

TREKKING WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Gokyo & Everest, March–April 2012

Monday 19 March

It was just another stinky, polluted Kathmandu day for the airport pick-ups but we could see the Langtang Himal on the drive to Kapan, as a strong breeze cleared the valley a little. Russ was off his Singapore flight very early but Doug and Marianne soon followed. It was so good to have all three back in Nepal. Doug and Marianne had trekked in the Everest region before but not so extensively. Russ was on the April 2010 Annapurna Circuit. I sent them off in a minibus to the Shambala and waited for the Thai flight bringing Frank, Ian and Helen. I've trekked with Frank now many times and he is acting as 'Number 2' on this trek. Helen had trekked Everest before but quite a few years ago. Ian was our only 'new boy'. Our plan was to trek to Gokyo with enough time to have a go at Gokyo Ri. Then some of the clients would do the Cho La Pass, Everest Base Camp and then have a crack at Island Peak. 25 days. The rest of us were not slouches either.

We would backtrack from Gokyo, via Phortse then climb the awesome high trail to Pangboche. From there we would hook up with the 'A' Team, maybe at Dingboche and spend a couple of nights with them before they set off to climb Island Peak and we set off to do the Everest Base Camp. This was huge.

On our first night in Kathmandu we walked over to Bouda and joined the swirling throng of Tibetans as they circled the great white stupa at dusk. It was Ian's first trip to Nepal and I think his first day was something of an eye-opener. 'Culture shock' doesn't begin to cover it. After a great curry dinner at the Garden Kitchen Restaurant I took some very tired, jet-lagged customers home through darkened streets for a much-needed sleep. They slept well despite the dogs, the early morning traffic and the very early morning prayer ritual; it is only the one guy but he has a conch shell with a rather piercing tone – and the bells, the bells!!



Our group in high spirits at Tengboche

While the customers slept I schlepped out to the airport one last time. I thought Netra and I were early – we were rapt to see that the coffee bar was still open. Sadly, Barbara had been out for half an hour and the sharks were circling. Her eyes were watering in the polluted air but the sight of tears just drew the sharks in for the kill. Luckily, we swept her away to a cosy room at the Muna Cottage.

Tuesday 20 March

After a sunny breakfast and a bit of gear-checking we bussed into Thamel for our 'big day out'. Always a bit chaotic, we got through it all surprisingly well. Banking went smoothly – Netra had to bring me over a million rupees. Pity it was in 500 rupee notes – it weighed over a kilo. We went to my favourite trekking shop. No bargaining, just sensible prices from the start. Doug replaced his original sleeping bag which was way too heavy and bulky. Russ and Helen bought light-as-a-feather super down jackets. I bought the porters much-needed sox and buffs. Too tired for sightseeing after all that shopping we opted for a really big lunch at the Weizen. A quick

trawl through the supermarket and the pharmacy – everybody now had their own supply of 'first aid' for tummy troubles. I got to put my feet up for an hour (to write this of course).

Wednesday 21 March

Since the clients got all their 'personal' shopping etc. done yesterday we had a 'free day' on our hands today. Netra kindly offered to take everyone up to Nagarkot for breakfast up on the valley rim and then a long, downhill walk to Changu Narayan – the oldest temple in the valley. I heard afterwards that the group 'hardly stopped' on the way down. A bit of a contrast to the way I do it – Coca-Cola here, cup of tea there, juice at the bottom of the steps. I think Netra was a bit overly-conscious of his looming 5.30 appointment at Pashupathi Rotary. He made it of course; the funds WERE transferred from Australia.

Meanwhile I pulled together the final threads of our trekking plans and tried, in vain, to find a pair of Crocs (fake, naturally). I had inadvertently loaned



Magnolias in bloom along the trail near Lukla

mine to a customer on the Muktinath trek. I found some hideous plastic chapals for \$2. We held our pre-trek briefing in the Shambala's garden. We seem to be ready.

Thursday 22 March

A nice clear flying day saw us at the domestic terminal of Tribhuvan Airport at 6.30. Muna and Djangbo made a super breakfast of chapattis and omelets in the garden at Muna Cottage where I stay. Where else could you get such a yummy breakfast at 5.30 in the morning? Lahar and Tham were staying at my place and Bir soon showed up.

It was the cleanest run through the airport I've ever had. No delays, no problems (unless you count Marianne's sewing scissors or Doug's leaking water-bottle) and then a beautiful, trouble-free flight to Lukla. It's a very short, tricky, uphill, airstrip so it always feels good to nail the landing – eliciting a big cheer from relieved passengers. It was fabulous to see familiar faces at Lukla airport. We had Tham, Lahar and Bir with us. Kancha, Jeet, Akhal and Ramesh were waiting for us, along with a new guy Deek (Akhal's brother). We took a coffee at a lodge overlooking the spectacular landing strip and soon paired up porters and customers. By 10 am we were off on trek.

The first session to Thado Koshi was perfect. Sunny weather (t-shirts) and not many trekkers on the trail. I twisted my ankle pretty badly on some uneven stairs (what other kind are there in Nepal?). I thought I had gotten away with it. Wrong!

Up until lunch we were in good shape but Helen looked pale and didn't want to eat. She was soon in trouble. Nepali tummy trouble. Frank wasn't feeling 100% either. Some of our group had already headed off to Phakding but I decided to leave Helen in a nearby lodge with an indoor loo. Barbara, very kindly I thought, offered to stay with her. Frank decided to stop here as well 'just in case'. By the time I had them settled in, and Kancha given instructions for the morning, I realised, as I came back up the steep stairs, that my ankle was almost certainly sprained. Bugger! It got progressively worse as I made the short but hot climb up to Phakding. Frank's tummy bug was fortunately short-lived and he arrived a couple of hours later; Doug and Marianne also had a touch of what Helen had. We appeared to be the 'walking wounded'. The Kala Pattar Lodge has had a serious

upgrade with double rooms out back with attached bathrooms. I was upstairs and despite a huge bowl of freezing water to soak my ankle, could barely hobble to the loo with a walking stick. Bugger again!!

Friday 23 March

On a chilly morning we were drawn to the sunny terrace while we waited for Barbara and Helen to join us. Great to see Helen much improved – though still feeling a bit 'fragile'. With my ankle completely kaput last night – as in unable to put any weight on it AT ALL – I expected I might have to wait in Phakding for a day or two and then catch up to the rest of the group. I strapped it carefully, with Lahar's help, and walked pretty tentatively for the first hour. It just kept improving all day. As I write this at the lovely Nirvana Lodge in Jorsale, I am feeling pretty lucky. The hot showers are being recommended up and down the corridors and apple pie has been ordered for dinner.

We indoctrinated Lahar and Kancha into the finer points of 500 tonight. With a couple of rum and cokes to lubricate the proceedings we had a good time. Ages since I had a fun night playing 500 in good company.

Saturday 24 March

The new trail from Jorsale up to the bridge is quite a climb, only descending to the bridge at the very last minute. I noticed that the locals were still using the old trail so will probably try that on the way back down. (We did). A yak train was close behind us for the first hour. We got a few good photos of them as they crossed the bridge then hot-footed it out of the way of the exit stairs where I've heard of a few serious accidents with yaks in the past. I stayed at the back all day. No choice really with my (miraculously recovering) sprained ankle. I don't really think I would have gone any faster under 'normal' circumstances. It is a bugger of a climb. It didn't help that I forgot the biscuits and sat on my boiled egg. Barbara, with a worsening cough (brought from Sydney), kept me company and Marianne was never very far ahead of us. With lots of stops and a cup of tea at the checkpoint, we were in Namche by 1 pm. I thought that was quite respectable but Russ, Helen and Doug had been there for two hours and Frank and Ian weren't that far behind them. What a crew!

There was a bit of shopping in the afternoon – Namche is a very big village. Helen washed some of



The climb to Namche Bazaar begins from this high bridge, about 80 metres above the Dudh Kosi river



Ama Dablam is a prominent feature of the view from Kangzuma

her clothes in the river – local style. The fog rolled in about 4 pm and tiredness dampened our dinner table conversation.

