



Peter and Ben Laurenson, on Gokyo Ri (5357m), December 2009. This vista takes in Cho Oyu (8,201m—above their heads), Mt Everest (8850m—the black pyramid right of centre), Nuptse, Lhotse (8501m), Makalu (8475m), Cholatse and Tawoche beyond the Ngozumpa Glacier. Gokyo village (4750m) and lake are bottom right. To see much more about the Khumbu from Peter, go to: www.occasionalclimber.co.nz/browse-images-2/roof-of-the-world/

KHUMBU

A Family Affair

words and photographs by PETER LAURENSEN

The pilot banked hard left, then right. Suddenly an air strip appeared directly ahead. A short patch of dusty, stony earth sloped upwards, abruptly ending at the base of a mountain. The ground rushed to meet us as the Dudh Kosi disappeared in a blur 200 metres below. We were down, jolting our way rapidly up towards the mountain. A dust cloud large enough to hold its own within the gigantic landscape surrounding Lukla engulfed our slowing plane. Just as we ran out of air strip, the pilot deftly guided us into a set down area on the right and immediately shut down the engines. We'd made it.

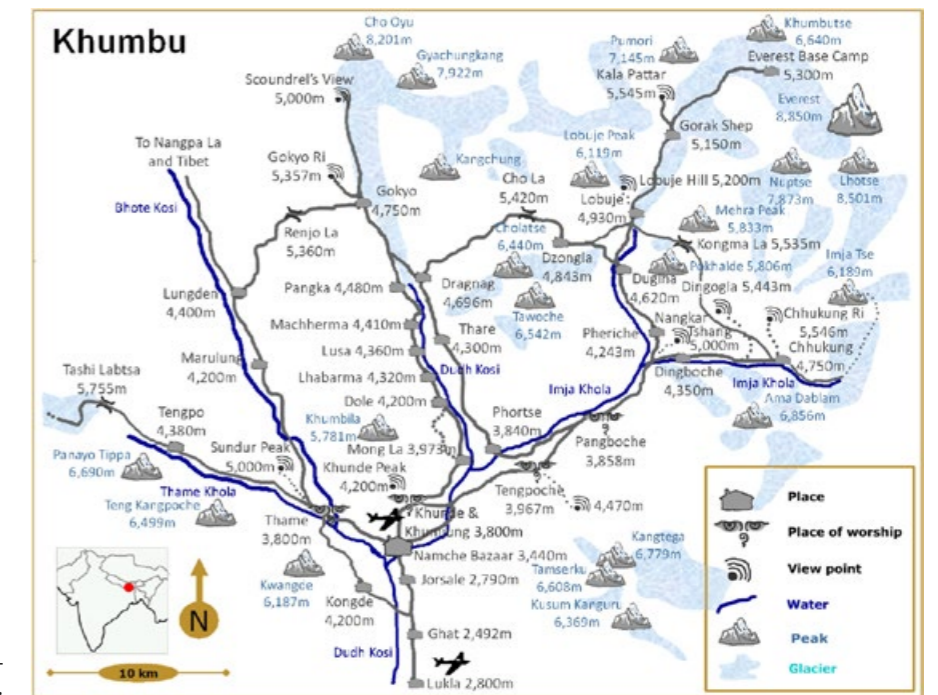
That was my first riveting impression of the Khumbu, 30 years ago. For me it had been a turning point—one where going to new places became less important than going to places I loved best. Since then I've flown in and out of Lukla another five times. My second visit, in 1995, was on a lumbering ex-Russian army helicopter. The usual Twin Otters couldn't land while the dirt surface was being replaced with modern asphalt. Resurfacing the air strip improved safety and permitted many more daily flights, but it also reduced the thrill factor. In a way, Lukla Airport is a litmus of how the wider Khumbu experience has evolved. Asphalt instead of dirt, instant wifi instead of porter delivered mail, Heineken instead of chang, a blank stare instead of a heartfelt 'namaste', thousands instead of hundreds passing through—the price of 'progress'.

