

TOUCHING THE SKY AND





THE KHUMBU COUGH

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PHOTOS BY: THE EVEREST SKY RACE



There were about 30 of them, moving quickly, in a big hurry to get to somewhere else, maybe being chased? They were breathing heavily as if the air was different to what they were used to at home and it didn't suit them. They seemed to be suffering. Their dress was unusual: eyes covered, body wrapped in bright colours, socks on their arms and their trousers thin and shiny black like the beetles that crawl on fresh yak dung. Each wore a number, on the front and back, like they do at the Miss Nepal contest in Kathmandu. They mostly carried sticks like old people do, not just one, but two of them, and they had attached bottles and pipes to themselves like the village water project. But they seemed very happy. They say Namaste a lot, which is very nice. They like tea, and lots of it, and pay good money for it. They take pictures of everything, even mother milking the yak. They're always taking pictures!

The first time

visitor to Nepal will often experience a culture shock – the people, the smells, the chaos - but spare a moment's thought for the inhabitants of remote Himalayan villages encountering for the first time an invasion of Lycra-clad aliens of the trail-running kind.

These particular aliens happened to be the largely French participants of the 6th Everest Sky Race, a biennial seven-stage race held over 10 days through the Nepalese Himalaya. The territory being invaded is the remote Rolwaling Valley, home to the holy Gauri Shankar (7,134m) peak, and the Solukhumbu, better known simply as the Everest region. The temperamental Tashi Labsta, a notorious glaciated pass of 5,755m, connects the two areas.

It's my first time in such an event. This one has its own race medic and own cameraman. The competitors are mostly males, but not all, and mid-thirties and above. Many seem to be looking for a break from normal life, a challenge and to experience the mixture of culture and nature that Nepal is famous for.

The race began in Dolakha, five bumpy hours east of Kathmandu. It's an innocuously small

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town with a pretty old centre, which is, like many places in Nepal, being slowly advanced upon by slapdash, concrete modernity. Its claim to fame is its rather curious Hindu temple dedicated to the god Bhimsen, a fierce-looking fighter, but one of the good guys who protects the weak. It's interesting, but we're all rather more keen to be beginning our journey into the mountains.

The word has got around and in the morning the townsfolk have come to watch the oddly dressed group. Before the start, members of a mothers group adorn each of us with a malla, a necklace of chrysanthemum flowers symbolising long life, and plaster a chemical red tikka powder rather too liberally on foreheads and cheeks. It's a typical Nepali tradition before starting a journey.

November is normally a peak-season month for visitors to in Nepal with its cool days and blue skies, yet within 200m of the start, the heavens open unexpectedly, leaving tikka dripping from our faces. It's a disappointment.

The first race stage was around 25km, a mixture of undulating riverside trails, through villages with ripe millet fields being pillaged by occasional families of grey langur monkeys. We arrive later in Suri Dobhan, a small, poor-looking village perched on a hillside. The villagers are joining in applauding the runners crossing the airy suspension bridge to complete the first stage. The atmosphere is fantastic.

Easing off my backpack (and cursing the crampons and helmet I have to carry for the pass), I naively realise that this is a race. While the field may be small in number with runners of all abilities, with no prizes, self-importance nor media fuss, and with an emphasis on enjoyment

and the experience, it's an unwritten rule that everyone is absolutely expected to do his or her best on the day. After a day of enjoyable ambling, "tomorrow I will run," I promise to Pascal, the race director.

