NZ Travel Advisory 8 March 2006
"New Zealanders should defer tourist and non-essential travel given the unstable security situation in Nepal … Public demonstrations throughout Nepal … can occur at very short notice, sometimes end in violence and can cause an almost complete closedown of the country. Maoist rebels are present in all districts in Nepal and the potential for further violence remains high. If you do decide to travel … exercise extreme caution, maintain a very high level of personal security awareness at all times, and avoid large gatherings and demonstrations."

Morbid or not, it's a good question… If you were squashed by a bus tomorrow, as your spirit departed the physical world, would it be basking in the cumulative experiences of a life well lived, or racked with regret about all the journeys not yet taken? As a husband, father and son, I reflect on that quite often. What's the right balance between living; and living up to your responsibilities and obligations? Between living for today and tomorrow? Between taking risks and keeping safe?

So I pondered that I had a wife and three boys to support, not to mention a still not insubstantial mortgage and my own small business to keep ticking along. Then there was the small matter of that Travel Advisory. On the other hand, the years since my last visit to Nepal were mounting like never before and my yearning to get back there again was only getting stronger.

Five years earlier on my last trip there I'd made a new friend. Helge (a chocolate loving German race horse masquerading as a trekker) and I met purely by chance one early morning on the trail and ended up sharing the next two weeks walking the Annapurna Circuit. The strength of our resulting bond is a good example of the magic I so much enjoy in the mountains. It also kept us in contact from our homes on opposite sides of the world as we plotted our return.

Much thought, internet surfing and conversations with people (like Suze at Adventure Consultants) who had a realistic appreciation about what was really happening on the ground in Nepal eventually led us to a firm decision. On 28th March I found myself checking through immigration at Auckland International Airport, once again bound for Kathmandu. It was to be my sixth visit to Nepal and it felt like it had been a long time coming.

I was away for four weeks and felt very grateful to my wife Lou for granting me a pass out for that length of time. We both knew that our two little angles Edwin, five and William, three, were not going to be any less full-on just because Dad had shot through for an alpine fix. Consequently, I had a lot riding on this visit.

View of Everest et al from 10,000 metres on the approach to Nepal

As soon as I glimpsed Kanchenjunga, then Makalu, then Everest, Lhotse and Cho Oyu from the window of the plane at 10,000 metres I felt a surge of anticipation. My passage through Nepalese customs went like a breeze. Pre-armed with completed declaration form, US dollars and passport photo, a brisk walk from the plane saw me at the head of the queue and through before the inevitable pile up as confusion took over. Once past the usual clamour of taxi drivers, it was just a short, bumpy, fume-ridden ride into Thamel.

Apart from the obvious military presence around the airport perimeter, at first glance it didn't feel like that much had changed.

Our excited reunion at the Kathmandu Guest House felt like a milestone. Although now clean shaven, Helge seemed pretty much the same as he had five years before. We were reunited. We had our gear with us. We had more than three weeks in the mountains to play with and the Khumbu, in my experience perhaps the most beautiful of all mountain regions, was just a short plane hop away. Helge had arrived earlier than me into Kathmandu that day and had already sorted out our Sita Air tickets. Oh yes, it was good to be alive.

Before dawn next morning we were back at the airport along with a bunch of other expectant trekkers. Would our flights get away to Lukla, or would bad weather in the mountains block us? In the departure lounge we heard rumour of another general strike set to start in the next week. We figured this was good timing for us as, by the time we returned in 22 days time, it would have passed. As it turned out, as we walked deeper into the Khumbu, back down in Kathmandu curfews were imposed and enforced by army and police patrols with orders to shoot infringers on sight. In protest, some half a million people, a fifth of the entire population of the Kathmandu valley, took to the streets.

So, how did it all come to this in a country so famous for its hospitable, good natured people? In the past fifty years Nepal's population has jumped from five to 25 million, placing huge pressure on the country's scarce resources. In rural areas poverty has remained widespread and people have lacked even the basics in education and health care. In addition, turbulent politics, characterized by incompetence and self interest led, in 1992, to a wave of demonstrations resulting in curtailment of some of the King's powers and the election of the first parliament in Nepal. Four years later, the Maoist party won a large share of the vote, yet the other parties denied them access to key positions. Consequently the Maoists left parliament altogether and started an armed revolution. Ten years on and more than 12,000 people have been killed in what has essentially been a civil war.

