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Worldwide Trekking

The first question you might ask is, “What’s the appeal of trekking?” Surely there has got to be a better way to spend a fortnight’s holiday than to rise with the sun, eat sometimes repetitive fare, suffer sore thighs on long uphill walks (and sore knees on the inevitable downhill sections), sleep in a potentially draughty tent and wake next morning to endure the same experience all over again in a bizarre re-enactment of ‘Groundhog Day’? To which I can only reply that during the last 18 years of my life, trekking has opened doors to natural wonders, hospitable indigenous peoples, intriguing cultures, strange languages, extraordinary customs and succulent culinary dishes that I would never have otherwise experienced.

The calming pace of life on the trail is quite literally a thousand years away from the hustle and bustle of the 21st Century that many of us find it impossible to otherwise escape from. Say ‘Au revoir’ to the constant ringing of mobile ‘phones, the incessant demands of email, the daily grind of commuting, and the omnipresent threat of deadlines.

By moving at the relaxing pace that humans were designed to be transported at – rather than zooming from one appointment to the next – trekkers often find that they are able to ground themselves, become adjusted to circadian rhythms, and have time to think with clarity about themselves, friendships, relationships, careers, and the future they want for themselves. Then there is the chance to make friends with like-minded people and the opportunity to enjoy a high level of intimacy with the surrounding natural environment.

Of course, sometimes this ideal is shattered during bouts of bad weather, or when nightfall closes in around a party before it reaches a campsite. But by and large, the

wise trekker who has undertaken a journey along an established trail that is within her or his physical capabilities will be largely spared from dealing with potentially fraught situations such as these.

If you are even moderately convinced that trekking might be for you, then you might begin to wonder just how fit you need to be to undertake, say, a week-long hike through a mountainous corner of Europe. Here's the good news. Trekking requires the body to perform aerobically (that is, heart and lungs working at a greater than sedentary pace to get oxygenated blood around your body) at a moderate level for an extended period of time. So if you are not currently vying with Lance Armstrong in the stamina stakes, don't worry yourself unduly. Getting fit for trekking is surprisingly easy, requires no expensive gym membership, and can easily be woven into the fabric of your day.

In order to start to get fit for trekking, you just need to walk briskly! Getting off the tube, bus or train a couple of stops before your regular alighting point will allow you to exercise aerobically before and after work, and may save you money in the process. You can also cycle to work, which is superb from an aerobic viewpoint, but don't entirely neglect the walking bit as cyclists' leg muscles develop somewhat differently to those belonging to trekkers. Walking rather than driving to the shops, taking the dog for an extra walk each day, mowing the lawn regularly, all these things will begin to improve your aerobic fitness. Of course, going for a run on a regular basis and undertaking specific exercises to strengthen arm, chest, stomach and back muscles will help enormously. (If you are in any doubt about your physical condition, then do visit your GP before beginning a new exercise regime).

One way to judge your physical preparedness is to embark on a weekend walk across countryside of a comparable length and steepness to the trek you are planning to attempt. If, at the end of this two day session (using kit such as boots and rucksack that you intend to take on the trek), you feel in your heart of hearts that you could repeat the same exercise for the same number of days that your trek is due to occupy,

then you will be about as physically ready as many of the people who go trekking for the first time.

Do bear in mind that when combined with a potentially unsettling diet, strange culture and lumpy bed, being more than adequately prepared physically will remove one of the potential barriers that stand in the way of having a fantastic time. It goes without saying that if your aim is to tackle an arduous trek then you will need to be several degrees fitter and stronger than if you are contemplating a gentle introduction to trekking.

It is important to be mentally as well as physically prepared. What sort of things are likely to happen? How will you cope with the inevitable days? What will the people be like who you will encounter? How can you avoid offending local people's sensibilities, whose customs maybe very different from your own? I have always found that reading a book on the culture that I will be embedded in has helped enormously, as has learning a few words of the local language.

