



# Notes From A Writer's First Trek

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By Racha Mourtada

My trek to Everest Base Camp was seven years in the making. It started when I moved to Dubai, but then got bumped and rescheduled until the looming deadlines I had set for doing it – either before I left Dubai or before I turned 40 – converged last spring.

As with many of the lofty adventures people plan, the delays came in many forms: hectic work schedules, doubts about being physically up to the task, obscure articles about the more harrowing, albeit unlikely, effects of extreme altitude, and the ever-present ‘Why?’ from well-meaning friends and bewildered strangers. As in ‘Why would you want to do this?’, to which I never had a ready answer, other than, ‘Why not, wouldn’t you?’

More than a scenic respite from the sun-scorched concrete of Dubai, it was also the perfect send-off, an epic adventure to kick off the next chapter in my life, as I was leaving old comforts and outgrown dreams in search of new ones. Everest Base Camp became something challenging to strive for and achieve, all set in a neatly-packaged 14-day period and tantalizingly placed 5,300m out of reach.

For some, it was the audacity of the adventure, the challenge of it, the cringe-inducing minutiae of preparation that prompted this question. Let’s just say my friends were not as enthused as I was about scouring the Internet to find a specially-designed plastic funnel that would allow me to pee standing up. For others, it was the seeming banality of the trip that led to the follow-up question: ‘It’s just walking, really, isn’t it?’. Well, yes, if you want to be literal about it, but it’s where you’re walking and who you’re walking with that make all the difference.

As to the where, the trek to Everest Base Camp (EBC) led us through some of the most breathtaking landscapes I have ever seen. The terrain started out with steep, lush ridges of green and charging rivers of glacial water, crisscrossed with colorful flag-laced bridges. As we pushed on higher, it transformed into rocky ledges that grazed a crisp blue sky, and stark stretches of land at the base of majestic peaks, snow-dusted and wrapped in clouds.

The who was a group of around 20 people, all Arabs - and one non-Arab who graciously put up with us - a handful of whom I had met in Dubai, but mostly strangers. We were a diverse group, in terms of age, fitness, trekking experience and reasons for being there, but we all felt a similar tingling prescience that this trip would be the experience of a lifetime.

It was anticipation and nervous excitement that forged the first moments of bonding. This was Everest we were scaling, after all, even if we were only heading to Base Camp. It was the season for summit attempts, and there were climbers in our hotel who were the real deal, including our group leader, who had climbed all seven summits. The whole place crackled with expectation. We stayed up 'til the early hours of the morning that first night in Kathmandu, frantically trying to get our duffel bags down to the 10-kg limit before our 6 a.m. flight to Lukla, our starting point.

As we waited to board our bus to the airport, a serene young Canadian man sipping coffee in the hotel lobby told us he had just come down from Base Camp 3, the second to last base camp before the summit, because he had become too sick to continue. I think we were more upset than he was. It seemed unfair to have gotten so close and not come away with the prize, but he seemed unperturbed, taking it in stride. 'EBC is a nice little trek, though,' he said, which put things in comforting perspective. If he had survived a summit attempt with such graciousness, surely, we would be fine.

For the most part, though, the stories that trickled down to us, from people one lodge ahead, or others on the way back from Base Camp, just stoked our nerves. Stories of migraines, nausea, passing out, difficulty breathing... people turning back. It made us feel unsettled, but also a little defiant; that wouldn't happen to us!

It was a physically arduous trek, though not from the start. In the beginning, there was a lot of singing and dancing to Egyptian classics blaring out of speakers strapped to someone's backpack. We became

known among the other trekking groups for our impromptu dances along the trail, which others happily joined, (most notably a father and daughter from Texas). We also became notorious because one of our friends - dubbed the Himalayan Fish by the Sherpas and always Speedo-ready under his clothes - insisted on wading into every one of the glacier pools along the way. Even the one at Base Camp, where we were all bundled up in at least two or three layers. Trekkers would come up to us and say, 'You're the people with that guy... we saw him splashing in the water.' I'm sure some of the Sherpas still speak of him.

Weariness crept up on us slowly, an accumulation of long days of pushing through steep inclines, both upward and downward, which were brutal on the knees; fitful sleep that worsened the higher we got; blisters, bruises and sprains. Varying symptoms of altitude sickness (of which, luckily, I only experienced a mild headache) seeped into our general fatigue. But throughout, there were spry and surefooted Sherpas to guide us, waiting like smiling beacons for the stragglers.

