

AM-TRAVEL-Woman-Trekker, Bgt code:2; Budget; See CP Photo CPT112; With QuickFacts; INDEX: Travel, Sports, International; Woman's trek to Everest Base Camp becomes nightmare

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MOUNT EVEREST, Nepal (CP) - Perched on a living, moving glacier whose avalanche rumblings were a constant reminder of danger, I wrapped my arms around myself and wedged into the narrow space between two boulders.

There I waited out the blowing snow and fierce wind of the storm. I dreamed of Everest Base Camp, still above me, where climbers build their makeshift-home at the desolate bottom of the world's highest mountain.

Its safety was so close, yet on this moon-like landscape - barren and isolated - there were no landmarks to assess how near or help me find my way.

I had spent three difficult weeks climbing to an altitude of 5,200 metres and was well beyond the highest village or any sort of civilization.

What started off as the adventure of my life on a solo trek as a female westerner was now a nightmare. I had hired a guide through a reputable hotel but was alone on this day because of another fight in what became a routine clash of our western and eastern ways.

We were a mismatch. Our disputes were rooted, as he eventually admitted, in his problem with independent women travelling alone and my problem with guides who got drunk every night.

That led to far too much attention from him at the end of the day, when I needed my space after intense hours together walking through gruelling remote regions.

I felt trapped in a bad relationship even though this 27-year-old father of three was someone I hardly knew.

We both awoke grumpy. I was happy after coffee but he'd stay moody with a hangover. I often offended him by consulting my guide book and pulling rank about where to stay or where to go.

Sometimes, he'd just take off and leave me walking alone for hours.

Other times he'd be sincerely apologetic and fiercely protective, scolding the occasional rude villager who made inappropriate sexual comments.

It was very confusing, and I found no answers in my guidebooks about the problems - cultural or otherwise - one encounters with guides. We place unprecedented trust at the beginning of a trek in virtual strangers whom we must hire largely on spec.

My experience was common and much less serious than stories of women being raped, even murdered while solo trekking.

I hired my guide in the capital city of Kathmandu and spent a day with him before embarking together into no man's land. He was sweet, kind and considerate.

“He drinks, this I know,” Nava Raj Dahal, the owner of First Environmental Trekking told me after I safely returned. “But he promised me he wouldn't drink on this trek.”

Dahal reminded me his first choice was an older, more fatherly man, an ethnic Sherpa. I chose the one from Kathmandu for his superior English and conversation during the lonely mountain trek.

Guides here are largely unregulated. They begin as porters, learn English and work for three years as guides before they qualify for certification.

“If the guide does something wrong, the company gets the problem. Why not the guide?” said Dahal, who has complained to government officials.

A company can fire unlicensed guides but can't prevent competitors from hiring them during heavy tourist seasons when demand is high.

Steve Conlon, whose American firm Above the Clouds Trekking has taken westerners to Nepal for 17 years, says there's been a culture shift with the arrival of the modern world.

Cash and other influences from 300,000 visitors annually has led to a different work ethic.

“In the old days, a woman travelling alone was considered a younger sister,” said Conlon.

“They've encountered enough single women who were casual about sex and other things. It's not unusual for people of a certain character to assume all western women are like that.”

The best scenario is a scorned advance, while the worst can be aggravated assault, says Conlon, who advises against solo trekking for women.

“You have to be able to take care of trouble yourself,” he said. “Once you're up there, you're on your own.”

How true.

The guide book promised a trail of yak droppings would lead the way - left behind by animals that bring food, kerosene, blankets and other supplies which climbers need to live for several months while attempting to reach the summit.

No roads or yak dung. Just snow and fog that hid the Khumbu Glacier - the most visible reminder I was on Mount Everest.

I couldn't see. I was cold, hungry, tired and nauseated from the altitude. Every step was an effort in the suffocatingly thin air.

My own foolishness ate away at me, because today I gleefully dumped my guide when I found other trekkers to take me on the final leg of my journey - four sturdy men who supposedly didn't need a guide.

Glee swelled to panic as I watched them turn back one by one to the highest village on the mountain because of the unrelenting snowstorm.

I clung to my goal of reaching the Everest climbers. Base Camp was my ultimate destination after three weeks of walking up and down strenuous passes. I had climbed 11,000 metres - 25 per cent more than the actual height of Everest, and descended another 7,300 metres of rugged, unbroken back country.

It would be dark soon. The horizon blended into the granite rock that extended into the ether all around me.

Just as I imagined the worst and envisioned rescuers finding my body, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, looked twice and recognized my guide.

“Let's go,” he said.

“What?” I asked, disoriented and slightly delirious. “How did you find me? Why are you here?”

“To take you to Base Camp, like you hired me to do.”

We arrived 30 minutes later. When you knew where to look, civilization was right there, marked by Buddhist prayer scarves flying in the wind. Colourful tents were erected everywhere and climbers huddled around CB radios making contact with teammates headed for the summit.

For me, this was the top of the world.

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