

A Himalayan Journey

Andy Tomlinson

I visited the International Porter Protection Group (IPPG) Rescue Post at Machermo in 2008 with seven other Rucksack Club members (Himalayan Odyssey; Tina Priestley. Journal 2008:98), attending the Altitude Talk given by the volunteers. I was so taken by the work of the charity that I decided to volunteer for a season at some later date; post-monsoon 2015 was that time. At the induction weekend, April 2015, we were about to have a session on earthquake awareness when the speaker came in looking somewhat chastened. He told us that a large earthquake had just hit Nepal. Whilst it had been predicted for many years, the reason for the talk, the reality was sobering. Damage to the Rescue Post and concerns about the relatively small numbers of trekkers visiting put plans on hold, but by the end of July IPPG confirmed that the Post was to be open post-monsoon. On a beautiful late September autumn day, I was left at Manchester Airport; eighteen hours later I was in the chaos that is Kathmandu.

Kathmandu - Machermo

5:30 in the morning and I'm searching frantically for the correct bus at the 'old' Kathmandu bus station; not easy when no one seems to know where any bus is heading. A head nods, the correct bus is identified, I scramble aboard and we are off. The streets of the city are still quiet, encouraging the driver to imitate an F1 driver between bus stops, so getting ahead of the other buses to maximise takings! Consequently, the bus became seriously overcrowded (including the roof!) but at least the driver showed some sense and slowed; even so it swayed alarmingly along the rough and bumpy roads. After ten hours, and with darkness falling, we arrived at Shivalaya where, amongst the earthquake devastation, a newly built lodge beckoned.

I had decided to walk in from this road-head, following much of the route of the 1953 Everest expedition. My route followed centuries-old trade routes crossing a series of high ridges separating deep verdant valleys before climbing steadily to the charismatic town of Namche Bazaar and thence to Machermo.

Three days later I was approaching the Lamjura La (3,500m) along a subsidiary ridge passing through beautiful deciduous woods with trees swathed in lichen and moss. The occasional small aircraft passed overhead en-route for Lukla, but otherwise we were alone immersed in our thoughts: the devastating consequences of the earthquakes that had hit Nepal six months earlier with destroyed and empty houses; village life and the resilience shown by people resurrecting their lives; the small number of trekkers whose foreign currency would help sustain recovery; the amazing changing landscape as we travelled; the problem I had already had with my first porter - worn out after two days of load-carrying and now left watching a young pretender shoulder the load. Beyond the Lamjura La we dropped



Passing through earthquake destruction.

Photo Andy Tomlinson

steeply before passing through my (new) Sherpa porter-guide's home village where he proudly pointed out all the family livestock tended by other family members. Just beyond, we arrived at the beautiful, substantial, yet badly damaged, Sherpa village of Junbesi; from here my first porter headed down for a bus back to Kathmandu. With sadness, we said our goodbyes with his career hopes as a porter-guide fading.

After Junbesi, mule trains became increasingly common carrying essential goods including rice, gas cylinders and kerosene to the towns and villages up to and including Namche. They are the heavy goods vehicles of the Himalayan foothills, causing significant destruction to the trails as well as physically blocking the way when the trail narrows; more than once I cursed these animals and had to remind myself that I was a visitor to the country and that they are an essential part of the hill economy. We arrived in Namche on day seven revelling in its well-serviced lodges, shops and cafes; the bakeries were the best! Their fresh cakes, excellent coffee and free WiFi were all enjoyed to excess over a rest day!

Heading north from Namche I took in the stunning views of the mountains including Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse and Ama Dablam. After three hours, we turned off the main 'drag' to Everest Base Camp, heading up the beautiful and much less busy Gokyo valley to Machermo. Two days later I arrived tired but acclimatized; no surprise with an accumulated 8,000m having been ascended from the road-head.



*Porter carrying 'essential' supplies to Namche Bazaar.
Following spread: First view of Everest.*

*Photo Andy Tomlinson
Photo Andy Tomlinson*





Machermo and Gokyo

There are two IPPG Rescue Posts in the Gokyo valley, one at Machermo, the other Gokyo. They are joint projects between IPPG, Community Action Nepal (CAN), The National Park and the village Management Committees. IPPG's main remit is to support the porters by providing low-cost food and accommodation plus medical care when needed. Local Nepalese are provided with basic acute medical care, as are western trekkers whose medical fees help fund the work of the charity. In addition to acute care, an Altitude Awareness Talk is given every afternoon at the Machermo Post, to anyone interested in listening. Overall the number of patients was down by around fifty percent, a reflection of the much smaller number of people travelling to the area; nevertheless, seriously ill patients presented needing overnight care and urgent evacuation. Those who had made the journey to Nepal post-earthquake were rewarded with a much quieter season in which to revel in the grandeur of this very special area.



A very young patient.

