

Foreword by DEAN KARNAZES,
bestselling author of *Ultramarathon Man*

RUNNING EVEREST

*Adventures at the
Top of the World*



Holly Zimmerman

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

Running Everest

For Lodge Group A

All information is supplied without liability. Neither the author nor the publisher will be liable for possible disadvantages, injuries, or damages.

Foreword by DEAN KARNAZES,
bestselling author of Ultramarathon Man

RUNNING EVEREST

*Adventures at the
Top of the World*

Holly Zimmermann

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Running Everest

Maidenhead: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2020

9781782558392

All rights reserved, especially the right to copy and distribute, including translation rights. No part of this work may be produced—including by photocopy, microfilm or any other means—processed, stored electronically, copied or distributed in any form whatsoever without the written permission of the publisher.

© 2020 by Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd.

Aachen, Auckland, Beirut, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Hügendorf, Hong Kong, Indianapolis, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney, Tehran, Vienna



Member of the World Sports Publishers' Association (WSPA), www.w-s-p-a.org

9781782558392

Email: info@m-m-sports.com

www.thesportspublisher.com

CONTENTS

Foreword by Dean Karnazes	7
Prologue	10
Characters	13
Chapter 1.....	16
Chapter 2.....	23
Chapter 3.....	32
Chapter 4.....	51
Chapter 5.....	67
Chapter 6.....	81
Chapter 7.....	90
Chapter 8.....	96
Chapter 9.....	105
Chapter 10.....	114
Chapter 11	122
Chapter 12.....	133

Chapter 13.....	143
Chapter 14.....	155
Chapter 15.....	163
Chapter 16.....	189
Chapter 17.....	197
Chapter 18.....	216
Chapter 19.....	221
Chapter 20.....	225
Chapter 21.....	229
Postscript	233
Appendix I: Bios.....	235
Appendix II: Interviews	238
Appendix III: Training for the Everest Marathon.....	284
Appendix IV: Trekking and Race Gear for Mount Everest Base Camp Trek and Mount Everest Marathon.....	289
Appendix V: Notes, Credits, Links... ..	292

FOREWORD

As a longstanding member of The North Face Global Athlete Team, I've been immersed in the world of adventure and mountaineering for many years. Epic tales of the Himalayas and Everest have been shared fireside at our annual athlete meetings, and I've always been captivated and awed by these stories; tales of hellacious winds, unimaginable cold, and thin, ever so thin air that makes breathing labored and arduous. On Everest, the dangers are very real, and the consequences of a mistake can prove terminal. Everest commands your respect, and it deserves it. Many have never returned.

So when I heard about a group attempting to run a marathon on Everest, you can imagine my surprise. How was this possible? Having raced and competed on all seven continents, twice over, I've been exposed to some of the most extreme environments on earth, from running across Death Valley in the middle of summer to running a marathon to the South Pole. But the thought of running a marathon on Mt. Everest seemed out of the question.

Yet that's exactly what Holly Zimmermann and a group of intrepid runners set out to do, to run a long-distance footrace at the highest place on earth. Though she quickly learned that much of the challenge would be just getting there. In this book, she describes—with sometimes hilarious and sometimes nail-biting detail—the lead-up to the race and the many gaffes and misadventures along the way, from food-borne illnesses to being run off the trail by an obstinate yak.

Getting to the starting line became a battle with the elements and with the sometimes less than opulent living conditions. Sleeping in cold, cramped quarters with limited fresh water and no toilets made for a mental and physical fight, and morale among the group ebbed and flowed as the days dragged on. Holly describes the psychological warfare taking place insider her head as she struggled to stay focused and composed, sometimes with only a few hours of sleep a night. Her attitude remained positive, despite numerous setbacks and unanticipated hindrances, like dealing with a pompous, narcissistic doctor, taking cuts in line and acting like God's gift to humanity.

When the race finally commenced, after weeks of travel, the challenges were multiplied. Spending two nights in tents at 17,000 feet on a glacial moraine field, the racers were hardly fresh when the gun went off. But away they ran, contending with impossibly sparse air and rocky, technical terrain that had to be navigated cautiously, each footfall placed with added care. Despite it all, Holly's performance was admirable, finishing as the first international female. Nailed it! as one of the other runners was fond of saying.

