

## TRAVELLERS' TALES: WITHOUT WORDS

It was 1984 and I was stuck on a trek in the Himalayas with a recently divorced bloke who wanted to talk only about it, and a family of four who wanted to talk only to each other.

During the day I contrived to walk on my own. Such scenery was all the company I could want. I even sort of enjoyed, in retrospect at least, negotiating the suspension bridges. The Sherpas, who could see how much the bridges terrified me, would wait until I reached the centre and then run out from the sides and jump up and down. They screamed in delight as I clung to the ropes, paralysed with fear, but they never let the torture go on for too long. They were my friends and it was all good fun.

Each night I sat with them and the "kitchen boys" as they relived the highlights of the day. I didn't understand a word they were saying but I usually got the gist and it was

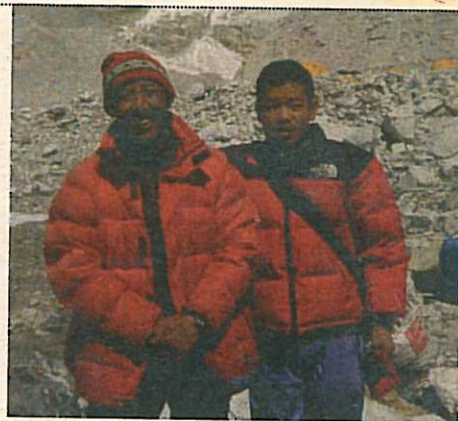
a much more entertaining evening than the alternative on offer.

The highlights for them usually entailed me on the suspension bridge, me or one of the other walkers falling over in a stream, or any of us plodding painfully up a hill that they scampered up and down in thongs. With hardly a common word we had plenty of common laughter.

The format of the conversation was extraordinarily civilised. One person would hold the floor and tell his (they were all male) story and the others would listen until the story was told, the laughter had died down and the next person began his story. Sometimes they went for five or 10 minutes. My favourite Sherpa, Kumar, had a command of English that ran to "Hello!" and, innocently, "Girls just wanna have fun" from listening over and over to my Cindi Lauper tape on my Walkman. One night

he told a story which went on for a longer than usual time. When he finally finished I said across the circle to him. "In Australia they would call you 'motormouth'." I motioned with my thumb and opposing fingers opening and shutting to indicate talking too much. He sort of smiled and I thought he didn't understand. But another story started and soon we were all laughing again.

The head Sherpa came in after a while. He didn't often join these groups and he was soon given the floor. He told of his recent guiding trip to Mount Everest Base Camp with a group of Japanese with whom he had no language in common. They had developed a series of phrases so they could manage, such as "go now" "stop now" "eat" "camp". It had been a lonely trip for him because he was the only non-Japanese and they had kept to themselves. I knew because he spoke very good English



and he translated enough of the story as he went for me to keep up. And it was a doozie of a story. It must have gone on for 20 minutes or more while everyone else sat silently and listened attentively.

When it did end, Kumar looked across at me with the widest grin, raised his hand and made the "motormouth" motion.

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