15 - 18 min read

Part 5

Nov 22

Goal time

I wake up the next morning, thinking how we are, finally, just a few hours away from the first of our goals and the tougher one at that. The day gets a new energy. I'm sure that everybody has woken up as excited and confident that this will be another good day.



Looking mighty pleased

The elevation difference between Lobuche and Gorakshep is only about 300 meters. Tenzing has told us that it will be a (Nepali) flat walk for the first 2 km and then a climb to our final teahouse location from where we will go to both Kala Pathar and Everest Base Camp over two days.

We set out at 7:30 AM and it is definitely below 0° as we start. The Nepali flat helps us get our rhythm and there are many other trekkers both ahead and behind us.



Two of these groups are large, possibly twenty plus people. One is an American girl group and the other an Australian one again led by a team of women. Both of them will be gunning for EBC first unlike us.

After the flat walk, of course comes the climb. Now it's all moderate to challenging. There is absolutely no tree cover or vegetation. It is moraine all the way. The climb is across a path of boulders and stones all the way. Until we reach a small descent.

Everyone seems relaxed as by now we have begun to rely on Tenzing's forecasts of how we will do, the terrain, hike time and so on. As usual we stop to take it all in with Lobuche peak looming large.







Helicopters buzz above as they head for tall peaks. Rescues ? Probably, i think to myself. Pumori watches us as we move closer.



Some four hours later we see it below us, a motley group of buildings, not more than four or five - Gorakshep - at 5162 meters as per my GPS. It is just about noon and we have made good time. So far so good, i think.

A tourism board tells us that we are at 5180 m. I'll take it. The surroundings tell us, of course, that we are in the middle of pretty much nowhere. From just across these buildings is a flat ground, the size of a couple of football fields, and rising from beyond that, is this black hill that we are going to climb after lunch. Looks are deceptive.



There are only two tea houses here and we are booked to stay in the better of the two. It is called Everest Inn. We enter the teahouse, and soon realize how bare and functional it is.

Our rooms are allotted on the second floor and we have to climb these giant wooden steps, each the height of at least 3 if not 4 steps and with no railings, to get to our rooms. There is a common bathroom to be shared by about 16 rooms on the floor.

At the time we don't think about it too much, have lunch quickly preparing to climb to the highest elevation that we would be doing on this trip - 5640 m.



The journey is as important as the goal

"Believe you can and you are halfway there" Theodore Roosevelt

As we get closer to the foothill of KP, I realize how challenging it is going to be. It is a 2 1/2 km distance, but entirely a climb - no flats and no descents.





Soon Gorakshep is a speck and I realize how insignificant 2 or 3 sheds are in the context of the surroundings. (see if you can spot the teahouse in the picture above)

The higher altitude slows us down, or at least slows me down, as I try to control my increasing heart rate and yet keep pace with everyone. The views as promised are just spectacular. On our right, we have the giant Nuptse still covered in ice and snow.





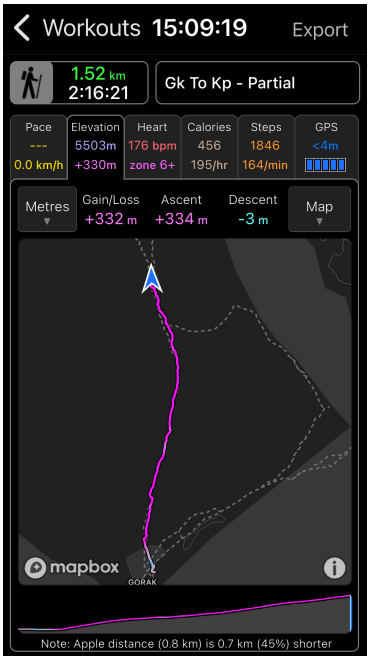
Given the altitude, I think I'm stopping every 10 minutes to catch my breath. And of course admiring the views and forgetting my huffing and puffing.

Finally, we are there. We can see the tower. It is the top of the peak just 30 meters above us. It is very crowded.

