

Return to the Solu Khumbu

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By Peter Laurenson

Since my first visit to Nepal, I have been drawn back at regular intervals to the Roof of the World, every two years or so. Because there are so many places within the Himalayan / Karakoram chain to explore, I hoped to visit a new place each time. In the back of my mind though, was a deep seated yearning to go back to the Solu Khumbu. It had become a benchmark by which I compared all other destinations, so profound was the impression it had made upon me.

Each year that passed seemed to accentuate my yearning to walk beneath Sagarmartha once more. In the seventh year I was fortunate enough to meet and spend some time with Sir Edmund and Lady Hillary. The couple was delightful, very down to earth, despite their international fame and hectic schedule. It was a thrill to discuss, in person, Sir Edmund's memories of his epic first ascent of Sagarmartha. Whenever the chance arose, I took the opportunity to talk about the Khumbu with them and, during these discussions, my first thoughts of writing about my Himalayan experiences were inspired.

The outcome of our discussions was inevitable. I could resist the Khumbu's call no longer, so engineered an opportunity to return. I went alone in early November, a time when the sky is crystal clear most of the time.

I resolved, this time, to view Sagarmartha from Gokyo Kala Pattar and to tread some different trails to those I had followed on my first visit. I also wanted to see how, with the sustained onslaught of tourism in Nepal, the Khumbu had changed.

My arrival in Kathmandu felt like a kind of home coming. Nepal is vastly different from my true home in New Zealand, but the affinity and familiarity I feel for the kingdom of the snows is very reassuring.

Like most places in the world today, Kathmandu had suffered noticeably from the proliferation of motor vehicles. Noise, congestion and pollution were all now prominent facts of life for the

inhabitants. But despite this, it seemed to me that the soul of this wonderful cultural jewel prevailed. Jostling my way along the crowded alleyways of Thamel brought successive smiles to my lips. The same sights, sounds and smells that so entranced me seven years before still bombarded my senses. It was great to be back.

With a bit of forward planning and the kind assistance of some friends in the right places, I was able to board an ex-Russian army helicopter the very next morning. With trekking permit in hand I was bound, once again, for Lukla.

Powerful feelings of nostalgia blended with pure delight as I gazed from the big round window of the chopper. The November morning light cast a heavenly glow upon the mountains. It was hard to conceive a more beautiful sight.



Durbar Square at sunset, Kathmandu

Travelling in by chopper was quite different to flying in by plane. The Russian-built rotor blades sent a deliberate, thudding, boom reverberating off the mountainsides. We manoeuvred our way steadily towards Lukla without any of the same feelings of vulnerability I'd felt in our light aircraft seven years before.

The frequent use of choppers was the first distinct change I noticed in the Khumbu. Helicopters offer a wonderfully versatile mode of transport, well suited to the rugged, inaccessible terrain of the Himalaya. For instance, landing at Lukla airstrip presented no difficulty at all, despite the fact that the runway was being labouriously paved, totally out of commission for fixed wing air craft.

But choppers are even more intrusive than planes. They fly closer to the ground, can reach more remote places and make much more noise. I couldn't help feeling a little resentful when the powerful thud of a flight-seeing chopper destroyed my solitary tranquillity perched atop Ding Gogla (a 5,400 metre knoll just across the Nuptse glacier from Chhukung Ri, where I first ascended through 5,000 metres on my first visit to the Khumbu). I had made a gruelling, early morning climb to a place where not a soul could be seen or heard for miles around. But the chopper had materialised out of nowhere.

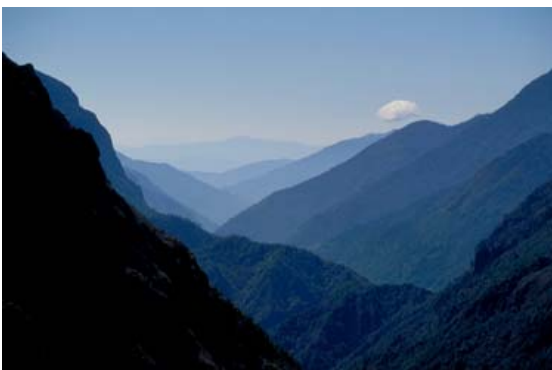
Well-considered controls on the usage of helicopters in the Himalaya are imperative. They need to minimise environmental impacts and also be mindful of the dangers of altitude sickness through ascending too rapidly.

