

Black Tea and Curried Vegetables

Alister Macdonald

This is an account of a trekking holiday in Nepal, in the month of April, 2000. Such trekking holidays are commonplace these days and some club members have doubtless enjoyed similar experiences. So what's new and what's worth writing about? Well, nothing is new and everything is worth writing about, so far as Nepal is concerned. The country comprises both highlands and lowlands of great interest and this article is about a trek in a small section of the north-east highlands. Of the world's fourteen mountains which exceed 8000m in height, eight are in the Nepalese Himalayas and by "doing" the standard Everest approach and Gokyo Ri trek I would see four of these. This is a popular priority with the trekkers who sign on for package trips in huge numbers, from all over the world. There are many companies that service the market and in my case I booked with Sherpa Travel, who passed me on to a highly satisfactory Nepalese company called Ama Dablan, after the spectacular peak on the route to Everest.

Trekking is merely walking and certainly not climbing. For the elite who wish to climb the Himalayas there is a separate bureaucracy operating a special set of regulations, but even the elite attains large numbers. When I viewed Everest from the Gokyo Ri there were nineteen expeditions at base camp preparing to climb the mountain. One was an all-women team from Nepal. Another expedition, which followed in May, was led by club member Rick Allan, on his first successful ascent, which was the subject of an article in the Press and Journal (June 6, 2000).

My trip began with a flight to Kathmandu, where I was met by a young man called Subrat Tamang, the trek leader, who had trained at an Indian Mountaineering School. Two nights were spent at a western-style hotel in Kathmandu where I met the rest of the party - Charles from London, Rob from Montreal, Alistair from Bristol and Lochee, a New Zealand lady. I was celebrating my sixtieth year by undertaking the trek and, not surprisingly, I was by far the oldest of the group. We set off with an early morning flight to Lukla where the trekking crew had assembled with the equipment. The sixteen-seater Yeti Airways plane was late, as is usual, but eventually we clambered in and it, in turn, clambered up into the clean crisp morning air above the brown smog of Kathmandu. We headed east over hill country, and squinting through the scratched windows were transfixed by the unbelievable panorama of the Himalayas. We were actually going to walk in that?

Landing at Lukla airstrip is the closest most of us will ever get to landing on an aircraft carrier. The three hundred metre dirt runway

reaches from the rim of a mighty valley up to the village, and when we saw it ahead, over the pilot's shoulder, it was obviously not for normal commercial flights such as ours. But this is Nepal, and the pilot put us down with 'nae problem at a ', or the equivalent. We clambered out, breathless with terror and anticipation, and lugged our gear over to a nearby paddock belonging to a tea house (lodge or inn) where our crew was waiting. There were porters, who carried everything (tents, food, fuel, cooking stove, and our personal gear), a cook and two kitchen boys, a "Sherpa" (guide), all supervised by the sirdar (foreman). He, with our leader, ran the show, rather well as I gradually came to appreciate. Within two hours we were ready to set off, on a short walk to camp at the village of Phakding (altitude 2800m, the same as Lukla). We soon learned the daily routine. Our tents were erected for us, in this case in a paddock by a lodge, and we had a hot meal at dusk. Yes, curried vegetables were conspicuous, but very nice, along with other Nepalese and Western food. Darkness was accompanied by a chill mist which obliterated the jagged peaks and snowcaps which hung over the narrow flood plain where we were encamped. The sleeping bag issued by Ama Dablam was blissfully cosy, especially after visiting the latrine tent pitched in a far corner of the paddock. Also conspicuous at every camp was an urn of water, soap and a towel, placed close to wherever we had our meals - mess tent or steading borrowed for the occasion. Hand washing was politely encouraged by our leader, and proof of the effectiveness of this, and the basic hygiene practised by the cook and his boys, was that no-one experienced any form of stomach upset during our sixteen-day trek.

The morning at Phakding began, as did every morning, with a kitchen boy depositing a large mug of hot black tea at the tent door. A tablespoon of sugar added energy to its marvellous hydrating quality, and zest to the now clear view of the encircling peaks, each glinting in the dawn sunlight. The frost was usually severe but the blue sky helped, and shaving in such conditions made you feel that you were a real trekker. Breakfast was western style and plentiful. Boiled water was then issued for the day; we never consumed untreated water, even for cleaning our teeth. The porters cleared the camp and helped each other to pack and balance their immense loads. These were carried on the back, in a basket suspended by a line looped across the forehead and supplemented with shoulder straps. The bulky loads projected well forward and had to be balanced very skilfully. They weighed at least 40 kg and often much more, a fact I still find difficult to reconcile with the porters' diminutive physique, and with the gradients they coped with. This, together with their lack of mountain clothing, especially boots, and indefatigable good humour conveyed a super-human quality that dwarfed us trekkers just as much as the surrounding mountains.

