

WOMEN'S OVERLAND HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION, 1958

BY ANNE DAVIES

ON May 6, 1958, Eve Sims, Antonia Deacock and I landed at Le Touquet, in France, and watched our Land Rover emerge from the aircraft in which we had flown across the Channel from England. At last we were under way and our long journey to the Himalayas had really started. For six months we had worked day and night to make this moment possible.

It was in September that we had first decided to drive to India and to visit the small country of Zaskar, which lies beyond the Greater Himalayan Range between India and Tibet. The fact that we could find very little written about Zaskar or the Zaskari 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 of Zaskar. It seemed to be one of the still unknown Himalayan lands.

The overland journey seemed to offer us the maximum scope for meeting people and of seeing at first hand their way of life. In our own vehicle we would be free to stop where and when we liked and we found that it would be a far cheaper method of travel than the conventional ones, as well as offering a tremendous sense of adventure.

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, and the great enthusiasm and encouragement of Dame Isobel Cripps, our Chairman, gave us the determination and incentive 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.

Our aims were fourfold :

- (a) To carry out a survey into the domestic lives of the women and children of Zaskar.
- (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 the expedition's experiences.
- (d) To climb, if possible, a virgin peak in the region of 17,000 ft.

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

Before we left we had undergone a five-day maintenance course at the Rover works at Solihull which was to stand us in good stead. We had received much help from various food and equipment firms and now our Land Rover was bulging with food, stores and equipment.

Our route took us through Western Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan to India.

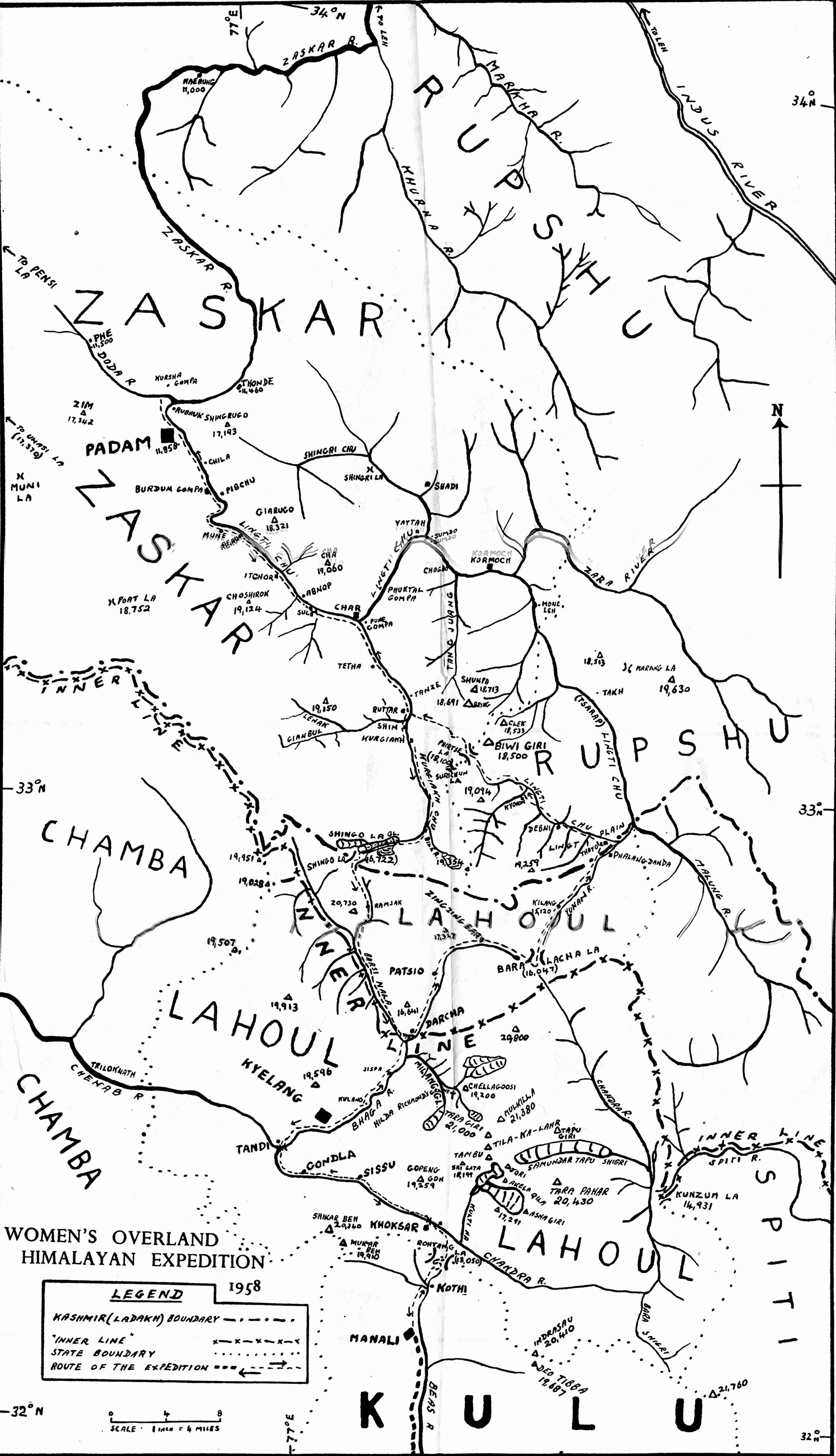
From Belgrade, until we reached Pakistan, we travelled over varying surfaces ; the Iranian roads being particularly terrible. We found we could travel at two speeds ; either at 10 m.p.h., when we would gently roll from one corrugation to another, or at 35 m.p.h. when we would ride the bumps, feel cooler from the breeze but run the risk of breaking a spring if we hit a dried-up wadi. To avoid breakdowns we chose the slower speed and, like the tortoise, completed the outward and return journeys with no serious trouble and in quick time.