Photo Andy Tomlinson

I got very cold living at 4,500m with little heating, so daily life revolved around waiting for the sun to appear before getting up! As the Rescue Post in Machermo had been badly damaged by the earthquake I decided it was best to sleep in a tent; on my trek in I had experienced a significant aftershock, which possibly clouded my judgment! Kancha, our resident Nepali cook-manager, conjured up fantastic food on a single kerosene stove. After breakfast, domestic chores, both personal and communal, were sorted along with consultations. The views from both posts were simply stunning and, as all volunteers were mountain addicts, we made time for 'play', such that

one of us would get out most days; one doctor was ever-present to man the post with Kancha. The battle to keep warm recommenced when the sun went behind Kyajo Ri at 3pm, a peak attempted by Will Harris and John Gupta whilst we were there; we couldn't understand why we could see head-torches descending one evening - Will's article explains why and gave us plenty of banter at their expense! (Failing to Climb Big Mountains in Nepal; Journal 2015:24).

The post in Gokyo was open over the peak trekking period only. Situated at 4,800m it was a three-hour walk up the valley. This manmade village has developed over the last 30 years and it is easy to see why. From the Rescue Post windows I could see west over the deep blue 'third' lake and up to the Renjo La (5,300m), whilst to the north, the imposing south face of Cho Oyu (8,188m), the world's sixth highest mountain, was ever-present. Many excellent lodges have been built as the number of trekkers has increased; it provides a perfect place to relax and acclimatize. A two-hour walk up Gokyo Ri (5,300m) provides magical views at sunset over Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse and Makalu. More trekkers now pass through here than Machermo, so this smaller Post was busier, particularly with porters. Gokyo is now reaching crisis point in terms of its size and numbers of lodges; the competition for clients is ever-present and trekkers head for lodges with the best reputations. Providing warmth is key at this altitude and the stoves are fuelled by dry yak dung. Collecting this is a major challenge as the numbers of yaks are finite; the dung is scattered far and wide meaning it can take one person a whole day to collect sufficient for one night's heat. Some other source of energy has to be found and whilst solar panels are in constant use, providing hot water and electricity for lighting, they do not provide sufficient for heating. To me, hydroelectric power must be an answer. The problem - there is not great co-operation between some of the lodge owners so a coherent policy has yet to develop.

My six weeks at these two posts passed quickly. I also made the most of the walking opportunities and over my time there managed to clock up just over 9,000m of ascent/descent and had some cracking days out; frustratingly I found that I did not seem to get fitter the longer I spent at altitude. In fact, it seemed quite the opposite at times; maybe I just did too much!

Machermo - Kathmandu

Trekking out of the Everest region over the high, remote and complex Tesi Lapcha pass into the Rolwaling valley, with stories of high, wild and beautiful landscapes placed this high on my 'tick list'. I managed to persuade Andy Llewellyn, Mark Hatton and Alf Gleadell to come and join me. They flew to Lukla with our Sherpa Guide Ang Dawa. Along with three porters they made their way slowly to Gokyo, via Namche, Tengboche and the Cho La (5,300m).

The route from Gokyo to Rolwaling heads over the Renjo La, one of the best trekking view points in the whole of the National Park with panoramic

Following spread:-

Looking over Gokyo to Everest, Lhotse and Makalu.

Photo Andy Tomlinson





views both east (including Everest, Lhotse and Makalu) and west. A long descent then followed to the high, open and beautiful Bhote Koshi valley. Two days from Gokyo is the delightful village of Thame (3,800m) where we were the only residents in a long-established and excellent lodge that is usually full in the autumn. We felt fortunate to be there at this time, revelling in the quietness, whilst sympathizing with the lodge owners trying to make a living from tourism.

Between Thame and Rolwaling we expected to have to camp for four days; our camping gear came straight from Namche with a heavily-laden extra porter. The loads our (now) four porters planned to carry were well over the 30kg limit generally recommended for altitudes of up to 5,000m and we were heading for the Tesi Lapcha at 5,750m! We tried to find another porter, but at this late stage it proved impossible. Porters are keen to carry heavier loads as they are paid more; against this is concern for the potential long-term damage caused by carrying heavy loads. Falls, with consequent injuries, especially in the difficult post-earthquake conditions, were also a concern to us; this proved unfounded, as they were very adept and skilful at negotiating difficult terrain.

Discarding some gear to reduce weight, whilst also carrying more ourselves (about 10kg), we left Thame with the porters carrying around 35kg. The weather was perfect as we climbed up into a beautiful wild valley with the steep north faces of the Kongde peaks immediately to our left. Behind us were magnificent views of the mountains to the north of Namche. We arrived to find the lodge open; the guardienne walks from Thame each morning and if no one has arrived by 3pm, she locks up and returns home. It was a fantastic lodge, reminiscent of an old climbing hut with great food and hospitality.

The next morning, we gained height rapidly, first on a grassy track but soon on steep loose boulders and scree. Whilst the sun kept shining the wind increased significantly, often gusting fiercely. The first camp was amongst boulders at around 5,100m; the wind made pitching tents a challenge, but our porters were experts! Water was some distance away in a frozen lake and, again, the porters helped. Brews, fetching more water and cooking kept us busy before turning in. Four hours of further hard, steep and loose climbing brought us to camping spots just below the pass under a high, slightly overhanging, cliff. I insisted our tents were placed right by the cliff to gain maximum protection from stones that fell from the top with every gust of wind; this made gathering ice for melting exciting! The porters left their tent further out but, as darkness fell, it was hit. Fortunately, no one was injured and they then shared our tents, plus all the extra clothing we had to keep warm. The wind, stone fall and cold ensured a poor night's sleep.

