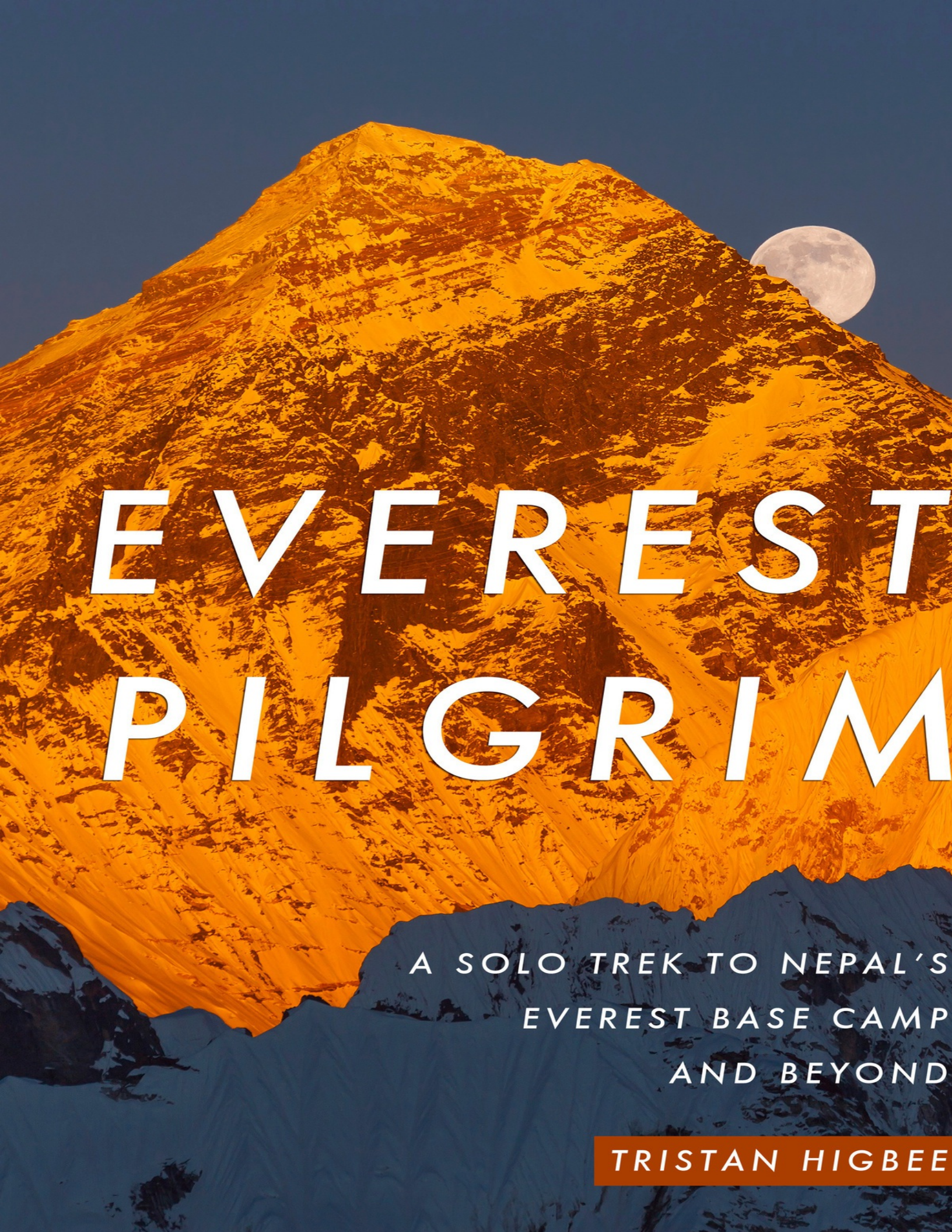

EVEREST
PILGRIM
A SOLO TREK TO NEPAL'S
EVEREST BASE CAMP
AND BEYOND
TRISTAN HIGBEE

Everest Pilgrim: A Solo Trek to Nepal's Everest Base Camp and Beyond

By Tristan Higbee

Copyright © 2014 by Tristan Higbee
All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.
Cover photo: Mt. Everest from Kala Patthar

Table of Contents

Introduction
7 Days and Counting: Arrival
6 Days and Counting: Exploring the City
5 Days and Counting: Buying Gear
4 Days and Counting: More Shopping
3 Days and Counting: Permits, Stupas, and Sadhus
2 Days and Counting: Buying More Gear
1 Day and Counting: I'm Ready. Let's Do This.
Day 1: Lukla to Namche Bazaar
Day 2: The Sherpa Villages
Day 3: Namche Bazaar to Tengboche
Day 4: Ama Dablam Base Camp
Day 5: Tengboche to Dingboche
Day 6: Dingboche to Chukhung to Island Peak Base Camp to Chukhung
Day 7: Chukhung to Pheriche
Day 8: Pheriche to Gorak Shep and Kala Patthar
Day 9: Gorak Shep to Dzongla
Day 10: Over Cho La to Gokyo
Day 11: A Shower and Gokyo Ri
Day 12: Scoundrel's Viewpoint and the Beginning of the End
Day 13: Down to Namche
Day 14: Down to Lukla
Day 15: Back to Kathmandu
Epilogue
Appendix A: Costs and Times
Appendix B: Gear List

Introduction

Most of this book was written while I was actually trekking in Nepal. I took notes on a piece of paper throughout the day while hiking. At the end of the day, I wrote out the day's events and my thoughts in a small notebook, and then I typed that handwritten account into my phone so that I could post it to my blog and share it with my friends and family. It was a slow, tedious, unpleasant process, made even less pleasant by the low temperatures that reduced hand and finger dexterity, but the resulting journal entries and, in turn, this book, are a very in-the-moment record of the adventure. You'll be exposed to my thoughts and experiences as they happened.

All of the places I mention in this book will make much more sense and mean more to you if you know where they are, so I recommend reading this book with a map handy. I've created a map of the trek that you can use to track my trekking progress, and it's on my website at http://thealoof.com/everest. You can bookmark or download it so that it's readily available whenever I mention a new place or mountain.

I took many more photos in the Everest region than I can fit into a book like this. I've included a handful to give you a general idea of what the mountains were like, but you can see nearly 250 additional photos at http://thealoof.com/everest. The photos are sorted by day.

I believe that wanderlust and the thirst for adventure are evolved survival mechanisms that exist to keep us happy and sane. More than anything, I hope that this book motivates you to go out and have adventures of your own. Thanks for picking it up, and I hope you enjoy it.

Tristan

7 Days and Counting: Arrival

Monday, October 21

The Kathmandu Valley is almost entirely encircled by large, green hills, but there is a breach on the northern side of the circle. While my plane was taxiing on the runway of Kathmandu's airport, I managed to catch a glimpse through that breach of a white wall of high mountains in the distance—the Himalaya. This wasn't just a faint blur of white on the distant horizon; this was a pronounced spine of very distinct, very jagged, very snowy mountains. They were close enough to look as big as they are.

That's when I really appreciated where I was. I zoomed out in my mind and pictured Nepal smack-dab in the middle of Asia, wedged uncomfortably between India and China. This is a country I'd wanted to visit for a long, long time. When I was 13 and living in Texas, I bought the latest edition of Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* guidebook. I carefully planned out itineraries of the treks I wanted to go on and made detailed lists of the gear I'd need. I memorized the names of the exotic-sounding rivers, peaks, and villages that I would pass over, by, and through. I was a kid in the flatlands who loved mountains, so of course I wanted to visit the Himalaya, but there really was no shred of possibility of any such trip happening anytime soon. It was a daydream.

Happily, I've found that my daydreams have the habit of becoming reality if the root longing is deep enough, and my longing for the high places runs deep. Fast-forward 14 years and there I was, sitting on a plane in Kathmandu and staring at what I'd been dreaming about for more than half my lifetime. It feels good to grow up and be someone your younger self would approve of.

Visitors from most countries need a visa to enter Nepal. Fortunately, you can get a visa at the airport upon arrival. Unfortunately, this is what everyone does. The result was an hour-long wait in line after filling out a Nepal entry form and a visa application. It wasn't my idea of fun after a long transcontinental flight, but it was what I had to do.

I'm usually really good about being prepared when I travel. I have multiple copies of my itineraries, hotel phone numbers, important passport pages, and so on. But I somehow missed the fact that I would need a passport-sized photo when applying for a Nepali visa. I have a bunch of passport photos for this exact purpose, but I'd put them all in my checked luggage, which I would be able to retrieve only after going through the immigration and

customs formalities. Oops. I didn't know what else to do, so I just got in line with my passport and the forms. When it eventually got to be my turn, the guy at the desk asked me for my photo. I told him I didn't have one. He pointed to a photo booth at the far corner of the room. A few minutes and $5 later saw me back at the desk with a handful of new and unflattering photos. Visa in hand, I grabbed my backpack from the baggage claim area and went outside to find the driver sent from the hotel to pick me up—you know, one of the guys that holds up a sign with your name on it. I saw a few of those guys holding signs, none of which had my name on it. I had definitely arranged airport pickup with my hotel, but miscommunications happen. I wasn't too worried about it, and I didn't want to wait around and hope that the driver would show up, so I went back inside to the taxi kiosk and paid 650 rupees ($6.50) for the ride. A driver standing nearby led me out of the airport building and toward his car. That's when I saw a much larger crowd of people holding up names on pieces of paper, and I saw my name clearly printed and properly spelled on one of them. It turns out I just hadn't gone far enough out of the airport. Oops again. I was able to get a 75% refund on the taxi fare, so I was only out 163 rupees ($1.63). I'll survive the blow.

I read a book[1] a couple of weeks ago about one man's trip to Nepal to hike the Annapurna Circuit. He said that he was shocked and appalled by the abject poverty he saw in the city as he was driven from the Kathmandu airport to his hotel. Here are his exact words:

"The 'scenery' … on this drive in from the airport was breathtaking. But not in the way of the Blue Ridge Parkway or Pacific Coast Highway. Rather, harsh, indescribable poverty was in our face the whole way."

It didn't seem quite as bad to me as he'd made it out to be, but it became obvious that Nepal is not a wealthy country, and Kathmandu is no glittering showpiece of a capital city.

I lived in China for a few years, and Kathmandu seems to me to be a dirtier, dustier, more chaotic version of your average Chinese city. There's a lot of trash everywhere, and the air is choked with dust. Everything has a matte brown veneer on it, and my eyes were burning slightly as we drove through the city. Whether that was from the dirt, the pollution, or simply being exhausted, I'm not sure.

The driving in Nepal is even more chaotic and crazy than in China, and there are far more motorcycles. Ostensibly, people in Nepal drive on the left side of the road, but this seems to be more wishful thinking than a generally accepted

practice. The traffic situation is more of a free-for-all, the survival of the fittest. Darwin would have approved. The city feels wild, raw, and very much alive. It feels like the kind of place that *Last Crusade*-era Indiana Jones could still get lost and have a misadventure in.

My room at the hotel is small but nice enough. It is clean, is in a great location, and has an attached bathroom, plus there's a wall-mounted fan that blows directly onto the bed. What more do you need? I unpacked a little bit, ate a granola bar that I'd brought with me from Serbia, checked my email, and took a thoroughly satisfying and much-needed three-hour nap.

I awoke refreshed and eager to explore the neighborhood a bit, but first I stopped by the travel office adjacent to the hotel lobby. I booked a one-way flight from Kathmandu to Lukla for a week from today. I bought only a one-way ticket because I'm not entirely sure how long my trek will take. I'm planning on it taking about 20 days, but weather, injury, sickness, boredom, or a general desire in me to fill up my days with as much walking as possible all mean that that number is subject to change. I'll call the Lukla airport a couple days before I arrive back there to arrange my return flight to Kathmandu. That should give me the maximum amount of flexibility. I'll use this week before I leave for Lukla to buy a bunch of gear that I need, get the necessary trekking permits, do a bit of work (I work online and can work anywhere as long as I have an Internet connection), and adjust to things here in Nepal.

Lukla is a small town in the mountains at about 9,000 feet (2,740 meters). It's where most treks in the Everest region start and end. You can take a bus from Kathmandu to a town even lower in the mountains and then hike for several days to reach Lukla, but most people fly from Kathmandu to Lukla in a small plane. Precariously perched and with unpredictable weather, the Lukla airport (officially named Tenzing-Hillary Airport after the first guys who climbed Everest) is said to be the most dangerous airport in the world.

After buying my ticket, I headed out to explore the neighborhood. My hotel is located in Kathmandu's Thamel district. It's the tourist district. It's full of restaurants, hotels, shops selling climbing and trekking gear, tea shops, souvenir shops, travel agencies, and anything else a visitor might want. Thamel used to be famous as the place in town to get hashish (and indeed, I was quietly offered some a couple different times while walking around today), but these days it's known mostly for its restaurants, hotels, and tourist amenities.

Walking around the neighborhood, I certainly did see a lot of tourists. There are a lot of Chinese tourists here, which makes sense. I've also heard a lot of people speaking English and French. The streets here in the Thamel district are narrow, crowded with people and vehicles, and charming in a dilapidated sort of way. It all looks and feels very exotic. The buildings on both sides of the streets are crammed with shops, signs, flags, wires, cables, and banners. The air is very dusty and occasionally foul, but also often accented with fragrances from the shops selling teas, spices, and incense.

While walking around, I found myself speculating about what mountain adventures all of the other foreigners like myself had just come from or would soon embark on. Some people had raccoonian tan lines around their eyes, a definite sign that they had recently been in the strong mountain sunlight but been smart enough to wear good sunglasses. I also found myself appreciating how good-looking Nepali people are in general. They're generally smaller than Americans or Europeans (well, let's be honest, everyone is small compared to Americans) and are very quick to smile. I like them already.

I wandered around for half an hour before returning to the hotel to do some research. I was happy to have gone out and seen what the neighborhood was like, but I needed to do some shopping. Before I could shop, I needed to get my bearings and figure out where everything was. Using the latest edition of *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*—the same guidebook I'd fawned over as a teenager—I marked on my phone's map the places that I'll be exploring throughout the next week: restaurants, gear shops, pharmacies, supermarkets, etc. Thus armed, I headed back out into the melee.

I needed to buy some good trekking footwear, so the first order of business was a reconnaissance mission to the North Face and Mountain Hardwear stores. I have a pair of Gore-Tex North Face shoes that I really like, but they're a bit too small to fit me comfortably if I'm wearing a pair of thick, warm socks. It'll be cold up in the mountains, and the thin running socks I wore when I bought and sized the shoes a couple of years ago won't cut it. There is a lot of Chinese-made, counterfeit name-brand outdoor gear and clothing in Nepal, but I need legitimately good shoes, so I went to the legitimate stores. The shoes and boots in the North Face store looked particularly promising, but I didn't try any of them on because I didn't have any thick socks to try them on with to ensure a good fit. Those are also on the list of things I need to buy this week. Satisfied that I'd be able to get some

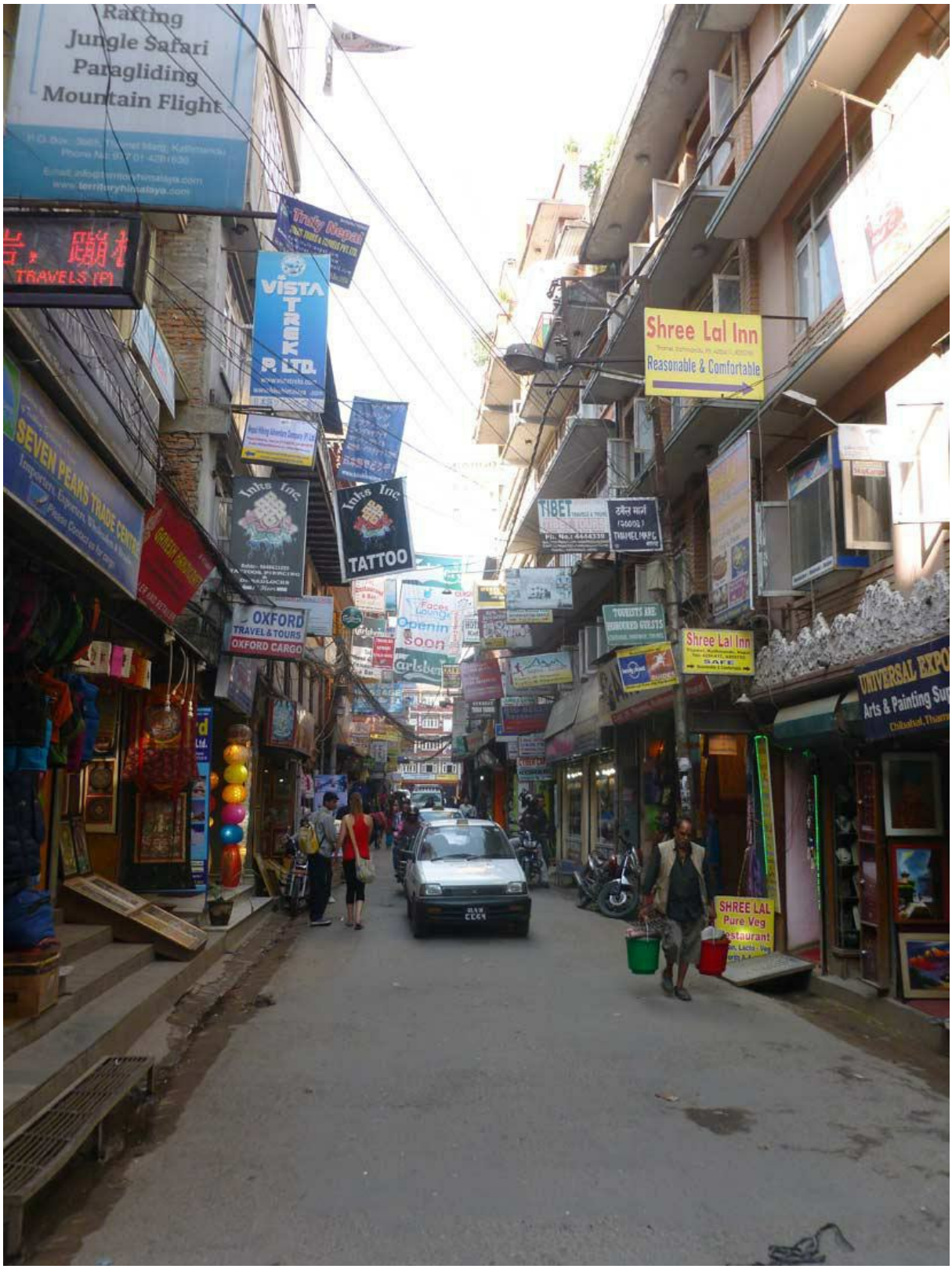
good shoes sometime before leaving for the mountains, I turned my attention to dinner.

My taste buds were still fondly remembering the falafel I'd eaten the day before during my long layover in Istanbul, so the plan was to go to a Middle Eastern restaurant. The problem with finding anything on these streets is that the shops are so close together that they're almost on top of each other. Combine that with the visual onslaught of shop signs and advertisements covering almost every available flat surface and it's easy to miss the one place you're specifically looking for. Despite wandering up and down the right street several times, I couldn't find the restaurant. Maybe the address I had was outdated, or maybe the restaurant had gone out of business. I consoled myself with some Indian food instead.

Sufficiently fed and watered (or, more accurately, Coca-Cola'd), I went to a small corner supermarket right in the middle of things in Thamel. It was full of foreigners stocking up on trekking essentials like chocolate, granola bars, cookies, and packets of tissues. I love having a hobby in which chocolate and cookies are considered essentials. I followed everyone else's lead and ended up with Spanish cookies, Nepali granola bars ("Manufactured Under American Supervision in Hygienic Conditions Using American Technology"), hand sanitizer, sunscreen, antibiotic ointment, and a map of the Everest region.

After that, I felt like I'd done enough for the day and returned to my hotel to relax, read, plan, and get a bit more work done.

I'm feeling good. Kathmandu is a neat city, and I'm excited to get into the mountains in a week. I feel like I have a daunting amount of stuff to do before I leave town, but I've got plenty of time.



Above: A narrow street in Kathmandu's Thamel district.

1. *Getting High: The Annapurna Circuit in Nepal* by Bill Walker.

Go back.

6 Days and Counting: Exploring the City

Tuesday, October 22

This morning I went to one of the shops that sell outdoor equipment. Picking one to visit wasn't easy; I'd passed by dozens of them while out and about yesterday. I wanted a shop that sold solid equipment and that wouldn't try to rip me off too much. Fortunately, I have a friend who spent several months in Nepal last year, so I pinged him and asked him where to go. He pointed me to a shop called Shona's.

I was going to buy all of my trekking clothes today but had second thoughts after talking to the shop manager. She said that a storm had dumped three meters (ten feet) of snow at Everest Base Camp in the last couple of weeks and that no one had successfully made the trek there during that time. If that's the case, the high passes I'll be going over as part of my planned Three Passes Trek will likewise be covered in a ton of snow. I don't mind some snow, but I have no interest in wading through snow that's several feet deep, not to mention facing the dangers that come with that much new snow in the mountains. I'm going to wait a few days and talk to some more people about the conditions up there before I buy stacks of equipment that I may or may not need.

