

COOK'S TOUR TO EVEREST

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The first intimation of a trek to Everest was cautious; it would only take place if a minimum of 15 applied. In fact 50 people applied immediately and, as all these appeared to be eligible, the organisers divided us into two groups, Group A which was led by Eric Shipton, and Group B, of which I was a member, led by W. H. (Bill) Murray. We were to walk from Dolalghat, 32 miles east of Kathmandu to the base of Everest and back to Lukla.

The only qualifications for membership were fitness and past experience of mountain trekking. We were also required to have "the ability to withstand altitudes of up to 18,000 feet" but, as no one can tell whether or not he has this ability until he puts it to the test, many of us left home without knowing whether or not we had it. We were all advised to get as much uphill walking as possible during the months before our departure. This was just as well since the trails used, though generally good and safe, were often steep.

Our party eventually numbered 22 including six women. Our ages ranged from 37 to 69 and the average age of the party must have been well up into the fifties. It was certainly not the case that the youngest members were the fittest.

We set off in transport from Kathmandu on the morning of 30th October, Group A having set off two days earlier. The trek had been timed to co-incide with the settled weather which usually prevails in November and happily 1969 proved to be no exception. At Dolalghat we handed over our kitbags to the porters, who were waiting to carry them to the first camp site, and set off on our walk. We ourselves carried only light rucksacks containing such things as cameras, spare pullovers and anything else we were likely to want during the day. The porters carried 70lbs. apiece.

Our first day involved a steep ascent of about 4,000 feet — not a lot but the sun was strong and most of us found it quite hard going. The nicest moment was when one of the Sherpas came down the track to encourage the stragglers like myself who were making heavy weather of it. He presented each of us with a couple of oranges and I do not think I have ever tasted more delicious ones.

A splendid tea awaited us at the camp site. At that stage of the trek, however, appetites were poor and the boxes of biscuits and the jam, honey and peanut butter laid out for us went largely untouched. It was a very different story at the end of the trek!

After tea, the Sherpas brought us hot water for washing. Supper, which consisted of soup, main course and sweet followed by hot drinks, was served around 6 p.m. It was dark by then and most people retired

early in readiness for 5.30 a.m. the next morning when the Sherpas brought tea and biscuits to us in our tents. Hot water for washing followed and, after a decent interval, porridge. We then set off on the day's march while the Sherpas struck camp. They soon caught up with us, stopping at some pleasant spot, usually by a stream, where they would set about cooking "lunch". While waiting for it, we would swim, wash clothes and/or write up our notes of the trek.

After lunch we would set off again leaving the Sherpas to clear up. Again they soon overtook us, leaving arrows where there was any doubt as to which of two tracks we should follow. It was not unknown for local children to obliterate these and mark fresh arrows in other directions, a practice to which one became more vulnerable the slower one walked. On the other hand it was regarded as a great mistake to arrive at camp before tea was ready. One of the joys of the trek was that one could walk at more or less the pace one chose and be out of sight of the rest of the party for much of the day.

We passed many interesting people on the way. There were the ordinary Nepalese who greeted us with a "Namaste" coupled with a joining of the hands as if in prayer. There were also a number of expeditions returning from the Everest area with their attendant Sherpas and porters.

In the early days of the trek we were travelling in the main in an easterly direction and, as the rivers in this part of Nepal flow for the most part from north to south, we crossed range after range of hills.

This was by far the most colourful part of the trek. Although we missed the rhododendrons, there were many other wild flowers, including gentians and orchids. Oranges and bananas ripened in the sun and were easily bought locally. The track frequently crossed rice and millet fields and there was an air of prosperity about the country.

At Thosé the first real mishap occurred. One of our party fell about 50 feet when an overhanging portion of a ledge gave way underneath him. The accident happened after dark and, not sharing a tent, he was not missed until the following morning.

We were not far from Jiri where there is a hospital and an airstrip and, after being made as comfortable as possible, he was carried there accompanied by my brother, the more mobile of the two doctors in our party. From Jiri he was flown to Kathmandu where it was found that he had sustained three broken vertebrae. Happily he was well on the way to recovery when we returned to Kathmandu and was able to come home with us.

After a week of trekking we entered Solu Khumbu, the province from which the Sherpas come. Here on one memorable day we saw not only Everest for the first time but also one of the men who first

climbed it. Sir Edmund Hillary was on a tour of the schools which he has built for the Sherpas and we met him at the lunch spot that day. He is of course much liked by the Sherpas, who refer to him as Sir Edmund Moonlight in the hope that it will bring him good luck. Our cook, Sonahisy, had baked a cake in his honour and we thought it a pity that he did not accept a piece before going on his way. So anxious were we to make up for his omission that we immediately ate it all ourselves.

