

Getting out of a wheelchair and to the Himalayas



TO THE SUMMIT

NICK ALLEN

***To the Summit* is the inspirational story of Nick Allen, who went from outdoorsman to wheelchair-bound with multiple sclerosis, then back to the life in the mountains he loves through sheer determination and grit.**

This remarkable story follows Nick's first faltering steps back into the outdoors, and his most astounding adventure yet – tackling a Himalayan summit.

At the same time, motivated by his own experiences with this cruel disease, Nick established a trust to help other MS sufferers do what he has: embrace all the outdoors offers.

'A beautifully told and moving story about physical, mental and spiritual wellness, the restorative power of the natural environment and the journey towards freedom through mountaineering.' Laurence Fearnley, author of *The Hut Builder*

'A frank, insightful and compelling account of climbing with multiple sclerosis. Nick's writing is eloquent; his drive is inspiring. This is a remarkable book.' Jan Arnold, New Zealand Everest climber, mother and doctor

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MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

The view from Chukhung Ri, with Ama Dablam poking up through the cloud on the left.





To my grandparents

"Tis grace hath brought me safe this far
And Grace will lead me home.

John Newton

At the lookout below Nangkar Tshang, where we acclimatised in preparation for Island Peak. Pasang and I had walked up the valley behind me.



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Pasang coming down off Chukhung Ri with the cloud coming up from the valley below.



CHAPTER 1

RUSHING TO BASE CAMP



*October 2015
Everest Region, Nepal*

‘It’s too warm,’ Pasang shouted over the wind. ‘This is very bad — bad weather is coming.’ He unzipped his heavy down jacket.

‘How far away is the front?’ I shouted, trying to make myself heard over the noise of the stiff breeze.

Pasang looked down at the clouds building in the valleys several hundred metres below us. The occasional threatening wisp was cast up towards the barren rock-and-snow summits we stood beneath.

‘When the warm winds blow, the storm is coming,’ Pasang yelled. ‘About one and a half or two days away. It is coming with snow.’

He pointed up to Lhotse (8516 metres) towering above us, seemingly within reaching distance of our position just beneath the summit of Chukhung Ri (5550 metres).

‘And see the white trail coming off the top of Lhotse?’

I looked across to the scarred black ridges fringing the thousands of metres of vertical ice and snow that cling to Lhotse’s south face. At the top, a sharp-edged wing of cloud and ice was streaming off Lhotse’s peak, crowning more nebulous formations swirling off the eastern ridge. The wind was clearly violent.

‘Yes, I see it,’ I said, trying not to be distracted by the enormity of the view.

Thrilled to have reached the top of Chukhung Ri, I grabbed a selfie with Ama Dablam in the background. This was my first time above 5500 metres since my miserable experience on Stok Kangri.



Cloud suddenly enveloped us. My focus snapped back to the terrain directly around me. We were scrambling down ledges and slopes covered in loose shards of schist that glistened in the sun. There was no grass or moss at this altitude, just rock fractured by the endless leveraging of the freeze–thaw cycle. It was slow going and I needed to take care, but I quickened my pace so I could catch up with Pasang.

‘Sorry, what was that?’ I shouted into the wind.

He just kept moving.

When I did manage to catch up, Pasang said, ‘Ice trails on Lhotse are very bad sign. The winds have come and it means stronger winds come. Snow and high winds are not good for climbing — we need to reach Base Camp tomorrow, otherwise we miss the weather window.’

The news of an approaching front was hardly surprising. For the last few days we had woken to a sky full of high cirrus clouds, a development that marked a change from the more settled weather patterns of the past week. The clouds were beautiful in the mornings, catching the early light and painting the sky with colour, but they were also the harbinger of an approaching front.

Pasang probably knew this better than anyone; a Sherpa by birth, he grew up in these mountains. His family home was in Khumjung, a few kilometres back down the valley, and as a child and young teen he was responsible for the family’s yak herd. Every summer, he would bring the herd up these valleys to graze on the mountain pastures. He slept out in the wild with them, sheltering from storms and during cold nights alone. Yes, he knew how to read these mountains.



