



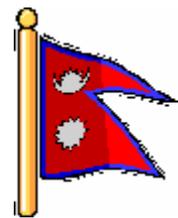
*Ama Dablam floating in trails of clouds*

## **Dream it, Plan it and Do it!**

*How I survived in the cold thin air for 20 days*

Chi S. Chan

February 6, 2005



### **Dream it, plan it and do it**

***Having a dream makes me feel romantic, planning it makes me feel alive, and accomplishing it makes me feel complete. We all have dreams, but it is not enough just to have them. You must act on them and never never give up. Planning a trip to Kilimanjaro and Everest is not as difficult as most people think. All you need is commitment, discipline, and passion. If you don't have 4 weeks vacation, you can do it in 10 days, if you don't have a few thousand dollars to spend, you can go with a much cheaper budget plan. Your dream may not be as "crazy" as mine but my point is: if you have a dream, go after it. Don't create excuses for not accomplishing anything in life. Who does not have problems, what taste does not have obstacles. You are the master of your own destiny, and only you can change your life to be a better one. So dream the impossible, plan the unthinkable, and do the unforgettable!***



*View of Mt. Everest*

Nepal is a land of the rising mountains, mountains that rise so high. Every thousand feet you climb, the temperature gets colder and the air gets thinner. You wonder how far you are capable of climbing, you wonder if your body will last another step. If you had any idealized thoughts about hiking in the Himalayas, you will soon dampened by the harsh reality of the elevation and the temperature. But the mountains here are one of the most beautiful in the world. You are constantly surrounded by mountains that tower above you. You look around at all the rugged beauty and you become lost. You are infinite speck surrounded by the most awesome mountains that nature can offer.

I dreamed about Mt. Everest since 1996 when the disaster stroke that year. Eight climbers perished overnight, including the most experienced mountaineers. Since, I have read books, articles, magazines and watched movies about Everest. Edmond Hillary, Tenzing Norgay, Jon Krakauer and David Breashears become my heroes. I remember every story they told about Mt. Everest. All the beautiful sceneries they described about Nepal, particularly the Khumbu Region where Mt. Everest resides, mesmerize me

Looking back the 20 days I spent on the Himalayas, I have mixed emotion. I miss Nepal already but the harsh reality of trekking and camping in the cold weather and on high altitude left me with some painful memories. I suffered, I struggled and I weighted barely 95 pounds when I finished the trek. I had begun my journey with the intention that I would go to Nepal, climb to Everest base camp, and check that destination off my list. But since returning home, I can hear a voice growing louder every day, calling me back to Nepal. Will I ever go back? Sure, I will. I am still longing to see the forests of rhododendrons paint the hillside of the Khumbu Valley in pink.

On 11/20, I wrote on my diary: “.....a drop of water falls on the ground sheet inside my tent, within seconds; it turns into thin ice. My contact lenses are frozen solid because I forgot to keep them inside my sleeping bag last night. My toothpaste, suntan lotion are all frozen inside the tube. In spite of wearing two pair of gloves and socks, my fingers and toes are numb. I try to put on extra layer of clothing to keep warm and the struggle immediately left me out of breath. Inside two sleeping bags with two hot water bottles, I am still cold. Outside my tent, the snow has stopped falling but the temperature continues to drop further. Dilli, calls me to dinner and I just have no appetite for foods. The smell of food makes me sick. I have been having stomach problem and not eating well for a few days. My visit to the toilet tent becomes more frequent and unpleasant. The headache comes and goes. It is only half way the trip and I wonder whether I can go on for another day.....” It was one of my toughest moments on the trip and there are more to come. Let me start from the beginning.

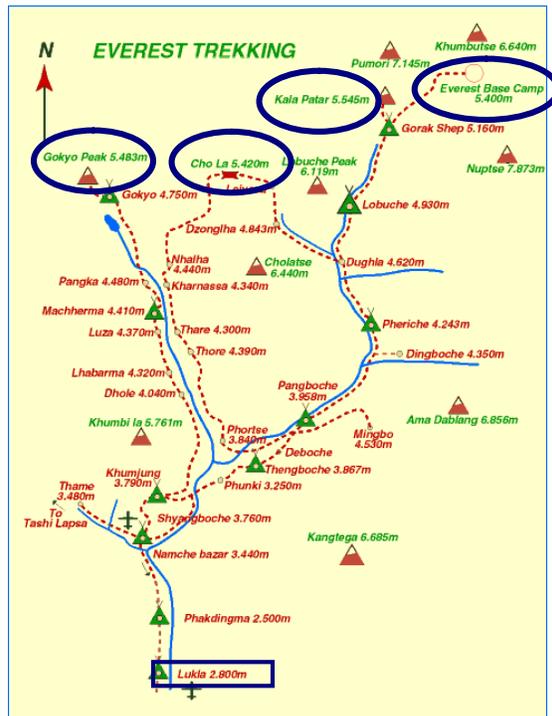
### Climate

October through November is probably the best time to visit Nepal. The weather is clear and dry. The mountains are at their most visible, making this the most popular time for trekking. Spring (February to April) brings warmer temperatures and longer days. The rhododendrons are in full bloom in the hills. The only disadvantage of trekking during spring is the disappointing haze that obscures the mountains from lower elevation. My main goal of this trip was to see Mt. Everest, so I decided to visit Nepal in November.

