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THE 1991 KASHMIR TO KULU SKI TRAVERSE

EXPEDITION REPORT

15/6/91

NAME OF EXPEDITION: THE 1991 KASHMIR TO KULU SKI TRAVERSE

MEMBERS: HUW KINGSTON (LEADER)

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OBJECTIVES: TO TRAVERSE ON NORDIC SKIS FROM THE KASHMIR VALLEY TO THE KULU VALLEY IN THE INDIAN HIMALAYA.

DATES OF THE ACTUAL SKI TRAVERSE: 21/3/91 TO 21/4/91

COSTS:	1991 SKI TOUR	1990 REC.TREK
FLIGHTS (INTERNAT & DOMESTIC)	2200	1000
FOOD, STORES & MEDICAL	500	100
ADMINISTRATION	100	
GROUND COSTS IN INDIA	650	
INSURANCE	200	
EQUIPMENT	870	
HIRE OF LABOUR		100
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	4520	1300
	TOTAL=5820	

NOTES

1 ALL FIGURES IN POUNDS STERLING

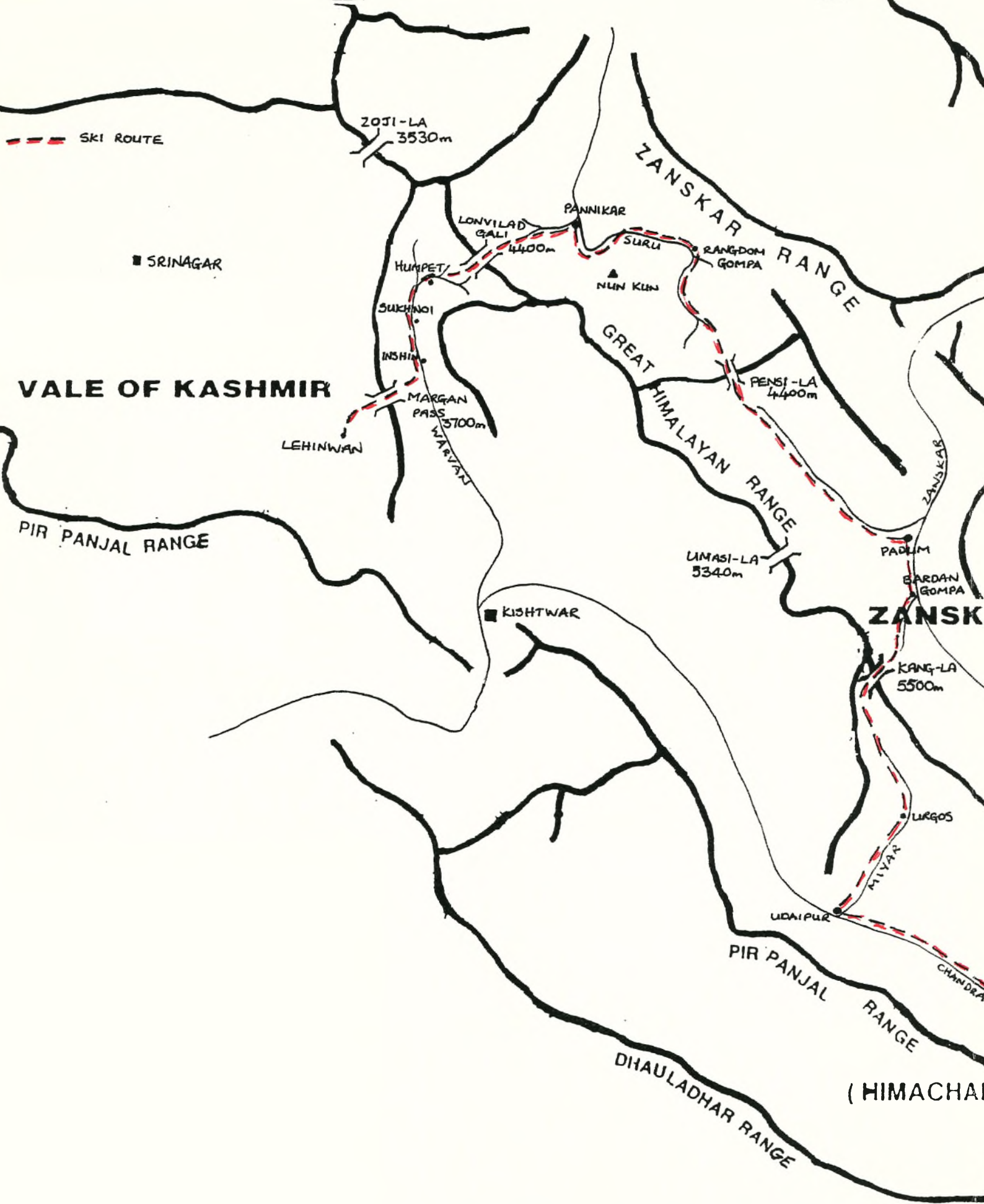
2 AS ALL EXPEDITION MEMBERS FLEW TO INDIA FROM AUSTRALIA THE INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT PRICES ARE FOR AUSTRALIA - INDIA RETURN. FOR THE RECONNAISSANCE TREK THEY ARE UK - INDIA RETURN