All is forgotten in the majestic presence that we are seeing. An Everest view that is considered as one of the best you can get. I mentally bow in awe.



Where we are is a beautiful small plateau from where we can see not just Everest but also the panoramic 300 deg view of the Himalayas. And no one else but us. This then is our Kala Pathar summit. We have done it in quick time, just two and half hours. All the imagination of what it would be like, evaporates in the presence of the real experience.







As we hold up the Made of Xavier's banner i can't help but think of Josy whose idea it was to put SXC on the EBC map.

Out comes my tripod as Nish and I set it up to take the pictures that I had mentally planned all these months.

And I am not disappointed. My trusted full frame, DSLR, along with its F2.8 lens clicks away to record some of the most amazing sights I know that I will ever see.









Come on baby light my fire

Time both stands still and flies at the same time, if that makes any sense !

We want to stay as long as possible, also to see the mountains light up at the sun goes down. Yet it would mean risking trekking back in twilight before we reach Gorakshep.





Finally, we head back down. I'm thinking of the original plan which was to have done KP on Day 2 which would have made it a morning trek and (i think to myself) given us more time on the top. Never satisfied !

Coming downhill has been slower and probably more difficult for us all except Nish who is almost like a junior sherpa. Doing that in the dark even more so. And our tired minds have to face those Demons as we make our way down in torchlight.

For a change I am moving pretty fast and along with Milan reach the bottom of the hill just before the light completely fades.

The others are not so lucky and have to make the last 15-20 minutes by torchlight. So it's another adventure here.

Finally back to Gorakshep, we all sit in the warmth of the teahouse dining room. We realize how sparse this one is. And we are all pretty tired. I for one dread the thought of the two floor climb back to our room. After the adrenaline rush has gone, the tiredness has set in. Most of us are too tired to climb up those stairs to our rooms. So we just order tea and snacks and stay in the dining hall. It is crowded with trekkers including those who are just back from EBC and those like us from KP. Nish meets some Aussie's and is happy to chat with them.

We have our dinner early. Tenzing comes over to tell us how great job we have done, that we have gone up to KP and back without a problem - Goal number one met. The tougher one at that. Makes me feel really good about the decision to change the program plan like we did. Tenzing is confident that we will do EBC easily tomorrow and frankly so are we.

What we are not confident about is how are we going to make it through the night. The temperature is going to fall to below -10, with windchill -17 is what it goes to in the end. The rooms are so cold that if you put a finger out of the sleeping bag that you are covered in, it will freeze. I just hope that I don't wake up to use the loo.

I don't bother to change and just sleep in whatever I was wearing that day and that's what I am going to be wearing next day as well. We somehow make it through the night.

23rd Nov

the final countdown

I wake up really early and start figuring out how to brush my teeth. I get ready and go and use the common toilet that caters to 16 rooms on the floor, the water is ice. No point doing much here. I get ready and head down the 2 floors. Its early and i find Milan brushing his teeth with a jug of hot water. I cajole him into sharing it, which he does willingly and I brush my teeth. I'm now ready for breakfast.

Vijay had read out the riot act to Tenzing the previous night. No more late night trekking. And we have a long day ahead of us. We have to go to EBC come back have lunch and then trek down to Lobuche before before it gets dark.

We set out at 7:30 in the morning and make good time. We are really confident about this. The terrain is nothing but rock and boulders and crossing glaciers from time to time. Tenzing explains that below what we are walking on, is many feet of ice.







The valley between us and Nuptse must be a few kilometers, at least, but so large is this mountain that it appears real close thanks to a broadside kind of view that we have.

And then we hear the distant thunder and stop. It's an avalanche, taking place on the side of the mountain. We watch in awe.

As we turn to continue walking, we hear it again, and there is a second avalanche. And then a third; is almost as of nature is showing off what she is capable of. The last avalanche triggers the flight of a flock of birds that must have been resting at the base of that area. Wow, they certainly had a birds-eye view of everything.

