



It is fine and sunny this morning – a good day to start our nine-day trek, described by the travel company as the Chomolhari Base Camp trek. A porter brings my luggage to our minibus and I walk over to the hotel for breakfast. Veronica eats with us, but leaves afterwards to start her journey to Thimphu.

When ready, we clamber into the minibus and are driven to Drukgyel Dzong. Here we meet some men who will accompany us, including a lively chap dressed in Japanese gear, whose name is Isup Tsiring. We are asked to wait until the ponies are loaded. To while away the time, we sit on a hillock overlooking the village, chatting and admiring the view. Later, Kipju approaches us and asks us to wait ‘ten minutes’. The ten minutes turns out to be a very long time indeed; there seems to be a problem concerning the ponies. We amble around and I go down to the village, where I take a look at the houses and people. The children, who come to see us, are particularly sweet.

Time drags on; clouds appear in the sky and the sun comes and goes. A lady sweeps the dusty ‘square’ of the village with a bunch of wooden branches, then a truck appears and stops in order to deliver medication. Isup Tsiring goes off somewhere to sort things out. It appears that the ponies have been reserved for the use of some VIPs – not for us. More ponies will have to be found. There appears to have been a misunderstanding.

At midday we request our packed lunches, which contain very little food. While we eat, a yak is tied to a post by a man, strangled and killed with a knife. The unfortunate animal fights for its life and takes a long time to die – we all feel sorry for it. The man then skins it and carves it up. Soon there is nothing left save for the

contents of the creature's stomach. Strictly speaking, Buddhists vow not to kill any living being, and are therefore vegetarians. However, in cold and high-altitude regions where lots of protein is an essential part of the diet, meat is eaten. The accepted logic is that if an animal has been slaughtered by somebody else and if you have not ordered the animal to be killed, then you are allowed to buy the meat and eat it, for you have done no wrong.

At last, just as we are losing heart and think that we will have to return to the hotel, Kipju suddenly announces that we can start. Telephone calls to Thimphu have revealed that as either the VIPs had not come or simply did not exist, we can use the ponies that have been supplied. Maybe we are the VIPs.

Swinging our daypacks on to our backs, we pass the water-powered prayer wheel and enter a more picturesque part of the Paro valley. Although the sun has disappeared behind the clouds, we stop occasionally to admire the view and take photographs. Tree-clad mountains roll down to colourful fields, where we can see typical Bhutanese wooden houses here and there. In the centre of the valley flows the clear blue water of the wide river, the Paro Chhu.



*Farmhouse, Paro valley*

However, there is an unpleasant aspect of this part of our journey: the path. It is rocky and uneven, and in some places quite muddy. I am not looking forward to trudging through mud and negotiating such uneven terrain – it certainly slows me down. As if that is not enough, it now begins to drizzle, then rain in earnest. Out comes the huge, sweaty rain jacket. My back is already wringing wet thanks to the nylon daypack. Slowly but surely the trek is turning into an ordeal. I see nothing of the scenery as all my attention is focused on the rocks and mud underfoot.

With everybody's spirits dampened, we fall silent. I get behind and only catch up with the others at rest points. Some places look nice; I realize that under better conditions they must look splendid. Children shout and wave when we pass houses. I greet the locals in their language (Dzongkha, a dialect of Tibetan), '*kuzu zangpo*'.

Sometimes I receive a more respectful greeting, '*kuzu zangpo-la*'. At one point some children shout from a window, '*Kuzu chocolates! Kuzu chocolates!*'. Most of the people seem totally oblivious to the rain; some do not even look very wet.

As some Indian soldiers are also taking this route, we frequently pass them or shelter with them. I stumble into a house where we all rest for a while together. We have now walked for three hours and everybody is glum. Thinking that we were nearly at our campsite, I am flabbergasted to discover that we have another hour and a half's journey ahead of us.