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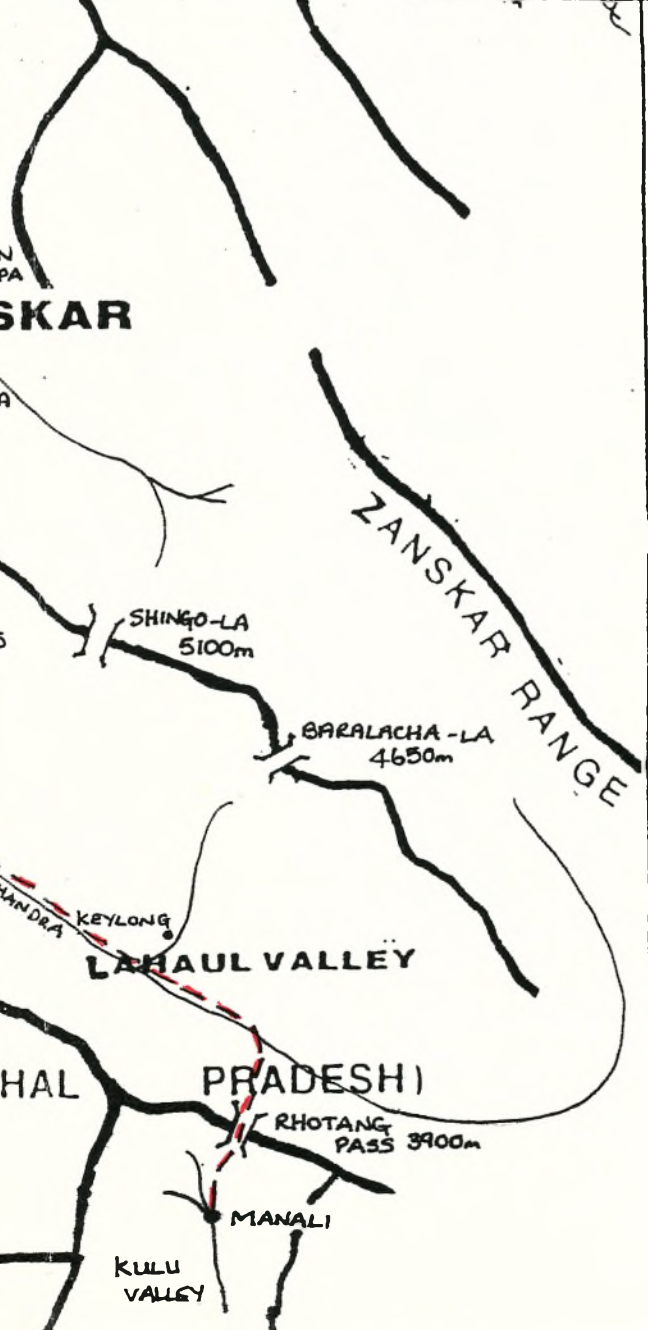
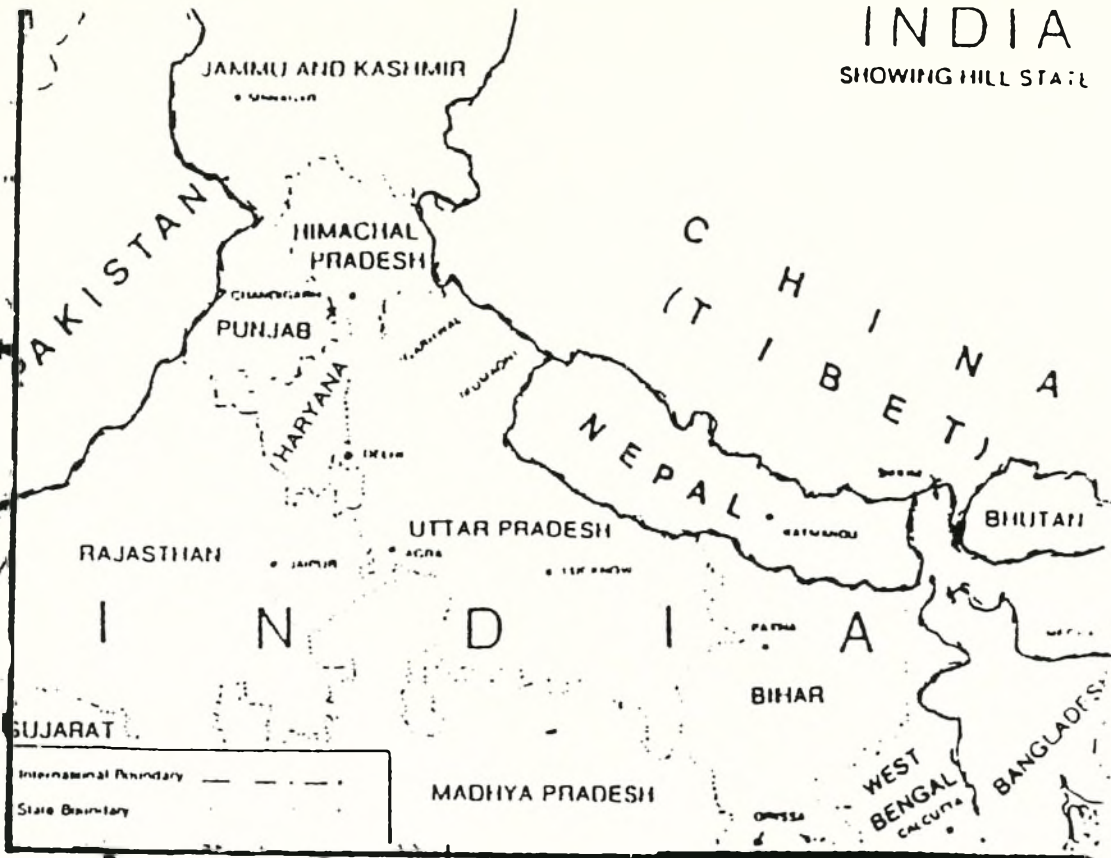
3 HUW KINGSTON WORKS IN THE OUTDOOR EQUIPMENT TRADE AND
HENCE THE MAJORITY OF GEAR WAS PURCHASED AT WHOLESALE AND
MANY ITEMS WERE GIVEN FREE.