Instead of my planned gear-buying spree, I decided to go do some sightseeing. I took a taxi to Swayambhunath, also known as the Monkey Temple. The temple is located on top of a hill west of the center of Kathmandu. The taxi dropped me off at the bottom of a long series of steps that lead up to the top of the hill. As I was hiking up the steps, I saw my first monkey. This was the first time that I'd ever seen a monkey outside of a zoo setting, so I was delighted and only barely managed to avoid squealing with glee. The monkey just sat on the steps staring at me as I approached it and walked past. I continued up the steps to the top of the hill and was rewarded with fantastic views of the whole of Kathmandu below me and a whole gang of monkeys around me. The main attraction at the top of the hill is the stupa. A stupa is a large, dome-like structure that usually contains Buddhist relics of some sort. In this case, the stupa was a white dome with a thick, golden spire on top. The golden spire had beautiful Buddha eyes painted on each of its four sides, and these eyes represent the all-knowing wisdom of the Buddha. Around the stupa were many prayer wheels and some smaller temples and shrines.

While I was taking pictures, a guy asked me if I'd take his picture for him with his camera. I did, and we started chatting. His name was Rashid, and he's a Lebanese guy living in Dubai. We chatted as we walked around the stupa, and we decided to get a taxi together back to town since we were both heading in that direction. The taxi dropped us off at Kathmandu Durbar Square, a beautiful old square surrounded by a timeworn palace and historic temples. The temples were gorgeous, and their intricately carved wooden facades were a wonder. The entrance fee to the square included admission to an adjacent museum that documented the lives of the last two kings of Nepal. The museum failed to enthrall me, but there must have been something in the air there, because I had to sneeze about every fifteen seconds. I hungrily gulped down Kathmandu's gray air upon exiting the museum.

After exploring the square and its surrounding buildings, we walked back to the main drag of Thamel and went our separate ways. I managed to find the Middle Eastern restaurant that had eluded me yesterday, and I feasted on falafel, hummus, thick flatbread, and a variety of dips and sauces that I couldn't identify but were delicious. I came home after that to get some work done and relax after an exhausting day.

It's hard to convey in words or photos just how crazy this city is. It's astonishingly hectic, frantic, and dirty. Rashid and I were talking about how usually there are nice parts of a city and not-so-nice parts, but we had yet to see any nicer parts of Kathmandu. I've never seen anyplace like it. It's fascinating. I love it.

There is one more interesting thing I saw while walking around today. Someone in a fourth-floor apartment lowered a little basket on a rope down to the shop on street level. Presumably, some money and a shopping list were in the basket when it was sent down. The shopkeeper filled up the basket with a few items, gave a quick tug to the rope, and the apartment dweller above hauled it back up. Now that's service.

Above: The stupa of Swayambhunath (the Monkey Temple)

Above: A monkey at Swayambhunath

Above: A wall in the Kathmandu Durbar Square area

5 Days and Counting: Buying Gear

Wednesday, October 23

I've come to the conclusion that I'm allergic to Kathmandu. Or I'm at least allergic to something in the buildings in Kathmandu. I usually don't have any problem when I'm outside, but when I'm in my hotel room or some other building (the museum yesterday, for example), I start sneezing and my eyes start to water. It's not very fun. Luckily, it's not constant. I'll sneeze four times and then be OK for an hour or two. This morning I went to try to find some Benadryl or some other kind of allergy medicine but had no luck. Instead, I found some herbal concoction that doesn't work. I will keep searching and will push through regardless.

Buying the clothing necessary for my trek was the object of today's endeavors. I was still unsure about the snow situation at Everest Base Camp, but I knew that I would need new clothes for the trek even if I didn't make it all the way to Base Camp. I headed back to Shona's. The shop is run by a British man and his Nepali wife, Shona. I told the man where I planned on trekking and the things I wanted to buy, and he then walked me around the shop, grabbing things off the walls and out of bins for me to look at and try on. Most people come to Nepal directly from their home countries and bring the appropriate and necessary equipment with them. When I left America 13 months ago to live, travel, and work abroad, I had no idea that I'd eventually end up in Nepal, so I didn't bring any trekking gear with me. I spent about 45 minutes in the closet-sized shop and emerged clutching several bags that overflowed with of all sorts of high-tech clothing and other useful goodies.

I did not buy a backpack, sleeping bag, or down jacket because I'd been thinking about renting those at the cost of a few dollars a day. A backpack costs around $25 to buy. A sleeping bag is roughly $100, and a down jacket runs about $40. Now that I've had more time to think about and weigh my options, I've decided to definitely rent a sleeping bag and probably buy a backpack, but I'll look around to see if I can find a good price on a down jacket.

I then went back to the hotel, laid out my new purchases on top of the bed, and savored the moment. It's been a while since I've been able to geek out over outdoor gear, and my inner gear nerd was overjoyed.

The next thing I did was buy a Nepali SIM card for my phone. This will be useful in two ways. First, there is cellular data coverage in the Everest region,

and I would like to blog and send emails while I'm up there. Second, the Internet connection in my hotel here in Kathmandu isn't very fast or reliable. I want to be able to use my phone as a personal hotspot and tether my laptop to it, thereby bypassing the lousy hotel WiFi.

Overall, today was a success. I was productive. I was also a little bit stressed out about having to find and buy so much gear, but it's been a relatively painless process so far.

Here's a random side note. Nepal is in a strange time zone. It's UTC +5:45. So when it's 12:00 noon in New York and 5:00 p.m. in London, it's 10:45 p.m. in Nepal. Not 10:00, not 11:00, but 10:45. Odd. I didn't know that there were time zones that were anything but whole numbers.

4 Days and Counting: More Shopping

Thursday, October 24

Kathmandu experiences regular power outages. I've experienced at least one a day in my hotel and two more in two different restaurants. They last anywhere from 15 minutes to two hours. The restaurants usually have lit candles on every table, so the power outages aren't a big deal there, and I usually have enough of a charge in my laptop and phone to make it through the dark times in my hotel. I'd read about the power outages before I came here, but I didn't give them much thought. They're not a huge problem, but it is interesting how frequently they occur.

There are a lot of foreign tourists in Kathmandu. They (we) are everywhere, and I expected this. But I've barely seen any foreign (i.e., non-Nepali) children. That makes sense, of course—Nepal isn't the first place that comes to mind when considering family-friendly vacations—but it still surprised me, and it is yet another way that Nepal differs from most other countries I've been to.

Today was predominantly a day of more shopping. Among other things, I bought the following:

• 20 packets of oral rehydration salts – I bought these both to replenish lost electrolytes while trekking and to mask the iodine taste of the purification tablets I bought yesterday.

• Bandana and high-SPF lip balm

• Diamox – This medicine is supposed to help with acclimatization. I'd prefer to not use it, but I bought some just in case.

• Replacement batteries for my headlamp

• A small scale to weigh my backpack once it's packed. I like knowing these kinds of things.

I did manage to talk a shopkeeper down to 2,000 rupees ($20) for a down jacket, but I wanted to see if I could get it for less elsewhere. I couldn't. When I went back to the shop a couple of hours later, a different man was working there, and he wouldn't go below 3,000 rupees ($30) for the jacket, so I ended the day with a down jacket still on my list of things to buy.

3 Days and Counting: Permits, Stupas, and Sadhus

Friday, October 25

In the morning, I walked over to the Tourist Service Center and got my trekking permit and permit for entering Sagarmatha National Park (also known as Everest National Park). Now $50 poorer, I took a taxi to a Buddhist stupa on the east side of town called Boudhanath. It's a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it was founded sometime around A.D. 500–600 (or maybe in the 700s; no one is quite sure). To be honest, I didn't find it as interesting or peaceful as Swayambhunath, and there was a regrettable lack of monkeys. There were lots of tourist shops and tourists but very few people who looked like actual worshiping Buddhists. I'm a lover of religious architecture and religious sites in general, but the atmosphere there was more of a carnival than a sanctuary.

I then took a taxi over to Pashupatinath. This is a Hindu temple complex, though apparently there's a Buddhist temple on the site too. I really enjoyed Pashupatinath. I didn't know much about the place and it covers a large area, so I hired a guide for a few dollars. Tourists aren't allowed to go inside the main temple itself, but there's still a lot to see. The primary draw for tourists is seeing cremations take place. Around 40 or 50 cremations take place here daily. A body, along with wood for fuel, is placed on one of the open platforms next to the river and set on fire. It takes a couple of hours for everything to burn down all the way, and the ashes are put in a bag that is then tossed into the Bagmati River, which the Pashupatinath complex straddles and which ultimately flows into the holy Ganges. There are also steps leading down to the river, and pilgrims bathe and sit there while performing ritual ablutions. Pashupatinath appears to be Nepal's equivalent to India's Varanasi.

I saw several sadhus at Pashupatinath. Sadhus are Hindu holy men with long hair and beards, white and orange paint on their skin, and a negligible swath of brilliantly orange cloth wrapped around their groin and rear. These men renounce worldly possessions and spend their time in religious devotion to the deity of their choice. They are mesmerizing, and it was hard to take my eyes off of them.

From on top of the wall of the main Hindu temple, people tossed coins onto

the roof of one of the smaller shrines in front of it, trying to make the coins land on a small red area of the roof. If they made it, they'd have good luck all day. If they missed, the coin ended up rolling into the river. Apparently some Nepali coins have iron or steel in them, because I saw a young boy tie a magnet to a string and then fish for coins in the river. I believe that is what is called making your own luck. Smart kid.

To my delight, there were even monkeys at Pashupatinath.

***

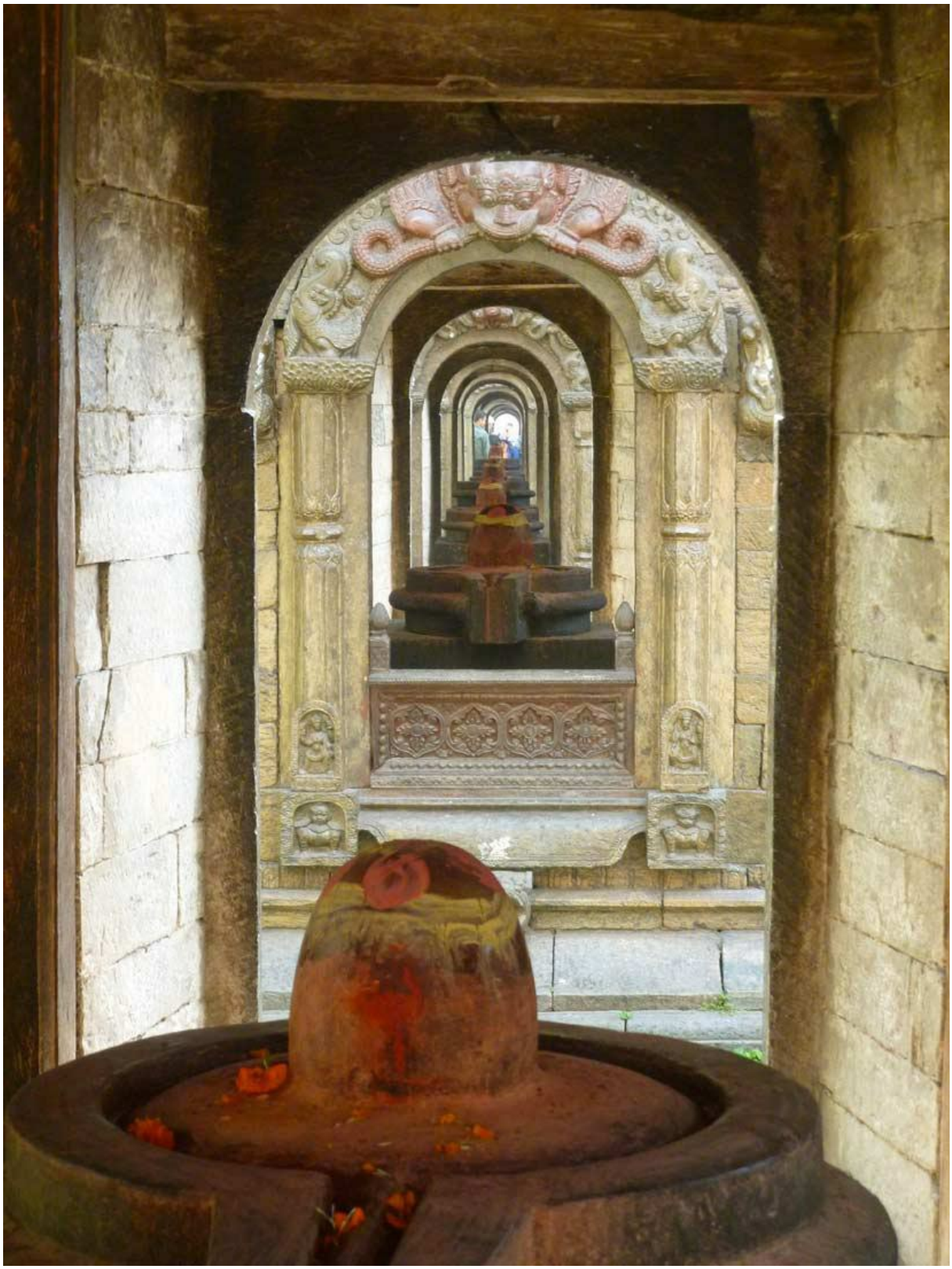
I remember that while living in Beijing and Mexico City, I would blow my nose and see that the mucus was black from breathing in all of the dust and pollution. Kathmandu has the dubious honor of joining those two cities in the Black Snot Club. The mountains that completely surround Kathmandu keep air pollution from dissipating. To make matters worse, a lot of the roads in the city are just hard-packed dirt. Shopkeepers toss water onto the ground in front of their shops to try to keep the amount of dust down (a tactic I remember people in China employing, too). That helps, but it can only do so much. A fair number of Beijingers wore surgical masks when outside to try to filter out some of the nastiness, and there are even more people in Kathmandu who do the same. It's not a bad idea.

I remember seeing swastikas in Buddhist temples in Beijing and being really confused until I learned that the swastika has been a symbol of auspiciousness in Buddhism and Hinduism for thousands of years, way before the Nazis appropriated it. Over the last couple of days, I've also seen Stars of David in various places throughout the city. It turns out that it's a Hindu symbol called the shatkona. According to the Wikipedia page on the subject, it "represents the union of both the male and feminine form. More specifically it is supposed to represent Purusha (the supreme being), and Prakriti (mother nature, or causal matter)."

These are the things that I live for when I travel. Sure, it's fun to see the holiest temples and grandest monuments, but noting the more subtle differences between cultures is what I really love. Another example? Men hold hands here. I've seen friendly men in the Balkans and Turkey link arms while walking, and I've seen women holding hands in a bunch of places, but Nepal is the first country I've been to where men holding hands is a part of the culture and not a romantic gesture.

Above: A close-up of Swayambunath

Above: A cremation at Pashupatinath



Above: A row of lingas (representations of Hindu deity Shiva) at Pashupatinath

2 Days and Counting: Buying More Gear

Saturday, October 26

Today is Saturday. According to the “Workweek and weekend” page on Wikipedia, “Nepal follows the ancient Vedic calendar, which has the resting day on Saturday and the first day of the working week on Sunday.” It is the day when government offices are closed, kids are out of school, and Christians go to church. This is another example of one of those little differences that I love to find.

Today I did a lot of shopping. I have one more full day in Kathmandu before I fly to Lukla, but I wanted to get as much done today as possible so that tomorrow I can relax and pick up any incidentals that I have forgotten about. First, I went and rented a sleeping bag and bought a liner to go inside it. The rental required a 6,000-rupee ($60) deposit, and it costs 80 rupees ($0.80) per day to rent the bag, which I’ll pay when I get back from the trek. This rental shop also had backpacks and down jackets, but they didn’t have any large backpacks left, and the down jackets were a bit too big and bulky for my liking. I ended up buying a fake Mammut brand down jacket for 2,000 rupees ($20) and a Nepali-made house brand backpack from the outdoor shop that’s owned and run by the British expat. The backpack was 2,600 rupees ($26). The jacket isn’t nearly as bulky and heavy as the ones that were available to rent, but it won’t be as warm, either. I hope it’ll be warm enough. I guess I’ll find out. I have about a million other layers to wear, so I should be OK. I also bought some more medicine, another Nalgene water bottle (these are expensive because they’re imported), and a waterproof backpack cover.

Buying all of this gear is mildly frustrating because I already have this stuff in the States, and it’s all lighter and of higher quality. But as I mentioned earlier, trekking in Nepal was not even on my radar when I left the US over a year ago. On the bright side, it has only cost me about $200 to get totally outfitted. That’s less than the cost of just the down jacket I have in America. Amazing. As it now stands, my base pack weight is around 20 pounds (9 kilograms). With food and water, I’m guessing that it’ll be around 30 pounds (14 kilograms).

I briefly had stomach problems last night. Visitors to India experience Delhi belly. Tourists to Mexico get Montezuma’s revenge. I guess last night I had… Kathmandu voodoo? Fortunately, it lasted for only a few hours. Every single account I’ve read about people trekking to Everest Base Camp

includes some form of gastrointestinal distress en route. Let’s just hope I got my allotment out of the way here in the lowlands.

Tomorrow will be the day of reckoning for my footwear. I’ll have to decide whether I go with my current shoes or purchase new ones for the trek. As I mentioned previously, the hiking shoes I have now are slightly too small when I’m wearing warm socks, but they’re broken in. If I buy new shoes, there will be more room for the socks and for my feet to swell, but they won’t be broken in. Either situation could lead to extreme discomfort. I’m leaning toward buying new shoes. I also need to buy a few more Snickers bars, pick up my laundry, charge my camera batteries, remove all the existing photos from my SD card, and get some documentation printed out. I’m also going to see if I can find a small Bluetooth keyboard that would make journaling and blogging easier, but part of me hopes that I don’t find one so that I won’t have to carry it. Everything else that I won’t be taking with me—my travel luggage, laptop, etc.—will be stored at my hotel here in Kathmandu for the duration of the trek.

To continue my tradition of briefly recounting miscellaneous observations, I’ll say that Kathmandu has the worst roads of any major city I’ve been to. And completely unrelated to the roads, I think that the people of Nepal are the friendliest people I’ve ever met. Everyone I’ve met in my limited time here so far has been incredibly nice. This is a great place.

Above: The purchased backpack, down jacket, and other items

1 Day and Counting: I’m Ready. Let’s Do This.

Sunday, October 27

My day today was productive and completely uninteresting. I shopped and packed. That’s it.

As recently as just a few weeks ago, I had planned to do just a five-day trek. But here I am about to go on a 20-day slog. From day six onward, I’ll be above tree line. I have a lot of experience in the mountains, but I’ve never done anything quite like this before. I’m excited, but a few things do have me slightly worried. I’m most concerned about my knees. I have a knee issue called chondromalacia patellae. There are bumps in the cartilage behind my kneecaps, and they cause my knees to grind when I do things like squat, climb stairs, or hike up steep trails. My knees usually don’t hurt too much, but 20 days of up-and-down trekking with a 30-pound (14-kilogram) pack will probably irritate them. A possible scenario is that I’ll be forced to take rest days where I don’t do anything at all, and those will likely be excruciatingly frustrating for me. I hate forced downtime.

I’m also concerned about getting a good night’s sleep in the guesthouses. I’m a light sleeper, and the guesthouses are supposedly quite noisy. I have earplugs, but my ears are shaped funny and earplugs usually fall out. In the past I’ve played nature sounds or white noise through my phone to drown out other nighttime noises (like when people were trying to break into my apartment in Serbia a couple weeks ago, though that’s another story), but that won’t be an option on the trek because I’ll need to conserve my phone’s battery life.

I’m slightly worried about the weight of my pack. But it’ll get lighter every day as I eat through my Snickers supply and use up the electrolyte packets, and I imagine that I’ll jettison a few things along the way that I don’t need. While 30 pounds really isn’t that heavy for a pack, I doubt it feels all that great at 18,000 feet (5,490 meters). The highest I’ve ever been is around 14,500 feet (4,420 meters).

Blisters are another worry. I bought new boots today, and I’ll be breaking them in on the trail tomorrow. This is not an ideal situation.

Other than those concerns, I feel good. Ironically, though I’m about to embark on the most physically demanding thing I’ve ever done, I’m probably

in the worst shape I've been in for the past five years. Sitting on my butt in front of a computer for hours a day is not good training. But I do think I'll be OK with the physical exertion. I think I'll be OK with the altitude. I think I'll be OK with the cold.

Finally, I honestly don't really care what I get to see or do when I'm up there. If I don't make it to Everest Base Camp, if the passes are covered in deep snow and can't be crossed, or if my knees cause too much discomfort, that's fine. I'm OK with that. I just want to be in the mountains. I miss the mountains. I've had rough days in the mountains, but I've never had a bad one. I've always felt more comfortable—more myself—in the mountains than anywhere else. The high places are nature's filters of everything that is ugly. In the mountains, pollution is minimal. Crowds are rare. Nothing is complicated. Life is simple. People are strong. Everything is beautiful. Everything is good.

I'm ready. Let's do this.

Above: All of the gear for the trek

Reminder: There are many more photos available at http://thealoof.com/everest.

