



"LIFE STARTS
AT THE END
OF MY
COMFORT
ZONE"

PETER VAN GEIT

The excitement mixed with nervousness was palpable amongst the 50 odd enthusiasts assembled at the football ground adjoining the railway track across from the Chennai Airport and beyond the Grand Southern Trunk (GST) Road. The time was 6.00 and dawn was cracking on the eastern side behind the hillock known as "Pallavaram malai". At first glance, this group looked more like an excursion group from a co-ed college. There were over 3 dozen young men and women, several middle aged men and women and a past-middle-aged woman wearing a saree. There were a few commonalities among them – every one of them was wearing a pair of running shoes and each had a backpack strapped to his or her back. A tall 20 something lad holding a pad clipped with a sheaf of papers was busy ticking off the names on the list as each enthusiast came forward to mark their presence. Completing his routine, the lad spoke briefly into his mobile phone. Minutes later, from the road leading down from the hillock emerged a slightly built, balding, blue-eyed Caucasian with a broad smile on his face. Beaming with energy and warmth, he walked briskly towards the group but stopped at the edge of the ground. Then, with a sweep of his arm he waved the group to join him, turned around and marched off towards the hillock. The by then highly charged group almost ran to catch up with this pied piper of Chennai – Peter Van Geit.

The men and women had one goal – to climb to the top of the hill in under 8 minutes. If they do, they will qualify for the real treks that the Chennai Trekking Club organises every week end. If they don't qualify then they keep trying till they do.

About 35 kms from the city, off the OMR and almost parallel to the Vandalur-Kelambakkam road, lies a long and winding road dotted with a few colleges, villa communities and even a few small villages. Close to one of the villages is an un-used stone quarry, but now used as a huge natural

swimming pool or "pond" as you may call it. Over a hundred young men and women go there regularly to dive from the rough edges into the pond and swim across to the other side. The water, though clean, is dark and deep. Beginners and learners gingerly step into the water helped by safe hands and the guide-ropes that the Chennai Trekking Club members have drawn across the pond. Visit it once and guaranteed that you will want to start swimming there. The thrill of adventure in diving into a quarry pond makes you 10-20 years younger.

Trekking, swimming and conservative-Madras were like chalk and cheese till a few years back. This is no longer true. The IT revolution saw the influx of thousands of youth from semi-urban and rural parts of the country into Chennai. Many of them had grown up swimming in the village ponds and rivers nearby. They had climbed trees and walked deep into woods. And they missed all this while working odd shifts in the thousands of IT companies in Chennai.

"Life starts at the end of my comfort zone" "Create your own path rather than following existing trails" are some of the mantras that Peter, a Dutch national who has made Chennai his home since 1998, lives by.

Not often do you meet someone who not only lives by those mantras above, but also manages to inspire thousands to take up challenge as a part of their every day life. Not often do you meet someone who is a complete outdoor person, happy to be away from civilization every week end, for years together. Not often do you meet someone who almost has a cult status (albeit within a relatively smaller community), but still grounded and simple. Not often do you meet a foreign national reeling out details on the unexplored valleys, gorges of the Western Ghats, the country side of Tamil Nadu or the Himalayan ranges.

Peter Van Geit or "Peter" as he is called



During the initial days, Peter started biking around the suburbs of Chennai in his "royal enfield" bike. Soon he decided to extend his biking to the rest of south India. Almost every week end, he started taking his bike on a train on the Friday evening, got down at Kottayam then drove up to Munnar, Thekkady etc and came back by train to be at office on the Monday.

by the members of the Chennai Trekking Club (CTC) was born and brought up in a Belgium country side. Even as a child, he was adventurous, building tree houses, digging underground tunnels in his garden or swimming in the lakes. Peter went on to do his Masters Degree in Computer Science from the University of Ghent. Working for a Belgian company, Peter landed in Chennai in April 1998 to set up a small software development centre.

For a person coming in from the colder climes of Western Europe, Peter found it tough initially in getting acclimatized to the hot tropical climate that Chennai had to offer. He adapted himself and realized that the weather here was best suited for outdoor activities. Thanks to the friendly nature of people, his office extending his work permit and the bewitching beauty India offered, Peter never went back.

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After a couple of years of biking, Peter decided to replace the 'wheels' with his legs and started hiking. This he started during the week ends with like minded colleagues who would leave Chennai and trek up the Gingee Hills or the Tada Hills. After some 10-15 trips covering Chennai, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra and Tamil Nadu, Peter started documenting the trips with pictures and put them on a blog, inviting people

to join for trips. Visitors to the blog got curious & were making enquiries if he could organize such group activities regularly.

