

## Introduction

Just over 10 months ago I clicked “confirm” and with some degree of excitement mixed with trepidation, booked a three week trekking holiday to Everest Base Camp.

Initially it was easy to just drop into the conversation about my plans for life after retiring from my job, that I had nothing planned, but was “off to trek to Everest” before making any permanent decisions about any future career.

“Oooh! How exciting!” was the usual response, followed by enquiries about temperature, sleeping arrangements and daily distance travelled – many of which I had the “trip description” answer, but little real detailed knowledge.

Occasionally, the destination defeated the questioner, with a need to explain (in at least one case) what “Everest” is and, once that was established, what a “Base Camp” is and why would anyone want to go there. I had a number of conversations where the questioner would either sympathise that I was only going to Base Camp, or that maybe, once I’d got there, I’d feel able to walk the final few miles to the top!

However, there were a lot of conversations with people who were far more knowledgeable and the increasing number of comments about altitude sickness and its possible effect on our ability to make it to Base Camp were sometimes dispiriting. I can’t even recall how many times we were told that “fitness has nothing to do with your ability to cope with altitude” – as if in some way, our fitness was going to hinder us or even make it more likely that we would fail!

Although our plans were met with satisfying responses, very few showed any sign of either jealousy or indicated any wish to do the same. This surprised me as it had long been a dream of mine that, once I saw it was actually possible, was the only destination for our dream holiday of a lifetime.

10 months was a long time to prepare. Fitness needed maintaining (we were sure that this *was* necessary), although we realised that being able to run 30 miles a week was not the same as being able to walk consecutive 6 hours a day – which was one of the guidelines for the “C” grade holidays. Equipment, we thought, could be sought from our usual camping supplies. Little else needed sorting – or so we thought initially!

By February, we’d re-assessed our outer coats against the temperature range supplied and were the proud owners of extreme light weight down jackets- much admired and the regular subject of the “guess how much it weighs” game. At just over 100g, the Summit series 800g down jackets were really the bees-knees of down coats – only to have the bees squashed when one of them (Jes’s) was stolen during a house burglary. Although it was covered by the house insurance and, for once, we had receipts to prove purchase, it proved impossible to replace and was substituted by the slightly heavier Nuptse jacket.

Sleeping bags needed to be 4 season ones, it said in the trip notes, and the ones we’d used with the kids over the last 10 years didn’t even have a rating let alone any indication of season’s trustworthiness and certainly didn’t appear to be able to withstand -10oC. However, an internet search sorted that for us with 4 season bags at a much lower cost than anything we’d seen in the shops. Let’s just hope that has not been a false economy! I have to admit that by the start of the trip only one of them has been tested for one night by Tom at home and the other one is still in its pristine un-used state!

Walking poles were “recommended” and purchased at enormous discount on the day that Blacks went into receivership. I’ve never owned such an expensive item (even at just 20% of its cost). However, summer use in the Alps proved too tough for these gorgeous beasts and they ended their lives in pieces in a layby in the Aosta Valley. Older, cheaper and hopefully, more robust ones are now snuggled at the bottom of my bag.

Thermal base layers are a necessity said the trip notes and seem to require more than the M&S thermal vests that we’d got. So new Merino Wool ones were also acquired as a result of Blacks misfortune and should keep us warm even at the highest point.

New day rucksacks were required as our old ones were also stolen by our burglar. I’m happily packing a beautiful rucksack designed for the shorter bodied female, equipped with a yellow flower! Jes is unhappily packing a rucksack that continuously disappoints him and causes him much annoyance as the straps come out of the side pockets, so



preventing anything from being stored securely in the said pockets. A martyr to the end, he insists it'll be OK - though I suspect I'll hear a lot more!


Packing was easy! It was so much more straightforward to pack for this trip than to sort the ever increasing volume of stuff that gets added to the campervan during the last few days before we leave for our summer expeditions.

Exodus provided us with their named bags – presumably they are the correct size for however they are to be transported up the trek. The “rules” said that we could pack up to 20kg for the international flights, but the Kathmandu to Lukla flight had a weight limit of 12kg. It wasn't clear if this included the weight of the rucksacks, but we assumed not. However, once we'd got everything stuffed into our luggage, we weighed in at just 13.2kg (mine) and 13.6kg (Jes's).

We'd checked with Orange about using our phones in Nepal and they said that we couldn't (there is no roaming agreement), so we decided to leave them at home and take our old simple one with us. However, that didn't prevent us from needing a spaghetti of leads and chargers for cameras, shaver, iPods, video etc. So cameras, shaver, iPods and video fully charged, in they went!

All goodbyes said, last minute instructions given to the boys, wodes of £20 notes totalling £1200 distributed throughout our hand luggage (you can only buy Nepali money inside Nepal) and we're ready for off.

Leaving home bought on the strangest feeling. The tragic deaths of trekkers in an avalanche in the Everest area in September, then the death of trekkers taking the Kathmandu to Lukla flight had made the holiday seem somewhat more extreme than we'd previously felt and I was aware that I was feeling a very real apprehension of what could actually happen, but equally that there was no reason for anything life-threatening to occur. This was a holiday – right? And holidays are fine – right?



### **Monday 15 October 2012 and Tuesday 16 October**


Its early evening and we've left the car in the Purple Parking multi storey, taken the bus along the neverending perimeter road and we're now in the departure area of Heathrow Terminal 4 waiting to board the first part of the journey; London to Delhi. Airport terminals are still quite new to me (having only flown for the first time when I was 50 and then only when we were going somewhere beyond the possibilities of the campervan!). They always seem to be a place of anonymous bustle and purposefulness, yet the airy spaciousness of the shopping malls subdues everything to a quiet hum with the “ding ding ding dong” being the only clear sound that breaks the hush.

Many hours and a flight later, my watch says 5 minutes to 8, but as we sit on the plane at Delhi ready to take off for Kathmandu, I know that it is around 12.30pm here.

A new watch that didn't need constant charging (as does my Garmin GPS running watch) seemed like a good purchase prior to the holiday, but maybe memorising the instructions for changing it would have made it an even better idea. I think I shall become expert at subtracting (or adding...?) 4 ¾ hours from its display to get local Nepali time.... Or maybe I'll just give up on knowing! Maybe it won't even matter!

The flight to Delhi passed a lot quicker than I had anticipated – Jes had his window seat (well done Exodus for getting that booked for us) so he was sorted for the entire time. I had a middle seat with a woman on the other side of me who turned out to be one of our group – Alison – one of the online departure lounge friends.

Food on the flight arrived promptly with spicy nuts as an aperitif followed by a choice of “meat or vegetarian”. What wasn't specified was that the veggie option was a lovely spicy curry with rice and chapati, whereas the meat option was a chicken breast covered in a bland tomato sauce accompanied by a portion of macaroni cheese. However, the cardamom flavoured dessert made up for any shortcomings.



At midnight (London time) Jes was told to shut the blind on his window (the only one left open on the plane and preventing anyone from believing the pretence that it was night time!), the cabin lights were dimmed and we were all expected to go to sleep.

“If there’s a doctor on board please make yourself known to the cabin crew” wasn’t part of a dream.... But no one seemed to respond and there was no apparent movement by the crew to address any problem. Was it just a matter of interest on their part or was there a crisis... we’ll never know!

At 3.00am UK time, the cabin lights were re-lit and on opening the blind and consulting the map on the screen, we saw the sun rising over the mountainous wastes of Afghanistan. The view of the mountain ranges of the unknown, inhospitable terrain with the morning sun shining on their golden tips, was spectacular. Sparse roads linked small settlements along the valleys and, until we were flying over Pakistan, civilisation seemed a long way away.

Breakfast was “continental” and served at 4.00am London time (goodness knows what it is Pakistani time!) much to the disgust of the man behind me who “always has meat for breakfast”.

Time sped after this and we were soon circling Delhi, looking down on a concrete jungle of apartment blocks and offices interspersed with beautiful ornate temples. A mist gave the city a soft focus and prevented us from seeing anything of the city from the airport buildings.

It took a while to get through customs and security at Delhi, but we obediently filled in our home details on the luggage tags provided and attached these to each of our bags. These seemed to prove that we were who we wrote we were and gave the Indian guards some element of confidence in our security. No one was allowed through without tags on every bag! We wondered whether these were some sort of security code or whether the X-ray machines weren’t working so the tags were the next best idea...?

Delhi international Airport (Indira Gandhi Airport) differed little from Heathrow, with many of the same retail outlets; WH Smith in particular has two branches! However, a few more colourful stalls and shops gave proof that we really were in India and handing over a £20 note for a coffee and receiving India Rupees in change confirmed that this really was a different country!

Croissant and coffee devoured, we whiled away time looking at Indian souvenirs (to be purchased on the return journey if still required) and wetting our appetite for a future visit.

A very long walk (there’s only one terminal sporting 15 boarding gates spread along the length of the building) aided by travellers, took us to the furthest departure gate and to yet another security check and frisk and onto the next stage of our journey.

Nepal!! WOW!!

During the flight from Delhi, we had our first sight of the majestic white peaks of the Himalayas though the window on the other side of the aisle from where we were sitting. I’m surprised the plane didn’t keel sideways as passengers craned their necks or stood up and blatantly leant over the passengers on that side to get a better view. What absolute perfection! And how big are they!!

However, just a few minutes later and we were de-celerating like mad on the runway of Kathmandu International Airport. Once out of the plane we walked through passages lined with “tourist” posters advertising Nepal and heading towards the arrivals hall. It must have been a premonition that the one poster that caught my eye was “Beeping the car horn is a form of creativity in Nepal”!

We’d completed our immigration forms on the plane. Jes had been given an indian one as the crew member obviously thought that his asian appearance made him appear far too much at home to need an English immigration form. We

were aware from our trip notes that we would have to queue for an entry visa, but what we weren't prepared for was the length of time this would take or quite how inexplicable were the stages. However, by now we'd identified others in our Exodus trekking group and so the queuing – and subsequent re-queuing in the correct queue – passed with pleasant "getting to know each other" chatter.

Who knows why there were queues labelled "foreign visitors without a visa" which appeared to be exactly what we were, yet there was a queue further along for "payment collection for foreign visitors without a visa". We were put right by another tourist who had previously played this game, so we changed queues and started again.

Who knows why it took three men to pass the passport and visa application along a shared single wooden school-type desk and to give it back at the end. Each one seemed to have charge of one ink stamp, although a simple re-distribution of jobs could have had each in charge of one desk and 3 stamps, thereby getting 3 times as many applications processed in the same time..... systems!!! However, we complied with all instructions and happily left the arrivals hall with a 30 day visa and \$3 as change for a £20 note and set off together to find baggage claim Number 2 where we'd been informed nearly an hour before, that our luggage would be waiting .

Seems simple? So what do you do when you arrive at Baggage Claim Number 2 only to find it empty of all luggage and no one there? Jes and Stuart (one of our group) went off in different directions to see if they could find the Exodus rep who presumably would be able to help, but to no avail. Suddenly a man in a fez appeared and told us to go and find our bags "on the floor by Baggage Claim Number 3". Again without question we did as instructed and found a pile of Exodus bags *and* the Exodus rep!

Our rep hustled us past locals at the customs point ( we would get used to this queue jumping over the coming weeks) and out along a corridor to the Arrivals meeting point. A glass screen formed the wall at the far end of this corridor and appeared to be covered by the faces of a mass of people straining to get the first sighting of the person they were meeting. Just before the wall we took a sharp left and exited the airport to be met by a wall of noise; hundreds of banner waving men in clothes ranging from full grey suits to the fez and traditional loose tunics and trousers, each bearing the name of a hotel, a travel operator or a surname of some traveller. Taxis, minibuses and private cars beeping their horns and moving around apparently randomly – obviously they were literally being creative! Dust and bright sunshine gave a gauze-like haze to the aspect, but the shouts of drivers at motorbikes and pedestrians (seemingly ignored) prevented any real dream quality.

With many good humoured smiles and gestures, the nine of us were loaded into a minibus with our green Exodus bags thrown (literally) on a roof rack top. In spite of the lack of ties and the bumpy potted roads, it seemed surprising that none fell off.

During the journey, our guide and leader Pasang, introduced himself to us and we set off towards our city centre hotel – "it could take 15 minutes or an hour depending on the traffic" he said. Over the coming days, we were to learn the accuracy of this prediction.

We'd arrived in Kathmandu during one of the biggest festival periods of the Buddhist year and so it was difficult to know whether the noise and crowds were normal. However, it was obvious that the dust and pot-holed roads certainly are! Dust masks were common apparel as cars and motorbikes slewed across non-made-up roads weaving around massive pot holes and kicking up dust and grit. The inhabitants of Kathmandu certainly appeared to get the most out of their transport – we saw old ladies sat side-saddle on scooters holding tightly to their driver; taxis full to overflowing with passengers bouncing along the side seats – heads hitting the roof of the taxi; a woman pillion passenger with a babe in her arms, whilst her driver appeared to make no allowances as he swerved around the impossibly crowded roads. Pedestrians and animals roved the roads weaving in and out of the traffic with little regard for personal safety.

Houses appeared ramshackle in the extreme, with many appearing lucky to still be standing. Wooden struts appeared to be holding them up both externally and within the open rooms! There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the suburban layout with houses leaning against each other, toppling down to shop fronts opening onto the dusty streets. Electric or phone cables in their hundreds line the roads dangling well below head level over the road edges (there were no pavements) and tangling impossibly as they met together at the regular tall wooden poles. How anyone could trace a fault beggars belief!



Colourful bunting crossed the roads forming a criss-crossed ceiling against the bright blue sky. This was probably part of the festival but added an amazing view as our introduction to the city.

“Wigan and Leigh College” was an unexpected banner outside one of the numerous “educational establishments” and seeming to bear little relationship to its English cousin!

And so finally we turned from a dusty unmadeup road up a steep tarmac drive to the front of the Royal Singi Hotel. New! Calm! Clean looking! Well-ordered and smelling of incense! We dropped down from our minibus and walked into the cool interior sinking into leather settees as a group and looked around at each other – our companions for the next 3 weeks. Our shared experiences at Arrivals had removed much of any initial politeness and as we took our “welcome drinks” we were beginning to feel comfortable in each other’s company.

Pasang took control (a sign of things to come!) and led us through registration and some early briefing questions and we soon dispersed to our rooms arranging to meet later for a first night meal together.



What a lovely first evening! We met at 6.30pm and Pasang led us along the dark (no street lights?) dusty streets with motorbikes whizzing past incessantly, to an establishment providing “Nepalese culture”. We were led up 4 flights of stairs and having taken off our shoes at the top of the first, filed into a large room laid with cushions and low wooden tables, lit by candles and hung with rich wall hangings.

Once drinks were sorted, we were provided with bowls of popcorn – a common appetizer and *very* more-ish followed by a selection of starters; dumplings (momos) stuffed with spicy lamb, roast wild boar, crispy rice, stewed mutton, 2 potato chips each(!) and some very hard boiled lentils – each presented in small dishes in tapas style.

A group of 6 young women then entertained the room with Nepalese dancing; colourful and rhythmic. Super-quick changes provided visual differences between dances and they glided around the tables with a variety of accompaniments – sticks, drums, water vessels. It was a very slick and professional performance, the culmination being the audience participating! None of the women in our group volunteered to join in, but Jes and Justin got up and did their best to emulate the women and earned a well-deserved round of applause.

Once the entertainment had finished, we were led downstairs to a room that was cell-like in its minimalism and in complete contrast to the room we had just left. White painted brick walls with arches separated it from other similar rooms. A large bare wooden table sat in the centre and allowed all 10 of us to join together for the main course of Dhal-Bhat (rice and lentils).

It was just as it said – rice and lentils – but accompanied by a selection of spiced vegetables, spinach and meats. Served on an individual metal tray, the rice was placed in the centre and the other accompaniments were arrayed around the outside, with the lentil dhal served in a separate metal bowl. Every part of it was delicious and with a lively conversation of a group of diverse but passionately knowledgeable people, the evening was a joy.

But how tired we were! Almost no sleep for 2 days made it impossible to do anything but get to bed as soon as we returned to the hotel hoping to wake at a sensible time tomorrow – an ideal only spoiled by having to get up after half an hour to turn off the noisy air-conditioning, but then to fall into a dreamless sleep.



