

IT WAS HOT when we touched down in Kathmandu at six in the morning on April 30th, in the year 2023.

But then I wasn't really surprised. I found that it is always hot in Kathmandu, whether early morning or not.

It had been five years since my last visit. Back then, it was to hike the Everest Base Camp Trek. Returning home, I couldn't stop talking about the beauty of Nepal and the wonder of the Himalayas. This piqued my son's interest, and he suggested that the two of us should do a father-son Himalayan trek. "And," he added smugly, "we should probably do it soon before you're too old to actually do it."

So at 69 (me) and 36 (my son), we touched down in Kathmandu. Not to repeat the Everest Base Camp Trek or even the other popular trek in Nepal, the Annapurna Circuit Trek. Over 300,000 people a year land in Kathmandu to do either one or the other of these two treks.

No, we were here to do the Manaslu Circuit Trek, a much lesser-known and less commercial type of Himalayan trekking experience. Only 2,000 people a year fly into Kathmandu to do Manaslu. And although, at 8,163 meters (26,781 feet), it is the eighth-highest mountain in the world, the name Manaslu doesn't carry the panache of either Everest or Annapurna. The bragging rights aren't the same. So it remains a much less-traveled, more pristine type of journey tucked up against the Tibetan border.

Not to mention, harder. At least, that's what we were told by the experienced trekkers in Kathmandu.

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"You're doing Manaslu?"

"Yeah."

"Good luck. It's a tough one."
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But *tough* isn't the word they use when they describe the trek in the brochures. There, the word is *authentic*. As we were about to find out, authentic is Nepalese code for *primitive*.

If you're not forewarned, Kathmandu is a city that can overwhelm you. Not just because of its physical size, but because of the mass of humanity that comes at you from every angle and in every form of vehicle. The cacophony of noise, muddy streets, lack of traffic laws—everyone just trying to survive by squeezing by with their cars and trucks and scooters, on both sidewalks and roads—at times, we felt lucky just getting back to our hotel with arms and legs still attached.

More than once, I caught my son looking at me with a quizzical glance that seemed to say, "And this is what you said was so amazing?"

And indeed I did. I loved every crazy thing about it. Kathmandu was alive. Crazy, but alive. And at my age, feeling alive is a feeling that you're grateful to be able to still find.

I will admit that I was apprehensive about taking on this type of physical adventure with my son. Not only was he much younger than I, but he was in much better shape. It wasn't that I was out of shape. At 69, I could hold my own with others my age, even ten years younger. But could I hold my own with a 36-year-old? Would my son, for the first time, actually have to watch over and treat me as if I were *truly* old? That's not something that I was ready to accept. My ego wouldn't allow that. Not yet, anyway.

There is a saying that the secret to aging well is to not let the old man in. I hadn't to this point. But I could hear the bastard knocking. Would it happen this trip?

Fortunately, having been in Kathmandu before, I knew my way around. So while we were in the city, I could still play the role of the father, guiding my son.

But in two days, we were to leave the city. And the mountains would be a different story. A story in which, for the first time, I couldn't write the ending to until it was actually over.



ONE CANNOT HIKE the Manaslu Circuit Trek without a guide. It is a restricted area of Nepal, and permits are required. Ours was to be an 11-day trek – 110 miles in all. It would take us up to around 16,500 feet at its highest point: the Larke Pass.

The name *Manaslu* derives from the Sanskrit word *manasa*, meaning *intellect* or *soul*. No doubt why one of the mountain's nicknames is "Mountain of the Spirit". It also goes by another nickname—"The Killer Mountain"—due to the number of climbers who have died trying to conquer it. Of course, it could be that everyone has it wrong, and the spirits that the first nickname references are those who never made it back.

The trek starts with a nine-hour drive to Machha Khola, a small town alongside the fast-flowing Budhi Gandaki river, a river with numerous suspension bridges that we would cross many times on this trek. Machha Khola sits at around 1,000 metres in elevation. Larke Pass is at 5,100 metres. That means we're looking at 4,000 metres (13,263 feet) of climbing.

