

OVERSEES MEET

MEERA PEAK TREK AND CLIMB, NEPAL 4TH TO 29TH OCTOBER

Participants:

Stephen Allison (prospective member)
John Brown
Peter Chadwick, Ann Chadwick (Guest)
Edmund Chadwick (guest)
Rupert Goodway (guest)
David Hick
Richard Taylor
Aaron Oakes
Michael Smith, Helen Smith (Guest)

Supported by:

Chewang Motup (Member)
Sherpas -
Pema, Ridar, Phurtemba, Phurteman Rai and Uttar
Cook team - Niri, Karma, Tsedup, Ramesh Rai, Ramesh
Tamang, Akash Rai, Ram Kumar, Jai Kumar, Bibi Rai
Porters: at one time or another some 33 porters were either
with us each day or bringing in supplies to meet us.



The team taking breakfast at base camp

Cost: US\$2,230 (£1,400) per person plus flights from the UK to Kathmandu (from £600) and tips (\$200)

Summary: An 18-day trek in total starting with a long acclimatisation walk in from Lukla over the Panggom La to the Hinku valley and up to the Mera La glacier. From a higher camp, 8 ascended to the central summit, 6 going on to the North summit at 6476m. A 3-day return trek was made down towards and over the Zatrwa La to Lukla.

Glossary:

Chorten – dome-shaped monument to a distinguished Buddhist, often a lama
Dingma – clearing
Durbar – palace or castle

Gompa – monastery or hermitage
Kharka – yak grazing area or meadow
Khola – river
La – pass or col
Mani wall – wall of stones with inscribed prayers which Buddhist pass on the left
Stupa – a heap-like structure possibly holding a relic and a focus for Buddhist prayer and pilgrimage.

The Plan

The genesis of this trip was straightforward. A long-held ambition to visit Nepal had been thwarted by the need to work during school terms – then retirement arrived. The choice of a route with a worthwhile trekking objective was left to the Club's Himalayan member, Chewang Motup of Rimo Expeditions. Of his suggestions Mera Peak sounded the most challenging and, following the 2011 Annual Dinner, gained increasing support. Indeed, at one point the numbers looked as if they would need to be capped at 15 but after a couple of health problems by mid-September just a dozen were signed up to go.

The objective, Mera Peak, is designated a 'trekking peak' by the Nepalese government. For many years the climb was graded Alpine Facile but due to depletion of snow cover near summit the final 30-40 metres is now graded Peu Difficile and requires a jumar in ascent and a short abseil in descent. On a clear day, from the upper reaches of Mera there is a panorama including among many others, five of the world's six highest mountains: Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and Kanchenjunga.

The trek to and from the climb is strenuous and often on narrow rocky trails steeply ascending and descending to give every opportunity to acclimatise.

The party was mixed in a number of ways. Experienced climbers in the greater ranges such as David and Michael were joined by those who had not walked on a glacier; Ann, Steve and Rupert. Only John, Richard, David and Aaron had visited Kathmandu before; John having passed through Lukla on the way to Everest base camp. Ages ranged from 24 to 66 and for some it was their first trek.

September saw steadily increasing email and telephone traffic between us discussing kit, how essential each item was and how it might be fitted into available kitbags. Down gear purchases must have helped boost China's economy and supported the UK gear market. Larger kitbags were purchased. Then we each made our various ways to Kathmandu – well most did.

Assembly in Kathmandu

Kathmandu arrivals hall presents a challenge for the tired traveller. Finding an arrivals declaration form, securing somewhere to fill it in and selecting the right queue to get a visa feel like trials but pale into insignificance against the patience you need once you are in the queue with its jostling for positional advantage and organised groups seemingly

circumventing part of the crocodile and the animosity this generates. An hour or so though and one is through to collect baggage (matching numbered stubs required) and so to exit to confront the wall of porters, operators and drivers all insisting on helping you. Then across the road one spots Sherpa Ridar calmly holding a white Rimo sign and order is immediately restored as you are ushered to a waiting taxi.