On we plod until we reach a small military checkpoint at the 'sizeable village' of Sama Shamba. Here we rest while waiting for our ponies. We are surprised that they have not turned up yet. Kipju goes off to see if we can use the officers' mess. Sitting on a wooden bench outside the checkpoint under the shelter of the roof, it becomes quite cool. I put on my thick woollen sweater, sit back and relax as best as I can.

After a long delay the porters and ponies finally arrive. Isup Tsiring appears and leads us off to the nearby campsite, to which Kipju will bring tea from the officers' mess. It arrives in thermos flasks while we are waiting for the tents to be erected. The hot tea is very much appreciated. By now it is 6.30 p.m. and nearly dark; we have to use torches in order to find our luggage and to see inside our tents. I share one with a chap named Andy.

I now change into dry clothes, organize myself, chat to Andy and write my diary until dinner is announced. We have an excellent meal in the dining tent. The porters apologize for the mix up and long delay this morning. As none of us have any inclination towards conviviality, we do not stay together long after the meal. Exhausted, we retire to our tents for a welcome night's sleep. Hardly an auspicious start to the trek.

The following day is a tedious one: a steady climb upwards in spitting rain, with more rocks and mud. As the clouds hang low around the mountains, there is nothing to be seen. It is at this point that I wonder why on earth I have come all the way here to do this – I could have climbed mountains in the rain or walked through forests in Ireland!



*Edelweiss, Paro valley*



By mid afternoon we have reached our campsite. We enter an empty building, which I learn has been built by the Bhutanese government for mad tourists like us. As it is cold by now, a fire is lit in one of the rooms and we spend the rest of the day seated around it, drying our wet clothes, eating, reading and chatting. By bedtime, we are reluctant to leave the warmth of the fire and go outside to sleep in our tents.

When I poke my head outside of my tent this morning, I shout with joy, for I can see a snow-capped peak and a patch of blue sky. So it is worth coming here after all! Everyone else is in better form at breakfast. As it is still cold, we once again sit around the fire, drying clothes and anything else that is wet. We will have a shorter and easier walk today, and so we are not in such a hurry to leave. When I collect a pair of trousers that I had left by the fire to dry, one of the porters rubs off some mud and jokingly demands a fee of five dollars for the service. The lads have a good sense of humour.

By the time we set forth it is hot. On we go through more uninteresting forest, stumbling over rocks. I make slow progress and slip once or twice. We have a tantalizing glimpse of Mount Chomolhari, but it soon vanishes. Chomolhari (24,000 feet or 7,326 metres), which straddles the border between Bhutan and Tibet, was first climbed in 1937.

At last the tedious forest comes to an end and we emerge into a wide mountainous landscape, complete with dazzling snow-topped peaks in the distance. This looks more like the Bhutan that I have expected to see. The path follows the course of the Paro Chhu, past clumps of colourful and exotic flowers, which I stop to admire and photograph. I catch up with Philip and Pat, who are busy bird spotting. Philip points to a mountain that has just appeared on our right. This is Jao Drake (pronounced 'jao-dra-kay') in the Soi valley. It is a magnificent sight; the sunlight catches its upper reaches, which are covered in snow. I plod on, circling the mountain and, when I round another bend, more mountains begin to appear.



*Housewife, Soi valley*



The path now swings left and yet another mountain, almost lost in the clouds, comes into sight. Approaching a lone house, I notice that some of my companions are heading indoors. I follow one of them upstairs and find myself in a large, sparsely furnished room that looks as though it has not been completely finished. A middle-aged man, dressed in a dark blue *gho*, sits on a rug, talking animatedly to one of our men. One of his two wives sits by a window, sewing and chatting. The second wife, dressed in green, beckons me to sit down on another rug. Some other members of our party are seated farther down the room, opposite a small but colourful shrine that houses bowls of holy water, a *dorje*, a *vajra*-bell, some other objects and photographs of the Dalai Lama. The people seem to be very hospitable and chat rapidly. I tell one of our men that it is very pleasant to be in a Bhutanese house with Bhutanese people and he translates what I have said for the benefit of our hosts. They seem to be pleased to hear this.

