

The Tale of a Trek

Two High Passes in the Khumbu – March 2024 With Diverse Observations and Random Commentary (And a Few Pictures)

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Author's Note

We accomplished everything we wanted. We didn't get sick. The weather was good. We crossed over two 5300+ meter (17,400+ feet) passes without trouble. We got to the Gokyo fifth lake. The inevitable and varied little problems along the way are as nothing in our recollections.

Although I've written in the present tense, this narrative is composed largely from memory. Allowing for that, the correlation coefficient between the story and reality is about $\rho=0.85$ — or less.

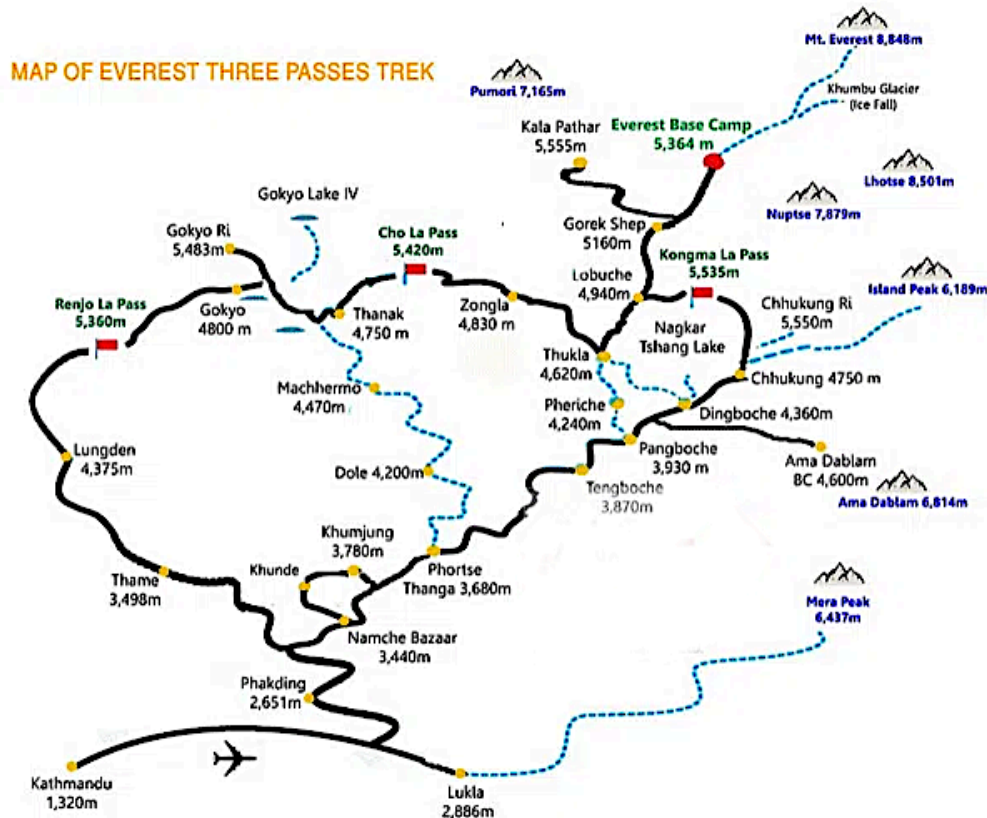
Note for the metrically challenged: 300 meters is about 1000 feet (984 to be more precise).

Note about money: At the time of our trek, US\$1 \approx 130 Nepali rupees (Rs). Thus, a 1000 Rs note is about like an 8 dollar bill, and about like a 7 Euro note (if there were such things).

My deepest thanks, as always, to Gosia, my partner for literally every step.

Map

We only did two of the passes shown on this map — Cho La and Renjo La. The map is not 100% accurate, but it will do to help orient the Loyal Reader (you).



Day 0 [11 March - Monday]

Today is our only pre-trek full day down in the lowlands of the Kathmandu valley (1400 m = 4600 ft). The primary mission is shopping for the trek. First stop: Chhetrapati Chowk in the Thamel neighborhood. There's a pharmacy here that has what hikers want. Acetazolamide (AKA Diamox); dexamethasone; antibiotics — no prescriptions required. Not far away is the Mitho Cafe, an excellent place for an early lunch. We pop our first acetazolamide tablets to jumpstart the [altitude adaptation](#) process, and enjoy our meal. We'll be taking these pills every day for the next week and a half.

The other things we need are spikes for the bottom of our boots — we have to cross a glacier — and a small duffel bag for the stuff we'll have a porter carry for us on the trek. Down a side street not far from the cafe, we find these things. Total cost was about 5000 rupees — about US\$40. The bag is a “North Fake”, like lots of stuff you find in Thamel shops. Real “North Face” items sell for the same prices they would in the USA or Europe. Our new bag is not as robust as it could be, but it will certainly do for this trek.

Shopping done, we head down toward Durbar Square, the palace and temples of the former kings of Kathmandu (not to be confused with the later kings of all Nepal). There are little and big shrines along the way — the Lonely Planet guide has some well-designed “walks” with details of all the sights you can see. One of the most interesting is a god statuette just sticking out the ground over in the corner of plaza. You'd never see it unless you have a book or a guide — it is a thousand year old cultural treasure just hanging out streetside. Every day, someone puts a little dollop of the red pigment used for [pooja](#) on this image. Sometimes flowers.



Next is an unplanned stop at a tea shop we see on our walk. At this sight, I realize that I particularly want some Nepali Silver Tips tea. This brew is delicious and delicate. And expensive in America. Not so cheap in Nepal either, but about 80% less than back home. If you ever get some, don't pour boiling water directly over the leaves. Pour the boiling water into the pot or cup, let it sit for 30-40 seconds to cool slightly, *then* add the tea leaves. This process will avoid a slight bitter aftertaste in the tea. Let it steep for 5-9 minutes, not much more. Soothing and special. I'm drinking a cup as I write this. I only wish we'd bought more. Next trip, for sure. Fill up the North Fake duffel bag!

It's warm and sunny, but with a diesel smog haze that makes me start coughing. This is the last day we'll be warm for over two weeks; unfortunately, it's not the last day for my cough.

Day 1 [12 March]

7:20 am: our flight to the [Lukla airport](#), the jumping off point for most treks in the Everest (Khumbu) region. Why Lukla? Because it has a flat-ish spot for a runway, unlike most of the Himalayan foothills in the neighborhood. In fact, the word “lukla” means “sheep and goat pasture”.

Of course, our flight is delayed. Fog in Kathmandu, fog at Lukla, or fog in between — all good reasons the flight can't go. It's visual flight rules all the way. Nobody wants to run into a mountain. Naturally, there is no explanation or prognosis available. The Tara Air counter people don't know anything, and don't care that they don't know. So we just wait. The Kathmandu domestic departure terminal is the second most boring airport waiting area I've ever experienced. Uncomfortable wire mesh seats. Not particularly clean bathrooms. These are its good points.

Sitting next to us is a woman from the Khumbu, who has been spending the cold months down in Kathmandu living with her daughter, who works here. It's now potato planting time up high, so she's flying back to help her husband with that truly essential chore. We'll see a fair amount of potato field digging going on during our two weeks of hiking.

This lady has the right way of waiting. Some time passes, and then she starts quietly chanting a Buddhist prayer or mantra (I think). After that she is not easily distracted. I'm not quite so detached, but I'm not anxious, either. We'll get there somehow. Today or tomorrow.

Gosia beetles off to the restroom. About one minute later, the Tara Air staff look up from their phones and suddenly there's action. "Lukla, everyone come up!" Boarding is done by taking a beat-up old bus to the Twin Otter (two propeller) plane. As I need to wait for Gosia to reappear, we are the last to "board" — but there are only 12 passengers.

The bus pulls up near the side of the plane. More waiting. It's actually getting hot in the bus, with the sun pouring in. The ground crew is loading cargo onto the plane. Lots of cargo. Twenty minutes of sweaty waiting, as we're dressed for high altitude. Finally, we get on the plane. I'm the last one to board, and that is actually perfect. The rows of seats don't have much legroom, but the last row has one seat at the back of the aisle, where there is no seat in front. That's for *me* and my long legs.

Half the seats in the plane have been removed, and the pile of cargo boxes is in that freed-up space, ahead of us. The last item to be loaded is a yellow bicycle for a small child, with training wheels, which they cram in somewhere. There aren't so many smooth spots up in the Khumbu, but we'll never know where this bicycle will be used. I'm sure the kid will enjoy it.

Lukla is sometimes called [the most dangerous airport in the world](#). Perhaps. My impression is that passengers on these flights who get nervous have never flown in small planes before. It's never seemed so bad to me. After all, the pilots don't want to die at least as much as we don't want to die (we hope and pray).

Forty minutes of flying through a light haze, and we are there, about 11 am. Seated at the back, we can't see the approach very well — none of the passengers can, since the front half of the plane is occupied by cargo. One fellow passenger doesn't look very happy, though. I guess the bounciness of the ride didn't agree with her. Ugh, poor girl. Back on solid land, with the excitement of being in the Himalaya — that should help.



The real danger of the Lukla airport is that there is little room for error. Lukla is a few miles up a steep valley which is only about a mile wide. The approach path flies up the valley and turns at the last moment towards the runway. It's very dramatic, as the landing strip on the valley side ends in a cliff, and on the top side ends in a steep hill. In other words, the pilots better get it right the first time, for there's no room for error. Once the approach is started, there is no space in the valley to abort the landing and decide to go around for another try. In that sense, perhaps it *is* dangerous.

Our baggage on Tara Air was limited to 10 kg (each) for checked bags and 5 kg each for what we carried on. Our checked bags, like almost everyone else's, are our stuffed-full backpacks, cleverly arranged to be very close to 10.0 kg using [this cute instrument](#).

At arrival, we pick up our packs from the pile heaped beside the airplane, but don't get to carry them far. We are met by our Sherpa guide (Sonam) and our porter (Razu), who promptly loads himself up with both packs. All of us troop out of the airport and around it to a lodge's dining room. We order some tea to caffeinate ourselves for the walking to come. While waiting, our first task in Lukla is to repack for Razu, shoving into the cheapo duffel bag the things we won't need while actually hiking. Sleeping bags, extra clothing, extra food, etc. Razu's load totals about 17 kg, plus a small bag with his own kit. The rest of our belongings we split between our packs. Probably the heaviest single item that I have is my 1 kg "emergency bag" with various junk that might be handy in a pinch.

Then it's off to start the trek! We walk through the hard-to-miss and well-paved main street of Lukla, lined with lodges and shops for hikers. We ignore these for now. On day 16, we'll be back and it will be time to indulge. Cappuccini and Pringles await our return! Decadent Nero-style luxuries ... or the proper rewards for heroic hikers.

Lukla is at about 2800 m elevation. Walking north to go up the Dudh Kosi valley towards Namche (600 m higher), of course the first thing we do on leaving Lukla is drop 300 m down. As we approach the finish line of the trek, we'll be toiling up that hill as our last labor.

Okay, dropping down a 1000 foot hill is actually the *second* thing after walking through the kani (gate) at the end/start of Lukla. The *first* thing is to buy our permits for trekking in the Khumbu and for entering Sagarmatha National Park. These tasks are easily done at two windows in a building that's a short ways down the trail. For reasons opaque to me, we have to show our passports, whose information is copied onto forms. Separate forms at separate windows, of course. The two windows are for two different government agencies: the local Khumbu municipality, and the national park system. The gods of bureaucracy don't allow the staff to share information. That would be user friendly, and probably deliver mega-bad karma to everyone involved.

Trudging downhill through the forest. Then up and down and up and down, as the trail is only "Sherpa flat" — which means random 100 meter rises and falls along the way. The Sherpa live in these hills and above, and from childhood think nothing of climbing up a couple hundred meters for a casual ten minute chat. Get used to it. Down down, up up, down, up, down, up. Now and then, a blessed and fleeting moment of flat, mostly at villages — which are generally placed where farming was possible.

Down here, in the lowlands of the Khumbu, we see fields already planted. The valley is wooded, steep, and gorgeous. The bottom is 200-300 m below us. The top is at least 1000 m above, and far more in spots directly below mountain peaks. Low level clouds give the valley a mystical feel.

Villages every couple kilometers. Next to the trail are snack stores, restaurants, lodges. Mani stones, prayer wheels. Always pass mani stones, stupas, and monasteries with your right hand facing the sacred site. Always spin prayer wheels using your right hand, clockwise. Otherwise, you are a barbarian clod and will be reborn as a yak.



Lunchtime when we troop into the village of Ghat — to paraphrase Snoopy, my stomach alarm clock is going off. For me, fried potatoes with an egg on top. Lots of carbs, a little too much for my taste. Getting sufficient protein on this trek will be a problem, especially since we don't eat meat. And even if we gleefully devoured the flesh of slain animals, I wouldn't try it in the Khumbu. Above Lukla, almost everything is schlepped in on the back of a yak, a mule, or a person. The way meat is treated doesn't make it seem even slightly trustworthy to us. Perhaps it is this anti-carnivorous ethic/practice that saved us from serious digestive troubles.

Speaking of yaks, they really only like high altitudes, above 3000 m or so. Down in this valley, we are oscillating between 2500 and 2800 m elevation, so what we see around here are actually “dzopkio”, yak-cow hybrids used at lower altitudes.

Only above Namche will we start to see purebred yaks, the cargo trucks of the upper Khumbu. How to tell a yak from a dzopkio? Yaks have long hair, and some of them are quite handsome. Dzopkio have stringy hair, and are not good looking. (Sorry, that's just the way I see it. YMMV. I'm sure some of the dzopkio are fine people, if only we'd just get a chance to get to know them.)

You can never have too many yak facts, so here's one more: female yaks are called “naks” — a word unknown to the New York Times word puzzle games, which are obviously curated by ignorant boobs. Despite the many signs and menus we'll see, there is no such thing as “yak cheese”. How do you tell a yak from a nak at a glance? Yaks



have a hump between their shoulders, something like a Brahma bull has. Naks are hump-free. Both sexes have wicked looking horns. Whatever you do, don't piss off a yak. Or a nak.

We stopped for the night in the village of Benkar, still in the Dudh Kosi valley. There are two more villages left as we go northwards up this valley, Jorsale and Monjo. Then it will be up up up, about 600 m (2000 ft) elevation gain, to Namche. But that's for tomorrow. According to Google Earth, from Lukla to Benkar, we have walked 11 km, with 1000 meters of up and down — ending up back where we started, elevation-wise. Sherpa flat all the way. For comparison, climbing out of the Grand Canyon (Bright Angel trail to the South Rim) is about 1300 meters elevation gain from bottom to top. All of which is lower than where we are.



