

Third World, First Time Around

Yes - a blatant reference to Paul Simon's You Can Call Me All



Left to Right: monks outside Bodhnath; Ama Dablam reflected in monastery window, Everest/Lhotse from Tengboche

To Katmandu

In September 1998, I made the decision to go to Nepal over Christmas break, in large part because my new physician in Oregon decided I had a suspicious lump in one of my breasts. Indeed, 1998 had been a difficult one in terms of women's health issues: 3 long-term friends of mine were treated for cervical dysplasia (all caused by HPV). In terms of my fate, the subsequent 8 weeks of tests ultimately revealed the presence of 2 benign cysts but changed my life by disrupting the comfort and security I had been so preciously gathering since events in 1996. In the middle of this situation, the question became: What do I want to see if this is for real? The simple answer was: Himalayas. Perhaps surprisingly, it wasn't specifically Everest. Of all the Himalayas, Annapurna and K2 always held more interest than Everest. But neither of these was a reality during the Christmas break afforded me. Part of the decision to see the Himalayas also had to do with forcing myself to experience a third world country. Back in 1997, when I made my first (ever) journey to second-world Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, I experienced moderate anxiety to the point that I vowed, at the time, I could NEVER handle third world. Given the potential cancer situation, my desire to challenge everything - including first-world comfort and arrogance - was a specific motivation to visit Nepal. Of course, Nepal was a very deliberate choice. I chose Nepal over many other countries (e.g. India and Pakistan) with a certain awareness based on reading about mountaineering expeditions in that general area. Nepal, according to my impression, offered a peaceful setting and culture that, on the whole, were not prone to political instability, abjectly severe illness or malnutrition, intense gender biases, or deadly religious conflict (despite the proximal coexistence of many faiths). Nevertheless, I was severely warned about the poverty and hygiene. The latter only fascinated me as a microbiologist. As a professor in this field, I felt it was extremely important for me to have more direct experience with diseases and public health issues at the global level. Let me just say upfront that I received that experience.

Finally, I did not do Nepal on my own. Because of a very tight schedule, I went guided with an American tour group - Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS) - who, in turn, interfaced with local Nepali guides and porters. The "Everest Escapade" package promised 4 days in Katmandu and 10 days in the Himalayas. The latter trek followed the route towards Everest but terminated at Tengboche monastery (around 13,000 feet). Porters and yaks would carry most gear; meals would be provided by a cooking staff. After Sara and my experiences in Patagonia, I struggled long and hard with the decision to go guided because, frankly, the tour groups we witnessed in Argentina and Chile were obnoxious. But after losing serious weight, brain cells, and time self-guiding in Patagonia, I felt the cost of a tour group was something I should try. And make no mistake - the cost is exorbitant when you consider the sub-zero accommodations and sparing cuisine (\$1,900 for trekking and hotels in Katmandu, plus \$1,600 for airfare). In my estimation, you could do this trip on your own for between a third and a half what we paid. Departure date for Katmandu: December 18. My classes wound up on December 12 and so I had ample time to prepare materials for the following term. This is important to mention because I would return 10 hours before my first winter term lecture. I do not recommend this itinerary again - but, as with everything on this trip, I was driven by the notion that everything is worth experiencing once given that that's how many times you live. I also figured that I was still young and stupid enough to pull off this stunt. Another reason I went with the tour group was to avoid thinking about the trip much before leaving. Nevertheless, I still had to deal with packing and health issues. Given that December is winter in Nepal, trekking temperatures ranged from MINUS 30°F at night to 50-70° during the day. Ameliorating these facts, December is one of the region's driest months, offering clear weather. We were limited to carrying one duffel of gear and a daypack during the trek. While this LOOKED like a large volume, it proved nearly inadequate given the amount of required clothing (layered synthetics, goose down jacket, heavy fleece everything top/pants) and extreme sleeping bag (rated MINUS 30° F). Well, I quickly discovered that extreme bags are hard to come by - especially in the middle of semi-rural Oregon. First, I inquired with my climbing friends who all laughed jokingly: "what do you need a bag like that for... are you going to the Himalayas?" My affirmative garnered the immediate response: "who goes to the Himalayas in the winter?" To make a long story short, I purchased said bag in Seattle (total expense \$275). In terms of health considerations, I completed a series of shots in September, boosting my hepatitis vaccines. Thankfully, Patagonia had covered polio and tetanus. Literature suggested obtaining shots for bacterial meningitis and rabies but, after discussing the risks of these infections with my doctor, we concluded that both seemed unnecessary. I also obtained prescriptions for hard-core anti-diarrhea drugs and antibiotics. We agreed that high altitude pills were not necessary given that I would only ascend to 13,000 feet. Prior to this trip, I had climbed to 10,400 feet 3 times on Rainier, experiencing mild altitude sickness only once. My fitness program entailed buying a treadmill in September and walking a few miles each night.

The night before leaving, I hadn't slept much. At the time, the US was bombing Iraq over weapons inspection problems and I was nervous about terrorism. My flight schedule was atrocious: Portland to LA (3 hours) with a 3-hour layover; LA to Osaka (11 hours) with a surreal 1-hour midnight layover; Osaka to Bangkok (7 hours) with a 4-hour layover; and, Bangkok to

Katmandu (3.5 hours). The good thing was that I spent virtually the entire flight over the Pacific getting to know Jon, a fascinating jazz musician (no one in the seat between us). The rest of the band was spread throughout the 747. Our exchange was initiated early when Jon said, "Well, we're gonna be sitting here for the next 10 hours - you better tell me about your love life." So I did - as the combination of my love life and musicians have made for interesting stories. I was sad to part with Jon and we hugged goodbye in the airport, blocking a determined line of exhausted and emotionless passengers. The bad thing was that I became REALLY sick in Bangkok upon landing. Food poisoning seems the likely culprit given sudden and violent throwing up, diarrhea, and a blazing fever. I blame it on the previous flight's breaded pork with fetid slaw-like side salad. Thankfully, I had connected with a mother-daughter team doing the REI version of my Everest trek. They watched my carry-on pack while I repeatedly hurled in the relatively clean women's restroom. All international flights - in contrast with those to/from Patagonia - were remarkably populated by Americans (20-30%, including at least 4 different Nepal-bound tour groups). There was also a young mother with two small children planning to self-guide through the Annapurna region. Her young daughter was un-affectionately known as "Typhoid Mary" given that, during the many hours of all flights, she ran around the plane hacking a deep cough into the searing dryness of the re-circulated plane air. With all my new friends in Bangkok, I lay half-asleep on the crowded floor when they called to load the plane to Katmandu. Upon standing, I broke into a full sweat, ran to the restroom, puked again, and dragged myself onto the plane. There were so many people that they upgraded our plane from an old Airbus to a brand new Boeing 777. I considered this a good thing because an Airbus had crashed into the swamps of southern Bangkok one week prior. Given my illness, I traded seats with a man near the bathroom. During the first 3 hours of this 3.5 hour flight, I threw up every 20 minutes. Interestingly, production from my other end was absent. The minute the Himalayas came into view, I stopped puking for this leg of the trip. Looking at them reminded me - strangely - of looking at the profile of the Olympics as seen from Seattle. I had to keep repeating to myself: over 20,000 feet tall. Unfortunately, the peaks were diminished a great deal by the purple-gray haze of smog that envelops the Katmandu Valley. Landing at Katmandu was also one of the most exhilarating experiences and I felt my heart skip many beats as we climbed onto the tarmac into the almost tropical air. The adrenalin, no doubt, fully vanquished my illness. The small airport was far less daunting than that in Buenos Aires and cigarettes (an immediate sensation in Argentina) never seemed to be a noticeably significant habit in Nepal. Clearing customs was a piece of cake given that we'd obtained our visas in advance. Our group leader was waiting to scoop us each up as we exited the airport, identifying the company luggage tags we were to display prominently. Indeed, I barely stepped from the building and was whisked to a bus. In contrast with Argentina, the situation outside the terminal was highly organized. There was a defined, barricaded area behind which stood sign-wielding people advertising hotels, treks, or transportation services. I explained my health situation to our leader and he casually informed me that I would be completely well in the morning and that he had no concerns whatsoever about the trek.