Every night, throughout our 16,000-mile outward and homeward journey, we camped in our tent beside the vehicle. We drove over the mountains of Turkey, past the imposing, snowcapped Mount Ararat to the arid deserts of Iran, through to Teheran, that modern capital city with beautiful Demavend forming an 18,000-ft. backdrop, south to Isfahan and Kerman and over the Great Salt Desert to Pakistan. In the cities we were warned of bandits in the desert, and in the desert we were warned of thieves in the cities. However, we continued to drive unescorted and to camp alone and if we did meet any thieves or bandits they treated us well. Not even a box of matches was stolen from us throughout the expedition.

Some miles before Bam, in the middle of the Lut Desert, our petrol pump broke down, and in a temperature of 109° F. in the shade !—but there was little of that—Eve Sims and I pulled the fuel lines to pieces and cleaned them. To our delighted surprise, after reassembling everything as best we could, the engine burst into action when we pressed the starter. Our husbands had always thought that the only tool we could use efficiently was a nail file ! However, we were duly complimented by the Greek garage-owner in Zahidan, near the Iranian-Pakistan border, but I must confess that he told us that all the nuts were only finger tight !

It became impossibly hot in the metal cab of the vehicle in Pakistan and India so we rested in Dak Bungalows by day and travelled by night, arriving in Delhi on June 15. The journey from London to New Delhi had taken forty-two days.

In Delhi we had a three-week delay, caused by a hold-up at Bombay



ZASKAR

ZASKAR

CHAMBA

LAHOUL

CHAMBA

RUPSHU

LAHOUL

LAHOUL

KULU

SPITI

WOMEN'S OVERLAND HIMALAYAN EXPEDITION 1958

LEGEND

- KASHMIR (LADAKH) BOUNDARY - - - - -
- "INNER LINE" STATE BOUNDARY x-x-x-x-x
- ROUTE OF THE EXPEDITION - - - - -

SCALE 1 INCH = 4 MILES

SKETCH MAP DRAWN BY LESTER JAVIES - MAP. 59 FROM SURVEY OF INDIA MAPS. S.C. C. 1



ANTONIA DEACOCK, EVE SIMS AND ANNE DAVIES WITH THEIR LAND ROVER.