The accessibility afforded by choppers makes it all too easy for non-acclimatised tourists to reach places they would normally take days and weeks to get to. They arrive fresh and can be under the illusion that a short three hour walk into the hills near their chopper pad will be easy.

Upon arrival in Lukla I set off immediately for Jorsale. Being at about the same height as Lukla, I wasn't going to run the risk of encountering acclimatisation problems by sleeping at Jorsale, but it meant I could still get started.

My second observation was of the number of trekking tour groups on the move - many more than we'd encountered previously. But November is peak season for tour groups, so it was no surprise to me. What did sadden me a little, as my chosen route led me onto the main tourist route at various points along my own trek, was that some of the local porters and guides had taken on the dour demeanour so typical of many European trekking groups.

Sometimes my enthusiastic calls of namaste were completely ignored, which was quite out of character. I've never been concerned about why trekking groups can be so aloof and even downright hostile to other westerners when they meet along the trail. However, when the locals, who are naturally so open and friendly, start taking on these characteristics, it tends to indicate that they are being overexposed to tourists.



Top, arriving at Lukla by chopper
Above, looking back towards Lukla from Namche

Not all western influences were negative. A new breed of well educated and travelled, self assured, sophisticated Khumbuites had emerged. I got the feeling that these people would make sure their own interests, culture and way of life would be safeguarded. If they were to evolve under the influences of westernisation, at least they were now in a much stronger position to do it under their own terms.

At Jorsale I checked into the Sherpa Lodge and Restaurant, a basic place situated above the Dhud Kosi. The river roared, the food was good, the patrons friendly - just the way I liked it. I slept well that night.

During my stay at Jorsale I met Pasang Dorje and his charming family. They lived several houses down from my lodge in a typical Khumbu dwelling. Pasang Dorje was a farmer whenever he was not guiding or portering. His pride and joy was a high altitude climbing suit, with attached boots, that he had been given when high altitude portering on an Everest expedition. He had climbed to 8,400 metres on that expedition.

At 28 years of age, Pasang had a wife, Ang Nima, and two very sweet little children. His eldest was a daughter named Pura Dekyid, nearly three. The newest addition to the family was Pasang Tsudin, a four month old boy with big, watchful eyes.

It was actually Pura Dekyid I got to know first. I couldn't help but notice her infectious smile, so I showed her a photo of my own son Ben, at that time an 18-month-old. This became a source of much curiosity for half the population of Jorsale, or so it seemed.

One of the best ways I know to break the ice with Himalayans is to share a family photo with them. Family is central to their world. Nothing is quite so interesting to them as getting a tiny glimpse into our foreign lives. Although not all of them could speak much English, we easily conversed for an hour or more. It was great fun for everyone.



Pasang Dorje and family at home in Josale

Part of my plan on this trek was to cross a high pass known as Cho La, which links Gokyo with Duglha. I'd been advised that I needed a guide to do this safely. By the time we'd finished sharing photos, Pasang Dorje and I had struck a deal. He would meet me at Gokyo in four days time so that he could take me over the pass.

The next morning, I carried on to Namche Bazaar, once again in time to enjoy another Saturday market. Moving up through the dense forested region extending to around 3,800 metres, I was heartened to find that deforestation did not seem to have worsened since my first visit. If anything, tree nurseries seemed more numerous.

I also discovered in Namche, and then later in Gokyo and Dingboche, that the Khumbu now enjoyed a steady supply of electricity. Seven years before, a petrol driven generator powered Namche until 10pm. All the villages above Namche used only wood and other burning fuels for light and heat. Electricity had certainly made life easier for everyone and also reduced the demand for wood fuel.

In Namche it seemed that little had outwardly changed apart from the obvious expansion and more corrugated iron roofing. Given the more worldly nature of some of the locals, prices had risen substantially for accommodation all throughout the Khumbu, but I was surprised at how reasonable the cost of food had remained.

