

Nepal trip report



Our trip to Nepal in April and May 2007 was my fifth visit there over a period of 30 years and Howard's fourth over 37 years.

Trekking in the Nepalese Himalayas is like time-travelling. The further away you go from roads or airfields, the further back in time you are, turning back the clock through the centuries to the pre-industrial era, a time before roads, machines, electricity, processed food, pesticides, McDonalds, airfresheners, television and computers.

I love trekking because of the stunningly beautiful scenery, simplicity of life, exercise and friendly people. But as processed food begins to reach this remote kingdom, I am also interested to observe the introduction of food additives into subsistence diets.



For hundreds of years, hill tribes in the Himalayas have eaten natural, additive-free foods that they grow themselves, and many have lived in a cash-free economy. Food scientists know that, as part of the nutrition transition from subsistence to supermarket eating that takes place as countries become more affluent, people start to eat more wheat, fruit, vegetables, meat, fat, salt and sugar.

They also know that these transitions are taking place faster and faster due to

globalisation of our food supply. Changes that happened over a period of 150 years or more in European countries are now happening within 10 years in areas of South America and Asia.



The problem with subsistence eating is periodic scarcity of food due to weather or seasonal variations, leading to malnutrition or starvation; lack of variety can lead to nutrient deficiencies, and it is difficult to maintain a clean water supply as the population increases. People are most likely to die young from diarrhoeal diseases, infectious diseases or accidents.

Increasing affluence brings food security, but as we are currently learning, too much affluence leads to the diseases of westernisation, namely obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, ADHD, ODD, learning difficulties and the rest.

So it was with great trepidation that I returned to Namche Bazaar, capital of the Sherpa region, where I had last spent ten weeks trekking and doing volunteer work in 1979.

Everyone who has ever read a mountaineering book knows how western visitors describe the Sherpas: prodigiously strong, cheerful, intelligent, loyal, hospitable, polite and respectful yet never servile, devout, interesting and fun to be with - these are just a few of the most common descriptions.

After Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing climbed Mt Everest, Sir Edmund devoted his life to improving the Sherpa lifestyle through building village schools and hospitals, and an airstrip to fly supplies into a region that had previously been an arduous two week trek from the capital city of Kathmandu.



The last time I visited, I too had walked all the way from the roadhead, staying in lodges that served the trade route between Kathmandu and Tibet. In those days, I carried my own pack and walked alone or with people I met on the trail - most memorably eating and camping for several days with two young Tibetan men who, in the tradition of their people, both proposed marriage, since Tibetans still practice polyandry (many husbands).

In those days there were few trekkers and once I left the main trail, I often stayed in one or two roomed houses with families, joining them around the cooking fire, unthinkingly observing their eating and child-rearing practices. Altogether I spent over 12 months on this style of travel in Nepal and the Indian Himalayas.

This time I was trekking with my husband Howard, again carrying our own packs and walking from the roadhead which had advanced through many villages in the meantime. I had heard that the popularity of trekking had mushroomed, that up to 100,000 trekkers per year now flew into Sir Ed's airstrip at Lukla, and wondered whether this had changed the Sherpas.



We had chosen to trek off-season to avoid the crowds and this strategy turned out to be spectacularly successful. On the third day, we were snowed in by the heaviest snowfall in 62 years, and spent most of the rest of our trip floundering and slipping in deep snow and ice, over seven high passes, 400 kilometres, and 31 days, ending up in an extremely remote region in Eastern Nepal towards Darjeeling. Many of the lodges were closed, high summer villages were deserted and except for several days of the Everest trek, we saw few trekkers. Everywhere, it was

desperately cold. This gave us the opportunity of eating again around the family hearth in many places where we were the only guests. Sometimes in places where there were no lodges – as used to happen 30 years ago - we were taken in by kind families.



Namche Bazaar itself was covered in snow and ice, and mostly closed. We found ourselves a hotel with three stories of guest rooms, a few hours of hydro electricity each evening which provided weak lighting and satellite TV, occasional cold running water, indoor western style toilets that sometimes flushed, and an indoor shower room in the basement run by an overhead bucket of hot water. These were unimaginable luxuries compared to my previous visits. Western-style comfort – and western-style food – had arrived.



