



The Ceiling of the Earth

A glimpse into the lives of native Sherpa communities in the shadows of the **Himalayas**

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As I approach the Himalayas by air, my skin prickles with anticipation as we seemingly skim the frosted tips of the gigantic, empty mountains that yawn into a biting blue sky. It's just a 40-minute flight before my dramatic landing in Lukla, the most dangerous airport on earth which lies in the shadow of the mythical Mount Everest in eastern Nepal.

While I enjoy the tensions of a challenge, my aim isn't to summit the tallest mountain in the world – trekking to its base camp at 5,380m is already an adventure of the highest sort, with rock-bottom temperatures, dizzying altitudes and a limited infrastructure and number of days to acclimatise. However, it's the very existence of these barriers, along with the unknowable, impossible-to-tame nature of the jagged landscape, which has drawn me to walk through the Khumbu Valley in the foothills of the Himalayas' most iconic mountain.

As I walk towards the sky and the air gets thinner and thinner, the expedition quickly assumes a meaning that goes beyond the spectacular scenery. Instead, it becomes a journey into the lives of the Sherpas, a native ethnic group of people who are in danger of disappearing like the sharp Himalayan wind. For 10 days I walk through traditional Sherpa villages, sleeping in monasteries, eating local vegetarian food and being astonished by the most compelling landscape I've ever witnessed.

The Himalayan range collects superlatives. While it's true that some areas are wild and barely populated, other locales are home to long-standing cultures that have adapted to survive in its hostile, beautiful environment. The Sherpas are a tribe of Tibetan origin which occupies the high valleys around the base of Mount Everest. Most outsiders know little about the role the Sherpas play in Himalayan society, but for many years their economic activities were centred on agriculture and trade. The opening of Nepal to visitors in the 1950s, followed by the arrival of large-scale trekking and climbing expeditions shortly afterwards, turned the Sherpas to mountaineering as a means to obtain income.

While the real motivation for foreigners to risk their lives in climbing the Himalayas is a personal sense of achievement, many Sherpas see mountaineering as the only chance they have to provide a better life for their families. To them, the mountains are sacred and one should behave with reverence when passing through the holy landscape. Adhering to the religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, they often refer to Everest as "Chomolungma", meaning "Goddess Mother of the World". ▶▶



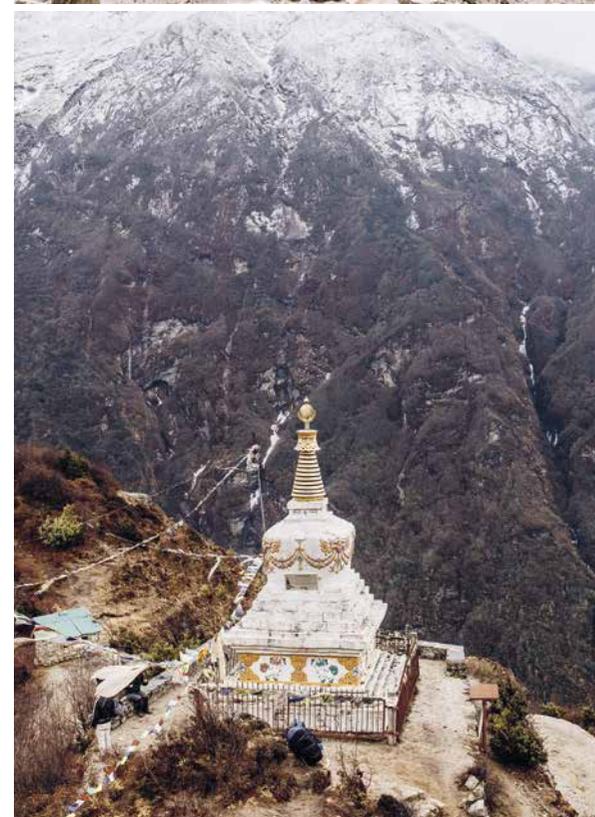
“For a country poor in resources like Nepal, tourism is an indispensable sector generating much-needed foreign exchange earnings, as well as employment,” says Amrit Ale, a conservationist and the founder of the Nepali-owned company Himalayan Quests. “Among the majestic mountains and cinematic landscapes are Sherpa porters and guides that struggle to have a decent life.”

