

# TREKking WITH TERESA

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## TREK REPORT – Cultural Safari, November – December 2016

### *Monday 28 November*

The airport pickup was easy today and Ian was raring to get out onto the streets with his camera as soon as we downed a cuppa at Muna Cottage. Ian and Rhonda came loaded with kids' clothes and a computer for the kids at Bright Future. This evening saw us walking over to Bouda for dinner at the Garden Kitchen where we met up with Isabel, Netra and Sarmilla. By the time we walked home through darkened streets it was time for an early night at nine. It was 2 am on Rhonda and Ian's body clocks.

### *Tuesday 29 November*

Ian was up early for a 7 am start at Bright Future; good on you mate! We were kind of forced to have a nice easy day as Rhonda was seriously unwell in

the tummy department. Luckily for us, Muna's son Michael, a doctor, was home on holiday from the Queens Hospital, New York.

Ian wandered the back streets and the Ani Gompa with his camera and, by evening, Rhonda had really started to perk up (charming, handsome doctor certainly a factor there) so Ian and I headed to the nearby Shambala for dinner. This restaurant hasn't seen a lick of paint or a new piece of crockery for years BUT the food continues to improve. Chicken Sekuwa, aloo jheera and a rich veg curry were a perfect combo.

### *Wednesday 30 November*

Isabel, head of Bright Future Community Centre,



*Sunset on the Rapti River, Chitwan*

took Ian and Rhonda on a tour of our local area. They saw paper-making from daphne, shawl weaving from cashmere followed by a momo lunch.

I ducked into town to pay for everything and finalise our bookings. I put some photos of our recent Upper Mustang trek on my website at [www.slowtrekking.com](http://www.slowtrekking.com) – thanks to my web guru Narayan at Nepalink. I found some nice floor rugs woven from multi-coloured recycled silk for the market in Germany. Rhonda was in much-improved form and joined us for dinner with Isabel. Early night again; I think Ian and Rhonda's bodies are still on Aussie time.

### *Thursday 1 December*

Ian was off to BFCC yet again this morning but Rhonda and I joined him for our, by now familiar, breakfast, indoors these days as the mornings have become chillier and the garden gets no sun till later. It is a far cry from just a month ago, when we were fighting for every scrap of shade at the outdoor breakfast table.

This morning we wandered around the corner to Netra's new house. Kedar, the taxi driver, thought

just after eleven was the same as 10.30 (a very Nepali trait) so, with time to spare, we had a cup of tea and then visited a local women's co-op at the end of the street. Fresh banana leaves were pinned together with toothpicks and dried in the sun, none too hygienically I might add. The loosely-formed dishes were then pressed in a heated iron press to make single-use bowls for weddings and temple meals. They get 120 NRS = \$1.50 per hundred. They had a cow which looked as if it might give birth at any moment. I'll keep you posted.

Taxi finally arrived and we headed into town. First stop was my favourite Nepali clothes shop, Grace. Rhonda is tiny and looked great in the shorter cotton kurtas. I bought hair clips – so cute I bought twelve of them! We walked into Thamel from Durbar Marg to exchange some money for the trip. Exchange rate was 81 yesterday but only 80 today. However, the board said 79.22 so we were not complaining. Next was Pilgrims where Rhonda bought some great fabrics. Then Ian got his highly-anticipated Gurkha knife, the famed khukri. It is the proper military issue and he is beyond 'well-pleased' with it. Our favourite trekking shop did a roaring trade from



*Boudanath Stupa, grand re-opening after restoration*

Rhonda and Ian. They bought a fleece each, trekking poles with the new quick-release clips, super down jacket and super-down vest for Rhonda. Socks and buffs rounded out the shopping spree. I think they spent \$150. I bought a dry-pack. Not quite as light or thin as the genuine North Face article but \$5 not \$25.

We ate at the Rickshaw Café, behind the Weizen Bakery. I ordered a veg burger but I did have a momentary pang of order envy when I saw Rhonda's order of fluffy pancakes with butter and maple syrup and a bowl of beautiful fresh fruit, including pomegranate. Yum!

