Trekking in Basa - Khmujung Nepal

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It was an almost perfect trekking experience. Our 16 members were the first group of trekkers to fly to the 2-year old Kangel airstrip. The pilot took a pass on the first attempt, but circled and made an excellent but thrilling landing on the hump of graded dirt his second try. Near the end of our first day of hiking we were surprised to be invited to the Dipwali celebration in the market village of Neli. We were entertained by local musicians and dancers, and then members of our group were invited to join in the dancing, which we did with gusto if not finesse.

The next day we were greeted outside of Basa village by a group of local musicians. We were led to the center of the village by the musicians thumping, blaring and tooting. There we were overwhelmed by the reception of the villagers. Every child, woman and man in the village had lined up to place garlands of flowers around our necks. Local luminaries gave speeches of welcome, while we were served copious amounts of rakshi (distilled spirits) and chang (beer). Chris Rubesch, Ursula Scriven and I delivered school supplies and letters from American school children to the children of Basa. Max Rubesch created the Basa air force by distributing paper airplanes and plastic flying saucers to the village kids. Mike Rubesch joined in the kids' favorite sport -- net-less volleyball. And Chris and Max free-styled with school kids using a tied bundle of flowers for a hackey sack.
We spent 2 & 1/2 days in Basa being entertained by a dance program put on by the school children and teachers and visits to homes around the village. The pastor of the Christian church proudly invited us into the little dirt-floor church supported by the 9 Christian families of Basa. We also visited the two traditional Rai sanctuaries outside the village. Rakshi, chang, and food was pressed on us by gracious villagers throughout our stay. When it was time to leave, we were piped and drummed out of the village by the town band and the villagers again lined up to place flower garlands around our necks. We were amazed that so many flower garlands could be created by the villagers, but growing flowers and creating beautiful garlands is the local art form.

Basa is almost untouched by the outside world. We were only the 4th group of "white people" to visit the village. The first tourist commercial transaction in the history of the village took place, according to our local informants, when one of our members purchased a knife from a local family. Instead of causing concern, this excited members of our crew who live in Basa, and they began speculating what villagers could sell to tourists, if Basa could become a regular trekking destination. We discovered that our cook, Purna Rai, is a "purket" or shaman in the Rai tradition. He invited us into his home, which was outside of Adheri, our next campsite after Basa. We were granted the rare privilege of witnessing Purna perform a healing ritual in his home, which involved him entering a trance state, chanting, dancing, and performing rituals with various sacred objects around an open fire, while 3 other Rais pounded and beat on drums and shields.
The next day we parted with Joel the Elder and John the Yeti, who would be faced with a hike up the 11,000 foot Ratnaga Danda, as they circled back to hike to Paphlu and fly back to Katmandu. The rest of the group hiked on up through the middle-Himalaya region of Solu to enter the high-Himalaya of Khumbu. Because the area around Basa valley is not visited by trekkers, our hikes through Solu were delightfully peaceful and allowed for noncommercial engagement with locals. As we entered the Khumbu and crossed onto the Everest Base Camp Trail and then entered Sagarmatha National Park at Jorsale, the trails became jammed with trekkers and yak trains. The daytime temperatures in the lower altitudes of Solu got up to the high 80s to make for sweaty hiking. The higher altitudes of the Khumbu brought the temperatures down for more comfortable hiking, and the beautiful great valleys and huge flora-covered hills of the Solu gave way to the great white peaks and rushing glacier-fed rivers of the Khumbu.

