Conditioning for Trekking in Nepal

by John Graves

I trekked in Nepal in 2019 when we traveled to Everest Base Camp via Gokyo (18,000'), the highest elevation for the MSSE Trek. I found that physical conditioning training was essential to an enjoyable, successful trek. The guides do an excellent job of acclimating trekkers to the conditions experienced in the Himalayas by gaining altitude slowly, taking rest days and keeping a watchful eye on everyone. That being said, personal training and conditioning are essential. We hope to create a generic training schedule to be posted later, but for now, consider the following:

• Increase cardiovascular fitness by doing high-intensity training. Intervals are an excellent way to accomplish this. Consider working out by climbing stairs, training on steep hills/mountains, running and cycling.
• Add strength training and balance to your workouts. Consider lunges, squats, step-ups and step-downs to prepare your knees and ankles.
• Train like you're trekking by simulating conditions we'll face in Nepal. Be outdoors, hike up and down hills and put in the miles. Think of this trek as a marathon, not a sprint. A slow, steady pace will serve you better than being in it to win it.

Familiarize yourself with Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). It is one of the leading problems for trekkers. The symptoms of this sickness are headaches, shortness of breath and dizziness. Don't be embarrassed if you begin to feel off while trekking. You are putting yourself and the group at risk by being silent, so tell the leader and/or guide. There are steps that can be taken to get you better, including resting an extra day and catching the group later or moving to a lower altitude if needed. If left attended, the condition could worsen into high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) or high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE), both of which can be deadly and will require immediate attention. In the worst-case scenario, that means being airlifted off the mountain at your expense.

Check out the table below that shows oxygen concentrations at various elevations. If we consider all the available oxygen at sea level as 100%, you can see that you have 50% of that amount available at 18,000 feet. Crazy, huh?

Altitude (ft)	Altitude (m)	Oxygen level (5%)	Available oxygen (%)
0	0	20.9	100
2500	762	18.6	96
5000	1524	17.3	83
7500	2286	15.6	75
10,000	3048	14.3	68
12,000	3658	13.2	63
14,000	4267	12.3	59
16,000	4877	11.4	55
18,000	5486	10.5	50