Katmandu, Katmandu, Katmandu. Katmandu is an interesting place. There are not adequate words to describe this city. Unbeknownst to me before this trip, the Katmandu Valley is home to 4-5 million people. After easily navigating Buenos Aires (home to over 20 million) I am still scratching my head because Katmandu seemed infinitely more populous to me. I think that maybe it is the Katmandu traffic and the fact that there are hardly any structures we would call sidewalks. Everyone seems to share the ill-defined, uneven roads (roads with no lines, no lanes, few traffic markers, no stoplights). Traffic was equally distributed among people walking, riding, and driving. There were more motorcycles than there were bicycles - although there were a fair number of bicycle-drawn taxi-carts. Cars included shoddy public buses, immaculate tour group buses (I'm ashamed to say that is what we enjoyed), mini-cars and taxis, strange motorized crafts that looked like tractors hauling metal huts, and the occasional expensive Western or Japanese car. In general, however, Katmandu was a city of people with very little. If there was a strong presence or separation between "have's" and "have-not's," it was not evident to me. Katmandu was also constantly noisy. We were told that cars have the right of way but are obligated to honk their horns when approaching any other kind of traffic. Essentially, this meant that drivers blasted their horns all the time. They also traveled well over the center of the road, barreling directly into oncoming traffic (who, in turn, had to move over and honk as they displaced pedestrians, cyclists, and other drivers). Oddly though, the experience of traveling in a bus or walking the streets never scared me. I became perhaps too comfortable and fascinated with the chaos that is Katmandu traffic.



Left to Right: Katmandu street (from bus), typical buildings, our hotel and its serene inner garden

We drove about 20 minutes to our hotel, the Malla, one of the most upper-end in the city (indeed, the 1991 "Lying Planet" rated the Malla as expensive). What was even more remarkable about Katmandu was how quiet it could become. Many places throughout the city were built with massive grounds and courtyards off main roads, offering surprising peace from the incredible noise and traffic. As was the case with our hotel (and many shopping districts and religious structures we visited), you could step off a main street, walk through a building into a walled courtyard or garden, and experience remarkable peace. In the case of our hotel, this meant listening to birds and admiring the bougainvillea and poinsettia that seemed to be blooming

everywhere. Indeed, our hotel was exceedingly posh in terms of its grounds, marble floors, and immaculate lobby. Nevertheless, before being handed our room keys, we were given a serious health warning (by our trekking leader - NOT hotel staff) about the next 2 days in the city. His most ominous statement: don't drink ANY tap water, including at the hotel. We were given a list of restaurants that were considered safe (including dining at the hotel). And then we were sent to our rooms. Of course, all I wanted to do was take a shower and go to sleep. In the room, there was a basket of fresh fruit and two pitchers of filtered water. After experiencing the bathroom, the pitchers of water looked all the more inviting. The toilet water was, literally, brown and particulate with material that looked and smelled like untreated sewage. Flushing only exacerbated these sensations. The tap water looked and smelled likewise. Showers were carried out with mouth and eyes closed. I roomed with Adrienne, a law firm consultant from Atlanta (she would be my tent mate as well). Thankfully, we proved extremely compatible. At around 2 that afternoon - after showers - Adrienne and I drew the drapes and went to sleep for pretty much 15 hours. The pillows seemed, in the words of Patagonia Sara, to be filled with lead shot. The heating/air conditioning system was sporadic and unpredictable (there had been a prominent sign in the lobby regarding the frequent power outages in Katmandu and we experienced plenty of these during our stay). Starving, I did get up enough nerve to eat solid food around ten that night, ordering sweet rice and yogurt via room service. The rice was wonderful but the yogurt was thick and sour (you could stand a spoon up in the stuff) and I didn't eat much. Within 20 minutes of this snack, I was out again until 7 a.m.

The next day, we toured major sites in the area. I was feeling 100% in terms of digestive functioning. First - the largest stupa in town (Bodhnath). I had actually seen this for a brief moment from the plane during the landing. A stupa is a dome-like tower, typically white and adorned with the eyes of the Buddha and prayer flags. There are small stupa along the trails in the Himalayas. Driving to this magnificent urban site, one would hardly guess that such a structure lay just beyond the street. We stepped from the bus and were herded along the sidewalk-less main road, boisterous traffic racing, to an alcove. As with the hotel courtyard, one need only travel 20 feet beyond the road to discover tranquility. Within this atrium: a massive circle, Bodhnath at its center. When I first saw the stupa, its gold tower radiating a rainbow of spoke-like prayer flags, I cried. This surprised me because I am not a religious person in any traditional way. Of course, I had also cried when I saw the Himalayas from the plane. In contrast with my previous assumptions, a stupa is not a hollow structure that you can enter. This stupa was built 2300 years ago, commissioned by a woman. When we arrived, monks were putting saffron water onto the upper dome, staining it yellow. Meanwhile, countless worshippers walked clockwise around the stupa at its base, spinning countless prayer wheels fixed into the white wall while reciting the mantra "om mani padme om" (which, to the best of my understanding, praises the lotus, associated with the birth of the Buddha). One can also climb high upon the stupa, although not up the tower. We assembled high on the dome and looked out onto the circular atrium, the chaos of Katmandu seeming to disorganize itself only on the periphery beyond the religious structure. Amidst the circle of buildings surrounding the stupa was the monastery proper. We entered during a prayer ceremony, monks (5-50 years old) engaged in a rhythmic chant. It felt awkward to enter - although many tourists were already there, some inconsiderately snapping flash photographs. Most of our group was silent, kneeling in the periphery to absorb the service. As with other monasteries we visited, the walls were immensely colorful, adorned with "Thanka" style paintings of the Buddha's life. A giant golden statue of the Buddha towered against a backdrop of carved wooden flowers. Silken tapestries dominated by the primary colors hung from the ceiling. As we exited, we spun a 6X4 foot prayer wheel off to the side of the foyer. It rung a shrill bell as it turned each rotation. Immediately beyond, we were approached by a severely crippled elderly man begging for money - the only such individual we encountered. As was a topic of later discussion, the Nepali struck everyone as relatively well fed, healthy, and peaceful. One woman noted that she was amazed Nepal was not like India, despite abject poverty. In the latter, she said the combination of poverty AND human suffering drove her to depression every day.



Left to Right: approaching Bodhnath, best view of Bodhnath, Hindu funeral pyres

We piled back onto the bus and headed to a Hindu temple located along the sacred river flowing through town. Hindu ceremonially burn their dead, casting the pyres into the river. We walked a dirt path 5 minutes to a bridge - beyond which only Hindus are allowed. Around us were several religious structures, innumerable monkeys, and religious men who tried to sell their photographed images for monetary reimbursement (some children also used this tactic). From our vantage, the main temple was partly visible behind a wall, as were funeral pyre platforms across the river. A family was preparing one of their dead relatives while we - and dozens of other tourists - essentially watched. The body was wrapped in brightly colored cloth. For many reasons, I had a difficult time with this and could hardly keep my eyes on the way-too-real acts before me. The men preparing the body, according to ritual, cleansed themselves in temple water that ran from an ornate spigot near the bridge; consequently, they were wearing little. Watching everything felt like a violation on many levels. It amazed me, nevertheless, to be a part of this. It stunned me that this was considered a tourist attraction. One woman in our group cried throughout and after the ceremony. We moved on as the family carried the body to the actual pyre. I'm not certain I could have survived the actual burning. A colleague who witnessed a cremation said the fire burnt the cloth from the body almost immediately (I don't need to explain any more). But we escaped through a sea of people selling jewelry. Half were aggressive, following, waving

items in your face, dropping prices incrementally, and making you feel obliged to spend money. Few Nepali accepted that Americans were short on cash (i.e. if you used this excuse truthfully, they insisted you must be lying). Also, if you bought from one vender, dozens would follow you and point-blank tell you that now you owed them.



