

Walking into DANGER

Trekking to Everest Base Camp in Nepal was a dream for Damian Hall. But in the face of grumpy yaks, deadly airports and debilitating altitude sickness, the journey threatened to turn into a perilous nightmare

‘Peak upon peak upon glorious peak. No roads, no mobile phones – just mountains, with all their magical and lethal allure’



Damian Hall braved yaks, yetis and marital disharmony to reach his goal

Yetis. Plenty have filed them alongside the tooth fairy but some experienced and respected mountaineers, such as Don Whillans and Reinhold Messner, say they believe in a yeti (of sorts). So are the many reported sightings genuine? Are these creatures really men so hirsute they fled civilisation in shame? Or just misunderstood apes looking for love?

I may find out soon. I've just bought a map in Kathmandu for the trek to Everest Base Camp, which my wife and I are starting tomorrow, and have discovered that it marks the spot where a yeti 'killed three yaks and attacked a Sherpa woman in 1974'. And now I can't get to sleep.

As it turns out, yetis ought to be the least of my worries. I should be more concerned about yaks, wonky runways, getting lost on glaciers, stomach bugs, the cold, and altitude sickness.

Altitude problem

Ever since I read *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's fascinating account of a difficult and ultimately tragic Everest expedition, I knew I had to see Everest one day. And since I don't have a spare £25,000 to climb the world's tallest mountain, known as Chomolungma by the Sherpa people, trekking to see it up close seemed like the next best thing.

Nepal's Everest Base Camp trek is one of the most famous treks in the world – and one of the most dangerous. Foreign trekkers often find trouble in the Khumbu region, with around three dying each year and many more helicoptered out. It's the altitude sickness – the umbrella term for high altitude pulmonary oedema and high altitude cerebral oedema, both of which can be lethal – that gets to them, long before any yetis might.

The trek starts at 2,800m above sea level at the village of Lukla, and rises to 5,200m at Base Camp. However, most see the climax of the trek as the ascent of Kala Pattar (5,545m), a peak that offers dramatic, awe-inspiring views of Everest, whereas from Base Camp you can't actually see it.

Most non-Himalayans need 12 to 15 days to complete the trek, because you need to let your body acclimatise fully by ascending

slowly. You have to curb your enthusiasm and not go too high too soon. Here, the tortoise, not the hare, definitely gets the prize.

Promised landing

Our day starts with a flight from Kathmandu to Lukla in a tattered 12-seater plane. We're buffeted by fearsome winds that cause turbulence, stomach somersaults and persistent nausea in my wife. Though I make suitably sympathetic noises, I'm paying more attention to the enchanting mountain views.

The Lukla airstrip was the scene of a fatal crash in 1991. And another one in 2004. And in 2008 another 18 people died there. When you consider its location - 2,800m up in the Himalayas - the capricious mountain weather and just how many of these small planes land and take off safely every day, that's not such a bad record. Says my guidebook. Unconvincingly. The guidebook doesn't mention that the runway is on a steep uphill slant or that it turns at a right angle. I should say here that there's no evidence that I actually cried. I'm just thankful we're still alive. And the trek hasn't even started yet.

We've chosen to walk without a guide or porter, because we've decided - perhaps recklessly - that trekking while someone else carries your gear isn't really trekking. After all, I have my partially trustworthy guidebook and the map with the clearly marked yeti attack spot. What could go wrong?

Yak it up

The first couple of days follow a roaring river along the bottom of steep valleys and across Indiana Jones-style rope bridges that swing precariously. The trail is lined with Buddhist mantras painted on rocks, *stupas* (squat monuments containing Buddhist relics) and colourful prayer flags, while the clang of yak bells is a constant soundtrack.

The giant Himalayan cows are the most popular means of transport around these parts. The first few times we encounter yak trains, I caper naively in front of them, clicking away on my camera, until a guide tells me



Crossing one of many precarious swing bridges, lined with prayer flags



Some worship gods, others worship mountains



Himalayan yaks may seem docile, but watch out for those horns

Essential Himalayan kit
Think light, sturdy and warm



Scarpa Manta walking boots £220

Your boots must fit well. It's pointless getting fancy footwear if they'll give you blisters. And they don't get much better than these. scarpa.co.uk

Kathmandu down jacket

Some of the fakes Bazaar are so cheap arguably value for they won't keep you as the real deal.

kathmandu.co.uk



Merino wool base layer £45

You're not going to be showering while so remember that, as well as being light and warm, merino wool renowned for not getting smelly. I wore a Macpac but as long as it's genuine merino be fine.

macpac.co.nz

Rab Andes 800 sleeping bag £360

You'll certainly want a down bag round these parts - and round your parts. Light and warm, this is a good choice.

rab.uk.com



Hat about £5

A hat will keep your ears from turning blue at the tips and you'll find them for sale for a few quid in Kathmandu. Shop around though - you don't want a scratchy one.



A prayer stone painted with Buddhist mantras, overlooking the Himalayas

about the time he was speared by a moody bovine's horn. Luckily the potentially lethal thrust caught his backpack, but it still nearly hurled him into a ravine. From then on, I decide to stand back a bit.