Day 1: Lukla to Namche Bazaar

Monday, October 28

I feel extremely cozy and content right now. I'm swaddled from head to toe in thick fleece. I'm in my warm, puffy sleeping bag on the very comfortable bed that is in my surprisingly nice $5-per-night hotel room. I just ate a massive plate of fried noodles and downed half a liter of Fanta. I'm at 11,000 feet (3,350 meters) in the village of Namche Bazaar (located inside Sagarmatha (Everest) National Park), and I can see some spectacular snow-covered peaks out my window. I'm exhausted.

This morning I woke up at 4:00 a.m. in order to catch my 6:10 a.m. flight to Lukla. There are dozens of flights to Lukla from Kathmandu every day, and the 6:10 a.m. flight is the first. I waited in the dark outside of the Kathmandu airport's little domestic flight terminal with a couple dozen other down- and Gore-Tex-clad foreigners. When the terminal building was opened up, we filed in. There was no security. I checked in and then sat with everyone else in a waiting room until it was time to board.

I was the first to board and took a seat at the very front of the airplane, right behind the pilot and copilot. There were 15 seats in the little twin turboprop plane, and only about half of them were full. There was a stewardess on board, but her list of duties was short. She asked us to put our seat belts on. She mentioned that we could fill out the "Suggestions for Plane Safety" card in the pocket in front of each seat (though it was missing from mine) if we were so inclined. And then right before takeoff, she handed out a single small piece of mango-flavored hard candy to each passenger.

The flight was short, only about 25 minutes long. Everyone on the left side of the plane had incredible views of the Himalaya, and the sun was just starting to light them up. Unfortunately, I sat on the right side of the plane (a decision I kicked myself extra hard for because I was the first one on the plane), but I did keep staring out the window of the guy sitting across the aisle from me. I know that's always kind of unsettling on planes because it feels like the person staring out the window is creepily staring right at you, but that's just the way it had to be. Sorry, guy. The Himalaya are worth being creepy for.

We flew incredibly close to some of the jungle-covered green foothills and over many tiny villages sitting on hilltops. I wonder what it's like to live in one of those villages. Do the villagers appreciate the grandeur of the mountains above them, or do they, like so many of us, become immune to the

routine beauty in their lives?

Our plane did experience some rather severe turbulence in a couple of places, but we still managed to arrive in one piece at the infamous Lukla airport. I was a bit concerned when the pilot had to use his hand to clear some of the fog from the plane's windscreen as we approached the runway, but all's well that ends well, and the plane ride ended well.

Right when we exited the plane, I was struck with a clear view of a magnificent peak across the valley from me. It was almost perfectly pyramid-shaped. The whole of the valley where I stood was still in early-morning shadow, but the peak was brilliantly lit with early-morning sun. That's when I knew that coming to the Himalaya was a very, very good decision.

I grabbed my backpack from the airport's baggage claim table and started walking through town. There was no snow on the ground, but everything was wet. It looked like it had rained heavily not too long ago. As I talked to people throughout the day, I learned that it had indeed just rained for several days straight.

There wasn't much activity yet in Lukla because it was so early in the day. People were just starting to open their shops, and I saw no other trekkers. The air was comfortably chilly and still. It was cool enough to walk without getting overly sweaty but warm enough that I didn't have to don extra layers. I reached the edge of Lukla and took note of the time. It was 7:05 a.m.

Most people hike from Lukla (elevation 9,380 feet/2,859 meters) to Namche Bazaar (11,290 feet/3,442 meters) in two days, but I wanted to do it in one. I figured that I had enough daylight ahead of me and was stubborn enough to make it happen. Some say that you should break it up into two days so that you don't get altitude sickness, but I didn't think that would be a problem for me. I had just spent a week traipsing around at 4,600 feet (1,400 meters) in Kathmandu, and I've climbed up enough mountains in the past to feel confident that my body could handle going up to Namche Bazaar in a day without too much trouble.

In many places, the trail from Lukla to Namche Bazaar was wide enough to look like a small road, though there are no motorized vehicles anywhere up here. As I was thinking about this, I realized that this is probably the first populated place I've ever been to that doesn't have cars. I was a time traveler in sunglasses and nylon.

I passed by a bunch of locals and porters walking in the opposite direction, but I didn't see another foreign trekker until I'd been walking for about an

hour and a half. And overall, while I certainly passed a lot of trekking groups today—hundreds of people in all—the trail actually wasn't as crowded as I thought it would be. I thought it would be one long line of hikers, all of them close together like the bearers of the dancing dragon at a Chinese New Year celebration, but thankfully that wasn't the case.

There were also a lot of pack animals on the trail, namely cows and mules. They were all shuttling gear and supplies between Lukla and Namche Bazaar. I understand that there are yaks and yak-cow hybrids further up the mountain, though I don't think I saw any today. And I saw a lot of local porters.

Those poor porters! So many of them were carrying what must have been at least 100-pound (45-kilogram) loads. Each porter had a large basket on his back, and he carried it via a loop of padded rope around his forehead. There were no shoulder straps or hip belts. The baskets overflowed with sacks of rice, cases of beer and soft drinks, and other plastic- and paper-wrapped bundles that I couldn't identify.

Each porter carried what looked like a short, fat, t-shaped walking stick, except that its primary function wasn't as a walking stick. It was a support for the massive loads on the porters' backs for when they wanted to rest. They would keep the loads on their backs but prop the t-shaped sticks behind them and under their loads so that the bulk of the load rested on the stick.

Everything about the whole process looked astonishingly uncomfortable and difficult. If I ever feel like complaining about the weight of my backpack, I need to remember these guys.

The scenery was astounding. For a couple of hours at the beginning of the trek this morning, the trail went gradually high up along the right side of a valley, and the river in the valley's floor wasn't visible. Instead, I had fantastic views of the glaciated peaks that rose up to my left on the other side of the valley. This first third of the trail went through very lush country. Moss hung from trees, and water seeped out from all over the mountainside. The trail then descended down into the valley floor and paralleled the most beautifully colored river I've ever seen. It was a light, milky turquoise. It was as if a giant somewhere upriver had tired of painting seascapes and dumped his paints into the river in frustration.

Throughout the day, the trail repeatedly crossed the river and its smaller tributary streams on spectacular suspension bridges. They were so far above the water and there was so much air below me that it almost felt like I was space walking, like I was treading air. If there were cows or mules on the

bridge that I wanted to cross, I had to wait for them all to successfully cross. These bridges are narrow enough that it's difficult to pass backpack-laden people, let alone mature bulls with full sets of horns.

The trail in this middle section passed by multiple waterfalls. Some of them were noisy and violent cascades right on the trail, while others were white ribbons that fell down silently in slow motion on the other side of the valley. At this point, I was hiking at the bottom of a deep, narrow valley, so I was able to catch a glimpse of the peaks that flanked the valley only when a side canyon intersected the main chasm.

And that now brings us to the third and final section of trail that I covered today: the ascent. The final ascent up to Namche Bazaar involved a grueling 2,000-vertical-foot (610-vertical-meter) climb. This was not trivial. It was very unpleasant, and my hunger at this point was getting out of control. The foliage surrounding the trail here wasn't nearly as lush. The trees were all coniferous, and the bulk of the undergrowth disappeared. The landscape reminded me of the dry, rocky Sierra Nevada range in California. The trail zigzagged its way up the mountainside with dozens—hundreds?—of switchbacks. The ascent seemed to go on for hours and hours, though in reality it took an hour and fifteen minutes. But that hour and fifteen minutes was a very long, very steep, very dry, and very hot climb.

I finally rolled into the large village of Namche Bazaar at 1:15 p.m, six hours and ten minutes after starting. That included all rest stops. The *Lonely Planet* trekking guide says that it takes eight hours not including stops, so I felt good about my pace. By 2:00 p.m. I'd found a hotel and was gorging myself on the aforementioned fried noodles and Fanta.

I hurt. My body aches. Tomorrow is an acclimatization day. I am happy to report that my feet survived my boots' maiden voyage. I had a few minor hot spots on some of my toes, but no blisters. I'm sore and exhausted and very happy to be here.

Above: A pyramid-shaped peak as seen from the airport in Lukla

Above: A high suspension bridge below Namche Bazaar

Day 2: The Sherpa Villages

Tuesday, October 29

Trekking here isn't a pure wilderness experience, and it's definitely not the place to come to for solitude. Though I mentioned yesterday how surprised I was that there weren't more people on the trail, there are still a lot of people around. There are multiple small Sherpa villages in every valley. Most of the villages, or at least the ones that we foreign trekkers routinely wander into, have at least a couple guesthouses and a restaurant or two. Namche Bazaar has dozens of guesthouses and restaurants. Here you can even buy cans of Pringles, pastries of various varieties, and books in foreign languages. What more does a person need?

To be honest, I'm delighted that this isn't a pure wilderness experience. It means that I don't have to carry a tent and camp every night. Knowing how much I love the outdoors, people are usually surprised to learn that I actually really dislike camping, but it's just so uncomfortable. And since there are restaurants in most of the villages I'll be passing through, I also don't have to carry or cook food, which is another thing I've never enjoyed doing outdoors. It's wonderful to focus on and enjoy the walking.

And that's what I did today. I got about ten hours of sleep last night, so I was well-rested when I woke up this morning. I was a bit stiff and sore but my knees and feet felt good. I had a breakfast of fried potatoes and eggs with another bottle of orange Fanta. The meals up here are relatively expensive. That's why the room rates are so low. (My room here has two beds, a private bathroom with toilet and shower, and electrical outlets that I can use to charge my phone, all for $5 a night. I think I'm actually being charged the basic room rate while being given a deluxe room because all of the basic rooms are full, but still, $5!) The hotels and guesthouses make their money when you eat at their restaurants, and I've read that they will charge you extra for your room if you don't eat enough meals there. My plate of fried potatoes and eggs was about $5.50, and the Fanta was $3. All the food has to be flown up in a helicopter or hauled up by porters. That's why it's expensive. Of course, expensive is relative. It's not like each meal is $50. I'm content with accepting how much food costs up here, and I'm thankful that I don't have to carry it or cook it myself.

The plan for today was to take an acclimatization day—a day in which I still hike but then return to a lower elevation to sleep. I wanted to hike up above

Namche Bazaar to a few Sherpa villages, so I walked to the Buddhist monastery on the edge of town and there found the trail that led upward. I actually followed the wrong path at first and ended up wasting about half an hour, but I eventually did find the right trail that led to where I wanted to go. And when the weather is beautiful and I'm walking in the Himalaya, I'm not too concerned about wasting time.

The trail was steep, and it switchbacked frequently. The mountainside was mostly covered in dry grass, low scrub brush, and big, beautiful boulders, some of which were as large as houses. And the views were stupefying. I had great views of Thamserku (21,713 feet/6,618 meters) and Kangtega (22,254 feet/6,783 meters) to the east and Kongde Ri (20,299 feet/6,187 meters) to the west. The mountains look enormous, but it's crazy to think that Everest is taller than the tallest of those by more than 6,000 vertical feet (1,830 vertical meters). These mountains are hillocks in comparison.

After about 45 minutes of the steep climbing, the terrain leveled off and I ran into the Shyangboche Airstrip. Helicopters use the airstrip to take up skydivers, and I watched a handful of skydivers touch down after successful jumps. If you're going to skydive, I think it would be hard to beat doing it in a place like this.

Once the helicopter went up again, I crossed the airstrip and hiked up another slope for 10 or 15 minutes until the terrain flattened out once more. This time the views were truly inspiring. These were the views that I had come for. The most beautiful and prominent peak from this vantage point was Ama Dablam (22,349 feet/6,814 meters). This is one of the most famous high peaks in the world, and I remember seeing pictures of it and wanting to climb it a decade and a half ago. Further to the left was a large peak that was being buffeted by jet stream winds, the result being a wispy cloud that lingered around its summit. This was Lhotse (27,940 feet/8,516 meters), the fourth highest mountain on the planet. Just left of Lhotse and also sporting a small cloud over its summit was The Big One—Mt. Everest. Even from this distance and barely visible, Everest's black summit pyramid was unmistakable. To the left of Everest—and appearing larger because it was closer to me—was Nuptse (25,800 feet/7,864 meters), another famous peak. And then to the far left and looking bigger than them all because it was the closest of them all was Taboche (21,309 feet/6,495 meters).

I stood there and marinated in the sun and glorious views for a while before continuing onward and upward to the village of Khunde. The landscape

before Khunde was dramatic—craggy, black boulders covered in thick moss, small juniper trees, piles of stones with Buddhist prayers carved into them, and small stupas covered in prayer flags. It was spectacular, and all the while Ama Dablam stood alone, beautiful, dominant, and in full view on the far side of the valley. Khunde, at 12,600 feet (3,840 meters) in elevation, was the highest point I'd been to on the trek so far, and I was feeling great.

There wasn't anything I wanted to see in Khunde, so I continued on through to the neighboring village, Khumjung. At least I tried to. Narrow footpaths crisscrossed Khunde, and tall stone walls (made to protect villagers' potato fields) were on both sides of the footpaths. It was exactly like trying to find my way out of a maze. I kept asking villagers in their fields for the way to Khumjung, but it seemed like they were all pointing me in opposite directions. One of the guys I asked actually spoke some English—he'd even been to California many years earlier—but he too pointed me in a direction that was different from all the others I'd been told previously.

I eventually ran into a German man (one of the very few foreign trekkers I'd seen all day) and his Sherpa guide. I asked them if they knew the way to Khumjung, and they told me to follow them since that's where they were going. I followed, and I had a great conversation with the German guy about traveling. I've only been to Germany once and for less than a day, but he had been to the States nine times. He had been to several of the Utah national parks that I love so much, so it was fun talking to him about them. We also enjoyed talking about out mutual dislike of Las Vegas. We made it to Khumjung after about 15 minutes. I tipped the guide, and we parted ways.

Both Khunde and Khumjung are directly below a beautiful peak called Khumbila or Khumbu Yul Lha (18,914 feet/5,765 meters). This peak is considered holy, and even though it is prominent, beautiful, and accessible, it has never been climbed due to its holy status. Edmund Hillary, the first person to climb Everest, founded a hospital in Khunde and a school in Khumjung. I passed the school in Khumjung and it seemed to be doing well. It's big and nice, and it houses and teaches about 350 kids from the region. Incidentally, one of the very few things that I still have in storage in the US (and probably the only thing that isn't practically useful) is an old wooden ice axe signed by Edmund Hillary. I bought it online several years ago before he died, and I plan to hang it on a wall in my house someday. I look forward to looking at it and fondly recalling memories from this trip to Nepal.

From Khumjung I returned by a different path back to the airstrip, taking in

more incredible views of Everest and company along the way. I got slightly lost on the way down after that, but the alternate trail I was on stopped by a beautiful series of small, spring-fed pools beneath a large, overhanging boulder, and there were some shrines and prayer flags back in the depths of the overhang. It was lovely. I purified and drank some water there and made it back to Namche by 1:30 p.m., about three hours and forty-five minutes after I left.

Back at my hotel, the appropriately named Hotel Namche, I had some macaroni and cheese for lunch. It was yak cheese. I enjoyed it. After lunch, I washed my hair in my bathroom sink and wiped the dirt and dried sweat off my body with a wet wipe. It's an extra $3 to take a hot shower, but that's the price of a Coke or Fanta. At this point, only two days into my trek and not terribly filthy, I'd rather have the beverage.

I haven't had dinner yet, but I'm sure it'll be something tasty and interesting that desperately wants to make me sick.

The weather has been perfect so far. It's been mostly clear and sunny the whole time, though benign clouds seem to roll in every evening. During the day, it's probably in the high 40s or low 50s (roughly 9 to 12 degrees Celsius). It's perfect weather for hiking in a t-shirt. Despite the sun, I did see some determined icicles hanging from the dark side of a boulder today at around noon.

I was able to check my email here, and Mom wanted to know whether all guesthouses have private bathrooms. No, but the one I'm in now does. I understand that the higher up I go, the less likely it will be that I'll find a room with an attached bathroom. That's fine by me. It still beats having to haul up a tent. Mom also asked if all of the guesthouses have private rooms. I think most do, but whether they'll have any left by the time I get there is the real question. If not, I'm fine with sleeping in a dorm room.

My plan for tomorrow is to go to the village of Tengboche and spend the night there. It's supposed to be a four-hour walk with 1,100 feet (335 meters) of elevation loss and 2,500 feet (760 meters) of elevation gain. Tengboche is at the same elevation as Khunde, the village I visited today. I will then probably take an acclimatization day at Tengboche the day after tomorrow. We'll see.

My knees are sore but the pain is minimal. I haven't experienced headaches, lightheadedness, loss of appetite, or any other symptoms of AMS (acute mountain sickness, more commonly known simply as altitude sickness). So

far, so good.

Above: Ama Dablam

Above: Namche Bazaar

Day 3: Namche Bazaar to Tengboche

Wednesday, October 30

My $2-a-night hotel room here in the small village of Tengboche might have the greatest views in all of hoteldom. I have a corner room in Hotel Himalayan, so there are windows on two sides of the room. Looking out one window, I see the famed and beautiful Tengboche Monastery roughly 100 feet (30 meters) away. Looking out the other window, I have a completely unobstructed view of Ama Dablam, Lhotse, and Everest. I'm at more than 12,000 feet (3,660 meters) here, but that means that Everest is still a whopping 16,000+ feet (4,880+ meters) above me. This is only day three of the trek, but this is definitely the most beautiful place I've ever been. I sat on a low stone wall below the hotel for a full hour before sunset, just enjoying and taking in the view. I'm pretty sure I was smiling the whole time.

The trek up here to Tengboche wasn't too bad. Fortified by a breakfast of fried potatoes and eggs and a Coke, I left my hotel in Namche at 7:20 a.m. and hoofed it out of town. The trail soon rounded a bend into a valley and bam, there were Everest, Ama Dablam, and Lhotse staring me in the face. Imagine a really, really, really big, V-shaped valley, one bigger than any you've ever seen. The elevation difference between the raging whitewater river at the bottom and the peaks on either side of the valley is 12,000 feet (3,660 meters). Like I said, it's a big valley. Now picture a path on the left side of the valley that is a couple thousand feet (600 meters) above the river. The path stays fairly level and parallels the river for a few miles. On the right side of the valley are the biggest and most beautiful mountains in the world, and there's nothing to obscure the view. It's still early in the morning, so there are barely any other trekkers out. You have the world to yourself. That's what the first half of today's hike was like, and the views of those famous mountains just kept getting better.

I'm a fast hiker, but I take frequent breaks. These are usually water breaks. As soon as I start getting thirsty, I stop, take my pack off, get a drink, put the pack back on, and continue on up the trail. The breaks usually don't last more than a minute or two, and I tend not to take any breaks longer than that unless I've stopped to see or do something. I've found that I much prefer these frequent short breaks to infrequent long ones. They help me keep my momentum going.

I also don't wear many layers when I'm actively hiking because I don't want

to sweat. If you're sweating heavily when it's cold outside, you're wearing too many layers. I read a trip report a few weeks ago by a guy who hiked to Everest Base Camp a few years back. He kept talking about how he couldn't stop walking because his sweat-soaked clothes would freeze to him if he did. That's just crazy. One of the main things I've learned in the past decade and a half of climbing and mountaineering is that you need to wear enough clothing that you won't freeze to death but not so many that you sweat. If you need to stop for an extended period of time, that's when you put the coat and extra layers on, and you take them off when you start hiking again. On this trek so far, I've been wearing just my thin nylon trekking pants and a short-sleeve t-shirt.

For the past couple of days, the trail has smelled like crap. Literally. There is cow and yak dung all over the place. I have to be very careful where I step. If I take my eyes off the trail for a second, my next step will most likely be unpleasantly and suspiciously slick or squishy. There was still a fair amount of yak mess on the trail today from Namche to Tengboche, but not nearly as much as from Lukla to Namche.

The level trail that made its way along the side of the valley eventually started to drop. I passed through a handful of small villages as the trail descended, and the lushness of the vegetation along the sides of the trail increased with every step downward. Near the villages of Kyangjuma and Sanasa, the trail went through some fairy tail boulder fields. The shed-sized boulders were surrounded by dark moss and various other bits of greenery, and small streams occasionally added some pleasant audible ambiance. If anyone ever decides to film a live action, Nepali version of *Fern Gully*, this would be the perfect place to do it.

The trail dropped steeply down to a river. The final descent was so steep that I marveled that heavily-burdened yaks were able to do it. I crossed the river on a modern suspension bridge, and on the far side was a series of picturesque water-powered prayer wheels. I had seen many prayer wheels in Nepal up to this point, but these were the first water-powered ones I'd seen. Prayers are written on the wheels, and spinning the wheel is like reciting the prayer. Hooking the thing up to water strikes me as being a particularly efficient way to pray.

From there to Tengboche was a steep, unrelenting, 2,000-vertical-foot (600-vertical-meter) climb. The trail snaked its way up the steep mountainside. Few others were on this part of the trail, but I did catch up to a small, middle-

aged woman hiking with a porter. The first thing she did was ask me was if I was Israeli. I have wavy, dark brown hair and olive-toned skin, so I've had people ask me if I'm from just about every vaguely Mediterranean country there is. I am, in fact, a quarter Armenian. She didn't hold my lack of Semitic roots against me, and we chatted on through our heavy, labored breathing as we continued up the steep trail. She was the head of an Israeli aviation company, and she takes off a few weeks every year to go climb mountains somewhere in the world. Her aim for this trek was Island Peak, a popular 20,305-foot (6,189-meter) peak south of Everest. She eventually stopped to rest, and I continued onward. Right when I was getting a bit too ready for the climb to end, the trail leveled off and I found myself in Tengboche.