Staggering under the weight of all that shopping we piled into a taxi for Bouda. Rhonda and I headed up to the Roadhouse's rooftop dining terrace while Ian set about a spell of photography. The stupa, with its freshly-gilded new top, glittered in the afternoon sunshine. Great view from the 4th floor. We walked home and collapsed in a heap; shopping really IS harder than trekking. Dinner at home with Netra and Sarmilla.

### ***Friday 2 December***

Dorje came around at 9.30 and took Ian and Rhonda to Pashupatinath. I walked over to Bouda with Sarmilla on a perfect sunny day. We all met up at The Roadhouse, our latest favourite. We ate so much pizza and salad we could hardly move but, with great difficulty, we managed a huge hot fudge brownie sizzler with ice cream. One serve, five spoons! We wandered home slowly, buying a golden yellow bougainvillea and some clay pots for Sarmilla's new garden.

Ian and Rhonda, wisely, skipped dinner in favour of a night in with a bottle of merlot and crackers. I, unwisely, had a plate of pakoras with Isabel, on a high after a very good day Bright Future-wise.

*Cinderella* is on the TV and I am finding it strangely compelling.

### ***Saturday 3 December***

We had a car and driver today. Amrit arrived at 9.30 and drove us to Pathan. While some of the beautiful old pagodas are under repair due to earthquake damage, our time spent in the museum was a treat. Located in the old palace, a beautiful, cool and spacious building, the exhibits are perfectly mounted

and lit with clear, easy-to-read explanations. We walked from there through narrow back lanes to the Golden Temple which nestles shyly behind a small ornate entrance. Inside is a ravishing temple for both Hindu and Buddhist alike, a uniquely Nepali concept I think. The temple was packed with worshippers, being Saturday, luckily the day nobody goes 'to office' meaning the roads were free flowing as we drove across town to Swayambunath on the north-west extremity of Kathmandu. Luckily, I knew the way.

Swayambu also suffered damage in the earthquake but the brass work on the main stupa glistened in the sun. Later we walked down to Kimdol to visit my friend Bina's little jewellery store. After a few choice purchases we were whisked off by Amrit once more, this time to Chhetrapati where, after dodging the traffic at this busy intersection, we were happy to enter the quiet of Thamel. The tourist season is almost over but, being Saturday, there were plenty of Nepali trendy young things on the street. The trekking shop got more business from us, mainly in the form of giant North Face travel bags. Ian got the lens hood he was looking for and Rhonda and I got tee shirts in the North Face sale. I ducked off to get some coffee for the trip at the Himalayan Java and it then took about 45 minutes to find each other – it was 'only fifty metres down the road' folks. In the end our Plan B (use the phone) worked. Too tired to face our packing we went out for dinner and a drink instead. I was up till midnight but finally turned in with everything ready to head off tomorrow. Phew!

### ***Sunday 4 December***

A massive day on the road. We exited Kathmandu reasonably well but a slow descent off the rim put us a bit behind schedule. Tea at River Top was very welcome at 9.30 and the Riverside Springs Resort at 12 for lunch was reasonable timing. Our new driver Ram Bahadur joined us in the beautiful garden pavilion for a rather posh daal bhat. After lunch the road descended into absolute chaos. The road was terrible, the traffic heavy and the roadworks interminable. Of course, all this provided entertainment so we were rarely bored on the long journey and we met some interesting people on our many stops. It was dusk when we got to Chitwan and quickly realised that neither I nor the driver knew exactly where our lodge was located. I had a series of concerned calls from the Jungle Villa Resort. They spoke to me, they spoke to the driver, we spoke



