

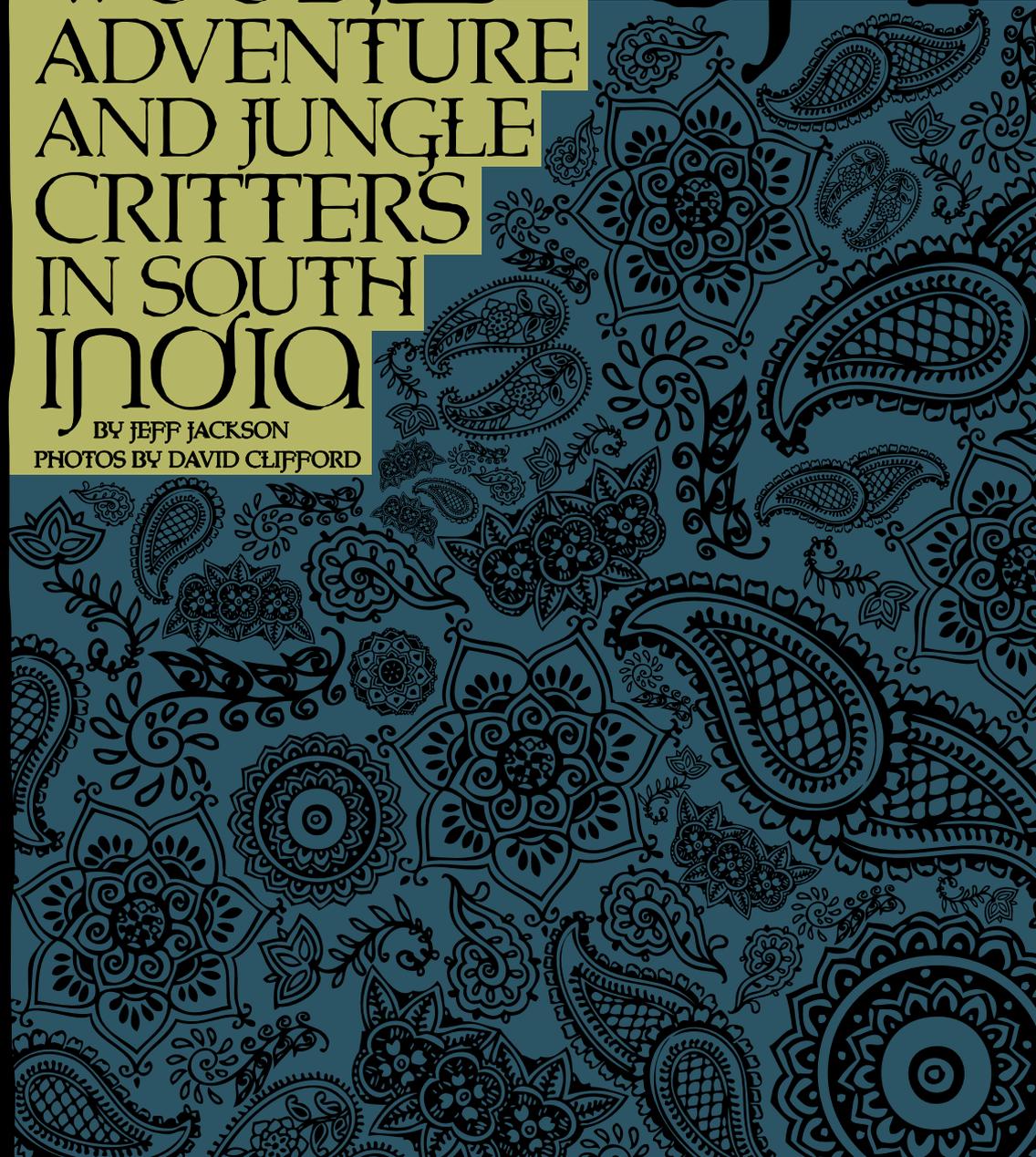


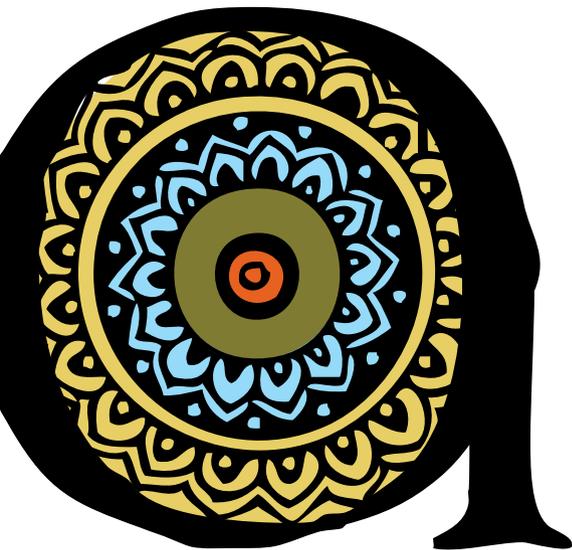


The Cobra Den

BOLLY-
WOOD,
ADVENTURE
AND JUNGLE
CRITTERS
IN SOUTH
INDIA

BY JEFF JACKSON
PHOTOS BY DAVID CLIFFORD





At 4:45 a.m. the streets of Mysore, India, were teeming with traffic. Pedestrians stood on the curbs crouched and alert like tennis ball boys ready to charge. A bicyclist balanced three gunny sacks of peanuts on his head. Another teetered along with 15 chairs stacked on the

back fender, followed by a motorcyclist who had a nine-foot aluminum ladder yoked across his shoulders, risking decapitation in the event of a collision. His kickstand was down.

Busses hung with garlands of flowers blew past at hilarious speeds, as did cars of all shapes and sizes. An inadvertent lane had formed near the center of the road composed of hay-carts drawn by water buffalo slowly walking in the wrong direction. Scooters loaded with families of four or five darted between trucks emblazoned with images of gods—Ganesh the elephant, Hanuman the monkey, Supramanya the cobra. Every truck was grossly overloaded and had a slogan painted on the bumper in English and squiggly Kannada.

The honking never ceased. It was a cacophony that exceeded a root canal in nastiness, yet the Indians seemed immune and in fact (as suggested by the frequent truck motto *Horn please horn*), they celebrated its usefulness. Our driver, a soft-spoken Mysore native named

Edwin Kumar, eased his way into the rapids like a prestidigitator, deftly employing his horn as sonar, as cat whiskers, as a physical nudge.

We joined the melee, gunning through Srirangapatna, the site of Tipu Sultan's last stand against the British, immortalized by Sir Walter Scott with the line: "He died manfully upon the breach of his capitol, with his saber clenched in his hand."

It was cool in December, but humidity fogged the windows and after the dry Colorado winter my friends Dave "Ya" Rasmussen, Josh "Jah Lion" Smith and I felt like mints in the mouth of a toad.

We'd come to India to climb, armed to the teeth with bolts and gear, hoping to add new routes to the wilderness of granite domes purported to populate the jungle like boils on a witch's butt. The going was slow, however, and I was getting antsy.

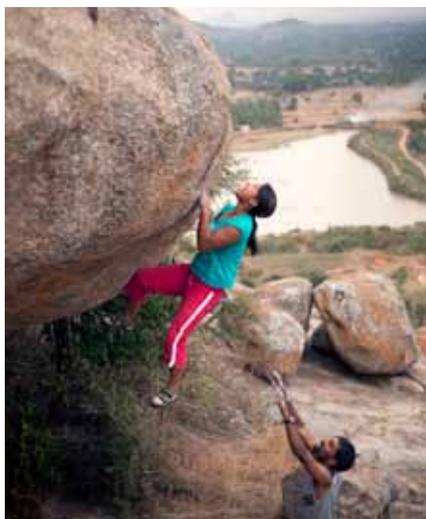
We were in the country. Sugarcane fields and vegas of wide-bladed grass. The morn-



CLOCKWISE FROM THE LEFT: Marking the bolt placements on *Speed Breaker* (5.12d).