### My Trekking Route

After all the begging to my boss, I finally got a month off between November and December. The trek that I chose was a bit aggressive. It is rated as challenging level and is specially designed for trekkers to experience one of the most spectacular parts of Nepal. It concentrates on high alpine views, hikes on the high rides and passes in the Gokyo and Khumbu valleys. There were four main highlights on this trek:

- 1<sup>st</sup>: Climb Gokyo Ri (18,100ft) to view Mt. Everest from a distance.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: Cross one of the Himalaya High Passes - Cho La, a 17,800 saddle
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: Climb Kala Pattar; (18,300ft) to view Mt. Everest from a closeup
- 4<sup>th</sup>: Visit Everest Basecamp, (17,600ft)



### World Expeditions

Nine months before the trip, I decided to sign up with an expedition company instead of trekking alone with a local guide. It cost me more, but knowing that I would be away from “civilization” for 20 days, it would be wise to let a reputable company to arrange everything. Hoping that I might even have a chance to take a hot shower! J (it turned out, NOT A CHANCE!) World Expeditions is an Australia base company. It has a branch in the US. The staffs from the company were extremely helpful to provide information before the trip. A week before departure, I received an e-mail from them warning me that this year, Khumbu valley had an abnormal cold weather. The temperature at night could drop -20C (-4F). I bought my 0 F degree sleeping bag with me thinking it would be adequate. How wrong was I!

### Kathmandu

I flew to Kathmandu on November 10th, 2004 to join my group. Right before landing, the pilot reminded us to look out of the window. We were at about 30,000 feet and it was amazing to see a range of white peaks rising high above the clouds and were at the same level as the plane. The Japanese man next to me pointed out Mt. Everest among those high peaks. My heartbeat rose instantly. I was really on my way to see Everest, my dream was about to become a reality.

After the plane landed, a Nepalese man from Radisson Hotel greeted me outside the airport. Greg, my teammate from Australia, showed up few minutes later. The small van took us through the streets of Kathmandu. Most roads in Kathmandu barely have one lane, and are really chaotic. There are no traffic lights, no STOP or YIELD sign, pedestrians, bicycles, cars, dogs and cows are everywhere. People drive like crazy and constantly blow their horns to clear the way. We went through lots of narrow side streets and drove by the Royal Palace and Thamel, (the tourist district) and finally arrived at our hotel. It was an exciting ride.

The hotel was set back in a courtyard and looked impressive compared to the nearby building. In fact Radisson is considered as a five stars hotel in the area. By Nepalese standards, it is a very luxury hotel. The representative from World Expeditions met us at the hotel lobby. He gave me my room key and warned me more than once; "DONOT drink the tap water, DONOT use it to brush your teeth, use only bottle water". I understood his warning after I got into my room. The room was decent but the bathroom had an unpleasant smell. The tap water was cloudy and yellowish, and the toilet was where the unpleasant odor came from. I was not too upset about the water so long as I can have a hot shower. Later that night, I met all my teammates at the reception.

There were 10 of us in the group; five men and five women, coming from UK, Australia, US and Norway. With the exception of Bob, a gentleman from UK, the rest are very fit hikers. Our leader, Shahim is a strong, dark and cheerful India man. Together with two assistance Nepalese leaders and 28 sherpas, our group appeared to be quite a lavish team.

### Short Flight to Lukla

After a brief visit to the city, we flew to Lukla, a small Shepas village where our 20 days trek began. As soon as we took off, the Yeti Airlines 16-seater took us up into the valleys. The small plane skimmed through mountain passes, lush green cliffs and steep waterfalls.

I learnt about the infamous short runway in Lukla from the internet. The Lukla's gravel airstrip is the shortest in the world. High on the side of a mountain, the runway is less than 1,500 feet long and it is built on a slope so that there is an elevation difference of about 200 feet between the ends of the runway. This slope slows planes and helps them stop before they run into the end of the runway. There are no instruments of navigational aids of any kind to help the plane land.

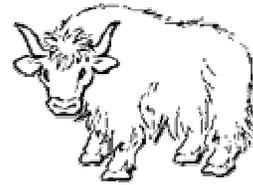


When our plane was about to land, I closed my eyes and prayed. Suddenly, the plane went into a steep dive and headed straight toward a mountainside. Just in front of the mountain, pointing directly at it, was the notorious short runway. The landing would be rather scary if you could see what was happening. A little initial bounce and ten seconds later, we were on the ground. Immediately, I was impressed by the scale of the huge peaks that surrounded the airport, however, this was only a foretaste of what was to come.

The porters retrieved our kit bags quickly and our crew assembled and started walking straight through the village, a fairly large town at 9,350 feet elevation, with many lodges. Lukla's main street was basically a small creek, with water flowing everywhere. The town is where most people stay as their last stop on the way back from the trail.



Our first day trek was a pleasant short hike. We trekked along the Dudh Koshi - the milk river, so-called because it consists almost entirely of rapids, whose frothing gives it a milky appearance. The trail followed the river, high above its lush, green valley. Most traffic on the trail were porters and trekkers. There were also a lot of yaks, or yak-cattle cross breeds, carrying loads. We passed a number of mani stones, inscribed with Buddhist prayers in Tibetan script, as well as prayer flags and a big prayer wheel. Sherpas are very religious people; they have lots of wonderful stories about their lands, their gods, and their beliefs. What impresses me the most is their spirit. They do not have much, in term of material things, but they are always happy. I never once met an angry Sherpas on the trail. They love to sing and as I got closer to



them, I respect them more and more.

Early in the day we came to the first suspension bridge over the river. This is a long, swaying, narrow bridge made of metal built by the Peace Corps. The deck of the bridge moves side to side with the wind, and up and down with no predictable rhythm to it. You just have to keep your knees bent and try not to look down at the roaring river. There are lots of white silk scarves tied to the bridge by the local. The scarves are blessed by monks and are symbol of happiness. We continued to cross the river several times before we finally reached our first campsite. Our porters already had our tents setup right next to the "milk river". After the afternoon tea, a bowl of warm water was brought in to our tent for wash. This bowl of water was our daily source of clearing and I treasured it every day!