Today, most people have heard about the Everest Base Camp trek in Nepal. I've quite often heard people say, 'Oh yeah, that's on my bucket list. I'd love to get to Base Camp one day.' My first visit to the Khumbu, the region on the south side of Everest, was in May 1988. Like most trekkers in the Khumbu, I visited Gorak Shep and Kala Pattar to get a view of Everest Base Camp and summit, peeking from behind the mountains' nearer west shoulder and Nuptse. I also visited Gokyo Ri to get a less-foreshortened view of the Everest group. Pretty much the standard Khumbu trek, the route I now call the 'ants' route' on account of how busy it's become.

That year, about 266,000 tourists visited Nepal and about five per cent of them visited the Khumbu, including me. On my most recent visit in December 2017, I was one of 940,000 tourists to Nepal. The five per cent rule for the Khumbu seems to still hold, because about 45,000 went to the Khumbu in 2017—four and half times more than on my first visit. Here's a sobering stat—Nepal is targeting two million tourists by 2020. Five per cent of two million is 100,000.

The good news is that the Nepalese are slowly getting better at managing their tourists and the impact they have on the environment. Up in the Khumbu, genuine efforts are in play to manage waste and operate more sustainably. In 1988, before hydro and solar power had reached the Khumbu, deforestation of vast hillsides to fuel trekker demand for cooked food and hot showers was painfully evident. Today the successful establishment of forest nurseries and strictly controlled, selective wood gathering are re-greening the Khumbu. There's also a lot more scope to the Khumbu than just the overcrowded 'ants' route' to Everest Base Camp—a trip I now avoid during the main trekking seasons of September to November and March to May.

The Khumbu is essentially five valley systems, linked by three high passes. Going from the west, the first valley traces the Thame Khola River between Namche Bazaar, the main village in the Khumbu and Tashi Labtsa, a 5755m pass giving access to the Khumbu from the Rolwaling region to the west. The second valley follows the Bhote Kosi River up from Thame to Nangpa La, the 5718m pass to the north giving access to Tibet. Linking this second valley to the third is Renjo La (5360m). The third valley follows the upper Dudh Kosi River, up past Gokyo to Cho Oyu, at 8201 metres, the sixth highest mountain in the world. Linking the third valley to the fourth is Cho La (5420m). The fourth valley is the most visited part of the Khumbu—the 'ants' route'. It goes from Namche Bazaar, tracing the Imja Khola River and then Khumbu Glacier to Everest Base Camp. Linking the fourth and fifth valleys is Kongma La (5535m).



Map of the Khumbu region.



Portrait of a Sherpa family, taken at our first meeting, Jorsale, November 1995. From left: Phura Diki, Pasang Chhuldim, Pasang Dorje, Pema Jangmu and Ang Nimi.

And the fifth valley traces the upper Imja Khola River from Dingboche up to Imja Tse (Island Peak). If you have about three weeks, doing what has become known as the ‘Three Passes Trek’ is probably one of the best routes on offer.

One constant in the Khumbu is its main entry and exit point. Regardless of which valley you decide to follow further up, to reach it you must climb 650 metres up a steep hillside out of the Dudh Kosi Gorge to Namche Bazaar, the main village in the Khumbu.

Namche Bazaar sits in a natural amphitheatre facing west across a cavernous gorge to the Kwangde massif, towering nearly three vertical kilometres above. In 1988, the village was powered by a diesel generator that shut down at 10.30pm, at which point the only sound to be heard was the barking of dogs. In 2017, hydro-powered music from several bars played into the small hours. Though modernisation has well and truly swept into Namche during the past decades, it still retains some of its special charm. Its elevation, 3400m at the bottom and 3550m at the top, makes it a good place to pause for an acclimatisation day. And its location places it on what was once a major trading route traversing Nepal, India and Tibet. For centuries, traders have converged there on Saturday mornings. Today they still do.

