

Everest Base Camp and Kala Pattar (5/20/2008-5/23/2008)

As I hiked towards Gorak Shep, at the foot of Kala Pattar, and the last lodge settlement on the route to Everest Base camp, I struck up a conversation with a friendly Nepali man, named Kili Sherpa (pronounced Kee-Lee). I ended up hiking with him and his cousin most of the way to Gorak Shep. It turned out the man I was talking was head of a company called High Altitude Dreams which organizes logistics for climbing expeditions. They provide porters, climbing Sherpas, base camp facilities, tents, oxygen bottles, and nearly everything a commercial expedition needs to climb Everest. Among his clients were the Seattle based Mountain Madness a company founded by Scott Fisher and featured in the book *In to Thin Air*. His company also supplied the logistics for group featured in the Discovery Channels series on climbing Everest. He himself had started as a climbing porter turned guide and had summited Everest twice, but had now given up climbing for the safer occupation of a desk in Kathmandu, where in addition to running his company he works on charity projects to provide education and mountaineering training to Nepali kids. Kili was headed to base camp for the first round of summits of the season which was scheduled for the 21st of May. In the midst of our conversation he invited me to stay at his base camp, an opportunity which I immediately accepted. Normally trekkers are not able to stay at the base camp and most make a day trip from Gorak Shep making his offer a unique opportunity to experience life at base camp, and at an exciting time when the climbers were making their summit bids. We ended up staying a night at Gorak Shep since the weather turned for the worse and the talkative Kili ran in to an old acquaintance named Marty at a lodge in Gorak Shep. Marty was a very accomplished climber and guide originally from the bay area but now living in his adopted home of New Zealand. While Kili and his company represented the commercial “climbing tourism” approach to Everest expeditions, Marty was a climbing purest, believing in carrying one’s own supplies up the mountain rather than having a hired Sherpa carry all the tents and food to the various camps on the mountain, and not using bottled oxygen.

Staying the night at Gorak Shep, I took advantage of the good weather the next morning and hiked up to the famous Everest view point atop the 5600m/18,373 ft hill known as Kala Pattar. The weather was excellent and I stayed on the top enjoying the panoramic sight until the clouds finally hid Everest view around 10 am. I then headed down and hiked to the base camp meeting back up with Kili.

Everest Base Camp is a massive tent city erected on the glacier below the infamous Khumbu ice fall, the dangerous beginning of the southern route to Everest’s summit. While surrounded with snow covered peaks, Everest itself is not actually visible from the Nepali base camp, but the history of the place still draws large numbers of trekkers to the base camp. For the majority of them, it is their final destination and culmination of their trek before they start back down. With the Tibetan side of the mountain closed off completely to expeditions this season by the Chinese, the Nepali base camp was even busier than usual with 31 expeditions climbing Everest, and more than 600 residents including climbers and Nepali support staff. The base camp is more precisely described with the plural, base camps, with each expedition having their own camp and facilities. Kili said they marked out where his company wanted to put their base camp 4 months before the season. Kili’s company was in charge of the base camp for three climbing companies’ expeditions, Mountain Madness, Mountain Madness Nepal, and Altitude Junkies with 20 climbers between the three of them.

I had never slept on a glacier before or at a higher altitude, with base camp sitting at nearly 5400m/17,700 ft. Although covered with rock and gravel, the entire base camp is sitting on a large moving block of ice, something I realized quickly when I was shown to my first tent. I made my way towards the entrance when my leg was swallowed up to my knee after unknowingly stepped into a small rock covered crevasse. Thankfully, they found me another tent, this one not pitched over a hidden crevasse. With most of the climbers on the mountain preparing for their summit bids when I arrived, the base camp had kind of a deserted feel to it. One climber was still at the camp when I arrived, a Jordanian named Mostafa. He had been delayed by a tooth problem but was now set to head up the

