

Part 2

On a wing and a prayer.

Nov 15 24: The 5 am alarm wakes us. We have to get ready to leave for the airport. Nish and I quickly get ready with Nish helping me with the re-packing. Its very cold and all we can do is brush our teeth, put on our clothes and lug our bags down. The others are already down and waiting. Excitement has replaced any lethargy.

We watch as a group of young men and women silently pass by on their way to the airport. I thought we were to do that too but there is a HiAce waiting for us.



All smiles and ready to start

The airport is a 5 minute drive which is oddly done in silence. Must be the strange surroundings I tell myself. It is not yet sunrise as, to an increasing noise level, we trudge into what looks like a couple of small buildings and find ourselves in the clamor of many others like us figuring out which of the six flights that morning would take us to Lukla.

It feels surreal - motley crowd of excited trekkers from different nationalities bunched together on a cold morning at a tiny rural airfield. Where did they all stay I wonder.





In order to reduce the excess baggage that some of us have, we put on all our jackets to reduce the bag weight. The weight is yet more than 10kg and we end up paying for excess, before collecting our boarding passes.

The simple fencing of this airport allows us to watch, as the first of the planes takes off from a short runway into and over the surrounding mountains.





We have to wait a bit and we just hang loose, walk around a bit, till it is time to check-in.



Not only is Lukla, where we are headed, the start point of our trek it is also said to be one of the most dangerous airports in the world. Excitement builds as the planes come in. Small 16-seater aircraft. Flown by extremely skilled pilots. Soon its our turn and we are herded into the cabin and before we know it, we are ready to set off.



- all except Nish who has had to take another flight due to some logistic goof-up and as we discover later, a couple of bags too had missed the flight. It worries us a bit but then this is Nepal as they say.

The aircraft is cramped. I am wearing 3 layers of jackets to reduce my check-in luggage. The aisle is narrow. Yet there is an air-hostess in all this melee and she offers each of us two lozenges and cotton, with a smile that seems to say "what am I doing here".

The flight is a short one. The plane squeezes itself up and away and then 15 minutes later while flying pretty close to a giant mountain, suddenly banks right and towards a mountain top laid with a very short and inclined 500 meter runway. No time to panic actually. It's all over in minutes. We have landed at Lukla - the gateway to EBC.



After de-boarding and coming out of the tiny airport I stop on the path, at a point overlooking the runway and I'm lucky to see a take-

off and landing all happening within the space of a few minutes. As the plane taking off banks left in front of this huge mountain, I spot the shape of another aircraft steeply banking the other way, mirror image like, coming in fast and low, towards this tiny, inclined, airstrip that I am standing over- a whole new respect for those who fly these machines.



Lukla is a quintessential trekking town of the Himalayas. Also the gateway to some of the most exciting treks in the world as well as the route to summiting the highest peaks.

The town is a small one. A long main street really. The airport and a hospital at one end and then shops, restaurants and tea houses the rest of the way. It's friendly too I'm sure, going by the doggies dozing in the morning sun.



We are taken into a restaurant for our breakfast and while we wait to eat, we are eager to get started. We also have to wait for Nish and the remaining bags. We then meet our assistant guide, Milan young 24 year old Sherpa who has stopped counting the number of times he has done EBC. And Bikal who is a porter who will walk with us and so in effect became another guide and companion.



In about an hour's time, we are finally ready to set out on our trek. We meet our porters who would be carrying our main luggage and reaching the tea houses much before us. After this they will just be ghosts till the end of our trip. It is amazing how they are going to carry 20 to 30 kg each on their backs, and climb these mountains so easily and reach much before when we would.

As we exit the teahouse and walk down the street we see the snow capped peak of Mt Nupla (5885mtrs) pointing to the sky straight ahead. It does not strike me then that we would be climbing to nearly those heights in ten days time.



The track is muddy with stones and roots of trees through fairly dense forests but the first day is quite simple as we walk from Lukla to a town called Phakding - a distance of under 8 km which we complete in about four hours.





Taking in the sights as we trek here for the first time. Clockwise: A trekkers lodge, a village street that we go through, buddies taking a short break, walk-walk-walk



We walk getting used to the surroundings, marveling at nature that has begun to show itself. We cross small towns. Pretty looking restaurants. There are steel rope bridges across the river that we cross. Engineering marvels if anything.

