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TRAVEL

To the roof of the world

You can't get much higher than a trek into the Himalayas.

STORY & PHOTOS BY LARRY URISH

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Every five or six steps, I bend forward, hands on knees, gasping for breath. My throbbing headache – which began as a twinge in my temples at dawn, when Bhala Kaji, my guide, and I left the village of Gorak Shep and headed up the mountain – feels as if a badger is trying to claw its way out of my forehead. At least now, two hours into the highest hike in our Himalayan adventure, we've ascended into the sunny part of the trail, and I can finally feel my fingers.



The human body doesn't perform well in the mountains. The lungs work much harder, and muscles lose a lot of their power. Throw in the biting cold and mountain sickness – sleep disturbances, appetite loss, nausea, shortness of breath and, yes, headache – and you may have the kind of “adventure” you didn't plan on.

As I slog my way closer to the top of 18,500-foot Kala Pattar, the summit of our three-week Nepal trek, I can think of only one question: *What the heck am I doing here?*

I find my answer when I turn to the right and gaze 10,500 feet higher and 5 miles into the distance to top of Mt. Everest (*pictured above*). Then I push on.

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I'm living proof that you needn't be a rope-carrying rock god to hike into the Himalayas, the world's highest mountain range. Those with a sense of adventure and a willingness to get into good shape can literally walk in the footsteps of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the first climbers to summit Everest in 1953. While the iconic trail ends at the icy, desolate Everest Base Camp, at 17,300 feet, many

trekkers opt to ascend Kala Pattar ("black rock" in Nepali), which offers better views 1,200 feet higher.



The adventure began months before leaving O.C. The preparation process included the usual to-do's before leaving on any overseas trip: airline reservations, passport and visa, immunizations, (Nepal is a Third World country), travelers checks and the like. I also needed the gear required of an outdoor trek that tops out 4,000 feet above the highest Sierra Nevada peaks: a duffel bag and sleeping bag, water purifier (see sidebar), cold-weather apparel, rain gear and boots. (Guides or group leaders will provide their charges with a comprehensive equipment list.)

My layover day in Kathmandu (*above*), Nepal's colorful, bustling capital city, allowed me to get my body clock reset and interact with Nepal's greatest treasure: its people, a fascinating blend of Hindu and Tibetan cultures and bloodlines. While there, I enjoyed the city's vibrant buzz while walking to Swayambhunath, referred to as the "monkey temple" due to its permanent simian residents.



The trek began at 9,000 feet after taking a one-hour flight to Lukla, a village with a tiny airport carved into the foothills that is widely considered the most dangerous in the world. During the days that followed, Bhala Kaji and I ascended our way through dense forests, stopping in small villages at day's end. Each village offered a number of Spartan but comfortable lodges run by friendly Nepali families, many with adorable, amazingly photogenic children.



As we climbed higher and higher into the Himalayas, the air grew thinner every day. Trees gave way to bushes, to smaller plants, to moss – until, at about 13,000 feet, the world around us was composed of little more than rock, snow, ice and dazzlingly blue sky.

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I continue to slog my way up Kala Pattar, bent over and sucking in the thin air every few seconds. I'm so focused on the labor of each step, I initially don't realize when the rocky trail simply ends. I look up and gaze in awe at the stunning 360-degree amphitheater of snow-capped peaks. The panorama is dominated by a black pyramid-shaped monolith that Tibetan monks for centuries have called Chomolungma, Goddess Mother of the Earth: Mt. Everest. It's a vision I'll never forget.

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