

# Sagarmartha Casts Her Spell

## Getting to the Khumbu

My first journey to Nepal started, with some trepidation, from Darjeeling. As we boarded our dwarf sized bus bound for Siliguri, we didn't have visas to enter Nepal, but had been told that it was no problem to get them at the border. Even so, when it comes to visas in developing countries, I've found that it's definitely a case of "a bird in the hand is worth ten in the bush". Suffice to say, we were less than confident that all would proceed according to plan.

The three and a half hour journey back down the switch back road to Siliguri proved uneventful and our jeep connection from Siliguri to the border was almost instantaneous. This seamless synchronisation would've impressed me no end had we not been transformed into canned sardines, along with 19 others, crammed into (and onto) our jeep, with all our baggage heaped upon us and the roof. The 50 minute journey that followed gave me ample time to dwell upon the Guinness world record of 99 people squeezed into a Mini Austin.

At the border, our visas to enter Nepal were issued with no mishap and, like sardines popping out of an over-filled sandwich, there we were in the dust and confusion of Kakarhbitta bus depot on the Nepalese side of the border. We felt like giving ourselves a break, so purchased "luxury class" bus tickets for the 15 hour plus journey up to Kathmandu. The idea of luxury class, with reclining seats and a bit of leg room, tantalised us for a while until we actually boarded our bus. The bubble burst when, ushered to the very back, we joined four smiling Indian youths who kindly squeezed up just enough to let us lever ourselves into two of the six narrow swabs outrageously masquerading as seats.



I can't remember very much of the journey up to the Kingdom of the Snows, which is a pity, as parts of the route are renowned for spectacular scenery. By the time the bus departed at 4 pm we were already tired. The bus was a short wheel

based machine and we were in the very back seats. This meant that, each time we jolted over a pot hole in the endless, upwardly winding road, we were catapulted violently out of our seats, usually bashing our heads on the ceiling.

I do remember the comatose heads of our young Indian fellow suffers flopping into my lap at various points during the night. Also leg cramps, aching joints, humidity and countless precarious bends in the road taken at break neck speed. At least it cooled down as we gained altitude and, once night fell, this hid the gaping voids on the down hill side that our crazed driver was negotiating - out of sight, out of mind.

Rather dazed and shell shocked, we eventually found ourselves honking and jolting our way through the outskirts of Kathmandu. Dawn had passed and the sun was up, revealing a site which perked me up noticeably. The people seemed familiar, the buildings jogged my groggy memory and the feelings I'd left behind in Darjeeling started to return. Re-emerging in Himalayan territory, almost by magic, the discomforts of the preceding journey were forgotten.

Our days in Kathmandu and its surrounding valley were filled with a bewildering array of wondrous discoveries. I soon knew that, despite the noise and filth of too many badly tuned internal combustion engines, open sewer ways, stray mongrels and general decay, the Kathmandu valley surely possessed an X factor. A special blend of qualities that other treasures of mankind like Lhasa, Kashgar, Jerusalem, Varanasi and Pagan also possess; an uncanny ability to cast a spell of intrigue that is more reality than fantasy, but difficult to distinguish between the two.

The most prominent of the kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley were Patan, Bhaktapur, Kirtipur and Kathmandu itself. All these places still exist today in various states of prosperity, development or otherwise. And all of them revealed to me glimpses of their medieval heritage and past grandeur. Words alone fail to do justice to these past kingdoms. To know their mystique requires a stroll through the narrow alleyways that lead to their hearts, their Durbar Squares, which each kingdom still possesses.



The Kathmandu valley is the site of several ancient kingdoms, all rooted in an entrancing alliance between Hinduism and Buddhism. It wasn't until 1768 that the Kathmandu valley and all of Nepal were forcibly unified by a Nepali, King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Until then, independent kingdoms coexisted. Nepal has never been occupied by a foreign power or undergone any major destructive war. As a consequence, Nepali history, heritage and culture had accumulated and flourished. Twenty different ethnic groups today make up Nepal's populace. The valley tantalized my imagination and stirred my spirit.

Another colourful day in Kathmandu

And in these alleyways and Durbar Squares a vibrant living culture charmed me with good humoured pushiness. Kathmandu is a cultural hybrid, still anchored by history, tradition and above all, religion. But it is also grappling with the concepts of and conflicts between a constitutional monarchy, democracy, socialism and the rapid invasion of westernisation.

All our senses were bombarded. The clang of countless bells in Hindu shrines, populated by devotees, flower petals, coloured rice grains and the mice feasting on them entranced me. Wafts of fragrant incense, contrasting with pungent rubbish piles and the packs of mangy dogs foraging in them, intoxicated me. Lively interchanges in numerous courtyard markets, at their busiest just after dawn and around sunset, entertained me. Magnificent, centuries-old craftsmanship, manifested in intricately carved, low hung doorways and window eaves, impressive shrines and handicrafts, competed with less endearing modern structures supposedly heralding development and economic progress. Wiry men carrying huge loads amazed me - ah, but we were near Sherpa country. And the culinary delights of the Pudding Shop and countless other eating houses offered a choice of Tibetan, Italian and anything else we cared to partake of.

If it hadn't been for the irresistible lure of the mountains, we could have remained in Kathmandu for many days. But the haze through which I could occasionally distinguish some of those magnetic Himalayan peaks, warned of an impending monsoon. We couldn't delay for fear that our first opportunity to venture onto the roof of the world would be denied by torrential downpours.

Our choice of trekking area seemed obvious. But being first time visitors to Nepal, maybe there was really no choice at all for us. We were in the realm of Sagarmartha, which in Nepal means "Head of the ocean", a rather perceptive title for the highest



From Kathmandu the Himalaya beckons

peak in a veritable ocean of all the world's highest peaks. Sagarmartha is also the highest point in a geological region that actually had been an ocean 55 million years ago. Then two continental plates - the Indo Australian, advancing from the south at a rate of five cm per year, and the Eurasian plate - collided, resulting in the transformation of an ocean into the highest, most extensive alpine region on earth.

