

summit

april / 1973 75¢



Dear G.,

We'd just begun to have delusions of competency after successfully organizing about ten trips to the mountains in East Africa and Asia. For nearly a year, almost everything except the weather had worked according to our plans. Nothing had been stolen from us. We'd learned to cope with the third world, or so we thought. Nepal was to be the climax of our trip, a thirty-day trek with climbing possibilities. Our route would take us through the remote Rolwaling Valley, across the Tesi Lapcha Pass (19,000 feet), up near Mt. Everest, and back from Lukla to Kathmandu by plane. As the Rolwaling Valley is quite close to the Tibetan border, it has been closed to trekking until quite recently and we hoped to encounter few other visitors.

We were especially looking forward to hiring some of the famous Sherpas of Nepal to accompany us. What Himalayan book has not praised the noble Sherpa for his strength, honesty, courage and loyalty? At last we would meet and climb with these renowned porters and guides among the world's highest mountains. Alas, things did not work out as we'd expected, perhaps because of mistakes on our part, perhaps because Nepal is changing.

Earlier trekking groups in Nepal have been almost unanimously enthusiastic about their trips; we suspect our experience was quite unusual. However, by telling about it, I may somewhat temper the view "trekking in Nepal is the grooviest activity around" that is currently bringing hordes of tourists to Nepal.

We thought Nepal to be very crowded, expen-

sive, and overrated in comparison with other places we've visited. As for the faithful Sherpa, the one we hired turned out to be a most clever and unpleasant thief. I do not mean to malign Nepal or Sherpas in general, but just to accurately tell you about our experience.

Kathmandu is still a fascinating crowded eastern city of shrines and temples. Nowadays though, narrow streets are full of taxis and westerners. The continual blair of horns virtually drowns the melodious bells and gongs of the temples. Apparently all the foreigners in town are going trekking. "Namche Bazaar," "Kuli Gandaki," "soybeans," "far out" fill the air.

Our Sherpa was warmly recommended to us by Nepal's most reputable trekking firm. "Take Mingma Norbu — very honest — an excellent sirdar." Fantastic. Unfortunately, Mingma insisted sahibs couldn't cook in Nepal. He would take care of all the food and cooking. To help him he would have to hire a kitchen boy. "Very cheap. Porter wages." Oh, yes, we would have to equip him, feed him western food and fly him back from Lukla. Giving in, we acquired Kami, a second Sherpa who Mingma undemocratically insisted on referring to as "kitchenboy."

"We need boots, packs, jackets, tents, and many other things, sahib." Suddenly it became apparent that the daily wage paid to Sherpas was only a small fraction of their real cost. About \$100 worth of cooking gear was also requested, although not purchased. The gear given to Sherpas is usually sold by them after each trek or expedition. Consequently, most Sherpas have no gear

FIASCO IN NEPAL

By Arlene Blum

and there is a lot of climbing equipment for sale very cheap in Kathmandu.

The first few days of our trek involved pleasant strolls through low altitude farm and forestland. Our appreciation of the scenery was somewhat marred by the leeches, fleas, ticks and bad colds we'd acquired. It is unlikely there is a form of life lower than the disgusting leech. Upon attaching themselves, they insert an anaesthetic and an anti-coagulant into the wound. Looking down, I'd see tell-tale red on my sock or shoe. Investigating further, my foot would be bleeding profusely and in the shoe I'd find a fat leech bloated with my blood. Ugh! Leech bites are harmless as leeches carry no disease. Still the bleeding can be most tiresome, and it is useful to carry a stiptic pencil to stop it.

Doubtless, you've heard many times of the beauty of Nepal and the friendliness of its people. True enough, so I won't bore you with further exclamations of rapture. Be it said that the trek up the Rolwaling Gorge to Tesi Lapcha is quite a nice walk.