Repeated enquiries & interests led to the founding of The Chennai Trekking Club (CTC) in the year 2008. Starting with 10-15 people joining every week, the CTC has now grown to over 25,000 members and is one of the most active outdoor communities in South India. A completely volunteer based community, CTC is a not-for-profit Trust of nature and trek loving enthusiasts.

Peter says it was a challenge initially to create a completely volunteer based platform. With his day job, Peter ended up spending almost 15-16 hours every day balancing work and planning for the week-end trip. Peter led by example & after some months other participants came forward in helping him organize events. Today, there are over 40 organizers who between them take up responsibilities, do the planning and drive the activities. The combination of passion for outdoor sports, diversified activities, transparency, and freedom inspired these like-minded souls and they started working as a connected unit.

Other than trekking, CTC has also diversified into biking, cycling, swimming, photography, heritage visits, organizing workshops on conservation / organic farming and conducting marathons. Volunteers who were passionate about a specific activity started taking the responsibility of driving that activity & today, Peter drives the activity of mountain running.

Apart from regular treks, CTC conducts special treks – an all women trek which is mostly a day trek or a over night one, senior citizens trek for older people, family treks & social treks where less privileged children are taken for a day out, made to do small treks, swim with safety gear and given a nice experience away from the confines of their orphanage. For the strongest of the lot, CTC conducts extreme treks



like the Dead or Alive trek, triathlons, monsoon treks in the Western Ghats and the 9 day survival treks. From a community which started with almost all its members coming from the IT crowd, the group now has members covering students, doctors, lawyers, chartered accountants and senior citizens. The kit for a regular trekking trip consists of food items like bread, jam, instant noodles, energy bars etc. for 2-3 days, tarpaulin sheets, LED torch lights, light weight cooking pots, sleeping mats/bags and ropes for climbing. The organizers make the trip enjoyable by conducting campfires, camp-outs etc.

There are challenges in any volunteer based activity and more so if the volunteers are a heterogeneous mix of people. The founding members of CTC have managed to handle this beautifully & with aplomb. The takeaway for the participants of every trek were learning in terms of working as a team, overcoming physical / mental boundaries, development of volunteering attitude and coming out as friends for life after a trip. The non-profit nature, transparency in published accounts, the demonstration of 'every one is equal' formed the USP of CTC and made it stand out.

Prabhakar, one of the core team members of CTC drives the sporting & social initiatives like the Trail Marathon & the Chennai

My first year in india i bought a royal enfield bullet citibike 500cc and discovered most of south india on bike covering 40.000km in the first 2 years. I used to drive from sunrise to sunset for several weeks from town to town discovering new places and wonderful nature around each corner.

Coastal clean up. Prabhakar, who was into IT consulting and now into real estate, came into CTC as a volunteer of a beach clean-up campaign, struck by the openness of the group and has got in fulltime. Their recent coastal cleanup campaign generated about 30 tonnes of garbage, which were source segregated & recycled.

Technology has played a major part in the growth of CTC. Peter says Google has been integral to the growth of CTC, be it the search engine people used to initially get to know about the group, or the Google terrain maps and the Google Docs that they use. GPS portable receivers also form part of the trek. The core team picks up new tracks/location, use the Google terrain maps, plan the route, do recce trips before setting off on a trek. Notwithstanding all these, there were always surprises leading to real time planning.

Other than major events like the marathon & the Chennai coastal cleanup which are funded through sponsorship the regular treks

are all funded through sharing of costs where everyone contributes equally and unutilized funds, if any are returned at the end of the trek. CTC takes a safety indemnity from the individual participants and also urges them to inform their parents/guardians about the trip. They also seek necessary permissions to enter forest areas that require them.

From being a baby of one man & a small set of volunteers, CTC has come a long way to becoming an institution in itself with a lot of diversification that caters to different people covering adventure, fun & environmental consciousness. It stands as a testimony to one man's belief that LIFE lies outside the comfy sofas and cozy air-conditioned rooms.

"There are two types of people in the world – those who keep finding excuses & those who just do it - Which one are you? "

Throwing this question at the crowd of Chennai, motivating and inspiring thousands to come out of their couches and turning them into challenge loving mean machines, Peter has contributed silently to the city of Chennai and in that process, has also ended up creating an institution. He is a fitting Champion of Chennai!

MANIKANDAN RAMACHANDRAN