We have an acclimatisation day in the village of Namche Bazaar, which means going higher for short walks and returning to a lower altitude to sleep. I'm desperate to lay eyes on Everest and it's frustrating holding myself back. But later I'll be glad I did.

Day four is the second of two long ascents and we begin to understand the challenges presented by altitude when we find ourselves occasionally breathless. It's well worth the difficulty when we reach Tengboche though. The village has a large Buddhist monastery and gives us our first clear views of Everest, the silver back poking menacingly over the top of its neighbours, with a permanent plume of white cloud snaking from its summit. Above the tree line, the high-altitude tundra is surprisingly pretty and soon the terrain changes again, to rocky rubble, the debris from epic glaciers.

Despite the breathing problems, after eight days of trekking I feel fantastic. In fact I've never been in

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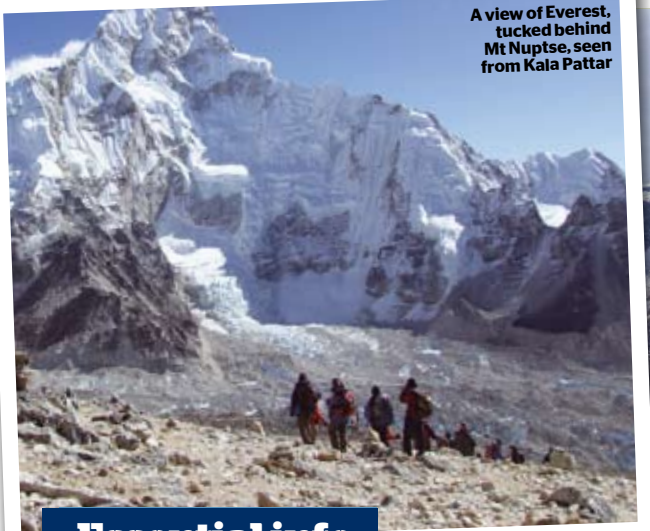
better shape. At altitude you burn off fat first so as well as the muscle you'd naturally get from walking day after day - my thighs have developed all sorts of satisfying new shapes - every horrible little fat deposit has been stripped from my body. For the first time in a while, I quite like what I see in the mirror. If only the altitude could do something for my hairline.

Height sick

In the village of Dingboche, we take another acclimatisation day and explore the surroundings. Peak upon peak upon glorious peak all around us, no roads, no bleating mobile phones - just mountains, with all their magical and lethal allure. I couldn't be happier.

But by the time we reach Lobuche, 4,930m and only a day from Base Camp, my wife is not happy. She's getting headaches, feeling nauseated and not sleeping much. We decide to see how she is in the morning. But the morning starts at 4am, when she wakes me with an intense pain in her head and fear in her eyes. I've read enough mountaineering disaster books to know we need to head back down again urgently.

A view of Everest, tucked behind Mt Nuptse, seen from Kala Pattar



Essential info

> When to go

Autumn (October to November) and spring (March to April) are best for trekking, between the less pleasant winter and monsoon seasons. If you really want to avoid the crowds, you can go in December or January as we did, but you'd better be ready for some seriously cold weather.

> Getting there

Fly direct to Kathmandu from London Heathrow from around £514. India's Jet Airways usually has the best deals.

> Getting around

Nepal has very cheap and regular bus services, but bad roads and frequent strikes. Leave plenty of time for travel connections, especially when you're returning to the airport for your flight home.

> Guide book

Lonely Planet's *Trekking In The Nepal Himalaya* is recommended.