For first-time visitors Kathmandu traffic appears chaotic with lorries, taxis, cars, bikes, mopeds and pedestrians weaving around each other, raised manhole covers and sacred cows showing little regard the correct side-of-the-road let alone lanes. However, it all works smoothly enough and appeared to be based on two principles: watch the space in front and if it is clear then go for it quickly before anyone else tries to; and, if there is someone else to left or right who might inadvertently or consciously move into that space then beep at them to signal your presence and intention. Abiding by those rules our taxi driver would approach a dual-carriageway up a ramp, cross the thankfully yielding oncoming-traffic and pass through a gap in the barrier at the next junction to join traffic flowing the 'right' way.

The ring road was surfaced as was the Kingsway to the ex-palace in the city centre. Some other roads had kerbs under construction but many were steep rutted beaten-earth roads suffering badly from the ravages of the wet season. Full taxis frequently struck their sumps on the road or had to pass through large puddles of muddy water. Practically every vertebrae-jarring journey involved these unsurfaced roads and taxi drivers seemed to prefer them to waiting in long queues to cross oncoming traffic on the better roads.

We gradually met up at the Hotel Tibet International which is on a ridge adjacent to the airport's ridge and close to one of the world's largest stupas at Boudhanath and a 20 minute taxi ride from the city centre. The hotel's top floor breakfast bar gave good views of the city, the stupa and on clear mornings the Himalayas. We ate in their restaurant with live local music on a zither-like instrument struck by hammers, or in the various restaurants and roof-top cafes round the stupa.

Excursions were made to the Swayambunath monkey temple, cultural Durbar Square with its old royal palace, ex-hippy Freak Street and touristic Thamel by those who had arrived early. An attempt to visit Gompas around the nearby stupa took us to various shops, past gardens and scuttering chipmunks but no Gompas so a retreat was made to a roof-top café for a breeze, beers and buffalo momos.

As we prepared to fly out to Lukla we were still missing Richard Dover who had neither visa for India nor a flight from Delhi to Kathmandu. Understandably, he was not leaving the UK unless these were secured. For the rest of us the Lukla flight was a frequent topic of conversation.

Firstly, the Lukla approach and landing was notoriously tricky involving a mountain ledge and an uphill (decelerating) runway. Secondly, the monsoon season had dragged on longer than normal and the rains had created a backlog of flights and passengers. Thirdly, the previous week a Lukla flight had crashed soon after take-off with loss of all crew and passengers following a bird-strike and an unfortunate attempt to turn back to the airport resulting in a stall.

A 5am breakfast for an early start, a wait in the check-in area, a baggage search, a long wait on the tarmac, a 35-minute ridge-skimming flight with grand views of Dorje Lapka (YRC objective in 1995) and other white peaks along the Himalayan chain and we were landing at Lukla, decelerating madly before reaching the mountainside and the swing right to the arrivals area. Twin engines still running, we were decanted relieved and filed off round the tail in the direction pointed out by a whistle-blowing policeman and passing the next batch of returning trekkers on their way aboard. Within a few minutes that plane was again airborne.

A nerve-steadying drink of tea in the garden of the Lukla Numbur Lodge and a lot of weight-assessing lifting of our kitbags then loads were packed and we were off on the trek.

The Walk-In Day 1, October 7th, Lukla 2,800m to Puyan 2,800m

Starting by 11am down by the side of the runway and off left and out of Kathmandu we find the path gives an easy start to the trek along the trade route out to the roadhead at Jiri – the route along which some of our camping equipment had arrived due to lack of cargo capacity arising from the cancelled flights. Dipping towards a stream crossing we are faced by a long string of ponies carrying loads of sugar to Namche Bazaar and have to step off the path to avoid being wiped out by these juggernauts. A couple of local porters carry sheets of slate about half a square metre in size while another has eight planks of wood each three metres long across his shoulders. By a stream soon after this, one of our two cook teams was waiting in a lodge garden with our picnic lunch. The daytime temperature is around 20°C.