Sunday 25 March

Spectacularly clear morning. Six customers and half the porters have gone up to the viewpoint to see the 'big peaks', Everest, Lhotse, Ama Dablam, Kangtega and Thamserku. It is something that has to be seen to be believed, especially at first light. Lucky Russ has the end room at the lodge with another great view which catches the first rays of sunshine in the morning.

After breakfast some of our customers trekked out to Thamo for lunch. Helen had one of her 'magic moments' (she has a few) at the Ani Gomba. There was a fair bit of bakery visiting in the later afternoon. Quite a few world class coffee bars have opened up serving coffee and cake to a hungry clientele. I bought some gloves for porters and lollies for the trek – our favorites – butterscotch and Fox's Glacier Mints.

Monday 26 March

We decided to go only as far as Kangzuma today. Ian has a very stiff neck – relieved a little with a massage from Kancha. Barbara's URT infection is no better but she staggered around to Kangzuma with us and then spent the afternoon in bed. We may have to make an alternative plan for her tomorrow.

A really lively group of Iranian climbers were in our lodge for lunch. Much fun, singing and even a little dancing. Beautiful people with gorgeous and inspiring photos of Island Peak.

It is my first time at the Thamserku Lodge. Ang Tashi at the Ama Dablam Lodge next door is not very impressed with our new choice but the boys tell me that they themselves are not well-treated there. I am a bit cheesed off with myself for not noticing this before. Always something new to learn. Half our crew has gone up to Kumjung. They returned with great photos of pheasants. I've had a bonus today – fabulously clear signal on my mobile phone so long chats back home to Eric in Germany – hi babe!

Tuesday 27 March

Sadly, had to let the group go on ahead without me today. Didn't like it much but Barbara was too sick to be left behind on her own. Frank Jones, who had

encountered little to trouble him as Number 2, now finds himself Group Leader with a rucksack full of 500 rupee notes. I had a call from Bir's phone to say that the group had made Mong Danda for morning tea and were heading down to Phortse Tenga for overnight lodgings. One problem solved.

Barbara felt she really ought to see the Doctor up at Kunde Clinic (the first Hillary clinic) but balked at the \$50 being asked for a pony. 'Tell them I'll walk' she croaked. It took three hours, walking very slowly, but was well worth the effort. Firstly because Kumjung and Kunde were a great sight but also because Doctor Kami Sherpa was a treasure. After a very careful examination the diagnosis was bronchitis. Lungs clear. Heart rate good, especially for a 62-year-old woman who has just climbed 300 metres over three long hours to see the doctor. Azithromycin was prescribed. Luckily, Barbara was already two days into the course. By the time we got back to the lodge at Kangzuma, Barb was already feeling better. The relief of knowing what it was I suspect. Lahar says that if Barbara can do a 5-hour round trip to the doctor then Phortse Tenga will be easy.

Wednesday 28 March

Barbara and I sat on the sunny terrace this morning to eat our porridge watching weird clouds form over Ama Dablam. At 9.15 we headed off on what I suspected would be a bit of a horror climb. It wasn't too bad. The trail was far more gradual than it appeared and the views were awesome. Reached Mong Selawa (4,000 metres) by 11.30 which I thought pretty good considering Barb's health. Lunch tasted good – big toasted cheese sandwiches and veg noodle soup.

The descent to Phortse Tenga took under an hour. We saw a team of the most beautiful yaks ever; a blond, a black and a pale grey with very long shaggy fur swinging gently as they passed us – yes, we trek slower than yaks!

It is nearly 4 pm as I write this. No phone signal so I don't know how the rest of our group went climbing to Dole today. Barbara and I have both had hot showers – the first since Jorsale, so much appreciated. The sun has gone behind the clouds and my hair is still wet. When I asked the lodge owner to light the stove he smiled and said yes – but then nothing happened. Dorje (our guide to be) should have flown from Jomsom to Pokhara and then Kathmandu today. Hope he made it.

Thursday 29 March

Travelling with just Barbara, Lahar and Ramesh was nice but having no phone contact with the rest of our group was becoming a bit of a worry. Still, I knew that Bir and Kancha had years of experience between them and Tham is a trooper when it comes to the organisation of meals.

The climb up to Dole was pretty steep but I was surprised at how much of it was wooded. In several gullies were beautiful frozen waterfalls. There wasn't even a tea shop between Phortse Tenga and Dole so we were well ready for lunch. We waited for it in the little sun-trap of a terrace in front of our rooms at the Himalaya Lodge. A really mixed crew in the dining room tonight. Canadians (loud), French, Germans, Polish and another eastern European couple whose origins I couldn't identify. My hip was giving me grief so I retired early but soon took delivery of my ordered dinner – a huge plate of really fantastic chips. Did try to eat them all but failed miserably. Barbara feeling better but still coughing a lot.



Friday 30 March

It was much further to Machhermo than I had imagined, though quite a lot of the trail was level. We set off late and soon had a cold wind at our backs (could have been worse!). Each time we rounded a ridge the calm, protected gully would envelop us in warmth. We stopped for a cuppa and then lunch but pressed on. We trekked on a high ridge with a roaring river below us and huge peaks looming ahead.

The final approach to Machhermo is a kind of moonscape of peat grass tundra, criss-crossed with hundreds of yak tracks. Such a delight to crest the last ridge and see Machhermo spread out below. Bir spotted us coming in and it was big hugs all round (once I got out of the way of the charging yak that is). Everyone pleased to see that Barbara had made it after all. It was a pretty crummy lodge and packed to the rafters (everywhere was packed out apparently). To top it all off Dorje turned up an hour or two later. He had come from Jomsom to Machhermo in 3 days!!



Lodge life

The bulk of our team was enjoying their acclimatisation day. Climbing various things, visiting the HRA clinic's talk on altitude sickness (how to avoid it of course). So good to have Dorje back on board.

Saturday 31 March

Barbara and I need an acclimatisation day at this altitude, 4410 metres, and Ian needed one more day as well. Not everyone acclimatises at the same rate. The three of us are trying to make the most of the meagre sunshine. Everyone else has headed off to



It was so much harder than it looks in this photo

Gokyo in good spirits. Entertainment was provided by a very naughty yak tearing around the paddock in front of our garden this morning.

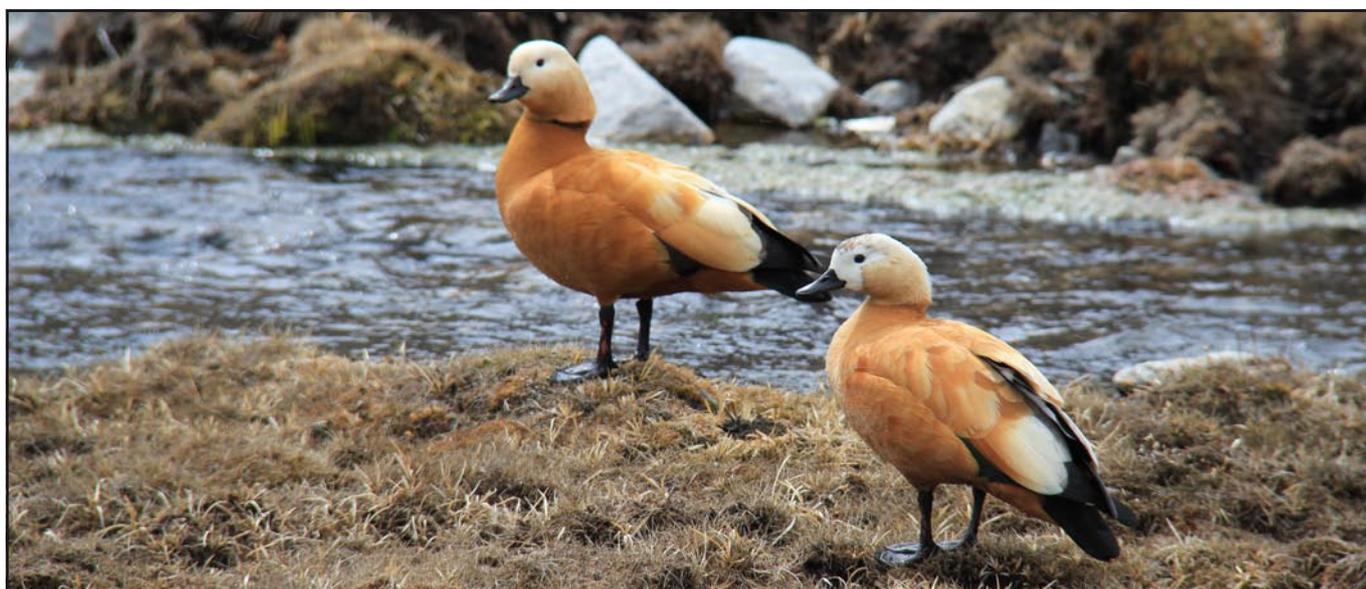
It snowed in a rather desultory fashion all day. I tried a short walk but a bitter wind and snow flurries soon drove me back inside. In the evening I got my iPod going with the little speakers but the poor cold battery only lasted for four songs. I think the porters liked Luciano Pavarotti's 'Nessun dorma'.

