

walking over expanses of snow and ice in trail running shoes. Compared to the few other groups in big boots and carrying ice axes, we look like lost tourists. It's not a difficult route in good weather, but notorious for stone fall and has exposed sections where a simple slip would only have an unhappy ending. Despite this, the crampons and helmets carried thus far stay packed.

"There's no race quite like this," says Sylvain Bazin, a trail running blogger, "where the non-competitive part can be more memorable than the competitive parts."

Descending into the Solukhumbu reveals the contrast with Rolwaling. There it seemed raw whereas here it seems sophisticated. It's a little to do with the weather, the sky above is now nothing but blue, and a lot to do with the wealth that has been brought by decades of tourism. The valleys are wide with good trails, the Buddhist chortens are freshly maintained, and the number of jagged peaks in view is simply stunning. It's as though an exterior decorator has been in and the shapely form of Ama Dablam made the centrepiece.





This is beautiful terrain for running, though with high points of over 5,300m every day, it is going to be hard. Passing a Yak caravan heading for Tibet and clusters of children heading to school wearing fake North Face and Mountain Hardwear jackets, we head up to the Renjo La (5,340m).

There is a certainly an upside to running at such altitude. The thin atmosphere allows light to pierce it more easily bringing an incredible vibrancy to the landscape. And space, the final frontier, seems close.

It feels however like driving a car in first gear: while the lungs and heart are in overdrive, the legs move you at a geriatric's pace. Overdo it by the slightest bit, whether ascending or descending, and you're an anaerobic heap losing seconds with hands on knees. Sucking from a bladder is impossible and, without stopping and losing time, a squirt of a gel is just about all you can eat.

A consequence of this is Khumbu Cough, the name given to the inevitable irritation in the lungs from panting dry, cold air. This can be

expensive as well as painful. Pascal, the race director, coughed himself a hernia and had to be immediately evacuated by helicopter.

From the Renjo La, we get the most incredible view of Everest, but only briefly. Lizzy Hawker lamented, "Sometimes I just wish I could stop to appreciate the view," but with the speed of the two Rais over their home terrain, she has her work cut out.

On the Cho La a day later, we pass trekkers breathlessly clambering up the steep boulder-strewn slope towards the pass holding both their trekking poles in one hand like a pair of giant chopsticks. While perfect for poking two eyes out at once, their poles are doing nothing to keep them upright. Perhaps, like me, they should use a single short pole to lean on extending the arm into third leg?

By now we're all tiring fast. There is an announcement in the evening that the plan to finish at Ama Dablam Basecamp is "unrealistic" and the final day will be shortened. 'Bravo' is the common sentiment.

The difficulty of sleeping at this height also takes

it toll. Some experience sleep apnoea where the body regularly ceases breathing only to part-wake itself to take five giant breaths before the unpleasant drowning-like process repeats.

The final stage takes runners up to the famed viewpoint of Kala Patar. At 5,500m its the highest point on the race, and perhaps of any race in the world. The long decent to the village of Pangboche is on the well-known Everest Basecamp trekking route and is a fabulous trail to end a fabulous journey.

