

## Hallucinating - from hunger - in the Himalayas



KIM ROSEN THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**MATT WHELAN**

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The smiling nomad wanted me to swap my sleeping bag for his chicken, my knife for his eggs, my headlamp for his rice and my stove for his flour. When I looked at his goat, he only grinned.

His brown, leathery face opened to reveal a cavity of broken, yellow teeth through which his tongue pushed coils of wet, black tobacco like hot tar through a spaghetti strainer. I've never wanted to know what he wanted for the goat.

A month earlier, our group of a dozen schoolboys, two teachers and a doctor had landed at

Benazir Bhutto International Airport in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, and headed north on buses into the Chitral and Hunsa territories that border Tajikistan to the west, China to the north and India to the south.

We had trekked for weeks through the rough and barren landscape of the country's Northern Areas. We had ridden yaks, their hairy, huffing masses parting seas of tiny green frogs.

We had been inside the blue cavities of glaciers and crossed the frigid rivers formed by their withdrawal, pissing on our own toes to warm them when we reached the other side.

We had reached Mingli Sar, a 6,050-metre mountain from the peak of which one can see K2 on a clear day.

We were in the foothills of the Himalayas, where valleys, often more than a mile across, give sharp rise at their edges to looming rock that leans in, obscuring the sun and choking the horizon. The valleys were scraped out by glaciers at the end of the last ice age, from mountains 70 million years in the making.

It's astonishingly beautiful country, but nothing looks beautiful on a stomach that is so far past empty, your very frame is shrinking upon it.

Two days into the return trip, we had realized we were short on food – about seven days short as it turned out – and would each have to spend the rest of the trek on a daily helping of one wet chapati, three tinned mushrooms, a slice of cheese and a scoop of sticky white rice.

It wasn't enough, and I remember watching the weight fall from my companions' bodies by the day, as it must have been falling from my own.

Food became the stuff of fantasy, and sometimes hallucination. Rocks began to look like potatoes and the sweat pouring off people's brows became condensation sliding down the sides of a cold can of cola. People's fingers began to look more and more like sausages, and sometimes I could hear them sizzling in the midday heat.

As our strength evaporated, so too did our morale, patience and basic courtesy. Squabbles

broke out with increasing frequency. During one meagre lunch stop, each of us doing our best to savour our scant calorific intake, somebody piped up to announce what a character-building exercise this would prove to be – that in time we'd be grateful for it.

The notion seemed absurd – and offensive – under the intense heat and light of another starved afternoon. The timing, like the rice, was rotten. I had neither the will nor the strength to protest, but others did, and the doctor had to intervene.

Watching the kerfuffle, I wondered which of us would become the Lord of the Flies. This must have been a very funny idea, because I broke down in hysterics, suffocating giggles that forced me to curl up on the ground and spill two of my button mushrooms into the dust. I ate them anyway.

A few more desperate days followed before we were lucky enough to cross paths with a group of shepherds.

Their own malnourished hands gestured between our battered camping gear and their small herd of stringy livestock.

One man wanted my sleeping bag for the chicken.

My sleeping bag? But what would I sleep in? Never mind sleep, I thought. Dead men don't stay warm in anything. I wanted meat. So I handed over my Sierra Series 860 with full synthetic down for a single, scrawny fowl.

Others traded pots or stoves, sleeping mats or socks, walking away with handfuls of eggs or small sacks of flour for which they now had little means of preparation. I saw a fold-out cutlery set go for a few strips of dried meat and a packet of cigarettes go for a cup of rice.

No one felt they could afford the goat.

Once trading had closed, we set up a diminished camp, lit fires and cooked our newly acquired food to the best of our already limited ability and newly restricted equipment.

It would be three more days of hard walking and long, frozen nights before we reached a transport tractor near the settlement of Shimshal that would take us to the road to Rawalpindi. By then, I'd lost more than 30 pounds and learned about true hunger.

Real hunger is not often suffered by those in the West, especially well-to-do prep-school boys from central England. When it is relieved, even for a short while, the relief is great.

As I chewed on strands of undercooked chicken and grains of dry rice, I watched the sun disappear behind the foothills of the Himalayas, and for a short while they looked beautiful.

*Matt Whelan lives in Whistler, B.C.*

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

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