For most Westerners, Sagarmartha is known as Mount Everest, named after the English Surveyor General Sir George Everest, who headed the survey in the 1830s that first identified the mountain as the highest point on the planet. Acknowledging the good surveying work that Everest certainly led, I still feel that it is more appropriate to refer to the tallest mountain on earth by the names given her by the people who know her best.

The mountain and the region spread out beneath her are about much more than statistics and heroic mountaineering exploits, impressive and inspiring though these facts and feats are. We as visitors can recognise this, by carefully looking, listening and feeling, as we tread the narrow paths leading to the spiritual heart of the abode of snows. But to really understand what it is to be Himalayan is probably only achieved by living a lifetime in this unique and special place.

As a mark of respect, I therefore prefer to use the local names - Sagarmartha, meaning “Head of the Ocean” in Nepali; and Chomolungma, meaning “Mother Goddess of all the Snows” in Tibetan. So, being in Nepal, it was Sagarmartha, at 8,848 metres, the highest mountain in the world. How could we be so near yet not go nearer?

Sagarmartha lay to the north east on the border with Tibet. The Nepalese region affording the best southern approach to Sagarmartha is known as the Solu Khumbu, home to various ethnic groups, most famous of which are the Sherpas. The main administrative centre of the Khumbu is a charming crescent shaped town, perched on a steep hillside at 3,440 metres. Its name is Namche Bazaar and until 1965, the only way to reach it from Kathmandu required at least 16 days of strenuous walking from Lamosangu on the Kodari Highway, linking Kathmandu with Tibet. By 1984 the road head had been pushed to a village called Jiri, 188 kms from Kathmandu. Despite ambitious plans, the road head has not progressed beyond Jiri since. This gives a perspective of how rugged and isolated the Himalayan foothills are.

Thanks to the initial efforts of the Hillary Trust, there is now a much easier alternative. The nine day journey has been cut to two or three by flying from Kathmandu directly to Lukla airstrip at 2,800 metres. The airstrip was constructed, under Sir Edmund Hillary’s guidance, as one of many initiatives undertaken by him to improve conditions for those living in the Khumbu region. Originally, the airstrip was meant to be a temporary facility in case of emergencies during the establishment of the Khunde Hospital. However, this dramatically improved access was not to be relinquished. RNAC (Royal Nepal Air Corps) expanded the air strip in 1977 and graced it with a control tower in 1983, which coincided with an expanding demand for transport to the Khumbu region for trekking.

Today, Lukla airstrip is the second busiest airport in Nepal. However, one should not be deceived by this surprising and rather indicative statistic. A flight to or from Lukla is spectacular, exciting and, at times, unnerving; not at all what I expected from a ‘main stream’ airport.



Sagarmartha (Nepal); Chomolungma (Tibet); Mount Everest (International)  
Here, viewed from Gokyo Ri in the Solu Khumbu

Just securing a place on the 15 seat air craft can be an event to remember, or maybe better to forget. The flights are highly weather dependent. Turbulent conditions, normally at the Lukla end, or poor visibility at either end, can delay flights for days, especially at the approach of the monsoon in May. When faced with the prospect of an additional seven days walk in to Lukla, or five or six days walk out to Kathmandu, tensions can run high when someone has an international flight to catch in two days time, or they’re simply trekked out.

Despite having only themselves to blame, because the uncertainties of travel in the Himalaya are well known, trekkers have been known to show their darker sides in these circumstances. I've been told of punchups between irate trekkers and the Lukla airstrip staff. Given the reputation of the Sherpas as fearless soldiers, my money would be on the Sherpas during such a fracas.

But I do understand the tension of uncertainty and anticipation when flying in the Himalaya. I can't wait to get back onto those mountain trails. Has my seat been double booked? Will we actually take off today? These are thoughts running through my own mind prior to take off. I'm glad to say that I haven't been disappointed yet, but I can't see myself coming to blows with anyone, least of all the good natured Sherpas, if things do ever go awry.

And to the contrary, rather than suffering disappointed on our first Himalayan flight, we were thrilled. By walking briskly to our twin engine Otter, twin engines in case one engine encounters problems during a section of the flight that is un-reachable by ground or un-landable, we secured window seats - a good start. These were put to permanent use as we left the tarmac of Kathmandu airport. Being light aircraft and, given the high altitude of the earth's surface, we flew close to the ground.

Looking out my window on the left side of the aircraft, I saw the Himalaya stretching as far as the eye can see both east and west. The mountains were of a size and scale only possible in the Himalaya. When complemented by a cobalt, high altitude sky and, from below by equally stunning multi layered, lovingly terraced hillsides supporting the crops that feed Nepal, the sight was simply breath taking - a glorious event worth experiencing even if you have no time to actually land and go trekking.

We soon saw the fragile-looking, winding roads fall away far behind, bringing home to us just how remote our destination was.

The two engines droned on reassuringly as we banked left, then right, then left again, in order to find a way through, not over, the massive ridges that are the foot hills of the Himalaya. Little hamlets became distinguishable, so close to the hill sides were we. But how could someone build a dwelling there? Where did they go to and fro each day? Certainly not to a hard day at the office. Looking at the incredible terrain either side of us, I thought to myself that maybe "hard days at the office" aren't as hard as we westerners like to think they are.

Far below us, where the feet of the huge ridges on our left met the feet of the huge ones on our right, a gray river tumbled down towards the lowlands. It was the Dudh Kosi, carrying glacial sediments and melted ice from a host of alpine giants, including Sagarmartha herself.



We were getting close. A village came into view on the right. Was it Lukla? No, not yet, replied our pilot. We later discovered it to be Chaunrikharka, a little north of Lukla.

