

Introduction

There are many reasons to trek to Everest, some obvious, others subtler. Of the two base camps used by climbers, the only one to trek to is in Nepal, through the valleys of Sagarmāthā National Park. (Expeditions always drive to the other base camp, in Tibet.)

Many visitors will be ticking off an entry on their bucket lists: following in the footsteps of famous climbers, standing in awe of the world's highest mountain and marvelling at the snow-capped summits. The physical demands of this trek will be achievable for most, yet it's tough enough to provide a strong sense of achievement.

The Khumbu and Gokyo valleys are rich in fascinating flora and fauna. Every rhododendron in the world is descended from the indigenous Himalayan plant that you see along the trail. And at higher altitudes, the geology is increasingly exposed, with glacial lakes, moraines and snow-clad peaks.

Many trekkers are delighted by the richness of Sherpa culture. First-time visitors to Nepal expect the exotic, and on trek their expectations are exceeded. Sherpa life is attractively simple, with their commitment to hard work and their insistent *shey-shey* hospitality. The Sherpa welcome is complemented by the beauty of the Buddhist trailside heritage – *mani* stones, *stupas* and prayer wheels. All this awaits you.

Tourism is the lifeblood of Nepal's economy. To quote the late Sir Edmund Hillary: 'Tourism is a very big economic benefit to the Sherpa people, and also they have very strong ties to their own social attitudes and their own religion, so fortunately they're not too influenced by many of our Western attitudes.' The massive earthquakes that struck in 2015 killed about 9000 people and left millions more homeless. The world gave aid, the Nepalis reacted with stoicism and energy, and much of the damage has been restored. But Nepalis need your custom now, more than ever before.



What is the best time of year?

Of Nepal's four seasons, spring or autumn are best for trekking, but expect major differences between temperatures in the Khumbu valley and Kathmandu. These mainly reflect altitude differences, which in Nepal are as important as the effect of the seasons. Your latitude will be about 28° N, similar to Miami or Cairo.

The pre-monsoon season (March to May) is popular. Days and nights are warmer, often at the price of afternoon haze – but with flowers in bloom. Kathmandu averages low temperatures of 8°C, highs of 28°C or more. Most attempts to summit Mount Everest take place in late May.

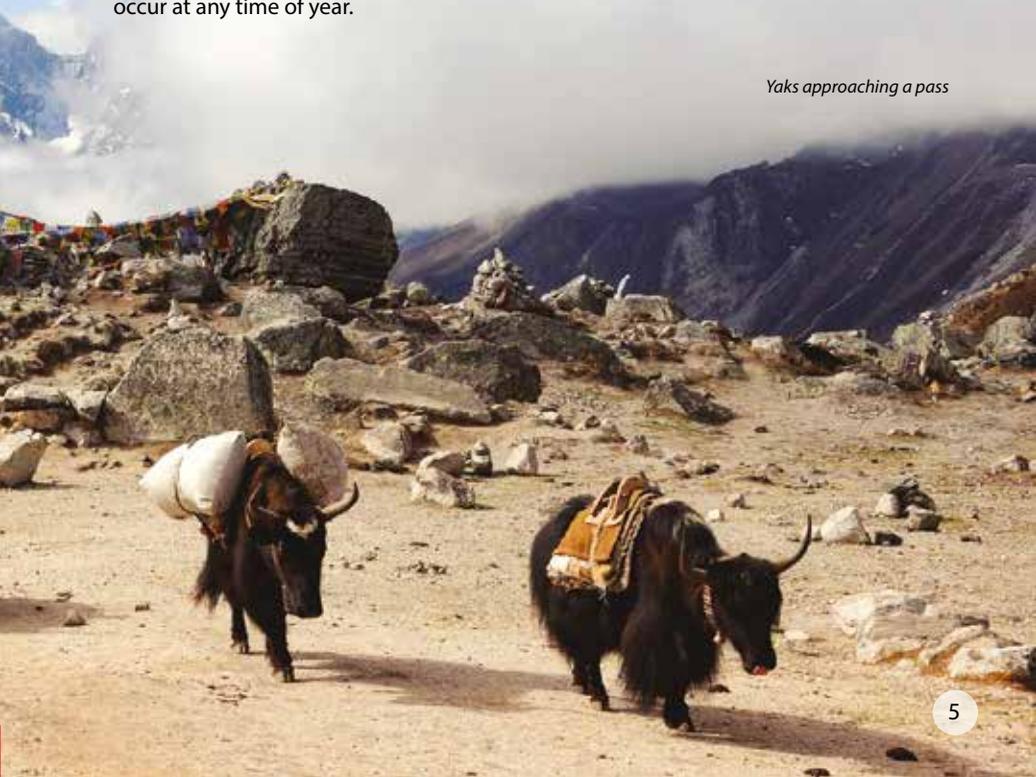
Summer is monsoon season, when strong winds sweep wet air in from the Bay of Bengal, and it usually extends from mid-June to mid-September, varying from year to year. This season is worth avoiding, because central Nepal is hot, humid and wet. In trekking areas, the weather is rainy, clouds obscure the views and the trail underfoot may be very muddy. Leeches infest altitudes up to 3500 m.

