

March into Everest

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When Sir John Hunt led his expedition to Everest in 1953 he followed the route which had been discovered by Eric Shipton in 1951. Mr Shipton, who is now in his sixties, and as active as ever, led a party over the same ground in November 1969 – a kind of sentimental journey through the most beautiful country in the world, to the heart of the Everest region. I was fortunate in being one of the lucky two dozen to share this memorable experience, particularly as I had left India in 1946 and never expected to see the Himalayas again.

Planning started well in advance, and as soon as news of it got around, such a long waiting list built up that another party of similar size was organised under the leadership of W. H. Murray, who had been on the 1951 reconnaissance with Shipton. The augmented numbers were an advantage on the chartered flight to India, but in Nepal the two parties travelled quite independently and some considerable distance apart, to conserve the limited camping sites available. So Shipton's party got away from Katmandu pretty smartly, leaving the others to do a bit of sight-seeing for a couple of days around the capital.

In Nepal the main rivers run from north to south, and as our course was mainly from east to west we had to journey across the grain of the country for many days. This involved a long trek, moving camp every day over another watershed, and no serious climbing was contemplated even as a diversion. The main valleys are very deep, the rivers through the foot-hills being only a few thousand feet above sea level; and as we advanced, the intervening ridges became progressively higher, so that most of us acclimatised naturally. This was an inestimable advantage when we eventually reached the strenuous going in the loose moraines of the Everest region, where the air is much thinner than we are accustomed to at home.

We were equipped with an assortment of two-man tents which seemed rather light and flimsy by Scottish standards, but proved to be quite alright in use. All had sewn in groundsheets; and we had light foam rubber mattresses under our down-filled sleeping bags, which were invaluable on the hard and stony camp sites which we frequently encountered.

In November in Nepal we had about eleven hours of daylight, usually bright and sunny, to thirteen hours of night so we were never short of sleep, particularly at the higher camps.

Our seven sherpas, the sirdar, two havildars and four cooks were always on the go at dawn and quickly drummed up porridge and hot tea, etc. They made porridge out of whatever was handy at the time, rice, barley, and occasionally something very like oatmeal or crushed maize. Biscuits, butter, cheese and jam completed a light meal, and very soon we were off in two's and three's carrying only 10 or 12 lb of personal kit in a rucksack, while our 30 lb kitbags were being picked up, two at a time, by our porters. Meanwhile our sirdar and his henchmen supervised the striking of the camp, the cooks cleaned up their pots, other porters shouldered the tents and camping gear and the camp site was left spotlessly clean for whoever might next come that way. Only the smoke blackened 'cooking stones', in groups of three, were left to mark the spot.

In an hour or so I would be overtaken by the cooks, singing at the top of their voices and going at a jog trot, the smallest sherpa laden with a jangling pile of cooking pots. This little chap Dorje, always carried an ice axe, or sherpa tin opener, as a kind of status symbol, and was never seen to use it even as a walking stick.

The cooks were sprinting ahead, to have the early lunch simmering on a wood fire by the time the main party caught up with them, around 11 o'clock. This was always an enjoyable and substantial picnic, usually by a stream, with the sun high in the sky. We might spend anything up to two hours at such a spot; washing, bathing, writing, or just basking in the sunshine. We were always loth to cut it short, even when our next camp was far away.

Our usual aim was to make camp about 4.00 p.m. and earlier if possible, as there was generally a lot to do on arrival. The cooks were always well up, and brewed up tea in no time; and while the second mug was going down the tent porters would begin to drift in. While the tents were being pitched the cooks would be starting to make soup and stew, and the scent of this on the air would bring in the baggage porters, many of whom put on a spurt over the last hundred yards as a gesture. And soon the sun would swing over the hill and we were due in the 'mess tent'. This was just a big fly-sheet, open all round and scarcely big enough to hold everyone standing and squatting inside, under a temperamental Tilley Lamp. Visions of cigar smoking Sahibs, enjoying a quiet rubber of bridge under such conditions, gave rise to more hilarity than regret, as we called it a day.

After ten days or so of this idyllic existence, we came steeply down to 5,200 feet to cross the gorge of the Dudh Kosi, the river which drains all the southern area of the Everest region, and the course of which we

were to follow northwards for the next five days. So far we had had only one glimpse of Everest, very far away.

Coming down to the suspension bridge, I saw a big chap coming up with a party of Sherpas, and he soon proved to be Sir Edmund Hillary, walking briskly to Katmandu. He and Eric Shipton are old friends, and it was an unexpected pleasure to share their meeting. In a medieval country like Nepal, with only hill tracks running through it here and there, one is bound to meet everyone who happens to be on the move in a given region; and this happy encounter was not so remarkable as it might seem.

Following the Dudh Kosi upstream one sees very little of the river except when crossing it occasionally. The track climbs high above a succession of gorges, traversing a few villages built on the easier slopes above. Here the forest leaves had been touched with frost, and their bright colours were enhanced by the occasional snow peak outlined against a clear blue sky. We were blessed with fine weather, after the monsoon and before the serious onset of winter; and the snow line seemed to recede ahead of us almost as fast as we advanced northwards.