### **Wednesday 17 October 2012**

In spite of worries about oversleeping and missing some of our “free day” in Kathmandu, a car horn beep at just before 7am had me jumping out of bed to look at the sun already shining brightly over the distant hills. After another brown water shower we went down to breakfast and filled up with everything on offer; croissant shaped bread rolls with red or orange jam, mini Danish pastries, small pancakes with syrup and fruit (me) and a full English breakfast, plus much that is



Asian or Nepalese— curried veg and little nan breads with veg bhajis as well as the pastries, pancakes and breads for Jes washed down with cup after cup of strong black coffee.

A quick trip to a shop up the road gave us our first taste of shopping and resulted in the purchase of our first bottle of mineral water for 35Rs (about 25p). The guide books had said to avoid buying bottled water as the disposal of the bottles were causing major environmental problems, but Pasang assured us that the recycling of plastic bottles had been sorted and we would be able to purchase mineral water throughout the trip – so much for the 2 packets of water purifying tablets!

Soon it was time for the trip briefing. This was held in the hotel's restaurant with three tables pushed together conference style and now accommodating two more in our group – they had caught different flights and had problems getting from the airport to the hotel so had arrived too late last night to join us. The group now consists of thirteen people:

- Us (Sue and Jes); prematurely retired and in late 50's.
- Alison – carer for a very poorly husband. Lives in Cornwall. Same age as me.
- Barbara – works in home for abused children in Salisbury. Seemed very well off. Late 20's and very used to being the centre of attention.
- Stuart and Jackie – live in Maidstone. Own an estate agency. Stuart has one arm amputated just below the elbow and is very willing to give “stumpy hugs”. Jackie is 50 on the day we go to base camp sharing the same birthday as Jes
- Alan – investment banker specialising in property – soon named “Mr Grumpy” by all – and accepted by him! Lives in Scotland and has been engaged for 15 years!!!
- Juliette – came “with” Alan but not “with” him? We never found out exactly how they came to be together and discovered that she's getting married in January to someone who met her at Heathrow and isn't Alan.
- Dierdre – Doctor probably in late 50's, from Winchester hospital specialising in bones...?
- Justin – 32 year old nurse in a Brighton hospital but came from Kettering. Girlfriend Lucy.
- Tony – owner of a building company and volunteer leader of a Spinning Class. Mid to late 40's with a broken nose resulting from when he “didn't duck quickly enough too many times”
- Marc – 30-ish manager of the leisure centre where Tony does his classes and co-cyclist with Tony.
- Anne – 50-ish, International Event Organiser from Ireland -a formidable woman!

Admin – insurance documents, medical permissions signed – were sorted first, with photos for trekking permits and visas submitted with much laughter. Signing to agree to a helicopter rescue should this be deemed as required was another cold reality hit that this is a REAL trek that we're embarking on.

We were then given our map! One of those choky moments – I've been given a map that will get me to Everest Base Camp and which includes paths from there that DO go to the top of the world (dotted to indicate that they are “difficult”!). I've always loved looking at maps and can spend many an hour imagining taking the pathways and seeing the 2D views in 3D, but this map surpassed anything I've ever had before. No one else seemed to be as emotional as I was feeling – but maybe they were all holding it in until we get to know each other better!

Pasang went through everything about the trek – where we will be each day, the altitude, the places we'll see, what we need to carry, what we can expect from the accommodation etc. etc. I made copious notes for some unknown reason – I'm sure he said nothing we won't have repeated or don't already know. A warning of an early start tomorrow with an morning flight to Lukla, was welcome news. We're all a bit edgy about it and I think the sooner in the day we get it over with, the better we will all feel.

Today was “free in Kathmandu” and Jes and I decided we didn't really want to join the organised tour of the city, but set off to explore by ourselves, armed with a city map. The route appeared simple. The reality was made far more difficult by the extreme traffic, noise and broken edges of all roads. Crossing an incessant flow of motorbikes and cars was a real challenge and demanded a “go for it” approach. I'm sure none of the drivers would deliberately knock anyone down or drive into anyone, but this was not the time to test the theory!





The streets of the old town were very narrow and ramshackle wooden buildings, occasionally shored up by grout-less red brick walls or wooden struts, bordered directly onto the broken edges. Cables by the hundred hung in spaghetti like loops just around head height with bunting flapping across higher levels. Mangy dogs roamed around with no apparent ownership or laid sleepily in the dust to sleep as the mood took them. Shop keepers called their wares to passers by, and with our obvious western appearance and tourist clothes we were a frequent target for their efforts. It was difficult to appreciate the displays of the shops without attracting the attention of the seller and raising their hopes of a sale.

We bartered for the occasional item, playing the ultimate “walk away” game to acquire the sale at our terms; managing to get a Yak wool pashima at an excellent price. It was all done with good will and humour and both parties appeared happy with the outcome.

Incense burned everywhere giving a musky overtone to the dusty streets and providing a heady aroma against the more noxious smells emanating from unknown origins. Small shrines on the edge of the streets and at corners were interspersed between shops with incense sticks poking out from and candles burning smokily behind the metal grills. Larger temple entrances opened onto the streets with glimpses of green courtyards behind their ornate gates.

On reaching Durbar Square area, the streets widened which didn't help the congestion as it simply seemed to provide more space for motorbikes and cars. Interconnected squares were bordered by temples and palaces each one ornate and decorated with red and orange squirls with white walls reflecting the bright sunshine.

“Fake Buddhist monks” walked in pairs around the area, dressed in similar bright orange robes to the real monks, yet more elaborate and further decorated with garlands of marigolds. They touted themselves for photographs with tourists and attempting to place a bright marigold flower or a red “spot” on the forehead of a tourist in exchange for a monetary return.

Tourists are required to pay to get into the Durbar Square area but local residents get free entry so that they can make use of their temples for their initial purpose of religious observance. Army checkpoints at each of the entry points prevent anyone attempting to enter for free.

Once through the checkpoint, we stood in the first open area and spent some time taking in the activity around us; a group of women sat in the shade of a tree singing prayers; a “holy cow” was being fed scraps as it lay tethered in front of a temple; a small goat waited patiently in the sun, unaware of its imminent end in a sacrificial ceremony; Nepalese people touted their wares – competing with the horns of the bikes and cars. Ability to be a guide were, on the most part, offered and rejected with good humour, as were the offers of necklaces, bangles and musical instruments. I must say that I would have been far more inclined to purchase a wooden flute had the seller not been playing it himself!

The home of the “living goddess” was interesting. The palace was a dark wooden three floored structure built around a courtyard into which tourists were herded with repeated instructions to put cameras away as no one must photograph the living goddess (although purchasing a postcard was obviously deemed appropriate!). The girl chosen for the role is selected as being a 3 or 4 year old who shows bravery when put into frightening situations. Once chosen, she then lives in this palace with her family until puberty when she becomes “a normal mortal” and is replaced by the next goddess. She makes appearances at intervals throughout the day at a high window once her family have checked that there are no visible cameras. We waited a short while, then a girl appeared at the window and looked down on the sea of upturned tourists' faces with no expression on her over made-up perfect face. As she is about 6, she can expect to last about another 7 or 8 years. It is said that husbands of previous “living goddesses” have had a low life expectancy – is this due to the high-maintenance nature of their wife or some other deeper reason? Whatever, it seems a strange custom that bodes well for no one.

A climb up the steep steps on the outside of a temple provided a high level viewing platform from which we could take a rest from the frenetic street life and look down on the square below. We spent some time watching the world go by with a game of chess going on in one corner of the square and an old man making flowered garlands directly below us. However, feeling that lunch was overdue, we returned to street level and walked from Durbar Square up the narrow streets of the Thamel finding a quiet green courtyard restaurant in which we enjoyed a Dhal Bhat and cold drink – and a much needed loo break!



One of the tasks Pasang has set for everyone for today was to change up our trekking money and had recommended £450 each for the trek. Giving over £900 to a man in a booth was a little scary! Say he had denied we'd given it to him! Say he refused to give us anything back! But, no worries, we received our Nepalese money back – thousand and thousand of rupees – in fact we got 119750Rs in small denominations (as instructed by Pasang) sufficient to fill a small carrier bag! New notes were still stapled as on leaving the bank, but older notes were often stained and worn to an almost fabric type consistency - and gave off an unpleasant greasy smell!

After the bustle of the morning, we sought the peace and tranquillity of the Garden of Dreams – and Edwardian garden built behind high walls in the 1920's and recently restored. It provided a beautiful area of trees, flowers, water features interspersed with grass and was busy with people – tourists and citizens of Kathmandu – laying in the sun on the mats provided or sitting on the plentiful stone benches watching the gardeners (women) busy hosing the plants.


Four bamboo trees were tied into a pyramid structure with a rope swing suspended below. We were told by a young Nepalese lad that if you swung the swing high, your worries would fly away – it seemed worth a try and we both took a turn in the tight seat.

Another battle along and across the busy roads as the citizens of Kathmandu sought their homes at the end of the day, took us back to the hotel to get our bags packed, the items we're leaving at the hotel identified and packed in a spare bag bought along for this purpose. Another brown water shower removed the dust from hair and skin and prepared us for the evening.

We discovered that the reason why the roads are SO bad in Kathmandu is that the council are attempting to widen the roads by knocking down the front of the houses on both sides and re building them further back! The question has to be, why do it all at one time? Why not do a street at a time?

We went to Kilroys Restaurant and spent another enjoyable evening sharing our initial impressions of Nepal along with stories of our days experiences. We all seem to be getting on well together with many common interests as well as similar apprehensions and concerns about the coming weeks.

So, off to bed to sleep. This is so exciting I can't believe it's happening. I can't wait for tomorrow!




### Thursday 18 October 2012

The promised 6:00am call came at 5:45am and an excited and quicker than usual get-up saw us down in reception waiting for the restaurant to open at 6:30am. We all hurried through breakfast and at 7:00am the bus pulled up outside and we piled in, rucksacks perched on our laps and our big bags piled in the back seats. It took just 15 minutes to drive to the airport with minimal traffic on the roads – not none, just less than at other times – and few pedestrians restricting the flow. As the sun rose over the chilly morning, shop keepers were setting up their stalls whilst feral dogs sniffed around to scavenge anything edible thrown out.

This time we went to the domestic flight building which was much older and less formal than the international terminal, but did appear even more crowded if that was possible!

Pasang exerted his authority and got us through into the waiting area, passing the queues of other passengers patiently waiting to enter. He ushered us to a clear area at the edge of the hall and asked that we stay together whilst he sorted everything for us, warning us that we could experience quite a wait. Although we were booked on the 3<sup>rd</sup> flight to Lukla, the flights have to fit in between the international flight schedules and also rely on weather conditions in the mountains.

In fact, it didn't seem long before we were instructed to go through security – with quite a cursory frisk this time – and into the Departure Lounge. Nerves were beginning to show in most of the group – I know mine were very obvious to me and I found it impossible to sit still or even do anything as normal as buy a cup of coffee. Through the windows that





lined one wall of the large hall, we could see the tiny planes similar to the one that we would be flying in and the reality of the risk of flights in these planes in this area was hitting home. On tenterhooks for more than an hour, we stood chatting to each other, taking a few photos (only later noticing the “no photos” sign) and passing the time the best we could. There were no electronic displays so we were at the mercy of Pasang to tell us when it was our turn, and soon enough, he was ushering us through another security frisk and out onto the tarmac and piling onto the Yeti Airways bus.

We bumped our way across the airport to the far side where our plane – a twin engine Dormier 228(!) – was being unloaded. We were told to wait in the bus whilst we wait for our plane to have clearance from Kathmandu’s air traffic control, to use the single runway. By now the sun was hot and the bus felt somewhat uncomfortable – or was that just nerves? Outside the previous passengers disembarked, fully dressed for cold weather with hairy facial growth giving us a pre warning of what we might look like in 2 weeks time! We watched as our bags were stowed under the front of the plane's cockpit and the airport workers then sat in the shade under the plane awaiting the next stage. The plane was then fuelled and finally we were called to leave the bus and climb the small gangway up into the plane, being greeted by the single air-hostess.

Seats were in singles lining each side of a narrow central aisle – window seats for all then – with just sufficient for the 14 of us and we buckled ourselves in, rucksacks between our knees and accepted the boiled sweet and cotton wool offered by the air hostess. The pilot and co-pilot sat in the cockpit section open onto the main cabin, so we could see and hear everything – not necessarily helpful or comforting!

The little plane taxi-ed along the periphery roads and finally stood at the end of the main runway ready for “pull back”(a technical term I believe refers to the pilot pulling a lever positioned in the ceiling on take-off).

The noise at take-off was tremendous and verified the need for ear plugs / cotton wool! With a final push -or pull back - we left the ground and wobbling from side to side we crept ever upwards towards the distant misty Himalayas foothills.

Initially we looked down on rivers, roads and houses scattered across the Nepalese plain, but as we flew further from Kathmandu, Z-bend road tracks gave way to mountain paths and scrub land. Settlements, populated with blue roofed houses, appeared to have few communication routes save the pathways, although from 5000m it was difficult to see whether these were passable by motorised vehicles.

Suddenly on the north side of the plane, we caught sight of the towering peaks of the snow capped mountains peeking above the clouds and these kept us enthralled and our minds away from the lurching bumpiness of the flight. Finally we flew over a tree covered ridge – at a lower level than the footpaths leading upwards – and in the distance saw Lukla perched on the mountainside to the right of us. As we neared it, the tiny airport became visible and within minutes the pilot had banked the plane and was lining us up with what seemed an impossibly short steep runway. Before we had time to panic, we were at ground level and decelerating madly before turning sharp right into the airport’s loading area with everyone on board cheering the pilot and applauding his undoubtable skills!

It was breathtaking and certainly more scary than anything I’ve ever done in my life, but we had arrived safely and the relief of all was palpable. It may only have been the same as an Alton Tower ride, but this was not covered by UK Health and Safety laws and was not part of a film script! Many texts flew into the ether from the group, reassuring our loved ones that we were fine. We tried to appear brave, but there were a number of white faces and damp eyes – I feel that we all faced our own mortality today and have come through the stronger for it!

So up into Lukla village – bustling with trekkers, tour guides, porters, Yaks and children. It was such a sensory overload and just what we needed to move our thoughts away from our flight. Buddhist prayer flags buffeted in the strong winds with their colours vibrant against the blue sky. From the top; Blue represents the sky; White represents the Buddhist overarching philosophy of peace; Red represents fire; Green represents the earth and yellow the lotus flower.

We stopped at a lodge just off the main path through Lukla and had our morning hot drink break which gave us time to get our thoughts together and return to normality – and to watch our bags being loaded onto our yaks. We were informed that one bag hadn’t made the journey from Kathmandu to Lukla and all went out to identify whose it was.... Guess what? Yes, it was mine! However, I was assured it would follow shortly and would be with me by the end of the



day. So what if I had to stay in the same clothes for 2 weeks – at least I was here! (What an over-reaction! The bag was waiting for me at our first night's lodge!).

Whilst having coffee, Pasang introduced us to our "team"; the assistant guide Dhanni – a middle aged man with a lovely warm smile in a brown lined face and someone who we would become very fond of; our first Sherpa, Pemba – a 27 year old Nepalese woman who has been a guide in the Himalayas for 4 years and who will be at the front of the group when we are walking. At just about the same height as me, she looks very slight in her white trainers, but we came to find that looks are deceitful and she is as tough as it gets; Rushan, the other Sherpa – a 25 year old recently married, very shy young man, but what a dancer he turned out to be; our yak-man – a tiny thin man of undistinguishable age with a shy grin – again turning out to be an epic dancer!

Today's walk was described as "easy and flat" Lukla is at 2800m, Phekeng was at 2600m and our route meandered along the side of the Milky River, undulating steeply at times – but with the small change in overall altitude considered to be "flat". Our day turned out to be a three hour trek over undulating paths to Phenkeng, split into two by a lunch break at one of the numerous lodges or tea-houses along the track and our first look at the menu choices that would dominate every meal for the coming weeks!

