

A Humbling Journey

By S Surenteran

Making the journey to Everest Base Camp (EBC) in Nepal remains one of the requisite quests for adventurers and avid trekkers around the world to accomplish. With proper training and preparation, and the able assistance of porters and guides during the climb, there is a distinct possibility that even the most novice of trekkers can conquer it. My two buddies (Siddiq Poh and Wee Wei Liang) and I have always desired to take up this challenge, and we are extremely proud to say we managed to scale the peak of EBC in May 2012. However, that is actually common. Countless people around the globe, from different racial and cultural backgrounds, regardless of age, gender, and religion, have completed the trek with relative ease. What is unique, and special, about our pioneer trekking experience was that we did it with no porters, no guides, and most importantly, no money. All in the name of charity! What made our expedition, called Trek For Fund, stand out even further is the fact that we embarked upon this trek on our own accord, out of our own initiative. There was no system or standard operating procedures in place to guide us in our expedition, which aimed to raise funds for Project Battambang (which helps the needy in Cambodia). We were largely on our own from Day 1 (although we had help along the way, of course).

At 5,364 metres, EBC usually takes around nine days to scale, starting from our arrival at Lukla Airport in eastern Nepal. Each day, trekkers typically ascend a maximum height of 400 metres and reside in tea lodges during the long nights. Money is essential, for meals and accommodation at each village, and thus, we were warned repeatedly by concerned friends and relatives that starting the trek with zero dollars could be indeed a mammoth, and even foolish, challenge. So you might be wondering: how then, were we supposed to survive and sustain?

And here was the method we planned: we brought sponsorship materials, documents, and publicity materials regarding our charity beneficiaries and requested for donations along the way from fellow trekkers and mountaineers to ensure our survival each day. We stated clearly that each dollar and cent donated during our trek would be matched dollar-for-dollar by four of our benevolent donors back in Singapore. In addition, we pledged to reimburse every cent of donations that we accumulated during the trek from our own pockets into the fund when we return to Singapore. This, of course, meant that we had to maintain a very stringent and disciplined accounting book for every single donation, no

matter how small. So in the end, it was a simple concept. We were "forced" to collect donations to ensure we could continue our journey each day, and donations would be quadrupled in value and eventually, all of it went directly to the beneficiaries!

Our actual journey to EBC was an exceedingly demanding and arduous experience indeed. We completely lacked experience in trekking and had to adapt quickly to walking for long stretches in varying terrains and morphing landscapes. Since we had to carry our own bags, our entire journey was physically draining. We ended up walking with 15-kilogram backpacks for almost eight to ten hours per day, keeping in mind that we started each day's trek with an energy level lower than the previous day's. This got tougher as we went higher because we had to acclimatise to the increasingly colder weather and higher altitudes. Without a guide, we often had to backtrack from wrong routes and even got lost on numerous occasions. However, the biggest challenge was the fact that we had to continuously fundraise during our climb. It was by no means an easy feat because most of the trekkers we met were sceptical about our initiative, and some had just enough for their own journeys. We actually had to survive on one meal a day for the first five days and even then, our dinners were usually plain rice with one small bowl of vegetable curry, shared by the three of us. Those few days really tested us mentally and physically, and we had to dig deep into our reserves on more than one occasion to persevere on. More crucially, we realised those testing times were overcome by our friendship and camaraderie, and it was a touching testament to our team dynamics that we were able to support and propel each other forward day by day.

Even though donations were hard and few to come by, each day, there would be one or two trekkers who sincerely believed in our cause and donated generously to our initiative. Several even donated some of their food items so that we would have sufficient energy to continue our ascent. Those moments were indeed very precious and humbling, and we honestly owe much of our success to these donors! Each day, we managed to raise just enough money for the plainest food and cheapest accommodation. This was somewhat enough to keep our quest alive.

On Days 7 and 8, we faced a new set of challenges to cope with. The merciless altitude started taking a toll on us and we had to slow our pace down to ensure that we did not fall prey to the much dreaded altitude sickness. We were also not equipped sufficiently for the harsh

weather as it started to snow with strong, bitter winds and temperatures started to dip especially closer during the evenings. On one occasion, we even had to backtrack to lower grounds when we were already agonisingly close to EBC (which was approximately half an hour away). This was because one of us suffered from a particularly bad case of altitude sickness. So near yet so far!

