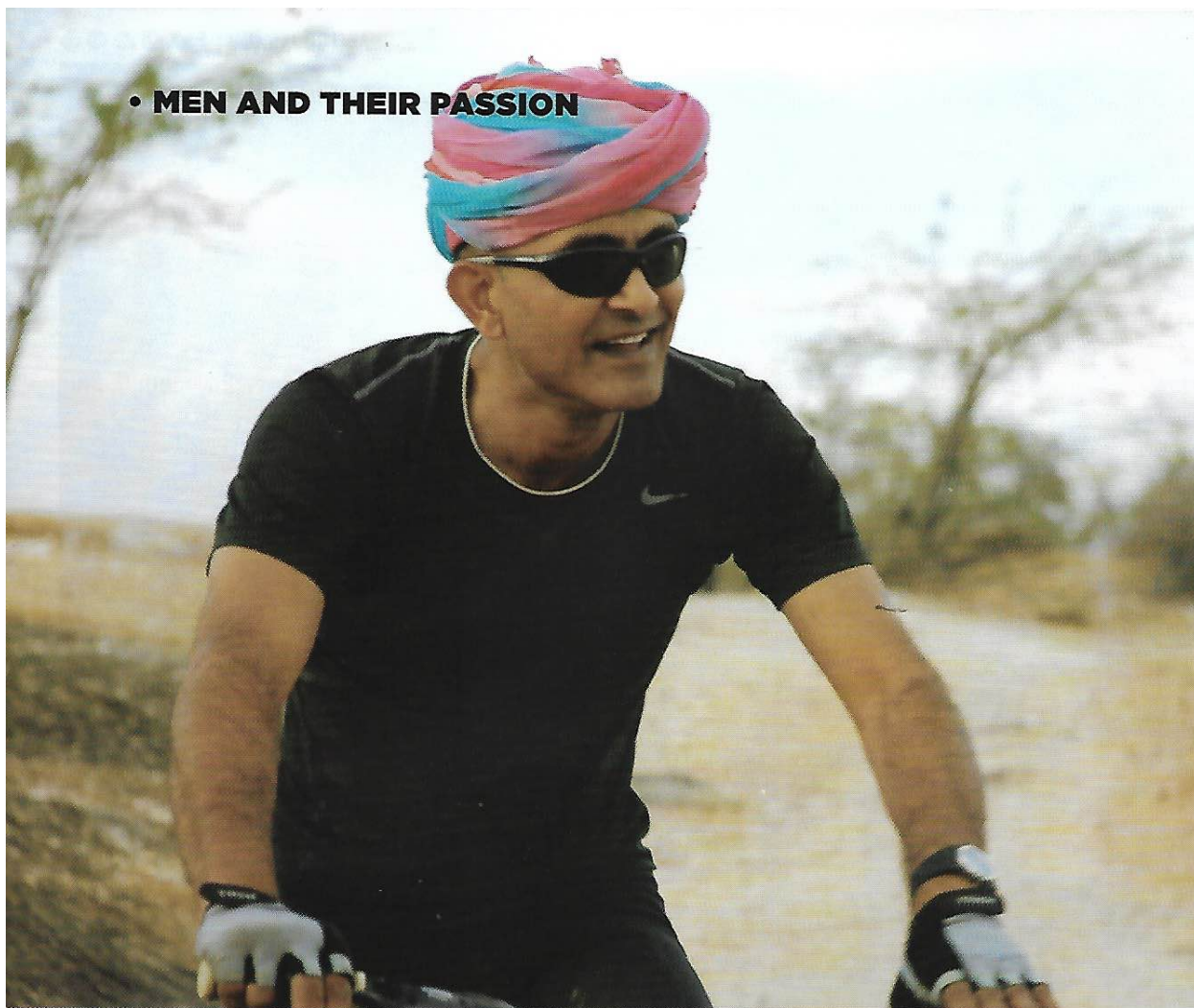


• MEN AND THEIR PASSION



## The call of the outdoors

An engineer by profession, Depi Chaudhry gave up his cushy corporate job to pursue his multiple passions of trekking, cycling and river rafting — and to make a living out of them.

