

2·4 Buddhism and its buildings

Most of the religious buildings encountered on the trek are Buddhist. This is because the population of the Khumbu area is mainly Sherpa, of Tibetan Buddhist faith. By contrast, of Nepalis overall, 81% are Hindu and only 9% Buddhist.

Buddhism

Gautama Buddha was born in Nepal, as Prince Siddhartha, in Lumbini in the south of the country. After his enlightenment in India, his teachings spread across Asia via many routes – entering Nepal both from India to the south and thence reaching Kathmandu; and via Tibet from the north, carried and reinforced by the Sherpa people.

Buddhism is a path of spiritual development leading to insight into the true nature of reality. It teaches meditation and other practices as ways to develop the qualities of awareness, kindness, and wisdom, and ultimately to become enlightened and break the cycle of rebirth. Its Four Noble Truths hold that

- All life involves suffering.
- Suffering derives from craving.
- Craving can be stopped.
- In order to stop craving, follow the Noble Eightfold Path of right understanding, thought, conduct etc.

Stupas below Tengboche



Tibetan Buddhism – the basis of the Sherpa religion – places special emphasis on the status of the teacher (lama) and monastery; the relationship between life and death; certain rituals; and vivid symbolism. The Sherpa religion also combines shamanic and animist elements from earlier faiths including the widespread belief in gods-of-place. For example Mount Everest represents Chomolungma, the Mother of the Gods.



Inside the monastery at Tengboche

Sacred buildings

The trek to Everest passes significant Buddhist monasteries at Namche Bazaar, Tengboche, Deboche, Pangboche and Phortse, and Kathmandu has the Boudhanath and Swayambhunath temples.

Monasteries (or *gompas* from the Tibetan meaning 'remote location') are places of Buddhist learning and meditation. Their floorplan is typically based on a *mandala* – a sacred geometric design that represents the cosmos and the workings of divine powers. This layout includes a central prayer hall containing a *thangka* (large instructional painting often on silk), religious statues, benches for the monks or nuns, and adjacent accommodation. Nearby may be one or more *stupas* (also known as *chortens*). These are stone shrines with Buddha eyes on four sides to ward off evil spirits in all directions. They contain prayer books and relics of important lamas. Gompas are often attached to a private chapel (*lhang*) that has mural-painted walls, statues and books. The entrance to a monastery is guarded by a small gateway (*kani*). Its walls and ceiling are usually painted with protective religious figures.

A recurring image in Tibetan Buddhism is the Wheel of Life. Said to have been invented by Buddha himself, it is a teaching aid that represents the workings of such elements as the three poisons of ignorance, attachment and aversion; karma; and ways to escape from cyclical rebirth.

Other expressions of Buddhism

Beyond the sacred architecture of Buddhism, look out for *mani* stones – boulders or walls bearing prayers normally written in Tibetan script – often *Om mani padme hum* ('Hail to the jewel in the lotus'). They are often located on the trail near villages or monasteries. Respect your hosts: always keep the stone on your right as you pass it (a good-fortune, clockwise, circumambulation as seen from above), and never lean against it.

Near monasteries you will see prayer wheels (aka *mani*-wheels). Mantras written on paper are held inside these cylinders. When you spin the cylinders (clockwise, as seen from above) the mantra will pass in front of you: again, pay respect by concentrating while you spin it, avoiding idle chatter.

Fluttering prayer flags are a ubiquitous and memorable feature of trekking in Nepal. They were developed under Buddhism in Tibet. Note that each colour has a meaning and always appears in the same sequence:

Blue – space

White – air (or cloud or wind)

Red – fire

Green – water

Yellow – earth



Mani stone below Phakding



Prayer wheel above Lukla



2.5 Climbing Mount Everest

Context and first ascent

On a British-led expedition in 1953, Edmund Hillary (a New Zealander) and Tenzing Norgay (a Sherpa) achieved the first confirmed ascent of Mount Everest (8848 m).

Until the early 19th century, the volcano Chimborazo (Ecuador) had been thought the highest peak in the world. In 1852 the Great Trigonometric Survey of India determined that Mount Everest deserved this title, standing over 2500 m taller than Chimborazo. But the kingdoms of Tibet and Nepal both refused access to foreigners until Tibet eventually opened its borders in 1921.

Across the Himalaya, the Germans were focussing on climbing Nanga Parbat, the Italians on K2, and the French on Annapurna. That left Everest for the British. After several prior visits, Mallory and Irvine made their ill-fated attempt in 1924 from the north (Tibet). Throughout the 1930s, many expeditions were unsuccessful. When Nepal opened its borders in 1950, the technically easier southern approach to Everest became possible. After meticulous reconnaissance and planning, and making more use of oxygen and high-altitude porters than previously, the team effort finally succeeded, and on 29 May, Hillary and Tenzing summited together.

Subsequent ascents and descents

By 2015, a total of over 7000 summittings had been recorded, achieved by over 4000 unique climbers of whom 9% were female. Most of the climbers who have summited multiple times are Sherpas. Ascent from the south (Nepal) remains more popular than from the north (Tibet). The death rate on both routes is similar (4%), but the number of deaths varies greatly from one year to the next. Of all deaths, 36% befall the tiny minority (3%) of climbers who try to summit without supplemental oxygen.

Nearly all Nepal expeditions use the Hillary-Tenzing route through the Khumbu Icefall, Western Cwm and South Col. For a realistic account of what the climb is like, read Harry Kikstra's book: see page 78.



The death rate has dropped since the 1990s – due to the greater professionalism of commercial operations, better equipment and more accurate weather forecasting. However, tragedy still strikes. In a single day in 1996, for example, eight climbers died in a freak storm. In April 2014, an avalanche in the Khumbu Icefall killed 16 Sherpas. A year later, the earthquake triggered an avalanche that killed more than 19 people. Avalanches are the leading cause of death among Sherpas: their work obliges them to spend long days in avalanche-prone areas, ferrying loads and setting up ropes, ladders and camps for clients. Of the 282 people who died on Everest up to August 2015, 60% were westerners and 40% Sherpas.

There is a short weather window when approaching monsoons temporarily shift the jet stream upward. The number of climbers competing for access in causes dangerous congestion. Historically, about 70% of all summits are achieved between 13-22 May.

The price of an Everest climb lies in the range \$30,000-\$85,000, depending on the level of support and the nationality of your guide: western guides can add \$10,000-\$25,000 to the price. Prices tend to be about \$10,000 lower from the Tibetan side, partly because permits are cheaper and also because its Base Camp can be reached by vehicle, whereas the Nepal climb begins with a week-long trek. The cost in human life and limb must also be reckoned.

Page 36: Everest's summit towers over its West Ridge (far left)

Page 37: Nuptse (7864 m), screening Lhotse behind



Everest records

- **First ascent without supplemental oxygen:** Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, 1978
- **Fastest ascent from Everest Base Camp (Nepal) using oxygen (8 hours 10 minutes):** Pemba Dorje, 2004
- **Most frequent summiteers (21 times):** Apa Sherpa and Phurba Tashi Sherpa in 2011 and 2013 respectively
- **Oldest person to climb Mount Everest (aged 80 years):** Yuichiro Miura in 2013
- **Youngest person to summit successfully (aged 13 years):** Jordan Romero, USA, in 2010
- **First summit to Base Camp ski descent without removing skis (4 hours 40 minutes):** Davo Karničar, 2000