But that wasn't the end. Controversy arose when it was announced that the first five international male finishers would receive cash and prizes, but nothing would be awarded to the top international female finishers. Apparently the #MeToo movement hadn't made it all the way to Nepal. How could this injustice be allowed? Holly broached the subject with the race organizers—rightly so—and they claimed to be “looking into it,” though the ultimate resolution was less than settling, if not a bit more disturbing.

Despite it all, the Everest Marathon was a memorable experience, with all the high drama and emotional twists of a true epic. Holly tells the tale with candor and honesty—who she came

to admire and who she came to despise—as any odyssey with strangers during trying times can reveal inner character strengths and flaws. A fascinating read, I’m sure you’ll enjoy it as much as I did. Whether you run at high altitude, at sea level, or not at all, there’s something here for everyone as the allure and mystique of Everest alone is captivating, and placing a bunch of marathon runners in the midst of this hallowed place elevates the intrigue to spectacular heights.

—Dean Karnazes

Author of *Ultramarathon Man*

Winner of the Badwater Ultramarathon, 2004

Eleven-time 100-Mile/1 Day Silver Buckleholder at the Western States Endurance Run, 1995-2006

Competitor magazine Endurance Athlete of the Year Award winner, 2008, 2006, 2005

ESPN ESPY Award winner, “Best Outdoor Athlete,” 2007

PROLOGUE

"Invited (to join) ... Everest expedition. Could not refuse. Please forgive erring son."

—Telegram from Edmund Hillary to his family in 1951 after having been asked to join the British Everest reconnaissance expedition

What motivates people to undertake extraordinary adventures? To travel far from home and place themselves in completely foreign environments, taking on endeavors that no one has ever accomplished, endeavors that are challenging both physically and mentally? Are these people rare exceptions or can that thirst for adventure be found in all of us?

My youngest daughter was named after Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic and who disappeared over the Pacific Ocean in 1937 during her attempt to circumnavigate the globe. Although I adore the name *Amelia* in its own right, it was the fascination with this pioneering, adventurous woman that inspired me to give her name to my own child.

But what exactly is adventure? Breaking it down into three facets, an adventure can involve danger and the unknown, an exciting or remarkable experience, or even a financial risk. For

the sake of argument here, we'll let all things be financially equal and focus instead on the first two definitions. Drawn by some of the tallest mountains on earth where they encountered yawning glacier crevasses, crushing avalanches, and extreme cold, the initial explorers entering the Khumbu valley in Nepal were certainly facing danger and the unknown—and so was Amelia Earhart, trusting her life to the mechanics of her aircraft and her own navigational skills.

Today, adventure has become more attainable, with less danger and fewer risks for those who seek it. Certainly life-risking danger is still lurking out there for those who are willing—all you need to do is pick up Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* to confirm this—but for most of us the excitement of the *Everest* movie is satisfying enough, so why would we put our lives in jeopardy to experience that in real life?

Now let's focus on the second definition of adventure: an exciting or remarkable experience. This can have a million diverse interpretations and mean something completely different to everyone on the planet. Watching your child take his or her first steps, embarking on a new career, jumping from an airplane. Depending on the person, these examples could be boring or ridiculously out of the question, but each instance could unquestionably be remarkable and exciting.

Adventure tours are booming today. People are taking multi-week vacations to exotic destinations that would previously have required months of travel. Not only are we travelling more but we are challenging our bodies with new physical fitness regimes and diets. We are testing our boundaries whenever we get the chance and as the envelope gets pushed, the norm goes right along with it.

Does this mean that we are more adventurous than our forefathers? According to our general definition, probably not.

But let's find out.

This book describes the journey of a group of people (let's not call them adventurers yet) who spent three weeks in Nepal, trekking in the Himalayan mountains for hours a day, sleeping in lodges with no heat in temperatures below freezing; having no access to fresh fruits or vegetables; no coffee; no alcohol; while enduring deplorable sanitary conditions and facing high-altitude sickness and the risk of injury, all with very limited access to medical help. And once they reached their destination and spent two nights camping in tents on a glacial moraine field at over 5,000 meters (17,000 feet) above sea level, they turned around and ran a marathon (yes, 42.2 km or 26.2 miles) back the way they came, back to that warm hotel, Internet access, that morning coffee and fruit bowl, that hot shower, that glass of Chardonnay, and those Portobello mushrooms.

Are they adventurers? Or a random selection of today's average human being?

And, last question... Could that be you?

