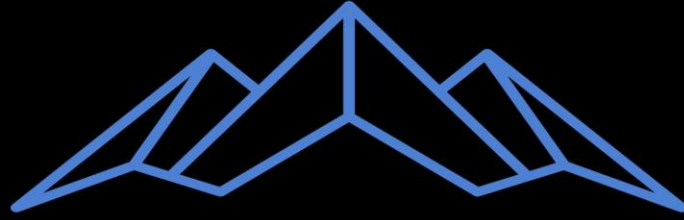


# Shooting in the Himalayas

by



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We all love a good statistic to enhance our narrative and the Himalayas are a veritable gold mine. The World's largest mountain range arcs through five countries over its 2400km length. It contains more than 50 mountains over 7,200 metres, and all 14 of the peaks over 8000 metres. To put this into perspective the highest mountain anywhere outside the range is Aconcagua, in the Andes, at just 6,961 metres. The three highest peaks on Earth fall on borders and are shared by two countries. Kanchenjuga is the third highest mountain at 8,586m and is shared by Nepal and India. China and Pakistan share Chhogori, in the Karakorum, which is the second highest mountain at 8,611m. The Nepalese and Tibetans share the honour of hosting the World's highest mountain known as Sagarmāthā in Nepal and Chomolungma in Tibet which stands at a massive 8,848m.

The region's glaciers contain so much water that the Himalayas are often referred to as the 'Third Pole'. A staggering 1.4 billion people rely on the mountains for their water supply, that's over 18% of the World's population. They feed Asia's ten largest rivers and, in turn, much controversy as sources are being dammed and diverted fuelling political tensions among regional neighbours. According to Guinness World Records, the Kashmir region is the World's most militarised zone, with over one million troops stationed either side of the 'Line of Control' every day.

The Himalayas have so much more than impressive statistics to offer film makers. They include an incredible diversity of mountain locations from huge snow-capped panoramas; Alpine forests, meadows, and streams; high altitude deserts, rock, and ice; plateaus, glaciers, and vast azure lakes. They are equally culturally diverse with communities from the Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist faiths, alongside so many tribal communities it would be impossible to list them all.



### **Permits & Visas:**

All Himalayan countries require a visa to enter. Some are easier to come by than others and if you want to keep everything legal and above board you will need to start this process early in your production schedule. You should approach the embassy or consulate of the concerned countries for their application process. In most cases it won't be possible for your Fixer to get



local permits, in your name, until you have a general permission to shoot in the country. Broadly speaking a minimum of three weeks and a maximum of sixteen weeks is required to complete these formalities but this varies a lot from country to country. The minimum would apply to 'simple' locations, that avoid restricted areas and National Parks, and the maximum applies to applications that include these. It's worth investigating the costs of all the necessary permits, and the Fixer's expenses associated with acquiring them, early on. They will almost certainly cost more than you think.



## **Travel & Access:**

Nearly all regions of the Himalaya are best accessed from the nearest international airport followed by one or two domestic flights, and then a 4WD vehicle, or a trek on foot. Land borders are best avoided if possible, as clearing foreign crew and equipment at remote border posts can be purgatory. If you must cross a land border be sure to have a Fixer on both sides.

Access times vary tremendously. If you want to shoot at Sagarmāthā base camp in Nepal you'll take a hair-raising flight from Kathmandu into Lukla, arguably the World's most dangerous airport, followed by a ten-day hike to base camp – this includes two acclimatisation days but more on that later.

Probably the quickest access to incredible Himalayan locations is the Dhauladhar range in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. After arriving at Delhi international airport it's a short 1hr 20min domestic flight to Dharamshala airport – sometimes called Kangra or Gaggal airport – where you land right in the foothills of the mountains. A short 1.5-hour drive later and you can be shooting in a pristine valley towards nearby high snow-capped mountains.

When your locations are beyond a road head you are going to be on foot unless your budget, and locations, allow for helicopter access. This means that all your film gear and most of your personal baggage will be carried by porters and ponies. It's advisable to use expedition camping accommodation even if homestays and tea houses are available en-route. Having a self sufficient base camp allows for privacy and ensures that you will have comfortable



accommodation, and adequate provisions even when local resources are overwhelmed in busy periods. Even a small documentary crew typically carry 120-150kg of film gear plus at least 20kg of personal baggage per crew member. Add this to the expedition infrastructure – tents, bedding, portable generators, fuel, catering and you're going to need quite a few porters and ponies. As a rule of thumb ethical weights for a porter are approx 20kg, and for a pony approx 80kg, although many carry much more you shouldn't encourage the practice.

