

“What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above.” – René Daumal

Searching for Scale

Highlights from the Himalayan Midlands

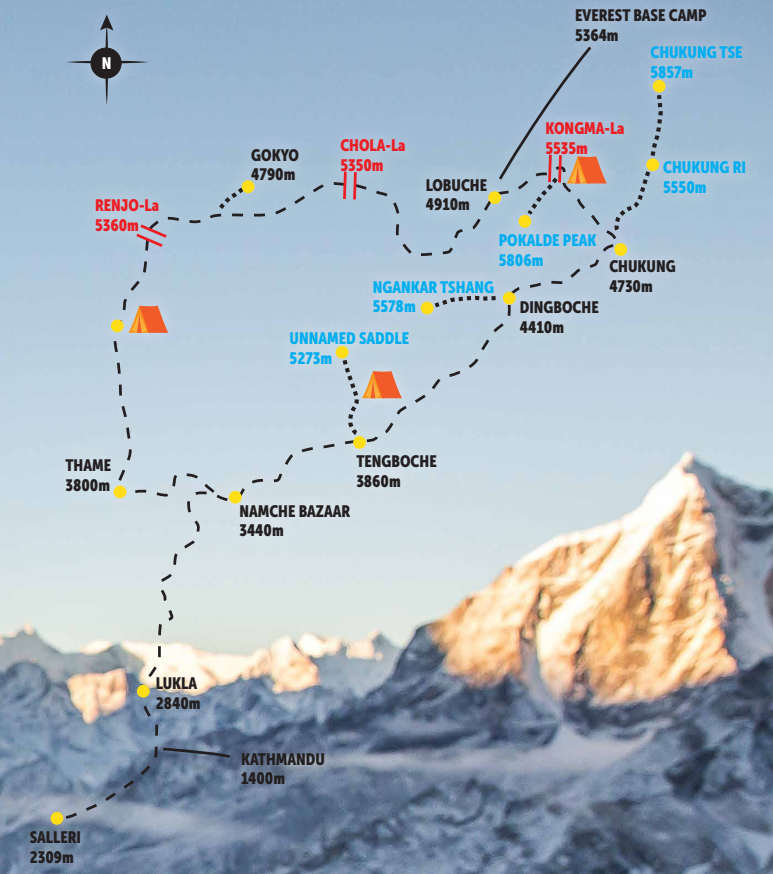
words & photography :: Hilary Matheson

The Himalayas contain many of Earth's highest peaks, and in the last hundred years there have been thousands of attempts, many ending tragically, by climbers hoping to conquer the tallest of them. And yet, many of the mid-range (approximately 6,000 metres/19,685 feet) Himalayan peaks never seem to get climbed at all. Some aren't even named on maps and, in Nepal, most of them don't even require permits.

This is no doubt due to the type of people who are drawn to these high places. Trekkers gravitate to the valley floors and are content to stare upwards into the majestic ranges, and on the other end of the spectrum, expedition climbers often have a burning, insatiable desire to challenge themselves and push up the highest peak (or at least the highest they can afford a permit for).

Our goal was to seek out that middle ground, where few seem to venture. We wanted to see what we could learn about perspective by climbing into the midst of these towering giants and summiting peaks that would be considered lofty anywhere else in the world. ▶

Limbs frozen, lungs burning, Chris Brinlee Jr. climbs on, waiting for the sun to crest as another day begins.





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The Crew

There were five of us, united by a common desire to push our limits. Chris was the most experienced alpinist of our crew, while filmmaker Justin used to be a pro backcountry skier. Ben, just 18 years old, was Chris's little brother and a rookie on all fronts, and this would be by far the biggest adventure of his young life. Saman is one of Nepal's top rock climbers and a local legend – he brought valuable experience and local knowledge to the team. And then there was me, the only woman on the trip. As a Vancouver-based photographer, ultra runner and rock climber, I've done my share of summiting epic peaks, but this trip would add a healthy dose of altitude and a new level, I would learn, of humility.



Summit hugs are the best kind. Saman Shrestha and Chris Brinlee Jr. top out on Chukhung-Ri.