CHARACTERS

Holly	Me; born in the United States; living in Germany; adventure chaser
Beatrice	Italian-born Zurich-based fashionista; down-to-earth diva; believer in karma
Shaun	London-based bodybuilder; humorist; cover model; everybody's best friend
Ricky*	Nepalese mountain guide; leader of Lodge Group A; naturalist; rock star
Harry*	Even-keeled Dutchman; experienced mountain trekker
Jesper*	Danish world-traveler and philanthropist; expert on most everything
Raemonde*	Canadian realist; gorilla activist; only Everest ultrarunner in our group
Niki & Carolyn*	Canadian girlfriends; running addicts; foul-mouthed
Mark & Jill*	Couple from the American South; road runners; movie fanatics

Hendrick & Cindy*	South African; reserved; lovers of extreme sports and dogs
Ray*	Self-diagnosed obsessive-compulsive native New Yorker; forcing himself to see the world; Harry's roommate
Dave	New Yorker; stranger to Ray though they live around the corner from each other; Shaun's roommate
The Mexicans	Clara, Gris, Veronica, Pedro; three women and one man from Mexico; spoke mostly Spanish amongst themselves...when not laughing
Kiki	Chinese-born American; energy-laden drama queen
Pemba	Raccoon-tail-capped Sherpa
Prajwal	Humble, young Nepalese doctor assigned to Lodge Group A
Kyaron	Nepali environmentalist; emergency helper post-earthquake; trail runner
Ash	Activist, sportsman, businessman; world-changer via <i>Run7.global</i> ; Shaun's buddy from England

- Maggy & Anja** German travel addicts; nature lovers; best friends; Insta giants
- Aayush & Anuj*** Nepalese cameramen; non-athletes; talented *yak-shitters*
- Thuan Na, Thi Thu Ha, Bluesky, Michael, Pierre, Jianqi**
Remainder of Lodge Group A

*See Appendix II for audio transcripts of personal interviews

CHAPTER 1

"To travel, to experience and learn: that is to live."

—Tenzing Norgay

Days 1 and 2: Arrival in Kathmandu

After the overnight Etihad Airways flight from Munich, in which I didn't get any sleep, I was not thrilled at having a three-hour layover in the Abu Dhabi International Airport. It was 8:00 am local time as I found a seat at the gate for the connecting flight to Kathmandu. The coffee didn't help much to lift my spirits, but Beatrice would be meeting me shortly and I was full of anticipation about seeing her again after more than a year.

If you are not familiar with Beatrice, this may be a good time to go buy my first book, *Ultramarathon Mom*, and get acquainted with us; otherwise, here's what you need to know. Beatrice and I met in 2016 at the Marathon des Sables, a 257-kilometer (160 mile) 7-day stage race across the Moroccan Sahara Desert, where we were tent-mates. She was born and raised in Tuscany but now

lives in Zurich after a stint as a bond broker in London. She is spontaneous, outgoing, and daring, while I am the complete opposite, an introverted pragmatic planner. In the Sahara we were nicknamed Salt & Pepper by some of the other runners. The comparison suits us perfectly, a blond and a brunette, basic and spicy. The only thing we seem to have in common is our thirst for adventure, which was what was bringing us together again.

Our current quest: The Mount Everest Marathon.

The Everest Marathon is known for its extremes. Extremely high, extremely technical, extremely remote and, above all, extremely, breathtakingly beautiful.

The trip entailed a couple of days in Kathmandu, a ten-day trek up to Mount Everest's South Base Camp, two night of sleeping there on the glacier, a marathon trail race from Base Camp down to Namche Bazaar, and then a few days of recovery in Kathmandu before flying back to reality. All told, we'd be away from our families for three weeks. And our families are not small, with seven kids in total between us.

So there I am in Abu Dhabi, completely wrecked after missing an entire night's sleep, and here comes Beatrice bouncing along like a schoolgirl, looking fresh as a daisy since she had flown in the night before and slept a wonderful eight hours in the airport hotel.

So much for me being the pragmatic planner.

Although, to my credit, I had managed to get us seats together on our flight from Abu Dhabi to Kathmandu. Beatrice was surprised when I handed her a new boarding pass, and she happily tossed away her old ticket that had us separated by half a plane.