To fill in my acclimatisation time at the 3,500 metre mark I climbed first, up through Shyangboche and Khumjung, to the Everest View Hotel, returning via Khunde at sunset. The following day I walked to Thami to sleep that night at 3,800 metres.

The Everest View Hotel is unique in the Khumbu. It claims four star status, offering all the western-style comforts its high paying guests would expect, plus some little extras like in-room oxygen. Guests who have trouble coping with a direct ascent by plane from Kathmandu to the Hotel, which is perched on a ridge at approximately 3,900 metres, can retreat to their rooms to cocoon themselves in richer air.

The hotel, built by the Japanese, is a sign of the times and does offer stupendous views of a mountain vista stretching, from Cholatse in the west, right across to Tamserku in the east. It did seem oddly out of place though, not in keeping with the more rugged, relaxed nature of the Khumbu and its people.

I was the only person sipping tea on the balcony the evening I visited the Everest View. Perhaps the paying guests were all closeted in their oxygen-rich bedrooms. It seemed strange to see so many under utilised facilities.

I had visions of the movie *The Shining*, but I appreciated the quiet in which I could study the plethora of snowy peaks before me. The waiters, who had nothing much to do, attentively assisted me to identify each one.

Although conscious that I still needed to descend again to Namche before dark, the view was almost hypnotic. Eventually, a rapidly worsening head ache broke the spell and I set off briskly for Namche. After a hearty plate of steamed momos, potatoes and pancakes back down at 3,450 metres, my head ache completely disappeared. Nevertheless, it was a timely reminder for me to respect my physical limitations in the abode of snows.



Views of Tamserku and other peaks above Namche Bazaar



My side trip to Thami the next day was a surprise highlight. The walk followed the Bhote Kosi river up through delightful forest, passing several small villages, mani walls, chortens and colourful Buddhist rock paintings of Guru Rimpoche and Green Tara. Himalayan Tahr gazed down upon me from precarious perches and big woolly yaks paused to see who approached between mouthfuls of coarse grass. At times, the valley opened up to reveal lovely views of Kwangde (6,187 metres) and Teng Kangpoche (6,500 metres), two peaks that loom over the valley.

At one point I walked with Pasang, a Sherpa woman who ran a tea house further up the trail at Samde. She invited me in for tea when we arrived, refusing to accept any payment, despite my emphatic pleas.

Further on I met Glenna, a Canadian. She reminded me of Pam and Rustin, who sadly I'd lost contact with since our meeting in 1988. Glenna made great company as we walked on to Thami together and, in typical trekking fashion, we linked up for several days to follow, thereby forging another new friendship that has lasted well beyond the trek.

Just before sunset we checked into the Thami Lodge. This delightful haven was operated by a very friendly Sherpa family. The lodge was clean and the family were excellent cooks. The view of Kangtega, Tamserku and Kusum Kanguru from their kitchen window was also spell binding. That evening, I scaled a ridge above the village to watch the sun go down. The mountains were bathed in royal shades of purple and lilac, colours I hadn't seen in the mountains before.

From the ridge, when I was able to drag my gaze from the beauty of the sunset for a moment, I looked northwest to Cho Oyu and a trail leading to the Nangpa La, a trader's passage between the Khumbu and Tibet. It stirred memories of the view from the far side that I'd seen in 1992 when trekking on the Tibetan side. Looking whistfully along it, I wondered what the 5,716 metre crossing would be like.

Sitting snugly next to the fire with our hosts while they prepared our dinner later that evening, a picture began to emerge. Pasang Dorje's family in Jorsale, Pasang at her tea house in Samde and now here. All these people were still living traditional lifestyles. The way they dressed, cooked and socialised were still largely untainted by western ways and ideas. I pondered over why people in the Khumbu have

been able to retain such a strong sense of identity when other ethnic groups in some other countries have been overrun.



Top, Kangtega, Tamserku and Kassum Kanguru from Thame
Above, Thame Gompa,
dwarfed by Tengkang Poche
and Ramdung

Religion and culture are intricately interwoven. So perhaps it is their strong religious faith, so permeating all aspects of their lives, that gives them this sense of identity and purpose.