Above, a peaceful moment at the Swayambunath
Below, make-shift barricade in central Kathmandu

Although his powers had been curtailed, the King remained quite popular until the bizarre and tragic events of 2001, when his son shot him, along with many other family members, before turning the gun on himself.

More political turbulence followed until the new King Gyanendra, brother of the slain one, decided in February 2002, to dissolve parliament, refusing to call elections and promising to defeat the Maoists with his army. Bold words, but the results were not forthcoming.

Things deteriorated further until, in 2005, the King attempted to rule directly by decree. This was too heavy handed for the common people to accept, resulting in the seven most prominent political parties entering an unlikely agreement with the Maoists, who by then commanded 20,000 fighters and 80% of the country. The only common ground binding this otherwise fragmented power cocktail was the desire to get rid of the King. Although now cornered, the King still controlled the army and police force. He was not about to relinquish power without a struggle, which led us to the curfews, strikes, demonstrations and violence we found ourselves hoping would pass before our return to Kathmandu.

Our arrival in Lukla also confirmed that not all was well. A heavy military presence overshadowed the magnificent alpine scenery surrounding the little sloping airstrip. Coils of cutty wire, squads of heavily armed soldiers, check points. Not what I had become accustomed to on previous visits. Clearly, the Maoists were an ever present threat and the government did not what to see the golden egg that the Khumbu is tarnished by Maoist occupation. Already the trails below Lukla were under their control. Even while we were there, we heard reports of four hard-headed Polish trekkers being temporarily hijacked by Maoists on the Jiri to Lukla trail when they had refused to make a hefty “donation” to the cause.

The Maoists have certainly become a real disincentive to trekkers in most parts of the country, but it is the local people who have really suffered at their hands. Later on our journey, we made friends with a huge bear of a Southern German called Frank and his much smaller but extremely tough porter Maule. This is what Maule’s experience had been of the Maoists, as explained by Frank.


Lukla airstrip on our arrival

“Maule explained to me what takes place in his village, located two days east of Lukla at 2,800 metres, off the tourist trail. The whole valley where his parents live is dirt poor. Still, every household has to pay a ‘donation’ for the ‘struggle to liberate the people’. ‘Rich’ people have to give 100,000 Rupees (US$1,500), ‘poor’ people 50,000 Rupees (US$750). Consider that a worker makes $1, maybe $2 a day and that a farmer owns maybe five water buffaloes, each worth about $80. Now the dimensions of these demands become clear. Not surprisingly, many people have fled to areas which are still controlled by the army (they are NOT nice either!). Especially the young have left the villages because the Maoists will make them soldiers if their parents are unable to meet these outrageous financial demands.”

It’s pretty sobering stuff, whichever way you look at it. Perhaps even more so when you see how warm and hospitable the people in the mountains are.

On arrival in Lukla we immediately set off in the direction of Jorsale, located about five hours walking up valley, where I was hoping to find Pasang Dorje and his wife Ang Nimi. I met this charming Sherpa couple ten years earlier. After that, we had exchanged several letters, until losing contact when I shifted back to New Zealand after a stint in Singapore.

There is only one path through Jorsale, located beside the surging milky waters of the Duhd Kosi River. So I suppose it wasn't such a surprise when, who should I literally bump in to as I entered the village, but none other than Pasang Dorje, looking no different from when I had bid him farewell ten years before. It did feel quite uncanny though. He just looked at me calmly and said "Ah. Peter. But no Ben?" Ben is my eldest son, who was just three when I first met Pasang Dorje. I had told him that next time I came to the Khumbu I hoped to bring Ben with me. Pasang Dorje had a good memory.
We embraced. Then he sent one of his four children (he only had two before, but then I only had Ben back in 1995 myself) off at a trot to retrieve Ang Nimi from their potato fields. That evening we all gathered for dinner and, although language prevented any really in-depth conversations, it was wonderful to hear about what they had been up to during the past decade.

Next morning, with Helge and Brian, another kiwi guy we had loosely teamed up with back in Lukla, I hit the trail at dawn to enjoy the cool air and tranquility while we climbed the first real Himalayan hill of our journey. From the dramatically situated, heavily prayer flag draped suspension bridge spanning the Duhd Kosi, the trail up to Namche Bazaar relentlessly climbs about 600 metres. Part way up, in a crystal clear sky, we had our first land-based view of Mount Everest, peaking over the gigantic, sheer Nuptse wall.

