

Everest Base Camp Trek October 2019 by Neeta Patel

Let me start by saying that this trip had been on my proverbial 'bucket list' for some 12 years since returning from climbing and summitting Kilimanjaro in 2007. That feeling of achievement was unlike any other I had felt before. Visiting India in 1992 and going up to Nainital and seeing the Himalaya range or 'massif' as it is fondly known while pony trekking was a wonderful experience and left a mark in my subconscious. Little did I realise that I would return many years later for an experience that has also left a huge impression in my mind which I will never forget. I have made friends for life and through our stories as a group when we meet up in the years to follow, we will always keep this adventure alive in our minds as something we all shared together

So, after deciding to sign up for this trek my friends and I began our preparations by joining a Sunday walking group and this helped immensely in preparing our bodies to walk at least 5-6 hours a day. Everest base camp is an endurance trek as it takes 8 days to reach base camp and then a further 3 days to return back to Lukla. I have always kept fit throughout my life mainly by swimming and walking but I also started spinning and powerhooping which helped with my cardio preparation. I feel that it is so important to focus one's attention and make a serious effort to get fit before taking on such a challenge like this or any other as there is less worry that aches and pains will spoil the trek and also less worry that an injury could be sustained. We all knew that altitude effects were unknown and that we could not be sure how each one of us would be affected.

The day dawned and we took our flight arriving in Kathmandu and were met by Prem Pandit of Mountain Hawk Trek Ltd. He was our guide and had been recommended to us by friends from the UK so we felt that we were in safe hands. After one night's rest in the Radisson Hotel we set off early the following day as the flight to Lukla was now from another town called Ramenchap which was some 5 hours away. The roads were not great so the journey was quite tiring and sadly our accommodation was not what it was supposed to be that evening, but we laughed it off and said that our adventure had just started a little early. We would need to get used to a basic standard of living for the next 11 days!

Lukla airport, if one has not heard of it, is on the top ten list of the most difficult landing and take off's due to the incredibly short runway. I was somewhat apprehensive about this but also knew that the pilots are among the best to be able to fly those small planes. The flight once we got going was amazing as the views just took our breath away as we approached Tenzing and Hiliary Airport, Lukla. An early arrival allowed us to have an early lunch before we were to start our first days trekking which was to Phakding at 2610meters. Prem was leading and Rajan was the sweeper guide bringing up the rear. It took around 3/4 hours to reach the guesthouse at Phakding. We were all in high spirits and met many other trekkers on route. We enjoyed the fabulous lush scenery around us and the first suspension rope bridge we crossed was a challenge for me. Not that I am scared of heights per se but I did go all slightly jelly legged when I tried to look down at the raging Dudh Koshi river below us as we crossed. I kept my eyes forward and just walked right across holding onto one side as I crossed. Over the course of the next few days there would be another 5 to get across getting higher and higher as the valleys rose around us. I had heard all about these bridges but they would not have stopped me from achieving my goal. The terrain was difficult in parts on this first day but we all preserved and allowed our bodies to start getting accustomed to walking. As we walked, we had to move aside for long lines of animals coming one after the other with their bells ringing to warn us that they were close. These were called Jobkey's. A cross breed between Yak's and cows. We were told that we would see Yaks much higher up as they live at higher altitude and that we needed to be

careful and stand next to the mountain side at all times when they pass by so as not to get pushed off into the deep valley below. These animals carried all the supplies needed higher up from food, water to even wood for building. Many porters also passed us by carrying really heavy supplies and this is how they make a living going up and down. We felt for them but this is their way of life and way of earning money for their families. Some would be carrying supplies that were almost double their body weight. On arrival at the first guesthouse, the night time temperatures even at this lower altitude became very cold very quickly and we all became aware of how much colder the nights would become as we continued higher. The sleeping bag provided by Prem was a godsend and incredibly warm and snug, however, that first night was a difficult sleep and I was tossing and turning. My mind was filled with thoughts and it was hard to sleep. I was not alone as we all had much the same problem but the following day dawned and we rose to another bright sunny day. After an omelette and toast for breakfast, it was time to get cracking.

The next day, we were told was going to be much longer as we made our way to Namche Bazaar at 3480metres which is a village housing many trekkers both going up and those coming back from Everest. We would enter the Sagarmatha National Park. The terrain on this day was made up of many large boulders and large steps which seemed endless. I just told myself to keep going slowly but surely. This was our first real test of endurance and Prem watched each one of us and made his own mental notes of how we were each getting along as his goal was to get us all to base camp. He advised on the correct clothes and how much water to carry for each leg of each day as water was available when we stopped for lunch so there was no need to carry too much and make our day bags too heavy. He would not let us take off our long sleeves even though it was warm as he advised that it would get colder and that we may not realise this and could catch a chill which could cause a chest infection. This advice as it happened kept us all well and we did not cause any disputes as with over 20years experience he knew what he was talking about. We found other trekkers on route would be taking off all their layers down to just a T-shirt but he was very strict and said that we should look at the Nepalese people who at this time of year were wearing thick down jackets. We also noticed many rescue helicopters flying overhead as Prem said that many get airlifted because they think it is easy and go too fast. A steady consistent approach was my plan for this trek as it is not a race. I knew that my body needed to acclimatize slowly as we progressed day by day and that I should listen to my body too.