In contrast, the Everest Base Camp Trek starts with a flight to Lukla, situated at 3,000 metres. From there, you trek to base camp at 5,364 metres. So you only need to

climb some 2,364 metres (7,759 feet) for that trek. This one will have us climbing just under twice as much. Another reason for my apprehension.

Soam, our Nepalese guide, spoke a smattering of English. His two favorite sayings were "Why not?" and "We'll see." They were soon to become two of my least favorite sayings.

We left Machha Khola on foot at eight in the morning. Sixteen miles and eight hours later, we stumbled into Jagat. It was warm and humid the entire way — almost subtropical. My son had a congested nose and a harsh cough, caused by the everpresent smog we encountered in Kathmandu. This promises to only get worse as we ascend.

Soam, in his broken English, tells us that a porter had died a few days earlier in Dharmasala, the last village we would stay in before attempting the Larke Pass. The snow was heavy and swirling, and apparently, the young, 19-year-old porter got disoriented and never made it to that night's tea house. The weather was so bad that the lead guide didn't want to risk anyone going out to try to find him. Until the morning. By then, he had frozen to death.

"So the weather will be bad at the Larke Pass?" I asked Soam.

"We'll see," was his response. "There is always snow on the ground at the pass, but usually not snowing this time of year." Then, with a smile, he added, "With the changing climate...why not?"

I had a sneaky suspicion that we would not be getting precise answers out of Soam the rest of the trip.

The next day, we met some trekkers coming towards us, walking down-valley. When we asked why, they told us the snow was so bad at the top that they didn't have the time to wait it out. So they were heading back.

My son and I looked at one another. With our scheduled flights, we didn't have the leeway to wait anything out. If the weather stayed bad, we were in trouble.

It's strange talking snow when you're in shorts and t-shirts, sweating in subtropical heat. Knowing that in five days, we would be on what seemed like a completely different planet. And not just figuratively.

For in the distance, the mountains waited.

We passed through narrow valleys, grassy meadows, lush forests, and small villages which consisted of a smattering of shacks—walls made of thin plywood and roofs of corrugated tin. Hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

It's not a place for the weak of heart. Or for the weak-kneed, as I was finding out. Sixteen miles was a lot, especially the last three-and-a-half hours, which were nothing but up. And this was only day one.



THE TRAIL WE were trekking was the ancient salt-traders trail. Its width was no wider than the width of a mule. After all, mules were the original creators of the trail, their hooves stomping it out of the mountainside as they carried the salt the traders were selling.

Today, the descendants of those early mules still rule the trail. Everything that goes up or down the mountains goes on the back of a mule or a person. Whether four-legged or two-legged, if you were on the trail, you were a beast of burden.

The mules, heavily weighed down with what was on their backs, were climbing the same steps made of stone that we were, while navigating the narrowest of trails. For some reason, it didn't seem to bother them as much as it did me. Nor did they seem particularly concerned when the trail—well, a footpath really—was precariously etched alongside a shaley cliff with nothing but air keeping you from a 2,000-foot drop into the Budhi Gandaki river below.

It was good that you could hear the mules approaching, either from behind or in front, by the clanging of the bells around their necks. This was a warning to you that they had the right of way. If you didn't jump to one side, they would bowl you over.

There was nobody leading the mules. The herder, usually a young man, would be in the back of a herd of 10 to 12. When the lead mule would pause to eat a sparse sprig of grass, the young man would throw a rock at him to get him moving again. The others would follow.

My son started to laugh when he first saw this. "Not unlike how the big corporations motivate their employees," he said with a smile. "Only instead of rocks, they throw money. And the others blindly follow."

It seemed that the only other trekkers we met on the trail were Buddhist monks. The entire Manaslu region is renowned for its spiritual significance. Some go so far as to say that those trekking the trail often experience a sense of tranquility and connection with nature. That might be true, but I can't say tranquility is what I was feeling.