The Saturday market in full swing, Namche Bazaar (3,450m)

Up in Namche Bazaar the military presence was once again obvious. Dug in on top of a conical high-point above the village was an entire garrison of soldiers. Trench systems, tangles of cutty wire, sand-bagged machine gun nests; and all with an unimpeded outlook up valley to Everest and a host of other magnificent peaks. It was an odd contrast, but I reminded myself that it was only because these soldiers were present, that we were free to wander the still Maoist free trails in the Khumbu.

A market goer deep in thought

We paused in Namche Bazaar (3,450m) to aid acclimatization and to enjoy the famous Saturday market. Then, early on another beautiful clear morning, we bid farewell to Brian and headed in the direction of Thame (3,800m). That afternoon we got our first spring snowfall and this happened intermittently for the rest of our journey. It made for lovely photos, but cold temperatures and sometimes heavy going up higher. Just a couple of days before we departed the Khumbu we had three days of heavy snowfall. In the Khumbu icefall, three Sherpas died when a serac, probably tumbling under the weight of all the new snow, fell on them.

Unfortunately, I had my first real signs of a cough in Thame. From there on, as we ascended into colder, drier, thinner air, it worsened, never leaving me until after I returned to New Zealand. Helge must be a Saint, because he never once complained about the hideous hacking, hoiking and cursing coming from me as I coughed and spluttered my way up over the trails and high passes during the next two weeks.

I wasn't alone in my suffering either. The "Khumbu cough" is a well known facet of being in the region. Frank the German also had a bad dose of it. He turned out to be a saviour by supplying me with sleeping tablets, without which, above about 4,500 metres, I (and consequently poor Helge) would not have slept at all due to the severity of my nightly coughing fits.

Unlike most other trekkers, Helge and I were travelling without porters. This meant that, because we had a tent and basic climbing gear, we each lugged 25 kg loads. We definitely felt these more as we got higher. Combining this with the cough and snowfall had me reassessing my self image – the fact that I am no longer as young as I once was came as a rather rude awakening! I resolved that, next time I go up high in the Himalaya, I will employ a porter.

Beyond Thame we made our way up the valley that eventually leads to Nangpa La (5,700m) on the Tibetan border. This was new ground for me so each step was taken with renewed anticipation.

Beyond Thame en route to Lungden

It never ceases to surprise me how little villages just crop up as you move through the region. It's one of the joys of Nepalese mountain walking that you can't find back in New Zealand. Our own route up this valley only went as far as Lungden, a small cluster of buildings at 4,400m. Lungden sits at the base of a much less well trodden trail leading over the 5,400m Renjo La to Gokyo, at 4,750m in an adjacent, much more frequented valley.

To once again aid acclimatization, we spent two nights at Lungden, taking a day walk without heavy packs up the route towards Renjo La. Even though our route could hardly be seen as trail breaking, without a guide and, given the frequent fresh snowfall, it wasn't immediately obvious.

In the true spirit of the NZAC alpine climbing course, I diligently planned our route using my 1:50,000 map and Nepalese army compass, procured back down in Kathmandu. In reality my route plan was useless, bearing little resemblance to the actual ground we trod. Whether it was my poor route planning or the dubious accuracy of the map, I still don't know!

What we did discover was that the route became clear as we moved along it. As long as it wasn't snowing we could find the way. So, on day seven, we lugged our packs back up to the twin lakes (4,900m) below the pass and set up our tent under a huge boulder. A miserable cold night followed, making it easy to get up as soon as the dawn light permitted.

Above, Renjo La (5,400m) is the notch directly above Helge

We set off for the pass in crystal clear weather, but that didn't last. As we neared the pass, ominous clouds billowed up the valley below us. Even on my good days, Helge is stronger than me so, with my cough, he took the lead and picked the route.

After scrambling slowly up a very steep snow slope, we made the pass about 11.30am, just in time to glimpse the tip of Everest before it was engulfed in massive billowing clouds. Within half an hour those clouds had also engulfed us in the form of heavy snow.

The view towards Gokyo Lake from Renjo La. Everest's summit is poking through the clouds directly above the lake

I finally staggered into Gokyo about 2.30pm, looking gray and ashen. The 650 metre descent in steep, knee deep snow had given me an insight into what it might be like to fall prey to exhaustion in the mountains. If Helge had not been with me I really might have been in trouble. But as it was, after many cups of hot orange and in the jovial, larger than life company of Frank the German, who happened to be at the same lodge as us, I started to thaw out and feel my spirits perking up again.