On reaching Namche Bazaar, we were gobsmacked at what we saw. Lots of buildings which looked like a toy village of many different colours. It was a very large bustling place with a friendly vibe. There were many different nationalities of people here as this is the base as mentioned for most to stay for two nights. This is also the last place to get good Wifi so we made the most and contacted our friends and family. The following day, we did an acclimatization trek up and got our first glimpse of Everest itself in the far distance. What a sensational feeling to see these incredible views. The skies were blue and clear which allowed us to see these amazing views of all the peaks, Lhotse and Nupste and Ama Dablam are all above 8000meters. A cloud formation was seen above the peak of Everest itself due to the fact that it is the highest at 8848meters. That was one of the highlights of the trip overall and a really fun acclimatization trek day.

The next day took us to Tengboche Monastery at 3860meters. We walked for around 5/6 hours. The first part of the trek was on a fairly flat terrain which hugged the mountainside and almost snaked around and around rising gradually higher as we went. The steep drops on one side as we walked were spectacular to see but scary and so we walked closer to the mountainside. The sun's rays shone and bounced off the terrain creating magical images and our photos taken on just our phones came out absolutely incredible that day. Again, we saw the peak of Everest in the distance on the

first part of this day's trek. It was today, at the lunch stop that I felt a very slight headache starting. I took a couple of Paracetamol to help and kept my pace very steady and consistent as I did not want altitude to spoil this for me. As it happened, the headache went away and luckily stayed away for the rest of the trip. Headaches at the back of the head tend to indicate that one is becoming affected by altitude whereas at the front it is less so. Something I had not read about prior to the trip but was made aware of by Prem due to his years of experience trekking these mountains ranges. It is important to be self-aware at all times and alert the guide if one is not feeling well. Prem would also check our oxygen levels every evening at dinner to make sure we were all doing well.

On arrival at the monastery, the weather had turned foggy and cold. All we wanted to do was eat and go to sleep. Sleep was becoming a little easier but I don't think I really slept well on any day during the trek! The monks live up here in this place which felt very isolated and windswept. Barren and cold! The monastery itself was a quiet and reflective place and we were allowed to go inside and view the colourful depictions on the walls of Buddha's story and life.

The following day's trek of 6/7 hours took us to Dingboche at 4350meters. Here, we would spend two nights at Good Luck Teahouse as another acclimatization trek was planned the next day. This took us up to 4710meters in 4hours and then back down to Dingboche where we had the whole afternoon off to rest. We went to the café which served proper coffee from an industrial sized coffee maker much like one at Starbucks and indulged in tasty cappuccinos watching films about mountaineering. Very surreal! That was a relaxing afternoon and we knew that the next two days would be difficult and long as the altitude and cold became harder and harder as we got nearer to our goal!

Lobuche was the next destination at 4920meters and it took some 6 hours along terrain that was now devoid of greenery and becoming glacial and sparse. Black rocks and large boulders abounded and it was tough at times to traverse and very tiring. We walked one behind the other to keep us going and to keep the pace steady. Arrival at the guesthouse that day was such a relief. We knew that the next day was the day we had been walking towards and that we would be reaching base camp. We also knew that the following day would be the longest day of the trek so far and that a good rest was needed. Sleep was better and after the same breakfast that I had had on all the days we started our push forward with an air of anticipation.

It took some 6 hours to reach Gorak Shep where we had lunch. We were a little later than planned and had to eat quickly as it was another 3 hours to base camp from here and then 3 hours back. Prem was worried about the light as walking in the dark is a dangerous proposition and not an option ideally even with headtorches which we had forgotten to take with us in our rush to leave. I must say that these 3 hours felt the longest of the whole adventure as base camp just seemed to take forever to reach. We crisscrossed over wobbly large boulders, wooden bridges traversing glacial waters and past trekkers on route and some already heading back. The terrain was difficult and slow work due to the altitude causing breathlessness and increased heart rate which added to the tiredness that we already felt after the early start. We continued as a team as our goal was getting closer and closer. We encouraged each other to keep going forward. We were all going to get there by hook or by crook. The excitement increased and then we saw it, the large rock stating in red letters, 'Everest Base Camp at 5364m'. It felt completely surreal on arrival but what exhilaration we all felt. We had all done it!! As a group we celebrated together. Hugged and cheered. As I looked around and up, I could see glaciers and snow-covered mountains surrounding us. It was like a winter wonderland. Jagged peaks of ice rising up in places beyond and just one yellow tent at this time of year unlike the masses that would spring up in April/ May when the climbing season began.

