INSPIRATION FOR TRAVELLERS

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10 TRIPS OF A LIFETIME

PLUS Nepal, Thailand, Wyoming, Belize, Colombia

The Mountain

In search of clarity, one woman goes to the greatest heights.

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I woke with a startle in the middle of the night to pitch-blackness. My heart was pounding like an out-of-control jackhammer. I pushed my way out of my sleeping bag, gasping for oxygen, and then – slammed with a wall of -8 °C air – dove back in.

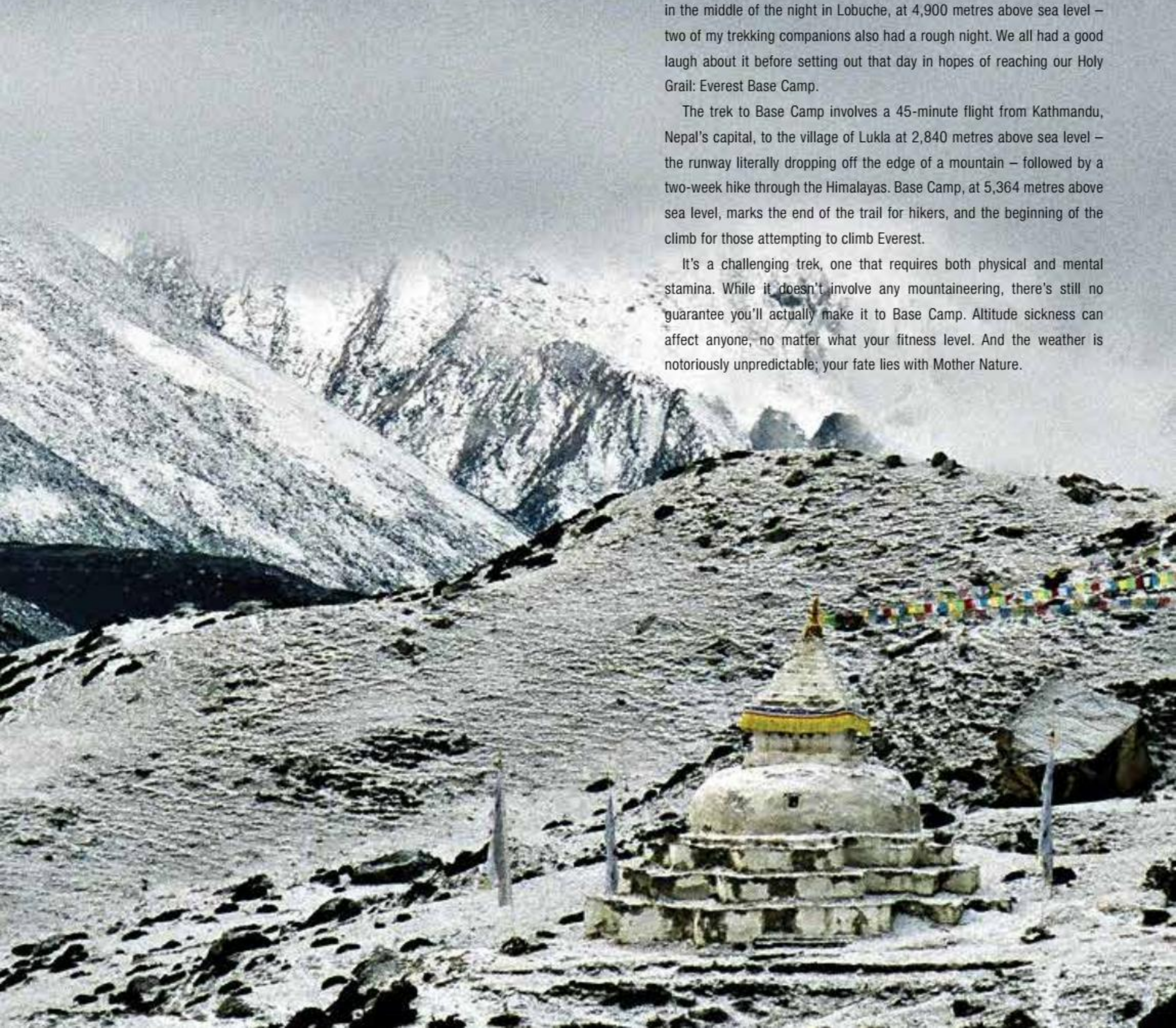
In that moment, it occurred to me that I probably shouldn't have rented a sleeping bag. Why didn't I spend the cash and buy a proper down-filled bag before I left on this trip? Then other questions flooded my brain: What had I been thinking? Why on earth was I doing this? But I didn't have to. I could turn back in the morning. I just had to make it through the night.

