DESTINATION

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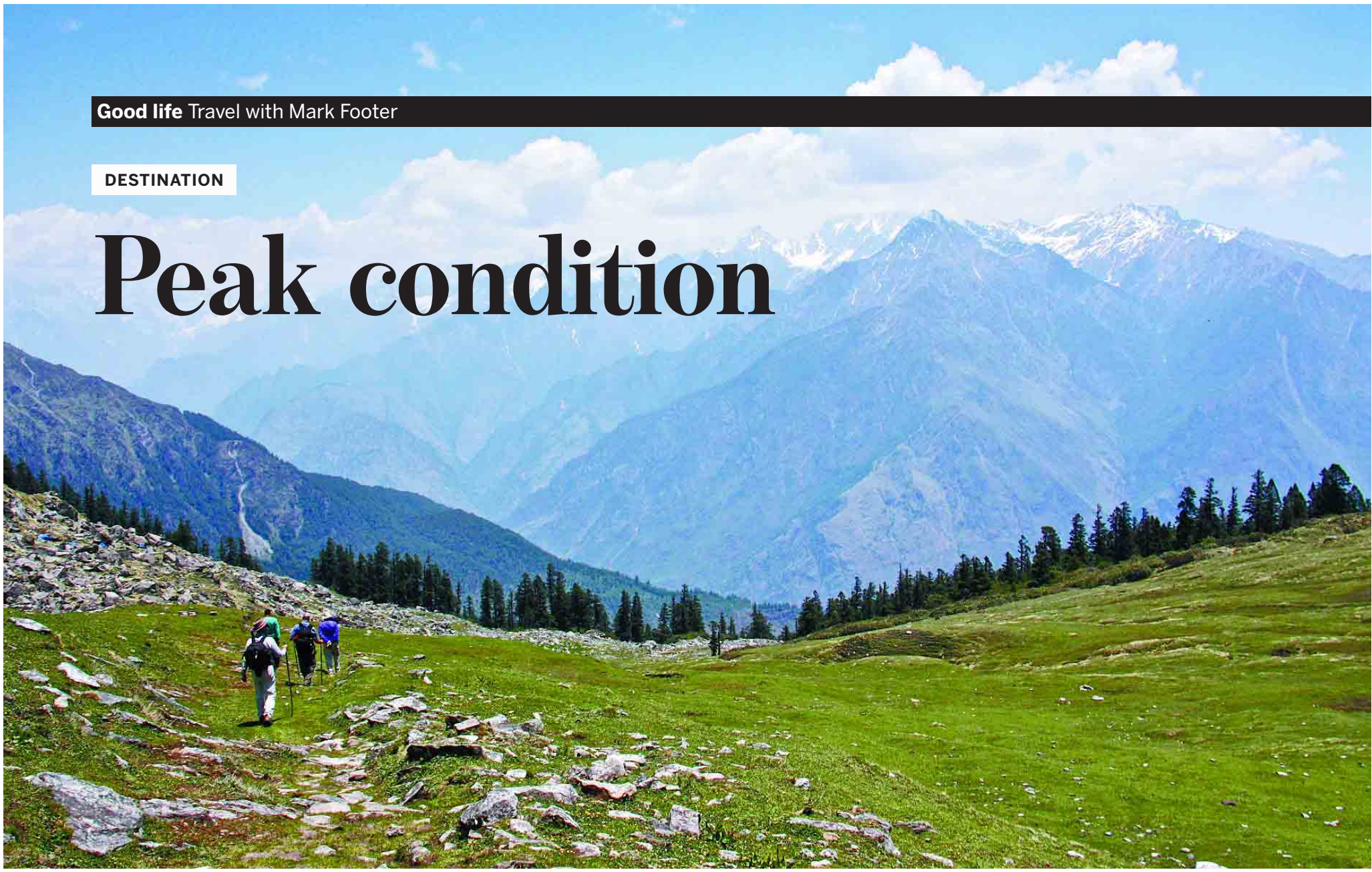

Following in the footsteps of climbing legends reveals how little the mountains and valleys of Uttarakhand have changed in the past 75 years. Words and pictures by **Cameron Dueck**.

The camp is stirring. I open my eyes briefly, to confirm there is daylight, then nestle down into my sleeping bag, savouring its warmth as I wait for the magical moment that reminds me this isn't just another camping trip.

"Sir ... sir, good morning," says a voice from outside my tent. "Your chai is ready."

I open the flap with a zzzzip and rustle of nylon, and there stand Gaurav and Saurav, teenage brothers, who hand me a cup of steaming hot chai.

I'm high in the Indian Himalayas, in the state of Uttarakhand, about 50km shy of the Tibetan border and close to the headwaters of the Ganges. I've done my fair share of camping and rough, backcountry travel, but never with a full posse of cooks, porters and guides; a one-to-one ratio of staff for 10 trekkers. The time and energy that leaves for savouring and reflecting on this phenomenal corner of India takes you back to an earlier time of exploration.

As I sit cross-legged in my tent, carefully setting my tin cup aside to cool, I open the books that have become my guides. Not trail guides that tell me to turn left at the big tree or cross the river near the bend, but guides for the mind and the eye as I follow in the footsteps of mountaineering icons.