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in the unloading of our stores sent out by sea. However, it gave us a good opportunity to see this expanding city and to meet many of the Indian working girls at the Y.W.C.A. where we stayed.

Our target was Zaskar. But to reach Zaskar one has to cross the legendary Inner Line that lies some 150 miles parallel to, and south of, the Tibetan frontier. Instituted by the British in the days of Kipling, it created a buffer area, for the British Indian Government, into which foreigners from the north were denied access. Neutralist post-1947 India, anxious not to provoke their Communist neighbours to the north, have steadfastly refused permits to cross this line, both to Westerners and to their own Indian explorers.

We were no exception to the rule and our application for an Inner Line pass was refused almost as soon as we made it. However, at the Y.W.C.A. we fortunately met one Lakshmi Bolar, a charming girl secretary to one of the Cabinet Ministers. On hearing our story she arranged for us to be interviewed by the Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and his daughter, Mrs. Indhra Gandhi. On arrival at his residence we were met by Mrs. Gandhi, one of India's leading ladies, and taken to the drawing room. A few minutes later the Premier walked in from a Cabinet meeting, kicked off his shoes, and bade us sit on the soft white carpet with him while we pored over his large-scale maps of the area. For the first time we were able to see the 'Inner Line' clearly marked. Until then its exact position had been something of a mystery.

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 an hour of nostalgic discussion—I had been to school in the Himalayas—he suddenly said, 'Well, I can see no objection to you young ladies carrying out your plans to visit Zaskar. I will see my Foreign Secretary about the necessary permits in the morning.'

The next day I was asked to go to the telephone. The voice at the other end said, 'This is the Foreign Secretary speaking. I am sending round your permits this morning.'

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 and our good fortune seemed to create quite a stir in Delhi.

I flew to Bombay and managed to clear our luggage—free of customs charges—in a few hours; the shipping agents had achieved nothing in three weeks. Incidentally, throughout our five months' journey, no customs charges were ever levied upon us. Then, with the stores, by train to Pathankot to rejoin Eve and Antonia, who had driven the Land Rover north from New Delhi.

Thence to Manali, at the head of the Kulu valley, where Major Henry Banon, the Himalayan Club Local Secretary, had our two Ladakhi porters, Numgial and Nowa Ram, waiting for us. These two porters had been with John Sims and Lester Davies, my husband, on the 1955 Royal Air Force Expedition, and Numgial had also been with the Abinger Hammer Expedition in 1956. Then, after a few days' delay while Antonia recovered from a fever, we set off on foot with our two Ladakhis, three Ghora Wallahs and their ten mules. The second part of our expedition had begun.

The second day's march to the 13,050 ft. Rohtang La was one of the most exhausting any of us had experienced. Having spent nine weeks without exercise, we were unfit for the steep climb. Near the col Numgial met a friend who ran a tented tea shop. We were given tea and, although the glass was filthy, it was the most welcome drink I ever tasted.

Dropping down into Lahoul on the other side our route passed through Khoksar, in the Chandra valley. Then along the hot dusty track to where the Baga river joins the Chandra. At Tandi the bridge had been damaged by flood waters and we were held up there for twenty-four hours. It rained hard during the night and the following morning when we reached Kyelang, the capital of Lahoul, we bought umbrellas in the bazaar. These proved invaluable as protection against both rain and the strong rays of the sun.

From Kyelang the path climbed relatively smoothly up to Jispa and Darcha. The bridge over the Barsi Nala was under construction and we crossed in a box suspended by pulleys from a wire hawser. The mules were sent eight miles up the Barsi to a bridge and rejoined us on the other side.

Darcha is on the Inner Line which runs along the south bank of the Barsi. Whilst waiting on the north side for the mules we watched Tibetans and local Lahouli merchants exchanging goods. With huge flocks of sheep and goats 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 lb.) 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 began.

That afternoon we met a young Sikh P.W.D. engineer, who was constructing the Darcha bridge, and he gave us the news of the revolution in Iraq and 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.



THE LINGTI CHU, NEAR PADAM, CAPITAL OF ZASKAR. THE THIN PATH ON LEFT IS THE 'GREAT NORTH ROAD' OF ZASKAR.