When it comes to life on the trail, your experience will largely depend upon whether you have opted to trek independently or with a tour operator. For first time trekkers, the temptation to join a group trek can be almost overwhelming. However, when it comes to choosing a company, do tread carefully. The glossy images and purple prose in the full-colour brochures are of course no guarantee of the quality of the staff, provisions and equipment on the ground. (To help you sort the wheat from the chaff, check out the 'Questions to ask your tour operator' panel.)

Your principle choice lies between booking with an operator in your home country or with a provider in the host destination. Booking with a UK operator ensures peace-of-mind should you have cause for complaint upon your return. A UK operator will probably be easier to contact during the build-up to the trek if you have questions that need answering, or reassurances about particular aspects of the holiday. In today's uncertain political climate, if the country you are heading to suddenly

appears on the list of 'no go' countries issued by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), then it will be easier to obtain a refund or switch objectives at the last minute.

By contrast, if you book over the internet with an in-country operator, especially in so-called developing countries, then obtaining any kind of compensation in the event of a disappointing trek could prove tricky or even impossible. That said, I have on many occasions dealt directly with local operators that have a solid reputation and I have only experienced excellent service. Furthermore, it is worth bearing in mind that many UK and other western companies running holidays to foreign countries use these very same local tour operators to run their treks 'in country'. In a nutshell, booking in-country can save you a dollop of cash, providing you are willing to accept a greater degree of financial risk.

Whoever you book with, bear in mind that a fair price needs to be paid for the type of service you require. Obviously, if you are happy to eat inexpensive dishes such as [*daal bhaat*] (*rice & lentils*) on a daily basis, and are willing to risk sleeping in leaky tents, then you are bound to find an operator offering bargain basement prices. However, it's not just yourself who may be compromised if you go down the low-cost route. Local staff hired to carry your gear, cook meals and erect camps are likely to be paid a pittance, and will rely entirely upon your generosity at the end of the trek to make up their wages. Furthermore, they may not be insured, resulting in their lives being put on the line if they fall ill. Stories of sick porters being abandoned and left to die on the trail by trekking parties are not scare stories dreamt up by a sensationalist media. Often the foreigners on these treks were completely unaware of the decisions being made by the head porter under their very noses. Such tragic instances continue to happen in mountain environments around the world.

A properly insured porter receiving a fair wage and dressed in clothes designed to protect him or her from the weather – particularly when trekking above the snowline – is far more likely to be in a position to provide a good service to your group

throughout the length of the trek, which will also result in a more relaxed experience for you on account of your gear arriving at the camp on time in a dry condition.

If the idea of trekking with a knowledgeable guide and a group of like-minded individuals leaves you cold, then maybe independent trekking is for you. Bear in mind that there are certain parts of the world where trekking alone or without a local leader is definitely not a sensible idea from a safety point-of-view. Remember too that in a few destinations it is illegal to hike alone. Other treks are located in wilderness areas that make a multi-week solo hike almost impossible (unless you have a very large rucksack and a back like Hercules.) Yet even with all these restrictions, you will still be left with loads of places – from the Milford Track in New Zealand to the Tour du Mont Blanc in the French and Swiss Alps – where independent trekking is not only possible but positively encouraged with plenty of places to stay and buy food en route.

There is a third way, one which I describe as ‘interdependent’ trekking. Rather than joining a formal group, you and your friend(s) can arrive in-country and hire the services of a local guide. If necessary, a couple of porters or a beast of burden such as a mule or donkey can also be acquired. Travelling with a small party will minimise expenditure whilst allowing you to learn about local customs from your staff. The whole group pitches in to help erect tents, cook meals etc. in stark contrast to a group trek where clients are pretty much treated like hotel guests. This style of trekking requires you to take personal responsibility for ensuring that your staff are adequately clothed and equipped for the conditions you expect to encounter. (From a budget point-of-view, bear in mind that locally-made items in countries such as India are relatively inexpensive when compared with UK shop prices.)