Josh Smith chucks a lap on *Ganesh's Broke Tusk* (V1). Images of Ganesh, such as this one carved into a solid granite block at Kunti Betta, often show him with a broken tusk. One legend recounts that he was asked to transcribe the *Mahabharata*, India's 1.8-million-word epic poem, as it was extemporaneously spoken by the sage Vyasa. Realizing the importance of the job, he reached up, cracked his tusk off and filled it with ink.

Shanti Rani on an unnamed (V6) at the Camp Shristi boulders, 34 miles from Bangalore.



emoniously poured the milky tea. He handed Edwin the steaming brew and received three rupees, about seven cents.

Edwin whistled and attracted the attention of another man, dressed in a thigh-length red tunic with a white mustache that curled toward his ears. He walked over and Edwin chatted with him in Kannada, a slang-ridden, Dravidian language spoken by around 38 million people in the southwestern Indian state of Karnataka.

He seemed to be exhorting the stranger, but the man bobbed his head, an equivocal gesture—yes, no, maybe? Edwin circumvented the confusion. He reached through the windows and felt the man's pants pockets, and then explored the tunic. The fellow's face remained surprisingly stony except for the mustache, which twitched like a monkey's tail when Edwin reached into his breast pocket and extracted a white packet the size of a matchbook.

He ripped the top off the satchel and poured the contents into his mouth. The rich smell of *masala* filled the car, the same aroma I'd whiffed since we arrived in India a few days before. It floods the streets with the reek of spice.

"What's that?" I asked as Edwin threw the packet out the window.

"It's paan, boss," he said. "You want some, isn't it?"

Edwin speaks a dialect of British English that is, at times, difficult to follow.

"Is it good?" I asked.

"Arey! It's too good. Just I was telling to him. The white packet. The gutka paan. Very good for relaxing time."

"Is it food?"

"*Yaiyo!* No! Spit betel, boss. If swallow you get a loose motion. You get a shit wider than an elephant's cock."

We both paused at that image. He tilted his mirror and watched me, his eyes a little sleepy.

"Maybe later," I said.

"Ah."

We rode in silence for a while until we passed a sign for Meety Bras and Panties, which provoked a hearty laugh. Edwin craned to look into the back seat at his three American passengers.

"You want a make a good time, isn't it?" he asked, smiling broadly and lifting his eyebrows. "You want a make a love?"

"No, thanks," Josh said.

"I know a lady with a wheatish complexion. She was innocently divorced."

"Nope," I said.

His head bobbed.

"OK, shri-boss. But I know a girl who was converted. I know a girl who was gone for a six."

"No thanks," I said.

"You want some ganja?"

"No."

"Sandalwood? I know a sandalwood wallah."

"No."

"Silk?"

"No, thanks."

"Toys? Chanapatna is on the anvil."

"No," I said, getting irritated. "We don't want anything. We're here to climb. We don't want to go to the markets or restaurants. We don't want to buy stuff. We're not interested in the tourist sites. We're climbers. We just want you to drive us to the rocks. Can you do that?"

Edwin looked at me in the rearview mirror with his bushy black eyebrows drawn together. I felt Josh and Ya silently reprimanding my Type A outburst. I imagined I could hear them thinking, *Jesus, Jefe, we're on vacation. This is India, dude. Can't you let go of the climbing obsession for a couple of weeks and lighten up?*



IN A WORD, I WAS COOKED.

Too many long workweeks and half-days on the weekends. Too many blown-out dia-

ing sun prodded the low clouds like the head of a match pushed into a cotton ball. A deep river, conical hills, domes and spires of granite. A eucalyptus tree completely shrouded by flying foxes—bats the size of ravens hanging by their feet. Men with madras skirts pulled between their legs to make shorts. People standing in front of lean-to shanties or crouching beside the road taking dumps. Pigs lurking surreptitiously behind guardrails, ready to wolf down the steaming turds. Jain's feet carved out of granite blocks the size of compact cars. All this flashed by my window.

Edwin, dark-skinned with a bushy mustache that hung partly over his thick lower lip like black fringe on a hot dog, veered carefully off the road and parked near a chai wallah. A shirtless middle-aged man with a round, hairy belly and curly black hair neatly divided into two buns raised a copper pot high above a plastic cup about the size of a Collins glass and cer-

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: A typical cobra den in a neighborhood at the base of Siddallu Kallu (Lightning Rock), the 400-foot granite prow and home to the crack *Bollywood* (5.11d).

The cow is sacred in India and they often wander into busy thoroughfares and bring traffic to a halt. Photo by Sam Bie

Looking north from the flanks of Siddallu Kallu. Handi Gundi, the site of a proposed 800-foot Buddha, is the big cone of granite on the right.

pers and early mornings holding a 2-year-old with a cold. Too many hours spent running errands, shoveling snow, fixing food, washing dishes, folding clothes. The chores weren't too bad, but the recognition that they were going to reel on forever was pretty heavy. Evidently fatherhood was a bill that could only be paid by dribbling a steady stream of life-blood onto a sponge called family.

Hannah was tired, too, working as a special-needs teacher at the Roaring Fork Waldorf School and being a mother to our son, Kai.

The daughter of the actor Michael Nouri (best known for his roles in *Flashdance*, *Victor Victoria* and *Damages*) and flower-child-cum-hospice-nurse Deborah Freed, Hannah was conceived in 1974 while her parents were practicing a play to be presented to their Indian guru, the 16-year-old Maharaji (Prem Rawat), a teacher with an estimated 7,000,000 devotees. In 1974 there were 60,000 "Premies" in the United States and when the guru visited they held massive celebrations everywhere he went.

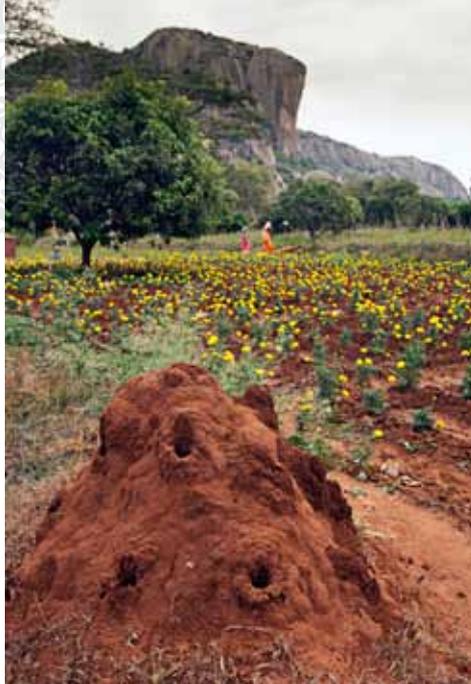
Under a big oak tree in a field in upstate

"IT WAS HARD TO MAKE THE LOCAL CLIMBERS REALIZE THAT AN ANCHOR CONSISTS OF TWO INDIVIDUAL POINTS. WHEN WE STARTED BOLTING, IT SEEMED TO BE AN INCREDIBLE WASTE OF PRECIOUS MATERIAL TO THEM. THE VALUE OF THE BOLTS WE USED ON ONE ROUTE USUALLY REPRESENTED ABOUT HALF A MONTH'S PAY IN INDIA."

New York, Michael was Shiva and Deborah was the water. Hannah has her father's strong Arab cheekbones and lustrous eyes. She has her mother's complete tolerance and ability to go with the flow.

Surely all husbands with children look at their wives as more or less enlightened beings, but Hannah has always struck me as particularly self-possessed and drama-free. I think she's a goddess. I might be wrong, but I doubt it.

