

MANDIP SINGH SOIN

Adventure is My Business

It is also his passion. The founder and managing director of IBEX Expeditions explores highlights of India's adventure tourism sector with IN Magazine

By **Ranee Sahaney**



Multiple awards winner, Mandip Singh Soin, is one of India's leading adventure buffs, whose passion has taken him to some of the world's and India's most daring adventure arenas. He has quite successfully married the 'hobby' of his youth with a full-fledged business in adventure tourism! Today he is also a respected and sought-after speaker for adventure tourism. He was last in Singapore for ITB Asia last October; Ibex Expeditions has earned numerous awards and was rated by National Geographic as among 'The Best Adventure Travel Companies On Earth.' He was nominated 'India's Most Versatile Adventurer' by The Limca Book of Records and won the Ness Award for mountaineering and explorations by the Royal Geographical Society, UK. In 2012, he was awarded the 'Tenzing Norgay National Adventure Award for Lifetime Achievement' by the President of India.



Mandip at ITB Asia

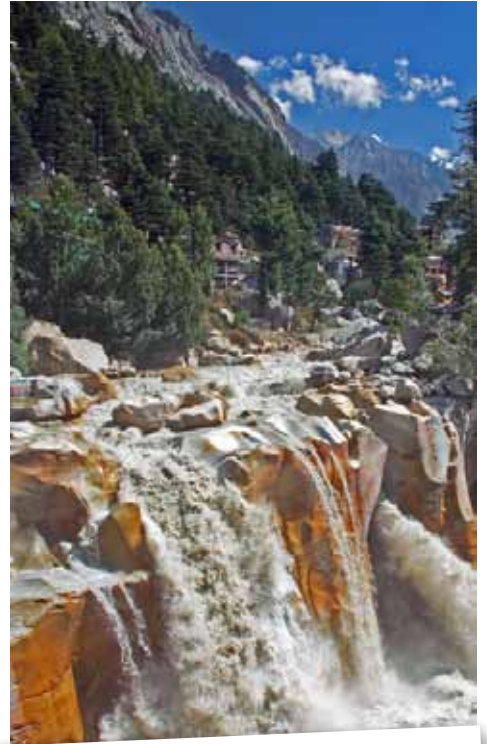
Can you tell us a little about the hottest trends in adventure tourism?

There are two streams emerging. One is the soft adventure type where folks who have never really done any adventure are venturing forth to try their hand at some gentle walks in the Himalaya or overland jeep safaris etc. Two, are other folks adding on high adventure activities within their holidays such as river rafting or mountain biking or even trying a bunjy or scuba within their adventure holiday.

What are some of the best and most professionally run extreme sports available in India, and how would you rate those experiences?



Panna Park



(Left to right) Mandip at Lake Mansarovar in Tibet; Ladakh; Gangotri Waterfall; Nagaland Hill



We now have an operation which offers bunjy jumping and canyon swings which is a super operation with internationally qualified personnel and the same holds true for zip wire experiences. This is true for river rafting as well where a lot of our guides are internationally trained and have rafted some of the challenging Himalayan Rivers where regular trips operate.

In terms of Mountaineering expeditions, here too we have well qualified personnel who are mountain guides who can guide mountaineers on trekking summits or indeed, a few specialist adventure tour operators can provide support for the overseas mountain expeditions that come to climb in the Himalaya.

What in your mind are the most popular activities in this area that attract foreign travellers to India?

The premier options are Himalayan Mountaineering expeditions where there is ample scope to still make first ascents of so many Himalayan peaks that are unclimbed. The second is to just experience a Himalayan trek, be it on a popular trail or a relatively unexplored trail, because a Himalayan trek is something quite unique unlike the Alps which are very developed. With the unique cultural intermix of the diverse Himalayan states, it becomes a very powerful magnet. Incidentally, India has 77% of the Himalaya in its territory.

What are the best adventure tourism destinations in the country? And why?

Some of the prime ones are, of course, the Himalayan states themselves like Ladakh and Zaskar in J&K – good for jeep safaris, treks, mountain expeditions, river rafting, mountain biking, angling and more. Then there is of course, Lahaul and Spiti and the Kulu valley in Himachal Pradesh that are good for all the above activities, and we can add kayaking as well.

Garhwal and Kumaon in Uttarakhand hold their magic as do Sikkim and Arunachal for trekking, mountaineering, river rafting and canoeing. Some of these states also afford unique winter trekking options like walking on the frozen river Zaskar or tracking the snow leopard.

What has been the most exciting adventure experience in India for you personally in all your years in this field?

Possibly the winter expedition that I led which was an Indo -British effort in 1994 , to walk on the frozen river Zaskar and to attempt to climb Stok Kangri a 6000m peak in winter by Skiis. We were flown in a helicopter from Leh to Padum in a helicopter that was flown out from our troops in the Siachen Glacier. We took local porters, guides and cooks and gave them employment in winter which kick-started this winter tourism in that region; we had so much fun staying in local Zanskari homes and caves along the way for a week through the awesome Zaskar Gorge, also called the Grand Canyon of India. We then made an attempt on Stok in Snow leopard country as the only people in that wilderness.