On the eleventh day we stopped at a group of huts called Nangaon (13,500 ft.) just south of the Tibetan border to do a bit of climbing. Some parties get here in seven or eight days. However, there was always someone ill in our group so we did not object too strongly on the many days when Mingma told us we could go no further after two hours of walking. The way in which this two hours was stretched into a whole day was a wonder to behold. "Tea, sahib," would wake us at 6 a.m. or so. The porters would be on the trail at

7 a.m. Each tea house or resting place would provide the occasion for a long stop. Breakfast would be around 10:00 though the breakfast spot could usually be reached in an hour's walk. At noon, our erratic progress would start again and stop for the day at 2:00 or so. "It is the custom, sahib."

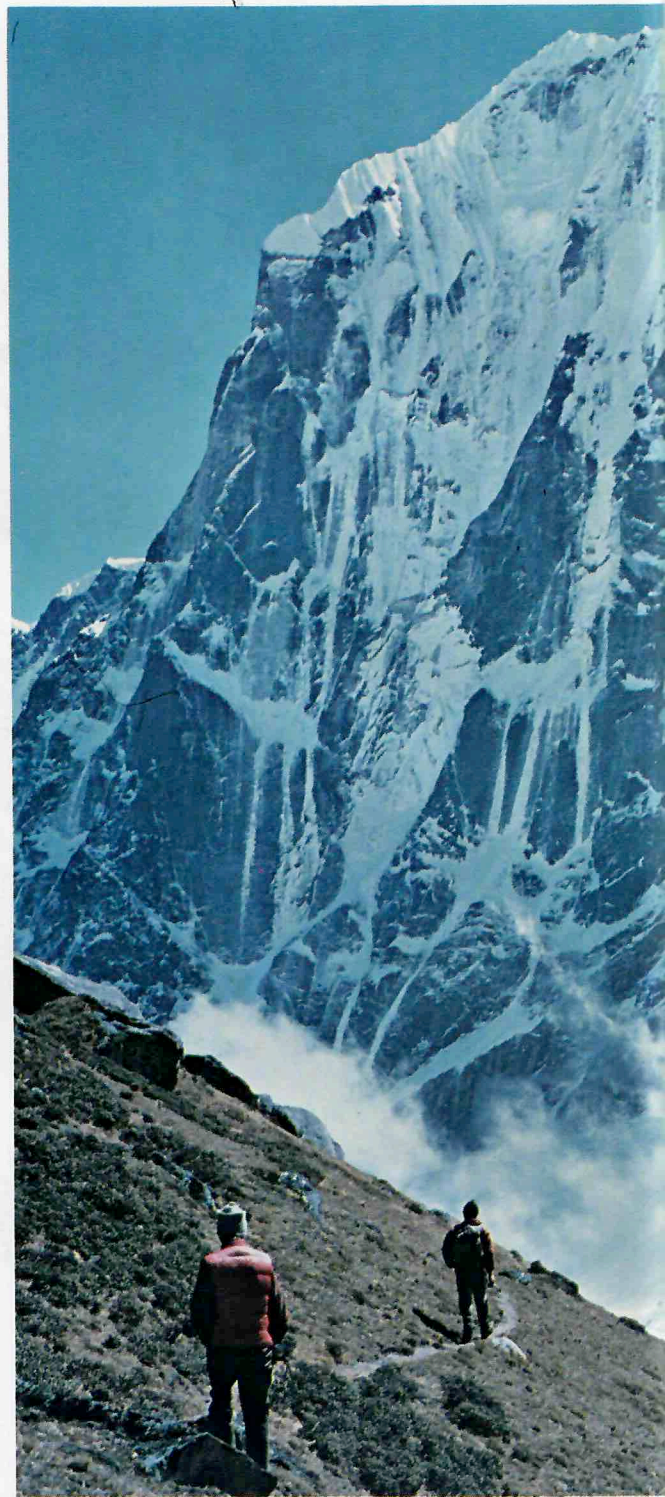
In spite of this leisurely progress, we were all losing weight at a great rate. Perhaps, this is a typical reaction of sedentary Americans trekking in Nepal. However, Joel, Ann and Dave, George and I had just spent a month climbing between 15,000 and 24,000 feet in Afghanistan, and Tom Stephens and Bill Conrad had spent the summer working in the mountains as climbing rangers. This was the first trip during which everyone had lost a lot of weight. Why?