Suddenly, another village came into view, also on the right side of our plane, but much closer. It was tucked into a side valley, running roughly at a right angle away from the Dudh Kosi, several hundred metres below. This had to be Lukla. Just as we thought it, our idea was confirmed by the somewhat alarming manoeuvres our pilot was manually executing. Initially, he veered left towards a seemingly sheer hill side, then banked sharply to the right. Julie tightened her grip on my thigh as I reassured myself that our pilot had probably done this landing hundreds of times, hadn't he?

The air strip came into view directly ahead. So rugged - not even tar sealed, just a dusty, stoney earth way. So steep - not level like a normal run way, but on an obvious gradient sloping upwards for in coming air craft. Most alarming of all, so short - with the top end of the run way abruptly cut off by the face of a mountain.

In we went. The air strip rushed up to meet us. The Dudh Kosi disappeared in a blur underneath us. Suddenly we were down, bumping and jolting our way rapidly up towards that mountain at the end of the run way. The resulting dust cloud was large enough to hold its own amongst the gigantic land scape surrounding us, but the plane was slowing. Yes, our pilot did know what he was doing, very well in fact. As we literally ran out of runway, he gently guided us into a set down area on the right. Finally coming to a

standstill, the engines were shut down and we were there. Feelings of excitement were sobered just a little though, when walking across the runway towards the quaint stone and mud houses of Lukla, I looked back down the runway towards a gaping, sheer drop to the Dudh Kosi River, only a few hundred metres away. Our scheduled take off from Lukla in fifteen days time was going to be a real heart stopper!



Lukla airstrip,  
2,800m

Although continually disrupted by the incoming and out going air traffic, each time depositing fresh, wide-eyed, budding trekkers, or uplifting grimy, suntan faced ones craving a hot shower and a beer back in Kathmandu, Lukla still retained a dignified air. The place had become quite efficient and business like, without losing the under-

lying friendliness and charm that characterises all villages in the Khumbu. We found it a nice place from which to start a trek and enjoyed the notion that it was Lukla waiting for us when we eventually had to come down again from higher altitudes.

At 2,800 metres, it is important to realise that Lukla is already at a respectable altitude. Because the mainly excellent trails of the Khumbu take you, relatively effortlessly, to 5,000 metres and above, it is most important to remain aware and respectful of the effects that high altitude can have on us. It is for good reason that the local Sherpas have such muscular legs, such big lungs and a heart size considerably larger than that of most of the visitors to their lofty home land.

The Sherpas and other high altitude dwellers make do with about half the oxygen content in the air that sea level dwellers do. Consequently, their bodies have adapted to this over the centuries. As low level dwellers, visiting trekkers cannot expect to wander about as we can at home. We must adapt to the rarefied air if we want to fully enjoy our time on the roof of the world. Apart from the enjoyment factor, we ignore the possible effects of high altitude at our peril. Altitude sickness can, has and continues to kill poorly informed or careless trekkers in the Himalaya.

This is certainly not a reason to avoid coming. There are some basic, easy to follow rules that, for the vast majority of us, will ensure that the worst to befall us as we ascend to around 5,000 metres is a little nausea, restless nights and possibly a mild head ache. All these symptoms disappear as you spend longer up high.

The golden rule is don't ascend too quickly. Above 3,000 metres it is strongly recommended that you don't ascend more than 500 metres per day; and vital that an extra day is spent at around 3,500 metres and then again, at around 4,500 metres. Other basic rules include drinking a lot of water - several litres per day above 3,000 metres, with a commensurate increase in water intake as you go higher. Also, let your body tell you how it's coping - and listen. If the effects of ascending too rapidly do manifest themselves, don't keep going higher. If the symptoms persist, go down.

Bearing all this in mind, our plan entailed spending our first night in Lukla, before ascending 640 metres to Namche Bazaar, the main administrative centre of the Khumbu and a major market place on Saturday mornings. Here we planned to spend two nights, at 3,440 metres, before proceeding higher.



Typical open friendliness from one of the residents of Lukla

### Lukla to Namche

The walk from Lukla to Namche began as a pleasant undulating trail following the Dudh Kosi River. The going got progressively tougher, requiring quite a few descents to, and then ascents from, tributaries feeding into the Dudh Kosi. Although it seemed that we'd ascended a lot since Lukla, in fact the sum total of our efforts amounted to about 50 metres by the time we reached Jorsale at 2,850 metres. Jorsale is the last village before the big climb up to Namche.

Despite slow progress in terms of altitude gain, we really enjoyed the sights, sounds, smells and sensations that we encountered. The sun was out, glistening on the milky surface of the Dudh Kosi River. For the Sherpas, Dudh means milk, an apt parallel to the effect of the fine glacial sediments that swirl thickly in the waters of many a Himalayan river. Sun rays filtered through the foliage of lush green rhododendrons, warming our bodies. The friendly locals invariably greeted us with calls of "namaste", a widely used Hindu greeting spilling naturally from their smiling lips, warming our hearts. Namaste translates as "I bow before the divinity that is present in you". The sentiment typifies the generous, open predisposition of Himalayans. It was truly a great day to be alive.

The trail passed through another six villages before Jorsale, all of them yielding points of interest and places to take time out for a local drink or snack. Villages frequently intersperse the trails of the Khumbu, even up to 4,930 metres in places such as Lobuje, the high altitude summer settlement closest to Sagarmartha. Many of these villages offered lodgings and food for passing travellers, both locals and tourists alike. Although very basic, they are usually friendly little oases of warmth, companionship and, for tourists, a perfect opportunity to observe how the local people live.

I've enjoyed many pleasant encounters in lodges of the Khumbu. The high incidence of these lodges is widely beneficial. Tourists enjoy a unique opportunity to travel lightly. There is no need to lug tents, cooking equipment or even substantial food stocks in the Khumbu unless you intend going into the unpopulated alpine domain above 5,000 metres – it's all there waiting for you. In the thin Himalayan air this is a distinct advantage. Countering this of course, is the drain on natural resources that trekking has created. Thankfully, this is now being managed and measures such as the installation of electric power and the helicoptering in of supplies are helping to minimise any further depletion of natural resources.