Gokyo is an idyllic place to hang out for a while. My cough had progressed to a chest infection so it was a good place to sit tight for a few nights while a course of antibiotics took effect. We had time for Frank to reacquaint us with the finer points of the only card game for trekkers - "Shit Head".

We also managed a day walk, up along the top of the huge moraine wall of the Ngozumpa glacier, to the fifth Lake at 5,000m. Here we enjoyed yak cheese and crackers while taking in the "Scoundrel's view" of Everest, which was indeed worth the scramble.

On day twelve Helge and I left Gokyo with the idea of crossing the snout of the Ngozumpa glacier and then following the low trail around to Pangboche. We felt that another high pass wouldn't be a good idea given my unrelenting cough. Besides, Helge was relaxed either way because all routes were new ground for him. It was the sensible plan, but the closer I got to Thangnak, the little settlement at the foot of the trail leading to Cho La, the more it all felt like unfinished business. Ten years earlier, Pasang Dorje was to guide me over the pass, but a violent cough defeated me then.

As we came into Thangnak (4,700m) it was apparent that things had changed quite a bit there over a decade. Now, two major lodges stood. The first one had a big sign out front announcing that it was possible to hire porters just to the pass. Well that clinched it – I had to have a crack at it. That night it snowed. Not a great sign, but next day dawned clear with an orange sunrise.

My porter's name was Saela, sixteen years old and keen as mustard. Not having to lug my pack made the first 400 metres a real pleasure, up through fairly gradual snow slopes. At 5,100 metres we crested a ridge and got our first view of Cho La. Between us was a valley, part filled with big, ice covered boulders – not a lot of fun to cross. Then it was a steep, fairly exposed 300 metre climb up a rocky snow face to the pass at 5,400 metres. In all it took us four hours.

Above, at 5,100m, looking across the boulder field to Cho La (5,400m)
Left, Everest from the "Scoundrel's view", near the fifth lake

Our reward at the pass was a stiff wind and a snow blasting, beneath brooding high cloud, so we didn't hang about. I paid and thanked Saela who, with a broad smile, disappeared back in the direction we had just come – all in a morning's work. With my pack back on I weighed in at a tad over 100 kgs, so the first stretch tracing the glacier down the other side saw me crashing through rotten snow up to my thighs.

We then came to a point where the glacier ended at a cliff. Our route traced a vein down to the right over very steep, very icy and hence treacherous rock. It was the most difficult section we encountered during our entire trek and, with the weight on our backs, it was a case of concentrating hard at every step until we reached the bottom. Then it was time for yak cheese and crackers (would've been rude not to really).

At about 2.30pm we trudged wearily into Dzonglha, situated on a little high point at 4,840 metres, offering superb views of Ama Dablam and with Cholatse towering directly overhead. Even with the help from Saela it had been a big day out for me. Even the German race horse was a little jaded.

Next morning we set off for Lobuje. More stunning views, particularly of Pumori and, somewhat perturbing, of the main trail leading to Base Camp via Lobuje. From high above it on the valley wall we watched the seething ants (trekkers and porters) and beetles (yaks laden with gear and supplies) swarming up the trail.


From left, Pumori, Lingtren and Nuptse, viewed between Dzonglha and Lobuje

We joined the swarm just before Lobuje and immediately noticed a change in the temperament of those we met. Heads down, no more friendly “Namastes”. In Lobuje the locals were subdued or even surly – the price of fame and people pressure. However, it was good to be nearing Base Camp. A night in Lobuje (4,900m) was a necessary evil, then we set off for Gorak Shep.

Helge powered ahead to ensure that we secured a room while I trudged up behind. It was actually a pleasant walk up beside the moraine of the Khumbu glacier. But seeing Gorak Shep again for the first time since my first visit eighteen years earlier took me aback. Where before there had been a single primitive shepherds rock shelter, now stood two fine looking lodges; and all this at 5,130 metres. A hearty welcome from Helge, Frank and Maule (who just kept popping up) on arrival put me in a fine mood.

That afternoon the weather cleared, compelling Helge and I to scramble up Kala Pattar to take in the panoramic view. We had the top all to our selves and, from 5,545 metres, we soaked up the classic trekkers view of Everest, Nuptse, Everest Base Camp, Lingtren, Pumori, Ama Dablam and countless other majestic peaks. The dimming light and intensifying cold eventually drove us back down to the warmth of the very busy and crowded lodge.


