





ON TOP OF THE WORLD

**IN NEPAL, A TRAVELER LEARNS
THAT EXPERIENCING THE
BEAUTY AND MAJESTY OF THE
HIMALAYAS UP CLOSE IS ONE
OF THE RAREST LUXURIES**

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REK” AND “LUXURY” ARE WORDS THAT YOU DON’T USUALLY ASSOCIATE with each other. How can trekking be a lavish experience when the definition of luxury—habitually indulging in comfort and pleasure—and

the essence of mountain hiking are conflicting? I sought the perfect balance of both, but it was only after our fourth visit to the Himalayas that we were able to discover the winning formula for luxury trekking.

Any person familiar with the Himalayas will tell you that the word “luxury” has a different definition in this place. In this remote part of the world, it can often mean things we usually take for granted: a hot shower, electricity to charge the various electronic devices we simply can’t live without, a soft mattress, and a heated room with your own private bath.

Ultimately, my goal was to see Everest up close, but the idea of conquering the altitude and difficult terrain, and the prospect of having to rough it out in teahouses put this dream in the back burner. I like my private room, my comfortable mattress, and my heated bath. A boot camp was not my idea of a holiday, but an Everest trek is something that I really had to do. So when I chanced upon information on luxury lodges in the

Everest region, I immediately booked my flight out.

A few months after, I was up in the air, headed to Lukla. The view—snowy peaks of the Himalayan range—rendered me speechless. So much so that I almost didn’t notice that the plane was about to land in one of the world’s most dangerous airports. Nobody warned me about the death-defying landing on Lukla, a village sitting on a ledge between the mountains at 2,800 meters. There was a mere 500 meters between the tarmac and mountains.

Still shaky as my feet landed on the airstrip, I breathed the clean air. Our guide, Narayan, found his way through the crowds and collected our luggage. First stop: Lukla Luxury Lodge for morning tea. Our guide, not used to the existence of such luxury lodges, brought us to another lodge with almost the same name. When I saw the place, I wanted to catch the next flight back to Kathmandu. It was dark, icy cold, and looked more like a barn than a lodge. This was not what I signed up for! Seeing we were ready to bolt, Narayan realized he had brought us to the wrong place.

At the right lodge, we had our morning tea and cakes, and met our porters, one of them still nursing a hangover. Weighing about 120 pounds and standing at not more than five feet, four inches, my porter could easily carry two 20-kilo Ortlieb bags with all my worldly essentials. I traded in my fashion bag for a functional backpack, and then we started on our Everest trail, strolling between brightly painted

teahouses and vegetable patches, with vast pine-clad mountains cradling the valley on either side.

Passing by lovely Sherpa settlements, along gentle undulating trails, and enjoying the marvelous scenery of the Dudh Kosi valley, we arrived in the village of Phakding, located at 2,652 meters. The snowcapped mountain ranges served as the backdrop of our adventure.

This definitely was no Route 40. This was not a road less traveled. Although December was considered the low season (seeing around 1,000-1,500 trekkers a month versus the close to 10,000 that come during the peak months), there were plenty of groups of all nationalities traveling up and down the dusty track with carved pathways and manmade steps. It seemed like a German autostrada, albeit a highway where everybody moved back to make way for passing yaks.

Joining the tourists were local Nepalese porters, small teenage boys and stooped senior citizens

included. All of them help the trekkers. As there are no roads, carrying supplies such as kerosene, beer, and boxes of American chocolate bars on their backs was the only way to get supplies further up the trails.

Catching my breath, I requested that we break for lunch. We are given a voluminous menu book that would make Martha Stewart proud. Imagine eggs cooked in 20 different ways! We opted, though, for the traditional dahl baht—basically, lentil soup and rice with potato.

We trod on for approximately three more hours to Monjo, a picturesque village with a handful of lodges. It was a feast for the senses: the sounds of plodding porters with transistor radios held to their ears blended well with the cacophonous mix of myriad languages. Porters, loads aside, rested outside teahouses as weather-beaten, windblown trekkers wound their way back to Lukla, prayer flags a-flutter. The brightly painted teahouses and of

course, the majestic scenery, are memories to treasure of this first day on the trail.

