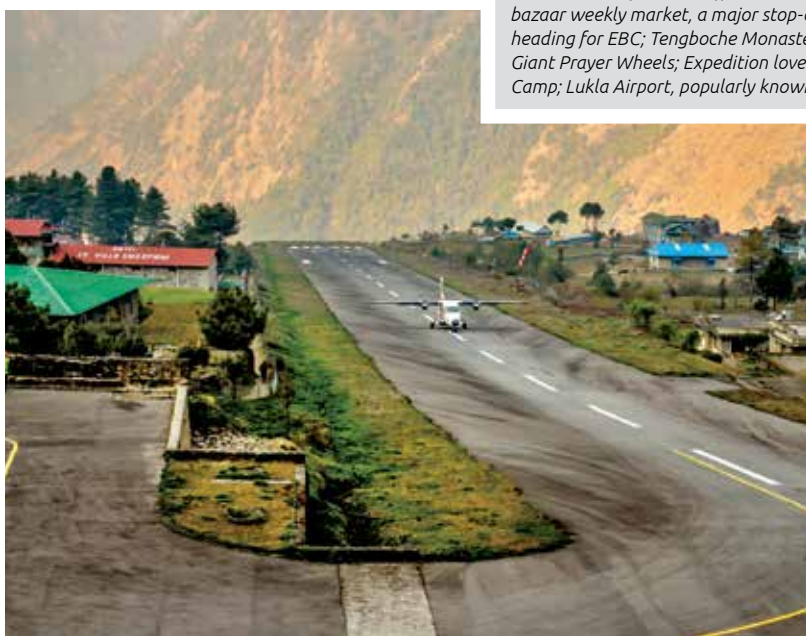


*From top to left to right clockwise: Kongde Range, closer to Namche Bazaar is classified as a difficult trekking peak to climb; Namche bazaar weekly market, a major stop-off point for trekkers and climbers heading for EBC; Tengboche Monastery worshiped by the Sherpas; Giant Prayer Wheels; Expedition lovers and climbers at Everest Base Camp; Lukla Airport, popularly known as Tenzing-Hillary Airport*





# Euphoria at Everest Base Camp

## Exploring Nepal

EBC Trek, as it is generally called, is on many peoples' bucket list and was in mine too. This popular trail is the same as the one used by Hillary-Tenzing team, to reach the South face Everest base camp. Daunting, as it maybe, it is quite an experience in terms of staying in villages at the foot of towering Himalayan Mountains and exploring the numerous monasteries along the way.

### Vasudevan

#### Landed at Lukla

The flight from Kathmandu to Lukla was incredible with mesmerising views of the Himalayas and quite comfortable except for the time when the airplane seemed to drop uncontrollably. Only for a moment, but enough to get one's stomach in one's mouth. Some people prayed, especially since there were 13 passengers! We kept gaining height and then we landed, no circling above, no announcements and no elaborate descent.

Sonam, my guide, met me at the Tenzing-Hillary airport and we were off. At 2,828 m, I was still breathing quite comfortably. This small town flourished mainly because of the climbers, trekkers and a small number of tourists. The single main street, with shops and hotels on both sides led us to the café and then to the trail head.

#### Trail Ahoy

A quick interaction at the police post ensured they knew all about my plan. After descending a steep set of steps I was on the trail! At this point the trail was around three metres wide and was akin to a highway in a city! The views were astounding. We were surrounded by high mountains dotted with small houses. A truly idyllic setting, a bright morning and invigorating freshness in the air.

Just then I crossed the first hanging

bridge. The cable-stayed bridge was definitely quite strong considering that humans as well as pack animals were constantly using it. However, with my first step, it started moving, not side by side, but up and down. It appeared to be alive under my feet as if its only objective was to throw me off into the river. I was, however, equal to its machinations and synchronised my steps to the pulsating movements. I even whistled a tune or two to the rhythm!

#### Tea Houses

We reached Phakding (2,650 m) in a good time of under three hours. It was mostly downhill except for the last half an hour or so. After a simple lunch of the ubiquitous Dal Bhath (cooked lentils with rice and vegetables) and my favourite hot lemon tea in tea-house, we were once again on the trail, weaving in and out of a series of villages until we reached a kiosk before Monjo (2,769 m) where I got my Trekking permit and Identity card. Dark clouds had started gathering and Sonam was practically pushing me to walk fast.

Sonam checked me into a tea house that looked to be under renovation. The owner, a Sherpani, said EBC Tourism was indeed a big boon which helped to send her children abroad for studies.