THE 1991 KASHMIR TO KULU SKI TRAVERSE



INDIA

SHOWING HILL STATES



AN ACCOUNT OF THE 1991 KASHMIR TO KULU SKI TRAVERSE

IN MARCH/APRIL OF 1991 A GROUP OF FOUR PEOPLE TRAVELLED ON NORDIC
SKIS FROM THE KASHMIR VALLEY TO THE KULU VALLEY IN NORTHERN
INDIA. THE JOURNEY LASTED 32 DAYS, COVERED A DISTANCE OF ALMOST
600KM AND CROSSED FIVE MAJOR PASSES.

HUW KINGSTON

CAROL ANKERS

MEGAN BOWDEN

JAMIE SERLE

1991 KASHMIR TO KULU SKI TRAVERSE

In East March 1991 the village of Lehinwan in India's Kashmir Valley was rudely awoken from its winter slumber by the arrival of 4 brightly clad foreigners. The attention they received was not due to any outrageous behaviour, just the fact that they were there, and intended heading off into the hills (which in the eyes of the locals is outrageous enough in itself!)

Although we were desperately keen to begin our journey, an enjoyable few minutes were spent chatting to the locals. So many feelings compete for attention: excitement, curiosity, apprehension - the list is endless. We were confident that our planning and preparation were sound, but that's only the first step. Who knows what might be encountered over the coming weeks?

The planning of the traverse had been underway for almost two years, 9 months previously, in the summer of 1990, a reconnaissance trip was made by two of the team members. In the light of information gathered during this trip, substantial changes were made to the planned route. Valleys with sides too steep to be safely negotiated on skis, or presenting a high avalanche risk, or sections where the river passed through steep gorges all had to be discounted. During this time two food depots were placed, one in Pannikar and one in Padum, each containing ten days food for four people.

In leaving Lehinwan we had only to walk for an hour before donning skis. After another hour and a half the decision was made to take advantage of a perfect camping spot, so the tents went up for the first time. The next morning our objective was to cross the Margan Pass (3700m). It took 4 hours to reach the pass in slowly deteriorating weather conditions. What had started as a few light snow-flakes was now a white-out.

As we descended visibility improved, although it was still snowing heavily. We were in a fairly narrow valley by this stage, and were concerned by the potential avalanche danger, so hurried along, never stopping to rest, hoping to reach the wide, open Jaran Valley before too much snow accumulated on the slopes above us. After 4 hours of exhausting skiing, picking our way over old avalanche debris, which placed great strain on the skis, it was with enormous relief that we reached a relatively safe spot below some trees. It would have been foolish to have continued further, so we dug a platform for the tents, and spent a restless night listening to the avalanches up and down the valley.

The snow stopped in the early hours of the next morning, and the day was clear and sunny with the occasional cloudy period. We stayed put, giving the snow chance to settle and any avalanches chance to come down, as well as giving us the opportunity to dry all of our gear. The following morning saw us skiing by 6.30am, hoping to escape from this menacing valley before the sun had chance to undo the delicate bond that joined snow and slope. It took almost 4 hours of clambering over avalanche debris, climbing

1971 KACHNIR TO PULLU BKI TRAVERSE

up and down the slides trying to select the best route, and crossing the river several times with varying degrees of success, before we finally reached the safety of the Marvan Valley. A celebratory brew and miniature Easter eggs as we listened to a huge avalanche come down where we had skied perhaps 20 minutes earlier. Not a thought to dwell upon.

Across the Marvan River was the village of Inabin, where we were welcomed and invited to stay at the post house. Our attempts to light a fire only succeeded in filling the whole place with smoke and the sight of the four of us sitting outside coughing and spluttering caused quite some amusement.

The exit of the valley to Sukhnoi was pleasant. Generally the valley was wide and open, although there were a few sections where the sides dropped more steeply to the river. In places avalanches had wiped the slopes clean of snow so we kicked our way gingerly across the mud and loose stones, hindered by the supernatural loads who trotted across with none of our "disturbing". Several villages lie along the valley, and in all of them we attracted a large crowd of interested followers who ran alongside us for a while.

We camped just before reaching Sukhnoi, the last habitation we would see until arriving in Pannikar. The next day our route took us north up the beautiful Kaintal Valley. After three hours the valley narrowed, and although we were keen to make further progress, decided to camp. The valley would be more safely negotiated early in the morning. We had been blessed with good weather for the past 4 days and the next day was equally beautiful. For the first few kilometres the valley was steep and narrow, thus vindicating the decision made yesterday. There were many sections where the valley sides dropped steeply into the river, so we crossed and re-crossed the river in an attempt to find the easiest route. At one stage the skis were removed and ice axes were used as we roped up and put steps across a particularly icy section. This can be quite frustrating as so much time and energy is consumed for such little progress. Eventually we reached Humpet, and our spirits soared. The valley here was wide and flat - a real paradise after our previous encounters. We camped by an open section of the river, and relaxed in the sunshine. The feeling of space was tremendous, a magnificent pure white wilderness.