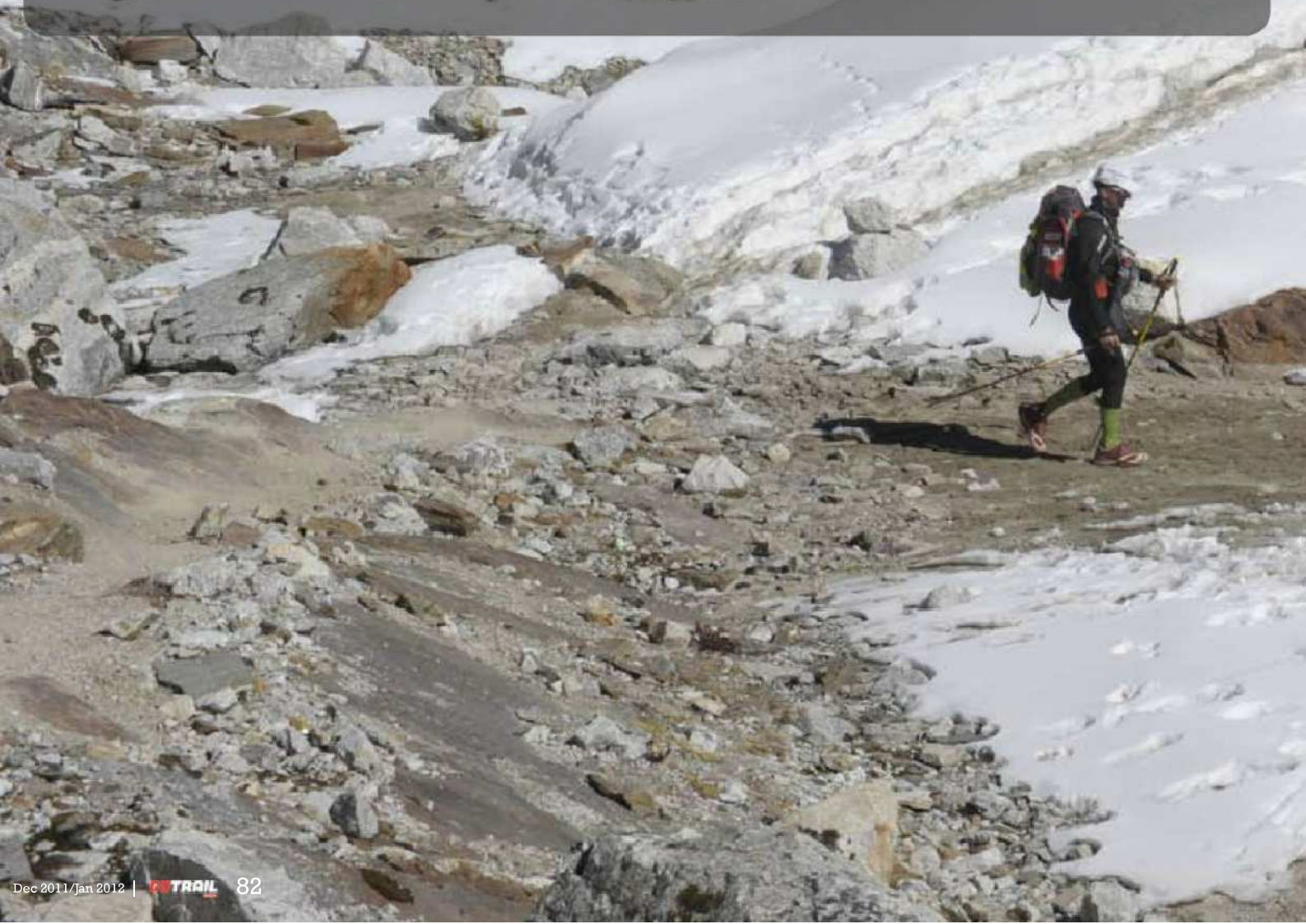
We've covered ground in 10 days, which normally takes four weeks. Apart from food, we've carried everything we needed. We've saved a lot of soap and washing powder. Rather than a race, it feels more like travelling under your own steam, and experiencing changing landscapes. It's running as travelling; a little like Bruno Poirier did in 1994 across Nepal.

