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Top of the world

Climb the mythical heights of the Khumbu in the Himalayas for a brush with Sherpa traditions. Ashish Kothari



Peaks emerge:Life in the mountains.Photos: Ashish Kothari

My first view of the world's highest peak, emerging from the clouds, was breathtaking. It was not just the sight itself, but also the years of reading about it since early childhood, that had built up expectations and excitement. We were half-way up to Nauche, a popular halt for trekkers heading to the base camp of Mt. Everest. Or rather, and there hangs a sorry tale I'll come back to, the base of Chhomolongma mountain.

The walk has been exhausting, but we have been resting a lot, in the process acclimatizing to the thinning air. Failure to do so, I'd been warned, could cause high altitude sickness, with nausea, fever, headaches, and worse. We had flown in from Kathmandu to Lukla, at 2,800 mtrs one of the world's highest civilian airports. The flight itself was an experience: Much of it was parallel to the Himalayan ranges, about as breathtaking as the scary descent to Lukla's single, thin runaway nestled between mountains.

Ups and downs!

From Lukla, after a warm meal at one of its many comfortable lodges, we started walking. I was with Tenzing Tashi Sherpa, one of the area's most active leaders in nature and culture conservation, and Stan Stevens, an American professor who has worked in this region for many years. Our first halt, Phakding, was an easy walk, mostly downhill. It was the next day, climbing 800 mtrs upto Nauche that was a test for anyone whose muscles have atrophied in city life. But the landscape is so captivating one forgets the aching legs and bursting lungs. With the Dudh Koshi river cascading below us, pine or oak forests on the slopes above one bank, agricultural fields and villages on the other, there is little time for anything else than feasting one's eyes. In the distance snow-covered or black-faced mountains tower above the valley, bringing alive the picture postcards one can buy in Kathmandu or Lukla.

At higher altitudes the vegetation turns to juniper and birch, and expanses of moraine where once moved glaciers appear below the snowbound areas of the peaks. Vertical black cliffs with white mineral deposits running down their sides rise above the vegetation, and frozen waterfalls testify to the rapidly decreasing temperatures as winter approaches. The path itself is busy, trekkers using the last of the tourist season to reach the base camp, and locals with their massive yaks or dzos (yak-cattle hybrids) carrying essential items up and down. We've been warned to stay on the cliff side of the path when passing these animals, lest one of them knock us down the valley (no kidding, a few people die every year this way)! And then there are the cultural protocols; as a predominantly Buddhist region, there are numerous mani stones carved with prayers and chants, and one has to remember to walk to their left. There are even more numerous mani (prayer) wheels, and yet another way of taking one's mind off the aches of climbing is to make sure every one of these is rotated as one passes by. And these are just some aspects of the sophisticated cultural system of the Sherpas, who, migrating from Tibet, inhabited this region several centuries ago. For me, the other delight was the wildlife. Sherpa traditions prohibit killing of wild animals (except occasionally predators like snow leopard that threaten their livestock), and this shows in the rather bold behaviour of birds and mammals. Pheasants of several species, musk deer, Himalayan tahr, and dozens of smaller animals can be relatively easily seen from the path. Much of the walk is in fact inside the Sagarmatha National Park, declared in 1976, though most people feel that the wildlife survives more due to Sherpa traditions than to the Park. That's another story I'll come back to later.

Nauche affords the weary trekker every possible facility. Over 40 lodges, most of them with hot running water, warm beds, and food ranging from western to Chinese to local cuisines, dot this rapidly growing "village". The markets offer everything from mountaineering guides and maps to warm clothing and local crafts. There is even Lavazza and Illy coffee if you're inclined to have a luxurious (and expensive) cappuccino! In fact I've never seen a more well-endowed trekking route; all the way from Lukla to the base camp, or to other spots in the Khumbu region, one can get such comforts. Fortunately most of this is run by local people, who thereby make a decent living; and increasingly they are also gearing up to dealing with damaging impacts like garbage, water pollution, and deforestation. There are, however,

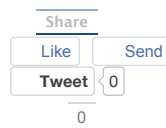
anomalies that stick out like sore thumbs, such as very high-end luxury hotels run by outsiders, a couple of which even have airstrips attached to them so that you can fly in from Japan or wherever, get a great view of the Everest range, and fly back without having to climb a step.

Which brings me to the sorry tales I mentioned above. There has been a steady cultural invasion of the region for many decades. Among the earliest is the naming of the world's highest peak; British authorities in the 1860s swallowed the myth that the mountain had no existing name, and promptly christened it Mt. Everest, after George Everest, the former Surveyor-General of India. Truth is, it had at least three names at the time: the Tibetans called it Quomolangma, the Sherpas Chomolungma, and the Nepalis Sagarmatha. But this itself is minor compared to the way in which Sherpa language and culture have been swamped by mainstream and official Nepali terms and concepts. Many of the other peaks, and even the villages, have been renamed on official maps; till recently Sherpa language was not allowed to be taught in schools, whose syllabus comes from Kathmandu; decision-making for the region takes place from outside; and there has been substantial migration of non-Sherpas into the area to handle trade, business, tourism, and other affairs. The National Park itself ignored the Sherpa traditions of conservation, imposing a western concept on the area. Slowly this is changing as the Sherpas themselves assert their identity, set up centres where visitors can be taught about their culture and traditions (Nauche alone has three), insert their language into school teaching, and press for their conservation practices to become part of the National Park's management.

Sunset at Chhomolongma

Beyond Nauche, as we climbed to Khumjung, we got a great view of Chhomolongma and neighbouring peaks from a pass at about 3,900 mtrs. The sun was setting, and the peaks appeared to be on fire. In the distance, far above Khumjung, we could see a cave where Padmasambhava (the Guru Rimpoche), founder of Tibetan Buddhism, is said to have stayed. A chorten (stupa) stood sentinel at the pass, and colourful prayer flags swayed in the breeze above the path. We lingered for a long time here, understanding with all our senses why the Sherpas consider this region to be sacred.

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