> Trekking guide

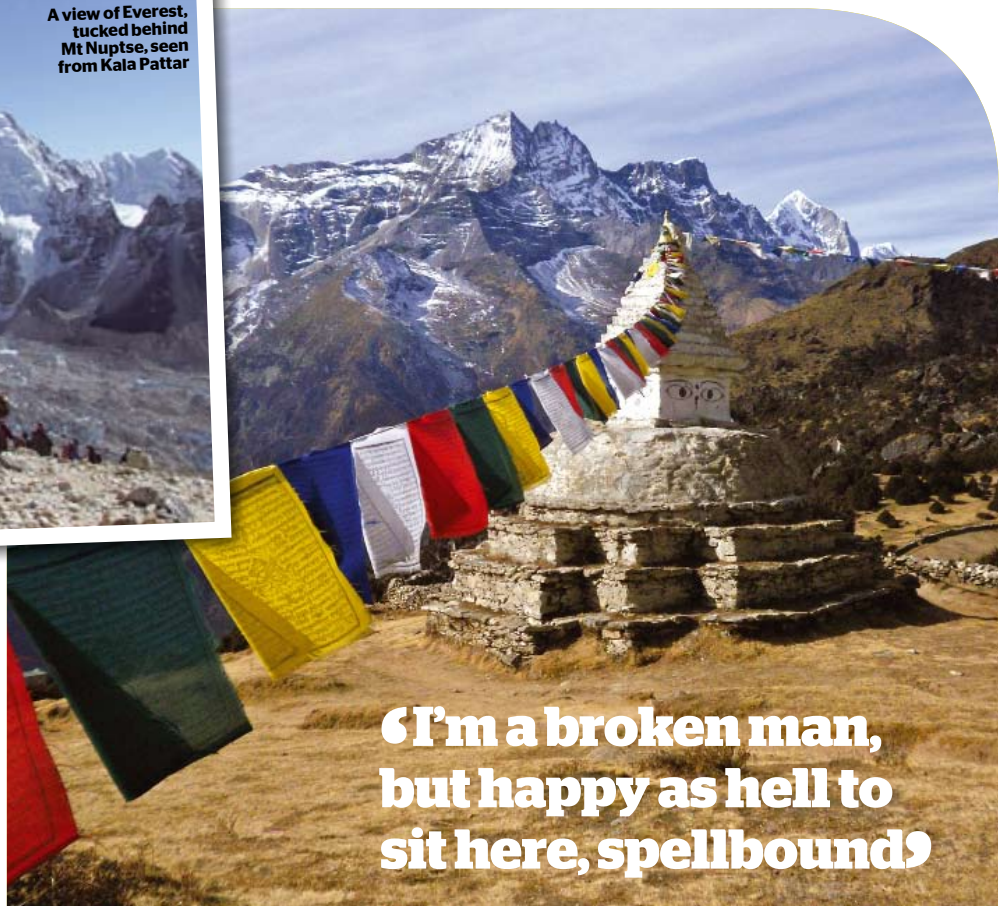
There are plenty of guiding agencies in Kathmandu, some better than others - try to find out which ones are best through word of mouth. If you hire staff, make sure they're government-registered. A guide should cost £2.50-£4 a day, while a porter will be around £2. Agree the prices before you start your trek. Most people in the tourist industry speak English.

> Visa

All visitors need a visa, which is available on arrival in Nepal. Bring two photos and 30 US dollars for a 30-day visa. Extensions are available.

> Accommodation

A basic room with shared bathroom will be between 300 and 600 rupees (£2.50-£5), or less if you're happy with a room in a teahouse.



‘I’m a broken man, but happy as hell to sit here, spellbound’

As soon as it's light and warm enough (it drops below -20°C each night up here), we leave our sleeping bags and retrace our path at pace. Passing monuments to climbers who never came home from Everest is a poignant reminder that we're doing the right thing. Her headache subsides as we rest by the yak dung stove back in Dingboche, drinking endless hot chocolates. If I had any feelings that we'd been overcautious, they vanish a few days later when we pass a trekker being escorted by a guide, his face whiter than the snow and slurring his words.

I don't say it, but I'm gutted I won't see Everest up close. However, my wife sweetly suggests she'll wait in Dingboche for a day while I make a dash for Base Camp. I'll have about 14 hours and the ascent is over 1,100m.

'It's possible,' says the teahouse owner, after a long thoughtful pause.

Black ice

I leave at 5am. It's pitch black and ridiculously cold. Headtorch on, I make my way through a long valley. But then I outsmart myself trying to follow a shortcut I spotted on the map, and daylight finds me halfway across the Khumbu Glacier. Glacier travel is dangerous enough when you're full equipped with climbing gear and roped to a partner. I regularly send large rocks skidding down into pools of glacial melt. I curse myself for letting days of holding back explode into reckless over-enthusiasm, but I get across unscathed, if a little less cocksure.

On the way to the dust bowl of Gorak Shep, the final settlement, I feel like I've passed into a twilight world. My head is

pounding and breathing is seriously hard work. I no longer exchange greetings with the numerous white-faced hikers I pass. Most have stopped for oxygen breaks and probably won't get much further. Instead of Base Camp itself (there's nothing there but rocks at this time of year), I opt for Kala Pattar. I want The View - it's become an obsession.

The last 100m of ascent to the prayer flag-swathed summit takes over an hour. I stop to rest again and again. I feel like I'm back in the playground and some bug-eyed bully keeps winding me with his punches. But, finally, gasping, I'm there.

Mountain high

I'm a broken man, but happy as hell to sit here spellbound, gawping at the world's biggest rock star. Everest, in all its 8,848 metres of terrifying magnificence, is not really an attractive mountain. Many of its slightly shorter neighbours have the charisma and beauty, most notably Ama Dablam (the name means 'mother's necklace'). But I sit and stare and click away with my camera until my headache becomes too much to bear.

After one of the most exhausting days of my life, I stagger back to Dingboche in the fading light, with legs wobbling like a drunken Elvis. In my fatigued state I become convinced my wife has, quite sensibly, left me for someone who considers the Caribbean a better holiday option. But she bounds up to me like a Labrador. The drama is over, but thankfully our marriage isn't. Yet. Yetis. Dammit. With so much else to get excited about I forgot to look out for yetis... ❄️



Think you've got what it takes to get up Everest? Take our explorer aptitude test at mensfitness.co.uk/links/climb