## **High Altitude Filming:**

### **Acclimatisation**

Once you leave the foothills and start working above 2,500m the Himalayas can be considered a hostile filming environment for your Risk Assessment and Health & Safety planning. You need to build in time for crew to acclimatise to altitude to avoid serious illness, and even death, due to Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS).



There are no absolutes as everyone acclimatises at different rates but generally, you should spend a night around 2,500m before travelling to 3,000m where you should make an acclimatisation stop of two nights i.e. the night you arrive and a further night. In the intermediary 'rest' day you can work at slightly higher altitudes if you return to 3,000m to sleep. After your two nights at 3000m you can move up to 3500m for one night and then up to 4000m where you must again spend two nights for acclimatisation. So, the rule is after 3000m you should only increase your sleeping altitude by 300 to 500m per day, and for each 1000m gained you must make an acclimatisation stop of two nights. If you have a headache along with any of the following symptoms: Nausea, loss of appetite, dizziness, disorientation, fatigue, or insomnia then you should descend as much as possible, as soon as possible, until you feel completely well again. If you feel unwell at all, except for simple traveller's stomach (diarrhoea), then assume it's AMS and descend. Do not take chances and never ascend if you are in any doubt. The onset of life-threatening complications can be sudden.

### **Climate**

Once at altitude weather can change suddenly and unexpectedly. Unpredictable micro-climates can develop in small areas so it's not uncommon to stand on a high pass between two valleys and see sunshine in one valley and a raging storm in the next one. Layered clothing is advisable. A base layer of synthetic wicking fabric that draws sweat away from your body and dries quickly is great for warmer climates while a base layer of merino wool is great for colder situations. Then you can add a light fleece, down jacket, hat & gloves, and waterproofs to cover other eventualities. All these layers should be available to you at all times in case the weather surprises you. Daytime temperatures will always be significantly higher than night time, so you will definitely need a range of clothing to cover a wide range of temperatures regardless of changes in weather. If there's any chance you'll encounter snow, or get caught in a storm then crampons, gaiters, ice axes, and ropes should be available. And, if you're travelling in vehicles, snow chains for the tyres are a good idea.



### **Crew**

Each unit should have a highly experienced local guide who can communicate with your crew. Local porters should be assigned to carry gear for your crew. They are used to the environment and altitude. All crew should support each other and watch out for potential dangers at all times. Each camera operator should have a spotter who ensures they don't inadvertently fall while looking through the viewfinder and moving around.

## Equipment

The colder it gets the less efficiently batteries work so you'll need more of them. Lots of them. And, if you're going to be in remote areas take a couple of small portable generators with you, and enough fuel, to re-charge them. Lenses freeze and fog which takes time to clear when exposed to sudden changes in temperature. Cables become brittle at low temperatures and camera bodies fail. It's therefore essential to carry spares as there certainly won't be anything available locally.

## Communications

This can be extremely tricky in the Himalayas as you quickly lose mobile phone network coverage. If the country, you are filming in, permits the use of satellite phones and UHF/VHF radios then you should be OK. It's worth noting India doesn't but they do allow unlicensed CB radios and have a frequency band specifically for mountaineering. Garmin have a range of useful GPS gear, that not only allows you to track your position and follow routes, but some also allows you to trigger an emergency response, showing your exact location, and send text messages via the Iridium satellite network.

## Emergencies

It is essential to have paramedic first responders, specifically trained for remote hostile environments, within a short distance of each unit. These crew along with all their equipment will need to fly in with you as they're not available locally. Have adequate reliable insurance that covers helicopter evacuation to an international standard hospital. Without assured payment helicopters do not mobilise.



## Locations:

I could write an entire guidebook, on locations in the Himalayas, and perhaps one day I will. For now, I'm going to give you a summary of some of my highlights from India and Nepal. There are many great locations in Pakistan and Tibet but for access and safety reasons these are currently only options for the most determined of film makers.