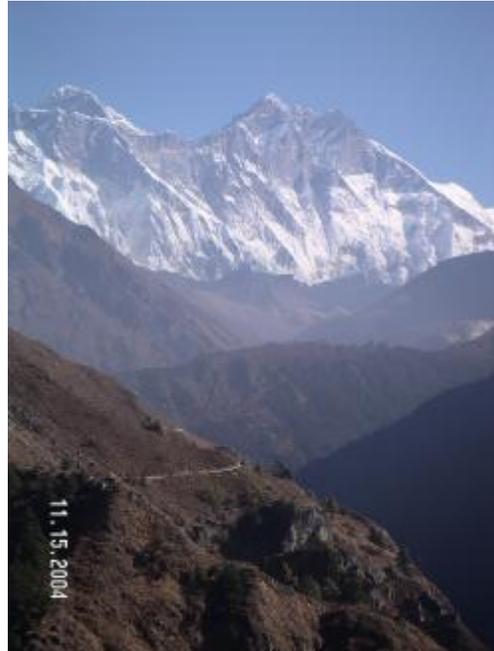
The afternoon clouds started rolling in, and the temperature dropped at once. I put on the down jacket and still felt the chill. By night fall, it became even colder. Temperature was around 30F in the dinner tent. After supper – cauliflowers, cabbages, potatoes, and local breads – we retired immediately to our tent around 8:00pm.

### Namache Bazar (11,400 feet)

We usually were up between 6:00am and 7:00am. Some morning if we were scheduled to climb a peak, we would get up by 5:00am to avoid the late morning clouds. Our breakfast consisted of black or milk tea, oatmeal porridge, eggs and toasts. A cup of hot tea was brought in to our tent every morning by the Sherpa. I appreciated that cup of hot tea more and more as the morning got colder and colder each day.

To day, we entered into the Sagamatha National Park. The entrance marked the beginning of the Everest Region. After breakfast and a short walk, we passed the Park entrance, which was manned by armed guards, who looked very young. They examined our trekking permits and after a few moments, we were on our way to Namche Bazar, the sherpa “capital” of Nepal.

The hill to Namche was a steady long up hill, extremely steep climb for our standard, but not for the Sherpas. They kept rushing past us with the heavy loads on their backs. As we hiked up the hill, we passed several group of trekkers laying in the dust and dirt next to the trail – they were beginning to show signs of altitude sickness. Our not-so-fit member Bob was also in trouble. We could hear his breathing getting heavier and heavier. He could not catch up with us and right before a steep hill, he decided to quit and just sat on a rock with his head resting on the hiking poles. Immediately, his backpack was taken away from him by one of the porters. Shahim, our group leader sat next to him and encouraged him to drink more water. The rest of us continued to climb with a slow pace. About halfway up the hill, there came a point where was slightly off the track and where we could catch the first view of Mt. Everest. I was very excited and just kept staring at the peak. This is what I came here for. The mountain was still a long way off in the distance, but the distinctive plume could be seen. Dilli our assistant leader told me, it would take us another 14-16 days walk to reach its base camp.



After a grueling climb, we finally arrived at Namche Bazar, U-shaped town perched on the edge of a deep gorge, at 11,400 feet. The town has a large number of gift shops and teahouses. It is the town I sent out my e-mail to friends and family to let them know I was still alive. We stayed in a delightful Sherpa lounge instead of camping today. But the room was cold, like an ice box. I kept telling myself, “it is better than camping, it is better than camping”. By evening, few of us began to have headache. Bob, the not-so-fit Englishman suffered the most. Besides experiencing sever headache, he also had diarrhea, nausea, shortness of breath, and tiredness. Based on my experience on Kilimanjaro, I know the poor man would lose

some weight by the end of this trip.

Here, we had our 1<sup>st</sup> shower in 4 days and we would not have another one until 18 days later, painful, extremely painful for a city girl like me! For Everest, only for Everest! **L.**

Next morning, we visited the Sagarmartha National Park Headquarter at the top of the village. Towering to over 13,000 feet above the valley floor, spectacular peaks seem to engulf us. Around us are Taweche (21,500 ft) Thamskerku (22,500 ft) Kantega (22,100 ft) Ama Dablam (22,600 ft), Nuptse (26,100 ft) and Lhotse (28,100 ft). The greatest of all, Mt. Everest (29,200 ft), rises at the head of the valley.



After spending two days in Namache, my headache was gone and Bob was also recovered from his altitude sickness. We left Namche early morning and headed for Gokyo. We hiked steadily up (always UP!). Across the Dudh Khosi (milk river) valley, it was Thamskerku again. The mountain I became so familiar with. To say it towered over us is no exaggeration – the river lay about a 3,000 feet below us, and the mountain stood at least 10,000 feet above. No matter how I photographed it, the pictures never did justice to the mountain. You have to be there to experience the magnitude of the mountain, not just Thamskerku, but all the mountains in the Himalaya region.

### **Gokyo Village**

The trail to Gokyo is extremely steep and relatively short. Dilli told me, in spring, this section of the hike is especially beautiful when the rhododendrons are blooming. Gokyo is famous for its five beautiful lakes. The area does not have as many visitors as the Khumbu Region where Everest resides. The place is often called “Death Valley” by the local. Because of the rapid increase in elevation, it is easy to go too high too fast in Gokyo. More trekkers have suffered severe altitude sickness here than on the Everest Base Camp trek. Helicopter is often called in to rescue trekkers. Shahim warned us, the rescue sometimes, took days and cost at least US\$3,000.

Our itinerary scheduled for six days walk (most people did it in 3-4 days) to reach the upper valley of Gokyo to ensure our safety.



By the 5<sup>th</sup> day of the trek, I was really falling in love with Nepal. I could never get sick of the scenery. Everyday, we were surrounded by spectacular view, the most comprehensive picture of 26,000 feet peaks in Nepal. I particularly love the early morning view when the sun just came out. Each high peaks were dressed in gold by the morning light. So far, we were blessed to have beautiful weather with blue sky and clear view everyday.

