

Mt. Everest Base Camp Trek

9/24/2014 – 10/11/2014

Jim Kiel – Barnsboro, NJ

Bob Dragon – Jackson, NJ

This was without a doubt one of the most difficult treks I have ever taken in my life. The experience was fantastic and will be remembered forever. The scenery during our 11 day trek in the Himalayan Mountains was magnificent. The weather was perfect with crystal clear mornings, late afternoon clouds and occasional showers after a day's trek. The trail varied from moderate to hazardous with about 70% of it difficult. In order to gain approximately 1,000 feet in elevation we typically descended 2,000 feet and climbed 3,000 feet every day. Our two acclimatization days involved steep climbing of about 1,800 feet and then returning to our lodge. I truly believe that our preparation and training with the high altitude mask over the previous 7 months made this trek possible. We did not get any signs of altitude sickness even at 18,000 feet thanks to Acetazolamide and constant hydration. We avoided meat and dairy products during the trek because of the inconsistent refrigeration. Overall the food, mostly noodles, vegetables, pizza, eggs and porridge was very good. Our trekking guide, Ashish Gurung, and two porters from Himalayan Glacier Trekking were outstanding. They were by our side during the entire trek encouraging and assisting when necessary. As we approached Mt. Everest Base Camp, I'll never forget these words when Bob said "Jim, this is your trek, now lead us in". We achieved our goal at 11:45 on October 5th. It was a real emotional high.



This adventure actually began in December 2011. I read about a trek to Mt Everest Base Camp in Travelzoo. I had hiked about 1,000 miles on the Appalachian Trail and read most of the books on climbing Everest and thought "that would be an interesting hike". I didn't give it much further thought until December 2012 when I saw the same advertisement. My wife Eileen said "Why don't you do it!" In early 2013, I started my research and locked in on Himalayan Glacier Trekking as the guide I wanted to use. I estimated the total cost at approximately \$6,000 and determined that late September or early October would be the best timeframe for the trek. My next goal was finding someone who could take three weeks to accompany me. I asked all of my hiking friends and relatives but nobody was willing to make the commitment. In May 2013, Eileen and I attended my good friend Bob Dragon's daughter's wedding and I popped the question to him. "Bob, how would you like to hike into Mt. Everest Base Camp with me"? He thought about it for about five seconds and said "I'll do it". Bob's the type of guy who never backs down on a commitment. After a very tough day during the actual trek, he told me that he wasn't going to invite me to any more weddings because he was afraid of what I might ask him to do!

The next 15 months were spent planning, buying the required hiking gear, training and more planning. As a retired engineer, I thrive on details and organization. Bob, a manufacturing director, was glad that I did that but was only interested in the overview. Finally, on September 24, 2014, after all the details were in place, we started our adventure.

We flew QATAR Airways to Doha, QATAR. After a brief layover, we then flew QATAR to Kathmandu, Nepal. QATAR Airways was excellent and I would highly recommend them for international travel to that part of the world. After about 24 hours of travel and 9-3/4 hrs. time difference, with only minor catnaps, we arrived in Kathmandu. I felt like a walking zombie getting my luggage, going through customs and locating our trekking guide. Once in their car I felt I could finally relax. Little did I know I was about to experience Kathmandu which is a very busy city of 6 million people. They drive on the wrong side of the road (wrong to us but right to them), constantly beep and honk and surprisingly respect each other's right of way. There are no traffic lights, no stop signs, no street signs and only an occasional traffic cop. The thousands of motorcycles had up to four people, cabs had fifteen plus and busses too many to count. Sitting in the front of the car, in what would be the driver's side in the US, the experience was unbelievable. There was no road rage, no accidents, and not even any near misses. Finally, we arrived at Hotel Shanker where we would spend the next three nights. After a light dinner and a few Everest beers, I crashed. The next morning, after breakfast which was an outstanding buffet, our guide met us. We walked a few blocks to the Himalayan Glacier Trekking office for our orientation and to pick up some additional gear. We had to cross the extremely busy streets a few times. If I thought riding in the car was exciting, crossing the street was something else. I felt like Frogger in that old video game. There is no gap in the traffic, you just walk across and all the motorcycles and cars just swerve around you.