Porters or pack animals transport the majority of your gear between campsites on a commercial trek, whereas with independent trekking you have to carry your life on your back. (The weights in the rucksacks of interdependent trekkers normally fall somewhere between these two extremes). Whichever style of trek you opt for, I

would suggest that you minimise the amount of gear you take along. There are multiple reasons to pack a light load. To begin with, less gear means less clutter. And less clutter means less time spent unpacking and re-packing backpacks. On my first trek, in 1988, I had dozens of widgets divided between numerous and identical stuff sacks. Guess how long it took me to find anything? Having fewer possessions also means that there is less insulation between the country and people you have come to visit and yourself. For example, you are far more likely to enjoy an enlightening conversation with a monk, student or teacher if you do not have headphones glued to your ears. Finally, fewer items in your rucksack means that you will have less stuff to lose and fret over.

That said, there are of course several products without which your trek is not even going to get off the ground. An army might march on its stomach but most enlightened trekkers walk on their feet. Unsurprisingly, boots need to be given a lot of consideration. If you have comfortable boots then pretty much anything is bearable. But end the first day of your two week trekking holiday with blisters, and a sizeable number of the next 312 hours are going to be cloaked in agony. Buying boots from a retailer rather than by mail order, and having them fitted by an knowledgeable member of staff, will reduce the chance of discomfort. Wearing the boots whilst training prior to departure will encourage the uppers to mould to the shape of your feet. And packing a healthy quantity of foot treatments such as Second Skin and Compeed will help to prevent hot spots on your feet from developing into blisters if you treat them sufficiently early. Supportive insoles such as those made by Superfeet can go some way to alleviating foot discomfort, but if you have 'problem' feet then investing in made-to-measure orthotic insoles made by a podiatrist will pay dividends in the long-term.

A rucksack of some kind is pretty much compulsory. If you are on a group trek then a capacity of 25-35 litres should be adequate. Into this goes items like your passport, money, camera, additional warm and wind/waterproof clothing, snacks and drinking water.

Drinking an adequate amount of water whilst trekking is vital. Above 3000 metres, people lose a great deal of water whilst breathing as a result of the dry air. I always aim to drink a minimum of four litres of water a day, especially at altitude. Remaining hydrated is a key part of avoiding altitude sickness (more on this condition later in the article).

Other things to pack in your daysack include a map, guidebook, phrasebook, suncream, penknife, medical kit, headtorch, umbrella, and also a duvet jacket. This last item is important when hiking above 35000 metres in places like the Himalaya. Why? Because porter groups often become delayed en route, showing up at the campsite several hours after the clients have arrived and stood around getting cold whilst waiting for their entourage to turn up. Also, if you become lost then a duvet will provide some protection from the night air.

As with all forms of adventurous travel, you will want to carry a copy of your insurance policy, and leave another copy (together with the appropriate photocopied pages from your passport) with your tour operator or an embassy official. Before purchasing your insurance, check that your policy covers helicopter search as well as rescue, and does not exclude adventure sports (which may include an activity as benign as trekking) or journeys to high altitude.

The rest of your gear goes into a large holdall or rucksack for transportation by porter or pack animal. Note that a duffel is cheaper to buy and quicker to pack than an expedition-size rucksack. Once full, a holdall is easily popped in the *doko* [close italics (basket) of a porter or strapped to the flank of a mule. And a duffel has no long webbing straps that could easily be torn off by an unbending branch or recalcitrant beast of burden. Items that go into the holdall include spare clothing, sleeping bag, foam mat, reading book, spare medication and diary.

If you are trekking independently then you will need to carry all of your gear in a large capacity rucksack with a supportive back system. Depending on where you are trekking, you may also need to pack a stove, a pot, extra food and a tent. By this stage we are starting to talk about a mighty load, especially if you are travelling at altitude. And that is something to be avoided, especially if you are unacclimatised.

Altitude and acclimatisation are two of the most talked about trekking subjects. Over the years, I have been asked more questions about altitude than any other subject matter by would-be trekkers. At its heart, altitude illness is thought to be a spectrum of problems caused by the lower availability of oxygen in the air that we breathe at altitude. It is usually brought on by rapid travel to elevations greater than 2500 metres.

