

## Everest Base Camp / Island Peak

*March 14 – April 9, 2014*



*Summit of Kala Pattar near Everest Base Camp*

In the spring of 2014, I came across a wonderful opportunity of a lifetime to travel to Nepal and trek in the wonderful sanctuary of the Himalaya Mountains near Mt Everest. It had been a lifetime goal - a “bucket-list” item for several years. I knew it wouldn’t be easy, and some training and experience would be required, but over the last couple years, the pieces fell into place wonderfully. I felt it became a life “masterpiece” that I had to document, so even though it was hard to put the whole experience into words, hopefully with a bit of time and patience, I can begin to share a piece of my story.

Through a wonderful flow of events, I had the opportunity to climb Mt Rainier in August 2012 with Rainier Mountaineering Inc. I feel this was a turning point in so many ways, and that it was in God’s plan all the time. I had been dating at the time, and coming off the high of Mt Rainier is when I made the choice to get married \_ I got engaged just a couple weeks afterward. Mt Rainier set the stage for me to go to Ecuador along with my experience from a recent PBC mission’s trip also to Ecuador. Having the opportunity to climb both Cayambe and Cotopaxi had made me realize my love for the mountains and setting goals. Again I would have never expected to get married just a couple weeks after returning from Ecuador!

Having climbed two 19,000-foot peaks in Ecuador gave me the confidence I needed to attempt a trip to the Himalayas in Nepal. I had hiked with some friends in the Sierra club for several years and talked at length about some of the treks they had done. One older guy in the club had climbed Kala Pattar and Island peak, and while he said they were some of the most difficult climbs he had done,

they were also the most rewarding. I saw that the same company I had climbed Rainier and in Ecuador with (RMI) offered trips to Everest Base Camp and nearby Island peak. My software job at the time didn't seem to be really going anywhere after my manager quit, and my wife Nisha and I had started to talk of taking a sabbatical - after nearly 15 years in the workforce it was time for a break. Shortly after one of my projects got cancelled, I knew my days at the company were numbered, so made the phone call to RMI to sign up for a 21-day trek. Many people seem to hold off on pursuing life's dreams until they are retired. But I knew that in pursuing the goal of trekking and climbing some of the highest mountains in the world, it would soon be now or never.

The longest trek I had made before was 6 days in Peru to Machu Picchu, and the longest wilderness trip I made was a 9-day lower Grand Canyon rafting trip. I knew 21 days would be a stretch, but with wonderful experiences with the people on past RMI trips, and their attention to detail, it should be a great trip. I was actually more nervous about Rainier and Ecuador than Nepal - maybe having accomplished a couple big peaks already took off a lot of the pressure. Plus I felt my main "bucket list" life goal was merely seeing and being close to Mt Everest - I knew I never planned to actually climb the mountain. Island Peak was a relatively minor peak in the area, and even if I didn't make it up Island Peak, I'm sure I would have really enjoyed the rest of the experience. Of course I had no idea I would be there barely a week before a deadly avalanche would sweep away 16 people right near where we were. (And later that year in October, the cyclone Hudhud would bring heavy unseasonable snow, burying dozens of more trekkers). I was never really nervous about getting hurt, but I'm sure I would have thought quite differently if the trip was one year later.

I did indeed get let go from my company in late September, somewhat as expected. The lay-off turned out to be a blessing in disguise - I would be able to use the severance, take a few months off, pursue this big goal, and then look for work again. I knew I had a fair amount of training to get in shape for my time in the mountains, so I was able to use several months of my semi-retiredness to prepare myself. Biking many of the local trails, mapping the levees around the bay, exploring the San Jose downtown and "urban caving" through the Guadalupe river tunnels was a great way to get into shape. Getting to the summit of Pico Blanco in the Ventana Wilderness is something I had been planning for years. This training was also an excuse to get out into the Sierra for a few late-season hikes. Once the Rim Fire had burned itself mostly out I enjoyed trips to Mt Goode, Mt Dana / Gibbs and White Mountain. The training was a mental one as well - hiking some of the high Sierra peaks on my own prepared my mind for the serenity and solemnity for the trek ahead.

When March finally rolled around, it was hard to believe the trip was upon me. I was more nervous about actually making the flight all the way to Kathmandu and

finding the group than making the trek itself. My fears were a bit realized when my travel agent called and said my Singapore airways had been cancelled - I had travel insurance so I wasn't too worried financially, but I was relieved to know they could just pre-pone my flight one day (which would give me one more day of buffer to reach Kathmandu and for my luggage to make it as well!). I didn't realize it at the time, but this was quite a blessing in disguise – even though I would end up having to miss a Schola concert (my flight was the same day as the concert!), I would end up landing on a rather auspicious day - Holi! Luckily I wasn't working at the time, so an additional day of vacation was no problem!

### **The flight to Nepal – March 14-16**

I felt Nisha was commissioning me on a lifetime goal when she was driving me to the SFO airport. I don't think I said much on the 1 hr ride to the airport - my thoughts were in a frenzy. So much anticipation had been building to this point. This was going to potentially be lifetime experience, flying halfway around the world to see the highest mountains and go to actually try to climb a few of them. Although Nisha wasn't at all interested in trying to train and push her body to such extremes, she steadily affirmed my decision to pursue this trek. In fact she continually kept me accountable to make sure I got into shape! She was the wind beneath my wings, and I don't think this trip would have been possible without her.

I knew once I entered the threshold of the airport and Nisha drove off, I would come back as a changed man when I saw her again. An art exhibit in the international terminal featured an array of doors from around the world – I saw those doors as openings to different cultures, and I knew we were going to be going through many on our upcoming experience.

Our 8-hour flight to Seoul was entirely in the daytime as we chased the sun westward, flying over extensive ice fields in the Bering Sea as our plane arced its way northward via a great circle route. A short re-fueling stop in Seoul (and to make us recheck through security for reasons only the bureaucrats high above would ever know), and we were back in the air heading toward the steamy tropics of Singapore.

The Singapore airport was abuzz with activity even in the wee hours of the morning as travelers around the world passed through a “lost world of time” on their way to their destinations. I managed to fitfully nap a few hours (on one of the old couches, instead of paying S\$50 for a lounge) - the clock read 4 am but my body read something late in the afternoon. I met a fellow traveller Hannah who was on her way to start a 12-day Annapurna circuit trek. Seeing her gave me a strong sense of camaraderie. I had already flown 9000 miles on a lonely quest to the mountains, but now I knew I wasn't so alone after all - in fact thousands of people would be making trips like mine.

The weather in Singapore was hot and sticky - the monsoon hadn't quite finished yet, but as we headed north, we crossed well to the north of the monsoon band and the clouds thinned and disappeared almost completely until we nearly touched down in Kathmandu. A thin mid-level cumulus cloud deck lay at the boundary of the smoggy haze below and the brilliant blue sky above at about 12,000 feet, revealing countless snowy peaks above. The Annapurna massif, Dhaulagiri, Lhotse, and finally Everest itself came into glorious view. I looked forward to our next several weeks exploring the mountainous sanctuary above.

Kathmandu was hazy and polluted - a result of its burgeoning growth over the last several decades. Growth of the population has outpaced the growth of the infrastructure, and environmental concerns have not been on the forefront of the population as a growing economy has allowed people to afford luxuries such as cars they haven't had before. I had been to India many years ago and remembered much of the frenzy of activity on the streets. I knew Kathmandu to be a cross between India and something like Vail or Mammoth - a mecca for outdoor activities.

It was March 16 when we landed - two calendar days had passed on my laborious journey halfway around the world and across the date line. Although travel to Nepal had been difficult in just the last several decades, improved international relations allowed me to simply obtain a visa right at the airport - no mailing in your passport months ahead of time. A half-hour wait through a couple lines in immigration, and my passport was stamped with a fresh new visa good for 30 days. My bags came right through customs with a green flag - it was great to breeze right through!

My guide Casey Grom met me at the airport - it was great to see a familiar face again 12,000 miles away! He was my guide 2 years ago on Mt Rainier (the beginning of my RMI mountain-climbing journey), so it was fitting to have him again on this life adventure. It was a short ride to the Yak & Yeti hotel in town and luckily I managed to get an early check-in to settle in, get a shower and take a nap after at least 36 hours of traveling.

### **Kathmandu – March 16-19**

After about an hour nap, I woke up and was far too wired to sleep much more, so I headed downstairs to have a look around. The hotel was at least 3 stars by American standards (probably 4 by Nepalese standards!) - complete with pool, bar, lounge, internet access and a nice restaurant. I wondered if anyone else from our group had arrived yet. I knew I was one of the early folks to arrive since my flight had gotten pre-poned. Climbers frequent the hotel - being fairly westernized, it served as a good "base camp" for incoming groups of foreigners. Chatting with a couple folks who spoke English I found that the Thamel district

was close-by (I thought it was based on Google maps, but I wasn't sure how much to trust Google in Nepal), but they cautioned me that it was a festival day - Holi, the festival of colors. I had heard of Holi (they have it in India too but it's one day later), but it hadn't occurred to me I was going to be right in the middle of it! They cautioned me to go up and change clothes to something I didn't mind getting trashed with colored powder and water. Hmm - do I just stay in and catch up on some sleep and wait for the madness to blow over around me? Of course not! I had to check it out!

Leaving the hotel I noticed the barrage of festivity almost immediately. People all along the street were shouting "Happy Holi" as their faces, shirts and pants were getting covered in red, blue, purple, green, orange and every imaginable combination of paint! Of course, wanting to take it all in, I had my camera out, ready to capture the moment, but now I realized maybe that wasn't the best idea - it could end up getting ruined on the very first day! And I hadn't even met the group to even start the trek yet! I went back to the hotel to get a plastic bag to protect the camera, and also the business card of the hotel - I started to think what if I got lost in the network of narrow streets outside and didn't know how to explain where the hotel was?



*Holi festival of colors*

On the street, one of the first kids I met wrapped his arms around me - Happy Holi! My shirt was ruined already - luckily I had a dumpy white shirt. A few more kids came and we embraced - taking turns applying paint and colors. A water balloon flying down from above landed just a foot away, a near miss. I knew I would have to keep a careful look out! I'm glad I left my wallet and important items in the hotel. I knew many cities had pickpockets - especially with foreigners who had money. Wandering through the maze of streets in the Thamel district brought a flurry of color - gaudy shops selling prayer flags, brass bowls, dentures, glasses, any and all kinds of T-shirts and clothing, even climbing boots and rope. A menagerie of old Hindu and Buddhist shrines dotted the streets - people were doing open-air pujas to Ganesh at a small temple. The

elephant god was covered in as much orange and red color as the people worshipping there.

Although I obviously stood out as a foreigner among the crowd, I don't remember being approached by any beggars asking for money. In many parts of the world, such as Delhi, the level of desperation is to the point where young mothers holding babies would weave through traffic, poking at people and invading your space to try to get their attention to get money. I didn't have my wallet anyway, but now I knew I could feel safer wandering around on my own. I was only assaulted by kids having fun celebrating the holiday - and they were excited to see my camera and wanted to get their picture with me!

Back at the hotel, I changed my first bit of money - it was about 98 rupees to a dollar (an easy conversion - just call it 1 penny = 1 rupee), and I suddenly felt quite rich! It felt like Monopoly money. For a hundred rupees cover charge (\$1), I found myself at a dance club adjacent to the hotel, doing the moves with a bunch of locals. Nepal was making their world debut in the T-20 cricket tournament in Bangladesh and people were cheering on every ball thrown. The music and laser light show was cheesy and the beer was cheap, but it was entertainment to unwind after 3 days of traveling. I didn't venture to ask what was behind the doors marked "Private", but I wouldn't be surprised that being in an area frequented by Westerners and business travelers with money, that acts not meant to be disclosed probably happen there frequently. A casino right next door was amusing - at the entrance was a small Ganesh idol where gamblers could offer a puja to wish them good luck at the roulette wheel. A few travelers were passing the time playing cards and pulling some old slot machines.

I wasn't brave enough to venture out too far yet for dinner - the hotel was the safest bet. I met an older man from Canada on a business trip to Kathmandu - It was nice to have some company. He was working at a bank just down the street from the hotel - it was interesting to hear his story and what he learned from many business trips to Nepal. He mentioned some scenic places nearby to check out. Since I had a couple days to kill before the rest of the group would be arriving, I decided to check out nearby Nagarkot and Bhaktapur. My Lonely Planet guide recommended those places as well, so I was excited about exploring a bit. I was enjoying my period of semi-retirement for a few months so far, and he was saying he was looking forward to retirement soon. I thought of retirement as a time where you could kick back, sit around driving golf carts and lay on the beach, but he was talking about his pair of 16-hand dressage horses (fairly big ones) he was training. He was as fit as ever. I've talked to many people who ended up becoming busier and more active after retirement, and I've felt I've been more active than ever during the last few months. I was off at least 10 pounds by actually getting out on my bike and traveling instead of sitting at my computer at work and snacking on potato chips...

Kathmandu seemed to be such a melting-pot of cultures. The traffic buzzed around in a frenzy – anything with wheels or legs occupied the streets including cars, small trucks, busses, auto rickshaws, homemade looking tractors with open diesel engines haphazardly welded on. And of course there were plenty of bicycles, motorcycles, scooters, people on foot, and the occasional cow. Women in colorful saris were riding side-saddle seated behind their husbands.

Nagarkot was a hill station strewn with Buddhist prayer flags, which on a clear day offered stunning view of the Himalayas. (though when I was there, it was rather hazy and only peeks of the highest mountains were partly visible). Bhaktapur was an UNESCO heritage site consisting of a maze of narrow brick-lined streets, like an urban maze where people had been living the same way for hundreds of years. Each narrow alley brought a new surprise, woodworking craftsmen showing off their trade, potters making hundreds of pots and vases, ascetic “holy men” worshipping at some of the temples by the river, and a menagerie of colorful shops selling textiles, fruits that appeared so exotic, incense, and idols to be worshipped at home. The main temple of Bhaktapur - a 5-storied roofed wonder of architecture with a pyramid of perhaps a dozen large steps served as a center of attention should I ever get too lost while wandering about.



*Nyatapola temple in Bhaktapur*

I wanted to pick up a couple souvenirs, and once a vendor spotted me looking at various items, he started following me – drawn like a magnet to a “rich white guy from America”. He would sometimes press up against me as I was walking and trying to get photos of some of the sights, and I felt trapped, like the only way to “get rid of him” was to pay him to leave. I had a stack of souvenirs I needed to get at some point on the trip, so I used the opportunity to pick up some prayer flags, flutes and small boxes. He sold me the first box for 1000 rupees (about \$10) but then in his desperation, he managed to sell me two more boxes for 500 (250 each!) – the prices started dropping quickly!

Our group was finally all assembling, and we had finally reached the “official first day” of our tour! We met at the hotel with our guide Casey Grom. In addition to me, there was

- Lee from Kansas
- Norm also from Kansas
- Sean from Colorado
- Kelly and Bob from Philadelphia
- Travis from the UK

We would all be making the trek to the Mt Everest base camp and staying for 2 nights if all went well. Then Travis would head back out (he had duties at home and at work) while the rest of us went on to Island Peak. We all felt an immediate sense of camaraderie, knowing we all came from 10,000 miles away for this adventure. Nobody who wasn't serious would have signed up for this! I was bringing my valuable experience on Rainier 2 years ago, and Cayambe & Cotopaxi in Ecuador from the previous year. Others had climbed Kilimanjaro, technical ice-climbing routes in CO, mountains in the Cascades and the Sierras, and the volcanoes in Mexico.

We had a day to tour around Kathmandu as a group. It was nice to get acquainted with the group as we shared experiences and take in the sights of Swayambhunath, Durbar Square, Boudhanath, and the Narayanhity palace where the king and queen and many members of the royal family were assassinated in 2001. The richness of the culture and style of worship was stunning - Buddhist temples with domes 100 feet in diameter and spires with “all-seeing eyes” probably 50 feet tall dominated the skyline. The eyes even adorned many of the doorways, watching you at all times... Monkeys climbed around an array of spires strewn with Buddhist prayer flags.

Hindus worshiped at the temples of Durbar Square including the 9-story Basantapur Durbar. The “living goddess” Kumari made an appearance at the Kumari Chowk. She was chosen thorough an ancient and mystical process to become an incarnation of the Hindu god Durga. She lives in a gold cage and is not allowed to leave except for certain festivals a couple times a year. Guards enforced we all put down our cameras while she made her 5 second appearance - no pictures were allowed. Her face was smooth and flawless - her perfection was auspicious. She must live a life of ease, being worshipped by millions of people, though she lived a life of complete confinement.

We had our introductory dinner in Thamel - we were still weary about the unfamiliar food in Nepal and didn't want to risk any GI issues early in our trip! We ended up eating at a pizza joint frequented by foreigners. We were the only



group there - we were on the early edge of the trekking season. Many groups would be arriving in the next several weeks. In fact another group from RMI was going to be arriving 3 days after our group, but they were going to just be trekking to Everest Base camp and not doing Island Peak. And then another group with Dave Hahn was arriving to attempt Mt Everest itself!

It would be a bit colder but dryer for us, arriving early in the season, and we wouldn't be battling the crowds so much until our way back home. The Everest beer and pizza was refreshing as we shared about our expectations for the upcoming trip. We talked about things we like to collect, such as baseball cards, electronics, or minerals, but I mentioned the thing I looked forward most to collecting was experiences - this trip was going to be an experience of a lifetime.



*Sights around Kathmandu*

We had some leftover pizza so we shared it with a young mom and her baby who were sleeping out on the street between Thamel and our hotel - I felt it was a more noble cause than just handing out money - food was something they needed. I hoped that she would be able to break out of the cycle of poverty - she might be considered an "untouchable". I remember in the Bible when Jesus healed a blind beggar and not only did he heal him physically, he enabled him to pick up his mat and walk and move forward in life, not constantly relying on handouts from generous people. I think the spiritual healing was at least as important of a miracle as the physical one. I said a silent prayer for them as I handed over the pizza.

My bags were sorted and packed. I had everything divided into 4 bags - my backpack was ready for many days of trekking - several layers of clothing, warm gloves and hat, good trekking poles and several extra cameras / batteries. I had my "checked bag" ready - clothes and gear that would be carried by the pack animals. My climbing gear including my mountaineering boots, ice axe, crampons, ascenders and rope would be packed away along with everyone else's climbing gear into a large duffel and shipped to the Island peak base

camp. We'd only be seeing it again in about 3 weeks - so I kept my fingers crossed! Finally I had a small duffel I could leave behind in Kathmandu - after our trek we would be returning to the Yak and Yeti so the bag should be safe there.

### **The Trek Day 1 – March 20**

The alarm buzzed at 4:45 in the morning in the pre-dawn darkness. We were hoping for the best on our nerve-rattling flight up to the mountain village of Lukla. On some surveys they said Lukla was the most dangerous airport in the world. At over 9,000 feet, the short runway was sloped up into the mountain - planes used gravity as a means to slow down fast enough to not hit the mountain just beyond the runway, and planes would take off pointing down the runway, again using gravity as an assist to get enough speed to take off heading back to Kathmandu.

The domestic Kathmandu airport was utter chaos - groups from all around the world were lining up to catch their flights to Lukla. Men and women had to go through the security gate separately. Our bags including our carry-ons had to be weighed, and we ourselves had to be weighed as well in order to balance the airplanes. Both my carry-on and checked bags were over-weight but they let them go through anyway - apparently recently there had been a plane crash and they were tightening restrictions on baggage allowances. I wasn't especially nervous about a plane crash, but I knew if our plane were going to crash we would have ended our lives doing something that we truly loved. I felt we were like astronauts getting ready to head off on a rocket-ship to the moon - we were going to be in another world for several weeks!

The air was crystal clear - the rose-colored dawn was arising over the row of jagged teeth of the Himalayas as we rode the bus to our waiting plane. The full moon and Mars hung brightly low in the sky. It was the clearest weather I had seen yet on the trip (shucks, you didn't need to go up to Nagarkot after all to see the mountains - you could see them from Kathmandu itself on a clear day!) The two props of our Twin Otter were in motion and soon we were lifting off. We were hoping for wheels-up at dawn to give us the best chance of a smooth flight. We were off the ground just a few minutes after 6:00 in the morning. The props were quite loud and thanks to the pilot handing us all headsets we could actually hear what he was saying! We had a few bumps from ground-level turbulence but it was mostly smooth as we climbed to about 7,000 feet, flying over the rich terraced agrarian society of farmers subsisting off the land, the way had been for hundreds of years.

The milky waters of the Dudh Khosi River were flowing down a series of steep cascades, cutting deep and narrow canyons in the mountains. Adventurous rafters could brave some class IV and V rapids through the turbulent waters - I'd

have to come back a week early on my next trip! We came over a narrow ridge just a few hundred feet below our plane - the rows of trees were individually recognizable as we narrowly cleared them. Our plane made a sharp dip as the wind compressed and expanded over the steep ridge - dropping my stomach a bit. A thin dusting of snow covered the hillside on the shadowed side. The roofs of some small huts were frosted and a couple farmers were working their fields getting them ready for a new growing season.