After a couple of years of working and mothering, though, even Hannah had dark circles under her eyes. We were short with each other. There simply wasn't time for cordiality. Most nights we fell into bed at 10 p.m. and Badger, the Jack Russell, was left alone to do the dishes. I'm pretty sure he loaded the dishwasher, too.



The family thing was proving to be harder than a metal pickle so far, and yet we wanted to have another kid. I know this seems contradictory, but stolid bewilderment is how we go about populating the planet. Procreation, to state the obvious, is not based on reason. Anyone who has found his child elbow-deep in his own poop can tell you that.

Before we got knocked up, however, we both wanted a breather, and when Christian Leeb, my friend and yoga teacher, suggested we join him at a top-notch Ayurvedic spa in Mysore, called the Indus Valley Ayurvedic Center

(IVAC), Hannah and I immediately committed to the trip. I'd save all my vacation, we'd drop Kai off with my parents and we would blissfully ride to India on a carefree, low-stress junket. Hannah wanted to do a bunch of yoga and pan-chakarma, a series of treatments designed to purify the body. I just wanted to relax. Maybe I'd get a few massages and revitalize my moribund yoga practice.



IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO CHANGE gears. A little research revealed an area of big granite formations 60 miles west of Mysore known as Ramanagaram. These domes and spires were famous as backgrounds for Bollywood blockbusters like *Sholay*, and mainstream American movies like *Gandhi* and *Passage*



to India. They ranged in height from 400 to 2,000 feet and included Savandurga (Fort of Death), reportedly the second-largest monolith in Asia. The French and English had been to the area and left their marks. Doug Scott established the iconic *Scott's Crack* (5.8), a two-pitch flake that arches up a clean slab near Ramgiri Temple. Arnaud Petit bolted a beautiful orange, overhanging 5.12b sport route near the Thimme Gowda farm and Johnny Dawes traipsed relatively unprotected up Savandurga to establish *Simple Monkey Day*, a 1,000-foot 5.10+.

More recently, the Austrian climber Gerhard Schaar had visited Ramanagaram in 2005 and befriended a group of local climbers. He was both impressed with the area's potential and concerned for his friends' safety, so he determined to come back with a drill and good gear to teach them how to properly equip routes. Back home in Innsbruck, he gave a series of fund-raising slideshows and secured sponsorship for hardware and a drill. He returned in 2008, added 15 moderate sport routes and left the drill and lots of bolts with a motivated crew of Bangalore climbers.

"The hardest part of the whole project was developing a basic sense of concern for security in my Indian friends," Schaar wrote in a trip report on rockandice.com. "Climbing on jiggling bolts, rapping from a single hanger and climbing above a potential ground fall was normal for them. It was very hard to make them realize that 5.10 climbers need more bolts, or that an anchor consists of two individual points. When we started bolting, it seemed to be an incredible waste of precious material to them. The value of the bolts we used on one route usually represented about half a month's pay in India."

The active locals, a tight-knit group that included Pranesh Manchaiah, Shanti Rani, Dinesh Kaigonahalli, Keerthi Pias, Balaji S.R., Ravindra Bhat, Rajesh Sivanna and Kamalesh Venugopal quickly added routes including projects to 5.13b and established boulder problems to V10.

I started an e-mail correspondence with a motivated Australian climber, Nick McKinnon, living in Bangalore and working for General Motors. He agreed to show me around and wrote, "South India is granite, mate. There is so much granite it is cut down for fence posts,



drain covers and light poles. Everywhere you go there's granite—so much it will never get completely developed."

When I e-mailed Gerhard Schaar, he wrote, "The potential is endless."

At that point I dropped my plans to relax and determined to climb every single day. I contacted my Colorado cohorts Ya § and Jah Lion, and they were instantly on board.

Ya Rasmussen, 30, a muscled beanpole with light blue eyes and sandy hair, is a custom furniture maker with a specialty in one-of-a-kind treehouses. He apprenticed with two of the Northeast's finest woodworkers, Wayne Marcoux and Dan Mosheim, before moving to Colorado and starting his own business, David Rasmussen Designs. He's a Colorado polymath—a good climber, biker and free-heel skier.

Like all craftsmen in 2009, he had lately found that work was scarce. His part-time job with a local architecture firm was eliminated and he had time, if not money, to burn. India seemed like a perfect way to pause and reflect on the future.

Jah Lion (Josh) Smith, 33, is thin and wiry. A blue koi tattoo extends past his short sleeves. He has dark hair, sunburned ears, pale eyes and a baseball cap. When I met him, he was living in a yurt and interning with Sustainable Settings, a nonprofit learning center near Carbondale, Colorado that focuses on sustainable agriculture and green development. Later Josh was

hired as the green building coordinator, and designed a 12,000-square-foot straw-bale/timber-frame raw dairy facility. He left Sustainable in 2008 to become the energy manager for the Town of Carbondale, but after a year he was burnt on the bureaucracy and politics.

"My wife's friend had just lost a baby, River," he told me. "And it made us realize the importance of living our lives to the fullest, as they are so fragile. So I decided to resign."

In a sense, we were all going to India in the throes of transformation and uncertainty, but that wasn't all we shared. Strangely, each of us had spent years living in yurts—Mongolian round houses—with no running water or electricity, heated by wood-burning stoves. And we'd all studied Buddhism.

Josh had worked for a month at Venerable Jam Yang's monastery in Australia, acting as a meditation facilitator for Venerable Antonio Satta, a visiting Tibetan Buddhist master from Italy. Jah Lion sat two back-to-back, silent, 10-day Vipassana meditation retreats. It was an experience he described as "beyond words."

Ya had been accepted as a disciple in a formal ceremony by Hui Hai (Wisdom like Ocean), a Buddhist/Taoist monk and Tai Chi master whom he met during a semester in China during a study-abroad program sponsored by Green Mountain College in Vermont.

"I lived near the temple and would go there

every day to study with him," Ya told me. "It was a very moving experience for me and I still keep in touch with him."

Yurt-dwellers, Dharma brothers and climbers. Not too different than the hordes of hippies who descended on all things Indian during the 1960s and '70s, seeking, as Maharaji put it, "stillness, contentment and peace." We wanted all that, plus a few pitches of steep granite.

We bought bolts and anchors, trimmed a light rack of singles and nuts, and started combing the area with Google Earth as we plotted our strategy with Nick.

By surfing the net we discovered that there were three concentrations of established climbing between Mysore and Bangalore. The closest was called Kunti Betta and it was only 30 minutes from IVAC. The next closest was the Ramgiri Temple area of Ramanagaram, two hours away. According to Nick and Gerhard, other domes and boulderfields dotted the plains far and wide. We'd be in India for two weeks and hoped to explore and climb as much as we could.

KUNTI BETTA

We passed a copse of trees bursting with orange blossoms and Josh leaned forward and asked, "What are those trees called?"

Edwin carefully pulled off the road and turned to face us.



“Junglewood tree.”

“OK, thanks,” Josh said. “Junglewood.”

Edwin waited patiently.

“Thanks,” Josh said. “You can drive now.”

This was the fifth time Edwin had completely stopped the car. Once to steal the paan packet, another time to make a phone call, a third time to take a drink of water, a fourth to buy a flower garland to hang on the pink Ganesh statue glued to his dashboard, and this time, to answer a question.

“Do you have to pull off the road so much?” I asked. “It’s supposed to take 30 minutes and it has taken us an hour so far.”

“I’m just trying to protect, yes.”

“Thank you, Edwin,” Josh said.

“It’s too dangerous, yes, yes. You see the buffalos and the cows, sir. This man is pissing on the road. In the cities the rich people are running on the road. In the darkness the poor people are living in the road.”