On top of Kala Pattar (5,545m), looking towards Ama Dablam (left side)

It was an intriguing mix of companions at the lodge. A real mishmash of hard out climbers, independent trekkers like Helge and I, as well as members of organized trekking groups. Many nationalities were represented. I sat quietly, farting, next to a large, gruff looking Indian General who was leading a group of Indian soldiers on Everest. For some reason that day I had developed gas issues but, there were so many people in the lodge that it was impossible for the General to pin it on me. I avoided court martial and lived to visit Base Camp next morning under a cloudless sky.

Reaching Everest Base Camp was a strange blend of emotions for me. Although I'd been up Kala Pattar eighteen years before and Base Camp is just three or so hours walking further up the moraine of the Khumbu glacier, it was still satisfying and intriguing to finally reach it after all that time.

Above, Khumbu Carnival. Base Camp (5,300m) at the foot of the Khumbu Icefall

Supplies for Base Camp

Being there left no doubt that it's a special place, where dreams are born, fulfilled and crushed; and history is made. People seem to have an intensity about them you don't normally encounter. It's obvious from the way some of the climbers spring about, that there are some tough customers up there.

But the multicolored spectacle of perhaps a hundred and fifty or so tents, all clustered around the base of the Khumbu Icefall, interconnected by a complex web of prayer flags, seemed rather bizarre and inappropriate to me. It was a bit like being at a carnival at the gates of hell. And although there were people all about, I felt somehow lonely in the crowd. But our visit there was to be just a couple of hours, whereas the climbing teams were stationed there for six weeks or more. Not surprising then, that I didn't feel a part of things. It didn't make our visit any less fascinating and Helge and I consoled ourselves with some more yak cheese and crackers.

Base camp is located out on the fractured ice of the glacier. Immediately before it towers the icefall, with its vertical maze of mega-crevasses and house-sized blocks of teetering ice. I felt a brashness there that seemed out of step with the spirituality of that highest of all places on our planet. Jamlang Tenzing Norgay, son of the famous Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, alluded to it in his book "Touching My Father's Soul". I understood his concern that Miolangsangma, Goddess of Chomolungma, might be displeased with what she saw spread out beneath her like some kaleidoscopic froth.

The concentration of high tech gadgetry implied to me that money will conquer all. No need to earn your mountaineering stripes over years spent climbing smaller peaks – just bring on the Sherpas, ladders, fixed ropes, high altitude mountain guides, state of the art weather forecasts, sat phones and laptops and climb that mountain. A once in a lifetime opportunity to become someone, to rediscover the meaning of life, to transcend mortality, or whatever. But these days, more than a thousand people have summitted Everest and the unlucky ones amongst them had to queue at the Hillary Step. Pre-monsoon 2006 proved to be a record season. 194 summiteers from the Nepalese side and around 300 from the Tibetan side.

Then there are the really unlucky ones, those who lost their lives attempting to summit or get back down the mountain. This season there were the three fatalities on the Nepalese side, all Sherpas; and eight fatalities on the Tibetan side. Back in New Zealand, soon after my own return from the Khumbu, a famous legless adventurer and all round high achiever, Mark Inglis, came under a shower of mostly condemning media attention when he returned from his own successful attempt on Everest. Having, along with some twenty others, reputedly passed a dying climber on the ascent without doing anything to help him, he found himself in the hot seat. The disapproval of Sir Edmund Hillary, by his own account a driven man in his time, was reported, along with other damning accounts.

I was gray in my opinion about it. At the most basic level it can't really be refuted that it's a hallmark of "humaneness" to help a fellow member of your own species if their life is threatened. If you could, then you would. No debate. But I know myself well enough to realize that I can be pretty tunnel visioned once I commit to and go for a goal.

If I had spent months or years preparing myself physically and mentally; outlaid some $40,000 US dollars or more; left my family and job behind for two months; put myself through probably the most physical misery of my life; risked my life; hung my hopes and dreams on reaching the summit of Everest and THEN, I was unexpectedly confronted with what could have looked like a lost cause lying, ill-clothed, in the snow; at an altitude where I wasn't thinking straight anyway, would I have helped him when that might put me at even more risk and could well deny me from realizing my goal? I would like to think so but, in all honesty, I really don't know. I do know though, that it's easy to make black and white moral judgments about others from the warmth and comfort of a living-room arm chair at sea level. I think Mark Inglis' was a case of "you had to be there!"