Three hours southwards uphill across forested hillsides and we are at Puyan for our afternoon tea and overnight camp. To the relief of everyone, the last of our kitbags, having come out on a later plane, soon caught up with us. We are sharing two to a geodesic design Mountain Hardware tent and these perform well even at the high camps. The staff clean, wash and thoroughly dry the tents after each trip and store them in Lukla ready for the next party.

We all eat well that evening in a tea-house building: tomato soup with popadoms, buffalo momos with cauliflower and potato curry, salad and rice then pineapple slices and a choice of tea, coffee or hot chocolate. This is typical of the meals sometimes which included chips, boiled potatoes,

sausage, naan, chipatis, dal, mutton or pizza. David, Aaron and Peter had all been going strongly. Only John lacked an appetite.

Lukla is a modest-sized village and Puyan is much smaller but they are the largest places we will trek through. Motup briefs us on the trek routine and a card school is formed.

Day 2 Puyan (2,800m) to Pangkongma (2,850m)

A yellow-billed blue-tailed magpie flies into nearby trees as we are packing up our bags before breakfast.

Soon after starting out this morning, around 9am, we leave the main trade route south to Phaplu and Jiri to climb eastwards on a quieter, narrower trail winding steadily upwards, over a col on the Tham Danda, down to a tea-house lunch by which time Ann's knee is painful. On a steep slope David misses his footing and crashes off the path descending some metres. Thankfully he is uninjured. Later, the path leads down to a stream near which David drops his camera which is found after much beating about the bush – literally. Then we climb up through lush farmland to the small trading centre of Pangkongma. A day of light showers becoming more continuous later then drying out overnight.

Day 3 Pangkongma (2,850m) to Nashing Dingma (2600m)

The day starts with a stiff climb through lush bamboo and rhododendron forest. The latter being Nepal's national flower. Passing many mani walls we go over the Pangkongma La (3,174m) it is too cloudy to see the hoped for south faces of Mera and Naulekh. Modelling balloons brought from the UK to amuse children prove too difficult for we trekkers to inflate but passed to the Sherpas they give hours of amusement and worryingly purple faces as they warm and stretch them but with no greater success. We descend steeply a long way to the Hinku Khola accompanied by children on their way to school. After a lunch stop overlooking the river we cross by a swaying suspension bridge. The afternoon is a 2½ hour climb up the eastside of the valley to Nashing Dingma and our camp in the clouds by a simple Gompa.



Suspension bridge over the Hinku Khola (MS)



Trekking up to Nashing Dingma (MS)

In the damp conditions, with the monsoons lasting a little longer than usual, leeches abound. Several are on the tent overnight. Soon after turning in a fracas breaks out nearby among some porters with the alcohol-fuelled shouting and scuffling lasting several minutes.

Day 4, Nashing Dingma (2600m) to Chalem Kharka (3600m)

Phurtemba serves breakfast wearing dark glasses and a neckerchief across his face. A non-drinker, he had stepped in last night to try and sort out the fight only to end up with a black eye, bleeding brow and broken nose.

The trail becomes increasingly steep as we walk up to the Surke La, a pass that gives us a taste of the altitude yet to come. We need a cup of tea to catch our breath in the teahouse just over the pass. Then we continue on upwards along a tree-covered ridge to camp at the summer grazing land of Chalem Kharka. The villages are getting smaller and most buildings are single storey with no chimney and the smoke eventually drifting out of the gables or eaves. The daytime temperature has fallen to 10°C and it is drier.

At the evening meal John finds a leech on his leg and deduces that it probably came up to this site on his tent. He flicks it to the ground. Over the next hour it finds its way onto Michael's leg feeds, burrows back through his sock and then drops off.