Hints for *choosing* a lodge while trekking in Nepal. (1) The only heating is a stove in the common dining room. You want a lodge where they'll light that fire even if you are the only guests. (Other guests being present will give you a chance to chat and compare experiences on the trail.) The staff will be nice and warm in the kitchen, don't worry. (2) Unless you have a problem, you don't need a room with an attached toilet — one down the hall is okay. Toilets on a different floor, or (worse) outside, are *really* not good for those 2 am pee runs in the cold air. (3) Most lodges have "sit" toilets available for us inflexible Westerners. If you're inflexible like me, you don't want a place that has only "squat" toilets. Check the toilet situation out before OK-ing a room. (4) Lodges are not often well built; in particular, check your room's windows for air leaks around the edges. You'll probably find some, which will blow icy air on your head at night. Take some duct tape.

Hints for *staying* in a lodge. (1) Bring some lightweight slippers (e.g., Crocs) to wear. Clumping around inside wearing your hiking boots gets old fast. As does having to put on your hiking boots for that 2 am pee run. (2) Lodge beds have blankets. Bring a sleeping bag anyway. (3) Bring a small flashlight or a headlamp. Lighting in some lodges is not that reliable. (4) *Bring toilet paper*. Lodges do not supply it for free. They will sell you a roll, though. The price goes up as you leave Lukla farther and farther behind. Which is true for everything. (5) Bring hand sanitizer. Even if there is running water (not guaranteed), do you want to wash your hands in liquid that's thinking of turning into ice?

A short food anecdote. We brought some protein powder (vanilla flavored whey) and mixed a large spoonful in with our oat porridge every morning. I think it helped. It would have been better to also have some fiber powder. Getting enough fiber in the diet is difficult, when the principal sources of calories are white rice and potatoes and noodles.

The lodge menus are all very similar. Some rice dishes, some noodle dishes, some egg dishes, some momos, often pizza. Pizza can be terrible ("why am I eating this?") or tolerable. I liked the noodle soups as having substance and some vegetables. The staple food of Nepal is dal bhat — "dal" is lentils, and "bhat" is rice —



sometimes labeled as “Nepali Thali set”. The unofficial national food motto of Nepal is *Dal Bhat Power, 24 Hour*. This dish comes with a thin lentil soup, a giant scoop of white rice, and some curried vegetables. Refills on these components are available, almost always for free. Personally, I could only tolerate eating dal bhat every third or fourth day. But Gosia liked it much more than I did — I’m not that fond of white rice or thin soups. The curried vegetables, on *my* other hand, are pretty tasty. Another common and usually tasty dish is momos, which are dumplings — similar to pierogi or gyoza. Usually there’s some sauce for dipping (often spicy, sometimes just ketchup). Finally, I’ll mention thukpa, which is a thick Sherpa/Tibetan soup with noodles. Almost a stew, very filling, and can be quite good.



Desserts are usually available. We didn’t eat many of those. The most amusing is a “Snickers roll”, which is a breaded and deep fried Snickers bar. I never had the desire to try one, but a German fellow we ate with at Lungden ordered this delicacy. My glance at his serving didn’t make me like the idea any better. But it seemed to hit the spot for him at the end of a long day’s hike.

The lodges make their money on the food. The rooms are usually free, or nearly so, if you eat your meals in your lodge. Otherwise, you’ll end up paying for the room alone what you would have spent on food. In the smaller villages, this isn’t a problem since there aren’t usually other places to eat, so you won’t be tempted to stray. But a few villages have active restaurants with more menu variety. Namche especially, the hub of the Khumbu for centuries. Gnocchi with gorgonzola, anyone?

Water. You can buy water in 1-1½ liter plastic bottles. Don’t make a habit of it, because the empties just pile up in huge stacks. You can get unpurified cold water and sterilize it yourself (pills or UV pens). You can buy boiled water at any lodge and put it into your own thermoses — what we did. We have quality thermoses, and boiled water at night was still warm water the following afternoon. It’s good to drink warm water during the day. The air is cold and dry at high altitude. Drinking cold water isn’t good for you in this place. It chills the throat, and lands in the stomach with an icy plop.

In the lodges, beverages come in cups, small pots, medium pots, and large pots. “Pots” are vacuum-insulated containers. At dinner, we typically ordered a large pot of hot water, filled our two thermoses, and drank the rest with our meals. The thermos water we carried with us the next day. At lunch, typically a medium pot of black tea, and poured anything left over into the thermoses. Once in a while, we indulged in a small pot of hot chocolate — there was never any of *that* left over.

Don’t drink booze at altitude. It will hit you hard and fast, like a hammer to the skull. Do you want to hike the next day with a headache? Avoid being stupid. Wait until you’re back in Kathmandu. Or at least back to Lukla.

Day 2 [13 March]

The last village before the climb to Namche is Monjo, about 90 minutes along from Benkar on a nice wide Sherpa flat trail. On the outskirts, Sonam takes us a little off the trail to the Monjo monastery.

A friend of his from school is a monk there. He shows us around, then blesses our trek and the prayer flags we are bringing with us from Kathmandu. Naturally, we leave a donation for the gumpa.

On the far side of Monjo is the entrance to the national park. We already have our passes, but could buy them here if we'd bypassed Lukla (which happens for those who hike in the long way instead of flying). A few larger trekking groups are milling around at the entrance, trying to get everyone's passes sorted out. And taking each other's pictures, of course. This is *it!* We are about to officially enter the Everest region.

Some people travel in large groups, 10 and more, arranged through travel agencies (Nepalese or foreign). I don't recommend this, unless you are all a group of friends. In such a case, it's easier to tolerate the person who is always slow, or who is always stopping to take pictures. I'd also urge trekkers to travel in pairs. That way, if one person falls seriously ill and has to turn back or stay put as the group keeps going up, the other half of the pair can remain with them.

From the park entrance, it's Sherpa flat for another kilometer or two. Until we cross a short bridge over the Dudh Kosi river, and immediately turn left to descend a little to the riverbank. The trail goes alongside the river for maybe 15 minutes (really flat, not Sherpa flat), until we get to the Hillary bridge. This is a steel suspension bridge at the head of the valley, where the river comes down from a steep slope above.

I haven't yet mentioned the multitude of suspension bridges that we have already traversed. There are about 10 crossings of the Dudh Kosi in the valley, and most of them are on 2 meter wide suspension bridges high high above the river. This trail is not a hike for anyone afraid of heights or looking down! In the bad old days, the river was crossed on simple wooden structures which were often washed away in monsoon season. These modern bridges are pretty secure, with the steel cables anchored into solid concrete abutments. Just don't try to cross one when an animal convoy train is coming the opposite direction. Especially if the animals have pointy horns.

Now it's time to climb the slope to the Hillary bridge. To cross, we have to wait for all the tourists coming down, impeding traffic going upwards (us). After a few moments, they go by and vanish below. Gosia goes onto the bridge to attach one set of our flags (bought in Lukla). The flags have Buddhist prayers on them, and as they wave in the breeze the prayers are taking effect. Similar to how spinning the prayer wheels work, in karma physics.

In the picture, you can see another bridge below the one holding Gosia. That one is for animal



trains. There are so many of them going to and from Namche that a second bridge was put in to prevent traffic jams. Cargo traffic doesn't go along the river trail either — it has a separate track to its bridge.

It's time to cross the slightly swaying structure, then begin the long slog up to Namche. There's no place to stop to buy tea or snacks past Monjo until we get to Namche, so it's just up up up for 2-3 hours. Halfway, there is a flat spot, with a moderately disgusting squat toilet inside a small shack. This location is the first place on the trek where you can glimpse a far off tiny Mt Everest, if you know what you are looking for. Almost every hiker pauses here for a rest, a drink, and a snack. And a pee.

We brought along some food for snacks to consume while hiking. About 3.5 kg worth. On any given day, most of it is in Razu's North Fake bag, but I always carry a little for times when there is no place to get food — like on this climb to Namche. Gosia and I split a Clif bar (chocolate chip) to fuel ourselves for the remaining 1000 vertical feet. By the time we get back to Lukla in two weeks, the 3.5 kg bag of food will be reduced to about 300 grams.

More up up up. Now and then, we pause to stand aside for mule or dzopkio cargo trains (stay on the uphill side of the trail, so you don't accidentally get brushed off the downhill edge). Or we stand aside for human porters, short tough Nepali men working their way up the slope with heavy burdens. Some of them were carrying so much that even I could pass them going uphill (I'd guess 50+ kg). Important goods, like towers of beer can 12 packs, and other items too valuable or fragile to trust to animals. Or in some cases too bulky. I saw at least two porters with such loads, each trudging up with a queen size mattress on his back. Heavy *and* bulky. Along the heavily trafficked trails are built stone walls at the right height for the porters to sit or lean on, to get a little rest.

Past Lukla, essentially everything is carried up. Only especially large and expensive items are worth helicoptering in. This difficulty of transport is why prices for food go up and up with the terrain. Down in Lukla, the two of us would spend 5000 Rs a day for our room and food. Up at Gokyo (4800 m = 16000 ft), it would be more like 12000 Rs (US\$90). At the highest lodges, prices are comparable to what you'd pay in America at low-end motels. In other words, it's still not expensive.

Eventually, the up up slope of the trail turns a corner and is flat. We've done this part of the trek before, and this sudden change to a level path is always startling. It also means that a few steps farther is another checkpoint for our permits. More crucially, it means we are very close to our goal.

Finally we arrive at Namche, the "urban" center of life in the Khumbu. It's often called "Namche Bazaar", as it was an important trading center when traffic to and from Tibet hadn't been choked off for unpleasant political reasons. These days, it's mostly a place built for tourists; however, it is also the "shopping mall" for this region.

Lodges galore, small and large. Stores with almost any product a trekker might want. If you forgot anything important, this is about the last place to get it. Socks, trekking poles, boots, medicine, snacks, SIM cards. Bakeries and cafès. I even see a store that will sell or rent pressurized oxygen bottles! Yes, you can get toilet paper and snacks farther up at any lodge (especially Snickers bars and Pringles), but they will get more and more expensive. Some large villages also have "convenience stores" where other basic items can be had.

The economy of trekking is interesting. Guides stay in the lodges with their clients. Porters, on the other hand, have their own places to stay. Unlike the lodges, these porter houses have large communal rooms for sleeping, with big piles of bed comforters for warmth. Lower down, the lodges

provide food for the porters (e.g., dal bhat), which is subsidized by the higher prices trekkers pay. Higher up, the porters have to pay something for their food, but I'm not sure how much.



Namche is said to be at 3400 meters elevation (11100 ft), but exactly *where* that might be true isn't clear. The town is on the south facing slope of a big bowl in the side of a large step up in the terrain, and is probably 100 m (or more) vertical from bottom to top. We enter at the bottom, where the village stupa resides. Above that is a beautifully stone-paved walkway up to the commercial action, alongside a set of large water-driven prayer wheels.

The air temperature is just a little above freezing, but the sun is warm as we come out of the woods and the day is pleasant. In the alleys of Namche, between the taller lodge buildings, is where the sun don't shine and the actual cold makes itself known again. We won't be in above-freezing air again for almost two weeks, when we get back to Namche. It's good that we have warm sleeping bags. (More precisely, Razu has them until we get to our lodge.)

Sonam guides us to the 5th floor of the Hotel Kamal, and the stairs are steep. I'm thinking, "Why do we have to plod up all these too-high steps?" At the top, the answer becomes clear. First of all, the dining room is on our floor. Second, there is an exit on our floor, out the back, to the street level. The hotel is built on the side of the steep hill of Namche, so the "ground" floor on the front side is level 1, but the "ground" floor on the back side is level 5. When we want to go strolling around the core of Namche, we leave on floor 1. When we want to leave Namche for higher pastures, we leave on floor 5. Simple.

The door that leads outside on our floor, just past the toilets, cannot be closed. That is, it can only be kept closed by throwing a bolt. If we do that on the inside, no one can get into the hotel. If someone does it on the outside, no one can get out. If it isn't bolted, then it swings open. Letting the outside air in all night. This is the way things are here. The concept of keeping warm-ish air in and cold air out isn't recognized, except for the dining room.

We are in the Khumbu just before the official start of the high season for trekkers. This year, the government has decreed that March 25 will be that start, for reasons that are not so clear. April and May are traditionally much busier than Dec-Mar, probably because it is warmer in those months. The immediate practical effect of the government's decision is that there will be no direct flights between Kathmandu and Lukla after March 25. Instead, all Lukla flights will go to/from a city called Ramechhap — which is 4-5 hours by bus east of Kathmandu (towards Lukla). As our plan has us arriving back in Lukla on March 29, we'll have to fly to Ramechhap (if/when flights are possible), and *then* take a bus into Kathmandu. With good luck, this is an all day journey. But “good luck” and “Lukla flights” are only casual acquaintances.

The problem the Nepali government faces is that there is only one airplane runway at the Kathmandu airport, and in the high season there are many international flights (how else would the tourists and their money get into the country?). A little 20 passenger prop plane takes up as much runway time as a 300 passenger jet, so the small planes are ejected. If we had been thinking ahead clearly, we would have scheduled our trek to be a bit earlier, so we could fly directly back to Kathmandu. However, as you will find out far far below, we *don't* end up flying via Ramechhap, or even fly out of Lukla at all. There are alternatives.

It's not the high season just yet. We were the only residents in the Boudha lodge at Benkar last night. We aren't the only guests staying in Hotel Kamal in Namche tonight, but the dining room is distinctly *not* full. Which is less fun than it could be, but it also means that our food arrives with reasonable dispatch.

Day 3 [14 March]

Namche is the central spot in the Khumbu because it is near the intersection of three river valleys. Those rivers join to form the Dudh Kosi, which flows down the valley we followed north from Lukla to the Hillary bridge. The three upper valleys lead to Mount Everest (eastern), to Gokyo (middle), and to Thame (western). Our plan is to hike east, turn north towards Everest, then cut west to cross over a pass to Gokyo village, then again over another pass to the Thame valley. Then we'll descend to the village of Thame, then curve back to Namche, and finally retrace our steps to Lukla.

It's customary to stay two nights in Namche, to help with altitude adaptation. Already we are over 1000 feet above Leadville Colorado, the highest town in the USA. I'm not sure staying over here is necessary for us, as on a previous trip we went directly to Khumjung, a small “suburb” town 300 meters above Namche without trouble. However, to save the trouble of packing, moving, and unpacking, we decide to stay put. In addition, blaspheming the mysterious gods of altitude sickness is not a thing we want to risk.

It's not exactly a “rest” day, though. We'll hike up to Khumjung, which will help with adjusting to the yet higher elevations soon to come. One prescription for altitude adaptation is “hike high, sleep low”. This saying is no doubt based largely on anecdote, but who are we to contravene the conventions?

The trail up is basically a long steep set of irregular stairs made from rocks. We pass and are passed by a few other tourists. More regularly, we are passed by locals commuting up to Khumjung for whatever reasons. The locals just zoom up the trail that we are laboring with. Oh, to be younger and fitter — and Sherpa-er.

But we make it. Our hiking technique is slow but steady. Keep a pace that doesn't require stopping to catch breath or rest tired legs. It works.