Although we tried to do the cooking, Mingma insisted on preparing and supervising the food which was disappearing at an astonishing rate. The fact that three small bottles of liquor we'd given to Mingma for safekeeping were all broken or leaked away in the first couple days of the trip should have given us a clue as to what was happening.

Returning from a reconnaissance of the peaks near Nangaon, we met a group of twenty German climbers and fifty porters who informed us that an even larger Alpinismus group (remember Noshag?) was only a couple of days behind. For the third time it looked as though we'd be invaded by Alpinismus. "Let's cross the Tesi Lapcha Pass before they catch up with us." "Good idea, we'll see Everest in three days. But where



Going through the icefall below Tesi Lapcha Pass.



Fantastic scenery on the trail near Tesi Lapcha.



*Trail after a heavy snowfall.
A peak in the Rolwaling Valley.*



are our porters?" Our porters were now working for the Germans who'd offered them higher wages. An indignant Mingma soon returned, followed sheepishly by the wayward porters.

Three days later we crossed the pass in a blizzard and camped at 18,600 feet. Ann and Dave helped carry a porter who had collapsed below the pass and been left out in the storm by the others. The Sherpa porters spent the frigid night in the open camped on some rocks. We admired their fortitude but wondered why no one had ever bothered to stack the rocks to make a hut or at least stone walls for protection from the wind. The Tesi Lapcha is a frequently crossed route connecting the Sherpa community of Beding with the Khumbu, and this is a standard camping spot.

Mingma kindly (so we thought) invited us to stay at his house in Kumjung (12,500 feet) for a day before we went up to Everest. Though it was October and supposedly the dry season, it now began to storm in earnest. For nearly a week, we camped in the mud in Mingma's potato patch while the snow sogged down upon us at a sticky thirty degrees. The snow was so heavy it broke a tent pole.

Occasionally we'd have a meal in Mingma's house to get away from the squalor of our tents. As Sherpa houses lack chimneys, the dense smoke inside made it difficult for us to breathe. Apparently this smoke leads to a high incidence of eye and lung disorders among the Sherpas. To escape the soggy tents and smoky house, we took to eating in the loft below the house, the residence of the cows and spiders.

One of the storm days was spent at the Everest View Hotel just up the hill from Kumjung at 12,500 feet. This hotel, which is being built by the Japanese, charges \$65 per day per person and is noted for its lack of central heating. At lunch, the frosty breath of the warmly attired guests shrouded the elegantly set table. All the water used in the hotel must be carried up to it by porters or yaks.

The guests are flown to Lukla and then either walk two days or are helicoptered directly to the hotel. Often they are so ill from the sudden altitude change that they spend all their time lying

in their rooms under electric blankets, breathing oxygen. The hotel recently tried to buy part of Kumjung to build a landing strip. The Sherpas refused to sell their village so a landing strip is being blasted out of a nearby hillside.

"Sugar finished, sahib. Need twenty pounds more." "Okay, here's the money." Four days later, "Sugar finished, sahib." Since only three of us used sugar and we'd used less than a pound a day on past trips, using up twenty pounds of sugar in four days seemed rather peculiar. Also strange was the fact that our wood bill was three times as great as that of other parties. Still, Mingma insisted these were the prices and became very insulted when we questioned them. We did object though when he charged us more for camping in his muddy front yard and eating in the loft than the Sherpa tea houses charged for a day's food and lodging for a group like ours. "It is the custom, sahib."

And, so it continued. We lost more and more weight while spending more per day than we had on any previous trip. Obviously, it was mostly our fault for not carefully supervising the Sherpas. After six months of climbing in Asia we were tired of hassling, and thought it worth paying a bit more to have a smooth relaxing trip and avoid unpleasant scenes. This was undoubtedly an error for it encouraged Mingma to think we were rich fools.