A magical days skiing, the second half using skins to ascend the glacier, saw us poised just below the Lonvilad Pass (4200m). A stunning camping spot enhanced by the appearance of a full moon at dusk. A delayed start the next morning as we waited for the wind to drop. Unfortunately it didn't, so at 7.30am we set off for the pass. Our packs seemed much lighter, partly as we were now carrying much less food, but also because we were wearing most of our clothes! 45 minutes later we reached the pass, and strangely the wind had almost vanished. It was an exhilarating ski down to Pannikar, dropping 1100m, although patches of breakable crust, the skiers nightmare, did cause a few tumbles.

To arrive, we found the custodian of our food depot, who brought a room and some tea for us, before presenting us with our tea boxes which he had been so carefully storing for us since last winter. We were delighted to discover that everything was in order, and nothing had happened. A most enjoyable rest day was spent in Parkitar, recharging the batteries, and having a much-needed wash (although one bucket of water doesn't go far between a sixty people!)

It was then back to waking at 4.00am and getting away by 6.00am. This was our routine throughout the trip, as the snow deteriorated rapidly once the sun was upon it. For more progress was made early in the morning when the snow was still firm. The route from Parkitar was straightforward as we could follow the line of the summer road which traverses the northern slope high above the river. Our aim today was to reach Parkachik, so it was a pleasure to round a corner at 10.00am and see the village not too far ahead. However distances, as always, are deceiving. It was 12.00 before we reached a suitable camping spot just beyond Parkachik, with a superb view of a jumbled ice fall dropping to the river and the slopes of Nun and Kun rearing above us.

During the next two days the route presented few problems, although the weather was rather unpleasant on the second day. The wind blew and it snowed heavily. White-out conditions made navigation difficult. We were lucky enough simply to reach Ringdon Gompa, and didn't expect the marvellous hospitality. The lamas found us a room, brought us tea, and showed us around their main prayer room. We were able to help them in return by delivering a letter to the brother of the lama, who lived in a village we would pass through in two days time.

From Ringdon the skiing was virtually flat as we headed towards the Penel-la (4400m). The intention had been to camp below the pass, but we were making good progress so decided to continue on to the pass itself. The climb was relatively short, and not too steep, but the sense of achievement was no less as we reached the Fluttering prayer flags which marked the pass. Marvellous views all around as the tents were pitched, looking forward to the ski down from the pass into the Zaskar Valley the next morning.

We weren't disappointed. Another glorious day, and an exciting but all too short ski down on firm snow. There then followed a long, very gradual descent, where one stride on the skis produced a few metres of 'free' glide. It was great to make such quick progress. As we descended the valley further the easiest route took us high above the river. There was no opportunity to drop back down to it, so we camped high on a terrace, overlooking the confluence of the Hagshu and Doda rivers. The surrounding peaks, ridges and valleys were stunning in the evening light.

Skiing on down the valley for two more days, passing through many villages where we received a warm welcome and offers of food and tea. We arrived in Radum (3600m), the 'capital' of Zaskar, on

the 30th of April. The village paths had been cleared of snow and were now wet and muddy. We squelched our way to the Greenland hotel to find Abdul Salam, the guardian of our second food depot. Here we were extremely well looked after by his family. A room was provided and we were invited to eat with the family, another oven cooked us some delicious bread which was served with 'Aray Jap'.

A most enjoyable rest day was spent in Padum, and another wash, but this time with just a flask of hot water to share between 4! The only drawback was the intermittent wailing from the mosque - I have never heard such a tuneless sound. We wondered if, perhaps, the Mullah was suffering from laryngitis! Whilst in Padum we also witnessed a Buddhist funeral.

Abdul Salam borrowed boots and skis from us and went fishing. He returned with a huge catch, but admitted he'd caught 10 by line and 30 by blasting! It somehow ruins the image of a tranquil fisherman, picturing him tossing dynamite into the water. The idea of wading waist deep in the icy water to collect the stunned fish didn't sound too appealing though.