Our first stop is the Everest View Hotel to take in the sights and have some tea. Not that the view from there is that impressive — Everest is a fair distance away. About 29 km (18 miles). From this vantage, it's also mostly hidden behind the 7500+ meter high Nuptse wall. Only the top part of Everest peaks out. Near Gokyo, we'll have a better angle.

In the photo, the pointy mountain at the right is Ama Dablam. It will dominate the view for our next few days of trekking, as we walk up the valley towards and past it. Unless you know where Everest is, you would have trouble seeing it in this pic without my label.

From the hotel, it's 15 more minutes to Khumjung, where people are working in the fields. We first stop by the Khumjung Buddhist monastery

(gompa). They have a "yeti skull" available for viewing, for a fee of course, but we decline that payment on this trip. We saw it on our previous trek in 2014. However, we do spend a little time looking at the wall paintings and the thangkas (sacred Buddhist art). In particular, the wall art is all new, as the monastery was seriously damaged in the 2015 earthquake, and had to be rebuilt.

The picture to the right shows a fierce Buddhist deity, I think Bhairav. He is a tantric protector against those forces that might cause someone to act badly. These angry ferocious Buddhist images are *not* demons!

Now it's time for a quick lunch. Khumjung is a residential and farming place, not a tourist trap like Namche, and there aren't a lot of choices. The usual menu fare is available, nothing special.

We next drop by the Khumjung high school — the upper level education place in the Khumbu region, where our guide Sonam learned his English. Except for teens from right around there, it's a residential school. There weren't many people around, though, so we didn't get to see much. The school was one of the first projects of the Himalayan Trust in the 1960s, founded by Sir Edmund Hillary.

The Sherpa requested a high school, being aware that better education was crucial. At that time, the Nepali government didn't concern itself too much with the remoter areas of the nation.

Finally, it is down down down the steps back to Namche. Going down steep slopes or stairs doesn't *sound* hard, but it really merits its own practice before trekking or backpacking — as much as climbing up does. The thigh muscles used to lower and brake your steps down are somewhat different from the muscles used to step up, and they can get pretty sore without being trained themselves. Then there's the knee impacts and stresses. Trekking poles can help with those, as well as with balance.



We have some free time, so we visit a couple of museums in Namche. These are up a hill outside of the “commercial district”, and so the upstairs entry/exit from our hotel was handy.

It’s time to talk about our guides a little. Sonam we had picked out, before we flew to Nepal, because he was a Sherpa (local) and spoke pretty good English. He lives in Benkar, which is one reason we stopped there on our first night. He knows a lot about the region, and tells us various stories. For example, when he was in high school, there was no running water in Khumjung. People had to fetch it from one of several springs. Part of the students’ duties was to fetch water for the school, after classes of course. In the winter, that meant in the dark and cold. About five years ago, a big project was built to pump water up to Khumjung from a source on the north side of the mountain the town backs up against. “Kids have it so easy these days” is clearly his subtext.

After we get back to Hotel Kamal in Namche, Sonam tells us he has a seriously upset stomach, maybe from eating bad chicken in Lukla when he was waiting for our late flight. He doesn’t feel like he can manage to go on with us, but he has found us a substitute guide. Sonam promises to try to catch up with us if he starts feeling better. [As events played out, that did not happen.]

Fura is a nice guy, softer spoken than the assertive Sonam. His English isn’t as good, though. A few days later, he told us that he’d had to leave school at age 13 to go to work. So he didn’t get to go to high school. He’d cleaned lodges, then worked as a porter, and now was a guide. Less brute force work, but of course he now has to shepherd the “large but weak” Westerners around and baby them. Guides don’t carry loads for their clients. That’s what porters do. Porters generally don’t speak more than a few English words. In many cases, they have no more than 1-3 grades of education.

At dinner, we talk with a Dutch couple on their way down to Lukla in the morning. They warn us that they’d gotten bad food at Lobuche (high up) and hadn’t felt well for a couple of days. We’ll hear similar stories from several other people along the way. It’s hard to know what to do about that, except to keep avoiding meat. Earlier, Sonam had suggested that pancakes are suspect, as well — why wasn’t so clear to us. I suppose we *could* live on packaged food like cookies, Snickers, and Pringles, but that doesn’t seem very sustainable.

Day 4 [15 March]

At breakfast, there is a lady, about our age, trekking alone next to us, sitting at the primo table — the one next to the wood stove. I hear her talking English with the dining room attendant and try to place her accent. Not Russian, but some other Slavic. So I ask her. She’s Polish! Marta and Gosia start talking quickly. Marta is on her way down, and is happy to speak Polish again. Her English is not highly fluent, and she says she barely spoke in the week she was up high. Her porter/guide’s English is also weak, and they couldn’t understand each other very well.

Porter/guide is a halfway position. They will carry up to 15 kg, no more, unlike the “pure” porters. But they know a little English, and so can act as a guide. Usually, they are studying to improve their English and pass the formal guide exam. Then they can charge more and carry less. Porter/guides are popular with solo trekkers who can’t carry all their stuff. In this way, the trekker doesn’t have to hire two people (as we did), which would seem a little absurd for a single hiker.

In my view, Day 4 is the day our *trekking* really begins. We are leaving the sybaritic decadence of Namche and headed up to smaller villages with shabbier lodges. And headed up to where the air will be colder, as well as having less and less oxygen. Up until now we have just been *walking*.

The usual route for going toward Everest is eastward through the village of Tengboche, which has perhaps the most famous gumpa in the region. The monastery is large and beautiful, occupied throughout the year, and open to trekkers. Legends about previous lamas abound — spreading the word of Buddhism throughout the Khumbu by flying, for example. Certainly that would be much faster and far more impressive than plain old walking.

But we've been there before. Instead, we head up the middle valley, north towards Gokyo. I know I said we are going east, but by starting this way we avoid the larger groups of trekkers who all go to Tengboche. We'll turn eastwards in the afternoon.

We walk north from Namche along a wide open nearly flat trail, and don't take the turnoff that leads down into the valley towards Tengboche. Instead of dropping, we are climbing up about 400 m to Mong La. "La" means "pass", and this low pass is the entrance to the Gokyo valley. In a week or so, our plan is to be at Gokyo itself, the last village before Tibet. Not by going up this valley, but by swinging around, going up the Khumbu valley leading to Mt Everest, and then veering west to enter the Gokyo valley by crossing over Cho La.

On our way up, a cargo train of about 10 yaks is milling around off the trail, grazing. The attendant is trying to get them marshaled to keep going upwards, but not very forcefully. He probably knows from experience there is only so much you can do to get yaks moving again.

Gosia is leading our ascent of Mong La. Fura says to me, "She is very strong." I agree. She *is* very strong. Only above about 4000 m is it possible for me to out-hike her, and then only when going uphill. For some reason, I'm not affected by altitude quite as much as Gosia.

In my (nearly pointless) attempt to keep up with Gosia in these sub-4000 m "lowlands", I am breathing deeply. In and out loudly. What mountaineers call [pressure breathing](#). After all, oxygen is half of the fuel for the muscles. Fura cautioned me against that habit. The cold dry air will hurt my throat, he says. After a while, I came to agree with him. I'm coughing a lot, and coughing hard. (At least the phlegm I spit out is clear white, so I don't have an infection). This coughing is unpleasant for me, and probably for everyone in earshot. It took about five more days, but by practicing taking shallow breaths more frequently, my [Khumbu cough](#) finally almost vanished. But it lingered until Dzongla.

There's a small village at the top of Mong La. It's pleasant and sunny, so while we wait for the food, we sit outside and take in the view. It's gorgeous. Simply



gorgeous. We order a pot of lemon ginger tea. At this rest stop, the tea is made with real grated lemon and ginger. Fantastically good. Hits the spot.

The photo above is the view from near the top of Mong La. In the background is Ama Dablam again. The village of Phortse, today's goal, is visible — the big cultivated area.

After lunch, we drop 400 m back down the far side of Mong La, walking the first steps along the entrance to Gokyo valley. This valley is morbidly nicknamed the “valley of death” — for trekkers who don't follow the altitude acclimatization guidelines. Don't sleep more than 300-500 m higher tonight than you did last night. Every 3 nights, take an extra day in the same place. The difficulty with the Gokyo valley is that the trail goes up quickly, and in terms of distance it is quite possible to walk to the village of Gokyo in a single long day from Namche. But Gokyo is at 4800 m elevation, 1400+ m higher than Namche, and 1200 m higher than the bottom of Mong La.

Serious altitude sickness doesn't hit until the victim has been at the high elevation for several hours, usually sometime in the evening. What can go wrong? Cerebral or pulmonary edema, that's what. Fluid buildup inside the brain or lungs. Brain is bad: the patient gets confused, and might have trouble walking. Enough pressure on the brainstem and the patient may stop breathing. Lungs are bad: the patient has serious trouble getting air in and out, especially when lying down.

The best treatment is simple — go down as fast as practicable. But if the illness strikes in the evening, going down a trail in the dark is not going to work well. And even if they are able to walk and try to get out, Mong La stands to block their way. Helicopter evacuation (about \$5000) isn't possible at night. There are medicines one can take — dexamethasone (a powerful anti-inflammatory steroid) to fight cerebral edema, and nifedipine to fight pulmonary edema. If anyone has them available, of course. Some people will try acetazolamide in these situations, but that doesn't work too well in a crisis — it takes a day or more to act.

Being strong and aerobically fit doesn't protect against altitude sickness, not at all. Even Sherpa get it sometimes, and they are [genetically adapted](#) to life at higher elevations. Not to mention super-fit from childhood.

At the bottom of the far side of Mong La, we turn eastwards at last, cross the river coming down from the Ngozumpa glacier next to Gokyo, and climb back up about 200 m to the Sherpa village of Phortse (3800 m) — world famous for its mountain climbers. We have seen no other trekkers on our route. The few people we saw going over Mong La are all headed straight to Gokyo village.

In the dining room of our lodge are banners from various mountaineering expeditions that stayed here. This village and lodge are serious places, not just for casual hikers like us.

It's a little early for dinner, so we go for a stroll around Phortse. It's built on a flattish spot, and consists largely of stone houses scattered among not-yet-planted fields. The fields are closed in by fences built from the rocks moved out of the way. A simple rural life is a life of hard work. It's still light out, but the sun has gone behind the mountains to the west, which makes us feel the cold air more.

On a wide spot in our path, three yaks block the way. As I said, they are basically high altitude cows with long hair and especially wicked horns. Mostly placid, but not always. While we try to figure out if we should edge past them, one of them starts bucking like a horse. OK, let's not go just now. Then the bucking yak charges another male. Sort of in the way teenage boys might say, “See, I'm tougher than you. Wanna fight?” The other one says, “You and what army?” They are mock lunging at each other, back and forth. No contact, just bravado. Yeah, we'll go another way.

Below Namche, the fires in the dining room stoves burn wood — only dead wood is allowed to be burned, to reverse the decades of deforestation. Each local village has a committee to oversee wood collection and (rarely) cutting. But above Namche, there are fewer and fewer trees. The fuel of choice for heating is instead dried yak dung. Luckily, there's no smell. Walking around Phortse, we see a woman following our path but off on the side, going slowly along the edge of a field. She's picking up dried yak dung and putting it in a wicker basket, presumably to heat her own house. Or maybe she'll sell it to a lodge. That's life in the Khumbu.

The lodge kitchens use heavy compressed gas cylinders, which are imported into Nepal from India. These red cylinders are a common sight on the backs of yaks, along with big bags of rice.

A yak train passing on the trail provides an interesting experience. The yaks wear very musical bells, each one slightly different, and are run in groups of about 10 animals per human tender. The result is that before the yaks get close enough to see, we hear the sweet symphony of their plodding approach. It's beautiful, unscored and natural.

Day 5 [16 March]

It's about a three hour walk along the "high road" to Upper Pangboche (4000 m), our next stop. It's Sherpa flat at best, naturally. Google Earth shows about 800 m up and 600 m down. This trail is carved out of the side of the east-west valley between us and Tengboche. Again, this isn't a hike for those afraid of heights. At all points we are "exposed" to the 500 m deep slide down to the river. Don't walk too near the edge.



The picture to the right is on the trail heading to Pangboche from Phortse. Lower Pangboche is the cultivated area to the center right, below Ama Dablam, on our side of the river. Upper Pangboche is the smaller cluster of buildings just above.

This picture shows you that we are now in wide open country. But photos only demonstrate that it is beautiful. Being inside it is different. Better. Everywhere we turn, it's great. Every place we stop to look is wonderful. The sensation of being *alive* in these spaces is thrilling. For us, hiking in the Grand Canyon, in the Utah sandstone desert, in the Colorado Rockies, and in the Himalaya is deeply satisfying, even spiritual.

We stop for the night at a brand new lodge, the "360 View". More accurate would be to call it the "270 View" since the scenery out its back is just the hillside. But out the front — Ama Dablam in your face!

If you've not been to the Khumbu before, then Everest is the mountain you've heard about and is the reason you're trekking here. It's a pretty big hunk of rock and ice, alright. But Ama Dablam, about 2000 m less high than Everest, is the visual stunner. It looks like a 2 km high rock/glacier combo shoved straight up out of the Earth — and that is pretty much exactly what it is. And it's almost directly across the valley, to our south.

On our February 2015 trip, we spent two nights in Pangboche. On the "rest" day, we hiked over to the base of Ama Dablam — down 100 m or so into the valley, then up 700 m. "Only" 4-5 km one way, but it took us a while. Looking nearly straight up at the near verticality of this mountain from its

base is awesome. It makes you wonder how they climb the damn thing. There's no "easy" way to the top. The routes all involve going up glaciers tilted at 70°, using ice screws for anchors. Not for us!

On this trip, after lunch we decide to try a short hike in the opposite direction, away from Ama Dablam. At home, Google Earth showed us some yak "kharkas" on our side of the valley, above Pangboche — fields where grass gets grown and yaks graze in the wet summers. Google searches showed me that there is a trail from the kharkas farther up to a viewpoint. Our original plan was to spend an extra night here and try to get to the viewpoint ridge, about 1000 m above Pangboche.

That schedule changed, and instead we spend this one afternoon in Pangboche hiking only to the yak kharkas with Fura. We pass the Pangboche monastery, one of the oldest in the Khumbu. But there is no one there. The monks had all gone away for the winter. Wisely. Most of them go back to spend the cold months with their families. Some make pilgrimages to Bodhgaya or Dharamsala in India. In lieu of going inside, we spin the prayer wheels around the circumference.

We pass the Pangboche school, which Fura says runs through 8th grade. It's about 100 m above Upper Pangboche, and 200 m above Lower Pangboche. That's the commute for the kids.