The Route

After spending a week in Kathmandu acclimatizing and sorting out gear – which we had lots of – our loose plan was to spend four weeks following the Three Passes trek, the highest elevation trek in the Khumbu Valley. As we followed the route, we'd be looking for peaks to explore, then doing out-and-backs from villages or our campsites to the summit (with the added bonus of being able to leave most of our gear at base camp). As part of our "fast and light" mantra, we didn't bring ropes or climbing gear, opting instead to stick to third and moderate fourth class scrambling terrain that didn't require roping up. If we hit technical terrain, we would either find another route or turn back. We were climbing in the same lightweight approach shoes we were hiking in, and it boggled my mind slightly that we would be able to climb to almost 6,000 metres (19,685 feet) more or less snow-free. The scale of what is considered high is on a different playing field in the Himalaya. ▶



Choose your own adventure. On the final 200m to the summit of Nangke-Tshang, Saman and Chris select their own route to the top.

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The Journey

Unlike most travellers, we skipped the flight from Katmandu into Lukla (which holds the dubious distinction of being the world's most dangerous airport) and instead embarked on a 12-hour (equally dangerous?) cliff-hugging, white-knuckle Jeep ride to Salleri, the district headquarters of Solukhumbu and the start of the route all Himalayan-bound travellers used before the airport was built.

As we bounced along on the unpaved, pothole-strewn "highway" I became convinced that the roads in this rarely-flat country only existed through sheer stubbornness and necessity. The road ahead of us often looked like a jagged slash of dirt cut harshly into impossibly steep slopes, zig-zagging its way up and over passes in a fashion that seemed to favour efficiency over safety. It was often only wide enough for one vehicle at a time, but that didn't stop oncoming Jeeps from trying to pass us from the opposite direction on blind corners, their loud and frequently-used horns the only warning our driver received of their imminent presence. On more than one occasion I realized, with no small amount of terror, that one or more of our back wheels were drifting as we rounded the steep corners at impossible speeds, spinning out through the dust into empty air.

Despite these slightly terrifying moments, I have to admit that I quite enjoyed this part of our trip. Quirks of the Nepalese public transportation system include mandatory breakfast and coffee stops along the route at our driver's favourite roadside cafes, and minor river crossings that acted as nice little carwashes for our dusty vehicle. When we finally arrived at Salleri, a shared and definite sense of adventure had already set in.

Many travellers sadly possess more money and expensive gear than common sense or experience.

Beginning our trek in Salleri allowed us some time to sort out gear and ease into the constant rhythm of trekking that would become our new normal. In this first section of our trek, the geography changed rapidly with the elevation. We moved through the jungle into the sub-alpine, and the area was lush with agriculture and teeming with wildlife. It's also



The whole team (Chris, Ben, Justin, Saman) heading up into the mountains from Namche. The Adventure begins.

a very quiet route these days since the airport now bypasses it completely, so the teahouse owners are incredibly grateful to see travellers coming through. When we finally connected with the main trail to Namche Bazaar and the number of fellow trekkers grew exponentially, I quickly longed for the solitude I'd gotten used to.

The route from Lukla to Everest Base Camp is, unfortunately, a bit of a highway, with travellers pouring in by the thousands. Many of them sadly possess more money and expensive gear than common sense or experience. I was appalled by the sheer volume of plastic bottles and waste left in their wake, which ends up burned on the side of the trails by the locals due to an absence of recycling or garbage facilities. This part of our journey was eye-opening for unexpected reasons. When one pictures

Everest and the pristine beauty of the Himalayas, one does not also visualize a sea of garbage and human trash to go with it. And yet sadly, this is the jarring reality created by irresponsible visitors, and made worse by the fact that there are little to no attempts by the Nepalese to regulate tourism numbers or provide even the most basic recycling or garbage facilities along the routes.

As we bought our permits for the Solukhumbu region, a board in the permit office showed the number of permits issued in 2017 was nearly double that of the previous year. This pace of growth seemed to be more than the region could handle. It made me realize that we need to create more accountability regarding the impact that our tourist footprints have on these formerly pristine areas of the world. ▶



The Climbing

On our seventh day of trekking we reached Namche Bazaar, known as the “gateway to the Himalayas.” Roaming the cobblestone streets in this little town, I could picture Hillary and Mallory heading through there on their way to Sagarmatha (Everest), and feel the anticipation of the many expedition teams gearing up with last minute supplies before they headed up and into the unknown. All roads to the Khumbu Valley lead through this small village and I marvelled at the tales those narrow streets could tell.