It’s helpful to understand that, while you’ll probably spend most of your time in the Khumbu above 4,000m, it’s still relatively highly populated, with small villages and a great teahouse and trekkers lodge network. It’s amazing just how many trails there are and how high you can get on them—all over the Khumbu. Indeed, this can be a trap for the unwary. Because many of the trails are so easy to tread it’s possible to gain altitude rapidly. If you’re not acclimatised though, the worst case scenario is that this can kill you. However, 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 5000m is a little nausea, restless nights and a mild headache.

My second visit in November 1995 was bittersweet. As each year passed I felt increasingly compelled to return. But that time I left behind my three year old son Ben and his Mum Julie. ‘One day, when you’re a big boy, I’m going to take you with me, matey,’

I promised. Though not realising it at the time, a few days later a chance meeting with a Sherpa family in a teahouse in Jorsale would cement my commitment to keeping that promise.

Ang Nimi seemed a bit frazzled. One eye on the cooking fire and the other on Phura Diki, her spirited three year old daughter, who didn’t want to eat her dinner. I could certainly relate. ‘Let me,’ I offered, taking over the feeding duties. Ben had put me through the ‘face, highchair and wall splatter’ routine enough times, so it didn’t take long before I had Phura munching away quietly. That marked the beginning of a friendship that has slowly grown along with our families over the decades.

Phura’s Mum Ang Nimi is typical of Sherpa women—warm hearted, calm, capable and hard working. Then 28, in his younger years, her husband Pasang Dorje had been a high altitude porter, carrying heavy loads above the South Col on Everest. Now he was a farmer, working hard to make ends meet and feed his young family. Phura had a younger brother Pasang Chhuldim and newborn sister Pema Jangmu. Three under four!

Though their English was much better than my Nepali, our conversation was limited. Pasang Dorje proudly brought out his one-piece high altitude climbing suit with built-in boots. This got us talking about the route I hoped to take on this, my second visit. I enquired about how difficult it was to cross Cho La, as an alternative route to get across from Gokyo to Lobuje. ‘I guide you, Peter?’ ‘Why not?’ I thought.

Despite what you might hear, any reasonably fit person doesn’t need a guide or porter in the Khumbu. The place is dotted with villages and often more than adequate lodgings, all connected by centuries old, well graded footpaths. The locals are friendly and speak enough English for you to get by just fine. But if you want to tackle something a bit more challenging, then an experienced guide and porter support can add huge value; and are sometimes essential. Being alone at the time, I felt some local knowledge would be a good idea for Cho La, so a price was agreed for Pasang Dorje to meet me at Gokyo in a week’s time.

Unfortunately, by the time I met Pasang Dorje in Gokyo, the dreaded Khumbu cough had well and truly taken hold of me. A violent, dry cough that saps energy and can even crack ribs. At its evil worst at night, it prevents sleep for the afflicted and all those in earshot. High altitude, dry, cold air and lots of physically compromised, virus-carrying visitors mean that I and many others struggle with it.

From Gokyo, Pasang Dorje and I crossed the snout of the Ngozumpa Glacier, reaching Dragnag in the hope that I might feel better as the day wore on. Dragnag, at 4696m, is the last settlement



before Cho La. Between coughing fits I glanced up towards the pass, some 700 metres above me. Sometimes it’s best to go with the flow. On that fine morning the flow went downhill, so that’s what we did. Cho La became unfinished business.

Two days later I returned to Jorsale to collect my tent and crampons from Pasang Dorje and to see his family, who welcomed me as a long lost friend. A quote from my diary: ‘They gave me noodle soup, milk tea and rakshi, honouring me with a khata and glittering garland. It was lovely and I left feeling both happy and sad.’ Before I left, we talked about Ben and how he was the same age as Phura. ‘One day, when Ben is a big boy, I bring him to meet you.’ This was met with much smiling and enthusiasm.