The first sign of altitude sickness is often a condition known as Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) which usually raises its unpleasant head during the first 36 hours after arriving at altitude, rather than immediately upon arrival. More than 50% of travellers develop some form of AMS when travelling to places at or above 3500 metres (such as Lhasa in Tibet and Leh in India). Symptoms include headache, lethargy, nausea, dizziness, poor appetite and insomnia, as well as irregular breathing during sleep. You don't need to be a doctor to realise that these symptoms can be caused by many other ailments. However, if you experience these conditions at altitude then it is best to assume that you have AMS until medically proven otherwise.

The good news is that AMS can in most cases be either minimised or avoided altogether thanks to a process known as acclimatisation. By ascending in gradual increments above 2500 metres you are more than likely to enjoy a trek which is largely free of altitude-related discomforts. I would suggest that if you are short on time then you might want to reduce the maximum height that you wish to ascend to.

If your schedule calls for a flight into a high altitude airport, you have a number of options. You could follow an acclimatisation programme for a few days prior to take-

off that takes you up to at least as high as the runway you are flying into. Or you could schedule in several days of rest upon arrival. A third option involves descending to a lower altitude as soon as you touch down. A clear illustration of how this third way works can be seen when people fly into the Peruvian city of Cusco (altitude 3300m) in order to trek to Machu Picchu along the Inca Trail. Conventional wisdom suggests that people relax in Cusco for three or four days before setting out on the trek. However, this can be an unpleasant experience for the first couple of days as the symptoms of AMS kick in. I prefer to take a taxi or bus straight from the airport to the beautiful nearby village of Pisac in the Sacred Valley, which is situated 600 vertical metres lower than Cusco. After spending around 48 hours relaxing in the Sacred Valley, I return to Cusco for two or three days to complete my acclimatisation programme in relative comfort.

Once on the trail at altitudes above 2500m the acclimatisation protocol is simple: avoid sleeping more than 300m higher than your previous night's camp, and take a rest day every third day. This might sound restrictive, but it isn't really. To begin with, you can climb higher than 300m during the day so long as you drop down again to sleep. This clause allows you to climb high in order to reach a summit or cross a high pass during daylight hours. Secondly, a rest day doesn't mean you must do nothing. If you are feeling strong, there's no reason why you can't go for a stroll, attend a local festival, or visit a nearby monastery before returning to the same campsite as the previous night. Indeed, this type of 'active acclimatisation' can be very beneficial.

Personally speaking, I prefer additional rest days during the initial stages of acclimatisation. This is because I have found that extra time spent acclimatising between 3000m and 4000m pays dividends later on in a trek. I also drink several litres of water each day, trek at a gentle and even pace, and avoid carrying a heavy rucksack. Unsurprisingly, it is superbly conditioned 'racing snakes' who usually have the biggest problem with these two suggestions. The good news is that if you are not overly fit or fast then you probably have a lower chance of contracting AMS by virtue of the fact that you will inevitably be moving more slowly!

One word of caution: left unchecked and AMS can develop into High Altitude Cerebral Oedema (HACE) or High Altitude Pulmonary Oedema (HAPE). Both of these conditions are very serious and life-threatening complications of AMS. That said, if you have successfully nipped AMS in the bud then it is unlikely that you will contract either of these two conditions. It is worth reading a small book or chapter about altitude illness so that you can discuss with your GP which drugs to take in the event that you do end up suffering from these conditions. Note that taking drugs or bottled oxygen will help to alleviate the symptoms but there is only one cure, and that is descent. Even a drop of just 500 metres is often sufficient to promote a rapid recovery. The sooner you go down, the sooner you will feel better: if you start feeling ill in the late afternoon, do not wait until morning to descend as this could be too late.

All of this sober talk about altitude sickness may have left with you with the distinct feeling that sticking your head above 2500 metres is tantamount to suicide. Far from it. The overwhelming majority of trekkers who travel to altitudes up to the 5000m mark and stick to the aforementioned guidelines suffer no more than the odd headache and occasional sleepless night.

However, if your schedule does not allow sufficient time to acclimatise safely then there are literally dozens of awe-inspiring treks at lower altitudes to get stuck into. Patagonia, the Swiss Alps and Arctic Scandinavia all offer marvellous trekking opportunities. Many of these countries are included in my guide to 'Five of the best trekking regions' elsewhere in this article.

