

Bistari, bistari – Trekking to Everest Base Camp with a hidden disability.

By: Steve Willems

Trekking to Everest Base Camp in the heart of the Himalayas is not an easy journey for anyone, especially those with a disability like Multiple Sclerosis. But for this group, nothing would get in their way.



The Everest Base Camp trek is popular with adventurers and tourists alike.

Rising high above us, hidden behind the swirling grey clouds, towers the mighty Mount Everest. Sagarmatha. Down below we see a sprawling city of tents stretched out along the Khumbu glacier, and despite the icy rain, excitement is building within the group. We're just one last descent and then a final climb away from reaching our goal: Everest Base Camp. But this isn't just any tourist group making the iconic pilgrimage through the breathtaking Solukhumbu. Most of this team has Multiple Sclerosis.

The Everest Base Camp (EBC) trek isn't easy, even for people without a disability. Starting in Lukla at 2860m, and then descending as low as 2100m, the trail snakes its way over and along a series of mountains and valleys to reach basecamp at 5364m. You're either walking up a hill or going back down one; the relentless undulations affectionately described as 'Nepalese Flat.' And then there's the altitude, with reduced oxygen making each movement feel like you've just come back from a morning run. I was getting out of breath in my room just packing my bag.

There were eleven in our group, and I was one of only four that didn't have MS. I'd been asked to document the journey while the other three were either partners or friends providing support. Before flying to Lukla we toured around Kathmandu, visiting a range of Hindu and Buddhist temples to get a feel for Nepal, but also bond as a team.

Guiding us were Tika, Gyan, and Maya from Trek Climb Ski Nepal, who were well-prepared to look after a group that had a variety of health concerns. That night, dining in a fancy restaurant, we were reminded about the significance of our journey by a group of British climbers. They'd come down from Everest to wait out the weather, relaxing in Kathmandu before heading back up. The groups got chatting and, as we left, they were overheard saying to each other: "wow, that's amazing!"

Often called a hidden disability, Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is an irreversible disease where the body attacks the nervous system, causing a range of symptoms such as fatigue, muscle weakness, loss of balance, loss of memory, and loss of mobility. All important to a difficult trek like EBC. It affects everyone differently and often in unpredictable ways.



The trek has many, many stairs.

Impressing a group of seasoned mountaineers buoyed the spirits as we flew to Lukla by helicopter, avoiding the treacherous five-hour jeep ride to Ramechhap airport to catch a plane. The first day was an easy half-day walk through several busy villages. We only had to carry day-bags stuffed with a few warm clothes and water, while a superhuman team of six porters hauled our luggage between tea houses.

The next day was the first major challenge, which was climbing the hill to Namche Bazaar. Bistari, bistari! Gyan would call out, always with a smile. Slowly, slowly! It was an important mantra, reminding the group not to push too hard and rest whenever they needed. The group took regular breaks, but couldn't stay too long as Gyan would suddenly yell out jam, jam! to get us moving again. Hurry up! And then, bistari, bistari! Slowly, slowly.

Fatigue, muscle weakness, and loss of balance took their toll. Many in the group were pushing their limits. Some admitted later to privately feeling it was too hard and thought of quitting, but encouragement and support from the others kept them going. Camaraderie between us was rapidly building, and by the end we were all good friends.



Steve Willems posing heroically on the way to Dingboche.

And so, we trudged on, up and up, step by step, until we rounded the final corner to reveal the tiny metropolis of Namche Bazaar. After that, no challenge seemed too hard, as long as we remembered: Bistari, bistari.

Another symptom of MS is a lack of bladder control. The group would often triage toilet breaks by level of urgency, rushing behind rocks and trees along the side of the trail. While taken with a sense of humour, it demonstrated another complication that someone like me didn't have to worry about.

To be safe, our guide Tika made us do more acclimatizing than normal. Our rest day was spent climbing up to the village of Khumjung for lunch, before coming back down to Namche. We climbed back to Khumjung the next day for an extra night of acclimatization, visiting the Hillary Museum and local bakery while hiding from the wind and rain.

After descending into a lush green valley, and lunch by the river, we climbed another agonizing hill to the famous Tengboche monastery. But the hard work was beginning to pay off as we all started feeling stronger. The weather stayed cold and wet, with clouds blocking the view of Ama Dablam, a spectacular mountain the trip's organiser, Jen, had climbed a few years before.

When Jen Willis was diagnosed with MS at 47, doctors said she'd likely be in a wheelchair within five years. She decided to quit her career as high school principal to pursue a childhood dream of becoming a mountaineer before it was too late. After summiting several other Nepalese peaks, including Ama Dablam, she tackled Everest in 2023. Sadly, due to a shortage of oxygen bottles at camp 4, Jen failed to reach the top of the world.

Devastated by the unsuccessful expedition, she fell into a period of depression and self-reflection, coming out the other side determined to help others with MS realise their personal ambitions. After proposing a basecamp trek on an MS Facebook group, she was inundated with people from around the world all saying the same thing: I have to do this.

They each had a point to prove, either to themselves or to others. Naomi, quietly spoken but internally fierce, can't walk without a stick due to 'foot drop,' a symptom of MS that causes muscle weakness, making it hard to lift the foot. This was a significant hindrance on paths that are rocky, uneven, and with countless steps. But Naomi trained for months to manage her gait. She secretly booked the trip without telling anyone, not even her husband, worried he would talk her out of it.

"What will it mean to reach basecamp?" I asked Naomi.

"Everything," she replied.



Group leader Jen Willis with our guide, Tika Tamang.

In Dingboche, we spent another rest day hiking up a hill to further acclimatize. Halfway up, Anna, a bubbly and joyful American, couldn't go on. Her MS was causing severe fatigue and dizziness. Jen and I sat with her overlooking Dingboche far below, sharing how hard the trip was, both physically and emotionally.

Anna was in the US army, having served in Afghanistan, but MS put an end to her career. After a series of personal tragedies, she was on the brink of suicide before turning her life around. For Anna, this trip meant more than just reaching basecamp. As we sat talking, listening, sharing, what started as a moment of supposed failure turned into a restful afternoon of bonding that was a highlight of the trip.

As the trees and alpine scrub was replaced by rocks and ice, we made our way through the harsh winds and low cloud to Lobuche, and then the final stop at Gorak Shep. The enormous valley carved out by the Khumbu glacier felt other-worldly, but I was more impressed by the

tiny figures making their way along the glacier. While the group struggled with altitude, illness, and the various debilitating symptoms of MS, they didn't let it stop them. They just kept on pushing, slowly slowly, refusing to quit.

I'd been to basecamp several times already, but this was different. As we reached the large stone with 'Everest Base Camp 5364m' spray-painted in red, I could see in all the hugs and tears around me what it really meant.

Hope. And freedom.

Not only had they proven something to themselves, but also to others. They had shown that MS, or any other disability, doesn't have to hold you back. If you have a dream, chase it. Because you can do it, too. Jam, jam, as Gyan would say.

Bistari, bistari.



The seven MS participants celebrate reaching Everest Base Camp.