Day 5, Chalem Kharka (3600m) to Chunbu Kharka (4200m)

One of our favourite breakfasts today: rice pudding with coconut flakes and raisins. The other favourite is porridge. Aaron has a stomach upset which is not responding to antibiotics so can't enjoy his food. He is put on a plain diet. On the other side, Ann is gaining resilience and is even carrying her sack downhill.

Today is a short sharp day taking us well above the tree line. First steeply up a corrie and then across a series of linked cols around 4400m. There are many gentians and edelweiss among the otherwise largely dry vegetation. The descent to a hanging valley is past a number of lakes sacred to Hindus, Panch Pokhari. Their shores have tridents sticking out of the ground or cairns.

There is an isolated house but otherwise this is a deserted area. An 11-year-old orphan, Suresh, is staying with relatives here. His mother died and his father is a miner in India. He has a ready smile and lively eyes.



A waterfall decorates the corrie back but the steep corrie sides block out the sun from about 4pm and the temperature fall to about -6°C overnight.

Day 6, Rest day at Chumbu Kharka (4200m)

Clear blue skies clouding up in the afternoon when there is a hail storm.

We take an acclimatisation stroll up past the waterfall to a higher corrie with a lake, 4536m. See elsewhere in this issue the description of the scattering of Howard Humphreys ashes by this lake. On our return there is an impromptu game of baseball/cricket with Suresh joining in. Aaron strikes the ball so well and hard that both bat and ball are destroyed. John enjoys a more relaxing day as he continues to find the going difficult which is odd as he is the only member of the party to have trekked in this area. Those unfamiliar with moving wearing crampons strap up and tramp across the grass and up and down a nearby slope to the amusement of the others.

More hail and snow overnight and frosting inside the inner tent.

Day 7, Chumbu Kharka (4200m) to Kote (3673m)

We are breakfasted before the sun strikes the camp at 8.15am then heading off up a ramp to a ridge, 4400m, with views down the Changdu Khola. The next hour or so was a grand traverse along a recently repaired path high above the Hinku valley amidst gathering cloud. From a grassy perch we descend in zig-zags through the Mojang Forest. Descending further across the hillside we cross the Majang Khola and our porters heating up a brown millet flour and pea mix over a smoky fire.

We were expecting lunch hereabouts but our cooks have found a better spot much further along by the Hinku Khola, close to Tashing Ongma and our day's destination, Kote or Kothe/Mosom Kharka as it is labelled on some maps. To keep us replenished two walk back towards us a couple of kilometres carrying our metal mugs and an enormous kettle of refreshing lemon drink. This section of the trail has moss-covered trees, tree-roots across the path and the occasional scramble down cliffs.

Lunch today is popcorn, beans, salad, carrot bread and chips with juice and tea.

A short note here about the forest we had been walking through. We dropped from above the tree line through scrub consisting of juniper (*Juniperus recurva*) with potentilla and berberis, all can be seen in our gardens and tree collections at home. As we descended we came into the more recognisable Himalayan Rhododendron forest with scattered and fairly large Himalayan fir (*Abies spectabilis*).

The understory consisted of Rose, Rowans and maples probably Cappadocian Maple (*Acer cappadocicum*). While walking we had seen little evidence of forest intervention except around some of the lodges where trees had obviously been thinned. There was really noticeable regeneration along the river valley and the paths. In one area shredding had been carried out. This is removing the branches from the side of the standing tree to be used as fodder and firewood, allowing shoots to grow back without being grazed off by the goats kept in the area. This was a medieval practice in our country and was carried out in some of the larger deer parks.

The remaining 45 minutes to Kote are by the widened riverbed gouged out in 1998 when a glacial lake, the Sabai Tsho, burst through its moraine dam. Clouds roll in and light rain starts by 2pm as we are exploring this larger village's small shops, butchers' slabs and carpenter's workshop. Young males bet on games of carrom in which discs slide across square tables lightly dusted with something like fine semolina.