Another significant factor must be the remoteness of their world. No cars, or even motor bikes, can be found anywhere in the Khumbu. The practicalities of every day living, as well as cultural evolution, are dictated by our surroundings. The time it takes to move around by foot in the mountains establishes what the pace of life will be. The isolation means that most of the time and labour saving gadgets we take for granted in the west aren't available in the mountains. People still do most tasks by hand, using man power rather than machine power and technology. When darkness falls in the Khumbu it is time to be with family, to converse, to rest. In the west it's more common to watch TV, start a night shift, or play computer games.

If road access to the Khumbu is ever established, it could well pose the biggest single threat to the current culture and way of life in the Khumbu and other mountain areas. This would be an awful price to pay in the name of economic progress and material gain.

Three days later we reached Gokyo. My anticipation of what I would see from the top of Gokyo Kala Pattar had spurred me on, despite the onset of a hacking cough. The weather had remained clear, permitting magnificent views of Tawachee (6,542 metres) and Cholatse (6,440 metres) to the east and mighty Cho Oyu (8,153 metres) directly ahead to the north.

The trail up to Gokyo offered a very picturesque and changing route. Emerging from the tree line around 4,000 metres, I

followed the trail high above the Dudh Kosi. Gaining about 400 metres while passing through six small villages, I then climbed a stone staircase beside the moraine of the Ngozumpa Glacier. As the trail gradually levelled, I passed one small turquoise lake, then another larger one known as Longponga, before reaching Gokyo.

Gokyo is nestled in a small sloping space between the huge glacial moraine and Gokyo lake. When the light was right, the turquoise coloured lake radiated a luminous quality. Looking northward, the trail continued on from Gokyo past three more glacial lakes, right to the foot of Cho Oyu.

For the Nepalese, Cho Oyu means "Goddess of Turquoise". From the northern outlook, the Tibetans see Cho Oyu as a "Buttress of Faith". Given the colour of the lakes spread before her on the Nepalese side, Cho Oyu is indeed a goddess presiding over a turquoise domain. But she had other sides to her personality; an orange temptress flirting with my camera lens through moving cloud at sunset; a bold sentinel presiding over the immense Ngozumpa Glacier in the bright, early morning sunlight.



Above, freight Khumbu style
Below, Gokyo - village and Lake, from Gokyo Ri



On my second evening at Gokyo Resort, I met a hardy American who claimed to have gone beyond the sixth lake, right onto the side of Cho Oyu. He wanted to see what it was like sleeping above 6,000 metres. He did this in his sleeping bag under the stars. The weather had been kind that night so he is still alive. But the destructive power of nature in the high mountains can strike suddenly, ferociously and without warning. His was an audacious act. Only a week after I had passed across the mouth of a valley below Gokyo, heavy rain engulfed the Solu Khumbu. In the middle of the night some very unlucky trekkers were forced to evacuate their lodge. They had no chance when a huge mud slide engulfed them. As a consequence of this sudden down pour many others also perished. In this land of giants, a heightened sense of life is qualified by a reminder of our insignificance and mortality.

But I was lucky. When I climbed from my sleeping bag before dawn the stars were out. Conditions were perfect when I reached the ragged string of prayer flags on top of Gokyo Kala Pattar. My cough seemed intent on shaking my chest apart in the cold, thin air at 5,350 metres, but it was wonderful to again be gazing across to Sagarmartha. She now revealed her true magnificence, towering above the multitude of other snow and ice clad summits. Nothing else could compete. Lhotse, fourth highest in the world at 8,501 metres seemed small. Fifth highest Makalu, a beautiful 8,475 metre giant, seemed to replicate Sagarmartha, only in miniature. Even Cho Oyu and Gyachang Kang (7,922 metres) failed to dominate, despite being much closer.