*On the road again. Kathmandu to Chitwan*







*Elephant safari*



*A boy and his dog*

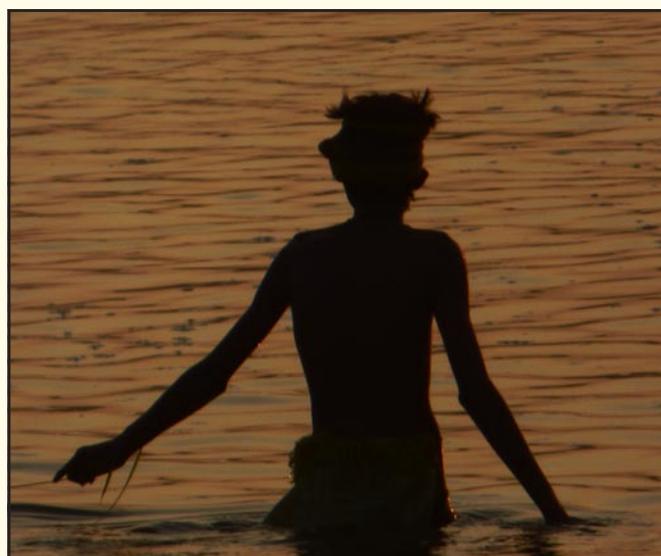
to the locals who gave us a variety of misleading directions. Ian made a few 'helpful' suggestions from the back seat which I must admit I did not always receive with good grace. With spirits sinking fast (it had been eleven hours) we spotted a Jungle Villa guide on a dark intersection. We were in the lodge two minutes later. Hot showers, lovely rooms and a perfect daal bhat. No worries!

### *Monday 5 December*

A full programme today, starting with an elephant ride through the jungle at dawn. Rhino were spotted. In fact, the elephant was led right into the deep river to get up close. After breakfast, which was huge, we piled into an open-topped jeep and drove on windy dirt roads through Tharu villages until we reached the canoe jetty. A long dug-out canoe was paddled at the back and poled at the front along the gently-flowing Rapti River. Many large and rather frightening crocodiles – garial and mugger – were spotted. We were not tempted to trail our hands in the water. The breeding farm for endangered crocs has been a huge success. With lots of rangers and a strong military presence there has been no rhino poached for almost four years now.

We asked for a light lunch, but then it just kept on coming, ending with pear and ginger cake. The elephant briefing was excellent. Lots of information; carrying for 18 months, convex/concave back (African/Indian), opposing 'fingers' on tip of trunk can pick up a single grain of corn (Indian).

We had gin and tonics while we watched the sunset. It was beautiful, though the basking crocodiles not



*Local boy fishing at sunset*



*Elephant lunch...*



*Bloody big croc (Mugger)*



*Tharu kids are adorable*

far away were a little disconcerting. The evening slide show was incredibly informative but best of all were the Tharu dancers who came on at the end. The men mostly drummed and sang, loudly, the women danced and sang. Highlight was the 'stick dance' and joining it at the end. Dinner was a barbecue tonight.

### ***Tuesday 6 December***

We headed out in the open-top jeeps once more this morning and visited some out-of-the-way villages. Met some locals and saw the Tharu lifestyle up close and personal. Seriously worthwhile.

Hitting the road around 10.30 we passed dozens of industrious rural communities living in brightly painted houses before joining the blacktop. I did have some misgivings as we had heard rumours of strike action from the 'five states' separatists. We had no trouble at all. A small gathering of protesters along the way waved us through courteously and wished us a safe journey. Ah Nepal!

The highway was easy going, well-made and not too busy. A stop for a wee in the jungle was a chance for Ian to chase butterflies with his camera.



*A walk in the jungle*

This evening Lumbini Bazaar was crowded with locals taking their kids, goats, cows and buffaloes home. Our hotel is just OK. Might try the new Little Buddha next door for 2017. The food was excellent.

### ***Wednesday 7 December***

A misty morning stayed cool as we took a rickshaw around the temples and visited the actual birthplace of the Buddha. Lots of chanting devotees from all over the world. Our rickshaw drivers are Muslim, a very small minority in Nepal but more common here, only thirty kilometres from the Indian border. Germany's temple was the highlight.

A quick (ish) lunch and then off to Bhutwal via the shitty town whose name I always forget. Go figure. Roadworks and drainage works, dirty sidewalks strewn with all kinds of crap. Luckily, we only have to drive through it. Bhutwal was rumoured to have political strife but nothing happened and we were soon out on the winding road. Higher and higher into the 'middle hills' until the river was just a ribbon of turquoise way below us. We had lunched already so we made great progress and arrived in Thansen Palpa at 3.30.



*Monks at prayer, Lumbini*



*Water lily (with frog!)*

As we rounded the last bend onto the ridge I had my fingers crossed for a clear view of the Himalayas. We were not disappointed. Magnificent doesn't begin to cover it. For Rhonda, it was her first decent look. She was gobsmacked. We sat on the terrace above the dining room, the waiter brought us chairs, and watched every subtle colour change till it was almost dark.