Left to Right: Bhaktapur, various shots of temples, architecture, pottery/artisans

We moved on to Bhaktapur, one of 3 cities in the valley (Katmandu and Patan being the others). Bhaktapur, the most ancient, is known for diverse religious structures and its artisans. The 30-minute ride to Bhaktapur took us by green farmlands rising in terraced plots up the hillsides. Bhaktapur was quiet and clean, owing mostly to narrow cobbled streets that lacked traffic access. We walked most of the town, watching potters dry their wares, women separating grains, rainbow-colored stands of produce. Our final destination was the main square: brightly colored buildings, many temples, ornate woodcarvings. There, I purchased a large Thangka landscape that depicted the profile of Himalayan peaks visible from the Katmandu Valley (some adorned with Yeti). The rest of the valley was laid out schematically - all major stupa emphasized alongside the villages, the terraced farms, jungles, and rivers. When I saw it in the shop window, I knew this was the keepsake I wanted to remind me of Nepal. As with everything, you are told to barter - something I did not enjoy. Nevertheless, I talked the hand-painted work of art from 110 to 80 dollars. Ironically, I paid 4 times that to frame it once I returned home. We returned to the hotel by 2 p.m. and were told to regroup at 4 for a meeting about the next day. After a short nap, I enjoyed chicken masala in the hotel dining room. It was EXCELLENT - as was the nan and guava juice. Embarrassingly, however, I suffered this HUGE nosebleed (we're talking something that looked like I broke an artery). I felt bad for the waitress who noticed it before me. Remarkably, I had never suffered a spontaneous nosebleed and so this was weird and disconcerting. I would have similar nosebleeds over the next 3 days - but, after that, they never returned. During our meeting, we received maps of the Khumbu region (that encompasses Everest/Sagarmatha National Park) and traced our trekking route. In terms of tomorrow's legendary flight, only one piece of non-carry-on luggage (not more than 30 lbs) was allowed per person. We could leave extra gear at the hotel. We could also bring a carry-on daypack and were encouraged to wear all our thick warm gear. Finally, we were told to bring a book as we would likely have to wait several hours for the fog/smog to lift (i.e. our 8:30 departure time meant absolutely nothing). The planes apparently don't fly with instruments in the mountains. In light of this, I thought it strange that no one discussed or could answer questions about weather forecasts over the next week. After packing, Adrienne and I went to bed early in preparation for the 6 a.m. wake-up call.



Left to Right: charter plane in Katmandu, dramatically sloping Lukla runway

Flying to Lukla and Trekking to Phakding

At 6:30 a.m., we hauled our gear down to the lobby, ate breakfast (buffet style with a mix of both local and western foods), and were off to the airport again - this time to the domestic terminal. This area was exponentially fouler than the international: more smoke and the bathroom had visible footprints of shit stamped all over the stall and partway out the door. Said prints were accompanied by a stench that promoted dry-heaving in several people, including myself. And there was no toilet paper - an admittedly minute problem as compared with the feces. I don't know how long we waited - probably an hour. As I sat there in the bustling terminal, it occurred to me that if I were doing this trip on my own I would have had no idea when specific flights were coming and going. There were clearly people moving but I was completely missing whatever system of communication they were responding to. Every once in awhile, someone would come over a loudspeaker - but never in English. It also seemed that our leader had pulled strings that got us through several hoops before a lot of others. I found the whole process confusing and consequently questioned my ability to easily self-navigate Nepal. In contrast with guidebook information, there are many companies that fly to Lukla. I counted 4 transport companies plus 1 sight-seeing-only plane that flies you around Everest - and a hot air balloon group that floats the valley (presumably above the purple smog). Lukla, the first major airstrip

constructed in the Himalayas, was built for the Hillary expedition - sad when you consider that Hillary lost his first family in a plane crash en route to Lukla a few years after his historic summit. In terms of our flight, we flew Yeti Air. Eventually, we were called to the tarmac, loaded onto buses, and hauled out to a distant airstrip. Two twin-prop planes landed sequentially, each seating 20. Ours was the second. Passengers disembarked and luggage was unloaded within 5 minutes. And then we boarded. Several of us were afraid of this flight and, sufficed to say, I was one of them - mostly because a friend's cousin had been recently killed in a small plane crash en route to Lukla. Calm-looking but nerve-wracked, I sat next to Theresa, a school teacher from California who became a friend on this trip. Remarkably, she was more scared than me. With all the hefty daypacks, the tiny plane (including the aisle) was packed to the point that you couldn't move much after you squished yourself and your belongings into place. There was 1 seat on one side of the plane and 2 seats on the other. Theresa and I sat next to one another. A bowl of candy and cotton (for your ears) was passed forward like a church collection tray. No safety precautions were reviewed, no seatbelts checked. Before we could ponder these facts, the plane was taking off, rising above the sea of smog and soaring over terraced farms. Flying, at this point, became dream-like: looking down at the green shelves was like moving through a computer generated map. It just didn't seem real - except when we dipped or angled and your sense of balance was obliterated. Overall, though, the flight was smooth - at least at the start.

The flight would last barely over a half an hour. We approached more rugged terrain and narrowly crossed 3 sylvan passes, experiencing turbulence as we surveyed the remarkable detail of the treetops below us. Over the first pass, Theresa shrieked and closed her eyes. One or both of us picked up all our hands and we held onto one another through the remainder of the flight. We knew the airstrip was near but we could not fathom precisely where because our visible trajectory was aimed toward the dead-end gorge. The details of the trees and rocky outcrops to our sides seemed in reach just beyond the cold glass of the windows. And then the plane lurched perpendicular. Lukla appeared - a quickly approaching village of structures, a miniscule strip of brown earth racing unevenly UP the mountainside - the legendary gravel runway. The plane dipped, almost nose-diving to contact the terminus of now-spewing rocks. Cheers to the pilots roared from the cabin, dimmed momentarily by one still-nervous passenger - surprisingly not me - who audibly noted: we haven't stopped yet. The landing lasted forever (and I can recall every millisecond). And then we came to a dusty halt, the wall-like side of a mountain immediately before us. Despite all the terrified melodrama, that landing was THE BEST. Unlike Theresa (who was, at this point, squeezing my hands with her eyes sealed shut), I HAD to watch every moment with eyes wide open. It was so amazing. It filled me with absolute awe - and I'm not someone who enjoys roller coasters or fantasizes about flying or jumping out of airplanes. We were unloaded with an unceremonious speed that defied the wondrous reverence we all felt. Many people, stepping off the plane, remarked that the landing at Lukla, alone, justified the entire price of the trek. Believe it or not - 7 years later - I still agree. But to the pilots, the ground crew, and the Nepal military guards - whose job it was to clear the runway between takeoffs and landings - this was commonplace. We were all so dumbfounded after the landing that we could hardly focus. Everyone seemed to want to stand in the middle of the runway and stare agape down the narrow ribbon of rocks. In the distance, we heard an incoming plane and so our next instinct was to fish out cameras to take pictures. All the while, the locals were doing their best to herd us politely out of the way. A second Yeti Air plane landed a picture-perfect landing and we could only watch in silence. Shortly thereafter, the pair of planes took off, one right after the other. And then we could only watch in awe and terror. At first sound, the take-off was terrifying because the engines were deafening, the craft generating maximum power while poised at the top of the runway. Most of us, however, were more relieved once we saw the actual take-off. We shared this erroneous preconception that the plane would literally roll off the end of the cliff. In fact, about 70% down the runway hill, the planes lifted gently and effortlessly into the air. There was also no obvious lurch to turn immediately (as with the sharp, perpendicular landing) because the rising planes cleared the features across the valley.