*Flight to Lukla*

I was immediately relieved to see a runway right through our front windshield - we appeared to be right over it, like we were going to land at a 45-degree angle! Normally the runway is far in front and the plane would land gradually, but I remembered the runway in Lukla was sloped. The perspective made it look compressed - like the runway was just a couple hundred feet long and we had to land in a jiffy - there was no option to do a go-around if we missed the runway! I held my breath for a moment and a few seconds later, THUNK the wheels landed on the runway and we quickly rolled to a stop and taxied to the edge of the tarmac, just in time to free the runway for the plane behind us to land. The planes flew in convoys - about 3-4 planes at a time would land and take off almost as if in formation.

It wasn't even 7:00 yet and we were in Lukla, relaxing at a teahouse right next to the runway! Ginger tea and Tibetan bread were served as we watched the second wave of planes making their landings on the steep sloped runway just outside the windows. The morning air was chilly and the fireplace was going. We had jumped from 4,000 to 9,000 feet in just an hour and noticed the thin air almost immediately. Even climbing one flight of steps in the teahouse was tedious - I tried to imagine what the altitude was going to be like 10,000 feet higher when we got to Island Peak! I knew we weren't at all acclimatized to the altitude yet and it would 3 weeks later before we got to our highest elevations.

Our checked bags arrived on the next flight and were getting loaded onto the

pack animals for the journey to Phakding - our first step on our long journey toward Mt Everest. At the lower elevations we were using dzos (a cross between yaks and cattle) - yaks were far too woolly and hot at 9,000 feet - such low elevation! The dzos handled well at most altitudes up to about 15,000 feet, and yaks were most effective above about 12,000 feet. We shouldered our packs and grabbed our trekking poles to start a 21-day journey in the mountains. I couldn't believe it was finally here! It was like being on another planet - surrounded by beautiful mountains over 20,000 feet (one was right across the runway from us!), and beautiful people. We wouldn't see a car for 21 days - people travelled on foot or horse or yak.

The trail was well used and well built - it reminded me much of the Inca trail in Peru - consisting of interlocking stones and built with steps for better traction. The stones were uneven and required a watchful eye on your footing but the going was fairly straightforward. Getting lost was nearly impossible - just follow the yellow brick road. Occasional prayer stones ("mani stones") uttering that mantra in Tibetan language ("Om mani padme hum") became our theme - the ancient 6-syllable mantra referred to the 6 virtues generosity, ethics, patience, diligence, renunciation and wisdom. I knew I would need many prayers along every step of the long journey into the mountains. The mani stones reminded me of my connection with the spiritual world that I needed to maintain. But instead of just following a bunch of stones I felt that wasn't enough to actually utter the prayers from my heart to Jesus who truly had the power to keep us connected to God.

We followed the milky Dudh Khosi river for the next couple hours as we slowly made our way downhill into our first village - Phakding. I had to be careful pronouncing the name - with a slight mispronunciation, it could turn into something a bit obscene! We had dropped to around 8,000 feet as we checked into our settlement to our first tea house - Jo's Garden. The lodge was spartan but homey - the rooms were small but offered decent beds and a bathroom with running water and a "western" toilet (though toilet paper was not included)! The teahouse also included a small shop for many necessities along the trail - Snickers bars, Pringles, SD memory cards in case you ran out, bottles of water and toilet paper. Water here was about 100 rupees, but as we climbed in elevation, every 1000 m the water would go up about 50 rupees. So at our highest elevation, water would be about 400 rupees (about \$4 / liter).

After settling in for a bit and taking a short nap, we had the option to hike up to a nearby monastery. They were going to be starting a service at 3:00 and it looked like we could make it in time. The steps were narrow and uneven up the hillside and I felt again we were on a spiritual pilgrimage to find enlightenment in the mountains. The monastery was beautiful, ornately painted with carvings and grotesque 3-eyed demonic faces on the doors. A group of monks was praying

inside - some kids were reciting prayers and mantras. People were clashing cymbals, blowing “Ricola”-like long horns, burning incense and studying prayers written in small books in the dim light. The prayers seemed quite repetitive, however - I wonder how authentic they were. Were people really praying from the heart, or were they just going through the motions day in and day out. I felt like God had been putting my wife and me on a roller-coaster ride since we got married just over a year ago, with the highs of marriage, the struggles of conflicts at our workplaces, again to the highs of getting to travel around the world. I hope my supplications and praises never fall into such a cycle of repetition of token prayers.

Back at our lodge, we enjoyed a hot dinner of fried chicken over potatoes and tea. The fire was going now and we got to relax for a couple hours over a good game of cribbage (Casey’s favorite) and a good book - I was just finishing a book about the first climbers to summit Annapurna. The clouds rolled in overnight and it got chilly, so it felt good to snuggle up and get some sleep on my first night on the trail. Our Sherpa friends started finding places to sleep on the benches of the tea house - they didn’t have the nice beds like we had. Their dinner was merely rice and lentils and vegetables - they lived a simple lifestyle.

### **The Trek Day 2 – March 21**

Today we were going to be finally entering Sagarmatha national park - we crossed the gate at a small pass near the town of Monjo. Spinning some prayer wheels and studying the pattern in the manual paintings on the ceiling, I contemplated our journey into the high mountains. I held up my National Parks pass for fun (which I had for Yosemite back home) - even though it was only a U.S. pass! But of course Casey had our permits for entering the park so we were soon on our way.



*This was just one of the foot-hills*

An enormous white snowy pyramid stood directly in front of us - I took a picture holding my finger on the tip of the mountain - I’m sure I could have posted it on

Facebook as “me touching the summit of Everest” - the mountain looked like an Everest in grandeur. I checked the map to see if it was even close to Everest and it turned out to be quite far - I think it was Khumbi Yul Lha - 5761 m. Even though we were already around 10,000 feet (3000m), the mountain was almost twice as high as we were, another 9,000 feet up! And Island peak at 6,189 m was considerably higher than the snowy giant right in front of us! We had a long way to go...

We got to cross one of the famous “swinging bridges” over the roaring Dudh Khosi River. Perched a good 300-400 feet above the river, the narrow bridge was only about 4 feet wide (enough for a train of loaded pack animals to go through, but just barely). We had to wait our turn (the bridge for obvious reasons was 1-way!) Prayer flags whipped from the cable railings of the bridge as the wind swirled up the canyon. A second older bridge was about 100 feet below us - a more rugged trail but at least the bridge was slightly less scary! Peeking over the dizzying height I glimpsed the raging white-water of the Dudh Khosi river near its confluence with the Bhote Khosi. We would climb high above the Dudh Khosi but then have to go all the way down to cross it again on the way to Tengboche. I held my camera tightly with the strap firmly around my wrist for photos.

It was a grueling climb up thousands of steps up the slope toward Namche Bazaar once we crossed the bridge. Some clouds were rolling in, providing some relief from the blazing sun from earlier. About halfway up, I was passed by some Sherpa porters carrying massive loads up the steps. One had probably a dozen cartons of fruit, one had boxes of Everest beer (I wanted to follow that guy!), one had stacks of maybe 20 long PVC pipes, and one had a stack of perhaps 12-15 sheets of plywood. I knew each sheet of plywood to be about 10 pounds, so that could have been 150 pounds! He had a special head-band strap connected to his load for better balance. I could have probably just had one of the porters carry me up the thousand feet of steps...

A pack train of dzos came by us - we all pulled aside to let the dozen or so animals pass, and when I looked I saw some large duffel bags indicating RMI on them - those must be our bags! I looked again, and there was my blue bag strapped to one of them - nice! Just ahead was an open level spot - an old lady was selling oranges, a nice treat for 100 rupees! I was able to peek through the trees on one side and glimpse a trapezoidal shaped dark cloud with a white streamer of cloud hanging to the right. I saw the streamer part was moving - it seemed to be some disturbance in the jet stream. But the dark part on the left wasn't moving much. I used my maximal 10x zoom and snapped some photos - after looking a bit more carefully, I realized the trapezoidal shaped form was actually Mt Everest itself! It was ripping through the jet stream, casting a banner cloud downstream. The winds could have been blowing at 100 mph on the summit...

A dusting of snow lay in the shadows as we crested the final ridge into Namche Bazaar - it had rained a couple days ago back in Kathmandu so the snow might have been quite recent. It was quite chilly now, that we were over 11,000 feet. The clouds thickened some more, and it looked like rain or maybe even snow might be close at hand. I was glad we were almost to our lodge - I was hungry and feeling a bit weak - I guess I still had a bit of altitude adjustment to go. Casey mentioned just across the valley was a stunning ice climb - the Losar route up to the Kongde ridge. Ice climbing was the furthest thing from my mind but I marveled at those who could do it well. I would probably have to start taking my Diamox for the trip starting in Namche and I would take a 1/2 pill every day until we passed Namche Bazaar on our way back down - I'd have to see how I felt.

Crossing the large entrance gate at the lower side of Namche Bazaar, we just had to follow "Main Street" up to our hotel. "Main Street" was a series of steps all the way up - like a similar main street in Machu Picchu in Peru - I was exhausted and didn't want to deal with any more steps, but the proximity to our lodge gave me a revitalized energy. We soon turned to the right and there was the Camp de Base lodge - our home for the night. The meat lasagna and tea couldn't have been better! It was wonderful to lay down after lunch and nap for a bit - I was still getting over my tiredness from our 6 am flight the first day and maybe even some residual jet lag of the original plane journey. The hot shower was wonderful - I missed it in Phakding. I was surprised to still be cleaning remnants of the colored powder from the Holi celebration 4-5 days ago - seemed like you could never really get rid of it!

It was snowing lightly outside but I wandered around a few blocks. Changing money at the nearby bank, I felt empowered to go shopping again! I picked up a couple books at a local bookstore - I had finished my Annapurna book and didn't think to bring another one so I was pleased to find "Eiger Dreams" by Jon Krakauer (the same guy who wrote the story about the fateful climb of Everest in 1996 - Into Thin Air). I saw some beautiful artwork - many artists were inspired by the beauty and wonder of the mountains. Various trinkets abounded in shops of curiosities - I made a mental note of some things (no point in buying stuff on the way up - save the shopping for when you were hiking back downhill!). Fresh water bottles, tubes of cookies and snacks would keep me going a bit longer. India was playing Pakistan at the big T-20 cricket match - it was showing on the big TV's at the local Irish pub.

We were all enjoying different books on this trip - I was looking forward to my new one. It was interesting how you can find out a lot about a person about the books they liked, and knowing we all had similar interests I was curious. One of us was reading the Long Walk by Slavomir Rawicz, documenting his escape from

a gulag prison camp and a 4000-mile trek through deserts, frozen tundra and high mountains to freedom in India. It would make our 100-mile trek in the Himalayas seem like a walk in the park. One of was reading *Empire of the Summer Moon* - a story about the rise and fall of the Comanche Indians - a powerful story about struggles to survive. I guess these stories about struggles resonated deeply during our trek - we would be encountering scenarios where we would live fairly minimally by shedding unnecessary baggage in order to reach a goal. I looked forward to blogging about our trek – I journaled every night. RMI was good about posting a blog on their website, giving updates every couple days, and I made sure I had new photos and stories on my facebook along the way. Nisha would appreciate following the story!

We enjoyed a happy hour with a Tuborg beer and an exciting game of cribbage before a good meal of chili chicken and desserts of fried mars bars. The snow was coming down in squalls outside - the dancing flakes reflecting in the lights outside. This would be the last alcohol on this trip until we got back to Namche on the way down. I remember taking just a few sips of cheap red box wine on Cayambe in Ecuador - a wave of delirium hit me at 15,000 feet as the alcohol hit my bloodstream. From this point on, the trek was going to get far more serious as we steadily made our way over 17,000 feet to Everest base camp.

### **The Trek Day 3 – March 22**

It had snowed about 2 inches overnight. Low clouds hung in the valley we had climbed the day before. We decided to take a rest day. We had already ascended quite a bit of elevation and didn't want to push too hard. The snowy trail would make for rather treacherous footing and it wasn't worth the risk. I was hoping for clear weather for the next few days, and an occasional check on [mountain-forecast.com](http://mountain-forecast.com) seemed to show different reports for different elevations of Mt Everest. The mountain weather is amazingly fickle - the clouds could roll in at any moment, obscuring the peaks in a white mist, only to part a couple hours later.

I got to relax quite a bit - a rarity on this sort of adventure trip. I knew without proper rest though our hopes of success would be diminished. I used the time to read, wander the streets, explore the nearby monastery and watch the swirling clouds. A couple rain / snow showers passed over the Dudh Khosi valley but not over us. I wandered on my own a little, passing the mostly abandoned Syangboche airstrip on the way. I think at one time people had landed there instead of Lukla - the airstrip was mostly level and the landing appeared to be much easier, but the higher altitude was harder to adjust to for many trekkers. And the villages lower down would suffer if so many trekkers bypassed them to just fly to Namche Bazaar instead.

We went shopping again in the town - the Saturday Market was going strong, in



spite of the snow and cold. Vendors were selling yak butter, rice, flour, potatoes and vegetables. All types of clothing - shoes, shirts, hats, jackets were for sale for cheap. Kids were playing in the snow as if it was a rarity in Namche. Several artists had shown their masterpieces in one of the shops - scenes depicting the majesty of the mountains with trekkers, swinging bridges, herds of pack animals, Sherpas, and towering peaks. One piece went for \$1000 - I tried to imagine taking it home, but wasn't sure how it would fare on the trek back to Kathmandu! I had remembered seeing an artist nearby our Yak & Yeti hotel back in town - I had his business card so I knew I could go back to him. Plus I didn't want to "jinx" the trek by purchasing anything too early! We went to a clothing shop and found some cheap knock-off clothes that we knew we'd probably only wear for the duration of the trip. It was a bit unseasonably cold, so many of us picked up pairs of down pants for \$5 and a pair of crocs also for \$5 which would be great for wearing at the tea houses when we wanted to get out of our heavy hiking boots.



*Late afternoon light from Namche Bazaar*

Sunset was spectacular - not far from our lodge was a viewpoint high on the ridge overlooking the confluence of the Dudh Khosi and Bhote Khosi rivers. Two separate layers of clouds were streaming underneath us as we watched, and a spectacular sunset alpenglow shone on the 6600 m Thamserku - what a treat! I felt every day and every part of the journey revealed a wonderful surprise. I felt a spiritual affirmation that I was in the right place and God was with me.

Back in the lodge, we warmed up by the fire and enjoyed one last beer and chicken chili for dinner. We got our packs ready for a good walk the next day. The stars came out after the clouds passed - we kept our hopes high for a clear day the next day.

### **The Trek Day 4 – March 23**

The snow from the previous day had mostly melted, allowing much easier travel. A group of school children in matching uniforms and adorable pink faces and rosy cheeks greeted us as we passed. The trail wound its way along a steep hillside as we slowly descended our way through a rhododendron forest on our

way to the Dudh Khosi. The blooms were just starting - it was still early season, but it was a promising sign that spring was around the corner.

We crossed at Phunki Tenga (I remember wrongly as “funky tango” - but that was easier to remember) and got ready for the long climb up to Tengboche. We said hi to the guard there as he checked our climbing permits for Everest Base Camp and Island peak. Unfortunately, our two older folks Lee and Norm were both getting over colds and were having a hard time on the steps on the trail. I was keeping my fingers crossed everyone was going to be healthy as we got higher. I was mostly worried about altitude and GI, but even something as simple as a cold could cause big trouble at 16,000 feet. And the higher you go, the less effective your immune system was at battling sickness. Our porters were quick to help and carry their packs. We were a team and we all had each other’s interests in our minds. I was bummed at having to slow down for others, but I knew I would be immediately grateful if they slowed down for me in case they had to return the favor.

Tengboche is known for its magnificent panoramic views and enormous monastery. The monks were going to be doing their daily service again at 3:00 and it looked like again we were going to just barely make it. Unfortunately the clouds had rolled in and it was drizzling slightly, so the monastery was hidden in an eerie mist. Only a handful of monks were chanting and reciting prayers. I was pleasantly surprised to find that photos were allowed (just do it discretely and turn off the flash and sound), so I could capture some bits of the architecture and highly stylized and symbolic artwork. The Buddhist tradition extended back for thousands of years, deeply rooted in history. Paintings of epic battles, extravagant 3-eyed demonic faces, grizzly animals, heroic gods and goddesses, and colorful trim adorned the temple with a magnificent gaudiness.



*Inside the Tengboche monastery*

We decided to push on a little further to Deboche to the “Rivendell” lodge. I was hoping for a sunset but alas the scenery remained socked in clouds - bummer. I’m sure it was named for a reason - if the clouds parted, I imagined a valley where the elves lived, full of waterfalls and towering peaks. But I was looking forward again to some rest, good food and vibrant discussions at the dinner

table. This time it was speculation as to the whereabouts of the mysterious missing Malaysian airliner - maybe it flew off into space, maybe it landed on a desert island and everyone is still alive but taken as hostages, maybe the oxygen supply ran out gradually and everyone died silently? Nobody might ever know. My dinner finally arrived - I had ordered the "special cheese burger" - my mouth was watering, anticipating a Double-Double like burger from In-N-Out (I hadn't enjoyed a burger for a few weeks and I broke down and had to order one). But to my dismay, even though it was a burger, it was an egg burger (not beef burger), the cheese was yak cheese (with a strong flavor, nothing like American cheese), and it was cold (when do you ever get a cold burger in the US?). And the bun was twice as thick as the patty. I guess it was "special" to some people. I was only able to stomach a couple bites before returning it and ordering a grilled cheese sandwich instead.

### **The Trek Day 5 – March 24**

I slept like a rock overnight, having fallen asleep probably a little after 8:00. It was 6:00 when I stirred awake, the dim morning light diffusing through the window. I peeked out the window, hoping for a view of what we missed the previous afternoon, and it was just a dark lead sky of uniform grayness, bummer. It was just as socked in as before. But as I was getting changed and getting ready to head over to breakfast, I noticed a stream of light coming in the window that wasn't there 15 minutes ago. Miraculously, the clouds were rolling back, like a scroll. I went outside to the patio and watched as the layer of clouds peeled back to reveal Ama Dablam, Nuptse, Lhotse, and finally the summit of the trapezoidal shaped Mt Everest! Small villages were visible across the river, high on a ridge, and down in the valleys. A "banner cloud" of maybe 100 mph winds was roaring over Everest and smaller ones were blowing over Lhotse and Nuptse as the mountains were literally scraping the sky. The jet stream started at about 25,000 feet and the high peaks would penetrate into the river of wind as it tracked around the globe. We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of honey pancakes and chocolate doughnuts and Casey's French-pressed coffee as we soaked in the views.

We started rolling down the snow-covered trail just after 9:00, the shady ground still holding the snow from a couple days ago. The rhododendron blossoms were just starting to bud. A deer scampered in the woods. We followed the long walls of mani stones, again repeating the mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum". We turned some prayer wheels for good measure as well. Ama Dablam shone in all its glory high above the river - the canyon forming a perfect frame.

A catastrophic flood or something must have blown through several years ago - the steel bridge that once spanned the canyon was pushed maybe 100 yards downstream into a twisted pile of scrap metal. The river was calm and serene now, flowing as a peaceful turquoise blue ribbon. A small temporary wooden

bridge spanned the river now. We would see evidence of these intense flash floods even more as we continued further up the mountain.

The trail wound its way up the hillside, approaching the tree-line, as it approached the small village of Pangboche. We were going to visit the upper part of this village - a few old houses and restaurants and small shops offering hot showers lined the street. We were getting to the point where even small luxuries such as hot showers were something to be relished. We were near the exit of a narrow slot canyon in the mountain above where rushing silt-laden glacial snowmelt had carved its way through during floods. I wanted to explore the canyon - it bore a resemblance to the sandstone slot canyons of Zion. But we had an even more important but unusual objective on our minds.

We were going to visit the Lama Geishi - he was an old Tibetan monk who escaped persecution back in the 1960's by fleeing to Nepal. He was probably about 60 or 70 or maybe 80 - his demeanor masked his age. His house was like a small monastery, with simple wooden benches, a fireplace and austere surroundings. His abundance of spiritual possessions made up for his lack of material wealth - he was living more in the afterlife than in this present life.



*Receiving my blessing*

We took turns saying our names, receiving an orange prayer necklace, and saying a prayer for peace. I bent my head low and he placed my necklace around my neck as if I was receiving an Olympic gold medal. He butchered my name probably as much as I butchered the words of the prayer when I repeated it back, but who was to judge! Just reaching this place was an amazing reward, and so far we had only barely glimpsed the high mountains! We took turns giving him a ceremonial katha (an ivory colored scarf with some money tucked inside as

a prayer offering). The money wasn't much for us, but for a man who probably rarely left his house, it was a source of much blessing. The Sherpas are very religious, and climbers on Mt Everest aren't even supposed to start the climb on the mountain without doing a puja to appease the gods above. I said a silent prayer to Jesus for our safety in the mountains. We were going to need many prayers - in fact, a disastrous avalanche was about to strike the Mt. Everest region in just a couple weeks.