You can of course extend the concept of trekking into non-mountainous destinations. Desert trekking, polar trekking and jungle trekking are all variations on the same theme, albeit with different sets of kit. For example, snowshoes and an understanding of avalanches are vital in deep snow, whilst in tropical environments a mosquito net and hammock will replace a tent and self-inflating mattress.

If you haven't been trekking before then I hope that this article will be the spark to ignite your enthusiasm. And if you are a seasoned trekker then I look forward to seeing you in the high mountains sometime, breathing in the thin air which surrounds some of the most special places on Earth.

Joining A Commercial Trek - The Gloss And The Reality

1. "Mattresses will be supplied"

Yes, but they could be made from open-cell foam, which squishes down to the thickness of a sheet or paper when laid upon. Why not pack your own lightweight self-inflating mattress or inexpensive closed cell foam mat? The worst case scenario is that you'll end up having two mattresses to lie upon each night. Pure luxury!

2. "We leave tips to the discretion of our clients"

But wouldn't some guidance be useful? I make it clear to my porters at the outset of the trek that tips are for good service and not guaranteed. I balance this with the knowledge that many porters have to spend a fair proportion of their daily wage on food and sometimes even shelter. In some instances, tips are the only profit that porters take back to their families. An absolute minimum of one extra day's wage per week of the trek – regardless of whether they are rest days or trekking days – for each porter, with an extra dollop for the head porter (in order to maintain the status quo) is surely within the budget of even the most impecunious trekker. If an individual porter, or the whole team, is particularly hardworking, then extra tips will encourage good service in the future. The occasional paid for meal is also appreciated and will help to endear you to the person(s) working hard to turn your trekking dream into reality. By all means make gifts of kit and clothing, but these should be issued in addition to cash payments.

3. "Our cooks produce a wide range of dishes"

True, but don't expect miracles. Produce will be limited by the time of year, available foodstuffs in local markets and the imagination of the cook. In fact, it is the last of these three issues that concerns me most. I would much rather that a Nepalese cook produces a damn good daal bhaat than a poor imitation of a western dish taught to him by well-meaning trekker back in the 1980s who had the gastronomic flair of the inventor of the Pot Noodle.

Going Green On Your Trek

1. If you fly out from the UK with a bundle of batteries for various pieces of electronic paraphernalia, spare a thought for their safe disposal. Many countries do not have recycling facilities for these toxic cells. Much better perhaps to return home with the used batteries and take a trip to your local recycling centre.
2. By stripping your possessions of needless packaging prior to departure, you'll have less litter to deal with on the trail. On arrival, please take an empty rucksack with you to the market – or buy reusable cotton sacks for holding food such as rice – rather than availing yourself of plastic bags from stallholders.
3. Empty glass bottles rarely make it back from hill stations to recycling centres in the valley, and plastic bottles end up (at best) being tossed into open pits. By reducing your dependence on sugary drinks whilst on the trail, and purifying stream water rather than buying bottled water, you'll reduce your impact on the environment and save money.

Questions To Ask Your Tour Operator

- Is your money protected in the event that the company runs into financial difficulties?
- What plans are in place to evacuate you in the event of an emergency?

- Does the leader speak English and has he received medical training?
- What is the minimum group size? How many weeks before departure will the trip be cancelled if this number is not reached?
- What is the maximum group size?
- Can the company send you a copy of their environmental policy?
- Are all staff – including porters – properly equipped and insured?

Reputable companies will always be happy to answer these and any other questions that you might have.

Five Of The Best Trekking Regions

For getting high

The Himalaya and Karakorum remained unbeatable for forays around the world's highest mountains. If you only have a week or 10 days at your disposal, then lower altitude treks in the Indian Himalaya and Bhutan can still afford spectacular views. If you have the luxury of a fortnight or more, it should be possible to get in amongst the high peaks of Nepal, Tibet and Pakistan. Visits to the Base Camps of the world's 14 8000m peaks usually require a round-trip of about three weeks (including acclimatisation time). Unfortunately, parts of the Himalaya and Karakorum remain under the cloud of political turmoil at this time, so check the latest advice issued by the FCO.