I think that we are all keyed up, adrenaline running high because today is the day that we will be at EBC. The three hour trek seems short despite some challenging sections and before we know it, we can see EbC a few hundred yards in front of us. It is just 10:30 AM. We have kept to the time that Tenzing had given us.





Despite seeing hundreds of pictures of it, EBC is breathtaking beauty. The final few yards we pass frozen lake, the sides of which are all ice that must be there, I think, for centuries.

As we approach close, I can see the famous EBC rock. The groups that have come before us are going crazy. Trying to jump on it and slide down it and take pictures all at the same time. We patiently await our turn.

After they move on, we take our pictures and then just walk around. Absorbed in the moment. I walk towards the glacier. Looking at the path that summiting mountaineers would take. You can see the tip of Everest in the distance. Everest is a good 3 1/2 km higher up in the sky. Humbled.





JB
21 April 2024









We spend about 40 minutes at this culmination of 70 km and 12 days of trekking. I could spend a lot more time here. Just taking it all in, but I know that we must leave as we have to descend all the way back to Lobuche before the sun sets.

We prepare to leave this beautiful part of the earth, invaded by so many of us, yet pristine and untouched. I thank my stars for having been able to do this and see this part of our wonderful planet.

The walk back is mostly in silence. Taking in the gorgeous landscape all around for the last time. As before, our descent tends to be a little slower than we would have assumed.

It's never over until the fat lady sings as they say and as we reach Gorakshep, we are about to set out into another major adventure.

Not surprisingly, everyone is quite tired, adrenaline reduced and my blisters are now reminding me that this long walk to Lobuche is not going to be fun.

Conversation also veers around whether we will reach Lobuche by sunset.

I think it is Nish who comes up with the idea of taking a horse ride back to Lobuche. Tenzing surprisingly is all for it and then later suggests that we actually take it all the way to Pheriche which should have been our hiking stop the next morning.

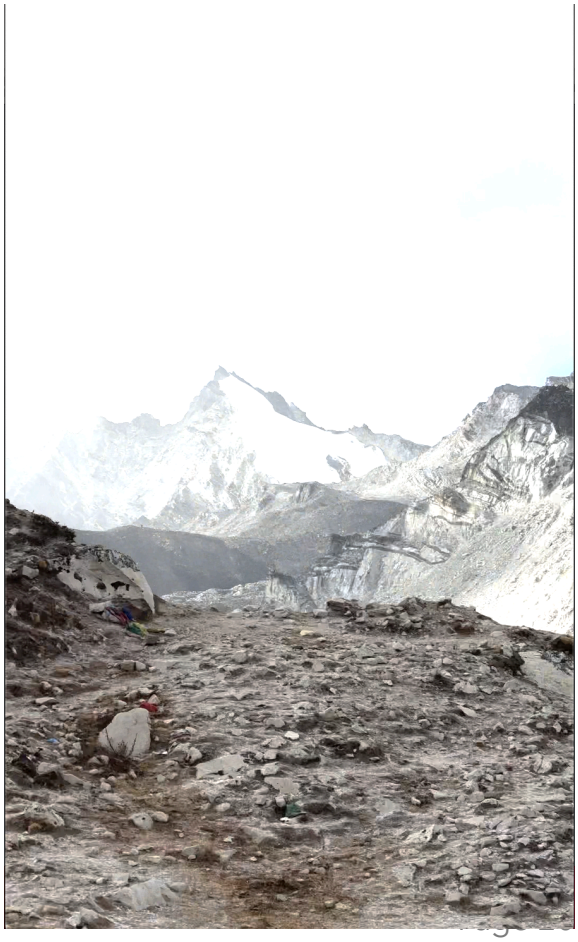
There is a unanimous yes from everyone without really thinking, I believe such was the relief in the mind after having completed our goals.

Nish is put in charge of the negotiations which conclude successfully. However, we have to wait for the horses to come and by the time they do it is 3:30 in the afternoon In the back of my mind, I I ask myself the question how are we going to get to Pheriche before sunset? Mind answers – we won't.