Power failures are also very common in Kathmandu. After looking at a typical telephone pole you could maybe see why. Again, everyone seemed to respect the maze of wires and didn't touch them except (hopefully) a certified electrician.

That evening we had a welcome dinner at a very nice Nepalese restaurant. The food was excellent.

The next day we had a guided tour of Kathmandu which is about 70% Hindu. It has a rich religious history. We visited many temples including the monkey temple. Street vendors were everywhere and would follow you for blocks trying to sell their wares. The further you walked, the lower the price. Finally, we just gave them a few dollars to let us walk in peace.



We actually started our Trek early Sunday morning September 28th. The domestic airport in Kathmandu was an organized zoo. Everyone seemed to know what was happening except for Bob and me. We hung onto our guide Ashish like glue. After going through about four levels of security and weighing everything we had including ourselves, we finally boarded our twin prop plane to Lukla (9,186 ft.). The 35 minute flight was smooth, but the landing was hard with instant engine reversal and breaking. The runway is very short and sloped about 20 degrees. Everyone clapped and cheered when we landed.



We picked up our duffle bags, met our trekking porters and stopped at a local inn for hot tea and water before our trek to Phakding (8,750 ft.). Our first trek took only 2-3/4 hours vs. 3 to 4 hours in the plan. I think Ashish was pleasantly surprised with our training and conditioning. We both felt good. We had lunch, vegetable noodle soup and apple pie, and dinner, onion soup and mushroom pizza at our tea house and spent our free time talking to other hikers and organizing our hiking gear. The food was very good. Ashish surprised us with fresh fruit at every meal which he had brought from Kathmandu. He reminded us that we must eat hardy and drink 4 liters of water per day. With the Acetazolamide, a diuretic we were taking to prevent altitude sickness, and constant hydration, frequent day and night bathroom breaks became routine for the next 11 days.

Up at 5 AM, we were on the trail by 7 following a nice breakfast of porridge (oatmeal), fried eggs and hot tea. We faced a tough day with a 5 to 6 hour trek to Namche Bazaar (11,280 ft.). The day started out relatively easy with fairly good trail conditions. We entered Sagamatha Park after about 3 hours of trekking. We had previously provided Ashish passport size photos

as all visitors have to formally register when they enter the park and check out when they leave for personal accountability.



Shortly after entering the park we stopped for lunch. Ashish told us to have a good lunch as we faced a tough climb. I knew we hadn't gained much elevation with the up and down morning. I figured we faced at least a 2,500 ft. climb. Shortly after lunch we saw in the distance Sir Edmund Hillary's bridge which was out of service for trekkers and the replacement bridge 500 ft. or so above it. The rock trail up was staring us in the face.



The long climb started. Bob was a real trouper, establishing a slow steady pace and forging ahead. I, on the other hand, climbed a bit faster but had to take frequent breaks to catch my breath and drink water.



Finally, after 3 hours of steady climbing, we entered Namche Bazaar which is the Sherpa capital. Bob said that this was one of the toughest days in his life. Little did we know what lay ahead.



We checked into our rooms and then relaxed in the dining area with some hot tea. After about two hours we walked into the market area to look around. There were numerous shops with all kinds of handmade items. We decided to do all our shopping here when we returned. Bob found a barber shop and decided to get a shave while I continued to look around. After a refreshing shave, we went to a local bakery for some delicious sweet rolls. On the way back to our tea house, we observed the free local Laundromat.



Up to this point, it had been slightly cloudy during the day with a mild rain in the early evening. That all changed the next morning. Up early as usual, I went outside to check the weather. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was crystal clear with high snow covered mountains all around us. I ran back inside to get my camera when I saw Bob just coming down for breakfast. I said "Bob, you have to go outside. You won't believe it!"