I was seated by the window, with Bea in the middle and a stranger on the aisle. He was probably about 30 years old, looked as though he was from somewhere in the Middle East, as were most on that flight, and he sat cool and relaxed. After about an

hour, the man fell asleep with his arms crossed on his hips and his legs spread out somewhat provocatively.

After a while, Bea and I had to go to the bathroom. I'd had to go for some time, but had been waiting for the guy to wake up so he could let us out into the aisle. Bea said she couldn't wait anymore and that she would climb over him. I laughed and told her I'd give her 10 euros if she could do it without waking him up. With excitement in her eyes, she immediately hopped up onto the armrest in the middle, then, facing him, she carefully side-stepped across to the outside armrest and jumped down into the aisle. Then she looked at me smugly, rewarded at the sight of my dropped jaw. I was impressed. Now what? How should I get out? *Whatever.* I followed suit as quickly as possible, climbing just like she did onto the arm rests, but a flash of fear shot through my mind as I briefly paused mid-straddle while looking down at a stranger's head between my legs. What if he were to wake up *right now*? I hastily jumped down into the aisle and Bea and I skipped back towards the rear of the plane, startled by the astonished looks from the dozens of passengers seated behind us who'd just gotten some free entertainment. From their intense stares, I thought we were going to get a round of applause.

Returning to our aisle we found that Mr. Cool had woken up, and though he looked confused when we asked him to let us back into our seats, he never said a word.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity—but was only four and a half hours—we reached our final destination: Kathmandu, the city of organized chaos.

The scene in the airport was farcical, too many people not knowing how to get a visa and too few people there to show us how. I thought that I was smart by getting my visa in Munich before the trip, but since Beatrice hadn't had a chance to get one back in Zurich, I'd have to wait anyway. Somehow, in what can

only be described as an unjust twist of fate, after we got all her forms filled out for her visa, then stood in separate lines for those with and without the entry visa, she was actually processed faster than me and, to top it all off, after she passed through customs, she stood behind the counters laughing and snapping photos of me trying to keep a straight face while frustratingly answering the redundant questions of the customs agent.

Then down to baggage claim and the same deal. Beatrice squealed with delight as her suitcase was one of the first to appear. I waited. And waited. The place was a zoo. Massive amounts of trekking equipment, bundles of who-knows-what tied up in rope, plastic wrap, and miles of tape, and monkeys swinging from the rafters. I needed to use the ladies' room but was afraid to miss my bag, so with crossed legs I waited for an eternal ten minutes until it arrived. Then after a quick stop in the loo, we were outside and being propositioned by taxi drivers, hotel reps, and luggage schleppers. We found our trekking company representative and he ushered us across a chaotic park-whenever-you-want-since-there-are-no-lines-anyway parking lot to a minivan that had a few from our group already waiting inside. We were given a flower-wreath lei necklace and asked to take a seat since we were waiting for others who had also been on our flight.

We chatted with the guys in the transfer van. There were two men from New York City, Ray and Dave. Complete strangers to each other up until that point. They had traveled separately, but on the same flight, and were surprised to learn that they live in the same neighborhood, just around the corner from one another. Who knows, maybe they pass each other every day on the street on their way to work or the gym, but it took a flight to the other side of the planet for them to have a conversation with each other.

After 15 minutes of waiting, it was beginning to get hot in the van.

Next came a Welsh dude, whose English was next to impossible for the rest of us to understand. Really. He asked if any of us had a pen, which resulted in dead silence and blank stares until he mimed a writing motion and then it clicked. Forty-five minutes later, the last two, Polish men, finally got there. They had been buying phone cards. Super. We had just traveled for a full day and wanted nothing more than a shower and a change of clothes, but we had to wait in the sweltering heat while our comrades were doing personal errands. Then, when they finally got there, not only did they not thank us for waiting but they did not even say hello! I commented lightheartedly that they owe us a beer, but there was no reaction. I suppose there was a language barrier in addition to the politeness gap.

At 6:00 PM we finally arrived at the Hotel Shanker! Drinks were handed out while checking in and then the confused nonsense started up again.

And why were the Polish guys being attended to first? Ugh.