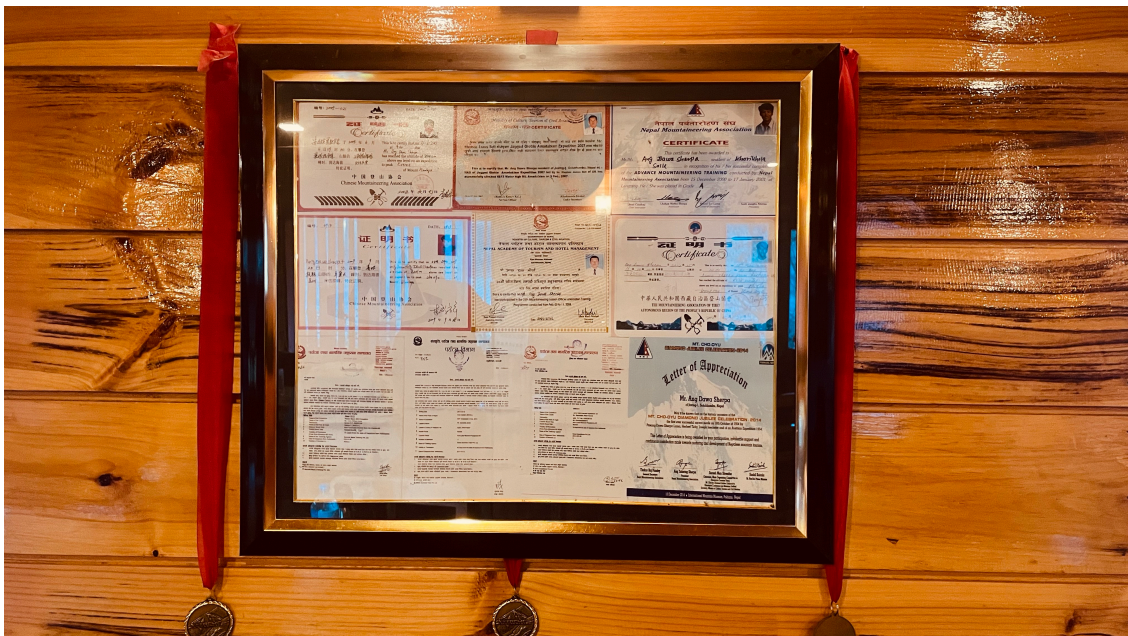
The Himalayas begin to unveil their beauty as we trek through the sparsely habited villages that dot the path.

The walk has been an up-and-down one, which is something we are told will be the way the entire trek would be. So the town of Phakding's elevation is 200 m lower than Lukla; there is an ascent of 160 m along the way and descent of 360+ meters resulting in the net 200 m drop. This is also a pattern we will see on most days.



Becoming
roadies one step
at a time

We reach our Tea House, the Sherpa Guide Lodge, where we are going to stay the night. It looks great. A wooden structure, warmed by a central fire where hot water is being boiled. The construction looks solid. It turns out the owner is a veteran Sherpa who among other achievements has also summited Everest. Yet is humble enough to serve the drinks at the table.



The food is wholesome. DBT is the recommendation and most of us eat that. It is cold but manageable with the two layers that I have on. Tenzing conducts his first briefing. Tells us that we did well and met his time goal. He informs us that we start trekking at 7 am tomorrow and have a long trek to Namche Bazaar. Breakfast at 6 am! Our reward for doing well 😊

We hang out a bit but tiredness, even probably an element of de-stress now that we have started, takes over and we trudge out of the warm dining hall into a cold corridor and to our rooms for the night.



N is tired as well. We just unpack what we need and get into bed. I remember the river and promptly fall asleep.

*I see skies of blue
And clouds of white
The bright blessed day
The dark sacred night
And I think to myself
What a wonderful world*
Louis Armstrong

the longest day

Nov 16th: I'm surprised how fresh I feel, even though we had walked for hours the previous day. It is only about 6:15 in the morning, but we are at the dining area for our breakfast. This is something that I would find hard getting used to. Even for my longest runs I would just have a slice of bread or two with peanut butter and then set off. Adaptation to all this is a key, I suppose.

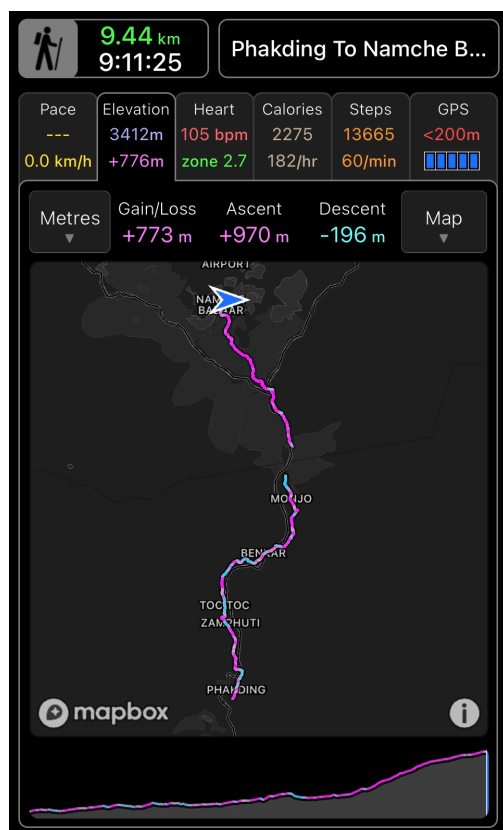
In the end, we leave about half an hour later than the scheduled time, something that Tenzing is not very happy about especially because it is going to be a long day of trekking. Welcome to IST - Indian stretchable time, I think.