By Madhuwanti Saha

Top:  
Depi on a tour in  
Rajasthan ; Depi,  
cycling in the Himalayas  
(below)

**DEPI CHAUDHRY** ran away back to his house in Hisar, Haryana, no less than six times, during his first semester at an engineering college in rural Karnataka. “My family was determined that I complete my engineering, and that’s why I became an engineer,” he says. “I was so desperate to get out that I studied hard and even topped the class and university.” Depi’s passion was for the mountains, a love that was kindled during his long stay as a boarder at The Lawrence School, Sanawar, in the hills of Himachal; by the time he finished class IX, he had already done a course in trekking and

mountaineering at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling.

Like a lot of young middle class men, he was forced into the corporate life soon after his engineering degree and the MBA that followed. Tata Steel was his first port of call, followed by the likes of ZeeNext and PSI Data Systems; he finally ended up as a vice president at SAP, in Bengaluru. “I had a good time playing golf and going on treks once in a while,” he says, but the lure of the mountains was never far from his life, and when his wife got a job with GE in Delhi, he quit his position at SAP and followed her. “She quit her job to move with

me to Bengaluru. When she decided to return to the corporate world, I decided to follow her and figure out what I wanted,” he says. “It’s relatively easy to quit your job when there is someone to support the family. There is way too much politics in the corporate world, at senior levels, so I didn’t mind taking the plunge.”

If not the means, Chaudhry was clear about the goal. “I wanted to spend as much as time as possible in the mountains. That’s where I belong.” The treks to the Himalayas became more frequent, and the transformation of his passion into a business came when he organised his first trip to the Himalayas,



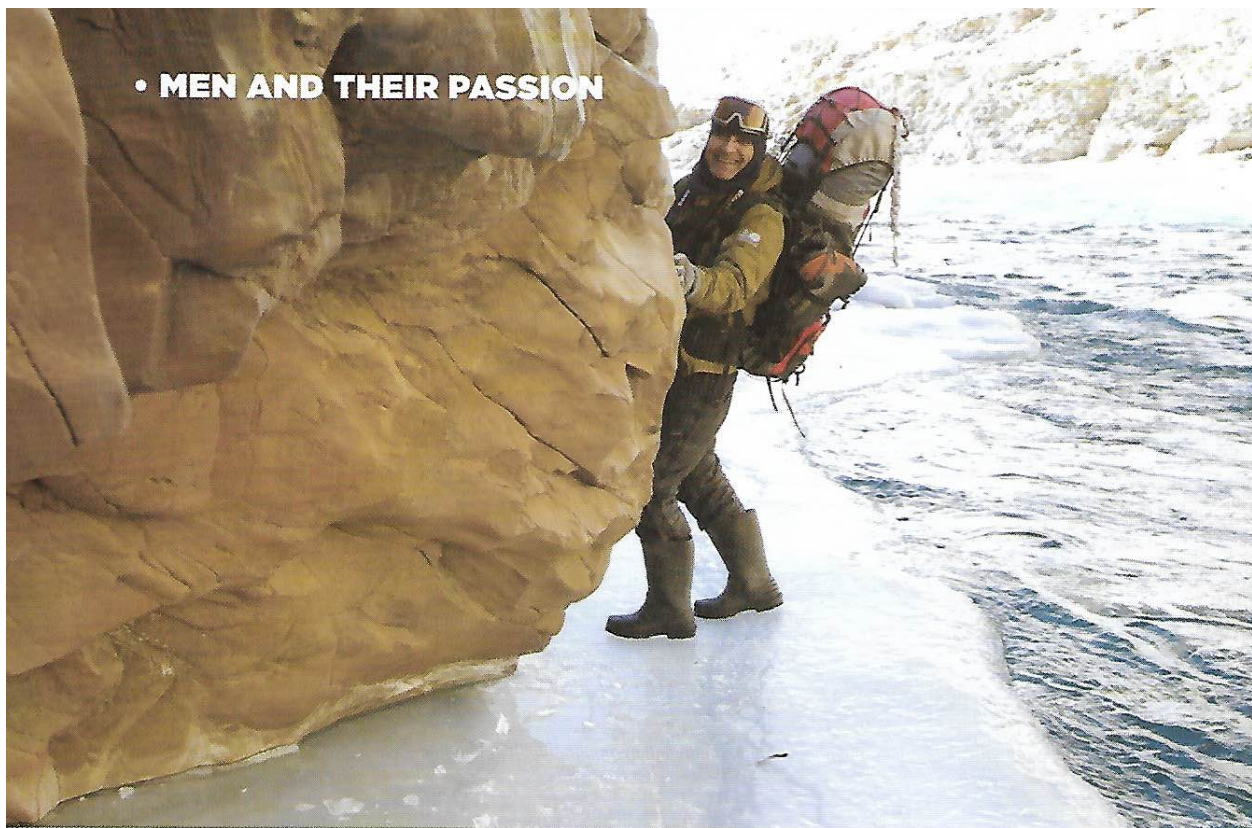
for five of his friends. “Right from choosing the route, equipment, and porters to the rest of the logistics, I conceived the entire plan. This gave me the confidence to set it up as a business,” he says.

