

Jiri to Chukhung (5/6/2008-5/15/2008)

Everest, it's a mountain that has fascinated the western world ever since it was determined to be the highest point on the planet in the mid-19th century. It has drawn travelers and mountaineers to the region surrounding it, known as the Kumbu, ever since. Seeing Everest for the first time inevitably brings a tingle down one's spine. I remember the excitement the first time I saw the mountain on my 1999 trip to China and Tibet. I had spent a day and a half at the Everest base camp on the Tibetan side without so much as a glimpse of the mountain. It was the end of June, and the monsoonal clouds covered the mountain like an impenetrable curtain obscuring it from my gaze. I went to sleep on the eve of my second and last night at base camp with the expectation that despite being right next to the world's highest mountain I would still leave without seeing it in person. The next morning I was awoken by one of my travel companions shouting, "Do you want to see Everest?" I leapt from my slumber to see a towering white mountain rising up from the end of the valley, the first rays of the morning sun highlighting the edges of the impressive north face of Everest. The mix of elation and awe I felt at that moment was indescribable. I can't remember before or since ever being so excited to see a view in nature.

Nine years later, I was now heading back to Everest but this time from the southern, Nepali, side. Having seen the mountain in such a dramatic fashion on my visit to the Tibetan side, and knowing that no Everest view from the Nepali side could match that first sighting, I was not so solely focused on Everest as I was eager to explore the surrounding valleys, peaks, and passes. While the base camp on the Tibetan side can be accessed by four-wheel drive, on the Nepali side the roads end at the town of Jiri. Most people, eager to avoid the arduous up and down trek across several valleys from Jiri to the principal town in the region, Namche, fly into Lukla a days hike away. The rather strenuous trail from Jiri has 29,000 ft in ascents and 22,400 ft of descents en route to Namche. Thus a hiker from Jiri to Namche climbs over several passes totaling nearly the entire height of Mt Everest. Not having flown since I landed in Asia 16 months ago I didn't consider any other option other than hiking in and out.

I set off from the town of Jiri towards world's highest mountain, following in the footsteps of the early mountaineering expeditions, many of whom followed the same trail. While the first expeditions into the region started by foot from the edge of the Kathmandu valley (8 hours by bus from Jiri), I was happy to take a bus over that stretch of the classic route. The trail winds through the middle hills of Nepal going primarily from west to east cutting across the natural contour of the valley systems which run north to south, accounting for the daily hikes up and over passes between valleys. Along the early sections of the trail which spans altitudes ranging from about 6000 to 11,000 ft, scenery is mostly green terraced hillsides and villages, with elusive snow capped peaks occasionally peering out from behind the green clad ridges in the distance only to be seen when the clouds were being magnanimous. In the villages outside Jiri, Maoist graffiti covered the walls of most buildings. The graffiti was a reminder of the recent civil war and the time when Maoist Gorillas extracted \$100 "donations" from trekkers in the area to fund their arms purchases, a revenue earning technique which nearly killed the trekking industry along the Jiri section of the trail, and contributed to the popularity of flying in to Lukla. It's a testament to the ineptitude and corruption of the previous government that the Nepalis found it the best alternative to elect Maoist, despite their history of thuggish tactics, into power in the recent election. A vast majority of the Nepalis I talked to were optimistic about the new government, even those working in the tourists industry that were hurt by financially by the Maoist tactics.

As I walked, my major concern was the weather. I was worried that an early arriving monsoon might obscure my views higher up. Typically the monsoon does not arrive until mid-June but it can arrive as much as a month earlier than that. The afternoon showers I was frequently experiencing did not allay my fears. As a result, I walked fast along the lower section of the trail making it from Jiri to Namche in 5 days, a section which often takes 6 to 7 days of solid walking. After walking the sparsely touristed and more rustic Jiri trail arriving in Namche is a shock to the system. Namche has always been

the major supply town for mountaineering expeditions, and now has become the central hub for trekking industry in the area. The town sits perched in half bowl like amphitheater arranged for viewing the surrounding mountains. The vast majority of buildings in the town are lodges, with shops catering to trekkers and mountaineers making up most of the rest. In Namche, I would gorge on 75 cent Snickers (\$1.50 and up elsewhere on the trail) and apple pie at just over \$2 a slice. Welcome comforts after life on the trail. Namche would also be the site of my last shower for the next 23 days.

Namche sits at the hub of the glacial valley system that reaches down from the Kumbu Himalaya. There are four main valleys that converge near Namche. On the far west is the Bhote valley, probably the least visited of the four and the traditional trading route with Tibet via the Nangpa La (pass) which sits at the northern end of the valley. The next valley over to the east is the Gokyo valley famed for its series of turquoise lakes which dot the valley until the massive shear face of Cho Oyo, the 6th highest mountain in the world, seals off the northern end like a massive white guard forbidding travel onward into Tibet. The Gokyo valley is probably the second most visited valley in the region after the adjacent valley to the east, which harbors Everest base camp and the most famous view point of Mt. Everest in Nepal, the 5600m/18,373 ft hill known as Kala Pattar. The vast majority of trekkers hike the well traveled path from Lulka to Kala Pattar and back. The most western valley of the four is home to the lodge based settlement of Chukhung, and the highest point in the Kumbu where trekkers can hike without an expensive climbing permit, Chukhung Tse peak at 5857m/19,216 ft. My journey through the Kumbu would take me on the so called “grand tour,” starting with Chukhung in the east and working my west via a series of three high altitude passes, well above 5,000 m, to the Bhote valley in the west, before finally hiking back out, the way I came, to Jiri.