It is quite straight forward finding your way along the numerous trails. If in doubt, just ask a local for guidance, either as they meet you on the trail, or at the next village that you come upon. The people of the Khumbu are now well accustomed to the ways of westerners, first through contact with mountaineering expeditions and, more recently, through much more frequent contact with tourists.

More than 16,000 now pass through the Khumbu each year, so most locals speak at least a few words of English, which helps to ease communications. It also opens possibilities for more in depth conversations, which can be both enlightening and also a lot of fun. People in the Khumbu, and throughout the Himalaya, love to laugh and joke.



Porters heading  
back down  
to Lukla

The benefits are not just one way either. Villagers, that once had only their crops as a meagre means of income, now can substantially supplement this with income from providing food and lodgings.

As we walked, of particular curiosity were our first encounters with ingenious merit gaining devices used by followers of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the Himalaya. Huge boulders with Buddhist mantras carved sometimes boldly, sometimes intricately, all over their surface blocked the trail, obliging passers-by to walk around them. When passed in a clockwise direction, this is believed to bring merit upon the wayfarer. A variation on this concept are mani walls - hundreds, or even thousands of stones, each carved with mantras, mandalas (Tibetan depictions of the universe) or images of Buddha, heaped along the centre of the trail to literally form a wall. Sometimes the craftsmanship in the carving is superb, also bringing heightened merit to the one placing the mani stone. Again, the clockwise approach is required, unless you are a follower of Bon (an animistic religion of Tibet that predominated prior to the onset of Buddhism about twelve centuries ago), in which case anti-clockwise is the order of the day.



Equally ingenious were the prayer wheel stations that dotted the trail, often marking each end of villages. These are cylinders that contain many thousands of mantras, written on paper which is sealed inside. The cylinders themselves also have mantras inscribed on their outer surfaces, often in bright primary colours. The cylinders are housed in small, purpose built, stone rooms with entrances sufficiently large to permit passers by to reach in and spin the cylinders, again in a clockwise direction. Each spin sends prayers into the heavens, bringing merit to the spinner.

More ingenious still are the water powered derivatives of the basic prayer wheel station. Here, the water wheel concept is applied to the task of spinning, in a clockwise direction, prayer wheels that are placed over mountain streams. So long as the stream runs, the result for the builders is a never ending torrent of prayers spinning forth to heap merit upon them. Of course, the prayer wheel concept is not restricted to stationary circumstances either. Mini prayer wheels mounted at the end of a handle are also carried by believers as they go about their daily business. A well practised twitch of the wrist results in a rhythmic, clockwise, spinning motion which also serves to build merit.

Another common variation on the merit building theme is the prayer flag. These are strung up between roof ends, across rivers and on mountain passes. As they are caressed by the wind, the many mantras printed on them flutter their prayers to the skies, again bringing merit to those placing them there.



One of the more colourful examples of a mani boulder

To lay people like ourselves, all these strange devices made a colourful and intriguing spectacle. At first it seemed rather obsessive to me. As my exposure to the dwellers of the roof of the world increased though, I began to understand that I was the one being obsessive, by judging their ways through my own western eyes. Whereas spiritualism and religion tend to be parts of our western lives that we turn on and off depending upon the situation, time of day, week or year, for followers of Tibetan Buddhism there is no separation. For the old Tibetan man I had watched behind the counter at the Himalayan Restaurant in Darjeeling, his repetition of “Om mani padme hum” and the gentle caress of his rosary were as real and central to him as anything else he did during any hour, day, week, year or lifetime. There is a clarity and sureness of things for him and his kind which I, in some ways, wish I shared.

We set off from Jorsale in the early afternoon, following a tasty meal at a smoky little rest house. The final section was a real gut buster, especially when tackled as the grand finale of a solid eight hour hike. At the time of my first visit to the Khumbu, the trail above Jorsale had recently taken a severe hammering from a ten metre wall of flood water, unleashed from a glacier further up in the mountains. The power of this liquid juggernaut, as it gathered momentum and rapidly falling debris, must have been devastating judging by the damage still evident on parts of the trail. Consequently, it was easy to lose the way at some points, which we did, ending up hanging precariously from a rock face high above the trail. Luckily, this predicament at least enabled us to relocate the trail again.

Although it was touch and go for a few tense minutes, despite the dragging, ungainly bulk of our backpacks, we managed to negotiate a small rocky outcrop that hung above a nasty drop. The adrenaline rush was actually well timed to help propel me up what was to be the biggest, single hill climb I'd ever encountered at that time. And it started, right down at river level, by following a huge crack in the base of a sheer cliff.

The local people are ingenious improvisors when it comes to erecting make shift trails, bridges and stone staircases where an avalanche, rock slide or flood has left its destructive mark. This particular path was fine testimony to their skills. It felt to me like we were actually climbing up into another world. Up through the wet cool shadows, away from the amplified roar of the Dudh Kosi, but into what? A land of giants maybe. I imagined how Jack felt as he climbed his beanstalk into the clouds for the very first time - straining legs, pumping heart and delicious anticipation.

About half way up we emerged onto the edge of a ridge, upon which was perched a little rest house selling the best tasting Coca Cola in the universe. I demolished a couple of bottles of the sweet, cool liquid before regaining some composure. As if to mark the auspiciousness of the occasion, there appeared, unexpectedly and rather briefly through shifting cloud, a beautiful mountain peak. At the time I didn't realise it, but this was my first sighting of Sagarmartha.



First sighting of Sagarmartha on the climb to Namche Bazaar

It wasn't too much longer before we found ourselves strolling into Namche Bazaar. My almost instant impression of the place was that it looked, on a smaller scale at least, exactly how I had imagined Kathmandu before actually seeing it for the first time.

Dusty stone walkways zig-zagged up and down, passing between characteristically Khumbu style housing. This is quite similar to the housing found in parts of Tibet in that it is usually two or three storied, built of mud and stone, roughly plastered and white washed. But the brightly painted window eaves that decorate the buildings are larger in the Khumbu. Equally colourful prayer flags, strung across roof tops, added to the visual appeal.