But the number of trekkers and yaks on the Base Camp trail caused traffic jams at bridges and enough dust that a handkerchief over the nose & mouth was sometimes necessary. We didn't have any rain, and the sky was clear everyday, so, once the tough hike up Namche Hill was behind us, we had spectacular views of the Everest Massif and all the great peaks of the Khumbu Himalayas, including my favorite mountain, the beautiful Ama Dablam. Our high point was about 13,000 feet at Shyangboche and the Everest View Hotel, where we had morning tea and gazed out at the amazing views of Everest, Thamserku, Ama Dablam, Lhotse, Nupste, Pumori, and other white-capped peaks.
Our northern terminus was the Sherpa capitol of Khumjung, where we visited an ancient Buddhist monastery, the Hillary School and Kunde Hospital. While we were in Khumjung, our three fastest hikers, Chris, Max (the 20 somethings) and Greg (our old fart fast guy) hiked on to Tengboche Monastery for a visit to the Monastery and to enjoy the magnificent view of the Everest Massif on the Monastery grounds, completing the 2-day hike in less than a day. Dr. Bill parted company from the group when we left Khumjung. He and Himprasad hiked off to complete the hike up to Everest Base Camp and to climb 19,000 foot Kala Patar for the classic view of the Himalayan range and views into Tibet. The remainder of the group hiked back to Lukla airport via Namche Bazaar and Monjo. We befriended a Tibetan shopkeeper in Namche, who offered quite good deals on Tibetan & Sherpa handmade goods, clothes and gems. Our group probably made her budget for the year with our many purchases.

At our last night in Lukla we had the traditional banquet with our porters, kitchen crew and guides. It was a rollicking affair with dancing and rakshi drinking. Purna outdid himself with a multi-course feast and chocolate cake for dessert. Our 28-member crew was delighted with the cash tips we gave them and the many items of clothing and gear our group donated to the crew members and their families. It was also an emotional and inspiring event. Our sirdar, Ganesh Rai, who is one of the finest human beings I know, gave a speech in which he thanked our group for what we have done for the Basa School, and the whole village. By using Adventure GeoTreks, we employ many of the men from Basa. Because the villagers are subsistence farmers with small plots of land, Ganesh explained that most of the village farms cannot support a family for an entire year. So, outside employment is required in order to make enough money to buy food...
during the months when local food has been exhausted. Adventure GeoTreks is the only outside employer that purposefully hires from Basa, because the owner of the company, Niru Rai, is from Basa and has remained loyal to his home village.

The one great disappointment and upsetting event of the trek was that friend Bruce was infected by a parasite in Katmandu the night before the trek started. He became dehydrated and very weak the first two days of hiking. His condition continued to deteriorate in Basa. Given that there are no medical facilities in Basa, Dr. Bill and Ganesh recommended that Bruce be evacuated by helicopter. The chopper evac was another first for Basa. But it was bitterly disappointing for Bruce and his wife, Donna, who were wonderful companions and had been so looking forward to the trek.

Back in Katmandu, we reunited with Cousins David & Mel, who toured Nepal with the intrepid octogenarian, my friend Joan. They reported that they had a great time touring by plane, car, foot and elephant with their guide, Raj. But, like those of us who did the temple tours around the Katmandu Valley, they experienced info overload about the many incarnations and manifestations of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Buddha.

Our trekking group was a wonderful and eclectic melange of personalities, which created an interesting and harmonious community in the meal tent and at tea time. We were plagued with some stomach and charpi (toilet) issues. But the group was blessed with Jude's great spirit and
perseverance, Ursula's gentle thoughtfulness, Leslie's happy-go-lucky attitude, Karen's wise and helpful advice, Susan's grit and willingness to share about dropping her sunglasses down a charpi hole, Mike's inquisitiveness and note taking, Joel the Younger's video-cam work and adventure experiences, Bill's care and concern for Bruce and his travel experiences, Gregg's toughness and love of a good beer and cigar, Max and Chris's youthful energy and generosity to Nepalese children, John and Joel the Elder's self-deprecating good humor, and Bruce and Donna's warmth and lack of self-pity despite Bruce's severe illness.

Anyone interested in trekking in 2010, let me know. Visit my web site www.jeffreyrasley.com for info on the planning for expeditions.

During 2010 I hope to conduct a fundraising campaign to raise funds to improve the health and quality of life of Basa village. Niru Rai has requested on behalf of the village that funds be raised to bring hydroelectricity to the village, so that villagers may cease cooking over open fires and use hot plates or simple electric ovens. That would significantly reduce many health problems caused by constant exposure to smoke from open fires. Another significant problem is lack of family planning. The farms are having to support more people as the village population grows. But the farms are unable to support all members of the community now. So, regular availability of birth control is essential to alleviate the burden of more mouths to feed.

I hope you will consider donating to this cause after I am able to provide details of the plans and funding mechanism.