

The Artists for Conservation "Flag Expedition #2" ~ David Rankin's Watercolor Expedition into the Ganges Himalayas

The Sacred Source

A Portrait of the Ganges 2007



Sacred Traditions

The effort to see God

One of the things that has fascinated me about India since my very first trip back in 1970, is the pervasive cultural fascination with God, the Divine, Mystical, Spiritual, Mythological, and Magical. The amazing thing is just how wide spread and powerful India's purely indigenous spiritual interests have become all over Asia. Many people forget, or never knew, that Buddha was not Chinese, Vietnamese, Tibetan, Japanese, or Korean! Buddha in point of fact, was from a royal ruling class family in North India.

And this spiritual aspect of India has been a constant fasci-

nation for travellers, merchants, military, political, educators, poets, tourists, and especially artists since the 1700's; when India's doors to the outside world really began to open wider.

But because of the physical extremes and efforts required to climb and explore the Ganges Himalayan regions, they remained un-explored and un-visualized until the early 1800's.

But when artists finally did begin to explore the Himalayas they discovered that they were filled with ancient spiritual traditions that preceded the life of Buddha by at least 1,000 years!

As an artist of this 21st century following in these much earlier traditions of artistic exploration, what attracts my artist senses is the extreme beauty of these high altitude temples and pilgrim destinations set amongst the clouds.

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Kedarnath Cloud Temple: The temple sits at a little over 12,000 feet. But rising directly behind the temple is this massive ridge of peaks, 6 of which range between 21,000 feet to nearly 23,000 feet

I call these "Cloud Temples" because they are all above 10,000 feet altitude. And depending upon the time of year one visits they can be virtually impossible to see in the dense mist until you approach to within yards of them.

I took this photo from the roof of our hotel at about 6 am. This is Kedarnath. It is one of the 3 most famous high altitude temples in the Himalayas. And you can see the temple rising above the town to the right. I had wanted to explore these regions during the traditional annual pilgrimage season of May/June, when hundreds if thousands of Hindu pilgrims make their way up here. My wife, Deanna, then designed our itinerary to coincide with the peak pilgrimage time to these 3 major sacred religious sites of Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath, so that I could observe and study the overall effects this was having on this otherwise pristine environment.

I knew this trek would be an extreme effort. And we had been training for it for months. But it was in fact even harder than I had imagined. And our visit to Kedarnath was marred a bit by the pre-monsoon rains which set in as we were half way up the mountain.

A very tough slog... all for "Darshan" "Darshan" is the term used by Hindus to define one of the traditional goals of any pilgrimage. In essence, it simply means "A Vision of God". In other

words, one seeks the opportunity to have a "glimpse" of God. And the effort to "see" God, in whatever physical form, is simply part of the experience. In Hindu rationale it makes perfect sense that the extreme physical effort one goes through to attain a glimpse, or sight, of God, even for a moment or two, is because, as one pilgrim put it... *"it's not such an easy thing... to see God!"*

The route up to Kedarnath bears this fact out in clear fashion. The Kedarnath trek is deceptively labeled as *moderate* in the guide books. And even our experienced guides kept referring to it as *"not too difficult"*.

They went on to assuage my concerns by letting us know that *"unlike the trek to Goumukh; which is a simple and crude path carved directly out of cliff faces, over open scree fields,*

and sandy boulder-strewn trails... Kedarnath is a paved walk way all the way up!" What they conveniently forgot to mention was how steep it is.



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And the amazing crowds of pilgrims and horses. We figured after awhile that the uphill grade was between 15°-25° for the entire 19 km climb.

The trail was no small feat of engineering and in fact it was kind of *paved*. But it was paved, or rather *constructed* of large irregular boulder-sized stones fitted into an uneven trail about 10' wide. There were at least 5,000 horses on this same trail, along with their droppings; which mixed with the mud when it rained to form a slick and treacherous ooze. There were men trying valiantly to sweep the horse manure off to the side every hundred yards or so. But the rains made this impossible.

Then the pilgrims! The scene was like one of those old Biblical movies where the Jews were led out of Egypt by Moses. I estimated that the day we went up, there had to have been at least 10,000 pilgrims moving up as 10,000 were making their way down... every hour of the day, from 5am-8pm!

Many were actually walking barefoot the entire way. There were thousands of seemingly wrongly dressed Indian women in bright colored saris, mothers on horseback holding their babies, groups of young boys on holiday, couples on honeymoons, rich business men and their families, and very old people slogging along totally alone with just a walking staff and a bundle, or in small groups. And then

there were large numbers of Nepalis carrying people up in "Dandies", a lounge-chair suspended between two long poles. The Hindus own the horses & mules, while the Nepalis are better at lugging things up on their heads, backs, & shoulders. This was a wonderful sight to study as some of the passengers in the "Dandies" had looks of utter terror on their faces, while others were so relaxed that they were actually dozing off as they were being carried on the shoulders of the Nepalis.