Lunch was delicious and as we sat eating Tibetan bread and curry, the clouds cleared to expose a view of an impossibly high snow-capped mountain – awesome! However, the clouds re-gathered and as the temperature fell, we were grateful to be back on the trek and warming up as we faced another uphill section.

This was certainly a day to face fears! The track regularly crosses the river and there were two metal suspension bridges to be navigated in this first day's walk. I think that the very first one was the worst of all of the bridges throughout the entire trek – not helped by the knowledge that we would cross it again on our return journey!

Each bridge was similar in design; metal slats formed the bridge floor with metal fencing lining the sides to about 3ft. Strong metal ropes pin the bridge ties into to rocky mountain sides and with the span anywhere up to about 70m and at a height of up to 50m above the river bed, the strong winds caused the bridges to sway; quivering and rolling as people passed each other. The width of the bridge was slightly too wide to be able to hold the sides and with a sizeable gap between the wire sides and the floor, initial crossings were breath holding affairs.

However, I had survived the Lukla flight and these were not going to defeat me and as I knew there were many more of these, it would be silly to allow myself to get scared. I soon developed a method of crossing... Looking straight ahead didn't help as you *had* to know where your feet were; Looking down was impossibly frightening; however, focusing on the knees of the person in front and walking in step with them allowed me to cross whilst maintaining my dignity(!) There were a couple of us in the group who had to cope with fears of these bridges and the others were brilliant in helping us.... "Its only a bridge.... You're nearly halfway there....just a little bit to go....". Initially slow, I soon found myself crossing them at a reasonable pace – though I never got over taking a sharp intake of breath as I had to pass a loaded porter coming the other way and requiring me to step close to the edge.

Many animals passed us as we wound our way along the valley. Cow-like Yaks carrying ridiculously heavy loads, mules loaded with containers and supplies and the occasional horse ridden casually by Nepalese young men. The yak's load ratio was nothing compared to that carried by porters! Hanging from a sling round their forehead was a wicker basket loaded with bags and supplies easily in excess of their own bodyweight. Strong wooden t-shaped poles allowed them to stop regularly and placed under the basket, took the weight off their heads. Children looking as young as 6 or 7 carried their own smaller baskets filled with cones or kindling – it appeared that it was never too early to train!

We arrived at the Sherpa Farmhouse at Phekeng at about 4:00pm and were given a welcome drink of tea. As would be the custom all along the trek, dinner had to be ordered by 5:00pm and we pushed Pasang's patience to the limit as he described the dishes over and again to us only to have forgotten what we had ordered by the time it arrived 2 hour later.

This provided an example of how Pasang led the group as he quickly shared his opinion that it was unacceptable to respond impolitely to the sherpas who waited on us, and we soon became well-trained in remembering our order and



listening for its announced arrival. In fact within a few days we were able to recall not only our own order, but that of everyone else in the group - an achievement made easier by the predictable menus.

Rooms were spartan (and these first ones were by no means the barest we encountered!) - 2 beds... and that's it! Shared loos and cold water wash basins available on each floor finished the accommodation facilities. Hot showers coming in at about £2 were declined by the majority of the group – we could have one at the next place... possibly! But electrics charged at about £1.50 an hour taken up by more for the plethora of 21st century electrical we needed to survive!

So bags unpacked, sleeping bags opened on the hard wooden beds and dressed in warm clothes for the evening, we look out the window at the stunning scenery and listen to the roaring river at the bottom of the valley. The trek has begun!



### Friday 19 October 2012

This is Nepal. We are high up in the Himalayas (well at 2400m anyway) in a lodge with other trekkers. Everyone has had a hard day and must be tired, so it'll be an early night for everyone then?

No! the karaoke / disco started at about 8:30pm and the noise went on well into the night (or at least the night we were trying to have). However, it seemed that it did actually stop on the right side of midnight and although it was cold outside the sleeping bags, we did have a good first night's sleep.

Pasang told us that the other Exodus group at the lodge were on their last night returning from their trek to Base Camp and predicted that we would be the same on our last night as we celebrate our success. This seems such an age into the future that we were all a bit sceptical, but forgave the group!

Our morning call and cup of black tea came at 6:30am and this was followed half an hour later by a welcome hot porridge breakfast. It was still cold in the valley as the sun was only touching the tips of the mountains and wouldn't reach the lower slopes and river for a while. This demanded that we wrapped up well and I was beginning to regret the decision to leave my fleece jacket at home. As for coping with cold fingers on cold metal walking sticks... I was already thinking that I would need to sort something!

So we set off on our first full day's trek. Drove of Yaks and mules were already on the track – the Yaks carrying trekkers luggage *up* the trail and the mules carrying empty fuel containers *down* the trail.

I had expected smells of animal poo, poor drainage and unusual food cooking, but I hadn't anticipated the evasive smell of kerosene to override everything!

We wound our way up through woods with the most amazingly high waterfalls plummeting down into the ice-green Milky River. In the distance was the snowy top of a mountain sharp against the pure blue sky. Although we all knew we'd see loads more mountains over the coming days, it was impossible not to take photo after photo. Prayer wheels and Buddhist prayer flag poles were common along the trail and tradition says that you must walk clockwise around these. As you pass, a push on the wheel causes it to ring a bell, adding to the mystical quality of the walk and proving particularly popular.

"It's only a bridge" – so said the braver trekkers – but for someone who believes they can fall between the slats in an open staircase, crossing the 5 suspension bridges culminating in the highest one of all, was a continuing challenge. As I've said before, they are too wide to reach the two side "rails" and even if you could, the prongs of the wire wrapped around the top made it uncomfortable and required you to look constantly at where your hands were going to avoid being speared! So the only option again was to go for it, hoping you could get across without anyone coming the other way. Yak trains had precedent, so weren't really problem. No one deliberately made it swing – the wind did a good enough job of that! Flags interspersed by cream satin prayer scarves whipping horizontally on each side by the wind made the higher crossings even more exhilarating as they lashed across your front and legs as you walked.



However, by the 5<sup>th</sup> – and highest – of the day's bridges, we had become much more confident and apart from the occasional frisson began to feel that this was one fear that I'd conquered on this trip.

The Exodus travel group try to support the development of the area through projects and at lunch time we were impressed by the sight of a massive steel drum shaped dish collecting the full sun and reflecting the rays towards the centre, at which position was a kettle heating up water. Although we were doubtful about its efficiency, by the time we were getting ready to leave, the kettle was too hot to touch.

The last part of the day's trek was a long 600m ascent from river level up to the plateau and the town of Namche Bazaar.

At an incredibly slow pace we climbed a rocky step at a time, taking numerous stops along the way and being told repeatedly to drink water. It may have been the slowest I've ever walked (at least since I was 18 months!) but by the time we reached the first houses of Namche Bazaar at 3440m, I felt brilliant! After all the horror stories of how hard it is to walk at altitude and the fears of whether we could manage it, we realised that if walking slow and drinking water was what it was going to take, then that's what we were going to do!

Namche Bazaar is a small town of low buildings spread around a high plateau and rising up the natural amphitheatre-like mountainside. Pretty much all of the roofs were blue corrugated iron – the occasional green one and even fewer red suggested that the blue is a fairly new change - with the walls painted mainly white. Narrow alleyways climbed between houses to link the terraces and once we reached the centre, the narrow horizontal pathways were lined with shops and lodges.

This is a main bustling commercial centre in the area and a constant stream of trekkers visit it both on the outwards and backward journey to the high peaks. Yaks and horses also traversed the paths – we even saw a Yak tethered outside a shop! Tables exhibiting wares added bright colour to the streets with North Face and Mammut clothing predominating the mass of trekking clothes hanging above eye level. Prices were low in spite of all of the goods being transported to the town via Yak – half the UK price roughly – and bartering was expected! An outdoor nerd's paradise!

Inside lodges and cafes signed photos of the revered Everest summiters adorned the walls, often accompanied by tee-shirts signed by various trekking groups.

Electricity is available in the town, but has a propensity to fail – resulting in Jes and I paying for a shower, only to have to take it in the pitch black! However, it was warm if a little sparse and we felt a lot cleaner for it! Interestingly, satellite and WiFi were available around the bars and cafes as were all the major phone signals! We joined some of the others in the group for a drink in a bar showing a Manchester united v Newcastle football match – huh!

Point of information for the day – cheap biro pens explode at altitude! I bought 2 such pens with me and each has deluged me with black slimy ink. The offer of a pen from the barman at our lodge for 100Rs (about 70p – which was quite extortionate in reality) was taken up – it was that or pencil!




### **Saturday 20 October 2012.**

I've seen Mount Everest!!! It is the most awesome sight in the world and was such an emotional experience.... But more later.

Being woken by a Yak train ringing their way up the mountain trail was somewhat unexpected, though I'm not sure why I hadn't thought it could happen. I was certainly aware that the yaks were already well into their day's work by the time we started. However, on looking out of the window to watch them pass, we could see that the day was dawning with another blue cloudless sky and the village waking to another lovely – if chilly start.

Altitude gives you vivid dreams! Really! I can't ever remember having such vivid ridiculous technicolour dreams – even if I'm not going to join the others in repeating them! I suppose its something to do with the lack of oxygen causing your



brain to stay more alert than usual.... Or something. It can't be a coincidence that the majority of the group are reporting the same thing!

As we left the town we were subdued by the news of the death of a Chinese trekker and the sight of the helicopter perched on the heli-pad at the edge of the mountain being loaded with his body, a crowd of people surrounding the area, was sobering. It was said in the town that he had died from a bad attack of altitude sickness, but no one knew for certain.

However, as we initially trudged up the steep climb past the tree line and looked down on Namche Bazaar snuggling in its amphitheatre, our spirits lightened and we started to enjoy the wonderful views around us. Far down below, at the edge of the town a crowd was gathering for the weekly market and we passed numerous locals heading downwards to join the throng.

As we got higher, our attention was taken by the increasing number of snow-capped peaks that were coming into view around us. Far ahead of us at the top of the first climb, hang gliders provided glorious shards of primary colours against the vivid blue sky. It has to be said that they were not very successful and none of the gliders managed to stay aloft for any length of time – how annoying to haul your kit up to 3500m only to have to repeat it a few minutes later!

As the ground levelled out, we set off along a path that contoured the mountain and suddenly, as we turned a corner, there she was – Sagamathar herself – or Mount Everest as we know her. Against a deep blue sky in a panoramic line were Nuptse, Everest, Lhotse and on the far right the matterhorn shaped Amadablam. Cries of delight and much clicking of photos followed after which Pasang took us through the names and features of each of the towering beauties in front of us.

Mount Everest has two summits – the “false” one known as the Hillary Step and the true summit at 8848m or 29028ft. From the direction we were looking it was easy to see how a climber could be fooled into thinking they had the top in sight when climbing the final ridge. It must be frustrating to get to the false summit with the knowledge that with the short climbing day (a climber must summit by 2:30pm or return!) massive amounts of effort and oxygen must still be expended to reach the true top of the world.

From our position, it was difficult to make out the valleys and gaps between the giants, but as we proceeded further along the path with our gazes constantly being pulled to the amazing vista, we soon became more familiar with the topology and they started to separate and take their positions on a more 3D landscape.

The Japanese owned Everest View Hotel is not only the highest hotel in the world but is probably the most scenic place in which to stop for a (very expensive) morning break. We were taken through the minimalist foyer and led out onto the north facing terrace where picnic style tables provided the most stunning view of the Himalayas at which to enjoy our drinks. As we were the only group there at the time, we spent much longer than usual over our break, taking photos after photo both of the mountains and individual and paired photos sitting perched on the stone wall with the mountains as background. It seemed impossible to leave such a viewpoint, but as we sat there, clouds started rolling up through the river valley towards the Khumbu valley and soon they began to hide sections of our view. Reluctantly we packed up and moved on.

Lunch was a couple of hours later at the village of Khunde; a settlement higher up in a wide valley edged by foothills and covered by scrub-like trees. The houses of the spread out village appeared well-to-do compared with others we had seen and Pasang explained that this was a result of the men of the village becoming Sherpas for Everest expeditions, earning thousands of dollars each trip plus a government grant and acquiring sufficient from accompanying a spring expedition to keep the rest of the family for the remainder of the year. These were the local heroes, although we were told that the women spit at the mountain for taking so many of their menfolk to their deaths.

A walk further up the valley took us to a hospital which usually hosts tours (and probably fund raising) for trekkers. However, this particular Saturday saw the building locked and empty – I wonder what happened to the patients? So after a short wait to see if anyone could be found, we gave up and started back down the valley.





The next stop was to see the yeti skull housed in a small monastery called Kumjung Gompa. The monastery was located next to a beautiful Buddhist temple and we went in as a group, in many ways quite apprehensive of what we would see. The temple was extremely colourful – reds and yellows predominated and statues of the many incarnations of Buddha of many sizes lined the front wall. Incense burned and with flickering candlelight, the atmosphere was one of total peace and calm. The side walls were covered by rows and rows of small drawers and our initial thought was that these held ashes of long dead monks. However our flights of fancy were short lived as Pasang informed us that each drawer held a prayer book or scroll – one for every occasion we were told.

The skull of the yeti was kept in a locked metal safe and it took an offering of a bundle of Rupees for the monk to unlock the doors for us to look in. Pasang had his head torch at the ready so that we could see the object within and although we thought we'd be forbidden to photograph it, the monk appeared happy that we had paid our dues so could do as we pleased! The skull never comes out of the safe, we were told, and the monks have constantly refused to have it DNA tested – all of which led us sceptic westerners to assume that we were in fact, looking at the skull of a monkey or possibly even a yak!

The walk to the end of the valley and our resting place for the night was eerily quiet as the clouds sunk close to the ground muffling our voices and causing yaks coming towards us out of the mist to take on strange apparitions. Pasang led the group along the narrow pathways, singing nepalese folk songs softly to himself and adding to the surrealism of the final mile. We left the valley through a tiny crack between high rocks and found ourselves back on the main mountain paths at the edge of the hamlet of Kyenjuma.

The Amadablam View Lodge is located at 3600m on the edge of the mountainside looking across at the giants of Amadablam and Lhotse. A “French Bakery” seemed to promise much, but closer inspection of the goods on offer persuaded us to resist and make do with the fare provided by the lodge.

The temperature dropped as the sun set causing the rooms to feel cold and with only a tiny low energy light, appeared gloomy. Additional duvets were provided to wrap around sleeping bags and with the promise of the view in the morning, we spent a convivial evening in the warmth of the communal area with its yak-poo burning stove.

A phone call home using the personal mobile of one of the lads of the lodge cost just 12Rs (which he absolutely refused to accept) and allowed us to feel happy about life at home thousands of miles away and the friendly banter within the group made for a pleasant evening.



### **Sunday 21 October 2012**

Waking again to Yak trains passing just before 6:00am, we cleared the condensation off our window and looked out to see the sun rising and tickling the tip of Amadablam. Possibly faster than sensible at this altitude, we jumped out of bed and threw on clothes, heading outside to join two Japanese tourists taking photos. It was bitterly cold and there was ice on the plastic tables and chairs. Our breath steamed in front of us as we panted in the thin air and we stamped our feet to keep warm as we watched the sun creep over the mountain tops.

Local people were already laying out their stalls of jewellery and woollen goods with the sweet smell of juniper incense wafting across the narrow terrace from a small fire set in the terrace wall. We spent a little time bartering for key rings to tie on rucksacks – Pasang having told us that we would be staying here on the way back so not to worry about buying anything too big. We watched our yaks being loaded with our bags by our Sherpas and were fascinated to see them tie the horns of two yaks together to prevent them from moving whilst the bags were pummelled into appropriate shapes to be tied in pairs onto the yaks' backs. I ceased to be surprised that my toothpaste mug had broken when I saw the treatment each bag had to have to ensure it was exactly right!

Breakfast over, we set off down the steep path through the woods to the river crossing. We all felt that the continental method of spanning valleys with bridges could have been adopted in Nepal to save us from having to navigate the massive ups and downs of the paths! The suspension bridge at the bottom was fairly easy to cross now – an unbelievable accomplishment in just 3 days! Shortly after we watched our yaks pass us as we were having our morning break in the sun.