I look at Vijay thinking this bypasses his dictat of not 'trekking downhill' in the dark so we should be ok.



Goodbye Gorakshep.



Just as we are about to climb onto the horses, snow flurries come down on us. as if to say “here you go, now you’ve seen it all”.

The horses are clearly big and strong, and not only know the way, but also have a mind of their own. Never having sat on a horse for such a long time the downhill portions of uneven moraine are scary as hell. I keep wondering with every descent, whether I will be be thrown off the saddle.





After nearly two hours on the saddle, we are nearing Lobuche. All that is left is twilight. And then I realize that it's probably a day or two away from a full moon. in this desolate landscape, the moon lights up everything though quite eerily.

Mine is the lead horse and so there is nothing in front of me for the entire 4 1/2 hour ride. So great views of everything including the impossible things that my horse keeps doing. I turn around more than once to see who is behind me if anyone at all. I see that some horses like the one that Vijay and Lester are on, are doing the entire journey on their own. Their handlers happily chatting somewhere at the back.

The night ride from Lobuche is madness to say the least. First, we go down a pretty steep Thukla pass, then cross the glacier and river to get onto the other side towards Pheriche. Further from there after a brief climb it's all the way down for another two hours. To add to this the temperature is probably below zero.

I don't know about the others, but my mind is numb and so I just go along for the ride and and watch my horse, nonchalantly walk along the edge of paths, which have crazy drops if there is a missed step. We continue to take those steep descent in the dark. I continue to enjoy the views though, burning it into memory, knowing that the expedition is almost over.

The last stretch to Pheriche thankfully is a Nepali flat for a few kilometers. Getting there, however, involves some complex maneuvering, which is impossible to explain, or comprehend.

As we approach closer to the village, I am presented by this incredible sight of the few lights of the village and in the background giant mountains glowing in the moonlight. My phone does not have any charge left nor does my brain work enough to search for my backpack which has my DSLR which could have captured what I saw. I guess in the end it will stay imprinted in my mind only and that is probably how it should be.

As we ride into the town of Periche, I feel like I am in western movie. Horses slowly going through this one street town in search of the teahouse, in our case.

Vijay and I find that we are alone, and our horses have taken a different route across the short swamp to the bottom of the teahouse. We are helped off the horses, but I am so stiff that I need to be helped up the staircase and into the dining area.

Tenzing has done his magic again and ensured that not only have we got Rooms at such short notice but the dining hall is warm, the owner really friendly and hot food is available even though its really late by the local standards. I am reminded of Athithi Devo Bhava once again.. like its been a full circle.

Temperature is around -5. But we are relaxed. We sit across the table exchanging notes on this incredible 4 1/2 hour ride that we have just done. Cutting short what would have been two days of trekking.

Tenzing assembles all of us for what he knows is going to be his last set of instructions. Since we are down to five, we need only one helicopter and we don't have space for him or Milan whom otherwise we planned to take back with us. He acknowledges that. That is his life.

We are told to get ready by 8 AM and that the heli would come by 8:30 or thereabouts. We stay around the hot water heater for a while, not wanting the evening to end.

We wonder what has happened with Dini after his reaching Kathmandu, as we have not had any proper connectivity for two days now.

We finally head off to the rooms which are cold as expected but we don't really complain, just roll out the sleeping bags get in and pass out.

When the music's over, Turn out the lights.. The Doors

Nov 24

I wake up early as usual, and once again, I'm amazed at the lack of stiffness or tiredness. My back and butt are just fine. No aches that should have been there given the crazy day we had had. These mountains are magic.



As we have breakfast we have one last but important thing to do. We could not have done this marvelous trip without the leadership of our guide Tenzing our assistant guide Milan and of course the completely invisible, but incredible porters. it is our duty to reward them with a little bit of money as is also the culture.

We call Tenzing and after a few solemn words of thanks we handover our combined contribution to him. We are happy to see that he is delighted with the amount probably did not expect it to be that much.

