



*the dark side of*  
**EVEREST**

A LUMOS PROJECT BY  
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*Lukla Airport is the most dangerous airport in the world, with a runway ending in a steep cliff-side. At 11,000 feet of elevation, this is where the journey to Everest begins.*

## PREFACE

I remember it like yesterday. I sat in my freshman dorm at Belmont, late at night, reading about the mystery, the danger, and the allure of the world's highest mountain—Everest. I was captivated by its elegance. I was terrified by its deadliness. I was in love with its challenge. But one particular thing about the mountain caught my attention more than anything else—the people. More importantly, the Sherpa.

Since the dawn of Himalayan exploration, the Sherpa people have served as the gatekeepers to Nepal's icy peaks. One of the over 120 different ethnic groups in Nepal, they inhabit the remote villages surrounding Everest and work as the chief porters and guides for Himalayan expeditions. After thousands of years in the mountains, the Sherpa have become especially adept at braving their harsh alpine surroundings and daunting landscape. It is their home.

But their life is far from easy. They are isolated, face difficult living conditions, work for low wages, and risk their lives for exploration. Social, economic, and environmental sustainability are of paramount importance if mountaineers wish to continue their age old partnership with the Sherpa. Because without the Sherpa, there is no Everest.

Four years after reading about the Sherpa in my freshman dorm, I was on a plane to Lukla, Nepal—the first Sherpa village on the pathway to Everest. My goal was simple: to learn about the people and environment of Nepal through firsthand experience. One day, I would use this knowledge to establish a sustainable, socially responsible mountaineering and exploration organization of my own, focused on giving back to local people like the Sherpa.

## TRIP STRUCTURE

No organization worked directly with the Sherpa, so rather than focus all of my time near Everest, I divided my trip into three separate components for a comprehensive view of Nepal. First, I trekked through villages in the high Himalayas and interacted with locals to learn about the impact of the mountaineering industry. Then I relocated to the mountains of eastern Nepal to work in conservation and learn how economic growth has impacted the people and environment. Finally, I ended my trip in the city of Kathmandu, working at a small hospital and studying how the healthcare industry has impacted human development. This nomadic schedule allowed me to see the various regions of Nepal and gather as much information as possible in my time there. Together, each expedition gave me a holistic view of the country and Everest's impact upon it.



*Myself on top of Mulde Peak in Annapurna, my first day of work with the Annapurna Conservation Association.*



*A Buddhist Stupa on the route to Everest Base Camp, tucked in the Himalayan backcountry. Stupas are holy monuments filled with the remains of monks and other relics. Painted in repetition on the rock beside it is the Buddhist mantra "Om mani padme hum."*

EXPEDITION I  
**EVEREST BASE CAMP**

The first leg of my journey was focused on firsthand research and cultural immersion. I trekked through the Himalayas, village to village, until reaching Everest Base Camp. My mission was simple—encounter and engage the Sherpa people. But in the early parts of my trek, I found that the Sherpa were nowhere to be found. I quickly realized that May was high time for Everest climbers, meaning that most Sherpa were gone to work... on the mountain.

Nowhere was this more evident than Phortse. Off the beaten path to Everest Base Camp, Phortse is a small farming village of one hundred or so inhabitants, made up entirely of the Sherpa ethnic group. With the exception of older men, some women, and young children, the village was nearly abandoned when I arrived. All hands were on deck at Everest. Even the owner of the tea house where I stayed was summiting the mountain for the tenth time in his career. After speaking with my guide and a few Phortse locals, I found that this was not uncommon. While some love what they do, many Nepalis would not choose this work. Mountaineering is hard on them both physically and emotionally. When they leave, there is no guarantee of returning home. My assistant guide shared that he always wanted to become a teacher, but careers like teaching are not realistic or accessible in the mountains. With the exception of farming, tourism is the most practical and readily available profession in the region. Most work in both.



*Light graces the west face of Thamserku during sunrise over the village of Phortse. The tea house where I stayed—‘Thamserku View’—can be seen to the left, where the window to my bedroom is open. Soon after this photo was taken, billows of smoke from the fireplaces of warm tea houses across the village clouded any view of the peaks.*



*A porter carries a heavy load of supplies toward Everest Base Camp, just past the intersection of the Dudh Koshi and Imja Kola—the two major rivers that flow throughout the Everest region.*

Mountain locals usually begin their careers as porters, carrying goods for tourists, gear for mountaineers, and supplies to villages across the region. With no roads and no motor vehicles, foot transportation is the only option for travel. Some use yak or horse, but these are expensive assets in the mountains, and often far more trouble than they are worth. After two to three years of porter experience, Nepalis begin work as assistants to experienced guides. Over time, they gain enough knowledge to become guides themselves—which is no minor accomplishment—bringing better pay, more flexibility, and extensive knowledge.