The path from the river to the high plateau where we could see our destination of Tengboche, was busy with yak trains and porters and we soon caught up with a train of about 5 or 6 yaks. Their Sherpas were having problems with some luggage coming undone and caused a “traffic jam” as they untied the offending bags and resettled them on the yaks. This congestion resulted in us climbing hot on the heels of the yaks and being subject to an incredible amount of dust kicked up as they scrambled up the dusty rocky path. We quickly adopted the Nepalese custom of covering eyes with sunglasses, hair with hats or bandannas and mouths with scarves or snoods. However, after following in their dusty trail for some time, our paths diverged and we carried on up the steep path. The sun was very hot and soon caused sun burned noses and cheeks, but the slow pace we were led at allowed us all to finally reach the ridge and walk the final few hundred metres before turning through the prayer flag festooned arch into the village.

Tengboche perches at 3600m on a plateau which provides views to the south and the river valley towards Lukla and to the north and the heights of Everest and the other Himalayan giants. The monastery of Tengboche is the largest and most important building on the plateau and is surrounded by a number of lodges, each with a tiny shop. Wide green pastureland between buildings gave a spacious feel to the area and provided grazing land for yaks as well as camping area for porters who couldn't fit into the crowded lodges. In every direction mountains towered above us with – at a distance of 21 miles as the crow flies – Everest. Lines of prayer flags defined many of the paths out of the village and up into the mountains and with the gloriously colourful Buddhist statues seated at the entrance to the monastery, the whole place felt mystical with an aura of calm and serenity.

Lunch over, we had a short time spare which allowed me the pleasure of perching on a rock to paint the view of Everest and Amadablam. Dressed warmly in my fur lined hat and down coat, I had time to do a speedy and quite basic watercolour painting, but one that will probably become an all-time favourite, simply as a result of the joy of being where I was to paint it!

Our group were invited to the monastery for the afternoon service. We queued on the steps of the building in the freezing cold waiting for the start which was announced by two monks blowing some sort of conch horns from an upstairs window.

We were then led into the outer courtyard where we removed our shoes and following the monks, we paraded into the temple where we were ushered onto the carpeted side aisle area where we sat either propped against the wall or more uncomfortably crossed legged. Hats were not allowed, but luckily scarves and mittens were as it was extremely cold.

As with the temple we had visited yesterday, the inside was highly decorative with red and yellow scrolls and icons, silks and tapestries adorned the walls and hanged down pillars. Gigantic figures of Buddha towered at the altar end. Monks in red robes sat crossed legged along both sides of the central aisle, with two elder monks facing the main door, their backs to the altar. Juniper incense lay in a haze across the spacious room and dispersed the sun's rays that shone brightly through the art deco style chequered windows.

The service started with the monks chanting softly and ringing bells, apparently randomly. This quietened into a rhythmic murmuring interspersed by occasional loud drum beats and peeling bells. Although there didn't appear to be any similarity between the chanting, Pasang said later that they were all chanting the same scripts – synchronisation obviously was less important than we were used to.

The only word that could describe the heady trance-like ambiance of the room is 'spiritual' and in many ways it was disappointing not to be able to stay longer although we were told that the service would go on for another couple of hours, so maybe it was for the best as we were all beginning to feel extremely cold. However, I was pleased with the sketch I had made of one of the monks and feel that the relaxation that drawing affords me, actually added to the experience.

“Spend the days high, sleep low” was a mantra for altitude acclimatisation and after leaving the temple we congregated by the primitive village loo, made ourselves comfortable, then were led on a late afternoon walk up the eastern ridge from the village to a monument at 3980m. Mist had by this time obliterated the views and except from the occasional glimpse of peaks between breaks in the clouds at seemingly impossible heights, we saw little. We returned to the lodge on a steep path through the juniper bushes and settled in with warm drinks to order dinner.



Suddenly someone came in exclaiming “The sun’s setting over Everest!” and the room cleared instantly as we poured outside, cameras at the ready!

What a wonderful experience – the sky in the west was orange and blue behind the silhouette of Tengboche Monastery, with Lhotse, Nuptse, Everest and Amadablam bathed in pink and gold reflected rays to the east. As would be expected, the top of Everest was the last peak to lose its golden tip – the top of the world being the last object on earth to be touched by the setting sun!

Back in the lodge, we braved the freezing water to have a cold hair wash to get rid of the dust we had collected on the trail today. With damp cold heads, we hurried to join the others in the communal area where the dried Yak-poo-pancakes were being loaded into the central stove and provided a very welcomed warmth.

Tomorrow we’re going to climb to 4400m, but with Everest Base Camp still a vertical mile above us, we’re all getting edgy about the reality of the altitude and whether we will be able to cope and much of the evening’s conversation focused on the topic.

Diamox had been prescribed by many of our GPs before we left the UK although none of us had started on it. However, the advice we’ve been given by Pasang was to take preventative doses as this should allow us to cope better with the headaches and nausea that some of the group were already suffering from – and should allow us to sleep more easily. Although Jes and I had not intended to have Diamox unless it became really necessary, everyone in the group were persuaded by Pasang that this was the right thing to do and the only side effects we were likely to have were tingling fingers and toes and a propensity to wee more frequently.

So with much giggling about “doping”, the Diamox tub was passed round after dinner with each of taking a half tablet. Twice a day, after breakfast and dinner, was the prescribed dosage, to be repeated each day until we returned to 3000m.

## **Monday 22 October 2012**

After a good, but cold, night, Jes and I went out to watch the sun rise over Everest. It was absolutely freezing with ice on the grass and icicles hanging from the communal water tap in the centre of the village. Many of the Sherpas had slept in small tents and dressed in the ubiquitous down jackets and with woolly hats pulled over their ears, were getting on with their morning task of sorting out the luggage and yaks – they seemed impervious to the cold!

After breakfast and the Diamox dose, we set off northwards from the plateau and down to the valley before the sun had risen over the high valley walls, so it was very cold as we went down the steep wooded path. However, within half an hour or so, the sun had started warming up the area and shortly after, we stopped to divest ourselves of our warm coats and gloves and were soon pasting on the sun-screen!

The trek today took us down to the valley, then a gradual climb up the side of the mountain to Dingboche. We passed out of the woods and as we climbed higher, the trees were replaced by bushes and by the end of the day, by low scrubs. Everest filled the horizon ahead of us with its plume of snowy cloud blowing northwards from its very tip. Nuptse, with its traditional mountain-like profile and Amadablam, a beautiful double peak, both appeared higher and more outstanding than Everest, which appeared to crouch behind the multiple peaks of Lhotse, glowering at its beautiful neighbours.

During lunch break, binoculars picked out two climbers high up on Amadablam, but as Pasang entertained us with stories of the numerous fatalities both of Sherpas and tourist mountaineers, we all wished our unknown climbers well and hoped they would turn back in sufficient time for a safe return. Being this close to the highest mountains on earth made us far more understanding of the true dangers of mountaineering and more conscious of the real risks involved.

Dingboche is a village 4400m above sea level and located in a valley leading northwards to Island Peak; one of the easy-to-summit peaks. The village, spread over a large flat area with stone walls separating the low houses, was populated by trekkers staying in one of the 30 or so lodges. By the time we arrived, cloud had crept up the valley and had blotted



out the sun. The bitter wind blowing up the valley onto the Tibetan plateau located on the northern side of the Himalayas made it uncomfortably cold – and this was the middle of the day!

We were given a free afternoon – the first ‘rest’ that we’d had so far and Jes and I decided to walk up through the village to see what it had to offer. Dingboche had a couple of small shops, a “French bakery” and an internet “café” – we bought a pack of cards in the shop each displaying a view of Himalayan mountains with Everest being the Ace picture; bartered for a pair of down mittens (to no avail), then found the Himalayan Preservation Centre which although just closing, was kept open for us to look round.

The displays – mostly photographic – provided information about the various projects being undertaken in the area. Many concerned the over-use of the Juniper bush for heating and the effect this was having on the soil quality. We learned that since 2002, government aid had been used to provide the resources to enable the inhabitants to swap to kerosene for cooking and heating – so that’s what the kerosene containers are about!

It seemed appropriate to donate something to the curator who had stood patiently watching us read the information sheets, and on seeing a fleece beanie hat for sale, I purchased it without bartering and it soon became a staple favourite in my trekking wardrobe.

This is such a poor country in many ways yet with an abundance of the earth’s richnesses, I hope that something can be done to help support the people so that they don’t have to destroy their environment in order to survive. Nepal gives much to the tourist and I would hope that we find a way of giving back to them. Buying a hat and putting the change in the donation box may help a little, but there is so much more needed.

We had been warned about the cold at night and Pasang ordered that we wear hats to bed and not to take them off! The temperatures reach at least -10°C at night and letting the head get this cold can exacerbate altitude sickness. We did what we were told! It also saved the need to wash hair as it become an invisible entity!

Even at 5:00pm it was too cold to stay in an unheated room so we all returned to the communal area where the stove had just been lit, played cards and argued about football until dinner time at 7:00.

On the cushioned bench against one wall of the communal room, Buddhist monks sat chanting good wish prayers for the lodge. We were told that they come up from Tengboche at the invitation of the lodge owners, spend time blessing the lodge, then will move on in one, three or five days (it has to be an odd number – even numbers are unlucky!). It seemed strange to us that we were laughing and joking as other people in the same room were conducting a religious service, but no one seemed bothered. Just one of those things!

Diamox and bed at 8:30pm – this early bedtime is getting ridiculous, but we are all so tired!

## Toilets

I feel the need to devote a whole separate section to the toilets of Nepal as they provided the focus of so many of our conversations on the trek.

Toilets at their worst are a rectangular hole cut into a planked lined floor of an outdoor shed perched over what is effectively an open cess pit. No lights in the shed mean that you have to go in and, before you close the door, ascertain where you need to step, then close the door and cautiously back onto the planks to each side of the hole. Nothing to hold onto necessitates good exercise for the quad muscles, but is not conducive to a peaceful poo. Being dark has its advantages as it’s not possible to see what is down the hole and with it being open to the air, the smell is less disgusting than you would expect.

The next up the ranking is the squat type. A porcelain base is constructed to provide feet plates both sides of a sluice area with an open hole – leading somewhere, although not necessarily or even likely to be into a sewer. This style is the most common and found in all lodges with variations of size and design, the most spectacular being one where all

except the central sluice area was covered by astro-turf; easily washed down and slightly less slippery than porcelain but sodden with unspecified and noxious liquid!

Notices in the first lodge we visited informed us that their plumbing system could not cope with toilet paper and that it should be disposed of in the plastic bucket provided. This, we were told, was customary all along the trail and was quite a shock to us that took some adjusting to. The buckets appeared to be emptied regularly, but are not the most pleasant sight and it felt very strange to be placing more used paper on top of the pile. However, it didn't take too long to accept that this was just the way it was.

Flushing a toilet is also something we take for granted. Some toilets flushed, but more it was more common to find a large plastic barrel of clean water to the side of the toilet with a measuring jug or small plastic container floating in it to be used to pour down the toilet to flush it. Again this became an accepted process, but as the temperature fell, it was less comfortable to have to fish out the jug from the freezing cold water.

Top of the tree is the "western toilet" which tended to be slightly smaller versions of the ones we have in the UK. Again they varied in the style and type of seat – or not and the extent to which they flushed – or not. The "no toilet paper" rule still applied and occasionally when someone forgot, the toilets were often blocked and had to be cleared by the use of readily available rods before they could be used again.

Interestingly, most toilets have locks on the outside of the doors with some not even having a lock inside. Even more interesting are the glass windows often found in the doors – why would anyone feel that a clear glass window necessary on a toilet cubicle?

So as the Diamox kicks in and we are "urinating frequently" the availability and efficiency of the toilets are become an increasing and vital part of our day.



## Tuesday 23 October 2012

Today was scheduled as an acclimatisation day at Dingboche – described as a "rest day" in the trip notes, but in reality, anything but!


We woke to a bright, but bitterly cold morning with ice on the glass blocking any view from our window. I got up to wash and clean teeth only to find that the water in the washroom sinks was frozen, so had to manage with bottled water. Similarly the water in the flushing toilet cistern was frozen, but a water barrel was provided for what was obviously a frequent occurrence.

Although we were very high, the valley was wide and the sun reached the valley floor fairly early, so by the time we'd had a leisurely breakfast, the temperature was rising and ice defrosting and providing steady drips off the roof.

We'd been offered the services of one of our Yak men, as they had no particular job to do today, to wash our dirty clothes and earn a little extra money. They were not allowed to wash "smalls" on religious grounds, but anything else was permitted. We sorted out a few bits as we wanted to support him and were amused to see him washing the clothes in a large metal bowl and drying it by spreading the wet washing over the stone walls. The whole wash was completed, dried, folded and returned to us at lunchtime!

Our acclimatisation walk today was to 4800m along the path to the top of Nganka Tshang (5200m). Although we were told that we could go to the top, we were advised against it as Pasang reported that it can cause over tiredness the following day – after which I don't think anyone felt they dared to request it!

The path ascended steeply from the gate of our lodge and led initially to two Buddhist monuments that appeared to mark the edge of the village area. From these, we wound steeply up the rocky path passing several smaller monuments often joined by prayer flag garlands, whipping horizontally in the sharp wind.



Large eagles wheeling around the top of Nganka Tschang provided a good excuse for a photo stop as did the “famous” Japanese artist at work on an oil painting of the wonderful view.

Our climb finished at a small plateau at 4800m and we spent about 20 minutes sitting on the rocks admiring the view of the mountains surrounding us in every direction with farm buildings clinging to the sides on narrow plateaus connected by footpaths to the valley floor. The valley far below us had a toy-town aspect, exaggerated by the vivid blue roofs and rectangular stone walls around the fields.

Toilet facilities (hiding places!) are hard to find at this altitude and we spent some time in giggling queues making use of the few opportunities we discovered without falling over the steep edges!

The walk down was FAST! The steep slope was slippery with loose rocks and grit and several of us slipped and fell backwards – even with walking sticks! However, no harm was done and with our team going ahead of us, we were left to pick our way down to the lodge.

After ordering lunch we had an hour or so to spare which allowed time for a walk up the main path of the village to find a sheltered spot to sit and paint. We’d been told about the Himalayan wind that howls from the south and onto the Tibetan plateau and we discovered that it really is as harsh as they say! Masks over faces and covered heads and hands were necessities, which made painting a cold occupation and kept the pace going much faster than usual!

Lunch over, we had a “free” afternoon and after visiting the shop that had refused our offers for the down mittens yesterday, I succumbed to the full price as the low temperature and its effect on my ability to cope was beginning to worry me and the £10 they were asking was in fact such a small amount to provide that additional comfort.

We’d seen the “Cyber Café” during our previous walks through the village and decided that it would be a good idea to visit it for a coffee and spend a while on the computer to contact home. It was warm in the small building but there were no drinks available begging the question why it was called a Café! We spent 20 minutes or so queuing for our place – it was about 10°C warmer than outside so we weren’t bothered about the wait, although we did wonder what was taking everyone else so long.

A poster on the wall informed us that the cost was 20Rs per minute (about 15p) or 500Rs for half an hour and we were hopeful that we could do it in about 5 minutes, planning what we were going to say as we waited. However, once in place and struggling in the gloomy interior to read the screen with sunglasses on (and totally unable to read anything without them!) we discovered that the slowness of the connection exceeded even that of our home connection. No attachments were allowed and the lad in charge told us not to try to send emails to more than one person at a time! So the 5 minutes extended rapidly to 25 minutes as we “copied and pasted” into consecutive emails to everyone whose address was in my online address book. Somehow Tom ended up with 3 copies, but some others never received theirs! However, it kept us amused and enabled us to feel that we had at least attempted to communicate with family and friends – although they felt a million miles away from us.

As we strolled back down the path through the village, the afternoon clouds were pouring up from the lower valley causing the temperature to drop dramatically as the sun disappeared behind them.