IN 2012, MANDIP SINGH SOIN WAS AWARDED THE 'TENZING NORGAY NATIONAL ADVENTURE AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT' BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA

What is so unique about an adventure holiday experience in India? Say rafting, trekking, mountain climbing, skiing?

I think it is the uniqueness of India where each of these sports is conducted in destinations that are uniquely diverse and as is known "people make the difference"! There is also delectable cuisine and an incredible sense of warmth and hospitality wherever people go, be it staying in a ski chalet in the Himalaya or a homestay in Ladakh; or a charming lodge in the forest with vernacular-style architecture which affords trekking possibilities.

According to a recent study by Trip Advisor some of the most chosen experiences are bunjee jumping, sky diving, scuba amongst Indians. Please comment.

Sky diving is still nascent as there is only one operation and it is a bit expensive. However, this trend is primarily there in the age range of 25 to 50 and this is good and welcome, having been spurred by the media channels like Discovery and National Geographic, and also people's ability to travel and see similar activities in other parts of the world and of course, in having the disposable income to partake of this.

Barren Island, India's only live volcano, was out of bounds. Now an agency like Karina Tourism and Adventure was talking about diving trips via a live board in the waters by the volcano, which have already been sold out. You did a trip to the volcano some years ago with special permission. Your take on this as an experience to look forward to.

Barren Island should not be opened for tourism and should be left for scientific studies/visitation since it is an extremely fragile eco system and would not be able to sustain tourism numbers. However, so long as scuba diving happens and its around the Barren Island and conducted from a ship, I think the impact should be minimal. Of course, proper guidelines of garbage, no feeding etc would be important to maintain.

What was the most thrilling activity you enjoyed on your trip to the North East?

A trek into the fabled area of Kanchenjunga going up to the Goecha La was one of the highlights, as was rafting down the Siang in Arunachal.

Madhya Pradesh



Puducherry

Can you recommend a luxury adventure holiday, sahib-style?

We have been conducting these for high net worth individuals who want to experience adventure in luxury so not only do they have a higher ratio of staff per person but are also given deluxe vehicles and more comfortable outdoor equipment such as luxury tents, hot water solar showers, hot water bottles, luxury dining tents with rugs, fresh coffee and percolators and delectable teas and cuisine that is high end.

What would you recommend for first timers wanting an adventure trip to India?

There is nothing like a combination of doing a jeep safari into the Himalaya, absorbing the awe and beauty of the mountain vistas, getting gently acclimatized and finally ending of with day walks and day rafting trips to come back longing for more.

What about veterans in the field coming to India for the first time?

The sky is the limit as far as mountaineering expeditions go if they are so trained or Himalayan trekking is concerned. To make a 7000 metre ascent or indeed even a 6500 metre technically difficult ascent still draws many from around the world.

One of the leading mountaineers of the US, who discovered mountaineer Mallory's body on Everest, called Conrad Anker made the ascent of Mt Meru's Sharks Fin route in 2011, which was deemed to be one of the most challenging routes ever done in the Himalaya.

What about activities for young adults?

As I mentioned it can range between adventure sports between bunjy, zip wire, para gliding or skiing but certainly, many would like to try their hand at Himalayan mountain biking which gives a physical challenge as well as a high sense of adventure going through Himalayan roads and high and remote passes.

Some recommendations for an adventure holiday for a family with a 60 + member and 12-14 year old?

A lot of the family adventures can either be in the Kumaon with the charming Himalayan lodges combining walks, looking for Himalayan birds or panoramic Himalayan views and doing this all through a jeep safari or indeed treating the wider landscape of India as an adventure tourism destination.

For example, we do a lot of these in Rajasthan using forts and palace hotels as well as boutique camps, interspersed with short camel safaris, jeep safaris, and Marwari horse riding for those with the skill.

Similarly, a walking wildlife safari inside a National Park in Central India or a dedicated Elephant safari for 2-3 days whilst camping en route are all great family ideas, not to miss Kerala where one can walk with the poachers- turned-guides and stay in tree houses.

View of Dhankar, Himachal Pradesh



Mandip on Thermometer Egg on Rifflehorn

What are some of the tips you'd give to someone who'd like to follow your career path?

Take the road less travelled and first check if you have a passion for the great outdoors and if you have a sense of adventure and a zest for travel.

Second, get yourself trained in the outdoors by doing a mountaineering course by which you can not just conduct yourself safely but also take care of your clients and understand the importance of minimizing environmental impacts. One must have the knowledge of how tourism works in general and have a keen eye for ecotourism and responsible travel ethics.

How viable has it been to make your 'hobby' a business? Some tips?

I guess I was luckier as the field was fairly new and virgin and today there is more competition for the startups. However for anything in Life, the first thing to have and not waver in is 'self belief'. Then the passion makes sure one does it well and at the same time one needs to display the entrepreneurial spirit to manage the business end of the venture. Not a bad idea to start small as the very nature of Adventure Tourism is different to Big/Large funded startups which are fine for normal tourism but not necessarily for adventure tourism where an organic growth gets you loyal customers and the experience to handle clients safely.