#### **Thursday 8 December**

We loved our stroll down the steep lanes of Thansen but, sadly, there was a strike and nearly all shops were shut. People were extremely friendly and we were greeted with Namastes from doorways and windows and passing traffic. We saw no other bideshi (foreigners).

Ram collected us at the bottom of the old town which has many fine Newari houses. The road today was just as high and winding as yesterday but, once again, we made great time and arrived in Pokhara around 4.30 after a pleasant lunch stop and a few mini-breaks along the way. Lake Front Hotel was very welcoming. Checked into a familiar room (I was here a few weeks ago, with the Upper Mustang group) and settled on my balcony as the sun slipped behind the Peace Stupa. The lake looked stunning. I

have let Rhonda and Ian 'off the leash' tonight and I have a plate of veg pakoras and a gin and tonic via room service. The BBC World News is on the TV. Heaven.

#### **Friday 9 December**

Lahar came by just after 7 am so we breakfasted quickly (thank you Amrita) and took a boat out onto the lake. Across from Pokhara, on a jungle-clad peninsula, is a trekking trail up to the Peace Stupa. It took less than an hour. The landslide of several years back has completely grown over and the views were stunning at every stop; and there were plenty. We had clear weather all the way across the lake and then all the way up. In fact, it was clear ALL DAY. Unusual hereabouts. After a long tea stop at the top – who could leave that view – we trekked back to Pokhara. There were lots of stairs but plenty of shady pauses; we really needed them as it was 24 degrees – in mid-December!

A local bus took us back to Lakeside though Lahar decided we had to see Davis Falls. Ho hum! Black and White Café gave us a beaut lunch and the best coffee. We meandered through the shops, much quieter than three weeks ago when I was last here. The vendors looked despondent but busloads of



*Rhonda and Ian with Ram (and the Himalayas)*

hysterically-cheering pic-nic goers brightened up the day. The sun shone and so did the peaks.

At around 4 pm Lahar took us to his sister's place in the Tibetan Refugee Camp. Her tea is really something. Milky, sweet and gently-spiced. Tastes much better than it sounds. Café Olive for dinner; such a quiet little oasis of peace with lovely staff. Early night, too tired to dance and getting up before 5 am tomorrow.