The rest of our group – Doug, Marianne, Helen, Russ and Frank – didn't have too much trouble on the climb to Gokyo. Wish I could say the same.

Sunday 1 April

A splendid morning for breakfast outside. The peaks shone in a cloudless sky. (Must have been a great day to climb Gokyo Ri). My tummy was playing up a bit so I delayed the start for an hour while things 'settled down'. Two Loperamide blockers and two Ciprojet antibiotics did the trick and we were off.

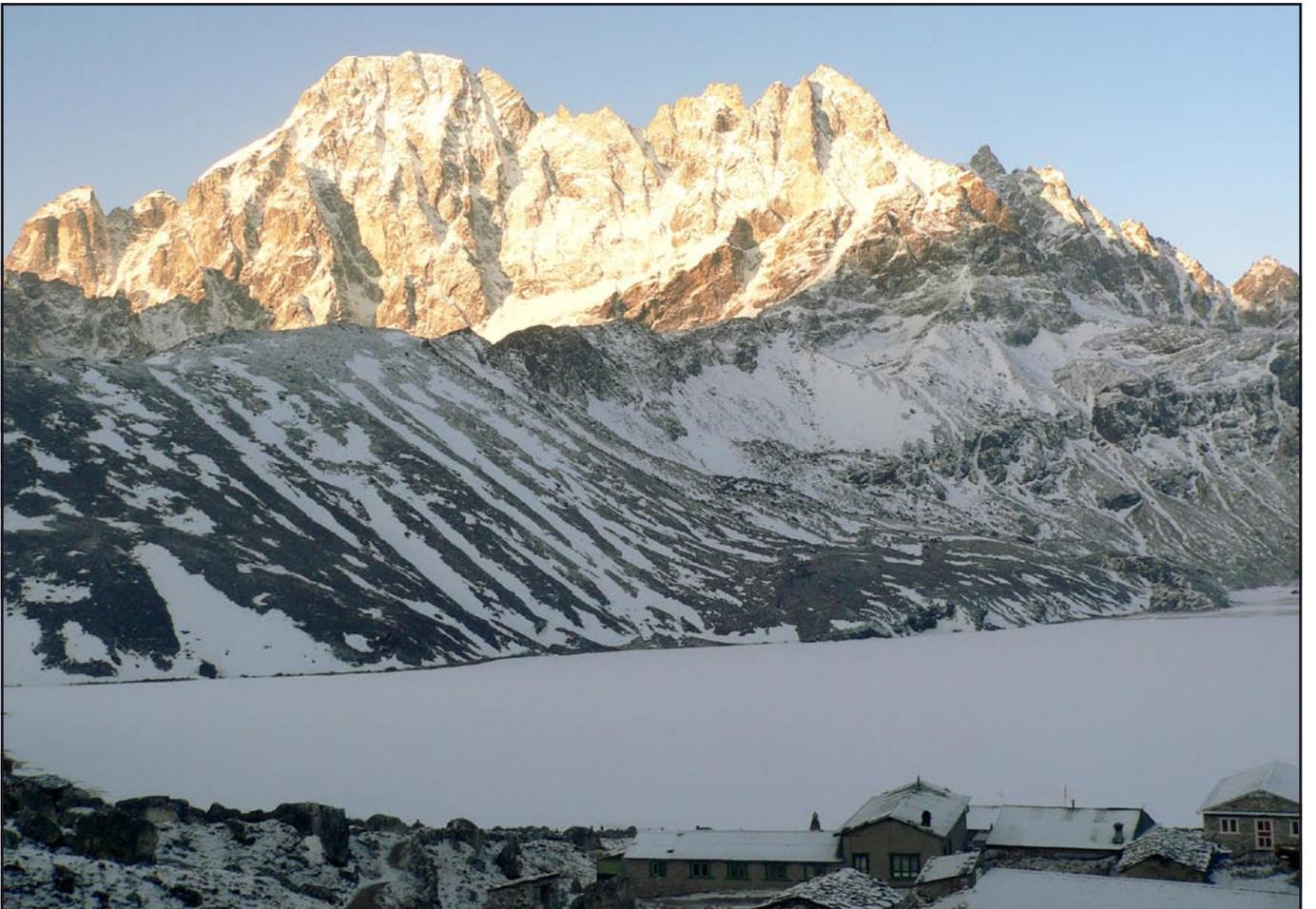
After the short, sharp climb out of the Machhermo valley the trail was not too demanding – though anything vaguely uphill feels hard over 4,000 metres. We took tea and biscuits at a small bhatti along the way. We certainly wished we had taken a bit more as the hours dragged on and we were still climbing. The rock staircase up to the first lake is really steep. Luckily the views were spectacular so we stopped to look at them a lot. During a lie down on the grass, out of the wind, in front of the first lake we saw beautiful golden ducks.



Golden Brahminy ducks on the first Gokyo lake



The first of the Gokyo lakes, Longponga Tsho



Gokyo

Though the going was now much easier we were rapidly running out of steam. Way past lunchtime, in deteriorating weather we approached 4,800 metres. The trail snaked between lichen-encrusted boulders and miniature man-made chortens of stones. By 3 pm I was crouched in a hollow to rest out of the wind, totally exhausted. Ian was no better. Barbara was ahead. I asked Deek to dump the bag and jog up to Gokyo and send someone back with hot tea and biscuits. Of course the guys were hungry too. It didn't take long and the hot drink and bickies fuelled us up for the last half-hour.

At the lodge, the Gokyo Resort, spirits were high. Doug, Russ, Helen and Frank had all climbed Gokyo Ri in the morning – our perfect, cloudless morning. They'd been well-rewarded with views across the glacier to Everest, Lhotse, Makalu, Cho Oyu (4 of the top 6) as well as the nearer peaks such as Tawoche and Cholatse. Helen did it in the unbelievable time of 1 hour 20 minutes. She really is amazing. The Lodge was huge and packed to the rafters. Great food and a really warm atmosphere.

Monday 2 April

As Tham wasn't too well (just a cold) Deek took his place as Russ' porter. He seemed pretty pleased to be doing 'the pass'. So Dorje led Doug and Akhal, Helen and Kancha and Russell with Deek off on the trail to Dragnag at around 9 am. They will cross the glacier today and be in a good position to make the famous Cho La Pass tomorrow.