Unlike the summit of Kilimanjaro where one can see for miles and miles on a clear day and it feels like you are actually on top of the world, this was such a different feeling for me. The sense of achievement was immense due to the time it had taken to reach this place and also knowing that I was the first in my family made it a proud moment for me.

We did not have much time as the light was fading. We took as many photos as we could alone, in pairs and as a group, as these memories needed recording so that later we would be able to savour the moments on reflection. Then the trek back to Gorak Shep started. Exhausted but full of joy too. 3 hours back felt like an eternity as we plodded slowly on and on. We finally arrived back to Gorak Shep as the light was fading. It was the longest and the most tiring day of all. I felt totally drained and could not eat very much at all. My energy was all used up. We were all totally shattered. No one really wanted to talk very much but we had to decide whether we wanted to trek to Kala Pattar at 5555meters the next morning at 5am. The weather forecast was poor and Prem advised us that visibility would not be good but that it was up to each one of us to decide. I had already made up my mind that it was not to be for me as I was very aware that the following day we would be starting our 3 day journey back to Lukla and so knowing how tough and gruelling that would be I opted to get as much rest as possible to conserve my energy.

We started the following morning on our return journey in freezing cold temperatures and layered up to keep out the cold. It had started sleeting and the snow was falling as we walked and there was also wind which meant that the snow kept blowing onto our faces. Nobody wanted to talk, I felt like we were on a mission and needed to focus on keeping going, one foot in front of the other. My fingers were getting numb from the cold but onwards I pushed myself. The journey back to Lukla is the same way as we came to base camp. We needed to walk much faster to make up the distance and this would get easier as we descended in altitude but the terrain was still incredibly challenging as it had been getting to base camp. Only this time we had to do it all in less than half the time.

We arrived in Periche at 4200meters after about 9 hours trekking and it was freezing cold due to the snow. We warmed ourselves in the dining room near the stove fire and ate a hearty dinner. Then it was sleep as best as we could as we all knew that the following day would be just the same, long and gruelling.

It dawned white as it had snowed some more overnight. Again, we layered up and started walking. The wind was less today and the views were also just as amazing with everything covered with a light dusting of snow. Up and down we went, back across the rope bridges and the weather started to feel warmer again and our spirits lifted as we reached Namche Bazaar just as the light was fading again. Looking out over the place we could see all the twinkling lights of the many guesthouses and the stars above were glistening in the sky. Magical!

We were sort of back to civilisation again and had WIFI, yay! All we wanted to do was send photos to all our family and friends telling them that we had all achieved our goal. That was such a great feeling sending those What's App messages as they had not heard from us for quite a few days. I am sure that they were all relieved to hear from us and proud too.

So, the final day dawned bright and clear. We were excited to know that this was our very last day trekking but we also knew that it was going to be a very long day. However, we were all in good spirits and eager to get going. It took all of my strength and resolve on that final day to reach Lukla. It felt endless as we kept pushing on and on and on. Up steps which seemed never ending this time. Alongside many other trekkers. Those going upwards were excited as we had been some 10 days

ago and those coming back like us were also excited to finish and were looking forward to celebrating.

Finally, after some 11 hours or so, we arrived in Lukla. OMG! Oh My God! What a relief that felt like!

We had done it. We were back and tonight there would be dancing and singing and food with all the group along with the porters whom we only saw periodically throughout the journey but who we owed so much too as they had carried our main bags to each camp. They are an amazing group and do such thankless work. We did of course thank them profusely and tipped them most generously so that they could go back to their families and have some time to enjoy and rest after all they would be doing it all again soon with another group of intrepid trekkers like US.

The flight back to Ramenchap from Lukla was welcome as all I could think about was getting to the Radisson for a long hot shower. We had not bathed for days and the cap on my head was literally stuck to it. LOL!

Prem invited us for a farewell dinner with some traditional Nepalese entertainment which was enjoyable. Tired and fulfilled we retired for a good night's sleep in warm and comfy beds after the sleeping bags and hard beds in cold rooms that we had endured for 11 days but had so been worth it to be able to say that we had trekked to Everest Base Camp. The next day we were leaving to fly back home.

My adventure had come to an end and I had some amazing memories to cherish with my new found friends for life and share with my family and friends back at home.

My proverbial bucket list came to mind and I put a mental tick against, 'Everest Base Camp Trek'!

I had done it and I told myself, 'You did really good girl'.