

“Bridges I Have Crossed”¹

A Trek To The North Face Of Ama Dablam, Nepal – March 2010



Dedication

This book is dedicated to Janet,
my wife, my love, my soul-mate.

Without her this book would not have been possible,
for she encourages me to be me, and then stands aside as I follow my path.

With boundless love....

¹ This is the text of a short photobook I prepared shortly after my first ever trip to the Himalayas. It is largely unchanged from the original text of 2010, other than to remove now obsolete references. All photographs have also been removed – many can be found at https://petercampbell.zenfolio.com/nepal_ama_dablam_2010

Namaste,

I don't recall exactly when I became interested in going to Nepal. It would have been many years ago. I do recall that I wanted to climb to Everest Base Camp.

My interest was further piqued when I attended a dinner and information session held in October 2007 by World Expeditions, with a special presentation by photographer Richard l'Anson. Held at the now closed Annapurna Cafe in Subiaco, Perth, the slide show and discussion by Richard only added fuel to my desire, which was certainly not dampened by the images in his stunning book "Nepal", which he had only just published.

Fast forward a couple of years to mid 2009. I had decided that early 2010 would be the time for me to do that long awaited Everest Base Camp trek. Searching the World Expeditions website one day I chanced upon their Ama Dablam Everest Trek with Lincoln Hall. Suddenly, the old plans were out the window. Here was an opportunity too good to miss. Bookings were made, old gear was dusted off and new gear purchased, fitness regimes created. I was on my way!

In late February 2010, shortly before my departure to Nepal, when saying farewell to me, my business colleague Peter Forbes said to me words to the effect of "you'll come back changed", meaning, I think, that something profound or fundamental would occur as a result of my travels. I recall replying that this may occur, although I did not go seeking change, only adventure and new experiences.

It seems that in at least one regard Peter was correct.

The title of this book is both a literal and metaphorical reflection of the changes which I think have occurred. The literal is in respect of the fears I have had to overcome, or at least acknowledge and attempt to put to one side, as I crossed the many suspension bridges which stood in my path (and indeed as I traversed some very narrow Yak trails around the sides of steep mountains). For my fear of heights, especially when coupled with moveable or non-solid structures, is something which I have known for most of my years.

The metaphorical meaning is deeper. Those who know me well will know that my preference at a personal level is to interact with people on a one-to-one basis, or in small groups, rather than to throw myself into large groups of people who I have never met before. Such latter situations bring out my natural shyness, and so taking myself to the other side of the world, to spend 2½ weeks with a group of people I have never met before, is an act well outside my usual comfort zone, no matter how otherwise adventurous the enterprise is. To this end the book's title aims to reflect this, and in places with its contents capturing elements of my inner-most thoughts as I trudged along, far away from the comforts of home and the company of my wife and soul-mate Janet, to whom this book is dedicated. So in this regard this is a deeply personal book, and I ask you to read it in that light.

And it is more than that. A group of sixteen quite different people from around Australia were (voluntarily) thrown together in a spirit of adventure, each to undertake a journey of their own motivation, with most, by their own admission, encouraged in part by the presence of mountaineer and

Everest summiter Lincoln Hall. In this regard this book is a record of this adventure - a physically and at times mentally challenging journey to one of the most beautiful places in the world.

The photographs within cannot do justice to the beauty of the Himalayan mountains, valleys, streams, forests, birds and animals, nor can they capture more than a fleeting glimpse of the nature and friendliness of the Nepalese people who we met and at various times looked after us. The photographs also only record that which can be captured by our sense of sight. The sounds, smells, tastes and feel of the region are missing from the photos, although I have attempted to capture some of these in words.

Even with those limitations I hope that this book delivers to you some sense of this amazing trip. The book contains a record of each day's travels, and extracts from my daily diary where I think that that would add substance, and separate sections on the bridges, Lincoln, and the support crew, without whom I could not have achieved what I did.

I hope that you enjoy this book in all its elements.

Peter Campbell
April 2010

Acknowledgements

World Expeditions created this tour, and managed all the support locally. They did a marvellous job, particularly the group leader, Manoj Sitling, a charming and wise man with vast energy and experience. The trip would have been much less without him, and my thanks go to him.

Australian Geographic were tour partners, and through the tireless efforts of AG Editor Ian Connellan who maintained a daily blog (which included lugging the necessary technology all over the mountains).

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Day 2 - Sunday 7th March - Kathmandu – Lukla – Ghat

The first trekking day awaits. I am full of excitement and nervousness and energy. I have been planning for and looking forward to this for almost 9 months, and today is the day.

The wake-up call at the Kathmandu Radisson was scheduled for 4:45 a.m., but I automatically woke up at 3:30 a.m., well ahead of wake-up call time, after a great sleep – what I then expected to be the last comfy bed for 2½ weeks.

We were onto the team bus before the sun came up, out to the airport for the flight to Lukla. The streets of Kathmandu were relatively quiet, and saw us to the airport in about 15 minutes. Then came the ubiquitous airport security – 2 x-rays, 1 frisking, 1 bag search – all quite half hearted and I suspect ineffective.

The trip to Lukla was all very exciting. We piled (crammed) onto a Twin Otter. Rob Liddell, being a pilot, was engrossed with the whole flight, and gave me a running commentary. I was sitting up in Row 1 with him and partner Christine Marsack, both from Perth. The Himalayas were clearly visible to our left, and we spent time guessing (wrongly!) which mountain was which. The Lukla landing was interesting. We found out later that the runway is 527 m long, and has a 10° slope. The approach is made by slamming the plane into the runway maybe about a third of the way along, and then hitting the brakes and reverse thrust to ensure that we stop before hitting the end! I found out a lot of that afterwards, which was probably just as well.