### *Saturday 10 December*

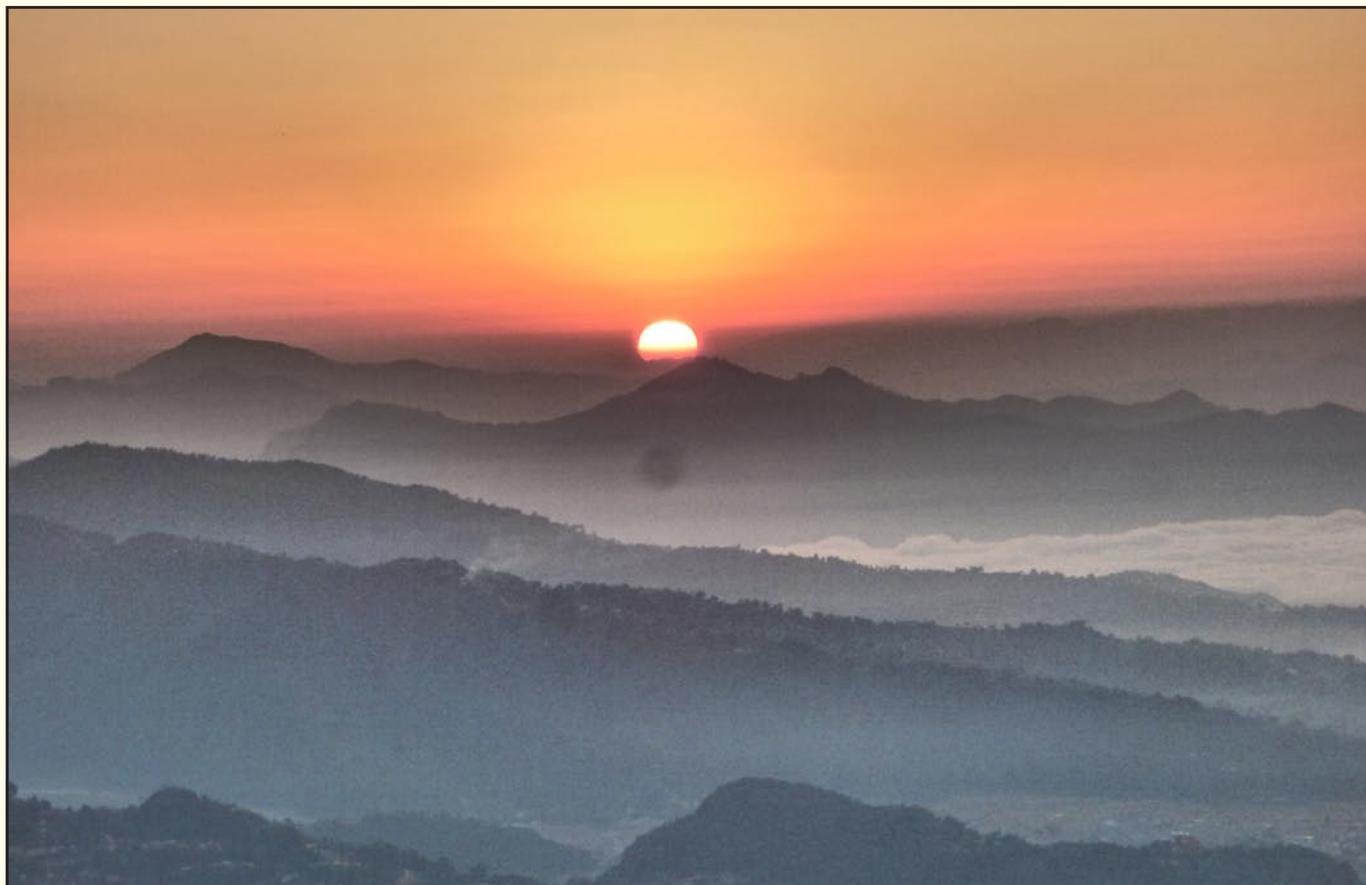
It was pitch dark at 5 am and I had been kept awake by rowdy Chinese tourists till 1.30. I gave them a mouthful from my balcony and, to their credit, they did then settle down. Chinese tourists – who knew?

In a daze, we piled on all our warm clothes and trundled up to the main road where Lahar, with impeccable timing, arrived with our taxi to Sarankot. The drive in the dark was a bit disconcerting as we lost traction a couple of times on the winding road. Somewhat surprised to arrive safely we climbed up to view the sunrise. When we had climbed almost three quarters of the way to the top it was almost first light and it was still twenty minutes to go. Lahar