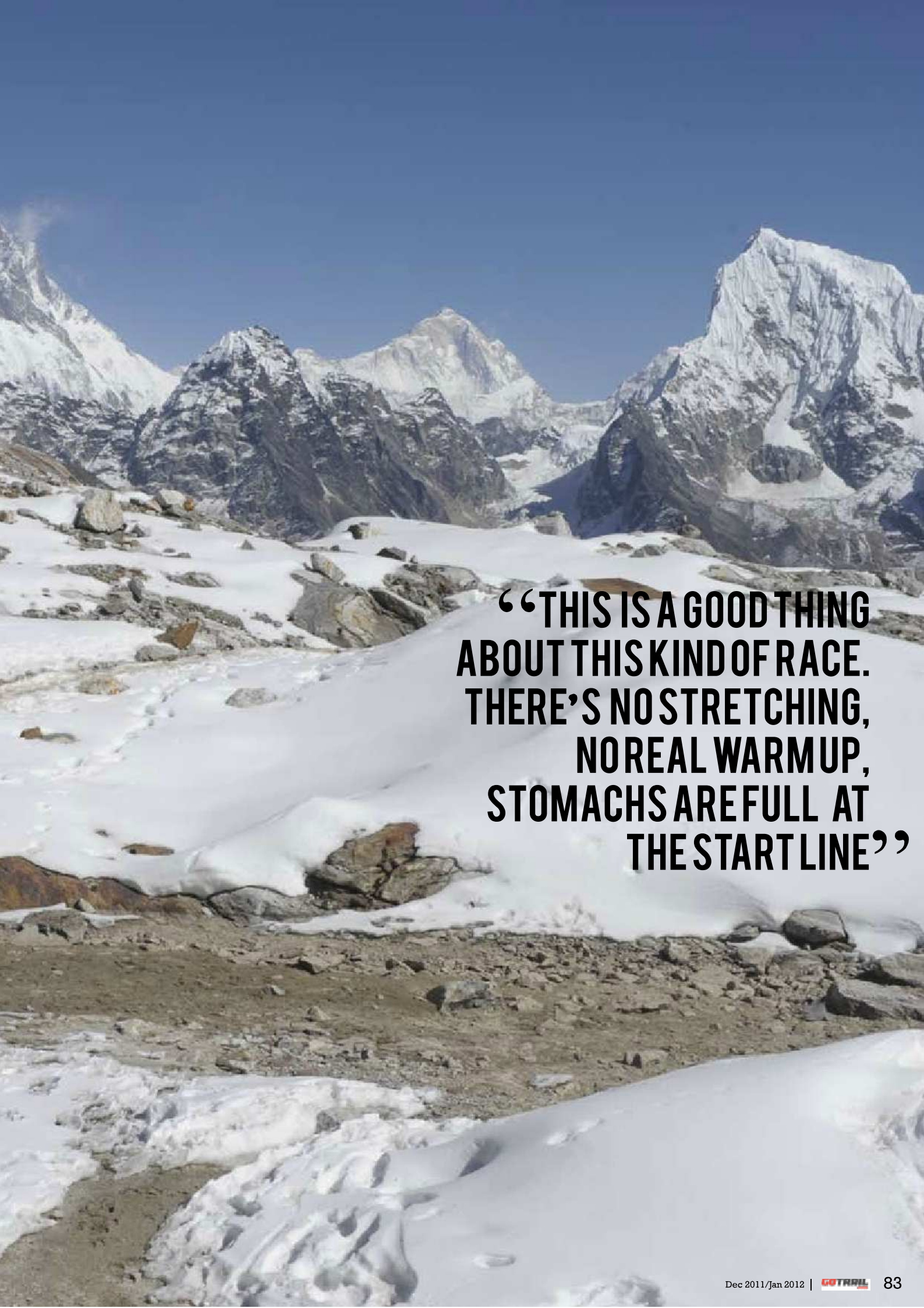
At a particular moment the packed dining hall where the presentation will take place sounds like a tuberculosis hospital with a cacophony of

contagious coughing. With puffy eyes, reddened skin from the sun and facial growth of varying quality (on the men at least) we all look and feel older. The aliens have been tamed. Yet the staff who have worked so hard to manage this race still look pretty fresh and prove it by clearing tables away and dancing to Britney, Shakira and friends.

They are not the only fresh ones. As we prepare to descend to Lukla airstrip to fly out to Kathmandu, Lizzy Hawker prepares to return to Everest basecamp. In 2007 she set a record with Steven Pyke for the 319km 'mail run' to Kathmandu in three days, two hours and 39 minutes. With remnants of Khumbu Cough in her lungs, she beat her record by just over three hours.

Find out more about this race as well as other trail running adventures in Nepal: <http://trailrunningnepal.org>





**“THIS IS A GOOD THING
ABOUT THIS KIND OF RACE.
THERE’S NO STRETCHING,
NO REAL WARMUP,
STOMACHS ARE FULL AT
THE START LINE”**