“I understand. Thank you for being careful,” I said.

“I was only just trying to do the needful, sir. I am a driver. I am responsibility for your safety.” “Just drive, please!” Ya yelled.

Reluctantly, Edwin pulled onto the road, then stopped again.

“Most people want to see the temples and buy the silk,” he mumbled. “I tell you the too good market and I get a firing.”

“Please drive,” I said.

“You want pindrop silence?” Edwin asked.

“Yes, please.”



AFTER ONE MORE STOP AT A CHAI stall to buy paan and ask directions, Edwin rolled the Toyota to a halt beside a pink school built at the base of granite stairs ascending toward a temple complex known as Mallikarjuna Swamy. The temple is situated in the saddle between two rock hills, called collectively Kunti Betta (Kunti Hill), and named for the mother of three of the Pandava brothers, about whom India’s most famous saga, the *Mahabharata*, was written.

In the myth, the Pandavas bet their kingdom in a rigged dice game, lost, and were exiled for 13 years. According to legend, the Pandavas spent part of their exile hiding in the rocks of Kunti Betta and named the hill after their mother, whom they missed. Kunti Betta is also reputedly the location of the fabulous fight in which one of the brothers, Bheema, destroyed the demon Bakasura. A big foot-shaped hueco on top of the western hill is supposed to be the

imprint from Bheema’s foot stamp. The historical temple and surrounding ruins date from between 2,000 and 4,000 BCE.

We stepped out of the car and grabbed our packs, leaving Edwin an apple and instructions to park in the shade and wait for us. We could see the rocks—huge eggs peppering the slopes just beyond the coconut palms and rice paddies. We charged up the steps, past the rows of cobra icons smeared in red and yellow pigment, eager to get to grips with the granite. We stopped at the temple complex, a tight cluster of five buildings with ornate friezes mostly depicting snakes, just long enough to do a couple of boulder problems that flanked a 12-foot image of Ganesh carved out of solid granite.

Just as we were preparing to hike up the hill, a monk in an orange robe appeared. Ariditha Ragu was light-skinned and taller than most Indians I’d encountered. He had penetrating gold eyes and when I told him we were climbers from the United States he took Josh by the arm and forcibly guided him to a locked gate, motioning with his smooth, nut-brown head for us to follow.

“Come, come,” he said.

He took out a key ring, opened the gate and herded us into a courtyard formed by three-



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: David “Ya” Rasmussen low on *Bollywood* (5.11d). The 230-foot flake takes doubles on cams to 4 inches, then flares wider than 12 inches for 150 feet.

Ariditha Ragu showing off Kunti Betta’s treasure, an ancient *Dakshinamurthy* or Shiva as teacher.

Josh “Jah Lion” Smith after the *puja*.

story boulders leaning together like toppled bowling pins. A van-sized granite Nandi, the bull that Shiva uses as his vehicle, reclined on a green lawn in front of the monk’s house. He opened the door and showed us his room, which was completely devoid of decoration except for a comfortable chair and couch upholstered in red vinyl. Then he ushered us into a temple, hewn out of a granite cave. The ceiling lowered as we walked deeper into the gloom. Ragu turned on a flashlight, took the keys out of his robe pocket and unlocked a cabinet built right against the stone at the farthest end of the chamber. He opened a small door and shone the light on a weathered carving done in white granite of a figure sitting cross-legged.

“*Dakshina Mutti*,” Ragu said. He wasn’t smiling. I could tell we were in a sacred place. “South statue.”

“Buddha?” Ya asked.

Ragu shook his head. “Shiva.”

Dakshinamurthy, as I later found out, is common all over India, and depicts Shiva in his role as teacher of yoga, music and wisdom.



NOW THAT WE WERE EDUCATED, the monk released us to explore the rocks, telling us where to find the standard trail to the top. We romped right between the hills, missed the

cutoff and found ourselves on a sandy road on the north side of the eastern *betta*. We briefly discussed backtracking, but decided to leave the trail and directly explore the entire north-facing aspect of the hill—to plunge headlong, in other words, into the Indian jungle wearing short pants and tennis shoes. After all the traffic and paan and chai and the unanticipated tour we were jonesing to climb.

It wasn’t long before our socks were inundated by a plague of grass seeds so sharp they drew blood when you pulled them out. We scared up a couple of big hares and rats, and leapt weird sandy pyramids, piled like termite mounds riddled with palm-sized holes. Our objective was a shady, vertical 100-foot crack that led to a 30-foot horizontal roof bisected by a couple of branching splitters. Sick!

We plowed forward through the chest-deep grass past hulking boulders and steep walls etched with holds. Unfortunately, a beehive the size of my desk hung at the lip between the cracks and we were shut down.

We contoured across the high ground and checked out a cave that had been fashioned into a dwelling dating from the mid-1700s. Fighters in Tipu Sultan’s army, resisting the British in the fourth Anglo-Mysore war, used it as a hideout and storage area for their deadly rockets, a technology that didn’t reach Europe until 1805 when the Royal Woolwich Arsenal demonstrated solid-fuel rockets based on Mysorean technology.

The “freedom-fighter cave,” as some local boys dubbed it, offered 30-foot highballs that we were hesitant to top out without crash pads. We had fun climbing the initial roof, however, hucking into the tall grass.

“It’s getting late,” Josh said as the sun neared the horizon. “I’ve been thinking about the rabbits and the rats around here. I’m worried

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” EDWIN ASKED WHEN WE REAPPEARED. “THERE ARE SNAKES. THERE ARE LEOPARDS. PEOPLE DON’T WALK IN THE HILLS LIKE THIS. I HAVE BUT ONE APPLE FOR A TIMEPASS. I ASK THE WOMAN FOR A COCONUT BUT SHE GIVE TO ME A TIGHT SLAP. I’M TOO, TOO WORRIED.”

about snakes. The sun is setting, it’s getting cooler. It’s time for them to hunt and we’re walking right through their territory.”

“After you,” Ya said.

We saw our first snake about two minutes later. Josh calmly stopped and pointed to the thick body swelling through the green grass straight down the same wash we were following. It was a brown snake, with a distinct line of interlinked dark brown ovals outlined in black

running down the back and sides.

The second snake was a slender, shit-green, five-foot serpent with a pale belly that Josh identified as venomous because of the flat head. It zipped across the path a yard in front of us.

We walked into a clearing and the snake appeared again, this time almost under our feet. We shrieked and pumped our legs in an effort to avoid stepping on it, and high-tailed it to the safety of a tall boulder. The snake had vanished and after a few minutes we continued traversing the grass, very gingerly.

At the halfway point we ducked into a cave to catch some shade. I noticed a set of big tracks scratched in the dirt covering the rock floor of the shelter and a pile of scat corkscrewed like a turban at the entrance to the cave. Ya took a picture of the curious three-clawed print and we went on our way.

We had almost completed our circumambulation when we happened on a large green metal contraption camouflaged with thorny acacia branches. It was a 12-foot-long rectangular cage built of stout metal with a single entrance and a separate, smaller bait cage on the far side. A pressure plate on the floor caused the door to spring shut when weighted.

“It looks like a trap,” Ya said.

“For something really big,” Josh added.

“Do they still have tigers around here?” I asked.

Ya and Josh shrugged and we finished off our march at dusk, tired and a little frazzled. As we walked through the temple complex, Ragu surprised us, again appearing as if out of mid-air.

“I thought you forgot about me,” he said. “I thought you had left without saying a goodbye. I wouldn’t be angry. I don’t blame you. But here you are, and now I will do for you a *puja*.”

Holy crap, I thought ironically. I’m completely skunked and now we have to do some

cockamamie religious rite before we can leave. It seemed like nothing was easy in India. The traffic, the wildlife, the culture all seemed like impediments that not even Ganesh could push over with his elephant head.