For geographical variety

The Andes in South America is a melting pot of different trekking environments. From the windswept plains and granite towers of Chilean and Argentine Patagonia to the

snow-white peaks of the Peruvian Andes, South America offers perhaps the most diverse range of trekking experiences on Earth. Trekking through Ecuadorian cloudforest brings visitors into contact with a myriad of different species of flora and fauna which lie in stark contrast to the arid plains of the Bolivian altiplano. Volcano trekking is also a popular activity in countries such as Mexico.

For climatic diversity

The mountains of East Africa are famed for their wide range of environments shoehorned into a compact area. For example, on Kilimanjaro it is still possible to go from sub-tropical to sub-Arctic in just a few days of sustained trekking. Unfortunately, the financial cost of a permit for anything more than a few days on 'Kili' increases the possibility of contracting AMS. This reason alone provides the perfect excuse for taking in a lower neighbouring peak such as Kenya's Mt. Kenya or Tanzania's Mt. Meru prior to tackling Africa's highest mountain. For only a little extra financial outlay you'll be able to ascend two peaks, whilst significantly reducing the likelihood of suffering from altitude illness on Kilimanjaro and maximising your chance of reaching its summit.

For quick getaways

The European Alps presents a medley of trekking challenges for the trekker who prefers not to stray too far from home. From gargantuan treks such as the Grande Traversée des Alps (known as GR5) which links Geneva with Nice, to day hikes through lush alpine pastures in Austria and Switzerland, Europe has an unrivalled selection of pathways in the valleys and passes that lie at the foot of famous high peaks especially in the French, Swiss and Italian Alps. The Pyrenees (on the border between Spain and France) and the craggy peaks of Greece and Turkey, also offer a kaleidoscope of trekking possibilities.

For hassle-free trekking

Other English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand, Canada, the United States of America and Australia all offer superb trekking opportunities with no language

barriers to surmount. Of the four, New Zealand has the most internationally renowned trekking routes, particularly in the Southern Alps. Routes such as the Milford and Routeburn Tracks are so popular that accommodation needs to be booked well in advance to avoid disappointment. The flagship desert mountain trek in Australia is the Larapinta Trail, but of course the entire continent lends itself to 'walkabouts' for people with experience of travel in hot weather. North America has a myriad of accessible national parks, all of which offer hiking options that last from a couple of hours to several days. The Granddaddy of the trekking world is the Appalachian Trail, a 2174 mile behemoth. So-called 'thru-hikers' complete the entire route in a single season!

And Now For Something Completely Different

If you want to head for a trekking region that receives little in the way of publicity here in the UK, there are dozens of countries that you might want to consider. Japan is a surprisingly mountainous country, and the chance of coming across a westerner on any route other than the perennially popular plod up Mt Fuji is most unlikely. The Chinese provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan are starting to gain popularity here in the west, but the spaces are so vast, and the possibilities so numerous, that getting away from trekking hot spots such as Tiger Leaping Gorge should not prove difficult. For the experienced trekker, the Himalaya in winter will throw up a host of new challenges. One of the most esoteric is the frozen river trek to the ancient kingdom of Zangskar: intrepid trekkers spend a week walking upon frozen water down a gorge deeper in places than the USA's Grand Canyon in the company of a knowledgeable local guide. Closer to home, the open spaces of Arctic Sweden, Finland and Norway, rich in cultural Sami heritage and untouched wilderness, are a blank canvas for your own explorations.

Useful Info & Contacts

AMS book: 'Altitude Illness, Prevention, Recognition & Treatment' by Dr Stephen Bezruchka

Culture guides: The 'Culture Smart!' series from Kuperard;

www.cultureshockguides.com

FCO travel advice: tel 0870 606 0290; www.fco.gov.uk/travel

Podiatrist: Norbert Cauvas, tel 020 7436 8960; www.footfactor.co.uk

Porter issues: www.portersprogress.org and www.ippg.net

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