

WIRED FOR ADVENTURE

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THE PURSUIT OF FREEDOM

“I wanted to go and find somewhere in the world where I could discover a point of extremeness.”

NICK SANDERS - RECORD BREAKING ADVENTURER

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THE ROAD LESS TRAVE

Neil Irwin sets out on an adventure to Makalu Base Camp. Along the way, he discovers the Nepal you don't get to see on the more popular route to Everest.

WORDS: NEIL IRWIN

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The Makalu Base Camp Trek is much quieter than its popular neighbour, Everest

Makalu. Does the name ring a bell? Perhaps not if you don't spend a lot of your time fantasising about 8000ers. It's not only one of the 14 mountains in the world above 8000m, but it's the 5th highest to be exact, standing at 8481 metres. Everest (8848m) may be synonymous for Nepal when it comes to both trekking and summiting, but perhaps Makalu should also be on your radar if you want to see what the country can really offer. From lush green jungle-like sections to rugged mountain scenery, and a hint of danger whilst traversing rock falls off the beaten path, the Makalu Base Camp Trek becomes a worthy opponent to Everest when it comes to picking your Himalayan adventure.

Nepal is a gorgeous country. The people, the landscape, you can't help but fall in love with it. The last time I visited was actually to hike the Everest Base Camp Trek some nine years ago, and having had a taste of the experience that the country can offer, I'd been yearning to head back. The problem being that I needed to find the right reason to return. So, when I saw a post from someone I knew pop up on social media advertising the idea of going on a private trek that not many others tourists do, my interest was piqued. This is my type of trip. To go where few people go.

Planes, Trains and Automobiles

Meeting everyone at the hotel before the trek can be quite unnerving, but we all shared a glimmer of connection by knowing the organiser of the trip. Turns out this was no simple trip either. This was unique - we were a group of about 20 which is pretty large in comparison to the normal 12 or so. Logistically, we soon found out, this was quite an undertaking.

Our flight from Kathmandu to Tumlingtar took roughly 40 minutes. The start line at a town called Num however was another four to five hours 4x4 drive away. Three jeep-like vehicles rocked up, all in varying conditions. Balding tyres, rugged but rudimentary suspension; you could tell they'd had a laborious life. Loaded up with our personal gear and six or seven people per jeep it got a little cramped for such an epic journey ahead. There are no tarmacked roads out here. By the time we set off from the airport, it was already late afternoon, so we knew it wouldn't be until after nightfall that we'd get to camp. The mood? Joyous and jubilant with the novelty of this drive, which soon wore off as the incessant shakes and bumps began to take their toll. An overturned lorry along the route certainly heightened the excitement in a cautious way. These roads aren't to be messed with, if you can call them roads at all.



Who's writing

Neil Irwin is an adventure creative specialising in capturing interesting, compelling and adventurous stories that showcase the people involved. He's always on the lookout out for new and inspiring journeys or stories to capture that will hopefully entice others to get out and explore anywhere from their local area to far flung places across the world.

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It wasn't until the morning after that we saw the scale of the trip. More than ten brand new bright yellow four season two-man tents with foam mattresses were stood to attention. I certainly wasn't expecting this kind of luxury! Not to mention the two assistant guides that came round each morning providing tea and coffee to our tent doors as well as some warm water to have a wash with. I was prepared for much less – to be living in my own filth for two plus weeks wondering when I'll next be able to clean my pits. Not to mention the mess tent that was fully equipped with tables and stools that we'd be dining in.

Num, as it turns out, is the base for a helicopter that ferries kit up to Makalu Base Camp as various expeditions ready themselves for the summit. Trekkers are the only ones that seem to come this way. Mountaineers would normally acclimatise somewhere else and fly in to base camp as the trek starts at 1,500m, which is around the same height as Kathmandu. This is somewhat of a contrast to Everest where trekkers and climbers would normally hike in on the same route. No yak trains here. Instead, it's all fields of varying crops tended to by their owners in 30 degree heat. We were getting a sweat on before it reached midday.

Mountains in Bloom

Day two was probably one of the most arduous of the entire trek, as we had to descend from Num to the valley floor, cross a river, then head back up the other side in searing heat. No one said it would be easy. I'd trained to get my legs in some form of shape, but after an entire day of steps both up and down, the group and I were happy to reach camp.

Conditions were certainly fertile below 3000 metres. Rhododendrons were in full bloom surrounding the paths with pinks, reds and purples and many variations in between, not forgetting towering trees and bushes. The views, albeit hazy, were still pretty stunning when the mountain tops could be seen. Nepal may be known for its rocky mountainous terrain, but it's a country with other environments and eco systems as well. I can't say anyone had warned me about the leeches that were waving around like blood thirsty little aliens either. They are silent little pests that, once latched on, are hard get off. You don't even feel them bite. One managed to get me in camp on the inside of my second toe.

Unsung Heroes

A section of the main valley heading to Makalu, near the Khorlange Forest, definitely felt like a bit of an obstacle course. Boulders and rocks were strewn everywhere due to constant landslides, we even had to bypass or go around little sections because the ground simply wasn't there. This certainly made the route more interesting, not to mention walking along and seeing jagged peaks jutting out the side of the mountains that definitely didn't seem earth-like. Yet there was always something to look at and admire. Flowers, plants, trees, and even local fixtures. There are simply no roads around here. Everything has to either be hiked or helicoptered in.

Our porters were definitely the unsung heroes. They carried everything. I mean everything. Toilets, tents, tables, not to mention our bags. At its peak, there were some 50 people within the support crew. They would wait patiently for us to deliver our bags, wrap them up tightly with nylon rope



A support crew of up to 50 helped the 20-strong party reach base camp



Above

Hiking in the presence of giants. Makalu is the fifth highest mountain in the world at 8481m

Below

Tea and coffee brought to Neil's tent in the morning was a welcome surprise