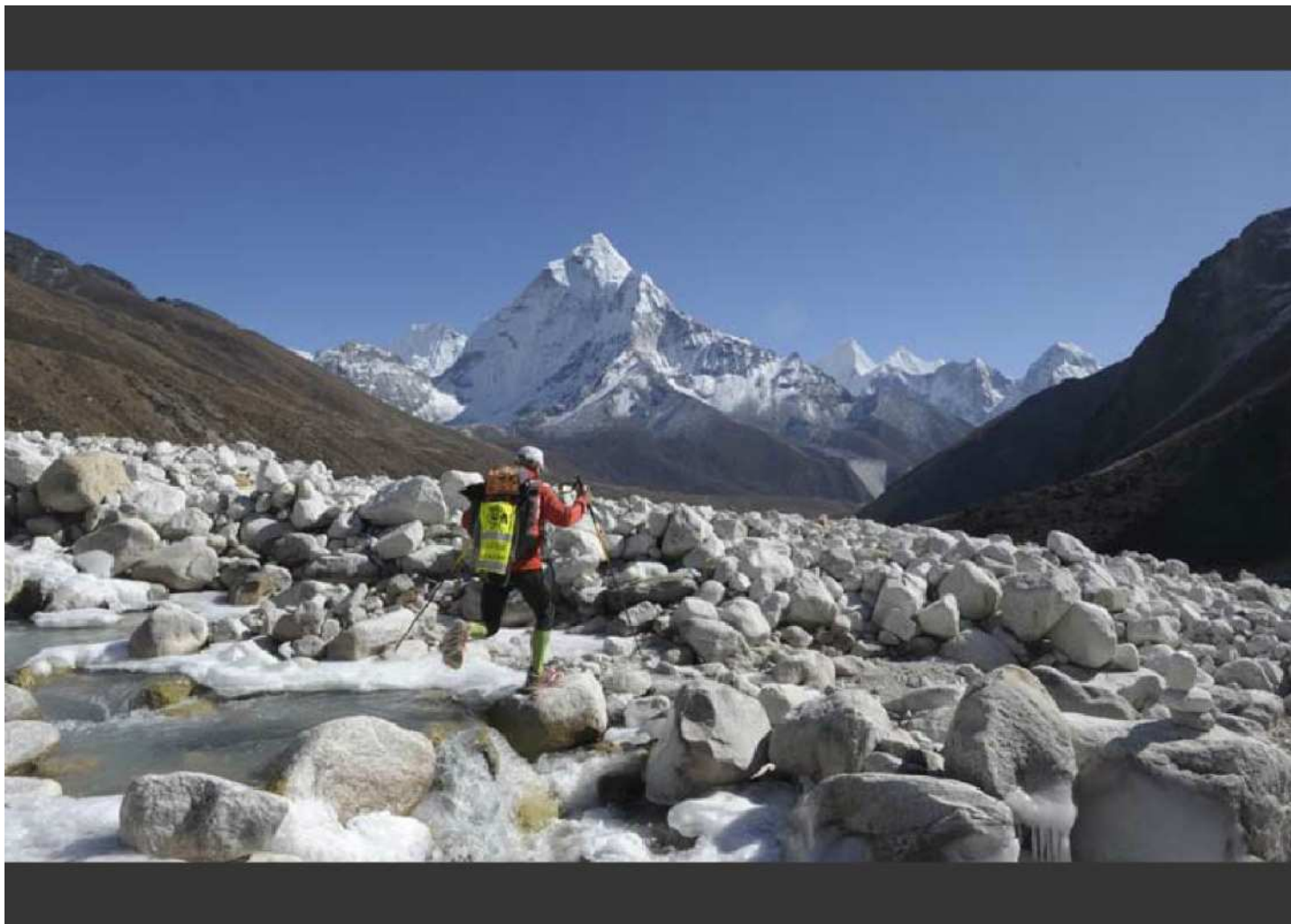
We're distributed among rooms that have been given up for us in different people's houses, with beds that invariably end

somewhere around mid-calf, and low doorways that bludgeon the skull should you forget to duck. It's comfortable.

The weather remained poor on the second day, and a new road has obliterated the trail marked on the map used to plan the route. Here a Chinese company was undertaking a huge hydroelectric project, much needed in a country plagued by blackouts. The race was halted for an hour as blasting and clearing above sent avalanches of rock and mud on to the road.

It was only day three when the sky part of the sky race came into play. As the trees thinned at around 3300m on the way to the hamlet of Beding, it felt like an invisible researcher was slowly turning down the oxygen tap on us lab-rats. Breathing became harder and even slight slopes would reduce a run to a jog to a walk.





The race was conceived by Bruno Poirier, a well-known sports journalist in France. His affair d'amour with Nepal began in 1994 when, aged 29, he ran across Nepal in 42 days.