Ground level was dominated by crowded little retail shops offering all manner of merchandise. The customers ranged from western tourists to Tibetan traders, especially on Saturdays, when Namche Bazaar hosts a thriving street market.

As if to remind us just how insignificant we really are in the overall scheme of things, to the west the Kwangde massif, a series of three summits, the tallest reaching 6,187 metres, towered nearly three vertical kilometres over the town. More distant, but no less spectacular, were two other mountain groups viewable from various vantage points at Namche. To the east, running south to north were the Kasum Kanguru chain (highest peak 6,369 metres), the striking cleaved peak of Tamserku (6,608 metres) and Kangtega (6,779 metres), all seeming to form one spectacular massif. And to the north we could just see our ultimate goal, Sagarmartha, peeking over the massive wall of Nuptse (7,896 metres). Fourth highest in the world, Lhotse (8,501 metres) soared up from the east end of Nuptse.

Sitting in splendid isolation between these two mountain groups was Ama Dablam, in my opinion, one of the most striking peaks in the Khumbu. Ama Dablam translates as “Necklace of the mother”, indicating how the local people also rate the beauty of this magnificent edifice. At 6,856 metres, it was not the tallest, but its dramatic ice fluted peak was accentuated by its location. From Namche, the entire mountain loomed up from the Imja Khola river, seeming to give Ama Dablam larger than life proportions.

Apart from acclimatising to a higher altitude, our stay in Namche obliged us to stop long enough to get to know some of the other trekkers in town. We ended up getting on particularly well with a Canadian/American couple. Pam, the Canadian, was a tall, bubbly, red headed nurse and Rustin, the American, a very muscular, even tempered paramedic. As it was, our trekking routes coincided, so we agreed to head off from Namche together. I was fortunate to meet Pam, because I'd developed a throat infection. The quickest way to cure it was an elephant needle jab of penicillin, administered deep into my right rump. Pam knew exactly what she was doing, as it didn't hurt a bit, and I was soon fully recovered.

I've found it easy to forge new, enduring friendships, with both locals and trekkers alike, during our treks in the Himalaya. Thankfully, this doesn't normally necessitate close “bonding experiences” like the one I had with Pam and her three inch needle. It's easy to strike up friendships in such a majestic, invigorating place. And experiences are heightened when they can be shared with friends. My Christmas card list has expanded to include Canadian, German, Dutch, Swiss, New Zealand, Nepalese and Pakistani recipients, all met during my time in the abode of snows.

The morning of our departure from Namche coincided with the Saturday market, always good news for meat eaters, as each market brings new provisions to Namche. At the time, no refrigeration existed in Namche, although since then an electrical cable has been installed, providing light and heat at the flick of a switch right up to the high settlements at Gokyo and Lobuje. Without refrigeration, meat was stored on hooks over the fire. With the passage of six days and the build up of soot from the fire, meat did not strike me as a gastronomic possibility. By Saturday lunchtime though, yak-burgers were once again a top seller in the trekkers lodges of Namche.



Namche Bazaar, with Tamserku (6,608m) towering overhead

The market itself was a most memorable occasion.

It started at the crack of dawn as yak trains arrived from all over the region, even from as far away as Tibet, bringing in a wide variety of commodities for trade. The jangling of the bells fastened around the pack animals necks made a delightful sound to wake up to. For a moment I even thought I was dreaming about the Sound of Music as I lay cocooned in my warm sleeping bag. As I realised what the sound really was, my early morning lethargy evaporated. It was market day and I didn't want to miss it.

As the sun rose, warming the town to wakefulness, the market filled with a colourful array of ethnic groups - wild looking Tibetans with braided hair from the north, Gurung women with delicate gold jewellery adorning their noses, Sherpas sporting big loads and bigger smiles, Hindus with geometrically patterned, pill box caps, and trekkers with impressed expressions and long zoom lens, all intermingling. Who watched who was sometimes difficult to distinguish, but when a deal was being struck, the garish clothing of the trekkers was quickly forgotten by the traders as they locked wills over the negotiation of a price.

The sun seemed to have a soothing effect as it climbed away from Kasum Kanguru towards Kwangde. In the early morning chill, people had been brisk and business like. But as the morning passed, they relaxed into friendly little gossip sessions and smoking circles. Slowly, the seething crowd thinned as satisfied traders drifted off.



### Namche to Tengpoche

Midmorning, after ingesting a cultural smorgasbord of memories from the market, we set off for Tengpoche, a small monastic settlement perched at 3,867 metres in a magnificent spot affording, so the monks of Tengpoche claim, the best view in the world. As we skirted around the base of Khumbila towards a suspension bridge crossing the Dudh Kosi at 3,250 metres, I thought that the views of Sagarmartha, Nuptse, Lhotse and Ama Dablam from that particular vantage point would be pretty tough to beat though.

From the Dudh Kosi we climbed steadily through lush forest until we arrived on top of the ridge. Here, we found Tengpoche Gompa (Gompa is a Tibetan word meaning monastery), almost complacently situated with its back to the “greatest view in the world”. And maybe the monk’s claim is true, the sight before us was indeed remarkable, not just because of the vastness of the panorama but also because of the significance of the peaks contained within it. To my delight, I later found myself lying on my bed in our trekkers lodge, hot chocolate in hand, gazing out my window directly at the summit of Sagarmartha. The jet stream, striking her at speeds in excess of 100 kms per hour, blasted a massive snow plume off into Tibet, accentuating my own comfortable state. What a pleasure it was to be there then.

Although Tengpoche Gompa was only established in 1919 and had been devastated by an earthquake in 1934 and by fire in 1989, it is still the most important Gompa in the Khumbu. On my second visit to the Khumbu in 1995, I was delighted to find Tengpoche Gompa reincarnated as a larger, grander building than it ever was before the fire. This resurrection, requiring significant financial contributions from both locals and international organisations, illustrated just how important the Gompa of Tengpoche has become. Several major Buddhist festivals are held there each year, attracting locals from all over the region, as well as many tourists.

