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Himalayas trek to aid needy children

Next month, 11 men and women, eight of them XL employees, will embark on a 100-kilometre trek to the Nepalese Himalayas, climbing over 9,800 feet in elevation to the base camp of the world's tallest mountain, Mount Everest. They are raising funds for The ISIS Foundation, a registered Bermuda charity founded by Audette Exel and Sharon Beasley, whose mission is to make a positive difference to the lives of children in the developing world.



Courage and charity: A group of adventurous XL employees and others will set off next month on a 100-kilometre trek to the Mount Everest base camp in the Nepalese Himalayas. They are raising money for The ISIS Foundation/Kathmandu Kids Club, which supports Nepalese children in serious need. Participants include (left to right) Roddy Gray, Jennie Lee O'Donnell, Nick Pewter, Tonia Szeto, Megan Kempe, Cherie Simons, Roma Jedrysiak and Mark Norman.

Photo Chris Burville

Each participant is attempting to raise \$10,000 in sponsorship for the Kathmandu Kids Club, a voluntary group which has linked hands with ISIS to provide support for Nepalese children in serious need. XL is helping to sponsor its employees, who are using their holiday time to make the trip, and also underwriting its cost themselves.

The March 6-23 trek is being coordinated by Charity Challenge, a UK travel company specialising in the organisation, leadership and administration of inspirational fundraising expeditions. The route will take the volunteer participants through the lush valleys of Sagarmatha National Park, with time to explore its villages and monasteries. It will begin in Lukla, and they will trek to the Sherpa capital of Namche Bazaar, during which they will acclimatise themselves to the altitude as they follow a trail across numerous rivers. Thereafter, the trail will gradually lead uphill until finally they reach the high point of Kalapathar at 5545 metres (18,192.26 feet) with its breathtaking panoramic views of the surrounding peaks and glaciers, including Mount Everest.

Later, the group will have time to explore Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu, with its many temples and bazaars, and also visit the orphanages and some of the children whom their funds will help.

A mixed group in terms of physical fitness and trekking experience, the men and women have been preparing for the challenges of their journey for several months now, and as the time gets closer they are also stepping up their preparedness.

Lifestyle's **Nancy Acton** invited the participants to share their thoughts and details of their preparations with our readers, and this is what she learned from those who responded:

Lukas Ackermann (XL Switzerland) has trekked in the Swiss mountains. Signed up because he believes in doing good things in life for others as well as himself, and this adventure combines both aspects. Is always up for 'challenges and cool things'. His last "awesome" project was flying on the world's first commercial airbus A380 flight from Singapore to Sydney in 2007, with the ticket money going to charity. Has not experienced heights like the Everest base camp before is confident he will make it. Trains alone up to six days a week, and chooses his food carefully. Is most looking forward to helping improve the lives of others, as well as experiencing the base camp in the Himalayas, mountains which he says are more impressive than the Swiss alps.

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Megan Kempe (XL Bermuda) has always wanted to travel and see as much of the world as possible, and her sense of adventure increases with age. Signed up because: it would be a new experience to see the Himalayas; liked the idea of raising money to help the Nepalese children; as a tourist thinks it important to give back to the community she visits. Always active and relatively fit, has focused on improving her cardiovascular conditioning and endurance. Trains alone, and spends a lot of time walking twice weekly; practises yoga and Pilates once a week, runs or stair climbs four times a week. Is confident she will be ready for the challenge. Diet-wise, eats more fruit and vegetables, and drinks "a ton" of water to prepare her body for processing large amounts of it. Is most looking forward to meeting the children who will benefit from the fund-raising, as well as the scenery. Is least looking forward to missing her little son.

Mark Norman (Bermuda Police officer). Has always been keen on the outdoors and adventure, and has been involved with the Outward Bound programme here since 1981. Has always had a fascination with mountains, but has never undertaken anything like this trek before. Knows others who not only have done so but also have climbed Everest itself. The altitude will be a new experience, and suggests it may be a problem for some in the group. Is certain it will be a trip to remember.

