



# MAGICAL HISTORY TOUR

**Katy Dartford** embarks on a special trek to Everest Base Camp to mark the 60th anniversary of the first ascent

## MEET THE AUTHOR...

**Katy Dartford** is a Chamonix-based travel and outdoor journalist, specialising in all things adventure, from climbing, trekking and mountaineering to cycling and skiing.





We finally catch a glimpse of Ama Dablam, shyly peeping through the clouds



Jumbles of mani stones and prayer flags on the trail from Lukla



Facilities get more basic as we go higher; our room in Dingboche

**T**he walled potato fields of Thame, with yaks grazing in the hillside, emerge through the mountain mists like an oasis after a day hiking through non-stop drizzle from Namche. It's late in the year for trekking as the monsoon season has started and it had rained pretty steadily as we made the gradual 10km of ascent from 3446m at Namche to the Valley View Lodge in Thame at 3820m.

I had joined the Adventure Company's 60th anniversary trek to Everest Base Camp, and the visit to Thame – the second most important Sherpa village after Namche, and once home to Tenzing Norgay – was what had sealed the deal. Visiting Thame was a chance to see real Sherpa life up close, away from the more touristy 'honeypot' villages. It was also useful for getting some extra acclimatisation and, most of all, it seemed the perfect way to remember the achievements of 60 years ago – of the Sherpas as well as the expedition team members.

Thame was quite a contrast to Namche, the Sherpa capital, its winding streets lined with shops stocking reproductions of well-known outdoor brands and colourful knitwear, as well as several bars and cafes. There are only a few lodges for trekkers, and it's the perfect place to see Buddhist culture thriving. Inside our cosy teahouse, the central, yak dung-burning stove pumped out plenty of heat to dry us off. Around the wooden panelled dining room, photos of Everest summiteers of years gone by lined the walls, as well as posters of past Everest anniversaries and books of Everest heroes.

### HOLY GROUND

From Namche, the normal route is to trek to the holy ground of Thyangboche, (or Tengboche), but taking the ancient Tibet trade route to Thame is a worthwhile deviation. A gentle climb from Namche, with the green waters of Bhote Koshi, led us through the valley of Bhote Kosi, which seemed little affected by tourism. We moved through alpine-like forests, then made a short, steep descent to reach a huge rockface decorated with three brightly-coloured Buddhas. Here we crossed a sturdy bridge over the river then followed a zig zag path upwards until we eventually reached Thame.

We were warned early on into the trek that the conditions would get more and more basic as we ascended, and after Namche, our leader, Jagan Timilsina advised us not to eat anymore meat. But Thame felt comparatively luxurious with our own 'ensuite' bathrooms and some of the best food of the trek – from crispy vegetable spring rolls, plump hash browns with a fried egg on top, vegetable mo-mo's ( a kind of steamed or fried dumpling) and, of course, Daal Bhat – a huge pile of rice flavoured with a small bowl of lentil soup and some curried vegetables. I wondered if this diet contributed to the village producing a number of other Everest summiteers, including Appa Sherpa, who has reached the top of the world a record 21 times. Our assistant leader, Pemba, told us it gives you the power to survive "three weeks, 24 hours, with no toilet, no shower".

We'd left Kathmandu three days previously, with the infamous flight to Lukla transporting us into a very different setting from the frantic capital; a stone-slabbed main street, lined with colourful shops, and



We spend two nights in Dingboche to aid acclimatisation



Crossing the first of many bridges

**Memorials remembering those who have lost their lives on Everest**



**Altitude check at the summit of Kala Pattar**

**Pujan, Jagan, Prabin, Dower taking a break on the last leg to base camp**



several pool bars. From Lukla we made a short trek to the village of Phakding at 2652m, passing through rocky outcrops of carved boulders, painted black and white, jumbles of mani stones inscribed with Tibetan Buddhist prayers and brightly-coloured prayer flags. Sweat-free Sherpas, hunched over from carrying huge loads of climbing paraphernalia or wood on their backs, balanced by a strap around their forehead, scuttled past us in plimsolls or flip flops, whilst texting on their mobile phones.

We tentatively crossed two airy suspension bridges, eventually arriving at Snowlands Lodge where the aroma of coriander and mint floated in the air as Sherpa women picked the leaves outside their teahouses. Snowlands seemed quite luxurious, with hot showers available and European-style toilets. Exploring the town we were surprised to find a couple of 'reggae' bars with pool tables and decked out with T shirts signed by expeditions from years gone by, blasting out Bob Marley tracks.

I was soon losing track of time and waking up fresh at 5:30am as we fell into the routine of trekking, tea stops, lunch, more trekking, dinner, and bed by 9 or 10pm. From Phakding to Namche through the Sagarmatha National Park, we passed houses set among fields of huge cabbages, crossed more suspension bridges and lodges which grew more and more basic the higher we went, and finally reached Namche after a steep 700m ascent.