### Tengpoche to Pangboche and Dingboche

The following day a short walk, crossing the Imja Khola River on a suspension bridge strung over a dizzying gash in solid rock, then up past impressive mani walls and chortens, led us to another gumpa at Pangboche. Although Pangboche is a substantial town by Khumbu standards, the gumpa is much more modest and run down than Tengpoche Gumpa. Even so, it did boast a unique claim to fame, which certainly captivated me.

On my first visit to Pangboche Gumpa, we were graciously permitted to enter the dimly illuminated main chapel by a stern, yet somehow humorous little monk. Maybe it was the combination of monastic robes, woollen pullover and sneakers he was dressed in that had me smiling to myself. But then again, I think his slightly bothered expression, tinged with a kind of parental tolerance, rather tickled me too. What ever it was, he was surely one of life's characters and, after all, he was the gate keeper to one of the Khumbu's rare treasures - the weather beaten bones of the right hand and bristly scalp of a Yeti.

These were presented by the little monk, in a suitably dignified manner, on a piece of red felt cloth. He stepped back, inviting us to see them for ourselves. His eyes gleamed with a look that said "see, the Yeti is no legend - seeing is believing".

In the mystical ambience of the chapel my cynicism had certainly diminished. Of course, I wanted to believe. What a wonderful notion, a wild man that had evaded humans for centuries by roaming the high places that we are unable to inhabit ourselves.

An intelligent beast of such proportions and strength that it has been labeled as "Big Foot" and "Abominable Snowman". It is able to grasp the thick, widely spaced horns of a full grown male Yak and split the unfortunate animals thick boned skull with ease, so one of the many stories goes.

Yeti is derived from the Tibetan words "yeh", meaning snow valley, and "the", meaning man. Snow valley men, or at least their large foot prints, have reputedly been sighted quite frequently in the Khumbu, as well as Sikkim and Tibet. Famous, well regarded explorers and mountaineers such as Lord Hunt, Eric Shipton, Tenzing Norgay and Reinhold Messner all claim to have made personal sightings. Sir Edmund Hillary even undertook an expedition in 1960 and 1961 that sought conclusive proof that the Yeti does exist. He was unable to find it and concluded that its existence is improbable. But clearly, in international circles the doubt remains and the debate continues. For many who live in the Khumbu there is no debate. The Yeti has acquired supernatural qualities and is featured in both art and legend. As far as I'm concerned, the legend is sufficient. It will be a sad day should it ever be disproved or forgotten.



The Abbot of Pangboche and, below, the reputed scalp and left hand of a Yeti



Having thanked the little monk with a small donation, we resumed our trek in the direction of Dingboche, a village at about 4,400 metres, which was to be where we halted for our second acclimatisation day. Leaving Pangboche, I remained unconvinced by the Yeti relics. I must confess though, later on that day when I found myself ahead of the others, alone on a trail in desolate terrain that had transformed suddenly and dramatically from the lush woodlands we had ascended through, I found myself glancing nervously back over my shoulder. Was there movement on the periphery? Why did I feel as if something, or someone, was watching us? My imagination seemed to be running wild. Or was it.....?

Thankfully or regretfully, I'm not sure which, I never had a personal Yeti encounter that day, reaching Dingboche without incident. Regardless, the bed time stories we and six others shared that evening at the Ama Dablam Lodge rang a little too close to reality for comfort. Huge, shaggy, snow valley men visited me in my dreams that night. But they weren't seeking to harm me, just to get a closer look at the weird hairless creature trembling before them with those impossibly tiny feet.

On the second morning at Dingboche I had my first taste of what it's like above 5,000 metres. Although essential that we didn't proceed any higher until we'd spent two nights at 4,400 metres, it was quite safe to day-hike higher, then return for sleep. In fact, this can even enhance the acclimatisation process. So, from Dingboche, I set out alone, just before dawn. Dawn came early, before five am, enabling me to follow the Imja Khola valley up to a summer settlement called Chhukung at 4,730 metres.

It was a dawn from heaven, with crystal clear air. Mountains surrounded me on all sides and not even the yaks had stirred. It seemed that the universe was mine alone to enjoy.

Although the air was noticeably thinner at that altitude, it didn't hold me back significantly now that I had left my back pack behind at the lodge. As long as I drank plenty and breathed deeply and frequently, I felt like a well-tuned trekking machine and was relishing the feeling. I attribute this, in part, to the large amount of cardio-vascular exercise in my life and, in part, to luck. Although a good level of fitness does help the body to perform at high altitudes, it is no guarantee. Very fit people can suffer the ill effects of altitude sickness even as low as 3,500 metres, while some couch potatoes can merrily waddle up to 5,500 metres.



From Chhukung, I veered left onto a big heap of black rock in pursuit of a high point from which to get a panoramic view of the area. Without the dead weight of my back pack I felt great. Exuberant life seemed to be pumping through my arteries and overflowing from my pores. It was akin to the high that marathon runners claim to get when their endorphins kick in. Although I have only ever run one marathon, I never felt anywhere near as good doing that as I did up in those gigantic mountains, breathing thin, crisp mountain air.

I expected to reach the top of the rock pile in about 20 minutes. In the clear, early morning light it looked so close. But I'd grossly underestimated the task at hand, not accounting for two factors.

First, relative to the massive surroundings and deceptively huge spaces, my modest objective appeared tiny. In fact, I would discover countless gasps later, that the top was approximately 500 vertical metres away. Second, each step I took was higher than I'd ever climbed before. Feeling invincible, off I went - on what turned out to be a journey of physical discovery.