Lukla is a small commercial town, with a population said to be around 10,000. Its airport is busy, with trekkers and supplies coming and going all morning, by both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter. It may have been an agricultural centre in the past, but these days seems to exist primarily to service the tourist trade, as it sits at the start of the treks to Everest Base Camp and other places in the Sagarmāthā National Park. It sits at an elevation of 2678 metres.

Having met our Sherpas and porters, we headed off at around 9:15 a.m. The walk to our first rest break at Chheplung (at around 10:30 a.m.) was a relatively easy stroll. Given that it was downhill pretty well all the way, it was destined to be easy. It was a matter of getting used to life on the track though – porters, cows, donkeys, other trekkers, uneven surfaces, the lot.

At Thado Koshigaon I faced my first challenge - the suspension bridge over the Thado Koshi Khola. I was mentally unprepared for it. A portent of things to come.

We arrived in Ghat at about midday, our first camping place, after only about a 4 km walk.

The afternoon was spent exploring up the path a bit – to a small monastery at Nurning – just north of Ghat. (Stats for Ghat are: Elevation 2564; North 27° 43.363'; East 86° 42.824')

Day 3 – Monday 8th March - Ghat – Pemacholing Monastery – Toktok - Monjo

Today we departed at 8:30 a.m. after what would become a normal start to the day (wakeup tea at 6:30 a.m., breakfast around 7:30 a.m., then on the move).

We left the main path today. Even at this very early part of the season, the main trail to Everest Base Camp is something like a highway, of trekkers, yaks and other beasts of burden, and porters. So leaving the highway and moving off the beaten path was welcomed, even at this new and early stage of the trek.

Almost immediately we came upon the first obstacle of the day, only a couple of hundred metres from the start - a very rickety suspension bridge. It wasn't very high, or wide, however nor was it particularly stable. I wasn't at all keen on it, and very nervously skittled across, arriving at the other side with a strongly pounding heart. As I was recovering a yak caravan appeared and charged over it without so much as a shake of a hoof, so I guess I had little to be concerned about.

We passed through the village of Sano Gumella at 2787m, with the mountain to the East being Kusum Kanguru (6370m), and then steadily climbed to the Pemacholing Monastery at 2848m. I was told that the monastery was supposedly founded in the 13th/14th century at the same time as the monasteries at Tengboche and Pangboche (by the first Sangye Ringboche), although this heritage is hard to verify. The monastery is a beautiful place perched high on the side of a hill overlooking the village of Phakding, just to the south. Brightly colourful, it had prayer flags and prayer wheels in abundance.

I found out later that the Tibetan New Year is called Losar, and occurs around the time of the Chinese New Year. It is an extended festival, with three days of main celebration. This is the time when the prayer flags are renewed, and the stupas are re-decorated. Losar in 2010 occurred on 14 February, only about 3 weeks before we were in Nepal, so all the flags here at Pemacholing and elsewhere were new and looking bright and fresh.

After paying our respects to the deities within, we continued towards Tok Tok (2720m), up hill and down dale, and lunch. With his broad smile and understated sense of humour, Manoj refers to this constant up and down as "Nepalese flat"!

We arrived at Monjo around 3:30 p.m.. The mountain off to the right (East) is Thamserku (6618m). We also had our first casualty for the trip - Lincoln was unwell with mild Giardia, probably picked up in Kathmandu!

(Stats for Monjo camp are: Elevation 2844; North 27° 46.247'; East 86° 43.523')

The afternoon was spent arranging the tent and admiring the stunning scenery as dusk fell around 5:00 p.m.

After dinner Lincoln started what would become a most enjoyable standard for the trip - his post dinner story telling. Stories about mountains, expeditions, relationships, his mates (mainly Tim and Greg and

Andy). They aren't recorded here – they are too many and too varied – but needless to say they became a highlight of the trip.

Day 4 – Tuesday 9th March – Monjo – Namche Bazaar

Today we completed a long slow walk up the valley to Namche Bazaar.

First point of call was the Sagarmāthā National Park entrance. This is the official entrance to this region, and inside was a 3-D diorama of the whole park. It was a little dark and hard to see, and yet provided a sense of the scale and grandeur of this region. It was not surprising that the greatest interest was on Sagarmāthā (Mount Everest) and Ama Dablam.

Leaving the park entrance (which was slightly downhill from Monjo) at around 8:30 a.m., we completed the long, slow walk up the valley. For the first 5 klms or so we snaked alongside the Dudh Koshi Nadi, across and back over the river three times, gaining little altitude. The first suspension bridge came just a few minutes after departure, the next at about 8:45 a.m., and the last at around 9:30 a.m.

It was as a result of today that I decided upon the title of this book, chosen for its literal and metaphorical meaning. For each of these bridges represented a very real challenge for me at the time.

Shortly after the last bridge, near the confluence of the Dudh Koshi and Bhute Khosi Rivers, at the top of the steep climb, we were rewarded with our first views of Mount Everest (known as Sagarmāthā to the Nepalese, a label I shall use for the rest of the book). Even as a non-mountaineer, there is something about the word “Everest”, often said quietly in hushed and almost revered tones, which has power and awe. The day was beautiful and fresh, and the great mountain, perhaps only 30 klms away as the crow flies, was clearly visible, with its distinct cloud plume seemingly gently flowing from its dark triangular top. This was not to be the last view of Sagarmāthā over the coming 10 days, and each one still held that same awe.