Thirty years ago, the Sherpa diet consisted largely of potatoes, boiled, fried, mashed or in stews, with a few other home-grown seasonal vegetables such as shallot; barley, buckwheat and millet; yak milk, butter, cheese and yoghurt in season, and very occasional yak meat. Now, they eat more rice, or - depending how westernised they are - wheat, especially as instant noodles. MSG is added to soups and stews, packet soups with flavour enhancers are consumed as soups or used as bases for other meals, including the national meal of dahlbaat (rice and lentils). Commercial

sauces and pickles (achar) may contain preservatives and flavour enhancers. Jams from Nepal or Bhutan are largely artificial colour, flavour and preservatives. Homemade butter is additive free, while the only brand of commercial butter in Nepal contains annatto 160b. Western style additive-laden snacks, lollies, chewing gum and drinks are now widely available. Cooking oil which used to be homepressed mustard seed is now soybean oil. If from India it contains BHA 320, while oil from Singapore is additive-free. The only good news about additives in Namche is a relatively low level of sulphite consumption so far because sulphited dried fruit and sulphited meat such as sausages have not yet arrived. Nepal currently has one of the lowest rates of asthma in the world.



On my first day in Namche, I was shocked to see a small Sherpa child having a tantrum in the street. Screaming “no, no, no”, he was out of control, pulling away from his mother’s hand, and throwing himself around. In the west we are told that tantrums are a normal part of child development – like headbanging - but I realised I had never seen a tantrum in the over twelve months I had spent in Nepal, even though Nepali families live a lot of their lives in the view of others, due to the communal nature of their houses and villages.

As I looked around, I saw that many of the Sherpa children had changed. I wouldn't blame them for not wanting to be polite to tourists – due to overexposure - but this was different. I noticed louder voices and disrespectful behaviour to both tourists and their parents. I heard family squabbles behind closed doors that sounded just like western families having a major row, along with sounds of children being hit and consequent screaming – previously inconceivable in Nepal where conflict is traditionally avoided and children are never hit. I saw a mother doing her washing at the communal tap, ignoring her toddler who sobbed and screamed inconsolably while trying to climb on her back. I saw frazzled relatives of all ages unsuccessfully trying to rock crying babies to sleep, and sullen looking Sherpanis caring for young children who needed the fulltime attention of an adult to keep them occupied.



In short, the Sherpa kids were behaving like Western kids. They were also eating like Western kids. I was reminded of the terrible days I spent with my children when, unaware of the effects of food colours, I had been giving them Tang powdered orange juice every day. Then I found that Tang has arrived in Sherpa country. Nearly every house we visited in that region, even the smallest and poorest, had a large jar of Tang, or a similar lemon flavoured cordial – both contained the artificial colour tartrazine (102) well known for causing irritability, restless, inattention and sleep disturbance, exactly what we were seeing in abundance before our eyes.

In a number of places where we stopped for lunch or overnight a child would pester us endlessly to entertain them until we were exhausted by their demands. Their mothers looked exhausted too, and spoke to them sharply in a way I had never seen before. In one place, Howard said, "I'm not staying here another night, I can't stand any more of that kid."



Of course, not all children were affected, and the children we got to know were not affected all the time. Periods of charm were interspersed with periods of rattiness for no obvious reason. Reactions depend on dose, and can be delayed. Tartrazine and other additives can also cause irritable bowel symptoms, anxiety, headaches, lethargy, rashes and many other symptoms. That's why it is virtually impossible for parents to understand the effects of these nasty food chemicals on their children.



After two weeks in the Khumbu, with the screams of the children still ringing in our ears, we climbed over a high snowy pass to begin the long, hard trek to Tumlungtar in Eastern Nepal. We found ourselves in a much wilder and less western-influenced area than I had ever visited before and immediately we noticed the difference in the children. Here the kids were quiet and

respectful, curious and fun to be with. At one place, where their mother was hoeing a potato field in a terrace high above us, three small children watched us unload our packs for about half an hour while we had a break. They were extraordinarily still and quiet, and their attention span was phenomenal. We enjoyed their company, and as we were leaving, the youngest gave a broad grin. "Bye-bye", he waved. This is what the Khumbu kids used to be like.



When I had my children, I used to wonder about child labour. While I deplore this appalling practice – which still happens in some places in Nepal – I couldn't understand how people could actually get young children to be productive. At that time – pre-diet - I couldn't get my kids to do anything, let alone hard work for long hours. Now I know. It's the food.



I feel very sad about what is happening in the Khumbu. I had previously hoped that the strong people of the Himalayas might be remote enough to escape some of the worst food madness in our increasingly crazy world. Sherpas in the Himalayas lead such a hard life due to extremes of altitude and climate that the last thing they need is unmanageable kids due to unnecessary food additives. I would dearly love to see artificial colours banned tomorrow but the people who make the decisions are too influenced by the enormous power of food corporations. In the meantime, it is up to us

to spread the word. See our brochure in Nepali and keep watching this space for further articles.

By Sue Dengate, April 2007