We gathered in a small room and Ragu lit a bronze oil lamp shaped like a gravy boat. The walls were hung with pictures of saints and gods. He grabbed a big bell on the end of a stick and shook it. The clangor ripped off the walls

like an explosion and my eardrums rang. The hair on my arms lifted as I felt a presence fill the room. The silence after the bell's last echo seemed to press down on my head. A moment before I'd been skeptical and tucked out. But suddenly, like a man who wakes up in the night to the sound of a stranger's footfall, I was alert.

Ragu chanted in a high-pitched, hoarse voice, rang the bell again and then poured water from a silver bowl into our cupped hands. He touched his fingers to a pile of white ash and marked our foreheads with a short horizontal *tilaka*. He brought his hands together and wished us well.

As we walked down to the car, I felt changed somehow. It seemed that India wasn't going to allow me to get lost in my obsession. Like Ragu, it was grabbing me by the arm and firmly ushering me into awareness.



"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" EDWIN asked when we reappeared. "There are snakes. There are leopards. People don't walk in the hills like this. I have but one apple for a timepass. I ask the woman for a coconut but she give to me a tight slap. I'm too, too worried."

"Sorry, Edwin," Josh said. "Next time we'll leave you some money and you can buy food."

"Yes, please. I want an updation. Just for a

The venom yield from a regular bite is 150 to 250 milligrams, while a lethal dose for humans is only 40 to 70 milligrams. It's an especially aggressive species. According to the naturalist Zai Whitaker, these snakes have been known to bite through their own lower jaws and plant their fangs in the thumbs of handlers.

The second snake we saw was an Indian cobra, known locally as *nağara haavu*, the deadliest snake in India in terms of human fatalities per year—an average of 10,000 plus. Revered in mythology, the snake is still worshipped in South India. The dozen or so "termite mounds" we had walked past were cobra dens, and we saw them all over the place, even just a few yards from houses. People left flower garlands and dripped milk onto the piles. We drove past temples dedicated to the cobra god, Ganesh's half-brother Supramanya. Cobra imagery was everywhere, from statues to pharmacies.

I also checked on "leopard attacks" and discovered that two girls had been killed since we'd been in Karnataka. According to a report in the *Times of India*, the forest department was replacing 2,690 thatched roofs with special *pucca* (proper) roofs in nearby villages in hopes of protecting folks from leopard attacks. Traditionally, leopards have denned up in the rocks and hunted from boulder tops, but



THE DOZEN OR SO "TERMITE MOUNDS" WE HAD WALKED PAST WERE COBRA DENS, AND WE SAW THEM ALL OVER THE PLACE, EVEN JUST A FEW YARDS FROM HOUSES. PEOPLE LEFT FLOWER GARLANDS AND DRIPPED MILK ONTO THE PILES. WE DROVE PAST TEMPLES DEDICATED TO THE COBRA GOD.

packet of paan, no?"

"Sure," I said. "But is it really dangerous to walk off the trails?"

"Cent per cent, shri-boss sir. You can get a killing."

"Really?"

"Ah."



WHEN WE GOT BACK TO IVAC I sat down in the computer room and did a little research. What I discovered was sobering. In a marked contrast to Colorado, where the elements can be challenging but the animals are relatively benign. Southern India hosts a veritable smorgasbord of perilous wildlife.

For example, the local name of the first snake we sighted is *kolakumandala*. In English it's called the chain snake or Russell's viper, one of the four deadliest snakes in India.

as humans squeezed their territory, they'd recently begun to hunt from rooftops, springing on families in the dead of night.

Leopards are the smallest of the big cats, averaging about 150 pounds, but are extremely powerful. They can run up to 35 mph, jump 10 feet vertically and 20 feet horizontally, and are excellent climbers, dragging bulky carcasses (averaging 55 pounds) high into trees. Historically, leopards don't tend to become man-eaters, but two Indian leopards were famous for their depredations. The Panar and Rudraprayag leopards were believed to have killed 525 people between them before the big game hunter and naturalist Jim Corbett tracked and shot them.

In his story "The Spotted Devil of Gummalapur," the hunter Kenneth Anderson wrote: "Although examples of such animals are comparatively rare, when they do

occur they depict the panther [leopard] as an engine of destruction quite equal to his far larger cousin, the tiger. Because of his smaller size he can conceal himself in places impossible to a tiger, his need for water is far less, and in veritable demoniac cunning and daring, coupled with the uncanny sense of self preservation and stealthy disappearance when danger threatens, he has no equal."

The cave we'd wandered into didn't seem like a leopard lair, however. Judging from the seat and claw marks, it was a bear's den. When I Googled "bear Mysore," the first thing that came up was a Wikipedia entry on the "Sloth bear of Mysore."

The picture showed a cute, white-nosed, floppy-eared face that had an uncanny resemblance to Baloo, "the sleepy brown bear" in *The Jungle Book*, and in fact, the Hindi word for bear is *bhalu*. Rudyard Kipling, author of *The Jungle Book*, must have related "sloth" to "sleepy."

The encyclopedia entry was less endearing. Here's the first sentence: "The Sloth bear of Mysore was an unusually aggressive Indian sloth bear responsible for the deaths of at least 12 people, and the mauling of two dozen others."

It went on to describe the "typical" method in which sloth bears kill their victims—by ripping their faces off. "Those who survived



COUNTER-CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: David “Ya” Rasmussen on the last day at Ramanagaram, 15 pounds lighter than when he started the trip.

The women of South India are always beautifully dressed regardless of economic status. *Photo by Sam Bie Pranesh Manchaiah on a V9 project in Camp Shruti.*

its attacks usually lost one or both eyes, some their noses while others had their cheeks bitten through. Those who died often had their faces completely torn from their heads.”

Ouch!

Sloth bears mainly subsist on insects but Robert Armitage Sterndale remarked in his *Mammalia of India* that “[the sloth bear] is also more inclined to attack man unprovoked than almost any other animal, and casualties inflicted by it are unfortunately very common, the victim being terribly disfigured even if not killed ...”

Another Anglo explorer, Captain Williamson, commented that the bears rarely kill outright, but rather “suck and chew on [victims’] limbs till they are reduced to bloody pulps.”

I shut down the IVAC computer and walked up the path listening to a soothing chant. An intoned “Aum” played at low volume, broadcast throughout the spa’s grounds from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. We woke up and faded off to sleep with the faint echo of the sacred syl-

lable in our minds. When I first heard it, I thought it would drive me bananas, but on the contrary, it was pleasant.

Monkeys chattered in the coconut trees. Big bats circled overhead.

You’re in India, I thought. Don’t fuck up.

I opened the door to our bungalow.

“How was Kunti Betta?” Hannah asked. “Did you find some good climbing?”

SIDDALLU KALLU

The alarm went off at 4 a.m. and I rolled out of bed and banged around in the darkness getting my pack together.

Hannah mumbled something, then turned over and started snoring softly, like a puppy growling at a chew toy. She was resting deeply, several days into her panchakarma regimen, a decadent round of treatments that included Abhyanga (daily massages conducted by two therapists with oils specially prepared for your individual constitution), Shirodhara (a continuous stream of heated oil poured over your third eye that induces a trance state), Netra Tarpana (eyes are bathed in medicated ghee), Sweda (herbal steam bath), Shiroabyanga (head, neck and shoulder massage), Kati Basti (a clay pot is made on your lower back, neck or anywhere you are experiencing chronic pain, filled with medicated oil. A therapist pounds the area with heated, lentil-filled bags), facials

and pedicures with neem powder, rose water, lemon, sugar and other “crazy Indian plants and stuff,” yoga twice a day, and appointments with Ayurvedic doctors that read her pulses and diagnosed imbalances.