We left the vantage point after consuming some mandarins supplied by a couple of entrepreneurial Nepalese women at a price of R50 (about 80 cents) each. They were obviously aware that parched trekkers were easily sold the fresh fruit.

Today was a day of spectacular scenery – mountains, valleys, trees. Along with the sights came the sounds of the track – the ever-present tinkling of the rivers accompanied by the periodic (but regular) ringing and clanging of the bells around the yaks' and donkeys' necks. And these accompanied some of the smells of the track – the dominant one probably being that of the equally ever present yak poo, closely followed the various smells of the forest, particularly the freshness of the pine trees which are native to the area.

From the 3rd bridge just below the vantage point it was a long hard walk up from the floor of the valley to Namche Bazaar. Very hard. In the space of just over 2 klms we climbed some 700 vertical metres – a trip which took around 2½ hours.

And our arrival at the town of Namche Bazaar was not where it ended. Our lodge for the next two nights – the Hotel Sherwi Khangba - was located at the back of the town, and up a further 100 metres (in height), which took another 30 minutes to walk to.

But it was worth it. It was nice to stay in a lodge (hotel) rather than camp, with magnificent views of the sacred mountain Khumbila, opposite Namche across the river valley floor.

Manoj counselled the group strongly about not having a shower today, but rather leaving it until tomorrow. All but two complied. His reasoning was that in his experience, a shower on the first day at Namche is likely to bring on an attack of altitude sickness (AMS, or “Acute Mountain Sickness”). Quite separately 2 people did comedown with various AMS symptoms, and were despatched to the Portable Altitude Chamber, or “PAC”, much to the interest of Rob Liddell, for treatment (the PAC is a portable recompression chamber, about the size of a big sleeping bag). Both of the people who had been showing AMS symptoms subsequently recovered.

(Stats for the Hotel Sherwi Khangba at Namche Bazaar are: Elevation 3525; North 27° 48.287'; East 86° 42.867')

Day 5 – Wednesday 10th March – Namche Bazaar – Panorama Hotel – Namche, around Namche

During the night I experienced an extremely vivid nightmare. (Manoj had forewarned us about the possibility of altitude induced nightmares, and without that forewarning I would have been unprepared for the graphic nature of the dream.) In the dream Tony Abbott and a Tony Abbott clone were going to break both my thumbs – and there was more to it, something to do with Janet, but I am unclear about that side of it. I later recounted this story to Alastair Walpole, who interpreted it as a metaphor for what he would do to Australia if he ever became Prime Minister! Quite detailed and graphic dreams are not an uncommon occurrence for me, but this was particularly vivid, so I was pleased to have been told about the possibility of this happening due to the altitude.

Nightmares aside, today was a very early start. I awoke around 5:30 a.m. to watch the sun rise from the Sagarmāthā National Park headquarters just behind (and uphill) from the hotel. Even at this pre-dawn hour there were many armed guards (army) around – I later found out to protect the Musk Deer from poachers.

At around 8:30 a.m., after breakfast, we did a morning hike to the airstrip (3754m) above Namche, and then on to a vantage point (3893m) for great views of Sagarmāthā, and then for tea/chips at the Syangboche Panorama Hotel (3850m). Also before us in the spectacular panorama on display were Nuptse (7864m), Lhotse (8516m), Lhotse Shar (8386m), Ama Dablam (6812m), Thamserku (6608m) and others.

This was an enjoyable and valuable acclimatisation walk of about 5 klms. The wind at the vantage point was bitterly cold, and a herald of things to come. But out of the wind, in the bright sunshine, it was one

of the most enjoyable walks I think one could have. We returned to the lodge around 1:00 p.m. for lunch, after which I wandered just around town.

I didn't buy anything but sent a few emails – it was good to make some contact with my outside world.

After 4 days on the track I was feeling pretty fit. I noted the presence of my normal tendency to be withdrawn in the company of larger groups of strangers, all within the context of the bridges I was learning to cross.

We also had an interesting post dinner discussion about para-normal experiences, and the book "Many Lives, Many Masters" by Brian Weiss was discussed, all in the context of Lincoln's "death" on Everest in 2006.

Day 6 – Thursday 11th March – Namche – Phunki Tenga – Tengboche Monastery - Deboche

As was the pattern I went to bed on Wednesday around 8:00 p.m., and was asleep shortly thereafter. An extract from my diary the next day reads as follows:

I woke up around midnight for what seemed like a long time. Found myself thinking a lot about Janet and how lucky I am to have her as a partner and mate – I realise that I am missing her quite a lot. My thinking this morning is that in future I won't go away without her for so long. Not that this is or will spoil the holiday in any way – just that this is an important realisation for me.

Nevertheless I awoke refreshed, and in the morning the group was quite buzzing. The health problems of the previous day seemed to have been resolved.

We headed off to Deboche, via Tengboche Monastery. The early morning mountain scenery was, as ever, magnificent. We arrived for a morning break at Kyangjuma (Ama Dablam Lodge & Restaurant) at 10:00 a.m. A lovely little village and resting place.

