

Rich Odendahl Treks to Mount Everest Base Camp September/October 2012

Everest Base Camp has been on my “bucket list” for years. At one point in my life, I had considered attempting a climb to the top of the world's highest mountain, but later dismissed that as having too great of a risk/reward ratio. Base Camp is a lot less demanding, and the risks are magnitudes lower. Cheryll was not up for the tough, two-week, high-altitude trek, so I needed a different partner for this one. I've been friends with Brad Sevald since we first met at GM in 1983. Brad shares my love for outdoor adventure, and his wife, Melanie, is just as supportive as Cheryll. Apart from the need to plan a large block of his vacation time well in advance, it was not hard to convince Brad to join me. Brad suggested that we round out our group with Ed Haefner and Dave Kelley. Ed works with Brad in GM Powertrain as an Analysis Engineer. Like me, he graduated with a Mechanical Engineering degree from Kettering University (formerly GMI). Unlike me, he is single and in his twenties, but nevertheless very comfortable as the junior member of a group of middle-aged, married guys. He's very fit, having spent much of the summer training for a marathon. Dave is an IT engineer who has spent decades leading Boy Scout troops on backpacking trips in the mountains of New Mexico and elsewhere. He's a bit of a character, but then again, so am I. Dave can enliven a conversation about most anything. It was a good group.

Cheryll and I had stopped into the Kathmandu office of Responsible Treks and met Chhewang, the manager, when we first visited Nepal in 2010 (<http://www.responsibletreks.com/home/>). After much research, the other guys agreed to book our trip with Responsible Treks. Chhewang and his company did a fine job managing the logistics, and we can heartily recommend their services to other adventure seekers. They put together a package including domestic flights, permits, lodging, food, porters, a guide and assistant guide.



Brad, Dave, Rich and Ed



Lukla Landing Strip/Ski Jump

Our group of four intrepid trekkers flew from Detroit to Washington, D.C. To Doha, Qatar. We had a fifteen-hour layover in Doha, so we went downtown for dinner and a chance to see what happens to the huge profits during the era of high gasoline prices. The Qataris continue to spend billions on empty skyscrapers, sports stadiums and a wide variety of infrastructure

projects in the hot desert. After dinner at the souk and an overnight rest, we continued on to Kathmandu to prepare for the trek. We stayed at a guest house for two days of final preparations and attempted to quickly shake our jet-lag. Our guide, Paljyor stopped by for a pre-departure review of our equipment. Paljyor is 32 years-old and has been leading treks for nine years. He has an infectious smile and a friendly, yet professional, demeanor. Our Assistant Guide, Santosh, is 21 and a student at a university in Kathmandu. He's five-foot-five-inches tall and weighs 120 lbs. He's put together a Facebook page for his remote village and hopes one day to obtain his full guide's license.



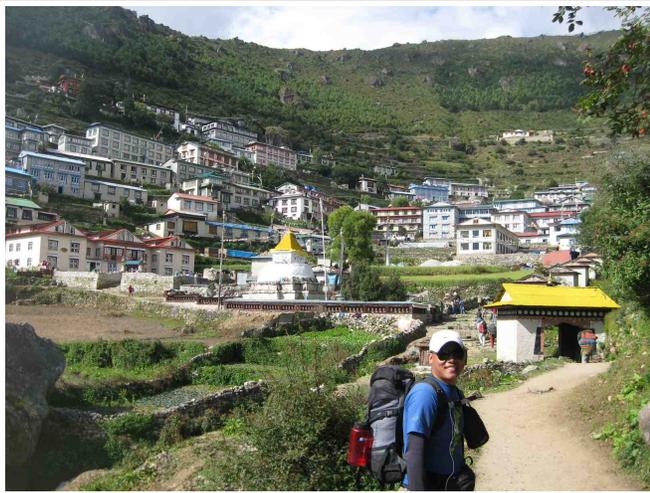
At the Trailhead



Apple Pancake for Breakfast

Just before we left, the newspaper reported that nine Germans had perished in an avalanche attempting to climb the Nepali peak of Makalu. It was a little scary, but reinforced my decision to skip the technical climbing, and stick to the trekking. The rewards simply do not justify the risk of going home in a box. Cheryll also saw the news reports, and fortunately has the experience from our previous trips to understand that there is a magnitude of difference between climbing and trekking.

