After this acclimatisation we were ready to travel to Rishikesh and then onto the Barsu Guesthouses to start our trek. Although we didn’t love the trek at the time – we can say we loved it now. Each day of trekking was different; each day had different challenges. We all found the first day hard – 8km up. By the fourth day we had reached Dodital Lake. The camp ground was beautiful, sited next to a reflecting lake. As the birthplace of Ganesh this is a sacred Hindu area. Hats off to Hannah and Avalon who dug the latrine!

Early start for the final ascent
We rose at 4am for the final ascent. Nine of the team chose to take on this final 5km and along with two Indian sherpas, we set off at a cracking pace. The remainder of the team rose a little later, packed up camp and started the 14km descent. The trek went so quickly; before we knew it we had 200m to go. Tillie was finding this tough, experiencing some difficulty with the altitude. Incredibly, she pushed on to the top and on achieving this she ‘fuelled up’ and our World Challenge leader accompanied her quickly back down to Dodital Lake. The rest of us stayed at the top for a while, enjoyed the scenery, took photos and congratulated each other on handling the challenge!

After a two-day descent we returned to Rishikesh to rest, recover and reflect; but not for long as we were to be on the road to Haridwar, within 48 hours.

Rishikesh was an easy place to stay with resorts, markets and restaurants geared to tourists of every budget. It is the home of yoga, massage and meditation schools. Our hotel had an internet café with three computers which our group needed to get back in touch with family after our eight days in the Himalayas.

Pilgrims along the Ganges
But Haridwar was a different story. Unlike the Mussourie and Rishikesh this was a very big and busy place. In Haridwar five tributaries of the Ganges meet, a sacred bathing spot for the Hindus. Thousands of pilgrims gather in this place for the Hindu cleansing ceremony. The police carried semi-automatic weapons and big sticks. The police were quick to deal with young beggars who appeared to be harassing pilgrims and tourists and actively moved us on at a time when we were gathering ourselves together after watching the ceremony.

It was in Haridwar that we saw the breadth of Indian life – its religion, moments of destitution and hopelessness, but also the joy of simple life. The markets were amazing – jewellery, ornaments, scarves, shawls and exquisite saris.

Our safari at John Corbett Reserve was fascinating and relaxing and according to our guide, most successful as we managed to see elephants and caught a quick glimpse of a tiger in the wild.

Pangot was an afternoon jeep drive away. We arrived at Ecolodges to the sweet smell of chai tea and the amazing news that we could stay in the lodges and didn’t need to pitch our tents!

We were looked after by the manager Raju, a polite and caring man. That afternoon we surveyed the path project and realised this was a big job. It involved digging out the ground and laying a 1.5m-wide brick and cement path for 200m. We set about working out the materials we would need and a project plan for our work the next day.

Next morning a small team travelled 20 minutes to Nainital to purchase materials. The rest of us visited the school and met the students and their teacher. We found out that there were more jobs that we could do at the school which included painting.

Fundraising at St Hilda’s aids construction
That afternoon we started digging the path and found the rock hard and unyielding. We employed a local labourer, tall Raju. Gradually we progressed but we could see that with the limited equipment and manpower, completing the full 200m would be beyond our time constraints. So this is where we were rewarded for our fundraising efforts at school.

We found labour and material costs well within our budget, so we decided to employ three more labourers to help us complete the job. This also freed us up to do the other tasks, particularly the painting in the school. By the last day in Pangot, we had finished the painting and 160m of the path; and we had purchased all the materials and labour for the path to be completed after we left.

This day we gave gifts to the children at the school. We had purchased cricket and football equipment as well as various stationery items. These children were like seagulls, but their joy in receiving brought us joy in giving.