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 Zingbar, 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 Gaddi (shepherd) joined the two porters for the night and, long before dawn, we decamped 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 up-stream 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 shepherd's 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 and 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 Zaskar leaving the three of us and Numgial 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 Eye 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 ' (Hindi for Wives' Peak).

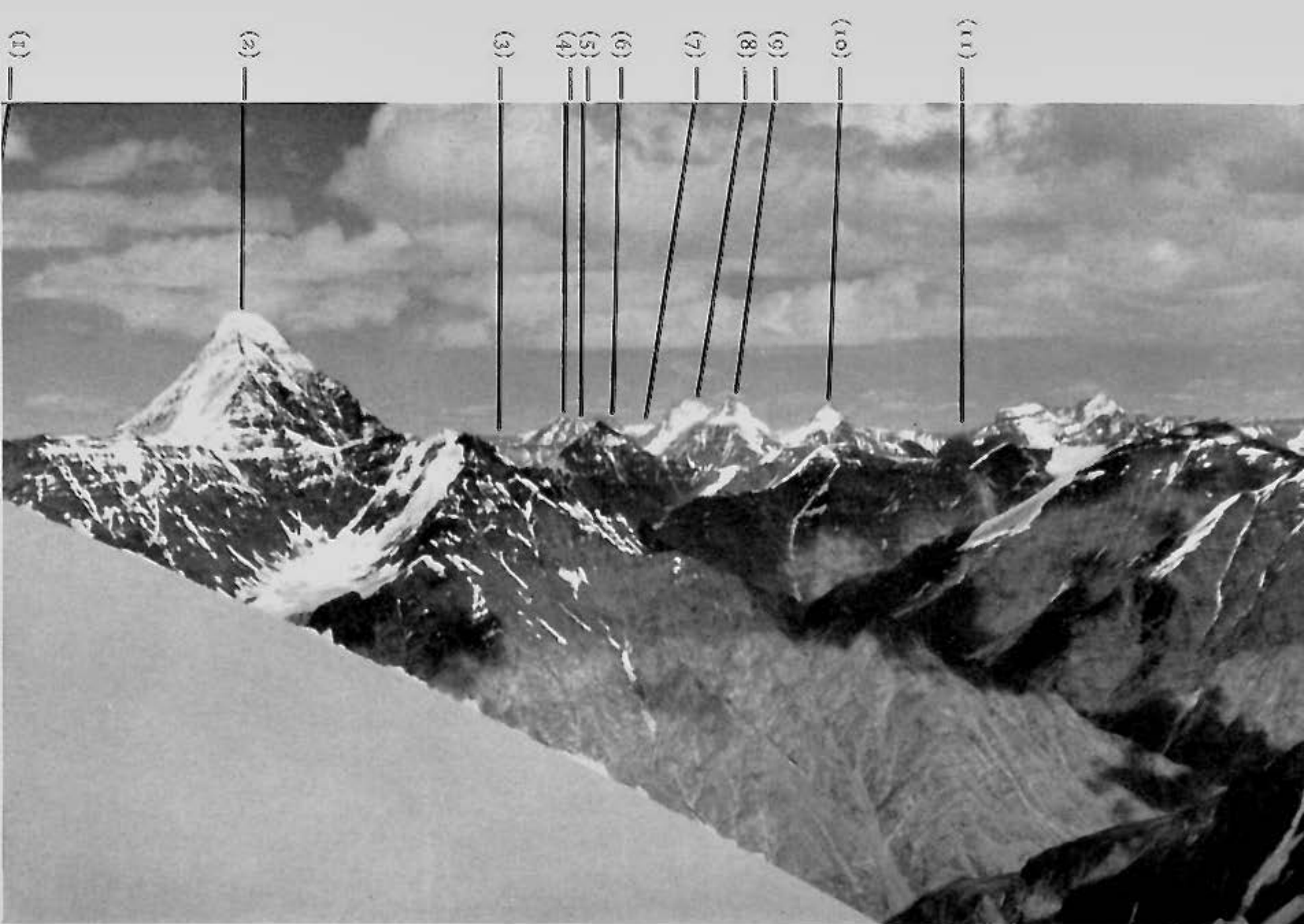
This diversion completed, we continued down into Zaskar and, two days later, came to our first village, Tetha. All the inhabitants came to meet us and found us a great attraction for, they told us, we were the first European women they had ever seen. Only one European man, a missionary, had ever been seen there. Our clothing and equipment were closely examined and we were asked innumerable questions. Our two Ladakhi porters spoke Zaskari and 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, the capital. The ' main road ' was a narrow path, chipped out of the sandstone mountainside. 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 (pronounced ' Pudoom '), which lies at the confluence of the Doda and Lingti rivers where they form the Zaskar river from which this country, the size of Wales, takes its name.