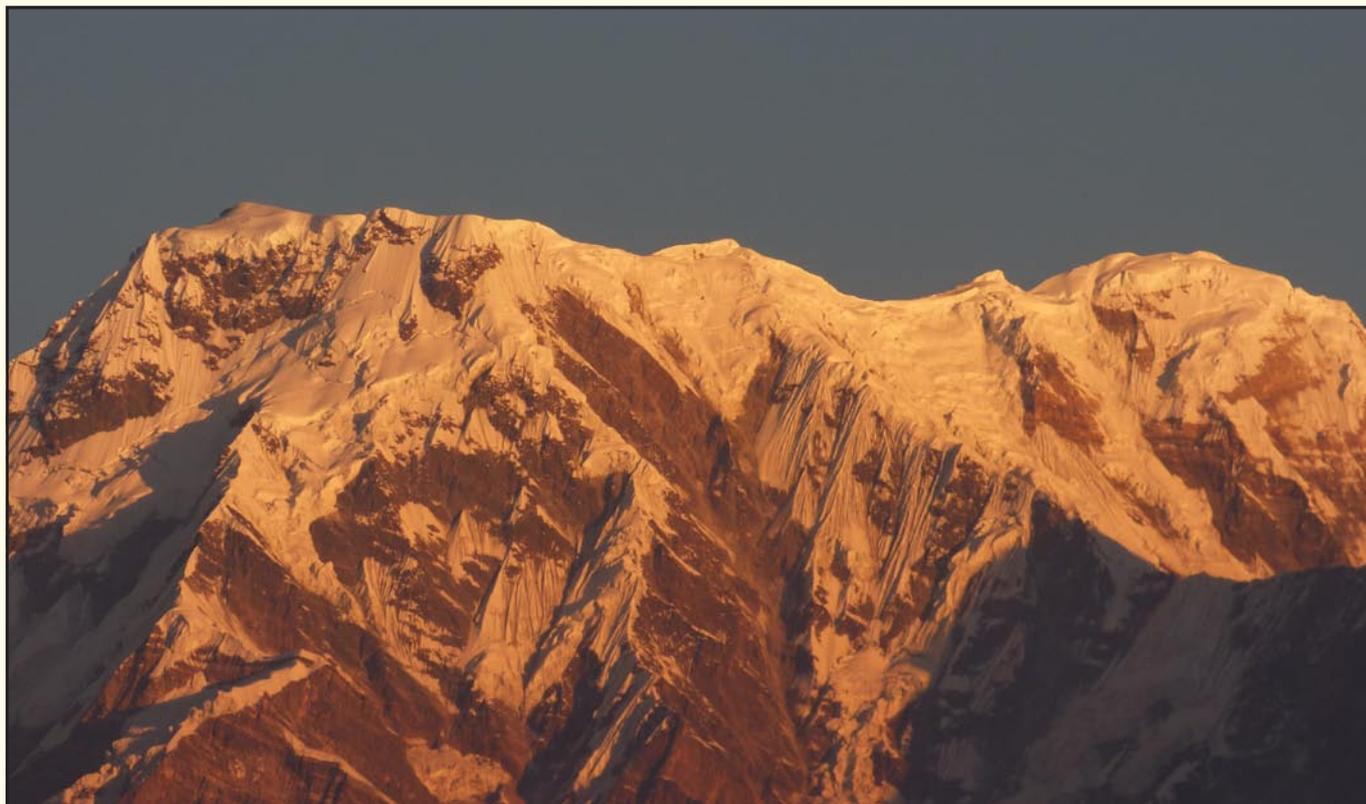
found us a dear little field on the side of the ridge. It had little wooden benches and tea was quickly brought out to us.

What a light show. I hadn't done sunrise from so high up here before. Well worth the effort, especially the mist-filled Pokhara Valley slowly illuminated by the gigantic red sun.

We drove back into Lakeside for breakfast, shopped and packed, collected laundry and were soon on the road again, destination Bandipur. Saturday is a good day to drive. Apart from potholes and rather too many thoughtless drivers, it was plain sailing, averaging 60 km/h, which seemed pretty nippy after the past few days. Scenery was luscious green, alternating between terraced fields and steep forested hills. Bamboo and bougainvillea in abundance and lots of poinsettias. The former in creams, golds and rusty reds and the latter in traditional Xmas red or pale cream and always at least three metres high. We only stopped once for a quick coffee and the Bandipur turn off came up far sooner than I had expected. As we climbed the steeply winding 9 km to Bandipur the Himalayas hove into view once more. The view at the top was a stunner. ALL the

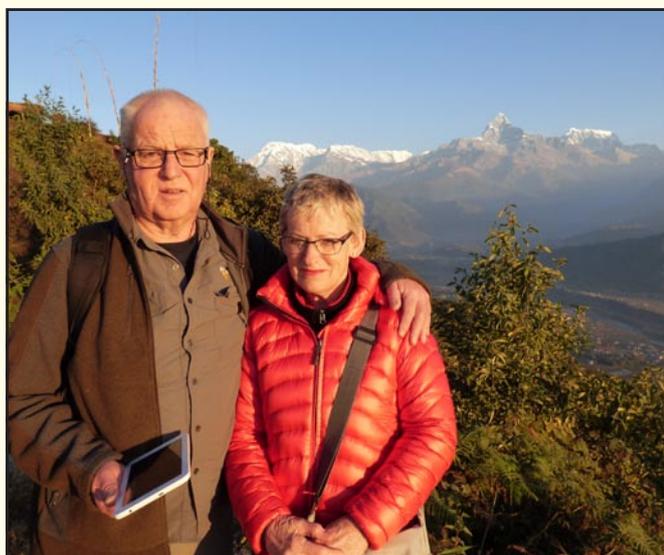


*Sunrise from Sarankot*



*Glorious morning colour*

peaks from Dhaulagiri to Dorje Lakpa. The hotel is on the front ridge of the town. Your knees weaken as you step out onto your balcony to about a thousand metres of vertical descent with 7000 – 8000 metre peaks in front of you. It was still 20 degrees at 4 pm so Ian and I decided on a stroll about the town. I like to visit the weaving studio of an old friend. The glow of sunset lured us back to our hotel to see the colours on the ranges. Super daal bhat tonight with red wine from Chile (thanks Ian). There are column heaters in our rooms.