Continuing on the trail, we made our way up to Shomare for lunch. I was glad to finally have a chance to sit and enjoy some food - we had taken a bit of time with the Lama Geishi earlier and now my stomach protested a bit! But when we got seated and somebody came to take our orders, he instead said they were "out of food" - we would have to look elsewhere - bummer. A little further up the hill was another place with a rather uninspired name - "Himalayan Lunch Spot" - but they had food... the pizza and Fanta soda couldn't have tasted any better!

We were above the tree-line now - low grass and scattered shrubs dotted the landscape at this point. The views continued to open up in majestic grandeur all around. Ama Dablam lay just across the river. Casey was talking about his summit several years ago. We had just passed the turn-off to the Ama Dablam base camp to the south, and Casey reminisced about his nights at camp 1 and camp 2 high on the southwest ridge to the west of the fluted snowy summit. The slope looked impossibly steep and treacherous and wasn't first climbed until 1961 (many years after Mt Everest). Ama Dablam (meaning "mother's necklace" in Sherpa) would be a dominant landmark in our view for most of our trek from this point on.

A little further on the trail, Casey ran into an old friend - his Sherpa buddy Ming-Ma from the nearby village of Phortse. He reminisced of times from years past - Ming Ma had 3 yaks now and was doing well. He was helping to ferry gear up to the Everest base camp. I felt we were all foreigners, visiting a strange land, but having a personal relationship with at least a couple of the locals gave us a stronger connection. Phortse is on the edge of habitable climate and elevation, and I'm sure times are quite lonely most of the year, but as with the Lama Geishi, he had a calmness and simplicity of life I envied.

The wind was starting to pick up as we gained elevation, and low clouds were rolling in, obscuring the grand views from just a moment ago, but providing an intimacy with our close surroundings. I felt so connected to the landscape - the clouds would come and go as the sun and the snow - it was all part of the rhythm of life in the mountains. Back at home in the US, we spend so much time indoors in climate-controlled environments that most of our daily lives are unaffected by what happened outside. After not working for several months, I had a keener sense on my surroundings, my body, spirituality, the sun and weather that I had

missed after so many years of going into the office every day.

We were soon crossing our final bridge of the day and entering the hamlet of Pheriche. Set in a broad braided glacial river valley, the cluster of buildings clung to the harsh rocky soil by the river. Checking into our lodge at the “Himalayan Hotel” (yet another rather uninspired name!), we were treated to a warm fire, music, and hot tea. The main tea room was mostly empty - it was just our group and a few other small groups. Being still early in the season, many of the trekkers hadn't arrived yet. This would be very different when we passed through the same village in a week, however. A Chilean couple and a Dutch couple were sitting by the smelly yak-dung fire (no trees grew at this elevation, so other fuels had to serve). We swapped stories and wished each other good luck on the trail.

Dinner was a wonderful set of chicken momos, fried snickers bars and mint tea to replenish the body. A lively game of cribbage (which I hadn't played since playing with my grandmother maybe 15 years ago), and a menagerie of old tunes on the radio (including Lynyrd Skynyrd, Bryan Adams and others from at least 15 years ago) made for the entertainment. Halfway through one of our cribbage games, I had to run out and have someone take my place for a couple hands - right around sunset, the clouds lowered, revealing the icy summit of Ama Dablam shining in orange and pink alpenglow above a grey cloud layer at 16,000 feet like a glowing castle in the sky. The sight only lasted a moment and I seemed to be the only one to notice it - a minute later I was back inside, feeling like the vision was from a dream.



*Alpenglow on Ama Dablam*

I felt we were on the edge of camping - there was no light in the bathroom, the rooms were not heated, and there was no running water (the pipes were frozen), but it felt as a luxury hotel near 14,000 feet. My breath felt a bit short in pangs as my body started to relax in bed, so I felt compelled to start taking my Diamox altitude medication after all (I was still fine before this and was hesitant to risk the side-effects).

## **The Trek Day 6 – March 25**

The morning appeared to arrive sooner - like we were closer to the sun. Peeking out the window and rolling back the curtain, it appeared socked in and foggy however - I was hoping for a clear sunrise. But my groggy brain eventually realized the window itself was frosted over with ice - a couple sweeps with a card from my wallet revealed a bright and clear view outside - a fine day for trekking!

We had talked about taking a lay-over day and hiking up nearby Nagartsang or Sonam Ri across the river (I think this was a made-up name after one of our Sherpa friends named Sonam). I was psyched about getting in our first peak of the trip! However, even though it was bright and clear outside, the wind was whipping a mighty 25-30 knots, making a hike rather cold and unpleasant. I was a bit gung-ho, but was advised to not push it too much. Rest was as important as exercise to acclimatize to our new elevation - and acclimatization was key to our success in reaching Everest base camp and eventually Island peak. We instead enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of cheese omelets and French-pressed coffee while hearing volumes of stories of Casey's past adventures. This also gave Lee a better chance to finish getting over his cold and for Norm to get better as well - his cough persisted and he worried about it developing into something worse.

I was a bit bummed to have to skip our first peak, but I also knew our group coherence was vital to our success. I didn't want it to become an "every man for himself" mentality, especially when the goals started to get close. But on the other hand, we had all spent thousands of dollars to get here and didn't want to miss anything. We had some free time after breakfast and lunch wasn't until 1:00 - a few people hung out in the sun room upstairs (it was like a greenhouse and they could nap in the warm sun like a bunch of cats!). Not wanting to miss out too much (I could always nap later), I headed up the trail just behind our hotel to have a look around. Some other people were on the trail heading up to what appeared to be some prayer flags and stupas. The view must be glorious.

It was a huff and puff just getting started on the trail - I had to slow down almost immediately. Developing a cough here would be a bummer, especially for a "non-essential" part of the trek! I didn't want to venture out too far (and I wasn't sure if this was an "official" trail that was a "sanctioned" part of the trek), and I didn't want to get in trouble, but the higher I got, the more compelling the view became and the more eagerness developed to continue further.

The wind actually died down on the trail, and soon I found myself at a row of chortens - large cairn-like stacks of rocks built as if they were memorializing something significant. These "ducks" marked a pass where the trail headed down for some distance before continuing on the ridge up ahead. I saw a bunch of people on a small peak ahead, but once I reached there, I saw even more people on a higher peak yet further, and then even more people on a yet higher

peak. I wasn't sure how far I should go! I figured as long as I was down by 1:00 for lunch I would be OK. A layer of clouds hung in the valley from whence we came - Namche Bazaar was completely obscured, but the peaks behind Namche - Nupla and Karyolung stood out shining way above the clouds. I felt we had covered so much so far, even though we still had about 15 days to go! I was already on my 2nd of 3 camera memory cards - I didn't want to miss a moment!

Coming to a large white prayer flag, it was noon and finally I felt I was at a good ending point. People were continuing up the trail further up, but I felt peace about how far I made it. The panoramic was nearly 360 degrees - behind me, the slope continued up the ridge of massive Pokalde at nearly 6,000 meters topped out. Looking back down toward Pheriche and neighboring Dingboche just on the other side of the ridge from Pheriche, you could see up the Imja valley toward Island peak (our objective in just over a week), Ama Dablam dead center, Taboche, and up the Khumbu valley where we were going to be headed the next day. I was psyched!

Near the base of the trail, I spotted a water-powered prayer wheel. A small alpine stream was channeled to turn a prayer wheel continuously like a paddle-wheel. All day and all night, it would read Om Mani Padme Hum without any human effort required. The water had partially iced up inside, slowing the rotation a bit, but it still churned perpetually. I figured I could go back home and go to my Commodore 64 computer and run a simple program:

```
10 PRINT "OM MANI PADME HUM"  
20 GOTO 10
```

I was back down in plenty of time for a cheese pizza and mint tea lunch - people were reading and sitting by the fire. Apparently I was the only one to venture very far and check out the sights. I felt a sense of pride in what I had accomplished but felt I had to keep it a bit to myself (in case the route wasn't "sanctioned" and I wasn't really supposed to go there). I've explored places I wasn't really supposed to on previous trips and felt I had to keep a secret until the trip was over. At least I would still have plenty of time to rest during the afternoon before setting out on our big day the next day to reach Lobuche.

Pheriche has a small hospital specializing in high-altitude medicine. Norm was able to get some medication he needed for his cough, I was able to pick up some extra sunscreen (I was going through it quite a bit faster than I expected!), and we were able to attend a seminar on altitude and its effects on the body. A small monument stood nearby - a split stainless steel cone with the names of all the climbers who passed away on the great mountain of Everest over the last 50 years. I recalled the "Into Thin Air" accident of 1996 and found many familiar names such as Scott Fischer, Rob Hall, and Andrew Harris who died in the blizzard on the dizzying heights of the mountain. Often one small mistake can



lead to another, forming a deadly chain of failures causing disastrous circumstances.

We attended a 3:00 seminar on altitude awareness - covering the symptoms of high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE), pulmonary edema (HAPE) and acute mountain sickness (AMS). I feared Norm might develop one of these conditions given his cough. I knew he could stay behind or descend if his condition didn't improve, but of course nobody wanted it to get to that point. A rule-of-thumb for climbing was that you should average about 300-400 meters a day, taking a rest day every 1000 m (about every 3 days). Our schedule would roughly adhere to that plan, given our rest day in Namche Bazaar and our rest day here. At the end, he indicated one condition he forgot to mention - HAFE (high altitude farting episodes)! The pressure in the body had to equalize one way or another!

The clouds rolled in by that end of the seminar, once again socking in the views - I saw this as a regular rhythm of the mountains. Dinner was prawn chips, which turned out to be more like a snack of Asian oyster chips... I had to put in an additional order of chicken chili to fill up (but this chicken seemed to be mostly bones - bummer). Kelly only had a few of her noodles so she offered me the rest as a 3rd course after striking out twice with food expectations! We then had to order next morning's breakfast so they would have the order in without making us wait in the morning - by then I couldn't think of eating any more food from there...

### **The Trek Day 7 – March 26**

I was looking forward to hitting the trail at last - the morning dawned bright and clear yet again, and although the wind was still blowing, it wasn't howling like the day before. However, when we sat down for breakfast I saw we weren't all there. Sean had developed some GI sickness and was still lying in bed. Travis had developed an infection and was running a fever so he was still in bed. Bob had developed a bit of a cough. Norm and Lee were still coughing some, even though they both felt a little better. It didn't look too good for our momentum as a team. I started to worry that we might not even make the Everest base camp if we had to go back to Tengboche or Namche Bazaar to rest and get better.

I was still feeling fine and so was Kelly, but we felt discretion was the better part of valor, so we would have to sit and take a second layover day. We had allocated 3 days of buffer in our schedule, and if we needed to sit out another day, we'd only be able to stay 1 night at Everest base camp, or push harder and do 2 days in one in order to stay on schedule. French toast and hard-boiled eggs made a fine breakfast with a hot cup of coffee. I studied the various posters on the walls of panoramas from different points - Kala Pattar, Sonam Ri, and some others. I couldn't wait to see it for myself!

After breakfast Casey was going to take us on a hike for those who wanted. I

was happy to just get out somewhere. It was 6 of us - Casey, me, Bob and Kelly, Norm and Lee (the others stayed back to rest). We ended up hitting the same trail that I did yesterday (so apparently it was “sanctioned” after all!) Norm and Lee made it up to “duck pass” which I remembered from yesterday, but with the slowness from their condition, they turned at that point. We passed the white flag I had reached yesterday. A gleaming white stupa lay just behind as well as a monastery that clung to the hillside, only reachable by paths of narrow winding steps. An old weather-beaten stupa lay slightly beyond on the hillside. Bob and Kelly called it good there, but Casey and I headed on up higher. It looked like we might be able to get to the top of Nagartsang after all! The forced extra layover day would turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

Casey being in much better shape trudged on ahead quite a bit faster than me - my lungs were burning as I tried to pressure-breathe to keep up. I figured I would reach on my own time. But the rocky trail seemed to continue up forever. I asked an occasional passerby if the point ahead was the top, and he said “not quite” - and then once I saw a higher point I figured that had to be it, and again the same response came from the next passerby - “not quite”...

A light dusting of snow covered the shady parts of the trail – causing me to lose the trail a bit, I was climbing a class-2 open rocky slope. I slipped a bit on the snow-covered rocks and nearly bent my trekking poles when my weight would suddenly shift, but I managed to stay upright. I saw it was already getting a bit late, and I wondered if I would make it back down by 1:00 for lunch (would I get in trouble if I was late?) I saw Casey heading back down from the top (maybe he decided to turn around too?) - my first thought was to pretend I didn't see him, so I could pass him and make it to the top, no matter how long it took (it was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission). But soon afterward, he spotted me and said “good job, Matt - just take it slow and steady and you'll be fine. You'll have a great view of Nuptse when you get to the top”. It was the words of affirmation that gave me a second wind to push the last 20 minutes to the summit.

The wind was blowing moderately strong, whipping the white and colored prayer flags in streaming ribbons. A small group was clustered at the rocky summit - one person's GPS registered 5050 m and another registered 5083 m - I couldn't believe we were over 5000m (which was around 16,500 feet). I thought we were going to be just over 15,000 or maybe 15,500 but this was considerably higher. I didn't know what the peak was called (I only found out later it was Nagartsang), so on the way down, I was bragging about summiting “No Idea Ri”! Indeed, Nuptse was shining in its glory, Ama Dablam was gleaming just across the valley, and countless 6000 and 7000-meter peaks scraped the skyline.



*View from the summit of Nagartsang*

It was already almost noon and I knew I would surely be late for lunch - oh well. At least Casey knew where I was. I started bounding down the trail with renewed energy, this time finding the proper trail! Progress was quicker than I expected - I guess I was getting more used to the altitude by now, and I was able to stride with little difficulty.

I reached our lodge about 1:05 just a few minutes late, though people were still just ordering - whew! I had summited my first Himalayan peak - I was stoked and feeling great! I was hoping for the best for the others too - it would be a drag if this was the furthest people would get. But everybody showed up for lunch, including Travis who had taken some medicine, and Sean who was getting over his GI. Lee had his expensive video camera out and Norm had his good camera too - they must have been feeling better too!

The lunch itself was a bit of a bummer - again I had ordered a cheeseburger, which like before turned out to be yak cheese, a veggie burger (this one was potato), and it wasn't grilled - actually it was just room temperature - bummer. But I was hungry and stomached it down anyway. Afterward we got to lie in the sun room for a few hours - I had my Eiger Dreams book and was reading about Jon Krakauer's adventures on the Devil's thumb in a remote part of Alaska. Casey was on his laptop, talking with his coordinator Jeff, trying to come up with a contingency plan for a summer trip to Mt Elbrus, which might end up getting scrubbed due to the volatile political situation in Russia. I was thankful Nepal was stable and nothing too weird was happening with the government (besides an occasional protest on gas prices) - we weren't going to get stranded somewhere or shot or jailed!

The afternoon featured a 2-on-2 cribbage tournament putting me and Casey vs. Sean and Travis - my MIT math skills with Casey's experience in the game would surely seem to give us an advantage, but Sean and Travis held their ground rather firmly - we only won by a narrow margin! We laid out our plans for the next few days ahead - I was excited!

### **The Trek Day 8 – March 27**

Breakfast was at 8:00 - we wanted an on-time departure at 9:00 for our long day up to Lobuche. We would be staying near 5,000 meters now and the altitude

would be getting more serious. Our coordinator Jeff was not having a good day. Although he was fine the previous afternoon, he “crashed & burned” overnight - maybe some bad food or something - bummer. He would have to catch up to us at a later point - we didn't want to delay any further. He took a Cipro and went back to bed.

The rest of us started plodding along the trail - one of the Sherpas was carrying Norm's pack, but everyone else managed their own. Some of us had our headphones in - the music blotting out the monotony of our steps. Every step was a step of discovery for me, however and I couldn't keep the headphones in very long. Casey was describing some more of the ice climbs on the lower slopes of Taboche across the river. They were now partly out of condition being in the springtime, but when the ice was good, they had been epic WI-4 and 5 routes, like the legendary Losar climb.

We passed the pastoral plains of upper Pheriche - slate-roofed huts, stone walls to keep the yak herds in, strings of laundry hanging to dry, and piles of yak dung drying in slabs on some rocks. Most of the trekkers were heading up the hill - only occasional groups were heading down. The weather was finally warming to more seasonable temperatures - it was cooler than normal for most of the last week. The trail was dusty, not just with sand and dirt, but droppings of many of the pack animals. It was a good time to start wearing buffs - not only does it keep your face warm, it helped keep in moisture to prevent your throat from drying out in the dry high-altitude environment. And it filtered out the germs loosened in piles of dung left on the trail when hooves and feet stirred it up.

The trail started heading up a steep rise to the right at the end of the flat glacial valley - we were heading into a hanging valley where the Khumbu glacier once spilled into the broad valley from where we came. Pressure breathing was a necessity - especially now that I was wearing my buff. Several trains of pack animals passed by - they seemed to pass as a steady stream now as we got closer to Everest base camp. A Sherpa I was following on the switchbacking trail had Bollywood music blaring from his cell phone.

We soon came to the small settlement of Tugla near the river just downstream from the snout of the Khumbu glacier. It was a small village consisting of just a couple tea-houses and small shops. However, just recently the town used to be much larger - a catastrophic flood back in 2007 washed away a significant portion of the village. A distinct break of the alluvial deposits just outside the village was visible, a testament to the power of the rushing water from the glacial outburst flood. Such floods have occurred for centuries, but are becoming more common as the climate is warming. An ice dam would form as the glacier melted, and as the water backed up, it would cause the dam to release catastrophically, causing a major flood. We would see the evidence of these

floods further in our trek near Imja Tsho lake by Island Peak.

After a tea break at one of the remaining small teahouses, we continued up a long hill on the way to Lobuche. This was going to be a test - with our packs and sustained climbing for at least 1000 feet, our group was going to slow down considerably. I was happy to have done well on Nagartsang the previous day, but I knew we were going to be sleeping at the higher altitude at the end of the day. It felt like climbing the fire road of Mission peak back at home, though a lot slower! A girl on the trail turned out to be from Santa Clara University nearby home - it was a small world! And the conversation lessened the pain of the grueling section.

Soon we were cresting the hill where we saw what appeared to be a bunch of spiky rocks - an inhospitable wind-swept wasteland. We were far above the tree-line now. Coming closer to the spiky rocks at the top of the terminal moraine of the Khumbu glacier, I saw many of them were covered in prayer flags - they were chortens, constructed as memorials to people who had died on Mt Everest in years past. I recognized the names of some of the unfortunate climbers - Rob Hall and Scott Fischer to name a few. It was a blast of reality - every climber on the mountain would be risking his life and it was a real possibility that he would not make it back down alive. A major avalanche would sweep through the Khumbu icefall in just a couple weeks, adding another 16 memorial stones to the memorial.



*Memorial*

Higher up in the mountains, climbers' bodies had been left to rest in-situ in the places where they perished, often right along the main trail. I had seen a body being carried down Mt Rainier when we were descending from the summit back in 2012 – a humbling experience. It showed the reality of the risks people took on their pursuit of the heights.

The wind was blowing and the clouds were coming in as we rested behind one of

the big stones. I said a silent prayer for peace and safety as we got higher on the mountain. Some light snow had fallen, mantling the ground in white further ahead. I had to layer on another jacket - starting to put to use some more of the expensive gear I had rented. I had purchased a pair of down pants in Namche Bazaar a few days earlier and now found them rather useful!

It was a fairly level and easy last part of the trek to our lodge in Lobuche - we were in probably the nicest accommodation! We were staying at the "Himalayan Eco Resort" which featured hot showers - nice! However the showers only worked between 2 and 4 pm when the pipes were not frozen. You would have to put the water flow on low, turn on the propane gas, and then adjust the gas pressure and water pressure to make a good temperature and flow. If you wanted the water hotter, you would have to sacrifice some flow, and vice versa. I cranked it up until the thermometer read a steamy 45 degrees (C) and let the water soak away my sore muscles. A late lunch of spicy beef momos and hot chocolate warmed me up nicely too.

We had some free time in the afternoon, and we were in a unique location now on the edge of the Khumbu glacier. According to the map, the glacier was right across the lateral moraine hill just outside our lodge. Of course, most everything involving glaciers was farther away, bigger, and more difficult than they first looked. But I went out a little way to explore anyway. A small trail headed up the side of the moraine, leading to another hill behind, and yet another hill - it looked short, but finally, I saw a bunch of tall cairns. The view was magnificent all around - the vast Khumbu glacier flowing down the valley on one side and the majestic mountains all around. I paused at the highest cairn to take some photos and just look around. The glacier was actually a good 100-200 feet below the rim of the moraine. The map indicated a trail that went over Kongma La pass, but when I got there, the trail dropped down a treacherous sandy slope to the glacier below. It was enticing to try and get down to the ice and explore a little. I stepped down a short way, but the ground seemed to crumble below my feet - getting down to the glacier probably wouldn't be too hard, but getting back up would not be fun.