### **The Indian Himalayas**

My favourite region for Himalaya locations is the Dhauladhar Range and the surrounding towns of Dharamshala, Palampur, and Chamba. The Dhauladhar are an easily accessible, impressive range of snow capped mountains, surrounded by idyllic villages and lush Alpine valleys, with direct 1hr 20min flights from Delhi. The area doesn't fall in a restricted area or National Park, so you avoid delays and expensive permits. Except for the touristy area around McLeod Ganj, above Dharamshala, the region is relatively undisturbed by tourism and offers easily accessible mountain wilderness as well as rich cultural heritage. Darjeeling, the location for Peter Weir's 'The Way Back', is famous for its tea plantations but it's a little-known fact that Palampur also has a substantial tea industry and is much more accessible from Delhi. This is why we shot Guy Martin visiting a tea plantation for Channel 4's 'Our Guy in India' there instead of Darjeeling. This allowed us to move only a few kilometres down the road to film Guy paragliding from the World





famous, record breaking site at Bir, and landing in a Tibetan village in the same day. The rest of the state of Himachal Pradesh has a lot to offer and is an adventure sports paradise. The Kullu Valley is spectacular and leads to Manali, the Solang Valley and the high-altitude Himalaya in remote Ladakh.

Ladakh is another happy hunting ground for spectacular locations. It's a high-altitude mountain desert, surrounded by high peaks, and shares a large plateau with Tibet. It is often

referred to as 'Little Tibet' and has much more in common with Tibet than India in every way possible. The region is remote and unspoiled, but accessible, due to its substantial military airport at the capital Leh. Incredibly, the airport can handle Airbuses and offers possibly the trickiest jet landing and take-off in the world. Only selected pilots undertake the task. The huge, and awe inspiring Pangong Tso (lake) is a popular location and has been used to great effect by both Bollywood and Hollywood. The Bollywood blockbuster 3-Idiots shot here as did Tarsem Singh for his highly acclaimed, 'The Fall' in 2006.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the state of Uttarakhand with its popular hill stations Shimla & Nainital, the Char Dham pilgrimage sites, and amazing mountain ranges including the almost mythical Nanda Devi Sanctuary. The state has played host to dozens of Bollywood movies.

When the security situation in Kashmir improves it will again be a great option with six, 1hr 20min, direct airbus flights from Delhi to Srinagar every day. Many travel writers describe the region as a Himalayan Shangri-La, and not without justification as the area is stunning.

### The Nepal Himalayas

Following the tragic earthquake in 2015 Nepal has enjoyed a few years of relative political stability. For many years frequent country wide Bandhs (closures) and violent protests plagued the nation as it made the transition from monarchy to secular parliamentary democracy. Conditions are once again favourable for film makers. If you plan around the crumbling infrastructure, and add some contingency for delays, you can enjoy shooting some of the most spectacular mountain scenery anywhere. In Nepal it's possible to get up close and personal with most of the world's celebrity mountains, which of course includes, Sagarmāthā (colonially known





as Everest), Manaslu, Lhotse, Dhaulagiri, Makalu, Cho Oyo, Pumori, Nuptse, Machapuchare, and my personal favourite the beautiful Ama Dablam.

Nepal's economy is based on mountain tourism and remains the most popular destination in the Himalayas by some distance. In the pre and post monsoon peak tourist seasons be prepared for a sea of Gortex and 30 to 60min queues to cross bridges on popular trails. Although more

challenging, due to colder temperatures and snow, you might want to consider shooting just after the post monsoon season in late November or just before the pre-monsoon season in late February if you want to shoot on popular trekking routes such as Annapurna and Everest Base Camp.

The Mustang region has a lot to offer film makers prepared for the long access times. The region is amazing, and little visited. You can reach locations that look incredibly remote but are close to tracks navigable by 4WD vehicles.

Notable recent Hollywood excursions to Nepal include 2015's 'Everest', the retelling of the worst ever accident on the mountain in 1996. They admirably shot much of the movie at the high altitude South Base Camp as well as Kathmandu. And, Marvel's extravagant blockbuster Doctor Strange made extensive use of Kathmandu's Heritage areas just after the earthquake in 2015. Despite obvious difficulties, as many of the heritage locations planned were destroyed, the Director and cast all pushed for the shoot to go ahead in the hope that the film would boost Nepal's tourism and provide a much-needed boost to the economy.

### **Pack your Pelis on a pony and shoot the most spectacular locations on Earth:**

OK, so absolutely no one ever said, 'Let's go shoot in the Himalayas, it'll be a breeze!' but many people have returned home with the most amazing footage they'll ever shoot and some great stories to tell their grandchildren. With proper planning and good advice, a shoot in the Himalayas can be incredibly rewarding both professionally and personally. So, next time you start a script with, 'Open on a white sand beach' why not consider changing it to, 'Open on a stunning snow-capped Himalayan panorama'? Hopefully, see you soon.