Puja ceremony at the Adventure Consultant's base camp

Another question arises out of this. Should we try to climb Everest simply because we fancy the idea and can afford to financially? In a range of very challenging situations Mark Inglis has shown how the physically disabled (and by implication, everyone) can push through seemingly insurmountable barriers. It's inspiring stuff. But I wouldn't categorise him as a fully fledged mountaineer – adventurer definitely but, from my own novice climbing perspective, becoming a mountaineer requires many years spent in all kinds of alpine conditions, terrain and situations. Mark wouldn't have climbed Everest without the (expensive?) help of fully fledged mountaineers.

I do feel that the commercialism that has crept in to climbing Everest has set up the sort of situation where perhaps immoral behaviour is more likely to happen. If mountaineering is your life, then maybe any single climb won't appear to be your only shot at Everest. Maybe fully fledged mountaineers will find it easier to let go of the goal to help someone in need – there's always next year, or the year after. Maybe fully fledged mountaineers will find themselves in need of help from members outside their own party less as well. I use the word "maybe" but I'm really thinking "probably".

So, would I try to climb Everest simply because I fancied the idea and could afford to financially? Although the Nepalese people can certainly do with the foreign exchange, in the special case of Mount Everest, for me the answer is definitely "no". More respect and less ego might be a better thing on that mountain. Some will disagree with me for sure and so we can expect the sometimes unsavoury dramas to continue to unfold on Everest.

Ants in a vertical maze - route finding on the Khumbu Icefall

Although Helge and I had originally planned to also cross from Lobuje to Chhukung via the Kongma La, having reached Base Camp was, for me and my rib-aching cough, sufficient. Over the next few days we retraced our steps down beside the Khumbu glacier, carrying on down to Duglha and then swinging left up the Chhukung valley. On day 19, from Chhukung (4,750m) I put a call in to Lou back in New Zealand via sat phone. By this point I was missing my family very much, so it was wonderful to hear her voice and to know that everyone was well. The Lodge staff had a chuckle as I wiped away the tears. I guess a grimy, hairy man crying with a beaming smile must have looked amusing.

Myself, Helge and Frank above Chhukung

Ama Dablam, left and Kangtega, seen from Dingboche

Next morning it was bleak. While Helge went for a blow-out up 5,550 metre Chhukung Ri, which I had done already on a previous visit in better weather, I joined the coughing crew (Frank and Maule) on the 350 metre descent to Dingboche. Going down hill at altitude is infinitely easier than ascending, so this only took an hour. While Frank and Maule continued on downwards I waited for Helge. He soon caught me up and, by late afternoon, we had reached upper Pangboche (4,000m), just as it started snowing.

And it kept snowing for three days. On the third day we had no option but to resume our descent, other wise we would miss our return flight from Lukla. A note from my diary sets the scene… "Well, I think the Khumbu is trying to kill me. At 10.30pm last night I had my first of several power chunders, supplemented by diarrhea.

I think it was food poisoning, as it hit me like a freight train. I got virtually no sleep and was still chundering water at breakfast. The weather had not improved one jot – just white and snow." The leg from Pangboche to Namche Bazaar took seven hours. Say no more.

At least that night I had my best sleep of the entire trek, so awoke on Day 22 feeling ready to walk out to Lukla. We called in to see Pasang Dorje and his family again at Jorsale and I was pleasantly surprised to find Pura Deki, their eldest daughter and now a blossoming twelve year old, home from school down in Kathmandu. Unaware of my recent bout of food poisoning, Ang Nimi very kindly cooked us an omelette. I ate it out of courtesy. Beyond Jorsale it drizzled constantly as the eggs repeated on me all the way to Lukla.

Upper Pangboche (4,000m) after the first day's snowfall

Back in Lukla the mood was tense. Three days of snow had prevented planes getting in or out.

On the one morning that it had cleared for a while the pilots decided to call a strike. Now, hundreds of trekkers anxiously waited to get on a flight. Helge and I were lucky. We had firm tickets so got priority over all those whose flights had been cancelled over the past three days.

Guess which one had the food poisoniong ...

Next morning it dawned completely clear. We were at the terminal building (a big, flash, multi-storied affair that wasn't there last time I came to the Khumbu in '95) at 6am. All eyes were on the runway. Suddenly, a twin engine Yeti Air craft appeared, swinging quickly in beside the terminal. Only the boarding side engine was shut down as relieved, white knuckled passengers, all clutching their boarding passes for dear life, scrambled aboard.

Before they had even finished boarding, another plane appeared, then another. Then, ahead of schedule, our Sita Air craft arrived. Thirty minutes latter we were set down at Kathmandu airport.