Our flight departed at 6:15 AM from Kathmandu bound for Lukla. Lukla is situated on the side of a mountain at 9400 feet above sea level. In the days before the airport was built, climbers trekked for several days from the nearest road in Jiri, just to get to Lukla. Now it's a 25-minute flight. The airport has been labeled one of the world's most-dangerous with a runway that is only 1800 feet long. It's built with a twelve-percent grade and a rock wall at one end. Regardless of the wind, planes land uphill and take-off downhill. There is nooooo margin for error. It's impossible to do a go-around if a pilot's approach is not perfect. The sky was clear and the winds were calm for our flight. The pilot made a flawless landing, and we were hustled off the plane as it was unloaded and reloaded for the return flight departing less than five minutes later.



Paljyor approaching Namche Bazaar



Fried Potatoes and Eggs for Lunch

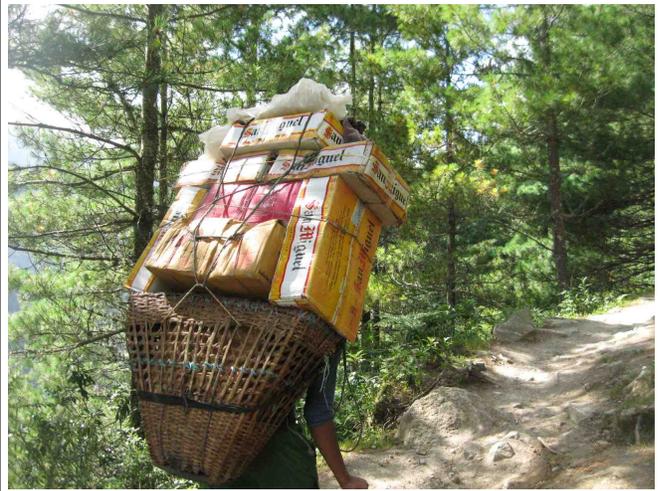
After breakfast at a local tea-house, it was time to hit the trail. The eight-day climb to Base Camp is from 9400 feet to 17,400 feet and covers around forty miles. Simple math suggests that this is an 8000 foot climb. In reality, however, getting to BC requires climbing over 18,000 feet and descending more than 10,000 feet as the rocky trail winds up, down and around the obstacles that line the steep valleys. Crossing several high suspension bridges over raging, cold rivers is not for the weak-hearted or those afraid of heights. I figured that if an 1100-pound yak can make it over the swaying foot bridges carrying a 100-pound load, then I could make it with my day pack. Of course, if a yak slips and falls, they probably add yak fried rice to the dinner specials list, or perhaps a nice yak-steak sizzler. Mmmmmmm.....Yakalicious!

Of course yaks do more than just carry loads. They also provide milk for yak cheese that is grated onto spaghetti and mixed into omelets. Only the dining rooms of the tea houses are heated, and at the higher elevations, the fuel is dried yak dung.

The Nepali people work hard and have a very stoic demeanor as they face their arduous lives. It was difficult to make them smile as we passed on the trail. Their work ethic is unbeatable, but smiling during work is just not part of the culture. It's ironic that humans carry heavier loads than the animals of Nepal. We shared the trail with thousands of porters carrying supplies to the higher settlements. Paljyor informed us that a porter can make about 65 cents US for each pound that they carry from Jiri to Namche Bazaar; about a one-week round trip if you walk from sunrise to sunset. The average load was over 100 lbs, and we passed one porter carrying ten cases of beer; a load of over 200 lbs. Incredible! I personally think twice about carrying more than two cases of beer from the garage to the basement in one trip.



