

# Family Values

**His wife, Anita, teases that she could be luxuriating and dispensing cocktails in chandeliered splendour instead of trudging alongside a 'zany' explorer.**

Indian mould-breaking travel entrepreneur Mandip Singh Soin jokes: "Anita pulls my leg and grumbles every trip together that she was tricked into it all and tells me she could so easily have married into the other side of the family – in finance, banking or investment.

"She is a lover of the outdoors like me. But sometimes her enthusiasm is less than mine!" Understandably, one of those occasions of doubt could have been while accompanying him up a live volcano.

Mandip smiles: "We have been married 25 years and the fact that we are still talking despite working and living together must say something! The secret? We look together in the same direction."

And that path they have trod has never worried them if it has been against the flow. It might well be called a route of innovation, caring and crusading on behalf of the environment and its often-deprived community dependents.

Mandip, 53, has been bewitched by nature and its challenges from age 14 – inspired by his head teacher.

"The principal had climbed on Everest and his British friend, mountaineer Chris Bonington, often stayed at our school. It was captivating listening to them. I was hooked.

"I think adventure was already in my genes. My father was an Army officer, who also did Para trooping," says the man who has variously chanced his arm – and legs – at bungee jumping, sky diving, rock and ice climbing, downhill skiing, hang gliding, kayaking, rafting, cycling, camel desert crossing and an elephant expedition.

With a Masters in history in his pocket and a diplomat's role beckoning, Mandip escaped on a year off to confirm his instincts that it wasn't the life for him.

His ability to survive on subsistence diet came in handy later still when he toured Europe with little cash. He took climbing instructor's roles in Britain.

"Responsible travel became ingrained the moment I started out climbing and trekking – it was natural to look after those same surroundings that were providing excitement and fulfilment.

"You also develop an empathy with teammates – the guides, porters and cooks. You realise that you almost certainly couldn't reach the summit without them and an intense respect grows.

It's the same feeling generated towards the pristine area you enter – you don't want to threaten closing it up by bad actions such as leaving garbage behind, burning valued juniper trees for firewood, despoiling the water systems. All that was still happening until the early 80s."

Mandip was heavily conscious of these and other pitfalls when he jointly founded Ibex Expeditions in 1979. "It was the first big focus," he recalls.

As managing director his mantra remains: Take nothing but photographs, leave only footprints.

"Each one of us can make a difference – and I know we must. Seeing the impact of pollution on the ozone hole in the Arctic in 1989 made a real and lasting impression."

He and director Anita, 51, maintain a personalised service catering for up to 1,000 people annually and keep introducing

**‘Responsible travel became ingrained the moment I started out climbing and trekking – it was natural to look after those same surroundings that were providing excitement and fulfilment.’**

new regions to a portfolio that provides eco tours, adventure escapes, luxury, safari and cultural breaks.

There is a core of about 500 repeat clients. These range from authors and artists to professionals and priests and they sign on for trips in India of up to six weeks.

"There is always a demand for places – our first expedition in 1980 was 12 strong and some of those come back again and again," adds Mandip.

"An 83-year-old Italian priest, from Bologna, who teaches mathematics, has been with us seven times. He enjoyed Himalayan expeditions but more recently, cultural trekking. I think I have some catching up on the red wine intake if I am to emulate him and carry on that long!"

Loyalty among his customers is repeated within his staff. His chief guide has been with him 30 years.

When Mandip ventured into the business he quickly saw flaws that he wanted to remedy. It grated him that tips weren't reaching the community and that the porters' incomes were derisory.

"The industry could be seen as takers rather than givers. Over a period that has changed," he's glad to say. "I wanted to improve wages."

By a terrible coincidence he was quickly able to show his personal commitment to revolutionise the approach to tourism. He joined in emergency work

alongside his staff whose families and homes were affected by earthquake disaster.

"By tiny actions things have built up into a fairer situation. Money has come into villages for educational, health and training schemes."

There is no fast track to bliss for the underprivileged but Mandip has been gloriously uplifted by the examples of bandits and poachers transforming themselves from zeroes to heroes.

A potential World Heritage Site on the River Chambal in central India, brimming with bird species, crocodiles and fauna, was off bounds for many would-be travellers for fear of being robbed.

Wary local administrators wanted to cancel the night before Mandip's team was due to set out to reconnoitre the area. They relented yet instead insisted the group must be shielded by a posse of 14 armed policemen. That guard was finally reduced to four.

This bold expedition three years ago laid a framework, created an atmosphere of trust with the locals, who had been scraping an existence off the land, and persuaded them of better prospects in becoming naturalists and guides.

Training progress has been slow and deliberate; the political will is now picking up zest, though, and everything should be in place by the end of the year.

"They can then earn an honourable tourism income, without the risk of being thrown in jail, leaving behind mothers and children."

reflects Mandip, president of the country's Ecotourism Society, and with a reputation that has gained a string of awards plus the title India's Most Versatile Adventurer.

"The village of Khonoma, in Nagaland, was in the black books because of their hunting of the protected Blyth's Tragopan Pheasant. They knew it was wrong but it was tradition and people were hungry. It was explained that they could earn probably five times what they were netting from the meat by running home-stay businesses and guiding birdwatchers to the endangered rare species. Everybody wins."

Ibex helped in this trial programme to persuade the younger generation to end the hunting. Some of the company's other projects have included: anthropological and deep sea fishing expedition; studying indigenous tribes, Himalayan trips – they prepared Singapore's team to surmount Everest – and the 'Ice Trek' in Ladakh on the frozen River Zaskar.

The area is landlocked for six months and at 15degrees below excruciatingly hard to survive economically. By 'opening up' the territory in 1994, about 1,000 travellers have visited, stayed locally, been fed and guided and the money attracted is double, treble summertime income.

As business surged, so Mandip has been handcuffed to his desk more than his 'adventurous genes' would prefer.



It's a trunk route



All together at Everest including children of 'the snow'



A peak moment for Mandip on Mount Meru

## spotlightfacts

- Camaraderie was at its height when Mandip joined three friends in 1986 in the first Indian ascent of 21,200 ft Mount Meru – considered to be the centre of the universe, according to mythology. "It was the most technically demanding climb of my life and before it we became so paranoid about the weight of our packs we even cut off the labels from our equipment!" recalls Mandip. The bonded team went without porters and moved lightning fast – reaching the summit in four days, returning in two.
- Camaraderie is a key element for Mandip Singh Soin. He willingly joined the Indo Pakistan Friendship Expedition at the Swiss Alps eight years ago – especially as he hoped it might contribute to progress in sparing the Siachen Glacier in the Himalayas. There is long-standing concern over the border area and its sensitive bio-diversity. Conservationists fret about hobnailed degradation from the presence of soldiers from the two countries.
- Camaraderie is needed between government and the Indian travel industry to keep the footprint light in the next five years when tourist numbers are predicted to soar from five to ten million a year. "We must have a fully concerted policy in place to avoid damage," says Mandip.

**‘Take nothing but photographs, leave only footprints’**



Mandip and Anita, still locked together as one despite his lust for adventure