We were approached by a very young and fragile-looking Nepalese woman, who told us that there was to be a short info meeting for our group at 6:00 PM. I looked up at the clock on the wall that now read 6:15. She followed my look and said, “Whenever you can get there.” Beatrice and I hurried to our room to drop off our bags, so it was another 10 minutes before we arrived in the conference room for the info session which was already well in progress. The speaker looked at us skeptically. “Did you just arrive?” he asked. Yep, we responded. Clearly they’d scheduled the meeting at a time when all group members should have already arrived and had time to check into the hotel, and he’d apparently not been informed that some were delayed. But by now we were a little frustrated since we would have gladly skipped the hour wait in the bus at the airport to have made a timely appearance at the meeting, but hijacking the

vehicle was not a viable option—even in the post-era Kingdom of Nepal.

Apparently there were different groups with the trekking company and the meetings were subdivided amongst these smaller units, so our meeting was an assembly of everyone in Lodge Group A. We were 25 people. I alternated between listening to the speaker and scouting out the other members of our trekking group. Shaun was sitting in the back row. We'd had some email contact prior to the trip and I recognized him from Instagram, so I was looking forward to finally talking to him face-to-face after the meeting. Two women who sat close together in the front also caught my eye, and my initial impression was that they were a couple. Another woman in the back row kept asking questions about information that had already been provided to us and that even Beatrice, who only reads for pleasure, had studied. The organization had been thorough, and on the Internet they supplied a very detailed itinerary along with a two-page pack list of essential items, so the woman's questions were redundant at best. She must have been nervous. Who wasn't? Sometimes we just need that personal interaction to ease our minds in stressful, foreign situations, even if we are fully prepared in all other aspects.

Then we were given our start numbers, trekking bags, and polo shirts. The trekking bags—giant red and black bags made of heavy-duty canvas with our start number on it and printed with the Mount Everest Marathon logo—rocked! I was so excited! That bag was going to follow me on every trip when I got home. I could already foresee my kids fighting over it.

We then spent a couple of minutes chatting with Shaun. Shaun is a rare breed, with more charisma than everyone I know, and built like the Incredible Hulk—though not green—with shoulder-length blond hair and, in somewhat of a contrast to his tough-guy body, a very boyish face that is nearly always wearing a smile.

After the meet and greet, Beatrice and I brought our trekking bags to our room and took well-needed showers. And although by then we were really getting tired after the long trip, we needed to eat before we crashed, so we went down to the hotel restaurant. We ordered way too much food, and it was all delicious.

With one exception.

Beatrice had some veggie tempura as an appetizer and, given that the vegetables weren't discernable under the thick crust, she unknowingly bit into a spicy pepper which had her in agony and temporarily speechless. (Note to self: this is one way to shut Beatrice up.) We quickly got some yogurt over to our table which she smothered all over her palate. The wait staff were practically doing backbends to help her.

We weren't able to finish everything, but we had given it our best shot and then shuffled up to our room where Beatrice got to work. She disappeared into the bathroom where she hand-washed her tiny black string thong in the sink and hung it out in the shower to dry overnight (I would get used to seeing Beatrice's tiny sexy garments hanging everywhere).

Though it was only 9:00 PM and despite the excitement of our upcoming adventure, we were barely able to keep our eyes open while texting family and friends. A few minutes later, just after turning the lights out, we were both sent swiftly into dreamland.

CHAPTER 2

"I needed to go . . . The pull of Everest was stronger for me than any force on earth."

—Tenzing Norgay

Day 3: Kathmandu City

At breakfast on the morning of our first full day in Kathmandu was when we first really got a chance to meet some of the other members of our group. I sat next to Cindy and Hendrik (Henni), who were a couple from South Africa but currently living in Japan. They had both done the trek before—the same route we were about to do—but they had done it without tagging the marathon on at the end. They loved the region and wanted to come back, and this time instead of *trekking* down from Base Camp, they would *run* back. Cindy warned us about one major downside of the trek: the sanitary conditions were apparently deplorable. She recommended that a neck warmer could be used not only for warmth and filtering dust in the air but also, when pulled up over your nose, to keep smells at bay. *How bad can it*

be? I wondered. That bad and even worse was what I'd soon find out.

Right after breakfast there was another short info meeting. Beatrice and I were sitting next to Shaun, well, Beatrice was sitting next to him (she'd developed a little bit of a crush), while Mark and Jill, a couple from the US, were directly in front of us. Mark had a full, graying beard and mustache and Jill had ultra-long jet-black hair woven into two tight braids. Both kind of had a hippie look and when they spoke I detected southern accents, but then again, coming originally from Rhode Island, most everyone sounds southern to me. Some of the others in the room looked familiar from the night before including the female couple and the uniformed question-asker. There appeared to be a healthy cultural mix from around the globe, but discerning conclusively who comes from which country is impossible at first sight in the 21st century.