*Ian and Rhonda – worth getting up for?*

### ***Sunday 11 December***

Breakfast on the terrace with more super mountain views. This is beginning to sound a bit predictable. Around 10 we headed into the small town of Bandipur. Walking is peaceful here since the town is blocked to traffic. This is a Newari town and the architecture reflects that fact. Dark red bricks, dark carved wooden window frames and balconies; shutters and potted plants abound. Bougainvillea and pyrostegia add a splash of colour to some of the whitewashed houses. We walked the length of the pedestrian thoroughfare and then took some smaller lanes flanked by brightly painted houses which became more and more modest as we reached the outskirts of the village. We took some very tiny lanes of stone steps and looked in on village life. Cows, chickens, goats and buffaloes everywhere. Baby goats with long ears were adorable. We were proudly shown some beautiful babies. Some people we met were billeted with local families to get more of a taste of local customs, language and culture. One woman really surprised us. Her Bangladeshi heritage gave her the look of a Nepali but her accent was pure Brummy. We glimpsed the trail down to the Siddha Cave and vowed never to take it. Two hours of bone crunching stone stairs at an angle of about 45 degrees. We ate freshly-made pakoras on the street, dunked in home-made yoghurt.



*Good morning deep valley*



*View from the balcony, Bandipur*



*Ian meets the weaving lady*

This afternoon Ian and I visited the weaving workshop and bought some lovely shawls. Silk and banana, silk and nettle. Original fibres, locally sourced. Delicious veg daal bhat tonight. Sunset was stunning, again. Electric column heaters in our rooms were most welcome.

### ***Monday 12 December***

Opting to drive fairly early, instead of trekking down, to avoid a long delay crossing the pass into the Kathmandu Valley, we arrived at the pass in just three and a half hours. Sadly, crossing town and driving out to Bhaktapur took another couple of hours. The Planet Bhaktapur Hotel is a little different. It is an old, renovated boarding school. Eighty percent of their clients are Italian, making their use of instant coffee a bit surprising. Luckily, we had our own stash of Himalayan Java. Their pizza was first rate. Ian had not been feeling great since yesterday so skipped dinner. Rhonda and I ate enough for three. The beds were divine. Crisp white cotton bed linen and doonas (2 on each double bed), big soft pillows and the best mattresses of the trip. The hotel is about 4 kilometres out of the centre of Bhaktapur.

Ideal walking distance and very peaceful, though the sound of festivities floated up from the city all evening.

### ***Tuesday 13 December***

Ram drove us to Nagarkot where we indulged in a posh coffee on the sunny terrace of Club Nagarkot. The walk started well enough but as I turned off the road I was uncertain of where the trail started. The advice I got was not good and we wasted a good hour scrabbling over roadworks on some pretty testing terrain. Rhonda and Ian were remarkably patient with me and, scrabbling (literally) back over said roadworks, we finally set off on what is normally a rather pretty and undemanding trek.

Sigrun from Iceland was a delightful encounter.

Ian realised that he was fading badly having not really recovered enough from his recent 'funny tummy' to be hiking the rim of the Kathmandu Valley. We bailed out early, having thoroughly enjoyed our hours outdoors. We jumped on board the local bus and that was a trip in itself. We had to

stand in the aisle with a lot of farm produce and just hang on. The music was great and we definitely took the scenic route.

### **Wednesday 14 December**

We found a sunny corner in the dining room this morning as it was only 3 degrees! After a leisurely breakfast, we walked the half hour into Bhaktapur and found that there was a lot more earthquake damage than we had expected. There were very few other tourists and the sun shone on the beautiful pagodas which were unaffected. We wandered the narrow lanes, found the potters' square and drifted along the street to some of the local bazars. We discovered a small but charming Buddhist temple where we were very warmly welcomed.