### **My first hurdle – bitter cold**

First week in to our trek, our altitude already reached above 14,000 feet and continued to get higher until 16,000 feet at Gokyo village. So far, I showed no sign of altitude sickness. I kept drinking lots of water to prevent it and felt my body was getting stronger each day. I was really looking forward to seeing the first Gokyo Lake. By the time we reached Dole, a town consists of a cluster of teahouses, things started to change. First, it was the bitter cold.



We arrived at Dole in the afternoon, the sun was still out and temperature was relatively warm around 37F. As soon as we set up camp, hail started falling from the sky. We retrieved to our tent until dinner. Hail changed to snow sometime in the afternoon and continued into the evening. In the mess dinner tent, we kept drinking tea, hot chocolate and hot milk to keep warm. Shahim warned us the cold night and he also reminded us to put our hot water bottles and other essential items, such as camera, batteries, contact lenses, toothpaste, and suntan lotion inside our sleeping bag to keep them from frozen at night. I am petty and there were enough rooms for me together with other items inside the sleeping bag. My other teammates, however, were not that lucky. They all complained how small the sleeping space was with all the items inside their sleeping bags. Greg, the Australian, is 6 feet tall. He had a hard time to move freely inside his sleeping bag so he asked me to keep his camera inside my bag. I said, "NO WAY, JOSA!" (Normally, I would help him, but last night, I told him I was running out of toilet paper and he said that he would sell me a square for \$1. So, time for me to revenge!) J

We all turned in early right after dinner. It was indeed a very cold night. Despite wearing a thermal underwear, fleece shirt and pants, socks and gloves, I was still shivering inside my sleeping bag. I piled my down vest and Goretex jacket on top of the sleeping bag to create more layers. After lots of tossing and turning; I began to warm up. Unfortunately, the several cups of tea I drank an hour ago wanted to leave my system. I hated to get up, but the more I ignored the urge, the more I needed to go. I held for an hour until I could not stand it anymore. It took me five minutes to dress, to put on my shoes, to wear my eye glasses, to get the toilet paper, to find a flashlight and finally to unzip my tent. The toilet tent seemed so far away and I really did not want to walk across the field to get there. If it was not the zipper sound of my neighbor tent, I would have done it on the ground next to my tent. After returning to my tent and going through the same struggle all over again, I fell into a deep sleep. That night, I had a dream. I dreamed about someone I care about all these years. The connection felt so real and as if that person also dreamed about me. Perhaps, the Goddess of Himalaya played trick on me.

Next morning, I was awaked to a tapping sound. Par Khi, our porter, was dusting the snow out of my tent with a stick. I checked my thermometer, it was -4C (24F) inside my tent. It must be much colder last night. Greg, our teammate who loves to wash, was complaining about his frozen laundry. I stuck my head outside the tent and saw the whole surrounding cover with white. It was rather pretty. Par Khi handed me a morning cup of tea and a bowl of warm water to wash.



### **Washi Washi**

Washi Washi is the phase we heard every morning and evening from our Porters. It means a bowl of water is ready for us to wash. Let me tell you how I treasured this little bowl of water (about 1 liter) everyday. Warning, it is going to be quite disgusting!

In the morning, we usually only had an hour to finish breakfast and pack all our gears into a kitbag, so the bowl of water in the morning could only be used for a short wash. First I used the water to wash my face, and sometimes to wipe my hair. In a cold morning, I would soak my hands and feet in the bowl to warm them up. In a warm afternoon (means above freezing point 32F), when the sun was still out, this bowl of water could be used for much more. Besides using

it to wash my face and wipe my hair, I also used it to wipe my whole body, from top to bottom. If the sun was still out, all the smelly socks and under wears would go in to the same bowl of water for wash. After the laundry was done, only half bowl of water left (1/2 liter) and I would use it to wipe the dust off my pants and jackets. Now, this bowl of water became quite cloudy. I carefully scoop out the dirt, and continued to use the water to wash off the mud and yak dumps from my shoes. If there were still water left in the bowl, my lucky gaiters would get a shower!

### **Climb Gokyo Ri (18,100 feet)**

On November 19<sup>th</sup>, (Day 8<sup>th</sup>) we finally reached the beautiful Lakes in Gokyo. The 1<sup>st</sup> lake is small, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> one is bigger. They both have the strikingly turquoise color. The Massive Ngozumpa Glacier, the longest glacier in the world, also came to our view. The village of Gokyo is a collection of stone house and walled pastures on the shores of a large lake (3<sup>rd</sup> lake) known as Dudh Pokhari. The views around Gokyo are tremendous and many people consider it to be Nepal's best. Climbing up to a steep track along the western edge of the glacier was very tiring. Dilli



usually set a very slow pace for us, but today, his slow pace was still too fast for us. A 10-foot hill that normally takes me less than 5 seconds to climb took us a good minute to conquer. The hike was not long but increasing became quite difficult. We took frequent breaks during the hike and by the time we reached camp, we all exhausted.

It became a routine that the sun would hide behind the clouds around 2 o'clock right after we sent camp, then snow followed and the temperature plummeted. Shahim gave us another sleeping bag that afternoon to keep us warm at night. My headache returned right after lunch, perhaps the altitude finally got to me. I retired to my tent, took 125mg of Diamox (altitude sickness pill) and slept till dinner. Dinner time, I felt nausea and hardly ate anything. The vegetable dishes I used to love did not seem so appealing to me at all. I went to bed with a very bad feeling in my stomach.