## ANNIVERSARY MEAL

As part of the anniversary celebrations we were served a Sherpa-themed dinner of Sherpa stew, (meat, beans, vegetables, barley, wild mushrooms, potato and spinach) followed by a potato pancake with butter, chive sauce and a spicy dip, then a chocolate pudding that tasted like masala tea. After dinner a group of women from the village came to the lodge to sing and dance for us. Wearing multi-coloured striped aprons they stamped their feet in time to the words, which were songs of 'farewell,' about their beautiful surroundings and about how life is a struggle; then they gave out scarves from the monks as a blessing for good luck

The next morning before we set off for Khumjung (3780m) we headed up to the monastery above the village to plant some trees. It was World Environmental Day, and Jagan wanted to replace the many alpine trees that had been felled during the last big storm. Each of us planted five small, blue alpine trees up the very steep hill. This was also the first time we had been above 4000m. After the planting we headed down the same path, then turned towards Khumjung, stopping on the way at the village of Thamo, for tea in Ang Maya Lodge. On its ceiling there were tee-shirts with numbers worn in marathons, and one whole wall was taken up with certificates and medals. I read a newspaper clipping that explained it all; Ang Maya's daughter, Mingma Chhamji Sherpa was 14 in 2005, when she took part in her first marathon – the Everest Sky Race, finishing – to her surprise – the first woman. Then she took part in the Tenzing-Hillary Everest Marathon, and finished the second woman. She took part in a total of nine marathons, before deciding to give them up because of the inequalities between prize money for men and women.

Accompanied by a stunning background of Ama



Dablam and the dazzling Kwangde range, we eventually arrived at the Tashi Sherpa lodge in Khumjung, home to the Hillary school, founded by Sir Edmund Hillary in 1961, and the Khumjung Monastery with its fabled Yeti skull. Jagan explained that the lodge was owned by 45 year-old Pharba Tashi, who had just had it confirmed that he'd matched Appa's record of climbing Everest 21 times.

After dinner we chatted more about Everest; I wondered what exactly you have to achieve before considering attempting it. "To do Everest in two years you need to trek twice above 5000m", says Jagan, "then you can expect how body will react. Then next you can climb a peak over 6000 or 7000 metres, it doesn't have to be technical, but you must be familiar with crampons and understand weather conditions."

Jagan said he hoped to guide Everest, but first he wanted to climb it four times from each side so he understood all the routes and, if there was an avalanche, he'd know where else to go. He said he planned to climb Ama Dablam in September, Kilimanjaro in February, then Everest from the Tibet side, returning back down the Nepal side. I asked if he was scared of climbing ever more dangerous peaks, "This is my perspective on risk...", he explains, "You need to have training and knowledge and be skilful in whatever you do, you must always be safe and if there is any doubt, you stop, and finally, death is not in our control anyway". He then showed me his 'Everest card' that allows anyone who has summited Everest to eat for free in Rum Doodles restaurant in Kathmandu!

Jagan said that by the time we reached Dingbouche at 4350m, he would be able to tell who would make it to base camp. Normally about 80 per cent of his groups made it, he said, then of that 80 per cent, just 50 per cent made it to Kala Pattar. However, because it was late in the season, and greener, he said we'd have a better chance as there would be more oxygen in the air. His advice to combat AMS was that we must "eat well, sleep well and drink well – drink, drink, drink!" So far I'd resisted taking Diamox, the altitude drug, as I was keen to learn my limits, and hadn't felt any sickness yet, but I'd packed some just in case. One of our porters, Prabin, told us he had been taking it, and that they often do as they make the trip so many times they get headaches more frequently.

The next day we began a long climb to the holy ground of Thyangboche (3867m), the traditional site where expeditions to the mountains receive their blessing from the High Lama. We headed down the trail to a river before making a steep 600m ascent through the forest where we were greeted by Thyangboche's colourful gumpa (monastery). The views had really started to open up and become more dramatic, and I noticed how the landscape around us had changed, becoming more barren with little sign of agriculture; this was a tough environment and the lives of the local Sherpa's seemed very spartan.

From here we headed on a gentle incline to Dingboche (4350m), a 'summer village', used by Sherpas with homes lower in the valley to look after their herds in the summer. We stayed there for two nights to aid acclimatisation, hiking up 400m the next morning and rewarded with stunning views of Ama Dablam peeping shyly through the clouds. At 6856m she is considered to be one of the world's most beautiful mountains. We returned to



Katy and the local guide team, Himalayan Encounters, celebrate reaching base camp



Base camp was empty, but the Khumbu Icefall still felt like a special place



The first sighting of Everest from behind Nuptse

Dingboche for the night, where I found it increasingly hard to sleep; I felt I couldn't quite get enough air into my lungs, and my heart was racing.

From here we trekked to Lobuche at 4930m passing numerous Sherpas carrying back-breaking loads of rubbish back from base camp. We reached a ridge with colourful cairns and prayer flags, commemorating those who have lost their lives on Everest, including the recent memorial to American guide, Scott Fischer, who died in the disaster of 1996. From here the path eased and we got some stunning views of Nuptse, shielding Everest from us. When we reached Lobuche, a normally busy place in trekking season but quiet now, we climbed a ridge to view the tumbling Khumbu Icefall, spread out before us, marking the way to base camp.

