



On an overcast morning, the air in Kathmandu feels heavy with rain. The Himalayas, which on clear days loom over the valley like shimmering sentinels, are now obscured by dark clouds. Thunder echoes against distant foothills, and a bolt of lightning strikes close. Our guide clutches her prayer beads and shakes her head. "It's not a good day for flying," she says.

We had risen at dawn today in hopes of catching a flight to the tiny village of Lukla, at 9,275 feet the start of the winding trail to Mount Everest.

Even in good weather, it is a precarious flight through narrow valleys and gorges up a precipitous mountain staircase. With no ground control, pilots must fly by land vision, which means the only "good" day for flying is a perfectly clear day. In early spring, such days can be few and far between. Worse, only four of nine planes servicing Lukla are working.

I glance at my traveling companions — trekkers with Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts — and almost read their minds.

Last night had held such promise. It had been a soft, starry night; hopeful the clearing would hold, we'd hailed a cab for a celebratory last supper, clattering down into a brainlike maze where candles burned in hundreds of shantytown windows. As we approached the riverside burial ground, a blue flame flickered above a funeral pyre, illuminating a pair of charred feet. I covered my eyes and shuddered: We had stayed too long at the fair. After a week of dust, crowds, fumes and stench, we were all ready to trade the cacophony of Kathmandu for the tinkling of a distant waterfall.

(continued)

ON A WING A



ND A PRAYER

Nepal adventure travel by Carole Jacobs

Not that Kathmandu isn't worth a visit. At once modern and medieval, the bustling capital of Nepal is relentlessly fascinating. Like Alice going through the looking glass, I'd tumbled into a labyrinth lost in space and time where every turn delivers the unexpected.

Bells chime from hillside temples where monkeys roam; barefoot farmers carry huge baskets of cabbages to market on shoulder poles. In twisted alleyways crammed with shops one can buy, why, anything at all: lopsided yak wool mittens and sweaters, Buddha masks, embroidered knapsacks with peekaboo mirrors, Tibetan knives with huge curved blades, even Chiclets chewing gum. Icons grin and groan from ancient temples, children peer from darkened windows, and through a succession of open doorways I see two girls in silk saris sitting in a darkened courtyard, picking nits out of each others' hair. To those back home I write, "You can't imagine."

Down a dusty lane, the Mad Hatter's watch had stopped in the 1960s. It seems everyone sports blue jeans, sandals, a backpack; the Western women in long, flowing skirts in deference to Nepali custom. Narrow streets are jam-packed with bookstores, backpackers' shops and cafés with names disorienting in their familiarity, like Alice's Restaurant and Pumpernickle's, where trekkers pore over guidebooks and scribble furiously in their journals.

Now, for the third morning in a row, we rise to a gloomy dawn and head to the domestic airport.

Our OAT guide, Cynthia, who has lived in Nepal off and on for six years and speaks the language, corners an airport official in hopes of pulling some strings in the cat's cradle of Nepali bureaucracy. An hour later she comes rushing toward us, her long red braid flying. "Let's go! We're on! Hurry!"

We stare at her dumbly and follow her to the departure lounge, where we wait another hour before we're escorted to the runway and waved toward a small plane. As I crouch low to enter, I hear droning behind me: *Om mani padme bum!* ("Oh lotus-seated god of the celestial jewel!") Apparently, I'm not the only one who's nervous.

Norm, a lawyer/pilot from Los Angeles who spent a year in an aerobics class to train for the trek, takes a seat by the cockpit to keep watch; Cynthia collapses in her seat and draws out her prayer beads.

Doug, a philosophy professor, and his sidekick, Donna, a newspaper reporter, embrace. As we lift off, I look down on the airport and say a silent prayer. I'm glad we're on our way.

Meanwhile, in Lukla the Sherpa guides are waiting to take us into their homes and hearts. The Sherpas emigrated to this mountainous region from Tibet 400 years ago and still practice an ancient form of Buddhism. In the past century, famous mountaineers discovered in these gentle, fun-loving people a natural aptitude for guiding. For the next week they would lead us from one small village to the next and finally to the remains of the Thyangboche Monastery at 13,000 feet, perched on a panoramic ledge in the shadow of Mount Everest. We would stay in the guides' homes and learn firsthand about their way of life.