The village of Tengboche is so very directly below the peaks of Thamserku and Kangtega that looking up at them is like looking up at a ceiling. Small banks of clouds constantly shroud and unmask peaks in every direction. I'll look in one direction and be surprised to all of a sudden see a massive white mountain that I missed earlier when there was a cloud in front of it. It's startling in the best possible way.

The rest of the day was spent exploring the village bakery and the inside of Tengboche Monastery, writing, and convincing myself that my runny nose and minor sore throat were figments of my imagination and not the onset of a cold. I still had more time to kill before bedtime, so I took out my map and busied myself with doing longhand math to convert the elevations of various peaks, passes, and villages on my map from meters to feet. It was just something to do.

Apart from the cold I am definitely not getting, I'm doing great. My knees feel good and my feet are still blissfully blister-free. Tomorrow is an acclimatization day, and I'll do some wandering around somewhere in the area.

I've realized that this past year of mostly mountainless living has created tension inside me. A coil has been winding and tightening with pent-up energy. As I hike here, I feel the energy stored in that coil being used. The spring is loosening, transferring all of those umpteen units of potential energy into my legs, lungs, and heart. I'm unwinding, returning to a more natural state even as I exhaust myself. Yes, this is the way it should be. This feels so good. This feels very right.

Above: Looking back in the direction of Namche Bazaar from near Tengboche

Above: Tengboche

Above: The inside of Tengboche Monastery

Day 4: Ama Dablam Base Camp

Thursday, October 31

Fortunately, my hotel room has amazing views. I mentioned this yesterday. Unfortunately, because it is a corner room and has windows on two of its sides, the room is colder than it otherwise would be. Fortunately, being in a corner room means that I share a wall with only one other room, so I can hear only one other person's every single move through the paper-thin walls. Unfortunately, the stairs that lead to the levels above and below mine are right outside my door, and I can clearly hear people walking up and down the stairs. Fortunately, being near the stairs means that I'm far from the toilets, which don't smell great. I think that the pros outweigh the cons. The view alone is enough to expunge any number of negatives.

My room has two beds in it. Each has a single sheet on it and no other bedding. I slept in one bed and laid out my gear on the other. In the corner of the room is a bucket that serves admirably as a trashcan. On the wall next to the door is a strip of wood with nails sticking out—a place to hang jackets and the like. There's a single light bulb in the ceiling, and I can turn it on or off with a switch next to the door or another next to my bed. That's everything in my room at 12,600 feet (3,840 meters) in Hotel Himalayan.

I think there are about 15 rooms on this floor. There are two bathrooms in the middle of the floor. Inside each bathroom is a toilet, a urinal, and a sign in broken English asking patrons to pee in the toilet, not on it. A sink and a mirror are in the hall outside of each bathroom. There is no hot water.

All of that can be yours for the low, low price of $2 per night (meals and toilet paper not included).

On the ground floor is a large dining and restaurant area. At night it's absolutely packed with dozens of trekkers from around the world. There was a large Italian contingent yesterday, but today the Americans have taken over. I am the only trekker here without a guide or porter, or who isn't in a commercial group. The room smells strongly of kerosene from the stoves in the kitchen. On the menu are various soups, noodle dishes, dumplings, teas, pizzas, and pastas.

The plan had always been for me to take an acclimatization day here in Tengboche. That's where I either rest or go out and do something, but either way, I'd spend a second night in Tengboche. The thing is, I didn't have any idea what I wanted to do. Tengboche is not a large place, and there's not

much to do here. The guidebook suggests hiking up a hill above town, walking to one of the nearby villages, or a few other things that didn't interest me. I got out my map to see if I could come up with something better, and I did: Ama Dablam Base Camp.

Ama Dablam. Even the name is beautiful. It sounds like the kind of mythical place that Spanish conquistadors died trying to find. The mountain looks striking in photos, but in person it's just stunning. It isn't connected to any other peaks of note. It stands alone, visible in all of its glory for days as you hike to Everest. According to my map, Ama Dablam Base Camp is at 15,000 feet (4,570 meters). That would make it the highest I've ever been and higher than the highest point in the contiguous United States by roughly 500 feet (150 meters).

The trail there from Tengboche sloped downward to the nearby village of Deboche. Deboche is unremarkable except that one of its establishments is called Rivendell Lodge. As a *Lord of the Rings* fan, this pleased me. A friendly dog followed me there from Tengboche before going off to find something or someone more interesting to hound. Both in my guidebook and on my map, the part of the trail around Dengboche is clearly pointed out to be a rhododendron forest. This didn't mean a whole lot to me as I walked through it. I had done a Google image search back in Namche to see what a rhododendron looked like, and it showed a small tree or large bush with bright pink flowering buds. I saw no pink, so this must not be the flowering season. Can you tell that botany is not my forte?

It was a cold morning. The formerly muddy trail was frozen solid, as were various puddles along the trail. It was cold enough that I hiked in gloves, a fleece hat, and my fleece jacket. I was hiking by just after seven o'clock, and the trail was empty. That's the best thing about getting an early start. There's no way a group of 20 trekkers can all mobilize that early, so I walked alone and in silence.

The trail kept dropping down until it hit a bridge over the lively Imja Khola, and then it climbed back up again, still going in the same general direction up the valley. The trail over the next half-hour or so was awash with various Buddhist monuments. There were several tall piles of stones, whitewashed stupas, and long rows of hundreds of flat stone tablets with prayers written on them in the beautiful Tibetan script.

After about an hour of hiking, I reached the relatively large village of Pangboche. The trail wound its way through the village and then crossed a

small stream on the outskirts of town. This stream was what I was looking for. According to my map, another path would descend down to the river after this stream crossing. Sure enough, I found the path, and it led down to another bridge that took me back across the river.

The map I have is not terribly detailed. It's a good overview of the Khumbu region, but you really need to supplement it with written directions of some sort. I had written directions for the main trail but not for the route to Ama Dablam Base Camp. According to the map, I needed to go in more or less a straight line from the bridge up to the camp. The problem was that there were several layers of steep slopes and hills between the bridge at the bottom of the valley and Base Camp. It didn't look like a straight way up existed. I sat and watched some locals cross the bridge and then make their way up some barely perceptible switchbacks up to the top of the first rise. I couldn't see where they went beyond that. Their path seemed like the only one, so I followed their lead. I crossed the bridge and followed the faint, zigzagging trail up the steep slope.

At the top of said slope, the land was flat and barren for several hundred yards before continuing up yet another slope. There were some very faint trails that led off noncommittally in different directions. At this point I was above the tree line, so there was nothing to block my view. As I looked off toward the next hill, I could barely make out a trio of people heading upward. I had a full and open view of Ama Dablam and could tell they were going in the direction of Base Camp, so I hurried after them. As I headed in that direction, I found that I was following very faint paths that had been worn over the decades into the hard, stony ground. The network of paths led across the flat and to the next slope, which again had faint, scar-like trails ascending it.

I could continue describing the route, but I progressed more or less in this same fashion for a while, and it doesn't make for interesting reading or writing. Sometimes the trails were faint, and sometimes they were clear and easy to follow. Sometimes the ground was level, and sometimes I was walking uphill.

I took a side detour to visit a large cairn adorned with prayer flags on top of one of the hills, and while I was up there, someone passed me on the trail below. I descended the hill and eventually caught up with the guy. His name was Nathan, and he was from Canada's Yukon. I told him I'd never met anyone from the Yukon, and he replied that most Canadians haven't, either.

He'd been in the mountains for 20 days and had essentially done the route that I plan on doing. He's been traveling for a few months and plans to travel for a year, so we had a lot to talk about, and together we eventually found our way to Ama Dablam Base Camp. I'd left Tengboche at 7:04 in the morning and arrived at Base Camp at 10:35 a.m. after several miles of walking and a roughly 2,600-foot (790-meter) gain in elevation. I gave one of my Snickers bars—a precious item—to Nathan to celebrate, and we parted ways. He was eager to head back down and try to make it to Namche, and I wanted to stick around and explore a bit more.

There were roughly 50 tents in the camp. Smaller ones with solar panels attached to them housed individual climbers, while much larger ones served as dining halls and communal areas. There were a handful of people around—some porters, a few Chinese climbers, and a couple Italians—but I presume that everyone else was higher up on the mountain.

Ama Dablam Base Camp is located near the bottom of the large, steep, bowl-like face that is prominent in most photos of the peak. Two ridges come down from the summit like outstretched arms, and these ridges flank the sides of the face. The views of Everest, Lhotse, Pumori, and literally dozens of other mountains were… I'm trying to come up with a good adjective that I haven't used yet… majestic? Inspiring? Breathtaking? Yep, all of that and more. I felt like I'd come to have an intimate chat with Ama Dablam, and all of the other peaks in the area turned towards us to quietly watch and listen.

Soon it was time to go. I headed back down the way I'd come up and somehow got lost. I very rarely get lost going up a mountain, but it happens more often than I'd like on the way down. A lucky consequence is that I saw a beautiful turquoise tarn that I otherwise would have missed. But before too long I did find the trail and followed it down, down, down to the river crossing that was the turnoff for the approach to Ama Dablam.

I was starting to feel pretty lousy at this point. I had a headache and little energy. Maybe I shouldn't have given that other Snickers to Nathan. Curse my generosity. I was back on the main trail and in no immediate danger, but I did not feel good. I was feeling weak and lethargic. I put my head down and plodded along. The hike back to Tengboche took about half an hour longer than it had on the way out in the morning.

By the time I got back to the area of the rhododendron forest, the atmosphere was very odd. Non-threatening clouds had rolled in, thinly veiling everything in fog. I noticed more tendrils of moss hanging from the juniper and

rhododendron trees. The trail was entirely deserted, and everything was very, almost unnaturally green. I passed a smattering of picturesque ponds and a group (gaggle? herd? flock?) of beautiful blood pheasants with their bright red tails. Grayness from the clouds filtered onto and through everything, making the world look softer and unreal. It was like being in a Japanese watercolor painting.

Eventually I did make it back to Tengboche. I chugged some lemon-flavored water, had some soup and potatoes at the hotel restaurant, and walked over to the bakery, which supplies trekkers with cakes, croissants, donuts, and cookies. I downed a massive slice of chocolate cake and returned back to the hotel feeling much improved.

Later on in the evening, I went to see the monks at the Tengboche Monastery chant their prayers, but that write-up will have to wait for tomorrow because I am exhausted. Also on the docket for tomorrow is continued progress up the valley to Dingboche. I already hiked nearly half of the way up to Dingboche today en route to Ama Dablam.

I’m doing well. My cold hasn’t gotten any better but also hasn’t gotten much worse. Knees are good. Feet are good. Morale is high. Onward and upward.

Above: At Ama Dablam Base Camp

Above: Taboche from Ama Dablam Base Camp

Above: Ama Dablam from the trail back to Tengboche

Day 5: Tengboche to Dingboche

Friday, November 1

Yesterday I went to Tengboche Monastery to see the monks chant and pray, which they do together as a group twice a day.

The main area of the monastery was a square-shaped room about 50 feet by 50 feet (15 meters by 15 meters) in size. I entered the room, and opposite the door I entered, at the far end of the room up in front, was a large seated Buddha statue. It was about 15 feet (4.5 meters) tall, painted gold, and adorned with multicolored robes. This main Buddha statue was flanked by two smaller ones. On a raised platform down in front of the Buddha were three places for the senior monks to sit. The two spaces on the side had monks sitting on them, but the middle one, which looked like it was for the most senior monk, was unoccupied. I don't know if he was dead or away or if no one ever sits in that spot. There were still robes and a couple other personal effects there, as if they were waiting for their owner's return.

Between the entrance to the temple and the monks' raised platforms up in front were four long, rectangular platforms that were also raised up off the ground, but not as high as the three platforms up front. So if you were to walk into the room, you'd see a central aisle straight ahead of you and two rectangular platforms to your left and two more to your right. Both sets of platforms ran the length of the room, parallel to the direction you would travel if you walked toward the front of the room down the main aisle. The two platforms on each side had a smaller aisle separating them.

Every surface in the room was covered with scenes painted in vivid reds, greens, and yellows. There were paintings of dragons, peacocks, and various geometric shapes. Assorted swaths of fabric, tassels, and quilted material hung from the ceiling, and the aroma of burning incense was pervasive. I've been in dozens of Buddhist temples, but the inside of this monastery was more impressive than them all.

As for the monks themselves, there were about 15 in the room, ranging in age from late teens to probably late 70s or early 80s. They all had shaved heads, of course, and they all wore the same deep crimson robes. When the call to prayer sounded (in the form of the deep bellow of a horn coming from somewhere within the monastery), the monks ambled in and sat down in what seemed to be their assigned spots on the raised platforms. Each platform held up to six monks, but not all of the spots were full. Each spot consisted of a

padded mat, a small bowl with tea in it, a collection of prayers written on narrow strips of paper, and a warm, heavy robe. As each monk came in and sat in his spot, he'd drape the robe over his shoulders before sitting down. There was one monk whose job was to lead the chanting. He had a little microphone in front of him, and his voice was piped through speakers throughout the room. All of the other monks chanted along more or less in unison. Other monks had their own duties, too. The lead chanter also had a pair of brass cymbals in his hands, as did the monk sitting next to him. If you've ever dropped a big metal bowl onto a hard surface, you know what these cymbals sounded like. They didn't crash so much as clang. The monks would all chant a line or verse and then the ones with the cymbals would clang away. In between the clangs, the microphoned chanting monk kept the beat like a metronome by tapping something metallic to one of the cymbals. At what seemed like the end of every couple of stanzas (for lack of a better word), two monks would pull out horns and blow on them. These were high-pitched instruments that sounded like trumpets. Then every once in a while, someone would blow on one of the deeper horns, which sounded like a cross between a didgeridoo and a cow's moo. And then there were drummers that also helped keep time and provide emphasis. There were two smaller drums —maybe two feet (60 centimeters) in diameter—and two larger ones four or five feet (120 or 150 centimeters) in diameter. At additional points throughout the chanting, other instruments were produced, including a small hand drum and what sounded like a cowbell. Occasionally the monks went a capella, still reading the prayers (or scriptures or whatever they were) off of the strips of narrow paper when necessary. At one point in the process, one of the monks slipped out the back and returned a few minutes later wearing an elaborate headdress and a colorful quilted robe. He went to the back of the room and sat on what looked to be a special padded and colorful chair. The chanting continued.

I had no idea what anything in this ceremony meant, but it was fascinating. I couldn't stay for the whole thing, but I stayed for about an hour and forty minutes before I had to leave to eat dinner. Before I left, what looked to be the junior monk went around and put plates of food in front of the monks. I guess it was dinnertime for them too. Only the head chanter actually started eating right away, and it was funny to hear his swallowing and lip smacking amplified through the speakers. The largest plate of food was put in front of the empty raised seat at the front of the room. Also, after everyone was given

a plate of food, the young monk went around the room again with a tray, and it looked like each monk put one of his pieces of food back onto the tray. I'm not sure what was done with that tray afterward. And finally, right before I left, one of the monks went around the perimeter of the room, where all of the tourists were sitting, and invited each of us to take a handful of popped popcorn. It was delicious.

I do wish I knew what exactly I had seen and heard at the monastery. What was the significance of the elderly monk donning the headdress? What happened to the food that was put back on the tray? What exactly were the monks chanting about? I was able to enjoy the artistic aspects of my time at the monastery, but I lacked the contextual information that would have given the experience more weight and meaning.

Still, I believe that holy places—and for me, mountains are included in that list—are holy more for what you bring in with you than what is there when you arrive. I entered the monastery with a heart full of joy and chest full of satisfaction from spending another day in the most amazing place I've ever seen. From back at the hotel, I could hear the drums and cymbals continue on into the cold night air. I ate my noodles, drank my tea, and gave thanks.

***

After a comfortable night's sleep, this morning I got up early and walked still further up the valley to the surprisingly large village of Dingboche, which is situated at above 14,000 feet (4,270 meters). The hike up was uneventful and took three and a half hours. Along the way, I stopped to help a Sherpa gather up the potatoes that had fallen out of the humongous sack he was carrying. Apparently the sack had been disgorging potatoes for a while, as I kept seeing them on the trail for the next half hour.

It's a moonscape up here in Dingboche. There are lots of stone buildings, stone walls, and piles of stones. Everything is stone. I'm staying in a little guesthouse that is cheerfully—and rather optimistically—named Hotel Bright Star. My room is barely big enough for the small bed it holds, and the walls are sheets of plywood. I have a feeling it's going to be a cold night tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if my water bottles are frozen solid by morning. My sleeping bag is plenty warm, though, so I'm not too worried. The northern aspect of Ama Dablam is framed perfectly by my window.

Tomorrow I head higher up still to the tiny cluster of stone buildings known as Chukhung, and the day after that I'll climb up a little 18,238-foot (5,559-meter) mountain called Chukhung Ri. It's strange to refer to a mountain so

high as little, but such is the grandeur and scale of this place.

Above: All of my gear organized into plastic bags before going into the backpack

Day 6: Dingboche to Chukhung to Island Peak Base Camp to Chukhung

Saturday, November 2

It gets dark in these mountain valleys at roughly 5:30 p.m., so I try to eat dinner at around that time. After eating, I usually finish writing and then get in bed at around 7:30. Then I might just sit and think for an hour, and I'm asleep by 8:30. That's what happened last night. This morning I woke up at 6:30 a.m. I usually wake up briefly a few times a night but still, ten hours of sleep is ten hours of sleep. I have yet to have trouble sleeping up here in the Himalaya.

The hotel I stayed in last night had two bathrooms. One was in the main building and had an actual toilet with a seat and everything. I can just imagine a Sherpa walking up the valley with a pristine porcelain toilet strapped to his back. After doing your business (and dropping your used toilet paper into the trash bin next to the toilet), you grab the pitcher that's floating in a large barrel of water nearby. You dump pitchers-full of water into the toilet until everything has been flushed away. Outside in the hallway is a blue plastic tub full of water with a spigot, and under the spigot is a bowl with a hole in the bottom. Together they make up the faucet and sink. Away from the building was a small outhouse, which I actually preferred using because it had a squat toilet in it, and it's nice not to have to touch a toilet seat or lid. It had the same flushing system—a big barrel full of water and a pitcher. Honestly, the bathrooms so far have been much nicer than I expected them to be. I certainly wouldn't eat food that's been dropped onto the outhouse floor, but the toilets are about as good as can be expected.

After breakfast this morning, I hiked even further up the valley to Chukhung. I actually don't remember too much about the hike. It took only a little over an hour. Instead of going high up on the side of a steep valley, the trail went right up the bottom of a broad, U-shaped valley. Again, the terrain was extremely rocky. I've never seen so many rocks in my life. Trekkers, porters, and yaks were all on the trail but in smaller numbers than usual. The yaks weren't even being used as pack animals—they were just grazing and somehow finding something edible in what looked like dead grass between the boulders.

I arrived at Chukhung at about 9:30 a.m. and got a room at a place called

Chukhung Resort. Resort isn't the first word that comes to mind when thinking about the place, but it is thoroughly adequate. My room contains two narrow beds and absolutely nothing else. It's spacious, though. There's a solid four feet (120 centimeters) of space between the beds. And to top it all off, the squat toilets down the hall are perfectly acceptable.

After getting settled in, I had to figure out what to do with the rest of my day. The main reason I wanted to come to Chukhung was to climb Chukhung Ri, an 18,238-foot (5,559-meter) mountain above town. I wanted to spend at least one night here at this elevation before attempting the mountain, though, so that gave me the rest of today to play with. I looked at my map and saw Island Peak Base Camp, elevation 17,000 feet (5,180 meters), a few miles away to the east. I enjoyed my excursion to Ama Dablam Base Camp two days ago, so I decided to give it a shot. The trekking guidebook said it takes six to seven hours round-trip, but I was confident that I could do it in less.

I left Chukhung at 10:20 a.m. It was a pristine day, as they all have been so far. I found the trail heading out of town and followed it up onto a moraine that bordered the south edge of Lhotse Glacier. The glacier doesn't look like much down this low. It's no beautiful white chunk of ice with deep blue crevasses. Instead, it's gray and looks like a pile of rubble. For a little while, the trail followed the top of the moraine along a knife-edged ridge, or at least as knife-edge as dirt and rock can get. The views from the top of the moraine were tremendous. I could clearly see the handful of buildings in Chukhung and the brown mass of Chukhung Ri above it. To the north was the astonishing wall of rock and snow that makes up the Nuptse-Lhotse ridge and the massive south face of Lhotse.

