



# Trekking Along the Singalila Ridge

by Terry Armstrong

Trekking, anywhere in the world, is certainly not for everyone. It is not a “vacation” by any means, but it can be a life changing experience. I have completed two treks in my life, one in the Andes, living for 12 days in tents and reaching an altitude of 17,400 feet, and one in the Himalayas with accumulated ascents and descents of over 29,000 feet over a 15 day trek. Both were equally difficult with temperatures well below freezing, long days on the trail, and minor altitude sickness, but it is the sense of accomplishment and comradeship that makes a person return to trekking time and time again. It is a test of endurance and character that few things can match. It is an experience that lasts a lifetime.

Although a person undertaking this type of adventure needs to be in reasonably good shape, it is even more important to have the right attitude. When facing cold, exhaustion and cramped quarters with a group of people one may not have known before, a willingness to accept each day for what it is, laugh at our own weakness and complete the task no matter how difficult are all important.

I was not in good shape prior to either of the treks I completed. Having a desk job, long commute and minimal free time for preparation I was worried about tackling the Himalayas. Wilderness Travel, who advertised this trek as one of their Exploratory Adventures (meaning it had never been done before), rated this trek a 6, on a scale of 1-7. My trek in Peru with the same company had been rated a 5.

Given the difficulty of the Peru Trek, I had sworn I would never do something like that again, but somehow through the years it took on a glamorous life of it's own as I told the stories and showed the pictures of what life was like on the trail. Having heard these stories for several years, my boyfriend, Don, decided we should do something like this together. I still wonder what it was that appealed to him - the water bottle freezing solid in the tent, my 10 lb weight loss, or the stories of dogs growling in the dark outside my tent.

I had always wanted to see the Himalayas, so we began researching the various treks that were offered by Wilderness Travel. Given the length of time it takes to reach that part of the world, and the likelihood that this would be our one chance to see the Himalayas, we chose a trek that would give us the most variety in terms of terrain, cultures and grand vistas.

The Singalila Ridge Trek offered a chance to visit a little known state of Sikkim. The itinerary included trips to their oldest monasteries, hiking through Rhododendron Forests, river crossings, camping at a sacred lake and spectacular vistas of Kanchenchunga, the third highest mountain in the world, and the southern Himalayan range. It sounded perfect for us. The only drawbacks were the difficulty rating and the length of time away from work. The price was certainly reasonable compared with other treks and our guide would be well-known National Geographic writer Bruce Klepinger.

Don and I spent a year preparing for the trek, buying all the best in outdoor gear. As a contractor, Don is always in top physical condition, but at 44 I worried about being able to complete a trek that was considered more difficult than the



trek I did nearly 10 years before. Don made sure I had all the best rain-proof, cold weather clothing and a -25 degree sleeping bag.

Just before leaving for the trek, we were informed that due to political difficulties we would not be able to reach the ridge by a trail that entered Nepal as originally planned. We were warned that the new trail would include extreme ascents and descents and were encouraged to keep in top shape. Now I was really worried.

Upon arriving in Delhi we were shocked by the amount of pollution and poverty in such a well known city. On a 4 hour drive to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, far from Delhi, we found conditions much the same. India is a land of contrast both culturally and environmentally - advanced technology and poverty, autos and camels, mountains, desert and jungle.

Our third day in Delhi we met the other trekkers for the first time over breakfast and left shortly after for our flight to Bagdogra. The drive from Bagdogra to Darjeeling, where we would rest for two days, climbed up through dense rainforest on a narrow road that dropped off steeply to the valley below. By dark we had reached Darjeeling, which we could see only by the lights glittering all over the steep mountainsides. Our hotel was the beautiful Windemere, a charming British establishment complete with fireplaces in the rooms and beautiful English gardens.

From Darjeeling we had a 6 hour drive to the town of Pelling from where we would start our trek. Don and I were both recovering from food poisoning the night before and by the time we reached our hotel he was cold and feverish. There was no luxury in this hotel. Our room had no heat, the bed was hard and the sheets thin and damp from the cold. I covered Don with extra blankets, slept in my sleeping bag and by morning we were both feeling better.

In the morning we met our camp crew, porters, sherpas and dzoes (a cross between a yak and a cow) at the trail head. The dzoes and porters would carry all our gear. On a typical day the porters would go ahead with the kitchen tent and supplies to set up lunch before we arrived, with the dzoes and tents arriving later.

The first 3 days we followed a steep, rocky, slippery trail through the rainforest, crossing rivers at the bottom of each ravine, and camping in small villages along the way. The weather was hot and humid, and we were pestered constantly by flies, gnats and the occasional leech. The trail was climbing higher each day towards the steppes of the Himalayas.

By the 4th day we had reached our original route at the sacred lakes of Paharay Jomie at 13,800'. We were now above the forest and into the clouds. It was misty and cold when we arrived and snowed during the night.

It became our usual routine to eat lunch in the cold while waiting for the dzoes to arrive with our tents. Once the tents arrived, we would find our luggage amongst all the gear, unpack our sleeping bags and spend the rest of the afternoon trying to stay warm in our bags until tea-time. A



few adventurous souls would make short trips to explore the surrounding area...but certainly not me. I was happy just to have made it to camp. After tea we would play cards, read, or write in our journals until dinner which was a couple of hours later. After dinner our water bottles were filled with boiling water which we stuffed in our sleeping bags before crawling in for the night. My -25 degree bag would get quite comfortable with the hot water, but Don, who only brought a -15 degree bag, was cold every night.

It wasn't until the 5th day that the mists finally lifted and we were able to get our first, spectacular view of Kanchanchunga and Pandim from the Danphebir Pass at 14,900'. Also visible briefly were Makalu, Lhotse and Everest. From our camp at Panding we were able to watch the sunrise over the mountains and enjoyed stunning starlit views at night. Every day thereafter brought us closer to Kanchenchunga as we continued up and down the deep ravines of the Singalila Ridge.

Some days hiking was limited to 3 or 4 hours with elevation gains/losses of 1000' to 1,500', but the longer days were hard on everyone, 7 to 8 hours with elevation changes of up to 3000'. One of our group, who had completed 5 different treks, said this was by far the most difficult she had ever done.

Although I was plagued by nausea and headaches the first week, I was surprised to discover that they disappeared completely by the second week and I grew stronger and more acclimated everyday. There were 4 or 5 in our group of 13, including myself, who were not strong hikers, but by the end of the trek I had moved up to the middle of pack. My back and knees, which were sore by the end of a long day, would miraculously recover at night. Approaching my 45th birthday, I was pleased to learn that I was stronger than I had been 10 years before in Peru, something I had not expected.

This is one of the reasons people return to trekking. It is not just the experience of discovering new places and new cultures, but it is the things you learn about yourself, both physically and mentally that make the experience rewarding. If I can climb the height of Everest and descend the same distance over a period of 15 days, through jungle and snow, then the rest of life should be a breeze :)