My third visit was during the Maoist rebellion in 2006. I teamed up with a German friend Helge to attempt the Three Passes route. 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 Ang Nimi. There is only one path through Jorsale, located beside the surging milky waters of the Dudh Kosi. So I suppose it wasn’t such a surprise when, who should I literally bump into as I entered the village, but none other than Pasang Dorje, looking no different from when I bid him farewell 11 years before. It did feel quite uncanny though. He just looked at me calmly and said ‘Ah. Peter. But no

Cholatse, Tawoche, Kangtega and Thamserku at sunset, viewed from the moraine of the Ngozumpa Glacier, above Gokyo.

Ben?’ Since our last meeting the only contact we’d had was a couple of letters. He hadn’t known we were coming, but this was his immediate thought. It got me thinking—what age does Ben become a ‘big boy’? By now I also had two other considerations—Ed, my second son, then aged five and Will, my third, aged three. After a five year gap Pasang Dorje’s family had also grown by one more—Lakpa Temba, then their four year old son. By now technology was catching up in the Khumbu. Some villages had wifi, cell phones were common and Phura, now living and studying in Kathmandu with Pasang Dorje’s elder sister Kanchi Phuti, had an email address. That would make keeping in contact much easier in future.

Over the next two weeks Helge and I made our way up the valley beyond Thame to Lungden, crossed Renjo La to Gokyo, then Cho La to join the ants’ route up to Gorak Shep and Everest Base Camp. Unfortunately, the Khumbu cough defeated my resolve to cross Kongma La, which then became more unfinished business.

Seeing Gorak Shep again for the first time since my first visit 18 years earlier took me aback. Where before there had been

a single primitive shepherd's rock shelter, now stood two fine-looking multi-storeyed lodges; and all this at 5,130m.

Visiting Base Camp in April or May, when all the climbing parties are in residence, is a fascinating experience. It was a strange blend of emotions for me. Although I'd scrambled up Kala Pattar 18 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.

The multi-coloured spectacle of perhaps 150 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 spanned just a couple of hours, whereas the climbing teams were stationed there for six weeks or more.

The concentration of high-tech gadgetry implied to me that money would conquer all. No need to earn your mountaineering stripes over years spent climbing smaller peaks—just bring on the Sherpa, ladders, fixed ropes, high altitude mountain guides, state of the art weather forecasts, sat phones and laptops and climb that mountain. Getting to the top of Mt Everest was once seen as mankind's last great challenge on earth. But these days, nearly 9,000 people have done it and some of them even had to queue at the Hillary Step at 8,800m, for an hour or more, while their bodies slowly degenerated. Pre-monsoon 2006 proved to be a record season with 194 summiteers from the Nepalese side and 299 from the Tibetan side. That record was promptly broken the following year, with 632 summiteers; and since then, apart from 2015—during the earthquakes—between 400 and 700 have summited each year.

So, what age does Ben become a 'big boy'? As the years passed the answer became apparent—fifteen! At fifteen Ben had completed his second year at Wellington College and was free of school commitments by the end of November. He was not yet into the serious business of NCEA, but old enough to cope with, appreciate and learn from some of the challenges that come with visiting a developing country at high altitude. December in Nepal is winter. It's freezing at night, but the days are clear and settled more often than not. And in December there were only a third the number of trekkers in the Khumbu that there were in October and November. So December 2009 was time to make good on my promise and, this time, I let Pasang Dorje and Ang Nimi know, via emails to Phura, we were coming.

It was the warmest of reunions when Ben and I walked into Jorsale. To quote Ben from our shared trekking diary: 'Meeting Pasang Dorje was extremely nice. We had some never-ending tea, then a tour of his 130 year old Tibetan style home. The top floor was black with soot because there is no chimney. Then we had more never-ending tea. Ang Nimi was very kind—I really liked her.'



Ben meets Pasang Dorje, Temba Lakpa, and Ang Nimi in Jorsale, December 2009.