Unfortunately, there exists a great disparity in pay between Western and Nepali guides. A local Nepali may earn \$5,000 USD for one expedition, while a British or Australian guide may make \$50,000 USD. As Porters, Nepalis earn roughly \$2,500 per year, carrying 175 pounds for 10+ miles every day. Guides may make double that, but much of their income goes to expenses including the gear and food used during their mountain expeditions. The cost of living is also significantly higher in the mountains because of the extensive transportation required for goods and services. Basic commodities like salt can cost ten times more in a village like Phortse than in Kathmandu.

Needless to say, the current structure of the mountaineering industry is not sustainable for the Nepali people. Trekkers and mountaineers use the majority of energy and utilities, local workers make very little in comparison to foreign guides, and no economic alternatives exist for the mountain residents. The Nepali people are well aware that they rely on tourism to survive economically. It has allowed otherwise isolated and lifeless villages to grow into hubs of activity. But it is now time to reform the structure of this economic system. Otherwise, Nepali people, mountain residents, and ethnic groups like the Sherpa will suffer the consequences.



*A noontime view of Old Town Ghandruk—my home in Nepal—a quaint village that rests deep within the lush green foothills of the Annapurna Conservation Area.*

## EXPEDITION II **ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION**

The second leg of my trip was spent in the Annapurna region, far east of Everest. I lived in a small village known as Ghandruk, home to roughly two hundred inhabitants of the Gurung ethnic group. In the foothills of the Himalayas, Ghandruk's scenery was far more jungle-like, even tropical. I stayed in a small tea house and worked with volunteers from across the globe, gathering data for the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. This included animal surveys, water surveys, and setting camera traps deep in the forest to capture wildlife footage. While environmentally focused, our work also highlighted other issues facing Nepal, revealing a great deal about its struggles and potential for growth.

One of the chief problems the country faces is pollution. Many local villages lack any knowledge of climate change and do not realize humanity's impact on the surrounding ecosystem. Understandably, it is difficult for any people to care about the environment when their greatest concern is personal survival. Until Nepal reaches a level of individual well being, its people will likely continue to have little interest in the environment. Currently, those who are able to amass enough wealth tend to leave the country rather than to help reform it, a dangerous trend for a country. Nepal must improve the living conditions of its people before it can care for its natural environment

One of the first steps to improving living conditions in Nepal is transportation, a heated debate amongst the country's mountain communities. In recent years, the government has worked toward connecting hard-to-reach villages with new road systems. Although aiding Nepal's social mobility, these roads are also threatening many locals' way of life. Mountain villages rely on income from tourists trekking to base camps or mountain peaks. By building roads, tourists will be able to bypass these villages via car to shorten their hikes, starting a new and dangerous economic trend.



*An excavator digs into the topsoil surrounding Ghandruk to build a road connecting it to the nearby village of Little Paradise. As primitive as it looks, this road is considered finished.*

Restaurants, lodges, and shops in these bypassed villages will be forced to close their doors. If mountain communities cannot diversify into new industries, they will be economically devastated. Villages are stuck—protect tourism or improve living conditions. There is no easy answer to such a complicated problem, but one industry may be of help.

Uniquely situated in a region rich with natural resources, Nepal is home to waterways that are prime for hydroelectric power generation. But the country has hardly tapped into its energy potential. It currently produces 400 megawatts of electricity, yet has the capacity for 50,000 megawatts—enough to power itself, China, and India. If developed, the energy industry could bring electricity to thousands and create countless new jobs across the mountains. Unfortunately, the Nepali government does not have the budget or interest in such infrastructure developments. Not to mention, its Chinese and Indian neighbors have no intention of becoming reliant on Nepali energy. Without outside investment, Nepal's energy sector will remain undeveloped and the mountains will continue to rely on tourism alone.

As with any nation, Nepal is experiencing growing pains. Over the past half century, it has seen exponential economic growth and improvement. The country now faces deeper challenges—ones that run up against its original way of life. Many think back fondly to the days when Nepal's villages were peacefully isolated. But those days were also filled with poverty, short life expectancy, and a lack of basic necessities like heat, plumbing, and healthcare. Nepal faces many challenges, but these are part and parcel of the road to development. It must use its past growth as fuel for its future prosperity. While others may help, the only people who are capable of truly changing Nepal... are Nepalis.

