

## My Trek in the Himalayas or What the Hell Have I Gotten Myself Into?

“How are you with altitude?”

“Beats me”, I replied.

“You’re going hiking in the Himalayas and you don’t know how you are with altitude?!”  
was Jeff’s stunned comeback.

Hmmm. I hadn’t actually given that any thought. Jeff clearly had. I was flying to Delhi in two and a half weeks. Shortly after that we would take a bus to Manali, followed by a jeep ride to Leh, along the highest motorable road in the world. After a couple of days, “adjusting to altitude”, we would start our trek. I decided that perhaps it was time I took stock of my preparations. That wouldn’t be too difficult. Up to now they’d been negligible. The other frightening piece of realia, that I’d been quite successful in burying, was the lowdown on my traveling companions. The four of them – Ray and Ange, a Welsh couple; Si, from England and Peg, his Singaporean wife, were all frighteningly fit and had spent the previous summer hiking in the Andes. I, on the other hand, did not measure up well on the fitness scale and had spent the previous summer lazing on Philippine beaches, drinking wine and partying in Canada. As I mulled over these facts, something else was gnawing at my subconscious. Seconds later, it registered. Both my lungs had collapsed, albeit years earlier, in a car accident. Could that be a problem?, I wondered.

Yes, perhaps that ticket to Delhi had been purchased a little too hastily. The next day I went to the gym and hired a personal trainer. At 500 pesos an hour (\$10 Cdn.) Miel was a real bargain. But the exercise was a little too little, a little too late. Nevertheless, I consoled myself, it was better than nada. As the training sessions slowly progressed, I tried to will the trepidation away, but it lingered. Well, I would do my best. After all, I **had** been invited on this expedition. My mates must’ve figured I could cope... Or had I? Had I, perhaps, wormed

my way in? My memory of the initial plan, formulated over a long distance phone call, was a tad foggy. I certainly hoped I'd been invited!

I got into Delhi late at night. I happened upon Ray and Ange, by chance, in the airport. They'd been living in Colombo. Si and Peg were in Hong Kong and would arrive by air to Leh in a few days. I was based in Manila. We'd all taught together in Beijing two years earlier. I'd booked into a mid range hotel for the first two nights, knowing that I'd be arriving late and not expecting to meet my friends at the airport. Ray and Ange would be staying at a hostel. I decided to ease my way into Indian life. I had lived in a bush village in Nigeria many moons ago and had spent four months 'traveling rough' in Ethiopia, Yemen, Malawi, and Tanzania the previous year. But in the years between, I'd grown rather accustomed to more upmarket travel and accommodation. I spent two nights at my hotel and then moved across town to join Ray and Ange at the more economical Anoop. While a tad run down, the walls and floors were marble and the rooftop cafe was a great oasis when we'd had our fill of the onslaught of sound, smell and colour out our doorstep. The Anoop would be a better preparation for the tent, soon to be 'home' and another rung down on the comfort ladder.

With no recovery time from the 485 km., eighteen and a half hour trip to Manali, eight of us were crammed into a jeep built for five for the next sixteen hours. Ange and I were in the front with the driver. We changed position when the one with the stickshift embedded in her thigh could stand it no longer. At the highest point, the road was 5,328 meters. The scenery was spectacular and terrifying; at times alternately, at times simultaneously. Some of the hairpin turns were roller coaster material.

One of the biggest challenges was finding a place to 'ease oneself', a memorable expression used by my Nigerian students. This necessity involved scouting out a territory away from the eyesight of the ubiquitous plethora of armed military men. We were well above the treeline

but, despite the height, we inevitably stopped in an area that was painfully flat. To get out of plain view, the females in our group had to climb embankments. One of our troupe was an excursion guide and scaled each available mound like a mountain goat, while I lagged behind painfully, feeling the altitude, occasionally questioning my sanity and trying not to dread the trials yet to come. The only inhabitants of the high plateaus are Khampa nomads, soldiers, and teams of tar covered workers from Bihar and Nepal, struggling to keep this politically advantageous road open.

We arrived in Leh and after much reconnaissance, we settled on a place for the night. Si and Peg would be arriving in a few days. After the fun and excitement of our reunion, we had to arrange a trek. In the meantime, we decided to explore Leh, which is located in a small valley just north of the Indus Valley. Until 1947, yak trains left the Leh bazaar and traveled over the Karkoram Pass to trade in Yarkand and Kashgar in Xinjiang in the far off northeast corner of China. Today it is important strategically with a large military presence. Leh, at 3500 meters, is situated in Ladakh, "The Land of High Passes". On the sensitive borders of Pakistan and China, Ladakh is one of the most remote regions of India and is home to the world's largest glaciers outside the polar regions. Temperatures in Ladakh are extreme. Some claim that it's the only place where it's possible to sit in the sun with your feet in the shade and catch sunstroke and frostbite at the same time. Ladakh was opened up to foreign tourists in 1974.

Brand spanking walking stick in hand, I set off with my companions to investigate Leh and, with luck, favourably whet my appetite for the trek. First stop was the nine storey Leh Palace that is a dead ringer for the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Until the 1830's, the palace was home to the Ladakhi royal family. They were then exiled to nearby Stok. The old town of Leh sits at the base of the Namgyal Hill and consists of an intricate labyrinth of alleyways. We picked our way through these, visited the stately, though somewhat dilapidated, palace and

continued out of town and up into the mountains. The day, which consisted of a five hour, medium ability hike, took its toll on me. My sister had mailed my hiking boots from Canada. I'd had them since a six month backpacking trip more than twenty years earlier, but I didn't wear them often. My feet hurt. Those earlier doubts were eclipsing the excitement and anticipation that I preferred to be revelling in. My concerns were twofold: was I physically capable of this and how would my performance affect my fellow trekkers? I was well aware that it was too late in the day to be having these apprehensions.