Six days later, Ben and I sat in a sun-drenched dining room overlooking Gokyo Lake, enjoying some down time as we taught each other card games. With no television or mobile devices, playing cards had become a common pass time when not on the move.

Our way up to Gokyo the day before had been tough for Ben, as he continued to acclimatise. At Pangka (4480m) he had that 'I just want to flop' look about him. So we took a break for an hour while half a Diamox (acclimatisation tablet) and a Panadol I gave him had a chance to take effect.

After the break he felt a bit better and agreed to push on. So up the side of the terminal moraine of the Ngozumpa Glacier we went. The route was longer than I remembered, making me a liar more than once when I assured him we were 'almost there'.

He wasn't having a good time so I offered to take his pack, but once again to his credit, he refused and doggedly pushed on. We reached Gokyo after two and a half hours of up. To quote Ben from our shared diary: 'Yesterday was the toughest day physically I've ever put myself through. And heck, at one point I hated Dad and thought he was a lying pusher. But I am sooooo glad that we pushed through and arrived at Gokyo. The food's better, the views are spectacular and there are nice people to talk to.'

And a diary entry from me: 'I know some would say I'm a pretty harsh father—letting his son suffer like this. But I knew he wasn't in any real peril and I'm a firm believer in the importance of self-motivation. During our journey so far I've started to see some of the father in this son of mine—the bloody minded, determined streak that can be a powerful resource at times. I'd hoped that this trip might be a stepping stone for Ben from boy to man and that's exactly how it's panning out. He's rising to the challenge wonderfully.'

As it turned out, my call to proceed to Gokyo proved to be the right one. Ben was fine and it placed us well for our coming challenges. We went on to climb Gokyo Ri and cross Cho La. Another

diary entry from me: 'This was our biggest day and now it's done—all downhill from here. I'm stoked with what we've been able to achieve route wise, conversation wise, life experience wise, Dad and son wise. This has really been an awesome trek—hard for Ben, but very rewarding in many ways.'

Over the next few days, as we reduced altitude, Ben's appetite and vigour returned. On day 15 on our way out to Lukla we called back in to see our Sherpa friends in Jorsale. I sent Ben on slightly ahead so he could enjoy their full attention on arrival. They didn't disappoint. Ben again from our shared diary: 'I knocked on the door and called "Namaste". Ang Nimi ran out and embraced me in a huge hug. Lakpa Temba sprinted out and down the path, yelling to Pasang Dorje that I'd arrived. Pasang Dorje was soon back panting and pulling me into a hug. Ang Nimi made me sit and already a cup of tea was there for me. Dad arrived and then there was noodle soup on the table. We chatted for a while, then they honoured us by draping khatas around our necks.'

It was time to resume our journey out to Lukla. 'Next time I come with Ed,' I said. This statement was met with more enthusiastic nodding and smiles. I felt tears welling as the unconditional warmth of their hospitality worked its magic.

At home in New Zealand, Ben's younger brothers absorbed his stories about our trip. Soon it was an accepted family truth that, when each younger brother reached 15, it would be their turn. Taking Ben to the Khumbu had also confirmed what I'd expected. As father and son we'd shared a priceless journey. And our Sherpa connection was the icing on the cake.

Another six years passed until Ed's 15th birthday in December 2015. In April that year Nepal suffered a devastating magnitude 7.8 earthquake that killed nearly 9,000 people, injured 22,000 and left three and a half million homeless. The Khumbu suffered some of these losses and indeed, Pasang Dorje and Ang Nimi lost their old Tibetan-style home in Jorsale. In that sense our visit was well timed, because we could bring some monetary help at a time when it was most needed. Several people from my own extended family chipped in to this worthy cause.

