

MEET MANDIP SINGH SOIN

An India-based adventure travel specialist, Mandip Singh Soin, founder of Ibex Expeditions, is not your run-of-the-mill travel operator. Rafting, cycling, trekking, rappelling, caving... nothing has been off-limits for this daredevil explorer who takes his role as an adventure-tourist-operator seriously – practising and encouraging responsible tourism that will benefit communities and wilderness areas.

Lakshmy Raman talks to India's most versatile adventurer.

FORTY YEARS, SIX CONTINENTS, HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

My dad was in the army. He was a para jumper and dinner conversation was often around tales of daring and adventure. A steady stream of war movies and Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie books all piqued my interest. At the age of 10, I often spent time in a tree house that my father had built for me. I would also go off stalking imaginary things through thorn and bush with a knife in hand. Later at 15, I went on my first Himalayan trek from school and was smitten by the grand and awe-inspiring views of Himalayan peaks such as Nanda Devi and Trishul. At 16, I made my debut as part of the

first Indian Public School boys' expedition to Black Peak: the spirit of adventure, camaraderie and the great outdoors were a magic potion and I knew this was what I would always want to do.

DID YOU HAVE OTHER CAREER OPTIONS ON YOUR RADAR?

As with most Indians, the dream job for my parents was to become a doctor especially given my liking for biology. At the time of joining college, a close family friend insisted I consider the IAS/IFS and thus, I joined St. Stephen's College to pursue becoming a bureaucrat!

YOU ESTABLISHED IBEX EXPEDITIONS ALONG WITH YOUR FRIENDS IN 1979,

WHEN ADVENTURE TRAVEL WAS NOT PART OF THE INDIAN DICTIONARY. WHAT MOTIVATED YOUR START-UP?

It was a case of Robert Frost's *Two roads diverged* and I took the one less travelled. My passion for the outdoors, climbing and trekking triumphed over the daunting prospect of pushing files. The fear of being in a strait-jacketed role in the government and all the red tape involved, and my yearning to travel and be a free spirit won over. A year of climbing, trekking and skiing in Europe was my epiphany where I knew that if I could be involved in something I really loved then I would succeed. I did have to find a financially viable model and be ready

to take the risk. Of course I had a set of slightly worried parents until my business took off.

With three other buddies, who shared my dreams, we decided to help organise treks and expeditions in the Himalaya for climbers and trekkers from around the world. Indeed, we were one of the first few adventure travel companies to be set up.

IBEX IS AN ENVIRONMENTALLY AND SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE COMPANY. HOW DO YOU PRACTISE SUSTAINABILITY?

Good outdoor ethics and practices that were part of our growing up, stepped into the workplace. We relied on common sense and instinct to leave as minimal an impact as possible. Our ethic, to quote a cliché, was 'Take nothing but photographs; leave nothing but footprints.' Thus, automatically bringing back non-biodegradable garbage, cleaning up, recycling our office stationery and using ecomaterials became part of our DNA.

However, the big step forward happened after my environmental expedition in 1989 when we studied the ozone depletion and the presence of pollutants in the pristine Arctic during a UNEP-supported expedition. This was a shock, and we realised that if we created the problem, we must be the solution. Hence, I took an earth pledge to make a difference both at home and at the work place.

At Ibex, we signed the Code of Conduct of the Himalayan Environment Trust and made sure that every client was made aware of what would happen on the ground. Thus, we have never used firewood for campfires, always brought non-biodegradable garbage back, camped at least 30 m. away from freshwater, never polluting it, supported local communities and more.

AND HOW DOES YOUR FAMILY FEEL ABOUT YOUR ADVENTURES?

Well, my parents always encouraged me. My wife Anita has been a great 'base camp' and is very much part of Ibex, which she joined in 1992 when I took over the company. She is an artist and a graphic designer with a good sense of aesthetic and has been with me on most of my expeditions. Our two children are named after the Himalaya – my daughter Himali who is 28 just gained her MFA at Goldsmiths University in London and is

an art writer and curator and wants to travel in space! Himraj, our son, is also a keen outdoors person, an Assistant Editor with *The Outdoor Journal* and has just returned from a successful expedition in the Antarctica called Project 2041 with Robert Swan. This is aimed at creating awareness about the need to keep the continent off-limits from mining when the current Antarctic treaty lapses in 2041.

IN THE LAST THREE DECADES, HOW HAS ADVENTURE TRAVEL CHANGED IN INDIA?

It has grown exponentially, and the upside is that a lot of Indian travellers are taking to enjoying the outdoors and have a greater appreciation of the Himalaya, forests and other wildernesses. At the same time, this is leading to healthier lifestyles and growth in character and team work. The downside is that there is also a large unorganised 'adventure travel operators' sector who are not approved by the government and who follow unsustainable environmental practices and often put their customers at risk due to diluted safety standards.

IS ECOTOURISM JUST A BUZZ WORD? HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE CONSERVATION TOURISM?

Ecotourism had become a buzz word in the 90s but there has been a sea change in the understanding both by the industry as well as the traveller. In the beginning there was a certain amount of green washing when many glibly claimed green credentials. The media highlighted this effectively so that customers became more discerning and it has had a levelling effect where it is easy for customers to audit their claims.

Conservation tourism are those type of tours or hotel operations that directly help with either the conservation of the fauna or flora whilst ecotourism also takes care of benefits reaching local community members in different ways.

