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At 29,029 feet high, Mt. Everest is the tallest mountain on earth. Trekker Jay Fuhrman captured this shot while on his trip to Kalapatthar, which is the base camp that most travelers use on their way to the summit.



Photographs courtesy of Jay Fuhrman

## Transportation Planning Manager Travels Far From Home

By JIMMY STROUP

(Dec. 27, 2007) Jay Fuhrman's cubicle on the Gateway Building's 23rd floor sits near a window that faces north toward the San Gabriel Mountains.

Two months ago, when he looked north, Fuhrman saw Mt. Everest in Nepal, deep in heart of the Himalayas.

Fuhrman has worked at Metro for 17 years. As a child, his father gave him a book on the Himalayas, and the peaks of the 800-mile range – which routinely top 25,000 feet – fascinated him. He developed a love for hiking and climbing and has traveled extensively, usually incorporating a visit to a mountain wherever he goes.

But until recently, he'd never been to the peak of peaks – the "Roof of the World." The majestic Himalayas are the Holy Grail of mountaineering; the one place where none are disappointed – or so Fuhrman hoped before he left to go see them.

He was not disappointed.

"The mountains in the Sierras are great mountains, but they aren't the tallest or the most spectacular," said the transportation planning manager. "And after seeing them, I wanted to see the biggest mountains in the world."



Fuhrman, seen here relaxing in his tent before a day of hiking, traveled to Nepal to see the "Roof of the World." His fascination with mountains has been something he's cultivated since childhood.

### A long-standing quest

The desire to see Everest was one that had brewed inside Fuhrman since his exposure to mountains as a child. He'd hiked mountains all across the United States, in Ecuador, Mexico and Canada, but he'd never topped 14,000 feet. His quest to see Everest was also a quest to scale a higher elevation.

After some soul-searching and his family's approval, Fuhrman decided to book a spot on what's known as a "camping trek" to a place called Kalapatthar, near the base of Mt. Everest. Kalapatthar sits at 18,000 feet – a full 4,000 feet higher than he'd ever been before.

"There were traveler's warnings from the State Department that said to be wary of Nepal, and that was enough to put me off," he said. "Some people I knew said, 'I just went there and it was fabulous,' and some other people I knew said it was a funky place that's sort of messed up

and that I shouldn't go alone. So I was uncertain."

Nepal has been involved in a minor civil war for the last 10 years: traditional kingdom government supporters versus a Maoist insurrection. The possible danger had chilled Fuhrman's inclination to go, but his desire won out in the end.

"Eventually, I just said, 'to hell with it,' and made my mind up to go and put down a deposit, which really locked me in to going."

Fuhrman got his shots, got an OK from the doctor, did a few hikes to prepare and found himself winging his way to Nepal. The journey was a full 24 hours of flying, first to Bangkok and then to Katmandu, where he met up with his traveling group – which was mostly comprised of British citizens.

"There were 16 customers plus two guides, plus a whole support crew. A sidar – who's sort of the head sherpa, businessman who keeps everything going – four sherpa boys and a head cook," he said. "Then there were about nine kitchen staff who prepared all the food. Finally there were four or five yak herders."

### Soaking it in

Fuhrman's signed 14-day trek included food and lodging all the way to Kalapatthar. Yaks carried all the equipment, the sherpas set up the tents, and the cooks prepared all the food – leaving the traveler to enjoy the sights without distraction.

It also reduces the likelihood of sickness, since the cooks bring along their own food, carefully preparing



The travel company Fuhrman used on his trip to Mt. Everest included laborers to carry gear, cook food and set up camp when they stopped each evening. Everything the group needed was carried by man or by yak; there are no cars on the trail to Mt. Everest.

fresh food for the guests. All in all, the ratio of travelers to support staff was about one-to-one, which Fuhrman found comforting.

"I never got sick. It was wonderful. I felt good the whole time. Never once had altitude issues," he said. "I never even got a headache."

The flight from Katmandu to the low-lying areas surrounding Everest is one that Fuhrman called "an experience." After 24 straight hours on an airliner, the group took a 16-seat plane to a little airfield cut out of a Himalayan mountain.

"It's a very short runway," he said. "If you come in too low, you hit the mountain and if you're too high...you die."

"When you're leaving, you have to bank very sharply because there's this big mountain in front of you and

if you don't, you die," he said.

### **Only a 'walk'**

Still, the flights in and out were the only treacherous parts of Fuhrman's trip. The group took nine days to hike to their destination – which Fuhrman called a "walk."

"It was challenging because it was at 15,000 feet, but we took it slow and it was no big deal," he said.

The weather was another barrier Fuhrman shrugged off. Fall is the most common trekking season at Everest, with temperatures ranging from the upper 50s in the lower areas to the 20s at night in higher elevations.

"It was cold at night, sure, but it wasn't that bad. I'm a fair-weather Californian, but I had my North Face down jacket and a terrific sleeping bag," he said. "I wasn't cold."

Conditions in the villages on the climb up surprised him, though. Tourism in the area has created a higher standard of living in the Everest trek areas than in other parts of Nepal. So though the country is third world and poverty-stricken, there were Internet connections and televisions and restaurants and bakeries.

"There's more infrastructure than you'd think," Fuhrman explained. "It's just that there aren't any motorized vehicles and roads because of the topography."

### **No disappointment**

Everest and Nepal were all Fuhrman hoped they would be. He said the

rumors of Nepal being dangerous were completely overstated.

"Immediately when I go there, I realized that whatever I'd heard about insurrection and Maoists was just bunk," he said. "The people there were generally Hindu and Buddhist and very peaceful, generous, humble and unassuming. We might look at them as simple, but that's their way of life. They're very connected to the land and the animals."

He did notice that there were few Americans. Fuhrman chalked it up to a combination of the extremely long journey just to get to Nepal, and a little bit of Sept. 11 worry over leaving the U.S. for countries very near Afghanistan, Pakistan and the like.

"I have no regrets. It was everything I expected it to be. It was a great trip. I feel more ambitious now. I'd be willing to do more next time because of this trip."

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