The ice let out a couple creaks and pops far below - it was in motion. Several small rockfalls clattered down onto the ice. The ice was riddled with small frozen lakes and caves where water had flowed where it found weaknesses in the ice. Much of the ice was "dirty" looking, covered with rocks and pebbles and occasionally large boulders. A few miles up the glacier I could see where the glacier made a turn to the right, hiding behind Nuptse. I believed Everest Base Camp to be near where the glacier turned. It looked just a little ways, but according to our itinerary, it was still 2 days away!

Back toward our camp, I could see a small blue sign with a white triangle on it - I

pulled out my binoculars to see what it was. Someone else on the trail said that was the famous “Pyramid of Lobuche”. Pyramid of Lobuche? I hadn’t heard of it, but decided to walk over to have a look. Again, it looked close, but was probably a 20-minute walk to get to it. My water was out and I only had a little trail mix with me - I probably should have skipped it, but I wasn’t sure if we’d have another chance to see what it was. It turned out to be a vast pyramidal shaped structure hiding in a small valley. Weather stations on the nearby hills recorded changes in the climate, tectonic uplift (the Himalayas are rising up 1 cm a year, though they are eroding down at about the same rate), rainfall and temperature (global warming is changing the climate in many ways). There was more than I wanted to read at the moment, but I marked it down to read about online when I got back home.

Dinner was “rara noodles” with eggs (like Ramen) - a food I probably got 10 for a dollar when I was a student back in college, but they sure tasted good for dinner that night! A cup of hot tea and a few games of cribbage by the yak-dung fire and I was soon asleep.

### **The Trek Day 9 – March 28**

The morning at Lobuche was clear and cold - ice had formed in my water bottles and patches of frost glazed the windows. The water tub by the toilet had a 1/2-inch thick slab of ice on it - after doing your business, you would have to break through the ice with the small bucket to clean yourself - a cold wake-up on one’s hind quarters! I awoke after a fitful night of sleep - the 4,910-meter altitude was having its effects on my brain, manifesting in a series of strange dreams.

Several of the small puddles outside had frozen and some water buckets had 12-inch diameters “frisbees” of ice from when the water froze overnight. Tossing one of the frisbees to Sean, he gave the frisbee a good kick and it shattered into a million pieces! I felt we were kids again in a wonderland of discovery. The Sherpas had an infectious laughter and a calming demeanor as they watched - something that would prove quite valuable in the intense days ahead. I still can’t believe there were serious fights between climbers and Sherpas last year on Mt Everest...

The jet stream was moving south again - lenticular clouds were whipping like flying saucers over many of the high summits. The trail was getting increasingly rocky and loose. In fact one of the porters slipped on the trail and lost his load - a couple of us ran over to grab it before it rolled down the hill - whew! We passed the Pyramid research station I had seen the previous day - though we didn’t stop this time. The day was rather short since we hoped to go up Kala Pattar in the afternoon if the weather was nice. I was really looking forward to Kala Pattar - it was famous and it brought the signature postcard views of Mt Everest. Casey said if it wasn’t good, we’d try again in the morning, and if it was still not good,

we'd try to hit it on the way back (though it would make for a really long day!)

Our resort was soon coming into view after a mostly level hike. We were staying at the Gorakshep Yeti resort. Lunch was chicken noodle soup - something easy to digest since now we were at some more serious altitude at this point - almost 17,000 feet. Gorak Shep is right on the edge of the Khumbu glacier as well, several miles higher up. The formidable unclimbed Spider Wall on Nuptse towered over our heads to the right - a series of dykes made a spider-web pattern on the sheer face.

After a break for lunch, we had plenty of free time - we decided to pass on Kala Pattar and just rest instead. It was a bit breezy and some clouds were blowing around, so most like Everest would be obscured, making it not worth the hike.

I had to get out at least some to stretch my legs without a pack on, so I went over to the nearby moraine to check out the glacier. Here the ice was white all around, a dazzling array of peaks and spires caused by the uneven melt-patterns of the glacier. Occasionally, frozen lakes with large frost-heaves were visible across the glacier. Ama Dablam looked like the "Paramount Pictures" mountain (I wondered which mountain it actually was - it had to be from the Himalayas somewhere!) Sections of the glacier had calved, revealing deep blue ice caves and fat columns of ice.

It appeared the clouds were thinning and it was warming up. It was only 1:00 and I saw the trail across a large dried lake next to our village at Gorak Shep. I decided to wander a little, maybe just going up a little ways to see if I could even see Mt Everest at all. I moseyed along the trail, talking with some Koreans as we huffed our way up the switchbacks. The mountains came out in a dazzling array of peaks all around. The roaring banner cloud over Mt Everest was beginning to part, revealing sections of the black trapezoid high up. After surmounting the first plateau on the trail, I realized the summit of Kala Pattar was in sight straight ahead! Not wanting to miss a "bucket-list" item of visiting Kala Pattar, I continued up the trail just in case the weather would turn later on and this would be my only chance (even if the rest of the group didn't get a chance - I guess there was a bit of "every man for himself" mentality after all).

The trail continued onward, past a series of cairns, Athabasca-style rock arches, and prayer flags draped over some small stupas. The wind picked up moderately, but not too bad as I approached the summit. Prayer flags blew all around. Without a pack I moved quicker than I expected - I made it from the base to the summit in 1:15 - about the same as Mission peak back near Fremont back home in CA. The view was stupendous - spanning from Mt Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse, down the Khumbu valley, past Ama Dablam and countless other peaks over 7000 m. The Hillary step to the right of the summit was clearly



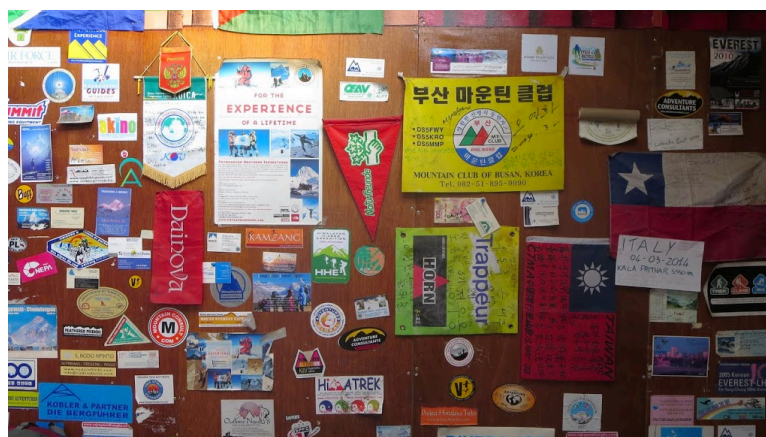
visible. Lobuche peak was just behind me, glaciers streaming down its faces. Several frozen lakes lay in the adjacent valley.



*Panoramic view from Kala Pattar*

It was a quick 40 minutes back down the sandy trail to Gorak Shep. The wind had kicked up more and by the time I was near the base of Kala Pattar, the clouds had rolled in considerably, obscuring most of the peaks. Light snow flurries were falling by the time I got back to our lodge around 3:00 in the afternoon. A short nap and a couple chapters of my Jon Krakauer book were very satisfying. My legs were feeling great and the altitude wasn't bothering me as much anymore - I think I was finally getting a bit more acclimatized.

Dinner was mixed pizza (mushroom and cheese) - the lodge was quite full as the trekking season was coming into full swing. Banners on the ceiling of our lodge at Gorak Shep memorialized brave groups who had battled their way to the heights from all around the world. A Korean group made it to Kala Pattar (5,500 m) and a German group made it to Island Peak (6,189 m) and many made it to base camp (5,348 m or 5,353 m or some variation around there). I wondered if we would be able to leave a T-shirt or banner or something boasting of our adventure. I felt we had to make the summit first though - I felt the adventure could get jinxed otherwise. My wave of superstition returned.



*Banners from groups all around the world*

I just wanted to relax by the fire, soak in some yak dung fumes and read - it was going to be a cold night, and sleep would probably be rather uncomfortable.

Some people sitting next to us were on a year-long trip, traveling around the world. I had already been off work for about 6 months, and if my wife got her voluntary package at work (they had offered packages last year and she was hoping the offer would come up again), maybe I could take 6 more months off and travel with her for those 6 months. I couldn't be away for more than about a month at a time like they were, but a year-long sabbatical sounded very nice!

### **The Trek Day 10 – March 29**

Several of us were woken up in the wee hours of the morning as a group of “die-hard” hikers woke up for a pre-dawn start to climb Kala Pattar. After hiking up there on a whim the previous afternoon, I was surprised at their unnecessary effort - the hike was strenuous, but felt like a higher-altitude version of Mission Peak.

The weather was cloudy in the morning - not much sunrise, so I felt bad for the early-bird hikers who busted out of camp so early in the dark and cold. Our group slept in, enjoyed breakfast at our spartan but relatively luxurious lodge at Gorak Shep before getting our packs ready. It had snowed slightly overnight, glazing the roofs in a thin mantle of white, though the snow would be mostly gone by the time we even finished breakfast.

The weather was starting to clear, though the wind was still racing over the high peaks, shrouding Everest and Lhotse in long banners of cloud. I was fortunate to have a good view of Everest the previous afternoon when the clouds parted. After getting our packs ready, we were ready to set out. Today was anticipated to be quite a big day - we were going to head up Kala Pattar up one route, and then down a different route over the back-side of the mountain, which would short-cut us back to the main trail toward the Everest base camp. Casey would take Norm along the main trail, bypassing Kala Pattar - the base camp was our true objective and we tried our best to make sure all 7 of us made it. Besides we all had our fleeces we got ahead of time indicating “Everest Base Camp – 17,575 ft”. Nobody wanted to miss it! Bob had lost his phone several days earlier, but somehow the device turned up in the morning – a good omen for our next part of the trek! Again, I don't believe I'm all that superstitious, but sometimes I couldn't help it.

I didn't understand why the other group had to wake up so early to try to catch sunrise on Kala Pattar - hiking during the morning was so much easier! Our group moved slowly - probably 2/3 the speed I did on my own the previous afternoon. The bottom 1/3 was quite steep, leading up to the plateau for the middle 1/3, before hitting the steepest 1/3 at the top. A helicopter was landing on the plateau - maybe to pick up some unfortunate hikers who realized the peak might be a bit too much for them? We passed a number of folks from the group who had left early - they were looking rather tired.

The views expanded as we continued upward, pressure-breathing every several steps. Again this would prove to be quite valuable as we got close to our final goal - Island Peak! I was feeling pretty good about the altitude at this point, having done fine on Nagartsang a few days back and Kala Pattar the previous day. I practiced "rest-stepping" along the way as well to conserve the muscles in my legs – today was to be a long day. Although the scenery was the same as yesterday and we were on the same trail, I felt the exercise was excellent preparation and couldn't hurt. So far my Diamox was working wonderfully, and the worst I had felt in the last several days was just a mild headache, which was relieved by a couple Advil's. I felt very fortunate and that I had a good shot at Island peak in a few days, given that our gear all did indeed arrive as it was supposed to, and that the weather was decent.

The upper part of the mountain again seemed to go on forever - the featureless rubble slopes hid any form of scale of the top. Our Sherpa friends Gelji and Gayloo were bounding up the trail - for them the hike seemed like a walk in the park. I thought I was doing pretty well, but seeing Sean a couple hundred yards ahead, I envied his ability - having grown up in the mountains of CO, he seems to have adapted well. I had to stop every few minutes - I had many excuses for taking photos! I would occasionally look back and try to gauge how high we were but the distances seemed meaningless in the endless realm of the grand snowy peaks. The tents of Everest Base Camp were clearly visible and it looked like they were far below, although they were nearly level with us. The slopes were rather deceiving.

The last 1/2 hr of the hike seemed to go on forever and time on my watch slowed, as if the geodetic effect of general relativity slowed time the further away from the earth we were (although in actuality the geodetic effect works the opposite way!). By the time we were surmounting the final set of boulders, about 1.5 hours had passed, although it felt more like 3 or 4.

The wind was quite a bit less than the previous afternoon, and the peaks came out nicely, although clouds still shrouded much of the top of Everest. I was quite exhausted but satisfied. Gayloo our Sherpa friend had so much energy - he was smoking a cigarette and singing some Sherpa songs - if I had any breath left maybe I would try to sing something too, but that would have to wait until another time! After another 20 minutes or so we all congregated on the summit and celebrated with some "hero" shots! We hugged and celebrated our success, and Gayloo gave me such a big hug that even though he was less than 5 feet tall and probably weighed less than 100 pounds, he picked me up and started to sing again about the mountains while holding me in his arms!

After a bit of lunch, I got to explore around the summit block a bit, finding a

couple small arches and a fun class-3 catwalk traversing a ledge behind the airy summit. Meanwhile Sean had climbed up to the prayer-flag laden summit pinnacle to hang out and meditate in the grandeur of the scenery - it was an unusual perspective where he looked like the king of the mountain! I thought about stringing a set of my own prayer flags on the summit, but realized I had packed them in my "checked" bag, which was on the back of a yak headed toward base camp - oh well.



*Sean at the summit*

Heading back down, we took a tack to the left, shortcutting down some gravelly class-2 slopes toward a couple frozen lakes. The going was tedious and a bit sketchy as we ventured off-trail on our short-cut. Not wanting to risk a turned ankle, we continued deliberately and slowly toward a small meadow where we could make out hints of the trail further ahead. Navigating from cairn to cairn, we slowly made our way down, heading roughly toward the Khumbu glacier below and angling a bit to the left toward the distant tents. By the time we were nearly down, we discovered that a recent landslide had taken out a chunk of the short-cut trail, so we found ourselves on a loose and sandy traverse across steeper slopes than planned. I started to worry a bit that somebody might end up getting hurt, and seeing that people were taking different paths down the undulating hillside, we were starting to get separated. Sean and I were almost down to the trail - we could see it ahead when a large pack-train of yaks passed by with their cow-bells jingling. It was a welcome sight! Looking back, however we could see Lee struggling quite a bit with his footing. Seeing the helicopter earlier in the day, I really didn't want to see another one become necessary. Fortunately he was quite careful and except for a couple slides down the gravelly slope, he was fine and we were soon on the trail.

The 3 of us continued up the trail and were relieved to see the others in a few minutes - they had taken a different route, which was longer but didn't have the sketchy traverse. I thought we had missed a turn and they thought they had missed a turn - that's when we all realized the trail had been washed out by the

landslide. We were happy to all be together again and safely on the trail. Base camp would just be another hour up the trail.

Heading up the lateral moraine on the left side of the glacier we headed up the valley toward the distant blue and yellow specks that were going to be home for the next couple days. It was hard to imagine that for many climbers it was to be their home for over a month! The glacier next to us was mostly white now - the bouldery debris was mostly gone and the corrugated alien shape of the ice revealed itself. The ice was pock-marked with circular melt-water pools that had thawed and re-frozen a multitude of times, each time reshaping the boundary around the pool. Enormous whale-like frost heaves in the center of several pools showed the power of the expansion of the ice when it froze.

Some pools were connected to a vast underground network of tunnels and caves - a set of "cut and closure" caves connected the plumbing underneath the ice. As meltwater flowed on the ice, it would cut a canyon downward, and as the ice moved, plastic deformation would close the canyon, visible as a seam above a newly formed tunnel. The tunnel would migrate downward over time. A group of cavers several years ago had brought rope, anchors and gear for rappelling into crevasses, and rafts for flotation to carefully navigate the icy underground rivers. The pictures in a recent issue of the NSS News were fantastic - crystal cathedrals with ice columns 6 feet in diameter stretching from floor to ceiling, multiple ice floors several feet apart with crystalline passages in between, and scalloped walls refracting an electric blue eerie glow from the cavers' headlamps.

The frozen pale blue of one pool beckoned exploration, but peeking over the edge of the trail on the lateral moraine showed perhaps a 200-ft steep unstable slope where a mis-step could cause a shower of soft-ball sized rocks to start raining down. As the ice has been melting, the unstable moraines have been deposited right at the natural angle of repose for the gravelly debris. Without a trail, passage down would be quick but dangerous without a good helmet, and passage back up would be nearly impossible without a rope - every step would send you sliding back to where you started. My imagination ran wild with what lie below. The layered ice was folded like the pages of a phone book from the forces of the motion of miles of glacier upstream.

We were finally to the end of the lateral moraine and to the point where the trail headed down a switch-backing path onto the glacier itself. The angle of the moraine was much easier now, and the trail was well-packed, allowing for easy passage. We were warned, however to keep moving through this section - no stopping for photos or chatting - the slope was quite unstable and rockfall was common. The slope was quiet for us and we passed quickly through. It looked like we were still on a gravelly rubble-pile when I saw we had to make a few steps up as the path winded around to the right. Suddenly my right foot slipped -

I didn't realize it, but we had already crossed onto the glacier itself. Underneath a thin layer of debris, the ice lay hidden. In fact just around the corner was a deep crack, maybe 40 feet deep, revealing many layers of ice below. I suddenly realized the enormity of the glacier, and even though we were barely on the edge of it, it was a formidable mass of ice.



*Approaching Everest Base Camp*

We reached a viewpoint where we could see the gleaming white ice in the distance. The tents were quite close now - some expeditions had dozens of Army-like tents in many rows, some expeditions had state-of-the-art modern geodesic shaped dome tents, and many expeditions were still getting their gear together - they would be arriving in the next week or 2 to take advantage of the pre-monsoon climbing season while the jet stream pushed to the north and before the rains from the south started to hit. People had set up cairns and prayer flags as a memento for reaching this spot. Many parties turned around at this point and went back to Gorak Shep, but we had a home waiting for us for the next 2 days. We celebrated our arrival with cups of hot Tang, pineapple cream cookies and fruit. I felt we were like astronauts here - we were in such a wild and inhospitable place. I remember the astronauts on the Mercury and Gemini programs in the 1960's would drink Tang - if it worked in outer space, it could work at 17,000 feet on a glacier!

The last "20-minute" section to reach our camp seemed to take over an hour - the undulating path over the glacier was uneven, slippery in sections, cold, and it forced you to stay on your guard! With each set of tents we passed, I thought we were getting to ours when we instead kept going - it would be just another 20 minutes and we would be there...

At last we made a left turn up a small path to our waiting tents. The bathroom and shower were still under construction, and as a team, we would be spending part of the next day getting base camp set up for a party of RMI climbers to settle in for the next month to make a summit attempt on Everest itself. It felt wonderful

to be part of something greater - it wasn't just about us reaching the base camp of Everest, but we were in a way participating in an entire expedition to the summit! I looked forward to following the blogs and updates over the next couple months as different parties went up to make their summit bids.

I was relieved to finally reach our camp – our tents were waiting. We had a dining tent, kitchen tent, recreation tent, communications tent, several storage tents, potty tents (a #1 and a #2 – though one was still in progress), and our sleeping tents. It was a small “tent city” – like that of Burning Man in the NV desert. Our tents were bright yellow and blue, cheery colors in an otherwise bleak landscape. I imagine if they were olive-drab Army-colored tents, they might look too depressing after many weeks...

Jeff, who had come down with GI joined us – he had been sick for 24 hours but with revitalized energy, ran up the trail and met us for dinner – nice! Kumar, our chef cooked us pizza, beans, noodle soup and tea – even better food than we had in any of the teahouses. And all that food had to be carried up on the back of yaks – amazing!

Since the “men’s number 1” bathroom wasn’t totally ready yet, we found the next best place to do our business - let it fly in a crack! Indeed there was a small crevasse about 10 inches wide and about 8 feet long behind our camp - I wondered how much we would be altering the ecosystem during our business and contributing to global warming... Just be careful to not slip and fall in!

I had a brief wander around camp afterward, exploring the icy heaves of the Khumbu glacier all around us. I couldn't believe we were going to be sleeping on a massive river of ice for 2 nights! My tent was ready and my poufy Mountain Hardwear Wraith sleeping bag was unrolled, ready for the first true test of its warmth. It was rated to -20 degrees (F), and even though the air temperature was only slightly below freezing, the lack of oxygen in my blood made it feel quite a bit colder. The clouds were glowing a coral pink just before I hit the sack.

I took a hot water bottle to bed after dinner - not only did it keep my feet in my sleeping bag warm through the night, it also meant my water wouldn't be frozen in the morning!

### **The Trek Day 11 – March 30**

The glacier under my tent creaked and groaned throughout the night - I would be awakened every hour or so with sounds of pinging or popping underneath and small vibrations ringing through my sleeping pad. As the ice contracted when the air cooled, the ice would snap in places. It was a bit unsettling, though we were assured the glacier wasn't going to crumble and our tents were going to suddenly fall into a 30-foot crevasse in the middle of the night. The glacier always moves

very gradually, just a few millimeters with each pop.