The hike from Namche to Chukhung is dominated by views of the elegant white massif of Ama Dablam, among the more beautiful and distinctive mountains in the world, and regarded as the holy to the local Sherpas. With the higher altitude, the weather improved, especially in the mornings and I got my first view of Everest (all be it only the tip) on the trek just outside of the village of upper Pangboche. But it was climbing the 5083m/16,672 ft Nangkartshang Peak above Dingboche, where I got my first of what would be many awe inspiring views of the white mountain lined valleys of the Kumbu. Forgive the rhyme but, it was a view so nice I climbed it twice, before heading onward and upwards to Chukhung.



View of Mt. Everest from the Tibetan side which I took on my 1999 trip to Everest base camp.



Blooming rhododendron on the trail from Jiri to Namche, near Goyem.



Porter rests amid blooming rhododendrons on the trail from Jiri to Namche, near Goyem.



Young girl on the trail from Jiri to Namche, near Nuntala.



View down the valley towards Namche and Lukla from Khari La on the trail from Jiri to Namche. My first good view of the snow capped Himalayas on the trek.



Rai woman and child on the trail from Jiri to Namche, near Jubing.



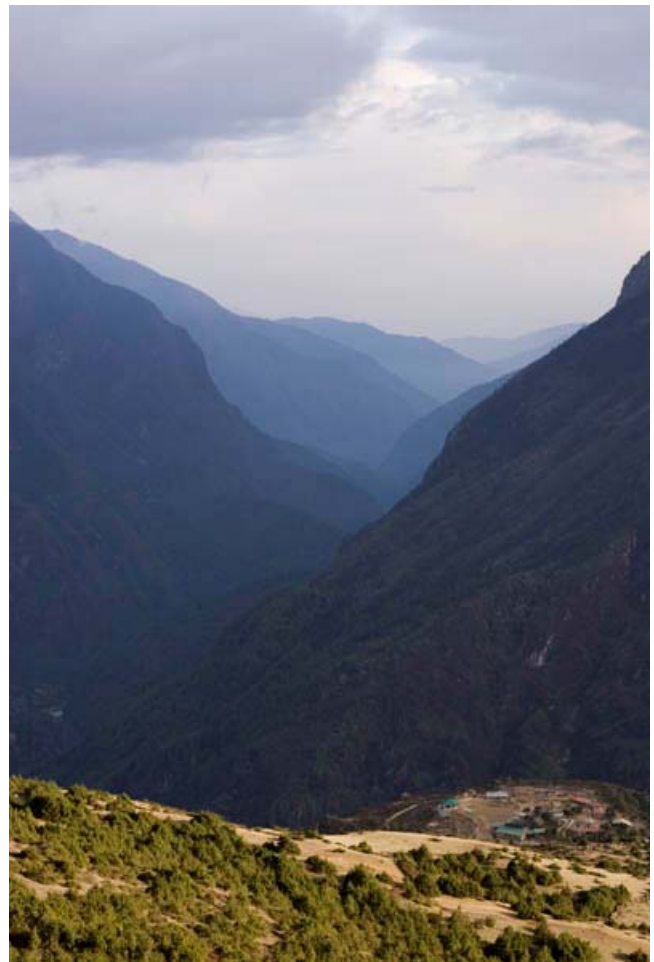
Little boy at Sonam Lodge on the trail from Jiri to Namche, Khari La.



Nuptse-Lhotse wall from above Namche.



Fresh snow on a peak from my bedroom window in the lodge I stayed at in Namche.



Looking back down the valley I hiked up from above Namche.



Snow capped peak revealed through the clouds, Namche.



Rhododendrons blooming along the trail from Namche to Chukhung, near Tengboche.



Mani stones and a stupa along the trail from Namche to Chukhung, near Pangboche.



Stupa and prayer flags above upper Pangboche.



Snow capped peaks through clouds from upper Pangboche.



My first definitive view of Everest (the top of Everest is visible in the center of the picture) on the trek, along the trail between Namche and Chukhung just outside upper Pangboche.



Buddhist mantras on a stone along the trail from Namche to Chukhung, near Dingboche.



Stupa along the trail from Namche to Chukhung, near Dingboche.



Yak skull scarves and mani stones along the trail from Namche to Chukhung, near Dingboche.



Prayer flags above Dingboche towards Ama Dablam.



Stupa above Dingboche.



Me on top of Nangkartshang peak (5083m/ 16,672 ft), with Ama Dablam in the background, Dingboche



View of Ama Dablam amidst clouds from Nangkartshang peak (5083m), Dingboche



View of Taboche (far left) and Cholatse (center) peaks from Nangkartshang peak, Dingboche.



View of Ama Dablam from the top of Nangkartshang peak (5083m/ 16,672 ft), Dingboche.



Night view towards Taboche peak from Chukhung.



View of Taboche peak from Chukhung.