On leaving Padum we felt as though we were on the final leg of our journey. Our first day took us into the Temase Valley where we crept on a shelf way above the river, using skis, ice axes, ropes and pegs we created a Heath-Robinson contraption to collect water from the dripping icicles suspended from the cliffs which towered above us. It snowed a little overnight, but by the morning it was only a moderate wind which slowed our progress. Around lunchtime the snow started falling, the wind increased and the cloud closed in. We really needed to get a good view of our route, as we had to turn south-east off the main valley. As visibility decreased it seemed wise to camp where we were. No sooner was the site staked down and the tents up than the snow stopped and the sun re-appeared! We didn't tempt fate by taking the tents down again - nothing would be more likely to cause the sun to disappear! Instead we enjoyed a lazy afternoon in the sun.

The next days weather followed a similar pattern, although the snow came and went several times during the afternoon. We were faced with our first real route-finding dilemma, largely as a result of the limited accuracy of the available maps. (We had two maps and their representation of this area were completely different!) An account by Guy Sheridan, who had skied this section of our route 11 years previously, said we should turn left at the bluff which looked like the Buchaille Etive Mohr in Scotland's Glencoe. The two Australians didn't find that information very useful, but we two Brits were pretty sure that the peak we were looking at was the one to which Sheridan was alluding. After a little prevarication, the valley up to the left was selected as the most likely option although there was still some element of doubt. After climbing for almost two hours an altitude of 4580m was reached, at the glacier tongue, hopefully putting us in a position to cross the pass tomorrow.

It wasn't until the next day, the 11th April, as we approached the pass that all remaining fears of being in the wrong valley disappeared. The climb up the glacier was generally straight forward except for one steep section which had several exposed crevasses. We picked a route on the right hand side, and were able to see that the crevasses section led back onto safe ground. At times it became a real battle of wills against body, forcing yourself to go on for another 20 steps, and another... The extreme effort was rewarded as we reached the pass, with the most spectacular views we had yet encountered. The peaks seemed so close. All the senses were more receptive than usual, emotions were more intense. It was a hard place to leave, but the ski down the M. V. glacier was also breathtakingly beautiful. Everywhere you looked were huge hanging glaciers, reflecting the brilliant side of the sky, and apparently defying the laws of gravity. It was a tired but elated team that sat enjoying the last rays of sun that evening, marvelling at the grandeur of their surroundings.

A 4th day followed. The snow temperature at this altitude remained low, so the skis sank into its soft surface, making progress slow on the almost level ground we were crossing. There then followed a three-hour ski through horrendous snow moraine. It was so difficult to choose a route as there was no way of knowing what lay ahead. Lots of side-stepping up and down, re-tracing your tracks, and hoping for intuition! It was with great relief that we eventually reached the end of the moraine and could see the valley stretching out smoothly below us.

There was a small section of the river exposed here, and we pitched camp beside it as the first snow flakes fell. It snowed heavily and continuously for three days, depositing 0.5m of snow and keeping us tent bound. On the third day, although the snow was still falling and visibility poor, dwindling food supplies made it necessary for us to move on. After four hours of being unable to see anything, the weather cleared and our spirits lifted. The uppermost village in the valley is Khanjar, and we hoped to reach it that day. However, after 12 hours skiing it was still not in sight, so we had to concede defeat, put up the tents and eat the last of our food, saving just a packet of biscuits for breakfast.

It was -20°C when we rose the following morning for the 2 hour ski to Khanjar. Here we sat on a terrace and were brought tea and bread by the very friendly villagers. They then took us inside and filled us with rice, vegetables and arak, the local wine. It would have been easy to have stayed longer, but time wasn't on our side after the delays we'd encountered. We bade farewell to our hosts and skied off down the valley. After crossing and re-crossing the river, and refusing numerous offers of chai (otherwise we'd still be there now!) we arrived in Urgos. Tashi Phuntshog invited us into his home, and we spent an enjoyable but somewhat drunken evening with him and his family.

The easiest route down the valley from Urgos was not obvious -

The snow cover was thickening and it was hard to decide which side of the river looked best. It was only possible to cross the river by bridges which were few and far between. Some sections required nerves of steel as we creabled over loose rocks and boulders where a slip would result in a long steep tumble to the river below. The snow went to and fro until about 10km before Udaipur, where we joined a newly built jeep track. At this stage we strapped axes to packs and walked the rest of the way to Udaipur. Along the track we encountered a wide stone chute down which boulders were continually falling from way above, some the size of beachballs. Trying to pick your moment, and then watch where you put your feet as well as watching for falling rocks was pretty frightening.