From Phakding we continued north, up the valley of the Dudh Khosi,

entering the Sagarmatha National Park at the village of Monjo (2800m). After crossing the river gorge by a spectacularly high suspension bridge we slowly ascended a steep 600m section to Namche Bazaar (3400m), the administrative centre of the region. It is a large village set in a bowl in the hills, and comprises numerous lodges, some shops, a school, a police barrack, a fine chorten (Buddhist monument) and an important weekly market. Altitude now became significant and two nights were spent at Namche, camped in a crowded paddock. A near-by vantage point gave us our first sighting of Lhotse and Everest in the distance and of dozens of other huge peaks ahead and around us including everyone's favourite, the ultra steep Ama Dablan (6856m).

Before describing more of the trek I need to emphasise two issues fundamental to understanding life in this region - the absence of roads and altitude. There are no roads north of Jiri, which is some five days' walk south-west of Lukla. For local farmers as well as transient trekkers, practically everything is transported on the back - of a human or a yak (or female yak or the male hybrid, the dzopkyo). The main exceptions are: first, special engineering requirements, such as cement or the cable to build the suspension bridges across rivers, where such items are flown in by freighter helicopter; second, in a medical emergency humans are transported by small helicopters. The whole region is sustained by footpaths strung along the walls of the mighty V-shaped valleys and occasionally crossing the often violent rivers. Wheeled vehicles are not used, as the paths are too rugged and steep. Even in villages surrounded by good arable land, I failed to spot even a wheelbarrow. Did you know that you can buy a Coke ten miles from Everest? That is so, but only because the lodges are supplied by porters carrying crates of the stuff on their backs!

The second fundamental fact of life is potential altitude sickness. All trekkers are made aware of the problem and the trekking companies follow well-established schedules, ascending slowly with extra rest days at critical points, as at Namche. Our leader checked us daily for serious symptoms and we were encouraged to talk about the minor ones - headaches and sleeplessness. Standard procedures are followed if significant symptoms appear; you do not ascend, you may stay put to see if improvement occurs, and you descend if it does not. It is often hard to descend, as the paths are so steeply undulating that a day's walking might be required to achieve a net descent of only 300m to the shelter of a lodge. However in the event of incipient pulmonary oedema that would be well worthwhile. Our small party acclimatised well enough at first, experiencing only minor symptoms.

So after Namche we continued along the wall of the Dudh Khosi valley, camping at the villages of Dole (4200m) and Machherma (4410m). Like all the villages in the region, these were poor places, exhibiting

squalid poverty similar to that of the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century. We reached Gokyo (4750m), our most northerly point in the valley, which is now a cluster of new lodges although the original village would have been too high for year-round farming occupation. Its accompanying lake, dammed by the lateral moraine of the Ngozumpa glacier, was partly frozen. Gokyo's main attraction was a local top, Gokyo Ri (5360m, more than 500m higher than Mt. Blanc), which provides a good view of Everest. After an intensely cold night we ascended 600m or more in brilliant morning light, leaving Lochee at camp nursing a bad cough. The going was easy underfoot, because the hill was essentially a giant heap of frost-fractured rocks, but we all experienced extreme breathlessness. After two hours of heroic puffing and panting we reached the summit, and lots of other trekkers, and took our fill of Everest (8848m), Lhotse (8501m) and an astonishing array of glorious, dramatic summits, including the near-by white wall of Cho Oyu (8153m) and the distant conical peak of Makalu (8463m). Despite the intense sunlight our descent was eventually prompted by the cold. My younger companions descended at speed but I was not properly rested by the sojourn on the top, and descended only slowly. We then headed down the east side of the valley to a sheiling called Na (4400m) where the camp was waiting for us. I drank lots of sweet black tea, enjoyed a hearty hot meal served in a bothy and got into my sleeping bag, well before the arrival of the chill evening mist.