Before the meeting started, Shaun began telling us about getting separated from his buddy, Ash, with whom he had planned to be on the trip, share a room, and so on, but each had unwittingly registered via different tour groups; Ash was flying up into the mountains that day whereas our group would be a day behind. Shaun was hoping that he could switch into the other group, but he was told that the logistics would be difficult. In order to do that, roommates, lodging, and food would have to be adjusted for the entire three weeks. Not as easy as it sounds especially since in the higher villages lodging is limited and some of our food would be transported via yak alongside our trekking group.

Once all assembled, we were introduced to the man who would be our group leader for the entire trek. A Nepalese man in his mid-30s who'd worked in the tourist industry for several years, his name was Ricky, though I assume that is a

westernization of his given name. He was very calm and succinct when he spoke in fluent English, and I immediately felt that we were in good hands.

After a recap of the pertinent information from the night before, the floor was open to questions. The uninformed question-asker was naturally the first to start, and she brought up the hypothetical event of one of us getting sick or injured and not being able to go on. What would happen then? But before Ricky had the chance to answer, Mark made a Rambo-type comment about how *No one gets left behind!*

Shaun laughed out loud. I think he was beginning to realize he might be happy in our group after all, with or without his friend Ash.

When there were no more questions, Ricky gave us the itinerary for that day. We would have a guided sightseeing tour of Kathmandu and then a press conference back at the hotel. Our bus would be leaving shortly, so Beatrice and I dashed off to our room to change into comfortable clothes and grab our cameras.

I was really looking forward to our first stop scheduled on the tour, the Pashupatinath Temple, because it was one thing that I had not seen on my visit to Kathmandu a few years earlier. In 2015, my husband and I had taken our four kids, who at the time were between the ages of 7 and 13, on an amazing trip to Nepal. We visited the capital city of Kathmandu and the ancient temples of Bhaktapur, hiked in the Himalayan foothills of Dhulikhel, took a wild ride cross country to Pokhara, and ended up in Chitwan National Forest where we rode on elephants, saw rhinos, and were even lucky enough to get up close to a Bengal tiger in the wild. We left that beautiful country just ten days before a massive earthquake struck which devastated the country's historical sites and infrastructure. I'd done some fundraising at home to help with their restoration efforts and had regular contact with a friend in

Nepal (Kyaron, introduced in *Ultramarathon Mom*), but I was eager to get back myself and see first-hand how the country was recovering.

So on that first day back in the capital city, we were planning on visiting a few sites that I'd been to before and one that I'd not yet seen: the Pashupatinath Temple. A Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, it lies on both banks of the Bagmati River and is the holiest Hindu temple in Nepal. Only Hindus are allowed in the main pagoda-style temple, which has four sides covered in silver and a gilded roof and is surrounded by many other temples to various Hindu and Buddhist deities.

Among tourists, the temple is best known for its public cremations. Along the river at least ten ghats (cremation pedestals) can be seen where the last rites of Hindus are performed before cremation. After a procession from the temple to the steps of the river bank, the body (which is wrapped in white except if it is a woman whose husband is still alive, then it is wrapped in red) is washed with the holy water of the Bagmati River and some is poured into the deceased's mouth to make sure they are dead. *You have to wonder if that is ever a show-stopper.* Next, a Tilaka (traditional marking) is placed on the forehead, the big toes are tied together with a string, and family and friends then carry the body to a ghat near the river. Finally, the deceased is placed on top of the ceremonial pyre with feet facing south.

Our temple tour guide told us that the bodies must be cremated within hours of death, and several ceremonies took place in the time we were there. Our group stood across the riverbank for at least an hour, mesmerized by what was going on at the other side. The body is left to smolder and then the ashes are swept into the river. After the ashes of one of the deceased had cooled, a man took a handful of the ash and placed it in a plastic bag. He then waded knee-deep into the river, bent down into the water,

and buried the bag underneath the sediment of the riverbed; apparently that is done with every ceremony.

The ghat is then washed clean and ready for the next ritual. There were extravagant ghats for the wealthy and plain ones for the poor, but the mourning of the relatives was the same, with the male relatives surrounding the body and the women in the sheltered porticos behind.

