

Trekking in Nepal

by Julie Barbosa, Boulder Ridge C.C.

If anyone ever gave you a chance to spend 5 days in airplanes & airports to go somewhere for 15 days, would you do it? That was about what total travel time ended up being after jumping the dateline a couple times. And there were times during the 'Trek' that I asked myself if it was all worth it. But if you want to see mountains, you have to leave Illinois, and since you're going on vacation, might as well really go!

Nepal is a country with incredible diversity, it reaches from sea level to the highest point on the Earth (Mt. Everest). Nepali do not call it hiking or backpacking when you travel by foot, it has become 'Trekking'. With good reason. Vehicular roads are few when you leave the main cities, mountains are tall, and to get from point a to point b, there always seems to be a mountain in the way. The Himalayan mountain range lies along the northern border of the country. Most people head to one of three destinations (if heading into the mountains), either Annapurna, Mt. Everest Base Camp, or Langtang. We were hoping to avoid the crowds, so we chose Langtang (Lang = Yak, Tang = trail of). The village of Langtang rests at the top of a valley, at the foot of Mounts Langtang I & II. To reach the trail head in the village of Dhunge, we left at 7 am in a Land Rover (about a 1970 vintage). The Rover dropped us off at a landslide, still a two hour walk short of the village, and it took us 6 hours to travel 65 miles. I learned the meaning of distance on this trip as I never have before. I have done long backpacking trips, but always at "normal" midwestern type altitudes — if we climbed 500 foot that was the total altitude height. Not in Nepal. We might gain 2000 foot in altitude, but it was from 12,000 foot to 14,000 foot. I asked myself why I was taking this 'vacation', but if I ever can afford to have the photos developed I'll remember why.

I met up with four friends from Australia, and the five of us trekked for two weeks. The tours take excellent care of you. For the 5 of us we had a 16 person support group. Guide, Sherpa, Cook & Assistants, & Porters. Porters are paid the least (about a US dollar a day), and physically work the hardest. In general, they carried about a 65 lb. load up & down mountains, in thin canvas shoes, flip-flops, or barefoot, and quite often arrived before us who carried maybe a 15 lb. daypack. They carried their own food, generally a bag of rice & maybe some lentils. Pretty sparse for all the work they did.

In Nepal Sherpa is both a last name and a position. The sherpa on our trek was in charge of making sure we had a campsite, set up and such. The guide mostly kept track of all the helpers and us, and did minimal actual labor.

Basically, the trek consisted of waking fairly early, (to a wake-up call, and a cup of hot tea), a hot wash basin, packing our personal gear, and exiting the tent. Sherpa & porters then packed up the rest of the tents and gear after feeding us breakfast. Trek for about 3 to 4 hours, stop for a 2 hour lunch break, trek for another 2 to 3 hours, get to evening campsite. They would serve us tea & cookies, then, after dark, serve us dinner. Basically, we were legs, stomachs & cameras.

Nepal is one of those places where if you drop your camera and it accidentally goes off, you have a beautiful picture. From

the terraced farmland, to the oak, rhododendron and fir forests, to the alpine zone, it is all incredible. And it seems whenever you look up and out, you see snowpeaks. We had fog quite often in the afternoon, but usually because were up in the clouds!

One of the first questions people seem to ask is how high did I go? I made it to Yala Peak (Tsergo Ri), a summit of 16,353 ft. That was an afternoon hike. From there we looked down upon Lantang I, and could see a glacier cutting through it coming toward the "valley". We camped in the village of Yala that evening - 15,200 ft. And there I did have the adventure of experiencing altitude sickness. (To give you a frame of reference, Denver, Colorado - the Mile-High city, is at approximately 6,000 ft.). Altitude sickness is a result of too little atmospheric pressure and a lower percentage of oxygen. You feel terrible. Headache, nausea, lethargy, major depression, no appetite. And you are unable to think straight. The best and only real cure for it is to go back down to a lower altitude. There are medicines you can take, but all they do is mask the symptoms. The most dangerous part of it is that you start to become confused and unable to make intelligent decisions. Usually you refuse to admit that it is altitude sickness, until you head back down and suddenly start to feel better. It has nothing to do with being physically fit, and everything to do with acclimation. Generally, if you ascend too rapidly, you get hit with it. I was thinking seriously of getting down quickly, like one step off the side of the mountain. It also has more to do with altitude at which you sleep, so it is okay to hike up higher, as long as you sleep lower. Rule of thumb I heard later, whenever you're over 8,000 ft., if you feel sick, it is altitude sickness.

I've always found it difficult to talk about long trips I've taken without some cue (like looking through photos). You have so many adventures in such a short time, it's sensory overload. Also, I'm afraid of babbling on and on, boring people with the adventure. It never seems as interesting to the telling as when you are experiencing it — hadda-be-there syndrome. Like for instance, about day 10, we were hiking up a switchbacking mountainside, and decided to have a snowball fight! We were probably about 10,000 ft. and chasing each other up the side of the mountain. I'm still appreciative of my hiking boots, otherwise I would have twisted my ankle about 4 times during the fight, probably 10 times over the whole trip. I went on that trip physically and mentally not completely prepared. Up to 3 weeks before, I was not sure I was going to go. And I never did receive an accurate trip description — has to do with it taking 2 weeks to get a letter from Perth, Australia to Chicago. I thought we were only going to get to about 9,000 ft. Oops!

My friend Alison (a horticulturist from Australia) and myself spent hours each day trying to identify plants. They all looked familiar — related to something. The alpine zone, despite being the most stark and shortest, was probably most intriguing. Most plants were under 8" tall. A lot were prickly, some were fuzzy — looking just like down feathers, and most were silver or grey-green hued. There were some really determined cotoneaster, and some beautiful gentians.

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Then, I made it to the top and looked out and all I could see were mountains and glaciers and more mountains and clouds down below. Incredible!

One day we hiked through an oak, rhododendron and fir forest. The oaks and firs were huge and the rhodo's (10-15') were contorted and beautiful. Incredibly quiet. On another day at lower elevation, (still a rhodo forest, but with a bamboo understory), we came across gray langur — a black faced ape — a whole troop of them. About the only other animals I saw were the Royle's pika (mouse hare) - looked like a big guinea pig.

Travel can be for adventure, for vacation, or for extending your horizons. With luck, it can do all of these and more. Traveling to foreign countries makes me appreciate home, with all its familiarity. It's a great break from looking at the same plants, the same people day after day. And finally, looking at mountains (trying to walk over mountains), actually makes me appreciate Illinois' flatlands. Nepal may be a once in a lifetime trip, but it is well worth it.

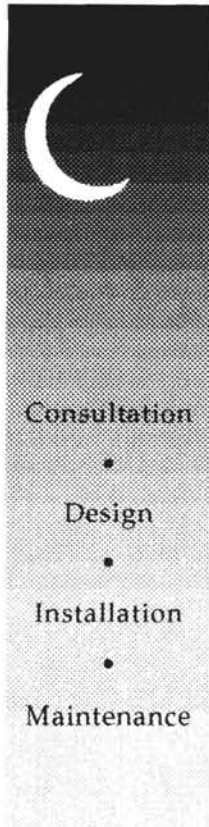


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