I polished off a hot vegetable soup and was getting ready to explore Monjo when the rain came down in sheets and

put paid to any more adventures from my side.

Sherpa Capital, big town with bigger heart.

Early next morning, after breakfast, Sonam and I commenced our onward journey. This was supposed to be one of the most difficult trek days. I got my papers verified at another check-post. We were on a steep descent and another of the Springy Bridges across one of the most ferocious rivers in the region, the Dudh Koshi or the milky river. It did not bother me anymore as I was getting to be quite an expert negotiating these quirky contraptions that are important to the economy of the region.

I could see two hanging bridges at different levels, far away in the sky! Sonam said, "Don't worry, we will be taking the one which is higher." To this day I don't know why he said "Don't Worry"!

The going became a bit tougher and the trail narrower when we left the river bank and started climbing towards the bridge. I had to halt several times, sometime sipping water and sometimes resting in acting as if I had seen some important thing to photograph!

This was by far the highest and longest of all the bridges. Normally the traffic is on both ways but when there is Dzopkio (see box) train then it is better to stop because they won't.

We still had to gain an altitude of

600 m in about four km of uphill trek. It was past nine but weather was turning hot and one by one my layers of clothes were coming off. The remarkable Sherpas in their flip flops were literally blazing upwards while I was huffing and plodding slowly. Just as I reached a clearing, all my tiredness were immediately dissolved. A fresh supply of energy was infused when I saw the top of Mt Everest behind the wall of Nuptse-Lhotse Mountains.

After hours of gruelling climb we reached the check post of Namche Bazaar, often called the Sherpa Capital, and then a long trail of stone steps going up. At the end of it I was truly tired and each muscle in my body was screaming for rest. I had taken one hour for each kilometre on an average!

## Introspection

The time was past two in the afternoon. I was sitting in the dining hall of the tea house in Namche Bazar (3,441 m) and sipping my now favourite hot lemon tea whilst looking out of the window. The weather was quite bad and there was a steady rain.

The tiredness caused by the day's strenuous trek was over and I had already regained my energy somewhat. I soon realised the weather routine would follow a pattern, sunny mornings followed by wet afternoons and cold nights.

I had sensed that a reduced level of oxygen was the reason for me having to stop numerous times. Memories of bustling Kathmandu and the dangerous flight to Lukla were already fading away replaced by fresh memories of Himalayas, rivers and this beautiful town. I was still days from my quest but I was contented like the cat that got the cream.

## Airport in the clouds

Next day was my acclimatisation trek to one the highest airports in the world at 3,850 m, the Syangboche airport. The runway was longer than Lukla but no self-respecting airplane would attempt to land here as the airstrip was full of gravel. I was told helicopters made occasional visits bringing tourists to a hotel named after the Mt Everest.



*Hanging bridge*

## Beautiful Monastery on a hill top

I was already settling to a routine of rising early, breakfast, lunch somewhere on the way and then continue towards the destination of the day. The day's trek was special as it accorded a first view of the beautiful Ama Dablam or Mother's Necklace and later even of Mt Everest and Lhotse in a line. Soon the trail went downwards. I had gotten to dread these descents because descents were always followed by steep ascent. "What goes down must come up" was the basic tenet in these parts. We dropped to around 3,200 m and crossed Dudh Koshi one last time and the path went up steeply, right after! Again I was conscious of the low oxygen level, which made me stop every few steps. The Sherpas always say "Bistare, Bistare, Jam" meaning "Let us go slowly". If you walk fast, you use up oxygen a lot more and get tired faster.

I was rewarded, at the end of the arduous climb, with the sight of the beautiful monastery at Tengboche, perched at 3,820 m. Tengboche is one of the oldest Sherpa villages. After a brief rest I pushed along relentlessly to the next village which was at a lower altitude. A total of seven hours later on the trail we reached Deboche (3,688 m) and I just crashed into my bed for an hour before going for dinner.

## And then it snowed

The next morning was clear. I had a

grand breakfast of hot lemon tea and Tsampa Porridge, a sweet porridge made of barley and wheat flour which provides sustained energy. I could now hear the rushing of the Imja Khola River, a tributary of Dudh Koshi and we would be following it till we reached our next stop Dingboche (4,400 m).

The monotonous trail was full of ups and downs, passing through villages with names ending in boche. After walking for about six and half hours we reached our lodge, which would be my home for two nights. There was a cacophony of frequent helicopters and I was told, they were on evacuation missions taking back acute mountain sickness (AMS) afflicted trekkers or climbers back to Lukla. That was the first time the seriousness of AMS (see box), dawned on me. Of course I had heard of AMS but never seen it being talked about in such a sombre fashion. A sudden snowfall kept us indoors for the rest of the day.