I slowly awoke, needing a few moments to gather in my mind where I was. It sounded as if a river was flowing nearby our camp – I was thinking about the cut and closure caves from the previous day. But everything was very frozen – where could the rushing water be? I then wondered if it was wind instead – my groggy mind was still processing where we were. I soon came to realize it was the roar of the wind over the high peaks just a couple miles away. Although the wind was dead calm at base camp, it could have been blowing 80-100 mph over the high peaks...

Breakfast was almost ready, but I needed to visit the “men’s number 1 crevasse” one more time. After my business was finished, I noticed behind me just a little further out from our camp was one of the meltwater pools like we had seen on our hike in the previous day. I had been dreaming about exploring around one of them, and now was the perfect chance! I felt I was dreaming - it was a magical place - a beautiful aquamarine frozen ice skating rink about 50 feet in diameter with a cracked frost-heave in the center. Carefully walking out on the frozen lake (the ice had to be several feet thick, but you could never be too careful!), I started making my way around. I’m glad I never went out without my camera handy - it often proved useful in unexpected circumstances...



*Ice formations near camp*

The ice was pristine all around - a wonderland with frozen fractal designs all around that few people probably ventured into. Most people around base camp were focused on getting the gear ready for a summit attempt instead of exploring in their own backyard around the tents! The lake was connected to another smaller lake nearby - a crevasse must have opened up at one time and the meltwater flooded from one opening to an adjacent one. Wandering around the whale-like frost heave, I came toward a crystal cathedral of icicles and ice-flowstone. It was a crevasse - forming a frozen slot canyon about 3 feet wide and maybe 20 feet high that went back for maybe 40 feet. I ventured in a short



ways, fascinated by the gleaming crystals reflecting the morning sunlight, being careful to avoid risking a fall by crunching through a thin section of the ice floor.

The whole venture was probably less than 5 minutes, though it felt like a dream lasting several hours. Hiking back up the snowy hill behind our tents, I came to the breakfast tent right as the ginger tea was being served. Hot breakfast was a treat - tea with soup and bread. I rarely had hot breakfast at home - I would have never guessed I would have it more often at 17,000 feet than at home!

A telescope had been set up, pointed at the Khumbu icefall just ahead. In the next few weeks, the Sherpas would be making their way through the icefall, setting ropes and ladders to form a highway for climbers and Sherpas to start ferrying gear up to the higher camps to put together a summit bid. The cracked surface of the icefall looked like the skin of an enormous reptile - constantly shifting with house-sized blocks of ice breaking apart and re-joining as it flowed down the undulating slope. The base camp is as far as we had to go - actually it was as far as we were allowed to go - there was a line near the bottom that constituted an official entry onto the climbing route on Everest. You would need an \$11,000 permit to cross that line.

After lunch, we finished building the "number 1 toilet". We finished collecting some rocks and chipping the ice to level the floor (swinging the pick was quite hard work at 17,000 feet!) The "hole" was the space between 2 large flat rocks, and you would do your business the local way of squatting. Setting up a tarp and securing it with ropes and heavy rocks at the bottom, we finally had the facility ready. It was rewarding to do something useful at base camp - we had come so far, and we knew we were quite privileged to get to use it for a couple nights. After working on the toilet, we installed holders for hand sanitizer and built some racks of shelves for the communication tent. Some solar panels had been set up, and we could charge our cameras and phones - with the cold and high altitude, the batteries were struggling to stay charged.

Meanwhile the Sherpas were getting the hot shower set up. Propane tanks had been hauled up in the last few days, and now the heaters were hooked up. We had about a 2-hour window to get a hot shower - too early in the day, the pipes were still frozen, and too late in the day the hot water would run out. Patience was a virtue, but it was richly rewarded with a steamy hot shower - the first I had in over a week, since although many of the lodges had showers, very few of them had working hot water, still being early in the season.

At 3:00 we had the option to wander around on a tour of the beginning of the route to Mt Everest. We were allowed right up to the point where climbers would "crampon-up" to start their assault on the highest mountain on Earth. Our crampons were en route (supposedly) to Island Peak - we would be using them

shortly, but not here (unless we were willing to pay \$11,000)... The ice was dazzlingly white once we got closer to the center of the glacier, far enough from the moraines and slopes where debris would regularly fall and collect on the ice. A small creek was flowing, at times on the surface of the ice, and sometimes below - you could hear the meltwater rushing. Not wanting to risk a mis-step, breaking through and soaking our boots, we found a good place where the creek was on the surface and shallow enough to cross easily. The wet ice was slick but with trekking poles and no packs we made it carefully across.



*Official start of the climbing route up Mt Everest*

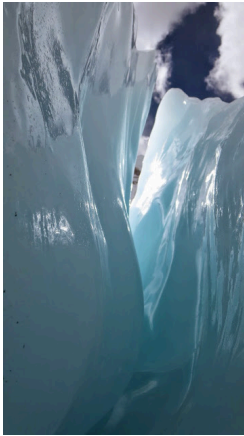
A large flat rock was standing on a pedestal of ice, resting at an angle. The erratic boulder seemed very out of place - no other rocks lay nearby and it seemed far too large to have tumbled all the way where it was. Apparently it fell a long time ago from higher on the glacier, then rode the ice down to its current location. The shadow of the boulder was apparently keeping the ice from melting on one side, but the ice on the other side, being exposed to the sun and the warm rock, melted unevenly. The boulder would tumble in slow-motion as the ice continually moved and melted. We took turns “holding up the enormous boulder with 1 finger” and getting photos!

The ice was dazzling white just ahead - a large “skating rink” lay just to the left of our farthest point. I got out my phone for a panoramic photo but slipped and nearly dropped it - the ice was quick slick now since it was no longer littered with debris. This would have been the place to crampon up. We had some time to explore a bit - the sun was coming in and out of the clouds, dappling the undulating surface of the glacier in a myriad of shades of white, blue, grey, and aquamarine. A crack in a nearby ice tower gleamed electric blue as it narrowed near the bottom. It looked clear enough to chip a piece and eat it, but it was hard as iron, having been frozen solid for years, maybe even decades.

We could see through Lho La – a pass from Nepal into Tibet. In years past, passage over the 6,000-meter pass was easier, but unstable ice has become too common. Chunks probably the size of apartment buildings appeared ready to calve at any moment (we spent some time trying to guess if it was 50 feet thick or 250 feet thick!). The mountains on the Tibet side looked considerably more barren than our side – the rain-shadow effect of the mountains was readily

apparent. The Tibetan plateau is one of the most desolate regions of the planet – it is so barren that few rivers ever reach the ocean.

A small piece of rope was lying on the ground - I went to pick it up, but it was frozen solid into the ice! It could have been left behind from a previous party - maybe they used it to practice their skills of traveling on the ice, or maybe the rope was forgotten. We cut several small pieces from the rope, and then later back in camp we braided them into memento bracelets. I wondered what other “treasures” were still buried in the ice below - as the ice melts and pushes further down the valley, I’m sure artifacts probably reveal themselves all the time. Several years ago, a massive cleanup effort had been organized to remove several tons of trash left behind from former climbing parties. After many seasons of climbing, people would leave base camp as a pig-sty after many exhausting weeks of being at high altitude and stressing their bodies on the climb.



*Ice of the Khumbu Glacier*

Tea and biscuits made for a nice happy-hour after our tour of the glacier, as we started discussing plans for our upcoming trek to Island Peak. Health, weather, and conditions were all wild-cards outside our control, but we were going to manage the best we could. The group had been doing quite well so far. We were keeping our fingers crossed for success. Lee and Norm were still a bit sick, but getting better.

The sun was setting as we enjoyed chicken cordon bleu, beans and potatoes for dinner – again, restaurant-quality food! The clouds glowed with a beautiful pink alpenglow before a multitude of countless stars came out afterward. The Milky Way was shining bright as ever as the cooks brought out a chocolate cake for dessert!

I was so happy we all made it to Base Camp and had a great time. I knew we were going to sleep well that night. After getting my hot water bottle ready, I was

asleep in my sleeping bag before I could even finish 2 pages of my book...

### **The Trek Day 12 – March 31**

I slept quite well the second night at base camp - I must have slept through the creaking and groaning of the ice below my tent this time. The guides were right that we would get used to it rather quickly. Or maybe I was just too exhausted to care much anymore! My thoughts were becoming more focused on getting up Island Peak at this point. I wasn't particularly nervous - I was still just so happy to be out in the mountains, feeling healthy and soaking in the beauty each day. My "bucket-list" item was finished - that was making it to the base camp and having a great view of Everest (which we did from Kala Pattar). So, Island Peak would be purely "bonus" now. I remember being so nervous on my trip to Ecuador the previous January, so I was glad to really be enjoying myself now without the level of fear experienced earlier.

Breakfast was toast and jam and hard-boiled eggs with coffee - rather spartan but much enjoyed. We were soon packing up and getting ready to head back down the mountain. Jeff had been wonderful, as had been Kumar and the kitchen crew. They were going to have their work cut out for the next couple months as the rest of the RMI climbers came into base camp to start their assault on the big mountain. Dave Hahn and his group of climbers were heading up shortly (and we'd actually meet some of them on the trail on our way down). We were given a ceremonial khata scarf as we left - they all wished us bon voyage for our journey.

Travis had developed a cough (often nicknamed the "Khumbu cough") after several days at altitude - it wasn't anything serious like HAPE, and his oxygen flow was OK, but he was quite happy to be heading down. He would not be attempting Island peak - work and family duties called, and he would have to leave the trip early to get back home to the UK. This would be our last full day together.

It was a quick 2 hours back to Gorak Shep - so much faster than our trip from Gorak Shep on the way up (with the detour to Kala Pattar) - 2 hours instead of 8! I could tell when we were close - a loud helicopter was blasting overhead - perhaps a group going sight-seeing on the clear morning, or ferrying supplies or evacuating people with altitude issues or other injuries. Although I had seen many helicopters by this point, the chopper still felt like a violation to the serenity of the pristine landscape around us. The blasting of the blades whirring in the thin air was almost like the sound of war, as if the helicopter was going to start shooting missiles and destroying the buildings of the village of Gorak Shep just ahead!

We stopped for a short break of soda and snacks at our same lodge we had

stayed at earlier, and were soon on our way to Lobuche. It was just 1 1/2 hrs down the hill to Lobuche where we enjoyed lunch of pizza. Gayloo took our orders ahead of time, ran ahead of us to put in our orders, so the pizzas were ready as soon as we arrived - nice!

By 2:30 we were on the trail again, heading toward Pheriche. We passed the memorial chortens at the top of the big hill leading to Thukla. The temperature warmed with each step downhill and the "thick" air at 14,000 feet was coming back. The wind picked up and the clouds rolled in again, but I didn't care much any more - Pheriche was close by. The valley was hazy now - Ama Dablam was partly obscured in a smoky layer. I wondered if a fire had started (I had vivid recollections of the raging Rim fire in Yosemite the previous summer), or if it was just part of the vast cloud of pollution over Kathmandu blowing in.

We immediately felt a sense of déjà vu seeing the lodge at Pheriche once again. Chicken steamed moms for dinner and chocolate pudding for dessert was a welcome treat as we met another guide Justin from IMG for dinner. Justin and his group were on their way up to Mt Everest - he shared his many experiences in the mountains and I wished him and his group the best of luck on their ascent. It was great to see the camaraderie between different trekking companies - there didn't seem to be hard feelings between IMG and RMI, and everybody wished everybody else the best.

### **The Trek Day 13 – April 1**

Sleep on my "king-size" bed was wonderful and the lower altitude did wonders on my body as well. We had covered in 1 day downhill the same distance it took us 3 days to go uphill - we had been re-winding the tape at 3x speed! But we were soon going to be headed back up the hill for the second part of our journey - heading up the Imja valley through Chukhung and up to Imja Tse (Island Peak). The trip was soon going to change dramatically - instead of a "walk in the park", we were gearing up for more serious climbing. I had rented over \$2000 worth of climbing gear, and so far I had only used the sleeping bag and one of the jackets!

After getting batteries charged and our bodies charged with French toast, hard-boiled eggs and coffee, we were soon getting on our way. We bid farewell to our buddy Travis and our Sherpa friend Gayloo who was going to accompany him – it had been a great couple weeks together. A small girl was weaving a diamond-like kite pattern on a wooden loom just outside our lodge - oblivious to the tension that was now mountain in my head to gear up for the serious climb to 20,000 feet coming in just a couple days.

The pack animals were loaded and we were on our way. Heading back up the trail to "duck pass" on the way to Nagartsang, we short-cutted around the corner to the adjoining Imja valley. The air had cleared considerably – the smoky haze

from the previous afternoon had blown out. A condor soared underneath us as we crossed the pass. We passed by Dingboche - at 4,400 meters it was one of the highest habitable settlements in the Himalayas. The largest vegetable they could grow was about the size of a pea, and potatoes and yak butter made a significant part of their diet. Farmers were diligently working in their fields and raising yaks. A baby yak would go for the equivalent of about \$300 and an adult \$1000. We passed a small herd of yaks - measuring by the size and number of rings on their horns we could tell they were just a couple years old.

Continuing up the Imja river valley, we stopped for a short break at Dhusum for snacks and a coke (soda was rather prevalent everywhere we went!). The trail again became increasingly rocky as we headed up the broad glacial valley toward the end of the Lhotse glacier. The usual afternoon clouds started rolling in, obscuring Lhotse and Nuptse in a veil of white. I was sensing the pattern of clear weather in the morning and wind and clouds in the afternoon. I figured this would happen for Island peak as well. I would have to trust that the cycle would continue each day and not be discouraged when the weather would change in the afternoon.

We reached the "Chukhung Resort and Restaurant" for lunch - again a pretty uninspired name. The clouds were blowing by, but the sun room was still warm and hot rara noodle soup and ginger tea made for a nice meal. Our gear on the pack animals soon arrived and we picked up our keys. We didn't have the luxury of private bathrooms here - shared bathrooms with squat toilets and frozen barrels of rinse water was what we had. We were used to making do with what was provided - it sure beat camping!



*Outside our lodge at Chukhung*

After lunch I made a short walk over several old lateral moraines to the edge of the grand Ama Dablam glacier spilling off the dazzling peak. The summit was in clouds but the slopes below were as majestic as ever - the clouds added to the wonder of the scene. The glacier reminded me of the Khumbu glacier, clinking as the ice moved, with small rockfalls clattering down the ice. The ice was scalloped with large seracs and pinnacles. Small oval-like meltwater lakes dotted the undulating pattern of ice. The glacier was surrounded by an amphitheater of 6000-meter peaks with an enormous ice wall - many of the peaks were unnamed. If it weren't for Ama Dablam itself, any of the peaks nearby would make

a formidable challenge. From the high point on the moraine, I could see 5 glaciers - the Nuptse, Lhotse, Lhotse Nup, Chukhung, and the great Ama Dablam glacier.

I was just about to start heading down when I heard a crack of thunder. I knew the weather was coming in but started to worry about lightning. But when I looked again, it wasn't actually thunder, but it was an avalanche! Or more specifically, it was a serac release. A hanging block of ice had let go, calving in enormous house-size chunks of ice tumbling down the steep slope to the glacier below. I didn't imagine anybody would be anywhere near the fall zone of the ice, but if there were, they would have been in a very dangerous situation. It would be in fact a very similar situation where a block of ice would break off in just a couple weeks, tumbling down the Khumbu icefall between base camp and Camp I, killing 16 Sherpas on the mountain, and forcing climbers to re-think the route past the icefall. It was humbling to witness first-hand the power of nature. I recorded some video, but couldn't get myself to re-play it when I got home for some time – I had to wait for the tragedy of the deadly avalanche on Everest to sink in.

Heading back to the lodge, I passed a small garbage dump where trash was being burned - it was a bit foul, but flying it out by helicopter would be so expensive - what else would you do? A slate quarry was just a bit further - the gleaming slabs of metamorphic rock shone like crystal paving stones. In fact I realized much of the slate had been used on the paths between the teahouses and for the slate roofs.

I had to make several emergency trips to the bathroom - a small bout of diarrhea was coming on... it could have been partly due to the food and repeated assaults on my stomach with the still unfamiliar flavors of yak cheese and butter, but it could have been partly due to the intense anticipation of the days ahead. Getting sick right before the big climb would be a bummer and would probably put me out of commission for a summit attempt, but I kept my fingers crossed and took a precautionary Imodium as a preventative measure. Fortunately it worked after all - no more bouts ensued – whew!

An Australian group of doctors was heading up to Island Peak the next day with us - we wished them good luck as the yak dung fire was being lit. The snow come down in waves outside during the late afternoon - the views from just an hour ago were completely socked in. Mixed pizza was dinner again for me, and the usual dal bhaat made dinner for our Sherpa friends. A laptop was playing videos of Bollywood songs - they were having a grand old time - I don't know if they understood any of the Hindi, but it didn't really matter... Dessert was a fried Snickers bar - a treat I never thought of making at home! I again filled a water bottle with hot water (tato pani) to warm my sleeping bag (it was going to be a

chilly night even indoors) and hit the sack.

### **The Trek Day 14 – April 2**

We enjoyed a slightly later wake-up in the morning to let the snow melt from the previous evening. An extra couple cups of coffee and a yak cheese omelet and toast with jam woke me up after a groggy sleep. The clouds had parted and brilliant sunshine filled the sky - I was encouraged at no matter how bad the weather seemed to be one afternoon, it would all clear in the morning. That promise would be key for the next couple days.



*Sunrise alpenglow from Chukhung*

By 10:00 the snow was mostly gone, and we were on our way up to Island Peak base camp at the base of the 20,300 ft mountain. The Australian group was camping nearby us and would be waking up at 2 am to attempt the peak the next morning. We were going to be taking things a little slower, giving ourselves a rest day at base camp to get comfortable with our climbing gear, ice axes, ascenders, ATC rappel devices, and roped travel.

We followed the trail past some of the same moraines I had explored the previous afternoon, before turning to the north and east up toward the outlet of the Imja glacier. A broad dry valley was once a vast lake-bed, the contents of the lake long since drained as the glacier receded. A series of small hills ahead made the latest terminal moraine of the Imja glacier - these hills now formed the boundary of the enormous Imja Tsho lake. The lake was as big as any of the Gokyo lakes - the destination of another popular Himalayan trek. I noticed the lake on the map but didn't think much of it until we got close - it would turn out to be quite a bonus! A set of tracks showed in one of the patches of snow - Gelji pointed them out as possibly snow leopard tracks. The reclusive animals were seldom seen and thought of as almost mythological, so I felt we were on the border of the spiritual realm as we neared Island Peak. Maybe yetis lived out here somewhere – the legend was sure prevalent around Kathmandu...



The tents of our base camp near the head of the lake were already set up - a dining tent, a kitchen tent, a bathroom, and 3 sleeping tents (one for Bob & Kelly, one for Lee & Norm, and one for me & Sean). It was nice to have my own accommodation for most of the trip (I got a single without paying the single supplement for the trip - nice!), but I could deal with a couple nights with one other person - no sense in dragging another tent the whole way!

Hot tang, potatoes, slices of sausage, grilled cheese sandwiches and cole slaw made for a feast! The food was better than we had in any of the lodges - and the porters had to carry everything up there as well! I went to check out the lake a little before taking a nap. It turned out to be at the base of a long steep slope - the surface was probably 150 feet below! I was hoping to get down and have a look by the water's edge, but not only was the lake completely frozen, but there was no easy way down - it was at least as treacherous as getting down to the Khumbu glacier from Lobuche a few days earlier. It wasn't worth the risk of sliding and tumbling down the loose, crumbly hillside. I was initially a bit disappointed - I had seen many wonderful pictures of the lakes such as Gokyo with turquoise colored water like Lake Louise. But then I remembered talking with another group on the way in who had come over Cho La from the Gokyo Lakes basin and they commented that even the Gokyo Lakes a few hundred meters lower than where we were also completely frozen. Even so, the lake was so vast and impressive, a sea of white rippled forms shaped by wind, snow, freezing and thawing, and the motion of the snout of the massive Imja glacier at the head of the lake. It was nature in its glorious and raw form – the naked geology was shown in its finest fashion.



*Imja Tsho lake outside our camp*

The lake was vast, like an ocean of undulating white - blending in with the snowy surrounding environment, riddled with patterns of snow like frozen waves. The snout of the Imja glacier was at the edge of the lake, forming enormous ice cliffs, crumbling seracs, caves, frozen icebergs and eerie shapes all around. It looked like a frozen playground - I'm sure with the proper gear and right conditions, exploration of the area would be very interesting - I'm sure similar cut & closure caves exist on the Imja as well as the Khumbu. Several cairns marked highpoints on the ridge, providing spectacular (though a bit exposed) views.

I got to enjoy a nap in the warm tent - although it was getting a bit chilly and

windy outside, the tent behaved like a greenhouse, trapping the warm sunlight. I had to lie on top of my sleeping bag - it was too warm inside the bag! It was key to keep the body warm to avoid having the body to waste too much energy to stay warm otherwise. I was relieved to find that all of our gear did indeed make it just fine to the Island peak base camp - after having not seen it for a couple weeks we weren't totally sure what was going on!

