated, leaving rocks and boulders as big as a house strewn across the valley.

The camp site at Kilang was ideal and we spent a restful night, being awakened next day by chirping marmots. Edelweiss and alpine flowers of every hue surrounded us. It was fairly easy walking across the vast empty Lingti plain, except for the numerous fast-running streams in Rupshu that had cut deeply into the sandy soil and had to be forded. On different days Antonia and I had near shaves when we fell into two of these icy rivers. Unfortunately both our still cameras were drenched and much of our still photography suffered thereafter until we could have them repaired in Delhi. Several of the streams were only fordable in the early morning, before the sun had melted the glaciers upstream and turned them into raging torrents.

Leaving the Lingti Chu the long climb towards the Phirtse La began. On the map (52G) the position of this pass is only vaguely marked and there are many question marks in the area. It was last surveyed in 1862, and then only sketchily. We camped just below the snow-line and were on our way to the pass by dawn. It is only a shepherds' track used in good summers and we were fortunate, for 1958 was an exceptionally hot summer. The climb up to the 18,100 ft. col was a great strain on all of us and we felt limp and tired when we reached the top. However, we had decided to have a go at one of the peaks that lay to the north-east, which is not marked on the map. We found a suitable camp site and pitched two small tents. Nowa Ram, the mulemen and the mules disappeared down into Zanskar leaving the three of us and Namgyal with a rucksack and a box of food. The primus was soon roaring, melting the snow for tea. It took hours to boil the water, the altitude began to affect us and we all had splitting headaches. Antonia Deacock was the least affected, but poor Eve was very sick in the night. We began to wonder why on earth we had left our families and comfortable homes to travel to this windswept spot. However, early the next morning we struggled up towards the summit of our chosen mountain. As we crossed the topmost snow-field the dawn sun lit the myriad peaks and clouds with a rosy hue against an azure sky. As

we gazed at the grandeur around us, our aching heads and limbs forgotten, we knew why we had come. By Himalayan standards not a difficult mountain, to us inexperienced climbers it seemed quite an achievement.

Standing on the virgin summit of the 18,500 ft. peak we decided to call it 'Biwi Giri' or 'Wives' Peak'.

This diversion completed, we continued down into Zanskar and two days later came to our first village, Tetha. All the inhabitants came to meet us and found us a great attraction for, they told us, we were the first European women they had ever seen. Only one European man, a missionary, had ever been seen there. Our clothing and equipment were closely examined and we were asked innumerable questions. Our two Ladakhi porters spoke the same language as the Zanskaris as well as Hindi, and I speak Hindi, so we were able to converse with these fascinating, primitive people. We took advantage of their curiosity to observe them closely and learn much of their way of life.

Time was running out and we made a six-day dash to Padam (pronounced 'Pahdum'), the capital. The 'main road' was a narrow path, chipped out of the sandstone mountain-side. It ran along the left bank of the Lingti (Tsarap) Chu, sometimes at river level and sometimes steeply climbing high above the numerous cliffs. The people of the small villages through which we passed greeted us warmly and we were entertained by the Lamas at Burdun Gompa, an imposing building built high on a rocky promontory above the gorge. The days were long and gruelling in the hot sun, trapped in the narrow valley by towering sandstone mountains. On the third day we came to the flat plain of Padam which lies at the confluence of the Doda and Lingti rivers, where they form the Zanskar river from which this country takes its name.

About two hundred people live in this tiny Central Asian capital, built amongst huge boulders. At first some of the children hid as we approached them but gradually they gained confidence and soon we had a large crowd watching our every movement during the day.

There is a small police post here and our passports were checked and stamped 'Padam, Zanskar'. Zanskaris all pronounce the name of their country as ZANSKAR, and not ZASKAR as it is spelt on the map, the first letter 'a' being nasal.

Having reached and explored our ultimate destination we quickly retraced our steps towards the Shingo La, 16,722 ft. Camping again at Tetha we were pleased to meet our erstwhile friends there.

The following morning we decided to give all the children sweets. Zanskaris seldom wash and, as all the children were suffering from

colds, their faces were filthy. I told Namgyal to tell them that only children with clean faces would get sweets. There was a mad rush to the ice-cold stream and with clean, wet, grinning faces, about thirty boys and girls lined up for their reward. They were probably more fascinated by the coloured tin-foil wrappings than by the contents of the Spangle packets we doled out to them.

What hard lives these people lead! Winter lasts six to seven months and in the remainder of the year they have to plough, sow and reap their scanty harvest and prepare for the long snows to come. There is no wood for fuel so the roots of the dwarf gorse, juniper and similar bushes have to be collected, often from miles away, for little grows on the steep barren mountains. Dung is also used as fuel and none is used as fertilizer. As there is little irrigation, soil erosion is quite alarming. In fact Zanskar is rapidly becoming a Himalayan 'dust bowl'. What the people cannot produce from their impoverished soil has to be carried over mountain passes of well over 16,000 ft., which means many days' march from the Himalayan foothills. There are no doctors, dentists or schools. The lines of communication are mere footpaths with icy streams and rivers to be forded, for bridges are only made when providence fortuitously leaves boulders in the river-bed to form the breastwork. They possess little besides the clothes they stand in, a few blankets and pots and pans, a spade and a sickle, a few sheep and goats and the small family home. Their greatest possessions are their freedom from officialdom and an infectious cheerfulness. One hopes that the Communist invasion in the Aksai Chin area, a few miles to the north, does not deprive them of even these assets.