After six hours of walking, a warm welcome, along with a hot cup of tea and homemade cookies, awaited me at the next luxury lodge. Sometimes, it is in the smallest things that one finds pleasure and comfort. Additional surprises were my furnished room—complete with gas stove—the rare ensuite bathroom, electric blankets, hot-water bottle, fresh linen, and soft mattress. Such things are rare luxuries for locals and tourists alike.

The hot, revitalizing, eco-friendly shower was the best way to ease my aching muscles. I thought I was in good shape but clearly, the first part of the trip had drained me. The dinner that night was a buffet meal with soup, freshly baked bread, noodles, curry, vegetables, and cakes. At night, warm electric blankets lulled me to a dreamless sleep.

I woke up the next day completely revitalized and





acclimatized. I psyched myself up for a hard uphill walk, and was forewarned that it would be tough day. We climbed from 2,840 meters to 3,450 meters, and arrived in Tashinga, a site framed with pine trees and said to be the spiritual dwelling of the Khumbu region's patron demigod.

Taking it slowly and enjoying the scenery as we hiked along the river, we crossed and re-crossed suspension bridges until the climb to Namche Bazaar, a busy Sherpa market town that hugs a mountain hollow, began. It was a long, steep climb. I felt the air getting thinner and with the altitude, breathing got more laborious. My pace started slowing, and I felt like I was about to take my last breath. I ended up



needing several stops to catch my breath, panting and almost wanting to get on the back of my guide, until we finally reached Namche Bazaar, at the heart of Khumbu, our first stop before trekking on to Tashinga.

After a well-deserved lunch break, and some time to look around the amazing amphitheater, we took the trail to our next luxury



lodge. As we left



Namche Bazaar, I couldn't help but be blown away—the first full glimpse of the Everest range was a moment that seemed frozen in time. Nothing can quite prepare

you for the amazing sight of the mountains standing proud against the clear blue sky (To the Nepalis, the sky is Sagarmatha, goddess of the sky).

The next morning, we headed for Tengboche Monastery, a Tibetan Buddhist convent. It was another hard day and uphill climb. A gentle descent to the Dudh Kosi River, passing through a rhododendron forest, and another lunch-burning ascent, took us to the monastery, high up at 3,870 meters.

This, I must say, was the highlight of the trip. What a vision. Against pristine skies lay



Everest, almost at the base of the magnificent Mount Ama Dablam. Ama Dablam is one of the most loved and admired mountains in Khumbu. The fact that one can walk right to its foothills and enjoy the aura of the mountain is a real gift from Mother Nature.

Leaving Pangboche, we returned to Namche Bazaar, taking the trail leading to Khumjung village. The path leads gently up the shallow valley and into Khumjung, the education center of Khumbu.

We had lunch at Syangboche Airport and then, we headed northwest. The valley ahead is extremely rugged but beautiful. The last half-hour climb to Mende was short but very steep. Thank God, after days of walking, I was finally in shape for this. The awesome location of the lodge and the commanding view it gave made every step of the climb worthwhile. An added treat that night was a feast and a cultural show. The following days were a blissful



the wild majesty of the Himalayas' famous peaks, Ama Dablam and Everest. The monastery, a pilgrimage stop, is still active, and pilgrims find their way up here to make offerings and receive blessings.

A scenic walk took us to our luxury lodge in Pangboche, located right along the trail to



blur as we retraced our steps to Lukla. In the Everest region, luxury is by no means up to global tourism standards, but for an area as remote and poor as this, where a hot shower is rare, my stay could be compared to one at the Four Seasons. The difficult trek and high altitude made the small, extra comforts welcome treats after a hard day on the trails. Flying back to Kathmandu, where a marble bath was ready for our worn-out, yet fulfilled, bodies, I felt a sense of satisfaction as I remembered the nights of the trek adventure, where I lay under the warm comfort of my blanket, knowing that it was the only way to end each day in Everest.❧





GETTING THERE

The writer flew via Thai Airways to Kathmandu via Bangkok. The writer traveled with the luxury adventure group Sea to Summit Explorations (contact information: www.seatosummitadv.net; [63] 917-8687971, [632] 815-8233) on its 14-day Luxury Everest Panorama Adventure.

WHEN TO GO

The best months for a journey are October, November, and March. You can expect good views and it will be warm. In spring, you have the bonus of the rhododendrons and azaleas being out. Winter can be cold, but views are clear and there are fewer people on the trails.

STAYING THERE

Dwarikas Hotel, Kathmandu, Nepal