Before we start off, we take a group picture, something that we make a ritual of every day after.



Bright-eyed and ready to go

It is quite a cold and crisp morning as we head out. We look at Tenzing and mask up just like him. He would know.



Hitting the trail I realize that this is going to be mostly uphill all the way. The company and the views make up for all that as we start the long trek.

Mountains and Peaks stacked up all around, dense forests in the lower heights, snow caps above, the Dudh sagar (Milky white river) flowing alongside and the pretty little villages with smiling kids waving us by.



The trail is through dense forested areas, high steps cut into the surface. The path is mostly up hills and down and then up again.

We are to go from 2600 mtrs to Namche at 3400 meters but there will be downhill sections so in reality we would be climbing about 1000 meters over a 9.5 kilometer stretch in some 9 hours.

We take several short stops and a couple of longer ones too. Most of us need it. Stop, breathe deeply and look around. The wondrous landscape feeds us with energy and we are back to climbing again.

We periodically encounter yak-trains and mule-trains coming down the other way or having to make way for those going up. We are taught to shout out or hear the call "Mountain side" as we move quickly to safety from these goods carriers and to avoid being innocently bumped off the mountain.



We stop to click memories but nothing compares to what is imprinted on the mind.



Entry into a more interior portion of Sagarmatha National Park

Its about 2 pm and we spot Hilary's bridge, the highest hanging steel rope bridge in this region at 410 feet above the river, 500 feet long.



You have to cross on it to get to Namche Bazaar. We see it from a distance and I marvel at the engineering that would have gone in to build it.



The steps to Hilary's bridge and the walk across

Having seen it from below, we now have to make the climb via a series of steps to reach the bridge. It is windy and as expected the bridge sways quite a bit as we walk to the other side. None of us have any vertigo issues and so actually enjoy our brief encounter with it and stop midpoint to admire the views around us and the river below.

Once over the other side it opens up into a dense forest with mud and stone path. Giant mountains are now visible both nearby and in the distance.



We continue to trek. It seems like a never-ending day. The climb is quite relentless.



The path is rough cut into the mountain, uneven and rocky at times. The roots of trees criss-crossing the path, the trees silent sentinels watching over us.



Watch the path or See the view



Several hours into the trek we take some well earned rest in nature's lap

Tenzing, sensing our tiredness, allows us to rest for a bit, which we happily do as it allows us to put some distance with a raucous family of trekkers who in fact are among the few Indians that we see on the trek. Soon its back to climbing again. Tenzing is worried about it getting dark as the sun sets early in these parts at this time of the year.

Nearly 9 hours of trekking. Finally we reach Namche, looking like from a fairy tale. Lights from buildings in a giant amphitheater-like setting feel strange, almost quixotic. Nothing had prepared me for



what I'm looking at. The entrance to the town is all lit up. Like a mini Las Vegas. There is a café at the center of it all.

Steps leading away from the café to the town with a channel of water gushing down, turning prayer wheels as it does so. A constant prayer. An even more surreal moment.



We rest our tired legs for a few minutes by the side realizing that we still have to climb through the town right up to the back where we would find our home for the night.

Some of us decide to wait for Diny & Lata. They finally show up. and we head to find our tea house.



This is what 'tired' looks like

In between our climb to the teahouse is a kind of market area with interesting shops and restaurants. I window shop in one and the lady takes one look at me and kindly says " go and get some rest and come back tomorrow'.



We finally reach our teahouse, a pretty large building for these parts. A flight of stairs (the final climb if you may) and we are in a large, warm dining area. Our rooms are in a separate stone building with a sign, saying 'earthquake proof', reminder of his highly earthquake prone region. Some hot 'pakodas' and Ginger Lemon Honey (GLH) tea as i sit on a lounge chair with my shoes off, bring me back to life.

Diny & Lata are thinking of taking a massage at the spa that is next door, It is so cold just going between the dining hall and the room that I pass on that thought.

Back later for dinner, the food is welcome, though I frankly don't remember what we ate. It must have been DBT.

Tenzing comes in for the briefing as we are finishing dinner. Once again, applauds our performance and that motivates us. He prepares us for another early start tomorrow.

We are going to go to the town of Khumjung, which is not too far away, and is similar elevation as Namche Bazaar. Says it will be much easier to do as compared to what we went through today.

After concluding that this had been one hell of a day, we decide to go to the rooms. Nish and I unpack and get into our night wear and tuck ourselves under the thick blanket to get away from the coldness of the room and soon we are asleep.