Out the left window of the plane, snowcapped peaks form a wall; to the right, the countryside rises in steplike terraces to hazy foothills blued by mist and distance. The plane turns right into a narrow gorge lined by a turbulent river, where cliffs and valleys intersect at unearthly angles. We follow it to a sheer ledge outcropping.

As the plane noses toward the ledge, my stomach flip-flops. It is the Lukla runway, a dirt strip barely longer than a football field that bulldozes through town like Main Street. The plane touches down with tentative wheels, wobbles along the runway, then shudders to a stop. As the pilot pries open the squeaky door, we leap out to freedom, blinding light and a landscape from Oz.

Emerald foothills soar above a storybook village of weather-beaten chalets. Puffy clouds play peekaboo with distant, snow-covered peaks and far below roars a river churning with glacial silt, racing through a gorge laced together with threadlike suspension footbridges.

Before we can pick up our luggage, our guides materialize—a ragtag band of hearty souls wearing secondhand clothing donated by trekkers and accompanied by yaks, each wearing a bell.

The guides hug Cynthia, an old friend, greet us shyly with the traditional Nepali *Namaste* ("The divine in me salutes the divine in you"), then hoist our 50-pound bags on their shoulders two and three at a time. They lash them to the yaks, along with a week's supply of food, tents, pots and pans, even a kitchen table. Then with a flick of a stick against the yaks' backs, we're off. Despite their bulk, the yaks

HOT TIP

Hygiene in the High Country

By Tom Simon with
Overseas Adventure Travel

Nepal is a Third World country, with Third World health problems. To make sure you don't take home more cultures than you bargained for, heed these hygiene tips.

■ **Boil all water, even locally bottled water, for 10 minutes, or purify water with iodine tablets. Keep your mouth shut when showering; brush teeth with boiled water; treat all wounds with boiled water.**

■ **Peel and wash all fruits and vegetables with skins before eating. Soak leafy vegetables in an iodine solution for at least 20 minutes, or boil them.**

■ **Wash your hands frequently, especially before eating. Make it a habit not to touch your face. Carry towelettes along with you.**

■ **Heat milk to the boiling point, and allow it to cool before drinking.**

■ **Wipe off all plates, utensils and cups in public eating places before eating from them.**

■ **Don't leave home without required inoculations, prescription drugs and a first aid kit (outlined in Overseas Adventure Travel's predeparture kit).**

■ **Never go barefoot in Nepal. The risk of infection, including hookworm, is great.**

step along lightly like cartoon ballerinas.

The trail we're on is the major thoroughfare from Lukla to all villages and peaks north, a human highway of load-bearing Sherpas. Small boys trudge past us with 8-foot beams strapped to their shoulders; young girls balance gigantic baskets on their heads; old women lug crates of produce.

About a half-mile down the trail, Newang, a Sherpa with an impressive command of English, comes up from behind and puts a gentle hand on my shoulder. "It is not good to walk so fast," he says. "The mountains will wait."

Trekking: The word conjures up visions of trudging up steep, rugged trails with 60-pound packs strapped to the back. But little of Nepal is wilderness, even though it houses the world's highest mountains and several national parks; in the fourth-poorest country in the world, every acre of arable land is farmed. The remaining forests are felled for firewood. The high country, full of moonscapes bald from deforestation, is used for hunting and grazing. We would hike from village to village with guardian angels who insisted we lay down our burdens (5-pound day packs) and partake of tea at every available tea shop. "At this rate," quipped Norm, still on L.A. time, "we'll get there in about three years."

The Sherpas live close to their gods. Around every bend is evidence of their

devotion: god statues; *stupa* shrines; boulders carved with religious symbols, called *mani*. Tattered prayer flags flutter from rooftops and from the swaying suspension bridges we gingerly cross.

After hiking an hour, we stop at a tea shop bearing a hand-lettered sign which lists the menu and the suggestion to "Find Your Self." Doug, our resident philosopher, muses over the phrase's meaning for a moment, still warming up. By the end of the week he'd be debating life, death, Jesus and George Bush, not necessarily in that order.