A little above the school is a medium-sized religious building. Fura says it's to honor Guru Rinpoche (AKA Padmasambhava), the monk who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the 700s. He is revered throughout the Buddhist Himalaya as nearly the equal of Siddhartha, the Shakyamuni Buddha. You can distinguish statues and images of Guru Rinpoche by his thin mustache, which gives him a very Indian subcontinent look. In this building is a gigantic prayer wheel, so heavy it takes at least two of us to spin it around. More good karma, I'm sure.

The kharkas are about 400 m above Pangboche. There is no yak action here at this time of year. Nothing is growing up here, yet — the kharkas are just patches of dirt now. Each field has a stone hut. Fura explains that the huts are shelters, not for the yaks but for the herdsman. The yaks need to be watched to protect them from wolf packs. A couple of strategic leg bites can cripple a yak, and then it's doomed.

I ask Fura how the fields are planted with grass each spring. What happens is that each season, some of the grass is cut and dried after seeds are formed. This hay is saved over the winter, and in the late spring is fed to a few yaks. These "seed yaks" (my terminology) are then brought up to the kharkas to poop all over the place. The fresh dung is worked into the soil, and *voilà*, the grass grows. Clever and practical. I also want to know how the grass gets cut. Fura says that in the old days, they bent over and used sickles, but now they have a machine. His description isn't too clear, but it makes me think it's a sickle-bar mower. I remember using these when I was a teenager. They are scary. My father had a finger cut to the bone on both sides by one when he wasn't careful. When I had to change a broken blade, I always made sure that the motor was off off off — not just that the blade scissoring action was disabled.

With just an afternoon for our play time, we can't go any higher than the kharkas and get back before dark. Alas. It would have been good to have that whole extra day and spend it going up to the ridge east of and above the fields — about another 500 m vertical. Our first guide Sonam had said that the hike to the viewpoint was too difficult. Looking at the route from the kharkas makes us think he had never actually gone there and was just reporting what he'd heard from someone.

While down in Pangboche, we see a series of helicopters flying into the helipad, about one every 10 minutes. The copters don't land — they are carrying loads slung on cables below them.

They hover over the helipad, people come out and unhitch the loads, and the cables are wound back into the motherships, which then fly off down the valley.

Fura tells us that this is all preparation for Everest climbing season, which is in April-May. The equipment for base camp and above is flown to Lukla, then helicoptered to Pangboche, then carried up to Everest base camp by yaks and porters. Someone must have made the logistical cost-benefit calculation that this is the “optimal” point for the dropoff. Helicopters that can go to higher altitudes carry smaller loads, so would be more costly.

[After we got home, I read that a number of expeditions had just summited Ama Dablam. It seems possible to me that a little of that cargo being dropped off below our lodge was for *those* climbing groups. Perhaps. On the other hand, it would make more sense for a helicopter to drop supplies for Ama Dablam just across the valley at the base camp site. And, of course, climbing Everest is a much bigger business enterprise than climbing any other peak.]

We also see a helicopter that *does* land in Pangboche. In this case, a local is being carried down to the helipad by a few others. He doesn't look well, and is being carried from the Pangboche clinic to the Lukla hospital. (Again, according to Fura.) It's good to have a Sherpa local as a guide, who can explain how things work and what's going on.

Day 6 [17 March]

On to Dingboche (4400 m)! Not the loveliest spot in Nepal, but it happens to be at almost the same altitude as Mount Elbert, the highest point in Colorado. Except, of course, that Dingboche is down near the bottom of a deep valley and has a significant number of potato fields around it. There's not a lot of farming going on at the peaks in Colorado. Nor are there a lot of lodges up there.

While we're walking, I'm thinking about stress. I've been worrying, which of course is largely useless. Can I make it over the high passes? What about crossing the glacier? I'm coughing a lot still. Do I have an infection, as I did back in 2014?

Finally, I hit upon something *useful* to worry about. Before we left home, I was going to cover up our compost pile with some dirt and shredded paper. But did I actually do that? *Now*, there's something productive to obsess about! I'm starting to feel better already.

Dingboche is about the highest place that's a “real” village. That is, the locals live normal-ish lives there, with fields scattered around waiting to be planted. Higher up, the villages are just there for trekkers. In the bad old days, those higher altitude places were just for yak herders in the summer monsoon season. In the earliest days of trekking, people had to carry tents and food above Dingboche. Nowadays, the people working in the lodges spend a few weeks up there and then go home. Living above 4400 m isn't really healthy for anybody, especially in the cold half of the year.

You've probably noticed that many village names end in “boche”. That word means “flat place”, which came to be a suffix for a place where people live — that is, they set up their housing where it was relatively easy to farm. Logical, flawlessly logical, as [Mr Spock once noted](#).

Historically, the Sherpa started migrating over the passes from Tibet in the 1300-1400s. In this region, they settled first in the lower lands, such as the Dudh Kosi valley between Namche and Lukla. This was the period of the “Little Ice Age”, and the higher elevations where we are now might not have been farmable then. As time went on, the climate warmed back up, and people started living up

above the trees. When potatoes were introduced (around 1800), even more food could be grown up here. In addition, I'm certain this land was used for yak herding all along. Yaks are valuable.

We're stopping for two nights in Dingboche. Part of the altitude adaptation program. In a few days, we'll be climbing up to over 5300 m. Being as adapted as practicable is crucial.

In the long term, adaptation would produce more red blood cells, which would hold more oxygen. But that takes weeks or months. Not having weeks, we have to settle for the shorter term physiological changes — changes to respiration patterns and blood acidity, mostly. That's what acetazolamide (Diamox) is supposed to accelerate. Do we need it? Possibly not, especially for me. But we don't want to find out the hard way.

There is one side effect which hits me on the hike to Dingboche. A few of my fingers start tingling, as if they are "asleep". It's not a strongly unpleasant sensation. However, after this day, I'm breaking my 250 mg pill in half, and taking one part with breakfast and one with dinner. Will it work?

During our first visit to Nepal, back in 2011, my sister had altitude sickness for our two nights/one day in Namche — which isn't *that* much higher than where she lives in Colorado. At that time, we didn't know anything about medicines for elevation adaptation and sickness. We do now. Fortunately, in my sister's case, when we descended from Namche just 200 m or so, she suddenly felt much much better. Weird.

The walk from Pangboche to Dingboche is the usual Sherpa flat. Only at the end, after we cross a stream, is there a significant nonstop uphill push of about 200 m. The trail is easy to follow.

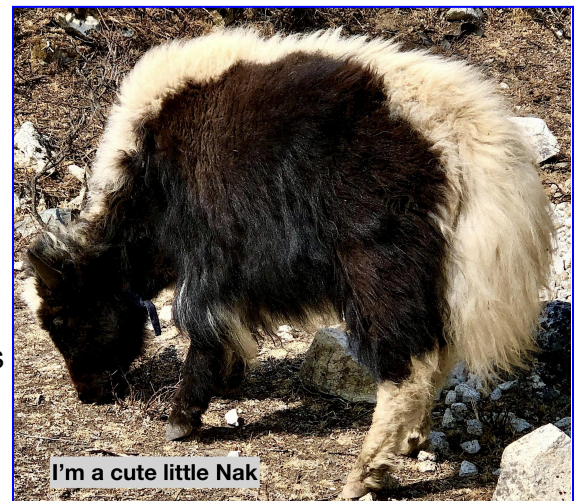
There are many lodges in Dingboche. It is on the route to Everest — in fact, it is the place where the trail turns northwards to go up the Khumbu valley to the base of the mountain. So Dingboche is a popular stopping point. In addition, if one continues going east, the next village is Chukhung (4700 m), which is the staging point for the first of the three high passes.

The high passes are Kongma La (5550 m), Cho La (5420 m), and Renjo La (5350 m), usually traversed in that order — east to west. The first one is the hardest, not just because it is the highest, but because the hike over the pass from Chukhung to Lobuche is fairly long, with no good stopping point in between. There are stories of people getting caught in the dark and having to spend the night shivering in their sleeping bags.

From the beginning, our plan was just for Cho La and Renjo La, the "easy" passes. Don't take the word "easy" at all literally, though. These are still hard hikes, because of the elevation and because the trails are steep. No one should try these passes who hasn't done something equivalently hard. For example, hike out from the bottom of the Grand Canyon in a single day, or climb a Fourteener in Colorado. I've done these things, and these Khumbu high passes were harder — colder and with a lot less oxygen.

The walk to Dingboche wasn't long. We settle into our room (after rejecting the first offering which has a cracked window pane), and eat some lunch. I think I had a bowl of vegetable noodle soup.

Our afternoon we spend on a stroll eastwards, towards Chukhung. Just to keep active, really. On the outskirts of Dingboche, we come across a small kharka with young yaks



and naks. So cuddly. Surely we need a cute baby nak in our backyard at home? Alas, we live near sea level.

On this level-ish trail, Gosia is faster than I am. And of course, there's no comparison with Fura. After maybe two hours, I start to lag behind. I've run out of gas — more exactly, out of blood sugar and caffeine. It's time for a break. I need to snack fairly often while hiking, but Gosia seems to be able to go on forever. (She'll dispute this, of course, but it's true.) It's windy, too, a cold wind. After we eat a protein bar, part of the stash brought from home, I'm feeling better and we turn back to the metropolis.

My cough is still with me, and only marginally better. I've cut out the deep breathing while hiking, but it hasn't helped much (yet). I'm nearly out of throat lozenges from home, so in a little building labeled "Best Shop in Dingboche" (marketing is universal) I buy some Strepsils. These are British sore throat lozenges, but they don't really numb the throat as much as similar looking products in the USA. That's fine for me, since I just want some soothing action. Should have picked them up in Namche, of course, where they'd have been cheaper.

Back at the lodge, there are two young "kids" (probably 35-40) talking in the dining room. Using some language we can't place at all. Finally we ask — they are Hungarian. Pleasant folks. The chat turns to the subject of where everyone is going next. One of the Hungarians says he's going up to Chukhung and thence over Kongma La. The other one says, "I have a cold, so I'm going down tomorrow." Aaughh! We don't want his respiratory infection! But he's not coughing, so hopefully he wasn't spewing too many virus samples for us to inhale. Just to be safe, we avoid kissing him.

Day 7 [18 March]

I keep waking up in the night to cough. Which wakes Gosia up. Not good. I'll try to deal with it.

After we come back from "the test". Today is an idle day, in the sense of spending two nights in the same place. There are two well-known day hikes that can be done from here. One is to walk all the way up to Chukhung (3+ hours), hike around there, then return. The other is to climb a hill called Nangkartshang (Nang, for short) that's very close to this village. Nang tops out at 5090 m, so it's about a 700 m climb. A moderately steep climb, but just walking on a dirt/rock trail — no hands needed, no ice to cross (what's called Class 2 in hiking route descriptions).

Why do I call it "the test"? The way I see it, and the way Fura sees it, climbing Nang is a trial run for the high passes to come. Each of those requires a climb of 600-700 m up to somewhat higher elevations. Today we'll see if we can hack it. If we can't do Nang, that will be a big downer.

No suspense intended — we made it. Basically, it's a long trudge up. The weather is clear and sunny, which helps make up for the cold air. Step, breath, step, breath. I like to synchronize my steps and my breaths when going up steep hills. At lower elevations, it might be two steps, one breath. Up here, it's a one-to-one relationship. And these aren't manly heroic striding steps. They are only

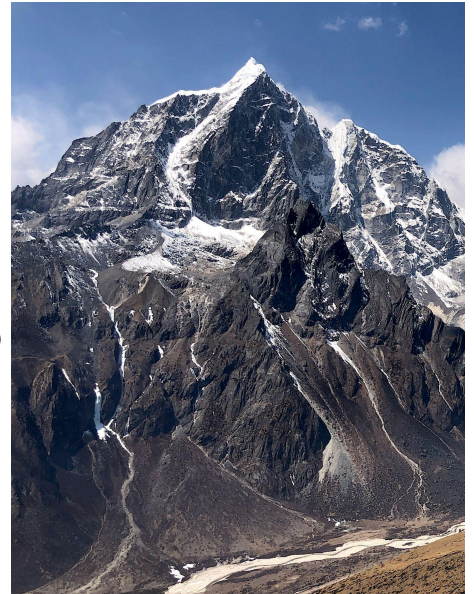


slightly longer than one boot length. That's how I can keep from breathing the icy air too deeply.

A couple of stops for a minor snack and drink of warm water. Up and up. Occasionally there are flags on poles to mark the way. Not that they are needed today. The route is very clear. But on a foggy day, the flags would be invaluable.

When going uphill at this altitude, I follow Gosia. I'm faster than her up this high, and I don't want her to fall behind and feel pressured to try keeping pace. So when she asks Fura something, I can't hear her words as she's facing away from me and the wind is blowing. But I can hear his answer. "One more flag." Which is a little mysterious, until suddenly I see the next flag — which is at the top! We've made it.

Picture time, of course. The wind is whipping around, but it's not too awful. By no means are we the only people on this little peak. All the trekking books say "Climb Nangkartshang". Many of the people with us at the peak are Americans (Ohio, Massachusetts, California), but there is one trekker from Vietnam, near Hanoi. We trade taking group pictures with phones. Everyone here is jazzed to have passed the test. To have made it to over 5000 meters elevation. Higher than Mt Whitney in California. Higher than Mont Blanc in Europe. Looking up at *real* mountains, like Ama Dablam (pictured to the right). Looking down into the valleys hundreds of meters below.



The only downside is the cold wind. To eat our snacks, we first look for a nice rock to shelter us. Then it's time to head down.

Trekking poles are especially useful when going down steep trails on dirt or grass. They help stabilize you and insure against slipping. If I didn't have poles, I'd probably go down *really* slowly, instead of just at arthritic Galapagos tortoise speed.

When we're back in Dingboche, I ask Fura if there's a pharmacy in town. I need something better than Strepsils, which work okay but not for long. He asks the lodge manager, and off we go. The pharmacy is in another lodge. We find our way to it, but the pharmacy isn't obvious. Inside the dining room, the woman in charge leads us into what is basically a walk-in closet lined with boxes of various drugs, etc. I ask her for something to treat cough. After looking over the very few selections, I end up with a bottle of a liquid. The ingredients sound familiar (one is an antihistamine), which is why I chose that one. For the next six days or so, I'll take a capful of this elixir twice a day. Does it help? Hard to be sure, but my cough starts diminishing. Gosia thinks it's great.

We made it up to the top of Nangkartshang and back! On to Cho La. What could go wrong?

Day 8 [19 March]

Exactly as written in the glorious and ineffable plan, today is our hike to Dzongla, a dismal "village" at 4800 m elevation. Dzongla's only reason for existence is to be the staging point for crossing Cho La (or the resting point for those over the pass from the Gokyo side).

It's clouding up, which makes the cold air grab us tighter. I'm wearing three warm layers on top — a Smartwool base layer, a Thinsulate filled jacket, and then my down-filled black jacket. Combined with the effort of walking, I'm reasonably warm.