## Walking along Khumbu glacier

Starting early from Dingboche we reached Dughla village where the completely melted Khumbu glacier was gushing down. Soon I was on a steep slope full of scree, rocks and boulders. I slid once in a while and my half-a-century old knees were screaming for attention. I reminded myself that I could do it if I walked slowly enough and eventually reached the top to the Everest Memorial





(Top) Yaks from EBC; (bottom) Everest Base Camp

raised by people in the honour of climbers who had lost their lives in their quest to conquer the highest mountain on the earth, the Mount Everest (8,848 m).

We then descended from one side of the glacier, which was well hidden behind a low hill, to reach Lobuche village (4,893 m), after more than six hours of walking. After lunch I went to look at the famous Khumbu glacier by climbing the small hill. It was distinctly un-glacier like. The glacier was carrying tons of boulders, rocks and moraine with it. There were small glacial lakes but ice was almost invisible under the layer of debris accumulated by landslides. Once in while I heard the stones and small rocks falling within the glacier cracks to disappear forever. I had not seen a more intimidating place on earth.

### The last village

The night was a sleepless one for me as the low oxygen was not allowing me to sleep and adding to the misery, I had contracted what was called the Khumbu cough! So had a lot of others, which was reassuring!

Next morning I made it to Gorakshep (5,127 m), the last village on the trail in under five hours in one piece. Nuptse Mountain (7,860 m) was uncomfortably close, over-looking down at us with its crooked nose. Mount Everest was not visible from this village. The day

seemed warm but my watch said it was five degrees Celsius. I saw a few Sherpa women washing their hair and drying in the sun.

### Exhilaration Part One

Trek to the Everest base camp (EBC) was full of ups and downs. We were actually walking on one side of the Khumbu glacier. Then there it was! Tiny coloured dots of the tents of climbers came into view. I was still some distance away. The whole panorama was breathtaking (not only because of the low oxygen level!).

Finally, a descent and a short climb, I was actually there! EBC is on the sides of the Khumbu icefall that drains into the Khumbu glacier but if there is an avalanche then god help the camps. I silently prayed for the people who had died a couple of years earlier in an avalanche and last year in the deadly earthquake. I felt so insignificant in my surroundings and yet that made me peaceful. A Sherpa from the nearest tent, pushed a cup of hot tea which I accepted graciously. I felt I was in dream. I walked around feeling the atmosphere and witnessing climbers practicing their skills. It was most joyous but Mt Everest was not visible from here.

### Exhilaration Part Two

Next morning the time was just about 5:00AM. I was presently at Kala Pathar

(Black Rock) hill top (5,550 m) near Gorakshep. I was standing spellbound at the spectacular show the nature was putting out. It had snowed the evening before and the temperature was 10 degrees below zero. I had goose bumps. I was sure it was because of the sight I was beholding and only because of the cold air. It was a full moon morning that had dimly lit the huge mountains and I was witnessing the sun rise behind Mt Everest. It had taken nine days of strenuous trek to be here and every minute spent was worth it. I closed my eyes and my entire trip flashed by and my eyes were moist!

Return journey was comparatively a breeze which I did in four days flat. The increasing oxygen level while coming down helped and I was blazing through the trail. I could have done it in three days too but I wanted to stay back at Namche bazaar to visit Hillary's Khumjung village. ■

## How to reach

Indians do not require a visa to enter Nepal. There are numerous flights from New Delhi and Kolkata to Kathmandu. Alternately one could travel by bus from Gorakhpur or Raxaul or even Delhi, Varanasi and Kolkata. From Kathmandu there are many flights to Lukla. It is better to take a flight as early as possible as the weather normally becomes cloudy later and the flights are often postponed or cancelled. For the more adventurous, take a bus or car to Jiri from Kathmandu and then trek for five days to Lukla. Before Lukla airport was built this was the only route available to go to Everest Base Camp.

## Where to stay

All along the route there are the tea-houses. They are typically eating places with a few bare rooms. Most of them are similar in their structure except in Namche bazar where there are better lodges. They cost less than USD 4 per night as long as one has dinner at the same lodge. The food options are quite a lot for both vegetarians and non-vegetarians and are more or less the same in each tea-house. While I don't advise it, lots of local and international alcohol available in every lodge. Cost of food and bottled water is directly proportional to the altitude. What is available in Lukla for USD 5 would cost nearly USD 9 at Gorakshep. Most of the route has cell phone connectivity except for Dingboche and Lobuche.