I had a chat to Lincoln this morning as we walked. I actually asked him how he felt seeing Ama Dablam again, which he didn't answer. This was the first time he had returned to the region since 2006, and I got the sense that this return was causing him to reconsider some of his inner thoughts from that time. However we got onto the topic of an individual's insignificance against the mountains. He said that the feeling of insignificance increases as you get higher. When you get on top you really realise your insignificance - because you are away from all the normal "support" which you take for granted. Thinking about this later, what I found interesting about this was the issue of perspective – I'll never climb Everest, or even Ama Dablam, but what might challenge one person at 8000+ metres (or even 7000 metres) might have the same effect on someone else, at say 5000 metres. Again, I found this thinking relevant to my "bridges" book as it was then evolving in my mind.

Mid-morning, after leaving Kyangjuma, we walked through a very peaceful segment. I became engrossed listening to the sounds of the forest – the wind, the birds, the river below. Sometimes interrupted by the yabber of trekkers. We passed slowly through a lovely rhododendron and pine forest.

Lunch was at midday just short of the Phunki Tenga bridge, which at 3250m is the lowest place north of Namche Bazaar. Our walk to Phunki Tenga had taken around 3½ hours to cover the 6+ klms, all mostly downhill. Which meant that the rest of the day's trip was uphill!

We left Phunki Tenga around 1:00 p.m., taking a little over 2 hours to cover the remaining 2.3 klms to the Tengboche Monastery (3860m). This is a beautiful monastery, which has had to be rebuilt twice after being destroyed by earthquake in 1934 and fire in 1989. I was privileged to see the monks in prayer. After a short stop we moved on to our camp for the night at Deboche, a further 1.5 klms away.

(Stats for Deboche camp are: Elevation 3723; North 27° 50.502'; East 86° 46.328')

The Deboche camp was bleak. And very cold. And I was very tired. But it was a spectacular walk today. The last section, through a rhododendron forest, looked like a desolate scene from Lord of the Rings. I said as much, and then almost instantly came upon the "Rivendell Café". The association was quite spooky.

Day 7 – Friday 12th March – Deboche - opposite Pangboche - Mingbo

Despite the bleakness of the campsite, I had a good sleep during the night, and awoke to a beautiful day, feeling good and with no apparent altitude effects.

At our pre-departure briefing Manoj advised us that he wanted the group to stay together for the first part of the morning (as opposed to our normal practice of spreading ourselves out to suit our own walking paces and our practice of stopping to take photos at will). He advised that part of the path out of the camp had been swept away by a landslide, and that he wanted to ensure that the group traversed this section safely. He didn't say how he knew this – I assumed that he had sent out forward scouts early in the morning as part of the day's planning.

His words were calm and measured, and did not actually give any real forewarning as to what this involved. So we set off just before 9:00 a.m. with this instruction in mind

At 10:30 a.m. we had a rest break, having just traversed the snow covered landslide. It was quite dangerous and pretty scary. In retrospect the most dangerous part of the trek – even though it was over in just a few minutes. A landslide perhaps 200 metres high (hard to tell) had wiped out the path. I couldn't really tell how high above us it was, but it was at least 100 metres below – and steep (maybe 60/70°) with nothing other than snow below us. True to his earlier instruction, Manoj had ensured that we waited as a group to make sure everyone crossed safely. Lincoln's advice, in typical Lincoln style was "be careful here – we don't want you to make the news for all the wrong reasons"!

One of the Sherpas went first, and using his ice-axe was cutting a path from the snow/ice.

I made it, although my foot slipped at one point – maybe only a few centimetres – which caused me to let out an involuntary “oh shit” as my footing gave way. Afterwards I realised that there was no path at all, only snow with varying degrees of compression. Lincoln was actually standing at that point, although again on reflection I have no idea what he could have done had I or anyone else actually slipped, for there would have been no time to grab hold, and certainly no stopping until you hit the river at the bottom of the slope several hundred feet below.

An extract from my diary shows:

Found myself quite shaky afterwards, and thinking again of Janet. Quite overcome by emotion – I shed a few tears – a further realisation of how important she is to me. Then thought about the introduction to the book – about this being a personal book about important reflections.

That over, we had an exhilarating climb up hill to somewhere near Yaral, over the Imja Khola river. The climb was through a rhododendron forest. The climb was very hard - no track. By midday we had a rest break across the river from Pangboche, and then on to lunch another 45 minutes up the track, just up from Pangboche, near the bridge over Cholongche Khola.

We then veered south-east (right) and proceeded up the Mingbo Glacier valley, to our campsite at Mingbo, arriving mid afternoon. (Stats for Mingbo camp are: Elevation 4321; North 27° 51.712'; East 86° 48.604')

The Mingbo campsite sits due west of Ama Dablam, perhaps 1.5 klms from the Ama Dablam Base Camp. It's a pretty cold and desolate place.

Day 8 – Saturday 13th March – Mingbo – Ridge - Mingbo

Today was a day of exploration. We left camp early – at 7:30 a.m. - for a walk to the top of the ridge overlooking Ama Dablam. We arrived at Ama Dablam Base Camp at 9:15 a.m. So, almost 2 hours to walk maybe 1.5 klms! And with the hardest part yet to come.

This was a stunningly beautiful location, although very bleak and cold. Everyone was well rugged up, wearing a full set of layers other than their Gore-Tex windstoppers.