The halfway point for today's march is the micro-village of Dughla (4600 m). We are going north, so Ama Dablam is at our backs now. The trail to Dughla is through open grassland — all the trees are far behind and below us. There are a couple of large groups ahead of us, and the trail seems crowded in places. Groups have to travel at the pace of the slowest person, so we actually overtake many of these younger people. Besides, they are taking pictures of each other half the time.

A lot of lodges have a sign "Horse on hire". Today we actually see someone who hired a horse. A woman, maybe 30, is sitting on a mountain pony, led by a porter carrying her pack. I've never seen this before. I had thought hiring a horse was for people who couldn't walk down for some reason — sprained ankle, maybe. Fura tells us that people go all the way to Everest base camp this way. It costs about US\$150 per day for the porter-horse combo. I'm afraid that I don't see the point of "trekking" in this fashion. Of course, the woman on the horse could have been hiking, then hurt herself somewhat. Traveling by horse could be her way of completing her goal. After all, would she ever come back?

My cough is still with me, but maybe it's a little less often and a little weaker today. We'll just have to see. There's not much else I can do about it now, unlike my thinking over the urgently important compost heap problem.

Dughla isn't much of a place. It lies just below the southern terminus of the Khumbu glacier, the one that comes down from Everest. Or more exactly, at the southern end of the terminal moraine of the glacier, the gravel and rock that the glacier pushed up on its way down the valley. That moraine makes about a 100 m high hill that needs to be climbed as one goes north from Dughla towards the EBC trek goal of getting up close and personal with Mt Everest.

But we've been there, done that. On this trip, we veer west from Dughla to head to Dzongla. But first — some tea and lunch, or elevenses, or whatever a pre-noon meal might be called. The lodge/dining room is crowded with all the people headed north, but we get a table. Luckily we arrived before the big groups. Once we head west, we will be alone on the trail, the four of us.

The path to Everest is a super-highway among trails, for the most part. Wide and obvious. The trail from Dughla towards Dzongla is narrow, and in places not so obvious. As we walk, we notice some people coming up behind us in the distance. Later, we see that they have gotten somewhat off the trail and are wandering through a field of rocks. I'd guess that they don't have a guide.

The clouds turn to snow flurries. Nothing terrible, just occasional snow pellets hitting us. But not what we want. In 2015, we came here and then it snowed a lot overnight — too much to venture over the pass safely. Are we getting a rerun, an encore performance? Dzongla, *da capo*? Well, there's nothing to do but march on.

It's not *quite* the Paris of Nepal. Actually, Dzongla is a dump, nothing more than a couple of sketchily built lodges. The windows in our room have 3-4 mm gaps around the edges. We forgot to bring duct tape, but Fura gets some plastic packing tape from the lodge keepers. Gosia engages in a favorite Washington DC pastime — a coverup. She squishes pieces of our toilet paper into the cracks, using the knife from my emergency bag, and then tapes over the gaps. The wind is blowing and we really don't want sub-freezing air gusting over us all night. Call us wimps, if you like, it won't hurt my feelings.

The dining room, on the other hand, is relatively warm and has a number of people in it already. It's a friendly place. Most people who've been hiking for a week-plus in the middle of

nowhere are very genial. And eager to tell their trekking stories. We sit next to Doug, a fellow American, who is doing the three passes trek. He tells us about his experiences going over Kongma La. His tale confirms the wisdom of our choice to skip that pass. He says the route down the far side was really tough. Broken up rock (scree), then boulders. Followed by crossing the Khumbu glacier, then hiking up to Lobuche, north of Dughla.

We arrived at this altitude on the day usually advised for trekkers — day 8 from Lukla. By pushing it, we could have been here three days earlier. And quite likely collapsing from altitude sickness. Doug tells us the story of an Israeli guy at Gorak Shep (5100 m), the last stop before Everest base camp, who had been doing fine down at Lobuche (4800 m) the night before. At the higher location, he started speaking gibberish and had trouble walking (ataxia). Classic signs of high altitude cerebral edema — fluid buildup in the brain, with the extra pressure making the neurons throw up their dendrites in frustration and freak out. He had to be helicoptered out in the morning.

Doug also tells us that up at Gorak Shep (5100 m), the last place before Everest Base Camp, many people at his lodge got diarrhea. Must have been inadequately cooked food, perhaps combined with the very real stress on the body of being up so high. There's a reason that Everest climbers spend several weeks at base camp (5360 m) acclimatizing before going up the icefall.

This small lodge is the fullest place we've been yet. Mostly because there are only two lodges in Dzongla, and to cross Cho La a trekker has to stay in one of them. Back in Dingboche, I'd guess there were at least 20 lodges, so the customers were spread thinly across the land. Here, there is a pair of Swiss girls, who came over Cho La, arriving a little before we arrived. A Polish guy named Andrzej (Awn-djay, approximately), going in our direction. A pair of Australian guys who live in the USA. All this company makes for a semi-festive dining room.

As the light outside is fading, a new group of four people enter the dining room. They've come over the pass from west to east, as the Swiss girls did, the less common way. There are two women, an older man, and a Nepali guide. I'd guess the man to be about 75. Good for him, climbing over the pass — and in a mild storm. They are all speaking French, as is their guide.

Fura, our guide, has access to the lodge's WiFi. The weather forecast doesn't look good. Snow all night and continuing through tomorrow. We don't relish the idea of trudging over the pass in a snowstorm. At best, it would be unpleasant — cold and with no views.

Rather than ask Fura, "Should we go over tomorrow?", we phrase the question as, "What do you think we should do?" Asking a yes/no question is easier, but that tends to get us the answer the local *thinks* we want. This is where we want a guide's expertise. Finding out how the Sherpa plant their grass for yaks to graze on is fun. Getting good professional advice in a tricky situation is serious. Wait an extra day, or go?

Fura rises to the occasion, and doesn't try to fish out the answer we're looking for. He says the forecast is that the storm ends tomorrow night and there's a strong chance of clear weather the following day. Wait the extra day is the decision. Which doesn't affect our original plan, as we built in such an extra day here. And one more day here will help with altitude acclimatization. Dzongla and Gokyo (on the far side of Cho La) are the highest elevation villages where we'll sleep.

There are three things that are hard to control on the trek: weather, sickness, and altitude problems. In 2015 we had a seriously bad snowfall while in Dzongla. In 2014, sickness hit our group,

including me. We've avoided the plagues thus far, and have been lucky again with the altitude. Now we'll find out about the weather.

Day 9 [20 March]

About half the people in the lodge, including Doug, decided to go over the pass in the snowstorm. They set off at first light, about 6 am. It's still snowing, not heavily but steadily — more than the flurries of yesterday. I don't regret our decision to stay. Although there's not much to do. Or much to say about this day.

Outside, the snow falls most of the morning. Then it slacks off. The sky is gray, and so is the world. A walk around the lodge shows a stark landscape. Shortly afterwards, the clouds lower and now we are in fog. Nothing to see. Back indoors, it's clearly time for a small pot of hot chocolate. About four cupsful.

We talk with Andrzej for a while. He is young and full of energy, but also decided to wait for the good weather. On the way down from Lobuche, coming over here, he ran into a team climbing Lobuche Peak (6100 m). He joined them on the spur of the moment, and got to the top. He'll be leaving with us in the morning, but we won't see him again until Gokyo. There's no way we can possibly keep up with such a dynamo. Andrzej simply exudes both friendliness and energy.



The plan is to leave at 6 am the next morning. Everyone else is going then, so we'll tag along. We order breakfast for 5:30 am, including some sandwiches for our party to lunch on.

We retreat to our cold room to pack up as much as possible tonight. Obviously, sleeping bags will have to be dealt with in the morning. The lodges actually provide polyester quilts to sleep under, but in this cold, a nice warm sleeping bag is transinitely better. The clothes we'll put on in the morning are inside the bags at night, along with our phones — batteries run down faster in the cold.

In the middle of the night, when I get up to pee, I take a look outside. There's a broken hole in the wall above the toilet, so I don't have to peer uselessly through the massively filthy window. I can see a few stars through the hole. It's clear!

Day 10 [21 March]

Porridge with protein supplement for breakfast! Again. Actually, it's not bad. We like oatmeal, and it's what we carry for breakfasts when backpacking. Then we hurriedly get ready to march. The sky is still clear. Waiting was the right choice.

And a little more waiting. We are ready by 6:05, but the other groups are lagging. Just standing around is chilling. But by 6:20, we are finally off.

The sun is still behind the mountains to the east, but it is light outside — light enough to see the way. We are slow, and the other groups starting this early outwalk us. But we have a guide, and

the path is easy to follow. The snow is trampled down by all the fast people disappearing around the corner ahead. It only snowed about 2 cm overnight, so we were very lucky. It's all coming together.

The first part of the hike up to Cho La is a steady gradual rise. It's fairly cold, and we're eager to reach the sun. After some zigs, some zags, and a couple of kilometers, we are approaching a high wall directly in front of us. The way forward is along its right edge, a staircase fabricated from sizeable rocks. By now, we're probably at about 4900 m elevation, and stepping up 50 cm at a time is serious work. Razu, as usual, has zoomed ahead. He'll wait for the rest of us at the top of the pass.

It's a good thing our legs are in shape. We did a lot of walking, flat and on hills, to prepare for this trek. That effort paid for itself. At no point in our trek did our legs feel the "burn" or get over-tired. Step up, take two breaths, step up again, breathe again, et cetera. It's hard at times, but not exhausting.

Above the steps it is still steep, but not a staircase any more. We can choose our step sizes, which makes it easier. The snow is not slippery, so we keep going slowly and easily.

Soon we come up to some big blocks of ice, 1-2 meters high. These chunks mark the low end of the Cho La glacier, which will take us almost all of the last kilometer to the pass. This point is where we put on our spikes, purchased way back on Day 0 in Kathmandu. It is the first time I've ever hiked across a glacier.

The snow actually helps. It has more traction than the solid ice. After we climb through the chunks at this lower edge, the glacier gets smooth and slopes up gradually. Underneath the snow, we are walking on what is basically a gigantic ice cube. Not covered in gravel and sand like some glaciers. With the snow cover, we might be able to walk without the spikes. Not that I want to conduct research on the subject.

It is *hot* on the glacier. We are getting the full high altitude glare of the sun twice — once from above, and once reflected by the snow and ice. I've read about this effect, but never experienced it so strongly. I'm sweating. Later that day, I'll find out my nose is seriously sunburned.

I let Gosia go farther ahead when the glacier gets fairly level. I want to get a nice picture of her alone on the glacier, with the pass ahead now in sight.

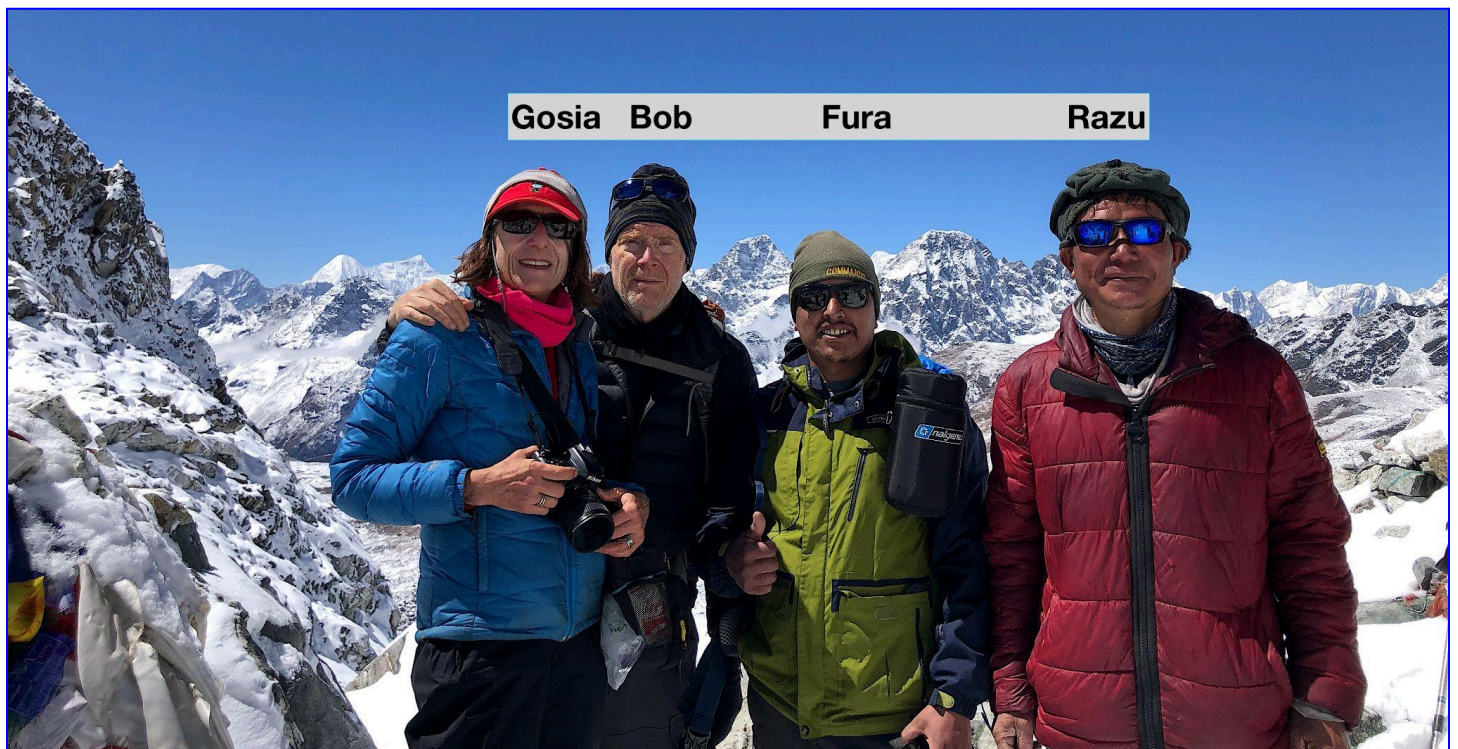


Doesn't work out. Before she can get reasonably far ahead for a nice shot, a young guy brushes past me, going fast. OK. He's zooming along. The glacier tilts up in a little ways, then down. He'll zip by Gosia and disappear over the ice hill.

Nope. Gosia starts up the hill. The fast guy passes her ... and slows down. He was hotdogging on the flat. Up the glacial hill he trudges no faster than Gosia. Then stops to catch his breath. Gosia almost catches up to him before he starts again. After more of this cat-and-mousing, I give up and take the picture anyway. I'll have to Photoshop him out back home, the bum.

I *should* rush to catch up now. The top of the pass is in view now, but at this altitude, rushing isn't much of an option, especially if the path slopes up even a tiny bit. I'm faster than Gosia up here, but not *that* much faster.

At the end of the glacier, there's a steep rock/dirt trail to go up for the last 60-80 vertical meters to the top of the pass. I get to the start of that final climb when Gosia is about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way up. At this elevation, trudging up this final steep part is probably hard work. But I don't really know, because it is so great to get here. At last. Nine years earlier, the snow defeated us. The year before that, bronchitis defeated us. Not this time, babeee!



