

A Humbling Ascent

written & photographed by omar samra



Last month we were introduced to Omar Samra, a lone traveler who, for an entire year, dispensed with predictability and all comforts to chase a lifelong dream of experiencing what our multi-faceted world has to offer. This month, Omar leaves behind a magnificent Burmese sunrise over Bagan, the city of two thousand Pagodas (Sept. 2004 issue), to soar up into the majestic Himalayan heights of Nepal.

Ramesh led the way through the steep ascent to the hilltop. An imaginary prize must have been his source of inspiration, as I had never seen him climb at such a quick pace. For the hundredth time in our weeklong trek in the Annapurna mountain range, I was taken back by his effortless style, despite the mammoth weight he carried over his shoulders. We had long broken away from the pack and it had been almost five hours since we'd seen a soul. I continued to labour behind, trying my best to keep him in sight.

Light intermittent showers had broken all day but the rain now began to gather more intensity. Shortly after, it had transformed itself into a fierce downpour. The towering peaks of the region's cordillera were masked by a greyish veil as the mist hindered visibility and pushed the surrounding 8000m peaks into a distant void. Gradually, and as we climbed and gained altitude, I felt the temperature drop severely and the weather became just cold enough for the first signs of light hail to appear. This was almost immediately followed by a relentless heavier version which made its presence felt as it sent large pieces of the condensed matter colliding with my face. I put my head down for protection, focused on the path ahead and kept going.

After two hours of continuous climbing, we were almost at the top with Ramesh still showing no signs of letting up. I had to focus on breathing deeply to fill my oxygen-starved lungs and maintain my ever diminishing pace. Meanwhile, Ramesh began leisurely humming a Nepalese tune, dampening the little mental togetherness I could muster in this final stretch. Minutes later the hill began to plateau and the climb was over, quickly giving way to a gradual descent a few hundred metres below to the village of Pothana, which marked the end of the day's march.

Descending is almost always less physical and infinitely more dangerous than climbing up. In this case, the slippery ground massively increased that risk. Ramesh seemed as if he had left his body to the forces of gravity and dropped down at a blinding speed as he navigated the menacing slope. I followed cautiously at first then found myself gradually building up momentum as I raced after him down the narrow dwindling path. Just as I began to build confidence with the tricky footwork, I tripped and felt the earth give way beneath my feet. I flew into the air, failed to cushion the fall with my hands, and landed hard on my back. The air came rushing out of my

lungs on impact as I slid out of control. I quickly bent and pushed my feet forwards into the ground trying to break my speed until I finally came to a complete stop. Looking in front, I could see Ramesh had not seen or heard my fall and was quickly disappearing into the distance. I got up in a hurry, wiped the muddy marks off my hand over the moist surface of a nearby tree, then hurried on.

Finally, in the distance, through the thick fog, the unmistakable shape of a rooftop came into view. The cold was still piercing through and underneath my clothes, yet for seconds, I felt like I was seeing a mirage. I squinted with my eyes trying to realign my cerebra and retina. Slowly, more rooftops appeared confirming that this was indeed a village and not one random isolated dwelling. I quickly forgot my recent tumble and regained momentum as I hurried further down, closing the gap between Ramesh and myself. The terrain began to level out, and I could easily make out the dark brown wooden structures of the huts. A few minutes later we had arrived and standing in front of the hut was Ramesh with his big smile, signalling me to stop. As soon as I entered the room, I pulled out my sleeping bag and began to remove one layer of clothing after the other until I finally reached one that was remotely dry. I was disheartened to see that the sleeping bag had become considerably wet on the account of the rain and my fall. I climbed into it, regardless, and zipped myself up in a mummy-esque fashion. Within the soggy interior, I could still feel the cold, but was consoled by not having to move any more. Almost instantly I fell into a deep slumber.

The discomfort was only felt when I was woken up a couple of hours later with Cyan, the other party member, asking me what I'd like for dinner. I remember wanting to ask him about their trip back, but too tired to speak; I heard myself mumble some incoherent words instead. Surprisingly, Cyan was satisfied with my answer and rushed off. Feeling already nourished, I plunged into a more comfortable sleep.