(Stats for Ama Dablam Base Camp are: Elevation 4588; North 27° 51.004'; East 86° 49.426')

After a short break we continued on and up to the ridge top. The map shows a height of 5001m, although my GPS was reading 5016 m. This was a very hard, very cold walk. I wanted to stop half way – but am so glad I didn't. I found myself counting my steps just to keep going. I'd set a goal of 50 steps before I'd allow myself a rest, which dwindled to 30, and then to 20. One of the Sherpas carried my

pack for a while (it's amazing how just a couple of extra kilos of weight make it all that much harder to move), and then for the last 500 metres or so I left it for collection on the way back.

(Stats for the ridge are: Elevation 5016: North $27^{\circ} 50.528'$; East $86^{\circ} 50.225'$)

This time the approximately 2 klm to the top of the ridge took around 2½ hours! An extract from the diary reads:

Not quite sure what the distance travelled today was (batteries frozen!), but as the crow flies the camp to the ridge was 3.42 klm, and it was pretty well a straight line, so the total distance was maybe 7.5 klm. And about 5 hours to cover that.

Based on that I'd say I pretty well hit my height limit today – 5000 metres. I may be able to do more with longer acclimatisation, but I was really struggling for the last of that climb.

We descended back to camp into the rapidly descending clouds, arriving around 2:30 p.m.

A long, tough, and really enjoyable day.

Day 9 – Sunday 14th March – Mingbo - Bibre

It snowed quite solidly overnight. I had a bad sleep, and experienced my first real symptoms of altitude sickness (and in many ways I was lucky, because almost everyone had been experiencing them for at least a couple of days). I had woken up several times during the night with panic attacks due to an inability to breathe – it was an extremely unpleasant experience, unlike anything I had experienced previously.

I reported it to Manoj as he did his daily rounds, and he immediately gave me a Diamox first thing, and ordered plenty of warm water. (I found out much later the important physiological effects of drinking warm water as opposed to cold.)

But once awake and mobile I felt fine, and did not experience any further symptoms for the remainder of the trip. I remained on Diamox for just a couple of days.

Today, after two nights at Mingbo Camp, we left for Bibre, which is due north of Ama Dablam. (Stats for Bibre camp are: Elevation 4494; North $27^{\circ} 53.919'$; East $86^{\circ} 50.988'$)

The walk was maybe 8-9 klm (again, I had limited and cold batteries so no accurate GPS readings).

Bibre is another most beautiful place – about 1.5 klm East of Dingboche, and perhaps 4 klm north of Ama Dablam. The camp overlooks the Imja Khola.

Today we marched in two stages – to Mingbo to a lunch place across the river from Dingboche, and then onto Bibre.

We walked along some pretty hairy yak trails – in some places no more than a boot width wide. Most of the drops weren't too big, maybe 10/20 metres down to the river. But some were over 100 metres. The thinner trails were often snow/ice covered and very slippery, so needed a lot of care.

Our walk today took us past some very pretty (deserted) yak pens. Being the end of winter the grass had not yet started to grow, and so the animals were elsewhere. But we saw many of them in today's travels, and I found myself really taken with these very photogenic creatures.

After lunch Lincoln and some others took a high route to Bibre, up to and across the Duwo Glacier. I was going to go, but on Manoj's advice didn't. In hindsight this was a good call.

My diary for today includes the following entry:

Today has been another good day. But still quite cold and now looking forward to the end.

Janet has been on my mind a lot today (as is now normal). I miss having her around, and think it unlikely that I will go away again on quite such a jaunt as this.

Had hoped that we might be able to call into Dingboche so that I could send her an email, and was disappointed when it was too far away to walk from camp.

Lincoln Hall

As I have said in the introduction, when I stumbled upon this tour and found that it was to have Lincoln Hall as a leader, I was immediately sold.

It was a pleasure to have spent a couple of weeks with Lincoln. For those in the outdoor or adventuring fields, or for those interested in such pursuits, Lincoln's name is probably a household word, especially after 2006. I imagine that many other Australians would at least have some familiarity with Lincoln's story.

So pre-trek I carried probably understandable expectations about what this man would be like. What I actually found was a humble man who had many sides to him. A charming story-teller, who painted colourful pictures about him and his mates Tim and Andy and Greg, each of them household names in their own right, as if they were there with us. Or a self-deprecating Aussie who is happy to have a gentle dig at himself – “Barbara says the only reason I survived cerebral oedema is because there's so much space in there” and “The FBI are the only ones who have my fingerprints”. Or the Buddhist vegetarian who is a director of the Australian Himalayan Foundation with its aims to give back to the people of Nepal and Tibet. Or the photographer and author who sets out to inform and entertain. Or the family man who spoke caringly about his wife Barbara and two sons. Or the quiet bloke who was just as happy as the rest of us wandering along and taking photos. And more.

Since my return I have been asked a number of times about the “highlights” of the trip. That is hard to answer, but without doubt the time spent with Lincoln is one of those highlights.

An extract from my diary on the 19th March follows:

Had a very pleasant post lunch walk to Phakding. After lunch I found myself walking with Lincoln and I commented that one of the highlights of the trip for me was listening to him talking about Buddhism. We spoke at length – maybe about an hour – and spoke about Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, his wife Barbara’s recent journey with the school she was teaching at and the Buddhist/support group she attended. He recommended a book/audio book “How To Practice”, by the Dalai Lama (which I subsequently found at the Pilgrim Bookshop in Kathmandu).

Day 10 – Monday 15th March – Bibre - Dingboche

Beware the Ides of March!

We awoke to a white blanket over the whole landscape. The snow was quite heavy – maybe 10/20 centimetres.

Early morning scuttlebutt around the camp was that the snowfall had caused the day’s plans to have been shelved. Because of the snow fall tracks were now obscured, and so it was too dangerous to go exploring.