That night we eat in a stove-heated room. Around the corner a hot shower is advertised. It is a stone-mosaic floored sentry box with a bucket for the hot water and a plastic jug. We stick to the bowls of hot water delivered each morning to our tents.

Day 8, Kote (3673m) to Tangnag (4300m)

Off by 8.30am and still in the shade of this high-sided valley. A day with views of snow-plastered peaks (Kayasar and a spur of Mera) as we head up the Hinku valley. Features appear ahead and take a long time to reach though we are moving steadily. The white-waters of the Hinku Khola are on our right.

We have a longer lunch stop picnicking in an open area but move on as cloud encroaches and we cool down in the cold wind. The temperature falls to 14°C.

The camp is at a small village which was the only one in the valley in 1991 when Motup first visited this area with a FRCC group. The small deserted shrine up the hillside then now has a few buildings, a resident lama and a steady 'trade' in blessing passing trekking parties. The shrine is now enclosed, is elaborately painted and has a stuffed eagle on the wall. Our blessing is accompanied by singing and dextrous simultaneous drum beating and bell ringing.

The evening game of film-title charades lasts until 8.30pm and amuses our Sherpas. The central stove is a hazard for the more energetic players. A foot 'pawing' the ground to indicate a bull and the first syllable of Bullet, being confused with the Thirty-Nine Steps causes general hilarity.

Cloud cover maintains the temperature and it falls to just below freezing.

Day 9, Tangnag (4300m) to Dig Kharka (4650m)

This is the first of two short days to get to base camp. We are again off in the shade by 8.30am and cross moraines and meltwater stream to a deserted grazing area - 2½ hours. On the way a short diversion left of the main valley gives a view over the Sabai Tsho lake which is now being monitored against another burst. The water level is obviously much lower.

After lunch in the mess tent we laze about in the sunshine then take another walk up to a high point to help acclimatise. This was our best campsite as it was in the wild away from settlements. There are good views of Mera's north flank until the clouds roll in. There are impressive serac collapses causing avalanches.

Day 10, Dig Kharka (4650m) to Khare base camp (4900m)

A 1½ hour walk starting later, 9.30am, having only breakfasted once the sun has reached our camp. If we thought we were chilly then our porters rising from their beds under a large overhanging boulder were sure to have been less comfortable. Three of our porters are women and this is the first time we have come across this.

Khare is a busy spot with several terraces covered with various groups' tents. Groups practice jumaring on a nearby slope. We hear that the first group of the season has made it through the soft snows to the central summit. After lunch we take another acclimatisation walk up the spine of a moraine to some prayer flags, perhaps 5200m. We are all moving steadily but slowly except John who has decided not to camp higher than this – he has no appetite and had felt for several days that he was not acclimatising well. Michael has a bad cold.

Our return to camp is accompanied by the arrival of noisy snowcocks clucking and calling. A small rodent is also spotted near the tents.



MS

Day 11, Rest day at Khare base camp (4900m)

The morning's acclimatisation walk is up a moraine on the other side of the camp up to and across a boulder field and to the snout of the Mera Glacier at 5200m. It is the same route we will take to the mountain and everyone is feeling pretty whacked.

The afternoon is a flurry of putting on, taking off adjusting and refitting kit as we have an equipment check. We are intending to have three to a tent at the next camp so this and the difficulties in portering result in a good deal of repacking and discarding of non-essential items. Helen, Ann and John are intending to stay at Khare for the few days we others are higher.

The Climb: Day 12, Khare (4900m) to Mera La advanced base camp (5350m)

For many this is the first day in heavy mountain boots. Despite this we cover the same ground as yesterday much faster. The scramble over ice and rock debris to gain the glacier is scrappy with danger in places of dislodging rocks on those below. Goodness knows how the porters manage with their loads and trainers or sandals. Once on the flattish glacier towards the Mera La we are moving parallel to the crevasses and there are several narrow snow bridges worn smooth and slippery by the passage of many feet



Crossing the glacier shelf on snow bridges (MS)

At the broad Mera La, 5425m, we see the rock tower of the next camp, called high camp, ahead but turn left and descend to a sheltered desolate rocky area to camp. Our porters had arrived here the day before to secure good spots for our tents. The edge of the glacier is the view to the right and to the left are a line of high Himalayan peaks. Food is served at our tents and we are all in our sleeping bags soon after lunch.

