

Hampta Pass - Where heaven meets land

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There are many people in the world, with some screws missing in their brain. Perhaps me being one of them, is a plausible explanation for a person who has never played any sports, never ran more than a hundred metres in his life, to attempt the Hampta Pass trek as a first-timer. It is located in the Pir Panjal Range of the Himalayas at 14,000 feet height, connecting the Kullu Valley to the Chandra Valley in Lahaul, Himachal Pradesh. The trail covers 26 kilometers over a span of four days, and is considered to be of moderate difficulty. Legend has that after the battle of Mahabharata, the Pandavas used this route to travel to the Chandrataal Lake, from where Yudhisthir ascended to heaven.

I got to know about this trek in December, 2024, during our institution's annual batch trip in Himachal Pradesh. Some of the students were enthusiastic to go on this adventure. Trekking and mountaineering were my childhood fantasies, and when presented with the actual opportunity, I was more than willing. Ultimately, only Sunirban Sarkar (whom I refer as Pyala), one year senior to me, and I signed up for this. What follows in the text, is an own account summary of the adventure.

After making our reservations on April for the trek in late June, we both were busy with our end-semester examinations and summer projects, leaving us with limited time to prepare for the trek. We did whatever exercise was possible in a week, packed our rucksacks as novices, carrying lots of useless items, more food than required. We rested in Manali for a day, before the trek, just beside our base camp. There, we were introduced to the other fellow trekkers and guides. We were an unusually small group of only ten people, all embarking on the adventure of a multi-day alpine trek for the first time. After an hour's drive to Jobra, we completed our lunch and set afoot for the Chika campsite. The trek had officially begun. The first day was the tip of the iceberg. With a distance of three kilometers, mild slope and lesser altitude, the day was a mere cakewalk. When we arrived at the campsite at 10,000 feet, the views were obscured by the clouds. Regardless, we were strictly instructed to stay outdoors and acclimatize ourselves for the next day.

Soon, the weather cleared into a mesmerizing view of the landscape. In contrast to the city, roads had been exchanged with greenery and the honking of vehicles had been exchanged with the splashing of a nearby waterfall and the flowing Rani river. As the last glimpse of daylight was fading away, we satisfied our hungry stomachs by the fresh cooked dinner. The first night in the sleeping bag was extremely uncomfortable. We had to sleep in the attention position, legs straight, hands at the sides, feet vertically up, with no room for movement. As expected in such an uncomfortable environment, sleep came late and did not last more than three hours. When I woke up from a premature sleep, I threw the sleeping bag aside in frustration and spent the rest of the night without any more sleep, trying my best not to be restless.

The start of the next day was gloomy, yet, inexplicably, I felt completely refreshed after the scanty sleep. The sun began to shine above us beautifully within the first few sips of the morning tea, and by the end of the tea, the weather was completely sunny. That day, the incline was steeper than the previous day from the beginning itself. The length of the trail was 8 kilometers. Around midway, there was a river crossing. Even with the mid-day Sun, the water was very cold, but the bigger problem was walking barefoot over the rocks while the river was flowing very fast. Even during the short stretch of river that we had to cross, I slipped my balance and trembled numerous times. The team members formed a line and held the hands of the former and latter member to prevent themselves and the other members from falling, in which case it would be very difficult to rescue the person from the flowing river. Thankfully, Pyala and another member of our team did not let me fall. Near the end of the crossing, our feet were practically numb.

After the crossing, I made a mistake by not drying my toes before wearing my socks again. The lunch was cold, I could not eat much, but the opportunity of a rest was graciously welcomed. During the remaining walk, I felt shortness of breath while walking and kept lagging behind. At the last break before the campsite, Pyala explained to me, this was not because of my lack of exercise, but rather due

to incorrect breathing. For the remaining part, I inhaled deeply with more volume in a single breath. This prevented me from panting. My walking speed improved drastically, and I finished second, after Pyala. At that point it felt, he was genetically built to be a mountaineer, trekking like it was a walk by a park. On reaching the Balu ka Ghera campsite, I saw mild blisters on my toes due to the wet socks. Nevertheless, I was stunned by the scenery to pay attention to them. Unlike the previous day, looking at the sleeping bag, I was grateful that I had a place to sleep. From the exhausting day, I could sleep anywhere and everywhere. The day was not difficult, it was just tiresome, preparing for the following summit day.