Back at our lodge we braved the plumbing and had a surprisingly warm shower, washing away the grime and dust of the last few day’s trek, albeit in a small flow of water. At a cost of 400Rs each it may have felt a bit of an unnecessary expense, but we had been warned that there were no more showers for the next three nights and there is only so long one can go without washing properly! The worst part of the shower was getting out of the water, but once wrapped in the thin trekking towel with shoes keeping bare flesh away from the freezing cold concrete floor, a rapid trot back to our room to get covered with the 3 or 4 layers of clothes saw us glowing and clean again!

During dinner we heard that the Exodus group ahead of us had half the group turn back before reaching Base Camp! That was a scary thing to hear at this point and made our self-doubts surface again. However, Pasang was quite scathing about them saying that the leader shouldn’t have allowed the doubts to spread in the group and telling us that we were all capable of getting there.

Fingers crossed... off to Pheriche tomorrow, then just one more trek to get there!



## Wednesday 24 October 2012

We had an early start today; tea at 6:00am and off by 7:30am. In spite of the sun just tickling the valley floor as we started, there were icicles on the water troughs and streams and any grass still surviving at this altitude crunched under our feet. We were all dressed in a multitude of layers with everyone now in thermal base layers and down jackets – sporting a variety of size and colour.

We climbed steeply out of Dinboche, crossing the ridge we'd climbed up to at the start of yesterday's walk. This time, instead of continuing up, we dropped down the other side onto a wide plateau which curved around the mountain following the route of the river a hundred or so metres below us tumbling its way down from the Khumbu Glacier.

Although it was a long walk, it was fairly easy 2 or 3 hour trek across the icy plateau and down its far escarpment to the morning stop at the river crossing. Arriving there we saw how popular this final path to Base Camp was as we had to fight to collect sufficient plastic picnic seats to sit together at one of the outside tables.

Most of the trekkers were in organised groups of about the same number as ours, although there were a few individuals and couples with their own porter. Most of the group were led by a native trek leader and we imagined they would have the group under the same control as Pasang had ours! However, loud electric music was blaring out across the lodge courtyard and we soon identified this was emanating from a young western male trekker with an enormous solar powered music box on his back. Again Pasang didn't withhold his disgust - not with the lad particularly, but with his group leader who Pasang felt, should have shared local traditions with his group and prevented the music from being played so loud.

After finishing our break, we set off to climb the steep mountainside that culminates at the face of the Khumbu Glacier. The path was very rocky and in places, quite slippery. Trekkers could be seen winding their way slowly upwards, the distance to go being gauged by how small they looked as they neared the top. With our bodies learning to cope with altitude in excess of 4500m, it was tough going and we took numerous stops to catch our breath and drink our freezing water.

Finally we reached the top and went through a prayer flag festooned gateway into a wide plateau liberally scattered with monuments and tombstones dedicated to climbers who had lost their lives in the Himalayas. Having watched a group of eight to ten climbers ascend one of the peaks that featured large in our view as we walked this morning, the spectacle of these memorials was especially poignant. Photos and inscriptions decorated each memorial with the vast majority describing the death of a young man, although there were a couple dedicated to women.

Carrying on, we walked on the moraine which lined the side of a glacial valley. The biggest difference to walking in a glacial valley in the UK and here was that this one still had a glacier in it; the Khumbu Glacier grinds its way inch by inch down the valley, groaning as it moved. The moraine provided a rocky surface and the safest route up the valley, but the variable sizes of rocks made the going quite tricky and we had to watch our footing carefully – no way did anyone want an ankle injury at this stage!

A short way along the valley, we passed a large flat stony area on our left that had been used as a temporary Base Camp during the spring when additional space was required. It may have been heaving with tents and trekking equipment 6 months ago, but now simply provided an area to tether a few horses and yaks.

I think we were all glad to arrive at the tiny hamlet of Lobouche at just under 5000m and we piled into the crowded communal room of our lodge. As usual we had the welcome drink given to us and at this point I felt fine – a little tired from the long morning's walk, but apart from yawning a lot, nothing untoward. However, a few minutes later, I felt something was wrong as I started to sweat and felt incredibly hot. Standing up I can remember telling Jes that I felt funny, but a roaring in my ears and black edges preventing me from focusing were the last thing I remember before I found myself lying on the bench with my head on Jes's lap with my feet up. It appeared that I had suffered from lack of oxygen in the crowded room and had fainted. I felt a bit of an idiot, but everyone was very kind and I soon recovered enough to have a light lunch.





My biggest fear as I came round was that Pasang was going to refuse to take me to Base Camp the next day, but he said to go on the acclimatisation walk that afternoon and see how I felt, which was all I needed to prove that I was absolutely fine and wouldn't repeat the girly faint again!

This afternoon's acclimatisation walk was slightly different than usual as Pasang said we could go on our own as we knew now about pace etc. The route we were to take was to the ridge of the moraine that overlooked the glacier and from which we would be able to see into the glacier. Very sensibly, we all put on additional layers of warm clothes, re-stocked our water carriers and set off in small groups up the 250m or so to the top of the ridge.

The view along the valley towards Everest was stunning and the greens and greys of the glacier provided additional interest in the foreground. The creaks and groans of the glacier as it made its way down the valley were audible during the few times when the wind dropped, but it was bitterly cold and having taken off our gloves and snapped a few photos, we hurried back down to the lodge.

Back in the communal room we sat warming our hands on hot drinks and chatting in anticipation about the following day's final trek to Base Camp. We'd been told that one of the finest views in the Himalayas is the sunset over Nuptse from Loboche, so we kept an eye on the time ready to don coats and gloves to capture this. However, it was not to be. The clouds rolled in covering the mountains from sight and with the temperature plummeting, snow began to fall.

During the evening Pasang gave us our directions for tomorrow; times for starting, lunch and dinner; what to wear; what to carry; what temperature to expect; etc. We're all very excited but with a degree of apprehension although we all believe we will make it now. Base Camp is just another 200m higher than where we are sitting. It's looking good! Nothing can stop us now!

### **Food (part 1)**

*As you have seen, food played an enormous role in our days. So as with the toilets, I felt it necessary to devote a separate section to the range and variety of our daily bread.*

*So starting with breakfast...*

*Hot drinks are provided and are much as you would expect except that all milk used is powdered whether for a "milky" coffee, tea or hot chocolate. In addition and depending on the lodge, there is also a choice including grape tea, lemon tea, hot orange and orange tea, hot ginger, mint tea, honey and various others. All of these were good and extremely welcome on an icy morning.*

*The remainder of breakfast was served to us in no particular order forcing us to eat whatever arrived as it arrived and before it got cold.*

*Porridge; plain, apple with or without a sprinkle of cinnamon, honey; thick and oaty and very filling – a good staple choice.*

*Toast can be ordered with honey, jam, eggs, beans or just with butter and is much as expected except that the sliced bread taste so much better than we buy in the UK. It's thick and very square in shape and we believe it's flown in rather than homemade as its shape and taste doesn't vary, but whatever, it's a real pleasure to eat.*

*French Toast has become a favourite with everyone – it's basically "eggy bread" ie. Just bread dipped (soaked) in egg, then deep fried – a real filler for the day!*

*Eggs are offered in a variety of formats, usually two at a time: boiled, scrambled, omelette (onion, cheese, tomato or plain) sometimes coming with toast, but other times on their own which makes planning sensible amounts tricky.*

*Pancakes may bring visions of transparent circles of the lightest batter rolled around tasty fillings, but the Nepalese interpretation is somewhat different! Starting out – presumably – with a batter, they arrive the size and dimension of a single layer of a Victoria sandwich and just as tasty! Served with cheese, jam, honey or even a pair of fried eggs, these are gorgeous, but SO filling!*



*Chapatis and Tibetan Bread are also offered on the breakfast menu with the same accompaniments. Chapatis are similar in look to white wraps, but the Tibetan bread is a deep fried thickest round bread that is usually scrumptious, but can suffer from being too greasy but is a favourite at every meal – although finishing one can defeat even the hungriest trekker!*

Thursday 25 October 2012

We were woken whilst it was still dark and like children on Christmas Day, we scampered around excitedly trying not to make a noise, but not succeeding as we giggled at each other pulling on layer after layer of warm clothes. Snow had fallen the previous night and we looked out of the frozen window with some trepidation about our ability to keep warm.

As it was Jes's birthday, a badge with "It's my birthday" was fixed to the front of his woollen hat and whispered singing of "happy birthday to you..." followed him along the corridor. No time for opening presents... anyway I had one in my bag!

Pasang had given us instructions of what we should wear to cope with the cold, but as I know I am prone to feeling the cold, I felt that more was necessary... so from the floor upwards....

Walking boots, socks, thermal long johns (Jes's spare pair as I hadn't bought any!), double layered trousers, a crop top, thermal base layer long sleeved merino wool top, a thin micro-fleece, a padded gilet, my new fleece, the super-duper down jacket, a long Goretex rain coat, a snood pulled up over my nose, woollen gloves, running gloves with the pullover finger mit, down mittens, my new Himalayan Rescue Association fleece hat, a fur lined ear flap suede hat tied under my chin, my fleece jacket hood and finally, the hood of my Goretex coat.

From the photo you can see that I have about 8" of clothes surrounding every part of my body – but I wasn't cold!!!!

We set out just after 6:00am. Our water bladders were still frozen so we had to drink from bottled water – with floating ice bits making for unpleasant surprises at each mouthful. The sun was touching the tips of the highest mountains and although it was far from the valley, it was light enough to walk without head torches. It was too cold to hold metal walking poles, but with the snow making the stones slippery, the first part of the walk was more difficult than usual. However, as we crossed the flat valley and started up the path to our final destination, we could see the sun's rays moving down the mountainside and knew that it reaching the valley floor would end the intense cold.

The first part of the trek was to Gorek Shep – the last inhabited settlement before Base Camp and only "open" during the trekking season. Initially we passed over the stoney frozen river bed of the water that flowed through the village into the Khumbu Glacier, but soon we were climbing up through the rougher morrain. The whole of the trek today was going to be along the edge of the glacier with the massive mountains on the other side rising thousands of metres above us.

Once the sun had risen and reached the valley, the temperature became bearable and within a short time, we had stopped and taken off some of our outer layers. Of course, this meant that everything we took off, we had to carry but we were told that we could dump excess weight when we reached Gorek Shep. So we continued at our usual snail's pace crossing gullies with icy rivers running down through icicles and snow banks to join the glacier below. It was hard walking in many ways and demanded concentration as the ground was both rocky and slippery – and of course, we were at more than 5000m above sea level!

Finally after about 3 hours, we went over another ridge and looked down on the metal roofs of the 6 or 7 lodges that made up Gorek Shep. We've got skilled at identifying our lodge for the night from the Exodus signs and solar heating equipment and this one was probably the largest lodge in the settlement.

Ordering lunch at 9:00am was somewhat earlier than usual, but we needed the energy to continue on the last leg of the trek to our final destination, so after a short wait, we gobbled up our food, dumped all unwanted weight from our rucksacks, replenished our water supplies and hurried outside. This was one time when we really didn't need any second call of the customary "Jum Jum!" "Let's Go!" – we were ready for off.



Gorek Shep is situated on the edge of a large flat sandy bowl and the first part of the walk crossed this to the steep edge and back onto the edge of the Khumbu Glacier. From the ridge that formed the majority of the trek, we could see the Base Camp area far ahead of us although it was impossible to make any sense of the scale as there was nothing to gauge it against, so it seemed to take a lot longer to reach it than it had appeared initially.

As we neared Base Camp, we started to make out lines of trekking groups making their way slowly along the ridge in both directions. This was the culmination of most treks and whatever route is taken to get here, it was no surprise that we saw about 4 or 5 different groups during the day.

The views across the glacier were dominated by the massive bulk of the snow covered Nuptse with the dark grey top of Everest spearing the sky behind it – the ever present plume of wind driven snow identifying its position even when the mountains in the foreground occasionally screened it. During the walk we saw a number of avalanches on the slopes of Nuptse, spewing out clouds of smoke-like snow with the sound of each one booming across the valley. As this isn't the climbing season for Nuptse, we had no worries about the effect of humans life and could enjoy the beautiful waterfall like sight.

We had been told that there are two expeditions currently making their way up Everest and as we got closer to Base Camp, their tents provided colourful additions to the grey moraine. Pasang told us that they are currently about Camp 3 at the moment and doing OK.

It costs £36000 per person to buy a permit to climb Everest and each expedition needs about 18 tents to hold all their equipment and personnel required to support the climbers. Much of the equipment is carried to Base Camp by porters, but some is flown in by helicopter which we were told costs about £24,000 a time!

Finally, we stood on the ridge looking down on Base Camp and Pasang asked us to stop and allow the group in front of us to finish taking their photos and leave. It appears that the protocol is for groups to give each other time and space to enjoy their achievement. There was no group visible behind us (although one did appear before we left) so we were able to stand and enjoy the view of our destination.

As the preceding group started getting their bags together, we walked down the sides of the moraine and climbed up the slippery slope of the Khumbu Glacier. Deep gaps in the glacier to the side of the path showed the depth of the glacier and the wet ice glistened in the afternoon sun. We followed the path carefully upwards until at last we came onto the flat area known worldwide as Everest Base Camp.

It was an emotional moment – this was the culmination of our dream holiday and we had survived the extreme altitude, temperature and tough conditions to achieve what we had set out to do so many months before. For once, the short wait allowed the entire group to arrive together and we shook hands, hugged and congratulated each other, thanking our guides and Sherpas for getting us there. They seemed equally pleased for us, even though realistically they must have taken hundreds of tourists there in previous treks.

One at a time we had photos taken by the sign conveniently put there stating “Everest Base Camp 2012” with its own array of prayer flags. Jes and Jackie were given a cream satin scarf each as a birthday token and proudly wore these for their photo. After the individual photos, we had group photos with Pasang manipulating 10 different cameras – taking care that each camera had acquired that once in a life time photo – there would be no second chance!

Since leaving the UK, I had carried a Marks and Spencer's tiny individual sized birthday cake and a birthday card in my rucksack and gave this to Jes to eat at this memorable place. We shared (as far as you can share an individual cake) the tiny cake and then found a small rock each to take home as our memento of “the top of the world”.

This was a place that invoked special thoughts in everyone and most of the group had some particular thought or memory to celebrate; a hip flask, a rugby shirt, a Newcastle football scarf, a book on climbing Everest and my own story of Dad's involvement in the design of the hut used for Hillary's 1960 expedition. None of us would ever climb Everest and to be standing in the furthest place along the path that led Hillary and Tenzing to become the first to summit Everest back in 1953, was such a magical feeling and as often happens on such occasions, personal thoughts turn to those who are special to us. We saw several people stripping off their warm clothes to don some article that belonged to someone dear to them. No one minded – this was a magical place to be and everyone was tolerant of each other's



needs to make it a place of remembrance. Several people sat on rocks deep in contemplation whilst others wandered around the area lost in thought or just gazing in wonder at the towering mountains around us.

All too soon, the next group were seen making their way down from the ridge and we knew our time was up and we had to leave Base Camp and make way for others to have their turn. We packed up our rucksacks, said silent “goodbye’s” to Base Camp and carefully picked our way back down the side of the glacier and back up the steep slopes onto the safety of the ridge.

We had been on the go for more than 7 hours at this time, at altitude in excess of 5000m and over extremely hard terrain and the trek back to Gorek Shep was very tough going. As could be anticipated, we began to suffer from a feeling of exhaustion bought on by the return journey along the demanding ridge. We now had to cope with bitter wind in our faces and cooling temperatures as the sun began to disappear behind the afternoon clouds and although we continued to buzz with adrenalin, we all felt the 3 hour trek was the hardest we had done. My arms and shoulders ached with the weight of my rucksack to the extent that even holding up my walking poles became an effort and as we neared the end of the walk, I found myself dragging the poles beside me – not the best way to treat them or to get the benefit from them!

Finally we arrived back at Gorek Shep and with a 2 hour wait before dinner, we departed to our rooms for a well-earned rest. The cold was intense and we tucked ourselves into our sleeping bags, leaning against the internal walls so we could look out at the glorious mountains disappearing into the dusk sky and repeatedly going over the events of a birthday for Jes that will rank for ever in the list of the most unforgettable days of our lives.