After this pass, my self-imposed stress level dropped notably. Coincidentally or not, my cough was lessening markedly, as well. It never quite went away, but gradually stopped being so strong, so frequent, and so annoying.

There are a dozen or more people perching on the fairly narrow top of Cho La. The top of the pass is a "knife's edge", steep on both sides. The sky is a clear blue and the sun is baking us, although the air is certainly below freezing. Taking pictures of the scenery and each other is everyone's primary occupation. Eating is a secondary task, but essential. It took us about four hours to get up there, so it is time to share out the sandwiches.

The top of Cho La isn't even the halfway point to the next lodge. We have to descend the steeper west side, then walk several kilometers to Tagnag (4700 m). Following Fura's advice, we keep our spikes on for the descent, which is down a snow-covered crudely built "staircase" of not always flat rocks. For Gosia, the spikes continue to work well. Not so much for me. Mine keep coming off my boots. They go on with elastic straps that stretch over the boots' toes and heels. "One size fits all" was the assurance. Yes, they fit. But for my big feet in big boots, the stretching makes them more fragile. The various spikes on the bottom are held together by chains of what turns out to be cheap and easily bendable metal. Stepping onto a rock on these stretched-tight chains causes some of the chain links to open. After the fourth time of trying to get the damn things to stay on, Fura and I give up. By then, we're more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way down, and nothing goes wrong when walking without the spike. You get what you pay for. The important thing is that the spikes worked for me crossing the ice.

At the bottom, it's time for another snack. From here on, it's Sherpa flat. Down into a small valley. Up the other side. Gosia is a little tired, and asks Fura, "After that hill, what's the trail like?" He assures her that it is flat from there to Tagnag. When we get over that hill and see the terrain yet to come — well, that's the exact point where we invent the term "Sherpa flat". More up, more down. The trail isn't that good, either, with rocks sticking out of it. Near the end of it, Fura takes Gosia's pack for the last kilometer or so, in addition to his own of course. That's good of him, since it isn't part of a guide's job in Nepal to carry trekkers' stuff. Most guides start as porters, and when they "graduate" to guiding, have moved up in social status.

Some Cho La trekkers continue on to Gokyo on the same day. That's not for us. We're just glad to get to Tagnag.

Day 11 [22 March]

It's not that far to Gokyo. The main obstacle is the Ngozumpa glacier we have to cross. It is very unlike yesterday's Cho La glacier. It must be much older, and it is much bigger. It descends from the high peaks up north, along the border with Tibet. Over the millenia, it has shoved a lot of rocks, sand, and gravel aside, producing steep high hills on either side of the glacier itself. It's almost like climbing up a gravelly knife blade — up to the top, a few meters across, down to the bottom. The top of the glacier itself is mostly covered in rocks and gravel. The picture at the right is from the top of the eastern knife blade, looking across to the western knife blade where we are headed. In a few places we can see naked ice, but the route we take (following Fura and Razu) is ice free. We pass a little distance from a pond on the surface of the glacier. Not a good place to fall into! Fura explains that in the summer the glacier moves a little, the ice breaks open in places, and a new route might



need to be marked when the trekking season starts again, in October. What we're following is kind of a foot-beaten trail, not a built trail, with cairns to aid in route finding.

The day is a little cloudy, but not bad. After an hour or so, we climb up and down the moraine hill on the far side of the glacier, and step onto the Gokyo valley trail. From here, we are following the route that thousands of trekkers take every year to get here directly from Namche.

Not far to go now. We crest a small hill, and below, directly north, is the "big city" of Gokyo (4800 m). Unlike Dzongla, Gokyo is fairly sizable, with more than a dozen lodges. As we'll find out soon, the menus in the lodges are much more varied than we've seen yet.

There are six lakes in the Gokyo valley, which are sacred in some sense to Hindus and Buddhists. The village is on the eastern shore of the third lake, and our lodge is the closest one to the lake (white, on the left side of picture). During this season, the lake is almost entirely frozen over, with just a small open area where a stream flows into it from higher up in the valley.



To the northwest of Gokyo is a hill called Gokyo Ri — "Ri" meaning "mountain" or "hill" in Sherpa. Due north is the valley down which the stream flows, paralleling the Ngozumpa glacier. Our plan has us spending two nights in Gokyo, so we can explore this beautiful valley. Then we will walk due west, threading our way between the lake and Gokyo Ri, which will lead us to the second pass: Renjo La.

It's a little early, but we decide to eat lunch, after unpacking our stuff for the next two nights. Then we sit back and digest for a little while, watching a pair of orange Siberian ducks in the lake. It's a hard life, here in Gokyo at a little under 16000 ft elevation. The dining room is sunny and warm.

Unfortunately, the sky is getting cloudier. Nevertheless, we go ahead with our plan to spend the afternoon climbing Gokyo Ri, hoping to luck out and get a good view. This hill is 5360 m high, making it about a 600 m climb from our lodge. We take it slowly. There's no lack of trails going up — there are paths worn all over the place. However, as we go up and up, the clouds are coming down and down. After maybe 90 minutes, we are walking in fog and a little bit of snowfall, and can't hope to see much of anything. Time to go back.

Before turning around, I use my phone GPS to check the altitude. Just a touch over 5000 m. Not bad. The third time we've cracked through that numerical threshold on this trip. Down we go.

At the lodge, we run into Andrzej in the dining room. He tells us of his hike over Cho La, and says he's seen almost everyone else from our Dzongla lodge around the town. They had asked about us, which is nice. I guess we were the "old folks" and they felt a little concerned.

Later, a trio of Indian trekkers sit down at the table next to us, just after we finish our small pot of hot chocolate. It's nice to see non-Westerners up here. Talking with the oldest one (60), he tells me he's recently retired from his position in the Indian government — minister of finance. First time I've met a cabinet minister. He's here with his son and a friend. They came up directly from Namche, and will be going back over Cho La, basically reversing our route. It's my impression that the

Gokyo-Everest combination trek via the pass is much more common than it was 9-10 years ago, the last time we were in the Khumbu.

For me, dinner is a margherita pizza. The only other time I had pizza in the Khumbu, back in 2014, it was terrible. A reheated frozen glob of carbs and junk. So I'm taking a risk here, but I really want something different. And it's not bad. Not great, and I'd probably be unhappy with it in an American pizza parlor. The sauce is a little too sweet, and the crust could be crisper. But up here, I'm liking it.



Day 12 [23 March]

Today's "rest" is a walk up the Gokyo valley, paralleling the Ngozumpa glacier. We want to get to the fifth lake. There are signs in the lodge that discourage this, saying that the fourth lake is easy but the path to the fifth lake is hard. In addition, Fura has never actually been to the fifth lake, so he can't advise us. Sandwiches for everyone have been ordered last night. Off we go.

The trail to the fourth lake is up and down rocky 30 m hills. It's not bad, but it is a little slow going for us at this altitude. Every step uphill is still a little hard. On the flip side, the day is pleasant and sunny, which makes this a nice walk. And there's no pressing goal — we can always go back if the weather turns, or if we get tired.

I read on the TripAdvisor Nepal forum that Hindu pilgrims from India come to Gokyo in the summer for religious observations at the lakes. Asked about this, Fura explains that they walk around the lakes and bathe in them. That last behavior is prohibited to us by signs along the lakeside, but at the current temperature, we aren't strongly tempted. Perhaps these summer pilgrims make the lodges more profitable, which is why there are so many of them up so high.

The fourth lake is long and thin, unlike the third lake where we are lodging. Onward Ho! towards the fifth lake.

After going over a couple more of the small rocky hills, the path's character changes. It becomes much easier. At least three meters wide and almost flat, much like a jeep road — where no jeep could ever have been. This alteration is quite nice, and we stride along slowly but heroically. After a kilometer or more, the "road" tapers down to a normal sized path, but it is still pretty easy. Not much up and down.

Somewhere up here to the right is supposed to be a nice viewpoint, a little before we get to the fifth lake. But since Fura has never been here, and since there is no sign saying "leave trail here for viewpoint", it's not obvious where to veer off the beaten path.

Until suddenly it is. There is a group of 4-5 people off to our right (east). This must be the place! We start wending our way over there, just as they are coming back towards the trail. A quick chat confirms this is where we



want to be. As we can see for ourselves after about two more minutes of walking across the rubble that takes us to the edge of the glacier. We are on the western moraine hill of the Ngozumpa glacier again. And we have an amazing view of Mount Everest, which is directly east of us. Unlike the view from most other places on the network of trails in the Khumbu, Everest is not hiding behind the Nuptse wall to its south, and we see the true magnitude of this mountain. For me, this moment is one of the best of the trek. So few people get to see Everest this way. We can even see the South Col (far right) — the site of Camp IV at 7900 m (26000 ft), the low spot between Everest and Lhotse, from which summit attempts are launched. The peak of Everest is on the border with Tibet/China. To the left of the summit (north) is in Tibet, and to the right is in Nepal.



After lots of picture taking and posing, we finish the walk to the fifth lake. It's much bigger than the fourth lake, and not much smaller than the third lake. We are almost exactly at 5000 m elevation (for the 4th time), and the lake is entirely frozen over.

Now and then there is a very deep “drumming” noise from the lake. At the lodge, a trekker told us she'd heard it yesterday, and the explanation is something to do with wind stress causing the ice cover to flex, making the air cavities trapped underneath resonate. Sounds plausible, because the sound is intermittent and only seems to show up when there are wind gusts.

Gosia and Fura climb up on a large rock where there is a small monument or memorial. They tie another line of prayer flags here, our turnaround point for today's walk. They also put a set of flags on top of Cho La, and will tie one more at the top of Renjo La tomorrow.

Cold-ish grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch. Not too bad, and filling. It is very peaceful here. No one else shows up, the sky is clear, and the sun keeps us warm-ish.

Beyond us to the north, there is a visible trail leading up to the right, then veering left. That must be where the sixth lake is, and near it, the Nepal-side base camp for climbing Cho Oyu. This peak stands at the head of the Gokyo valley, and is the sixth highest mountain in the world at 8188 m. It's supposed to be the "easy" one of the fourteen 8000+ m peaks. Which means that only a *small* percentage of the climbers die. We'll skip this mountain, too.

We don't have time to explore this trail. Going up it would take at least 90 more minutes, and we have to get back. Walking back after the sun goes behind the mountains to the west would be cold cold cold. If there is a next time here for us, we'll have to leave earlier, at first light.

It takes us 2½ hours to get back to the lodge, walking all the time — we've done all the stops already. About the time we get back, the yaks out grazing are also wandering back to the village.

Gosia has come down with her own cough, now that mine is diminishing. Unlike with my cough, she is hacking up colored phlegm. A strong sign of infection. I'm urging her to take antibiotics (purchased on Day 0), but she thinks it's a virus.

We need another roll of toilet paper, so I buy one at the dining room counter — 500 Rupees, compared to 150 down in Namche. While we're at it, we find out the price of alcohol. San Miguel beer, 1000 Rs (\$8). Tuborg, 1200 Rs (\$9). Bottle of Nepalese wine, 2500 Rs (\$19). Small bottle of Khukri rum, 1200 Rs.

Tomorrow, Renjo La. We order porridge for a 5:30 am breakfast, along with some egg sandwiches to eat at the top. It's a long day tomorrow, 650 m up and 1000 m down.

Day 13 [24 March]

We were aiming for a 6 am departure, but of course we're not on the march until 6:20 or thenabouts. Unlike the departure for Cho La, our little group of four is leaving alone. It's cold, as the sun is still skulking behind the mountains to the east. And the sky is partly cloudy. Last night it snowed a few centimeters, but that has stopped.

As we leave Gokyo, heading west along the nearly flat trail between Gokyo Ri and the lake, a village dog follows us. Dogs like this are common in the Khumbu. They look reasonably well fed — not fat like a lot of American dogs, but certainly not skin and bones. I'm not sure who feeds them. Perhaps everyone, now and then. In any case, this dog is trotting along with us, or alongside the trail. Veering off to chase something now and then.

After we pass Gokyo Ri, the trail starts climbing straight up the ridge that leads to the pass. For a while, it is quite steep. With our slow and steady pace, with our tiny steps when needed, it isn't that difficult to keep going. After going up 200 m or so, the path forward gets more level, which is a relief. Now and then, we spy the dog still loosely trailing us. I had thought the steep part would turn him back. No way.



He scampers up the steep stuff like it was flat and at sea level. He makes our Sherpas, Fura and Razu, look slow. So much for trying to leave a Sherpa dog in our dust.

Perhaps halfway up, we stop for a snack and some nice warm water. Then it's up up up, as usual. I spy the pass up above, and point it out to Fura. He shakes his head. It's way over to the right, not as high as the spot I picked, and the trail will veer over in that direction soon.

It doesn't seem that far to go, although it takes at least another hour. But slow and steady works. Step, breathe, step, breathe, step, breathe. And we're there! Unlike at Cho La, it's just the five of us — two Americans, two Sherpa, and one dog.

By now, the sky is socked in solid, and we can barely see Gokyo village through the haze. The glorious views from the top have eluded us, first at Gokyo Ri two days ago and now at Renjo La. Well, we can't have everything. And it isn't snowing.

Early lunch time. First Fura, then me, then Gosia — all of us toss the dog some fragments of our sandwiches. I suppose almost everyone does this, which is why this dog is probably the most practiced climber of Renjo La in history.

Our disappointment from the absence of any good views is suddenly alleviated by the pink bird! It's a Himalayan Rose Finch, a small bird with a pink belly. This bird is beautiful, and something Gosia particularly wanted to see. It's a very good omen, appearing out of the sky like this. Without doubt, sent by [Avalokiteśvara](#).

A group comes up the pass from the other side, the longer way up. A pair of Italians. We chat a little, then they break out their own food. And of course, the dog gets his fair share. Quite a racket, really. I was concerned that the dog would follow us down the far side and get stuck away from his Gokyo home base. That turns out to be a foolish worry. The Italians head down before we do, and the dog follows them back towards his village. He clearly knows what he's doing. Quite likely he'll get some more handouts back at several of the lodges when he gets down.



It's now our turn to head down. We've got 1000 m to drop (what the Italians climbed up), and a moderately long walk. A long steep staircase at first, dropping 400-500 m to a high altitude frozen lake. Then a long flat spot, then the final drop into the next valley west of Gokyo.

On the flat part, we walk past what is almost a beach. In the landlocked country of Nepal, up at about 4800 meters. There's a great deal of sand, but no water. It must have accumulated there over the centuries, carried here by the wind. Strange looking place.

We get to Lungden (4400 m), and stop at the "3 Pass Guest House". It's pretty nice, in the upper half of the Khumbu lodges we've been in. We're not quite the only people there. A soft spoken solitary German hiker, maybe 30 years old, is also there. He passed us going down, probably getting there half an hour before we arrived. He's not very talkative, though.

