

When Men & Mountains Meet

The Arwa Col in the Nelang Valley is the stuff of legend and has defied ascent till recently. This is the story of a high and dangerous mountain pass and four men who set out on an adventure and lived to tell the tale.

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Raymond Shaw stops to catch his breath as he makes the dizzying descent down Saraswati Col (5,900 metres), another world first we notched up on this exploratory trek



If mountains could speak, the Nelang Valley in Uttarakhand would, perhaps, have the most interesting stories to tell. From the Great Game to tales of trade and treachery, and escape and exploration, and finally desertion, this valley on the India-China border has seen it all.

In 1939, British explorer J.B. Auden attempted to open a route between the Mana and Arwa Valleys, and in trying to do so reached a col (high pass). However, this was not the pass he wanted to climb. His aim was to reach Arwa Col, which is located at 6,100 metres and could possibly be the highest in the Indian Himalaya.

In the intervening years, every attempt made to stand atop the col had been thwarted, either by the mountains or the weather. The fact that it is located in the Nelang Valley – which has been closed to civilians for more than 50 years – did not help.

With the restrictions lifted in May 2015, Avilash Bisht and I seriously considered the prospect of making an exploratory foray into the valley. Armed with maps and GPS, our four-member team of Avilash Bisht, Raymond Shaw, Ranu Kawatra and myself set out on this venture on May 24, and, with good weather and better luck, the team managed the first successful ascent which was made on June 6, 2016.

The Leopard Cave Camp, christened by Harish Kapadia, who doffed his hat to J.B. Auden, who wrote about finding a leopard cub at this spot and keeping it warm in his sleeping bag





(Facing page) The end was in sight, but the means of getting there were by no means easy. Walking through a snowfield latticed by snowmelt, we made our way through the mountains to an ITBP camp, where our prayers of finding help and transport were answered

(This page) You know it's going to be a difficult trek when you have a river crossing that needs a ladder! The ITBP personnel stationed at Nilapani were helpful enough and informed us where the ladder was kept. It was a perfect start: No wet feet



Bad weather surrounded us early on Day 2 as we left Nilapani river and climbed upwards and eastwards. With no trails to follow, the horizon was our guiding light and the map our trusted guide