We enjoyed a bit of happy hour – tea and popcorn and snacks. Dinner came soon afterward since it was going to be getting dark (and very cold) quickly at our exposed high elevation. Soup with pasta and cheese warmed our bodies before we headed through some fresh falling snow back to our tents. The "hot water bottle in our sleeping bag" routine was going to be a live-saver for a chilly night.

### **The Trek Day 15 – April 3**

Today was our "vertical practice" day - where the guides would rig several fixed lines and have us make a few runs up and down the ropes to make sure all our gear was adjusted properly and in working condition. I recall many vertical practices with my caving group back home, and it was nice to be using a lot of the same gear actually. My ascenders and helmet were already familiar, and my ATC and climbing harness was familiar like my caving descenders and harness as well. Before using technical gear to climb big mountains such as these and the volcanoes in Ecuador last year, I would have never expected my caving experience to be invaluable in mountaineering!

Island Peak was rated alpine PD+ (peu difficile - the same as Cayambe and Cotopaxi) - which was also level 3 "ice axes" out of 5 on RMI's scale (2 is Mt Rainier DC route, 4 is Denali, and 5 is Mt Everest!) Somehow, Island Peak was considered a "trekking peak" – I knew Kala Pattar to be a peak you could just walk up. Maybe that's why I wasn't so nervous about it, but after reviewing the skills necessary for a safe ascent, the climb took a new level of seriousness.

After lunch in the dining tent, we got our climbing gear out, laying out our jumar ascenders, ATC descenders, extra carabiners and perlon cords. We all wanted to make sure the gear was all ready and in good condition before putting to the test the next day. My perlon cord turned out to be too thick to pass through the eye of my jumar, but around that time, Norm who was still feeling under the weather decided to skip the summit attempt the next morning. His perlon cord fit my jumar so he was proud to climb with me in spirit!

We took turns ascending a series of fixed lines outside the dining tent, climbing some steep rock slopes with the ascenders, and rappelling back down with our descenders. It was all familiar to me, but with my reduced brain capacity at 17,000 feet, the refresher was very useful.

Our Sherpas had climbed the peak in the morning and were already heading back down. They came back with confident smiles on their faces that the route looked good and the fixed lines were ready for us to make our summit attempt the next morning. They made it up and down in just 5 or 6 hours – I figured even if we were twice as slow, we should be able to manage in 12 hours!

In the early afternoon we found out that some of our neighbors managed to reach the summit, but some didn't, turning back in exhaustion and deteriorating conditions. The wind had picked up considerably, and sitting in the dining tent, we watched as the yellow and blue canvas flaps of the tent were whipping back and forth. I knew wind would be a serious factor on the climb and I knew my thick mitten-like gloves were going to be quite difficult to manage if I really needed them. Dinner was a Japanese miso soup and nori strips. I had snacked on similar things at home and it was a welcome change before our big day.

Going back to my tent around 6:00 during the dim twilight of evening, I tried to imagine the snow stopping, stars coming out and a beautiful day dawning for our climb. In previous evenings, the weather often cleared shortly after sunset, bringing clear skies in the morning. However, this evening seemed a bit different - the deck of clouds coming in during the afternoon seemed thicker than usual and the steady fall of snow didn't seem to be letting up. I lay awake in my warm sleeping bag, listening to the whoosh of fresh snow falling and sliding down the walls of our tent. Sean seemed to already be asleep and I tried to minimize my tossing and turning, but my mind was still in a frenzy. He was quite a bit more experienced than I was and he seemed rather unfazed at the weather.

I had felt on similar occasions in the past when I felt a bit of hope was lost and that something was going to be taken away, that God in turn comes around and provides. Actually just last year, we nearly got turned around on Cotopaxi - in our van, even before entering the park! We had sat for over an hour at the gate, waiting for permission to pass through. But the rules had recently changed and we even saw some others get turned away at that point. And then in my moment of despair, I looked up and the gate was being opened. It was as if God had to put me through a moment of humility to fully trust in His provision. The next 24 hours would require a lot of dependence on God's provision.

I was starting to resign myself to the fact that the weather was going to be the final deciding factor. I was disappointed that after so much preparation we would probably have to scrub our summit attempt after all. The 49ers had made a valiant effort in a recent Super Bowl only to fumble at the 1-yard line and spoil a good push of offense – I had started to feel the same way about our climb. After several hours of tossing and turning, I had to get up to go to the bathroom. Checking my watch it was about 9:30 pm - I must have slept several hours after all. It was cold outside and quite a bit to my relief, the sky was a dazzling display

of stars - the Milky Way was amazingly bright at nearly 17,000 feet! About 1-2 inches of fresh crunchy snow lay on the ground, quite frozen and not slippery. I held out my hopes after all about the climb the next day after all. I started counting down the hours until midnight when supposedly the guides were going to wake us up if the weather and conditions were good enough for a summit attempt.

### **The Trek Day 16 – April 4 - ISLAND PEAK SUMMIT DAY!**

Today was the big day - the climax of over 3 weeks in the mountains! I hardly slept a wink last night, and I must have been checking my watch every 15 minutes, waiting for midnight. I was hoping that we would get woken up soon - if the guides didn't wake us up, that would have meant we would be scrubbing the summit attempt and waiting for better weather. Perhaps the next day we could try again. But if we had to punt one day, we would have to scramble back to get back on our trek down the valley to get back to Lukla to try to make our flights back to Kathmandu. We had already used a couple buffer days while several team members were recovering from GI and altitude related sicknesses, and we didn't have much margin at this point. Also, if our flights out of Lukla got delayed, there wouldn't be much buffer to get back to Kathmandu and on our flights back to the US. It would be a whole cascade of troubles!

Around 12:15, I started hearing a bit of banging in the kitchen tent nearby so I anticipated the guides waking us up soon. I was already wide-awake at 12:30 when Casey rang out – “rise and shine, time for breakfast!” It sounded like we were good to go after all. However, a bit to my dismay, after cautiously unzipping the tent, I looked up to see just dark sky above - no stars. And it was actually snowing lightly again - the feathery flakes were reflected in my headlight beam. Perhaps the guides were getting us together for a pow-wow to assess the situation and make a go-no go decision. I remained cautiously optimistic.

Breakfast was a meager serving of porridge and ginger tea - simple but nutritious. I couldn't eat much, but relished the bit of hot food provided. The snow had stopped outside and we crunched our way back to our tents over the fresh snow to make our final preparations for our summit day. It was around 1:30 in the morning by the time we finally got moving. I was ready before that, pacing back and forth to work off some of the anxious energy. We had many sets of “brake lights” before getting started - somebody's ill-fitting climbing boots, wrong layers of clothing, adjusting our climbing harnesses, final packing, and final “magic” trips to the bathroom - it would be many hours before we could use the facility again.

My gear was ready and my pack was packed - I had my Scapa Inverno double plastic mountaineering boots, Outdoor Research Expedition Crocodile gaiters,

First Ascent Rainier Storm Shell hard-shell pants, First Ascent 18K medium weight soft-shell jacket, Columbia sportswear hard-shell jacket (ready if needed), First Ascent Peak SV extra poufy down jacket (ready if needed), BCA Tracker DTS avalanche transceiver (if needed), generic medium weight fleece gloves and extra poufy thick First Ascent Summit mittens (if needed) Julbo glacier glasses, and Edelrid helmet.

The low tones of Bach's B Minor mass were working through my head - the Kyrie Eleison fugue contains many repetitions of "Lord have mercy", played with a slow and deliberate air of solemnity. Each step was a step of grace and mercy with cautious optimism. I was relieved that the Sherpas had gone up the previous day to check the route and make sure all the ropes were in place for us. I'm also glad our group had congealed well and we felt a sense of camaraderie as we slowly started to work our way toward the official trailhead. The tents in camp behind us faded in the background as we inched our way along. The wind hardly stirred and a few hazy stars shone above us.

Enormous cairns marked the "official trail" up the mountain - signaling our start. Casey was anticipating about 6-7 hours to the top and 3 down. Norm was still sound asleep in his tent, but the 6 of us, Casey, and our 3 Sherpas moved steadily upward. The snow didn't seem to bother us too much - we might have been moving a little bit slower, but the pace was fine for me - my bottleneck was how much oxygen I could take in! Even with the pressure breathing we had been practicing over the last week, it was tough. The first part of the trail was nothing more than a steep trekking route - it wasn't technical but slipping was a real danger.

We moved slowly over the gravelly switchbacks up the first mile or so of trail. After what was probably 1000 feet of elevation and a little over an hour, we stopped for our first break. It wasn't too cold, maybe just below the freezing mark. Dazzling stars shone over most of the sky, high thin clouds obscuring the rest. I was counting the hours until dawn's first light, which I expected to be just before 5:00. I was hoping if we didn't make the summit that at least we would get high enough to enjoy the sunrise - I'm sure the view must be majestic!

Casey reminded us to put on a layer during our rest - the last thing we wanted would be to get chilled, since your body would need so much more energy to keep yourself warm. I slowly crunched down some trail mix and half of a bar - we had a goal that at each rest stop we should finish 200-300 calories and 1/3 liter of water. I wasn't at all hungry, but I knew I'd come to regret it further along if I didn't get the proper energy. I stayed cautiously optimistic about moving forward, but a few minutes later, Kelly mentioned that she had enough of the climb and wanted to start heading back down to camp. I was bummed and a bit discouraged, but knew I shouldn't be fazed at her misfortune. I numbed myself to

it in order to keep going. Our Sherpa Pemba would escort her down and then run up again to try to catch up with us.

We could see a large group coming up behind us - maybe a dozen headlights were slowly working their way up the mountain. We were hoping to stay in front, since if we got passed by a large group, contention on the ropes higher up could force many of us to wait and leave people in a dangerous situation such as the traffic jams on K2 years back that resulted in several deaths. I didn't expect the situation to get that dire, but it could get uncomfortable rather quickly. We shed our outer jackets, shouldered our packs and continued up the trail. My right foot was getting chilled inside my boot - I knew it was only going to get colder as we ascended, so I continued wiggling my toes to keep my foot warm. It would take about an hour, but finally my foot fully warmed up again and never got cold again - whew!

A few moments later I noticed the trail seemed a bit darker than before - our headlamps had all worked together to light our way, but suddenly I saw one of them was out. Looking around I noticed it was mine! Bummer - I had changed the batteries the day before to give a fresh set, but the lamp blinked out anyway. Maybe the "new" batteries were older than the current ones. Hmmm - I didn't want to spend too much time futzing with batteries at 18,000 feet, but I knew where my spare set was, in case of a pinch such as this. I mentioned I needed a moment and quickly swapped the batteries with fresh ones from my pack. But to my dismay the light wouldn't even come on now. Maybe they were dead too? Or I put them in backwards? I was still fiddling with the batteries (I could have probably fixed the light in another minute or 2 - I had a few more fresh batteries), but Casey volunteered his spare and said let's keep going. I was thankful but a bit disappointed at my lack of self-reliance.

The trail became steadily more rocky and steep as we weaved our way higher on the switchbacking path. We passed the "high camp" which was one of the proposed options to make our summit day shorter. I'm glad we stayed at the base camp though - it was less cold, the altitude was a bit easier, and even though my sleep was fitful, I'm sure it was better than it would have been 1000 feet higher. My trekking poles were a necessity at this point - the trail was often slippery with snow obscuring the loose stones. I knew often a class 2 trail can turn out to be more dangerous than class 5 - after reading about Pat Hadley's passing on a peak in the Sierras last summer, I knew extra care would be in order.

Our second break was by some large flat rocks - again we followed our routine of dressing up a layer, eating and drinking (and taking a quick pee if necessary) and putting away the layer before moving again. Not many words were exchanged at this point - we all had our objectives in mind. Above this point, the route became

more class 2 as the trail petered out. A couple class 2-3 chutes had to be ascended. Put one pole behind your back (wedging it between your back and your pack), and use one hand and one pole to climb the rocky sections. The technique worked quite well and I'll have to use it in the Sierras next time! The snow made the footing a bit slippery but we all looked out for each other. I figured once we got onto the glacier, the snow shouldn't be so much of an issue anymore since we would be in crampons and off the slippery rock. I knew we couldn't be far at this point.

A dim glow of light started to rise in the east. I felt the night had lasted 24 hours and it was finally breaking - like the first glimmer of hope after a long period of despair. I could just barely make out some broken shapes high in front of us now. Tongues of ice draped over the rock like giant snakes barely visible in the pre-dawn greyness. As the light started to warm, I continued with renewed vigor along our trek, as if the goal of my journey to the faraway lonely mountain was finally in sight, and I was ready to fight the dragon that was waiting for me in the icy heights.

The few remaining stars had faded and the dim orange glow in the east grew brighter. High clouds obscured part of the sky, the remnants of the bit of weather that had streamed through the previous day. The wind was calm, however, and clear sky was in the west and south, so I held my hopes high. I just knew to keep breathing and following each step of the way. It was such a privilege to come to this point - even though we were still quite far from the summit, I already felt we were on the roof of the world! How few people in the world ever get such an experience?

The broken margin of the glacier was nearly straight ahead and it appeared we had just one more ridge to cross to reach it. Although the route was easy class 3, a mistake with that level of exposure would probably end up being deadly. We already had our climbing harnesses on, so the guides got out a few lengths of rope to short-rope us across the rocky section. Much of the snow had blown off this section, leaving the rock mostly dry - it appeared this would not be a fun place to be if the wind did decide to kick up. To the north and east we could make out the banner clouds of the jet stream screaming past Lhotse and the high peaks just beyond. Just a few minutes later we were on some large slabs with the striated masses of cross-bedded ice right in front of us.

Conditions had been rather variable during the last few years - probably owing to climate change. I felt lucky we appeared to have an easy entry on the glacier - it was just about a 20-degree ramp that led right to the rocky slabs we were already on. A final snack and drink at the slabs, and we were then putting on our crampons for our next phase of our adventure up the mountain. I had both of my cameras and several spare batteries - they were getting put to good use already

as the light rose enough to permit some pictures.

The ice was hard and crunchy as we ascended the initial ramps toward a broken icefall just ahead. Having just done a similar climb on Cotopaxi just last year, I felt my experience was very timely and relevant. I again remembered our Sherpas had just done this trek yesterday. I could see some strands of rope ahead in sections of the icefall - it looked like we were going to be passing right through it! I thought there might be some kind of bypass, but no, we were going to attack it head-on! I felt even if we didn't make the summit, I was already quite satisfied - to be in such a fairy-land of ice and seracs on the sweeping glacier was already such a unique experience. The view behind us down toward Ama Dablam and the countless peaks was like being on another planet.

The first couple ropes were pretty easy - clipping our ascenders, we were able to simply walk along the ropes, though gaping crevasses opened on both sides. I just concentrated on my breathing and putting one foot in front of the other. I'm glad we had a couple "warm-up" ropes, since we soon came to a vertical ice-cliff perhaps 25 feet high. I've climbed much higher drops - even the "beginner vertical" cave of Rabbit Hole in the Sierra foothills was higher. But at nearly 19,000 feet, it was a whole different story. Lee was ahead of me on our rope, and he was having a great deal of trouble. I was actually a bit surprised he made it as far as he did so far considering his age, but I started fearing he was going to have trouble when the going got tough. And indeed, this vertical section would turn out to be a bit much for him. He struggled his way up the rope, stumbling several times to get his footing and move his jumars up the rope. I sat at the bottom for probably 15 minutes waiting (and starting to shiver a bit from sitting) and was relieved when he finally made it! Although he nearly passed out when he pushed his body over the lip of the ice cliff, he made it and the going would be easier for some time.



*Icefalls on the lower glacier*

Mantling the top of the cliff myself, I was dazzled at the ocean of white glacier in



front now, and I knew the summit couldn't be far away at this point. I almost felt like I was in some kind of video game with a universe of completely different rules, different natural phenomena, and different physics, completely disconnected with reality back at home. Across the sea of mostly level ice was the final headwall to the summit! I could see the ropes leading up, but with no sense of scale, I couldn't tell if it was another 50 feet up or 500 or 1500. Running some quick math in my head I knew we were climbing about 1100 m on summit day (around 3700 ft) and we must have already gone up at least 3000 (or so it felt). I didn't bring my GPS, but Casey was saying it should just be another hour or so. The time was about 7:30 in the morning, so for an 8 hour ascent, there couldn't be too much more. I knew exactly what I needed to do to keep going. I said a quick prayer for the strength and courage to stay the course.

Lee decided he had enough at this point when he saw the steepness of the headwall - discretion is the better part of valor, so he was going to call it good. Again, I had to steel myself and keep moving. At this point, it was Sean and his Sherpa Gelji, me and Pemba, and Bob with Gayloo. Sean and Gelji were already far along their way up the headwall - perhaps 1/3 of the way before I reached the base. He was fast - his years of climbing in CO were paying off!

I was surprised to find out we weren't going to be needing our ice axes or our trekking poles any more - we just needed to walk up to the rope, clip in, and start ascending. However, looking up at Sean and his Sherpa, they didn't seem to be making progress very quickly. In fact they hadn't seemed to move for nearly 10 minutes. I started to worry they had reached an impasse - maybe they couldn't get past one of the rock bands? Or one of the ropes wasn't usable? Or somebody got hurt and they were addressing an injury? Maybe this is as far as we could make it on this trip. I felt each step was a gift and was fortunate to be able to make so many steps so far. Again, in my moment of humility and realization of my dependence on the Sherpas ahead, I looked up and saw they were making forward progress again. Perhaps they were fixing one of the anchors or re-tying some of the ropes. I knew having fixed ropes set up by the Sherpas was a form of "cheating" in mountain climbing - we weren't true alpine-style purists, but I didn't care - I was happy we could get up the mountain any way we could!

I knew we were getting close, but Casey wanted to have a turn-around time if we were moving too slowly. I kind of remembered him mentioning roughly 8 hours for the ascent (since if we took too long, it would be harder to keep warm and stay properly fed and hydrated, leading to potentially bigger issues for our way down). I felt we had already exceeded the time limit (Lee had been moving quite slowly), and my steps were slow and painstaking. Summit fever was setting in at this point - it looked like just another 50 feet to the top! Of course it was actually probably more like 200-300 feet. I was just starting to clear the first rock band

which I thought was still near the bottom, so I was pretty slow, rest-stepping to conserve my energy. But looking down, the group behind us appeared as ants on a vast sea of white glacier - I had come further than I realized.



*Upper slopes of the mountain, crossing a bergschrund*

Three or four ropes hung parallel along the route so I got to pick the cleanest and newest looking rope to clip into! I put my safety on the next cleanest rope. Passing a couple of British climbers two ropes over, I said hi and tromped my way forward. They were moving even slower than I was - I wished them all the best, but I felt a little better that I was no longer the slowest! Each step was a painstaking pattern of step, breathe, breathe, step, breathe, breathe, move jumar 6 inches up the rope, breathe, breathe again... The rope stretched into infinity high above me. The wall appeared as vertical ice though it was probably about 60 degrees. Without the rope and safety, it would be an extreme adrenaline-producing feat. But my movements were slow and deliberate - there was no reason to show off or try to move quickly (moving fast would only decrease my chances of success anyway!) I just hoped we wouldn't get called back since we were over time. I was almost willing to ignore the turn-around and continue anyway - I guess summit fever was setting in after all.

An open bergschrund faced me on the way up - a gaping split in the ice, where the active moving part of the glacier was peeling away from the permanent ice stuck to the cliff just above. The bergschrund was like an entrance to the underworld - a yawning mouth with teeth consisting of spikes and spears of ice. Clinging onto the rope a little tighter, I side-stepped to the right about 20 feet until a steep slab of snow bridged most of the gap. Heaving myself up on the bridge, clawing my way up inch by inch with the front-points of my spiked crampons, I felt every bit of progress a small victory. Running my ascender even a few inches upward gave me the ability to step just a little higher to get past the near-vertical section of ice at the top of the bergschrund. From there I could traverse back to the left and continue my line upward.

I felt I was in some sort of dream - my oxygen-deprived brain trying to grasp my surroundings. I was so exhausted at this point and waiting for my mind to process anything familiar that I started to hallucinate a bit. It could have been the lack of oxygen, but I started to imagine myself waking up and finding myself in the kitchen of our house back in CA. Nisha was asking if I had finished making the idlis, and if the chutney was ready (those were often our comfort foods back at home). I suddenly realized again where I was, and that I hadn't moved for several minutes. Pemba had caught up with me, encouraging me forward. My pack at this point must have weighed over 100 pounds (actually it was probably not more than 25) as I continued to inch my way further. I thought I saw Sean at the top of the ridge, but when I called out to him, either he ignored me (maybe because I was yelling like I was a bit crazy), or it was all an apparition after all.