The need to get to Island Peak Base Camp the next day worried me. It was a day earlier than we had planned, and I was anxious about rushing our progress up the mountain. Tomorrow was supposed to be a rest day, an opportunity to gain the strength needed for the climb ahead. In view of my traumatic failure to summit Stok Kangri in northern India just three weeks earlier, and considering that our schedule afforded me only one shot at Island Peak, I was worried that

forfeiting a rest day could jeopardise my chance to summit. But then I wasn't prepared to surrender to the sky either.

'How long do you think this weather will last? Do you think we could wait until it has cleared?'

I almost slid on the loose rocks as I tried to keep up with Pasang.

'Waiting for the weather is bad option,' he replied. 'It could take one week or ten days to clear, and then there will be much snow on Island Peak, making the walking more difficult. I think we climb as soon as possible. We move quickly, to get back to Chukhung and the teahouse. We have lots to do. We need to do a gear check and pack.'

I tried to think of alternatives, a different solution. 'What if we walked over Kongma La tomorrow, headed up to Everest Base Camp, then came back to Island Peak for a climb?'

'We could do, but another weather window might not come, and we would have no time to do Three Passes trek.'

I was excited about completing the famous Three Passes trek — crossing Kongma La (5535 metres), Cho La (5420 metres) and Renjo La (5465 metres) — and I knew I would be disappointed to give it up, only to sit in a teahouse for days waiting for the weather to clear. And to miss the opportunity to climb Island Peak? Well, that was unthinkable.

I weighed up the options, nervous and uncertain about the best course of action. I felt the burden of my unsuccessful attempt on Stok Kangri. I did not want to lose another peak — to do so would mean writing off the whole trip, and my months of training, as a waste of time. I knew I would kick myself if I missed out on both Island Peak and the Three Passes trek because of a decision to postpone the climb. I need to accomplish something, I thought, and climbing sooner rather than later was probably the least risky option.

We continued our march down the hill to Chukhung village. By now we had moved off the more difficult part of the descent from the summit and on to a sharp but gentle ridge that took us down to a grassy saddle. The ridge was lined with hundreds of small cairns, blackened by the weather, some as old as the town below, no doubt. Sun-bleached prayer flags, tattered and frayed and heavy with

moisture, stuck to the rocks or flapped stiffly in the wind. It was much easier to move quickly along the ridge, thanks to the tracks formed over hundreds of years of ritualised prayer offerings. It was easier to think, too, now that I didn't have to concentrate so much on where I was putting my feet.

'I suppose it does make sense to go now,' I said. 'But do you think I am ready for Island Peak? I mean, are you confident that I could summit tomorrow night?'

'Yes, you are ready. Everything's good. Oxygen levels are good, you are fit, everything's good. You just climbed Chukhung Ri with no sign of altitude sickness. You are strong, ready.'

Pasang Sherpa's vote of confidence was reassuring. A six-time summiteer of Mt Everest, Pasang had guided clients up many other significant peaks. And he made a good point: we had been monitoring my blood-oxygen levels every day since our trip began eight days earlier and they were high, consistently matching Pasang's own. My heart rate was encouragingly low, the product of months spent training at the gym. And I did feel strong climbing Chukhung Ri, experiencing not so much as a flicker of a headache or a tinge of nausea. I also now knew that I could reach 5550 metres and function at that altitude, undoing some of the fears that had developed after my abortive attempt on Stok Kangri.

Nevertheless, those conflicting fears still ran deep. My experience on Stok Kangri had delivered a massive blow to my confidence, and I still did not fully trust my body's ability to function at high altitudes. I was plagued by the fear that this was all a pipe dream, doomed to come crashing down around me — that my multiple sclerosis would have the last word. Attempting to summit a day early meant cutting out that important day of rest.

These fears were not new — they had been at the back of my mind even before I left New Zealand — but they had intensified as a result of the struggle on Stok Kangri. For me, 5500 metres represented the point at which you pass into hell. Everything in me wanted to avoid a repeat of that experience, and I was deeply afraid of anything that might increase my chances of failure.

Sun-bleached prayer flags on an old
cairn above the town of Chukhung.