When the storm ended, we set out for Gorek Shep, a frozen lake near Everest, with nine porters and two Sherpas carrying our one hundred fifty pounds of personal equipment and meagre food. Since porters should each carry sixty-six pounds, we tried to dismiss some of them. Mingma said all the porters would quit if any were sent back. Most of Mingma's sister's load was her baby who seemed rather unhappy. We suggested sending her back. "Impossible, sahib."

Mingma then told us we must pay the lightly laden porters five days' wages for what was an easy three days' march. "It is the custom, sahib." I finally refused Mingma's demands and got involved in a most unpleasant scene. We ended up paying four days' wages.

Next day the frame of my Kelty pack, which

the Sherpas had been carrying, was completely broken. No one knew how it had happened.

The hike up to Everest was really beautiful although the track was full of garbage and defecation. An even worse effect of the ever-increasing hordes of visitors is that all the trees are being cut down for firewood. Until a few years ago there was a taboo against cutting live wood. No longer. Now there are predictions that in a few years all the wood will be gone, and the hillsides barren and eroded.

The best day of this trip we hiked from Loboche (16,200 feet) to the French Camp I on Pumori (17,700 feet). The sky was deep blue, the air warm and calm, and the views fantastic. Everest and so many of the mountains I'd heard about for years lay majestically before me. We could go no further because of all the new unconsolidated snow left by the storm. The North Col of Everest can be seen by walking to about 20,000 feet on Pumori, reputedly an easy hike when the snow is consolidated. Someday I'd like to see this view. If I ever go to the Khumbu again, I plan to bring freeze-dried food from the U.S. and to do my own cooking and carrying.

After thirty days we escaped from the Khumbu in an emaciated condition. In the confusion of leaving, our loyal Mingmu kept all the equipment we'd given to Kami, the kitchen boy, of whom we thought highly.

On our return to Kathmandu, we called the trekking firm that had recommended Mingma. "He doesn't work for us. He was just a Sherpa hanging around looking for work. Goodbye."

As a parting gasp, we had a big dinner at Kathmandu's best restaurant, and all got dysentery.

We're off now to the Great Barrier Reef of Australia to wash away the diseases of Asia and then to the New Zealand Alps.

Sincerely,
Arlene

P.S. If you still want to go trekking in Nepal, be sure you either hire an honest Sherpa (don't know how you do this), pay a reputable trekking company to arrange things, or just carry your gear yourself. Trekking companies charge \$12 to \$20 per man day for organizing everything. Our trip

cost \$8 per man day and I expect you could live quite well for less than half of that if you didn't hire Sherpas. In any case, in Kathmandu there is a most useful book called "Trekking in Nepal" that gives an idea of how long various treks should take and contains lots of useful information. There are also trekking maps of most of Nepal available in Kathmandu and topographic maps of the areas around many of the major peaks are available in Europe. For example, Schneider has made an excellent topo of the Khumbu which may be purchased from Sporthaus Schuster in Munich, Germany.

We spent \$2.50 per man day for food for us and the three Sherpas who ended up eating with us. There is a definite tendency for the number of Sherpas to increase—we had only wanted to hire one. Other per man day expenses were \$3.50 for porter and Sherpa wages, \$1.00 for expenses along the way like wood, and \$1.00 for flying the Sherpas and ourselves out from Lukla.

The best time of year for trekking in Nepal is supposed to be October to December and February to March. The long storm we encountered in October is most unusual. During this storm four porters died of exposure and many more got severe frostbite. Judging from our experience with the exhausted porter on the Tesi Lapcha, the Sherpas and porters do not always look after one another. It is the responsibility of the trekking party to keep track of all porters when conditions are severe.

Also, a trekker died of pulmonary edema while we were in Kumbung. Many people fly to Lukla every day and then try to walk up to Korek Shep (17,000 feet) in a week or so. A number of people react badly to the altitude, and the amount of pulmonary edema is increasing. There were no climbing fatalities in Nepal while we were there, but five people died on trekking trips. Rather surprising.

After the crowds on Noshag we expected the Khumbu to be crowded with tourists. It certainly was. Several thousand people visit the area each year and the number is rapidly increasing. I wonder what will happen after all the trees are chopped down?