Up early, we crossed the pass (5,750m) quickly then down. On two occasions it got so steep that lines were rigged for the porters to use. The descent seemed endless and the occasional iced-up scrambling gully added spice! We reached the campsite after a long and tiring day. The ability of the porters never ceased to amaze us; after carrying heavy loads over



Keeping warm at the lodge above Thame.

Photo Andy Tomlinson



Andy and Mark camped at the Tesi Lapcha.

Photo Andy Tomlinson



Alf in front of Kongdi Ri on descent from Renjo La.

Photo Andy Tomlinson

difficult terrain for long periods they then had the energy to put up tents and get ice for water! Alf and I were really dehydrated and it took us ages to boil sufficient water; Andy had boundless energy, so he put it to good use scavenging for ice amongst the boulders lying on the glacier.

The established trail had been rendered unsafe by the earthquake as the whole glacier was now covered by a layer of unstable boulders, which we crossed on a new path following a vague line of small cairns; no track was visible as only two or three other parties had crossed since the earthquake. We weaved our way up and down around peaks and troughs from the centre to the south side of the glacier. As Andy said, it was like walking on eggshells as you were never certain if a big boulder would roll when weighted. A final 300m ascent led to a col; suddenly we could see a beautiful wide glaciated valley 1,000m below where our campsite in the summer village of Nagaon was situated several hours away. I arrived as the light started to fade; the tents were up in the front garden of an empty house rendered unsafe by the earthquake. In a little over two hours the next morning we were at Bedding, the highest permanent habitation in the Rolwaling valley. This village gets little direct sunlight as the surrounding valley walls are so steep; this, combined with its proximity to a fast-flowing cold river, meant that it was very cold! There was plenty to watch and see in the village, although the cold eventually drove me to bed; that evening the porters (and Alf!) drank whisky and danced to keep warm!



Andy and Mark looking back at the upper Rolwaling Valley. Photo Andy Tomlinson

The previous night's excesses and no sun until 8am, meant a slow start. We lost height rapidly passing through bamboo and then deciduous woods, whilst crossing back and forth over a fast-flowing river. Our delayed start meant head-torches were needed for the last hour to Simigaon, another village heavily damaged by the earthquake. This was our last night in the mountains and the lodge, which had suffered too, was basic but very welcoming. The extent of the damage was seen in the morning as we made our way past many damaged houses, with families still living in temporary, and often flimsy, shelters. A steep two-hour descent, with the porters in great spirits singing as they descended with their heavy loads, brought us to the road. This had been a very special trip for me: the journey from Thame to the road was all that I had hoped for and more; the porters and Ang Dawa were the happiest, most competent and most relaxed team I have ever trekked with, such that high on the Tesi Lapcha, when things were getting tough, one of the porters said 'we're all one family and we must look after each other', a sentiment I had never heard expressed by a Nepali before in over 40 years of working and traveling there. Their constant banter kept us amused, with Alf frequently orchestrating it with comments about the speed of their descents, or the best alcohol and cigarettes to consume!



The final section of 'road'.

Photo Andy Tomlinson

We walked the final two miles down what had been a road, negotiating landslide debris and the occasional boulder the size of a house until we came to a small town; the lack of any coherent Government policy towards post-earthquake repair was stark and affected us all profoundly; just one JCB digger working alone against the destruction we had witnessed, on a road to a major hydroelectric scheme still out of action post-earthquake.

A bus awaited us for the long journey back to Kathmandu, with a driver keen to get home; it was a standard Nepali bus ride initially over unmade roads with big drops and occasional narrow sections, followed later by tarmac surfaces and the 'normal' overtaking antics as we approached the city with the markedly increased volume of traffic. We reached the haven of our hotel at just before 6pm; a shower was the first thing we all wanted, followed by beer! Our euphoria at returning to such comforts was tinged with sadness, partly because the close-knit team was no longer together, but also because of the state we had seen so many ordinary Nepalis left in post-earthquake, awaiting help the Government had promised but still not delivered six months on.

Reflections one year on

As I finish this article a year later, my diary entries made at the time bring back a multitude of memories: the incredible opportunity, and privilege, I had to spend ten weeks living and travelling in this remarkable country taking in two treks I have dreamt of doing for at least 30 years; the first five days trekking from Shivalaya through the verdant valleys of the foothills; the dramatic mountain scenery and the unrivalled opportunity I had to explore the Gokyo valley; the people I met through my work at the Rescue Post; the tensions below the surface amongst the local lodge owners competing for western trekkers; sunset over Everest, Lhotse and Makalu from Gokyo Ri; the fantastic wild, remote and challenging trek over the Tesi Lapcha into Rolwaling and the totally together team we became; the failure of the Government to demonstrate leadership in reconstructing the country post-earthquake. My thanks to all who together helped make this possible.