A slippery mess The sheer spectacle of this timeless scene was far beyond my imagination. In fact, the extreme unrelenting uphill grade coupled with the high altitude, the intense congestion on the trail with tens of thousands of other pilgrims, thousands

of horses doing what horses do, and the driving rain and dropping temperatures made this a very exhausting and difficult part of the trip.



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Ashleigh likened this extreme effort to that which she once experienced with her family as they climbed out of the Grand Canyon.... only this climb had 10,000 people going each direction... up and down simultaneously... thousands more horses... and of course the addition of the hard rain, manure & mud, and high altitudes!

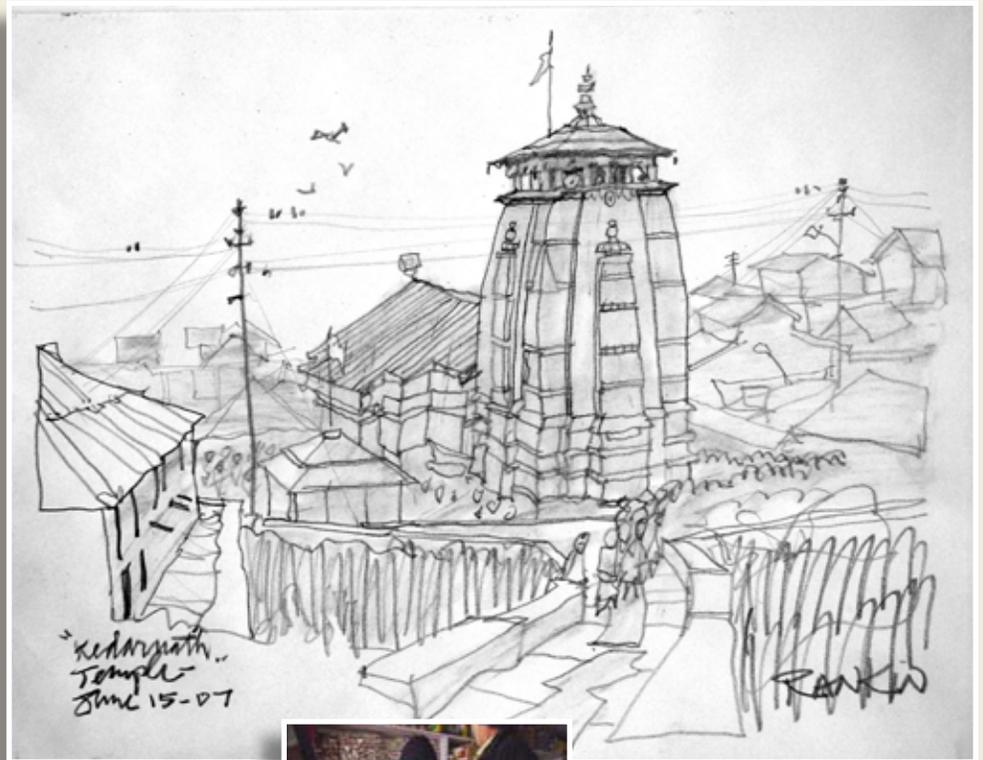
After a very short distance I realized that I was not going to make it up on foot. So I shifted us all up onto horses; which in fact were mostly sturdy mountain mules. But although this made the climb much easier in some respects, once the rains set in, the uneven boulder-carved trail, worn smooth by millions of pilgrim's feet, became quite dangerous. The rains quickly created a gooey mixture of horse manure & mud that was extremely slippery. So we had to use great care on "mule-back" to be constantly prepared to either quickly shift our weight in the ill-fitting, formica-like saddles, or prepare to jump off should the mules stumble, or possibly wander over the edge.

Extreme beauty

Once we adjusted to the deteriorating conditions and the art of staying in the saddle, I began to look around at where we actually were. The rain became so hard that we had to put away our cameras and video for most of the trip up; which was a shame because it was so insanely beautiful.

I had read many articles about the problems with deforestation in the Himalayas. But frankly, I was astounded by the Himalayan forests, especially going up to Kedarnath. It was in fact the most dense cloud forest I had ever seen, with gigantic trees covered with all manner of exotic creepers and air plants on moss covered limbs.

Butterflies of all kinds fluttered amongst the branches. And because it was spring, tiny male Himalayan birds were flitting about through the canopy trying desperately to attract the attentions and affections of the girl birds.



Working in the weather

The weather up at Kedarnath never opened up much. The pre-monsoon rains came and went off & on most of the time. And the clouds covered the mountain top with only brief breaks.