### BASE CAMP

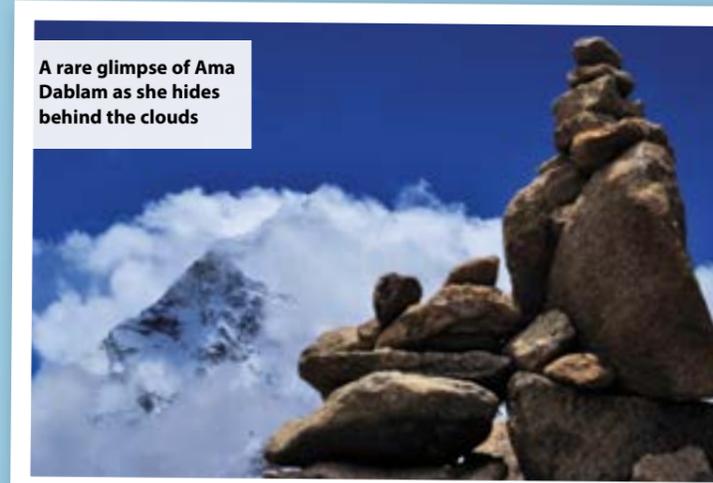
The next morning we set out early for the 6km walk to Everest Base Camp, with only one of our 12-man group unable to make the climb due to AMS. We followed signs to Gorak Shep along an undulating trail, but it felt like hard work as we slowly traced along a moraine crest. Suddenly Jagan upped the pace; a thick cloud was following us and threatened to hide any views of Everest. We scuttled along after him as best we could, and were rewarded by a tiny sighting of Everest, peeking out from behind the more beautiful Nuptse. The excitement was tangible, and we stopped to take photos before carrying on our descent onto the Khumbu glacier and to base camp. During the spring, the main climbing season, there would be encampments of expeditions from all over the world here, but now it was deserted, except for us. And there were no views of Everest, just the bewildering Khumbu Icefall. Yet it still felt like a special place, and the excitement continued with more posing for photos on the rubble-strewn glacier. Finally we slowly retraced our steps for an early night and another restless sleep at Gorak Shep.

But it wasn't all over yet; the next morning we woke at 4am to climb to the lofty summit of Kala Pattar (5545m), the rocky outcrop which towers above Everest Base Camp. Meaning 'black rock', it offers the only close view of Everest to non-mountaineers from the Nepalese side. Although it seemed like not much more than a big hill from Gorak Shep, it was very steep straight away and a shock to the system at 4am in the morning. After a very slow ascent we finally got to its crown; with its craggy ridge and spikey top it actually felt like we had really achieved a summit. The views from here were breathtaking – far better than Base Camp itself – with Everest, the more beautiful Nuptse, Lhotse and numerous other peaks visible.

It was easier to run down Kala Pater than walk it, and we arrived back at the lodge in time for a breakfast before beginning the descent to Lobouche. Returning to Lukla, I had a real spring in my step thanks to the loss of altitude. After a night of celebratory drinks, we flew back to Kathmandu and the madness of the 'real world'. Here I began to reflect on a fantastic trip, during which I'd experienced authentic Sherpa culture in Thame, and made it to Everest Base Camp on the 60th anniversary of the groundbreaking first ascent. What could be better? T&M

## The Knowledge: Everest Base Camp

Essential info to know before you go



A rare glimpse of Ama Dablam as she hides behind the clouds

### WHEN TO GO:

There are two main seasons to trek in the Everest region; pre-monsoon (April-May) and post-monsoon (Sep-Oct). The most popular time is spring when the weather is warm, but although it's colder in the autumn the views can be better as the sky tends to be clearer.

### HOW TO GET THERE:

Most trekkers fly into Kathmandu and then get an internal flight to Lukla, the infamous airport on the side of a hill. If you don't fancy that, you can get a bus or taxi to Jiri and then trek to Lukla, though this will add about seven days to your trip.

### WHERE TO STAY:

Tea houses are the most popular places to stay in the Everest region, though there are more luxurious lodges available and also camping is an option.

### HOW HARD:

With long trekking days and altitudes of up to 5000m, the Everest Base camp is a challenging trek but within the capabilities of fit hillwalkers.

### WHO TO GO WITH:

Katy travelled with **The Adventure Company** who offer an 18-day Everest Base Camp trek from £1,849pp including return flights from the UK, accommodation in hotels and teahouses, breakfasts, a local tour leader, English-speaking guides and local porters. The trek costs from £1,029pp without flights. More info at: [www.adventurecompany.co.uk](http://www.adventurecompany.co.uk) or call 0808 231 6179.

Other recommended tour operators include **World Expeditions** ([www.worldexpeditions.co.uk](http://www.worldexpeditions.co.uk)), **Adventure Alternative** ([www.adventurealternative.com](http://www.adventurealternative.com)) and **Explore** ([www.explore.co.uk](http://www.explore.co.uk)).

## USEFUL GUIDES

available at [www.trekandmountain.com/shop](http://www.trekandmountain.com/shop)



Everest: The Trekkers Guide by Kev Reynolds (Cicerone)



Trekking in the Everest Region by Jamie McGuinness (Trailblazer)

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