Despite the many distractions of the palm readers, fortune tellers, and card readers, as well as women selling bracelets, artwork, and suspicious looking bottles of drinking water, the ten-minute walk back to the bus was a somber one. I don't think I've attended as many funerals in my entire life as I'd just witnessed that morning.

Our next stop was the Boudhanath Stupa. The term *stupa* refers to a mound-like or hemispherical structure containing relics that is used as a place of meditation. The Boudhanath Stupa is one of the largest in the world and the original dwelling is thought to be about 1,500 years old. Atop its whitewashed dome, a gilded tower with the eyes of the Buddha watches all who come to visit. The stupa dominates the plaza and allows worshipers just enough space to walk its outskirts, before the surrounding walls close in with shops, cafes, and homes, giving it the feeling of a ship in a bottle. As one of Kathmandu's busiest tourist destinations, it is now well maintained in a fresh coat of paint and bright prayer flags flying from its highest points.

Bea, Shaun, and I strolled around the base of the stupa, spinning prayer wheels as we went, then up a set of whitewashed steps to walk directly around the perimeter of the dome itself, prayers flags by the dozens flapping in the breeze just above our heads and towering up to the top of the golden spire. It's a magical place, and the energy you feel swirling around you is completely humbling.

The contrast of the brilliant colors of the flags against the white and gold of the stupa makes it clear why such images are so often photographed. We took plenty of photos, some striking a pose, but other times we captured each other simply entranced by our surroundings and, after Shaun took a series of Bea and me together, a female tourist asked him to take photos of her as well. I think it was just an excuse for her to talk to him. Of course, he couldn't say no.

Back down at the stupa base we met with Anuj, who had been hired by the marathon organizers to do the photography as well as make videos of the trek and marathon. While chatting with him, a huge flock of pigeons settled down next to us and suddenly Anuj had a cinematic vision of Beatrice and me running through the flock of pigeons and how they would majestically take flight. Unfortunately, the pigeons were not well-trained actors and were apparently very used to being around people, because as we took off on a jog through the flock, they didn't budge. I nearly tripped while tip-toeing through the cluster, trying to avoid stepping on them. A few of them took flight but swooped around and immediately rejoined their group. Anuj said we should try it again, but this time run faster and make noise. At a full sprint and screeching like canaries, we still didn't ruffle any feathers of those winged rats and, not wanting to break any beaks or risk a fall into pigeon poop, we ceased our moviemaking bid after just two takes.

Once the group had rejoined, I talked to Dave while waiting for the bus. He was in his late 20s, from NYC, and though he spoke English with no foreign accent, due to his straight dark hair and Asian features, my guess was he had some Chinese ancestry (later confirmed as first-generation American, often speaking Mandarin with the two Chinese-born women in the group). He was travelling alone on his first overseas trip. "Whoa! First trip

overseas, and you come here to run a marathon at the foot of Everest?!?" I asked with astonishment. He nodded, slightly embarrassed. Then he said that he liked my sense of humor. Seeing my confused expression, he clarified. He had been in the minivan the day before on our ride from the airport to the hotel, and it was my comment to the Polish men that they owe us a beer for making us wait.

Apparently, he didn't get a beer either.

Back at the hotel, though we were all starving, we were ushered straight into the banquet hall for a press conference. Bea, Shaun, and I sat right in the front row. Local cultural dignitaries were seated at a long table up on the stage along with the race organizers and each was given a few minutes in the spotlight, describing the history of the race, the importance of tourism to Nepal, and the efforts that are being made to keep the region eco-friendly. Then several runners with impressive stories from the various trekking groups were subsequently called forward to make some comments. Shaun was first to be called up to speak about his fundraiser. He described how he was raising donations for The Himalayan Children's Charities (HCC). I thought that he knew about the press conference and planned a speech since he did not appear to be at all surprised when he was called up front to speak and he seemed to know exactly what to say. Once he sat back down the race organizer started talking about two friends who met at the Marathon des Sables. Oh! That was us! Caught a bit off guard, Beatrice and I were called up front to say a few words. Although Beatrice can strike a pose with the world's best, she is not an impromptu speaker, at least not in English, though she may have fewer hang-ups in Italian. Anyway, I took one look at her face and knew I needed to be the one with the microphone. So I talked for a minute about the MdS itself, which is not known to everyone, and then about our friendship and what brought us