

BEYOND the Edge

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE BLOG



9 Tips for Trekkers Dreaming of the Himalaya

Posted by [Adrian Ballinger](#) of [www.alpenglowexpeditions.com](#) on October 21, 2014



Passing the Namche Bazaar monastery on the trek to Everest Base Camp, with Thamskeru in the distance; Photograph by Adrian Ballinger, Alpenglow Expeditions

At this point, most of us have probably read the stories about the tragic events over the past week in Nepal. On October 14, Cyclone Hud Hud brushed the Nepali Himalaya on its way inland from the Bay of Bengal. It caused blizzard conditions, rapid snow accumulations, and avalanches that had deadly consequences for the people caught in its path, including several dozen trekkers. While storms of this magnitude are rare during the popular Nepal trekking seasons (April to May and October to November), they, and other things that can kill you, are not unheard of. And trekking in places like backcountry Nepal and elsewhere can be dangerous because of the remote nature and lack of emergency infrastructure. Does this mean don't go trekking in Nepal? Absolutely not! Here are nine things to consider when planning your dream trek.

1. DIY or Outfitter?

Choosing whether to organize a trek through an outfitter or "do-it-yourself" should be a decision made based on your experience and comfort in the mountains. The spectrum ranges from a trip organized with a Western company (who will often provide certified guides, excellent logistics, satellite communication, extensive medical kits, and staff with the knowledge to use them) to a trip organized with a local company (standards of guides, logistics, and emergency preparedness vary) to you trekking solo with your backpack. All can be enjoyable and appropriate ways to experience the Himalaya. Just be sure your choice matches your experience and ability to make decisions when things go wrong. If you choose an outfitter, don't choose based solely on price. Do some research, and ask for recommendations of companies with whom others have had positive experiences.

2. Do You Need a Guide or a Porter?

If you choose to DIY, recognizing the difference between porters and guides in Nepal, and knowing which one you need, is essential. A porter often has little or no mountain knowledge or equipment. While they can be very strong and helpful in carrying your bag, they cannot make decisions for you in the high mountains or have any responsibility for your safety. In fact, it is really our job as trekkers to ensure they have appropriate clothing and eyewear and stay healthy. A guide, on the other hand, should have mountain experience, first-aid training, and some sort of guide's certification (from the Khumbu Climbing Center or Nepal Mountaineering Association for Nepalis; from the International Federated Mountain Guides Associations for non-Nepalis). Guides offer a significant safety net to your trek, if they meet these standards.

3. Understand the Basics of Altitude.

Treks in the Himalaya often go to extreme high altitudes, all without touching snow, ropes, or crampons. Both the Annapurna Circuit and the Everest Base Camp trek take you to over 18,000 feet. In the U.S., only the two tallest peaks in Alaska reach this high. These altitudes combined with trekkers' lack of preparedness lead to multiple deaths each year. Every trekker should understand how to recognize, avoid, and treat high-altitude illnesses. The website [Altitude.org](#) is a great place to begin your education. On your trek don't miss attending one of the Himalayan Rescue Association's free daily altitude clinics located on Nepal's most popular trekking routes.



Trekking above Gokyo after a recent snowfall; Photograph by Adrian Ballinger, Alpenglow Expeditions

4. Weather Forecasts.

Guide companies like mine, [Alpenglow Expeditions](#), pay thousands of dollars a year for daily forecasts and analysis from meteorologists whenever we have groups high in the Himalaya. This cost will be out of reach for most trekkers. Alternative free forecasts on the web now do a good job at predicting major weather shifts and big storms. Two good sites for the Himalaya are [www.mountain-forecast.com](#) and [www.meteoexploration.com](#). Learn about weather and what these charts mean before you get to the mountains. Simple online weather courses are widely available.

5. Communications.

Good comms are an absolute necessity for safety while trekking in the Himalaya. There is really no alternative to a satellite phone (mobile phone service, while theoretically available in some trekking regions, is unreliable and almost guaranteed to be non-functional in the case of an emergency). Sat phone rentals with prepaid minutes are now inexpensive, and can be used to check weather, keep someone up to date on your location, and initiate a rescue if there is an emergency. The best satellite networks for the Himalaya are Thuraya and Inmarsat. Emergency locator devices like the Spot and DeLorme, while better than nothing, do not come close to the communication ability of an actual satellite phone.



Trekking on small trails high on the hillside below Ama Dablam, Thamskeru, and Kangtegru, in perfect weather; Photograph by Adrian Ballinger, Alpenglow Expeditions

6. Carry a Medical Kit, and Know How to Use it.

Your kit should include prescription drugs for altitude and illnesses—discuss with your doctor what medications you should have for a remote trek at high altitudes. If they don't have experience in this specific field of medicine, visit a travel clinic with altitude experience. Combine this drug kit with a trauma kit, with enough supplies to treat a wound or injury for a few days in a remote location. And don't skip the personal education necessary to use this kit. A WFA (Wilderness First Aid) course is three days well-spent prior to your trip! See the courses offered by the [National Outdoor Leadership School \(NOLS\)](#) here.

7. Join Global Rescue.

Helicopter rescues from high altitudes are now commonplace, and make trekking and climbing in Nepal much safer than in the past. But these rescues are very expensive. [Global Rescue](#) is a well-tested provider of evacuation and medical services in the case of emergency, and the cost of a plan is tiny compared to the cost of a rescue. Some travel insurance policies will also cover evacuation, but be sure to read the fine print. Bottom line, if you don't have Global Rescue, have a plan for how you will pay for your helicopter rescue (up to \$10,000) on the spot in the case of an emergency (legitimate trekking operators will have a "pay later" agreement with the helicopter companies).

8. Support the Khumbu Climbing Center and Porters Progress.

These two organizations, the [Khumbu Climbing Center](#) and [Porters Progress](#), help to train, outfit, and improve working conditions for high-altitude workers and porters in Nepal. Whether you choose to have local guides and/or porters on your trek, chances are they've been helped by one of these groups.

9. Be conservative.

Along with all of these considerations, the most important factor in safety in the mountains is still your personal decision making. After a few days of trekking in beautiful weather soaking in incredible mountain scenery and Nepali culture, it is easy to forget how truly dangerous the high mountains are. Be conservative in your decisions! If weather, acclimatization, or health are not what they should be for you or your teammates, play it safe and descend, turn around, or take a rest day. The mountains are entirely unforgiving of mistakes.

Adrian Ballinger is an IFMGA guide, the founder of Alpenglow Expeditions, and has guided more than 30 expeditions in Nepal over the past two decades, including six to the summit of Mount Everest. Alpenglow Expeditions offers guided treks and climbs to iconic peaks and mountain ranges around the world.