Shortly afterwards, tea is served, followed by bowls of noodle soup – hot in every sense of the word. Believing that this is our lunch, we expect to be given more food, but that is it; fortunately most of us accept second helpings! Afterwards I go into a dark kitchen, where I am shown a churn, made of bamboo, which is used for making buttered tea. It is nice to be inside a typical house like this. Some Bhutanese music is played for us on an old and battered cassette tape recorder; although interesting, the music makes little impression on me.

We leave the house soon afterwards and continue our trek. Rounding a hill on our left, we now approach our goal: the Chomolhari base camp. I finally reach it by about three o'clock. The great mountain should be on our left, but by now it is completely enveloped by cloud. However, when a tiny corner appears briefly, cameras begin clicking.



*Chomolhari*

By dinner time it has turned quite chilly and so I put on the padded jacket supplied by Exodus Expeditions. We eat a good meal, finishing with pineapple slices, and sit around talking afterwards. Although everyone is in a much better mood this

evening, the Awkward Pause, which I had encountered the previous year in Ladakh, makes its appearance once again. Apart from one American, the rest of the group (excluding myself, of course) consists of quiet, reserved English people. The American had surprised us the other day by asking for our names and ages for his diary. In fact, he told us, this was the first time he had ever written a diary. He also admitted that he had never taken any interest in flowers or birds, but now he was stopping frequently to photograph both.

When I slip out of the dining tent to relieve myself behind the bushes, I discover that the stars are shining brightly in an inky black sky. Here, like Ladakh, the stars appear astonishingly numerous and clear – I feel as though I can reach upwards and touch them. Despite the cold, I spend some time gazing up into the Milky Way, entranced.

This morning we are woken at six o'clock by an excited porter shouting, 'You can see the mountain!' Groggy with sleep, I dress quickly and scramble outside. There, in front of us, standing out sharply against a vivid blue sky, is the dazzlingly white peak of Chomolhari. As it is the only mountain lit by the rising sun (all the others being in dark silhouette), it is a truly magnificent sight. The massive pinnacle looks as though it is only a few hundred feet away. It seems as if it has appeared by magic, for yesterday it was almost invisible because of thick cloud. Once again, cameras are fetched and they begin clicking.

Stomping around in order to keep warm (there is frost on the ground), I drink my cup of tea and wash quickly when a bowl of hot water is given to me. The sun is just beginning to light our part of the valley when breakfast is announced. In the dining tent we demolish bowls of porridge, toast, spicy sausages and more toast with jam.

Although today is an optional rest day, we all decide to go on the suggested side excursion up to a ridge, so that we can enjoy a better view of Chomolhari and its neighbouring peak, Jitchu Drake (pronounced *jit-chu-dra-kay*). We are told that we might see some *bharal* or Himalayan blue sheep.

We set off early, following Isup Tsiring. As the sun has risen above the mountains, it has suddenly turned very hot. The uphill climb is steep and our progress is slow. Gradually it levels out and we turn north-westwards. Rounding a corner we see a splendid view of Jitchu Drake, though its pinnacle is now hidden by cloud. From this position we have breathtaking views of the mountains at the other side of the valley. What an experience to be up here, in Bhutan, gazing at these massive Himalayan peaks, all pointing heavenwards! The sight is truly awesome, in the original sense of the word, and absolutely thrilling. From here we can see the river, the Paro Chhu, rushing downwards from the snow and ice of Jitchu Drake, and winding its way through the green valley far below.

After a short rest, I follow Isup and the others back southwards. We now approach the side valley that leads to Chomolhari itself. Just as I reach a ridge, Isup beckons to me, indicating that I should proceed quietly, and whispers that he has seen a flock of blue sheep below. I quickly attach the zoom lens to my camera and creep over to another ridge. Sure enough, about thirty-four of the timid animals can just about be discerned far below; as they are almost the same colour as the mountainside, it takes a moment or two to find them. I am able to take a few photos of them and also of Chomolhari, now that we are a little closer to the mountain. I

feel it a great privilege to see the blue sheep. When some of my companions appear and produce their cameras, the animals, who by now have seen us, flee.