At 8:45 a.m. Manoj announced that we will be going down to the village of Dingboche, as there was a possibility of a blizzard which would prevent further pushing to the east unwise.

So we departed a short time later, heading down to Dingboche, which is probably only 2½ klms from the campsite, downhill and broadly west. It was a slow and easy walk. I dawdled along towards the end, accompanied by Manoj. Saw a very pretty little bird flitting around the path – Manoj told me it was a Himalayan Robin. Most of the birds we have seen have been the ubiquitous crow, the choughs (blackbird type birds which Lincoln had advised he has seen as high as 27,000’), and the occasional Himalayan Vulture.

Manoj explained that the snow covered lumps in the field are potato storage – they are sewn and grown from May to November, and then buried for storage until use.

As today was to be a short day there was no rush. The decision to head downhill and not press on to Chhukung had been made at the last moment, which meant that the porters and support crew were only just ahead of us, and that it would take time to set up camp at Dingboche.

Because there was no rush Manoj and I called into one of his mate’s tea houses. I was offered a cup of flavoured tea of sorts – I have no idea what it was. It was described as “black tea”, to me it tasted something like a peppermint tea, but whatever it was it was delicious. We stayed for maybe ¾ hour,

and the two of them prattled on in Nepali, leaving me to relax in seated (and relatively warm) comfort, look around and write up my diary.

As I had had a slightly upset tummy the night before, and I was cold and tired, I was quite happy with today's slow pace and that we were descending, albeit only slightly. And as the day progressed it turned out to be a good decision – the clouds and obvious snow storms up the valley would have made further ascending unpleasant as well as dangerous.

After setting up at camp and lunch I wandered around Dingboche. Dingboche is just a main alley way about 1½ - 2 metres wide, about perhaps a kilometre long. As with all villages, the walls are handmade from rocks. Everything either opens or runs off the main alley way. There are quite a number of nice looking tea houses and lodges, many of them fairly quiet/deserted, as we were still relatively early in the season.

Found the internet café up towards the top of the village. The connection was good - R450 for about 25 minutes. It was great to talk to Janet briefly by email – I felt good for doing so. Sent a couple of other messages also. The people at the internet café were very friendly and chatty people, with a cute puppy!

(Stats for the Dingboche camp are: Elevation 4330; North 27° 53.413'; East 86° 49.603')

Day 11 – Tuesday 16th March – Dingboche - Tengboche

Today we headed off to two monastery villages – Pangboche and Tengboche.

Pangboche is the site of the oldest monastery in the Khumbu region - 600 years old. Whilst photos were not permitted, I could see from some of the timbers and general construction of the place that it was very ancient.

After lunch at around 1 p.m., near Milinggo – just out of Deboche, we continued on to Tengboche.

The track from Milinggo up to Tengboche was a slow, steep, slippery, icy, snowy climb through a bleak Rhododendron forest, the same one as from the “Lord of the Rings” comment a few days earlier. The track was covered with a mixture of ice, snow, water and yak poo, and quite churned up by yaks and the previous trekkers.

Even though the climb from lunch was only a vertical climb of maybe 100 metres, it was a hard walk uphill this time compared to when we had walked downhill a few days earlier. It was a cold and chilly day, but quite pretty.

The campsite was across a very small creek and opposite the Tengboche Monastery.

Day 12 – Wednesday 17th March – Tengboche – Sonasa - Khunde

I awoke to the chants and horns of the monks in the nearby Tengboche Monastery. A beautiful sound, evocative of the archetypal Buddhist image. It was a lovely start to the day. From my diary:

Today is also St Patrick's Day, 93rd Birthday of Patricia Campbell. Happy Birthday Mum!

We left Tengboche around 9:00 a.m. for Khunde. Whilst the elevation change from Tengboche to Khunde was negligible, it was a “Nepalese flat” walk as Manoj would describe it. That is, lots of down and back up again over the course of the day. Our start point at Tengboche was at elevation 3846 metres, and over just over 2 kmls we descended to Phunki Tenga at 3250 metres.

Then the walk up from the bridge at Phunki Tenga to Sonasa (3618m) was difficult. Only about 1.5 klm in distance, it was a steady, steep climb. By the time we got to Sonasa the weather had started to turn, with cloud/snow coming in from the East.

We lunched in a cosy room in a tea house at Sonasa (food prepared by the boys) and by then the weather had turned decidedly miserable.

After lunch, Lincoln talked about 2006, the first time I recall him doing so, and various anecdotes associated with that time. He got onto the matter of dying on the mountain, and he made a comment “it seemed like the easiest thing to do”. Lots of others had already died. He was officially “dead” for about 20 hours. (This also references into his later comments the next day.)

The remaining 2.4 klm to Khunde (thankfully only a bit uphill) was mostly in light snow.

We walked through the snow to the lovely little village of Khumjung, stopping at the Khumjung School for a quick look around. The Khumjung School is one of many school and hospital projects established by Sir Edmund Hillary and his Foundations. And what also struck me is that school kids are the same everywhere – a group of six teenage girls passing me at one stage could have been anywhere in the world! Whilst they were speaking Nepali, their chatting to each other and giggling could have been anywhere. At the Khumjung School I chatted briefly with Lincoln about his and Barbara's charitable work.

It was then only a short walk (perhaps a kilometre or so – around a half-hour walk) to our camp site at Khunde. Khumjung and Khunde are effectively twin villages. And very neat and pretty little villages as I discovered the next day.