We spent an extra day in Namche Bazaar for high altitude acclimation. After breakfast, Ashish led us on a day hike up an adjacent mountain about 1,700 feet for some nice views. We could see mountains near Everest but Everest itself was covered in clouds. Later that day we met some nice people also on their way to Mt. Everest Base Camp. There were three women from Hong Kong, a couple from Boston and another from Switzerland. We talked, played cards and shared stories. We would see these same people several times over the next eight days.



Early the next day we were on the trail again to Tengboche (12,694 ft.). It was now Wednesday October 1st. The trek that day started out with a climb and then decent to cross a glacier melt-off river. We walked on a mountain trail which was under construction, stopped for lunch and reached Tengboche in the early afternoon. Each village we stayed in usually had a historic place to visit. Tengboche had the biggest Buddhist Monastery in the Khumbu region. We visited the Monastery during an afternoon prayer session, said a few prayers ourselves for a safe trek and returned to our tea house. Later that afternoon while in the dining area, everyone suddenly rushed to a large window overlooking the mountains. What's happening, I asked? Someone said "you can see Everest". Excited, I joined the group and there it was in all its majesty! Bob and I got our cameras and went outside to capture a few pictures. Everest (29,029 ft.) was in the background with Nuptse (25,791 ft.) in the foreground and Lhotse (27,940 ft.) to the right. What a beautiful site!

The next morning we were up at 5 AM as usual, had breakfast at 6 and were on the trail at 7 to Dingboche (14,300 ft.). At this elevation, some elements of altitude sickness are experienced by everyone. Bob and I both felt good, no headaches or upset stomach, however we were losing our appetites and sleeping became more difficult. Ashish instructed us to try to eat as much as we could as we needed the energy and to rest even though sound sleep was difficult. He also continued to comment how strong we were. Dingboche was the second location where we would take an extra day for acclimatization. At 14,000 feet we were approaching tree line. The trail became increasingly more difficult. The terrain was different! Steep rocky mountains in the background and shorter sandy loose rock and gravel foothills by the trail. There were a lot of recent avalanches we had to cross plus loose rocks, sand and gravel on the trail. Sound footing was a constant issue. This coupled with a narrow trail cut 3 to 6 feet wide in the side of a mountain with a sharp drop-off forced you to focus at every step. If I wanted to look at the beautiful scenery, I stopped walking. We arrived at Dingboche early that afternoon. After 5 days, the routine of daily trekking was settling in. Our friends from Boston were at the same tea house and they said that the Hong Kong women should get there the following day.



At breakfast the next day we met a group of eight Germans, six men and two women, who planned to summit Ama Dablam. They left that morning for the Ama Dablam base camp and a three week summit attempt. This is a very difficult mountain to climb with high sheer sides. We wished them good luck.

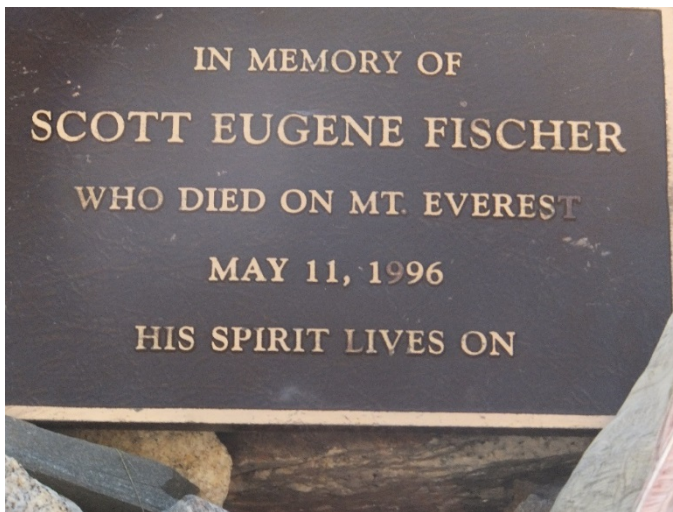


Ama Dablam (Mother Mountain)

After breakfast, Ashish led us on another acclimatization hike up the almost vertical side of a neighboring mountain.



