

BOOTCAMP MANISHANKAR GHOSH NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SUSHIL BHASIN MISSION ARMY

GET DIRTY, GET TOUGH

Get dirty, get tough

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Cadet training: Kuldeep Rana , a finalist on NatGeo's show Mission Army, braves obstacles at the Commando Training School in Belgaum.

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The daily workout routine can be quite a grind. For most people, it is a mental battle waged every day— gathering the enthusiasm for a morning run or 100 push-ups in the evening. “Unless your mind is strong, it is nearly impossible to push yourself to get up and go for a run or exercise every morning,” says Ela Vohra, 23, an IT professional and one of the finalists of *Mission Army—Desh ke Rakshak*, a show airing on the National Geographic channel.



Cadet training: Kuldeep Rana , a finalist on NatGeo's show Mission Army, braves obstacles at the Commando Training School in Belgaum.

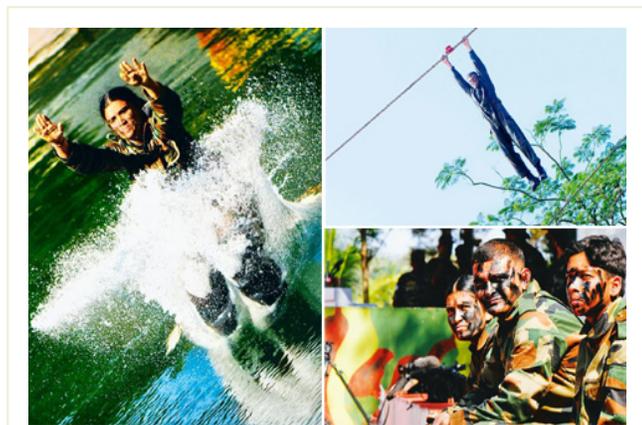
One way to push both mental discipline and willpower for physical fitness is to try a full-body workout that targets the mind as well as the body—the boot camp.

Boot camps originated in the US, where army veterans adapted hard-core military training for civilian fitness programmes. Today, adventure camps in the country's mountainous and forest areas offer customized boot camps for jaded corporate groups, school and college students, or for that matter, anyone interested in pushing their limits.

Mission Army offers a glimpse of life in a real boot camp. Five finalists, selected from among 30,000-odd participants across India, have been spending a few days each at the Indian Military Academy (IMA) in Dehradun, Commando Training School in Belgaum, High Altitude Warfare School (Haws) in Gulmarg, Armoured Corps Centre and School (ACC&S) in Ahmednagar and Artillery Centre in Deolali, and participating in rigorous workout regimens.

Rudrashish Sengupta, 23, one of the finalists and a student of mass media, says the training schedule at these army camps came as a rude shock to start with. “We were competing with real cadets and did everything from jumping off 50m-high walls and ace-ing the obstacle course.” The finalists say they’ve come out stronger, more confident and calmer from the boot-camp experience. And all this while getting fitter and leaner. Ask them if they would recommend these sessions to others and all five echo: “A boot camp is a life-changing experience.”

The real experience



Fear factor:(clockwise from left) The National Geographic channel’s *Mission Army* show participants Ela Vohra, Rohan Takalkar, and (from left) Vohra, Kuldeep Rana and Priyanka Oswal at the Commando Training School in Belgaum.

However, a typical boot-camp session outside the show and the army is a little different. It might include hiking up cliffs, crawling in pits, swinging from ropes, rock-climbing and rappelling, or even rafting down a river with frothing rapids—but it isn’t as tough.

Manishankar Ghosh, who runs the adventure tourism company Qustrails, which operates training camps in the Tons area and Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, says there are several schools across India that offer to customize a boot-camp experience; the difference between the usual adventure sports and a boot camp lies in both the nature of activity and the degree of difficulty. “When

people trek up to our camp, we can already gauge their level of stamina,” says Ghosh. “After a few days at a boot camp, your body opens up significantly. Activities like these basically put people face to face with their fears—water, height, speed, proximity to nature. Being out there, not protected by what’s familiar to you. People leave more confident from these camps. I’ve been into this for 11 years now and it can be a life-altering experience,” he says.

Mind over body

One of the finalists on the show, 24-year-old MBA student and athlete Kuldeep Rana, is no newcomer to a physically strenuous lifestyle. But the boot-camp experience, he says, teaches you more about the strength of the mind. “In 400m running, the first 300m are fine, it’s the last 100m that really require strength and stamina,” says Rana. “A boot-camp experience teaches you that same lesson for life. When you push your body to a limit, after a point your mind takes over. When you run, your legs will only take you 3-4km. It’s your mind that will take you the 30-40km distance,” says Rana.

Sushil Bhasin, a retired brigadier, served 34 years in the army before opening Empower Activity Camps, which runs a boot camp on the Mumbai-Goa highway, with a stress on “experiential learning”. He says: “There are some things you can’t learn from being told. You have to be out there, on the cliff, hanging from a rope, to understand some lessons of life. That’s experiential learning.” Bhasin classifies adventure experiences into two types—pure adventure such as skydiving, where thrill-seeking is the aim. “Then there is a concept called processed adventure. It’s designed to provoke you to think, to question yourself, why did you do it? What are your fears? Have you overcome them? Do you trust your partner? Do you trust the rope you’re hanging from? All of this can’t be done in a classroom or a gymnasium,” explains Bhasin.

On a day at Empower Activity Camps, you may have to swim through a lake, build your own raft, climb a mountain, pitch a tent, live in the wilderness, and perhaps even find answers to some of the questions Bhasin poses.

Bhasin narrates an incident about a young office-going man who had joined a camp at Empower. “He used to believe that he needed a minimum of 8 hours of sleep or the next day he’ll be irritated at work. Going through the camp put this notion out of his head. Even after a strenuous day filled with activities, the group kept up till late at night and began the next day by 5am, but still felt no real fatigue. He says that now he can do with 4-5 hours of sleep.”

A cautious approach

Doctors do not dispute that there are benefits, but they do advise caution. Camps, they say, must be conducted by highly qualified people and participants should be selected after careful assessment of personality types. Sameer Malhotra, head of the department of psychiatry, Fortis Hospital, Noida, says: “At some levels stress is good. It adds to motivation. But you have to ask yourself if a boot camp or an activity like that is just for the thrill? Running over fire is bound to boost adrenalin.

But does it do any good to your day-to-day lifestyle, does it solve any personal or work-related issues? A training camp that is physically rigorous and mentally puts you on the edge must be done under proper supervision; the context and purpose of the camp should have some logic.”

Sengupta says the experience has made it possible for him to go the extra mile. “Earlier, I had a just-go-with-the-flow attitude, but since I’ve returned from the show, I find myself encouraging my friends to make an extra effort to keep fit. And I keep looking for new ways to keep myself active,” he says.

Mission Army airs every Monday at 10pm. The finale is on 2 May.

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