### **Friday 26 October 2012**

How well did we sleep! But a 5:00am call got us out of bed and ready for another long but exhilarating day starting with – before breakfast – a climb to the summit of Kala Patthar to watch the sun rise over Everest followed by another long trek to Pheriche.

Once again it was bitterly cold and we quickly donned the same clothes as we’d started the previous day and hurried down the unlit steps with just our head torches providing any method of seeing where we were going and into the communal area for a quick drink and a biscuit. Several of us had developed sore throats during the night – a common ailment at altitude caused by the low levels of oxygen causing dryness of the air and cold temperatures reducing oxygen levels! Pasang had throat sweets at the ready that helped whilst being sucked, but gave no lasting relief.

One of our group had fallen ill with more severe altitude sickness, so he was being allowed to sleep for longer, then would be escorted straight down to Pheriche. He’d been given an additional Diamox dosage and Pasang didn’t seem too concerned – so we trusted that he would be OK. Several others in the group were uncertain whether they would be able to make it, but Pasang persuaded them that they could get a good view by going just a short way up the mountain and that they could then come down and carry on to Pheriche without waiting for those who went on to the top.

So all but one of the group started on up Kala Patthar in the half light of the early morning. A steady string of headtorch lights ahead of us depicted the path leading to the top – the early morning climb giving the best views and so attracting every trekker who had made it so far. A number of trekkers were already on their way down the mountain, obviously wanting to get the clear pre-daylight views with just the early dawn lighting up the silhouettes of the range, but having to contend with temperatures well below freezing.

Pimba set her usual slow pace upwards, but as the group spread out, she suggested that we should go ahead – it would be almost impossible to get lost, unless one foolishly fell over the shear edge to the west! We had been told it would take up to 3 hours to reach the summit, but a group of us reached it in just under 2 hours with others in the group turning back at the half-way plateau.

It was an extremely tough climb; not in the terrain particularly, although it was rocky with slippery sand between rocks and needed concentration, but because it was a steep climb at a very high altitude. At 5545m, this was a very high altitude to exert oneself and although it was not hard to keep going, it was almost impossible to get your breath back when you stopped – so panting just wasn’t possible!



The last 50m seemed interminable even though the people on the summit appeared within reach, every muscle and de-oxygenated breath screamed to stop and once stopped, it was extremely difficult to make yourself start up again. However, we didn't come all this way to stop 50m short of the top and clambering across rocks and keeping away from the massive drop, we reached the top and dropping our walking poles, turned and took in the view.

It was stupendous! The top of Everest was just 2.1 miles as the crow flies and towered dark and forbidding in the background with its usual plume of wind driven snow. The sun chose that moment to break the horizon, creating a brilliant star of light on the summit of Nuptse soaring to the right of Everest. Down in the valley far below us, Base Camp snuggled in the dawn darkness with the glacier at its far end winding its way up between the mountainous spurs to the South Col. Further to the right, the many pinnacles of Lhotse glowed in the rising sun and far to the right the beautiful double peak of Amadablam reflected gold light on the perfect white of its snow.

The sky behind this vista was the bluest of blue. From a pale translucent blue behind the mountain summits, it graduated to the deepest sapphire with not a cloud to break its purity. As the sun rose higher, the sky above us lightened to a cobalt blue providing stark contrast to the hundreds of colourful prayer flags being whipped horizontal by the sharp wind that were attached to the summit rocks.

Photo after photo had to be taken, individually and in groups. Although the summit didn't engender the same emotion as Base Camp, we all appreciated that we had achieved something special to have reached it – and many "well dones" were shared.

We were aware that we had a long trek ahead of us and yesterday's efforts were still in our legs, so we soon set off down the mountain and back to the lodge. It didn't take long – every step made the altitude effects very slightly easier and although the scree was slippery, we were soon crossing the flat desert-like plateau only stopping to write "Jes and Sue" with a walking pole alongside all the other names written in the sand.

Back at the lodge we discovered that the rest of the group had already set off for Pheriche and after having our late breakfast, we joined the trail downwards.

Although we were going to be dropping well over 1000m, as we re-traced our previous journey we had forgotten how much the glacier ridge undulated and how tough it was trekking across the rocky terrain and by the time we reached Labouche (where we had started yesterday's walk) we were ready for lunch.

After Labouche we still had a 3 hour trek to Pheriche and as we left the lodge, we saw a complete change in the weather with dark grey clouds rolling up from the valley and covering the mountains before us. Soon it began to rain and this turned into driving hailstones carried on the bitter wind blowing straight into our faces. Rain coats on with hoods pulled down and scarves protecting our mouths and noses from the biting cold, we hurried upwards, through the monument plateau and down the steep edge to the river crossing where we had sat basking in sunshine two days before.

A steep rocky path took us through a gully down to the river valley and as we left the gully and turned into the open valley, the wind really hit us, but far in the distance, we could see the tiny coloured roof tops of the houses of Pheriche. The hailstones stopped and we battled our way against the wind along the flat wet scrubland of the valley. On each side and behind us the snowy peaks started to appear amongst the clouds and in front of us we could see the white peaks that we had been admiring at Dingboche a few days before.

An hour later saw us walking along the main path through Pheriche with spirits rising as we neared our lodge. A corrugated hut set on the top of a stone wall housing a toilet, made us laugh – presumably the users could access the waste below!

The lodge was one of the nicest we'd stayed in a having a large wood panelled communal room with a stove burning in the centre creating a cosy warmth. A television displayed a satellite channel in the corner by a bar which provided some of the group with the means to celebrate our achievements. The rest of our group had arrived a few hours earlier and we spent time catching up on each other's experiences and hearing the good news that the altitude sickness had abated and everyone was feeling a lot better.



We hadn't had a shower for 3 days and decided to brave the freezing cold of the areas away from the stove and stood under a trickle of water warmed by a collection of 24 12V batteries that ran the electric shower. Shivering excessively until we'd put our layers back on, we felt a lot cleaner. Every day now we'll be getting lower and warmer and I think everyone is recognising that we were beginning to miss our comforts and were starting to look forward to returning to civilisation as we know it.

### **Saturday 27 October 2012**

It was good to have a "lay-in" this morning but we still woke at 6:30am and after managing to open our frozen window, we looked out on the sun creeping into the valley. The ground was frozen hard and vegetables growing in the area outside our window had been severely battered by frost.

The first section of our trek today was along to the end of the windy valley. Gradually, the numerous streams fed from melting snow dropping from the mountain's heights and snaking around the valley, joined together until at the end of the valley there was just one icy river tumbling and bubbling out to join rivers coming from the other valleys.

Once out of the valley, we turned south and walked downwards until we joined the path we'd taken to Dinboche. Although we knew the views behind us were stunning, we enjoyed the southern aspect where we could see in the distance, the lodge where we planned to have our morning break and far in the distance high on the plateau, the Tangbouche Monastery – our lunch stop.

We all felt a sense of achievement as we greeted the trekking groups struggling their way slowly up the paths, with us making our way at a more speedy pace downwards. We had commented on the same reaction when we were the upward newcomers meeting those coming down – and now we were at it! We all aware that we had achieved something very special and had come through extremes of cold and altitude and felt that the experience had changed the person we were and will become, in some permanent way.

The climb up through the woods to Tangboche was easy going that we had thought it would be – an indication of how much easier it is to walk at a lower altitude. The sun shone down through the trees from a blue sky and the ease with which we were able to breath made the upward climb a real pleasure.

Tangboche felt as magical on the way back as it had on the outward journey. We sat outside the lodge soaking up the sun watching monks and trekkers going in and out of the monastery. Jes bartered for two pairs of knitted slippers from the small shop and was thrilled with his 100Rs saving, whilst I walked slowly around the area where I had painted looking carefully amongst the dusty scrubs to attempt to find my lost my rubber and paint pot – to no avail.

After lunch we set off down the extremely steep wooded mountainside to the river crossing. It may have been less effort than walking up it had been, but several of us skidded on the dusty surface and conversations dropped as we concentrated on keeping our footing. Finally we reached the suspension bridge and proved how far we had come in conquering our fears and none of us required any help in crossing it!

The hardest part of the day was the last hour where we had to climb an equally steep slope from the river up to the plateau of Kumayana. We could see the lodge in the distance far above us tantalisingly close, yet demanding that we kept going – another 8 hour trekking day! Even those who had been poorly were still going well and the determination shown to keep up with the group proved just how supportive everyone had been.

However, we were all pleased to reach the lodge at last and with our welcome drink warming our hands, we sat around the benches that lined the room, competing for who could tell the best joke – not completed as a number of us went into instant memory loss with no joke to tell!

As we moved further back toward the end, our thoughts began to turn to the flight back from Lukla to Kathmandu. Pasang has heard that the mist had caused a number of hold-ups and warned us that it is not unusual for trekkers to have to wait at Lukla for clear weather. Having seen the area that the planes are flying into, I am more than prepared to



wait however long it takes! However, he said that we would have an early take-off time, so shouldn't suffer too much from hold ups. ... anyway, that's still 2 days away!

During the day we'd seen 5 helicopter rescues. We've been told that the rescue helicopter doesn't waste the outward journey and takes supplies up with them to drop off before loading the casualty. What I want to know is whether the helicopter is ready loaded with supplies or do they load up the supplies after they get the emergency call? Either way seems to have some flaws for an emergency service!

## **Food (part 2)**

### *Main courses*

*Nepal lies along the border between India and China and the food reflects this in its mix between the two cuisines.*

*Dhal Bhat is the staple diet. This is literally Lentils and Rice and the two are usually served with a liquidy vegetable curry and sometimes a meat curry. Popadoms with spices are another occasional accompaniment.*

*Curries are fairly watery in consistency and being more bland than the standard Indian curry relate most closely to a Chinese curry. They are "heated" by the addition of local chilli spices or pickles. The meat in a curry is most often chicken, although Yak is also popular. Lamb is surprisingly not available and beef is forbidden by the religious observance of Hindi people so is never seen. Egg curry was available at a few lodges.*

*Chow Mein and Noodles of various types are always on the menu. These can be accompanied by fried vegetables or meat (or both). Tuna or fried eggs are also offered and are obviously added to the top of the plate just prior to serving. The noodles themselves have no discernible difference to the spaghetti on offer, although is usually listed as Spaghetti Bolognaise or Spaghetti, cheese and tomato.*

*Momos are a national dish in Nepal and quickly became a favourite of mine. They are a circle of pasta like dough that is formed into a small crescent around vegetables, cheese, potato or meat and either deep fried or steamed. Ten are placed around a plate with a small bowl of spicy tomato sauce for dipping. They are just delicious!*

*Pizzas are available at every lodge. They usually have quite a thick doughy base topped with tomato and cheese with vegetables, tuna or mushrooms. The quality of these are extremely variable – it really was pot luck!*

*Bread is carried up the mountains by porters – we've see them with hundreds piled high on their backs – and sandwiches are offered on all menus. Cheese or Tuna are the most common but are quite dry as the butter used is a much drier crumbly spread than we are used to. The most unusual but delicious snamdwich I had was a Fried vegetable and cheese sandwich which turned out to be exactly what is described with hot cheese dripping through hot crispy vegetables and soaking into the soft bread!! YUM!*

*Soup comes in a variety of flavours – determined by the packets available! However, "Sherpa Stew" is a filling vegetable and pasta stew which bears no resemblance to soup and with Tibetan bread, was a firm favourite with everyone.*

*Every lodge provides the same menu with few variations, so we don't take long to make our daily choices. Quantity and quality varies considerably and the interpretation of what seems like an obvious item, can be laughable – custard that was served as a spherical blob that could be cut with a knife was one example of the differences in our understanding! Costs escalate as we trekked further up the valley – not surprisingly having seen the yaks and porters carrying the provisions up the steep paths. However, the sight of meat open to the dust and flies of the sandy paths, made us all wary of some of the options.*

*Whatever .... We certainly haven't starved!*

## **Sunday 28 October 2012.**

It was another long trekking day; another 8 hours of walking downwards to end at the first lodge we had stayed in on the trek.



It had snowed overnight and we were woken by the sound of snow being scrapped off the pavement under our window. Cold or not, the souvenir sellers were not going to miss the opportunity of making a few sales from the overnight tourists and were soon setting out their brightly coloured beads and woollen clothes. Several of us dipped under the waterfall of melting ice that was running off the roof and crossed the path to browse along the tables, bartering with good will on both sides for presents to take home; key fobs and bracelets being the most popular purchase.

The first part of the day took us along a nearly level path (there's no such thing in the Himalayas!) round the side of the mountain on top of which we'd previously visited the Japanese Everest View Hotel. The path was quite wide thankfully as the drop to the river far below was breathtakingly frightening! Yaks could pass easily, though we were careful to be on the mountain side of the path and not near the edge where a misplaced yak horn could have us jumping back into oblivion!

After a few miles, we realised that we would soon reach the place where we would no longer be able to see Everest and Amadablam. They had been in sight for many days now and, although we had not become so accustomed that we were taking them for granted, it was a sad thought that they would soon be hidden. We were also aware that this was likely to be the last time we would ever gaze on these wonderful mountains and that this last view needed to last a lifetime.

We stood on the rocky outcrop at the corner for some time taking our "goodbye" photos and fixing the last impression into our memories. Finally, we picked up rucksacks and turned the corner.

After donating some small change to a man who spends his life maintaining the path we had walked along, we continued down, past the colourful monument that celebrated 60 years since Everest was first summited and into Namche Bazaar. Pasang had promised us some shopping time and with an agreed meeting time, we rushed out into the alleyways of the village to find and haggle for the indubitable bargains on offer. We'd all seen several items on the way up, so most of us knew exactly which shops we were heading for. Prayer flags to be put up in our Sheffield garden, a Kala Patthar woollen hat embroidered with the statistics of our achievement of 5545m, CDs of Nepalese music and a variety of small tokens for our family back home, were all purchased and stowed away in ever expanding rucksacks.

Although the sun was shining, the narrow streets were still in shade and the wind made it too cold to hang about, so after a brief "show and tell" in the lodge, all purchases were packed away and we set off down the wooded slopes to the lower river crossing.

It was a hard climb down. Dusty rock combined with slippery yak poo made it difficult to keep from slipping and Pimba certainly was setting a fast pace – no snail's pace for us on the way down! However, we did express our sympathy for the many trekkers on their outward journey knowing just how hard the upward climb was – and what they still had to face.

In time we reached the highest suspension bridge and all crossed it with no help, in spite of the harsh cross wind. Again we congratulated each other on conquering our fears!

Just before we reached the boundary of the Sagarmatha National Park we experienced some excitement as a woman carrying a baby came out of a house at the side of the path and ran towards us shouting and covering the baby's head. Pasang pushed us back along the path we had just walked and explained that a swarm of Himalayan bees had been disturbed and were flying around the woman's house. It appeared that these large bees get angry when disturbed and can cause a nasty reaction in anyone who gets stung.

Anyway, after waiting a few minutes, it seemed that the swarm had moved on and we were safe to pass. We moved quickly past the house and climbed the hill to the national park entrance, only stopping to look at the enormous bee hive hanging from a rock face – presumably the home of these bees.

Nepalese soldiers patrol the gates and all carry guns, so we obediently sat on the stone wall and waited which Pimba talked to the official behind the barred window. We should have known better! As soon as Pasang arrived – known to everyone – the guards exchanged pleasantries with him and waved us straight through.



A short climb over the ridge and we were on the path down to the next village and lunch. We had phoned through or order in advance, but even so, the clouds rolling up through the wooded valley and covering the mountains cooled us down sufficiently for us to don padded coats and gloves for the afternoon's trek.

Just before we'd stopped, Jes had seen a rucksack displayed outside a tiny shop that we'd passed. He was still less than happy with his sack and we decided to go back to see what we could get it for. Two children were in charge of the shop probably about 10 and 14. They were quite confident in giving the first cost, but once we started bartering, the older lad had to nip across the road to confirm the next move from some unseen person. As usual this was concluded in good humour and Jes was the proud owner of a new rucksack that appeared to meet his wishes.

We ran back to the lodge, settled up the bill and showed off the rucksack, then set off down the path. The afternoon trek was long and the path wound its way predominately downhill through the woody slopes, crossing and re-crossing the every expanding river as it raged its way down. It seemed impossible that just 2 days before we were looking at the source of this river 2500m further up in the mountains.