In a few days we reached Namche Bazar, 11,300 feet, and took on fresh porters, all sherpas and several sherpanis, for the harder going ahead. They were a happy crowd, mostly related to our seven trusty men who had joined us in Katmandu, and they made light of their bulky loads.

Next day we pitched Camp 15 at Thyangboche Monastery in the compound of the Guest House. The Monastery stands on a knoll at 12,715 feet, just above the tree line, on one of the finest sites imaginable. We were hospitably welcomed here, and as we had been going steadily for fifteen days we were all glad to call a halt and enjoy a rest day in such very beautiful surroundings. Snow peaks tower above Thyangboche on all sides, the most striking feature being Ama Dablam 22,494 feet, barely seven miles away, to the east.

But the eye was inevitably drawn north-westwards to Lhotse and Nuptse, with the summit of Everest above and beyond them.

The lamas of Thyangboche had a herd of yaks, and we hired a couple to carry firewood to our higher camps. These animals, apparently so leisurely in their movements, seem to go better the rougher the ground, and it is by no means easy to keep up with them going uphill or over moraines.

From Thyangboche one can only go downhill, and soon we were at the Imja Khola and heading up the far bank towards the last few villages this side of Tibet. The trees were soon left behind, and

as we reached the upper yak pastures, now brown and bare, the country underfoot began to resemble the Cairngorm plateaux. Although we were now 10,000 feet higher than the Cairngorms, ground conditions were quite similar, due to the difference in latitude. Our luck held with regard to the weather, and the days continued bright and clear, with scarcely a breath of wind. As soon as the sun set, frost clamped down on the camp, and at all the higher camps our drill was a good hot meal at dusk, then straight into the tents and our sleeping bags to keep in the heat, and ensure a comfortable night.

The Khumbu Glacier which flows southwards from the Lho La on the Tibetan border, and is fed by ice from the Western Cwm of Everest and several tributary glaciers, is so heavily covered by moraines in its lower reaches that it has no perceptible snout.

It stirred the imagination to think that under perhaps 50 feet of stones and boulders, there might be several hundred feet of almost stationary ice. Higher up of course the ice shows through, and the moraine ridges become sharper and more unstable. One keeps as close as possible to the crest of the ridge, above the slipping and falling stones, which range in size from pebbles up to massive blocks as big as the Shelter Stone.

At Camp 17, which was a little higher than the top of Mont Blanc, many of us began to feel the altitude enough to slow things down a bit. Next day at 17,000 feet we reached a beautiful frozen lake on the glacier, where melt water had accumulated in a large hollow; and we pitched Camp 18 on a shelf above the lateral moraine, and overlooking the lake, to the west of the Khumbu Glacier. There was an easy ridge twelve to fifteen hundred feet above the camp, and after lunch most of the party went up, and were rewarded with really spectacular views of Everest and its neighbours.

The weather remained perfect, with all the famous peaks standing clear against a blue sky. The top of Everest was just a few miles away to the east, and from 18,500 feet, and seen across the trough of the glacier valley, it seemed difficult to believe that it was still 10,000 feet above us. Only the favourable weather had enabled us to get so high on this rocky crest, where we were safe from all local hazards. From Pumori, Nuptse and the lower slopes of Everest, avalanches were coming off at frequent intervals from hanging glaciers topped with monsoon snow. The upper rocks of Everest had only a dusting of snow on them, as it never consolidates at that altitude, and is constantly being whipped away in the wind.

We stayed two nights at Camp 18, which was within striking

distance of the 1953 Base Camp Site, near the foot of the Ice Fall. This had been our original objective when we set out from Katmandu, and most of us wanted to finish the job. However, having been higher the previous day, under such ideal conditions, the slog up the glacier was rather an anti-climax, although the weather continued to be kind. The historic camp site, on a large patch of moraine on the glacier, is of course only a map reference. Even had the camp been left standing as a memorial of the first ascent, it would have been swept away long ago.

As an alternative Eric Shipton kindly offered to lead a small party up the west side of the glacier, and on to a spur of Pumori, to get a better view of the Ice Fall. I opted for this attractive programme, but towards mid-day I realised I had reached my ceiling the previous afternoon. The tigers went on to 19,000 feet, as far as it was safe to climb, while I remained below looking down on the Base Camp Site and photographing the Ice Fall. I strolled back to Camp at leisure, just in time for tea, an undeserved bonus which the others unfortunately missed.

On the way home we got an airlift in small planes from an alpine meadow at Lukla above the east bank of the Dudh Kosi. This again was only possible because our good fortune with the weather continued till the end.

Summing up I would say that stamina, and the will to keep going day after day are far more important than technique, in the conditions we met with in Nepal, and I feel sure that many members of the Cairngorm Club would have enjoyed this experience as much as I did.