Chris was especially elated. This was everything he'd imagined when we first envisioned this trip – steep scrambling with small holds that was still well within the abilities and comfort level of a crew competent enough to travel quickly over this type of terrain without the need for ropes and belays.

As we stood on that summit, surrounded by 360-degree views of mountains both higher and lower, I was struck by the contrasts of the space we were moving through. Here I was, several thousand metres higher than I had ever been in my life, and yet I was still dwarfed by 8,000-metre peaks that seemed to stretch up to the sky. It was as if I was simultaneously on top of the world and yet still on the valley bottom.



From Namche Bazaar, it quickly felt like this trip was getting real. As an acclimatization exercise, we soon split off from the main trail, camping at 4,500 metres and reaching 5,200 metres before turning back due to whiteout weather conditions. This was my first encounter with any sort of altitude, and I quickly realized that all the cardio in the world wouldn't help me when the oxygen got thin. I wheezed like a twenty-year smoker, huffing and puffing my way up hills that I would eat for breakfast at home. Note to self: leave ego in Namche, pick up on the way back out.

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Our first proper summit was a few days later – a rarely travelled peak called Ngankar Tshang, which tops out at 5,578 metres and required some moderate route finding and scrambling. We left the teahouse at Dingboche at 3:30 a.m., silently moving upwards under a canopy of twinkling stars, our path illuminated by moonlit glaciers. I was cold. My water froze within the first hour and my extremities felt like they did too. Wearing every layer I had with me to ward off the cold, icy winds that whipped around us, I counted down the hours/minutes/seconds until sunrise when those rays finally broke over the ridge...

This feeling persisted with me as we continued our journey. No matter how high we climbed in our subsequent ascents, we were inevitably left staring upwards at something far larger and more imposing than ourselves. I watched little avalanches regularly let loose on Ama Dablam as I travelled beneath its shadow, and felt the immense power of Lhotse as it loomed directly above me in all of its hostile and forbidding beauty.



We just kept climbing, choosing our route based entirely on what we could see above us. We gained a saddle just below the summit, and Ben and Justin opted not to push upwards for the final 300 metres as they were feeling the effects of the altitude. Chris, Saman and I pressed on, moving through some fourth class “choose your own adventure” scrambling terrain that had some moderate exposure before we finally topped out on our first summit.

Surprisingly, Everest itself, for all of its notoriety, didn't have the same impact on me as some of its lesser known neighbours. It really has earned its reputation purely based on the human need to stand on the “very top,” but aesthetically it doesn't cut nearly as intimidating a figure. I stared up at this most famous of summits with a level of detachment. This mountain had claimed so many lives and been the obsession of so many others, but in reality it's just this giant snow-covered mound with no other claim to fame besides its sheer height. ▶

TOP LEFT A lesson in perspective. Saman, the tiny climber in this frame is at 5,500m, dwarfed against the immense backdrop of Lhotse and Nuptse. TOP RIGHT Hilary and Saman share a room with a view (of Everest). CHRIS BRINLEE JR. MIDDLE LEFT The donkey-to-human ratio heading into Namche Bazaar was approximately 500:1. MIDDLE CENTRE Prayer flag-lined street in Thamel, Kathmandu. MIDDLE RIGHT Hilary, staying chipper during a frigid Himalayan morning. CHRIS BRINLEE JR. BOTTOM LEFT 5,100m in uncharted territory and Hilary gets her first taste of the impacts of altitude. CHRIS BRINLEE JR. BOTTOM RIGHT Hardy yaks can cling to impossibly steep trails along the mountainside, watching the world through curious eyes.

