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Luxury treks in Nepal: Sipping lemon tea in the shadow of Everest

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It must be one of the most iconic views in the world. Peeping out from between the fir trees was my first glimpse of Mount Everest, its luminous, ice-coated flanks etched against a cobalt sky.

I'd been trudging up a steep and dusty Himalayan path for hours to reach the Topdada lookout, but the hard slog had been worth it. While I caught my breath, Padang handed me a cup of hot, aweet lemon tea and home-made biscuits. He is sprinted down the hillside for more than an hour from the next village with the refreshments.



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This was just part of the service during our luxury trek in the Khumbu req north-eastern Nepal. Instead of camping, we stayed in small lodges built traditional style, with ornately painted doors and beautifully carved ceili

We had started out from Lukla, a remote village six days from the nearest road. Flying in from Kathmandu, we landed on the short runway that has a steep bank to bring planes to an abrupt halt. I was travelling with there friends, all of us middle-aged and none superfit, so we had chosen a leisurely tilnerary, walking for between four and six hours a day at a gentle pace.

We knew we were in expert hands when we met our guide, Bala. He was a local Sherpa and had climbed with Sir Chris Bonington and Doug Scott. Our porters, He and Salla, were lightly built but as strong as yask, bewing our luggage on their backs and striding out at twice our pace to deposit the bags at the next stop long before we arrived.

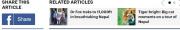
Most mornings we were up early and on our way soon after sunrise to catch the best views of the shimmering, snow-capped peaks. By midday the clouds had rolled in so sometimes we found ourselves bestling through thunderstorms and blizzards. Tibetan Buddhism permeates every aspect of life here.

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We followed in the footsteps of the locals, walking clockwise around onion-shaped places of worship called stupes and spinning rows of prayer-wheels to agreed spiritual blessings. Colour lut prayer-flags were strung across the hillsides and walls of mani stones were engraved with secred texts. Monastreise were built into rocky crags where shaven-headed boys as young as five were already studying for a life of contemplation.

Our route took us along rivers and across wobbly footbridges smothered with white khata scarves. But it was the entrance to the Sagamatha National Park that was truly breatflating. The cliffs were carved with Buddhist cripriuse and blood-drhododendrums were dotted over the wooded slopes, while high above was the holy mountain, Klumblai, a colosal plannace for rock and or longer to the control of the control

From here on, we started to climb steadily, pacing ourselves as the air became thinner, Jostling for space on the narrow track were hordes of trekkers heading for Everest Base Camp, while local people carried everything from haystacts to sets of wooden doors on their backs. Arriving at our lodge, the Yetl Mountain Home in Namche Bazzar, I gulped down mugfuls of fresh ginger tea to combat altitude sickness.

We were now so high we had to stay put for two nights to acclimatise, and our breakfast eggs took twice as long as normal to boil. As night fell, temperatures dipped below zero, so we huddled around the wood-burning stowe in the dining room. The lodge resembled a museum with archive pictures dating back to Geor Mallory's 1924 Eyerest expedition. The village itself is set in a stunning natural amphitheatre, encircled by a jumble of soaring peals.

amphitheatre, encrided by a jumble of oad Just above it stood a small Buddhist monastery where we joined the lams for morning payers. It is a butter lamp in from of the golden statues as the lams chanted mantars, sprinkling rice over us for good luck and placing red coder cound our necks. blessed by the Dalai Lams. These spiritual leader. To learn more about Everest, I made my way to the Sinow Tigers Museum, which is decidicated to all the Sherpas who have reached the summit at least four times.

reached the summit at least four times.
The walls are covered with their photos
and I paused in front of a shot of one of
the greatest mountaineer, Ang Ria
Sherpa. The first man to reach the
summit ten times without oxygen. He
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Yaks were tethered beside dry-stone walls and smoke from juniper fires wafte us as we approached the isolated settlement. It was the culmination of our tre we gasped for air at a dizzying 13,000ft.

On our last morning we rose before dawn. The moon hung over the mountains and the ground sparkled with frost along the rough path to the Syangboche airstrip where we boarded our brief flight back to Lukla.

The yaks, normally grazing on the runway, were obviously still asleep. Taking off in the tiny turboprop, I glanced back towards Everest to watch a puff of cloud on its summit turn pearly-pink in the first rays of sunlight. It was a sight I will never forget

Getting there

The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646, www.theultimatetravel.company.co.uil) offers a ten-day Everest Lodge Trek from E3.075 per person including all flishing, three nights' room-only in Kathmanda and seven day't tekking with ulti-board accommodation, professional guides, porters and national park fees. To support the Sherpa poters, under the support of the s

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