About two hundred people live in this tiny 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 '. Zaskaris all pronounced the name of their country and themselves with an ' n ' and it would seem that the map spelling should be Zanskar.

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



- (1) SHINGO LA (16,722 FT.) CROSSED BY EXPEDITION ON RETURN FROM PADAM, TO LEFT OF AND HIDDEN BY 20,730 FT. PEAK IN FOREGROUND.
- (2) 20,730 FT. JUST SOUTH OF SHINGO LA (16,722 FT.) (IN LAHDUL).
- (3) SURICHUN LA BETWEEN ZASKAR AND RUPSHU.
- (4) RIDGE BETWEEN SURICHUN AND PHIRTSE PASSES.
- (5) PHIRTSE LA (18,100 FT.), CROSSED BY EXPEDITION.
- (6) BIWI GIRI (18,500 FT.), CLIMBED BY EXPEDITION (DARK ROUNDED MOUNTAIN).
- (7) CLEK (18,533 FT.), WHITE RIDGE BEHIND BIWI GIRI.
- (8) 19,094 FT. } THESE THREE PEAKS FORM A TRIANGLE IN RUPSHU, SOUTH OF
 (9) 19,354 FT. } UPPER LINGTI CHU.
 (10) 19,259 FT. }
- (11) COL OF BARA LACHA LA (16,047 FT.).

(Photo F. Solari; attributions Squadron Ldr. and Mrs. Davies.)



Photo, Sqn. Ldr. L. W. Davies]

GOPENG GOH AND OTHER LAHOULI PEAKS FROM ROHTANG LA, CROSSED BY THE EXPEDITION.

The following morning we decided to give all the children sweets. Zaskaris seldom wash and, as all the children were suffering from colds, their faces were filthy. I told Numgial 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.

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 Barsi Nala.

Back to Darcha, and we retraced our steps through Kyelang 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 Delhi in the Land Rover. It was the first time they had been to a big city. They visited the bazaar 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 on 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 Indian-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 into 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. Bantam-sized chickens pecked around the lawn and a small boy chased and caught a couple. Twenty minutes later they were presented to us, cleaned and plucked, as a present from the Press

President. A young Afghan reporter took us for a moonlight picnic and fed us on luscious melons and peaches. We were shown round the Women's Hospital and found the unveiled Afghan women Westernized in their dress and well made up. The hospital was modern and well equipped.

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 arrival had been telephoned to the next village for we were always expected. An English-speaking Afghan showed us the beautiful mosques 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 the first females to have crossed Afghanistan unescorted by men.

In Teheran we met again 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 land as green and lush as England. Like England, it rained hard throughout our time by the Caspian Sea. One night, some kindly Iranian boys entertained us in their farmhouse home and graciously accommodated us in their room for the night. There were floods everywhere and we were very grateful for their hospitality. Here many of the people speak excellent French or Russian.

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 Ullswater, we watched our Land Rover being landed by crane, at Harwich.

Many were the frontiers that we had crossed during our long journey; not least the legendary 'Inner Line'. But to us these were as nothing compared to the barrier that so often exists between East and West; that we succeeded, in our own fashion, in surmounting.

An old Tibetan Lama, with whom I conversed in Hindi during our stay in Padam, had asked me somewhat incredulously, 'But, Mem-sahib, was it really worth your while to come all this way just to see us?'

We felt it certainly had been because often, in our case, 'the twain did meet'.