Lacking in confidence after yesterday's poor guiding effort, I was a little nervous about finding our way through the maze of back streets to our hotel. I put my mental navigation system onto auto pilot and followed my nose. It worked.

Ram was waiting to drive us 'home' to Muna Cottage. We tipped him well and I paid his 1,000-rupee traffic fine. He had been reliable and responsive and a great driver. Might have been a bit tricky if I had not spoken some Nepali.

So good to be home. Tonight, we walked to Bouda for dinner as it was a full moon. Very relaxing on the Roadhouse rooftop terrace overlooking the stupa as the moon rose. The kora was packed. Thousands swirled around the stupa, chanting and swinging prayer wheels. The full moon always brings out a crowd and, being winter, lots of Lo Pa, Sherpa, Managhi, etc. are down in the city.

### **Thursday 15 December**

Very late breakfast and then into Thamel for a lot of shopping. We started with Sri Om Tailor, which is a 'hole in the wall, up the rickety stairs' kind of joint, for three new Kurtas. Much needed. After a divine lassi from a stall (orange blossom water and shaved almond paste), we wandered through the old bazars of Assan Thole and Indra Chowk. We stopped in the 'kapada chowk' (fabric bazar) where Rhonda bought cotton prints (she makes exquisite soft toys). We bought some scarves in Assan Thole and, after a quick coffee, it was on to the felt shop, Merino. Then Le Petit Prince for clothes (strange name and an even stranger collection). A mix of hideous hippy-

shit, ghastly slutty-punk and a few great pieces from good designers which seem to find their way into the jumble. Ian bought a super-down jacket; well, they are only \$40. I think that was all.

On our return, in yet another shit heap of a taxi, we ran into Isabel, just back from Kangel in the Solu where great work is being done through Days for Girls. She is full of enthusiasm for new projects involving goats and agriculture. I finally had the shower I have been promising myself for three days and we are off to Shambala for Chicken Sekuwa and Aloo Jheera.

### **Friday 16 December**

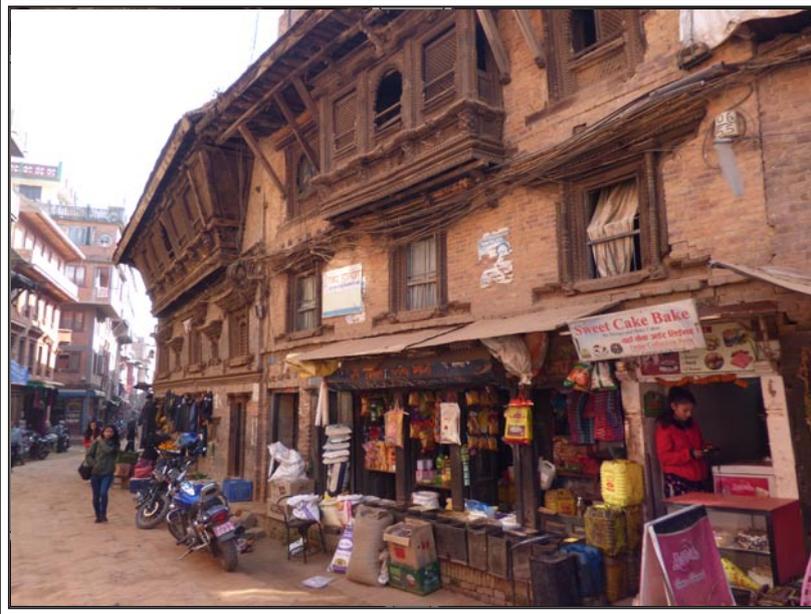
Home today so an 11 am taxi to the airport. It was rather unusual to have just two customers. If it had been anyone but Rhonda and Ian it might have been less successful. However, they are great company and really 'get' Nepal. They are brave and curious, ideal customers. With just two customers we used a car and driver only. We started and stopped when we wanted to. We trekked or ate or shopped when we felt like it. Thank you, Ian and Rhonda for the company, the gin and tonics and the laughs. See you next time.

Cheers,  
**Teresa didi**  
Namaste!

*Thanks to Frank Jones, Desktop Dynamics, Geelong  
for editing & layout.*



*Meanwhile, back at Muna Cottage... miaow!*



*Something interesting around every corner in Bhaktapur*