Next morning, everybody was gearing up for Summit day. The length was 10 kilometers, height was 14,000 feet and the terrain was also difficult, with both steep incline and decline in the same day. Everybody in our team, except Pyala, gave their rucksacks for offloading, to be carried by mules. The guides recommended me to do the same, but the inner me was hesitant. If I surrender here, I would be scared during my subsequent treks. Inspired by the Kakababu character by Sunil Gangapadhyay, who says that anything can be accomplished by determination and will-power, I moved on carrying my rucksack. Within the first fifteen minutes, I slipped and fell down, and while crossing a small stream of water by stepping on some loose rocks, I misplaced my leg and my feet got ankle deep in water, with my boots and socks completely drenched. A terrible start for the summit day. But on the bright side, with better breathing technique, I was walking faster than the previous day, even with the rucksack.

Halfway through the journey, we reached the glacier section. This was the part of the trek I enjoyed the most. The completely deserted white landscape was too beautiful. I was proud that I did not slip my balance even once on the entire glacier. Soon we reached the summit, high on adrenaline. There was very strong wind and visibility was reduced by fog but we kept on our smiles for the photographs. Celebrating our victory for a few minutes, we descended forward. That was the most difficult section for me. I had always heard the descent in any trek is more difficult and accident-prone, but I did not expect it to be that challenging. I had used up most of my energy going up. I was not at all confident about my stepping, causing my leg to shake vigorously in fear before every step. I slowed down the entire team and the guides thought I might fall anytime. In that landscape, a fall meant a severe injury, so one of the guides told me to hold his hand for assistance and he helped me descend for five minutes.

Once I was close to the rest of the team, he said to walk on my own, but follow his stepping and try to maintain his pace. Easier said than done. I was having a hard time keeping up with his expert steps and pace. Once the steep descend was over, he told me to walk normally and he went to the campsite to prepare our food. My feet were sore, I could feel the blister in both my feet growing due to the wet socks, making it impossible to walk. I could see the Shea Goru campsite, but it took more than an hour to cover the remaining distance in that condition. When I reached the campsite, I was practically limping from the blisters and my energy was completely drained. That night, I was worried because the next day was entirely descent. I changed my socks and kept my feet warm, but they had not recovered entirely. I realized this is the only day for which Hampta pass is not considered an easy trek. But still, it was my favorite day for the amazing views of the glacier.

There is something special about the sleep after trekking. No matter how much I was exhausted after any day, a night's sleep recovered everything next morning. That day began with a river crossing at six in the morning. The water was ice cold, but I controlled my stepping from past experience, and this time crossed the entire river without screaming "It's cold!" or "I'm gonna fall!". From there, the descent started. It was supposed to be my weakness, but instead I was descending the fastest! I figured out that this was happening because the previous day, though my mind was fuzzed with exhaustion, I had descended following the expert steps of the guide for hours. Unconsciously, it was stitched into my reflexes. While others were learning to place their foot by experimentally checking which step is more stable, I always had the answer at the back of my mind, due to the stronger reflex built the previous day.

At the end of the trail, even Pyala who had remained the first throughout the trek, now lagged behind me by a hundred meters. I could hear him screaming, "Congrats! you finished first". Within seconds, he too arrived at the Chhatru campsite and we were jumping and shouting in celebration. The drive to Chandrataal Lake was heavenly and the scenery at the lake was a beautiful climax to the journey. While returning from the lake, one of the guides pointed at a mountain and said that it was the toughest peak he had climbed. I did not ask the name of the peak, rather looked at it and thought that maybe someday, unknowingly, I will be standing there too.