After two hours and an additional 1,800 feet of elevation, Bob and I both ran out of gas. The top was another hour and 900 feet. We slowly descended, planting our poles with every step. I believe it was during this descent that Bob started to have soreness problems with his right knee. He had had surgery three times on the knee after a childhood water skiing accident. Today we had hiked higher than any place in the Swiss Alps per our friends from Boston who had a programmed altimeter. The women from Hong Kong arrived later that afternoon so we spent the rest of the day playing cards and relaxing. Each night was getting progressively colder. The only heat in the tea house was a small pot belly stove in the dining area. It was now in the mid 20's. I slept with my hiking clothes on deep inside my down sleeping bag. The next morning, Ashish told us that if we continued to trek strong, he would recommend that we skip our stop at Duglha and continue on to Lobuche (16,207 ft.). This would be a net gain of almost 2,000 feet in altitude. Bob and I were both feeling good when we passed Duglha so we continued on to Lobuche. Shortly out of Duglha, we started to climb and climb and climb. I think we gained all 2,000 feet in one long climb. At the top, we trekked past a memorial for several mountaineers who had died while trying to summit Mt. Everest. It was a somber moment. I took a picture of the Scott Fisher memorial. Scott, a renowned Everest guide, died on Everest when a sudden storm occurred in May 1996.



It was a beautiful day and the Himalaya Mountains became more majestic as we climbed higher above tree line. We arrived in Lobuche and had lunch. Ashish didn't feel that we hiked enough. So after lunch we climbed another mountain adjacent to the tea house where we were staying. To our surprise, we could see Mt. Everest Base Camp from the top. We were now pumped as our goal was only a day away.



That night we joined our hiking friends and made banners. Bob had made some banners ahead of time and brought markers for us to use. I used a pillow case I had brought. We also met Miss Nepal that night. She was also trekking into the Base Camp the following day.

It was a dark and cold morning at 5 AM on that October 5th day. I packed my duffle bag and headed to the dining area for hot tea. After our usual breakfast of porridge and fried eggs, we hit the trail. It would be a long day, 8 to 9 hours. I elected to have my porter carry my day pack and Ashish carried my water. We arrived at Gorak Shep (16,971 ft.) at 9:30 AM. Ashish said we were making good time. After a light lunch, we headed to Mt. Everest Base Camp at 10:30. It was a very difficult hike. We climbed up to about 18,000 feet and crossed several recent avalanches with loose rocks. Our adrenalin must have been flowing because I just don't remember the dangers. After about 1-1/2 hours, we were within reach of our goal. Only one more avalanche, the worst of them all, and an exposed glacier to cross (wet boots and loose

rocks don't mix) and we would be there. Fifteen minutes later Bob said "Jim, this is your trek now lead us in". There were about twenty other trekkers there. This was the highlight of our trip. We had made it! After a few minutes of hugs and handshakes we toasted with some great juice Ashish had brought and started taking pictures. The sun was still out but it was starting to cloud up.





After about an hour, we decided to head back to Gorak Shep. It had just started to snow lightly and it was turning colder. Walking the trail was bad enough with dry shoes. The trek back to our tea house was very difficult. My porter stayed by my side the entire way back holding my hand for added stability on several occasions. I didn't fall once but there were several near misses. It took us over two hours to get back to Gorak Shep. We were both exhausted. Bob wasn't feeling well and his right knee was hurting. I wasn't my best either. It started to snow harder and our friends hadn't returned yet. Finally, everybody got back safely. I took some pictures of the Kumbu glacier on the way back. The 40 foot high ice towers were absolutely amazing.





A trek to Kala Patthar was scheduled for early the next morning to see the sunrise over Everest. It started at 4 AM and involved another really tough hike. The ground was already covered with snow and I just couldn't see myself climbing another mountain in the dark on newly fallen snow. We bailed out as did about 50% of the trekkers in the tea house. Of those who decided to go only about 60% made it to the summit.