The following day we reached the Dudh Kosi which flows south from the Tibetan border. We now ceased walking against the grain of the land and followed the valley in a northerly direction for several days. At one point we saw the Lukla airstrip from which we were to fly back to Kathmandu at the end of our trek. Situated at 9,200 feet it is extremely small and has a very pronounced slant. Moreover there was a crashed aeroplane at one end of it. Several members resolved to walk back to Kathmandu at the sight.

Like all visitors to this part of Nepal, I was soon captivated by the yaks. They seemed to have such pleasant dispositions and, if met with on a narrow mountain track, would always make way at whatever inconvenience to themselves. If only they could pass on a little of their courtesy to some of our motorists!

At Namche Bazar, where most of our Sherpas lived, we were invited to spend the evening in the house of our sirdar or chief Sherpa, Passang Kami. This was by far the most enjoyable evening of the trek. At 11,300 feet we appreciated eating indoors instead of the rather draughty mess tent where we usually ate. We also appreciated the local chang and rakshi which Passang provided for us. Chang is a kind of beer and much more to my liking than rakshi, a spirit with a high alcohol content.

It was interesting too to see the inside of a Sherpa household. The ground floor was reserved for animals and the family lived on the upper floor which was reached by a wooden ladder. Here there was a fire but no chimney and it is little wonder that the clothing of many Sherpas was impregnated with the smell of smoke. It often appeared as if their houses were on fire, the way the smoke seeped through the roofs.

At Thyangboche (12,715 ft.), four of the ladies decided to go no further but to stay there until the rest of us returned. They could hardly have chosen a more beautiful place with its monastery, its yak pastures and its wonderful views of the mountains.

After two nights there, we went on to Pheriche (13,921 feet). People were still living permanently at this height, sharing their single storey stone huts with their animals. We were surprised to see a Japanese flag hoisted on one of these shortly after our arrival and soon found that it was occupied by a young man of that nation-

ality who was spending the winter there guarding stores left by a Japanese expedition and studying mammal life in the area. The only mammal we saw thereabouts was the Tibetan tailless rat, but we saw several eagles with wingspans of, we guessed, six or seven feet.

It was now very cold at night. At the beginning of the trek we had been too warm in our sleeping bags but now we got inside them fully clothed. I even wore my duvet jacket on the coldest nights. We crossed the tree line shortly above Pheriche and the wood we needed for the higher camps had to be carried on the backs of the porters. The snow line was much higher, about 18,000 feet at that time of the year.

Our highest camp was Gorak Shep, or Lake Camp (17,060 feet). This was used by members of the 1953 Expedition as a rest camp and to them, returning from the Western Cwm, it may have seemed such. To us, however, it seemed bleak and inhospitable, an impression which was reinforced by the fact that the lake was frozen.

It was here that Eric Shipton awaited us, his party having passed us on their way down. He was in fine form, eager to introduce us to the Pumori ridge from which he looked into the Western Cwm in 1951 and discovered the route which was used in the ascent of Everest two years later. The chance of climbing anywhere with Eric Shipton — let alone on such an historic ridge — is not one I would normally decline. But on this occasion there was no alternative. The Pumori walk involved climbing to about 19,500 feet and, feeling as I did at just over 17,000 feet, I knew I could not make it. Nor were many of the party in a better position and in the end only three accompanied him. The rest of us climbed Kala Pattar (18,192 ft.), a hill immediately above Lake Camp from which there is a very good view of Everest and the Khumbu Icefall. There is no view from the base camp itself.

The ascent of Kala Pattar, little more than 1,000 feet above the camp site was, I felt, my limit. I had to pause quite frequently for breath and was unable to enjoy the picnic lunch which we had at the top. Others, however, had a worse time and a woman of 50 pushed herself too far. She was helped down to Lobuje (16,175 ft.) that night and the Sherpas carried her down to Pangboche (13,100 ft.) the next day. At the lower altitude we expected her to recover and it was a great shock to us when she died during the night we spent there. She was buried the next morning just above the camp site. Bill Murray conducted a short funeral service and the local headman promised to put a cross on her grave. There was nothing more we could do but return to Thyangboche and break the news to those we had left behind.

We all retraced our steps to Namche where once more we spent the evening in Passang's house. As the trek would shortly be coming to an end, we gave him for distribution among the Sherpas any items of clothing and equipment which we did not want to take back to

England. I had become greatly attached to these splendid people who had given us so much and it was a pleasure to be able to give them something in return.

Two days later we reached Lukla and from there were all flown back to Kathmandu, in spite of our previous resolutions. It was a most enjoyable flight, taking us over much of the route we had followed on our outward journey.

It was undoubtedly the most memorable holiday of my life. We had covered in all a distance of about 250 miles during the 24 days we were on trek and climbed at least 50,000 feet. With Bill Murray and Eric Shipton as guides, it was wonderful experience to see the mountains of which I had read and heard so much. But I shall remember with more affection the happy and uncomplicated people who live beside them.