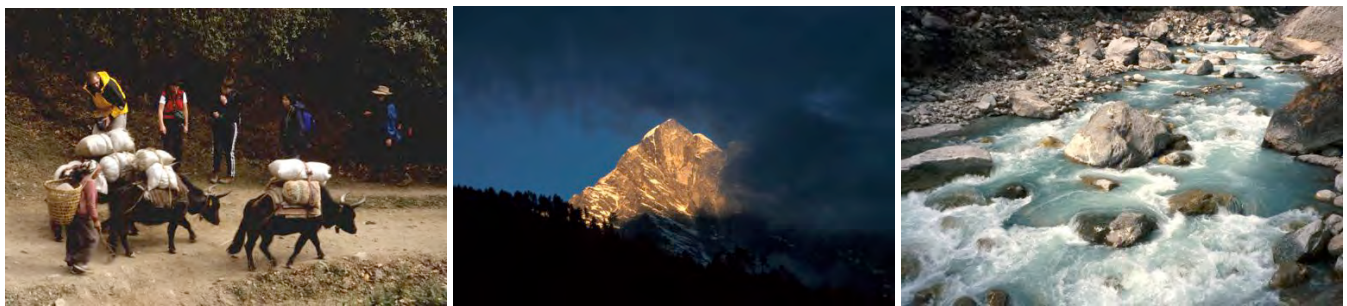
We eventually gathered near one of a few lodges to the side of the runway. As we were on a significant slope, everything was terraced. We situated ourselves on a bare shelf beneath the main building. Our leader introduced us to most of the staff. Some - the yak herders - had already left with our gear strapped to said beasts. In our stupor, we missed this. Given that our client group was only 13 in number, we had more than enough assistance: the leader, 4 Sherpa guides who would walk interspersed throughout the group (not to mention perform camp set-up and deliver tea in the mornings), 2 cooks, 2 cook assistants, and 2 yak herders. I am ashamed to say that I would be so distracted throughout this entire trip that I would never get to know any of the staff. Only the female cook assistants (18 and 19 years old) who prepared and served our food remotely impress my memory because I enjoy watching people cook. Although I did have one interesting conversation with a Sherpa (I'll discuss that one later), it felt awkward to be led while hiking by guides. Part of it was just being overwhelmed (albeit in a meditative way) by the mountains and the constant sense that "my god, I am in the Himalayas." But a lot was just my sense of independence that comes from hiking thousands of miles with only close friends and family. I'm sorry to say that the bond just wasn't there for me with the Sherpas. There were, simply, too many people - too many unfamiliar people. One of the Sherpas remarked to me that our group all appeared young, fit, and active - unlike many guests who required or wanted direct assistance because they were not in shape. He literally spoke of having to haul packs and/or physically lead people into camp by headlamp. Our group read like a more uniformly affluent version of Gilligan's Island: Hollywood agent, Hollywood trademark attorney, biotech. human resource specialist, two New York bankers, a Silicon Valley computer couple, an Aussie travel agent, an oil company marketing analyst and his wife (she had been a former bank president but was now training in naturopathic healing at Yale), an Atlanta law firm consultant (Adrienne), a high school English teacher (Theresa), and me, the Professor. The ages ranged from 26 to 51. Most had traveled on at least two different continents prior to this trip. But I am digressing... The female assistants were busy setting up lunch, laying out a tarp and cloth with condiments in the center. It was about then that I started to acknowledge the altitude. I felt funny: light-headed, suddenly exhausted, winded by simple breathing, anxious about the next 10 days. Fortunately, we all sat down for a far-too formal lunch. Each pre-loaded aluminum plate was carried to us, served individually - along with a steaming tin cup of Tang-like liquid. I don't recall what we had that first day - cabbage/onion salad, variously prepared potatoes, and eggs were staples. Little meat or poultry was served during the entire trek. It would be about 1:00 when we set out that day, our goal for the night being a camp at Phakding (5 miles

away, most downhill). Sufficed to say, improper pronunciation of this word earned plenty of purposely-bad language. Frankly, no one was sure what the right pronunciation was because even the guides seemed to say it a little differently.



Left to Right: Lukla lunch, on the trail to Phakding - terraces, teahouses, religious structures

Leaving Lukla, we dropped from 9200 to about 8700 feet via a wide, up and down, side-hilling trail. I remember little of that first day in terms of exacts. Mostly, I was completely obsessed with the IDEA of trekking in Nepal, acknowledging that my feet were touching the Himalayas - the same trail used by the likes of Hillary and Krakauer. I had to keep reminding myself that I was actually doing it because, for me, it was hard to believe. I don't remember doing that as much in Patagonia - perhaps because Patagonia was something I never really thought about in advance. In contrast, Nepal - the Himalayas - well, they had long been engrained in my mind with a certain godly grandeur, with extreme historical and larger-than-life expectations. Expectations - no doubt - that were met in some ways and not met in others. Setting out, we first walked through 5-7 blocks of Lukla proper, all on cobbled stones. As we dropped out of the city and through a pocket of trees - the trail wide and dusty with many rocks - I remember thinking something to the effect of - "hallelujah... we're finally on the trail and IN the mountains." Within 5 minutes, we rounded a bend and there was a sprawling farm - and in the distance, another small group of buildings. Such is the theme along this trekking route. There is no wilderness and I think I felt and accepted this sense of disappointment early on. I'd say I had only two periods of time (that amounted to 30 minutes total) where I felt in "wild" mountains during this trip. One was during the climb to Namche and the other was on the high trail to Khunde. Nevertheless, I succumbed to this as the way it would be. I tried to content myself by finding appreciation in the culture, the frequent Buddhist structures, and the farms - all the while keeping my eyes peeled upward to the mountains. Honestly, though, looking at the mostly bare granite Himalayas from high in them filled me with the familiar sense of being, say, in the North Cascades. Only from the plane did I ever acknowledge the incredible depth of the gorges, the relative height and steepness of the mountains. I was also expecting way more glaciers and ice. Comparatively, Patagonia's metropolis-sized ice fields were more awesome to me. But the IDEA of trekking in Nepal was the thing that blew my mind. After a few hours, we arrived in Phakding. En route, I met up with the mother-daughter pair who watched my stuff while I barfed in Bangkok. The porters were just setting up the tents and the yaks were being shooed out of camp, their herders hand-picking up dung and tossing the pieces towards the adjacent river. Feces aside, I will say that I was amazed by the beauty of Himalayan rivers. The quality of blue - a soft and opaque pastel aqua - was one of those memorable hues that just took my breath away. Dominated by rapids, massive light granite slabs and stones, and fine glacial silt, the blue was dynamic - like the sky perhaps. I could have watched the alpine rivers for hours.



Left to Right: yaks on the trail, alpenglow in Phakding, GORGEOUS Himalayan river

The MTS-issued tents, 4-season North Face VE-25's, were lined up too closely (in my opinion). Two people slept in each (unless they paid extra). Thick foam mattresses were laid out for us. We dealt with all other gear. Above the terrace where the tents were staked was a teahouse and a small, rustic lodge. Such was the usual arrangement for the rest of the trip. We would dine in the lodge, all of which featured a dung/wood-burning stove (for heat) and minimal lights. The cooks utilized gas stoves in what one member of our group deemed the "medieval kitchen" (I could not bring myself to photograph the women working in the kitchen). Our dining routine was hors d'oeuvres and tea at 4-5 and dinner (soup, a main course with 5-6 different items, and dessert) with more tea at 6-7. I enjoyed naps before and after tea that first day. Dinner, however, was a disquieting experience for me that first night. Once the sun vanished behind the ridge (usually between 3-4 each day), the temperature dropped 30° (or more). Consequently, everyone put on everything they brought to stay warm. Many teammates looked like they just stepped out of REI with heavily loaded credit cards. While most others sported spotlessly new North Face down gear from head to toe, I donned my dad's 1960's REI jacket, sprouting feathers. We all looked so large, cold, and goofy. Cramming into this dark dining room (lit by one blinding lantern that emitted pure white light) and sitting on wobbly short chairs, I felt

claustrophobic and suddenly aware that I didn't know anyone in this room and I was FAR, FAR, FAR, FAR away from home. To make matters worse, we could all see our own breath and mine was condensing on my glasses. Fortunately, the garlic soup and shrimp puffs distracted my momentary epiphany of dire comfortlessness - which, thankfully, never returned again. Dinner featured an assortment of parboiled vegetables, fried eggs, and boiled potatoes. Dessert: canned mangoes in heavy syrup. After dinner, everyone retired around 8 p.m. Relatively speaking, the first night was not cold (5-10° F) but that did not make going to the bathroom any easier. Said facilities featured 2 narrow, standing-height privy tents placed above holes dug in the ground. These were fine if you did your business with the first 30 minutes (i.e. when the holes were nearly empty) or during the first hour of the day (i.e. when all the shit was frozen - its kinetic energy/diffusion low). By day 2, these "helpful hints" were shared freely by members of the team. Even our leader noted that it usually took longer for a group to establish enough rapport to discuss colon-derived function and products. And, no - I did not initiate this discussion.