EXPEDITION III  
**KATHMANDU MEDICAL WORK**

Nepal often conjures up images of snowy mountain peaks and small quaint villages. But much of the country is also full of urban city centers and wet grasslands. I spent my last few weeks witnessing this reality, reminding myself that Nepal is much more than Everest alone. It is a diverse country filled with many people and places, each with a story.

The final portion of my journey was spent in the capital city of Kathmandu, working in a small hospital called Alka. My role was as an observer; speaking with doctors and nurses, witnessing medical procedures, and learning about Nepal's healthcare industry. My goal was not only to gain a better sense of the country's human development through this experience, but also to get an accurate pulse on life in an eastern city—a deeper part of Nepali culture.

Dusty, polluted, crowded, and dangerous—Kathmandu is a hard place to live. Smog from vehicle emissions blankets the city. Dust kicked up from construction projects is ever-present. The lack of green spaces results in no carbon absorption and no refuge from the dirty tan buildings. Without sanitation and cleanliness, Kathmandu has become dangerously polluted. This is only accentuated by its high population density. But at its core, the pollution is a result of a much deeper, more individual issue—hygiene.



*Overlooking Nepal from the east side of Pashupatinath Temple, a sacred Hindu landmark and UNESCO World Heritage Site. This nicer side of Kathmandu is filled with more colorful and ornate buildings, but the heavy smog can still be seen along the horizon. Here, the ashes of the dead are ritually spread into the Bagmati River.*





*My team at Alka Hospital, an example of global volunteerism. Left to right: Christina (Hong Kong), Tejaswi (Nepal), Mike (UK), Rebekah (South Carolina), myself, Yang (Nepal), and Able (Texas).*

transportation and close living quarters makes for easy spread of bacteria. Even hospitals struggle with sanitation. Catheters and needles are reused, doctors do not wash hands, and tools are improperly sterilized. These are major issues that run deep in individual decision making, and views of the healthcare industry only add to the problem.

Nepali culture is largely reserved, so many do not feel comfortable seeing doctors, especially for physical examinations. People often distrust doctors and nurses entirely. They self-diagnose, refuse x-rays, reject medicine, and self-prescribe drugs. Because Nepal does not require physician prescriptions for pharmaceuticals, individuals can purchase any medication they choose. What they choose often ends up making their ailments worse. Physicians are overwhelmed with patients and frustrated with a lack of resources. With a 1-to-1700 doctor to patient ratio, the need for licensed physicians in Nepal has never been greater. But universities simply have too few seats to accommodate all who wish to become medical doctors. Nepal's healthcare industry is in desperate need of investment, and without it, the hygiene and pollution problems facing the nation will likely only worsen.

Kathmandu's conditions were among the worst I have experienced. Beyond health and pollution, it struggles with corruption, crime, and poor education. Sacred temples are riddled with impersonators dressed as monks and asking for "donations." The government is largely beholden to whatever its powerful Chinese and Indian neighbors ask of it. Children are enrolled in school, but their education is more disciplinary than academic. Needless to say, the social, economic, environmental, and political issues facing Nepal are complicated and deep rooted. Living in Kathmandu revealed to me that creating my own organization will never solve these problems, but perhaps it can be a catalyst toward a broader improvement effort. It is a long road to change, but Nepal must start somewhere, and soon.



*At Everest Base Camp—the successful completion of a long and arduous trek. The beauty of the destination is worth every bit of adversity on the journey.*

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It's easy to understand why the summit of Mount Everest is pictured on every denomination of Nepali currency. It has brought more life, intrigue, and growth to the country of Nepal than the early mountaineers and Sherpa could have ever imagined. My time traveling across this beautiful and mysterious new place was filled with adventure, friendship, hardship, and learning. Not only did I forge relationships with individuals that will last a lifetime, but I also learned more about the country of Nepal, the story of its people, and the reality of its struggles than any number of books, articles, or videos could have ever taught. It is now my responsibility to take this knowledge and use it as a resource to cultivate a better and more prosperous future. Whether through a socially responsible logistics and mountaineering organization, my own personal volunteerism, or simply by sharing my experience with others, this message is now a part of me and it is my duty to keep it alive.

I've discovered that the world is more nuanced than the tales of past travelers, photos of gorgeous landscapes, and artifacts of foreign cultures. While the intrigue of Everest may have brought me to Nepal, the humility of its people is what kept me there. The mountains, while a stunning and fundamental part of Nepal's very identity, are only the beginning of its story. And this journey, thanks to the generosity of Lumos, is only the beginning of mine.



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