I took it easy today on a still-recovering tummy and Ian did the same. We were both pretty pleased with ourselves for making it to Gokyo. This is completely new territory for Ian and I think he is way, way

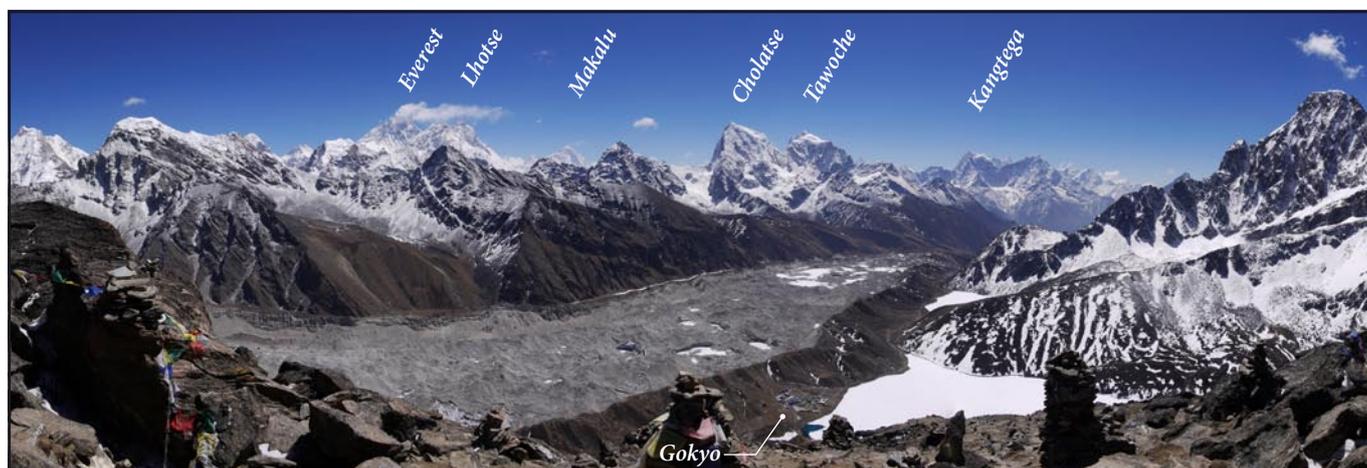
outside his normal comfort zone. Bir with Marianne and Ramesh with Barbara succeeded in climbing Gokyo Ri so are even more pleased with themselves than we are. It is a very big hill and climbing is tough enough over 4,000 metres, but over 5,000 metres can really suck the energy out of you. I dragged my sorry butt up to the rim of the glacier behind the lodge. A real OMG experience. AWESOME. That is a very, very big glacier indeed. I loved the sound of it. Muffled cracking noises followed by trickling rocks. Below is Frank's view from the top; I climbed the little ridge behind the village!

Tuesday 3 April

I loved this day. We thought we might get as far as Dole but the weather closed in just before lunch. We had set off in weak sunshine and no wind. The walk back down to the first lake was a piece of cake early in the morning on fresh legs. The stairs were no trouble either. While it was cloudy sometimes, the freshly-dusted mountains and high peaks bathed in mist were beautiful in a different way to the sparkling sunny day of our ascent. Nearing Machhermo it really started to snow heavily but it was dry pellets of 'sago' which didn't cling to your clothes or melt on contact and make you wet. The trekking was wide open and easy so we just put our jackets on and enjoyed it. Our choice of lodge at Machhermo was brilliant (thanks Bir) so when the snow didn't let up after lunch we decided to stay the night. The food was great, the dining room cosy and the rooms comfortable. But it was very, very cold and at times we couldn't even see from one side of the garden to the other.

Wednesday 4 April

Another great day of cruising downhill. It is just me, Marianne, Barbara, Frank and Ian in our group



The view from Gokyo Ri, 5360 metres, takes in Everest, the Ngozumpa Glacier and the Gokyo Lakes

now. We opted for an early start. Very little wind and a watery sun just managing to keep us warm. Of course we had to climb out of Machhermo first but we were soon on a fairly level trail which swept around ridge after ridge. Our descent into Dole was a long, hot zigzag. I couldn't remember it being so steep or so long. We dined on omelets and chapattis at our old haunt the Himalayan Lodge.

Back on the trail after lunch it was wonderful to be amongst trees again, and birds and insects and beautiful red birches with peeling papery bark. The final descent to the bridge was rather tricky but at least we didn't miss it like Jeet and Ramesh. Marianne was, as usual, miles ahead. She and Bir had a picnic on the river bank while they waited for us. Marianne regaled us over a cuppa with the story of Bir feeding her leftover chapatti to a cow only to have to run like hell to escape it when it came after him for more. Wish I had seen that.

The 'great wall of Phortse' was our final obstacle for the day. Very pretty but steep as. I caught up with Marianne near the top. She was sitting quietly

watching a musk deer grazing on the Spanish moss which festooned the little rhododendron trees. The village of Phortse is lovely. Neat as a pin with small, stone-walled potato fields and beautiful old traditional houses. Built of stone and rendered in mud then painted, the windows and doors have that classic A-shape which gives them a rather Tibetan appearance.

Ian and Frank have had the hot shower. A bucket of hot water is taken from the kitchen and poured into a small overhead tank on a tin shed in the garden. It works!

My phone is on charge. There are rumours of 'some signal' in the front garden for Namaste SIM cards. (Turned out to be rubbish).

Thursday 5 April

Another early start but well worth the effort as the morning was a stunner. It is a long, hard slog out of Phortse but we kept stopping to look at the view. With every few metres gained in altitude we could see further and further up the Gokyo Valley and all



Time for tea and bickies at the top of Gokyo Ri – thanks to Ramesh and Bir

the way back down to Jorsale. A Sherpa man stood high above us on a rock, hands raised heavenwards, chanting at the top of his lungs. I couldn't hear as much as I would have liked due to the loud chatter of a bunch of American trekkers crapping on about home. Pity folks can't try a little harder to just 'be here'.

It was a fairly tough trek to Pangboche but the trail is so high you feel you might reach out and touch Thamskerku or Kangtega. Waiting at the crest of the trail, quite high above Pangboche, I finally got a full five bars of signal on my phone and called Germany for twenty minutes. By midday Deek and I were in Old Pangboche. I sat down for a while in baking sunshine while a light sprinkling of snow fell on me. Delightful. After waiting ten minutes I finally left Deek to help two local yak drovers, very lovely young women, who had a bit of a struggle on their hands with an ornery beast. I had forgotten it was Deek's first time up here and he didn't know the way. It's a bit of a trick to get from the old village to the lodges at Pangboche itself. There are lots of options. It took us nearly two hours to find him – I felt awful because he was really hungry.

I love the old, unspoiled Sherpa village at Pangboche with its crumbling old houses and smiling people. It is not as wealthy as some of the other big villages so the old gomba and traditional houses remain as they've looked for centuries.

We stayed at the Sri Dewa Lodge – the best gas hot showers in the Khumbu. We are talking tiled bathroom!! Expensive, but you can take as long as you like. Not sure about the safety of having the gas bottle in the bathroom with you.

Frank is taking something for his chesty cold and looked all-in on arrival. I don't think he liked the trail as much as I did (I distinctly heard the word 'horrible' when I asked him how he went) but these comfortable rooms are a good place to recover. Marianne and Bir had run into a film crew making a documentary about amputee and injured veterans doing extraordinary things – like climbing Mt. Everest. She had just been recounting the same guys' exploits in Antarctica the evening before so she was pretty rapt to meet them. Apparently Martin, Francis and Jacko were really friendly too and posed for photos with her.



A striking light-coloured yak near Pangboche



L to R, Martin, Francis and Jacko

As I write this in my cosy room a strong wind has sprung up and clouds have rolled in. Our crew is out visiting the bakery or the internet café (one and the same place I think). It must be time to light the fire.

Friday 6 April

Dawn broke on a winter wonderland this morning. I rushed outside and drank my bed tea in a silent white world. Within half an hour the wind freshened

and snow showers rolled up the valley. We delayed our start and got the stove lit in the dining room while we considered our options. At the first break in the weather we headed off. The day just got better and better. Dressed for blizzard conditions we were all way too hot within ten minutes. The local kids were all out playing in the snow. A big dog with a cute black pup frolicked in the fresh white powder. The pup followed us up to Somare where it seemed completely at home while we had morning tea. We had some massive snowball fights. A beautiful day.

Our favorite lodge at Dingboche, the Peaceful Lodge, had rooms but was chock-a-block. By 3 pm we started to wander up to the white chorten on the hill and sure enough, our hardy bunch was just starting to file in, led by Doug. Hugs all round and then back to the dining room to share and compare travel yarns. The Cho La had been treacherous.

MEANWHILE THE 'A' TEAM DID THIS...

Leaving Gokyo and the B team we headed across the Ngozumpa glacier and the village of Dragnag. With small rocks falling and cracking sounds from the glacier the track somehow got us to Dragnag just in time before it started snowing again.



Good morning Pangboche

Tuesday 3 April

A good night's sleep in a very comfortable hotel and we headed off at around 8:00am to start the second of our challenges – Gokyo Ri, 5360 metres, the first – then Cho La Pass 5420 metres. Trekking up the valley toward the pass did not prepare us for what was to come, especially when the pass came into view – ‘We have to go over that??’. Working our way up the rock fall, towering mountains around us, and snow on the ground and snow falling. A brief stop for biscuits and cheese and it was down the other side. Sliding down ice and snow covered rocks, crossing a glacier covered with 30cm of fresh snow, crossing the Cho La Pass was so rewarding, but very demanding as this was our longest day of the trek so far. Dzongla village and the hotel became a welcome sight for a tired and hungry team.