Pemba volunteered to take my pack for the last 50 feet, and in just a few more minutes, I was jumaring up the last section of rope! Clipping my safety to a traverse line, I could finally unhook my jumar and walk the last 50 feet. The apparition of Sean turned out to be real - he was actually there with Gelji. I couldn't believe where I was at this point - looking behind the ridge revealed an endless sea of glaciers, row upon row of majestic peaks, and finally the magnificent south face of Lhotse that had been obscured from view the whole day. It was an easy walk the last few feet, and in just a moment I was standing at the highest point of the mountain! There was nowhere to go but down!



*Summiting Island Peak!*

I was amazed at the total lack of wind at the summit. Although it was just a few thousand feet above us, the jet stream was roaring like a dragon over Lhotse at perhaps 80-100 mph. I could appreciate how the weather is truly 3-dimensional. The forecast at one altitude could be totally different from another. I knew the winds could change in an instant, so I relished every moment we had to enjoy the

experience. Just a few scattered prayer flags marked the summit. No register to sign (they didn't believe in having registers in the Himalayas like they do in the Sierras), and no place to leave my mark. Ama Dablam reached into the void of space like a giant needle. Imja Tsho the giant lake right next to our Island peak base camp was like vast snowy meadow. Our tents were behind a ridge in the foreground but I could imagine where they were. The straight-line distance from camp to summit looked like it was less than 2 miles. We were supposedly higher than Denali - the highest and coldest peak in North America (Denali had been revised down 85 feet to 20,237 feet, making us at 20,305 feet about 70 feet higher)!

I reached for my camera but my frozen glove fingers weren't nimble enough to operate the buttons. Taking off my glove (very carefully - I had forgotten to put a tether to keep the glove from blowing away in case the wind picked up), I turned on the camera. The familiar Canon jingle lit up and I was actually able to get a few photos - I still felt I was dreaming, and often in my dreams, when I reached a wonderful place, my camera would malfunction or do something weird just to remind me that nothing was real after all. That was my "Inception" spinning-top test. But here on the 6,189 m summit of Island peak, the camera performed flawlessly - it was indeed real!



*Summit panorama*

Pemba was just a few steps behind me - we laughed and hugged and got photos of each other. It was about 9:00 in the morning, 7.5 hours from the start. I was happy with my time after all - I think we did great as a group. Bob and Gayloo soon followed and finally Casey reached the summit. I felt our pilgrimage to the heights was a religious experience, and I could sense how people would believe God lived on top of a mountain. The focus and dedication required to reach the summit paralleled the dedication required to walk with Him during our lives.

Unfortunately the small summit didn't afford much exploration and couldn't accommodate our whole group very well (I had in fact remained clipped in the rope the entire time at the summit). After a few panoramic movies, a couple selfies, and photos in every direction I could visualize in the short time we had, Pemba and I were starting our way back down. Although it was bittersweet to have to go down so quickly, I was relieved to be getting off the exposed ridge and headwall. Unfortunately my glove that I had taken off was completely frozen. My

chemical hand warmers had performed wonderfully - my hands were never cold on the ascent. But now I started to worry - was frostbite going to settle in, and how quickly? I had another hand warmer in my pack but it was not readily accessible. Futzng with my pack on the narrow summit would not be a good idea. I did have my poufy mittens accessible, but I knew they would be a problem since the rope work would be quite difficult if I couldn't thread the rope through my ATC device without repeatedly taking them off and putting them back on again. Luckily, however, after whacking my gloves a few times back and forth I managed to break the ice inside enough to wiggle the liners back onto the appropriate fingers and work the glove back onto my hand - whew!

Rappelling down the ice wall was great fun. I was relieved to be lower with each pitch of rope descended since it was late morning and I knew the weather could turn at any time. I remembered the steps of threading the rope through my ATC and clipping my safety on a parallel rope. With my partly frozen gloves, the work was slow, but I was making progress. Pemba was patient and he did great to make sure I was following the right safety procedure to avoid any problems on the rope. On one rappel, I had nearly forgotten to connect my safety before starting down, but a quick QA by my Sherpa was a valuable resource.

About 1/3 of the way down, Pemba seemed to get a bit impatient as I was laboriously working my descender on the rope - on one rappel, he just grabbed my device and clipped it over in probably less than 10 seconds - the same procedure for me had taken over a minute. The descent was over before I realized it - it felt like everything that had been going in slow motion earlier was now being played in fast-forward. I remembered each rock band and feature on the way up. Reaching the bergschrund from earlier, I recalled the challenges of the ascent. The traverse was much easier now, and I could even lock off my rappel device for a moment to snap a few photos with the wrist strap of my camera securely around my wrist! It might be quite a while before I would ever get to a place like this again and I didn't want to miss a shot! One of the climbers in our group was using a GoPro camera - I couldn't wait to see his photos!

Next thing I realized I was at the bottom of the lowest rope and unclipping my ATC. Lee was sitting nearby - hanging out and watching as we went up and down. I wonder, had I been in his shoes if I would have regrets of not making the summit, or would I still feel it was a life experience? Nearby was my ice axe and trekking poles that had been waiting while we were on the ropes. Pemba and I roped up for crossing the flat glacier ahead - even though it looked safe, hidden crevasses could be lurking underneath. I recall on my trip to Ecuador the previous year seeing a small hole in the snow, poking my ice axe through, and finding it to be a gaping hole maybe 20 feet deep - you could never let down your guard, even when you thought you were "done with the technical part" - they say many more injuries happen on the way down from the summit when both body

and mind are tired.

Pemba and I were walking back along the flat glacier when he saw one of his buddies. Sitting down and chatting in his local Sherpa dialect, he was really enjoying himself! I enjoyed the break and even though I didn't understand a word of what was being said I felt Pemba and his friend were reminiscing on good times. Next thing I noticed Pemba was reaching into his backpack and pulling out a thermos. He started pouring out cups of hot coffee - wonderful! It was as close to having a Starbucks at 19,000 feet as you could imagine! The hot coffee was a real treat - warming my bones and rejuvenating my energy (I hardly slept a wink the previous night!)

Rappelling through the ice-falls near the toe of the glacier, I had a renewed perspective of the perils we had ascended through just a few hours earlier. I remembered the 20-foot ice cliff Lee struggled over on the way up - I gave Pemba my camera so he could get pictures of me going down, and when I was down I got pictures with my phone - the pictures looked like we were extreme mountaineers to go on the cover of Outside magazine! It was an experience I would remember for years to come.

Walking down the last of the ramps of ice, we emerged on the large flat rock slabs where the whole ice adventure started at 5:00 in the morning! I was so tired I could barely unhook the straps of my crampons, but Pemba came to me and unclipped my crampons in just a couple seconds! It was wonderful to have them off and my ice axe put away - from this point, the rest of the trip would just be hiking. All the technical parts were finished and I felt an immense wave of relief at my success on my first trip to the Himalayas. I felt Nisha had supported me so far in my journey and I couldn't wait to get her the news of my successful summit.

Our group assembled at the base of the glacier, where we were handed cups of hot Tang and apples to celebrate our hard work! My ears popped with the decrease of altitude and I felt a zephyr of warm air coming up from the valleys below. I felt home-free for the first time during the trip and that the challenges were over. It was bittersweet, actually - my mind scrambled a bit to figure out what the next challenge would be. I still remember Nike's slogan from years ago "there is no finish line" on Mt Rainier. I knew every step now was a step closer to home and to Nisha.

The wind was starting to kick up, so we hastily packed up again after our short break and started to make our way traversing the narrow ridge to get back to the switchbacking gravelly trail to the bottom. Clouds started to hover near the summit. The groups from earlier were still on their ascent - I was surprised at their lack of turn-around time, and wished them the best. Many of them had

come from Iran and I'm sure for many of them this trip was a dream as well. Summit fever can be dangerous, especially if you end up getting in over your head and getting caught in bad conditions. I felt another wave of relief that we were down now - even if we get socked in with clouds, we knew we could follow the trail down - even though there were places we could get temporarily cliffed-out, we could still follow a general line and get to the base of the mountain safely.



*Descending a knife-edge ridge below the glacier*

We short-roped over the narrow ridge - although the technical part of the climb was over, a fall would still be rather perilous. Pemba and I set our own pace heading down the mountain - at this point, we all knew how to get back to camp. It wasn't until Lee sent me some pictures and movie clips months later that I realized how scary the narrow ridge was after all - he had put his go-pro to good use!

The snow from the previous evening had mostly melted - we had considered keeping our crampons on for the scree descent in case the snow was slippery, but we were fortunate to not need them. At this point, we were happy just continuing and not constantly waiting for people to catch up. Normally I would have been far chattier on the way down, but I was so tired I was just imagining counting the switchback on the way down. We actually stayed roped-up for quite some time - at first it was a bit annoying but then I saw it as a relief, since the scree was slippery, my knees were shot and my mind was so tired it was hard to concentrate on where to put my feet safely.

Reaching for my camera for some final pictures on our way down I got a scare. My camera, which had normally been in my upper fleece zipper pocket, was missing! All the photos from our entire day (and about 1/3 of our trek) were on there. I swore I had the camera just a few minutes ago, but even it was dropped just 50 feet away, it would take a miracle for us to find it again. Luck was with me, however - when I unzipped my outer coat, I felt something slide down my chest - I instinctively grabbed it in case it was something important that fell. Picking it up I looked and there was my camera! Apparently when I thought I was

zipping it back into my upper fleece pocket, I was actually zipping the main zipper (which is 1 inch to the right of the pocket zipper – strange design...), so I had actually put the camera inside my main zipper (against my chest where it would slide and fall) instead of my pocket. For the rest of the trek, I found myself repeatedly checking my camera (and spare camera, and spare memory card, and phone, and spare battery). You couldn't be too careful!

We passed the "high camp" and I knew it was just another 1000 feet or so down to base camp. We finally unclipped and put away the rope and motored down the last section of trail. Occasionally I looked up to see where the other climbers were - I felt they couldn't be too far behind, but the uneven slopes of the mountain prevented much of a view. My legs felt like spaghetti by the time we reached the final switchbacks and the large cairns signaling the start of the trail. It was 1:00 in the afternoon - 11 1/2 hours since our start. I figured the climb was going to be 12 hours - even though I felt we were quite slow on the ascent I was impressed at our speed on the way down. Kelly who had bailed out early in the climb was sitting and watching us come down, wondering if Bob was just behind us.

I wanted to sit and enjoy some tea and snacks in the dining tent - the Sherpas in camp had prepared a celebration meal for us! I got tired of waiting and ended up sipping some tea by myself - the quiet space was actually kind of nice, allowing my mind to be at ease and start to process the day. I was ready to bed down at any point in my tent and just sleep! My tent and sleeping bag were warm, and although it was breezy outside, the baking sun warmed the tent as a greenhouse. I could strip down to just a T-shirt inside.

After maybe a 1-hour nap I heard a bit of stirring outside. Kelly was wandering around and said that Bob should be coming shortly. I had to layer up again to head outside, but I relished the company again. Soon afterward, Bob, Lee, Sean, Casey and the remaining Sherpas came and joined us at camp. I was relieved everyone made it down safely, though a bit slower than expected. Nobody had to use the supplemental oxygen either. I did develop a little bit of a cough on the way down - either it was from the dust blowing around camp, or it was from the exertion at high altitude. Maybe it was my turn now for the "Khumbu cough", but at least I didn't develop any symptoms until now.

Finally we enjoyed some tea and snacks together in the dining tent - it was around 3:00 by now. I figured we would just read and relax until dinner, then go to sleep and start hiking out the next morning. But after a bit of rejuvenation we suddenly got the idea of starting the hike out the same day! It was about 2 hours back to Chukhung and a warm bed - the pre-ponement of our re-entry to civilization was a welcome thought. My phone and camera batteries were nearly dead, and the opportunity for a recharge was wonderfully anticipated. The lower



altitude should help with my cough as well.

The tents were down in a hurry and our packs were ready, so we hit the trail by around 4:00. Island Peak was in the clouds by now and it looked like scattered snow showers up high. We might get soaked in during our hike (the clouds had rolled in many afternoons), but I didn't care - I was so looking forward to Chukhung now! We started all hiking slowly as a group, but then split off according to our own speed. I motored down the trail with my headphones, following a couple of the Sherpas down the trail. We paralleled the moraine of the glacial valley where Imja Tsho now sits. Occasionally every 1/4 mile or so, large V-shaped notches split the moraine wall - results of catastrophic ice-dam floods what would send torrents of water down during the centuries. It must have been one of these flash floods that took out the village of Thukla at the base of the glacier. Today, the lake was quiet and still frozen solid.

After about 1/2 hour I didn't see the others behind me - I was alone with the Sherpas, motoring down the trail. Clouds enveloped a wide valley we traversed on the way in. The sky started to get dark in the late afternoon twilight. My headlamp was in my pocket just in case. We must have set quite a fast pace - I felt we were moving quickly but I was glad we were going downhill and getting closer to home with each step. My legs were numb of the soreness from the climb and were just moving mechanically forward. I ended up keeping up with the Sherpas all the way until Chukhung, eager to get into town. Just as our lodge came into sight, the clouds started to part, revealing a wonderful golden sunset - capping off a wonderful day! The satellite dishes on the roof and the solar-powered water heaters roused my expectation of hot food and connectivity with people back home again.



*Cloud-filled valley below Chukhung*

Checking into the lodge, I was greeted with the familiar foul smell of yak dung burning. Basking in the warmth of the fire I chatted with a couple other climbers and reminiscing about the trip so far. I wished them well. Seeing the banners on

the ceiling I wanted to brag about our success, but felt somewhat ambivalent since only 3 of the 6 of us made the summit. After getting my phone partly charged again, the 500 rupees (about \$5) for 15 minutes of wi-fi internet was well worth it - I was able to post a photo on Facebook and send an email update for all my fans back home!

It wasn't until about 8:00 when the others finally showed up - my stomach was numb from hunger and exhaustion that I didn't really even feel hungry anymore. But once I started eating, I ate like a horse, ordering extra portions of Tibetan bread, chicken chili and pizza!

### **The Trek Day 17 – April 5**

I slept like a rock overnight - my muscles were quite sore, especially those used in the sustained use of the ascending gear. Muscles were sore that I didn't realize I even had! My mind woke up very refreshed - dreams of wild horses racing across the wide-open spaces of the desert brought a new sense of freedom and peace to my thoughts. My mind was decompressing so much now - all the technical and risky aspects of our trek were finished and we could just enjoy the open spaces of the great outdoors now. All the pressure was off!

Tibetan bread and boiled eggs made for a simple but nutritious breakfast. We were walking by 9:00, our usual time. We bade farewell to our wonderful Sherpas who had helped us up on the mountain. Uberaj our cook, Mingmar and Phurba our camp assistants, and Mithun one of our porters were well appreciated. I hoped to get back someday, and I wonder if I would recognize them like the way Casey remembered his buddy Ming Ma back near Pheriche.



*Parting shot - Kelly, Sean, Bob, Gelji, Lee, me, Kaji, Norm and Pemba in the back, and Phurba, Mingmar and Uberaj in the front*

A dense layer of clouds lay about 500 feet below us, obscuring the valley in a sea of white foam. I relished my last views of the towering peaks before we sunk into the pea soup below - I was nearly out of memory on my 3 memory cards but I

snapped photos anyway, not wanting to miss a view! John Denver and Judy Collins playing through my headphones made me teary-eyed with thoughts of home coming in just a few days. Being socked in the dense fog, I felt the mountains were a dream so far away at this point, and mentally I was already halfway home. John Denver was singing "Leaving on a Jet Plane" - about a month ago I was leaving home on a jet plane, but that same jet plane would bring me back home too. I thought of my dad's deployments in the Navy and how when I was a kid, my family communicated through recording cassette tapes and sending them back and forth. I had a glimpse of how he must have felt on those long journeys.

Nagartsang was mostly in the clouds as we passed the village of Dingboche with its terraced fields, stupas and tea houses. Soon afterward we came to the confluence of the Imja and Khumbu valleys - the rivers meeting just downstream of Pheriche. Lunch in Syomare was also rather simple - dal bhaat (rice, lentils, and veggies). Dal bhaat was a staple that many Sherpas ate every day, and I was overdue to give it a try. The lentils made a couple people a bit sick earlier so they were joking to me when I was going to get sick... I had eaten vegetarian food at home with my wife many times - we tended to eat simple Indian food often, so having rice and veggies was like a step back home as well.

We continued to follow the Khumbu valley down, past countless stupas, gates with mandalas on the ceiling, caves with cairns inside, mani stones and walls of prayers. We soon passed Deboche and Rivendell where we stayed on our way up. The lodge at Rivendell was full but our group was doing well, so we pressed on to Tengboche. I was actually more excited about staying at Tengboche - I was hoping for the views we had missed on the way up, and also to get a better look at the famous monastery. Alas, when we reached there, again the clouds were socked in pretty low, obscuring most of the peaks above - oh well.

Tengboche did have a wonderful bakery - featuring cakes, brownies, pies and hearty chocolate chip cookies. I picked up a cappuccino, some brownies for the group and a piece of cake - it was fun to sit and compare notes with some other trekkers who were passing through. I was just careful to avoid the lemon merengue pie - Casey had mentioned he visited the same bakery on a previous trip and got a wrenching stomachache and GI issues after a piece of that pie (I even remember him telling that same story on our Mt Rainier climb 2 years ago, so it was rather significant!)

My stomach was fine with the cake (whew!) as we checked into our hotel - the aptly named "Himalayan Hotel". The wi-fi was slow but adequate - the prices were getting cheaper again as we headed downhill - here it was just a couple hundred rupees for the whole evening instead of 500 rupees for 15 minutes! Dinner was "Sherpa stew" - a hearty meat & potatoes style dinner. Norm and

Lee were snoring with food coma shortly after we finished, heads down at the table - I couldn't blame them - they had been real troopers for so many days now!

### **The Trek Day 18 – April 6**

The bed was comfortable and sleep was very nice! The lower altitude made a world of difference. The pipes had frozen overnight - the lack of running water was a bit of a bummer, though the pipes thawed quickly with the sun in the morning. And as the sun came up, the clouds parted for us after all! Peeling back like a curtain, the view opened up to reveal a panoramic scene including Ama Dablam, the Tengboche monastery, Lhotse and finally Mt Everest gleaming in the morning light.



*Tengboche panorama*

I took a stroll around the monastery, re-taking photos and deleting the darker and foggy ones from the previous afternoon. The sun made the colors dazzle with the blue sky in the background. A small group of monks were praying inside - I clicked discreetly inside. A group of workers was hauling large granite stones - moving like a chain of leaf-cutter ants holding large pieces. I followed the workers for several hundred yards down the hill and found some people chipping stones by hand from a small make-shift quarry. The stones were going into a new tea house behind the monastery. Whew - so much manual labor at 12,000 feet! I did not envy them - it seemed so not fair to have been getting paid so well for a desk job for so many years.

Breakfast was American style - coffee, toast, sautéed veggies and potatoes. We were soon checked out and heading back down the hill toward Phunky Tenga - we visited the guard once again as we checked out. One of our Sherpas filled him in with the details of our mostly successful trek and climb. After crossing the river, it was a slog going back up the long hill toward Namche Bazaar. I remembered the trail being cut out of the hillside - panoramic views all around of the enormous Dudh Khosi river valley.

Adiemus was playing in my headphones - the stirring medieval tones were strumming through my head as a small band of cumulus clouds started blowing in at eye level over the valley. The clouds added a whole new dimension of the scene - the vastness and serenity. White stupas and prayer stones marked the

trail at regular intervals. Some kids were playing and carrying water jugs - it was tempting to try to get pictures, but they were rather sensitive to tourists and their cameras. I had to refrain.

I saw Mithun again - he was carrying some of our bags now, since we didn't have as many pack animals for the way down. He was carrying my bag - I recognized my black Under Armour duffel in his load! We sat down for a few minutes and he offered me a Fanta and some pieces of coconut! The last time I had coconut was in the islands of Belize! It was an unexpected treat - like when Pemba offered me a cup of coffee high on Island Peak.

It was a quick traverse on the final section to get back to Namche Bazaar. I remembered exactly where our lodge was at Camp de Base - just off the main street. The hot shower was heavenly - I ran the water so long that my fingers were wrinkled like raisins - I'm sure many layers of dead skin washed away as well - my skin felt so rejuvenated and fresh. Mixed pizza with tuna and cheese was sweet. I enjoyed a quiet read with my book as the clouds rolled in and a few rain showers passed.

I wandered outside after the shower, re-visiting some of the shops I remembered on the way up. I found the same bookstore and art shop and Irish pub as before. Exchanging some more dollars (the exchange rate had dropped from 97 to 92 - oh well), I could go on a "shopping spree" once again! I had in my mind what I wanted now, and I felt free to get whatever I wanted - all the pressure was off, and we were going to be in Lukla the next day. Some construction workers were building a new tea house down the hill - similarly to the one in Tengboche. The hammers were clinking for hours, chipping away bits of granite to shape the stones into even blocks to make the walls. One lady was chipping with one hand while holding her phone with the other, listening to Bollywood music. Kids were playing shuttle, volleyball and cricket games in the street, and ladies were washing clothes, and sweeping the streets while their husbands worked in their shops.