Late in the day two Hong Kong Chinese return from Mera staggering and dropping items of gear. They were going slowly and had not been turned back by their Sherpa. They had intended an ascent of Island Peak next but this now looked unlikely. Their cook and gear had long since descended north from the Mera La. On average we count two helicopter evacuations from this route each day.

After an evening meal about 5pm we start a long 'sleep' as we intend leaving tomorrow's start until after the sun strikes the tents. Thank goodness for pee bottles.

Day 13, Mera La ABC (5350m) to the high camp (5780m)

We rope up to practice moving together for the short distance across a straightforward glacier bowl up to high camp. Motup leads the first rope, Michael the second.

Camp sites here are cramped. Our team have secured the best sites on narrow rock terraces sheltered from the wind by the rock tower. Others struggle to hold on to noisily flapping tents or pitch on the glacier. We are in the tents and settled to sleep around 6pm as the last of the light gave Sikkim's Kanchenjunga a rosy glow. We have a short night's sleep ahead.



High camp (MS)



High camp cook tent (DH)

Day 14, High camp (5780m) to Mera summit (6461m) to Khare

Tea is delivered to the tent at 1.30am and we are well kitted up and off by headlamps before 3am. I can't imagine how many flocks of eider were harvested to fill all our down gear. Perhaps most impressive were Steve's gloves supplied by Peter Elliott's PHD - almost the size of boxing gloves. Undoubtedly the oldest were David's and Michael's 1988 jackets which had seen many a trip.

The steady trudge weaving right then left round crevasses was relieved by the odd stop for an adjustment or two and bursts of (OK, slight increases in) speed as we overtook another rope. The route steepened and those ahead stopped as a long crevasse with a collapsed snow bridge barred the way. Motup traversed right until the lips were less than a metre apart and leapt up over the gap. We followed protected by Motup's rope.



The bergshrund at first light (RT)

Soon after this Michael's cold-impaired breathing gets the better of him and Penma ties on at the front of that rope. Peter is also suffering from the same cold making breathing difficult. In the early light, another steepening and then the route levels out towards a shallow col on the broad summit ridge. Looking back we have clear views from Cho Oyu past Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse and Makalu right across to Kanchenjunga.

The main summit is a few hundred metres ahead atop a steepening which has a gully on the right. David, Richard, Aaron, Steve, Ed and Rupert follow Penma's steep lead jumaring up his rope to reach the top. The descent is complicated by a slight overhang for those less experienced in abseiling.



Heading up the summit slopes to the gully

Meanwhile, Peter and Michael turn left with Ridah to the more rounded central summit before descending directly down the ascent route to high camp. The glacier's snow surface was softening but the jump over the crevasse was straightforward.

By noon all were safely gathered back at high camp for drinks and a light lunch before heading unroped over the Mera La back between the crevasses of the flat section to the glacier snout. Peering over the edge we spot Ann and Helen on the rocks below. They had been up that morning with Puttemar Rai onto the glacier and some distance above the Mera La towards high camp. After an untidy scramble down we join them in celebratory mood for a drink and a bite to eat then descend the moraine together. John has remained in Khare suffering from mountain lassitude.

Late afternoon we are all back at Khare base camp after a long but rewarding day. The ascents were firsts of their kind for many of the party and all who went up felt they had done as much as they wanted to.

The Walk-Out: Day 15 Khare (4900m) to Kote (3673m)

The walk out is often a peculiar time as the excitement is generally over, people may be getting tired and the ground is probably familiar. This was true to an extent this first day of the return journey but not the remaining two. Those were to be over the high Zatrwa La to the east of the Hinku Valley and the quickest way back to Lukla.