Wednesday 4 April

A relatively easy day to Lobouche although it was overcast, light snow and a very cold wind. It meant an early stop and time to reflect on the trek so far. We are really amongst the big mountains; we continued to admire the enormity of them between cloud breaks.

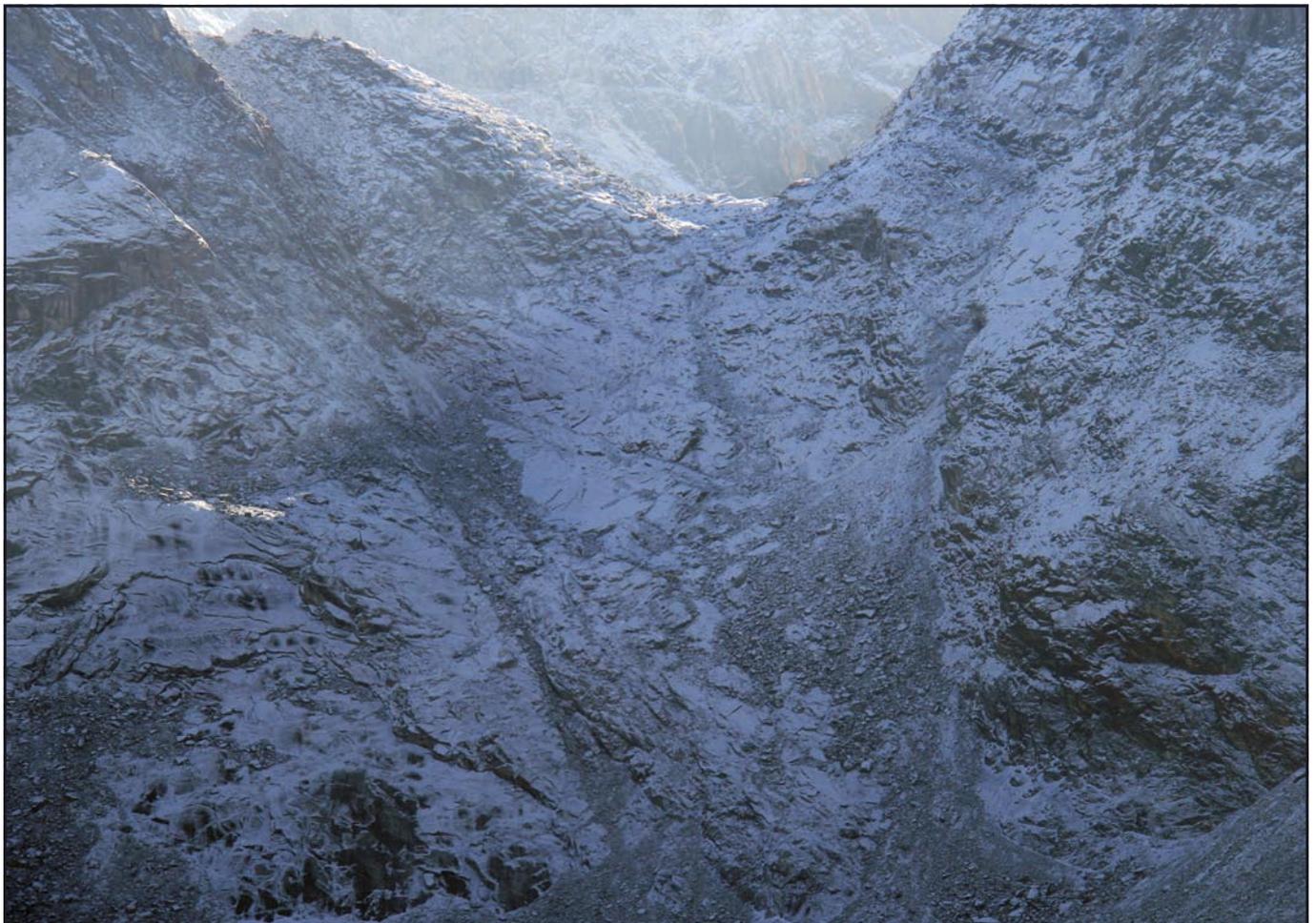
Thursday 5 April

This day had mixed emotions for the team, no room at the inn? Kala Patthar our third challenge, at 5545 metres. After securing a dorm for the night (12 beds, 6 up, 6 down) in a 4m x 3m room – I must say it was cosy – we headed up Kala Patthar. The view was spectacular, with Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse, Base Camp, Khumbu Glacier and other mountains, valleys and glaciers surrounding us. The sky, a spectacular blue, just added to the contrast.

Friday 6 April

After a ‘challenging’ night's sleep in the dorm, and a massive dump of snow overnight, we headed off to Base Camp (our fourth challenge). It was cold, very cloudy and snowing lightly as we headed up the valley. After traversing the Khumbu Glacier and arriving at Base Camp our cameras captured the moment briefly as we turned back before a total whiteout, disappointing, but great acclimatisation.

This day was by far the longest, trekking more than double any other day so far as we headed for Dingboche, sunshine and a hot shower after 5 days??



The daunting approach to the western side of the Cho La Pass



View from the Cho La Pass



The 'A' Team at Everest Base Camp

...BACK TO THE 'B' TEAM:

Saturday 7 April

We were all packed and ready to go to Togla when the weather made me rethink our plans. It was horrible – and snowing steadily. I'd had an unpleasant night of awaking breathless – a new experience for me. Odd after being up at nearly 5,000 metres already at Gokyo. Lahar also has a sore muscle in his leg (soon improved with anti-inflammatories). Our original itinerary had promised a two-night reunion with the whole group so I decided to pull the plug and call a 'day off'. We have time.

The weather improved dramatically after breakfast with all the major peaks dazzling in full sunshine. A few of us climbed here and there, Frank went a fair way up Nangkar Tshang and Helen made it to the old gomba overlooking Dingboche. Some went to the internet café and some to the bakery. Some managed it all. A nice day in a beautiful valley.

Sunday 8 April (Easter Sunday)

Chocolate Easter eggs for breakfast – thank you Marianne. The group of climbers, comprising Russ, Doug, Helen and Barbara (almost recovered from her bronchitis and willing to 'give it a go') set off a bit before my group. We wished them every success with their summit attempt and then set off on our own journey towards Everest Base Camp. I had Frank, Ian and Marianne with me. It was a beautiful clear day. I wasn't feeling too flash, probably the altitude, but the going was relatively easy (even if it didn't feel like it to me). We easily made Togla by lunchtime and ate outside in the sun. It soon cooled down though and our rooms turned out to be really

snug – the loos were well above average too, always a blessing. A very cosy evening huddled round the yak-dung stove. We met Celine and Raffi from Switzerland. Nice company.

Monday 9 April

The going was quite a bit harder today but I felt better so coped easily. The Togla Ridge wasn't as hard as we thought when gazing up at it in fear and loathing yesterday evening – 250 metres, straight up out of the lodge door! It was a warm, sunny day with the mountains dazzling and I thought it was possibly our best day so far. Our half-hour spell at the memorial chortens at the top of the ridge was a heavenly respite.

The rest of the day was much easier and we easily made Lobouche for lunch. The lodge rooms were excellent and the dining room huge – pity about the toilets!! A vast number of trekkers, climbers and HRA staff packed the dining room this evening. A buzz from imminent Everest attempts crackled through the conversation – the higher they plan to go the louder they talk about it in the dining room. We played cards with our porters. The fire was warm.

Tuesday 10 April

Everyone assured me that it was a reasonably easy trek now from Lobouche to Gorak Shep. The map certainly gave no indication otherwise. Liars! It was really bloody hard. I found the Lobouche Ridge harder than the Togla Ridge. No trail really, just a 'bit of a way' through broken jagged boulders. All this at 5,000 metres plus. Luckily the views were a big distraction.