This ridge is very impressive. On the left is Nuptse (25,791 feet/7,861 meters), and to the right is Lhotse (27,940 feet/8,516 meters). The ridge connecting the two peaks dips to as low as 25,000 feet (7,620 meters) but no lower than that, making it what has to be one of the highest stretches of ridgeline in the world. And this is not some broad, snowy, friendly ridge. If you took the teeth out of a handful of piranhas, turned them to stone, magnified them immensely, and stuck them on top of a mountain, you would have the wimpy little brother of this ridge. It's serrated like nothing I've seen before, and I believe that it has never been traversed in its entirety. With the valley bottom down where I was standing clocking in at around 16,000 feet (4,880 meters), the ridge top that I was looking up at was a preposterous 11,000 feet (3,350 meters) above my head. That's the height of three and a

half El Capitans stacked on top of each other, or about nine Empire State Buildings. It's massive.

The mountains here are just a different kind of beast. The scale is otherworldly. These mountains make sense in the context of woolly mammoths, crocodiles the size of whales, and other megafauna, but not in the context of fragile, two-legged primates. When I'm around mountains, I'm used to seeing them reach a certain point in the sky. Here, they reach double or even triple that height. When I look out a window here, I have to ratchet my gaze upward by orders of magnitude.

Chukhung. Nuptse. Lhotse. The ridge. And then when I looked south, all I saw was white. This is the shaded, northern aspect of these mountains. Little sunlight reaches these walls, and the snow doesn't melt. The result is that almost no black rock is visible. It is a solid, near-vertical wall of white snow, its crest rising and dipping to outline distinct peaks.

Directly to the east is Island Peak. At 20,305 feet (6,189 meters meters) high, it's not a massive mountain (not in these parts, anyway), nor is it particularly striking. It's an extremely popular climb, however, because it is a real summit that requires real mountaineering, yet it's attainable by mere mortals. You have some glacier travel and separate high camps. It's seen as a good introduction to expedition mountaineering. I imagine that it's called Island Peak because it rises up like an island out of the middle of a gigantic glacial amphitheater. The Lhotse, Lhotse Shar, Imja, and Amphulaphcha Glaciers surround the peak.

And finally, no vista in this part of the Himalaya is complete without Ama Dablam, which looks almost unrecognizable from this angle. It's an arrowhead that has pierced the glaciated landscape around it and lodged itself firmly in the space above.

After riding the crest of the moraine, the trail dropped down onto the moraine's right side, weaving in and out of its contours. A large, olive-colored stream drained Imja Tsho ahead, though the lake itself remained hidden behind its own moraine retaining walls. The ground on both sides of the trail was covered in about a foot (30 centimeters) of snow, but the trail itself was so well traveled that most of the snow had disappeared. Throughout the hike, the substance underfoot shifted seamlessly between heavy mud, small boulders, gravelly sand, and plain old dirt.

As soon as the trail had crossed an imaginary finish line marked by the bottom edge of Island Peak, it swung north abruptly toward the mountain.

The trail then banked back to the east and continued just shy of the peak proper along a wide, flat area between Island Peak to the north and icy Imja Tsho to the south.

At this point I had a headache. It wasn't enjoyable, but it wasn't debilitating either. I was well above 16,000 feet (4,880 meters) now and about 2,000 feet (610 meters) higher than where I'd started in the morning. At the opposite end of the flat, open expanse that the trail cut through, I could see a collection of yellow, red, and blue shapes—the tent village of Island Peak Base Camp. Covering the length of the open expanse took longer than I thought it would, but I eventually did make it to the cluster of tents at nearly 17,000 feet (5,180 meters).

It was freezing. The air temperature probably wasn't much lower than it had been earlier, but a fierce wind ravaged the little gap that cradled the camp. There were maybe half a dozen people wandering around, and none of them looked pleased to be there. It was a windy, snowy, cold, and desolate place. I stood there at the camp for a few minutes, eating a Snickers and drinking some water, before turning around and getting out of there as fast as I could. Luckily, my headache was gone by that point. It took me about two hours and fifteen minutes to hike to base camp and just under two hours to return to Chukhung. I was back in my hotel room by 2:45 in the afternoon. The sun was already weakening, and scattered clouds were starting to obscure some of the peaks.

By now I've established a comfortable post-hike routine. Once I have finished hiking for the day, I change into my long underwear bottoms, fleece pants, long sleeve shirt, fleece jacket, and down jacket. Today I wiped myself down with baby wipes to be slightly less gross, but I think this place actually offers hot showers. I'll have to look into that for tomorrow. After I change clothes, I start writing. I usually spend about an hour and a half writing in a small notebook about my day and then another hour and a half typing it out on my phone. That's the worst part. I definitely should have brought a portable keyboard with me. After typing up my day's experiences, I check my email and upload a handful of photos if I have Internet access. I then eat dinner (tonight I sat and ate with the Israeli woman I met a few days ago en route to Tengboche) before coming back to my room and occupying myself for an hour with something entertaining or necessary before it's time to go to bed.

Tomorrow I'll be climbing the large hill (or small mountain, if you're a

glass-half-full kind of person) above town called Chukhung Ri. Just above it is Chukhung Tse, which is about 1,000 feet (300 meters) higher and apparently the highest mountain you can climb in Nepal without a permit. We'll see if I feel up for that one tomorrow.

Sitting at dinner tonight and looking around the room, I was reminded of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, in which pilgrims from different places and walks of life en route to Canterbury Cathedral have come together at an inn at the end of a day and are telling stories. Isn't that exactly what all of us are doing here? We're all from different countries and backgrounds, all sitting around talking and laughing, all on our own individual pilgrimages to a place that holds special meaning for us. The Spanish hippy, the Japanese salaryman, the British doctor, the twenty-something American nomad—each of us will come away from this with something uniquely different and wholly our own. We are all on a pilgrimage together in this blessed place, but every one of us is a solitary pilgrim.

Above: Island Peak Base Camp

Above: Great hiking on top of the moraine back to Chukhung from Island Peak Base Camp

Day 7: Chukhung to Phericche

Sunday, November 3

I'm not sure how I feel about today. It's probably been my least favorite day so far. I climbed an 18,200-foot (5,550-meter) mountain, which is pretty darn great. But I thought I had climbed a 19,100-foot (5,820-meter) mountain. I just realized my mistake about 10 minutes ago. It is now nighttime. I will explain.

My morning was pretty standard as far as my mornings now go. I got out of bed at 6:30, had breakfast (flat bread, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes, and mint tea), packed up, and was out on the trail by 8:00. I left most of my stuff at the hotel and just took a small daypack with me. I'd packed my down jacket, two liters of water, and a handful of other items, including the essential pair of Snickers bars. I followed a trail out of the village to a little stream. The stepping-stones sticking up out of the stream were covered in thick ice this early in the morning (and most of the stream was frozen, too), so I had to find an alternate crossing with less-slippery stones. I did and then got back on the trail, which angled up and right across the lower slopes of the mountain.

This mountain is actually more of a very big hill that looms over the village of Chukhung. It's called Chukhung Ri. It has no glaciers or other exciting features. It is rotund and brown and covered in lifeless grass and rocks. The mountain has two round summits that are connected by a ridge and saddle. The elevation of the lower summit is about 17,700 feet (5,395 meters), and that of the upper summit is 18,238 feet (5,559 meters). Where the confusion came in is that there is another mountain, Chukhung Tse, that's about 19,100 feet (5,800 meters) high and also connected to Chukhung Ri's higher summit by another drooping ridge. To make a long story short (or at least shorter), I thought that Chukhung Ri's lower summit was, in fact, the higher 18,200-foot peak, and that Chukhung Ri's higher summit was Chukhung Tse's 19,100-foot peak. I visited both of Chukhung Ri's summits but completely missed the 19,100-foot summit of Chukhung Tse.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The trail that I was on went up through brown wasteland and eventually led up to the saddle between the two summits of Chukhung Ri. I wish I could better describe the hike up there, but it was really a straightforward, sandy trail cutting through the brown, rocky nothingness. The saddle between the two summits was marvelous, though. It

was covered in what must have been fifty different cairns (man-made rock towers or piles) of various sizes. I've never seen so many in one place. It looked like a village of gnomes had been petrified. This being Nepal, the larger cairns were connected to each other with prayer flags that were flapping violently in the stiff, cold breeze.

I had been moving pretty slowly up the mountain to that point. I really didn't want the altitude to get to me, so I took long, frequent breaks and drank a lot of water. I could feel that I was on the verge of getting a headache, and I didn't want to rush things. I had time. As soon as I felt a headache starting to form, I'd sit down until it passed.

From the cairn-filled saddle, I first went to the smaller summit—the one that I thought was at 18,200 feet but was actually at 17,700. It was only about a ten-minute walk from the saddle, and the view from the top was amazing. This was the first summit view I'd had in the Himalaya, so it was the first time I could really see mountains all around me in a 360-degree circle. Actually, I felt less like I was in the middle of a circle and more like I was in the center of a great, rugged sphere. Rock, snow, and ice were above me, below me, and on all sides.

The mountains that I could see included not only the now familiar giants—Nuptse, Lhotse, Island Peak, and Ama Dablam, with Everest hidden by the sheer mass of Lhotse—but also Makalu (another one of the world's 14 8,000-meter peaks) and a whole slew of previously hidden peaks to the west. These were the peaks around the high pass of Kongma La, which I had originally planned to cross tomorrow. Unfortunately, I've heard many reports that the pass is impassable due to the amount of snow. This year is apparently colder and snowier than normal.

I don't like basing my route on secondhand information. Everyone has heard that the pass is closed because of all the snow, but no one has actually been up there recently to know for sure, and no one can say how much snow is really there. From the summit of Chukhung Ri, I saw that Kongma La and the entire approach leading up to the pass was almost entirely free of snow due to its south-facing aspect. Those slopes get a lot of warm sunlight. The problem was that I couldn't see the other side of the pass, and that's the shaded side, where any snow would linger much longer. I toyed with the idea of going up to the pass tomorrow with just a light daypack so that I could see for myself, but that's a whole lot of invested effort for a questionable return. Moreover, several people that I've talked to here about the three passes I had planned to

cross (Kongma La, Cho La, and Renjo La) said that Kongma La is the least interesting of the three. Taking all of that into consideration, I decided to forego the pass. It's disappointing, but it's the right choice for me as a solo trekker.

While I was taking in the view from the lower of Chukhung Ri's summits, a stinging, icy wind forced me to put my down jacket on underneath my windproof outer layer. Apart from the great view, the thing that struck me most about being up there was the shininess. There was some sort of extremely shiny and reflective mineral in the dirt and rocks on top. It looked like someone had sprinkled fairy dust up there. I took my gloves off and set them on the ground so that I could take photos more easily, and when I picked them up again, they were covered in the fairy dust. It's probably a good thing that I don't name mountains. I would have named this one something like Fairy Glitter Knob.

With the lower summit conquered, it was time to move on to the higher one. I retraced my steps back to the cairn-covered saddle and started up the ridge to, again, what I thought was the 19,100-foot (5,820-meter) peak but was really the 18,200-foot (5,550-meter) one. The ascent up to this summit was much more involved and interesting. This summit was much rockier, and it reminded me of the shale- and scree-covered summits of the higher peaks that I used to play on in the Rocky Mountains. There was even engaging scrambling in some sections. After about 45 minutes, I'd made it to the top. The view from the higher summit was more or less the same as from the lower summit—that is to say, it was spectacular—though I could see a bit more of the enormous and intimidating south face of Lhotse.

Off to the north, a ridge continued from the peak I was on, dropping down and then rising up again to culminate in an attractive summit not too far off. It looked like a great climb, but I decided to forego it since I'd already done what I'd gone up there to do. That attractive summit turned out to be Chukhung Tse, the 19,100-foot (5,800-meter) peak I thought I was on top of, but I didn't realize that until tonight. I took a few more photos on top and then started back down.

It took almost three and a half hours to go up the mountain and reach both summits and only about an hour and fifteen minutes to get back down to the hotel. But boy, did my knees pay for it. They will be feeling that descent for a few more days, I'm sure.

I was back at the hotel by 1:00 p.m., which raised the increasingly common

question of what to do with the rest of my day. It gets dark at around 5:30 p.m., so I had about four and a half hours to play with. Since I'd decided against crossing Kongma La, I needed to skirt around it and its surrounding mountains to the south and west, going back down to Dingboche and then heading north up to Pheriche and Lobuche, where the route over Kongma La would have deposited me. I decided that today I'd go as far in that direction as I could. I grabbed my full pack from the hotel and headed down the valley to Dingboche.

The trek was boring. I'd already passed through this section of tundra a few days ago. What really made things worse was that clouds came in and hid the high peaks and slathered a uniform mask of gray over everything else.

I stopped briefly in Dingboche to use the WiFi and get something tasty from the bakery. I ended up with a slice of carrot cake. It looked and tasted absolutely nothing like real carrot cake. It was rock hard and cost $4, but it was still delicious. The altitude must finally be getting to me.

From Dingboche I needed to head to Pheriche. These two villages are relatively close together. Though they are in different valleys, a connector trail joins them together. The problem was that I couldn't find this connector trail, so I had to make a very long and time-consuming detour. The weather had turned even foggier at this point, so there was nothing to look at except for the trail itself and the yaks grazing to the side. It was like walking through a dirty cotton ball. With yaks. I arrived at Pheriche just before dark.

So now my version of the Three Passes Trek will be one pass short. That's OK. I'm going to make up for it by climbing more small peaks and visiting more base camps. Maybe I'll christen this the Four Base Camps Trek or the Three Peaks Trek.

I'm writing this in the restaurant area of my guesthouse in Pheriche. It's my favorite one yet for no other reason than that there aren't many people in here. There are two Brits a couple tables away from me, a quartet of Spaniards across the room, and a pair of Poles down at the end. This is a lot nicer than sharing the room with thirty other trekkers. It's peaceful. A stove in the middle of the room keeps the place warm, and the lady who works here occasionally adds yak dung patties and pieces of cardboard to keep the fire going. I often see yak patties stuck to the outside walls of buildings or on the stone walls around yards. Once they've dried out, they can be used as fuel. It's an important resource in a place where no trees can grow.

Tomorrow I start the trek to Everest Base Camp itself. I'll go as far up the

Khumbu Valley as I feel like going, probably at least as far as Lobuche and maybe even as far as Gorak Shep. Or I might just stay here and rest. I've been feeling worse as the evening has progressed. My runny nose is still active, and I'm coughing more now. My sore throat, which has been dormant for a few days, is back. I can hear everyone else in the hotel here coughing and sniffling too. These hotels sound like sick wards. Ah, the glamour of Everest.

Above: Looking out over the Ama Dablam and Lhotse Glaciers from the sub-summit of Chukhung Ri

Above: Looking up at the massive south face of Lhotse from the top of Chukhung Ri

Above: Ama Dablam above some buildings in Dingboche

Day 8: Phericche to Gorak Shep and Kala Patthar

Monday, November 4

I'm going to answer some questions that some folks have asked me through Facebook and email. Where do people go to the bathroom when hiking? I pull over and pee behind a boulder if I need to, but otherwise I just wait to go to the bathroom at a restaurant or guesthouse. I think that's what most other people do too.

Do people camp? Very few do. I've read about people camping as part of a trekking group (like where the company sets up and takes down the tents for them), and I have seen handfuls of the same kinds of tents set up like that in some of the villages, but otherwise I have not seen anyone camp. I see no reason why anyone would want to camp here. Why sleep on the ground when you can get a mattress, more warmth, and electricity for just a few dollars a night?

Do I manage to sleep well at high altitude? Yes, I sleep great. I toss and turn throughout the night, but I do that when I sleep anywhere. Overall, sleep hasn't been a problem.

What are the temperatures at night? I have no idea. I'm really bad with guessing temperatures. Chukhung was the coldest place I've slept so far, and I would guess that it got down into the low teens or even single digits at night (-10 to -15 Celsius). During the day I can comfortably hike in a t-shirt if there is no wind. It's been cold outside, but I've never been too cold. Between my 0-degree (-18 Celsius) sleeping bag at night and the many layers of clothes I have at my disposal during the day, I do just fine.

Do I have a cough? Yes. Definitely. I have a violent cough and a runny nose, though my sore throat is almost gone. Speaking of runny noses, my nose is raw from wiping it so much with tissues, so I've been working on my farmer's blow (also known in slightly less proper circles as the snot rocket). That's where you plug up one nostril and blow hard through the other, thereby clearing your previously clogged nostril right out. That's the idea, anyway. I'm a pro with the right nostril but the left is usually only a partial success. Still, that's better than rubbing my nose raw with tissues.

Have I been taking Diamox (acclimatization medicine)? No. I wanted to see how my body naturally reacted to the altitude, and I haven't felt the need to

take Diamox. I've been acclimatizing just fine without it.

How do I shower? I don't. Today is day 8 and I have yet to shower. Taking hot showers up here is expensive, and only certain places even have them. Honestly, the thought of stepping out of a hot shower into the cold air at 15,000 feet (4,600 meters) is incredibly unappealing. I'm sure I smell bad, but I can't smell it.

The phone situation up here is about what I expected. Cellular reception is spotty but existent. Having the data turned on quickly drains my phone's battery, so I don't turn it on very frequently, but I do often get cellular reception good enough to make calls or send texts. Earlier tonight I called my parents, and I had full bars up here at nearly 17,000 feet (5,180 meters). Amazing. In order to keep as much juice as possible in my phone's battery, I tend to use the WiFi at guesthouses instead of the cellular data connection.

It's not inexpensive to charge electronics and use the WiFi at guesthouses. To charge my phone usually costs between $2.50 and $4 an hour, and that'll only increase the charge by 30 or 40%. WiFi Internet access costs roughly $1.50 or $2 for ten minutes. Most places also offer hourly or even daily WiFi rates. The costs themselves aren't necessarily prohibitive, but it is a giant pain to deal with the battery life issue. Between using my phone to take photos, figure out my elevation, occasionally confirm my location through the GPS, typing up all of my trekking notes, posting photos to the Internet, checking email, and occasionally doing work-related things (I had to renew a domain name this morning, for example), a single charge doesn't last nearly long enough. On top of that, batteries drain faster in the cold.

Contrasting sharply with yesterday's misadventures, today was my favorite day so far, but it was also the most physically demanding. I hiked from Pheriche to Lobuche to Gorak Shep and then climbed up and down Kala Patthar, the 18,514-foot (5,643-meter) mountain above Gorak Shep. The trail from Pheriche went up a wide, flat, beautiful valley with jagged peaks on both sides. The sky above was a brilliant blue and completely cloudless. Somehow the air seemed clearer and crisper than normal. It almost sparkled. Once the trail got to the end of the valley, there was a steep section. The trail carefully made its way around the boulders that littered the slope and then led into another broad, flat valley. This was a recurring theme throughout the day—long stretches of more or less flat sections connected by short, steep, switchbacking sections. There was some snow on the ground for most of the day, but the trail itself was always clear.

There were a lot of people out walking. I'm guessing that it's because I'm now back on the main trail to Everest, whereas for the last few days I've been off to the side a bit. I walked and talked for a while with an Australian and an American, both of whom were around my age, and both of whom were a few months into planned yearlong trips. I've met several people who are a few months into yearlong trips, but I haven't met anyone else actually further into their yearlong trips than that. Do they all give up and go back home? Do they run out of money? Do they stick to warmer, sunnier climates? I have no idea. Wherever they are, they're not here.

Between Pheriche and Lobuche, the trail passed through a flat, open section of land that was littered with memorials to climbers that have died on Everest. There were about 30 of them, maybe more. Most of the memorials were made from stone and cement. Others had details written on metal plaques that were bolted to boulders. I saw the memorial for Rob Fischer, who died in the 1996 Everest storm and who was talked about at length in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. I even saw some memorials to climbers who died during the most recent climbing season. It was a sobering place.

I made it to the village of Lobuche at about 10:40 a.m. Some of these villages, like Dingboche or Namche Bazaar, actually have people living there, and the villages would exist even if there were no trekkers or climbers. But other villages—Chukhung and Gorak Shep, for example—contain no houses of any kind, at least not that I could see. They consist of a handful of stone buildings that are places for trekkers to stay and eat. Have these villages always been like this? Did Gorak Shep exist a century ago, or is it a completely modern invention?

I stopped in Lobuche to get some lunch. I got a massive—though not very tasty—plate of fried noodles with eggs for the princely sum of $6, plus a mug of mint tea for another dollar. I've rediscovered my love for mint tea on this trek, and I now get it with every meal. It's a lot cheaper than getting a Coke or bottled water, and it leaves no plastic garbage behind.

After lunch, I continued to hike toward Gorak Shep, which is the final village before Everest Base Camp. About half an hour before reaching Gorak Shep, the trail emerged at the top of a moraine on the edge of the famous Khumbu Glacier. As with the Lhotse Glacier I skirted a few days ago, the Khumbu looks like a big pile of gravel that has been frozen in a wave. This is the glacier that forms the infamous Khumbu Icefall, arguably the most dangerous part of the standard route up Everest. Everest itself was hidden from my view

by the jagged, acutely angled pyramid of Nuptse, which looked absolutely gorgeous from this side.

I arrived in Gorak Shep, found a place to spend the night, and then set my sights on Kala Patthar, a large hill above the village that is literally and figuratively the high point of many trekkers' trips in the Everest region. It's 18,514 feet (5,643 meters) high—a bit higher than Chukhung Ri, which I climbed yesterday. (Was it only yesterday? Geeze. These days are getting longer.) Kala Patthar is known for having amazing views of Everest.

