

Tilicho Tal

In the fall of 1984, I headed on a solo journey to the Himalayas with the intention of hiking a classic trail that was known as the “Annapurna Circuit”. I had one additional goal that had been in my thoughts since college. Back then, when I was about 20 years old, I had enjoyed rock climbing and mountaineering for about five or six years. I had climbed in Britain, Norway and Austria, where I had reached peaks that were up to 10,000 feet. But in college, the thought of going to the Himalayas felt so exotic that it seemed unreachable.

One day, several college friends and I had been tidying a large cupboard where we stored all of the climbing ropes and other gear. Hidden under other gear, I found an old guidebook to treks in the Himalayas. All of the photographs were black and white. One photograph jumped out at me: it was harsh, it had a foreboding quality, it looked stark, but I was totally drawn by its power.

One of my friends saw me studying the picture, “Hey, man, you look like you’re under a spell.”

“Perhaps, I am.” I responded.

“So, what are you looking at, Barry? Is she pretty?” another friend quipped.

“It’s a photograph of Tilicho Tal (Lake Tilicho) and it’s thought to be the highest lake in the world that never totally freezes over, which is surprising as it’s at about 16,200 feet.” In that moment, something deep down inside me knew that I would one day stand on its shores.

Sixteen years later, I started the journey to trek the “Annapurna Circuit” and take a side trail up to Tilicho Tal, and now I restart it once again, but this time in writing.

In Kathmandu, I checked out several trekking agencies and eventually found Lakhpa who would be my guide for the trek. He spoke faltering English, but it was fine for most of our exchanges. A few days later, at dawn we arrived at the main bus terminal, which was a sea of confused people wondering which bus would go where. Lakhpa bought tickets and after several attempts, we found a bus heading out to Western Nepal. Once our luggage was stowed on the bus’s roof and we had found an empty seat, Lakhpa turned to me, “We will depart the bus at a small village that is about 20 or 30 miles this side of Pokhara, which is the main city in that area. When we get out of Kathmandu, if you want, we can go and sit up on the roof rack. The temperature is warm, so it may feel better than being crammed in here.”

By the time we departed the terminal, all the seats were filled and people jammed the aisle ways. This made the bus conductor’s job very difficult as he checked people’s tickets and sold tickets to other travelers who joined the bus along the way. The conductor was small and wiry allowing him to climb over the backs of seats, in and out of the wide open, or missing, windows, and even up to the roof rack, where a large group of people had gathered. He could move quickly about the bus, despite the bus lurching along pitted roads at about 40 mph. His antics kept me well entertained for the journey that lasted about four or five hours.

I was enjoying some beautiful flowering trees alongside the road when Lakhpa looked back at me, “OK. This is where we leave the bus. There’s a place for lunch over on the right of

where the bus'll stop. Grab yourself some Dahl Bhat while I'll go and find a porter. I'll be back shortly and join you for lunch."

In the couple of days that I had been in Kathmandu, I had become familiar with Dahl Bhat. It basically was rice, lentils and spinach in spicy sauces. It was a staple that provided a good source of protein and was very cheap. It was eaten by many households for most of their meals as other types of food were too expensive for them.

Looking up from the relative comfort of my place on the edge of the luggage on the roof, "You mean we have to walk from here?" I asked.

"For the next few weeks, at least." He laughed.

While I relaxed and explored the delights of a plate of Dahl Bhat, Lakhpa found an amazing little teenager to be our porter. He may have only weighed about 90 pounds, but he could haul about the same amount in the load. He, also, was the one who kept waiting for Lakhpa and I, and we weren't slow.

We hiked around to the Northern side of the Annapurna range from the eastern end. After about ten days of trekking, we reached a large village, Manang. It was situated in the main valley that laid just south of the Nepali/Tibetan border. Over the centuries, Manang had grown larger than other villages in the valley as it was close to a couple a passes that allowed Tibetan merchants to come and trade their wares with Nepali traders. We stayed in a large "tea house" that was crowded with trekkers who would be heading north easterly towards the Thorong La – the highest pass on the entire Annapurna Circuit. We anticipated returning to this point in a few days.