Frank's amazing panorama shot of the valley at Togla

While glimpses of the surrounding peaks through swirling snow clouds gave a hint as to the beauty of our location, Gorak Shep itself is a bit of a dump. The lodge was certainly no oil painting.

The Khumbu Glacier is an absolute stunner. The trail grazes the northern rim here and there affording stunning views of this river of ice. It falls so steeply in front of you that the glacier is scarred by massive cracks. Here and there the cracks have opened up into icy caves of mysterious blue/green depths.

As I write this in the lodge, nursing a bit of a headache, Bir has taken Ian, Frank and Marianne towards the famous Everest Base Camp.

The Base Camp walk was terminated just after half-way due to nasty weather. No point getting soaking wet and cold right through just to see some tents. We had a very good view of the Base Camp from the trail during the morning. Good enough for me I am sorry to say. Lazy/sensible, lazy/sensible. Still not sure.

We skulked around the lodge dining room trying to persuade the owner to light the fire. He held out for a while but in the end our persistence paid off. The room warmed up quite quickly, especially as dozens of snow-laden trekkers piled into the room and tried to dry their gear around the fire. We played cards for a while but were ready to sleep at 7 pm. It had been a long day over difficult terrain in poor weather at high altitude. We needed our sleep.

Wednesday 11 April

At 5 am I checked with Marianne (sharing rooms). We agreed it was too foggy to wake Frank for an early go at Kala Patthar. By 6 am it looked much brighter with patches of blue sky and some of the peaks clearly visible. Got a cuppa organised and then sent Marianne and Frank off with Bir, Tham and Deek (the new boys want to see everything). Deek has never actually been trekking before and spent the last three years driving trucks in Leh, Ladakh. (Respect!)

The weather closed in during their ascent so Marianne and Frank were back by 8 am. They'd given it their best shot but no point killing yourself to get up a hill when the weather prevents any kind of view. I had lost track of time reading 'Three Cups of Tea'. I'd finished my book and was reduced to

stealing a few chapters of Marianne's book whenever she went out.

We ate as much breakfast as we could and then set off in light snow on a rather gloomy morning. The short climb out of Gorak Shep soon warmed us up but then the sun shone through faintly and the snow stopped. Despite the improving weather the climb back over the Lobouche Ridge was almost as hard as the ascent. Such a massive pile of jagged rocks you cannot imagine. The views back up the glacier and across to the peaks was magical in a mysterious, partially-veiled monochromatic landscape. Black and white – snow/ice/rock.

Suddenly the traffic was unbelievable. Yaks, Dzopke, great long caterpillars of trekkers 30 to 40 at a time. Once we cleared the ridge the going was wonderfully easy. Still, it took two and a half hours to reach Lobouche for morning tea (compared to 3 hours going up). We didn't tarry at Lobouche, wanting to make the most of the reasonable conditions. After a fantastic descent the weather looked ponderous as we neared Tokla. Snow swirled around the departing trekkers as they put on ALL their gear. We could hardly get a seat in the dining room. Over a warming lunch the weather backed off and so we set out in strange conditions which seem unique to the Himalayas. The sun was quite glary so we needed sunglasses but it was snowing lightly. Beautiful in the sheltered gully that descends abruptly into the valley where Pheriche nestled – never seeming to get any closer as we pounded the long flat valley floor. Decided that I would not want to ascend by this route. Dingboche to Togla was much easier and nicer. As we neared Pheriche we passed tiny tumbledown stone cottages, some with a thin plume of smoke from the chimney, so they were clearly still in use. There were literally hundreds of grazing yaks. The last kilometre was a maze of muddy tracks over squelchy marshes – peat saturated with melting snow I reckon.

It only took one hour and forty minutes to reach Pheriche and we were hoping for the famous Himalaya Lodge. It was full but Bir had organised the White Yak and what a super choice that turned out to be. As I write this journal I've been impressed by double-glazing, flushing toilets (yes, the flush works), divan beds with clean heavy blankets, stove going flat-chat in the dining room (at 3 pm). What a lodge!



The trail crosses a section of glacier near Gorak Shep. Note the big group of mountaineers in the distance. The prominent peak in the background is Pumori (7,165m), which lies on the Tibetan border.

It is summit day for the Island Peakers, hope they have had a good one.

I am not sure if Ian is just a good downhiller or if he can sense his escape route opening up before him, but we just couldn't catch him today. With hindsight a 25-day odyssey covering almost everything in the Khumbu region may not have been the ideal choice for a first trek?? People half our age are clearly struggling with it. A few days into the trek, at Namche Bazaar, I don't think Ian would have backed himself to get to Gokyo, let alone Gorak Shep but, by crikey, he did. Day 21 and everyone still going strong.

Thursday 12 April

Our lovely lodge, the White Yak, made us a beautiful breakfast with the fire going flat out in the dining room – you know you are in a great lodge when they light the fire for breakfast. It was quite hard to leave but a beautiful sunny day was beckoning. It was a pretty easy climb out of Pheriche and lovely riverbank scenery. The big peaks, Ama Dablam in particular, were positively shining in all their

splendour. Before we knew it we were at Somare for morning tea. So good to see green trees, ploughed fields and kids playing with dogs in the sunshine. Back at the familiar Sri Dewa for lunch – luscious (and affordable) tinned pineapples.

After struggling to get a connection I finally heard Dorje's voice 'Didi, we are in Somare'. Hell, that was just half an hour back up the trail. We waited in a sunny corner for our 'A' team. They were over the moon. All made it up onto Island Peak with Helen, Russ, Doug, Kancha and Dorje making it to the summit. Very well done people. We walked together down to Devouche.

MEANWHILE, HERE IS WHAT THE 'A' TEAM GOT UP TO...

Sunday 8 April

Our trek into Chukung today was uneventful with fantastic blue sky and an opportunity to capture excellent photos and see Island Peak clearly, including the last ridge of our planned ascent – daunting to

say the least. As further acclimatisation a walk up Chukung Ri was undertaken but was called off at the first ridge (5200m) due to poor weather and visibility. Later we meet our climbing guides, organise equipment and discuss the rope training planned for the next day.

Monday 9 April

Training day up the side of Chukung Ri with ropes and equipment we will need on Island Peak, all went well with a little bit of fun. Plenty of rest today, maybe too much time to dwell on our fifth and final challenge.

Tuesday 10 April

We left the 'comfort' of the hotel and headed off to the Island Peak base camp, a little over 2 hours walk. At 5000 metres it was getting harder to breathe. Light snow all afternoon. After dinner at 6:00pm it was off to bed for a 1:00am start up the mountain. Unfortunately Russell and Doug were not woken by the cook as he went to the wrong tent, delaying our departure till 2 am.

Wednesday 11 April

2:00am start, fresh snow all around, cold, and dark. Good progress was made in the first hour, with some 400 metres of vertical ascent, only 800m more and we

are on the top? Five and a half agonising hours later the summit was reached. You can't make assumptions at this altitude. Mentally and physically tired, we reflected on what we had achieved and briefly took in the moment before starting back down. Helen, Russell, Doug, Dorje and Kancha had realised a dream to summit a mountain (6189 metres), and challenge themselves. Barbara had given it her best shot, and got a long way up, but her bronchitis had left her unprepared for challenge number 5.

Thursday 12 April

A leisurely start as the team are heading downhill with a drop of some 1,000 metres, a relaxing change from the last few days. Spirits were high after a good night's sleep and, with a relaxing stop at the bakery in Dingboche for coffee and cake, the team were on a roll. We were greeted at Pangboche by the B Team eager to find out about Island Peak. Our sense of achievement started to be realised, when sharing that experience with others, lots of hugs, kisses and handshakes all around for both teams on their successes over the last 2 weeks. We all moved on to Devouche for our next stop, this was also the first day without snow since March 29 (13 days).

(Thanks Doug).



Island Peak Base Camp



The ascent of Island Peak



Dorje on Island Peak

As I write this journal in Devouche the customers are taking turns in the gas-fired shower. Must be my turn by now so I am off!