Another cold night, there were ice inside my tent. We were woken early at 5:30am with tea but no washing water. We hoped to get an early start at climbing Gokyo Ri. (Ri means peak at Nepalese) After breakfast, we crossed the frozen river and began our ascent. First, we started as a group and eventually separate each other to hike at our own pace. Thankfully, we were climbing in the sun which meant it was not too cold. The path zig-zagged and went up and up. The Diamox I took last night left me with a tingling feeling on my face. The same feeling I had when I climbed Kilimanjaro last year. It bothered me a bit but the medication really worked. It helped me to breathe better. It took us two and half hours to eventually make it to the top. The last 100 feet were the toughest. Every step was an effort. The training I did back home was really not good enough. I wish I had trained harder. If you think hiking 26-mile is tough, climbing Gokyo Ri is 10 times tougher. We could only take a couple of steps before having to stop and catch our breath. I was glad finally to catch sight of the prayer flags. Dilli was waiting for us at the top. He gave me a big hug and congratulated me. Looking around me, I was totally overwhelmed by what I saw.

***“Poised high in Heaven as the spotless pinnacle of the world”***

*View of Mt Everest from Gokyo Ri*



The view of Everest was spectacular. It was a perfect clear day and I could see from the top pyramid right to the south col. A plume of mist that was the mountain's trademark was also visible. But it was not only Everest we could see. In fact, there are four of the six tallest mountains in the world visible from this point. We could see Everest 29,200ft, Lhotse 28,100 feet, (4<sup>th</sup> highest), Makalu 27,900 feet (5<sup>th</sup> highest) and Cho Oyu 27,100 feet (6<sup>th</sup> highest). In addition to these giants, we could also see Cho latse, Ama Dablam and hundreds of other nameless peaks.

We spent an hour at the top and took as many photos as we could. After one last picture with Everest in the background, we headed down. I kept my eyes on the horizon with each step until at last Everest and Lhotse sand from view. What had taken us nearly three hours to climb took only a little more than an hour to descend. Back at camp, I started not feeling well.

**My second hurdle – Discomfort**

The nausea feeling in my stomach never went away although I kept taking Diamox. Everyone was sipping hot orange drink in the sun outside the dining tent, having conversation about this morning's climb to Gokyo Ri and I simply felt too ill to function. I decided to skip lunch and retired to my tent, hoping to sleep off the effects of the altitude.

When I used a mirror to take off my contact lenses, I was a bit distress to see my own reflection. My nose and cheek were red raw from the sun burnt, my hair was extremely greasy, my hands were dried and my fingers had blisters. I had not had a shower for a week and I had been wearing the same cloths and socks for three days and still had no desire to change them. My fingers and toes were always so cold that they hurt. I was nearly out of breath when I packed my camping gears this morning. The feeling of being sick aggravated me further. Everything I did was a struggle. I was supposed to be on vacation, why should I suffer, why should I torture my

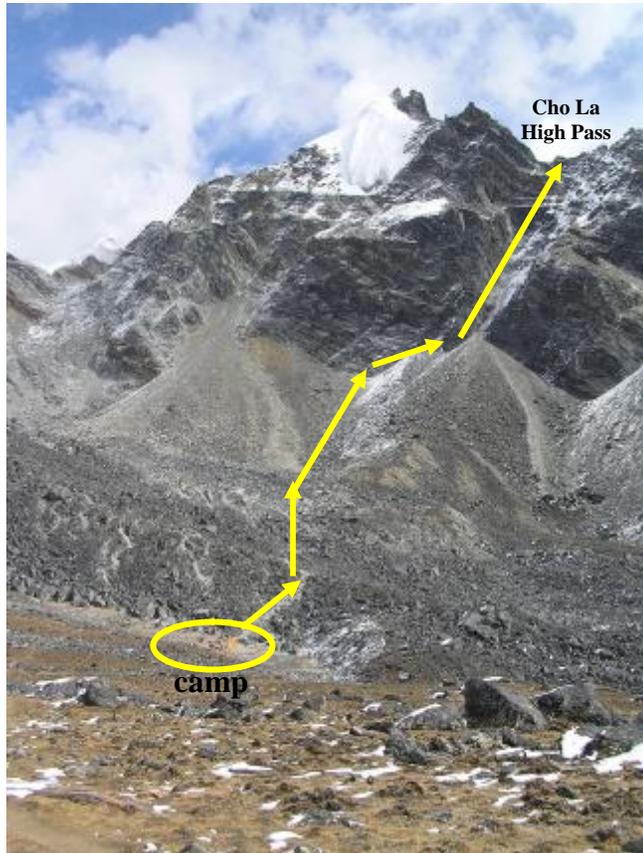
body like this. I just could not think straight, Maybe it was the thin air.... Conversation went on outside my tent, and I found myself thinking life at home. I missed my little apartment, my bed, my plants and my friends.

Right before dinner, I developed a fever. Dilli came to my tent and I asked him to refill my water bottles with hot water. I was too sick to get up and eat. Ten minutes later, Shahim came to my tent with concerns. I told him I had been taking Diamox and should be fine in the morning. He brought me a bowl of soup and I could not bear the smell of it. I went to bed with an empty stomach and I slept through the night till dawn. Morning dawned clear and incredibly cold. The temperature inside my tent was -18C(0F) I really hated camping in the cold. It was horrible, absolutely horrible. NEVER AGAIN!

### **Cho La Base Camp**

Having more than 14 hours sleep definitely made me feel better. I still disliked the smell of foods, but I forced myself to eat. We would cross Cho La tomorrow and I absolutely need to gain back as much strength as possible.

Shahim told us, today would be a 7 hours easy walk on flat to Cho La base camp. It was such a lie! In order to get to Cho La base camp, we had to first walk back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> lake and then walk up to a saddle in the ridge. From there it was a scramble down onto the glacier. The glacier was very icy, and also covered in rocks of all shapes and sizes. For an hour and half we were hopping from rock to rock, twisting ankles and wrenching knees. After lunch, we had another long steady climb up the valley, until we finally reached a ridge where we could see the Cho La pass. The look of the pass gave us a chill. We were all seriously concerned about the crossing. It is an extremely steep rocky wall with no clear path. However, there was an obvious landfall in the middle of what looked like the line of the climb.