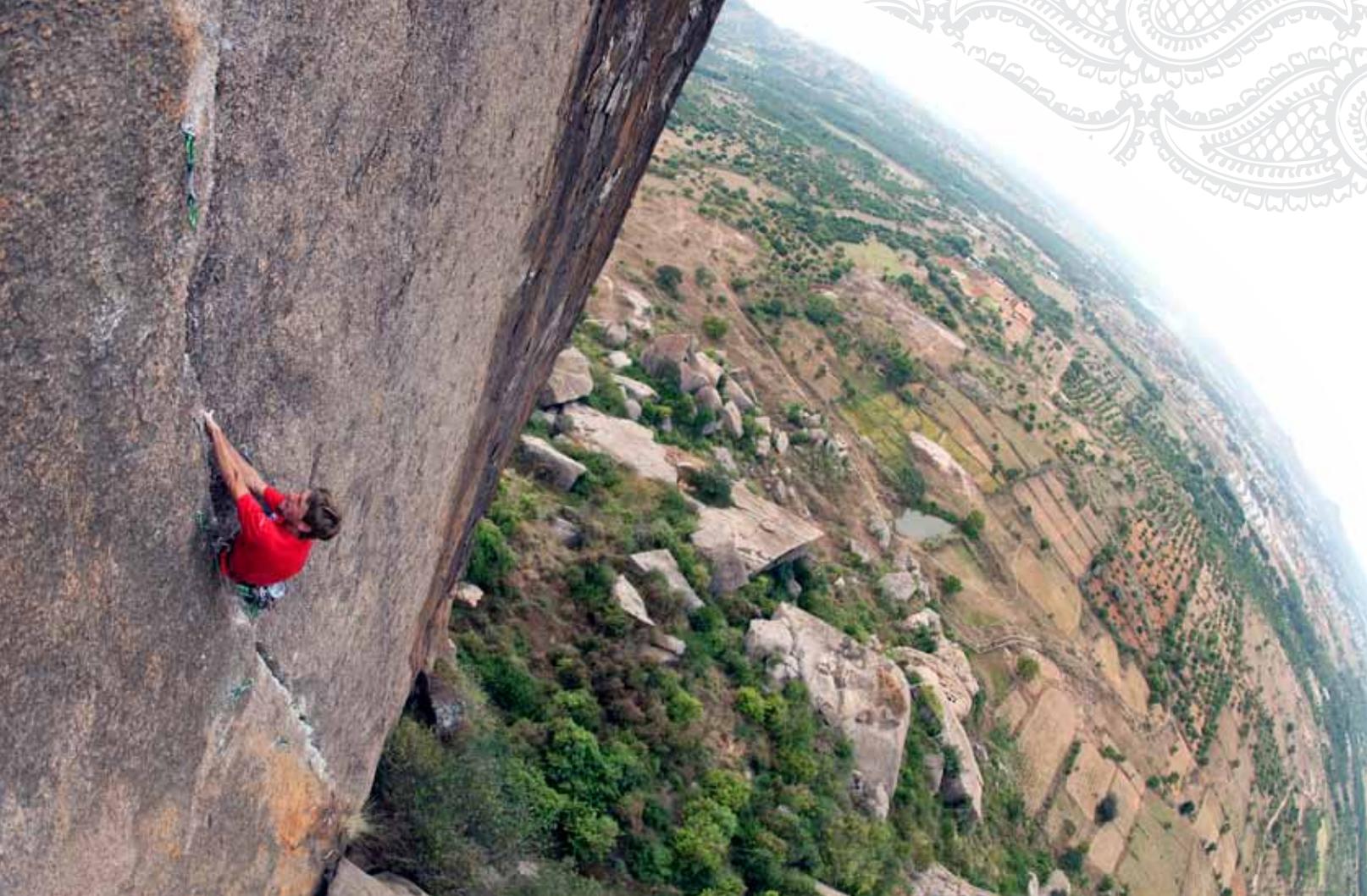
In addition to the treatments, she was eating some of the best food in the world, prepared by chefs trained in Ayurvedic cookery. Coconut chutney, dosas, paped, chapattis, naan pieces, vegetable palya, bendi goju okra, lemon and broccoli soup, rasa, kashmeri pulao, matki dhal, shahi tukda—and that was just for lunch!

The color was returning to her cheeks. She joked with the therapists and had made friends with people from all over the world who were at the center receiving panchakarma. The girls who gave her the facials showered her with glass bracelets and other cheap gifts from the market. They took turns braiding her hair.

Hannah was happy and I couldn’t help but smile, too—both at her bliss, and at the giant difference between us. I would go completely ape-shit being confined and pampered, but she loved being treated like a queen. Heaven knows every mother deserves it—even if only for two weeks in a lifetime.

I shut the door quietly and walked along the path to the lobby. Ya and Josh hadn’t arrived, but a person was sleeping on the couch. He stirred and stretched, then sat up and greeted me.

“I’m sorry if I woke you,” I said.



BADAMI ▶



TO MOST FOREIGNERS, rock climbing in India means bouldering on the infinite granite blocks of Hampi or roping up for the sport and trad lines near Ramanagaram. Recently, however, climbers have been exploring the sandstone fastness of Badami, a city located in a valley at the base of a striking red outcrop in the state of Karnataka, about 300 miles north of Bangalore. Cliffs and boulders surround scenic Lake Agastya and climbers like Kurt Albert and Arnaud Petit have visited and left their mark in the form of routes.

In the last couple of years, development has really taken off. Gerhard Schaar added 35 routes in 2008, and the French climber/photogra-

pher Sam Bie has been very active in the area as well, equipping India's hardest sport climbs on the steep, skin friendly, bucket-filled walls. The most difficult line in India bolted by Chabot, is found at Badami. *Ganesh* (5.14a) was redpointed by G erome Pouvreau in February this year.

SEASON :: November to February

EXCHANGE RATE :: 45 rupees to 1 dollar

GETTING THERE :: Badami is a popular tourist destination, famous for its four ornate cave temples and 18 poetic inscriptions engraved in the sandstone and dating from the 4th century. Busses and trains serve the city daily. From Hampi, go to Hospet and take the 1:30 p.m. bus to Badami (80 rupees). The trip will take about five hours.



ACCOMMODATIONS :: You'll find a variety of hotels right next to the bus station for around 150 rupees per night.

GEAR ::

60-meter rope
15 quickdraws
5 shoulder-length slings
30 feet of cord to set up topropes (optional)

Two sets of cams to 4 inches

Two sets of nuts

GUIDE SERVICE ::

The British company Hot Rock guides at Badami and Ramanagaram. Contact them at: www.climbhotrock.com

The local climber and activist Pranesh Manchaiah also guides all over South India: pranesh_m_c@yahoo.co.in

GUIDEBOOK :: Gerhard Schaar is writing a guidebook to Badami and Bangalore-area climbing. Contact him at: gerhard.schaar@gmx.at

NOTE :: Don't leave your gear unattended. Monkeys have been known to steal food, and locals will grab your stuff if given an opportunity. Women are advised not to walk alone in the rocks, and the area is notorious for poisonous snakes.



"No, sir. Not at all. It is time to get up."

The stranger had an oblong face and a big grin. Happy enough, it seemed, after being disturbed well before the first Aums of the day.

"Do you know anything about snakes?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Oh, for sure."

"We're rock climbers. We walk in the tall grass."

"Why?"

His face showed a mix of shock and alarm.

"That's where the rocks are."

"I have a friend," he said. "He is a Snake-sham. I will write down his phone number and you can make an appointment."

"We're leaving in a few minutes and we'll be climbing all day."