Just in the week before our departure to Nepal I received an email from Phura letting us know that her youngest brother Lakpa Temba, who suffered from epilepsy, had unexpectedly died at just thirteen years of age. On top of the earthquakes this just seemed too much to comprehend. Walking in to Jorsale at the end of Ed's first trekking day felt very different from past arrivals. The Buddhist ceremonies to help Lakpa Temba's spirit pass on to the next phase in his path to Nirvana were in full swing when we stepped into a new building, now standing on the footprint of Pasang Dorje and Ang Nimi's old home. The look of resigned desolation on Ang Nimi's face rendered me incapable of saying anything. We just hugged as silent tears fell, yet it also felt really good to be there to lend our friends support. Ed's diary entry that

Peter and Ed enjoy a classic sunset vista from Kala Pattar (5545m), December 2015. From left, Khumbutse, Changtse, West shoulder, Everest summit and Nuptse. In season, Everest Base Camp locates at the foot of the Khumbu Icefall, directly beneath Changtse and Lho La.





Ed meets our Sherpa friends in Jorsale, December 2015. With Pasang Dorje and Ang Nimi this time are Pasang Dorje's sister, Kanchi Phuti (second from right) and her son Ngimtsheri (left).

evening: 'It was a very emotional moment when Dad and Pasang Dorje hugged. The happiness that spread across Pasang Dorje's face was amazing; same with Ang Nimi ... Lakpa Temba's funeral was not only emotional, but culturally interesting. Not many tears were shed but you were still surrounded by sadness.'

Pasang Dorje had fallen when rushing after dark to seek help for Lakpa Temba before he died. He now had a large scab on his face and was missing two front teeth. Despite all of this, in typical Sherpa fashion, they both wanted to spoil us. Thankfully, I was able to assure them that we were fine and that they must continue with the ceremonies. Sipping hot sweet tea, Ed and I sat to the side, quietly watching several monks playing horns and cymbals. Actually, it felt that everything was in hand. Sherpa religious belief is strong and I think this is a great source of comfort for them in times of tragedy.

The next morning Pasang Dorje gave us a tour of their new lodge. I was impressed that they'd been able to build it so quickly after the quakes. Already though, aftershocks had wrecked more havoc. One of the solid stone end walls of the two storied building had partially collapsed. This seemed an opportune time to give Pasang Dorje the thick wad of Nepalese rupees we had for them. I also passed them a copy of my first book, a self published effort titled *Occasional Climber: A journey to Mount Clarity*. In it are featured pictures of our Sherpa friends, including a happy shot of Lakpa Temba from my last visit with Ben. He and Pasang Dorje sit with arms around a khata-draped Ben, all with wall to wall grins. When Ang Nimi found the page more tears flowed, but it was obvious how much she cherished this memory. 'Lakpa Temba very excited that Ed and you coming, Peter,' Pasang Dorje explained.

As we set off for Namche Bazaar it was apparent that Ed had caught the photographer bug, shooting in every direction. During our trek I taught him the basics of manual photography, which was a bonus for us both. He now has a good insight into how to make a camera really

work to its potential and I got to share one of my life's passions with my son.

Our plan was to get well-acclimatised on our own devices up to Everest Base Camp, then meet Kami Chiri Sherpa, a local guide, a little back down the Khumbu Glacier at Lobuje. Kami was a five times Everest summiteer. From Lobuje, Kami would guide us across the Khumbu Glacier and up Kongma La, for me the unfinished business from my 2006 trek with Helge. We would camp 100 metres beneath the pass on the far side and, next morning, climb Pokhalde, before descending to Chhukung. From there we would climb again to Imja Tse (Island Peak) Base Camp, where Ed would wait while Kami and I went for the

summit (6189m)—my chance to finally break 6000 metres.

Day ten saw us at a deserted Everest Base Camp—very different in December than during the busy May climbing season. Three days later, at dawn, Ed and I set off from our camp at 5450m beneath Kongma La with Guide Kami to climb Pokhalde. Nearer the top our climb passed some very exposed places, so Kami got the rope out, putting Ed between himself and I, as we simul-climbed. Essentially though, it was just a rock scramble with no snow or ice on the route. Nevertheless, on the summit Ed's grimace transformed into a triumphant ear to ear grin. It was his fifteenth birthday and he had climbed 5,806m Pokhalde. His expression explained why we climb. Ascending through the dawn into a freezing but beautifully calm morning, we now relished a shared sense of achievement and stupendous panoramic view of one of the most spectacular mountainscapes on earth.