After the previous day's exertions we sleep well and make our "7 8 9" deadlines: 7am tent tea, washed and packed for an 8am breakfast, 9am off on the trek. The descent of the valley stuck closer to the Hinku Khola than on our ascent and passed a number of enormous boulders.

Lunch was al fresco at tables on a terrace below a solar heater. Richard disappeared to bargain for some locally-made woollen hats.

John was in poor condition with a stomach upset to add to his troubles and was wobbly on his feet. We were concerned for his ability to cope with the next two days ascent. By 4pm we are back in the busier village of Kote. The celebratory evening meal includes chicken and, courtesy of Motup, Scotch whisky. By the time we turn in the temperature is about 5°C.

Day 16, Kote (3673m) to Thuli Kharka (4230m)

There is an abrupt start to the day as we are still in our tents in the middle of packing our bags before breakfast. The cry goes out that a helicopter is on the way and the tents must come down as we are near its landing area. Tents are quickly emptied, dismantled and packed and soon the red helicopter sets down to the alarm of a grazing white horse. One door opens and while beckoning the limping evacuee packs of beer are thrown out.

The unfortunate trekker is soon strapped in and the helicopter is away - another rescue on the insurance bill.

Initially following the river down a series of cliffs forces us to make minor ascents and scrambles down until we reach Tashing Ongma before turning directly and steeply uphill towards the Zatrwa La. The path is through Himalayan firs then rhododendron forest and our porters take frequent breaks. There are German and Quebecois parties on the same trail and our lunch spot, Tashing Dingma, is busy. Perched on a viewing platform by a hut next to a large boulder we catch a strong cold wind. The afternoon has another steep ascent then a short traverse into a corrie with a few buildings and a painted rock, Thuli Kharka.

We eat in at the top of the hamlet in a building with a stove tended by a lady determined to feed it with logs longer than the stove itself. After a round or two of inferior quality Royal Stag whisky, Richard, Steve, Aaron, Rupert and Ed find a bar lower down and take their custom there. Both in our mess hut and the bar there are people trying to sleep but they do not appear to mind our staying as while we are there the stove is being kept alight and the room warm.

Day 17, Thuli Kharka (4230m) over the Zatrwa La (4610m) to Lukla (2840m)

A cold start and breakfast is delayed until after 7am when the sunlight reaches the al fresco breakfast table. Today it is porridge followed by fried eggs on pancakes.

We head directly up the steep corrie back to cross the first of three ridges or cols which form the Zatrwa La. From the last two of these we have good views to the west of snow covered peaks. John is moving steadily and in much better condition than yesterday. The descent is steep, sometimes with a poor footing and relentlessly down. We pass a high house whose water supply is hundreds of metres away across a rocky traverse then continue down below the tree line crossing streambeds to a hamlet by fields and a Chorten.

During our picnic lunch we are entertained by Thar, wild hairy mountain goats, whistling and grazing on the slope above. Grazing on crisps, biscuits and cola just below us are the younger Canadian party. We preferred the look of our pakoras, fish, salad and beans.

Another couple of hours' descent traversing wooded hillsides, ridges and streams brings us to a Gompa on the outskirts of Lukla. By 4pm we are back at the Lukla Numbur Hotel where we have a primitive but welcome hot shower. Afterwards we gather in the bar for a beer and tips are collected for the support staff. We settle on \$200 each, 10% of the trek cost, which Motup considers generous though this is only about £10 per day each to be spread across the guiding, cook and portering teams.

Beers at the hotel cost 500 rupees and are supplemented by Motup producing a bottle of Johnny Walker.