Everest isn't quite visible from Gorak Shep below, but it starts to appear after only a few minutes on the Kala Patthar trail. The higher up you go, the more spectacular the view of Everest becomes. At the top is a clear and unobstructed view of the mountain. Its black pyramid of a summit dominates your attention, even though there are so many other amazing mountains within view. I realized that the vista I was seeing was actually the exact same one that I had on a poster in my room when I was a kid. From the top of Kala Patthar, I could clearly see parts of the South Col (the saddle connecting Everest to Lhotse), the Western Cwm (the large bowl that is below the South Col), and the Khumbu Icefall. These names are legends in mountaineering lore.

Hiking up Kala Patthar was significantly easier than Chukhung Ri. Part of the reason is that I was better acclimatized today, but it's also because there is significantly less elevation gain on Kala Patthar. Otherwise, both mountains and their respective ascents are quite similar. Both mountains are big, brown hills with sandy trails that lead into rockier terrain the higher you go.

I passed a bunch of people on the trail on the way up, and there was a party of eight friendly people (six Americans and two Sherpas) on top when I got there. I took some group photos for them, they took a bunch of shots for me, and we chatted about our respective adventures. Everyone I talk to is very surprised that I'm doing this trek on my own, without a guide or porter. Apart from Nathan, the Canadian I hiked with to Ama Dablam Base Camp, I haven't met any other unsupported solo trekkers.

The view from the top was so good that it was hard to stop taking pictures and even harder to leave. I stayed up on top for half an hour before starting on my way down. It took about an hour and twenty minutes to get up the mountain and only about fifty minutes to get back to the hotel, where I had a truly disgusting plate of noodles that I couldn't even finish. Today was not my day for fried noodles.

My pack felt very heavy today. My body felt achy and tired. These mountains are turning me into an old man. If the Fountain of Youth exists somewhere on the planet, it's certainly not in the Himalaya.
Tomorrow I go to Everest Base Camp and then back down the valley to prepare for crossing over the high pass of Cho La the next day. Even though I have referred to this as a trek to Everest Base Camp, the camp itself has never been my final destination. It's just one more stop in a series of spectacular places that I have the pleasure of experiencing on this trip.

Above: Hiking up the valley at the start of the day

Above: The village of Gorak Shep, with Kala Patthar (the dark hill) and Pumori (the prominent peak) above

Above: Mt. Everest (the dark pyramid left of center) and Nuptse (the pointy peak right of center) from Kala Patthar

Above: The summit pyramid of Mt. Everest

Day 9: Gorak Shep to Dzongla

Tuesday, November 5

Today was brutal. The first item on the agenda after a breakfast of egg fried rice was to visit Everest Base Camp. I'd heard conflicting reports about the place. Some people said that it wasn't worth it because it's just a big field of gravel that you can't even see Everest from. And then others have said that it is amazing because, you know, *it's Everest Base Camp!* I had to see it and decide for myself.

The route there was relatively straightforward and took about an hour and fifteen minutes. Nearly the entire hike was on top of the moraine that had formed alongside the Khumbu Glacier. I could definitely see Everest for much of the hike, even though the summit itself disappeared as I got closer to Base Camp. Then, toward the end of the hike and to my mild surprise, the trail turned onto the glacier itself. I had thought that Base Camp was next to the glacier, not on top of it. I was wrong. I hopped over a couple small crevasses that were about a foot (30 centimeters) wide and passed by some amazing ice caves and craters that were full of vivid green water. Most of the glacier here was covered in dirt and small rocks, and the path over the glacier was obvious and well worn.

The Khumbu Glacier in the vicinity of Base Camp has two distinct sides to its personality. There is the tame, flat, gravelly side that I was on and on which Base Camp is situated, and beyond that, just past Base Camp, is the scary side. There the glacier is not flat and smooth but uneven and jagged. It is pure white and menacing, its deep crevasses looking like mouths frozen into dreadful smiles. The Khumbu Icefall, where the Khumbu Glacier breaks up into a maze of towering, icy death blocks that can collapse at any moment without warning, is clearly visible right above Base Camp. It is intimidating, and I can only imagine what must go through climbers' minds as they approach it.

At Base Camp proper, there was only one expedition. It was a Korean team climbing Lhotse, for which the standard route is mostly the same as the standard route on Everest. The team had strung a rope around the perimeter of their camp to keep looky-loos (i.e., trekkers like me) out of their business. Still, it was amazing to be there and to think of the history of the place and of all the climbers that have been there. Edmund Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, Reinhold Messner—all of them had stood where I was standing. I was

literally following in the footsteps of my childhood heroes.
I don't understand how anyone could think that going to Base Camp isn't worth it. It definitely was for me. I now know exactly where it is and what it's like to be there. I've seen it with my own eyes. It's a place of both massive historical significance and natural beauty. Whenever I read about Base Camp in the future, I'll be able to nod my head and have these memories to refer to and look back on. It was definitely worth seeing and experiencing.
On the way back from Base Camp, I saw two cute, fat little rodents of some kind. They looked like miniature marmots, but cuter. Pikas, maybe? I'm not sure, but they are noteworthy because they were the first non-human mammals I had seen in the Himalaya.
I was back in Gorak Shep by 10:55 a.m. I grabbed my pack and moved on down the trail. An hour later and I was in Lobuche, the village where I'd gotten the massive plate of sub-par noodles the day before. I was debating whether to stop in Lobuche for lunch but instead I just ate a Snickers bar and purified some water that I scooped up from the stream adjacent to the village. I continued downward. After roughly half an hour, I reached the turnoff to Dzongla, my destination for the day. Up to this point, I'd been walking on ground that I'd already covered before, but the Dzongla turnoff marked the start of brand new territory for me.
Finding the trail to Dzongla was difficult. The turnoff was marked with a sign and arrow, but the trail soon was lost in a flat, snowy plain. Several paths had been cleared through the snow and I couldn't tell which one led to Dzongla. I also couldn't tell what was an actual trail and what was simply a narrow strip of land that all the snow had naturally melted off of. Just as I was trying to figure out what to do, a guy across the plain yelled over to me, asking if I knew where the trail to Lobuche was. Since I had just come from there and knew the way, I pointed him in the right direction. I asked him if he knew the way to Dzongla. He said he had just come from there and then he pointed me in the right direction. How fortuitous.
The trail started out unpromisingly by going steeply up a snowy and muddy hillside, but soon it rounded a bend and became my favorite stretch of trail so far. Nearly all of the other paths I've taken have been wide and rocky. They've usually been wide enough that I could easily pass people by walking on either side of them. But here the trail was just a narrow dirt track a couple feet (60 centimeters) wide. It was a pleasure to walk on. As the trail rose, the

scenery grew more dramatic. The snowy peaks gave way to incredibly steep, rocky black monoliths, the most prominent of which rose directly up out of a deep green lake like some sort of angry sea monster. That dark, craggy mountain stayed on my left side for most of the rest of the day, but the scenery where I was over on the right side of the valley kept changing. First there were snowy hillsides, then rocky peaks, then a series of mossy bogs, then boulder-strewn slopes, and finally more rocky peaks that were covered in perfect gold and brown cliffs.

This trail definitely felt remote. I passed by a few porters but saw no other trekkers. The weather was so perfect and warm that it was strange to think that I was high up in the Himalaya and not 5,000 feet (1,520 meters) lower in someplace like the Tetons. Reality was reinforced, however, every time I turned around and saw the inimitable silhouette of Ama Dablam.

At one point, maybe an hour from Dzongla and a couple hours from anywhere else, a Sherpa girl passed me coming from the other direction. She was wearing a cotton sweatshirt and flip-flops with socks, and she was carrying a plastic shopping bag in one hand, like she had just come from the corner market. Incredible.

The trek to Dzongla took longer than expected. It felt like it took four or five hours, but it really took me about 2 hours and 20 minutes from the turnoff. I was definitely struggling for the last 45 minutes or so. I felt like I should have hit the village much sooner, and I couldn’t see any place that looked like a suitable location for a village. The view ahead of me was of a solid wall of rocky peaks. Somewhere up there was Cho La, the high pass I’d be crossing the next day. Had I somehow passed by Dzongla and missed it? Surely I would have noticed a village if I had walked by one, no matter how small it might be. I pulled out my phone and checked the GPS to make sure that I was still headed in the right direction, and I was.

Just when I was considering breaking out the third Snickers of the day (I vote that all time and distance everywhere be measured in quantities of Snickers bars consumed or required), I managed to detect the outline of an earth-colored building sitting at the edge of a plateau. A few minutes later, I’d arrived at Dzongla, a collection of two or three stone buildings and not much else.

At the guesthouse I checked into, I met a Norwegian and an Irishman who had met and started hiking together a few days earlier. We ended up chatting for several hours in the dining area about a variety of topics—travel,

trekking, religion, cars, languages, work—and tomorrow we plan to hike up and over the pass together. We were enjoying ourselves. At one point while we were talking, another guy in the dining area turned to us as said, “Are you Americans? You’re being really loud.” I had heard him and his companions speaking Ukrainian earlier, so I replied to him in Ukrainian, saying that I was an American and that I was sorry we were being loud, but that his way of asking us to quiet down was offensive. That alone made the two years of living in Ukraine in my late teens and early twenties worth it. My reply in Ukrainian left the man speechless, but we of course did try to quiet down, and the Ukrainian man was nicer after that. For the record, I was the sole American of our group, and I was by far the quietest one.

I have developed a new physical ailment. I guess I haven’t been putting enough sunscreen on my fingers, because they are very red and raw and have started to develop bumpy blisters. It’s like having a rash on every finger, and it’s quite painful. I’ve been careful about applying sunscreen to my face, ears, arms, and neck, and I thought I was being good about putting it on my hands, but apparently I had been applying it only to the backs of my hands and not enough on the fingers themselves. Consider that lesson learned.

***

Having visited a few different base camps by now and seen so many beautiful mountains, I’ve been thinking about whether I am more or less inclined to go on a large mountaineering expedition. I’ve climbed about 60 mountains in all, but the most involved of these was a two-day ascent of Mt. Rainier in Washington. It’s hard to see all of these amazing mountains here and not want to climb them. The lifelong climber in me can’t help but look at the ridges, ramps, towers, smears of ice, and cliffs and not want to hop on and have a go. And it’s hard to look at an impressive mountain and not want to stand on top of it. But it takes months to climb the largest of these mountains. Just being out here hiking for nine days has been draining enough, and I get restaurant food for every meal and a bed to sleep in every night. Doing menial things like brushing my teeth, putting in contact lenses, and going to the bathroom are chores down here. They would be absolutely miserable to do high up on a mountain.

But then I see a mountain like Everest. It’s an impressive mountain. It’s steeped in history. And of course, it’s the tallest mountain on the planet. Would I climb Everest after seeing all of those memorials yesterday (and a few more today) to climbers who have died on the mountain? After knowing

I'd be spending three long and probably miserable months chasing just one summit? After knowing about all the work it takes just to get to the bottom of the thing?

I promised my mom when I was 12 or 13 that I would never climb Everest. But if the opportunity presented itself (i.e., if someone gave me tens of thousands of dollars and said, "Here, go climb a mountain with this!"), I think I'd probably do it. Car enthusiasts want to drive the fastest cars, history buffs want to visit the most important battlefields, and mountain climbers want to climb the highest mountains. It's natural.

Over the next few years, I can see myself climbing mountains like Kilimanjaro, Elbrus, or Aconcagua, but I will be completely content with never climbing Everest and to have just seen it and read books about it. So don't worry, Mom. Barring any unforeseen financial windfalls, my promise to you looks like it will remain unbroken.

Above: Everest Base Camp. Note the tents at the bottom of the photo and the Kumbu Icefall just right of center in the photo.

Above: Arakam Tse rising up out of the lake below Dzongla

Day 10: Over Cho La to Gokyo

Wednesday, November 6

I know I've started out these daily entries at least a few times by saying that today was the longest and toughest day yet, but… today really was the longest and toughest day yet. It's one of those days that I will remember for years to come, both for its amazing scenery and its amazing difficulty.

Quinlan (the Irishman), Paolo (the Norwegian), and I convened for breakfast and then left Dzongla's Mountain View Lodge and Restaurant for the journey to Cho La, a pass at 17,607 feet (5,368 meters). The pass was a few miles and about 1,800 feet (550 meters) above where we had spent the night. We progressed up the valley toward a wall of rocky peaks. These weren't snowy peaks with some rock poking through; these were rocky peaks with rare patches of snow on them. They were very unlike anything I've seen so far in the Himalaya and, as a longtime rock climber, I felt strangely comforted by them. If you imagine a broad semicircle of rocky, pointy brown peaks, with no significant breaks or real weaknesses between them, that's what we were looking at as we approached the pass.

We knew that the pass was somewhere up ahead, but none of us knew exactly where it was. We were on a trail and were fairly confident that we were on the correct trail (a feeling corroborated by the GPS and maps on my phone), but we still couldn't quite tell where the trail was taking us. We also knew from reading the inadequate route description in the *Lonely Planet* guide that we would be traversing up and to the right on a ledge system and pass some boulders, so we kept asking each other and wondering, "Is that it? Is *that* it?"

We found the answer to that question when we saw a Sherpa porter descend a partially hidden, snow-filled gully to the right of a massive brown and orange cliff. We opted to avoid the snow by scrambling up and to the right of the snowy area through a web of large boulders and short cliff bands. Let me just say that scrambling over boulders across a steep ledge system with a 25- or 30-pound (11- or 14-kilogram) pack at around 17,000 feet (5,180 meters) is not easy. I don't know if I've ever panted so hard in my life. I'd been above 18,000 feet (5,490 meters) a couple times on the trek up to that point, but I'd always been wearing my little daypack, never my full pack. It was extremely hard work.

Once the gully ended and we reached the top of the ledge system, we spent

half an hour resting, admiring the view, and taking pictures. It was gorgeous up there. Below us, the valley we'd hiked up earlier in the day and the day before widened and dropped in elevation by a few thousand feet (a thousand meters), framing Ama Dablam at its far end.

We were at the edge of the Cho La Glacier. The glacier was relatively small as glaciers go, and once we were done resting and photographing, we started traversing along its left flank. There were people who had come up the opposite side of the pass who were now passing by us, and the path alongside the glacier was obvious and well used, if icy and slippery. Luckily, back in Kathmandu I'd bought some spikes that attach to boots to give extra purchase on icy surfaces, and these made walking on the glacier trivial. They weren't full-on mountaineering crampons but a series of spikes attached to a rubber harness that stretched over the boot.

Neither of my companions had anything similar, but they managed to traverse the glacier without too much trouble. The bulk of the glacier, silent and to our right, looked smooth and idyllic. Quinlan mentioned that it was the first skiable thing he'd seen in Nepal, and I agreed.

It took less than 15 minutes to traverse the glacier. At the far end was the pass, Cho La. There were about a dozen people there who had come up from the opposite side, and there was a steady stream of roughly 20 more that we watched reach the top of the pass as we sat, rested, and soaked in the new vista.

The familiar and well-known peaks of the Everest region were behind us now, and an entirely new cast of peaks took center stage. There was only one that I recognized: Cho Oyu, one of the 14 8,000-meter peaks, and the sixth-tallest mountain in the world. Cho Oyu was far to the right (north) in our field of vision, standing guard on the Tibetan border at the head of the valley. Even with all of the other high peaks around, it stood out as an exceptional mountain. It's often cited as the easiest 8,000-meter peak to climb, making it a good training peak for people who want to climb Everest.

It soon became our turn to descend from the pass. This descent was surprisingly steep. There was a hard-packed path of icy footprints leading up to the pass (or down from it, from our perspective). Paolo headed down first and had no problems in his stiff-soled hiking boots. With the little spikes strapped onto my boots, I wouldn't have had a problem either. But Quinlan's shoes didn't have very good tread on them, and he was worried that he would slip and go on an unpleasant and uncontrollable ride down the mountainside.

I ended up giving him one of my two shoe spikes so that we each had one spiked foot, and that worked out great. I planted the spiked foot confidently, the dull foot gingerly. We descended in good time and with relative ease. Paolo was waiting for us several hundred feet below the pass, where the terrain leveled out.

At this point we were in a large, snowy bowl that was mercilessly reflecting the sunlight like a solar oven. It was miserably hot. From the bottom of the bowl, we had a few small hills to go up and over before making our final, sweeping descent off the mountain, and I was having a tough time on the uphill sections of the hills. My strength was gone. My legs were heavy. Tendrils of steam rose up from my superheated body, little wisps of my energy siphoned off by the power-hungry sun.

I couldn't keep up with the other guys, so I told them to go on ahead without me while I took a break, and they did. The heat and sun were merciless. I made my way slowly up the next hill and then down it to where the guys were filtering water by a small stream. I already had enough water to drink, so I continued past them up the next small hill, which I ascended very slowly. When I got to the top, a cool wind provided much-needed relief from the heat, and a large boulder offered shade. A few minutes of rest there did wonders for me. By the time the guys had finished getting water and made it up to the top of the hill where I was, I was back in form and ready to continue on with them. There was still snow everywhere (though the trail itself was probably 75% free of snow), but at least we were out of the concave solar oven.

From there the trail dropped steadily over to the small cluster of buildings at Dragnag, situated near the edge of the Ngozumpa Glacier. We stopped there in Dragnag for lunch—tea and noodles for me, rice for Quinlan, and nothing for Paolo, who was on a worryingly low budget of $10 per day—and then continued alongside the glacier for 15 minutes before getting ready to cross it on our final approach to Gokyo. Gokyo was our destination for the day, and it sat somewhere unseen on the opposite side of the glacier.

At 22 miles (36 kilometers) long, the Ngozumpa Glacier is the longest glacier in the Himalaya. It's also nearly a mile wide. It fills the whole of the bottom of Gokyo Valley. We debated for some time about where we should cross the glacier. Our maps showed the crossing lower down by Dragnag, but locals told us that it was higher up the valley, more or less straight across from Gokyo. We were high up on the east side of the glacier and at a perfect

vantage point. Cho Oyu loomed large, beautiful, and threatening up at the head of the valley, and we could see several ponds, both large and small, scattered across the glacier. Many of the ponds had a cliff of ice on a side or two that looked to be at least a hundred feet high. That glacier is a seriously impressive chunk of ice.

We had been following the main trail from Dragnag, and so when it descended from the top of the moraine down onto the edge of the glacier, we figured that had to be the right route, even though the trail looked suspiciously faint. The trail paralleled the glacier's edge for several hundred more yards (meters) before finally crossing onto the glacier itself.

Walking across the glacier was exhausting because 1) we had already been going for around seven hours by this point, and 2) the trail rose up and over several large and irregular humps in the ice. They were essentially ice hills. These hills created unavoidable PUDs (pointless ups and downs).

But walking across the glacier was also fascinating because we saw all sorts of amazing ice formations. It was as if titans had held an ice sculpting contest some millennia ago and the entries had all been left unattended out in the open ever since. There were huge ice cliffs with blue, tan, green, gray, brown, and black streaks running down them, and each pond that dotted the surface of the glacier was tinted with one of those colors. Most of the walking was on packed snow or gravel, but we occasionally saw chunks of clear-as-glass ice rising up out of the glacier. We also saw large chunks of rock and ice fall off of the ice cliffs down into the partially frozen ponds below. We saw no crevasses, but we did occasionally hear the glacier moan from deep inside, like guttural sounds of pleasure as we scratched its back.

We dragged ourselves into Gokyo at just before 4:00 in the afternoon, finally ending nearly eight hours of continuously demanding physical effort, and procured neighboring rooms in one of the village's guesthouses. At dinner I ate dal bhat for the first time. It's the unofficial national dish of Nepal. It consists of lentil soup over steamed rice, and it's a staple of trekkers and locals alike. In Kathmandu you can even buy t-shirts that have things like "Powered by Dal Bhat" printed on them. It turns out that when you order dal bhat, you get as much of it as you can eat. If you finish your plate and want more, you'll be given another heaping mound of lentils and rice for no additional charge. Though it is a tasty dish (if you've had lentils in Indian cuisine, you'll know what it tastes like), it's the all-you-can-eat aspect that explains why the dish is so popular among trekkers. I definitely appreciated

that tonight.

By the way, I've had no trouble finding places to sleep. This was a big concern of mine before the trek. I feared going through a Mary-and-Joseph-style, no-room-in-the-inn moment every evening. But that has not been an issue. I've gotten a room to myself every night. My earlier starts and consistent hiking pace mean that I arrive at these places before all the rooms fill up.

Long days like this are hard to put into words. I can tell you what I did, where I went, and what I saw, but that only conveys so much. Moreover, it's difficult to convey just how good it feels to finally stop after a day like this. I've reached a state of tired nirvana. Everything is good after a day like this. It's fascinating to see how well the human body can cope in environments and situations like this. And it's humbling to be a tiny speck of living, breathing matter in an environment that is overwhelmingly indifferent to human suffering and come through on the other side a little bruised and battered but more or less unscathed and ready for more. These mountains are amazing, and it's a joy to be an actor, however briefly, on this stage in the most spectacular theater in the world. Just playing the insignificant part of Background Tree #3, with no lines and only a few minutes of time on stage, is enough to make you want to devote a lifetime to the craft.