Friday 13 April

It was a cold, clear, amazingly beautiful morning in Devouche. Marathon runners en route from Gorak Shep to Lukla(!) passed our front garden before breakfast. We climbed the steepish hill up to Thangboche where I found the whole group at the bakery. Kangtega's glacier glistened in the sun and the view back to Ama Dablam, Lhotse and Everest would have to be seen to be believed. Sensational views – hard to leave. It was a long downhill to Phunki Tenga where another new bridge has been built – much higher up this time. Our lunch took ages so we were well-rested by the time we set off for the big climb back up to Kangzuma. While it was steep, and the unattended yaks were a pain in the butt, we found the going easier with so much oxygen – back under 3.5 km. Loads of air, trees, birds, raging rivers, yaks and sunshine. Great to be walking all together.

Good to be 'home' at the Thamserku Lodge. We had lively company. Anthony, who had walked in from Jiri. Angela and Reiner from Austria (matching dreadlocks) and four young British women who were a laugh a minute. Sadly, Russ had an upset tummy. Dosed him up with appropriate meds. and hope for the best.

Saturday 14 April

Clouds and fresh breezes coming and going this morning but super to wake up in such a splendid valley. After breakfast Dorje took Frank and Ian (go figure?), Helen and Barbara 'over the top' via Kumjung and the Yak Farm, across the dirt airstrip at Shyangboche. You do get a bird's-eye view of Namche when you drop in from the top like this. I took Russ, still feeling less than fantastic but much-improved, and all the porters and the luggage around the easier way. It only took us 2 hours but Doug and Marianne were already relaxing at the Hotel Everest with a cuppa by the time we arrived. There was a bit of a scramble as we retrieved stored gear, checked in all our climbing garb, de-hired the down jackets



Me and Tham, lost in our own fabulous world near Pheriche

and made a few choice purchases. The standard of trekking gear has improved dramatically since I was last here, although Namche has lost most of its old-world Sherpa charm as every lovely old house is replaced with a modern lodge. I guess that is progress and the locals look to be doing very well on it.

I've just come in from the long downhill run from Namche to Jorsale. Seemingly endless at times, my knees felt like overheated brakes. The look of utter bewilderment on some of the faces coming up was a bit sad. Clearly some of the younger Asian trekkers had no preconception of what they were undertaking. Surprisingly, it was the older Europeans who seemed more comfortable.

It was extremely windy on the 'scary bridge' but we took the old, lower trail and were soon in the woods and out of the wind. The new high trail is safer for yaks but it is a very big climb. I love the way the old trail clings to the riverbank though I admit the track was a 'bit thin' in places (a few logs lashed to the cliff). I walked in with Barbara. We so enjoyed the riverside walk we hardly wanted it to end. As we reached the police checkpoint at Jorsale I saw Bir and some of our boys in the garden of the Nirvana Lodge giving me the thumbs up. Nice one boys.

It was spitting rain for the last half hour today but now it's pouring steadily. Happy to be inside. The fire is going in the dining room so that's all for today.

Sunday 15 April

As we usually trek from Phakding to Lukla on our last day I was quite surprised at how much longer it was from Jorsale. I didn't realise it till we got back to Kathmandu but I was coming down with the mother of all colds. I felt like death warmed up at lunchtime and the climb up to Lukla after lunch nearly finished me off.

Lahar's sister Asha miraculously turned up at Phakding – she was visiting her Tibetan friend's relatives. She wanted to spend a bit of time with Lahar so I enlisted her help to carry my daypack to Lukla for me. Careless packing this morning had resulted in about 10 kg in the day pack. Asha was good company and we shared a room at the North Face Resort where we took advantage of being the last in and had a really long, hot shower.

It was a very tame last night. We shared a bottle of wine but we were all too tired to stand up – let alone dance. No trouble sleeping tonight with dozens of quiet donkeys chewing hay in the paddock outside our rooms.



Looking better than they felt?

Monday 16 April

A superb flying morning. No drama, no queues or backlogs. At one stage there were four aircraft parked on the apron and a chopper taking off – busy as! Very sad to say goodbye to Bir (he has another trekking job), Kancha, Deek, Akhal, Ramesh and Jeet.

Barbara and Ramesh are going to trek down to Pattale, Dorje's home village, which should take 5 or 6 days.

A few of the customers went into Thamel this afternoon. Some of us had a well-earned recovery day. Is it my imagination or do we all look a bit pleased to be going home?

Tuesday 17 April

Deepak's sleek silver Toyota Hiace was ready as promised at 7.30 am. Tham and Lahar were going home to Pokhara. Helen, Doug and Marianne were going for a short tour to Lakeside/Pokhara and taking Dorje, Laki and the boys, Sonam and Lagpa, with them. I heard it was a slow trip – 10 hours with hold ups.

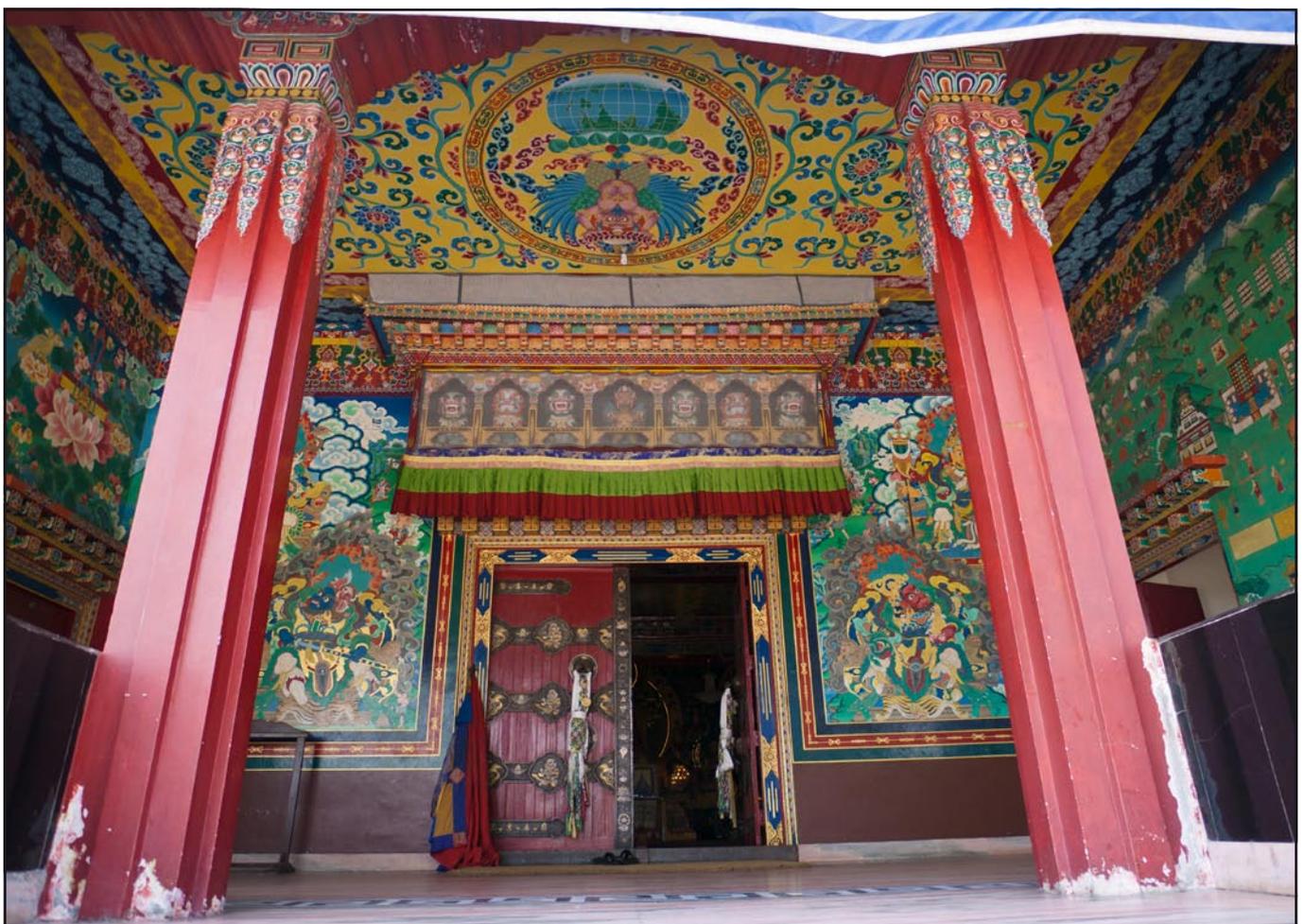
Meanwhile, Russ, Ian and Frank had a much more laid back day, their last in Nepal. Netra walked up to Kopan Gomba with them for lunch. In the evening we visited Bouda. It is my favourite thing to do on my last night. A nice feed at the Garden Kitchen Restaurant and then a half-hour walk home in the soft, starry night – could almost leave you with a good impression of Kathmandu.