Left to Right: official entrance to Sagarmatha National Park, Namche Bazaar, the team with Everest - Christmas Eve

To Namche Bazaar

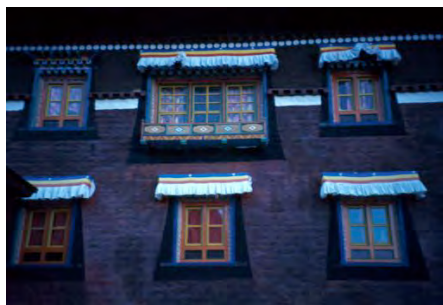
The next morning, as was the usual routine, we were awakened at 6 a.m. by Sherpas bearing hot drinks: chocolate, milk, or tea. We were then offered a pan of hot water with which to sponge bath. We then packed our things, setting them in a pile outside the tent. Breakfast, usually ready within 15 minutes of wake-up, always consisted of a hot cereal (oatmeal or rice), some bread product (plain toast, batter-frittered apples, or French toast), and an egg (fried or hardboiled). Over the course of 10 days, I consumed at least 25 eggs because they turned up at all meals - often the only source of protein. We departed shortly after breakfast. Our first obstacle of the day had been visible from camp: the first of 7 suspension bridges. In contrast to older and more wicked bridges I'd seen in pictures from the region, this bridge (like most others encountered) was made of solid steel cable construction: a steel grate platform on which to walk, stabilized from many directions by smaller cables. All cables were secured by massive concrete blocks at either end. Apparently, the Swiss Army had put in several new bridges a year or two before. The first we crossed was 300 feet long and 30-40 feet above the water at its midpoint. It didn't swing much and seemed solid. Consider that 8 yaks can unflinchingly saunter across one at the same time. After crossing the bridge, we continued along the river. Structures were virtually continuous: villages, farmhouses, stone restrooms. We also passed tree nurseries - established by Hillary - intended to reforest the heavily logged region. At first glance, my impression of the surrounding forest was not one of deforestation. The only hint of this problem was the constant smell of smoke (wood or dung) in the air. Some people remarked about how charming that was. To my nose - used to fresh air in the wilderness - the smell seemed both obnoxious and noxious. Eventually, we log-jammed at the Sagarmatha National Park entrance and waited for our leader to catch up and procure trekking permits. The military guards at the gate wore large automatic weapons but said nothing. A large sign communicated, via weird English, the dangers of altitude sickness and the need to proceed slowly from here on up. We continued 15 minutes more before lunching at a stunning open spot of boulders where the beautiful river carved its way down the valley. There was not a cloud in the sky and we all lay out upon the rocks physically soaking up the heat. After lunch, the way finally became interesting (and almost wilderness-like): the trail climbed steeply to what felt like a diving board - in fact, the supporting concrete block for the tallest suspension bridge on this route. I'd estimate that it was 100 feet above the water. It was not a "new model" although it felt pretty stable. There were not as many side cables, though, and so it swayed more - particularly given the wind gusts from the deeper side-canyons. It was also wooden down the center and I had to keep repeating - just walk across, don't look down, don't think about what you are doing, and BREATHE.



Left to Right: a low suspension bridge (near lunch spot), approaching climb to Namche, the highest suspension bridge

The other side of the bridge was actually worse: the cement platform had no guardrails and dropped straight down on two sides. An extremely steep set of stairs chiseled their way down about 20 feet before leveling on real earth. And then the REAL climb to Namche began, a steep, dusty, angling-in-every direction, exposed trail. I was not happy for about 20 minutes - at which point the trees began to thicken and the edges were not as obvious. I paced myself slowly, though - and I was glad I did. There were times I walked only 10 paces before intentionally stopping to drink and sit down. At one point, Everest was supposed to be visible but there were actually clouds and it was unclear whether what we were seeing was Lhotse or Everest. I was too zonked to care, frankly. After about 2 hours, things leveled out appreciably and we contoured gently around this hogback of land. Namche seemed to appear from nothing: first a teahouse, then a big farm, and then the whole town. The actual town lies in a dramatic cirque and feels like it's all going to slide down the hill. Bars and bakeries and souvenir shops occupied a portion of every structure - as did signs for showers and hot tubs. There is only one major bank in town, and a few phones (service is sporadic). Showers, though, are definitely the hottest commodities - with several no-doubt erroneous or out of date signs claiming their showers to be the "highest" in the world. Our camp was located on one of many terraces that comprised Namche. Getting there required a considerable walk and climb. Given that I had had to pee for ages, I ducked into a filthy hotel toilet. One of the Sherpas tried to steer me back into the group but I escaped, likely confusing the poor guy with my gestures that attempted to explain the dire bladder situation. At camp, I reconnected with Adrienne, who had been suffering knee problems all day. Although we napped most of the afternoon, Adrienne and I mustered enough energy to take a brief walk through the main market. Our trip itinerary was to rest and acclimatize the following day. I can't say I felt sick or too tired at this point, though. Our lodge dining room was on the third floor of this stone and wood building. It was the most pleasant of all the camp lodges: gorgeous wood interior and a comfortable stove. After a fine dinner, we all went to bed. That night would drop to well below freezing and ice would encrust the tent. I woke up with ice all around the sleeping bag opening where my breath had condensed and froze.

Nevertheless, I hauled out of bed before dawn and walked through town searching for classic morning pictures of the surrounding peaks. While the day was more or less free, we had the option of hiking UP 30 minutes to the Sagarmatha Visitor Center, National Park Headquarters. Located on the end of the ridge that makes up one side Namche bowl, the visitor center offered our first view of Everest - on Christmas Eve, no less. For some reason (and this was a good thing at the time), I did not fully understand we would be seeing Everest as I headed out. Huffing and puffing up the hill behind the crowd, I staggered finally onto the plateau of flat earth, turned around, and went - wait a second... that's Everest. And damn if it wasn't. In fact, it was: Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse, and Ama Dablam - amazing. I actually had to sit down. For better or worse, Everest comprises only a minor slice that is visible above the Nuptse Ridge. Lhotse is the highest point on the foreground ridge. Seeing any more of Everest from this region is very difficult because it is enclosed by Nuptse/Lhotse. You really don't ever see the whole thing unless you go all the way to base camp, a trek typically not done in December. We spent about an hour at the visitor center and headquarters building, set up as a self-guided tour of photographs depicting the major features of the park (biology to climbing to social history). Below park headquarters, adorned with several "no trespassing signs" and other signs that forbade photographs, was a working military base - its basketball court in notable view. You cannot imagine how much I wanted to photograph that with Everest behind it. After returning to camp and enjoying lunch, Adrienne and I headed down for "many shopping" as it was deemed by the Nepali: prayer wheels, sweaters, and yak paraphernalia (bells, yokes...). The most prolific shoppers, Adrienne and I stashed our booty as our leader shook his head about whether our flight from Lukla would be able to take off. I reminded him that I weighed 20 pounds less than most adults and so I had at least that much booty potential (RETROSPECTIVE COMMENT: now I weigh normal and have just booty). In lieu of appetizers, we went to the private home of our head Sherpa. His wife and parents served us traditional Chai with small boiled potatoes. We were instructed to peel the latter by hand and then dip them in salt or pepper relish. It was a terrific honor to be taken into this private home. On our way back, we stopped at one of the bars where I enjoyed my first Coke and Rum. This lanky, Nepali, DDG hippie chick tended the red-velvet-lined bar. A dark pool table surrounded by classic-featured/attired Sherpas shooting billiards was almost too weird - but did epitomize the Namche culture. All the while, I imagined Indiana Jones walking in (Mmmm - Harrison Ford). With Pink Floyd playing, the yak dung burning, and Rum warming my insides, I knew this would be one Christmas Eve that would never again happen... and so it should be savored for everything it was and wasn't. Given the lubricating effects of happy hour, our Christmas dinner was festive. The cooks baked a chocolate cake (a no-doubt culinary novelty), and we played the Stones, Steve Miller, and Van Morrison on a battery-powered portable CD player. Even the 5° below weather seemed in our favor.