Autumn (mid-September to November) is excellent for trekking, especially late autumn when the colours may be vibrant and the skies often clear with plenty of sunshine. Although nights are cold (-5°C to -15°C at Gorak Shep), Kathmandu has daily highs of 20°C or more.

Winter is from December to February and can be foggy in the early mornings, but the trails are relatively empty. Nights are very cold (down to -20°C at Gorak Shep). The temperature in Kathmandu ranges from 2.5°C to 20°C.

At this latitude, the noonday sun is always high in the sky, and the daily temperature range is extreme year-round, with nights that are cold or very cold, especially at altitude. Rain and mist often roll in during the afternoons, and thunderstorms can occur at any time of year.

Yaks approaching a pass



The period between booking your trek and departure is important: it allows you to prepare physically for a tough hike to altitudes of well over 5000 m (16,400 ft). Consider also learning a bit about Nepal, its heritage and religions, the Sherpa people and perhaps also some phrases of Nepali before you go: see page 79. At least learn to reciprocate the *namaste* gesture with which you will be warmly greeted.

Choosing your trek

For many people, the goal and route seem obvious: fly from home to Lukla via Kathmandu, then trek to Everest Base Camp (EBC) via Namche Bazaar, and retrace your steps. We suggest that there are other interesting options to consider before you settle on an itinerary:

For some people, the cost of air travel to Nepal means that the trek may form part of a longer holiday: for some of Nepal's other attractions, see page 30.

Since (no matter what the weather) you can't see Everest's summit from its Base Camp, many people will want to climb something with a summit view: Kala Pattar is the most obvious choice, and as a side-trip from Gorak Shep it combines readily with a visit to EBC (either before or after EBC).

If you prefer a more remote experience, the trek to Gokyo Lakes has a much more beautiful destination than Base Camp, and the summit of Gokyo Ri arguably offers a better (albeit more distant) view of Everest than does Kala Pattar.

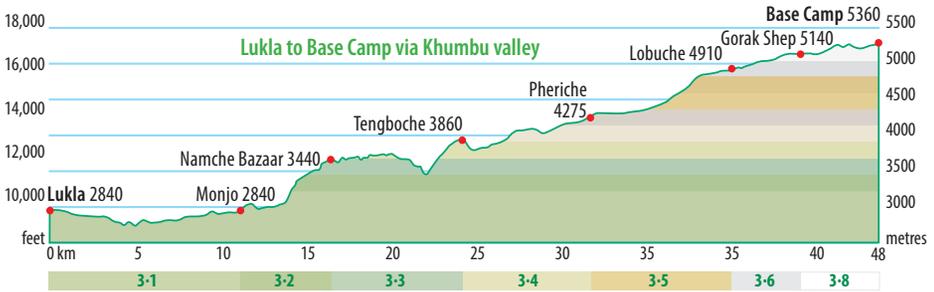
If you enjoy a greater challenge and have the extra resources, consider a circuit from Namche that takes you over the Cho La and can be combined with Kala Pattar/EBC or Gokyo Ri or both.