Finally, on our ninth day, we successfully reached EBC, having raised around S\$272 during the course of the journey. This, agreed unanimously by all three of us, was an extraordinarily ecstatic moment for us as we managed to complete this epic journey successfully!

Of course, that \$272 was not all the money that we raised from this initiative. In the months and weeks before our trek itself, we publicised our efforts through various media channels in Singapore. We were fortunate enough to have our initiative covered by SMA News and Youth.SG, and also appeared in a short segment of a programme on Vasantham Central. Our Facebook page garnered much attention with many people (friends, families, and good-hearted strangers alike) coming forward to donate to our cause. Two Singaporean companies, Appollo Sellappas and Abiraame Jewellers came forth to support our cause and donated \$2,000 each. All in all, we managed to raise around \$15,000 before our climb itself and eventually reached a total sum of \$20,033 by the end of our entire journey. This surpassed our expectations and targets by a satisfyingly larger amount than what we had set for ourselves at the onset. We are very thankful for all our friends and acquaintances who donated generously and supported us wholeheartedly throughout the whole process. We are also grateful and indebted to our Nepali friend Tenzeng Sherpa, and Professional Trek & Expedition (P) Ltd, who both assisted us in making the necessary arrangements to ensure the success and safety of our climb.

This journey left us with much more than purely the extrinsic value of fundraising because it taught us countless valuable lessons along the way, and imbibed in our minds so many priceless experiences and cherished memories. The unforgettable moments whereby we had to get used to living from day-to-day and mouth to hand made us so much more acutely aware of our taken for granted fortune in comfortable Singapore, where we never have to worry about our basic needs, as compared to the locals in Nepal who struggle to make ends meet. We will also always recollect fondly the unadulterated joy we captured from obtaining donations from genuine stranger trekkers along our journey. At a deeper level, their donations were also a form of affirmation and belief in our initiative, which kept us motivated and driven. Trek For Fund definitely ranks as our most satisfying and biggest accomplishment thus far in our lives, both in an individual and collective sense. The knowledge that we have spent so much effort and time in doing something as meaningful as Trek For Fund brought us



Andrew and George (second and third from left) were one of our biggest donors there and we were super grateful to them



We bumped into the one and only Dr Kumaran Rasappan (first from left), who eventually summited Mount Everest one month later



We even had time to stop by a local primary school to give out some goodies we had brought over from Singapore



An example of our sole daily meal for the first five days as we struggled to collect donations: rice with vegetable curry



Sheer jubilation upon reaching EBC, with heavy snow pouring on us!
L to R: Surentheran, Siddiq and Wei Liang



Trekking with our loads was definitely no easy task!

an unparalleled amount of gratification and contentment, knowing that we have fulfilled our societal roles in helping the needy (in Cambodia) to the best of our abilities, and that we have actually caused a positive impact on strangers in another part of the world. We hope that this is merely a start, and our efforts can be propagated to a larger effect, whether by ourselves or others. Without a shadow of a doubt, Trek For Fund is one hell of a ride that will stay in our memories forever. **SMA**



S Surentheran is currently a third year medical student at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. He enjoys his community work and is always on the lookout for crazy adventures!

About Project Battambang

Project Battambang is an overseas community project organised by students from the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine. For the past two years, the team, mentored by Dr Ong Yew Jin, has been going to the district of Poipet, located near the Cambodian province of Battambang and on the Thai-Cambodian border, with the main focus of supplementing local primary healthcare services, and developing effective and sustainable rural healthcare programmes for the community in the long run.

Aside from community health screenings, the team also conducts household surveys shedding light on the needs of the community, and tailored health education programmes seeking to improve the health situation of underprivileged Cambodians. The team also supports the development of village schools and education of needy students in the area.

To ensure long term sustainability, the team works alongside two main local contacts: the Missionary Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and accompanying students from the Phnom Penh International Medical University.

If you are interested in joining or supporting the project, or finding more about it, email Project Battambang at med.battambang@gmail.com or visit our website at <http://www.projectbattambang.com>.