The first 200 metres or so weren't too bad, I was breathing progressively heavier and faster, but still felt okay. But as I passed through 5,000 metres, my body began to let me know in no uncertain terms. To my amazement I could no longer sustain an unbroken pace. Every 20 or so steps I was obliged to stop, doubled over, so I could devote full attention to the task of gulping in huge lung fulls of air that still didn't seem to satisfy my groaning leg muscles craving for oxygen. "More, give us more" they protested. "Alright", I told them, "just as soon as you complete this set of 20 steps". And so it went on. Progress had slowed so that each set of 20 steps didn't seem to make a difference. I found myself morbidly curious about what it must feel like at 8,000 metres. Mountaineers call it the Death Zone up there. Now I understood why.

Once the initial surprise had passed, I warmed to the challenge. Then I was there, a host of little makeshift rock chortens made by earlier visitors confirmed it. A feeling of achievement, much greater than the pile of rubble seemed to justify, came upon me. Then I registered what lay before me - the most glorious panorama I had ever seen.



Views from Chhukung Ri



Later, I discovered that my pile of rubble was called Chhukung Ri, a 5,200 metre knoll. Towering over it to the north was Nuptse, a sheer rock and ice wall of three vertical kms, at her highest point 7,896 metres above sea level. As if to upstage Nuptse, at her eastern end

Lhotse soared to 8,501 metres. It felt appropriate to view this other worldly scene in a clock wise direction. As I turned, Imja Tse, Ampu Lapcha, Ama Dablam, Kangtega, Tamserku, Pokhalde, Kongma La, Khungma Tse and Pumori all featured before I found myself drawn ultimately back to the gargantuan wall of Nuptse.

At her feet lay a sea of fractured ice. In fact, it seemed that my little knoll was surrounded on all sides by immense snakes with white spines and rubble-gray sides. Like a five-headed serpent, the glaciers of Nuptse, Lhotse Nup, Lhotse, Imja and Ama Dablam all converged on the Imja Khola valley, draining into the river of that name. The sun lit the scene, high lighting the earth shades of the rock and water shades of the ice and snow. The sky blazed in neon blue. I looked on in awe.

All too soon it was time to get back, they would be wanting to set off for Lobuje soon. I was again amazed, this time by the incredible ease with which I was able to descend from high altitude. It wasn't long before I was back down at the Ama Dablam Lodge, wolfing down a huge plate of potatoes, whilst trying to digest all that I'd seen and learnt that fine morning.

### Dingboche to Lobuje

Being the end of May, the monsoon was nearly upon us, but we'd found that the mornings were invariably clear. By getting away early, we could enjoy several hours of glorious, clear views before the clouds engulfed the mountains around midday. This particular morning had been no different, but I had spent it by myself, learning about life above 5,000 metres. By the time we set off for Lobuje it was nearly noon and the clouds had already arrived. As we trekked slowly upwards around a huge hill side, passing through high pastures, it began to rain. Just ahead was a squat stone building with smoke twisting from the peak of its slated roof (Khumbu houses don't normally have chimneys, just a small hole at the pinnacle of the ceiling). We made a dash for it and peered inside the low doorway.

Greeting us were six friendly pairs of eyes looking up at us from grimy, weather-beaten faces. There was no hint of resentment towards our intrusion, just a knowing acceptance that it was raining and these foreigners needed shelter. The father beckoned us in with a smile and quick motion of his hands. The mother and oldest daughter resumed their efforts over a huge blackened pot, while the younger children began an inventory of our belongings.

Although relieved to be out of the chill, drizzling rain, I couldn't seem to relax, despite the genuine welcome from our hosts. The house was essentially a stone and earth shell with rammed earth floor and soot covered ceiling. The furniture consisted of a couple of wooden benches, the only other item in the spartan room being an open fire place. Presumably, the family slept on the earth floor wrapped in sheep or yak skins.



The two women huddled over the pot were preparing the family meal, potatoes. Granted, there were many potatoes, but that was it. As soon as the potatoes were cooked the mother offered us a handful each, before tending to her family. They tasted delicious - simple, warming, sustaining.

As westerners, with two back packs full of expensive material possessions, we felt too humbled by such generosity and graciousness to feel genuinely comfortable. Here was a family with so little, offering what they had to two unannounced strangers. Looking back, it was a pity that I couldn't just accept their hospitality at face value. They were not offering us any more than they would one of their own kind in the same circumstances. But I viewed the situation through my own western

The Everest Group through aging prayer flags

eyes. Feeling more awkward than anything else, I felt relieved when the rain ceased and we were able to resume our journey. As we said farewell, I was also relieved that we had packed some Five Star chocolate bars (Nepal's answer to Mars Bars) back in Kathmandu, as the children were delighted when we presented them with one as a small token of thanks.



Later, as we ascended beside the terminal moraine we enjoyed glimpses of the beautiful, very symmetrical snow peak of Pumori (7,145 metres). But the view didn't last long before more clouds swirled in to engulf us. In this other worldly setting, shapes loomed out of the mist like ghostly beings. The area was renowned as Yeti country, so when a large figure materialised a little ahead of us I was secretly relieved to find him to be human. He was a powerfully built, weather-beaten, bearded Australian whose feet seemed not to touch the rough ground as he sprang down the trail. He was obviously full of the joys of life, because he beamed a huge smile from ear to ear. A large teddy bear lolled drunkenly over his shoulder, silently telling us about this Aussie's free spirit. "How much further to Lobuje", I asked. "Ah, another hour, tops, mate. Bit murky ahead but the food's good at the lodge."



Below Lobuje, with Pumori on the far left

He didn't look like a trekker. Somehow he seemed larger than life to me and his sun burnt nose and wind blasted face were an obvious give away. "Have you been climbing up there?" I asked. "Yeah, up on Everest. Me and my mate summited five days ago". He gestured to his teddy bear. I couldn't find the words to respond to such an impressive announcement. Hearing his news first hand sent butterflies fluttering in my chest. He must have felt fantastic, so I shook his hand and mumbled some words of congratulations.