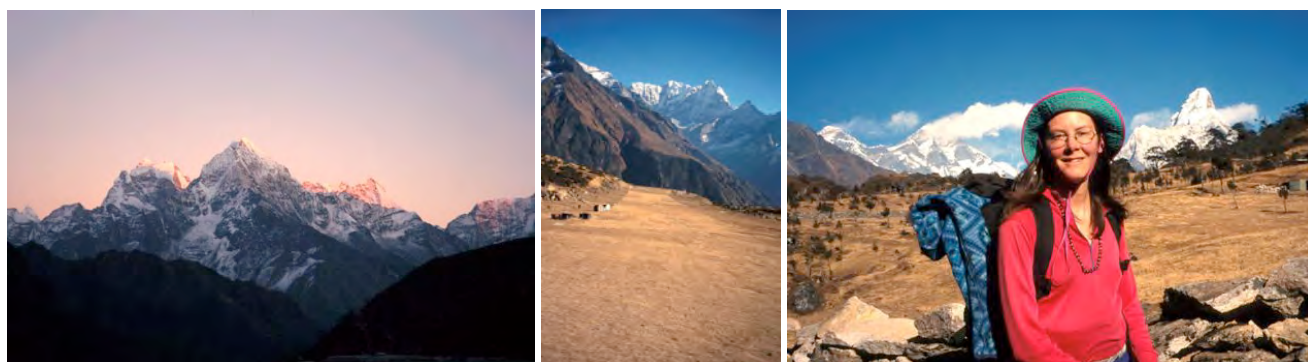


Left to Right: yak-herder leading the way to Thame, Thame monastery, Thame morning alpenglow

To Thame and Khunde

The next day, we moved camp to Thame, a town in the opposite direction relative to Mt. Everest. Although the trails were easy and mostly flat, we would climb to over 13,000 feet and I definitely had a headache that began at lunch and continued through dinner. It was during the final climb that I had my only long conversation with one of the Sherpas. He was very curious why I wasn't married and how, being single, I could pay for this. That I taught college didn't convince him that I was self-reliant (he assumed I must make less than comparably employed men). He was only 31 (then, barely older than me) but, honestly,

looked over 40 (I didn't tell him that). Most of the Sherpas, he said, had families elsewhere and worked a long time away from home. He thought Americans didn't work much since they were always on vacation. I laughed and said I felt like Americans use MUCH less vacation time than, say, Europeans - explaining that most people I knew didn't get more than a couple weeks total each year. We seemed to shrug and smile a lot, unable to reconcile whatever stereotypes we clearly held about one another and our different cultures and lifestyles. When I arrived in camp, many folks were playing Frisbee, an activity I could not fathom given that I was feeling rotten. Adrienne also had been throwing up since lunch and appeared to be suffering a huge ear infection. I gave her my antibiotics and plane-stolen barf bags, all of which she eventually used. Two others had also been suffering headaches and nausea (including full-scale puking). Above camp, a tall parade of giant snow clad peaks towered up the valley. We knew, looking at them and feeling the wind rolling down those icy faces, that it was going to be FUCKING cold that night (and it was). Nevertheless, we powered up from camp to the Thame monastery. En route, we peered over a shallow pass that lead into Tibet: a wasteland of moraines and brown mountains. Nevertheless, the land evoked something powerful that I can't name, something mysterious - like the word Tibet. The path to the Thame monastery, defined by Mani stones, also looked back on Thamserku (above Namche). Many of us deeply regretted not bringing crayons and paper with which to make rubbings of the stones. Thame monastery was built high on a rocky butress behind which was a towering rock face. Indeed, the structure seemed to have been purposely built in this natural alcove of rock, shielding it from the bracing wind. We removed our shoes and entered the empty, dark, and ice-cold monastery. The interior was reminiscent of the monastery in Katmandu - although larger. The hike down was cold, quiet, peaceful, and effortless. Sufficed to say, dinner was poorly attended given the illness going around. Those of us NOT puking crowded into a wood-paneled room with windows on 3 sides and a central stove. Outside, the silhouettes of the Himalayas glowed in the waxing moon. While the night started out bitterly cold, it seemed to warm 10° by morning.



Left to Right: Thamserku morning light, sloping runway en route to Khunde, me en route to Khunde (Everest, Ama Dablam)

Given the cold, it was no surprise that we awoke to clear skies, the mountains alighted in fading pinks that gave way to luminescent yellows. Adrienne swore off camp food and headed back to Namche to recover (guided separately by one of the Sherpas). She proclaimed dung smoke as the culprit. Leaving Thame, we headed back the way we came, stopping for lunch 2/3 of the way back to Namche. Theresa and I hiked together, talking all the while. It was especially nice to connect with someone who knew what they wanted out of their career and, having attained it, grew more satisfied each year. Ten minutes after lunch, we turned off the main trail. Within 30 minutes, I was feeling ill and, following a dash to a trailside outhouse (I use that word loosely - in fact, I would use loosely to describe many things), felt much better. Behind me, 2 others were suffering MUCH more severe GI problems (they would take 3 hours longer than the rest of the group). To me, though, the hike seemed short, painless and - for the second time - somewhat wild (at least if you disregarded some highly visible power lines). Of course, there wasn't a man-made dwelling for 30 continuous minutes. At several points, I stopped to admire the scenery - a veritable rock garden dominated by heather and other semi-familiar subalpine flora. Eventually, we came to a private airstrip that was owned and operated by the exclusive Everest Hotel, the venture of a Japanese businessman. The trail dipped and then climbed a rolling ridge - repeat, repeat. Everest and Ama Dablam came into view, the latter by far the most amazing to behold. Our destination for the night was the small and scenic town of Khunde - home to the largest hospital in the area. It had a spectacular entry trail, dominated by piles of Mani stones and many miniature stupa - all beneath the overwhelming and brilliant Ama Dablam. I could have watched that peak for days, I swear. Our tents were set up in one of many rock-enclosed areas. Indeed, the whole town was a maze of rock fences. I arrived so early that I actually enjoyed a sponge-bath in my tent. Unfortunately, within 5 minutes of said bath, the sun dropped behind a distant ridge and the temperature dropped 30° (if not more). Frankly, the overnight temperatures in Khunde made those at Thame feel balmy. Our lodge dining facilities, lacking both a stove/heater and lights, did not make matters any better. No amount of clothing warmed us as we ate. Blinded by the propane lantern, I went to bed dazed, still hungry (having lost my appetite), and freezing. Not having Adrienne to contribute some heat to the tent further prevented a decent and comfortable sleep (all relative, of course). That night, I began to seriously dream about going home and sleeping in my own bed (always the sign that things are drawing to a close). I also vowed - teeth chattering - that I would keep the house at 80° for a whole week once I returned (I believe I did, actually).

To Tengboche and Back to Namche

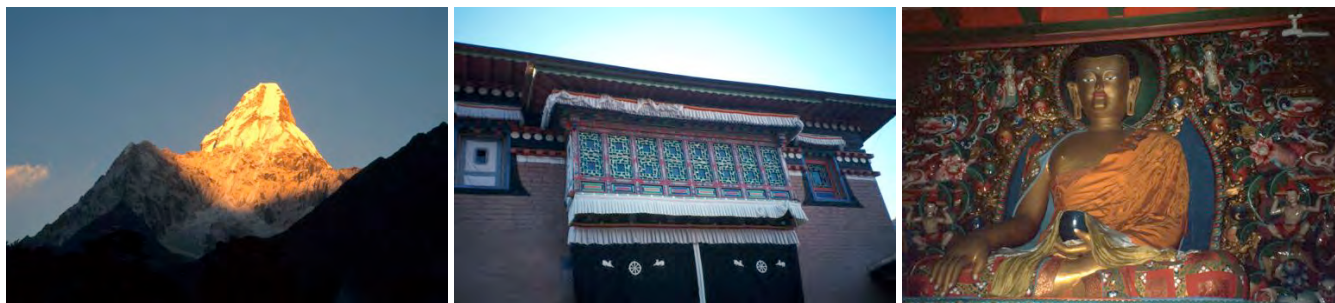
It was, of course, bitterly cold come morning, ice everywhere. We hit the trail as fast as possible because everyone was shivering. We dropped first through the town of Khumjung, handicrafts and merchants lining the path. There were many steep, eroding trail sections in and around Khumjung - the kind with ball bearing stones that threatened to pull you to sudden falls. Although the trail itself was super-wide, there were also some amazing cliff-hanging sections where substantial blasting and construction had clearly taken place. From Khumjung, we descended sometimes steeply to the river valley below for a lunch break. En route, we passed a teenager with extreme altitude sickness. He appeared in a state of seizure - flailing, heaving,

and dropping to the ground - his arms and legs liquefying as Sherpa guides grabbed for him. Seeing this, I felt extremely lucky to be unaffected by the altitude. Nevertheless, this situation was a pretty sobering reminder that some people aren't so lucky. I arrived before most people at the riverside lunch spot and took a nap under my unfolded map (owing to the extreme sun). I also ran into the mother/daughter team (their tour visited Tengboche first and were now on their way to Thame - opposite ours). They spoke wickedly of the climb to Tengboche and so I felt daunted.