On the other hand, I was also deeply afraid of losing the opportunity to climb Island Peak. Although Imja Tse, as it is called by the locals, is a small 6189-metre peak sitting alone beside the towering faces of the Everest Massif, it was the main goal of my entire trip.

I wanted to climb Island Peak for two reasons. The first and main one was to help change the perception of multiple sclerosis as an inevitably debilitating disease, and by extension raise money for the Mastering Mountains Charitable Trust, which I had set up a few months earlier out of a desire to help the MS community. The purpose of the trust is to provide a scholarship for people with MS to help them overcome an obstacle that prevents them from getting outdoors. The public's response to the trust had been overwhelmingly positive and supportive, which was exciting.

The second reason I wanted to climb Island Peak was more personal. I still held the hope of getting serious about climbing, and Island Peak, which is known as the ideal entree into high-altitude climbing, was going to be a toe in the water, a test to see if I could manage something larger.

Stok Kangri and the previous nine months had all been leading up to this moment. So much was riding on my ability to summit — I stood to lose an incredible amount if I failed.

I was also afraid of sounding like a wimp. As Pasang and I talked during the walk back to Chukhung village, I tried to skirt around the issue of my MS, and particularly my fear of fatigue and failure. I did not want to state directly that I was afraid of getting sick. We had spoken about it before, but I did not want to bring it up again.

'Do you think we will lose anything by heading out a day early?' I asked Pasang.

'No, but you will probably lose Island Peak if we stay. Trust me, you will be fine. You are strong. We will go tomorrow.'

We had reached the grassy saddle that fed into the smooth flanks of the mountain. Pasang broke into a jog, gliding down the slope. I followed. This was the easiest way to descend.



We started the following day with a slow breakfast and a final gear check before heading out to Base Camp. We ate breakfast at 7 a.m., as was our routine, then sat in the morning sun drinking black tea and going through the gear again, making sure everything was there. I always enjoy the process of going through my gear a second time — I find it therapeutic. Seeing everything on the ground in front of me, going through a mental checklist again, and arriving at the conclusion that I have everything I need — assuming nothing goes too wrong — gives me a sense of calm.

With all this out of the way, I was ready to finish getting dressed. I love the act of robing up, putting on my technical garments in preparation for the day ahead. The process of getting ready, knowing that I am about to put my gear to its proper use, creates a wonderful feeling of anticipation.

When I was a kid, Dad would take us down to Mt Ruapehu once a year for a weekend of skiing. We would stay at Ohakune in an A-frame and head up to the Turoa skifield. Climbing into my ski pants, pulling on my socks and gloves, putting on my hat and glasses, was all part of an exciting ritual.

Driving up the mountain road, through the snow-laden beech forest and around the ancient lava flows, it felt as if we were flying to a different planet, a new world. When we reached the top of the road I'd open the door of the car, feel the blast of cold air on my face, put on my sunglasses and look up at the sky, a deeper blue. Up the mountain, everything felt innately better than at the lower reaches of the earth — the air and the light purer, closer to the source. Sitting on a chairlift and rising higher up the slopes, I was moving closer to the frozen summit, the dwelling place of climbers, those god-like men who were my heroes.

The track from Chukhung crossed the ice-laced waters of a cloudy glacial stream as it wove its way through the moraine fields, the remains of a glacier long receded. It was a beautiful morning, with a cloudless sky and a heavy chill in the air. I have always loved mornings like this — clear, cool, carrying a sense of exploration, of imminent discovery. This morning, as we walked across the glacier

towards Island Peak Base Camp, was no exception.

But the process of dressing and thinking my day through had also brought a sense of unease. As I considered how I would address any problems as they arose, it was easy to become anxious. I could think through the obvious scenarios — a twisted ankle or a graze — and take comfort from the fact that I had what I needed to deal with them. But then there were all those situations that you cannot really prepare for: legs broken in a fall, a collapse from exhaustion, a total loss of strength to a leg, the disappointment of failing to summit.

