



# INTO THE Himalayas

WITH STEVE NEARMAN

Nobody just accidentally ends up in Sandakphu.

But that is exactly where I ended up in October 2004.

Barren. Frozen. Windy. Siberia? Who on God's Earth would end up there?

And 3,636 meters high, which for you metrically challenged folks, is a fingernail shy of 12,000 feet.

It was Sandakphu, the beast that she is, which stood in the way of my completing the 5-day, 100-mile stage race along the India-Nepal border back two decades ago. She literally beat me to the ground, and punished me with a night of cold sweats.

Altitude can do that to a sea-level baby. I did run a chunk of the Himalayan Run and Trek that year and I could

have gone to my grave satisfied to have been a surviving participant in the behemoth endurance event.

Some 19 years passed and in came the phone call. From one of my best friends, who happens to be my personal trainer. Let's be clear here: best friends don't let friends do crazy running events. But this guy Jeff Horowitz is different, persuasive

— author of many running books to rival George Sheehan, including "My First 100 Marathons: 2,620 Miles with an Obsessive Runner" which he published in 2008. Fast forward to 2023, and he was a couple of marathons away from 200.

**FULL DISCLOSURE: we also published two books together.**



Photo Credit: Himalayan Run & Trek



He, too, had experienced the Himalayan Run & Trek along the India-Nepal border a few years after I did. Probably ran it backwards on one leg. But to go back to Sandakphu—translated, “the height of the poisonous plant”, in reference to the former abundance there around a century ago—with one of my best friends was tough to pass up.

And to take another shot at Sandakphu, finally, like Rocky said before the first Apollo Creed fight, all I wanted to do was to go the distance. What awaits at the top of Sandakphu is like nothing you will ever experience. More on this later.

The Himalayan Run & Trek has been organized from the start in 1991 by C.S. Pandey, a near mythical man who grew up in Central Himalaya and is passionate about the mountains of his homeland. His Indian accent along with his wise advice, knowledgeable commentary and welcoming demeanor add to the entertainment of this journey.

All the while, he holds a firm grip on your hand so as to exact your fullest of attention!

Every logistic is maniacally planned and executed and this event is a logistical challenge. What could possibly

go wrong with 25 ultramarathoners and me, the 800-meter guy, over five days and 100 miles, plus a couple of days before and after the trek?

Moving two dozen competitors from Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi to the airport in Bagdogra and onto two large passenger vans for a long ride into the Himalayas, Pandey and his staff don't miss a beat. An overnight in Mirik sets the stage for a day of altitude acclimation in Darjeeling – yes, one of the tea capitals of the world!

Darjeeling is also famous for its toy train, Himalayan Zoo and the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, inspired by Tenzing Norgay's ascent of Mount Everest (29,028 feet) along with Sir Edmund Hillary. We took in all three of these sites while sucking in 7,000-foot high oxygen.

For some of my fellow competitors from Colorado and other high-living places around the world, they simply did not even notice the altitude. But how do you prep when your typical runs are on Long Beach and the canal path and the closest high peak—Mount Washington at 6k—is a five-hour drive? And it's too rocky to run there anyways.

I got smart the second time around. I trained regularly around the hilly Pinehills, finding a nine-course which spans the parameter of our master planned community and ends with a mile long uphill on Long Ridge Road to the top. But I also took to Wildcat Mountain across the notch from Mount Washington and ran/walked up and down the steep 2 ½-mile trail from 1,950 feet at the base to 4,062 feet at the summit. Truly mind-numbing.

An early departure for the trek start at Maney Bhanjian gave us plenty of time to complete a brutal Day One – 24 miles from 6,000 feet to 12,000 feet in the middle of nowhere and then the prize at Sandakphu. After the first half mile of downhill, we climbed and climbed and by four miles, my watch said we were at 10,000 feet. Just 2,000 more feet of elevation over the next 20 miles – piece of cake. Wrong. We spent the rest of Day 1 running/walking up and down and up and down 18-20% grade on dirt and cement roads,

You literally could lean over and touch the road ahead of you, it was that steep.

The group broke up fairly fast and I found myself alone for much



THAT DAY WAS ONE OF THE BEST DAYS OF MY LIFE. GUIDED BY SEVEN YOUNG AND FIT NEPALESE GUIDES WHO CARRIED OUR WATER AND FOOD ON THEIR BACKS, I WAS TOTALLY IN THE MOMENT FOR THE ENTIRE 10 MILES OF PLUSH FOREST, KEEPING AN EYE OUT FOR TIGERS AND RED PANDAS.



Photo Credit Himalayan Run & Trek

of the time, which was welcomed as I needed this trip to air out from daily life back in Plymouth. Plenty of time to be in deep thought.

But as the miles and uphill/downhill combinations continued, they were mentally wearing me down. My hopes of getting to the top of Sandakphu under my own power and going the distance were fading with each hill. I finally threw in the towel with just five kilometers to go and took the support jeep to the top.