"Mountaineering in the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalayas more nearly resembles mountaineering in Switzerland, the country is unspoiled by commercialism," wrote Frank S. Smythe, in his 1949 book *The Valley of Flowers*, which describes his expedition through this region. "There are no railways, power lines, roads and hotels to offend the eye and distract from the primitive beauty and grandeur of the vistas, and there are peaks innumerable, unnamed and unclimbed, of all shades of difficulty, and valleys that have never seen a European, where a simple kindly peasant folk graze their flocks in the summer months."

Smythe's book, along with *The Ascent of Nanda Devi* (1937), by H.W. Tilman, and *Nanda Devi* (1936), by Eric Shipton, are landmark accounts of early Himalayan mountaineering.

Nanda Devi, at 7,816 metres the highest mountain in India, was, then, the tallest in the British Empire. It stands in the middle of a basin ringed by 7,000-metre peaks, creating the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. We're only trekking the approaches to the mountain, but these historic accounts spend many pages describing the same valleys and slopes we are traversing.

Times have changed, of course, but Uttarakhand remains raw and undeveloped, the disadvantages of which became evident last June, when heavy rains caused devastating floods and landslides. India's worst natural disaster since the 2004 tsunami, it killed more than 5,700 people and over 110,000 had to be evacuated from the steep valleys in this mountainous state. The mountains still show scars from landslides and roads are still buried in rubble.

In 10 days of trekking, we see no other European trekker, and only a handful of local groups. We are hiking in high season, crossing and joining popular routes such as the Curzon Trail and Roopkund Trail as we weave our way towards the Kuari Pass, but still, we have the mountains to ourselves.

Smythe's book keeps me scanning the high meadow passes and valley trails shaded by pine and chestnut trees, searching for the myriad flowers he identified on his trek. I spot the bright blue *Eritrichium strictum*, which looks like a forget-me-not, the rare dwarf *Iris decora*, and the Arum, or *Arisaema Wallichianum*, a cobra-headed plant that looks vaguely evil. The high passes are carpeted in tiny primula blooms, purple, red, blue and yellow, close to the ground, hiding from the constant wind, unfaded by the baking Himalayan sun.

I feel a little drunk; not only because the altitude – we are trekking as high as 4,100 metres – has me panting and dizzy with a dull ache behind my eyes, but also

because I can see forever. The mountain peaks, strung like jewels across the horizon, are intoxicating. Nanda Kot, Tirsuli, Nanda Gunti and Mrithuni, a series of 6,000- and 7,000-metre peaks, appear repeatedly, like old friends, on the far side of a river; catching the gleam of the first morning sun here, shrouded in fog there, bathed in a golden sunset as seen from our campsite.

"In the moisture-free atmosphere of the Himalayas the peaks look high because they are high. At midday they gleam like polished steel under a nearly vertical sun and the eye sinks with relief to the green valley floor," Smythe wrote.

Tilman, infamous for his tetchy temperament, was far more perfunctory in his descriptions of the region, but even he expressed admiration for the "peculiar nature" of the landscape, where valleys at 1,000 metres are filled with lush-green vegetation, while snowy 7,000-metre peaks are visible only 20km or 30km away. That lushness, and the few visitors, is what sets the Indian Himalayas apart from those parts of the mountain range in Tibet and Nepal. The Indian, or southern, side of the range enjoys summer monsoons while the northern flank is much drier.

"The whole country is an intricate tangle of valleys and ridges with their attendant ravines and spurs, which, even in the foothills, are all on a scale undreamt of in [England]," Tilman wrote.

At the end of every day – a walk of 10km to 15km with a change in elevation of several thousand metres – we arrive at a new campsite, to be served by our porters like the explorers of old. Everything is hauled on horse-back, there is no refrigeration and Suman, our cook, has only two kerosene burners at his disposal. But upon every arrival, we are served chai and sweet and salty snacks, helping to replace the energy and minerals lost on the trail.

Dinners usually consist of at least four dishes, plus bread and rice, and Suman rarely repeats a dish on the 10-day journey. *Rajma*, dals, various paneer preparations, stuffed bitter gourd, *chole bhature* and Tibetan-style dumplings. When we're all sighing and setting our plates aside, the waiters arrive at the dining tent with banana fritters in chocolate sauce, rice pudding and freshly baked cakes. We must walk, or we'll grow fat.

On the penultimate day, we approach Kuari Pass, the objective of our trek, and pitch our tents next to sheep herders on the Dhakwani meadow, just as Shipton did. "The tinkle of sheep bells and the plaintive notes of a shepherd's pipe drew us towards a shepherd encampment, and here we spend the night, a thousand feet below the pass," I read, as a shepherd chases his flock through our camp, the beasts bleating and tripping over guy-wires.

The next morning we cross the pass, which gives us views of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Kamet and Hathi Parbat, the hewn rock and glittering snow that Shipton described as "one of the grandest mountain views in the world".

Shipton found it "difficult to refrain from gasping at the vastness of the scene", and I realise nothing of any significance has changed since those early explorers passed this way.

Clockwise from far left: descending from Kuari Pass, with Hathi Parbat in the distance; a friendly local; the last valley before Kuari Pass; a pack horse takes a break; camping on a bank of the Nandakini River; an *Iris decora*; an alfresco breakfast shared with a flock of sheep at just under 4,000 metres.

Getting there: Cathay Pacific, Jet Airways and Air India all offer daily flights between Hong Kong and New Delhi, from where companies such as Geck & Co Adventures (www.geck-co.com) will pick you up and guide you on an appropriate trek. The Indian Himalaya trekking seasons are from March to June and September to November.