A few moments later, he calls the entire team of guides and porters and tells them how much we have given. I remember him telling me that a large share of any tip would go to the porters because they have the most challenging time during this these journeys. One more lesson in management as Vijay would say.



Time's up and soon we get a call that we should go and stand at the heli pick up point. As we walk towards the makeshift helipad, which amazingly is nothing but a surface of rocks and stones that have been laid to look flattened.







Then we hear it it in the horizon. Coming fast and low and with tremendous skill, upon us.



The bags are thrown in and we are all bundled into it. I am lucky to get the seat next to the pilot to watch. What would be the final adventure move as we head back Lukla where it all began eleven days earlier.



The helicopter takes off and does not disappoint as it navigate its way through the mountains, flying very low and very close, giving us helicopter view of everything and just twenty or so minutes later landing at, the now not so terrifying, Lukla airfield.



Celebration

Lukla Nov 24th

We are put up in an excellent tea house. i guess after Gorakshep this was a real luxury. Kudos to Nitesh once again and not for the last time. After we check in and, i for one, a have a sumptuous breakfast after eleven days, we take a brief R&R before we decide to explore Lukla.





After a while we decide to go down town having spotted a cafe or two.

Back to eating food in a more relaxed environment.



Walking up and down Lukla feels so nice. Peering into shops, searching for mementos, T-shirts heralding our achievement and last but not least looking for local rum and coke to celebrate what we had done.





25th Nov

A good night's rest, in a really nice room, and we are up next morning refreshed and happy. We get ready, pack the big duffel one last time, and head for breakfast. I for one am looking forward to it as there is no trekking to be done after eating.

We have been told to wait while Nitish arranges for us to be put on a flight that will take us directly to Kathmandu. The alternative is going to Ramechaap and retracing back to Kathmandu over that long road trip and we are praying that Nitish pulls it off.

It is past 9 am when we get the call to walk across to the airport. Bekal, who we met on landing at Lukla is there to help us with the luggage.



We reach the airport and it is really crowded. We are told to wait in a corner until contacted. I get that call some 30 minutes later after which it is a mad rush to get our bags weighed (remember the 10kg limit) and checked in.

We are given boarding cards, with no names on it, and sent to the security line. The officers ask us to open all the bags to see if we are taking anything (like rocks) back and finally let us through.



Another half hour passes. Finally our flight is announced. Its a chartered transport run that we are going back in. One that offloads toilet rolls and other supplies while we wait on the tarmac.

The flight of course gives us a last look at these breathtaking mountains. Those with a window just watch silently.



At last some 40 minutes later we land in Kathmandu.



We find our bags outside in a separate holding area. We quickly make our exit, find our HiAce and head towards our hotel where Lata and Dina with Nitish are waiting for us. And Su, Vidhyu and Sanju who have come to welcome us back.



The Himalayan Roadies unite once again

And the story doesn't end here! The one who missed all the fun and was following our every move via the WhatsApp family group threw in a surprise by landing at Kathmandu almost the same time as we did to spend the next few days together.

Happy ending after all.



The Bandra Boys unite too (oops where's Diny)

Finally, I am so grateful for having some of my dearest friends, my son and my cousin take this journey with me and also thankful to our families that permitted this 'mad adventure of the (mostly) sixty plus' and who followed our every move via a (Lester's genius) Whatsapp group. And to all our other dear friends and well wishers. Last but not least the ones that made it happen, Tenzing, Milan, Bekal, the unnamed porters, Nitish and Akshay - a big Thank You.

I write this in the hope that it will always be a reminder that "nothing is impossible".

In the words of the inimitable Osho;



There is no tomorrow, neither is there any yesterday; one is no more and one is not yet. All that is there is the present moment, that is now

Credits & Thanks: To Josy for his rounds of feedback, to Nish for these beautiful pictures most of which are taken from his phone, Lester and Diny for a couple of their pics too, and to all of us for the memories a few of which I've put in.