Above: Hiking up toward Cho La

Above: The village of Gokyo beneath Gokyo Ri. Cho Oyu is the cloud-covered peak to the right.

Day 11: A Shower and Gokyo Ri

Thursday, November 7

It's day 11, and I just took my first shower of the trek. It was as great and terrible as I had hoped and feared it would be. More on that later.

I'm in Gokyo, a village situated at nearly 16,000 feet (4,880 meters) between a massive glacier and a frigid, seemingly bottomless green lake. This morning I said goodbye to my Norwegian and Irish friends, who have to get back to Lukla soon to catch flights. After the best night's sleep that I've had so far (which contrasts sharply with the sleep I had the night before at Dzongla, which was the worst of my trip) and sleeping in till the almost sinfully decadent hour of 7:30 a.m., I had a lazy breakfast and went off to climb Gokyo Ri, a 17,575-foot (5,357-meter) hill above Gokyo. It was similar to Chukhung Ri and Kala Patthar in that it's a big hill with nice views and is right above a village. Gokyo Ri turned out to be my least favorite of the three. As far as difficulty goes, I'd put it at harder than Kala Patthar but easier than Chukhung Ri. I felt unusually weak and tired as I climbed up it. Maybe my body is just still recovering from yesterday.

There's not much to say about the climb itself. It was on an often-muddy trail that sometimes switchbacked and sometimes went straight up. There was a fair amount of snow on the ground after the first third of the climb, but as has been the case most of the time so far, the trail itself was mostly free of snow. In general, there is a lot more snow on the ground on this side of Cho La than was on the other side. Everything in the Gokyo Valley is white. There were several other people on the mountain today, but not so many that I would call it crowded.

I made it to the top an hour and a half after I set off from the guesthouse. It was quite cold and windy up on top, and there was deep snow everywhere, though previous trekkers had packed down the good areas to stand and sit. As I'd come to expect, the views were spectacular. There were mountains in every direction for as far as I could see. I couldn't see anything that wasn't mountain or glacier. I had a great view of four of the world's 14 8,000-meter peaks: Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse, and Makalu. I also had a wide-open view of the Ngozumpa Glacier that led like a pockmarked red carpet up to the base of Cho Oyu.

The view of Everest and the other peaks to the east was very similar to the view from I'd had Kala Patthar a few days earlier, except now I was a bit

further away. The peaks to the west were significantly smaller and less impressive. You know you've been spoiled when a clear view of Mt. Everest fails to excite you, but I was more interested in getting a look at the deep green lakes that the Gokyo Valley is known for. I could see a couple of the ones down by the village of Gokyo, but the lakes further up the valley were blocked by the shoulder of a mountain in front of me. Still, it was a perfect day (the 11th in a row of perfect weather!), and I was happy to be up there. I celebrated by sharing some chocolate with a Frenchman I met on the summit. Then, out of chocolate and wanting to get out of the cold, I knew it was time for me to head back down the mountain.

And that brings me to the shower. I knew it would be great because I was gross and needed a wash, but I knew it would be terrible once I turned off the hot water and the cold mountain air hit me. The price was reasonable ($4), so I grabbed my shampoo and clean clothes and in I went. It was marvelous and everything I could have hoped for. I've never derived such pleasure and satisfaction from washing my hair. I cleaned off eleven days of dirt, sweat, and caked-on sunscreen. It was like going back in time by digging through the archaeo-dermatological detritus of the past week and a half. It was the best shower I've ever had. And then it was time to end it.

I switched off the hot water and immediately started shivering. It instantly became the worst shower I'd ever had. I don't know what the air temperature was in that little shower room in the corner of the guesthouse, but it couldn't have been much warmer than the air outside. It was a race against time to dry off as much of my skinny, naked, shivering body as I could with the blue handkerchief that I'd bought in Kathmandu (which says on the tag, amusingly, "Made in China for Hobby Lobby stores"). I might as well have been drying myself with a scrap from the thinnest of threadbare t-shirts, but it was all I had. With the absorbent capacity of my handkerchief maxed out, I threw on some clothes and ran upstairs to my room to dive into my sleeping bag. I somehow survived the journey.

I felt like a locust that had been underground for 20 years and then emerges into the world of the living for the first time. It is now my unhappy lot in life to continue living among the unwashed masses for the next several days.

Above: The top of Gokyo Ri

Above: The view of Gokyo and the Ngozumpa Glacier from the top of Gokyo Ri

Day 12: Scoundrel's Viewpoint and the Beginning of the End

Friday, November 8

I'm done. My right knee was doing something funky yesterday as I was climbing up Gokyo Ri. Whenever I bent my knee, it felt like a tendon or ligament or something equally important sounding was slipping over the kneecap, and then it would slip back off again as I straightened my leg. I don't know if that's what is really happening or if that is even physically possible, but that's what it feels like, and it hurts. It had never happened before yesterday, but it happened again today. Also, the lack of energy that I felt yesterday continued today. I'm not in the right physical shape to go over Renjo La tomorrow. I guess the Three Passes Trek has become the One Pass Trek.

On top of that, I'm mentally ready to go. Leaving the Himalaya right now is like ending a relationship with someone you know you should break up with but don't want to. You still have feelings for each other, there is more you planned to do together, and you would rather be together than apart, but something isn't right and you know ending it is the best thing to do. You know it's time to move on.

It's time for me to move on. I'm tired of coughing and having a runny nose. I want the sunbaked skin on my nose and fingers to return to a state approximating normality. I want to work. I want to not have to pay dearly for Internet access or for charging my phone. I want the air around me to be warm. I want to read and listen to podcasts. I want to use a flushing toilet. And I want the option of being lazy without the consequence of freezing to death.

Tomorrow morning, I'll start the walk back down to Lukla. I'd love to get to Namche tomorrow and to Lukla the next day, but we'll see how I feel and how the weather behaves.

I went for one last walk today. The hike up the valley, along the side of the Ngozumpa Glacier's lateral moraine, was cold and windy and snowy, but the view at the end made it well worth the effort. I hiked beside the glacier for a few miles, past some of the beautiful Gokyo lakes, to a place called Scoundrel's Viewpoint, where I had a final peek at Everest. It was a fitting farewell hike. There it was, Mt. Everest, the greatest mountain on Earth. I

was looking at a celebrity. I took out my camera to play paparazzo one last time and then headed back down the valley.

On my way north in the morning, most of the trail had been frozen solid, but on the way south back to Gokyo, the sun had had time to soften the snow. I was postholing up to my waist in some places. It was exhausting. I didn't see anyone else for several hours as I struggled through the deep snow. This was blue-collar hiking, and I loved it. The slow going meant that I had plenty of time to enjoy the lakes as I passed them. Each was exquisite, a slab of deep gray-green surrounded by jet-black peaks dusted in fresh snow.

I walked the final stretch back to Gokyo in a haze. I was too tired to pay attention to much of what I was passing, though I'm sure all of it would have looked appropriate on the cover of a coffee table book about the Himalaya. I got back to my hotel, bought a Michael Crichton book from the small and overpriced bookstore inside the guesthouse, had Thai fried rice for lunch, and spent the rest of the day reading.

Above: Taking it all in at Scoundrel's Viewpoint

Above: One of the stunning lakes of the Gokyo Valley

Day 13: Down to Namche

Saturday, November 9

My room tonight actually resembles what most people think of when they think of a hotel room. There are wall outlets where I can charge my phone for free. The bed has sheets and a comforter—no sleeping bag necessary. My room has an attached bathroom with hot water, a shower, and a flushing toilet.

What is this place? Heaven? Close. It's Namche Bazaar.

It took more than seven hours of hiking and a descent of about 4,500 vertical feet (1,370 vertical meters), but I'm here. And now that I'm not in Gokyo anymore, I realize how freaking cold it was up there. Last night my water bottle froze completely solid in my room. My toes, numb from the cold, didn't warm up until I'd been hiking for half an hour. The thermometer inside the heated dining room this morning read 20 degrees (–7 Celsius). Again, that was in the *heated* dining room. The process of stripping down from my breakfast clothes—long underwear bottoms, fleece pants, long-sleeve shirt, fleece jacket, and down jacket—and wriggling into my hiking clothes—nylon pants, a different long-sleeve shirt, and my hard-shell jacket—was excruciating, especially the part where I had to pause with nothing on but my long-sleeve shirt and apply nearly-frozen sunscreen. It's during moments like this that I curse my love of the mountains. Why can't I be passionate about beaches or jungles?

While hiking today, I listened to music for the first time in weeks. It was the soundtrack to the musical *Les Misérables*. I've listened to those tracks hundreds of times, but they have never sounded as beautiful as they did today. All of the music I've heard in the past couple of weeks has been either the chanting made by monks in a monastery or the same Nepali or Tibetan song played over and over again through tinny guesthouse loudspeakers. Listening to *Les Mis* after two weeks of hearing not much more than the sounds of the wind and my own footsteps felt like living in a world of black and white and then suddenly putting on glasses that let you see in color. It was wondrous. Never before have I derived so much pleasure from music, and I couldn't stop smiling. I listened to the entire soundtrack three times throughout the course of the day.

Have you ever seen a time-lapse video of one location through the different seasons? The trees get covered with snow. The snow melts, and the trees are

bare. The trees sprout buds. The trees bloom and are covered in green. The leaves drop off. All of this is seen over something like 30 seconds. That rapid-fire progression through the seasons is what today felt like. I felt like I was covering not only ground, but also time. The arctic wasteland of Gokyo gave way to rocky, barren tundra. The tundra evolved into sparse vegetation that covered the countryside like a teenager's patchy facial hair. As I descended further, the sparse brush was overtaken by juniper and rhododendron forests. Waterfalls cascaded down right next to the trail. The steep walls and up-close vistas of Gokyo gave way to sweeping panoramas of distant yet now familiar peaks.

The people passed by going in the opposite direction—that is, going uphill—all looked so fresh and clean. I was now the experienced elder. I was the wise old sage. My hair was wild and my eyes were knowing. I was emerging from self-imposed exile in the wilderness. I felt strong and accomplished, but I also envied those fresh trekkers for everything they still had in front of them.

I made my way through the last part of the day on autopilot. I was tired. The trail was wide, dusty, and uninteresting. There was a section of never-ending uphill switchbacks. The views were all ones that I had seen before. I was ready to stop hiking. I was ready for the cozy warmth of fleece and down. The final stretch to Namche was one disappointment after another. Every time I thought I was almost to the village, I'd round a bend and see nothing but more trail slicing its way evenly across the mountainside.

When I finally arrived at Namche and made my way down to the hotel, I was able to get a good look at my face in the brightly lit bathroom's mirror. The skin on most of my face is tanned a deep brown, the exception being the bright area of skin around my eyes that had been shielded by my sunglasses. I now have my own racoonian tan lines. My nose is a cratered battlefield, the result of two large pimples I somehow managed to get that healed as dark brown scabs. Too much information? Anyway, I'm a mess. But even looking like the victim of a napalm strike can't make me feel any less good than I do right now. The skin will heal. My belly is full. I'm safe. I'm happy. My knee feels strong. And I'm still in a spectacular part of the world.

***

The shower in my bathroom has two temperature settings: scalding and Gokyo (i.e., freezing). I committed to the former setting and somehow made it through without needing to be hospitalized. I then headed out to see what

my options were for getting a flight back to Kathmandu from Lukla. It turns out that the flights need to be booked more than just a couple days in advance. They're all full. Hmmm.

Figuring that tomorrow I'd continue down the mountain and cross the proverbial bridge to the airport when I came to it, I turned my attention to more pressing matters. I walked into Namche's bakery, bought myself a slice of dry and tasteless (though somehow still spectacular) chocolate cake, a donut, and a Fanta, and celebrated my triumphant return.

Now back at the hotel, I'm thoroughly enjoying being under the heavy warmth of my bed's comforter. It feels wonderful to not be in the sleeping bag. A bell somewhere close by is being struck, signifying the changing of the hour. What hour is it? I don't know. It doesn't matter, does it? I hike when it's light, I sleep when it's dark. That is my life. Or at least, it was. I'm going to miss it.

Above: A section of the trail back to Namche Bazaar

Above: The village of Phortse clinging to the mountainside in front of Ama Dablam

Day 14: Down to Lukla

Sunday, November 10

Down, down, down I went today. Down from Namche Bazaar. Down through the valleys and across the bridges. Down to Lukla.

Going downhill sucks. Climbing up a mountain is the interesting part. You're not sure of what will be around the next corner or over the next rise. You're unsure of whether you'll make it to the top, and there's excitement in the uncertainty. Coming down a mountain offers none of that. I've already seen what will be around the next corner. I know that I'll make it down eventually. And on top of that, going down is harder on the knees. All of these things combine to make going downhill something of a chore, apparently even when I'm surrounded by the incredible natural beauty of a place like this.

All of these things come together when I'm hiking to ensure that getting down off of a mountain or trail always seems to take longer than it should, and that was definitely the case today. It felt like I would never make it to Lukla. If I were featured in Dante's *Inferno*, I'd be the guy whose lot in the afterlife is to walk down to the seventh level of hell but never quite get there. I was in descent mode today, and when I'm in descent mode, my mind becomes occupied with promises of distant pizzas and ice cream sundaes instead of the mountains and waterfalls close at hand.

There was some sort of marathon or race going on today, and a number of runners crossed paths with me as I descended. I think the race was from Lukla to Namche. I saw the first runner as I was descending the switchbacks directly below Namche. He was clad in all sorts of aerodynamically skin-tight synthetic performancewear and appeared to have nothing on or with him save for a single bottle of water clutched in his hand. He had a number pinned to his chest. He was jogging up the mountain and breathing heavily. I thought about when I'd walked up these switchbacks two weeks earlier, and then I thought about the guy running, and my legs and lungs suddenly ached in sympathy. Better him than me.

I saw several more runners over the next several hours, and they reflected the full spectrum of trekkers that I'd been seeing for the past two weeks. Some appeared to be in peak physical shape and had high-tech clothing with logos and sponsors emblazoned all over. Others were more humble and subdued in their attire. Some had no packs; others had small packs that hugged their backs. Some were running, and some were walking. All of them had

something in common, though: they were foreign. They were noticeably European, North American, or East Asian. I saw no Nepalis. It made me realize that I don't think I've seen any non-Sherpa, non-local Nepalis on this trek. That makes me sad. It's sad when the greatest thing a country has to offer is inaccessible to the vast majority of people in that country. I imagine it would be like going to the Grand Canyon and seeing no Americans, just rich Chinese businessmen.

Lukla was much as I'd glimpsed it two weeks ago, except that there were more people on the streets this time. The village is dirty and dank, noisy and unappealing. It's as if each plane that arrives from Kathmandu brings with it a little bit of grime from the city, soiling this potentially sublime place.

The rest of my day consisted of indulging myself. I found a new book at the hotel and read for several hours. I had a dinner that included a platter of sizzling yak meat. I had good reception on my phone and was able to check email and social media. And I did manage to buy a ticket back to Kathmandu. I'm on standby for the next few days. If a plane looks like it won't be full, I'll be summoned to the airport, which is directly adjacent to my hotel.

Lukla isn't my favorite place in the world, but it's still pretty great to be here. The air is still cold at night and the people around me, locals and visitors alike, are still mountain people. If I have to choose between being awakened by a rooster here or a car horn in Kathmandu, I'll choose the rooster every time.

Above: Walls of prayer stones above Lukla

Day 15: Back to Kathmandu

Monday, November 11

Kathmandu is louder than I remember it being. It's strange to hear so many noises after so long in so much silence. But it is nice to eat things other than dal bhat and fried potatoes. The falafel wrap and ice-cold Coke I just had really hit the spot. I showered and shaved and became 15 years younger as a result. My lingering cough has disappeared already.

A knock on my door early this morning while I was reading my book told me that it was time to fly. I was seated this time on the side of the plane that faced the mountains as we flew to Kathmandu, but I barely even looked out. The mountains looked so small and snowy now, so distant and monotonous. It was like looking at an unflattering photo of a beautiful woman I had known well and been in love with.

I caught one last look at the mountains as the plane taxied on the runway in the Kathmandu airport. It was the same view that I'd three weeks earlier, that wall of white visible through the cleft in the green. This finishing glance felt like coming up for one last desperate gulp of air before going back under the water. I wasn't sure how long it would have to sustain me. I hoped it wouldn't be too long.

Epilogue

It's been nearly a year since I left Nepal, but Nepal hasn't left me. I've been to 30 countries, and Nepal is my favorite. I yearn for it—ache for it—and not just for the mountains. I miss the people. The people of Nepal are among the nicest I have ever met. I miss the chaos and congestion of Kathmandu. I miss the sights, the sounds, the colors, the smells, the food, and the adventure of it all. Nepal is a wonderful place. I can't think of it and not smile, and I can't wait to experience it again. Just yesterday I booked a one-way ticket back to Kathmandu. I'll be there in less than two weeks.

After my trek, I gave away all of my trekking gear and moved to Thailand for the next seven months. There are definitely mountains in Thailand, but they're not, you know, *mountains*. To give you an idea, a buddy and I rented a two-door Toyota and drove it up to the top of the tallest mountain in the country. But I still think about my time in Nepal frequently. My Facebook profile picture is of me on top of Kala Patthar, with Everest above my shoulder. My trek in the Everest region is one of the highlights of my life.

I loved my time spent hiking in Nepal's Himalaya, but most of what I experienced can be experienced anywhere. Any mountains will do. Just go for it. If you don't have mountains nearby, go out into whatever form nature takes in your area. You'll get lost and dirty. You'll freeze and ache, burn and weaken. These discomforts are what we pay to be in the world's epic places. They're a currency that is certainly not geographically limited to Nepal's borders. What you end up buying with that currency is a satisfaction so complete, a happiness so nourishing, that you can't help but want to hand the money over again and again.

There were times on the trek when I wondered whether I would be willing to go back and do it again once it was over. Though it may not seem like it at the time, the adventures that make you question your choice of leisure activity always turn out to be the best adventures. Last month a friend and I rode $35 Chinese bicycles across Cambodia. It too was difficult. It kind of sucked. And I loved it. I would definitely do it again. And yes, I would definitely hike to Everest again.

Scottish-American naturalist, preservationist, and mountaineer John Muir said, after having caught a glimpse of northern California's hulking Mt. Shasta for the first time, "My blood turned to wine, and I have not been weary since." I experienced changes of my own once I stepped foot in

Nepal’s mountains. The word *mountain* has taken on a new meaning in my lexicon. The Himalaya are the ultimate mountains. They are perfect. They are what I see when I close my eyes and dream of fragile adventures in desolate and wonderful places. They are everything that my 13-year-old self hoped and dreamed they would be, and so much more than my present self can appreciate. Those mountains somehow made me feel both completely insignificant and all-powerful, like I was less than the dust of the earth and like I was God. What do you do once you’ve felt that way? How do you go back to living your normal, everyday life when you’ve explored so much terrain on the map of human experience?

It’s simple. You think back with fondness and gratitude. You smile. And you start planning your next trip.

THE END

Thanks for Reading

If you enjoyed this book, I'd really appreciate a review on Amazon. A significant chunk of my income comes from my books, so every review helps. The more popular my books are, the more adventures I can write about and you can be a part of. If you'd like to follow along with my adventures and travels, head on over to my blog at http://thealoof.com. And don't forget that there are many more photos from the Everest trek at http://thealoof.com/everest. There's also a Contact page on the site if you have any questions or comments for me.

I returned to Nepal a year after this trek and went on a few more treks. I wrote *Himalayan Pilgrim: A Chronicle of Independent Trekking Through Nepal's Less-Traveled Regions* about the treks I did in the Langtang and Helambu regions. And a book about my solo trek of the Annapurna Circuit in winter will soon be available on Amazon.

If you're interested in rock climbing, you might enjoy my book *101 Rock Climbing Tips and Tricks*.

Appendix A: Costs and Times

The Nepalese rupee (Rs.) amounts as recorded below are what I actually paid. The US dollar amounts are an approximate conversion. The exchange rate at the time of my visit was not *exactly* 100 rupees to the dollar, but it was very close to that, and I've decided to use the 100-to-1 conversion rate to make things easier. Consider all dollar amounts approximations.

On the trekking days, you'll also see a set of times. These are notes I took about how long it took me to do certain things or get to certain places. These lists of times are not comprehensive or complete, nor does every item in the list relate to something I talked about in that day's trekking record. These are simply the times that I happened to write down when I thought to do so. I always like to know how long these sorts of things take, and perhaps others will also find the information useful.