I drifted in and out of sleep several times. Each time my senses reawakened, I would feel a growing pain embracing every muscle of my body. The temperature didn't help much, seeming to have dropped way below zero. I went back to sleep hoping to dream of a world where the sun always shined and muscle pains were a thing of the past. I had little or no luck on both counts and finally woke up with the same



throbbing pain. Luckily, food was now only minutes away.

I unzipped my sleeping bag all the way down this time, and fumbled in pitch darkness for my shoes with shivering cold feet. With no electricity and an ice-cold floor, the simple task tested my patience. Just before I began hurling out a symphony of curses and obscenities, I spotted the pair at the end of the room. I must have impatiently discarded them when I came in. They were half frozen now. I cringed and put them on anyway, hoping that my new dry socks will somehow get the better of the numbing cold, then made my way out to join the others.

Immediately, I looked up and to my surprise, the skies were undeterred. The thick beating hail was now a soft, descending flaky snow. Already, almost everything outside was bathed in white. I must have been sleeping for hours. Just then I remembered that it was New Year's eve. My mind drifted across mountains and oceans, thousands of miles away to home and the faces of close family and friends. I closed my eyes, trying to recapture what it felt like to have lived amongst them during the same time of year. A mixed wave of emotions swept over me, but I couldn't help a smile crossing my face despite of it all as I pondered my fortunate situation of being in such a magical place.

A few minutes later, we were all huddled together in a little room around an oversized stove. Much like Tibetan households, the energy source acts as the centrepiece of the home and is where families spend most of their time. They depend on it for warmth, to cook their food and eat off of it, so it stays warm throughout the whole meal. A few trekkers and sherpas were the biggest crowd in a few miles radius. Some were engaged in a quite whisper, respecting the serenity of the mood, while others, including myself, were engaged in their own private thoughts. Everyone was close to the fire but tried to move even closer still, rubbing their hands together to harness as much energy to warm their still cold hands and feet.


Very little conversation was exchanged that evening. Quiet Gyan, in an innocent attempt to keep warm; ended up consuming a little more Nepali wine than usual and did most of the talking. He insisted on singing a song to two Japanese women over and over. I can't remember any of it, just how it ended, 'American life, Japanese wife', I guess basically summing up most Nepali men's dreams.

As I sat in these unfamiliar surroundings, I found myself gazing through the window and into the vast whiteness gradually engulfing us outside. My mind raced, and I felt it drift skywards like a third entity towering above me. In the hut, I could see the heads of a few people conversing, huddled around a heat source. I hovered higher still through a wooden roof that shielded everyone from the weather. I was now outside but I felt warmed somehow by an alien yet familiar sense of belonging to this remote part of the world. Higher I soared until the full expanse of the jagged Himalayan peaks came into view. I strained not to lose sight of our hut, and looking down through the side of a window I saw myself immersed in thought. I looked younger. Inside we all sat unaware of what was happening beyond the boundaries of our mortal sight, at complete peace with ourselves.

It was still early and there was no way I would last till midnight. I joked with the others that 9 o'clock is trekking midnight and excused myself to bed. Gyan suggested that because of the festivities we could wake up at seven and get a bit more sleep.

I decided to take a little stroll before going back to bed and walked out on the balcony then down some creaky wooden steps. I jumped the last flight of stairs in an effort not to make a noise. It wasn't a good idea to wander far into the snow at this time of night, and so I contented myself with silently sitting and gazing into the star-filled sky. In the pale light of the crescent moon I could make out a few familiar constellations. I can't remember how long I sat counting, inventing names for stars and then starting all over again.

Finally, with a promise to learn more names, I headed to sleep once again.

When I woke up the next morning the snow had ceased and it seemed that the sun would be shining brilliantly today. It would be an easy descent all the way down to the valley. At the higher altitudes, snow covered the landscape for as far as the eyes could see, then eventually as we lost altitude it gave way to leafy forests and lush green terraces. As I neared the village, there was a brilliant waterfall above me and a stream crackling to my side. A few children were getting ready to go to school. 

Background: The Himalayas as seen through Omar's lens.
More of Omar's Nepal photography next page.