Hacking coughs and runny noses combined with 12 days of hard walking, not to mention the altitude changes over those days, made us all greet our lodge with delight. We were aware that the final trek left that would take us to Lukla, was a short one, so we would have a welcome lay-in and we all felt that we needed it! Despite the end being in sight I think that all of us were beginning to feel that we had done enough for now!

However, who would have thought that on the penultimate night of our trek, we would end up having a dancing competition with our guides and Yak Men!! It started with an off the cuff "guess the song" competition with Jes's competitive spirit at the fore and much noisy laughter as the songs were recognised. A few of the group started dancing to them and it didn't take long for all of us to leave our seats and take to the dance floor (a clearish area between tables!). We soon recognised that there was a element of competition between some of the group and our version of "Strictly" got going! This culminated in Rushen , a quiet lad who had hardly said a word throughout the trek, turning out to be a brilliant dancer who took on Justin in the "Dance-off" finally winning our "Nepalese Tracker Dancer of 2012".

Some of the group had been celebrating with alcoholic drinks and indulged their desires to extend their cultural experiences by trying hot chocolate and Nepalese brandy – something they regretted in the morning when extreme hangovers provided evidence of their efforts!

However, the evening was one that we will remember as a real highlight and we all went to bed laughing hysterically and absolutely exhausted.

### **Mountain Porters**

As someone had told us, there's no free delivery service for supplies in the mountainous villages of the Himalayas. Everything that is required, whether wire to mend a fence, wood to build a table, kerosene to heat the oven or eggs to provide breakfast for trekkers, has to be carried from Lukla. We saw no vehicles in the area once we'd left Lukla airport – not even quad bikes... or even push bikes! Yaks, Horses, Mules and Porters were the only means of ground level transport.

Porters carry unbelievably heavy loads and are paid by the weight they carry. The usual method is for a large wicker basket fastened with a canvas sling around the porter's forehead. The basket will be packed full with its height doubled by further goods roped to the top.

The more usual baggage were provisions such as bread, boxes of San Miguel beer, eggs – packed in 3 dimensional cartons and Pringles. We decided that the latter were an alternative to potato crisps as they would probably survive the trip in better shape than a box of fragile crisps. Incidentally, Pringles were sold at an escalating amount; about £1 a tube in the villages near Lukla rising to about £4 a tube at the further point of the trek.

Porters travel at a much faster rate than the trekking groups and had precedence in passing along narrow paths. However, they stopped frequently to rest – not surprisingly! Each porter carried a wooden T shaped "rest" which was just the right height to use as a stumpy walking pole and also to allow them to place it under their basket to take the weight whilst they had a cigarette break!



Mules and yaks also contribute to the transport of provisions, although there were probably more Yaks involved in the trekking industry, carrying luggage with 8 or 9 bags at a time. Yak Men are responsible for a group of 5 or 6 Yaks at a time and walk at the front and rear of a train, rope whips being used – mainly on the bags, not the animals – to keep them going. Occasionally small stones were used to persuade a particularly stubborn yak to move on and although we were surprised by this initially, there was no indication that the yak felt any discomfort, or even took much notice!

Yak speed seemed to be a constant, uphill or down! Every yak we saw appeared healthy and well looked after. They are massively powerful animals and we felt sure that an unhappy yak would be something that we would not attempt to challenge!

We saw several yaks who had gone off the path to graze on the vegetation on the steep slopes. It was impossible to work out how such a big animal could balance at such an angle particularly with its centre of gravity raised by its heavy load. However, they seemed to be able to return to the path to resume their travel quite easily once their yak man reappeared from his comfort break.

However, it seemed it was acceptable for other travellers to chastise the yaks as, when a train of yaks were passing by us too close for comfort for a group of tourists on the side of the path with the drop behind us, Pemba took my walking pole and prodded them, then made her intentions abundantly clear with a good whack on the rump of one that wasn't responding. The yak man didn't seem at all bothered as there is obviously a hierarchy in the mountains which permits a Sherpa to boss a yakman around!

### **Monday 29 October 2012**

What a pleasure it was to wake up in our luxurious corner room at our own time and start the day in such a leisurely way! The two windows meant that not only was it extremely light, but we also benefited from a double view – down the wooded river valley towards Lukla in one direction and across the river and rooftops of other lodges and dwellings of the small town in the other. As we had done so many times on this trip, we watched the sun rise kiss the tips of the peaks and work its way slowly down to warm up the valley floor.

We only had 3 hours of walking left and with a mid-morning stop, it was an easy day. That was not to say that it was level! In fact it was one of the most undulating paths we'd trekked, but at just 2800m and in warm sunshine, we'd soon shed our coats and strolled along in tee-shirts.

Several times during this final day, we stopped and looked back up the wooded valley towards the towering snowcapped peaks, striving to impress the views onto an eternal long term memory. How can we ever forget the beauty of the Himalayan peaks, the icy turquoise river, the lush green of the wooded hillsides, the peace and tranquillity that pervaded the area? But we all knew that soon we will be returning to the reality of our separate lives in the UK and all this will become a dream and a story told in a photo album.

All too soon we were climbing up the final ridge and passing through the stone arch commemorating the first woman to climb Everest and entering the bustling town of Lukla. It was much earlier in the day than we'd passed through at the start of the trek and was now a lot noisier and appeared far busier. At just after mid-day it seemed that everyone was out and about with people sitting on the dusty road outside the shops – narrowly avoiding getting trodden on by the frequent trains of mules passing through. Souvenir shops and grocery shops appeared equally represented and the goods displayed outside each were equally dusty. Western logos and trade names abounded; North Face, Trespass, Garmin and even Starbucks Coffee (though it didn't look like the usual UK version inside!).

We were staying in the same lodge that had hosted our first morning coffee break on our first trekking day and as it was our last night, we had been allocated en-suite rooms – a real luxury – with towels AND toilet paper. We were expected to pay an additional charge for the shower, but to be able to stand for an unlimited time under running hot water in a warm room with no one waiting outside... worth anything!

The communal room of the lodge boasted a veranda running along one wall with a stunning view over the valley below and mountains that surround Lukla. Less of an attraction was its fine view of the sloping runway of the airport and as we sat watching a tiny plane come in, we held our breath at the sheer impossibility of any plane breaking in time to turn



into the airport turning circle. But as the planes arrived one after the other, we became more comfortable about the procedure. Planes flew in and out at regular and frequent intervals interspersed by helicopters landing and taking off. As the planes take off they appeared to sit at the top of the runway, take a deep breath and, like a long jumper, run like merry hell down the runway dropping off the end into the void of the Himalayan valley, immediately curving upwards into the blue sky in time to soar over the first ridge towards katmandu. Scary stuff!

On the plateau between our lodge and the edge of the cliff, we could see a football pitch sized area with children on bikes playing polo! To the side of the lodge was a badminton court with four lads playing watched by a fair sized crowd. Alongside the “main road” through the village we saw young men playing “Air Hockey” with discs on a chalky flat surface and others enthusiastically involved in a match of table tennis. This was the first time we’d seen any sport of any kind in Nepal, although many porters wear UK Premier League football shirts and we have seen TVs showing English matches.

I spent a short time painting the view from the veranda, soaking up the sun and trying to imprint the view on my memory. Others in the group slumped in their chairs, enjoying the rest from our exertions. Conversation was slow and relaxed reflecting the easy relationships that had formed between us.

Gradually people drifted off into the village to purchase the last few souvenirs and gifts and once the painting was finished, we followed their example and enjoyed a late afternoon stroll along the main road, only returning to the lodge when the sun set and the temperature plummeted.

Tradition for the last night of a trek (or so Pasang tells us!) is for the trekkers to treat the “boys” – including our girl Pimba of course! We have also been asked to donate any clothing or footwear that we have no further use for, as the porters will wash it and use it – so that’s where the football kits come from! Some of the group were not particularly happy about this – again it was quite a pressurised gift. Like us, we packed as sparingly as we could and haven’t really got “spares” and felt that giving away clothes in addition to the £35 per person we were expected to “donate to the kitty” to be shared amongst the team as well as paying for the team’s food and drink for the evening, was putting quite a strain on finances. It was difficult to decide whether we were just being mean and ungrateful – they are so much poorer than us – but the trip wasn’t cheap and finding these extras at the end of it was difficult and would have been so much easier to swallow had it been incorporated into the original cost. However, if that is the tradition, who were we to complain – so we all paid up without argument.

The ceremony in fact was lovely. We stood in a semicircle facing our team and expressed our thanks to each of them, hugging and shaking hands knowing that tomorrow they will be off with a new group of trekkers whilst we fly back to civilisation. Several of the group waited on the team in the same way that they had waited on us throughout the trek. Once the meal was finished, we danced to a mixture of western and Nepalese music before going exhausted to bed for our final night in the Himalayas.

## **Tuesday 30 October 2012**

I woke to the sound of the first helicopter of the day getting ready to set off for a sun-rise tourist trip. The heliport and airport were about half a mile from our lodge. Jes said he’s been woken at 5am by a dog fight, but that had just passed me by!

As I watched the helicopter ascend into the clear blue sky and bank steeply towards the mountain heights, I could see a tiny plane from Katmandu approaching the treacherous sloping runway and as the pilot slammed on its brakes to ensure it slowed sufficiently to turn and stop within the incredibly short allowance, the reality that we were flying back today hit me and butterflies started flapping around my stomach.

As if that wasn’t enough, within 20 minutes we saw another 2 planes arrive and one leave, admiring the skills of the invisible air-traffic control centre who do a fantastic job of coordinating the 3 minute turnaround the plane companies aspire to. In addition to the planes were regular helicopter movements with the red rescue helicopter being kept particularly busy.

Surely nothing could make this airport and more deserving of its spot at the top of the “most dangerous airport in the World” league table? But of course! The runway cuts through the village perpendicular to the cliff edge edged with



residential and farming areas and right next to the runway and halfway down its length a bonfire had started up with the farmer appearing unconcerned about the billowing white smoke covering the runway! Even though the morning was stunningly clear, the pilots had to contend with passing through the dense smoke screen before lifting off!

Once breakfast was over, most of the group went out on the veranda to watch the planes, occasionally admitting that we were apprehensive, but equally trying to persuade each other that the pilots really do know what they are doing and probably cope with all of this ten times every day. It didn't help!

We had been told that we were booked into the 3<sup>rd</sup> tranche of flights, each of which consists of 4 airlines and that we would leave the lodge when Pasang had notification that the 2<sup>nd</sup> tranche had left Katmandu. In some ways, having something to do – albeit a short walk – was better than just standing watching. Once the message was received, we gathered up our rucksacks and strolled through the village and up round the back of the airport across the concrete wall that marks the end of the runway and provided a photo opportunity that did nothing to calm our nerves!

The departure area was chaos! This is a very tiny airport and with each flight taking just 14 passengers, it didn't take much to see that the space for baggage to be given in, weighed and pass through security would soon be filled to capacity.

“Security” involved us standing by our bags and opening the top zip and allowing the masked security guard to feel down the sides. It would have been very easy to have concealed items in the bags but maybe they were more interested in monitoring our reactions than actually looking in the bags.

Next we passed through the personal security check where the guard checking me was more interested in why I had string tied to my camera. I demonstrated to him how I used this to prevent my camera from falling whilst I was trekking. Pimba had made it for me and I had got attached to it and would have been sad had I been asked to remove it. However, he appeared satisfied that it wasn't a threat and waved me through to the Departure lounge.

Lounge is a poor word to describe this area. There were some plastic seats spread around the room, but the vinyl tiles (many of which were loose and moved around the area in a slow dance that was fascinating to watch) and blank walls made it little more than a transport depot.

For some unfathomable reason, Pasang disappeared around the back of the café area and started serving teas and coffees! That man knows everyone and had a finger in every pie! Even the lodge manager from Phaking had trusted him with a large wodge of bank notes to take to a bank in Katmandu!

Our group clustered by the window looking out onto the turning circle with the beauty of the green hills topped with snowy peaks, golden in the morning sun. In the foreground the turning circle was visited every few minutes by a tiny plane whose breaking engine deafened us with its roar only to be replaced by the revving of the next plane starting its downward journey. The smell of kerosene (or whatever they put in planes) invaded the room, hanging in the air, adding to the frenetic mood and making it impossible to relax.

Finally it was our turn. I had hoped it would be a quick turn round with no time to think about the take off... Unfortunately, our pilot and co-pilot chose this turnaround to have a bowl of noodles (breakfast?) so we spent about 10 minutes sitting in the tiny plane parked in the turning circle waiting for the engines to re-start. However, noodles finished, we buckled up our straps, stuffed earphones into our ears and the engines started.

We taxied out of the turning circle and turned to face down the runway, feeling the slope keenly. The plane stopped, then with what could only be described as a metaphorical taking of a deep breath, the engines were turned to full and we set off down the 30° slope. Once again the similarity of an athlete came to mind, although from the inside of a plane it felt more like a pole vault than a long jump, but we finally lifted into the air and before having a chance to think, we'd banked sharply to the left to avoid flying straight into the mountain on the other side of the valley.

We experienced a little turbulence during the 30 minute journey, but this paled into insignificance against the views of the Himalayas we stared at throughout the trip. There were no clouds in the sky and the mighty peaks rose from behind





the green foothills with the many peaks of Annapurna dominating the horizon initially, then smaller unknown peaks taking over as we neared Kathmandu.

Gradually the ground below us became more populated, dirt paths became more widespread and the rugged mountainous landscape transformed into green smooth hillsides which in turn flattened out to form the plain around the capital.

And so, finally we arrived into the heat of Kathmandu – totally inappropriately dressed in our trekking gear and looking far less well groomed with most of the men sporting stubble or beards and all of us wearing clothes that had been well-used over the past two weeks. It didn't take long to strip off coats, fleece and jumpers and to put scarves over mouths as we were reminded of the dust raised on the roads through the city.

Getting back to the hotel and sinking into the comfort of a cosy settee for the welcome drink, as a real pleasure. Once Pasang had distributed our passports, paperwork and valuables and we had dumped our belongings in our rooms, we joined up and set off.... Where to.... To KFC of course! Two weeks of hard exercise and limited menus with little fresh meat or salad had given us all a healthy appetite for "real food".

Once fed and watered with Pepsi rather than the ever available bottled water, we separated and Jes and I spent a lazy afternoon strolling through the Thamel, phoning home and trying to extract more money from an extremely unhelpful UK bank who wouldn't let us use our cards!

On returning to the hotel we had baths in brown – but warm – water and got ready for an evening out. The group had been booked into the Nepalese Garden Restaurant which turned out to be a large walled garden set out with gazebos and parasols interspersed with palm trees and other greenery. Large white pendant hanging from the trees provided a soft light and a lovely setting for a superb meal.

### **Food – part 3**

#### **pudding!**

*Puddings are on every menu but rarely offer more than 5 or 6 choices. Apple predominates and apple pie – a deep fried apple pastry – was an easy and tasty choice. Apple fritters were occasionally offered; crispy and piping hot, these became a favourite.*

*Jes likes his custard, but the solid yellow paste provided the first evening as an accompaniment to his cake, was even beyond him. In fact, it obviously embarrassed even our team as they appeared to harangue the waiter for the strange offering. Custard improved over time, but never became more than a thick glutinous sauce.*

*Rice pudding was offered on all menus and although it varied in thickness and sweetness, was always hot and edible.*

*Chocolate Pudding! This choice was leapt upon by the males of the group, but the variation in its reality caused its popularity to wane somewhat along the journey. The food bought to the table under this heading varied from a chocolate sponge drizzled with chocolate sauce to a bowl of deep brown jelly like sludge containing lumpy bits- not bits of chocolate sponge but lumps in the sauce – that appeared extremely unappetising.*

*Deep fried Mars Bars and Snicker Bars were a favourite. Coated in pastry or batter, then fried until golden and oozing hot caramel and molten chocolate and, from the noises emanating, these provided high levels of satisfaction to those who succumbed to the temptation.*

*Finally, there was often a "canned fruit" choice or sometimes more specifically "pineapple rings". The former most often was what, in the UK, we would call tinned fruit salad rather than fruit cocktail and contained chunky portions of a selection of fruit – much appreciated as we hadn't had any fresh fruit since leaving Kathmandu. Interestingly in one lodge, I was served with a bowl of hot canned fruit which may sound unappetising, but as this was at one of the coldest stops, was very welcome as well as being very tasty!*



### Wednesday 31 October 2012

I don't know if I was missing my cocoon type sleeping bag, or whether from the effect of "normal altitude, but I woke very early and after listening to a couple of podcasts, I sat by the window and watched the sun rise over Kathmandu and the increasing noise of the city as it woke to another day.