Two days later, at 6,100m on the summit ridge of Imja Tse, Kami and I were turned around 90 metres from the summit by high winds and freezing temperatures, but that's another story.

Back down in Jorsale, the mood had lightened since the day of Lakpa Temba's funeral. On a sunny morning we climbed the stone steps to the lodge to find everyone out in the front courtyard busily varnishing furniture. Pasang Dorje's sister Kanchi Phuti, who had been a tower of support, was there with one of her sons, Ngimtsheri, so it was a happy gathering. Later, after one of Ang Nimi's dal bhats, as Ed and I made ready to go, Pasang Dorje beat me to the draw, asking, 'Next time is Will's turn, yes Peter?' 'Of course, my friend. Of course.' Laden down with Khata's, but feeling very light hearted, we set off for Lukla.

Fast forward two years and now it was Will's turn. In the months prior to our departure, my partner Cathy and I had had lengthy communication with Phura. Despite successfully completing a tertiary nursing qualification in Kathmandu, she had struggled to secure a job in Nepal. Now she had decided to undertake a course

of nursing study in Sydney. The logic was that an Australian qualification would hold greater leverage when seeking a job and, if she studied in Australia, she may also be able to work there as a nurse, enabling much more rapid repayment of the loan she would have to take in order to afford to study overseas. It was a bold move considering the costs involved. So we'd been trying to help her explore all angles before committing to what would, for a young Nepali, be a huge bank loan. We also offered to help a little with costs. While all this meant that when Will and I were in Nepal, Phura would not be, of course we would still visit her family.

Back in the Khumbu, Pasang Dorje and Ang Nimi's situation had changed since my last visit. Having struggled with the commercial aspects of running a trekking lodge, they had leased their lodge in Jorsale to a third party to run, while they themselves returned to small plot farming across the Dudh Kosi in Monjo. It took us a little while to find their rented one room, earth floored home, which sat on a terrace off the main trail. But their usual hospitality shone upon us when we did. On their small rented plot they grew potatoes, cabbages, coriander, garlic, carrots, cows, chickens, a dog, a cat and a horse. An excerpt from Will's diary entry that evening: 'I was surprised by how inviting and kind they were to someone they had never met. It was far less awkward than I expected ... really cool to see them after hearing about them for so many years. We were given many teas, biscuits and potatoes—so many in fact that we did not eat dinner that evening.'



Will's turn to meet Pasang Dorje and Ang Nimi. Monjo, December 2017.

From left, Kangtega (6779m), Thamserku (6608m) and Kusum Kanguru (6369m), viewed from Thame at sunset.



This trek with Will would be based on a trip up to Gokyo and then, via Renjo La, head back down the Bhote Kosi valley to Thame. In doing this I would have crossed the three passes with my three sons. Cho La with Ben, Kongma La with Ed and Renjo La with Will. But there were also several new high points and sections of trail we would explore as well.

One was a local high route between Mong La and Dole. Above Mong La, at about 4300m, we crested a ridgeline running up to Khumbila and a whole new landscape appeared. Even in December there was virtually no snow on the steep rocky mountain. Its ice-glazed bones lay exposed as a series of defined ridges, spanning out from the much smaller summit area. Will and I had reached the first of three on this local high route.

The descent from the first ridge was quite gradual. Cresting the second revealed a steeper, more exposed descent with icy patches. Our view of the third ridge suggested a nice broad top, but on reaching the third crest I was somewhat shocked to find us on top of a sheer cliff that dropped over 100 vertical metres. Will from our shared diary that evening: 'We had climbed to the top of a precipice and could see no track down. But soon my keen young eyes found the track and Dad decided crampons were needed. We made our nervous way down the steep narrow route, which confirmed that it was worth bringing our crampons. It was quite icy and any slip

would have meant death. We made our way down to the flatter area below. Looking back we were impressed with ourselves.'