Jennie Lee O'Donnell (Bermuda) is a busy, stay-at-home mother whose travel experiences include kayaking in Alaska and western riding on a dude ranch, but never a hike or trek of this nature. She signed up to help the Nepalese children, and to show her three daughters that putting one's mind to a challenge and going for it is all it takes to help others. Greatly admires the Kathmandu Kids Club team, with whom she works as the Bermuda volunteer manager. Follows the recommended training schedule, which involves up to four walks a week, some as long as eight hours and involving a 6 a.m. start, using both the Railway Trail and her neighbourhood, with its 'steep' hill. Cross-trains with Pilates and also runs. Turned 40 last year, and is now in best shape since pre-motherhood. Acknowledges trek will be "daunting". Says carrying 15-lb. backpack, hiking six to eight hours a day for two weeks, and sleeping in tents will be tough on her bones, but says support from husband, children and friends has been overwhelming. Doesn't have a head for heights, so plans to stay away from cliff edges. Is most looking forward to seeing the beauty and majesty of the Himalayas; experiencing the culture of Nepal, and meeting its people, particularly those for whom the ISIS Foundation has worked to benefit. Is least looking forward to missing her young daughters for such a long time. Views visiting some of the ISIS Foundation orphanages, and seeing the children previously found in dire circumstances who are now being cared for as her reward for aching muscles, blisters and other difficulties of the 16-day trek. Is confident team goal of \$150,000 can be reached, which will make an "amazing" difference to the Nepalese children.

Nick Pewter (Bermuda) is as a "very adventurous" person who enjoys sports, and deems keeping fit is important. The trek is his first "since Spittal Pond". He signed up to fundraise for a worthy cause, and explore a previously unseen part of the world. Bases his head for heights on several trips up Gibbs Hill lighthouse. Trains daily, sometimes alone, sometimes with others. Regime includes running, climbing stairs and dancing at Café Cairo. Is most looking forward to happy Sherpas and least to angry yaks.

Cherie Simons (XL Bermuda) has never done anything like this trek before, but likes to challenge herself and try new things outside of her character and comfort zone. Not naturally adventurous, but likes to try everything once. Is not a sports person but optimistic about successfully completing the trek. Finds Bermuda's lack of altitude her biggest training challenge. Nonetheless, walks for long periods, does hill and stair work, and cardio at least four times a week. Fits in intense workouts whenever she can. Doesn't particularly like heights, but is not afraid of them. In terms of diet, drinks lots of water and makes healthier meal choices. Is most looking forward to experiencing the pride of making it to the base camp, completing the entire trek, and seeing all the sights. Is least looking forward to the lack of luxurious bathroom facilities, the cold weather, and the common sleeplessness.

Tonia Szeto (XL Bermuda) loves hiking, but has never participated in anything longer than a day trip. Does, however, have a sense of adventure, and enjoys experiencing new things. In fact, she recently returned from a skydiving trip. Is at her happiest out of doors soaking up her surroundings. Is physically fit and unafraid of heights. Trains up

to six days a week, and her regime includes weight training three times a week, and cardio two to three days a week. Also does some stair work. Is most looking forward to meeting the children at the orphanage for which the group is fundraising, as well as learning more about herself and how she copes under challenging conditions. Is least looking forward to cold nights and no toilet/washing facilities for two weeks.

Other participating trekkers are: Roddy Gray, Roma Jedrysiak and Christine Doughty (XL Bermuda) and Richard Goodger (XL UK). It is thanks to Pia Hopkins (XL Bermuda), who invited a group of her colleagues to attend the Kathmandu Kids Club auction, that the participants elected to raise funds by signing up for the trek.

Anyone wishing to donate to any of the charity trekkers can either telephone The ISIS Foundation at 232-9001; contact Pia Hopkins (XL Bermuda) by e-mail (pia.hopkins@xlgroup.com) or telephone 294-7166. To make an on-line donation visit website www.justgiving.com and enter a search for the trekker's name.

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