

A GEM IN ISOLATION

THE SPECTACULAR AUDEN'S COL TREK OFFERS YOU THE RARE CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE WILDERNESS AND CLIMB IN SOLITUDE. TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MILAN MOUDGILL**

From the base camp (15,748 ft), Auden's Col is visible for the first time, a depression between the formidable wall that has the Gangotri range to the north and Jogin group to the south.

With India's population nearly at a fifth of the world's headcount, squeezed into 2.4 per cent of its land mass, it is rare to get a true sense of 'wilderness' even in the remotest areas of our part of the Himalaya.

The Auden's Col trek in Garhwal is an exception—a spectacular getaway, with the assurance that it is just you and your (hopefully well-chosen) companions for the nine days it takes to go from Gangotri to Kharsoli.

The Gangotri and Jogin massifs form a formidable wall, separating the Rudugaira Valley from Bhilangna with this small depression in their ridge line, just accessible enough at 18,011 ft to offer a way across.

The journey is spectacular, through alpine forests

on the Gangotri side, giving way to high-altitude scrub and vast mountain views, then scree and moraine—all in the span of a few days. Then, after an arduous ascent through a crevasse-cut slope, is the col, affording a breathtaking view of the Khatling Glacier. After an abseil down this mighty glacier, and the chilling experience of traversing it, one comes off on the moraine, down a Tolkienian landscape edged with high cliffs from which waterfalls plunge.

The exit is along the Bhilangna river, surging from the mouth of the Khatling after a couple of days' walk through dense Himalayan forest. Altogether, this is one of the most isolated and scenic treks in the Himalaya.





The first day's route from Gangotri to Nala Camp is a continuous uphill trek till the col, through shaded forests of birch and maple



An extra day is spent at the Rudugaira Base Camp (14,763 ft) to acclimatise—a beautiful spot to do so, with its panoramic views and spectacular night skies

AUDEN'S COL



In the guts of the Jogin glacier, negotiating our way from Rudugaira Base Camp to Auden's Base Camp



A hanging glacier forms an imposing backdrop to our first camp on the Khatling side



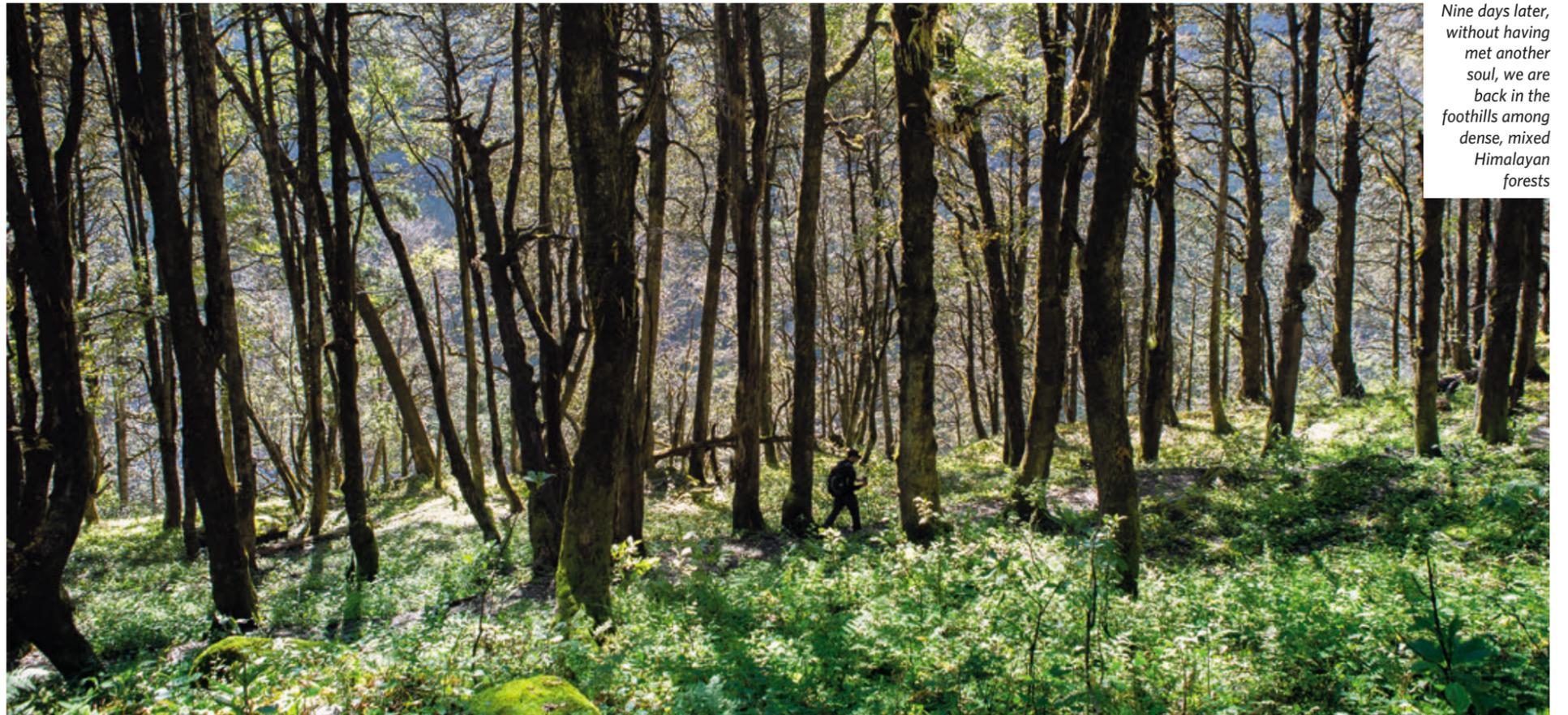
Roped up, weaving our way in single file through the crevasse-ridden Khatling snowfields



A satellite moves through the quiet sky as we try to rest on the night of the col attempt



Once off the glacier, the route is over moraine all the way down to the snout of the Bhilangna, through a surreal landscape



Nine days later, without having met another soul, we are back in the foothills among dense, mixed Himalayan forests