I was mightily relieved when Will reached safe ground. He handled the situation calmly and ably, but there were a couple of points where, as he wrote, a mistake would have meant a deadly fall. Later in Lusa, where we stayed that night, the teahouse owner's head jerked in surprise when I explained where we'd come, unguided. 'One more snow and freeze, route impassable,' he exclaimed. Our local shortcut had turned out to be a longer, much more demanding mini adventure, some of it type two fun. But, now safe in the teahouse, it was already one of those father-son shared experiences I think we'll recall with relish for many years to come.

We proceeded on to Gokyo, climbing Gokyo Ri, before heading over Renjo La and back down to Thame. There we explored the valley leading up past Tengpo to Tashi Labsta, as well as climbing 5000 metre Sundur Peak, directly above Thame Gompa.

Our last objective was quite a new trail, traversing the north-facing terrain beneath Kwangde, between Thame and Kongde. We set off at dawn and the most difficult section of the route came after about three hours. The trail led into a sunless chasm punctuated by frozen waterfalls. Beyond this an exposed stone staircase, protected at a near vertical section by a fixed steel cable, led up to a small shelf. The trail then traversed around a ledge cut into

cliffs. Our crux turned out to be a 20 or so metre stretch of level trail coated thickly in blue waterfall ice. The challenge was the sheer drop on the downhill side. Thankfully, a fixed rope had been installed that I clipped Will in to and, in crampons, it was quite straightforward. From there the trail relented as we climbed above the cliffs onto a huge scrub covered shelf. Seven hours after leaving Thame, we reached Kongde.

I imagined the view would be good and it met expectations. At 4200m and set further back from the heart of the Khumbu than I'd been before, the view took in Kwangde directly behind and above, peaks to the north on the border with Tibet, the rock spine leading back to Khumbila, then a host of snow peaks including Tawoche, Cholatse, the Everest Group, Ama Dablam, Thamserku and Kusum Kanguru. We also looked across Namche, over Khunde and Khumjung, past Tengboche, to the entrance to the Imja Khola valley. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Next day, the trail down from Kongde picked its way steeply through bluffs that were something to behold. It was also a novel change to exit the Khumbu via a different route than through Namche. The only hitch was that we overshot Monjo. So the next morning Will and I, unencumbered by packs and relishing the richer air down below 3000 metres, skipped back up the trail to bid farewell to Ang Nimi and Pasang Dorje.



At the crux of the Thame to Kongde route, December 2017. A rope-protected frozen waterfall cuts across the trail, with a yawning 200 metre drop on the right. Crampons were essential here.

With quite a history now between our two families to work with, as a gift I had prepared a little photo album to celebrate it in pictures. Knowing that our story still unfolded, I set it up so that future pages could easily be added, leaving several blank at the back. 'These pages will fill with pictures from this visit and also the

next one when I bring Cathy,' I explained. I also asked them if they would like to join Cathy and me on a walk up to Gokyo, not as porters or guides, but as our guests. When I first met them 22 years before, Pasang Dorje and I had been to Gokyo together. But Ang Nimi was particularly excited by my suggestion now. 'I never in Gokyo. I want to see. Very much.' Gokyo is only a few days walk up valley from Jorsale. I shouldn't have been surprised that, in all her years, she'd never had the luxury of exploring her own world-famously beautiful backyard. While the Khumbu is much wealthier than most parts of Nepal, the distribution of that wealth is not evenly shared. For many in the Khumbu, life is still a relentless struggle to survive. The thought of Ang Nimi's face when she finally reaches the idyllic shore of Gokyo Lake makes me smile with anticipation.



Kongde Lake (4500m), December 2017. Reflected in the lake are, from left, Tawoche, Nuptse, Everest, Lhotse, Ama Dablam, Thamserku and Kusum Kanguru.