Since then he has combined his passions of running and Nepal by organising countless multi-stage races through remote and high places in this wonderfully diverse country, building up a community of like minded individuals along the way. Along with the Everest Sky Race, there is the annual Annapurna Mandala Trail and the infamous Himal Race, which takes self-sufficient runners across great distances through very remote and difficult landscapes. Those who have competed in his races, and have run over 5000m, can call themselves Chevaliers du Vent, Knights of the Wind, and for the females, Amazones du Ciel, Amazons of Heaven. Indeed, emails from him address you as such.

Virgine Duteme, one such Amazon, describes

Bruno as having "mystique". "If you want information about one of his races, you have to phone him and he will determine if you can join," she says. There's no website or advertising, just occasional articles in magazines and the rest is word of mouth.

Beding is a small village with a Gompa (monastery) and around 50 stone buildings surrounded by bare fields. Lingered cloud means the sun is not able to put in an afternoon's work. "Chiso!" says the lodge owner, "it's cold!" while walking in to the tea-house leaving the door as wide open as her jacket, apparently viewing the cold as something to bear rather than as a problem to solve.

In the afternoons, most people spend a few hours cosily in bed reading or sleeping. The altitude requires restful adaptation. As per daily routine, 5pm is tea and biscuit time though, with appetites ravenous, the biscuits will not last long, nor will politeness when down to the last cookie on the plate.

In the twilight hour before dinner, I do a short tour of the village passing by the Gompa, ending at a less holy house where alcohol is being drunk. The smell of raksi, locally brewed millet alcohol, mixes with the wood smoke in the air behind the dirty curtain acting as a door. The old man sitting by the fire offers a glass. His daughter warms the hooch on the embers in a kettle to take the chill off. It's a distinctive taste that grows on you, as does the wizened old man. He has climbed on all of the big mountains, even with Chris Bonnington, he tells me knowing I am from England. His hands wrapped around the raksi glass reveal several amputations.

Dinner's called. It is recognisable trekking fare: bright pink prawn crackers, a tasty garlic soup, a heap of dal bhat, rice and dhal, for main course with second and third helpings. It's not what the French would choose themselves, but it's high in calories and plates clear quickly.

With stomach full, it's time for an arguable highlight of the day: sleep. It's not even nine o'clock and a rainbow of down-filled cocoons are ready for nine hours of uninterrupted warmth and dreamy sleep.

If going to sleep is the best, then crawling out of warmth into yesterday's (and tomorrow's) clothes in the frozen morning air is less appealing. The breakfast scheduled for 6.30am invariably arrives at something past seven. The day's stage is due to begin at 7.30am. This is a good thing about this kind

of race. There's no stretching, no real warm up, stomachs are full at the start line and, apart from the Swiss competitor complaining about the starter's watch not following Swiss time, the atmosphere is relaxed and good natured.

When the starter's whistle blows though, elbows are sharp, and it is competitive. Stage

four is the shortest of all, and at just 10km, it's a sprint. The grassy, yak trail from Beding to Na climbs 500m to 4,190m where we'll spend a day of acclimatisation. Lizzy Hawker, the British runner of some repute is out in front intent on maintaining her first place on the leader board. She's trailed by locals Deepak Rai and Jorbir Rai, both of whom are past Everest Marathon winners.

Lizzy had joined the race after having to stop her solo run along the Great Himalaya Trail, the new 1600km high-route across Nepal. In dense, mountainside forest, in an untracked wilderness area, she lost a pack containing critical equipment including satellite phone, money and permits. Bitterly disappointed she seized the opportunity to join the race to get back into the mountains where she feels most at home.

With four stages completed, there is a three-day hiatus from racing. First, a rest and acclimatisation day with a gentle walk up to 5,000m for the views and give the body's adaptation a push. On the second day the journey towards the Everest region begins. The hike to the foot of the pass makes for a long day. We skirt the Tsho Rolpa, one of the many rapidly growing Himalayan

glacial lakes, that is threatening to burst its natural damn wall and obliterate the valley below it. At the moment we pass it however, the damn fortunately appears solid. Less can be said for the trail over the Trakarding Glacier, which zigzags across loose glacial debris and bare ice making

the going as tough as running.

Here the group makes its only camp on a boulder-strewn area and there is not a flat surface in sight. The surrounding peaks are majestic, but freezing air sinks from their icy walls. Together these factors make for a sleepless last night in the Rolwaling Valley. The crossing of the Tashi Labsta is dramatic and it feels unusual to be

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