

#HIKING TRAIL

Dodging death and mischievous monkeys: Ikramul Hasan Shakil's epic journey

Dhaka might seem like a universe unto itself with its bustling streets and towering high-rise buildings, but take a six to seven-day trek from the last human settlement near the Tibetan border, and you will find a world so different it might as well be another planet.

Ikramul Hasan Shakil, a trekker whose love of the outdoors and sense of adventure is only matched by his tenacity. He is the first mountaineer from Bangladesh to leave his mark on the "Great Himalayan Trail," beginning his arduous trek on 1 August, 2022, from Hilsa town, which is located at the northwest border of Nepal and Tibet. The mountaineer has travelled more than 1,700 km while pushing himself to the limit.

Now back to the story, imagine a place so treacherous that each step taken by Ikramul felt like an expedition in and of itself. Guided by his trusty companion, Arjun Roy, Ikramul faced the brutality of nature in its full spectrum, including treacherous paths and lethal landslides. "I dodged death twice," he quips, recalling the landslides that nearly ended his odyssey.

However, the adversity only pushed his spirit further. Forced to divert their route, he and Arjun found themselves in the middle of a forest during a torrential downpour.

"It's hard to describe what it feels like to have your hard-earned rations and clothes stolen by



monkeys, but there was something oddly amusing about it," says Ikramul.

What could easily have been an ordeal became an exploration; searching for edible mushrooms and relying on the guidance of the locals and villagers he had earlier interacted with became not just a means of survival but a unique culinary experience. He was able to forage for edible mushrooms, a minor yet invaluable triumph over survival. "I learned which mushrooms were my friends and which ones to steer clear of," Ikramul mused.

If most trekkers would quit after a day of landslide dodging and ration-snatching monkeys, then they most certainly would when faced with loose gravel and treacherous steps at 5,000 metres. Not Ikramul though. Battling snowy, inclement weather, and near-zero visibility, he persisted.

After a long, chilly trek on icy paths and rocky hills, Ikramul finally saw Phugaon like finding a hidden treasure. He described it as a "rocky desert floating in the sky, almost like a mirage."

This tiny village has just 14 families, and they live at different heights to adapt to the seasons. What amazed Ikramul the most was how well the villagers have learned to live in sync with nature, thanks to their smart home designs. From comfy wooden houses in the lower areas to solid mud and stone huts up high, these homes are both eco-friendly and built to last.

When it comes to kindness, language is no barrier. This was clear when a local grandmother of two welcomed Ikramul into her home. Despite not speaking the

same language, her warm hospitality spoke volumes. "After days of surviving on nuts and wild mushrooms, potatoes and chutney felt like they were from a Michelin-star restaurant," Ikramul shares.

For someone accustomed to life's luxuries, these simple moments provided a context that redefined luxury itself — luxury in the form of basic human connection and kindness. The grandchildren of the kind lady, took no time to get familiarised with Ikramul. "The connection with those kids was instant and pure. With their curiosity and their laughter, it felt like we were speaking the same language despite not uttering a word," Ikramul fondly recalls.

Saying goodbye is often hard, especially when you have been touched by unparalleled hospitality and warmth. As Ikramul bid adieu to the family, he felt a stir of emotions. "The moments spent here might be temporary, but the impact they had on me is everlasting," he says.

Ikramul Hasan Shakil's journey is a touching tale, not just of physical endurance but also of emotional richness. He may have trekked into the mountains in search of adventure, but he found something far more valuable — a renewed sense of purpose and an indelible connection with humanity.

So, the next time you find Dhaka's chaos suffocating, maybe, just maybe, you can dream of a tiny village high above sea level and ponder over what adventures life has in its secretive pockets. After all, we are all explorers on our unique journeys, searching for a story worth telling. Would you risk it all for the tale of a lifetime? Ikramul did. And he returned, not just with a story, but with a newfound understanding of life, resilience, and the indomitable human spirit.

By **K Tanzeel Zaman**
Photo: **Ikramul Hasan Shakil**