mountain the next morning en route to his summit bid. He was an interesting guy, who was attempting to be the first Jordanian to climb Everest and complete climbs of the seven summits (highest points on each continent). He had climbed the other six peaks which left only Everest to complete both of his goals, a mountain he had tried to climb twice before without success. He said he was feeling good this time and was optimistic that his third time would lead to success. Mostafa had not been climbing mountains very long, a career which started only a few years ago. Living in London, he and his friends began talking one night at a pub about how there had never been an Arab to climb Everest. Sparked by that conversation, he decided to climb Everest having never climbed a mountain before in his life. Knowing that the King of Jordan read *The Times* every morning he managed to get an article published in the paper about his Everest aspirations. A few days after the article appeared he got a call from the King asking if he was serious about his goals and the King told him that if he climbed Denali (in Alaska) then he would take him seriously. Mostafa went to a local mountaineering shop and bought all the best equipment he could and went to Alaska. Miraculously he managed to summit Denali, and has been under Jordanian royal patronage ever since, traveling the world and climbing mountains, as Jordan's only mountain climber. For his last meal before heading up the mountain he cooked his own pasta sauce a meal which I was invited to partake in.

I ate well at base camp being completely full after each meal. With the relatively high price food at the lodges, it was a feeling I hadn't had since starting the trek. So in addition to getting a rare inside look at an Everest expedition, I was being stuffed with free food and tea, as well as provided with free lodging. I was certainly lucky to have been walking that stretch of trail to Gorak Shep when I had, meeting the right man at the right time. An auspicious meeting, brought on by bad weather the day I had intended to leave Chukhung and my decision to continue on from Lobuche after lunch. Balancing out my good fortune, I did have stroke of bad luck when I came down with a case of diarrhea on the second, and last, night I stayed at base camp. I'm not sure if it was something I had at the camp or prior but the effect was a night interrupted constantly by the uncontrollable urge. It was a bad case and seemed impervious to the Imodium I repeatedly popped in an attempt to get some rest. In among the worst timings for such a condition, it snowed all night making the hourly trek to the toilet tent even more unpleasant. I had to pick my way across snow covered rocks to the toilet tent, a small tent around a large plastic barrel, filled with feces and receded into the rocks so that it was possible to squat over. Between the icy rocks and my drowsy state it was amazing that I managed to avoid falling in. I've had some unpleasant situations in which the Asian belly bug has reared its ugly head, but that second night at base camp, considering the weather and location/condition of the "toilet," has to rank as one of the worst.

Despite the diarrhea episode, staying at base camp was a remarkable and unique experience allowing me first hand observations of an Everest expedition in progress. As I sat around in the dining tent drinking tea the evening I had arrived with Kili and the staff, word arrived that two Sherpas had just summited, fixing the ropes along the final route over the Hillary Step to the summit. A few hours later in the evening word came in that their group had left for the summit at 9:00 pm, from Camp IV on the south cole at nearly 8000m/26,000 ft. Despite being only about 850m/3000 ft vertical feet below the summit it typically takes the climbers 10-12 hours, climbing all night, to reach the top. While most of the base camp staff would stay throughout the night to monitor the progress of the climb, I would call it a night and retire to my tent.

I was awakened early the next morning to shouts of "Summit, Summit, Summit!" The next few hours were filled with a frenzy of activity, with radio calls coming in detailing who was on the summit, and satellite phone calls going out from base camp to the friends and families of the climbers across the globe bringing real-time news of their accomplishments and sparking jubilation on the other end of the line. After a morning of summits, the afternoon brought news of the dangers involved in entering a high altitude environment unsustainable for human habitation. News was filtering down from the mountain that an Omani man from another expedition was in trouble high above the south cole, with one arm and

one leg having stopped functioning. Kili berated the organization that he was climbing with for not adequately screening clients and having a poor safety record. Apparently 3 of these “climbers” had never been above 3000 m before and one never higher than 2000 m. With commercial climbing expeditions essentially taking tourists to the summit in what Kili calls “an expensive airline ticket,” it takes money rather than climbing expertise to summit Everest these days. By the following morning when I left rumors around base camp were that three people had died on the mountain, the Omani man, a Swiss climber, and a Korean. I later learned that only the Swiss man actually died, he was an experienced climber attempting a solo climb without oxygen and he died on his way down from the summit.