There'd been talk of doing a few short treks. This sounded like a good plan to me. Ray, however, was quite keen on a longer stint. In the end, we settled on a seventeen day trek from Zingchen to Tsumoriri Lake, with a shorter eight day option to Runtse. We chose Overland Escape and they would provide the tents (including a kitchen and dining tent), dishes, food, horses for our luggage, a cook, guide and helper. We'd be averaging six hours a day.

The night before we left, we had a large meal consisting of several Indian dishes. I thought the food was delicious and ate more than my usual small appetite affords. In the morning we were up bright and early and initially I thought the churning in my stomach was just butterflies. It wasn't. I don't know if it was food poisoning or stomach flu, but I tried to tell myself that it would pass. Well, trying to convince myself didn't cut it. As the truck jerked along, delivering us to our destination, I quickly emptied a nearby plastic bag and replaced it with the contents of my stomach. I was weak and faint and felt like death.

We arrived at our starting point. It was unanimous, amongst my traveling companions, that I would not be leaving with them. Even though I knew that they were right, it was difficult to accept and I was in tears as we pulled away. Before we separated, there'd been a huddle and Plan B was hatched. If I was up to it, I could hike in to meet them the next day. If not, my part in the excursion would have to be aborted.

Back at the guesthouse, my condition continued to deteriorate as I floated in and out of a feverish consciousness. I began to wonder if it was a recurrence of malaria. I knew that I would have to go into the Overland Escape office to make arrangements for the morrow, in the hopes that I would be in better shape by then. I looked at my watch and left the trip to the last possible minute and then had to drag myself into the office. I was given a cup of tea, which was the only thing I'd had to drink all day except water. I hadn't eaten. It was six p.m. Two of the guides would come to my hotel early the next morning and, if I was feeling better, I would join them. We would drive and then hike in to where the gang was spending the second night.

I spent a fitful night. Should I just pass on the trek? I'd been having doubts since the altitude chat with Jeff, weeks earlier. It would be wrong, reprehensible even, to bail if I felt better. I had come so far. To pack it all in would be such a waste. But could I manage, especially in my present state? In retrospect, if I'd had any inkling of what lay in store for me, I wonder if I would have made the choice that I did.

In the morning, it was hot as hell. I was weak, nauseous and plagued with reservations that I desperately tried to ignore. We left the jeep and set out early. By four p.m., my herculean efforts to continue pushing one foot in front of the other were fast waning. On a diet of tea, bananas and consuming uncertainty, I had a mantra that played over and over in my head like a skipping c.d. "This too shall pass". I didn't think we'd ever arrive at Skyu, where I was to rejoin my party. Hours passed. It was getting dark.

Then, as if to further test me, a large chunk of the track had been washed away. In its place was a cavern. Shree and Adarsh were proposing that I climb down about forty meters and back up the same distance while they intended to jump the chasm. Not a chance in hell, I thought. It was a 'lose - lose'. I didn't want to add that extra time or effort to the day but I shuddered at the gargantuan gulf in the track. The drop was sheer and terrifying. I wasn't

good with either height or long-jump. Eventually, we settled on a makeshift human chain and I'm still not exactly sure how we managed it, but in the end, the Himalayan Gap was bridged and conquered. By now it was well after dark. My Delhi watch had packed up hours earlier and neither of the guys had one. After what seemed like a couple more hours of hard slogging, we finally reached the campsite. My friends were nowhere to be seen. I asked several people, but no, there were no foreigners at the site. I laid down with my head on my pack. I shut my eyes and tried to banish the nagging reality. I was spent. The guides planned on returning to the truck; I knew I couldn't. And then I heard my name. Those two syllables instantly transformed my despair to elation. For now, relief triumphed over the impending doom.

The following days challenged me like I've never been challenged. I didn't want to be holding the others back and I made that clear from the start. At one point though I wasn't sure of the direction as even Ange, the slowest of the other four, was out of sight. When we stopped for lunch that day I nabbed Anchuk, one of the guides, and asked him to stay at the rear with me. He became my lifeline. I often apologized to him when I found out that he was training to be a monk because there were times when curses involuntarily escaped my weary and often exasperated lips. I was the last one in every day and the others placed bets on when I'd arrive. I did pretty well though, usually trailing between a half hour and an hour. The boulder-field day was particularly trying – miles and miles of colossal, ugly, clumsy boulders. The scenery was often breathtaking in places but I didn't always take the time to appreciate it. I do regret that. I found the demands to be both mentally and physically arduous. I definitely had to will myself on. I crossed two passes, one at 4380 meters and the second at 4900 meters. The latter one was during a freak blizzard where you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

In the end, after wrestling with the decision for days, I left at Rumtse, the 'check out spot' at

the end of day eight. So did Ange, who was struggling with back and feet problems. But I was proud of myself. I never succumbed to getting on one of the horses, though the temptation certainly beckoned at times.

Ironically, Jeff's altitude concerns were unfounded. In fact, while one of my mates was affected, altitude was the least of my problems. I've since learned that while you might cope well with it during one trip, there is no guarantee that you will the next time. I'm not expecting altitude to be a problem next time, though. No, from the five star Shangri La in Kota Kinabalu, where I'll be spending my next holiday, I'll be enjoying the mountain view, poolside.