Left to Right: Khumjung and Ama Dablam, Thamskeru from trail up to Tengboche, Tengboche camp

After actually climbing to Tengboche, though, I'd say it was pretty easy. The style and grade was so northwest to me, zigzagging through the trees up this hogback, and then gently ascending this long ramp along the final ridge/pass summit. During the climb I noticed that we were walking through nearly all rhododendron bushes. I was blown away by their size and age (they were like gnarly old trees). I could not fathom seeing these in bloom - but I hear that they are legendary in the spring (of course, so is/are the rain and leeches). In about 2 hours, I arrived at Tengboche proper. Wow. Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse, and Ama Dablam rose from the low valley before us. The monastery shone colorfully to the side. All I wanted, though, was to sit down. For some reason, I was expecting the monastery and the camps to be poised on a really narrow ridge/pass of land. But this was not really the case as the area seemed to flatten out before us, the saddle large and broad. Before us, a long valley of old moraines and the serpentine river were the only things that separated us from the Nuptse Ridge and, above it, Everest and Lhotse. I must confess, though, that it was not as spectacular as seeing it the first time. AND it didn't feel a whole lot closer. Indeed, when I show friends the photographs and say - that's Everest - they all think I'm referring to Lhotse. And then I have to point at Everest - eclipsed by formidable mountains. In addition to the big peaks, Tengboche also offered views towards many other regions. The trail to Gokyo Ri (the next major town between us and Everest base camp) was particularly inviting - as was a stark valley of rugged rock that seemed to lead in the northerly direction. Our tents were spread out in a clearing that offered commanding, 360° views. Beyond the monastery, there was also lodge, teahouse, a store, and all sorts of cheap plastic outdoor dinette sets. Half our group had already arrived and were sipping beers in the sun. I flopped down in a chair and just gazed. Eventually, I remembered that I needed to air my bag out because there was so much ice on it from the night before. After an hour or so, we convened at the monastery for a brief tour. This monastery site has a long and somewhat tortured history, previous structures having been destroyed by earthquakes and fires and rebuilt recently. The newest rendition was quiet and dark inside - albeit not lacking in the usual color and animated drawings of all monasteries we had seen. The MASSIVE alter had only a few candles lit and I had a sense, for the first time on this - to me - overpopulated trail - that it actually could be worse (i.e. this was not high season). After tea/appetizers and a glorious show by the setting sun, we enjoyed what I considered the most satisfying meal: spaghetti and strawberry Jell-O. I know, I know - that's so tacky considering here we are in Nepal. But it was great to taste spicy tomatoes and beefy buffalo meatballs after potatoes, cabbage, eggs, repeat, repeat, repeat. Most people, admittedly, had been seriously craving protein (despite the exorbitant numbers of eggs). The meatballs, however, spawned questions regarding the killing of animals by Sherpa. Apparently the purest did not - but others in the social order did. It was also said that even the most pure Sherpa had no objection to eating meat once it was killed. Later, in Lukla, we passed a graphic display of meat in progress - the bloody separation of a large beast, dripping organs passed hand to hand. The night was comfortable and warmer than the previous one - owing to a really warm stove in the lodge and big food for dinner.



Left to Right: Ama Dablam alpenglow, Tengboche exterior and interior

At 7 a.m. the next morning, half our group (including me) elected to attend an hour-long prayer ceremony at the monastery. Of course, at that hour, it is sub-zero. Taking off your shoes and assuming a rigid kneeling position on freezing wooden floors is REALLY cold. Indeed, few monks seemed to be present. Given that the head lama was away, we all joked about how the rest of them must be sleeping in. Discomfort and irreverent humor aside, the ceremony was extremely interesting and

memorable - very different from the one in Katmandu. After a long series of low and rapid chants - interspersed with ritually drinking what looked like hot milky tea - the monks began playing all these funky instruments in what often sounded like pure chaos. One monk seemed to lead, ringing a brass-colored hand-bell and using a hand-drum to generate regular percussion. There was also a HUGE gong-like drum to the leader's side that was played by another monk. The stick for this, though, was a long bent device that allowed the player to sit in the lotus position - perpendicular to the drum face - and play. Across, another monk used what could easily be mistaken for pan lids as rough-sounding symbols. He created strange sounds - not exactly what one might expect. The most fascinating instruments, though, were the horns. One monk played this LONG telescoping horn (10-14 feet) that sounded like a strange beast (or a funky Swiss mountain horn). I could not decipher how his random blasts fit into the music. Another monk played a small horn that resembled a soprano sax and made crisp trumpet-like sounds. The final monk blew into this small gnarly horn whose end resembled the mouth of a fish. Its sound, like that of the telescoping horn, seemed uncontrolled and animal-like. The monks interspersed music with chanting. It should be noted that video/audio recording was prohibited. Later, over breakfast, we joked about how the monks subtly incorporated hacking and nose-blowing in between their chants and notes. Indeed, I have failed to discuss the ubiquitous respiratory displays in Nepal. If hearing and seeing people cough, spit, and hack shit up offends you, avoid Nepal. And if the sound doesn't get to you, the sight of phlegm-bits on the trail will. Between those, the yak patties, the chicken droppings, etc., it's hard not to notice the lack of wilderness. Recalling the morning ceremony, for some reason, reminded me of trying to fall asleep in the often-noisy Himalayas. On one hand, I did enjoy the delightful singing of the Sherpa. Our porters and guides would sing 1-2 hours nightly, dancing, talking, hacking, and spitting in between the song-bursts. The melodies reminded me of Native American and Eskimo songs and were wonderful as long as you weren't exhausted (because even earplugs didn't help). A couple nights, barking dogs howled and yapped throughout the night. Being the queen of light sleep, I often lay awake wishing I were in the Cascades - far from any noise except the wind, far from all these people and all this pollution... But then I would roll my eyes at my own arrogance because Sherpas have inhabited the Himalayas for thousands of years and that's just how it is. Even so, I would be glad I was going home because that was who I was and where I was from... and eventually I would fall asleep and dream strange hypoxic dreams - but only, in the words of one member of the trek, for an hour or two at a time... because that's what you do at altitude and below freezing: you take 6 one-hour naps (if you are lucky).

In the morning after breakfast, we set out for Namche - where we would spend one night before heading back to Phakding and then Lukla. The morning section was grueling - particularly the steep climb back to Khumjung. I grumbled all the way up that bloody trail, surprised that my stamina yesterday had been reduced to mush. Upon returning to Khumjung's ware-lined streets, I rewarded myself with more "many shopping" (yak bells and jewelry). The route from Khumjung to Namche was nearly level and utterly glorious - mostly because it had been blasted into the steep hillside and provided constant views up all valleys, including back towards Everest. I had, by this time, donned a full skirt (albeit over longjohns). For a few brief hours, it felt like the Sound of Music in a summer sort of way - frolicking through the Himalayas in a dress with Ama and Everest soaring. Halfway along this section, we stopped at a spectacular spot and enjoyed the best lunch on the trip: spicy beans, parboiled leafy things that looked like Swiss chard, fried herbed potatoes, and some sort of pita type bread. I had seconds all around. Theresa and I walked the rest of the way back to Namche together - chattering away about the joys of teaching, the freedoms of our careers, the happiness we'd both found doing the same thing (more or less). And the views only seemed to get bigger. Back at Namche, we met up with Adrienne, who had rested and was convalescing well. Despite the urge to take a nap, I wound up shopping again with her. Were I to go back to Nepal, I would definitely bring more duffle bags because the shopping was so great. Once the sun went down, we enjoyed a mostly quiet evening (mostly because about half the team went out drinking). I missed some late-night interpersonal/group dynamics issues outside thanks to a good set of earplugs and powerful cold medicine (I was acquiring a sore throat and tinny ears). Without getting in too much detail, I'll just convey the fact that there had been excessive drinking by several members of the group. This had resulted in some embarrassing moments, including hurling on the pool table (and beyond) and overt jealous tension between one of the couples (owing to flirting by one of the singles that was, apparently, reciprocated). I was apprised of these events by Adrienne who heard plenty - both gastrointestinal and marital. Sufficed to say, many hung-over teammates traveled very slowly the next day - with Adrienne and I leading the dispersed group. The descent from Namche was not as ugly as I was expecting - although the high bridge was worse the second time across (mostly owing to big wind - a sign of weather changes brewing). We lunched immediately after the park entrance and then continued to Phakding. I was, honestly, not looking forward to even one more night outside (and we still had one more night at Lukla). Thus, I was in a foul mood - but I shared it only with Adrienne, who was of a similar ilk. We were simply subsisting, our brains thinking only of showers, real food, warm houses, and sleeping without noise.