Back in Lukla then Kathmandu

Not having any mishaps or bad weather we had no needed to use the spare day built into the schedule. So we had a spare day in Lukla. There is not a lot to do in Lukla: it has

one main street and even walking round slowly, going down to the local market and watching people ride hired bicycles on the football pitch (the only flat ground around apart from the airstrip), it is difficult to make it last much more than an hour. Some managed a little shopping, two found a pool hall, five persuaded a flea-pit cinema to show a 30-year-old National Geographic video of Edmund Hillary's work in the area and Ann persuaded a yak-herder to sell her a particular yak bell and strap from one of his herd.

The hotel's bar and sitting room overlooked the airstrip and was decorated in the strong Nepalese colours with assorted expedition tee-shirts pinned to the ceiling. This is where we ate. The cooking facilities at the hotel were probably less than convenient for our cooks as the evening meal was delayed. The desert was a cake decorated with the three summits of Mera. After eating we presented each cook and guiding team member with their tips and thanked them all for such a well-supported trek. Then the dancing commenced. To an eclectic mix of tracks our enthusiasm exceeded our finesse and we soon cleared the floor of any other patrons.

An early start, queues for check-in, security hand-search of kitbags, segregated male and female channels for body searches and a wait in the departure 'lounge' then we were flying back to Kathmandu. The next day or so before everyone left, there were shopping trips, a day's visit to the well preserved medieval town of Bhaktapur, and a grand meal out at the Ghar-e-kabab Indian restaurant in the prestigious Annapurna Hotel on Kingsway. *En route* to the last one of our taxis lost track of the others leading it and was heading out towards Lhasa until David persuaded him to return to the hotel and get new instructions.

Back in the UK everyone took stock. Most had lost some weight, one a couple of inches from their waistline. A week was long enough to shake of the fatigue from a month's strenuous trekking. It took a month or so for the minor frost-nip to work its way out.

Once again the Club is indebted to Motup and Rimo Expeditions for another successful Himalayan expedition. Having Motup along was a great advantage to us in appreciating the terrain and cultures we were seeing. Our memories of the varied experiences on this trip will remain with us long after the sensation has returned to our frost-nipped fingers and toes.

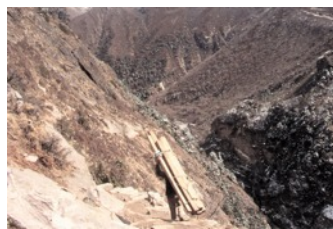
Michael Smith

Editors Note

I read this piece with great interest and some jealousy given that I could not join them. I should not complain as I was celebrating my 40th wedding anniversary in New Zealand.

To support Michael's piece these are a couple of pictures from my earlier trip to the region which highlight comments he has made.

The first shows the landing strip at Lukla, uphill to stop you coming in, but a leap into the void taking off.



We did not have the luxury or safety of a two-engined light plane but went in sitting on the luggage in a Russian army-surplus helicopter with so many holes in the fuselage that the view of the terrain was no problem.

I understand that the airstrip is at least surfaced now.

The second is of a porter carrying an impossible load as the team had observed. The nice new metal bridges were not in evidence to any extent when we were there and rather than step aside for a pack train we met on one occasion a string of Yaks coming towards us with no room to pass and a very considerable drop beside us. Our Sherpas told us to separate and lie down and let the Yaks pick their way over us.

One luxury we could have taken but did not think of were pee bottles. Going out into the snow at 14,000ft in the middle of the night is no joke.

The Birds

Tibetan Snowcock
White-Throated Kingfisher
Brown Dipper
River Chat
Crested Hawk Eagle
Steppe Eagle
Pariah Kite
Yellow-Billed Blue Magpie
Raven
Chough
Black Crow
House Crow
House Sparrow
Yellow-Cheeked Tit
Oriental Magpie Robin
Brahmin Mynah
Jungle Mynah
Indian Grey Shrike

Photographs

JB John Brown
AC Ann Chadwick
DH David Hick
RT Richard Taylor
MS Michael Smith,



Above
Grain drying and winnowing at
Bhaktapur (MS)



Top left
Trekking up the Hinku Valley, (RT)

Bottom left
Trekking and Sherpas on the Zatwra La

The Route