These scenarios played in the back of my mind, slowly undermining my confidence, as we wound over and around the old moraine mounds, now covered with hardy grass and mosses, beneath the towering peaks. I tried to focus on enjoying the stunning environment — the ravens circling, the impeyan pheasants running along the ground, the movement of ice across the mountain faces, the creaking and groaning of the glacier.

Staying on top of my thinking and remaining unstressed is both a necessity and a battle for me. Stress is one of my primary enemies when I'm trying to manage fatigue, as it quickly leaves me drained and makes me slow to recover. The danger of stress has been reinforced through my many crashes over the last few years, and never more powerfully than at Stok Kangri. But then the benefit of managing stress has also been evident in my many successes. As I walked through the moraine fields I knew I needed to return to basics, settle my thoughts and kill the stress.

I was doing just that as we walked into a beautiful little valley sandwiched between the southern moraine wall of Lhotse Glacier and the peaks towering above. The valley floor was flat — such a pleasant break from the unstable moraine fields — and supported by a braided stream, cloudy white and silver with the fine glacial powder and reflected morning light. The air was still and I felt a sense of the idyllic, of walking into a place that I had always longed for, where there is a view against which you judge all others lacking. For a moment, at least, I felt that childhood sense of wonder, with its pure thrill of being up high among the frozen white peaks.

Island Peak Base Camp.



This is what it is about, I thought. Walking along the valley floor, I felt a renewed determination to enjoy the journey, to go as far as I could, and to not let the success of the trip be determined by my ability to summit. I was aware that my concerns about success and failure were reducing my enjoyment of the landscape; a crying shame, I told myself, when I was in one of the most spectacular places on earth. With time, though, I felt a sense of peace and calm, happy to give the peak my best shot and to give away all those things outside of my control.

After we had been tramping for a couple of hours we decided to take a break near the top of the valley before crossing the base of the Imja Tsho glacial lake. We rested in the shade of a massive boulder, facing the stream and the sharply rising peaks. In the distance we could see three men — two climbers and their guide — returning from Island Peak Base Camp. The climbers looked fit and strong, but were obviously tired. The older of the two was relying heavily on his walking poles, while the younger was carrying the pair's ice axes, one in each hand. When they finally reached us they joined us in the shade, dropping their gear, the ice axes clinking as they bounced on the rocks.

'How's it going?' I asked.

The older climber glared at me. 'OK,' he replied, with what sounded like a German accent.

'Did you make it?'

The younger man started digging into his pack, absorbed in the search for his water bottle.

'No,' replied the older man.

I never know quite how to respond to answers like this. You want to acknowledge their frustration and pain, but don't want to devalue their attempt with an offer of pity. After all, in less than 24 hours there was every possibility that I might be replying 'No' to someone who asked me the same question.

'Oh, sorry to hear that,' I said. There didn't seem much more to say. I stared off towards the face that rose thousands of metres up out of the stream in front of us.

Pasang began talking to the men's guide. They spoke quickly in Sherpa. I stole a glance back at the two climbers. The older man looked as if he was about to cry. Raw disappointment was written on his face as he looked blankly at his water bottle, his jaw clenched.

I went back to the little drawing I had begun making with my finger in the dust — a spray of lines, forming a star of sorts.

Pasang shook hands with the other Sherpa and rose to leave. He looked at me and gave a quick nod. Once we were well out of earshot, I turned to him. 'What was up with those guys?'

'They got to Base Camp yesterday and were very sick at night. Vomiting and stuff. Their guide thought that it was acute altitude sickness.'

'Did they climb at all?'

'No, they did not even make a start. The guys were both too sick.'

I felt sorry for them, recalling how devastating it had been coming off Stok Kangri, even though the reason was different. And my sense of calm was now ruffled. Although I was quietly confident that altitude sickness would not be a problem — Pasang had done an excellent job of preparing me — I was still not sure how the altitude would affect my ability to manage fatigue. So far my track record at altitude was not great, and I knew I would be devastated by a second failure to summit: it would be unspeakably, crushingly disappointing.

I had begun to feel tired by now. Moraine is not the easiest to traverse at the best of times, but I was feeling a particular type of tiredness — the type that had proved dangerous in the past — and that worried me. Would I feel like this tomorrow?