



THE TRAIL ORGANISER

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Some moments on treks stay cemented in one's memory, and a trek to Sikkim allowed me a couple such. At 14,000 feet, the Samiti Lake camp was a dilapidated trekkers' hut. The wooden roof had rotted and caved in. Half the hut was exposed to the sky and a draft whistled in steadily. We settled down in a corner of the hut, waiting for the night to pass quickly. It was bitterly cold and I slept intermittently, feeling a coil of cold air around me. When I couldn't take it any longer, I sat up and was surprised to see the hut awash in a gentle white luminescence that beamed down from the roof. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I noticed the foot of my sleeping bag covered in soft snow. Nonchalantly, I looked up and noticed snow drifting gently from the gash in the roof. Somehow, this setting didn't seem out of place.

I tapped the light on my digital watch and saw it was 2.30. We were slotted to leave in an hour, so I quietly got out of the sleeping bag, put on my parka and let myself out of the creaking door. A few teammates' heads turned, but they quickly huddled themselves deeper into their sleeping bags. I stepped out into a white-washed landscape. A few inches of snow had fallen, but enough to cover everything in a coat of white.

On the western horizon, where the valley ended in the middle of two towering hills, the full moon was suspended just above the horizon like a large cheese ball. I dug my hands deep into the pockets of my parka and made my way towards the lake, the moon behind me and my shadow leading the way. The cold had frozen the snow. My foot made a soft crunching noise—like I was treading on millions of splinters of icicles.

As I got to the lake, Mt. Pandim's silhouette glistened in the night, standing out against the inky darkness of nothing behind it. On the dark, absolutely still waters of Samiti, the clear reflection let me see every crag and every gully of the great mountain. All around, an amphitheatre of tall snow-covered peaks awaited me. Overwhelmed, my eyes welled up for the first time in my life on a trek and that night, alone in the silent moonlight, I cried for everything I loved and despaired for. As I trudged back, it was time to move, but the vision didn't—couldn't—leave my mind.

THE FULL MOON CAST LONG, DARK SHADOWS ON THE SNOW, BUT THE NEON LET YOU MAKE OUT THE TINIEST OF PEBBLES. THE AIR WAS STILL, SO STILL THAT FOOTSTEPS SEEMED CACOPHONOUS

The team gathered itself quickly. We left our backpacks at the hut and attempted to scale the Goecha Pass at 16,000 ft. We didn't need torches... that night, the moon was our beacon. At 4.45, when we'd covered ground and reached a high point, we stopped to rest. The Kanchenjunga range fanned out a stone's throw away and, to the east, a glimmer of light was sneaking in. To the west, the night was still young. As dawn made its way, a shooting star with a short tail streaked across the night sky.

A halo seemed to surround its slow movement and my eyes followed it until it disappeared behind Kanchenjunga. For the second time that night, I felt tears.

I often relate this story as I sit around a campfire. Yes, I've been extraordinarily lucky to see these spectacles in the same night, but I don't mention that trekking on that full-moon night was planned two months in advance, or that it was the month for meteor showers! 🌠

Arjun is the founder of Indiahikes, a blogger and an experienced trekker. He takes a keen interest in training youngsters to appreciate our trails.