My Tilicho Tal adventure was about to begin. The next morning, we headed South along a much smaller trail that wound its way up a narrow side valley. By lunchtime, we reached the one village that was located in the valley. The entire village comprised about eight cottages where farmers and herders lived. There were no stores or any amenities - just these cottages. Lakhpa had to ask at a few of the cottages to find the one family who he had been told about in Manang: this was the only cottage where travelers could find accommodation. As we looked around the area surrounding the village, we could see several fields that held herds of sheep or goats.

I asked Lakhpa, "How come these fields have no fences, but the goats and sheep don't seem to want to meander?" I could see some branches, I presumed from bushes, lining the borders of these fields, but that was all.

Lakhpa looked down at some close by branches, "Barry. Don't go near those branches. They have the strongest and sharpest thorns you will find anywhere. They will rip you really badly. Those sheep and goats know to avoid them: that's the reason why the villagers collect these branches and line the fields with them. Those branches also protect the flocks from any predators that may come through the valley at night."

After lunch, Lakhpa and I sorted out our gear as we would be leaving our porter at the cottage and carrying only what we may need for our quick adventure up to Tilicho Tal. I slept fitfully that night as I felt a little anxious about the following day. After a good breakfast,

Lakhpa and I headed further south; dawn light began creeping down the peaks that seemed to hang so far above us. The trail became narrower and less defined as it gradually started to angle up the side of the valley. It appeared to be heading towards a massive scree (an open area of mountainside that was covered in loose gravel and small boulders). The scree rose from the river that meandered along the bed of the valley up to the shoulders of the peaks that sat to our right. Sure enough, the trail led out and across the scree, which looked extremely intimidating. It lay at an angle of between 45 and 60 degrees, allowing us to rarely see the top or the bottom of it. Crossing it was a constant fight - for every two steps across it, we slid at least one step down it, which we had to clamber back up to stay near where the trail appeared to be. Our progress slowed dramatically when the trail started to gradually ascend the mountainside as it crossed the scree. Occasionally, we were fortunate to find outcrops of solid rock where we could stand and rest for a short period. The day was progressing on, but it seemed that the scree went on for ever.

After many hours of slow climbing, the path caused us some major consternation. The path hit a solid outcrop that felt good until we followed the path's next section with our eyes. The outcrop became a semi circular chute that appeared to cut a path straight down the scree. Loose rocks tumbled down the rocky chute regularly and the path crossed the chute. To heighten my fears, the chute seemed to be made of weak flakey rock. The distance across that chute may have only been ten to twelve feet, but there were no bail-out options. We honestly had a conversation about quitting there and then: it looked very dangerous.

“Oh shit! That doesn't look good.” I stammered.

“Is there another way around this point?” Lakhpa mused.

“We've been on the only trail for hours. Is this the end of our Tilicho Tal attempt?”

“We can surely cross this little problem.” Lakhpa muttered as if he was persuading himself.

I tried to not look down the chute as it appeared to go straight down the mountain for several hundred feet before disappearing from sight. The one and only slightly encouraging detail were signs of boot scuff marks around the few flattish spots that could be considered to be foot holds.

Lakhpa peered at the potential foot holds, “Does it look like some other people have clambered across this chute before us?”

“I was wondering that myself, too. The rock is so soft that other climbers' boots have left marks. And I don't see any evidence that anyone slipped. So it could be strong enough for us to get across.”

Amazingly enough, that was all the encouragement we needed. Lakhpa said, “I'll go first to check it out.” I realized later that I was then forced to follow him across the chute as I didn't fancy the idea of reversing across and down all that scree on my own.

Lakhpa was not a trained climber and had only limited experience of rock climbing. I watched him move out onto the fragile foot holds feeling reasonably confident but then, in an instant, my faith melted. He suddenly started to experience a problem that I had suffered

multiple times when I used to rock climb - the knee shakes. This happened when I felt so fearful that I lost control of the nerves in my legs causing the knees to shake uncontrollably. The only thing to do was to try to relax and regain control over the leg muscles. I felt totally useless, helpless and extremely concerned. He gradually pulled himself together and managed to traverse across the remainder of the chute. He stood on the outcrop on the far side and it felt like he was miles away. I maneuvered out onto the foot holds and sensed Lakhpa's fear - that was one exposed and nerve wracking place to be, but I knew that he had crossed it and I had a sense that I was at the worst point. As I moved further to the left, my mind seemed to relax and take in how the foot and hand holds felt and how I experienced the rock chute. In a flash, I nicknamed it "Flakey Pastry Gorge" and that nickname was imprinted forever in my mind, by the time I reached Lakhpa. We stood there shaking hands and patting each other on the back acknowledging that we were probably fortunate to be holding each other's hand, but without actually saying the words.