It was easy to forget that these humble and unassuming men had led many an expedition to the Everest summit. They carried our duffel bags - sometimes two per Sherpa - so that we only had to contend with our light daypacks. They sprinted ahead of us to the lodges to check us in and help prepare our meals. There is something very humbling about being served tea by a man who has successfully summited Everest four times (like our head Sherpa; he had attempted to summit seven times in all). We met other locals on the trail as well - mostly men but some women too - who had planks of wood the size of a door strapped to their backs and around their foreheads. These were piled high with food, clothing and appliances for the villages and, cleverly, could be used as something to lean against when it was time for a break. They stooped over walking sticks, with what seemed like an old person's posture, but they moved with determination and surprising speed in their flip flops or sneakers, accompanied by tinny cassette music. We saw schoolchildren bounding up the innumerable steps at Namche Ba-

zaar, one of the beautiful villages on our way, while we huffed and puffed through the first really strenuous stretch of the trek. We had officially crossed over into high altitude range and started our ascent into the clouds.

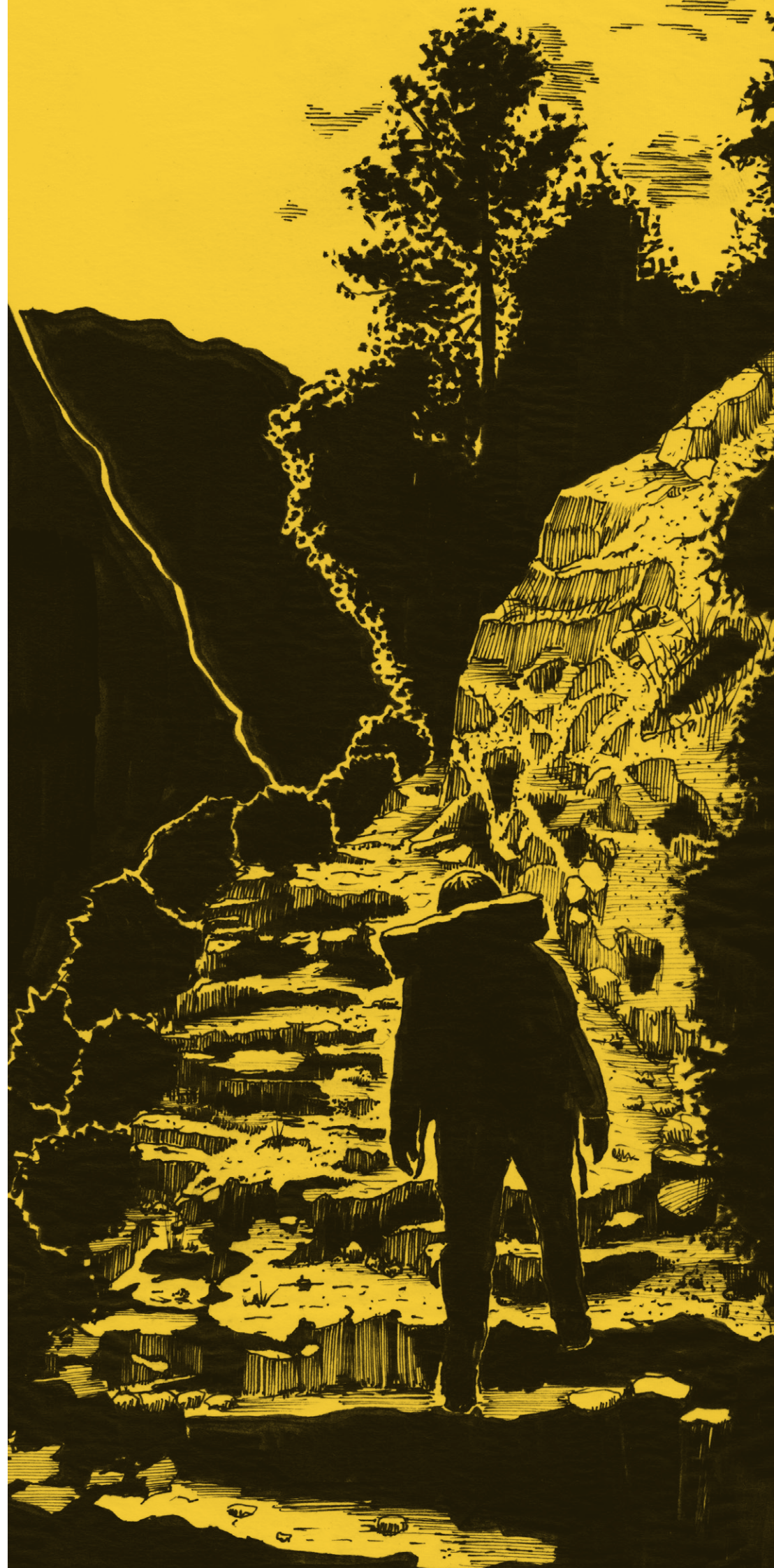
At 3,800 meters, we were looking down at these clouds from the side of a mountain that dropped off into miles of craggy rock face, patchworks of rich earth and regal trees. Above 4,000 meters, we were asked to slow down our pace significantly. One step at a time became a literal mantra as we struggled to draw in deep breaths. At 5,000 meters, every foot forward felt like a real effort and trying to overtake someone or quicken your pace left you trying to catch your breath for a few minutes. The high altitude didn't just affect you while you were moving, it felt like a weight on your chest while you were sleeping; that and the recommended five liters of water a day kept me up on those nights. In the morning, we would joke about the struggle of leaving the comfort of a toasty sleeping bag (and so often!) to get up to go to an icy bathroom.