The air was so clear that every detail was illuminated as the sun rose higher. I could trace Sir Edmund's classic route up from the South Col, along the south east ridge, to the south summit, over the Hillary Step and on to the summit. A jet stream blasted snow off the summit in the direction of the northwest ridge. An even larger plume came off the top of Makalu while, 600 metres below me, Gokyo slept on. The turquoise lakes glistened. On the far side of the moraine, under a sea of rubble strewn across the Ngozumpa Glacier, melted ice gushed towards the Duhd Kosi. Ominous cracks split the calm as the glacier shifted forward under its own weight.



Above, Cho Oyu is at far left in this view from Gokyo Ri
Below, Pasang Dorje shows me where the un-named peaks are, beyond the fifth lake above Gokyo



Realising that my body was not coping well with the combination of chest infection and high altitude, I resolved to savour the fantastic scene before me. Cho La no longer seemed a realistic goal on this trek. To my surprise, it didn't disappoint me as much as I expected it would. What I had been able to do already had been so enjoyable that it didn't matter that I couldn't complete my entire schedule. Three hours passed before I started back down the hill to Gokyo. I needed to descend if my lungs were to be given a chance to recover.

Respiratory afflictions are quite common at high altitude, where the air is dry and cold. Lungs are forced to work harder, along with all the other faculties, due to the lower oxygen content in the air. I suspect that this factor would prove to be my own weak point if I ever have the opportunity to try some serious mountaineering in the Himalaya.

Next morning I set off with Pasang Dorje who had, as agreed, come up to meet me from Jorsale the evening before. In a last ditch attempt, we crossed the snout of the Ngozumpa Glacier and reached Tauna in the hope that I might feel better as the day wore on. Tauna, at about 4,600 metres, is the last settlement before Cho La. Between coughing fits I glanced up towards the pass, some 800 metres above me. Given my condition, lugging my 25 kg backpack up there was not a good idea. We had a cup of tea and discussed contingencies.

Sometimes it's best to go with the flow. On that fine morning the flow went down hill, so that's what we did. Pasang Dorje agreed to take my now redundant tent and crampons back with him to Jorsale, while I descended below 4,000 metres to Phortse. I hoped this would make me feel sufficiently better to swing round and back up to Chhukung for a final climb to 5,000 metres plus, before beginning my walk out to Lukla.

This plan worked well. Down lower my cough persisted but was bearable and, as it turned out, I did manage to climb Ding Gogra for some unwelcomed helicopter spotting. Although the scenery I enjoyed during the next five days remained outstanding, the highlights were people related.

Pasang Dorje and I shared a bottle of beer at a little earth floored tea house in Thare before saying farewell. I reached Phortse at dusk and checked into the Phortse Tea Shop, a one room dwelling at the top of the village. Phortse is a spectacularly situated village. Its dwellings seem to tumble down a flattened, but still sloping, wedge-shaped piece of land bordered on two sides by virtually sheer cliffs and behind by a steep mountainside.



My hostess preparing chapattis at the Phortse Tea shop

As it transpired, only I checked in to the Phortse Tea Shop that evening. The only other guest was a mouse. My hostess was a sturdy Sherpa woman with a brisk, efficient manner and cheery singing voice. After enjoying a particularly serene sunset, I settled back contentedly to marvel at her chapatti-making prowess. Sleep followed quickly after dinner.

Two days later I found myself back at Pangboche Gompa. Sadly, I couldn't get another look at the famous Yeti relics. They had apparently been stolen by a trekker some years before, another sign of the times. I didn't see the humorous little monk either, and couldn't ascertain his whereabouts from anyone. At least the monastery still possessed the same dilapidated charm.

Right next door to the gompa I discovered, not surprisingly, the Pangboche Gompa Lodge. Owned by a very friendly and hospitable man named Namka Sherpa, it looked out across a small court yard onto the gompa and also commanded a magnificent view of the Necklace of the Mother, Ama Dablam, across the Imja Khola valley.

Namka Sherpa worked part of each year further up the valley, at the Himalayan Rescue Association in Periche, as well as overseeing the lodge. His wife and two daughters tended the lodge while his three sons were away doing other things. His wife was quite striking in appearance, taller and finer featured than most Sherpa woman. She had also passed her good looks onto her two daughters.