From that outcrop, we could see the far edge of the scree and where it transitioned to grass. After another hour of scree crossing, we happily left its instability and enjoyed the solidity of grassy ground. We trudged up the trail that meandered ever upward towards a ridge that hung above us.

From talking with local people in Manang and stories he had heard over the years, Lakhpa knew that we would need to have one overnight and we had planned accordingly. Despite having to plan for an overnight, knowing about the scree crossing we had pared down as much weight as we could and carried just the bare essentials.

During the hours that we spent crossing the scree, we occasionally thought we may have heard possible voices but we never saw anyone. Finally, we saw a group a short distance above us. The open grass had been funneled into a narrow gully and it formed a perfect sheltered area where we could all camp for the night. A couple of other small groups had already established their camps. We laid out a groundsheet and our sleeping bags as the sun dipped down behind the peaks that seemed now to be a little closer than they had felt that morning. We chatted with the other groups about their routes to that point. One other group had taken the same trail as ourselves and they agreed that the gorge had been really troubling. Others had climbed higher on the mountains in an attempt to avoid much of the scree. We all agreed that there was no easy way to reach this staging point.

As the skies were clear and the sun could no longer warm us, the temperature quickly plummeted down to about freezing. Before darkness fell, we gathered water from a nearby stream and pulled out the stove that I had brought with me to cook some soup. Snuggled in my sleeping bag, sipping soup and watching the moonlit snowy peaks felt so good. I was exhausted from the day's hike and was asleep before 7:00.

I was awoken by Lakhpa at about 8:30 with a cup of warm coffee (the dreaded instant variety that may have been near a single coffee bean at some time). I sipped it and was back asleep in no time. At 11:10, I was presented with another cup of soup that I didn't want. I realized that probably Lakhpa's sleeping bag was not capable of handling the cold that hung

around us at the 15,000 feet elevation and he needed the hot drinks to keep warm. He did ask me if I wanted another hot drink at 2:30 and I refused it.

A frosty dawn greeted us and we struggled to our feet to start the day. Lakhpa set about making some tea to warm us, but soon realized that his night of keeping a supply of hot drinks had depleted our fuel supplies. So breakfast was a stale cold granola bar with no warming beverage for either of us.

We left unnecessary gear on the groundsheet while we only took camera and emergency gear on the final 1,000-foot clamber. As we approached the top of the ridge, a bitterly cold wind began to buffet us and its strength gained with each step we took, but at least the weather was clear and sunny allowing us to see the entire incredible panorama. The top of the ridge was a mixture of rock outcrops and expanses of gravel. But there, just beyond, stretched the waters of Tilicho Tal - I had made it. A sense of joyous wonder protected me from the frigid wind for a few minutes. I tried to take in the enormity of the peaks that surrounded this one small lake. But the icy wind struck deep to our bones, and its howling roar made the smallest vocal exchange impossible. I felt both exhausted and elated. I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. My eyes fought the wind to stay open enough to savor the azure, gray and white of the lake and the sparkling spectacle of snow and ice fields that had been draped upon the shoulders of the peaks as they stood, looking down upon us. Between the lake and the mountains' upper shoulders, snow fields and rock faces wove intricate patterns as they ascended towards their lofty peaks.

It had taken 16 years of dreaming, planning and hiking – I finally stood on the shores of Tilicho Tal. In the bright sunlight, the rock faces had a lighter grey color than they had in the photograph I had seen in college, giving it a softer feel than the picture. But the power and splendor of the vista were undeniable and I was in awe.

On the far side of the lake where the shore appeared to abruptly change to sheer rock walls, the water was frozen. The ice extended over about a quarter of the lake. On our side of the lake, it was still unfrozen and the wind sent white capped waves across the water's surface, but they were soon dashed upon the rocks that lay just below where we stood. I felt a kinship with the lake; it strove to not give in to the icy wind that seemed intent on freezing it over, while I defied the wind's icy claws that wanted to drag me away from the lake and back down the side of the ridge.