Although the Shingo La is some fourteen hundred feet lower than the Phirtse La it was the most difficult we had encountered. From the north we had to negotiate a fairly steep glacier and there were numerous snow-fields. We left our camp just below the snow-line by the light of the moon, but there had been fresh snow near the top of the pass. The unfortunate mules, struggling with their loads, sank into this soft snow to their bellies. Loads were removed and portered to the top and we coaxed, bullied and drove the animals over each snow-field. It was well past midday by the time we had crossed the last snow and started the descent to the Bani Nala.

Back to Darcha, we retraced our steps, through Kye tang and the Chandra valley to the Rohtang. We were sad to leave the kindly, cheerful hill people and return to the heat of the plains. In Manali we received our mail and the news that the Middle East trouble was over and our homeward route clear.

As a reward for their excellent work we took our two Ladakhis to



PORTER NAMGYAL ASSISTS ANTONIA DEACOCK ACROSS A MOUNTAIN STREAM, 14,000 FT.



EVE SIMS, PORTER NAMGYAL AND ANTONIA DEACOCK REST ON THE 14,000 FT. LINGTI PLAIN IN RUPSHU



WOMEN'S OVERLAND HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION, 1958. GOPENG GOH AND OTHER LAHOLI
PEAKS FROM ROHTANG LA CROSSED BY THE EXPEDITION

Delhi in the Land Rover. It was the first time they had been to a big city. They visited the bazaars and saw their first cinema show. However, when we returned to Pathankot three days later, they were pleased to be returning to the mountains. Their verdict of Delhi was that it was too hot for a man from the hills ; it might be all right for a rich man but a poor man was better off in the mountains.

Both of them were in tears as we said good-bye. We had walked over 300 miles together, crossed five high passes and climbed a peak with them and we were equally sad at the parting. With lumps in our throats we drove to Amritsar and the Indo-Pakistan border.

Lahore was now green and cooler than on our last visit. The monsoon had caused a good deal of flooding north of the city. Through Rawalpindi, Attock Bridge and on up the Grand Trunk Road we drove to Peshawar. How thrilling it was to motor up the legendary Khyber Pass and follow the sparkling Kabul river to Afghanistan and to Kabul, its capital. A suitable camp site was made available for us by the Afghan Government on the lawn outside the Government News Agency.

Unfortunately we were unable to linger for long in this historic city, a veritable oasis in the barren mountains, and had to drive south over an atrocious road to Kandahar. Each night a camp site was provided for us by the police, in a walled compound, and an unfortunate policeman was often ordered to guard our tent all night. In every village our passports were checked. Obviously news of our departure had been telephoned to the next village for we were always expected. An English-speaking Afghan showed us the beautiful mosque of Herat and told us much about the history of this ancient city. Again, time limited us and we had to move on. We were told that we were probably the first females to have crossed Afghanistan unescorted by men. Afghani women never travel without a male escort.

In Teheran we again met friends whom we had made on the outward journey, and we were the guests of Mr. T. Kaul, the Indian Ambassador, whom we had met in Manali where he had been on leave. He arranged a permit for us to drive over the Elburz Mountains to the Caspian Sea military area and up to Astara, near the Russian border. It was wonderful to leave the heat and dust of the desert and cross the mountains to a land as green and lush as England. Late at night we crossed the tortuous mountain passes to Tabriz and camped some fifty miles beyond. The next day took us across the Iranian-Turkish border and back to the smoother gravel roads of Turkey. Back through Ankara to Istanbul and then on

through Greece, Yugoslavia, Austria, Germany and Holland. On a bleak misty morning in October, five months after leaving home, we watched our Land Rover being landed by crane from the ferry-boat at Harwich.

Altogether we had driven that reliable vehicle through twelve countries and over 16,000 miles. Not once had the engine faltered. We had no punctures on the outward journey and only three, one in Afghanistan and two in Iran, on the homeward journey. Often the going was hard, hot, dusty and uncomfortable, but with a great deal of help and a large dose of luck we had succeeded in all our original aims. We had crossed the Inner Line. We had reached Padam. We had crossed Afghanistan. We had even climbed our peak. But these are the sort of achievements that any expedition should be able to claim.

They were as nothing, to us, compared with the friendships we made in the lands through which we passed. So many expeditions have little time for getting to know the people who live in the Himalayan valleys. It is our great pleasure that we were able to find time to make so many friends, especially in India, Pakistan and Zanskar itself. No doubt mountains and geographical explorations are important. However, much of the Himalaya has now been extensively explored and one hopes that future expeditions can find more time to get to know the delightful people who live in those mountains.