But although I had hoped for more clear views of the massive peaks surrounding Kedarnath, the cloud cover produced amazing and magical qualities to the light and an almost mythological setting to the entire scene.

I'd walk around this tiny hamlet at more than 12,000 feet, sketching anything that caught my eye. The large dramatic temple, was of course the center of interest. But when the rains would bear down hard Deanna would simply move me indoors into a tiny shop or cafe where I



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would simply start sketching people. I always love to do this in India. And



everyone seems fascinated by the process. So it is a great way to while away a rain storm or two.

When working like this I've trained myself to create a sketch of someone in 5 minutes or less otherwise they get impatient.

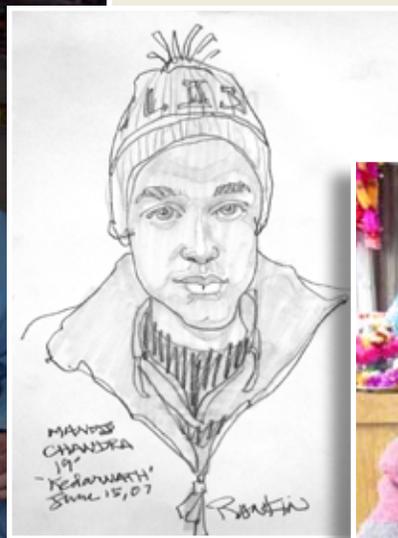
And I like to take pictures of my subjects afterwards to combine with the sketch. And hopefully, now that the internet is so pervasive, these kind people will be able to enjoy seeing their pictures in this way!

An interesting phenomena that I've observed many many times sketching people like this all over the world, is how very taxing it is. I think it's because I become so very focused sketching this way. Other than when I am painting, sketching is the most intense artistic procedures I engage in. I become so focused on my subjects that I lose awareness of everything around me.

And after I get warmed up a bit, after a portrait or two, it seems as though my artistic senses and hand-eye coordination click into some other higher gear. It's really quite a wonderful and meditation-like experience.

This kind of visual display of artistic procedure always meets with enthusiastic responses in India. It inevitably produces large crowds of people peering quietly and intently over my shoulder as I sketch or paint.

Back down in Haridwar I was painting one evening by the



Ganges and after about one hour I happened to catch the look of amazement on Deanna's. It broke my attention and as I looked about I discovered that without my knowing about 200 people had quietly and respectfully gathered all around me watching in delight.

9B Graphite Although I also sketch with ballpoint pens from time to time, the very best sketching tool is a 9B woodless graphite pencil. This soft black pencil allows me to create a wide variety of line values, from very heavy & dark to very light. But it also then allows me to blend it into a mid-valued gray to capture light source and the illusion of volume.

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Kedarnath Peak region where we had just been.

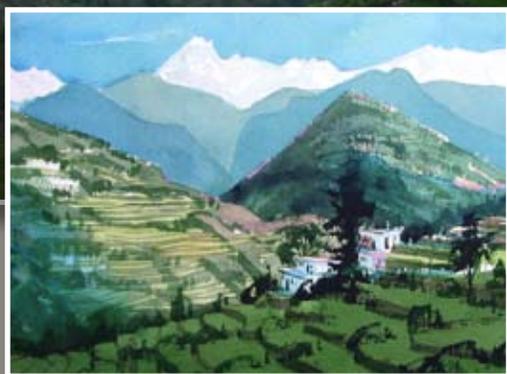


Another view

2 days later, we had made our way down the mountain from Kedarnath. We were concerned about riding horses down the mountain because our guide had told me that he had heard from the Nepalis that a number of injuries had occurred when horses had fallen on the slippery pathways. So we decided to hike the 19 km down the mountain. But as anyone can tell you that has done much serious hiking in mountains, the hike down has its own unique stresses and strains upon ones knees. And Kedarnath is a very good example of this. The uneven and irregular stones on the path required near constant attention to ones foot placement. The last thing we needed was for any one of our small team to twist an ankle this far into our expedition.

By the time we got to our next rest stop at Okhimath we were ready for a little R&R. And I took this opportunity to do a watercolor of the vista looking back up into the very same set of peaks we had just come down from.

The view was clear and dramatic very early in the morning when I first began. But by the time I had finished it had gotten quite misty and over cast back up in the peaks. I had a number of breaks in my morning painting session because there were so many wonderful



birds, especially tiny elegant sun birds, flitting about in the bushes and rice fields all around me. But I was quite happy to spend a couple hours relaxing and painting with this grand vista of the Himalayas spread out all around me.

Note: View an Expedition Video "Ohkimath" of David painting this watercolor at David Rankin's "Flag Expedition Blog"....
natureartists.com

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