Familiar terraced hillsides on the approach to Kathmandu

It was a big relief to arrive back in Kathmandu, despite not knowing what to expect there given the heated political climate. Although the atmosphere back in down-town Kathmandu was rather depressed, with locals indoors and businesses closed, as foreign tourists, we never felt in any personal danger. In Thamel the hotels and restaurants mostly remained open and foreigners could move around more or less freely, which must have seemed bluntly unjust from the local's perspective. But that was the least of their worries. In addition to the general strike, the Maoists had closed the roads into Kathmandu. This and the all day curfews imposed by the King effectively shut down virtually all business, resulting in shortages of food and fuel, leading to doubling and even trebling prices. Yet more frustrated people took to the streets in protest.

Uncertain times back in Kathmandu

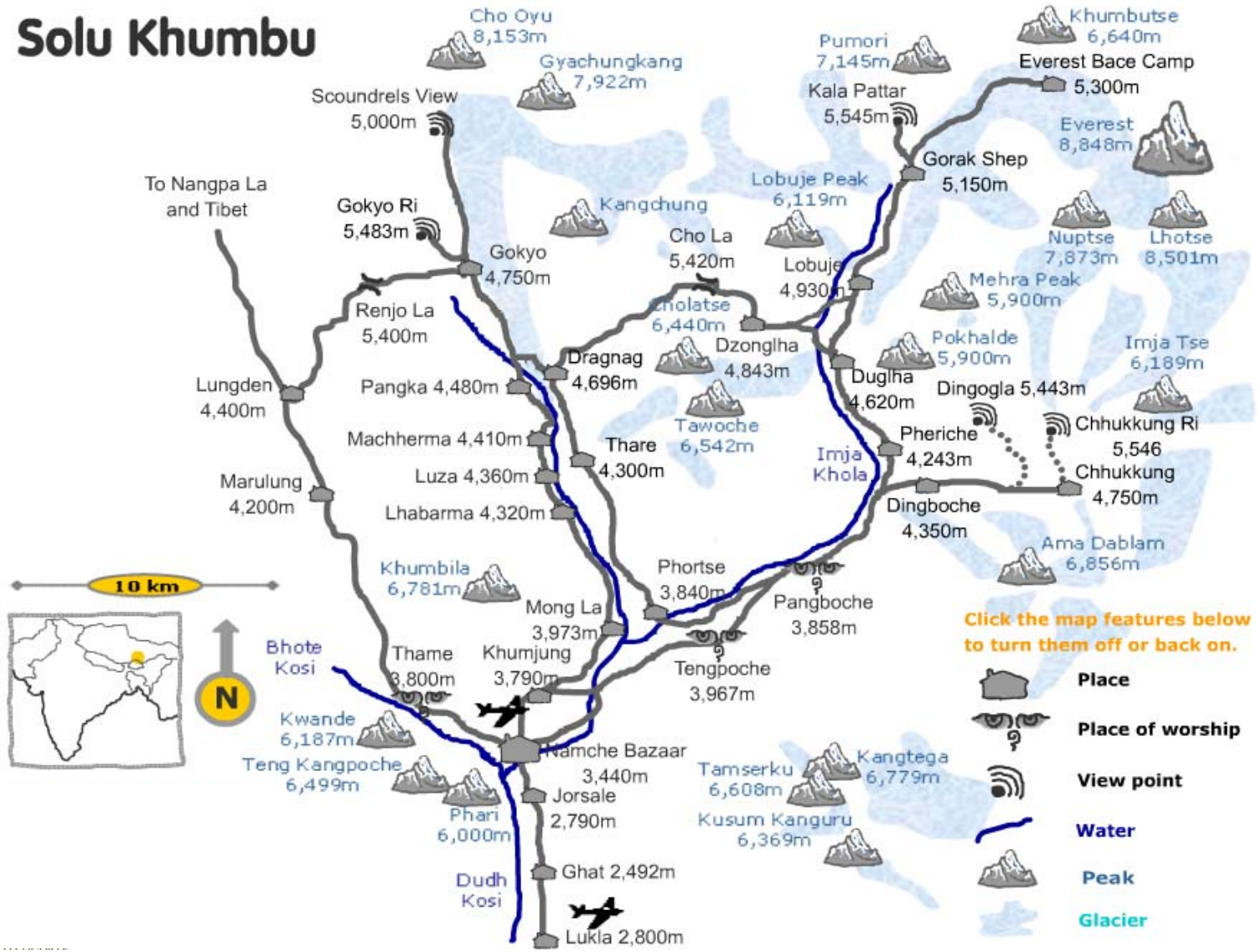
Then the biggest demonstration yet was announced. The aim of many of the protesters was to get through to the Royal Palace, only about five minutes from where we were in Thamel. We realised that the closer they got, the more violent the struggle with the security forces would become. Officially, more than 20 people had already been killed. This was the situation as I bid Helge a hasty farewell and caught a police escorted tourist bus to the airport. This time, sadly, I wasn't at all reluctant when I departed Nepal onboard my Thai airways flight.