(Stats for the Khunde camp are: Elevation 3832; North 27° 49.256'; East 86° 42.410')

One of the sights of the day was the construction material being carried up the hill. Often 5/6 sheets of 12 mm ply, or roofs of zincalume or 4/5 sheets of corrugated iron between some ply. The most incredible was 4 steel pipes (90 mm diameter x 3 mm thick), each 4 metres long. Manoj enquired about the weight – 130 kg – all carried by just one man, on his head.

Day 13 – Thursday 18th March - Khunde – Khunde Peak – Khunde - Namche

Today was an early start to the day. We were up at 6:00 a.m., breakfast at 7:00 a.m., on the road by 8:00 a.m. Our morning destination was Khunde Peak (4200m), and the memorial to the Hillarys along the way.

The memorial to the Hillarys was primarily to Sir Edmund's wife Louise and daughter Belinda, both killed in a plane crash in 1975. A monument to him since his death had also been added more recently.

The walk up to the peak was terrifying. The climb was hard, but the adrenalin from my fear was probably making my breathing harder than the actual climb.

At various stages the drop below was probably 5/600' (see photo) down to the treeline, but it felt and looked a lot more.

At times the path was only a yak hoof wide- only about a boot width!

One of the Sherpas – Vinot – could see that I was distressed, and took my hand to get me around 2 or 3 of the particularly steep and narrow places. He also offered – and I gratefully accepted – to carry my backpack.

At the top the views were stunning, but I was distracted by the emotion of the climb and the future fear of the climb down. As it turned out we descended by a different route, which whilst steep and narrow in places was nothing like the climb up.

(Stats for the Khunde Peak are: Elevation 4169; North 27° 49.157'; East 86° 41.917')

After a round trip of 4.2 klm we arrived back in camp around 11:30 a.m. It was quite exhilarating, but again it pushed me to my limits. I do recognise that the fear is illogical, but that doesn't make it any less real at the time.

Khunde is a pretty little village – all the roofs are green because some Kiwi mountaineer didn't like the blue roofs and so arranged for them all to be painted green!

Left Khunde after lunch around 1pm, and walked back to Namche Bazaar – across the airstrip – a trip of only about 2 klm, which took about an hour. We arrived in Namche around 2 pm. Most of the group went straight to the lodge – I accompanied fellow trekker Libby Packer while she went jacket shopping and then we went to a money changer for tips. After that I found the internet café and checked/sent a couple of emails.

I then wandered around and up the hill to the lodge, which was still hard work even given the lower altitude and my acclimatisation.

After dinner Lincoln spoke about the various books written on 2006, many of which have a different take on the situation. He is not judgemental about the different versions, because each person only

sees their particular aspect, and people are affected by altitude, dehydration, emotions, etc, and sees things differently. He says as much in the introduction to his book “Dead Lucky”.

Day 14 – Friday 19th March – Namche – Chumoa - Phakding

This morning we had a normal departure, and lunch at Chumoa, about 5.5 klms down from Namche Bazaar.

Downhill most of the way, with 4 bridges to cross – 3 suspension and 1 steel slats. One of the suspensions was the big one at the convergence of Dodh Koshi River and the Kyashar Khola (over the Kyashar Khola), and I found that I could now traverse that with relative ease and little fear.

Then over lunch Lincoln spoke at length about Buddhism, and particularly about meditation and the Buddhist belief on the stages of dying, which was very relevant to his 2006 experience. That was followed by a most pleasant post lunch walk to Phakding. As I mentioned earlier on the dedicated “Lincoln Hall” pages in this book, after lunch I found myself walking with Lincoln and I commented that one of the highlights of the trip for me was listening to him talking about Buddhism. We spoke at length – maybe about an hour – and spoke about Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, his wife Barbara’s recent journey with the school she was teaching at and the Buddhist/support group she attended. He recommended a book/audio book “How To Practice” (which I subsequently found at the Pilgrim bookshop in Kathmandu).

It was very enjoyable just strolling along and chatting and I felt I got to know him a bit better.

We arrived at Phakding around 3:30 pm for our final camp. (Stats for Phakding are: Elevation 2809; North 27° 44.589’; East 86° 42.780’)

Late that afternoon I decided to go for a bit of bridge therapy, just for fun...

Was wandering around in the middle of the bridge (over the river at Phakding), and then suddenly a horse and rider appeared on the other side. He stopped for just a second and then galloped over the bridge. No time for a photo – just squeezed to the side and he missed me by just a few centimetres maybe millimetres.

Day 15 – Saturday 20th March – Phakding - Lukla

Well, the last day arrived, on post trek reflection, all rather quickly. We left camp at 8:30 a.m., after farewell speeches and the traditional handing over of tips to the Sherpas, cooks and porters. Lincoln spoke on behalf of the group in his passable Nepalese. We don’t know what he said, other than it was along the lines of “thanks very much, we couldn’t have done it without you”.

Then it was group photo time and departure.

We had a rest break at Ghat at 9:30 a.m. It all looked so different now, in reverse.

Then came the slow hard climb back up to Lukla (a climb of around 300 metres) where a proper bed (well almost) and a hot shower (actually stone cold) awaited.

I wandered around Lukla for a bit, but didn't do any final shopping. Then made my way back to the lodge for a pleasant dinner, and early night due to crack of dawn fly out.