Mountaineering remains the most desired job in the Everest region, but it's with mixed feelings that I acknowledge the importance of tourism in the Himalayan kingdom. Severe environmental destruction and profound cultural changes have occurred with the advent of non-sustainable tourism and while trekking allows me to achieve an intimacy with the landscape, it also gives me a better understanding of the damage caused every year by thousands of climbers and trekkers. Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park has no infrastructure to cope with the pollution generated by tourism and Sherpa culture has arguably become more influenced by Western values than by any other force. The Nepalese government is aware of the damage caused to the environment and Sherpa traditions, and is currently working on a project to limit the number of permits given every year to trekkers and climbers. This announcement came several months after one of the deadliest Everest climbing seasons in recent

years in which 11 people died due to overcrowding, despite facing no major avalanche or earthquake.

On my second day I reach the Sherpa village of Namche Bazaar. Located at 3,440m above sea level, it's considered the gateway to Everest Base Camp and is often used as a pit stop for altitude acclimatisation. It's here where I catch my first glimpse of the tremendous snowy peak of Everest and also meet Lhakpa Sonam Sherpa, another conservationist whose aim is to preserve Nepal's native culture for future generations. We meet over dinner at Hotel Sherwi Khangba, an ancient lodge and teahouse dedicated to celebrating Sherpa heritage. It was used as a starting point for many Everest expeditions in the 1950s and 1960s, including that led by Sir Edmund Hillary.

“At the moment Sherpa culture is just about alive,” Lhakpa tells me. “But in 30 years, who knows? It's my culture. It's my interest to protect it.” Lhakpa is like many Sherpas, and yet unlike any other. He has spent his entire life in the Himalayan mountains helping his father to guide Western climbers and has worked with numerous Everest expeditions, even surviving a colossal avalanche some years back. However, these are stories many Sherpas share. What makes Lhakpa different is his dedication to his people. Below his teahouse is a room dedicated to the great





Sherpa climbers. Photograph after photograph shows Sherpa climbers almost unknown outside Nepal, yet heroes in their home country. Another room is devoted to Sherpa culture, full of pictures explaining their traditions, celebrations and faiths. Across a small path intersected by a Buddhist shrine and line of prayer wheels, Lhakpa has created a museum inside a restored Sherpa home. In a tiny room away from the main teahouse he's set up a slide projector to proudly show visitors a series of pictures taken during his adventures.

The day I experience the adrenaline of landing on the giant Khumbu Glacier at 5,360m above sea level, I also meet another man who stands apart in the Himalayas – Ang Phula Sherpa. We are introduced in Gorakshep, a small settlement and the final stop before Everest Base Camp. Ang Phula is a senior mountaineering guide who has led expeditions and summited the world's tallest peaks, including the "Goddess Mother of the World".

As he describes the story of his life, I picture the aspirations and ambitions of a typical Sherpa. A young boy might start as a porter carrying heavy loads to the mountains before working in the Base Camp kitchen. An ambitious young man might hope to be promoted after working at this level on one or two expeditions

to the rank of "climbing Sherpa" and then "climbing guide". Ang Phula was not only promoted to climbing guide, but also became the managing director and partner of the company where he first worked as a porter.

Moving between Sherpa villages on foot completely changes the rhythm of my days. My breathing dictates my pace, not the other way around. The trail is a constant revelation – in every ascent or descent there's a makeshift altar or deserted monastery that hasn't changed for hundreds of years. Distances become real and I learn to see the world as a complex network of rivers, bridges and hills populated by monks, sharing my worldview with the people who live within the looming glare of the mountains.

THE LOWDOWN

Himalayan Quests offers Everest Base Camp treks from £1,500 per person for a private group. Prices include domestic transportation, permits, meals and teahouse accommodation

himalayanquests.com