Wednesday 18 April

It was very quiet after Russ, Frank and Ian left on the 10 am taxi to the airport. I am sure we will catch up in Melbourne/Geelong soon enough. I made the most of the afternoon, sorting out a mountain of bills and a mixture of trekking gear and leftover clothes for Netra to give to the needy. A quiet evening in with the BBC World Service on the radio for company. Heaven.

Thursday 19 April

The return bus trip from Pokhara went much more smoothly and by 12.30 Dorje had rung to say the bus was in the Kathmandu suburbs. Doug, Marianne and Helen looked relaxed and suntanned after a



Entrance to the gomba at Kopan Monastery

couple of days in Pokhara. It really is the 'chill out' capital of the universe.

A low-key afternoon and then another slow walk over to Bouda for a couple of laps of the big stupa with the Tibetan community. The old ladies plait red or turquoise cloth into their long grey hair and dress as they did 60 years ago when they left Tibet. The next generation in designer jeans and sunglasses, heeled boots (Tibetan girls are short) and chic little handbags are a contrast. Their boyfriends on motorbikes, sporting pony tails and more carefully-chosen designer sunglasses, are always on the phone.

Friday 20 April

Breakfast in the garden at the Shambala. Dorje brings a wonderful surprise with him – Danraj, his older brother, who has trekked with us many times and had been taking care of the Muktinath trekkers. He is off to Kuwait tonight for a job as a security guard. I wish him all the best but remind him to just 'come home' if the going gets tough and the work or salary don't turn out to be as promised. Danraj is such a lovely, gentle man – I hope he is not let down.

With Doug, Marianne and Helen in a taxi and on the way to the airport all seemed well till we hit the traffic jam at Pasang Lama Chowk. Two kilometres from Chahabil and already chock-a-block. Our resourceful driver knew his way back through Pashupathi Temple. I had never been that way and found it fascinating. Glad we weren't stopping though as the large, red-bottomed monkeys didn't look totally friendly.

We made it to the airport in good time. More sad farewells but, once again, hope to catch up with this crew in Victoria next month.

I had to go directly from the airport to the dentist but it was a productive appointment. Came out an hour later with clean teeth and good advice about an implant. 'Don't need it'. Advised to replace my dark amalgam fillings with light ones so that the gap doesn't look so obvious. I like the way this dentist thinks.

I lunched with my friend Jules and did some legwork in Thamel. I came home in a cab at 6 pm and was asleep by 6.30. I woke at midnight, having missed

dinner altogether, when the power came back on startling me with lights and loud TV.

Saturday 21 April

I did enough work in Thamel yesterday to earn a day at home today. Long sessions of packing and sorting out. Long talk with Netra. Paid the last of my bills then lay on my bed reading – ALL AFTERNOON! I've arranged for Barbara to have my room tomorrow. She is in Pattale and coming into Kathmandu by jeep. I've since heard from her, and she says:

The trail below Lukla was extremely beautiful. Ramesh was the perfect guide, letting me walk alone and savour the experience but never too far away if I found I needed him. The terrain is very, very up and down. No flat trails here. Trekking alone I met some great people, especially locals, and connected in a way that is not really possible when trekking with a group. I loved it. I stayed with Dorje's parents in Pattale which was interesting. The worst part was the jeep rides. Cramped, hot and terrifying. I hated it. However, it was well worth the effort to walk down from Lukla and I would recommend it highly for the nature, the scenery, the people and the unspoiled trails and lodges.

Sunday 22 April

Dorje came over for breakfast and to the airport with me. Sporting normal clothes – jeans and an overcoat – I feel like a different person at the airport. Australia, here I come!

This trek was HUGE! Quite a bit bigger than we imagined when we set out. At times it demanded rather a lot from us. I am quietly pleased with the way we handled ourselves. Hope you are too.



*Cheers,
till next time,
Teresa*

- Photo Gallery -



The steep climb up to the foot of the Ngozumpa Glacier near Gokyo



Dorje deploys prayer flags on Gokyo Ri

- Photo Gallery -

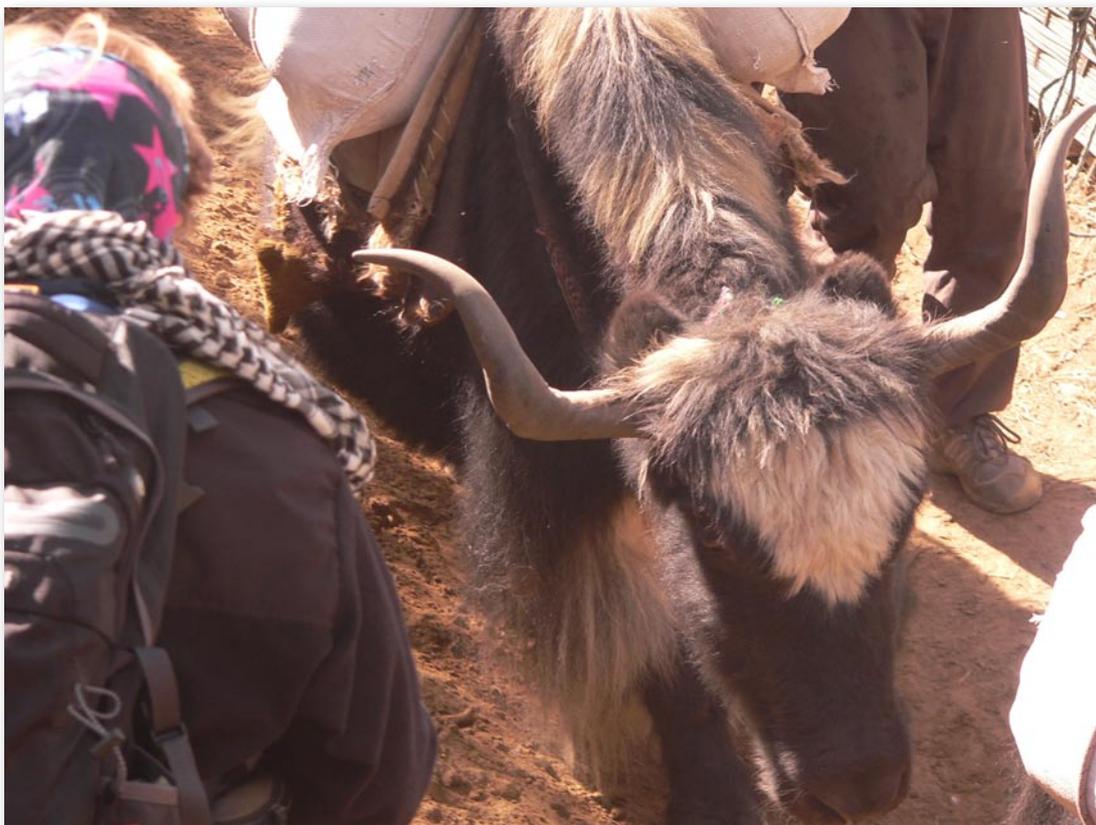


The 'A' Team's descent from the Cho La Pass



The view from the summit of Island Peak

- Photo Gallery -



Barbara makes eye contact with a yak!



Doug crossing the Ngozumpa Glacier between Gokyo and Dragnag

- Photo Gallery -



Our group at the North Face Resort, Lukla, ready to hit the trail.

*Back row: Lahar, Doug, Akhal, Teresa, Bir, Kancha, Jeet. Centre: Marianne, Helen, Barbara, Ramesh, Deek.
Front: Russ, Tham, Ian. Frank is behind the camera, and Dorje is to join us at Machhermo.*

NAMASTE!

*My own camera packed up fairly early in the piece. It is old.
Thanks for sharing your pictures Doug/Marianne/Frank/Russ.
Thanks also to Frank Jones, Desktop Dynamics, Geelong for editing and layout.*

TREKking WITH TERESA

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