And I was ok with that. Remember, I am the 800-meter runner in a sea of ultramarathoners and they actually respected that I even made it 21 miles at altitude!

Riding front-passenger side in the jeep was no easy task either. Broken roads and huge rocks for the Range Rover to navigate, sometimes going around, sometimes going over, tight hairpin switchbacks and several thousand feet drop-offs is not for anybody who gets car sick.

Finally at the top, while I knew what to expect since I had been there before, was still nothing short of spectacular. The trek along the Singalila Ridge to Sandakphu and then to Phalut is one of the most popular in the Eastern Himalayas, owing to the stupendous vistas of the Kangchenjunga and Everest ranges which it affords.

In one breath-taking span across the horizon from right to left, ice-covered Mount Kanchenjunga, the third-highest peak in the world, stands directly before me, appearing on fire due to the sunrise. Panning to the right, Makula, Everest and Lhotse jut out high into the sky.

Four of the world's five highest peaks, all around 28,000 feet and higher. Back in 2004, I felt for the first time in my life I could reach up and touch heaven. Repeat in 2023.

Taking in a steady diet of Motrin, aminos, hydration supplements with water and with a massage gun in my luggage, I am still moving on the morning of Day 2, a 20-mile out and back at 12,000 feet. Amazingly zero impact from the altitude. I spent much of this day running on crushed rock paths with my new best friend, 60-something Vaughan from England, as we traversed a series of switchbacks and counted down the final kilometers as we were running on fumes.

Since I was running the 100-kilometer option, my Day 3 was a treacherous jeep ride a few miles down from Sandakphu to the start, and then through a beautiful national forest for 10 miles while most of the crew doing the 100-mile option completed what is called the Mount Everest Marathon.

In 2004, when many of the 45 participants that year were complaining about the 31 miles that showed up on their Garmin's instead of the standard 26-mile distance, Mr Pandey deadpanned: "Okay okay okay. So blame me for giving you more time out there in the beautiful Himalayas!"

It appears he fixed the distance this time around. No complaints except from Vaughan's wife, Anne, who took a wrong turn and did the 31 miles! Not a happy camper coming into Rimbik in the dark, although safely escorted by some of Pandey's men.

That day was one of the best days of my life. Guided by seven young and fit Nepalese guides who carried our water and food on their backs, I was totally in the moment for the entire 10 miles of plush forest, keeping an eye out for tigers and red pandas. At one point, the trail was getting narrower and narrower until we were basically bushwhacking. I knew at that point we were lost – especially when all the young men stopped and turned around and asked me something in Nepalese.

My reply? Sorry guys, not from this neighborhood.

Eventually we found our way to Rimbik at 6,350 feet, a gorgeous bustling little town set into a mountain with a view of Sikkim in northeast India, bordered by Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal. After another fantastic Indian meal with my new-found ultra friends, we slept and were up early for Day 4. 13 miles from Rimbik to Palmajua.

It was my first opportunity, except for the first mile of Day 1, that I could run with my bud, Jeff, as we descended a couple of thousand feet over five miles of switchbacks on rural roads and then enjoyed three miles on flat land before I dropped off to take pictures and video and be a tourist. I imagine he was glad to be done with the little ringing bell I had on my backpack.

But I'd be lying if I said I did not suffer the last five miles of steep uphill walking/running on the other side of the valley back up to 6,560 feet, and I was not the only one!

By day's end, I was pretty much run out. Day 5 was 17 miles beginning in Palmajua. Three of us – the daughter of one competitor and the wife of another – stayed in the shuttle bus until there were just five-kilometers left, and together we walked it in to a heroes' welcome in Maney Bhanjian where we were greeted by the sweet cheers of little students from the local primary schools.

Back in Mirik later that afternoon, Jeff spied this imposing castle-like building – where else – at the very top of a very steep hill. We HAD to go check this out, the curious journalists that we are. We trekked to the top to find the Bokar Ngedon Chokhor Ling Monastery and to our surprise, us two Jewish wanderers received an invitation to enter!

Inside an impressive building, we observed Buddhist monks engaging in a full schedule of practice and study. But they took time out to take selfies with us.

Our trip did not end there. As a side trip Pandey offers for an extra cost, we travelled back to Delhi the next day, and after taking in the organized chaos of a huge and congested city as well as one of the best Indian dining experiences of my life, we were on our way to Agra to visit an immense mausoleum of white marble built between 1631 and 1648 by a Mughal in memory of his wife.

I had been to The Taj Mahal in 2004 but it never seems to be anything but striking and inspiring. If I had that guy's money, I'd build such a place in the Pinehills for my wife but I don't so I am happy to take home the pictures and memories of a time well-spent with an old friend.

Ironically early in the trip, Jeff and I told each other we probably wouldn't go for a third time.

Just getting there is a lot of work: two seven-hours flights and a layover just to get to Delhi, let alone the five days of running/walking. But a few days later, we completely changed course and who knows, we might be running in the Himalayas again one day.