7 Days and Counting: Arrival

Trek-related costs

610 Rs/$6.10 – Stick of SPF 80 sunscreen
60 Rs/$0.60 – Antibacterial cream
95 Rs/$0.95 – Hand sanitizer
300 Rs/$3.00 – Map of the Everest region
16,650 Rs/$166.50 – One-way flight from Kathmandu to Lukla
Daily total: 17,715 Rs/$177.15
Cumulative total: 17,715 Rs/$177.15

6 Days and Counting: Exploring the City

No trek-related costs

5 Days and Counting: Buying Gear

Trek-related costs

700 Rs/$7.00 – Water-resistant wind pants
600 Rs/$6.00 – Fleece pants
800 Rs/$8.00 – Lightweight long underwear bottoms
1,200 Rs/$12.00 – Trekking pants (synthetic pants with zip-off legs to turn them into shorts)
500 Rs/$5.00 – Synthetic t-shirt

1,000 Rs/$10.00 – Long-sleeve synthetic shirt
1,200 Rs/$12.00 – Full-zip fleece coat
500 Rs/$5.00 – Wide-brimmed sun hat
200 Rs/$2.00 – Lightweight gloves
400 Rs/$4.00 – Heavier, water-resistant gloves
2,200 Rs/$22.00 – Two pairs of wool socks
1,800 Rs/$18.00 – Sunglasses with a hard-shelled case
800 Rs/$8.00 – Iodine water purification tablets
1,300 Rs/$13.00 – Spikes that wrap around shoes to provide grip on icy slopes
2,200 Rs/$22.00 – Trekking poles (2)
1,200 Rs/$12.00 – Nalgene water bottle
310 Rs/$3.10 – SIM card
3,500 Rs/$35.00 – 10 GB of data usage for the SIM card
Daily total: 20,410 Rs/$204.10
Cumulative total: 38,125 Rs/$381.25

4 Days and Counting: More Shopping

Trek-related costs

550 Rs/$5.50 – Bandana and lip balm
300 Rs/$3.00 – Diamox tablets (2 packages)
210 Rs/$2.10 – AAA batteries
600 Rs/$6.00 – Oral rehydration salts (20 packets)
250 Rs/$2.50 – Small scale
Daily total: 1,910 Rs/$19.10
Cumulative total: 40,035 Rs/$400.35

3 Days and Counting: Permits, Stupas, and Sadhus

Trek-related costs

3,000 Rs/$30.00 – Sagarmatha National Park permit
2,000 Rs/$20.00 – TIMS card
300 Rs/$3.00 – Two color photocopies for the permits
Daily total: 5,300 Rs/$53.00
Cumulative total: 45,335 Rs/$453.35

2 Days and Counting: Buying More Gear

Trek-related costs

6,000 Rs/$60.00 – Refundable deposit on sleeping bag (not included in either total below)
650 Rs/$6.50 – Cotton sleeping bag liner
1,020 Rs/$10.20 – Sundries: toilet paper (60 Rs), cookies (115 Rs), 2 6-packs of Snickers bars (740 Rs), 2 packages of wet wipes (115 Rs)
380 Rs/$3.80 – Medicine: Cipro (10 tablets), loperamide (10 tablets), small pair of scissors for cutting moleskin
2,600 Rs/$26.00 – Backpack
350 Rs/$3.50 – Backpack cover
1,250 Rs/$12.50 – Nalgene bottle
2,200 Rs/$22.00 – Down jacket
Daily total: 8,850 Rs/$88.50
Cumulative total: 54,185 Rs/$541.85

1 Day and Counting: I'm Ready. Let's Do This.

Trek-related costs

360 Rs/$3.60 – Underwear
250 Rs/$2.50 – Vitamin C (20 tablets)
10,899 Rs/$108.99 – The North Face Vindicator Mid II GTX boots
250 Rs/$2.50 – iPhone case
825 Rs/$8.25 –Allegra (10 tablets), knee braces, ibuprofen (15 tablets), ear plugs
1,930 Rs/$19.30 – Sundries: hand sanitizer (95 Rs), toothpaste (75 Rs), chlorine purification drops (30 Rs), six-pack of Snickers bars (370 Rs), 12-oz. bottle of saline solution (1,225 Rs), toothbrush (70 Rs), muscle and joint rub (65 Rs)
250 Rs/$2.50 – Neck wallet
Daily total: 14,764 Rs/$147.64
Cumulative total: 68,949 Rs/$689.49

Day 1: Lukla to Namche Bazaar

Trek-related costs

400 Rs/$4.00 – Momos with meat
500 Rs/$5.00 – Room in Namche
300 Rs/$3.00 – Fanta

550 Rs/$5.50 – Fried noodles with meat and egg
100 Rs/$1.00 – 30 minutes of WiFi usage
600 Rs/$6.00 – Taxi to the Kathmandu airport from Kathmandu
Daily total: 2,450 Rs/$24.50
Cumulative total: 71,399 Rs/$713.99

Times

4:05 – Woke up
4:50 – Got in a taxi
5:10 – Arrived at airport and waited in line
5:30 – Airport opened up
6:10 – Plane took off
7:05 – Was on the trail and had reached the edge of Lukla
8:58 – Arrived in Phakding
10:00 – Arrived in Benkar
10:48 – Arrived in Monjo
11:05 – Arrived in Jorsalle
12:00 – Arrived at the big bridge at the base of the hill up to Namche Bazaar
1:15 – Arrived at the Namche permit checkpoint
2:00 – Was sitting in my room after finding a hotel and checking in

Day 2: The Sherpa Villages

Trek-related costs

550 Rs/$5.50 – Fried potatoes with egg
300 Rs/$3.00 – Fanta
100 Rs/$1.00 – A tip for the guide that helped me find the right path
550 Rs/$5.50 – Macaroni and cheese
500 Rs/$5.00 – Room in Namche
300 Rs/$3.00 – Fanta
320 Rs/$3.20 – Vegetable momos
550 Rs/$5.50 – Fried noodles with meat and egg
100 Rs/$1.00 – 20 minutes of WiFi usage
50 Rs/$0.50 – Ballpoint pen
Daily total: 3,320 Rs/$33.20
Cumulative total: 74,719 Rs/$747.19

Times

9:05 – Left the hotel
9:46 – Back at the gompa (temple) after getting lost
10:30 – Arrived at the airstrip
10:40 – Saw Ama Dablam and Everest for the first time
11:45 – Arrived in Khumjung
12:00 – Left Khumjung
12:30 – Arrived back at the airstrip
1:30 – Arrived back at Namche Bazaar

Day 3: Namche Bazaar to Tengboche

Trek-related costs

300 Rs/$3.00 – Coca Cola
200 Rs/$2.00 – Room in Tengboche
200 Rs/$2.00 – Water
300 Rs/$3.00 – Vegetable momos
380 Rs/$3.80 – Fried noodles with egg
550 Rs/$5.50 – Fried potatoes with egg
600 Rs/$6.00 – WiFi usage
100 Rs/$1.00 – Monastery donation
230 Rs/$2.30 – Potato soup
320 Rs/$3.20 – Vegetable and egg fried rice
Daily total: 3,180 Rs/$31.80
Cumulative total: 77,899 Rs/$778.99

Times

7:20 – Left the hotel in Namche
8:30 – Arrived in Kyangjuma and Sanasa
9:02 – Arrived in Lawishasa
9:20 – Arrived in Phungi Thanga
10:38 – Arrived in Tengboche

Day 4: Ama Dablam Base Camp

Trek-related costs

230 Rs/$2.30 – Potato soup
380 Rs/$3.80 – Fried noodles with egg
270 Rs/$2.70 – Vegetable noodle soup
350 Rs/$3.50 – Fried potatoes with egg

400 Rs/$4.00 – Slice of chocolate cake
70 Rs/$0.70 – Mint tea
270 Rs/$2.70 – Chicken noodle soup
300 Rs/$3.00 – Potato momos
200 Rs/$2.00 – Room in Tengboche
Daily total: 2,470 Rs/$24.70
Cumulative total: 80,369 Rs/$803.69

Times

7:04 – Left the guesthouse
7:17 – Arrived in Deboche
7:40 – Crossed the bridge over the Imja Khola
7:53 – Arrived at the stupa with eyes on it
8:07 – Arrived in Pangboche
8:30 – Crossed the river again
9:15 – Reached the top of hill with the rock pile on top
9:32 – Left the hilltop
10:35 – Arrived at Ama Dablam Base Camp
10:55 – Left Base Camp
12:15 – Crossed back over the second bridge
1:50 – Arrived back in Tengboche

Day 5: Tengboche to Dingboche

Trek-related costs

70 Rs/$0.70 – Mint tea
270 Rs/$2.70 – Vegetable noodle soup
350 Rs/$3.50 – Hash browns with fried egg
200 Rs/$2.00 – Room in Dingboche
350 Rs/$3.50 – Potato and cheese momos
70 Rs/$0.70 – Mint tea
380 Rs/$3.80 – Egg chow mein
400 Rs/$4.00 – WiFi usage
350 Rs/$3.50 – One-hour phone charge, from 21% to 67% battery life
70 Rs/$0.70 – Mint tea
300 Rs/$3.00 – Potato soup
380 Rs/$3.80 – Egg chow mein
Daily total: 3,190 Rs/$31.90

Cumulative total: 83,559 Rs/$835.59

Times

7:20 – Left Tengboche
8:30 – Arrived in Pheriche
8:44 – Reached the Ama Dablam Base Camp turnoff
9:15 – Arrived in Shomare
10:05 – Crossed the bridge just after the turnoff that leads to Everest Base Camp
10:00 – Arrived at the edge of Dingboche
11:00 – Found a hotel room and was sitting in it

Day 6: Dingboche to Chukhung to Island Peak Base Camp to Chukhung

Trek-related costs

70 Rs/$0.70 – Lemon tea
380 Rs/$3.80 – Fried potatoes with cheese
300 Rs/$3.00 – Potato soup
200 Rs/$2.00 – Room in Chukhung
495 Rs/$4.95 – Vegetable egg noodles
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
325 Rs/$3.25 – Potato soup
335 Rs/$3.35 – Fried egg
Daily total: 2,185 Rs/$21.85
Cumulative total: 85,744 Rs/$857.44

Times

8:17 – Left Dingboche
9:30 – Arrived in Chukhung
10:20 – Left Chukhung
12:35 – Arrived at Island Peak Base Camp
12:54 – Left Base Camp
2:54 – Arrived back at the hotel

Day 7: Chukhung to Pheriche

Trek-related costs

350 Rs/$3.50 – Phone charge

845 Rs/$8.45 – Set breakfast
400 Rs/$4.00 – 30 minutes of WiFi usage
400 Rs/$4.00 – Carrot cake
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
350 Rs/$3.50 – Vegetable noodle soup
450 Rs/$4.50 – Fried rice with egg
350 Rs/$3.50 – Vegetable momos
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
200 Rs/$2.00 – Room in Dingboche
Daily total: 3,505 Rs/$35.05
Cumulative total: 89,249 Rs/$892.49

Times

8:00 – Left the hotel
10:06 – On top of the sub-summit
10:33 – Left the sub-summit
11:25 – On the main Chukhung Ri summit
11:43 – Left the top
12:04 – Back at the saddle between the sub-summit and summit
1:05 – Back at the hotel
1:12 – Left the hotel
4:45 – Arrived in Pheriche

Day 8: Pheriche to Gorak Shep and Kala Patthar

Trek-related costs

120 Rs/$1.20 – Lemon tea
540 Rs/$5.40 – Fried noodles with egg
470 Rs/$4.70 – Vegetable momos
350 Rs/$3.50 – Water
600 Rs/$6.00 – Fried noodles with egg
90 Rs/$0.90 – Mint tea
120 Rs/$1.20 – Tissues
300 Rs/$3.00 – Room in Gorak Shep
450 Rs/$4.50 – Fried rice with egg
300 Rs/$3.00 – Potato momos
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
500 Rs/$5.00 – WiFi Internet usage

Daily total: 3,920 Rs/$39.20
Cumulative total: 93,169 Rs/$931.69

Times

8:13 – Left Pheriche
9:29 – Arrived in Dughla
10:20 – Passed the turnoff that leads to Cho La
10:40 – Arrived at Lobuche
11:15 – Left Lobuche
11:30 – Passed the Pyramid turnoff
1:00 – Arrived at Gorak Shep
1:25 – Started up Kala Patthar
2:45 – On top of Kala Patthar
3:14 – Left the top of Kala Patthar
3:55 – Made it back to the hotel

Day 9: Gorak Shep to Dzongla

Trek-related costs

120 Rs/$1.20 – Mint tea
610 Rs/$6.10 – Fried rice with egg
300 Rs/$3.00 – Toilet paper
300 Rs/$3.00 – Room in Dzongla
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
400 Rs/$4.00 – Vegetable momos
500 Rs/$5.00 – Fried noodles with egg
500 Rs/$5.00 – Phone charging
Daily total: 2,890 Rs/$28.90
Cumulative total: 96,059 Rs/$960.59

Times

8:04 – Left Gorak Shep
9:20 – Arrived at Everest Base Camp
9:38 – Left Everest Base Camp
10:48 – Arrived back at the hotel in Gorak Shep
11:15 – Left Gorak Shep
12:20 – Arrived in Lobuche

12:32 – Left Lobuche
12:50 – Turned off the main trail at the Dzongla turnoff
3:10 – Arrived in Dzongla

Day 10: Over Cho La to Gokyo

Trek-related costs

300 Rs/$3.00 – Tomato soup
80 Rs/$0.80 – Mint tea
500 Rs/$5.00 – Fried rice with egg
500 Rs/$5.00 – Fried rice with egg
100 Rs/$1.00 – Mint tea
600 Rs/$6.00 – Dal bhat
400 Rs/$4.00 – WiFi Internet usage
600 Rs/$6.00 – Cookies and candy bars
150 Rs/$1.50 – Tissues
300 Rs/$3.00 – Room in Gokyo
Daily total: 3,530 Rs/$35.30
Cumulative total: 99,589 Rs/$995.89

Times

8:10 – Left Dzongla
10:05 – Arrived at the top of the Dzongla side of the pass
10:50 – Arrived at Cho La proper
1:30 – Arrived in Dragnag
2:10 – Left Dragnag
3:55 – Arrived in Gokyo

Day 11: A Shower and Gokyo Ri

Trek-related costs

100 Rs/$1.00 – Mint tea
630 Rs/$6.30 – Vegetable and egg fried rice
100 Rs/$1.00 – Milk chocolate bar
500 Rs/$5.00 – 5 more chocolate bars
400 Rs/$4.00 – Shower
500 Rs/$5.00 – Vegetable momos
600 Rs/$6.00 – Dal bhat
100 Rs/$1.00 – Mint tea

150 Rs/$1.50 – Two packages of tissues
300 Rs/$3.00 – Room in Gokyo
Daily total: 3,380 Rs/$33.80
Cumulative total: 102,969 Rs/$1,029.69

Times

9:30 – Left the hotel
11:00 – On top of Gokyo Ri
11:33 – Left the top of Gokyo Ri
12:34 – Arrived back at Gokyo

Day 12: Scoundrel's Viewpoint and the Beginning of the End

Trek-related costs

110 Rs/$1.10 – Hot chocolate
500 Rs/$5.00 – Muesli with apple
500 Rs/$5.00 – Vegetable momos
110 Rs/$1.10 – Hot chocolate
100 Rs/$1.00 – Strawberry tea
600 Rs/$6.00 – Thai fried rice
700 Rs/$7.00 – Book
100 Rs/$1.00 – Spicy lemon tea
600 Rs/$6.00 – Macaroni
300 Rs/$3.00 – Potato soup
300 Rs/$3.00 – Room in Gokyo
Daily total: 3,920 Rs/$39.20
Cumulative total: 106,889 Rs/$1068.89

Times

8:26 – Left Gokyo
9:23 – Arrived at Fourth Lake
11:10 – Arrived at Scoundrel's Viewpoint
11:36 – Left Scoundrel's Viewpoint
1:50 – Arrived back in Gokyo

Day 13: Down to Namche

Trek-related costs

450 Rs/$4.50 – Fried potatoes with vegetables
100 Rs/$1.00 – Hot lemon tea
450 Rs/$4.50 – Vegetable omelet
220 Rs/$2.20 – Twix and cookies
550 Rs/$5.50 – Fanta, donut, and slice of cake
100 Rs/$1.00 – WiFi Internet usage
320 Rs/$3.20 – Vegetable momos
90 Rs/$0.90 – Mint tea
440 Rs/$4.40 – Vegetable chow mein
75 Rs/$0.75 – Tissues
2,000 Rs/$20.00 – Room in Namche
Daily total: 4,795 Rs/$47.95
Cumulative total: 111,684 Rs/$1,116.84

Times

7:53 – Left Gokyo
9:45 – Arrived in Machermo
10:15 – Arrived in Luza
11:20 – Arrived in Dole
11:55 – Waterfalls
12:20 – Arrived in Phortse Tenga
1:27 – Hilltop
2:13 – Intersection of the Gokyo trail and the trail to Everest Base Camp
3:10 – Arrived at the edge of Namche
3:25 – In the hotel room

Day 14: Down to Lukla

Trek-related costs

500 Rs/$5.00 – Fried potatoes
90 Rs/$0.90 – Lemon tea
210 Rs/$2.10 – Toilet paper and tissues
700 Rs/$7.00 – Fanta, donut, slice of cake
75 Rs/$0.75 – Mint tea
300 Rs/$3.00 – Potato soup
500 Rs/$5.00 – Chicken curry
800 Rs/$8.00 – Room in Lukla
16,400 Rs/$164.00 – Ticket from Lukla to Kathmandu

Daily total: 19,575 Rs/$195.75
Cumulative total: 131,259 Rs/$1,312.59

Times

8:10 – Left Namche
8:58 – Arrived at the bridge at the bottom of the valley
1:23 – Arrived at the outskirts of Lukla

Day 15: Back to Kathmandu

Trek-related costs

400 Rs/$4.00 – Shared taxi from the Kathmandu airport to Kathmandu
1,560 Rs/$15.60 – Sleeping bag rental fee
Daily total: 1,960 Rs/$19.60
Cumulative total: 133,219 Rs/$1,332.19

***

Summary of Costs

Total cost of the trek (not including flights to and from Nepal): 133,219 Rs/$1,332.19
Total cost of the 14 trekking days (not including transportation between Lukla from Kathmandu or anything that I bought in Kathmandu before the trek): 45,310 Rs/$453.10
Average cost per day while actually trekking: 3,237 Rs/$32.37

Appendix B: Gear List

For the benefit of fellow gear nerds out there, below is a list of everything that I took with me on the trek. After the list are a few of my thoughts regarding the gear.

The basics

Backpack (60-liter capacity)
Pack cover
Packable daypack
0-degree (Fahrenheit) sleeping bag
Sleeping bag liner
Trekking poles (2)
Sunglasses (2 pairs) with hard case
1-liter Nalgene bottles (2)

Clothing and footwear

Synthetic long-sleeve shirts (2)
Synthetic short-sleeve shirts (2)
Lightweight hardshell jacket
Down jacket
Fleece jacket
Lightweight long underwear bottoms
Fleece pants
Trekking pants
Hardshell pants
Thin socks (3 pairs)
Wool socks (2 pairs)
The North Face Vindicator Mid II GTX boots
Flip-flops
Underwear (4 pairs)
Thin liner gloves
Heavier gloves
Sun hat
Fleece beanie
Handkerchief

Health and first aid

Roll of moleskin
Scissors for cutting moleskin
Bottle of iodine tablets (for water purification)
Bottle of chlorine drops (for water purification)
Tube of SPF 80 sunscreen
Tube of insect repellant
Tube of muscle/joint rub
Tube of antiseptic cream
Electrolyte packets (20)
Vitamin C (tube of 20 tablets)
Ibuprofen (15 tablets)
Ciprodac (10 tablets)
Allegra (10 tablets)
Loperamide (10 tablets)
Diamox (20 tablets)
Mucinex D (4 tablets)
Lozenges (8)
Adhesive bandages (5)

Toiletries

Toilet paper
Tissue packets (4)
Wet wipe packages (2)
Sleep mask
Earplugs
Comb
Pocket mirror
Spare contact lenses (2)
Eye drops
Shampoo
Toothbrush
Toothpaste
Floss
Deodorant
Lip balm
Nail clippers

Electronics

iPhone with bumper case
iPhone cable
Headphones
Headlamp
Spare headlamp batteries
Battery pack charger for phone
Plug adapter
Wall-to-USB adapter
Camera with 16 GB SD card
Camera batteries (2)
Wristwatch

Other

Wallet
Neck wallet with cash, cards, passport, and permits
Small notebooks (2)
Pens (2)
Snickers bars (20)
Printout of day-by-day trail directions
Map
Small sewing kit
Safety pins (10)
Total base pack weight (not including consumables like water, Snickers bars, and electrolyte packets) = 23 pounds (10.4 kilograms)

Gear Discussion

I wouldn’t make too many changes if I were to trek to Everest Base Camp again. There were several items that I didn’t use but was happy to carry, namely the pack cover, spare sunglasses, heavier gloves, safety pins, sewing kit, and most of the items in my first aid kit.

I would have liked to have even more Snickers bars. I love those things. They were available in the villages I trekked through, but only at a steep $2 or $3 each.

Regarding water treatment, I preferred the ease of the iodine tablets to the chlorine drops. I didn’t like how imprecise the drops were; it was hard to tell if I had added just one chlorine drop to the water or several. After treating a bottle of water with the iodine tablets, I dropped half of a lemon-flavored vitamin C tablet into the water to improve the taste.

I would have loved to use a small solar charger to charge my electronics while I was walking or resting. Charging electronics in the guesthouses was inconvenient and expensive.

I used everything else on the gear list, and it all performed well. I experienced no rain or precipitation on the trek.