"Then you must have a *puja*."

"We had one yesterday. How long are they good for?"

"Did you go to Supramanya's temple?"

"I think it was Shiva."

"That's good. But you must do a puja for Supramanya. You must pray to Supramanya if you see a snake. If you see a snake, pray very hard and it will go away."

"What about leopards? Who do I pray to if I see a leopard?"



LEFT TO RIGHT: Ya power liebacking the splitter *Bollywood*. Nick McKinnon and Kamalesh Venugopal: Our guides and two of Bangalore's finest. Sushi Roni, an up-and-coming Bangalore local.



through the throng and parked near the train tracks where we'd agreed to meet Nick McKinnon, the 35-year-old engineering manager for General Motors on international assignment for three years. When I'd asked him about his biggest work challenge, he said, "Horns, man. The Indians go through horns like shit through a goose."

Nick, a good-looking, amiable, sharp-witted guy with a gung-ho attitude, is an avid climber with 15 years experience including an epic first ascent on the Wollumbin Shield, a remote big wall on Mount Warning near Cape Byron, the eastern most point on the Australian continent. He was living in Bangalore with his wife, Jennifer, and three young daughters, but he got out every weekend.

"We try to stay sane as best we can while living the expat life in India," he had told me. "My stay here is almost over but I'll miss standing at attention in the cinema while the India national anthem plays, then watching an incomprehensible Bollywood flick while eating *masala* popcorn."

Nick arrived with Kamalesh, a local climber who was familiar with the area and had agreed to come along, drive, and show us around. We were visiting a new crag—a

"If you see a leopard you just run, sir."
"How about bears?"
"Why do you go into these rocks?"

Good question. Complicated, but something to consider in terms of India. I practiced yoga because I had a body. I meditated because I had a mind, but climbing was something else. It demanded equal parts spirit, effort and attention. It was ritual, worship and performance art. Without it, I'd be lost.

The dark side of my climbing obsession had cost me relationships, jobs and loads of money. Climbing had the potential to overtake me like an addiction. I'd ignore responsibilities and generally wallow in it for months at a time like a drunk on a bender. I'd even barrel forward into sketchy situations, taking chances when I should've backed down.

I was a father now, and balancing responsibility with self-interest had become more convoluted. On one hand I needed to feed my soul. On the other hand, how was I going to play catch with Kai if my eyes were torn out?



THE TEMPLE OF THE SNAKE GOD was conveniently situated about three yards off the Mysore-to-Bangalore highway on the way to Ramanagaram. It was a long, low building built out of cinderblock and rebar with a giant fiberglass cobra rearing over a familiar orange mound. The snake's hood was flared, showing the tuning-fork-shaped ocelli traditionally believed to represent young Krishna's footprints permanently tattooed on all cobras after he danced on the head of the fierce monster cobra Kaliya when the snake wouldn't give back his ball.

Edwin nursed the tires off the road and slowly stopped on the west side of the temple. I jumped out and surprised the priest—a short, fat, very dark man with rolls on his forehead that made him appear serious if not pissed off. He was squatting by the gate with his robes pulled up commencing a splashing micturition.

He smiled and motioned me inside.

I left my shoes with a woman and entered the temple. It consisted of a short stone table supporting a silver dish containing about 20 coins. Red and yellow flowers decorated an image of Nagaraj, the snake king, carved in a 6- by 6-foot slab of granite. An open kiln burned and greasy smoke wafted out of the door, singeing my nose hairs and prompting speculation about what was on the barbi. The priest hurried inside, lit the oil lamp, rang

THE DARK SIDE OF MY CLIMBING OBSESSION HAD COST ME RELATIONSHIPS, JOBS AND LOADS OF MONEY. CLIMBING HAD THE POTENTIAL TO OVERTAKE ME LIKE AN ADDICTION. I'D IGNORE RESPONSIBILITIES AND GENERALLY WALLOW IN IT FOR MONTHS AT A TIME LIKE A DRUNK ON A BENDER.

the bell, chanted and marked my forehead with a red slash. I laid down five rupees. We namaste'd each other with folded palms and, presto, I was snake-proof.



THE ROAD TO RAMANAGARAM presented the usual spectacle. A man sleeping curled up, barely off the road. A young boy lying on his side vomiting. A jewelry vendor with a superfluous, dried-up pinky dangling off the side of her hand like an overdone sausage link. A rickshaw loaded to the size of a semi-trailer with tied-on coconut husks. Men holding hands. A woman carrying two bags of groceries and a jug of water on her head. A kid squatting while an old man sat on his thighs and crapped between his feet. Three horses with no saddles or bridles bolting pell-mell down the highway.

Hindi music blared from green speakers lining Ramanagaram's market street. It was a Muslim area and no one smiled as we nudged

shady 400-foot, north-facing tower called Siddallu Kallu (Lightning Rock).

Josh gave Edwin a couple of hundred rupees for lunch and paan and we piled in Kamalesh's truck and made for the imposing wall that leaned into a crest of hills like a granite prow chopping the waves of grass.

We ditched the car in a low spot by a willow. Weaver birds stuck their orange and black heads out of elaborately woven (hence the name) nests and chattered as we sorted our rack and spotted potential climbs. Nick pointed out an overhanging crack that split the wall from base to summit.

"I've wanted to climb that thing since I came to India," he said.

The undergrowth was too thorny (and dangerous) to allow us to approach the base, so we skirted the jungle and climbed a smooth, low-angled granite slab to the summit.

Kamalesh Venugopal, a 47-year-old IT con-
(continued on page 74)

THE COBRA DEN

(continued from page 47)

sultant with 30 years of climbing experience, is fit and smart with a ready laugh. He's from the previous generation of Indian climbers who viewed rock climbing as training for the Himalaya. As we scrambled upwards, he told me about his experiences in the mountains—seat-of-the-pants expeditions to the tallest, most demanding peaks in the world, including two trips to the Garhwal Himalaya, two trips to the Kumoan Himalaya and one trip to the Kishtwar Himalaya. Some summits, some epics. His face turned serious when he talked about an avalanche that claimed three of his buddies, but his smile returned as he pointed out several trad first ascents he'd put up on the 200-foot rolling feature adjacent to Siddallu Kallu.

"We climbed here with great intensity from 1980 to 1997," he said.

We were at the summit of Lightning Rock and we marveled at the amount of granite. Looking north, I counted 50 domes and spires of between 400 and 2,000 feet tall, knuckling the jungle to the horizon.

"There's too much rock and too many impediments to climbing it," Nick said. "Here, climbing is as much about having a *masala dosa* for breakfast, driving through the insane traffic and avoiding or bribing the forest officials as it is about actually climbing."

"You have to bribe the forest officials?" Ya asked. "Why?"

Kamalesh pointed to a thousand-foot granite cone about a quarter mile away.

"Two years ago an organization called the Sangamithra Foundation wanted to carve an 800-foot Buddha into that rock, Handi Gundi," he said. "They got a bunch of Bollywood stars to perform for a fundraiser—even Shahrukh Khan, the king of Bollywood, sang and danced. They raised millions of rupees. Then a big group of rock climbers gathered at the base to protest. We put up a banner, got the media involved, went to court and stopped it on grounds that

the proposed statue and retreat center would endanger the environment. The forest officials were getting a lot of money for the project and they're still mad at climbers for stopping it. They won't bother us here, but if you climb by the temple you will have to pay a bribe."



THE PLAN WAS TO LOWER ME down the crack as far as possible, and I'd climb out. Kamalesh had scrambled to a promontory across the way. He would watch the bees. The closest hive was only 30 feet to the right of the crack. If the bees freaked out and attacked me, he would ... what?

Nick estimated that our 70-meter rope would just reach the dark cave at the base of the crack. We'd need to start there to lead the climb. But what lived in that heaped-up mass of boulders?