Dinner was chicken chili over a final game of cribbage. I enjoyed my first bit of alcohol since passing through on the way up! It was all downhill and the luxuries were slowly returning that we had missed for weeks now. The bed was warm and comfortable - I didn't need to snuggle up quite so tightly in my sleeping bag anymore.

### **The Trek Day 19 – April 7**

The morning dawned bright and clear - I had been worrying about the weather recently since there were rumors of many missed flights out of Lukla due to weather. Low clouds had consistently hung below 12,000 feet filling in the valleys for the last several days. We knew we had a rather long day to get all the

way back to Lukla so we could fly out first thing tomorrow morning. At this point, I felt I was pretty much “done” with the trek and happy to get back home and to my wife!

We enjoyed some easy Tibetan bread with honey and boiled eggs, so we could be packed up by 8:00 for an earlier-than-usual start. We were on the trail early, though we all had to wait soon afterward for our Sherpas and gear to catch up so we could all “check-out” together. Apparently they have some new rules to make sure groups stay together and stragglers don’t get lost. Once we got moving, I felt we were playing the tape of our trek in fast-rewind, going back to places I had remembered so long ago! It had been nearly 3 weeks now though it felt like a lifetime ago. We stopped at the same vista point where the lady was selling oranges on our way up. I obliged and bought another one. Everest and Lhotse were visible as before, again throwing vast plumes of clouds as the jet stream raked the peaks.

The trail was crowded now as many groups were making the trek up. I was quite happy to be bounding down the trail now, well acclimated and used to the conditions and the altitude. I could probably keep up with most of the Sherpas now at this point - I was probably in about the best shape I ever had been in. It was bitter-sweet - I felt I could do a lot more, but I was ready to get home as well. I’m sure I had probably lost 10 pounds on the trek.

Bob, being quite acrophobic, keenly remembered the swinging bridges on the way up, and as we were heading back down the steep hill from Namche Bazaar, we all knew they were coming. Most of us were hiking at our own pace, listening to our music in our headphones when we got to the highest bridge over the Dudh Khosi near where it met the Bhote Khosi. I went to check out the lower bridge for a different perspective where I could see the upper bridge high above me. The lower bridge was not nearly as crowded though the trail to get to it was quite steep and rugged. I guess most people preferred the upper bridge since the trail was more straightforward. I was about halfway across and looking up at a group of hikers who had started across the bridge about the same time as some porters carrying large sheets of plywood were coming across the bridge. Inevitably they met in the middle and somebody was going to win, and somebody was going to lose and have to turn around - the plywood was 4 feet across and the bridge was about 4 feet 6 inches wide. The porter with the plywood was going to win (the plywood weighed more than he did!) and the unfortunate hikers had to go back, wait for everyone to pass, then try again. One of the unfortunate hikers turned out to be Bob - he would have to retrace his perilous steps and try again...

We soon came to Monjo at the exit of Sagarmatha National Park - it had been a wonderful couple weeks and I couldn’t wait to go back someday. A menagerie of tunes were playing on my phone now - Adele with Fire & Rain, Gas House Gang

and Michael Card. One of his songs stuck out that included lyrics from the Bible - "if you refuse [to worship] the stones would cry out" - I felt in a way the stones were crying out. Though here they were chanting "Om Mani Padme Hum" - I translated those words in my head as "praise God for His magnificent creation".

One of the kids from the village came up to me - he was so adorable with pink cheeks! I had found a beautiful flower nearby and he graciously accepted it for a photo. Several other children joined and we caravanned down the trail for a stretch - I felt they were cheering us on as we finished our marathon trek. One of the other kids had several flowers and we took turns holding them and putting them in our hair - this small connection with the local village kids added an aspect to the experience in the mountains as great as climbing itself. One kid sitting in an old doorway made a charming scene – I knew for sure I would have to write a story about doorways I've seen around the world. I was reminded of the doorways back in the airport in San Francisco, and I thought of the doors with the mysterious eyes on them.



*Sights on the way down from Namche Bazaar*

Lunch was at Phakding just down the trail from our first lodge at Jo's Garden. It was great to see the familiar first lodge again - I felt it was such a milestone of where the whole experience all started, bringing waves of nostalgia! Sean had motored down the trail ahead of us (he offered to race me down the trail and the winner would get to order toasted ham & cheese sandwiches for us all) - it was great to have lunch mostly ready by the time we got there - some of the meals in previous days only came after a 30-40 minute wait!

It was mostly a gentle uphill the last couple hours to Lukla - the trail progressively got wider and more traveled. Many trekkers only went part way into the mountains and I felt we were getting closer to the start by seeing the make-up of the people on the trail. Some over-weight folks couldn't have traveled too far! I stopped a bit more to appreciate what I would soon be missing on the trail - the

different types of flowers, rhododendron blooms, prayer wheels and stupas. Even though I had seen so many I knew this was the last time. Mothers with their cute children with rosy cheeks, and kids were playing games in the street such as cricket, make-shift board games like Parcheesi, and a sand version of air-hockey.

The clouds were mostly socked in by the time we reached the Lukla gate - the "entrance" of the main trail. I couldn't believe it was all over! We had probably covered 100 miles of trails during our 19 days in the mountains. The experience would last a lifetime. I visited the local "Starbucks" (clearly a knock-off since the logo was slightly different) where I warmed up with a "cappuccino" drink. An Australian group had completed 3 passes (Renjo, Cho and Kongde) and did Island Peak over about a month - amazing! I thought our trek was ambitious! It was fun to compare notes and be able to show pictures right on my phones! Renjo La looked difficult from the pictures - they had to use micro-spikes on the icy trail and they had a 10 hour day, barely making it into town before dark - whew!

We found room in the lodge right by the Lukla airport - in fact, it was the same lodge we had tea when we first got off our flight on our first day! But this day was much different. It was raining now and you could barely see across the runway - the end of it disappeared in a white-out of clouds and haze. The planes were quiet. I worried a little, knowing we had potentially a buffer day - if we had to punt one day, we could scramble and make it out the next morning (for me, I would be just barely able to connect to my flight back to the US if everything went well). There was also a helicopter option - slightly riskier and quite a bit more expensive, but the helicopters could fly in conditions where the planes couldn't.

I had heard there were shots fired between North and South Korea - another flare-up between enemy nations at sea. I was going to be flying through Seoul on my way home to the US. There was still much uncertainty getting home, but as on a journey, I knew to just trust God for safety and patience to overcome bumps along the road.

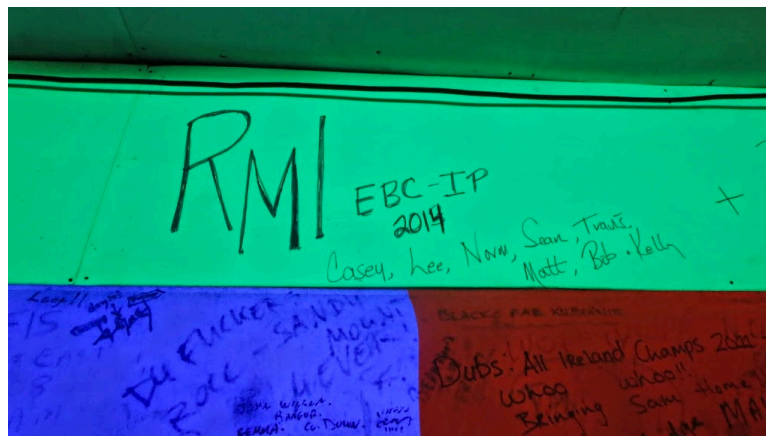
My room was like a palace - the wood was well done, the shower was hot and had nice tile-work, the bed was bigger and more comfortable, and the room even featured a TV! I had to jury-rig the plug to the lamp with some duct tape to hold it into place, but I felt I was closer to civilization as I ever had been! Fried beef momos and Everest beer made a fine dinner - our last one in the mountains (assuming our flight got off on time the next day). We all had to celebrate!

We headed down the street to the local Irish pub to party! It was a bit small and smoky inside - people were shooting pool on a rather worn table, dancing on a floor under a 20-year old disco ball and drinking cheap beer. But it was the



perfect place to unwind and celebrate our trip. Posters on the walls bore testimony to people's adventures in the mountains. One group must have made it to Everest base camp but had to scrub Island peak when the weather got worse, and then they were unable to fly out of Lukla when it got even worse, so they had to trek through the leech-filled jungle for 4 days to get to Jira before they could get on a bus back to Kathmandu! We made our banner - a simple RMI logo with our names signed (and Travis's added since he had to leave early). I wonder how many people go back to the same pub years later to see if their banners were still there?

After a few Guinness beers, some of us lowered our shame threshold to brave the dance floor - dancing with Gayloo and Sean and Bob and Kelly - we were having a grand old time! The stress was finally cleared away - we just had to catch our flight out of Lukla the next day! Getting a bit drunk wasn't too much of an issue - we had nowhere to drive anytime soon, and Casey assured us that coming down from high altitude to low altitude the next day gave us a "get out of jail free" card - even if you got totally falling over drunk, you could wake up the next morning with no hangover - nice!



*We left our mark at the tavern*

A crescent moon broke through the clouds on our walk back to our lodge - the rain had passed and clear weather seemed to be on the horizon. I kept my fingers crossed as I hit the sack for the night.

### **Going home – April 8**

We were to be on the 2nd wave of flights out of Lukla - I had calculated the first wave would leave Kathmandu at 6:00, arrive in Lukla at 7:00, so the second wave would be 2 hours later. That would put our departure time at 9:00. I dreaded that we'd have to watch a wave of flights come and go before our turn would come up. I was all packed and tried to sleep in, but I was wide awake at 5:00 waiting for the first peeks of light out of the window to make sure we'd be able to get out safely.

Somehow, I felt by a miracle the guides had arranged us to get on the first wave of flights instead - Casey was soon banging on people's doors to get up quickly and get rolling - there would be no time for breakfast! We were going to be on the first wave of flights after all. The sun came up clear and bright and we were soon schlepping our bags down the block to the airport terminal. The buzzing of the first wave of planes started to come - good they were able to get out of Kathmandu okay, so they should be able to get back down - whew!

Security was a joke - the metal detectors beeped on every one of us, but after a 2-second pat-down check, we all got through easily. We were on the 5th and final plane of the first wave and before I realized it we were climbing aboard the Twin Otter pointed down the hill. The props fired up, we rolled downhill and soon the wheels were off the ground at about 7:05 am. It was noisy and moderately turbulent - I'm glad we weren't any later. My stomach was starting to turn about 1/2 way down, but we must have crossed an inversion layer over Kathmandu where the air was remarkably stable, making for the second half to be smooth as glass. The wind-sock hung straight down at the Kathmandu airport. The usual layer of smog covered the city, obscuring any hint of the mountains that stood within 50 miles away. I felt the whole trip was a dream - we were back in the noisy world of cars, traffic, honking horns and pollution in less than 1 hour.

The "baggage claim" was an outdoor rack where bags were tossed rather haphazardly. A pair of monkeys climbed on the upper rack. The bus took us back to our familiar Yak & Yeti hotel - I still couldn't believe we were back!

It wasn't even 9:00 in the morning by the time we got to the hotel - and of course the rooms weren't ready yet! We enjoyed the breakfast buffet, napped a bit in the lounge, lay by the pool, and caught up with email and news (we didn't have wi-fi in Lukla so there was so much to catch up on). I picked up my bag that had been sitting in storage for 3 weeks - it was still there, the lock still in place - whew! My room was finally ready at 10:30, allowing a hot shower, a nap, another shower, and some unpacking and re-packing (I had to get 4 bags down to 2 somehow). A quick swim in the pool was nice - the water was quite cold but it was warm outside, almost even hot since we were 10,000 feet lower than we had been for several weeks!

I paid my friend Samuel a visit at the local art shop - he had remembered me from before the trek. He cut me a good deal on one of his prints - a magnificent scene of the trek through the Tengboche area featuring Ama Dablam, Nuptse and the trapezoidal summit of Mt Everest. I was thrilled to have it and I couldn't wait to get it framed and have it as a masterpiece at home - a wonderful way to remember this experience.



*Artist Samuel*

It wasn't even lunchtime yet - and already it felt like such a big day! I wandered some of the narrow streets outside our hotel, stopping for an "American" lunch at "KFC" (Kathmandu Fried Chicken ?) - the 2-piece chicken meal reminded me of home. Ice cream at "B&R" was satisfying as well - I felt the western influence starting to pervade throughout Nepal. However, I soon would realize how far I was from home. I ventured down one block to the "Arcade" - a shopping plaza. It was old, the buildings were claustrophobic, the steps between floors were uneven and narrow, and some of the decor was starting to get a bit odd. A small sign pointed to a "gallery upstairs" - it definitely was worth checking out.

Rows of old dusty shelves with an array of old musical instruments, idols, hand-painted chests that belonged in some sort of ancient museum, carvings and a menagerie of oddities adorned the back rooms. Some shelves of masks in the back were dimly lit and the odd shapes of the red, orange and black demonic faces appeared out of an Indiana Jones movie where some ancient secret would be uncovered, the masks would come to life and snakes would come out of the floor or drop from the ceiling. The owner had a gruff voice, chain-smoked several dirty cigarettes and invited me for a closer look. I hastily snapped a few photos and got out of there quickly - a strange vibe filled the air, as if a family of demonic beings actually lived there in the spiritual realm.

Back on the street across from the hotel, I was happy to be back in reality now! It was a whiplash of emotions - from majestic mountains to the uncertainty of the flight to comfort food of fried chicken to the demonic mask museum (and I think they were for sale too). I was thinking "what next could there be"?

At the hotel, I found a van had been arranged for an optional tour at 2:00 of the city. I had already seen a bunch of places on my own, but it was 1:30 and I didn't mind seeing some places again - when was I ever going to get back to Kathmandu in the near future? There would turn out to be many more surprises in store for me for the day - we ended up going to Durbar square again, climbing

a 9-tiered pagoda, seeing a bunch of old baths with snake-like sculptures and demon gods killing other demons, and walking through the crowded markets of the back streets in Thamel.

The big surprise happened at Pashupatinath - Nepal's oldest Hindu temples, dating back to the 4th century. It is the most sacred site in Nepal. Entering the main gate, we soon were overwhelmed with colors, sights, sounds, and smells, which we would soon learn about. "Holy men" ascetics stood by the temples - some real, some counterfeit. A simple test would tell a counterfeit - if he was asking for money, he was likely a counterfeit - he was really a beggar "looking pretty for the tourists" to collect money for people to get photos of. We obliged with one man, taking turns snapping photos. But I was more impressed with a "real" holy man further inside. He was reading some prayer cards and just minding his own business. I got a candid photo of him (the "fake" holy men would cover their faces quickly if they sensed somebody was about to take a picture) - he didn't care or notice. I just wished him Namaste and placed a coin by his feet - he didn't want it but I left it there anyway.

Children were swimming in the muddy Bagmati River at the base of a bunch of cremation ghats - this was a sacred site where Hindus would put their dead to rest to be reincarnated for another life. One man was being carried - he was covered in bright marigolds and roses, and soon would be covered in wood and straw to be burned. The Bagmati was special - it flowed into the Ganges - the most holy of rivers. Three fires were burning on different platforms, and the body we saw would soon be placed on another platform to be set into a funeral pyre. We stayed to listen to a small concert consisting of a 2-string lute, sitar, tabla drums, and some men singing and chanting with drone-like tones. Halfway through the first chant I caught a whiff of something putrid - like the smell of burning hair. I looked over and saw the smoke from one of the fires was starting to blow our way, and we were smelling the burning body. It was a wretched smell, but I knew it was part of the "cycle of life" for Hindus, in the same way the Verdi Requiem might be part of the "cycle of life" in Italy. Death was a real part of life, and I realized how much more privileged I was to be able to experience life to the fullest on our trek in the high mountains when I still could.

Our final farewell was about here - after a short happy hour back at the hotel, we headed down to Ben & Jerry's, not the ice cream shop, but a popular hang-out where climbers from around the world celebrated after scaling the high peaks. I felt lucky and so fortunate to be among them. We received our "official certificates" of our accomplishments of making it up to Everest base camp and Island Peak (20,305 feet).

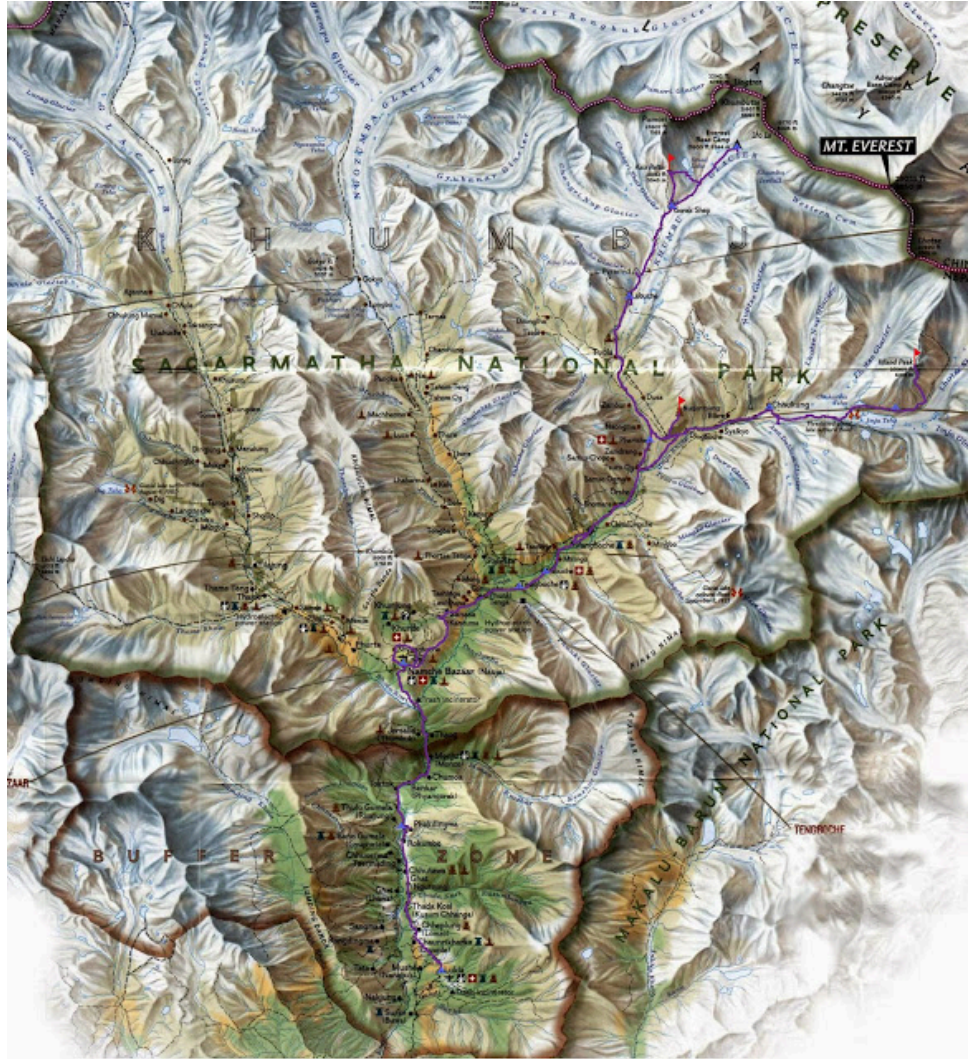
### **Final going home – April 9**

Bob and Kelly had left already, taking an early flight back to the US. Lee and

Norm were already on the bus heading down to Chitwan national park (on a previous trip, they had taken an elephant safari and managed to approach some wild tigers from the safety of the back of a group of elephants). Sean and I were the last to head out - we both had early afternoon flights back to the US - he was going back to CO and I was heading back to SFO. We left the hotel just as a group of Russian climbers was just checking in – they would be attempting Mt Everest over the next several weeks. Our flights were 15 minutes apart so we bade farewell as I headed to gate 3 and he to gate 4.

I was saddened at the thought of going back home. The trip had felt in a way like a “near-death experience” where someone dies, sees a glimpse of the light of heaven, but then heals and returns to the sinful earth. A melancholy would persist for several months. I would be reminded as a believer in Christ that I was “not of this world” – my true home was in heaven. I guess the emotions of the experience were so intense, and the whole trip was a gift that would take months to “unwrap”.

The Singapore airlines flight again connected through Singapore and Seoul, re-tracing the route we came in on. All the flights were smooth and on time. The movie “Frozen” was playing on the 777 somewhere over the Pacific, and as Elsa was singing “Let It Go”, my eyes started to tear up as all the pent-up emotions and feelings from the last month in the frozen Himalayas started to let go and pour out. The silly snowman Olaf became a sort of mascot, helping to link and process the thoughts of how I would never be the same again. Nepal would be an experience I would cherish for a lifetime.



*Our 100-mile trek in the Himalayas*