Our Porters with 60 Pounds Each



Independent Porter with 160 Pounds

On our third morning, Paljyor heard a report that a plane had just crashed while departing Kathmandu for Lukla. There was much misinformation at first, but we later learned that the twin-turboprop had hit a large bird shortly after take-off. Early analysis suggests that the pilot stalled the plane while banking too steeply in an attempt to return to the airport. All 19 aboard were killed. This was turning out to be a rather deadly tourist season for Nepal. Hopefully changes will be made, but some in the press are skeptical; fearing that profit will trump government regulations. Apparently, Nepal's aviation safety regulations are kept tightly hidden in a locked drawer, right next to the building code.



Brad Starts across a Bridge



Rest Break

The tea houses where we stayed were, to put it kindly, very basic. Electricity was unreliable. Sometimes there was a single one-watt LED bulb for the eight-foot by eight-foot cell that Brad and I shared. Sometimes the toilet was down the hall. Sometimes it was outside. Some toilets flushed, others didn't. If there was running water, it was sporadic. None had any ventilation, the benefit being that they were surprisingly warm in the morning; 44 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit depending on the elevation. The food was all good, but basic with pasta

and rice dishes on every menu. Santosh was expected to act as our waiter at each meal. The Nepali eat Dal Bhat (rice and lentils) for lunch and dinner. Paljyor advised us not to eat any meat above Namche (11,000 feet), as the hygiene standards declined at altitude. It was definitely better than living in tents on the rocky ground, so we redoubled our hand sanitizer usage and tried to be very careful with our water purification tablets.



**Long Drop Toilet with Manual Flush and
“Nepali Toilet Paper”**



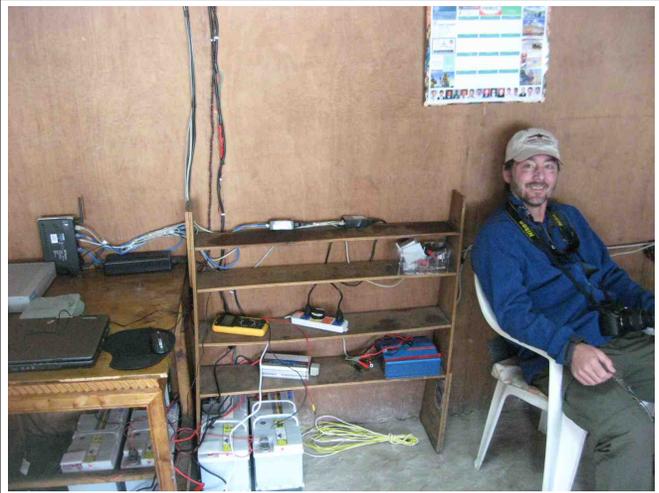
Long Drop Waterfall

We hiked past gorgeous waterfalls, monasteries and Buddhist shrines called stupas. The tree line was around 13,000 feet and the pines and rhododendrons gave way to high meadows with grass, lichens and juniper. Above 15,000 feet it was mostly rock. We passed a somber collection of chortens (monuments) commemorating those who had died on the mountain.

We shared the trail with groups from all over the planet. There were Israelis, Indians, Koreans and Europeans. What we didn't find was a hot, unattached Swedish trekker babe for Ed. He was ready to settle for a hot Australian trekker babe until her boyfriend showed up. Oh well. Ed is a great guy, but any prospective ladies will have to accept his refusal to sing. Ed was incorrigible when we took turns leading the “Adventure Trail” song as we hit the trail in the morning and after each rest break.



Dingboche Tea House Kitchen



Brad at the Dingboche Internet Cafe

Each morning, we were reminded of the risk of high altitude when rescue helicopters conducted a half dozen or more missions. Mornings were the best time to fly. They usually dawned clear and cold. Most afternoons the wind built and fog developed as the wind lifted the warm, moist air from the plains to the south. Fortunately, there was no rain.

Perhaps the lack of rain was not entirely good fortune. I started to sneeze on the fourth morning. At first I attributed this to walking too closely spaced on the dusty trail. But, by the fifth day, my symptoms had turned into a full head cold. Breathing at base camp would be hard enough given that the atmosphere at 17,600 feet provides only 54% of the oxygen available at sea level. Throw in congestion and a dry cough, and it was clear that Everest was going to extract suffering from me. Brad developed similar symptoms two days after me. I feel bad that I may have infected him, but we don't really know for sure where he got his germ.