We are headed down (south) along this valley. If we went north, we could (in principle) walk all the way to Tibet. There's a pass at the top of this valley, Nangpa La (5800 m). In the past, Tibetan traders used to carry goods over this pass and down to Namche to sell. Nowadays, armed Chinese

soldiers make sure that no one crosses the pass. The trail is said to be decrepit after decades of non-use. Fura tells us that Nepalis do some yak herding farther up the valley from Lungden, in the warmer monsoon summers.

Day 14 [25 March]

Lift off is early again, before the German hiker. Our first goal is the village of Thame (3800+ m), at the mouth of this valley. A famous Buddhist monastery is there, and we want to see it. The story is that three monks, all brothers, crossed from Tibet. Each one founded a gompa — one in Pangboche, one in Tengboche, and one in Thame. Each brother tried to outdo the other, of course. Sibling rivalry goes way back.

At one point on the trail downwards, to our left there is a big field with a lot of mani stones. It takes us a few moments to figure out the proper way around all these sacred objects. As we are circumnavigating the field clockwise, the soft-spoken German hiker passes us, perhaps 50 m away, going the short way around the stones — on the wrong side. I have to say that I'm a little shocked, at least for a moment. It seems that I have internalized a little of the attitudes that come with Buddhism.

Thame has two parts, and the monastery we want is in the upper village. From the trail, we have to hike up to it, again circuiting the “good way” around some memorials and a large stupa (pictured to the right). By this time, I'm pretty hungry and let that fact be known. Fura assures us there is a good place to eat just outside the monastery.

Which there is. A tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant. Food at last. And a toilet that is literally just a hole in the ground in a small shack.

The monastery is a beautiful building backed up against a cliff wall, up at about 4000 m. Quite a location, looking down on the valley below. Most of the older monks are away, as we've seen before. Here, there are a number of younger trainee-monks, led by what looks like a 15 year old. He shows us around, and discusses the thangkhas (sacred paintings) in the gompa with us. His English is quite good, and he explains the complicated stories behind the thangkhas well.

I ask this lad how he learned to speak English so nicely. He answers, “We have an English teacher here. She is from Poland.”

When I tell this to Gosia, she's pretty excited. A Polish woman here, very close to the middle of nowhere!? Gosia *has* to meet her.

Julia (Yoo-lee-aw) is a youngish (mid-20s?) woman. She and Gosia talk volubly in Polish for 20-30 minutes. I'm sure that Julia is very happy to speak Polish again, after months in the Khumbu. Later, Gosia tells me her story.



Last autumn, she was trekking along the same route as we are doing now. She fell in love with this monastery. The head lama said “Yes” when she asked if they could use a volunteer English teacher. So she stayed. The winter was quite tough for her at times. There was a week where it never went above -20°C (-4°F), and just getting out of her sleeping bag was very difficult. (Nothing is heated, of course.)

It took Julia a few weeks to get the boys to pay attention, but it is quite clear that she managed. She teaches three classes a day, and is learning the Sherpa language.

There is no cell phone signal in Thame, so from time to time she has to walk about two hours towards Namche to call and let her mother back in Poland know that she is okay. Unfortunately, her tourist visa is expiring and cannot be extended any more, so she’ll have to leave Nepal shortly. The gompas tried but was unable to get her status converted to a work permit. (Immigration bureaucracies are similarly difficult everywhere, it seems.) She’ll have to exit the country and try again from abroad.

We’ve seen the younger boys fooling around with a soccer ball, being kids. Julia explained to Gosia that in this monastery, the monks let the boys be boys. In many others, the youngsters are expected to act like adult monks. Saturdays (the Nepali “weekend”) are the only times kids get to play in those gompas. Gosia and I lean towards the Thame monastery’s way of raising boys.

Being a Buddhist monk is not always a lifelong commitment. It is a way of training, and a boy or man can leave at any time. In some Buddhist countries, such Thailand, all males are expected to be a monk for some time, even as little as a month. I’m not sure what the practice is in the Khumbu.

From the monastery in upper Thame, we go down to Thame proper, which is at the end of the valley we’ve been walking down yesterday and today. Our stream empties into a larger river running from west to east, the river below Namche that runs in turn into the Dudh Kosi. Just below Thame is the hydroelectric plant that provides power for the villages within range of the cables. We turn left to follow the river — not down near the riverside but up on the hill, heading east back to Namche.

The trail takes us down and down some more, headed towards some cliffs. The hillside we are traversing is steep, and the trail has to work around various impassable parts. One of these is where we cross the stream that comes down the valley from Lungden, shortly after we leave Thame. It’s an impressive place, with a short and modern steel bridge.

From here, it’s up and down a lot, a wide well-trafficked trail, but tiring. A couple hours after leaving the monastery, we get to the village of Thamo. It’s tea time!

In this town, there is a Buddhist nunnery. Typically, nuns in Buddhism don’t get the full respect that monks do, so a girl choosing to be a nun must have a strong reason. We’d like to talk to some nuns, but it turns out that most of them are away (just like the monks). The two that are present don’t speak English at all, so this plan doesn’t pan out.

It’s on to Namche! Up, down, up, down. By the time we get there, the sun is starting to go behind the mountain to the west of the city, and we are tired of walking. It’s been nearly 20 km today. We stay in a lodge on the near (western) edge, moderately high up the bowl in which Namche sits. We are on the opposite side of town from where we stayed, long ago on Days 2 and 3.



Again, we are the only guests in the lodge. Even Fura isn't here, as he lives in Namche and is spending the night at home with the wife and kids. At least it's warmer down here. I think slightly above freezing. Practically a tropical heat wave! We're too tired to go exploring, especially since almost everything is either up or down from here. We've had enough ups and downs today. We've lost (net) about 1000 m in elevation from Lungden, and in reality probably climbed 1000 m and dropped 2000 m. They say it's a long long way to Tipperary, but it's also a long long way to Namche.

Day 15 [26 March]

We'd agreed (last night) with Fura to leave Namche about 8:30 am. Breakfast was ordered for 7:00 am, since we are waking up by 6:30 every morning. Gosia finally decides to take the antibiotics, since she's not getting better. After eating, we go out for a walk around the neighborhood. It's a nice sunny day, or will be once the sun manages to crawl over the mountains to the east.

Near our lodge is another with a long concrete patio along its front. A couple of kids are practicing roller blading there. There are few places in the region with smooth level surfaces, so perhaps they are hoping to get down to Kathmandu someday. Someone should really invent mountain roller blades.

We passed the Namche gumpa on our way into town last night, but were in a hurry to get the walking done. This morning, we stroll around it (clockwise, of course), spinning all the prayer wheels that line its exterior walls. We've done this many times before, at monasteries and stupas. It's fun, and maybe the dose of extra karma will help us in the next life.

Now it's down and out of Namche, back to the Dudh Kosi valley. This has been our fourth trip to the Khumbu, and it is likely our last time in the region. It's a little sad leaving this "city", but we've got a bunch of walking to look forward to. The goal today is Phakding, a big-ish village halfway to Lukla, with a lot of lodges. Tomorrow, we want to climb up above Phakding to visit the monastery there. We've hiked up to it twice before, but all our previous trips were in winter months and the gumpa had been locked up. Phakding isn't far — about 11 km, with 700 m of up and 1600 m of down.

At this lower elevation, walking is getting easier. For one thing, I don't have to think about my breathing going uphill any more. The trail down from Namche is busier than when we came up, two weeks ago. More trekkers and more cargo. The shoulder season of March is being promoted to the high season of April. Fura tells us that it would be even more crowded, but there haven't been many flights these last few days because of fog in Lukla. That doesn't sound good for our own flight out, two days in the future, but there's no point in worrying about that. By now, I've even stopped worrying about the compost.

Down to Monjo, and a tea/snack break. There are a number of places that advertise themselves as "the last place to eat before Namche" — or, in our case, the first place to eat *since* Namche. Then we continue our trekking out. There are many more people on the trail now compared to when we came through here two weeks ago. I gather from Fura that this is still "nothing" compared to what it will be in a few weeks. The Khumbu really lives off of about 6-8 weeks in the spring and again in the autumn. Although life here is in some ways difficult, the Sherpa are (statistically) the best off ethnic group in Nepal — because of all the tourists and their spending. The Khumbu economy must have been hit brutally hard by the pandemic.

Mid-afternoon gets us to Phakding. We halt at a lodge on the west edge of the town, on the western side of the bridge crossing the river. The monastery is basically straight up the valley side, above us about 200 m vertical.

Scads of trekking groups stop in Phakding. It's about halfway between Lukla and Namche, and has a large collection of lodges. We are in a self-organized group, but many people go with agency-organized treks. You can find dozens (or more) of such trips by Googling "[Everest Base Camp Trek](#)". About those agencies and their pre-planned itineraries: I'll just tell you to beware any trek schedule that puts you at Lobuche or Gokyo (each at 4800 m) before day 8, counting arrival at Lukla as day 1. They are climbing too fast, and it is very likely that someone in a large group will get altitude sickness. Don't be that someone. You could be coughing up blood (which is seldom good), or spouting gibberish — or worse.

At dinner, there is a group of 10 seated across the dining hall from us. It takes us a while to identify them as Norwegian. They all seem to know each other well, so it isn't just a collection of strangers like many agency-organized groups. For dinner, they all get the same food. That makes sense, to get the meal in a reasonable amount of time. The kitchens aren't gigantic, so 10 different orders would probably result in the food arriving in dribs and drabs.

Day 16 [27 March]

I sleep much better down here in the lowlands (2600 m). I'm actually well rested for the first time in two weeks. Must be the "warmth" and the extra oxygen. Even better, Gosia's cough is beginning to go away. The antibiotic seems to have helped.

We repack the North Fake bag for Razu to carry, as usual. It's a little lighter than when we started, as we've eaten most of our American snack food by now. Razu, of course, is going straight on to Lukla. No need for him to haul the bag up to the monastery with us, and then back down. In general, the porter doesn't stay with the sluggish Western trekkers. Instead, he quick marches ahead. In the high season, this can be essential to get a room, when lodges can fill up. Of course, the guide can try to call ahead, but cell phone coverage is spotty or nonexistent at the higher altitudes. We didn't have any coverage from when we left Pangboche (day 6) until we entered Thamo (day 14). Weather predictions, a critical resource, were obtained by paying for satellite WiFi at various lodges.

A large part of our climb to the monastery is on well built stone stairs. Mostly not the type with huge 50+ cm steps, thankfully. By now, this is easy for us. The air is not so thin, the weather is not so cold, and we're a smidgeon stronger than we were two weeks ago.

It's a large monastery; however, most of the older monks are still away. But a caretaker finds someone with a key who can let us into the inner room. This is the place where the monks meet to pray and chant. It is heavily decorated with beautiful paintings and thangkas. It was worth the hike.

Instead of walking back down to Phakding to rejoin the main trail on the eastern side of the river, Fura leads us along a narrow local trail that parallels that track on this western side. We walk down through a nice pine forest, into a small village, then down again into a side valley that feeds into the Dudh Kosi. A large iron pipe on concrete supports runs down this little valley. I ask Fura, "Is this a water supply for the bigger villages below?" The answer is "no". Our trail follows the pipe, and soon we come up to a small building which is clearly labeled "micro-hydropower". We can hear the mechanism whirling inside — electromagnetic induction, discovered by Faraday, which powers our

civilization, not to mention being the part of the physics which makes MRI work. The pipe supplies electricity, not water, to the villages in the immediate region. (At higher elevations, far from the hydropower setups, the lodges use solar panels and batteries.)

Such projects are built with funds from various international foundations. The way they work is that the locals have to put in proposals for what they want — electricity, water treatment, bridges, etc. The foundations will fund these things (at least in part), buying the hardware and supplies, but the locals have to do the physical grunt work.

Soon we arrive at another suspension bridge, which will take us back across the Dudh Kosi to the main trekking trail. We've been in the exurbs long enough. Back to the super-highway.

We hike for another half hour, and then end up lunching at a lodge called "Holiday Inn". I don't think it's a part of the hotel chain, though. The food was very nice, and the owner chats with us for a while. He has two very cute little girls, who are playing on his flat concrete patio — where we are basking in the warm warm sun. If you are going on a Khumbu trek, I recommend this place as a lunch spot for when you are marching to or from Lukla.

From the Holiday Inn, it's about three hours to Lukla. Net gain of 300 m, plus some up and down as always. As we walk, the nice sun slowly disappears behind clouds. Not good.

While we're walking, I ask Fura about walking out from Lukla. I've read something about it, but I'd like to know more of the details. He explains that the road building isn't finished, but that if we start walking down from Lukla at 6 am, we can get to the end of the road as it is now by noon. There are 4x4s there (Indian-built Boleros, which look something like Toyota Land Cruisers). For a fee, one such vehicle can transport us down the very bumpy road to the town of Salleri, which will take until dark. The next morning, we can catch a bus for Kathmandu, which will take the whole day. Well, that's a backup plan, but not a very appealing one.

We climb up that last 300 m hill and enter the gate to Lukla about 2:00 pm. We will be staying in Paradise! OK, actually in the Paradise Lodge, which is right next to the airport. As we walk through the main tourist street of Lukla, Gosia spies out two important businesses who will get some of our money soon. First, a café where we can get cappuccino. Second, a salon where she can get her hair washed and dried.



Me? I want a shower, a hot shower. In Paradise, our room has a bathroom with a shower. But the "hot" water comes from a solar heater, which is not giving us the good stuff because of the cloud cover. There is a solution, though. I can get a gas heated shower for 400 Rupees (about US\$3.10). That goes on the ledger for our room, as our meals will later.

By the way, the rooms in Paradise are not numbered, but are named after mountaineers. We are in the [Reinhold Messner](#) room — the first climber to summit Everest solo and the first to climb it without using supplemental oxygen. Over the beds hangs a photo of the lodge owner with this legendary character, when she and he were young.

One thing needs to be done before the decadent sybaritic revelries of bathing can commence. We have to say goodbye to Fura and Razu. Fura will be walking back to Namche (north and uphill),

and Razu will be walking in the opposite direction (south and downhill). We give them final tips, and they are off. Have to make some more miles before dark. We would be very glad to use them both again, if we are ever hiking back in Sherpa-land.

The shower room itself is pretty cold — it is in the lower level where the sun doesn't reach, even when there *is* sun. There's no convenient place to put my pack towel or clothes, either. At least outside the shower there is an injection-molded plastic chair to sit on while I remove my boots. However, the nice warm shower is very pleasant while it lasts. Getting clean after 16 days on the trail is definitely worth three bucks. (Of course, basically all my clothes smell terrible by this point. But my body is now modestly tolerable.) Back in our room, I do something even more radical — I shave for the first time in 16 days.