Despite his best efforts, the trekking company failed to take off. “I missed out on the most important part — how to get customers,” he jokes. “Indians don’t trek, and international trekkers have their alliances in place beforehand.” He expanded his business into another favourite outdoor sport, rafting, by setting up a camp close to Rishikesh. Even this venture died a premature death because of the intense competition. He eventually converted the camp premises into a three cottage eco-friendly house, Aashraya On Ganga, which he designed and built himself, and which is now available on rent as a homestay ([www.aashrayaonganga.com](http://www.aashrayaonganga.com)).

Through all this, Chaudhry kept up with his personal passion for trekking in the Himalayan region. During each of these trips, he kept a meticulous record of the kind of terrain he was trekking on, including GPS coordinates, maps, elevation profiles and names of ridges, glaciers, rivers and streams; in addition, he took plenty of photographs. All that came in handy when producing his 2010 book, *Trekking Guide to the Western Himalayas*. It featured detailed information and maps about 43 routes, most of which he had trekked himself; the rest was based on information from friends and fellow trekkers.

The treks also resulted in his other big achievement — creating a massively

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detailed trekking map of the Himalayas. "The objective was to create a detailed trekking map and share it for free with fellow trekkers. In India, we lack good, accurate trekking maps", he says. "It was a huge task. We were not sure where to start from, but we had a vision and the passion to guide us. It went through a few iterations before we arrived at the final version. We stitched close to 30,000 images manually. Looking at GPS data available and the contour lines, we manually traced the trek routes. Each and every road, river, stream and route has been manually drawn. The GPS elevation profile for the treks have also been created by us manually."

The map is so detailed that it required a 17x17 foot canvas for everything to fit and be legible. The map is now displayed at the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's premises in New Delhi. Because of its massive size, it can be moved up and down only with the help of a motor and a remote control. A digital version of the map is available for free download at [himalayamaps.com](http://himalayamaps.com), and



an app for mobile phones will be out soon. Since much of it has been manually drawn and put together, Chaudhry is hoping to improve upon it with inputs from trekkers who use it.

Chaudhry's main business these days is organising cycling tours across the country for tourists, largely foreigners. During the time when he was shutting down his trekking business, a friend invited him on a cycling trip to Rajasthan. He enjoyed it so much

that he undertook various cycling expeditions across the country, including one from Agra to Kanyakumari, a distance of 4500 km. One of his favourite routes is from Shimla to Kashmir via Kinnaur, Jalori Pass, Manali, Leh, Pangong, Tso Moriri, Nubra, Zaskar, Kargil and Dras, which he has done several times.

Thikanas on Cycles, the company he set up, has turned out to be very successful. It offers cycling tours around the country,

particularly in Rajasthan and in the Himalayas. The company has 50 cycles stationed in Jaipur and Rishikesh, and special trailers to carry them. He recently also expanded operations to Sri Lanka and Myanmar. He is also in the process of compiling a detailed cycling map of the Western Himalayas.

When not conducting cycling tours, Chaudhry runs a small and specialised company called Jannat Himalayan Trail, which organises treks in the Himalayas. "Compared to Thikanas on Cycles, it's relatively small, as I prefer trekking to remote places, some of which do not even show up on Google," he says. He does not want to make it bigger, for the fear of losing the charm of every trek being unique. "If commercialised, I have to repeat treks and they become monotonous," he says. He gives an example of his remote treks. "Last year, a friend and I took a route in the Himalayas, where the gradient was so steep that we could only walk 3 km a day. Not just that, on the last day, we had to wade through 23 km of a river between Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh, in our floaters and underwear."

A change of season is the time that Chaudhry heads back home, to spend time with his family and to work on his maps. He still consults with some companies and conducts occasional training programmes. He admits that he would have been making far more money if he had continued to work in his corporate job. "But I would have never achieved this level of satisfaction," he says.

Depi on a trekking expedition (top) the trekking map that he created (below)