There are many routes in Nepal that cross high passes (17,000 ft – 19,800 ft). Pass is a saddle between two high mountains. You will face the dangers of rock fall, snow, avalanches and high altitude when crossing these passes. Ice axe, crampons, and rope are often required. Even with the best preparation there is no assurance you can get across a Himalayan pass. During winter, crossing high pass is formidable.

During winter, crossing high pass is formidable.

The Sherpas set up camp at the base of the pass, which was an area totally covered in rocks, it was difficult for them to find places to pitch the tents, but there were a few flattened out places which had obviously been used in the past. The worst thing was dodging all the holes that had been used before for toilet tents! While not the most scenic campsite, this was probably the most unique, and definitely different.

For dinner, all I could eat was the garlic soup and I did not even like it. The chef made us something looked like a pizza, but taste nothing like it. I tried a small bite and my stomach immediately reacted to it. I nearly had to throw up. (Just want to clarify: it was nothing wrong with our chef's cooking, in fact he is an excellent cook. It was me who lost the appetite for foods)

Wake up call would be 5:00am tomorrow. Shahim alerted us it would be a long 3 hours climbing up to the top of the saddle and another 3 hours scrambled down to other side of the mountain where the trail to Everest Base

Camp begins. Another cold night, I wore all my “inner and middle layers” hiking cloths to bed just to keep warm and beside; I did not have to change in the morning. Something, a city girl like me never did before.

### **A Blizzard Storm – Cho La High Pass**

It was still dark when we sat in the mass tent for breakfast. My fingers were so cold and I had to keep hitting them to make sure they were alive. My dear Sherpa Par Khi came and put my hands between his and started rubbing them. I was so touched. Sherpas by nature are very kind people, especially Par Khi. He has a very good heart. We quickly ate our breakfast and by the time we were about to leave, it began to snow.

Crossing Cho La in a snowy condition is extremely dangerous. Our itinerary did mention about using a different route if weather turned bad. The snow became heavy within minutes. It just kept falling and falling. Our heads, backpacks, and jackets all covered with a layer of snow. I had to put the hoop of my Goretex jacket on top of my wool hat just to keep the snow from cumulating. We were waiting Shahim for the “Plan B” if any.



There was no Plan B. Shahim came to me and asked me to hike with our chef. Our chef usually hid himself in the kitchen tent. I never knew he is such a tall, lead and handsome Sherpa. “Namaste!” he greeted me with a smile, I almost melt. I really did not mind hiking behind him having his backside facing me. J

In fact, each female in our group had a Sherpa to accompany for the hike. John, the eldest member, Bob, the not so fit hiker also had a sherpa to assign to hike with. Dilli, Shahim, Par Khi each carried an ice axe, heavy rope and had a serious look.

It was a steep climb, over a lot of scree. On several sections we actually had to climb with our hands. After an hour’s steep going, it was still snowing heavily. By now, there was a great deal of snow on the trail and our progress was extremely slow. I began to feel nausea. My daypack seemed to be much heavier this morning. I was dragging my feet and falling further and further behind the chef. He came back and asked me to hold on to his arm. After a few steps, I felt worse with a stomach cramp. I found myself weaving, tripping and nearly falling to one side or the other in the snow. Before I knew it, I began to vomit. Par Khi came from nowhere and took away my backpack at once. Shahim pat my shoulder and gave me a little encouragement to go on. I



knew I had to go on, the team was not staying behind or leaving without me. The weather turned to worse. We were now at the midst of a true blizzard snow storm. Our visibility was so poor that Dilli had to confirm with Shahim a few times the direction we were heading. A lot of shouting was going on while I continued to get sick. By the 4<sup>th</sup> time, I threw up everything I had eaten that morning. Shahim sat me down and gave me a small pill. He asked me whether I could walk on my own.

Most of our porters carried load twice their weight with only minimum winter gears. A few times, some of them slipped. Having his large backpack on his back, Par Khi was carrying my daypack on his chest. I could not bear to give them extra burdens. I bit my lips and determined to go on. I set myself a pace of three breaths to every five steps. It was a painfully exhausting process, slowly trudging one foot in front of the other as I continued to ascend the steep open terrain trail. I kept thinking how it went on seemingly forever and ever. It was quite an elation to finally reach the top of the saddle. The summit (17,800

ft) was rocky and exposed, with Tibetan prayer flags shivering in the wind. At last, we did it. Our chef and Par Khi came and hugged me. The most difficult part of the hike was behind us.

The wind and the cold temperature did not allow us to linger at the summit too long. Soon enough it was time to start heading down, the other side was very steep, at first we had to climb down the icy glacier, then some more rock climbing down a steep hill. Just before we got to the bottom of the pass, Par Khi slipped and our teammate, Jayne, right behind him, also fell. Jayne's husband's Paul came to console his wife and she finally broke down. She had been having problems acclimatizing since the climb to Gokyo Ri. This hike was her last straw. "It is too hard!, I can't do it!" Jayne was in tears and reluctant to go on. Our poor leader Shadhim kept running between each trouble client. He did as much as he possibly can to motivate each team member and to keep the group together in the blizzard storm.

Half way climbing down, I needed to go to the bathroom. I excused myself behind a boulder. After I finished and walked back to the trail, one of my legs was caught between two rocks. I struggled and my leg sunk even deeper into the rocks. I pull my leg as hard as I could and I fell backward. My leg was released but my hiking boot was still caught between the rocks. Par Khi, Dilli and Shahim all saw me falling down; they came rushing to see whether I was hurt. Dilli used his ice axe to dig out my hiking boot and Par Khi helped me to put my shoe back on. I did not know whether I should laugh or cry. I was indeed having such a tough time on that day.