After the shower and shave (for me) and the hair wash back at the shop (for Gosia), we go to the Tara Air office, which is open only for a couple hours in the afternoon for people to check-in for their next day's flights. The airlines have to allow for trekkers getting back early or late, so they can't hold everyone to their ticketed flight date. But, of course, they'd like to know how many passengers they'll have tomorrow. The system makes sense. What doesn't make sense is that the airlines all have offices with tiny little signs, which makes them hard to find on the main drag. All the shops catering to tourists have large hard-to-miss signs. Of course, Nepali people are uniformly helpful, so just asking is the best way to find something that isn't obvious. Anyway, we get our boarding passes.

That minor chore taken care of, it's time for cappuccino. For Gosia. For me, caffè latte. And a can of Pringles! Every time we've hiked in the Khumbu, I've had Pringles on the way out. It's my reward, and it's the only time I eat them. Unusually, Gosia eats about 30% of my reward. Mostly, she won't touch junk food, but maybe she's mellowing as the years go by. Or maybe she's hungry.

We were told we'd be on the "second flight", after all the people who couldn't go today because of the afternoon fog. Okay, that's fine. Usually the mornings are clear, so the second flight is fine. We are scheduled for 7:20 am. Have to repack everything for the airplane. Ten kg for the "checked" backpacks, and everything else in the carry-on bags (literally bags).

Tomorrow, back to Kathmandu!

Day 17 [28 March]

Well ... not back to Kathmandu, after all.

Breakfast is early so we can get to the airport at 6:20, as we were told. The hotel is directly across the runway from the terminal building, so we have to walk around — up the hill to the top of the runway, over the width of the runway, airplane parking area, terminal building, then down to the entrance. Which is just being unlocked as we walk up. Of course, there is no one there from any of the airlines. At least we can weigh our bags to see how close we are to the limits.

The sun isn't up, and it's cold. However, the little tea shop in the airport opens up. Black tea for Gosia, milk tea with sugar for me. (Milk is from a powder.) After 20-30 minutes, two guys from Tara Air finally arrive and start checking passengers in. Weighing and tagging our bags, mostly. We got our boarding passes yesterday. Once the backpacks are dealt with (stuck on a pile), we can go through "security" to the waiting area. After all, we are on the second flight, which won't be long — right?

The phrase "security theater" is sometimes applied to the American TSA, which screens passengers before they can go to their flights. At Lukla, it's more like "security theater theater". Of

course nothing is X-rayed — they don't have the equipment. The metal detector we have to walk through doesn't do anything. As far as my carryon bag goes, I'm just asked if I have a knife or lighter. Also, the officer gives me a slip of paper with a number to call when we get to Ramechhap. It's for his "cousin", who has a car and will give us a good ride to Kathmandu for a good price.

It is a little foggy today. But we can see across the valley, hazily, which is about a mile away. The planes, when they take off, have to build speed quickly and then turn left to go down the valley out into the airspace assigned to them. It's not possible to climb directly out of the valley over hills on the other side. Their crests must be at least a half a mile higher than the airport. Which means that the pilots need decent visibility to navigate down the narrow and turning valley.

The first flight's plane is already here — it was parked overnight, as all flights were suspended before we arrived yesterday, leaving this plane stranded. So once the valley is clear enough, the first flight loads up and takes off. It's not terribly late. Yet.

As I mentioned before, all flights are now to Ramechhap. Air time is only about 15 minutes. It takes 15-20 minutes to unload and reload when things are going well. We hope that the second flight will be here soon. Tara has two planes for the Lukla route, we've been told. Surely it's on the way.

And it is! Except, we aren't actually on the second flight. "Second flight" in Tara-ese actually means "the next flight that happens after all the left-behind people get taken". And we aren't on the third flight when it arrives (the same plane that was the first flight). But we *will* be on the fourth flight.

Which never happens. The fog is getting worse. And worse. We hang around for a couple hours, but finally it's announced, "The airport is closed." That's it.

Getting our bags back is trivial. All the checked backpacks are piled up outside, where the planes park. We just go out on the tarmac, find our bags in the heaps, and take them. The airport is closed, and there is almost no one around. Then we trudge back to Paradise, somewhat deflated. But not too much. This possibility of this happening is why we built three buffer days into the end of our schedule. We get our Reinhold Messner room back, and drop our stuff. Time for lunch.

In the dining room, there's a new group that just arrived. By helicopter from Ramechhap, after they didn't get an airplane for two days in a row. They are an advance crew for some American outfitter which has a big group arriving for the Everest Base Camp trek in a few days. After lunch, they are heading up to scout out the route.

The woman in charge of this group is solid and confident. They have to be back in Lukla in five days. I ask her how far she thinks she can get in a five day round trip. She says, "I'm hoping for Dingboche or Lobuche." When I point out to her that Lobuche is about 2000 m higher than we are, and that she's risking serious mountain sickness in going so high in three days (allowing two to get back), she doesn't seem worried. It's her life, but really.

While we are waiting for lunch, we ask the lodge owner what a helicopter ride costs. She seems to know just about everyone in Lukla. The helipad is directly down the hill (west) of the hotel, a little north of the end of the airplane runway. She sends a young man down to inquire. By the end of lunch, we get our answer, "About \$300-350." A little less than the \$500 we thought it would be, until we remembered that the flight is to Ramechhap, which is much closer than Kathmandu. For reference, our Tara Air tickets to Ramechhap are \$172 each. The prices for airplane flights are set by the government, and are significantly lower for Nepali citizens.

We head out for an afternoon walk, rather than loll around in the dining room. We walk back to the vicinity of the airport entrance, where the pathway continues south to villages on the other side of Lukla. If we went far enough, we'd end up at Mount Mera — in about four days. We pass by a number of residences with fields, the Lukla hospital, the Lukla gumpa, and some large unlabeled institutional building — a school? Then we are out of the “suburbs” and moving through nicely wooded country. Very unlike the treeless zone above Namche. In the fog, our walk feels kind of mystical. There is no one else on the trail, and the scene is very quiet. All we need is a quiet instrumental soundtrack.

When the trail starts to bend uphill fairly steeply, it's time to turn back. In Lukla, it's time for another coffee. We walk all the way through the town to the kani (gate) that starts the trekking trail. There is a café there, which is slightly less expensive and much emptier than those in the core of town. The barista seems lonely and wants to talk. Which is fine with us.

This café is next to the Lukla “Mountain Lodge”, which is a chain of luxury lodges in the region. High quality food, electric blankets, insulated rooms, and so on. We actually thought of staying in one, so we know the price — US\$210 for two people, plus \$80 for the guide and \$30 for the porter. Plus meals. There are six of these lodges in the Khumbu. We have no idea if they are financially successful, but I tend to guess not. The lodge here certainly *looks* impressive, being made of stone. Most other lodges are wooden structures, which typically get flimsier with altitude. The walls in our room at Dingboche were ¼ inch (6 mm) plywood, nothing more. A mild push would bend the wall outward slightly.

The barista tells us that the man who heads the company is also the founder of Yeti Air, the biggest airline in Nepal (Tara is a subsidiary of Yeti). It is clear that our barista really admires this business leader, who is one of the richest men in the country. Similar to how people like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Elon Musk have each in their turn received measures of adulation.

We also walk off the main street, so nicely paved with stones, to see some of the rest of Lukla. The side “streets” are just dirt trails, of course. Downhill, there's a second gumpa with a thangka painting school. We look at some of their thangkas, which are for sale, but sadly nothing speaks to us. We have a number of them from previous trips. I'm open to getting one more, but I want something of high quality.

On the uphill side, we are trying to find a path to what looks like a small shrine or memorial against the side of a cliff. We walk by what must be a middle school, where the kids are just getting out. Doing middle school kid stuff, like chatting and laughing.

The trail we are following leads up directly towards the shrine. But it doesn't go there. The path ends in some bushes, at least 200 m from our goal. We just don't feel like pushing through these shrubs just to keep exploring. Time to go back down to the tourist street.

Back at the Tara office, we are assured that we will be on the first flight in the morning.

For dessert after dinner, I order the chocolate crêpes. This dish turns out to be basically a cut up roti (similar to a wheat flour tortilla) covered over with Hershey's chocolate sauce from a squeeze bottle. Not *quite* up to the standards of the finest Parisian establishments.

Day 18 [29 March – Good Friday]

At the airport early again. After all, we are supposed to be on the “first” Tara Air flight! Today, there are no airplanes parked at Lukla, so we have to wait for an incoming flight.

Waiting rooms are inherently dull. There's a small stand with food, which all looks unhealthy and/or unappetizing. Yesterday they had bananas, but those are all gone. It's a little foggy, but after a time it seems to be clearing up. Then, about infinity hours later (maybe 30 minutes), a plane lands!

But not a Tara Air plane. It's a Sita Air flight. So we don't get on, but the lotto winning Sita Air passengers are happy. But surely a Tara Air flight will come soon.

Nope. The Summit Air flight leaves, the skies are reasonably clear here. Better than yesterday. But no more planes arrive. Another infinity time goes by (there are many many levels to the infinite). Gosia goes outside to find some tolerable food. There's no pretense of security left by now — people can just walk in and out of the waiting area. After a few minutes, she comes back with some goodies from a "German Bakery". These are actually *good* goodies. We recommend this bakery. It's close to the passenger entrance to the airport.

When the snacks are gone, Gosia goes to find someone who might know what's going on. The weather here is good. My phone tells me that the weather in Ramechhap is good. What's the problem, dude?

Gosia comes back. The problem is that the weather in between is not good. I guess that the pilot of the Sita Air flight made a bad report about the conditions. Or perhaps the air traffic controllers are looking at a satellite weather map. So we wait through another couple steps of infinity.

People are drifting out and not coming back. We can overhear some groups talking about helicopter rides. Finally, we both go up to the Tara Air operations office, and talk to the guy in charge. He doesn't think there will be any more flights today. Then he pulls out a piece of paper and writes down the name and number of a guy with a helicopter company. And offers to have someone take us to see him, down at the helipad. Must be his "cousin" he's sending us to.

Why not? The weather here is still OK, but the airport is emptying out. So we troop around the airport, past our hotel, and down the paved steps, then along a dirt trail, to the helipad. We end up just before the cliff west of Lukla which falls off into the valley below. There are offices for about 10 companies in a large-ish building, but the one the Tara Air guy sent us to is in a small tea house next door. There we meet a company rep who tells us the price to Ramechhap is \$350 each. What we were told in Paradise. Then I think for a second, productive thoughts for a change, and ask, "What about Kathmandu?" That would save us a 4-5 hour bus ride. It's already past 11 am, and we'd likely not get to Patan (where we are staying) until well after dark.

The price to Kathmandu is \$550 per person. Why not? It's just money, and we're sick of being here. He says, "Wait an hour." He has to assemble a full load of passengers before committing to taking us. The helipad is chaos today. It's still clear enough here, so choppers are arriving and taking off regularly. The clouds are moving in and staying, though.

I'm hungry, so I order and pay for some food in this tea house. Gosia is out taking pictures of helicopters. The food arrives, and at that moment a plane lands! Gosia rushes in — it's a Tara Air flight!! Leaving my lunch untouched, we grab our packs and try to run back to the airport. It's probably about a kilometer and maybe 70 m uphill. It's not so easy running uphill with 15 kg on my back.

We don't make it. The plane lands, the passengers get off, new passengers get on, and the plane takes off, all in 15-20 minutes. We get to the airport about 5 minutes later, and the Tara Air supervisor looks at us like we are aliens freshly landed. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to catch that flight. Will there be any more?"

The answer is “No”. The airport is closed.

So we trudge back to the helipad tea house. Someone has cleared my food. The helicopter rep asks where we disappeared to. Then he laughs a little at our explanation. By now, Lukla is fogging up. Helicopter arrivals are slower — I suppose they have to be spaced farther apart to avoid mid-air collisions (wise). We wait a while longer. Finally, he’s willing to take our payment, which must mean that our ride is more-or-less assured. [We’ll eventually get our Tara Air tickets refunded, by the way.]

We pay with a credit card. He’d prefer cash, but we prefer to have a way to cancel the payment if things don’t work out. Then we wait some more. After an hour or more, he hands us each a Snickers bar (the inflight meal?) and tells us we’ll have to walk “a little bit” to get to the helicopter. That’s somewhat unclear. The helipad is about 100 meters away, obviously.

There are three passengers ready to head to the helicopter — Gosia, myself, and a German woman about 30 years old. A young man is to take us to the helicopter. By now, we realize that we have to walk past the helipad, and head down to the next village. Pulling out our map, we discover Surke is about 5 km away, and 600 m below. That’s the “little bit”. The young man confirms “Surke”.

The guide takes off quickly, carrying the German woman’s pack. She’s young and keeps up with him. He keeps urging us to go faster, but that’s not happening. The path is relentless stone stairs down down down. After a while, he just takes off with the German woman following him. We are left to find our own way.

Which isn’t hard. The main path is easy to spot. The first third of the way is through more “suburbs” of Lukla, and the path is paved with stones. Down and down. Eventually, the houses peter out, and the path becomes a dirt trail. Down and down. The fog is above us, and we can see down into the valley below through the trees. It’s really quite pretty. Steep sided, of course.

A few people pass us going up, and one says with a smile, “Your guide tells you to go faster.” Not happening. Now and then, a mule train going up wants to get by, and we have to wait. Where the trail is damp, they’ve chewed it into ugly mud. Still down and down.

Eventually, we get to a hand-lettered sign with an arrow and the words “Surke helipad”, pointing off the main trail to the right. So we’re not lost and we must be getting close.

About this time, two people catch up with us. Another American about our age, and his Nepali guide. The four of us continue on. We’re not that close, still a kilometer down a narrow steep dirt trail. I’m glad we have trekking poles. Finally, the path flattens out. Ahead of us is a lodge, with a lot of people lounging around. And on a grass field outside the lodge, our helicopter! One hour has passed. Again, I’m thankful for all the leg strengthening walks we did back in Maryland. Even now, my legs aren’t tired. The rest of me is, though.

Five passengers, four in the back, the German woman in the front right seat next to the pilot. Backpacks are crammed into various compartments. While we’re waiting for the takeoff, the young German tells us how the guide carrying her pack kept hurrying her. She felt they were practically running and was afraid of tripping all the way down.



We're not in fog while flying, but it is very hazy. Most of the time, our eyes can see the villages below our flight path, but photos are too fogged up to be fixable. Especially at the start of the flight, in the steep walled valleys. The villages and hamlets hanging on the sides of some of these places, where terraces are farmed, are impressive. No roads, just trails. Closer to Kathmandu, numerous roads have been built into the hill country in the last two decades.

Finally, we land. It's *hot* down here. We have to strip off our warm mountain clothes quickly. Then we are given rides in pickups to the airport terminal. Where we have to go through security to enter the building. On the other side of the security screening is only one door — which takes us outside to the taxi parking lot. What was all *that* about? A full employment plan for security screeners?

It's not hard to get a taxi. On the way to Patan, I can finally eat my Snickers bar.

The trek is over!