It was impossible to just stand there, in the wind. We needed to brace both feet firmly on solid rock and lean determinedly into the wind. One casual step would send us staggering backwards, almost requiring us to sit down to regain some stability. We took in this incredible spectacle for about 10 minutes, but the wind and the cold drove us back down the ridge. Soon the sights of the lake and peaks were nothing but memories. I wished that we had been able to stay longer, taking in the sights. But being forced to depart left me with an overwhelming sense of wonder, having observed such natural beauty, which I could only witness through my own resistance to the violent conditions that had created this beauty. Such stark beauty cannot be seen and understood, intellectually – it has to be experienced and felt.

We stopped at our overnight camp to gather up our belongings and to relax for a short time. We discussed our return as the thought of crossing Flakey Pastry Gorge was certainly unappealing. We took the trail back though the grass to the edge of the scree. From there we started to return along the trail as it crossed the scree towards the gorge. But we had no intention of retracing our steps across the gorge. We simply needed to be out in the main body of the scree before we could drop off the trail and we started to descend the scree, straight down. Descending a scree, known as screeing, is an interesting activity: it is a combination of leaping, skiing, running and praying - constantly. Gravity was the power source and we hoped that your leg muscles could provide enough braking power and control. I felt it was as close as I could imagine to flying whilst still being on the ground. We dropped a thousand feet in a matter of a couple of minutes, all the time screaming in response to the wild exhilaration. We took a break for a minute or two to rest our legs, then dropped and screamed down another thousand feet of scree. This, we repeated, with the rest breaks coming more frequently and for longer as the pounding was driving our legs to near exhaustion. We finally steered our path over to one side of the scree so that we could move back on to grass just before we reached the river.

Having dropped our packs nearby, we both collapsed into the river in euphoric states. I don't think either of us had ever experienced such a sustained thrill as that scree run. We had descended about 7,000 feet in just under an hour - our bodies were beyond exhausted, but we were on total adrenaline highs. It was one great, but very weird feeling. Laying in the river felt so good, but soon hunger forced us back into action.

There was no path alongside the river and, at times, there was no easy way around it so we simply clambered down little rapids or walked along the riverbed. That walk back down the river, no matter if it was in it, or alongside it, felt extremely surreal. It took us about two hours to arrive back in the village where we caught up with our porter. He looked at both of us and said something about us looking a little strange, which I felt was probably a fair assessment of our states.

I have rarely taken afternoon naps, but that day, I did and I felt so much better for it. The following morning, we headed back down to Manang and the main trail.

It had been my hopeful intention to see Tilicho Tal and I had then done so: it may have only been for 10 minutes, but I would not have traded those 10 minutes for any other experience. To have a wild dream and to actually live it out is something that is rare. To have the opportunity to experience such may require us to face our own deep-seated fears, to feel our breath literally taken away, or to sense true euphoria. I had experienced all three and, not to be too dramatic about it, I lived to tell the tale. Some may say that I was fool-hardy to have taken this side trip: that is debatable. I definitely was drawn at times to risk-taking, however, I was never suicidal. In this adventure, I could not deny the risks involved, at any point, or the potential consequences. Some people would have not taken these risks because of the potentially dangerous conditions. But, in many ways, isn't that comparable to daily life. Risks exist in every day, but people become comfortable with them. I have heard of people who refuse to fly or even drive on freeways because they believe these forms of transport to be too dangerous. In

the case of Tilicho Tal, the risks were more obvious and they allowed me absolutely no room to hide or be distracted from them. This, in some sense, was a time of living in the absolute and raw here-and-now. There was no space for defensiveness, nor bravado, nor machismo and no glib acceptance of potential risks - this was a time of brutally honest living. A number of major thrills occurred in this 48-hour adventure, but if there were significantly memorable thrills in it, then these were them – firstly, the amazing experience of living with brutal honesty in the here-and-now, looking at life and death as one. And secondly, in writing this account, I have recognized a powerful lesson having only managed to spend about 10 minutes at the lake. The most important aspect of attaining a long-time dream is not in its achievement, but it is in the effort to gain it.