Too late, I realized that everyone who was sleeping in their trekking clothes had it right; putting on my half-frozen clothes in the morning was a particular point of agony. Brushing my teeth with glacier water gave a whole new meaning to 'sensitive teeth', and showers had ceased 4 or 5 days back, replaced with wet wipe wipe-downs. But after a hot breakfast, a cup of lemon-ginger-honey tea, and a stretching session outside the lodge against a backdrop of imposing mountains, all that agony was forgotten. Even as the air thinned and got colder, the sun grew stronger, warming us quickly, and within half an hour, we would be shedding the layers we had pulled on earlier that morning with chattering teeth.

More than a physical challenge, the trek was a test of endurance, one that was bolstered by the spirit and collective drive of over 20 people, who, in the space of two weeks, became dear friends. I don't think any of us expected to laugh so much. There was fatigue, upset stomachs, occasional tears along the way, severe sunburn, worn out knees and a

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sprained ankle, but mostly a lot of laughter. There was an energy that coagulated at our center when we were all together and stretched thin but strong as we dispersed, each at our own pace, buoyed by a distant off-key singing or a fluorescent t-shirt standing out against a dark brown ridge. We arrived exhausted to the lodges but played cards into the night (let me tell you, people who do these types of treks are very competitive at card games).

The final push to Base Camp started on a beautifully bleak stretch of earth, almost desert-like. At this altitude, there was no longer any vegetation, just rock and mud and, in the distance, snow. The pace was deliberately slow and careful, not just because of altitude-induced fatigue, but the loose rock that made up a lot of the trail. As we got closer, the bright yellow of the tents at Base Camp were heartening spots of color on the horizon. Trailing into the camp one by one, our shuffling steps picked up speed as everyone jumped up and down, hugged each other and snapped pictures. There was an air of relief, and an almost-disbelief that we had made it (in the final hours before reaching the camp, I began to understand why some people might turn back). Every time someone from our group came into view, there was an eruption of cheers and a resurgence of energy. We had been told earlier that we shouldn't stay too long after we arrived; human beings weren't made to function at this altitude. So, as soon as we all finally assembled, shaking off a bone-deep weariness, we shot a video of us dancing joyfully, in silence, at 5,300m. The music would be added in post-production before circulating to the group, but if you were to watch it as is, we just look deranged.

I had thought that reaching Base Camp would be the pinnacle of the trek. It was what I had set out to achieve, after all, and it didn't disappoint. But two days into our descent, I had a fleeting moment that rippled across that experience in a way that I couldn't quite explain, like a tiny stone that skitters across a pond, before letting it settle, at once the same but infinitesimally changed. It was misty and clouds

swirled like loose cotton around the mountain tops. The fast team was ahead of me, and the second team behind me, both out of my eye line and earshot. I was truly alone for the first time on this trip. An almost expectant lull hung in the air, as if the mountains around me were acknowledging my presence, or waiting to let me in on a secret. Something clicked then, a tenuous connection, a feeling of being singularly and spectacularly at one with all that surrounded me. The entire trek seemed to narrow down to that moment, in the light drizzle. I felt like I had finally found what I had come for, even if I wasn't quite sure what that was.

The descent had a different quality and tempo to it – a three-day trek in all, covering the same distance as the seven-day ascent, so it wasn't exactly restful. Never had I been so grateful for walking sticks! Now that our vision was not clouded by the goal of getting to Base Camp, we were enjoying the landscapes even more and seeing them with fresh eyes. There was a new incentive, though, and that was getting to the showers.

Finding out that these were proper ensuite showers in proper hotel rooms (as opposed to the hose above a drain in the floor when we last showered six days ago) was a revelation of almost divine proportions. Our elation could not be contained; a few of us even waited outside the lodge in Namche Bazaar for the pleasure of shouting this joyful news to the people straggling in and watching the incredulity on their faces. Then, of course, was the post-shower bliss, which we rode all the way back to Kathmandu.

There, a group of us bought 'Everest Base Camp' patches and sewed them on to our backpacks, as souvenirs, but it's not the type of trip that needs one. It lingers with you, through pictures, new friends that already seem like old ones, and memories of an experience that you tuck in the back pocket of your mind and occasionally unpack. Especially when you're having a rough day and need to remind yourself, 'I trekked to Everest Base Camp. Surely, I can do this...'

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