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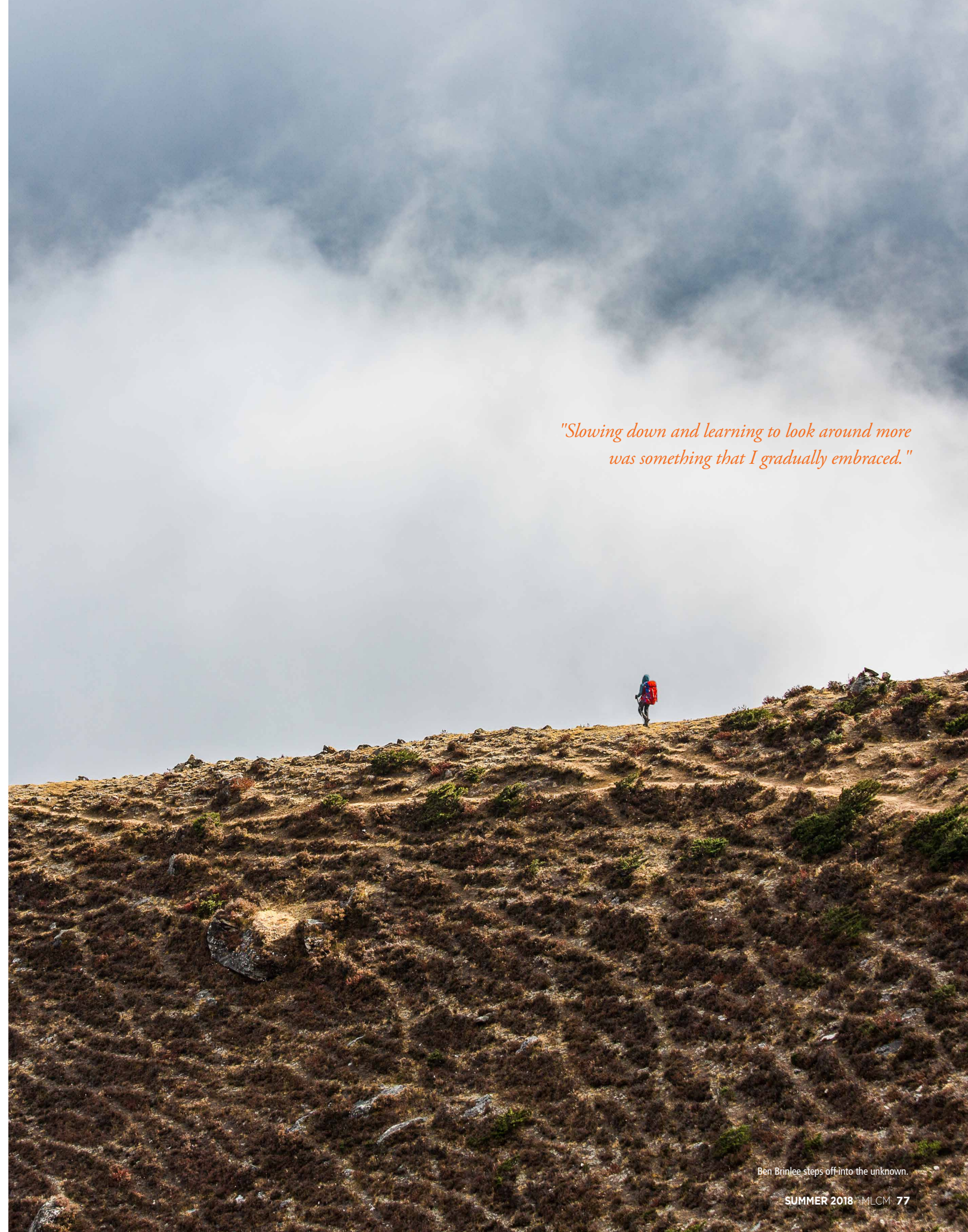
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"Slowing down and learning to look around more was something that I gradually embraced."

Ben Brinlee steps off into the unknown.



Sunrise over Kathmandu, made brilliant by perpetual fog that settles over the city.

Perspective

As we trekked and summited and trekked some more, each day fell into a pleasant routine.

I revelled in the little moments of quiet I found each day, savouring early mornings as the sun crept over mountain tops, bathing the valleys in rays of golden light. I inhaled the blue, pungent smoke created by humble stoves merrily burning dried yak dung patties, and watched it curl off the tin roofs of the villages and into the crisp morning air as we passed by.

