

HIKING TO EVEREST BASE CAMP



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Celebrating at Everest Base Camp with fellow Malaysians

With experience gained on a hike to Nepal's Annapurna Base Camp with some school friends in 2013, I confidently signed up for a hike to Everest Base Camp (EBC) in May 2018.

I left Johor Bahru for Nepal 4 days after the historical 14th General Election. I met my 7 teammates in Kathmandu where we gathered for our flight to Lukla (2,286m asl), one of the world's most dangerous airports. Apart from myself, the team comprised of 4 Brits, 2 Aussies, 1 American and 2 Nepali guides.

Lukla is the gateway for all hikers headed for Mt Everest. The journey to Lukla was an adventure itself. First, our flight was delayed and then cancelled due to bad weather in Lukla. As a result, we had to spend an extra night of anxiety in Kathmandu. The next morning, we had no choice but to hire a helicopter for the trip which took about an hour. As we were a day behind in schedule, we had to skip one of the acclimatisation days (in Dingboche) in order to catch up.

Hiking in Nepal is quite established and tourism remains an important industry. We would hike from village to village and spent nights in guesthouses or lodges. We usually set off at around 8.00 a.m. and trekked 7-8 hours daily.

After 3 days, we reached one of the most famous villages in the Himalayas, Namche Bazaar (3,440m). This is an impressive settlement. Though it's in the middle of nowhere, there are pubs, bakeries, restaurants, shops and even an ATM machine! This is also the last frontier of stable electricity and internet connection via wi-fi.

Like most hikers, we would stay an extra day in Namche Bazaar to allow us to acclimatise to the thin air as we had covered a vertical ascend of over 1,200m in the past few days. This is done by climbing to higher ground and then retreating back to lower altitudes to spend the night.

On Day 9, as per schedule, we reached Gorak Shep (5,180m), where the old Base Camp was located. After lunch and a short rest, we left for the ultimate 2-hour hike to EBC (5,486m). As Nepal is a predominantly Buddhist country, Tibetan Buddhist flags can be seen lining monasteries, stupas as well as pathways and bridges. There was an air of calmness, serenity and spirituality, more so as we were away from pollution, computers and modern age gadgets.

In the Himalayas, I met 3 groups of Malaysian hikers. I felt great to be speaking Malay and discussing Malaysian cuisine after more than a week in the mountains. Malaysians are true globe-trotters who can converse in different languages.

The real challenge was hiking from Gorak Shep to Kala Patthar (5,545m) the next day. While six members of my team slept on, my roommate and I woke up at the ungodly hour of 4.00 a.m. for a 2-hour hike in pitch-dark conditions (headlamps required).

Our reward was watching the sun rise on Mt. Everest and that was, for me, a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

As I gazed at Mt. Everest (8,848m) from Kala Patthar, I felt the urge to attempt a climb to the summit. The highest point on earth may look within reach but in reality, climbing and scaling the summit poses substantial health risks and requires 2 months of acclimatisation and training at the Base Camp as well as a hefty tour package price.

Humans are not built to survive at heights of 8,000m above sea level, which is deemed to be the "death zone" as the air is extremely thin and there is only 30% oxygen as compared to sea level. The risk of hyperthermia and acute mountain sickness can easily claim lives.

However, modern hiking gear, facilities and experienced guides have made conquering Mt. Everest a reality and over 4,000 people have reached the peak since Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary first did so on 12 May, 1953, using only rather primitive equipment.

It was an honour even to be at Everest Base Camp, to see mountaineers, professional climbers and Sherpas making preparations to climb the summit. I was also fortunate to have met the fantastic, helpful and selfless members of my team. ■