At the bottom of the pass was a well-defined trail, with barely any rocks to walk over. We arrived in Dzongla and set up camp by the village, which consisted of only two small teahouses. After such a strenuous day, following an early morning, we could not do very much at all this afternoon. I hung around in the tent with a trouble stomach. Again, I could not eat anything that night. Jayne and I sat inside the dinner tent and looked at each other. I am sure we were thinking the same thing: **WHAT THE HEAD ARE WE DOING HERE!"**

### **Climb Kala Pattar (18,300 feet)**

Cho La is a passage between Gokyo and Khumbu Valleys. After crossing Cho La, we were officially on the "Everest Highway", the most popular trail in the region. Our next goal was to climb up to Kala Pattar and have a close view of Everest. From the peak of Kala Pattar, Mt. Everest is only 10 miles from that point.

We arrived at Gorakshep on November 23rd, 12th days of the trek. The campsite here was a bit crowded. We had another two groups sharing the same campsite. One of them was also led by World Expeditions. They just finished their climb to Kala Pattar and would be leaving Gorak Shep tomorrow. Most of the members had altitude sickness since their trip had a much shorter itinerary



(15 days). They told us about the stunning views of Everest at the top of Kala Pattar. Gorakshep was the windiest and the coldest place we camped so far, also the highest (17,100 feet) overnight stop. Despite the coldness, I liked Gorak Shep. There were some lovely views of Pumori and Nuptse/Lhotse right in front of where we camped. Leaning against Pumori Peak, Kala Pattar, the "Black Rock" beckoned. The peak appeared to be a "bump" on the side of Pumori.

We set off early morning with a flask of hot tea and all the clothes we could wear. After we walked over the dry lakebed, the slopes up Kala Pattar began. The climb was not as bad as I had imagined it.

Having already spent a week above 16,000 feet, each member of our team was already fully acclimatized. Even Bob was doing great. The first section of the climb was quite steep, steep slopes at 17,000 feet exhaust us very quickly. Afterward, the path flattened out a bit, relatively speaking. I was fully recovered from my illness and did quite well with the climb. Par Khi and I were ahead of others. He taught me how to build a good looking Nepalese cairn along the path. The cairn, according to their religions, brings blessing to a family.



Soon enough we could see the Icefall. As we got further up the hill, we could see more and more of Everest revealing herself. First, it was her head, then her shoulders, massive, so remote and yet so close. On the blue horizon, its dark cone loomed above the Nuptse wall. Far below, Base Camp lay deserted in a jumble of rocks and ice.

The last third of the climb, we were back to a very steep hill, but the nearness of the summit gave us new energy. Two and a half hours later, we reached the top of Kala Pattar, and stood in awe as Everest, Mother Goddess of the Earth. I spent most of the time at the summit by just staring at Everest. I know there would be another moment in my life like this. This is one of my life ambitions, to be here away from all the hustle and bustle at the whim of nature and to be with the highest mountain on earth. My eight years long dream finally became true.

It was a perfect day, the sky was so blue. The mountain views were spectacular in all directions. Just above us, Pumori was the closest mountain. Between Everest and Pumori, we could see a pass to Tibet. Looking back down the valley we had just come up, multitude of mountains lined up on the horizon. The valley and peaks formed the most impressive sight I have ever seen. Ama Dablam, the prettiest of all, captured my attention immediately. Add to this beauty are the dark blue sky found at altitude and a few puffy cumulus. A ray of sunshine fell on Ama Dablam and it smiled at me. "Namaster Chi, you did it!"



Joy overcame me and I found myself in tears....

The walk down was much faster, but very steep and it was easy to slip on the sandy trail. Having spent 2 weeks hiking, our group was getting stronger. None of us had any altitude problem, not even Bob. Everyone returned to the campsite with satisfaction and we were sitting in the dinner tent discussing tomorrow's plan to Everest Base Camp. It is a six hours round trip walk and the main attraction of this hike is to walk along the glacier. We were all very eager to finish this last difficult trek before heading down to the mountain.

### **Everest Base Camp (17,600ft)**

November 26, we got up around 6:00am. It was another cold morning and with unbearable wind. No matter how many days I spent in the mountain, I could never get used to the cold temperature. It was always a struggle to me, particularly in the morning. My hands and toes were always so cold and I had to keep jumping up and down, walking back and forth to keep them warm. I drank cups and cups of hot tea during breakfast and as a result, everyone had to put up with my endless requests for bathroom break during the hike. This morning, I wore 3 pair of pants and going to the bathroom became such a difficult task.



We broke camp shortly after 7:00am. First, we crossed an icy dry lakebed, then scrambled over the moraine, a forbidding wall of stones and rocks and began our walk. Hiking at 17,000 feet altitude was still quite tiring even the hike was on a relatively flat ground. After nearly three hours long strenuous walk, we finally reached the "End of the world", a moonscape of tortured land and ice with gaping crevasses and the great Khumbu Icefall. As its name implies, the Khumbu Icefall actually is an icefall, like waterfall but slower. The icefall is a slowly churning stream of ice that cracks, pops, crashes, slides and flows. You can hear the chilling cracking sound if you stand long enough by the icefall.

The Base Camp looked surprisingly clean despite what I had heard about the area. With only a few other trekkers walking around, the Base Camp was more deserted than I had envisioned. The remains of a



*Group picture at Everest Base Camp*

helicopter that was crashed some 10 years ago made the campsite appear to be even more hostile. The air was thin and dry. The sun was so strong that it blinded you. Dilli told me when the wind blows, the temperature can drop below 40F. I can not imagine how human can live in such harsh condition even for one day. Dilli found a rusty can of mushroom soup left behind by one of the Everest Expedition teams and Shahim climbed the dangerous ice fall and returned with a broken rope ladder. Most guides and Sherpas fantasize about climbing Everest. The climb although is danger, it brings pride and good income to their family. Shahim, Dilli and Par Khi are no exception. They all told me one day, they would love to be on one of the Everest Expeditions.