We had a leisurely breakfast then set out to walk to Swayambhunath – the Monkey Temple – which is considered to be the most holy Buddhist temple in Nepal. The travel books had suggested taking a taxi or cycling, but in fact it was a straightforward route taking no more than 50 minutes at a strolling pace through the narrow streets.

As the festival is now over, the streets were less crowded and we started off along the same roads as we'd taken on our first day in Kathmandu. In spite of there being no road signs, we managed to identify the turnings and continued westward. The further way from the old town we went, the more shops appeared to sell "normal" goods. We even found a stationery shop and bought a rubber to replace the one I'd lost in the mountains.

It was a school day and we think that we must have walked through the area where most of the schools were located. They advertised themselves as "Traditional English" and the children going into them would not have looked out of place in the 1960s. These youngsters were the lucky ones obviously coming from the more wealthy homes. Less well attired children roamed the roads and seemed at home serving in the shops. Travel books ask that tourists encourage children to attend school by ignoring their attempts to beg or barter, but I'm not sure that this is having a significant effect judging by the numbers not in school.

On the way to Swayambhunath, we had to cross the river. A number of roads converged on both sides of the bridge forming an incredible bottleneck both for drivers and pedestrians. There were no pavements so anyone wanting to walk across the bridge – hundreds at any time – had to take their lives in their hands and join in the fray. There was no point in turning back and no other way to get to the temple, so we pushed ourselves into the centre of a mass of citizens, crossed the traffic and reached the left side of the bridge. We wove our way across the crowd to get to the wall of the bridge and looked down on the most revolting detritus that could ever lie on a river bed or line its banks. The water in the river was brown and thick with mud with a noxious smell rising up and forcing us to cover our mouths and noses. At this time of the year, the low level of water was insufficient to have any effect on moving the mass of garbage in plastic bags, sacks or just floating as indistinguishable waste items. All along the river, we could see people wading through the morass, poking around in the waste, presumably trying to find anything salvageable or even sellable. Shanty type structures line the banks but whether these were homes or temporary shelters was impossible to know. Apart from us, few people stopped to look. It was a sobering sight and in such contrast to the white majesty of the Himalayan peaks in the distance.

As we left the river behind us, the central section of the temple of Swayambhunath rose on the horizon, towering on its hill in the distance, glowing golden in the sun. Following this splendid sight, we soon arrived at the Eastern Steps that led steeply up the hill to the temple's entrance.

The steps were extremely steep, but the statues of Buddha and shrines to various gods, provided a good excuse to stop frequently and draw breath. Stalls perched at the sides of the steps and although selling many of the same souvenirs that we had seen in the city, beside several stalls the traders could be seen actually making their wares. It was fascinating to see men embroidering beautiful pictures, young children with curved chisels tapping away at slate signs and women threading beads onto necklaces and bracelets.

Jes had unexpectedly bartered for a pair of Manchester United flip flops (200Rs) back in the city, but now added a Manchester United wrist band (20Rs) and a bead bracelet for me. He loves to haggle!

As we neared the top of the steps, we caught sight of our first monkey and within a few minutes, the number of these wild creatures had increased until there were monkeys in every direction and on every wall, tree or shrine. These monkeys have adopted the temple and hill as their home and the guide books warn that they will snatch handbags and scarves, but at this stage none of them appeared interested in us... yet!

The Shiva at the top of the hill was stunning with gold statues of Buddha, brown wooden houses, rows upon rows of prayer wheels set into white walls and shrines imitating giant chess pieces. Buddhist monks walked purposefully around



the area taking no notice of the hordes of tourists and their cameras. Monkeys scampered everywhere, pushing themselves in and out of the small shrines set behind iron grills in the walls and up and around the rotating prayer wheels, providing constant photo opportunities for the tourists.

In line with tradition we walked clockwise around the courtyard, leisurely turning the prayer wheels as we passed. Incense burned in the wall shrines and provided a heady perfume that mixed with the sun's heat and intensified the haze that lay over the Kathmandu plain. It should have been possible to look across the entire width of the city to the countryside beyond, but the smog was too dense to identify any landmarks. Far in the distance the smog cleared to show forested hills, rising in the north to join the snowy peaks of the Anapurna range.

Finding a secluded courtyard and suitable wall, I sat and painted whilst Jes went off to take photos. However, a shop keeper came out of a back door with a bowl of garbage which he threw over the wall and attracted a pack of mangy looking noisy dogs, increasing in turn the fly population. As soon as Jes returned I packed my paints and we climbed the narrow steps to a restaurant located on the roof of one of the old buildings.

Sitting in the shade with cups of refreshing tea, gazing out over the soft focused city, was delightful and engendered a feeling of calm and wellbeing.... Only to have this suddenly broken as a monkey jumped onto our table, sat down and proceeded to eat handfuls of sugar from the stainless steel bowl. A dog that had been lazily wandering around the rooftop caught sight of the monkey and transformed from a sleepy pet into a snarling aggressive monster! The monkey didn't stop to fight, but fled over the roof.

Maybe we should have reacted differently, but our instinct had been to get the camera out rather than chase the monkey away, so as we'd finished our drinks, we decided to pay up and escape before the restaurant owner could blame us for the mess on the table!

Making sure that we'd completed an odd number of turns around the temple, we left and descended the steep steps until we reached the Pilgrim's Path that circumvented the hill near its base. We set off around this at a slow stroll, flicking some of the thousands of prayer wheels that lined the path as we passed. The midday sun was very hot and the trees shading the path made this a pleasant walk as we looked for somewhere to eat our lunch. About half way round, the path took us northwards to a second Shriya where we spent a few moments watching men pulling buckets of coins from a holy pool. The weight of these was obviously considerable and it took two strongly built men to carry the loaded bucket to be emptied. I wondered where they took the coins and what they were used for.

We'd bought some fruit and rolls from shops along the route for our lunch and on finding a shaded seat, sat down to enjoy the food. What a mistake! No sooner had we sat down than we became the focus of every scrounging animal in the vicinity (We'd already managed to get rid of a begging woman as sensitively as we could, so she doesn't count). In spite of the beautiful views of the distant mountains, we left our cool seat and decided we'd be better off in a more populated area and set off down the hill to where we could see a number of tourists sitting on the rocks and steps at the bottom of a large statue. This appeared better!

I'd bought two oranges and was peeling one to share with Jes. Suddenly a monkey appeared in front of me and made a grab for it! I yelled and Jes swung his rucksack to scare it off and as our attention was taken by this, I was suddenly aware of a hand coming from behind me and grabbing the orange. Although it only took seconds, my first thought was that I was being attacked by an old wizened pickpocket, but almost instantly realised that this was another monkey. I screamed and jumped up as the half orange and hand disappeared behind me, then back in front, the first monkey launched another attack and jumped up at me and the other half of the orange that I was still holding. I will admit that this disconcerted me more than many things I can remember and my reaction was to throw the half orange AT the monkey. This seemed to do the trick and it caught the fruit and immediately sat down to enjoy it.

This was no time to eat a banana – our remaining fruit – and we decided to continue round to the end of the Pilgrim's Path and back into town before attempting to eat the rest of our lunch. So we hurried along the path and retraced our route back through the old town, through the Thamel, finally ending up in the Garden of Dreams for a welcome drink and piece of cake.



What a contrast to the bustle and noise of the city and to the experiences of the morning! We sat on a marble bench in the dappled shade and just chilled for an hour or so as the sun moved lower in the sky, Jes listening to music whilst I finished my painting from earlier. A magical moment!

The Garden was exhibiting photos taken of the grounds before and after restoration and we spent a pleasurable time looking at the impressive work that had turned a run-down plot of land into this oasis of calm. However, time was moving on and we had to leave the gardens and fight the rush hour traffic back to the hotel. A short detour allowed us to photograph the “Keep our city Green” sign that we’d seen sited in the midst of a morass of mud, dust and drooping wires.

Rum Doodles Bar, named after the mountaineering spoof novel “the Ascent of Rum Doodle” was the chosen restaurant for our last meal together. This three or four storey building was a magnet for trekking groups since it hosted climbers from early Everest attempts. Trekking groups are invited to decorate large cardboard Yeti feet which is then displayed amongst the thousands of others that adorn the walls and hang from the ceilings of every floor. We sat at a long table on the roof terrace in the warm evening, saying our thank-yous to Pasang and exchanging email addresses and phone numbers. Several of the group were discussing plans for their next trek, but we knew that this was a once in a lifetime trip and unlikely to be repeated.

Although the nightlife of Kathmandu attracted a few, most of us returned to the hotel for an early night knowing that a 5am call had been booked and the next day would see us returning to normality. The holiday was over.

### ***The people of Nepal***

*As with the food, Nepali people are a mixture of Indian and Chinese and vary in appearance and culture accordingly. Most have Mongolian features; black thick hair; wide, high cheekbones with close set dark eyes and a slightly flattened nose. Skin tones tended to be a dark golden brown which complemented the wide white toothed smiles.*

*We found everyone to be a polite friendly race. We saw no aggression (except for the beeping of car and bike horns) and were constantly impressed by their desire to make us feel comfortable in their country. However, they were never obsequious and apart from a small number of beggars and street traders who struggled to take “no” for an answer, we met nothing that made us feel that we were not only welcome in their country, but that they enjoyed us being there. This was so much different to the Purple Parking driver’s behaviour towards visitors to our country at Heathrow!*

*Men’s attire was very much influenced by the west and the tradition for visitors and trekkers to donate unwanted clothes to their team has resulted in a Kathmandu street bearing an unexpected resemblance to Keswick if the number of North Face jackets is anything to go by. Shoes were usually trainers, although away from the city centre, sandals and flip flops were the more usual accompaniment to western slogan tee-shirts.*

*Women don’t appear to benefit anywhere near as much from the tourists and although younger women were frequently seen picking their way along the pitted streets in tottering high heels and short skirts, it was rare to see bare legs and even rarer to see bare shoulders. As in many Asian cultures, older women tended to become more rotund and to wear saris or loose tunics and trousers. No women wore trousers on their own unless they were tourists and westerners.*

*As I’ve said before, there were few beggars. A couple of men with extremely deformed feet sat on the steps of a major foot bridge in Kathmandu and we saw an occasional mother begging for food for her baby. The vast majority of the population appeared to be attempting to make a living with women sitting behind a miniature market stall formed by a bowl containing a few potatoes and carrots being a common sight. Even in the mountains, everyone appeared purposeful and dignified even as they survived in obvious poverty.*

*“There’s no way to get a good job unless you learn English and can use a computer” said Pumba, In fact, the extent of English language was stunning and we never struggled to make ourselves understood.*

*Everyone had a phone! (probably a slight exaggeration, but not far off!). Walking through the crowded streets of Kathmandu, you would think you were in any UK town centre if you could ignore the dust and dirt and just judge by the number of phone users! Even out in the mountains – even at Everest Base Camp – there are phone signals! Our trekking team used their phone incessantly – the front leader phoning the back to check they were keeping up, phoning the lodge*



*to get the kettle on, making social arrangements, putting in a food order to shorten the lunch break – all required a phone signal.*

*So why then didn't our phone work!!! We even wasted 100Rs on a Nepalese SIMS card only to find that our phone was locked against it.*

*As in many Asian cultures, children are integrated into the workforce at an early age and were often seen alongside Mum or Dad, particularly in the mountains. It was festival time for the first week or so which may have given a wrong impression, but more children appeared to be at home than at school. During our time in the city, we saw the "well-to-do" children going to school, but there were enough children on the street to query the Nepalese claim of Education for All.*

*Children frequently tried to make money from tourists and it was not unusual to have a beautiful child holding a kitten or young baby, offering to have their photo taken in exchange for a few coins. The advice is to ignore them and not to give money or sweets to children so that they would view school as a better alternative to begging. I think there is a long way to go before this becomes a reality.*

### **Pimba**

*Pimba has to have a separate section to herself as I think she is a very special person. Pimba was one of our Sherpas – or assistant guides, third in the hierarchy of the team after Pasang (Lead Guide) and Dhanni (Deputy Lead Guide).*

*Every day started with Pimba and Rushan bringing us a morning cup of black tea and wishing us a good morning with her ever ready smile. She spent most days at the head of the trekking group finding the route and setting the rate for the trek and was always attentive and incredibly helpful.*

*"Zum zum!" (Lets go!) was her call to start walking and she set the pace for us to follow. Over the twelve days, we all set our place in the line of trekkers and I usually found myself right behind her – initially because she was the only person I could see over and latterly because I came to value her company.*

*At the time of our trek Pimba was 27 years old.*

*"When a woman is over 23, she is too old to marry" said Pasang*

*A sad thought if true as Pimba is a lovely woman both in looks and personality.*

*She confided that she had an ambition to become a Lead Guide like Pasang, but needs to spend time in England to learn English properly, but this isn't possible without a sponsor as her brother will be the priority to go if her family can afford it. Her English is good, but she is right that it needs to be more fluent if she wants to be able to cope with the egos and expectations of the trekkers.*

*In the first few days she taught me a few words to add to the "Nemeste" (Welcome) that we had picked up from the outset. "Lowsessa" (Please), "Dannibat" (Thank you) and "Metusah" (It is good) allowed me to feel that I was making a small effort.*

*She also taught us the importance of following custom and introduced us to the tradition of walking clockwise around shrines and Bhuddist markers, even when it meant retracing our steps and taking a path between the side wall of a house and a prayer flag pole!*

*I carried a small video camera and Pimba fashioned a sliding string loop so that I could carry the camera safely suspended from my rucksack in case I stumbled. A piece of strong Himalayan string is a fine symbol to remember a woman who made my dream holiday special.*

### **Finale**



As I sit on the plane having gone through about 5 or 6 security checks and “frisks”, I’m looking out at the haze over Kathmandu towards the distant Himalayas and thinking about everything we’ve achieved over the last 18 days. Not necessarily in order of importance or achievement, this is my list:

1. I’ve trekked to Everest Base Camp and stood at the bottom of the path that leads to the summit of the highest mountain on earth.
2. I have climbed to 5500m to the top of Kala Patthar to watch the sunrise over Everest and Nuptse.
3. I survived altitude, feeling few effects (other than my embarrassing faint!) and now know that fitness DOES make a difference!
4. I lived in close proximity to 12 other trekkers and a team of Nepalese guides for over 2 weeks making some good friends and without falling out with anyone.
5. I ate Nepalese food for 18 days and didn’t get ANY stomach upsets either from the food or the water – although in truth we only drank bottled mineral water, so maybe that doesn’t count!
6. I know that I can push myself to limits beyond those I had believed and can keep going when I am tired and cold and suffering from lack of oxygen.
7. I have survived the coldest cold that I’ve ever experienced and apart from a 10 day nosebleed and catarrh (Oh! Haven’t I mentioned those!) I have finished the trek even more healthy than when I started.
8. I will never forget this experience. Ever.

What would I have done differently or changed – again in no particular order

1. Don’t leave your fleece behind. A new one is expensive (though nice!)
2. Trust your down jacket to keep you warm – it’s the warmest thing you’ll ever find!
3. Buy down gloves/mittens. No layers of wool, nylon or thinsulate come anywhere near it!
4. Take Strepsils and/or Polos. The intense cold and low oxygen levels cause very dry throats and although lemon drinks help, its effects don’t last long enough to get from one lodge to the next.
5. Train to walk for longer hours than you think you’ll need. 6 hours a day was a short day’s walk. 10 hours with altitude and steep ascents and descents are a lot more challenging than you think
6. Take – and use – poles!