Kathmandu

Kathmandu is a thriving, bustling, noisy, crowded city of somewhere between 1 and 2 million people – locals told me it was around 2 million, but the web provides a wide range of answers. Total Nepalese population is around 27 million, a little larger than Australia (but over a much smaller area). The first impression one gets is the Kathmandu International Terminal, a large red-brick “shed” lacking any real character. Outside the terminal the full extent of people and traffic becomes apparent.

There are no apparent road rules. Everyone simply drives with their hand on the horn, and somehow everyone else gets out of the way! The “might is right” rule is probably the only prevalent one – trucks and buses dominate over cars and vans, with motor bikes, push bikes and pedestrians at the bottom of the food chain. In my time there I didn't see any vehicle accidents, whether that was because there weren't any, or whether I was in the right place at the right time, who knows.

Straight out of cosy Perth (or even quieter Dunsborough), Kathmandu is a sensory affront. But it's one which I think one gets used to fairly quickly. The main shopping area, Thamel, is a maze of streets and alley ways, with every imaginable local craft shop selling clothing, trekking gear, books, maps, tourist artefacts, you name it. The people are by and large friendly, neither too pushy nor taking offense if you don't want to buy their wares, and at the same time happy to engage in some friendly bartering for whatever they are selling.

I'm not sure quite how anything works. Power lines (I assume – perhaps they were telephone lines) are strewn everywhere. Traffic lights (the few that are around) don't work. Certain restaurants are to be avoided. But on the other hand, it's not all that hard to find a peaceful coffee shop, or to have a roof top beer in Thamel and watch the world go by below you.

Day 16 – Sunday 21st March – Lukla - Kathmandu

Up at 0445, for 0530 brekkie and then up to the Lukla airport by 0600. A bit of waiting around before boarding at maybe 0645. Interesting take off. I reckon the plane had all of 27 metres left of its 527 metre runway length when its wheels got off the ground. Good flight – pretty murky.

Into Kathmandu mid morning – a bit of mucking around and then a final wander around Thamel for last minute shopping.

Dinner out at a nice outdoor restaurant – most of the group were present.

Day 17 - Monday 22nd March – Kathmandu

Went on a whole day tour today. Visited the great Stupa at Boudha (built around 5th century), and then onto the Hindu temple at Pashupati Nath. The temple typified the grottness of Kathmandu. The river which flows past the temple (and which is a tributary and therefore eventually follows into the Ganges) is polluted beyond belief. There were at least half a dozen funerals occurring when we were there, with the cremations pyres in various stages – from almost burnt down to just being lighted. At one stage there was a loud bang and mini-explosion from one of the pyres, and this was said to be a head exploding! Don't know whether that was true. Apparently the river was quite clean about 10 years ago, but the new government (since the assassination of the king) doesn't seem to be able to fix it now. A past prime minister and revered leader - Girija Prasad Koirala - was cremated the day before and the remains of his pyre were there for us to see. Dignitaries are cremated in a different part of the temple to the rest.

In the afternoon we went to Durbar Square- the site of the old city of Kathmandu – build progressively over the last 4/500 years. Apparently each city has/had its own Durbar Square where the king resided. Amazing old architecture. Visited also the temple of the Living Goddess - - where we saw the remains of a goat which had recently been sacrificed, and was in the process of being diced prior to cooking/consumption.

Last visit for the afternoon was the temple at Swayambhu – the “Monkey Temple”. Quite a beautiful temple – in the process of having some restoration work being done, so the photos won't do it justice. Again, some pretty amazing old architecture. It sits high on a hill to the west of Kathmandu city, and you can look down at the smoggy/foggy city below.

Tonight we went to dinner at Rum Doodle² – apparently quite famous in Kathmandu. Quite nice. Ate in the open air upstairs area, about 3 floors up, above the hustle of the Thamel shops. Walked back to the hotel – about 15 minutes, and then had a night cap at one of the hotels bars, with Ray and Stuart. Didn't really need a drink given my ill-health, but there you go.

² The old Rum Doodle in the centre of Thamel has closed and relocated a few kilometres out of the city centre. The last time I was there – in April 2018 - it has lost all its charm. Luckily it had retained some of its old relics, such as Ed Hillary's signed “foot” (if you've ever been there, you'll know what that means).

Footnote – October 2021

Since this first trip I have returned to the Himalayas several times, and despite the passing of the years, hope to go again. Other stories can, or will, be found [here](#).

Lincoln Hall sadly passed away in March 2012, less than 12 months after a number of our original party had planned to travel with him to Tibet. The Tibet trip proceeded, but without Lincoln.

Trekking Party ³

- Ray Blumgart, Sydney (room/tent-mate)
 - Peter Campbell, Perth
 - Ian Connellan, Sydney (AG representative)
 - Stuart Doig, Melbourne
 - Marty Doolan, Katoomba
 - Michael Doolan, Ulladulla
 - Lincoln Hall, Wentworth Falls
 - Keith Johnson, Wollongong
 - Rob Liddell, Perth
 - Julia Lim, Melbourne
 - Christine Marsack, Perth
 - Gary Murdoch, Wollongong
 - Libby Packer, Brisbane
 - Alistair Walpole, Melbourne
 - Adrian Weedon, Bega
 - Linda Weedon, Bega
-
- Manoj Sitling, Tour Leader, Kathmandu
 - Karma Josh, Deputy Tour Leader, India

³ All these years later I remain in close contact with 2 of this party, and occasional contact with a couple of others. I last saw Manoj Sitling, entirely coincidentally, in April 2018 in the Radisson in Kathmandu.