Suddenly, a rumbled and groaned, great blocks of ice crashing down from the slope of the icefall. I looked up to the icefall and the famous Western Cwm. Although Mt Everest was not visible from the Base Camp, I felt

her present. With awe and respect, I said my goodbye to the mountain. Here is the end of my journey and I do not fancy going further. Climbing Everest was, is and will be never one of my dreams. My dream ends here and I am contented to come this far.

### **Sacred Temple and Mountain**

Having reached my final destination, I felt untapped reserves of energy. I was eager to return to civilization where I did not have to worry about the harsh mountain environment. Next day, we packed up and headed down to the valley. It would still be a several days walk before we returned to Lukla. On our way down, we passed a group of Chortens on the hilltop in memory of all the Sherpas who died climbing Mt. Everest, including the one in memory of Scott Fisher, the famous US “Mountain Madness” guide who died in the 1996 Everest Expedition.



We also visited several villages. My favorite place was Tengpoche, where is host of an ancient Buddhist monastery. Shahim told us, each year, all the Everest Expeditions stopped here and received blessing from the monks before the climb. Inside the temple, Buddhist monks in maroon and saffron robes seated themselves in circle. Sweet smell of juniper branches filled the room as they were burnt in offering. The chants of the monks echoed backed into their repetition. The place gave me a sense of peacefulness and I knew I had been blessed by the Mountain of Goddess for this wonderful journey. I gave my offering and left the place with contentment.



Outside the temple, the morning mountain views from the monastery are magnificent. Everest, Lhotse and Nuptse are at the head of the valley and Ama Dablam stands on the other side. From Tengpoche we followed the main trail and back into the forest, continued downhill to the river where we camped.

After dinner, I stayed outside a while admiring the surroundings. The stars were brilliant that night. The snow outside was shimmering under the pale moon light and the surrounding mountains were brightly illuminated. Ama Dablam, my favorite mountain in the Khumbu Valley, was in silver. Later that night after I went to the toilet tent, I looked up the sky again. The full moon had just set behind the

mountains, backlighting the peaks as it went down. Ama Dablam, looming over our campsite to the east, was still fully illuminated. The moonlight on the snow was nearly as bright as dawn. Once again, I became emotional.....

### **Back to Civilization and Uh! Hot Shower at last**

Next morning, we packed and hiked further down the valley. The downhill was easy. Soon, passed Namche Bazaar and arrived at Lukla early afternoon. Shahim had a surprise for us. He took us to a newly built lodge and told us, no more camping and we would have our first hot shower after 18 days. The hot water would only last for 1 hour at 3:00pm. I could not wait! The room was cold with no heat, but comfortable. I lighted up the candle hoping it created some heat to warm myself up but in vain.

Inside the bathroom, I finally saw myself in the mirror and I was a bit shocked. I had lost weight, I did not know how much, but definitely some. My face was dirty and black; every inch of my skin was filthy. I already knew how dirty my clothes were and how bad I smelled, but to actually see myself was a bit shocking. I took off my wool hat and I was totally horrified by how my hair looked. It tangled together like the hair of the

homeless people in New York. I guess three weeks in the mountains without shower will do it. But there are positive things I saw in the mirror. Behind the filthy skin, there was a glow on my face. My eyes were full of energy and my body was as fit as ever. I guess three weeks hiking on Himalayas would do it too!

I wait for 2 hours inside my room and finally the hot water arrived. I stripped off all my smelly clothes and stood under the faucet for a good half an hour. I let the steaming hot water run through my hair, body, arms, legs, fingers and toes. I came out of the shower as a new person; a clean, happy, healthy woman!



Par Khi came and said goodbye to me later that day. Although I was excited to return to modern civilization, I was very sad to say goodbye to our leaders and Sherpas, especially Dilli and Par Khi. Par Khi brought hot tea and washing water to my tent every cold morning. All the staffs were up before us to prepare hot breakfast, packed up after us and rushed to the next campsite to set up camp and serve us dinner. They carried our daypack when we were tired. They lent us their helping hands when we were exhausted at the slope. They genuinely were happy for us when we reached the peaks. They really took very good care of us.

#### **The Sherpas I love**

The Khumbu region is inhabited mostly by Sherpas. Generally they are Buddhist and live in the middle hills. There is certain nature kindness about the Sherpa people. Their kindnesses are constant, genuine and never ending. Sherpas are physically small but strong. They are reliable, charming, funny and helpful. They love to sing and dance. Perhaps I have the some color of hair, eyes and skin as their, I feel very close to them. I never treated them as my servant but a friend. Dilli, our assistant leader, gradually stole my heart as the trip progressed. Par Khi, my porter, became my closest friend by the end of the trip. These two people I left behind in Nepal will forever have a special place in my heart. I hope one day when I revisit Nepal, I can see them again.

I gave up my hiking boots to Make, a young Sherpa who lacked of good winter hiking gears. He did not mind they were women's hiking shoes. His face lit up when I gave him some chocolates and other small hiking items. In return, he gave me his lucky stone that he carried on his neck.

I gave Dilli, Make and Par Khi extra tips in addition to the group tips. These people were very kind to me. I wish I could do much more for them. We exchanged e-mail addresses and promised to be in touched. (After I returned to the US, Dilli sent me a couple e-mails, Par Kai has problems writing English but sent his regards through Dilli.)

#### **Epilogue**

The flight back to the US unexpectedly moved me into a surreal state, where everything felt distant in both space and time. New York seemed familiar enough upon arrival, but the air was different than I remembered. Perhaps back in my mind, I was still thinking the air I breathed in Nepal.....

I will forever remember Nepal; the snow-capped peaks looming over pine-forest, twinkling stars dancing across the dark sky, Tibetan prayer flags fluttering in the wind, stone cairns marking the trail to my side and the rich culture and kindness of the Napalese people.

I will end my journal with a Nepalese greeting: *Namaste!*

**THE END**