We hiked to Lukla the next morning, arriving there around 1 p.m. As suggested, the weather was beginning to change: more haze, high clouds. I worried that a storm was on its way and that could mean we would be trapped here for a day or two. While that possibility had been figured into our itineraries, it was not an option in my mind because I was going crazy with the cold. Like-minded Adrienne and I commiserated a lot that afternoon, watching clouds ebb up the valley and cover the peaks. What made the afternoon tenser still: the staff was preparing a special dinner that featured fresh chicken. At the time, 5 still-living chickens were audibly clucking away behind the tent area inside a big basket. I grew up with chickens as pets (my kitchen remains adorned with chicken paraphernalia to this day). Thus, between the clouds and the pending death of my friends, I was not in a good mood (I would say fowl but that would be an expectedly bad pun). Following slaughter, the chicken was breaded and fried but tough as leather. I found it entirely unappetizing on all levels. I did enjoy the fried noodle salad, hard-boiled eggs, and chocolate cake. After dinner, Adrienne and I tried to socialize at the Lukla bar where our group, despite the last bar-romp, was at it again - this time mingling with a larger and drunker American tour group. Their 30-something leader sported a long ponytail and spent the entire time flirting with young women and making the moves on the dance floor. I am not, however, a party-gal. And this scene was WAY too junior high school. Making matters worse, the Everest brand whiskey seemed to be making my sore throat worse, in contrast with goading advice to drink because it would kill the germs. Indeed, my cold symptoms had increased and the medication was only making me buzzingly lethargic, unable to fully relax or eventually sleep.

After leaving the weird bar scene, the music and noise would keep Adrienne and I up deep into the night (and give us an especially bitchy edge the next day).

Back to Katmandu and Home

Upon unzipping the tent, we were greeted with complete fog. Adrienne and I, hopeless, were certain this would mean that we would be stuck another day. But our leader was confident. Scheduled on the first Yeti flight out, we figured at least ONE plane should be able to make it in. Thus, we packed our things and moved up to the landing strip. MANY others looked like they'd been camping there for days waiting to depart. As clouds wrapped everything up to the last pass, we waited 2 hours, several folks playing Frisbee on the empty runway. And then a plane landed - another company. Within a half an hour, a Yeti plane landed (we actually heard it 10 minutes before it appeared). We had no time to ponder the death-defying take-off given that they packed us on and were revving the engines a minute later. We were rolling down the airstrip as though on a roller coaster. And then we were airborne. The take-off was, honestly, smoother than landing. But the flight back was more lurching because of the weather. This time, Theresa held my hands fearlessly as I panicked with each drop or tip. Once in Katmandu, Adrienne and I showered like madwomen and then did our best to wash our dirtiest clothes in the already brown tap water. Five full washes/rinses in the sink still yielded muddy water that actively smelled like acrid sweat and feces. Adrienne and I then hit the town, walking to Thamel - 5 blocks away. Given the excitement of the day and our WAY-oxygenated states, stepping onto the streets of Katmandu was a relatively peaceful thing. I was in a bizarre mood: half Zen peacefulness and half soaring invincibility. The sound of the city was nothing compared with the fullness of the images about everything before. The shop-lined Thamel district was abuzz - people of all seeming faces and races. Western looking people - mostly hippie types - passed every few minutes. And, yes, we were offered obvious drugs many times as we walked through the streets. There's a line from an old AI Stewart song (Modern Times, 1975): "You stood outside and planned to travel to the lands... Where the pilgrims go... So you packed your world up inside a canvas sack... Set off down the highway with your rings and Kerouac... Someone said they saw you in Nepal a long time back... Tell me why you look away." Walking through the streets that day, I felt like I had been transported to that song, to some distant but weirdly familiar moment. Being an AI fan for the last 10 years, I wondered if I was actually in Nepal because of that old song. Who knows. And then I wondered who might someday say that about me - that they saw me there a long time back. Of course, "Apple Cider Re-Constitution" is AI's BEST work.

We dined at a fabulous Thai restaurant and wolfed down several meat-based entrees under sunny and warm skies. And then we made our way to the infamous Monkey Temple (officially: Swayambhunath). This required quite an adventurous walk, I must say (10-15 blocks). We passed some admittedly rough-looking parts of town. But everyone we met was peaceful and friendly. After crossing a filthy river (no words will do this justice) we finally spied the temple - WAY up on a hill. We climbed and climbed and, just when we thought we were there, we climbed another 200 steps. Unfortunately, I did not bring my camera. Swayambhunath was fabulous - mostly because it offered a panorama over the city. The funniest thing was the sign at the entrance: "BEWARE OF MONKEYCHILD." Indeed, we saw about 300 monkeys and their children, most of which seemed non-threatening unless approached by mangy mutts (both of which made me question why I hadn't updated my rabies vaccine). The stupa and temple complex were FABULOUS. I purchased a gorgeous mask of Ganesh, the esteemed Elephant God. Unfortunately, it would break during its gifted mailing to Patagonia Sara. On our way down, Adrienne and I were befriended by two delightful 8-year old boys who talked us into buying them a family-sized box of powdered milk. It was impossible to resist. After all the wicked stairs and MANY blocks, we decided to take a cab back to the hotel. Regarding cab service, NEVER let the cab drivers in Katmandu give you a flat price; MAKE them use the meter because the flat price they quote will be triple the meter rate. In response to meter requests, some drivers did put up a fight and walked away (but they always came back and gave in). Adrienne was REMARKABLY good at standing up to them as she had that rough east coast thing going. Honestly, though, the cab fees are SO dirt cheap that it's almost not worth the struggle. We enjoyed a nice dinner at the hotel with several women from the trip. Despite being New Years' Eve, Adrienne and I were exhausted and went to bed around 10 p.m., uninterested in any festivities.

After sleeping in late the next day, Adrienne and I decided to visit Patan, the final of the 3 major cities in the valley. After arguing with us, the cab driver dropped us off in the town square as open markets were being set up. For an hour, we wandered aimlessly. Sadly, Patan was the dirtiest place we saw during the whole trip (or that I have ever seen in the world so far). Meat shops with blood everywhere, huge and unrecognizable animal parts being hacked away by men in the streets. Shop after shop carried likely-illegal medicine - dominated by over-the-counter antibiotics. As a microbiologist, I was appalled. What truly got me, though, was this powerful stench. As we got closer to the source, it was clear that HUGE open jugs of human feces were being stored right on the street outside several buildings. Realizing I was going to be sick, I told Adrienne we needed to get back to the hotel (and so we did). Within 30 minutes of returning, I was kneeling over the toilet puking my brains out - and this went on and on. I was running 102°F, break into cold sweats - puking every 45 minutes. All the while, the images and sensations of Patan swirled through my mind, enhanced by the smell of the fecal toilet material inches from my face. Twenty-four hours of meals appeared before me in sequence (and, yes, I could trace each by its diagnostic color): the eggs and granola breakfast, the butter chicken dinner, the noodle and collard green Thai soup (thank god that was the last one). I did stop puking before getting on the plane the next day - but my head was filling with crap and my throat was raw and burning. We had a one-night layover in Bangkok, during which time - in a delirious and medicated state - I watched way too much Indian MTV from my king-sized hotel bed and did enjoy an amusing phone call with my sister in Japan (despite the fact that she broke into "One Night in Bangkok" repeatedly). The flight across the Pacific was memorable only in that it was the most turbulent high altitude flight I've ever experienced. I missed having soothing jazzman to talk with, although I did enjoy a brief conversation with this art psychology student who had been living on an Indian tea farm and ashram the last 3 months. LA was a nightmare: flights were late and tempers were high. My good friend Matt surprised me at the Portland airport. Back in September, Matt had been the one to take off work and hold my terrified hands when I had to get mammograms. I chattered constantly during the 2-hour drive home (and the following day and night, poor Matt!). On 2 hours sleep, I delivered my 8 a.m. lecture and went on to endure 9 weeks of bronchitis (nearly losing my voice). But do I regret it? NOPE. I hold fond and

enduring memories of Nepal, although my perspective has been altered because of other people's favorable responses to the trip and its mostly beautiful images.