As for the monks, they were traveling from monastery to monastery, spending two to three weeks in one before moving on to another. While there were small monasteries in every village, the monasteries the monks were visiting were not only larger but also the most holy, ancient, and isolated in Nepal. From the trails we were on, they would climb up another three to six hours to get to these monasteries—the

sanctuaries of the sacred. Looking up, you would occasionally see one, always on the highest peak, closer to heaven—or at least the enlightenment that the monks were striving for.

That said, it seemed to me as if most of the monks had already found this so-called enlightenment. Their faces looked serene, as if they knew the answer to a question that I wasn't enlightened enough to ask. Instead of expensive hiking boots, they wore sandals. No Patagonia or North Face jackets, but rather saffron robes wrapped around their shoulders. Their walking poles were nothing but a staff fashioned from a stick that they found somewhere unattended on the ground. All heads were shaved, whether male or female.

In a way, I found their peacefulness disturbing. They had nothing, but acted like they had everything. So why was it that I, who had everything, still felt like I had nothing?



TEN YEARS AGO, small children would run away at the sight of a whiteskinned person walking through their villages in the Manaslu region.

Today, they still don't necessarily pose for pictures. But they don't run. The looks on their faces are more of curiosity than fear. And, of hunger. Living is tough in this part of the world. Nothing comes easy.

No doubt, my son and I had a similar hungry look on our faces. The tea houses we were staying in were quite basic. I thought the same of the tea house on the Everest Base Camp Trek. But those were like the Four Seasons compared to what we were experiencing now.

The nights were getting colder the higher we went, and the tea houses were becoming even more primitive. The plywood walls on some didn't even meet, leaving large gaps that would allow both wind and light to come through. As darkness fell, we would stuff as much spare clothing into the cracks as we could, trying to stop the wind.

Whatever clothing we had left, we put on to wear through dinner and especially when crawling into our sleeping bags. Down jacket? Check. Stocking cap? Check. Gloves? Check.

The only skin we wanted exposed to the night air was our noses.

My son's congestion and cough had gone from mild to extreme. The spark he usually has in his eyes had dimmed. The days were long. The food—repetitive and tasteless. The Diamox tablets we were taking to help with altitude sickness had us up

and peeing every two hours throughout the night, into a squat toilet that was usually out the door and down the hall.

It's funny now to think that that was the good news.

The bad news was that the sole was starting to come off my right boot. My son noticed it first at an afternoon break on day two. I thought he was being a smart-ass, trying to be funny, when he pointed it out.

I was wearing Asolo boots. Italian made. Leather uppers. Reputable company. They've been making boots since 1946. I had mine for ten years. They were the most expensive boots on the market when I bought them. And well worth it, I thought, as they've been on my feet through the Dolomites, Mt. Blanc, Everest Base Camp, Patagonia, and the Andes.

I thought they would outlast me. Now I was just hoping they would last two hours until we got to that evening's tea house.

"They'll have super glue at the tea house," Soam said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"We'll see," he replied.

Well, see, we did.

They didn't.

A French guide at the tea house had some thread and a needle strong enough to push through leather and the heavy rubber sole. He did what he could and crossed his fingers as he handed the sewn-up boot back to me.

Looking at it, all Soam said was, "We'll see".

And see, we did.

The next morning, it held for two hours.

"Two days from now, we'll be in Samagaun," Soam told us. "It's a much larger village. They'll have boots. You can get a new pair there."

In the meantime, my son came up with an idea. He had two small rolls of duct tape, each about the width and size of a cigarette. It wasn't a lot, but it was something. He took one of the rolls of tape and wrapped it three or four times around the sole and over the laces of the boot.

"Probably best not to get it wet," he said, handing the boot back to me. "If you keep it dry, it might hold. And don't apply any unnecessary torque."

Yeah, right. Easier said than done.