I found joy through the cheery exchanges of “Namaste, how are youuu?” with the local children as we passed through tiny towns. Children with round, ruddy cheeks playing outside in any weather and scrambling fearlessly up and along the steep terrain outside their villages, content to build that world using whatever props they could find.

There’s a simplicity to life in this land that holds immense appeal, particularly when compared to our overly materialistic North American sensibilities. Yes, it’s a hard life. Incredibly so, at times. The rubble from abandoned buildings compromised during the devastating 2015 earthquakes, still lies in forgotten piles. Other buildings are propped up by rebar, their crooked exteriors looking only slightly less shaky than their abandoned counterparts. Rutted roads bear testament to the raging floods that the melting spring snows can bring with them, sometimes wiping out vital food supply routes for weeks at a time. These mountain folk are entirely dependent on the mercy of Mother Nature and yet, there is such great joy and peace to be found in their resilient world that relies more on community than the latest iPhone app for happiness.

I came to Nepal thinking that my journey would simply be an exploration of pushing physical boundaries. I did experience this, and there were certainly times where I was reduced to tears by the physical difficulty of what I was asking my body to do. And yet, while searching for scale in a vertical world, I also found perspective in the places I least expected it – in the cozy homes and lives I was welcomed into along our journey, and through the warmth extended by travellers and locals alike as our lives intersected for a fleeting moment.

Here I was, several thousand metres higher than I had ever been in my life, and yet I was still dwarfed by 8,000-metre peaks that seemed to stretch up to the sky.

As ego-driven humans, we are very fixated on objectives, that a successful trip must have a quantifiable goal, a “purpose” that others can admire and measure against. And yet so much of my journey was about exploring unknown, unnamed, and (some would say) relatively unremarkable areas of the world’s highest playground. In the end, we didn’t summit nearly as many peaks as we had so optimistically planned for. A family emergency in the middle of our trip cut short some of our objectives, as two of our team grappled with unexpected loss, and the focus of the trip changed to support them.

But that’s life. It doesn’t always go according to plan, so we adapt. And somehow I didn’t mind at all that we only accomplished *some* of our grandiose goals. By that point I had realized that the reason for me being there wasn’t so I could climb the

highest, farthest, or fastest. It was so that I could step back and absorb the lessons life wanted to give me, and be willing to create the space and silence necessary to find them. I suppose that’s part of the inherent nature of searching – you don’t always know what you are going to find. My ultimate sense of accomplishment came through slowing down and appreciating the smallest details of each day, rather than trying to stand on top of the world in order to look down on it.

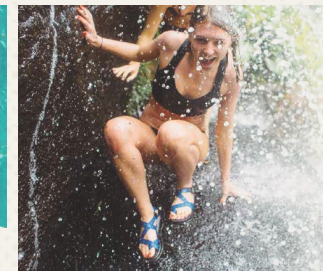
Looking back at our trip with hindsight now, I’ve realized that the most powerful thing I gained through our journey was perspective. Without distractions to guard against the candid moments of reflection that extended silence invites, it’s hard not to end up confronting uncomfortable truths. The constant, plodding pace of trekking itself was a challenge for me, as I am used to moving much faster when I’m in the mountains. Slowing down and learning to look around a little bit more was something that I gradually embraced, once I let go of my impatience. It turns out that you actually miss quite a few things when you are only focused on how fast you can go from point A to B. I was also made uncomfortably aware, through its absence, of my reliance on social media and the constant affirmation and false sense of connection that it provides. I began turning off my phone even when we did have Wi-Fi access, and in turn I was actually present where I was, instead of always looking to the places I wasn’t. There were many times throughout the days of solo trekking that I would find myself bursting into glorious acapella song, and then some poor donkey herder would come around a corner to find me channelling my inner Eddie Mercury as I navigated trails and jumped over piles of dung. It didn’t seem to matter, and we would exchange cheery Namastes before I launched into the key change. 🎵

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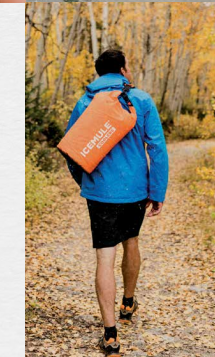


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