View from Kala Pattar back down the valley. Ama Dablam is the peak on the left.



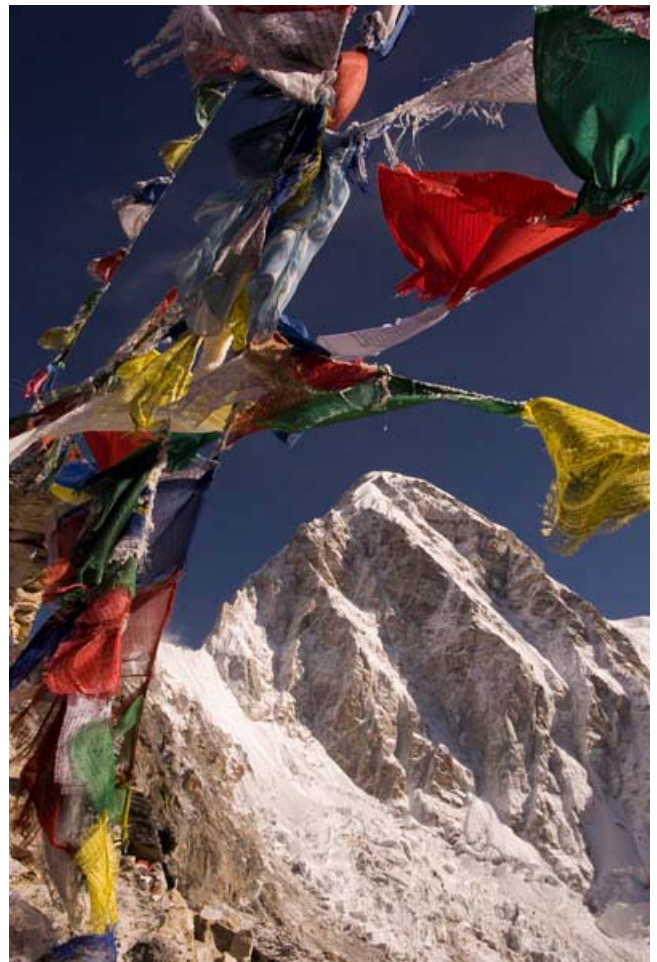
Ama Dablam from Kala Pattar.



View from Kala Pattar.



Me on top of Kala Pattar (5600m/18,373 ft) with Pumori peak behind me.



Prayer flags decorating the top of Kala Pattar (5600m/18,373 ft) with Pumori peak behind.



**Nuptse left, Ama Dablam right,
from Kala Pattar.**



**Ama Dablam from
Kala Pattar.**



View from Kala Pattar.