The Sherpas are warming up too. At the next tea shop, they tell us a story about the head of yeti, the sole remains of the legendary Abominable Snowman. In 1954, large, humanlike footsteps were seen in the snow near Mount Everest. Expeditions were made in search of the elusive beast but all that surfaced was a domelike scalp, which to this day resides in the Khumjung monastery, near the high point of our trek. Experts pronounced the scalp a fake, but the Sherpas said we should decide for ourselves. We would be able to do that if we were lucky and the monk was home in Khumjung.

As we hike up a hill to our first night's campsite, we're amazed to find the Sherpas have already erected a small tent city, including a toilet tent and dining tent. A fire blazes in the shack where they're cooking dinner; on seeing us approach, the guides carry out pans of hot water

and place one at each of our tents. "Hey!" says Norm. "Room service!"

By the time we finish cleaning up, dinner is ready, a four-course meal of soup, chicken-rice casserole, bread, several vegetable dishes, and pudding and tea for dessert. After dinner we roll into our tents and fall asleep to the sounds of the Sherpas singing as they wash dishes. Tomorrow we'll awaken to a tinkling bell and another pan of hot water by our tent.

Sophie, a Utah widow with two months' worth of Handi Wipes in tow, scolds me about drinking from dirty cups. Newang repeats his suggestion that I slow down. Do I listen? Nah!

Invigorated by the brisk mountain air and fueled by a hefty breakfast of oatmeal and pancakes, I scamper up the steep, 2,000-foot rise to the next village like a mountain goat and leave the guides and yaks in the dust. For an hour I'm on top of the world, with the views to prove it. By the time the rest of the group arrives in Namche Bazaar, I'm flat on my back with altitude sickness. So, apparently, is Norm, who becomes so weak en route to Namche he has to hike back down, and out of our lives.

A day later, I'm still flat on my back while my companions romp about the bustling cliff-side streets of Namche, an amphitheatre carved in a rugged hillside, soaring peaks forming a glistening backdrop. (Doug and Donna contracted altitude sickness but recovered enough in a

CONDITIONING TIP

High-Altitude Anxiety

By Tom Simon with Overseas Adventure Travel

Altitude sickness, or acute mountain sickness (AMS), can trip up the most intrepid trekker and leave her feeling as if she has been up all night drinking. Symptoms include nausea, mild shortness of breath, vomiting and diarrhea, weakness, sleep disturbance, and slight swelling of the hands and/or feet.

If symptoms worsen or progress to include extreme fatigue, disorientation, persistent vomiting and diarrhea, it's crucial to descend. Serious AMS can trigger cerebral and pulmonary edema, or collection of fluid in the brain or lungs as well as hallucinations, coma and even death.

AMS is caused by lack of oxygen. At 10,000 feet there's only half the oxygen as at sea level. Scientists have yet to discover why hypoxia, or oxygen deprivation, makes us sick. Some believe that changes in air pressure make cells swell as a result of accumulated sodium. There's no telling who will suffer; most flatlanders have some symptoms at 12,000 feet, and few escape without symptoms at 18,000 feet. Being in good shape does not offer added protection; in fact, it can be a detriment because you may have the stamina to walk faster than you should.

At high altitudes, help avoid AMS with these tips:

- Ascend gradually. As your body acclimates, it produces more red blood cells and your capillaries expand to accommodate reduced oxygen availability.
- Don't overexert yourself. Carry a light load and don't hike so fast that you're short of breath. Take frequent rest stops.
- Don't climb more than 1,000 feet a day above 12,000 feet.
- Drink plenty of water and make sure that your diet consists of foods that are high in carbohydrates and iron.
- Avoid salty foods and salt tablets, alcohol, caffeine and other dehydrating foods and beverages.
- The prescription drug Diamox is sometimes prescribed for AMS. Consult your physician.
- If symptoms worsen and include persistent vomiting and diarrhea, severe coughing, extreme fatigue, delirium, severe headache and loss of coordination, descend immediately and rest for a day or two before attempting to climb back.

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day or two to carry on as long as there was a bush nearby.)

They hike the town's steep trails to a museum and monastery, and bargain in the open-air bazaar. Sophie gets a private viewing of the Namche yeti head which, to distinguish from the "real" thing coming up in the next village, Donna dubs the "son of yeti head."