Once again, despite it being peak season for trekking, I was the only guest. Namka Sherpa's wife invited me to join her family in their kitchen rather than sit alone in the guest area. I was glad to find that Namka Sherpa spoke good English, because this enabled us to converse about more than the usual basics like, "Where are you from? Are you married? How many children?" While the women worked around the hearth preparing dhimdo, Namka Sherpa told me about himself and his family. He also explained what was on the menu for dinner.



Approaching Pangboche, with Ama Dablam dominating the vista at right and the Everest Group on the left

Dhimdo is the Sherpa equivalent of Tibetan tsampa. Unlike tsampa though, which is made solely of ground, roasted barley, dhimdo is made of a mix of barley, corn and wheat. I've had tsampa before and have found it to be very bland and heavy to eat. Although the dull, grayish-brown log that was plopped on my plate looked more suitable for ejection rather than something to ingest, to my surprise, it tasted so good that I was pleased when more was piled on my plate. A spicy mushroom soup was poured over the dhimdo to give it flavour and moisten it. I think that made the difference for me.

I felt privileged to be invited so openly into their little circle. Clustered around the glowing hearth, I got another taste of what Sherpa family life is like. The gathering was fluid. People came in and out, both friends and family. At one point, a very old man joined us. He had a kindly looking leather face that always seemed to smile, even when his mouth wasn't actually smiling. Like me, he was afflicted with a hacking cough, but it didn't seem to bother him. He didn't speak English but, through Namka Sherpa, I could ask him questions. His name was Ang Kin Zum and although he wasn't sure, he estimated his age to be 77 years. He was one of the remaining few in the Khumbu practising the art of mani stone carving. When Namka Sherpa suggested that I might visit Ang Kin Zum next morning to photograph him at work I could hardly believe my good fortune.

Later a young Sherpa trekking guide joined us. I asked him and Namka Sherpa how they felt about the onslaught of tourism in the Khumbu. Between gulps of Khukree Rum and sweet tea they explained quite emphatically that tourism, particularly trekking, had been good for the Khumbu. They agreed that the resultant foreign exchange and additional jobs had significantly improved their quality of life. They also assured me that traditional Sherpa ways still prevailed. Most of what I'd seen during my trek supported this reassuring view.

Next morning the first rays of the dawn sun streamed through my window. Looking out, the central spire and overhanging roof of Pangboche Gomba were silhouetted beautifully, with the Kwangde massif illuminated behind.

Later in the sunny little courtyard, while I waited to be taken to see Ang Kin Zum, I watched two grubby, cheeky, little girls playing knuckle stones, while Namka Sherpa's pretty wife gave him a haircut. It made a happy village scene.

Looking like a new man with his new hair style, Namka Sherpa took me up behind the gomba where we found Ang Kin Zum, tapping expertly away with a small hammer and slender stone chisel. He was carving the ubiquitous mantra "om mani padme hum" in Tibetan script on a small piece of gray mountain rock. A more natural spectacle I couldn't imagine. His tough, old, stone-dust-covered hands worked the rock so easily. Occasionally he spat on the rock to facilitate the precision of his chisel. In a surprisingly short while he had completed the mantra. He looked up with a sparkling, leather faced smile that hinted of the pride he felt for his handiwork. I made a silent wish that his craft would live on after him.



Two days later I returned to Jorsale to collect my tent and crampons from Pasang Dorje. All the family was there and expecting me. Ang Nima hustled me into their humble home and immediately presented me with some hearty soup. It was very good to see them again and I sensed that they thought so too. After taking some family portraits, which I've since sent back to them, we drank tea and talked about the day I'd return with my family. We could all meet and Pasang Dorje could lead me over the Cho La. It was a fine idea.

Just as I was about to leave, Ang Nima honoured our friendship by draping white scarves and a garland of flowers around my neck. As I walked down the trail towards Lulka I couldn't help shedding a few emotional tears. All the magic of the Himalayan experience was summed up by her touching gesture and I knew there was no better way for me to say my second farewell to the Solu Khumbu. Of course, I vowed once more to return.

Left, Ang Kin Zum, mani stone carver. Below, knuckle stones. Below right, little Pura Dekyid and I having a chuckle before we bid a fond farewell



Solu Khumbu, Nepal