It was almost six on April 17th when we reached Udaipur in Lahaul district, and saw our first vehicle for 28 days - quite a shock to the system. We were also delighted to see a sign "English wine and beer and!" - that beer must rank among the finest ever tasted!

The next morning was spent trying to send a telegram to the Singapore Airlines office in Delhi, informing them that we wished to change our flights. We were due to fly to Sydney from Delhi on April 21st. Today was the 18th and it would take us at least 3 days just to get to Manali! We sent one telegram from the Post Office and one with an army major who was flying to Kulu with the helicopter that afternoon. A telephone message was also to be passed on by the telegraph office, so we hoped that somehow the information would reach its destination. (A telegram did arrive, but we don't know which one!)

The road up the Chandra Valley from Udaipur had been cleared of snow for much of its length, but had since been blocked by landslides, rockfall or avalanches. We were able to take transport for about 15km, but it wasn't just any old transport: our Major had made available the "Officer Commanding's" jeep. From there on we had to walk, although we managed to hitch a ride on a truck for a few kilometres.

Our destination was Jalmer, where we stayed in a forest rest house. These rest houses are to be found all over this area, providing accommodation for Indian Government officials travelling on business and also for foreigners. Finding somewhere to eat was more of a problem until the brother of the local shopkeeper invited us to eat with him and his sister. They provided us with a delicious meal, and we were reminded again of how generous and hospitable these people are.

We left Jalmer at 6am and walked for seven hours before reaching Tandi, at the confluence of the Bhaga and Chandra Rivers. Rumour had it that trucks were operating along the road from Tandi, transporting the groups of snow clearers, so we might be lucky enough to hitch a lift. It was late afternoon when we managed to arrange a lift. A truck was going the other way first, but would pick us up on its return journey at 8pm. Thus we found ourselves

huddling close to the bed of a creek, only the occasional draft of light from a distant tent giving a brief glimpse of our surroundings before we were plunged into darkness once more.

The night passed just fast sleep and everyone climbed out. We ate a short breakfast before cutting the tent for the last time in a snow bank beside the road.

A very early start the next morning meant the first hour, walking along the road, was in darkness. We started skiing as the day brightened, and made excellent progress on the fine surface. Negotiating enormous cones of avalanche debris, some over 1km wide, slowed us down as we had to remove our skis and pick our way carefully across, trying to select the easiest route. After four hours we reached Anksaar, and after enjoying another meal of rice and dal (our staple diet of the last few days) set off to climb up to the Rhotang Pass. At 3700m it was the final barrier between us and Manali. The local people had been walking this route for the previous two weeks, so there was a good line of footprints to follow. Many on their way down from the pass, descending stopped for a chat. 'Where are you going?' - there really weren't any places we could possibly have been going to except Manali. It seemed to take forever to reach the pass, but it was a cause for celebration when we did. It was too windy to linger long and consider our achievement, so, saving that for later, we began our descent. We may have dreamt of carving graceful telemarke down to Manali, but it was not to be. The snow was like porridge, impossible to turn in, but all too easy to fall in! It was 3.00pm when we arrived at the rescue post at Mahri, where they check that the locals who cross the pass in the snow arrive safely. The offer to spend the night here was gratefully accepted after an 11 hour day. We couldn't have reached Manali in those conditions, so our patience would have to last until the morning. After an enjoyable evening at Mahri we left for Manali the next morning. The skiing wasn't much better than yesterday, but our spirits were so high it didn't matter. As the snow thinned and then disappeared, skis were strapped to backs, and we had a pleasant hours walk to reflect and recreate ourselves to re-enter 'real-life'. On reaching the road a tractor and trailer fortuitously appeared, and 10 minutes later we were in Manali. Time for a much needed bath in the hot springs, a few delicious meals in our favourite restaurant, and to re-live some of the episodes of our month long traverse. It seemed so long since we had left Lehriwan, and so much had happened, so many experiences. It was, and in fact still is, hard to absorb everything at once.