We were just finishing breakfast when the trekkers started to return from Kala Patthar. They all said how difficult it was and that it was questionable if the risk was worth the reward. Bob's knee was really starting to bother him more and more. He was wearing my spare knee brace, using an anti-inflammatory medication and Ashish would spray it with a chilling agent every few hours. We decided to push for Lukla in three days vs. the scheduled four days. This meant we would be hiking 12 to 13 miles a day. We wanted to stop in Namche Bazaar to purchase gifts for our family on the way back. Ashish reworked our return schedule as we started to descend. Our acclimation paid dividends during our decent. Our blood remained oxygen rich and we really didn't get tired. Bob and I both used our poles a lot to take the strain off our knees during the decent. We also had our porters carry our backpacks to reduce the downward thrust of each step.

That night we stayed in Pangboche. On the trail early again the next morning, we headed to Namche Bazar. The trail was a little tougher and Bob was hurting. We reached Namche Bazar by midafternoon and decided to start an early celebration with some liquid refreshment/ pain

killers e.g. Everest Beer. After a few rounds, we went into the market area to purchase our gifts. I went back to the shop I had stopped in on the way up. The shopkeeper was so nice as were all the indigenous people we met during our trek. She helped us select local hand crafted items. After shopping we went back to our tea house to continue our celebration. By this time, all of our friends had reached Namche Bazar and joined in. We built our own Mt. Everest complete with the Hillary Step out of, what else, but Everest Beer cans.



Later that night, Ashish, Bob and I had a serious discussion about our options the next day. We all knew we had a very tough decent leaving Namche Bazar. Bob wasn't sure he was up for it. Ashish discussed an evacuation helicopter but no decision was made. I had counted thirty-three helicopter evacuations along the trail up to that point. I could see in Bob's face that he wanted to finish the trek and not be the 34th. Ashish agreed that we would decide the next morning.

It was now Wednesday morning October 8th. Bob was feeling a little better and some of the swelling had gone down over night. He knew he would feel his best early that day. After breakfast, I went back to the market place to get a good luck scarf from the shop keeper and Bob started down the trail. After about two hours we met up and slowly descended together. After an additional two hours we reached the bottom of the long decent. Bob was a real trouper! We shortly stopped for lunch and a well-deserved break. After lunch, we continued on to Lukla. The trail after lunch was slightly uphill. We finally arrived in Lukla at 4:00 and were both totally exhausted.



That night we both had barbecue chicken at Ashish's recommendation. It was outstanding. Bob and I decided to cancel our scheduled side trip to Chitwan and try to get an earlier flight home. We had completed our trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp two days early and asked Ashish if we could get an earlier flight back to Kathmandu. Our friends were flying back to Kathmandu the next day and would have the celebration dinner later that night. We had hoped to join

them. Once again Ashish did his magic. He got us on a late morning flight back to Kathmandu, made arrangement to go to the QATAR Airlines office in Kathmandu to get an earlier flight home and reserved rooms for us in Hotel Shanker where our luggage was stored. The next morning we said goodbye to our porters and thanked them for their dedicated service. We met up with some of our friends at the airport and after minor delays, we were on our way back to Kathmandu.



Our Trekking Team



Hong Kong Friends and Miss Nepal

The flight back to Kathmandu was smooth and uneventful. The plane circled a few times over Kathmandu and we had great views of the Himalayan Mountain range. We obtained an earlier flight home and then went to the hotel to get ready for the celebration dinner with Himalayan Glacier Trekking and our Hong Kong friends. The company and dinner were great. The next morning after breakfast we headed to the airport for our long flight home. The memory and images of this adventure will remain with me forever.

Reflection

Himalayan Glacier Trekking did an outstanding job. Their planning, facilities selection and communication throughout the entire trek was tremendous. Ashish, our guide, was without a doubt the best. Our two porters did a great job and were by our side when needed most. Our training and preparation was rewarded throughout the trek. Altitude sickness was a non-issue and we remained generally healthy for the entire timeframe. We met people from around the world who all had the same goal. It was truly an experience of a lifetime.





Jim Kiel - October 29, 2014

Photos by Jim Kiel, Bob Dragon and Ashish Gurung