*Bharal or Himalayan blue sheep*

Having viewed all that this fine vantage point has to offer, we begin to descend. I race down and am back at our campsite in no time at all. As I have lost the others, I fear that they may have gone somewhere else. However, a few familiar figures soon appear far above and put my mind at ease.

As it is still sunny and hot, I decide to wash the dirty clothes that I have been wearing. Soon I have a line of washing drying in the sun. I then bathe myself in the nearby stream.



*Jangkethang*

Now with plenty of time to spare, I amble away from the camp towards three ruined *chörtens* in the middle of the valley. I am now beginning to enjoy myself; it feels good to be clean, relaxed, and not having to rush off somewhere again. Away



from the blue tents and synthetic materials, I sit down beside one of the *chörtens* to admire my surroundings in peace. Basking in the deliciously hot sun, I gaze at the wonderful mountains surrounding me, their crevices and textures emphasized by the strong sunlight. To my right, a herd of yak, looking like small black dots, graze on a hillside in the distance, their tinkling bells faintly audible from where I sit.

After a while, I amble on, stopping to admire various small alpine plants and watch yellow butterflies flitting among the flowers. At one end of a small wooden bridge I find a large number of them; they fly up and around when I approach. I have already noticed other types of butterflies over the previous couple of days.



*Gentians*

I reach a turn in the valley, cross the river and once again sit down to take in all that is around me. The valley curves away southwards (the way we came yesterday) and to the north, part of Jitchu Drake can be seen.

I finally return to the camp, sit in the sun again and join the others for an outdoor lunch. While we eat, a colourfully-dressed young boy appears, leading a yak, and obligingly stops for photos.



*Boy with yak*

As some of my companions have decided to walk to a couple of sacred lakes nearby, on the other side of the valley, I decide to go with them. We head northwards, approaching Jitchu Drake, pass an unpainted house not unlike the one we were in yesterday, and cross the river by a narrow wooden bridge. Then comes a

steep ascent as we climb a low hill. The higher we go, the more the scenery improves. From here we look across the valley towards the hill that we scaled this morning; as it looks impossible to climb, we wonder how we did it.



*The base of Chomolhari*

We finally make it to the top. Here we discover that, in order to see the lakes, we have to cross a ridge. This we do, enjoying more spectacular views of the mountains. Once we are over the ridge, we walk around one side of a bowl-shaped valley. We are finally rewarded with a glimpse of one of the lakes. Although this part of the valley is in shadow, it is still picturesque. My companions stop at a certain point, but I go on a little farther, to a spot where I can enjoy a good view of the lake to the east and the gleaming, icy peaks to the west. Although the view is excellent, I do not delay too long as dark clouds have begun to appear in the sky. These, however, have the effect of making the light more dramatic, resulting in the texture of the mountains becoming emphasized.

I finally tear myself away from this magical spot and once again race down to our camp. I am the first to arrive, despite the fact that the others have left before me. As my newly-washed clothes are bone dry, I fold them and put them away. After I have sorted out a few things, cups of hot chocolate and biscuits are distributed among us.

This evening's dinner features something that we have requested: tinned tuna fish. This and other goodies, which we have not yet eaten, have been brought all the way from England in a cardboard box. Coleslaw is also on the menu this evening and we finish with pineapple slices. I refuse a cup of tea after the meal, believing that I may sleep better without it, and accept a small helping of fiery Bhutanese rum. After chatting for a while about films, we go outside to a roaring bonfire and stand around staring at it for a short while, then make for our tents. It has been a splendid day – the best so far. We all hope that the weather will be fine tomorrow, as we will be passing through some interesting scenery.