Next day I felt stronger and particularly enjoyed the descent to Phortse (3800m), during which we saw a pair of soaring griffons, quite close up, and some deer. Next day we headed east, reaching the bleak upland village of Dingpoche (4410m) in the now familiar cold and misty late afternoon. The plan was to ascend the valley of Khumbu Khola to the north to reach Lobuche (4930m) and thence walk up to the second viewpoint of Kalar Pattar (5545m). However, throughout the night at Dingboche I experienced massive, unrelenting hyperventilation and concluded at breakfast that I was not well. It was as if I had lost all my altitude acclimatisation, and I could not hope to walk up to Lobuche. The leader organised my retreat. The sirdar would go with me (he was also keen to descend as he was experiencing bad headaches - most Nepalese are lowlanders, just like trekkers) and so too would a porter, to carry the gear. So we three set off to descend to Devoche (3820m), and only sometime later did it occur to me that we were the oldest in the group as a whole. The land became greener and the air warmer as the day passed, and fortunately the descent was not complicated by any nasty uphill sections. At Devoche we found a lodge where we stayed the night. I slept and breathed normally, but pottering about on the following day revealed abnormal breathlessness. Devoche is at the bottom of the hill on which the monastery of Tenpoche is situated, the monastery which expeditions to

Everest traditionally visit. The hill also gives fine, distant views of Lhotse and Everest, and its woods also provided me with a sighting of a rare musk deer. After two nights at Devoche, the sirdar and I felt we should descend further along our return route, despite our improved condition. We set off for Namche Bazaar and on the way spotted a male impeyan pheasant (the national bird of Nepal, brilliantly coloured). We continued beyond Namche, descending the 600m hill path in dusk and drizzle. On reaching Jorsale we failed to find a lodge for the night, so we moved on to nearby Monjo (2800m) where we were lucky. We spent three comfortable nights at Monjo, waiting for the rest of the party, so that gave me two full days to observe life in the village. The local children attended a school, in which each classroom was a separate hut, set around a beaten earth playground. At the end of the day the children swarmed out, descending a variety of improvised rocky paths with ease, and spilled into the main street of the village. This too was a steep rocky path, wide enough to take a single column of yaks, so there was no concern over road safety. I watched some early planting going on in the surrounding fields, and builders, both men and women, walking slowly up out of the village to a construction site. Each carried two or three dressed stones, set on a wooden bracket, slung on the back like a rucksack. Most buildings in this region of Nepal are of dry stone wall construction, in which standard wooden window- and door-frames are set. Only rarely is mortar applied on the outside. The interiors are spartan. Toilets are occasionally built-in, but generally it would be better if they were not. In my lodge the cooking was carried out by the lady of the house and her two sons on a large wood-burning stove, and there was also a cold-water tap, fed straight off the hill. I enjoyed the food, especially the giant spring rolls - or were they a fashionable veggie wrap? Mugs of black tea were a frequent hand-warmer, and a focus for chatting with passing trekkers. Some were carrying their own gear, and if descending they now knew better. Those ascending, i.e. going north, had yet to cope with the altitude.

My fellow trekkers arrived in due course, having achieved the top of Kalar Pattar, but gave me the impression that the experience was not very different from that on Gokyo Ri. We continued our descent of the Dudh Khosi valley to Phakding where we spent our final night on the trek. The last walking day was particularly hot, more humid, and one sensed the weather was transitional between spring and monsoon. We camped at Lukla, and spent the rest of the day exploring the village and its watering holes. We were to take the first Yeti Airways flight to Kathmandu on the following morning. Mercifully the weather was perfect and having passed through the check-in process within a large shed at the side of the runway, we were able to squeeze into our 16-seater minibus-with-wings. Peering over the pilot's shoulder gave a view of the runway, which simply ended in a void. Obviously it had been cut short by some cataclysmic event, an

earthquake perhaps, and we would need to use a helicopter. But no, the plane began to roar, and then, bucking and bouncing, it sped down the runway. We soared out into the immense space of the valley below, and gradually left paradise, a mountaineers' paradise, behind us.

To Dream of Mountains

I wrote this poem at 2 o'clock in the morning on board a ship while we were discharging cargo in Piraeus. The thought suddenly struck me that normal people were all tucked up in bed and in that moment I couldn't understand why it had been necessary for us to decide to add an extra night shift in order to "expedite" our departure the following day.

Escaping from the clatter of the decks for a cup of coffee, my mind drifted beautifully to the high mountains. Over coffee I scribbled these words in my log book. In later working life and probably along with many of you, I could do this equally well sitting at my desk in Aberdeen !!

To sit and dream of mountain slopes,
but my mind must work, not ponder,
must work mid clattering hooks and chains
and think of mundane matter

The words they use, "to expedite"
mean now that we must rush,
not as a rocky stream can do,
in peace, the mountain hushed

But work, make profit, loose our minds,
in a cause that's far and distant,
work round the clock, no time to sleep,
work on, insist, be insistent

Here time means work,
I know it's not
but none have time
to listen

Robbie Middleton
Piraeus 1974