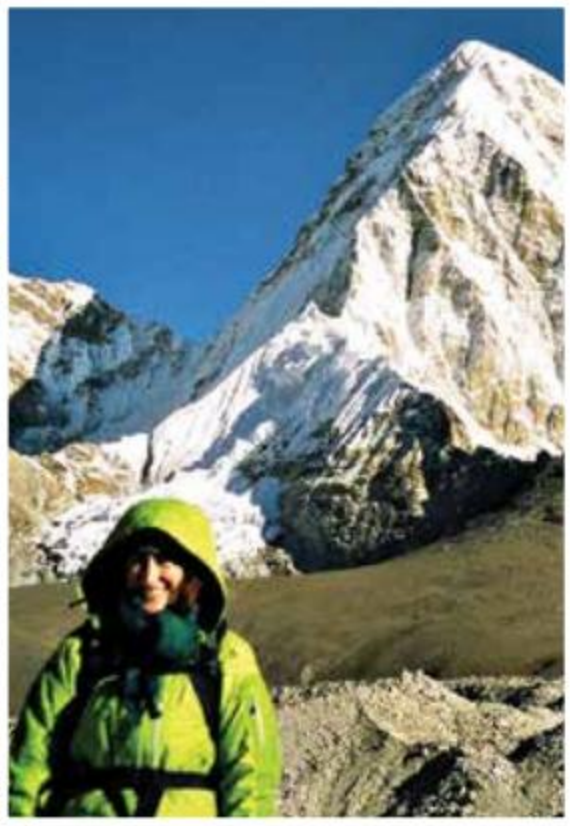
The next time I awoke, it was to my alarm clock and the early morning light streaming into the teahouse, perched on the Himalayan mountain range. And, by the time I was settled around the yak-dung fire with the rest of my group – about a dozen Aussies and Kiwis – loading up on carbs and drinking Nescafé, it was clear I had no intention of turning back.

Turns out I wasn't the only one who had an altitude-fuelled panic attack in the middle of the night in Lobuche, at 4,900 metres above sea level – two of my trekking companions also had a rough night. We all had a good laugh about it before setting out that day in hopes of reaching our Holy Grail: Everest Base Camp.

The trek to Base Camp involves a 45-minute flight from Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, to the village of Lukla at 2,840 metres above sea level – the runway literally dropping off the edge of a mountain – followed by a two-week hike through the Himalayas. Base Camp, at 5,364 metres above sea level, marks the end of the trail for hikers, and the beginning of the climb for those attempting to climb Everest.

It's a challenging trek, one that requires both physical and mental stamina. While it doesn't involve any mountaineering, there's still no guarantee you'll actually make it to Base Camp. Altitude sickness can affect anyone, no matter what your fitness level. And the weather is notoriously unpredictable; your fate lies with Mother Nature.





I've never been one to obsess about ticking something off a proverbial bucket list, nor did I have life-long desire to see Everest. But at a time in my life when I faced a lot of career and relationship questions, I felt the need to get away – as in, the-other-side-of-the-planet far away. Not to run away, but to clear out the clutter in my brain, to give myself time and space to think. Or maybe to not think. And an epic trek seemed like the logical thing to do.

It's entirely possible to do this trek on your own (and hire a Sherpa guide and porter in Kathmandu). There are also group tours, ranging from moderately priced to those with a hefty price tag. You sleep in simple teahouses (there aren't any Hiltons high up in the Himalayas) and eat simple meals (I had a lot of dal bhat and the occasional $5 Snickers bar that had long passed its expiration date).

After a few days, there are no more hot showers (or showers, period). And in many cases, the toilets consist of a hole in the ground – albeit, with the prettiest scenery you'll ever see surrounding a hole in the ground.

It's not everyone's idea of a good time. But there's a reason why this part of the world attracts so many hikers and climbers. The Himalayas are breathtaking; they're awe-inspiring. The route to Base Camp, surrounded by the world's highest snow-capped peaks, is actually referred to as 'the steps to Heaven' – and it's an accurate description.

But it's more than that. You're pushing yourself to your limits, challenging yourself to do something you're not sure you can do. Hiking at high altitude, with steep ascents and descents, is one hell of a cardio workout. The altitude also affects your body and brain. I lost my appetite (when I needed it most) and felt over-emotional and giddy – I was either in tears or hysterically laughing.

On the morning we set out for Base Camp, I was struggling to breathe and my legs felt heavy, like I was wearing ankle weights. Maybe that's when I finally understood the concept of 'being in the moment.' Problems back home seemed oh-so trivial. In fact, I wasn't thinking about them. I was literally taking life one step at a time.

Gasping and wheezing, I did eventually make it to Base Camp. Standing there with my trekking companions, I felt a profound sense of accomplishment. We cheered and snapped photos and took sips of Everest Whisky. And then, not sure what else to do in this barren patch of snow, we turned back.

I didn't have an epiphany on that mountain. There was no miraculous revelation about my life's purpose; there were no answers to my problems. But something else happened.

Straggling behind the others, it was getting dark by the time I arrived back at the teahouse. As I approached, a Sherpa standing near the doorway pointed behind me. Turning to look, I saw the mountain range in shadows, with Mt. Everest peeking out from behind, lit brilliant pink by the setting sun. It lasted about 20 seconds. And then it disappeared into the shadows.

You can't plan for those moments. They just happen. And that, I suppose, is why we find ourselves on a mountain, with a hammering heart, in sub-zero temperatures, doing something we didn't think we had the strength to do.

Because for 20 seconds, Mother Nature took my breath away – and that had nothing to do with oxygen deprivation.

"Mother Nature took my breath away"