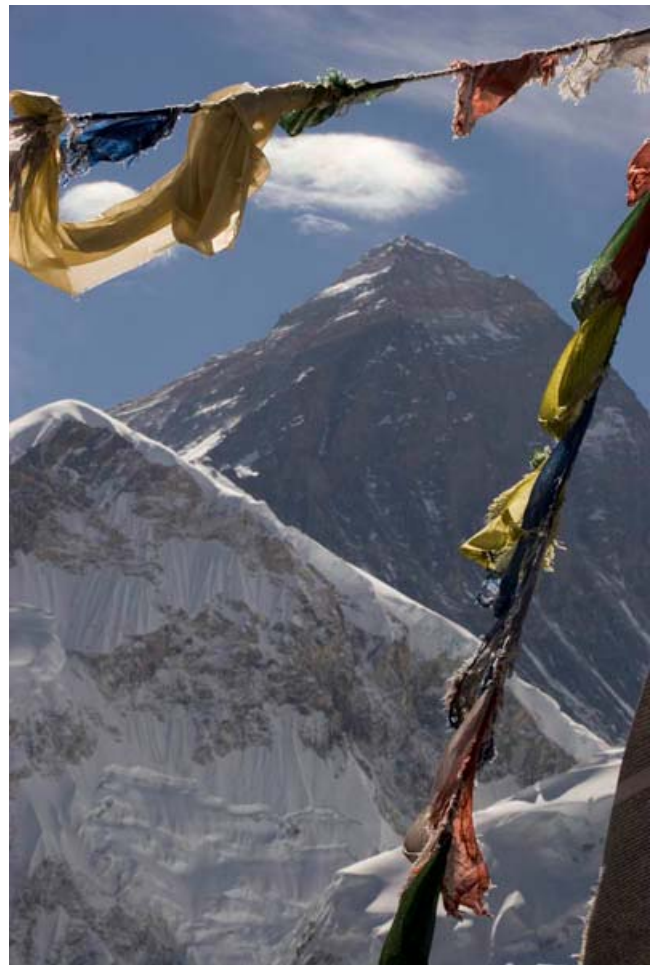
The tent city of Everest Base Camp from Kala Pattar.



**Ama Dablam from
Kala Pattar.**



**Mt. Everest (center) and Nuptse (right)
from Kala Pattar.**



Mt. Everest from Kala Pattar.



**Mt. Everest from
Kala Pattar.**



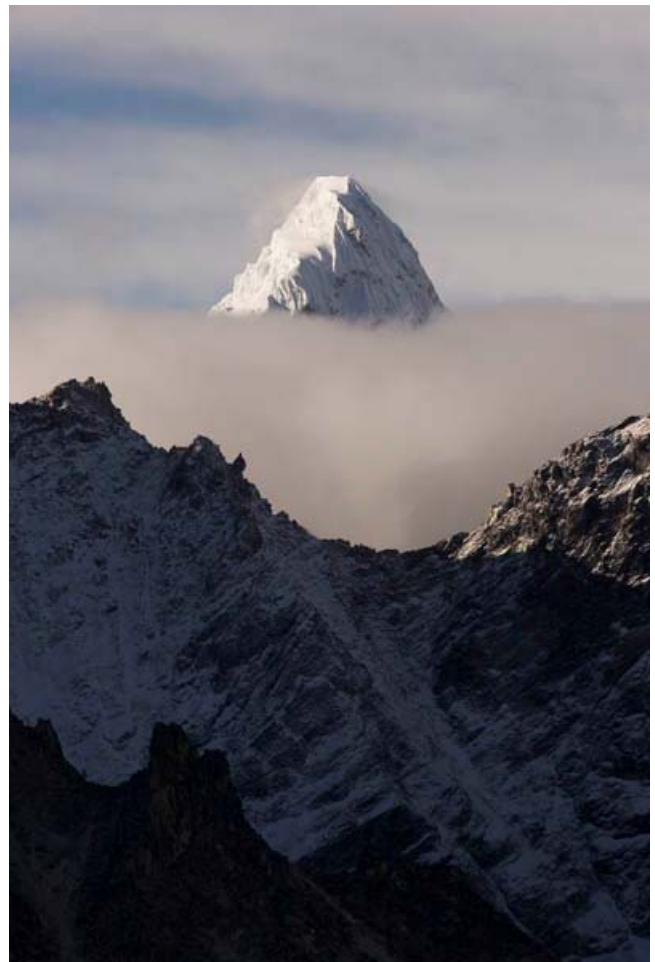
**Me in front of Everest (left)
and Nuptse (right) from
Kala Pattar.**



Mt. Everest (center) and Nuptse (right) from Kala Pattar.



Mt. Everest from Kala Pattar.



Ama Dablam from near Gorak Shep.



**Mt. Everest from
Kala Pattar.**



Nuptse from Kala Pattar.