When another day passes and it becomes clear that I'm not going to recover without going down to acclimate before coming back up slowly, the group and I part company—temporarily, we hope.

As they ascend to Thyangboche Monastery at 13,000 feet, with views of Mount Everest and her sister peaks towering 21,000 to 29,028 feet, my hiking buddy Newang and I descend 3,000 feet to a small village. This time he doesn't have to tell me to slow down; I'm so weak I nearly crawl. Normally bilingually loquacious, Newang is silent as a monk. I think he's praying for me.

I feel better as morning dawns, so we idle back up to the Khumbu Lodge in Namche, a popular hikers' hangout with hot showers, a restaurant and panoramic views. Here I sleep in the same suite as former president Jimmy Carter. His mountain vigor is legendary; rumor has it his Secret Service escorts fell like flies.

After another day's rest, Newang and I climb up to Khumjung on back trails to the four-star Mount Everest View Hotel; at 13,000 feet, it is the highest hotel in the

world, with its own airstrip and direct 45-minute flights from Kathmandu. Every room has a private view of the mountain, which is a good thing.

Because it is nearly impossible to acclimatize to such a high altitude within the space of a 45-minute flight, many guests spend most of their time in bed recovering from altitude sickness.

Newang pores over the fancy menu, written in English-as-the-Japanese-speak-it, learning a few new words along the way. We order tea and drink it quickly, not wanting to stay too long: At \$120 a night, it's a pricey place for a relapse.

As we hike down a snowy back trail to Khumjung, the group spots us and cheers us on. It's good to see them again; in 10 days we have come to know and count on each other. Tomorrow we will begin what should be a less eventful descent. But not before making one last stop.

The monk just happens to be home at the Khumjung monastery. With great flourish, he brings out a box, unlocks it and withdraws what looks to be a coconut with rock musician's hair. He holds it up briefly before hurrying it back into its box. Then he demands an exorbitant fee.

"Oh, come on," says Doug, digging into his pocket. "You don't really believe that's the head of yeti now, do you?" The monk starts, as if he has been slapped. Donna mutters something under her breath: "That's a bunch of bunk."

"Bunk . . . what does that mean,

bunk?" Newang asks as we walk back to the lodge to pack up. When Donna explains, he explodes with laughter, as if it's the funniest thing he's ever heard.

Safely back in Lukla two nights later, we sit around the farewell dinner table discussing the Sherpas. They are the most polite, good natured and even-tempered people we've ever met. If we had come between them and their gods, they had never let on.

They are so much more civilized than we are that we fear our stumblings, grumblings and wisecracks have offended them. When we ask if this is so, they smile and say of course not, although we frequently surprised them. "In a good way?" I ask hopefully.

They gaze at us for a long moment, apparently searching for a polite way to explain. Another minute passes; they are obviously thinking very hard. Then Newang breaks the ice. "We learned many surprising things from you," he says, laughing. "But the best was 'bunk'!"

For me, the lesson to learn from Nepal is a lesson for life: Don't walk so fast. The mountains will wait.

Rx FOR ACTION

For more information on adventures in Nepal, including 1992 prices and departure dates, contact Overseas Adventure Travel, 349 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02139; (800) 221-0814. Cost, approximately \$1,900, includes predeparture information; American guides plus English-speaking local guides; Lukla roundtrip flights, all meals on treks; hotels, breakfast and three dinners in Kathmandu; complete trekking services, permits and airport transfers if traveling with a group.

Read *Nepal—A Travel Survival Kit* (Oakland, California: Lonely Planet Publications, 1990). To order this book, call (800) 229-0122; in Canada, Alaska and Hawaii, (510) 893-8555.

Getting there: KLM offers daily non-stop service to Amsterdam from several major U.S. cities and continuing service to New Delhi, India. From there you can hop a flight on a local airline to Kathmandu. With an unblemished safety record, KLM has won "Best Passenger Service" and "Airline of the Year" awards. Call (800) 777-5553, or let OAT make your flight arrangements.

En route: Overnight at the New Delhi Hyatt, which has a health club, pools, gardens, restaurants, night clubs and a shopping mall on premises. Call (800) 233-1234 for more information. ■