It seemed like an important question, a pivotal moment where my life could literally hang in the balance.

On the other hand, the crack was long, steep and splitter—a gorgeous line, a thing of beauty, and I knew that I had to climb it. It wouldn't be the first time I ignored that little voice of reason to climb. My first wife, Cristina (now married to the politician Gary Mauro, the guy who ran against George W. Bush for governor of Texas) once said I was "nutty as a fruitcake." Maybe she was right. Was something wrong with me?

I tied into our 70-meter rope and stood at the edge of the precipice, thinking about the gross divide between responsibility and passion when the phone rang.

"It's Edwin," Nick said, handing me the cell phone.

"I want to get a lunch, boss."

"Fine," I said.

"But I'm just doing the checking in, yes, yes?"

"OK," I said. "Go get lunch."

I handed the phone back to Nick, took a deep breath and prepared to lower. The phone rang again and Nick checked the number.

"It's your driver."

Ya grabbed the phone. "What

Nothing beats chillin' with friends

"As dawn broke and I could finally see our position I had to laugh at the absurdity of it all."
Mark Wilford after an attempt on Saser Kangri II

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do you want? ... Yes, you can have the tandoori. I have to go.”

He hung up and started paying out slack. The phone rang again as I cleared the lip and I heard Nick say, “Look here, you just get your lunch, come back to the rail station and stop ringing us!”

The phone rang again and the last thing I heard was Kamalesh speaking to Edwin in Kannada.

The wall swept steadily inwards and I cruised past superb granite, pink and gold, with faceted fenocrysts and feldspar crystals, lumped with infinite foot jibs. The rope unspooled and I lowered past a hundred feet of wide flake that peeled off the wall so steeply that you'd climb long sections straight on, and others by pinching and heel hooking. You'd lie it back, face climb knobs, in a couple of spots knee bar and once squeeze inside. I'd find all that out later, but then, on that initial lower, as the crack narrowed, I plugged in a 4-inch cam, two 3-inch cams, two #2s, and two 1s in order to stay in.

The mouth of the cave was approaching fast. I yelled up to Ya to slow down so that I could check it from above, but he was 230 feet away and couldn't hear me.

“Stop!” I screamed. “Hold up! Take! Stop! Stop! Stop!”

The dirt rushed up and I jerked to a halt. The rope stretched and my feet grazed the ground, raising a little dust. An abandoned beehive flapped at head level. The old combs were like paper and they moved in the slight breeze. I peered into the dim cave, ready for the attack, but no tiger, leopard or bear charged out. No huge cobra reared up. *The puja must have worked!*

Far above, I could see the top of the crag. Way above that, three tawny eagles stuck out their six-foot-wide wings and circled, looking for dead stuff to eat. I crammed my hands in the crack and started climbing.

We came back another day and led *Bollywood* (5.11d, 5.10c). In his informal guide to Ramanagaram, Nick describes it as the best climb in South India. With its easy, un-jungled approach, amazing position, continuously overhanging nature, unique holds and shady aspect, *Bollywood* would be a prize anywhere.

RAMGIRI TEMPLE

The trip was coming to a close and despite rising everyday at 4 a.m. and driving hours to explore promising clusters of boulders, huge spires, walls and canyons of granite, my itch to climb remained unscratched. We'd spent 12 days climbing on

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THE COBRA DEN

the excellent and abundant stone—sussing boulders at Kunti Betta, bolting lines up to 5.12d near Siddallu Kallu, ripping up our fingers on the sharp, sunny granite near the Thimme Gowda farm, jamming cracks and falling off sport routes, but the traffic, the impenetrable jungle, the debilitating sun, and the threatening wildlife all conspired to make climbing (and especially new-routing) in South India “tricky.” So for our last day I decided to head to the heart of developed climbing and check out the Ramgiri Temple area, which boasted over 30 bolted routes.

Josh was completely played out and opted to catch a train to Bangalore, avoid the traffic and enjoy the sight of rural India rolling past his window. After an 11th-hour, baller effort and successful send of *Bollywood*, he had weeping holes in his hands and I could tell that the last thing he wanted to do was touch rock.

Ya had a stomach complaint, a vicious bug he’d picked up during the week he’d spent exploring a sandstone climbing area called Badami [see sidebar]. He’d lost 15 pounds and described “water flowing from my ass like an artesian spring.” He lay on the seat of the car, gaunt, looking like a Nordic *sadhu* with faded blue eyes.

“I just want to get to Bangalore,” he said raising his head. “Can’t we keep going?”

I looked around at the tall burnished cliffs. The clouds were building in the south. Temps were great. Ya reminded me of the blind, emaciated holy man/beggar who stood on the Ramanagaram bridge, his hand held out while pigs stood belly-deep in sewage below him. It was another one of those pesky moments of truth, where I was faced with a choice between

climbing and something else.

“Just one more pitch,” I said.

Ya rolled his eyes and laid his head back down.

Hannah looked rested and radiant despite an angry, full-body rash brought on when a sandalwood salesman aggressively sprayed her freshly panchakarma’ed skin with perfume. After two weeks of good food, clean water, yoga and purification, she was practically floating and I talked her into walking over to a Gerhard Schaar route called *Bonsai*, a 60-meter 5.10c that climbs granite patina for 100 feet. You finish by pinching the roots of a banyan tree. It was a beautiful, one-of-a-kind climb that combined two dissimilar styles—metamorphic stone and water-born wood. A perfect yang and yin.

I climbed the textured flakes, moved into the dangling roots like a monkey and for the millionth time in India, just like when Ragu rang the bell—or when the cobra crossed our path, or when I lowered into the *Bollywood* cave or when we saw the corpse on the sidewalk—I was blessed with awareness. The moment closed over me like a snake’s hood and I was awake. These little *kenshos* were made out of the climbing, but also out of the endless hassles, the strangeness and heartbreaking beauty of the people and landscape, which spilled onto the road in a kind of cosmic theater of opposites.

South India’s prevalent deity, Shiva, is the god of paradox, after all, both destroyer and creator. Life offers up moments of truth, but the greatest challenges come in the form of endurance. Enduring the plenary rote of domesticity—the endless round of mundane responsibilities, for example—and not just enduring it, but trying to do it righteously so that later on down the chronological road, when

there is a reckoning, you can rest easy knowing that the work was well-done, the relationships well-loved, and the life well-lived.

Climbing is a catalyst, but family is more like India—terrible and beautiful all at once, a bewildering flux that tries your patience and grows your heart in equal proportions. It doesn’t have to make sense. Love never does.

I’d made mistakes, let my passions rule me and acted like a lunatic. I was a saint and a fool, a Buddha and an asshole *at the same time*. I was Shiva, and that was OK. That little bit of realization alone was worth the trip.

We packed up the rope and walked back to the car. Ya lay in a coil of guts and bones on the front seat. Edwin was talking to a forest department official.

“He say you got to pay him 45 rupees, Jefe-ji.”

I peeled off the bills and handed them over. As we returned to the little white Toyota where Hannah waited with Ya, Edwin said, “She is a very nice girl, sir. Very nice.”

“Thanks.”

“But you said you had three wives. Why three? One nice girl is enough.”

He touched my arm and bobbed his head.

“I said I’ve been married three times. Big difference.”

“Ah,” he said. “Like a film star, *arey!* Like a god, isn’t it?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “But something like that.”

We all climbed into the car. Ya struggled up and slammed his door. Edwin cranked the motor. He ripped the top off a paan packet, dumped the spice and betel into his mouth and threw the paper out the window. The smell of India filled the car.

“Drive,” Ya pleaded.

“OK, boss.”

Jeff Jackson is editor of Rock and Ice.