High Camp – Gorak Shep



It's getting a little chilly. Please throw some more yak dung on the fire.

The eighth day's climb to Base Camp took about five hours, and we arrived at the final glacier crossing in the early afternoon. I had no appetite and had been forcing myself to eat for the last couple of days. The final approach was powered by pure adrenalin. I was not going to come this far and stop short. But we made it, and euphoria set in for having accomplished our goal. We only stopped long enough for pictures and high-fives. The normal climbing season is in the Spring, so there was only one group of Japanese film-makers occupying the camp with climbers on the high mountain.



Memorials to Lost Climbers



Mission Accomplished!

It was a two-hour hike back to the high camp at Gorak Shep where I got little sleep and my congestion and cough worsened. My body did not want to heal in the thin air. Brad was feeling a little better in the morning, but not better enough to join Ed, Dave and Santosh for a 4:00 AM climb of Kala Pathar to see the sun rise over Everest's left shoulder. I, on the other hand was ready to get down to a lower altitude as soon as possible and let my body start to improve. Our itinerary called for another five days at high altitude. There would be a short descent and then a climb over Cho-La Pass which is nearly as high as Base Camp, before a trek to a high-altitude camp at Gokyo and then a day to explore some lakes.

It was decided that the other guys would continue on with Paljyor and the porters. Santosh was assigned to see that I was able to complete the four-day hike to Lukla safely. We parted ways and I started to feel progressively better as we descended over the next several days. Santos stuffed his pack into my duffel and carried it using one of the handles over the top of his head. My decision to descend was validated by the veritable rainbow of phlegm that I discharged over the next several days. One fluorescent-green masterpiece was unlike anything that my body had ever previously expelled. It looked alien.



Santosh Carries My Bag through the Sagarmatha National Park Exit



Rich Crossing a High Suspension Bridge

During the descent, the trails were eerily quiet. We found out why from a group of five Americans. Although it was clear during the mornings at the higher elevations, the airport in Lukla had been closed by fog for five days. There had been no planes in or out. This group from Houston had spent \$600/man to charter a helicopter to a pad at a town 1000 feet lower than Lukla and hiked up. They said that both Kathmandu and Lukla were crazy with trekkers desperate to begin their journeys or get back in time for their international flights. I was told that a bidding war had erupted with people paying up to \$1100 to get out of Lukla.

Santosh and I decided to spend a rest day at Namche Bazaar, two-thirds of the way down and a seven-hour hike from Lukla. There was no point in hiking down to find that all of the tea-houses in Lukla were full of trekkers waiting for flights. In Namche, I met a couple of guys from New Zealand in their twenties who were also descending. One had gotten diarrhea in Lobuche and had spent an afternoon in the Pheriche clinic hooked to a couple of IV bags full of antibiotics and fluids. The other had symptoms similar to mine. After a rest day, they took two days descending to Namche, and then we hung out together for the balance of the trip as our health collectively improved.

The fog lifted, and the backlog cleared as we trekked to Lukla. Santosh was obviously tired, but handled his duties with aplomb. He was not only a decent guide, but also a good companion. Unlike Ed, Santosh was more than pleased to join me for a chorus of the "Adventure Trail" song as we started down each section of the trail. The "Adventure Trail" song does wonders for my spirits.

Responsible Treks was able to arrange seats for Santosh and I on the first flight out the next morning. I love the mountains, but I don't feel a need to ever go much above 14,000 feet ever again. This is one item that has definitely been crossed off my bucket list.

The other guys arrived in Kathmandu four days later. They were happy and relatively healthy, having enjoyed a leisurely stroll down and nice, hot showers.

I found a digital scale that showed that I had dropped nine pounds during the trek. I also had

to punch a new notch in my belt to keep my pants from falling down. I called Cheryl, and she was not pleased by my new svelte figure. She said that she didn't want me home until I replace most of the lost pounds. There's a little bakery around the corner from my hotel with a good looking yak-milk cheesecake. I think that I'll go get a slice and wash it down with a large Everest Beer. Mmmmmm.....yakaliscious!



Everest over My Right Shoulder

More Trip Reports are at; <http://odendahls.com/>