The trails were more muddy than not, and when you weren't dodging puddles, you were dodging the mud pies on the trail left by the mules. Most had a pungent enough smell to warn you in advance, so you could step around them. But not all.

Suffice it to say that keeping the soles of my boots clean and dry wasn't possible. And I was getting worried. After all, the two villages after Samagaun were the ones that had recently been socked in with snow.

"Are you sure Samagaun will have boots?" I asked Soam.

"Why not?" was all he said.



IT WAS EARLY in the morning on day five that we finally saw the two-peak saddle that is the top of Manaslu. The light was perfect, making it shine like a golden dome.

We would be there, not the peak, but the mountain, in three days.

It was only a five-hour trek from the village of Lho to Samagaun. But it was straight up. My son's congestion wasn't improving, and to keep going up with what must have felt like a nose full of cotton, couldn't have been easy. Breathing is hard enough at that altitude.

While in the teahouse in Lho, we heard that it was snowing ahead. We tried going online to check, but WiFi in these remote locations is more of a wish than a reality. The best one could do was cross their fingers.

Samagaun sits in a small bowl, surrounded by mountains. As we approached, I could see that it was larger than any of the villages we had passed through. My hopes rose. Could there be boots?

As we got closer, the clouds started moving in. I saw Soam look up and frown. "Oh, oh," I heard him mutter under his breath.

We checked in to the teahouse and got some lunch. By the time lunch was over, all of Samagaun was socked in. The furthest you could see in front of your face was five feet. And the temperature had dropped some twenty degrees.

"How 'bout those boots?" I asked Soam.

I have to say that I wasn't expecting an REI with a large assortment of boots to choose from in a town like Samagaun. But from the way Soam was building it up, I also wasn't expecting a small convenience-type store the size of a newspaper stand with only two or three pairs of tennis shoes stuffed in a cubby for the locals. Not a boot to be found. And, of course, nothing larger than a size eight.

Not good.

Soam asked about super glue. They had two small tubes. We bought both and headed back to the teahouse. Once there, we carefully removed the duct tape—it was still sticky—applied the super glue to the sole, and then re-taped the boot.

"That should do it," Soam said.

"If there's no snow," I replied.

"We'll see," said Soam.

That night at dinner, the buzz was all about the weather that lay ahead. There were two other guides there with their groups, both of which spoke English better than Soam. We strained to eavesdrop on their conversations as they explained the possible options to their clients.

"Samdo, the next village up, was experiencing snow," they explained. "It could be that we hike to it, find it snowed in and full of trekkers that could not trek further, requiring us to turn around and hike it back to Samagaun for another night."

Or, if there was room, we might have to wait the weather out in Samdo for a day or two. Then again, if it all went well, it will be five days—up and over the pass and back down to Kathmandu."

My son and I had five days left with no way to contact our airline and change our flight. If we kept going up, it was, at best, a 50/50 chance that we would be back in Kathmandu in five days. If we went down the same way that we had come up—we had a 100% chance of making our flight.

We left it for the weather to decide for us the next morning.

At 6:00 the next morning, I pulled back the blind and could see nothing. Samagaun was once again completely socked in. And, it was snowing. Decision made.

What we didn't know was that it was 18 miles further going back than it was going up and over the pass. So we would have to cover more distance every day by going down-valley.

But down-valley we went.

Once again reaching Lho, the woman who ran the teahouse said her sister in Samdo told her that it was snowing heavily that morning. The next day, at another teahouse, we heard that the snow had continued for 36 hours.

Looking over at my son, I saw a smile cross his face. He was looking at me. I thought it must have been because we were so smart to have turned back. But then he pointed down to my left boot and started to laugh.

As did I, when I looked down to see my left boot's sole hanging loose. It would have never made it through the snow.

"How much duct tape do you have left?" I asked. "Enough to get us back?"

He smiled. "We'll see," is all he said.

Of course. After all, why not?

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