Back in New Zealand at the end of April, I was glad to learn that fortunately, at that critical point just before the demonstration, the King finally relented. The seven parties accepted his decision to reinstate parliament and the demonstration, planned for the following day, became a huge celebration. Businesses reopened and the narrow lanes of Thamel jammed again with the usual chaotic traffic. The Maoists announced a unilateral cease fire for the next three months and ended the blockade of the roads. The new government entered into a new round of peace talks with the Maoists (although peace talks have already twice failed in the last ten years) and they released several high-ranking rebels as a sign of good will. A nine point declaration made in May 2006 stripped the King of most of his powers and declared that Nepal should be a secular rather than Hindu state.

I'm sure that these developments have encouraged the people, yet the fundamental problem of fragmented and self-serving politicians still remains. The King is weakened but not out of the picture. The Maoists, while now involved in constructive dialogue with the seven parties, are still a formidable armed force. The seven parties, while united in their efforts to reform the King, still can not agree on certain fundamental issues.
And what likelihood is there for significant change moving forward when the newly appointed Prime Minister, 85 year old Koirala, in poor health and with a clear association with some of the problems since 1992, is once again at the helm?

Although sometimes referred to as the Kingdom of the Snows, the temperature in Nepal is still too hot for comfort. While the unprecedented people's movement suggests that the people's aspiration for peace and democracy has never been stronger; and a workable solution may finally be on the horizon, the situation remains very fragile with the Maoists still armed. What is apparent to me at least, is that staying away from Nepal won't help. The country needs the foreign exchange that tourism, trekking and climbing bring and the presence of foreigners may even serve to moderate extremism. I hope, for the sake of Pasang Dorje, his family and the millions of his warm hearted country-folk, that a stable solution is found very soon. And from a selfish perspective, I want my own sons to one day safely walk the trails of the Khumbu, enjoying the same warmth, humility and sheer magic that I have. That's worth fighting for!

With Pasang Dorje, Ang Nimi and three of their four children in Jorsale (2,800m)


Solu Khumbu
Cho Oyu 8,153m
Gyachungkang 7,922m
Scoundrels View 5,000m
To Nangpa La and Tibet
Gokyo Ri 5,483m
Gokyo 4,750m
Kangchung
Renjo La 5,400m
Lungden 4,400m
Pangka 4,480m
Dragnag 4,696m
Machherma 4,410m
Thare 4,300m
Luza 4,360m
Marulung 4,200m
Lhabarma 4,320m
Khumbila 6,781m
Mong La 3,973m
Phortse 3,840m
Pangboche 3,858m
Tengpoche 3,967m
Bhote Kosi
Thame 3,800m
Khumjung 3,790m
Kwande 6,187m
Teng Kangpoche 6,499m
Namche Bazaar 3,440m
Jorsale 2,790m
Phari 6,000m
Dudh Kosi
Ghat 2,492m
Lukla 2,800m
Cho La 5,420m
Cholatse 6,440m
Dzonglha 4,843m
Tawoche 6,542m
Lobuje Peak 6,119m
Lobuje 4,930m
Duglha 4,620m
Imja Khola
Pumori 7,145m
Kala Pattar 5,545m
Gorak Shep 5,150m
Khumbutse 6,640m
Everest Bace Camp 5,300m
Everest 8,848m
Nuptse 7,873m
Lhotse 8,501m
Mehra Peak 5,900m
Pokhalde 5,900m
Imja Tse 6,189m
Dingogla 5,443m
Pheriche 4,243m
Chhukkung Ri 5,546
Chhukkung 4,750m
Dingboche 4,350m
Ama Dablam 6,856m
Tamserku 6,608m
Kangtega 6,779m
Kusum Kanguru 6,369m
10 km
N
Click the map features below to turn them off or back on.
Place
Place of worship
View point
Water
Peak
Glacier