1991 KASHMIR TO KULU SKI TRAVERSE - SUMMARY

Day	Date	From	To	Weather	Time*	Comments
1	21/3	Lehinwan (2700m)	Below Margan Pass (3000m)	High Cloud Cover	2	
2	22/3		Over Margan(3700) - 'Death Valley'	Heavy Snow	8	Descent from Margan in near whiteout led into a very steep sided avalanche valley
3	23/3			Generally Clear	0	running NE Waiting for snow to settle
4	24/3		Inshin(2600m)	Clear	6	More horrible skiing down avalanche valley to wide Warvan Valley
5	25/3		Near Rikinwas village(2700)	Clear	8	Skiing up valley. Generally OK but with one or two steep traverses
6	26/3		Camp in upper Warvan (2800)	Generally clear	3.5	Valley narrows after Sukhnoi the final village.
7	27/3		Beyond Humpet (3400)	Clear	10	Very constricted valley involving steep traverses above river some minus skis and once using rope for security
8	28/3		Below Lonvilad Gali(4150)	Generally clear	7	A beautiful open valley leading to easy angled glacier
9	29/3		Over Lonv.G. (4500) to Pannikher (3300)	Clear	6	Descent from pass to Denora then fairly narrow valley to Pannikher
10	30/3		-	Clear	-	Rest day
11	31/3		Beyond Parkutse (3550)	High Cloud	5.5	Some steep traverses on N side of river (line of summer road)
12	1/4		Mouth of Shafat Glacier(3800)	High Cloud & wind in am	7	Narrow valley, safest on south but sting in tail before valley opens-steep descent in deep soft snow on foot

* Time EXCLUDES RESTS

13	2/4	Rangdom Gomba (4000)	Blizzard am clear pm	8	Ski through a very wide valley
14	3/4	Pensi La(4400)	Clear with cool breeze	6	Easy skiing then gradual ascent to pass
15	4/4	Hagshu Nullah Junction (3800)	Clear	7	Steepish descent from pass then wide valley which then led on to river terrace above river flowing in gorge section
16	5/4	Near Phe Village (3500)	Clear	7	Wide valley skiing passing numerous villages
17	6/4	Padum(3350)	Clear	6.5	Wide valley
18	7/4	-	Clear	0	Rest Day
19	8/4	Into the Temasa Nullah	High cloud Snow in pm	6	Steep traverse to Bardan Gomba then climb up to Kong La, a small notch before dropping steeply to Temasa
20	9/4	Up Temasa Null. for 3km	Snow Squalls Occas. Clear	4	Up Valley before worsening weather forced camp
21	10/4	Snout of Glacier leading to Kang La(4600)	Snow & clear spells.Strong wind	2	Poor weather & not being 100% certain of route forced early camp
22	11/4	Over Kang La (5500)& down on to Miyar Glacier (5000m)	Clear	7	Short crevassed section on route to pass then desc. to flat glacier
23	12/4	Miyar Glacier snout(4000)	Clear am high cloud	7	Slow desc. on crust then difficult route thru

			then snow		terminal moraine
24	13/4	-	Heavy snow	0	Tentbound in 3 day storm
25	14/4	-	Heavy snow	0	" " "
26	15/4	4km before Khanjar	Heavy snow in am clear evening	12	Running out of food so moved in foul conditions down widish valley which became undulating when luckily clearing began
27	16/4	Urgos(3700)	Clear	6	Back to villages & also down to trees
28	17/4	Udaipur(2300)	Clear	10	Some diff. skiing and nasty traverses.Snow finished at Shakoli then walk down gorge with stonefall danger
29	18/4	Jalma(3000)	Clear	-	Part lifts part walking up cleared road
30	19/4	Sissu	Clear	-	Lifts & walking to limit of cleared road
31	20/4	Over Rhotang Pass(3700)to Murhi	Clear	9	Ski up to Khoksar then climbed to pass on foot before ski down in grim snow
32	21/4	MANALI!!	Clear	-	Ski down to Rahlia then lift Manali