We talked enthusiastically for a short while about the magic view he had seen from the summit, but it was clear that he was keen to keep moving. Weeks on the mountain were now behind him and he wanted to get back to civilisation.

We didn't think to exchange names, but it was a simple task to find out later that he was John Muir and he and his Teddy had succeeded via the south east ridge. The expedition, made up of Australians and New Zealanders, was led by Austen Brookes and the three successful summiteers were Paul Bayne and Patrik Cullinan, both summiting on May 25; and John Muir, following his team mates on May 28. The official records don't mention Ted.

As he bounded off down the moraine, I reveled in the significance of our meeting. This place of huge mountains and courageous exploits I'd read about in news papers had sprung to vivid life. People were actually making history and we were there to bear witness. My anxious vigilance for pouncing

Yetis was forgotten as I day dreamed of what it might be like above 8,000 metres. A little later, just as we reached Lobuje, it began to snow.

Lobuje, at 4,930 metres, was the highest place I'd ever attempted to sleep at. I say "attempted" because at that altitude, sleep doesn't come easily. As a consolation, the resourceful patron at the Above The Clouds Lodge produced warm, freshly baked chocolate cake from a cast iron casket sitting on top of her open fire place. The cake was as good as you'll find in any modern bakery at sea level. I can vouch for this because, not wishing to offend the cook, I had two pieces. No point in wasting perfectly good food, after all.

Once the sun set, there was little to do at the lodge but try to settle in as comfortably as possible. I spent some considerable time debating with myself the merits of drinking yet more water before climbing into my sleeping bag. The water would certainly help me to acclimatise to the high altitude, but the thought of being beckoned out of my cocoon by a call of nature into a snow storm in the dead of night definitely didn't inspire me. Common sense eventually prevailed, more water was imbibed and, as it transpired, it didn't make any difference one way or the other. A jolly Irishman called Joe snored so loudly that the tremors reverberating outwards from his cavernous nasal passages would have shaken my bladder back to life regardless.

About two am, whilst out doing my business, a full moon materialised out of the clouds. Its silvery light so illuminated the desolate land scape that we decided to set off immediately for our goal. Relieved to put some distance between us and Joe's unconscious concerto, the promise of making our final approach to Sagarmartha negated the effects of our restless night.

As dawn approached, we found ourselves crossing what seemed to be one of Mother Nature's quarries. The downward moving ice of the Khumbu and Changri Nup Glaciers had ground the rock into a gray mush resembling wet cement. It was plastered all over the bizarre shapes born out of the collision between the two glaciers. We weaved our way across this, eventually reaching even ground again, beside a dismal, two shack herder's settlement. Known as Gorak Shep, at 5,160 metres it was situated by a frozen lake and some monuments to people who had perished in the area over the years.

On all sides, huge mountains towered over us. I knew Sagarmartha was very near but, from Gorak Shep, I couldn't see her due to the closeness of other giants like Nuptse, which thrust upwards three vertical kilometres from just across the Khumbu Glacier to the east. To the north west, also very close, loomed the beautiful pyramid of Pumori and Lobuje Peak also featured prominently to the south west.



On top of Kala Pattar (5,550m). Sagarmartha is the peak sitting in behind the other two

Between us and Pumori was a large pile of black rock. This was unmistakably Kala Pattar, which in Nepali means "black rock". Kala Pattar was our goal, a 5,545 metre knoll affording expansive views of a multitude of Himalayan giants, including Sagarmartha. For trekkers, this is about as close as one can get to Sagarmartha without actually venturing on to the treacherous Khumbu icefall, the huge hanging glacier that emanates from the western cwm beneath Sagarmartha's south col.

Although ascending Kala Pattar was neither technically difficult nor dangerous, the thin air above 5,000 metres provided challenge enough. But by 7 AM we reached the top of Kala Pattar, sharing the most intimate encounter we could with Sagarmartha on my first foray into the heart of the abode of snows.

Although the weather wasn't kind to us that morning, being overcast with very high clouds even at day break, from the top of Kala Pattar we could still look directly eastwards across to the summit of Sagarmartha. With the dominating presence of Nuptse in the foreground and the whiteness of the sky merging with Sagarmartha's snow dusted southwest face, she almost appeared timid to me. But now we had some appreciation for scale in the mighty Himalaya, where appearances can be extremely deceptive. I wasn't fooled this time and basked in the satisfaction and pleasure of our first meeting with the Head of the Ocean.

At that moment, I hadn't consciously committed to returning, but subconsciously I was hooked. Sagarmartha had indeed cast her spell, as I would return to her realm many times in the years to come. My yearning to be close to her and her seven sisters, soaring above 8,000 metres along the border between Nepal and Tibet, has yet to be satiated. I doubt that it ever will.

On our way back down to Lukla over the next six days, we made a side trip to Gokyo, which has its own Kala Pattar. Although Gokyo Kala Pattar is about 150 metres lower than the Kala Pattar beside Gorak Shep, it offers an even more expansive vista and a more accurate perspective from which to gauge Sagarmartha's great height, relative to all the other surrounding peaks.

By the time we reached Gokyo the monsoon had caught up with us, so we never glimpsed Sagarmartha again during our trek. This just served to waken my conscious resolve to return to the Khumbu.

By the time I found myself sitting in the garden bar of the Kathmandu Guest House with a cold beer in hand, surrounded by new friends made up in the Khumbu, I knew that I'd be back. Fourteen days of sustained trekking with three ascents above 5,000 metres during that time had left me feeling like a superman down at the lower altitude in Kathmandu. My legs felt like they were made of iron and the air, although not so pure anymore, was rich in oxygen. I felt wonderful.

My pilgrimage had begun.



Viewed from above Namche Bazaar at sunrise.  
From left, Tawoche (6,542m), Nuptse (7,896m), Sagarmartha/Everest (8,848m),  
Lhotse (8,501m), Lhotse Shar (7,589m), Ama Dablam (6,856m)

# Solu Khumbu, Nepal