These options are summarised in the table below, and described in detail in Parts 3 and 4.

	duration (ascent)	highest altitude reached	comments	map pages
Lukla to EBC	9-11 days	EBC 5360 Kala Pattar 5545	popular choice	41, 43, 47, 49, 53, 56
Lukla to Gokyo	7-9 days	Gokyo 4790 Gokyo Ri 5360	less busy than EBC	41, 43, 73, 67
Lukla to EBC and Gokyo via the Cho La	12-14 days	Cho La 5370 Kala Pattar 5545	can do this clockwise or anti-clockwise	41, 43, 47, 49, 73, 67

The diagram below shows you the profile of the standard route from Lukla to EBC in seven sections. Although each section can be done in a day, nobody (unless pre-acclimatised e.g. from a previous expedition) should attempt this trek in seven days: you need several extra overnights for acclimatisation, and a bare minimum of two days for descent, taking the overall duration close to a fortnight. Most operators will build in 2-3 nights at Namche Bazaar and 2-3 nights at Pheriche or Dingboche. On the 'rest' days, it's wise to spend at least a few hours trekking higher, to aid acclimatisation – or, if you feel exhausted, maybe just rest.



At 2840 m (9320 ft), Lukla is high enough for a few unlucky people to develop symptoms merely from flying there. (Before the airport opened, the traditional route was to take a bus from Kathmandu to Jiri, then hike for 6-9 days to join the trail near Lukla.) The profile above doesn't show the rest days: although they are essential, different groups spend different numbers of extra nights in various places.



You may need extra nights for other reasons, for example at Gorak Shep if your plans include Kala Pattar. Also, since flying into and out of Lukla is sometimes thwarted by poor weather, you may spend one or two unplanned extra nights in Kathmandu or Lukla. The timing of your international flight needs to take account of this uncertainty.

If instead you trek from Lukla to Gokyo, the altitude gain is less (Gokyo is at 4790 m whilst Gorak Shep is at 5140 m) and the distance shorter, but you still need extra overnights. If you opt to make the circuit to EBC clockwise, over the Cho La from Gokyo to Lobuche, then you can continue up the Khumbu valley to Gorak Shep and EBC. (Alternatively, some groups go to EBC first, then divert south of Lobuche to Gokyo anti-clockwise.) Whatever your itinerary, be aware that EBC, Kala Pattar, the Cho La and Gokyo Ri are all at very high altitude (5300-5500 m) and to reach all four over a period of 4-6 days demands that you are thoroughly acclimatised first.

Your choice of itinerary should be influenced by factors listed below: think about these, and discuss them with any travelling companions:

- your level of experience and confidence at trekking
- your previous experience at altitude, if any
- how long you have available
- your budget, not only for the package but also for local spending and tips.

Unless you've done this kind of trekking before, it's better to plan conservatively and within your capabilities. If you have a wonderful time, you could always return in future, but if you feel constantly under pressure, exhausted or unwell from altitude, it will spoil your holiday.

Choosing a tour operator

Although it's perfectly possible, and may be preferable for some, to make all your own arrangements and trek independently, this book is written mainly for those who use a tour operator. Once you have decided which trek you want, consider other factors before choosing. Read online reviews, check websites and seek out personal recommendations. Assuming you have found one or more operators that seem to offer the trek you want at a price you can afford, consider also the following:

- Exactly what is and is not included in the price? See our table on page 26.
- What is their policy on porter protection, and do they advise on tipping?
- How long have they been operating treks in Nepal and what has been their response to the 2015 earthquake?
- How well does their guidance reflect environmental awareness?
- What fallback options may be offered should illness or accident strike?

If you are unsure about how you will cope with altitude, the choice of itinerary becomes very important: some tour operators will offer a less demanding alternative to clients who are taken ill, others may expect you to stay put and await the group's return, or even treat your holiday as over and return you to Kathmandu.