**Pumori from near
Gorak Shep.**



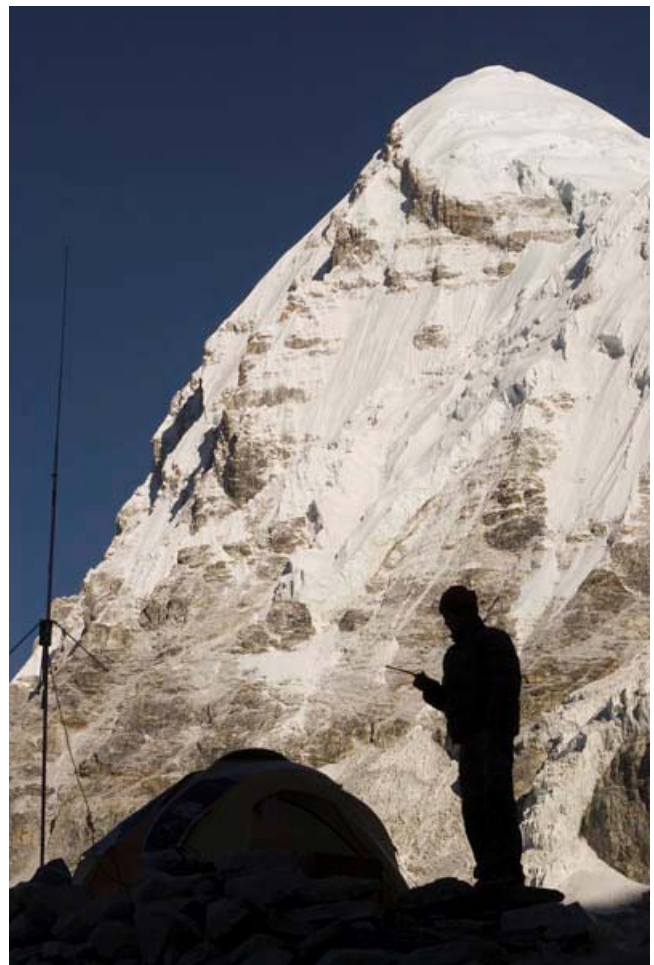
Everest Base Camp.



Me, in the dinning tent at Everest Base Camp with Kili, Mostafa (Jordanian climber), and Brady (Kiwi girl who was helping with a research project on effects of high altitude).



Jordanian climber, Mostafa, attempting to become the first Jordanian to summit Everest, cooking his own pre-climb pasta sauce before heading up on to the mountain for his summit attempt. Everest Base Camp.



Working the radio on the morning of the first summits of the season, Everest Base Camp.



Working the radio on the morning of the first summits of the season, Everest Base Camp.



Everest Base Camp.



Prayer flags, Everest Base Camp.



Working the radio on the morning of the first summits of the season, Everest Base Camp.



Kili Sherpa of High Altitude Dreams, the man who invited me to stay at Everest Base Camp.



Camp I stayed at, Everest Base Camp.



One of the many small avalanches visible from Everest Base Camp.



Sitting around the radio base station on the morning of the first summits of the season, Everest Base Camp.



Everest Base Camp and the Khumbu icefall, the treacherous start to the Everest climb.



Climbers on the Khumbu icefall.



100% crop from the center of the above picture showing climbers on the Khumbu icefall.



The Khumbu icefall from Everest Base Camp.



Jordanian and Canadian/Quebec flags on a tent at the camp I stayed at, Everest Base Camp. The first woman from Quebec to summit Everest reached the summit while I was staying at Base Camp.



The first tent they tried to put me up in. It had a nice view but unfortunately there was a crevasse right near the entrance, which I fell in up to my knee. Everest Base Camp.



Climbers on the Khumbu icefall (center towards the bottom).



One of the camp porters bringing back water, Everest Base Camp.



Everest Base Camp.



Me, Kili, and some of the staff from the base camp I stayed at, Everest Base Camp.