IS THE INDIAN TOURIST OPERATOR MATURE ENOUGH? GREED AND LACK OF VISION ARE MAJOR HURDLES. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

It will get there. Many are well-intentioned and would like to do the right thing but I believe it is always a bit of carrot-and-stick that works. Industry is usually profit oriented and the tourism industry is no exception. The lack of vision displayed at



Mandip was joined by mountaineer and quadruple amputee Jamie Andrew on the Swiss Alps climb in 2002, as part of the Indo-Pakistan Friendship expedition.

the government level both at the Centre and State is a major hurdle. We would not have had a tiger tourism crisis had they instilled good land use practices, and industry had been forced to follow existing laws.

WHICH LOCATIONS IN INDIA ARE THE MOST VULNERABLE TO THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF TOURISM?

Almost every destination really. Places like Ladakh, and Uttarakhand do stand out as places that tend to become tourist honey pots and soon get converted to honey traps! Some of our tiger reserves have similarly become traps. Take the example of the Pangong lake where marmots are being fed all types of food by tourists (see page 66). Simple management practices



Mandip and his wife Anita on an expedition to Madagascar in 2010. In his words: "Anita has been a great 'base camp' and has been with me on most of my expeditions."

AD

and proactive steps by the local tourist industry could easily reverse this but the greed of making a fast buck by all overrules common sense.

ARE WE DOING ENOUGH TO PROTECT PRISTINE AREAS LIKE THE SIACHEN, ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS? Not in Siachen, I am afraid, due to the presence of the Indian and Pakistani troops! I hope that one day, soon, we can declare this as a Peace Park and not pollute the glaciers as we have been doing for over 25 years! Roughly a thousand kilogrammes of human waste has been going into the glacier everyday for almost three decades, and it pollutes the Shyok river that flows through to India and curves its way into Pakistan!

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have a much better policy now than what we saw during our 2002 International Ecotourism assessment expedition which generated a Paper for the Ministry of Tourism on rectifying the situation and we also recommended not to open up Nicobar for tourism until we get it right in the Andamans.

WHAT POSITIVE BENEFITS CAN TOURISM BRING TO THE ENVIRONMENT, AND HOW CAN WE HARNESS THESE?

Well, if you look worldwide, there are companies – both lodges and tour operators in Africa who have actually ploughed in profits to buy forest land and help protect it for posterity. In India too, some hotels like the CGH Earth group of Kerala, help the environment in many ways – encouragement of organic food, avoiding the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and rainwater harvesting are just a few practices that have a good impact. By helping the bark poachers in Periyar to become tourism guides or converting *Naga* hunters into birdwatching guides, we can involve locals and provide livelihoods.

We employed erstwhile bandits as ecotourism guides in the Chambal valley. The other great example is that of snow leopard conservation through the communities in Ladakh in the Hemis National Park. Earlier the snow leopard was viewed as a nuisance by locals as it often predated on their livestock. This led to some amount of trapping. After a homestay programme was developed, the community benefitted from the tourists who stayed in their homes, and who hired them as guides, and it soon became a



As the founder president of the Eco-tourism Society of India, Mandip hopes to make eco-tourism the engine that drives responsible tourism. Here, he talks to a community in the Chambal.

vested interest for the community to make sure that the snow leopard and its habitat is protected.

Taj Safaris launched a deluxe wildlife tourism operation by enhancing the experience many fold through quality guiding and interpretation. They officially partnered with the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department to relocate gaur from Kanha to Bandhavgarh without which they could have been wiped out in the event of any epidemic. They also continue to support local communities in several educational initiatives.

However, these examples are far and between, and a whole lot more needs to be done in India and tourist operators must be held accountable towards this.

AS THE FOUNDER PRESIDENT OF THE ECOTOURISM SOCIETY OF INDIA, WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR FOCUS AND AGENDA?

We want to make ecotourism the engine that drives responsible tourism that benefits communities and wilderness areas. We hope to harmonise the action at a policy level between the Ministry of Tourism and Ministry of Environment at one level and at the other end bring about best practices in the tourism and hospitality industry.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST WONDERFUL AND POWERFUL EXPERIENCE IN ALL YOUR TRAVELS?

Possibly the year I travelled as a backpacker in Europe when I climbed and skied in over 10 countries with just

US\$500 in my pocket. I still had a dollar in my pocket on my return. It also helped me clear my head regarding the career choice I had to make!

HOW CAN THE INDIAN TOURIST HELP AND BE PART OF THE SOLUTION?

The Indian tourist needs to be made aware of his or her responsibilities as a traveller – it has to go beyond just having a good time. Each time a person travels their visit can contribute to protection.

YOU HAVE WALKED OVER THE FROZEN ZANSKAR?

Yes, this was a pioneering expedition. We also attempted the Stok Kangri peak in winter with skis. Lord Hunt was our Patron, and the Explorers Club awarded us a flag for this expedition. It enabled us to start winter tourism in Ladakh that is now popular with many travellers.

YOU HAVE TREKKED THE HIMALAYA, ALPS, ANDES, ARCTIC AND MORE? ARE THERE ANY DREAM DESTINATIONS LEFT FOR YOU TO EXPLORE?

Yes – always – now to the seventh continent – Antarctica. If all goes well I will lead a trip of like minded travellers and explorers to Antarctica in December 2016.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU ARE NOT TREKKING IN ICE RAVINES OR RAFTING DOWN DANGEROUS WATERS?

I sit happily at home and listen to Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and try my hand at becoming the world's best omlette maker! 🍳