

TREKKING WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Muktinath, March–April 2012

I left Berlin on a chilly March morning. The dashboard thermometer read minus five degrees C as we zoomed down the autobahn at 150 km/h. After an endless stopover at Doha – is this perhaps the world's most boring airport? – I was lucky enough to get an upgrade to business class to Kathmandu. I emerged into the midday glare of spring in Kathmandu. 28 degrees, polluted as hell and traffic backed up from Chahabil to the airport. Ugh! It took two hours at a slow crawl to reach Muna Cottage but as I threw my bag on the bed in my 'old room' it felt like home. No customers till the day after tomorrow and a couple of unread books in my stored luggage. Heaven! I spent the next day in town with my friend Jules, buying three pieces of traditional yarn-dyed cotton – I can't resist this material.

Saturday was much cooler and the traffic was 'reasonable' on the way to the airport. Louise and Paul (Canadians who live in Singapore) with their two kids Matthew and Lauren came on Thai Airways and we soon jeeped back to the Shambala. Louise had trekked the Everest region with me four years earlier and had always talked of returning with her family. It was finally happening.

I barely had time for a quick bite with Netra in the garden before schlepping back out to Tribhuvan airport for Ken and Jan who were flying in from London, via Delhi. I had taken Ken trekking just 16 months earlier, with his two sons Gareth and Howard (you don't forget those guys). Now he was back with his wife Jan.



Our group at Jharkot

To stretch our tired, jet-lagged bodies we strolled over to Bouda for dinner. The Tibetan community was out in force and we were swept around the stupa a few times with the chanting throng. We spotted Dorje on the last lap and made our way together over to the Garden Kitchen. Food was as good as ever and I had my usual paneer butter masala with naan. An early night for tired travellers, especially the kids.

Sunday is a normal work day in Nepal and we had a minibus to take us into Thamel. We were soon embroiled in the usual pre-trek business: exchanging money (some for me thanks), finding trekking gear and other shopping, in between quiet breaks at the Weizen for cups of tea and banana lassis. By lunchtime the trekking permits were sorted – I nearly made the mistake of getting one for myself. Duh! After lunch Dorje took Louise's family to the old Durbar Square for some serious sightseeing while I took Ken and Jan through the old bazaars to Indra Chowk and my favourite fabric shop – The Linen Club. It was then off to the tailor, a tiny place up an ancient winding staircase, to get Jan's favourite LBD copied. (Men – 'little black dress'.) Shambala was a quiet haven after Thamel. An early night for tired day-trippers.

Monday 12 March

It was a bit early to get a feed at the Shambala this morning so everyone came down to the Muna Cottage (where I live) for omelettes and chapattis in the garden with Dorje and the other porters. Our shiny big new Toyota Hiace soon appeared and we stuffed the luggage behind the back seat and half an hour later we were bumping over Kathmandu's appalling roads towards the west. It felt great to leave the smog behind as we crested the rim of the Kathmandu valley. Seeing Ganesh Himal moments later was an inspiration.

The Hamlet, our usual tea stop, appeared to have a hundred buses parked out front so we kept going. Consequently I was gagging for a cuppa by the time we stopped. A wedding party was taking refreshments at the same place and their clothes had to be seen to be believed. Only a dark-eyed beauty could carry off so much red and gold. The bridesmaids were almost as beautiful and the groom was not bad either in a creamy gold-embroidered silk tunic with matching cream pants and little slippers that turned up at the end. Cute!

Lunch was naturally at the Riverside Lodge – a cool, shady retreat from the road. Just about the time everyone had had quite enough of the bus ride, we arrived in Pokhara. Sanu's garden at the Lake Diamond looked great and the plumbing had been upgraded – it's not their fault if the power goes off just when you try to use the electric pump. Lahar and Dorje took Louise's family to the pizza joint we always go to (sorry, forgot the name) and I took Ken and Jan to Café Olive – I love that place!

Tuesday 13 March

Despite the slightly cloudy weather at 6 am this morning I decided to wake up our visitors for a boat ride across the beautiful Phewa Tal. The mountains showed themselves a little as we were paddled away from the shore and it was really peaceful out on the lake. Everyone did the 'test climb' easily and there was a welcome cool breeze at the top as we circled the huge white stupa which can be seen for miles around. The four cardinal points are marked with beautiful Buddha statues from different lands. We lingered over tea and biscuits at the funky little bambu lean-to café, and then back down to the



On Phewa Tal, Pokhara



shore in half the time it took us to ascend. On the return leg young Matthew had a go at paddling his family's boat and Ken had a go at ours. Since Matthew did such a good job I agreed to go for pizza again for lunch today. Hope the grown-ups didn't mind. This big open dining area with overhead fans and open sides is the ideal place to spend the hot midday hour. We shopped a little in the afternoon. I bought a hemp hat, Lauren got a new trekking jacket (very cute) and Jan bought lightweight embroidered cotton shirts.



We romped through the pre-trek briefing. Louise and Ken had trekked with us previously so there was plenty of experience there to share. One more 'civilised' meal and some last-minute packing; after an early start this morning we all enjoyed an early night. Big day tomorrow.

Wednesday 14 March

D-Day. Last-minute frantic searches for missing gloves and misplaced torches. A scrambled-egg breakfast on the terrace and then the porters arrive. So good to see the familiar faces – though I'd only said my last farewell to most of them 4 months ago. Kaji was there and Danraj and A.G. and Lahar's lovely brother Ram (he was my personal porter last year since Lahar has been promoted to 'proper Guide – no pack'). There were two new guys Rajan and Pasang – loads of experience, especially with kids as they are fathers themselves.



It felt really weird to wave them off in the minibus and not go with them. After all the company is called 'Trekking with Teresa'. I must have rung Dorje 15 times that day but he had no signal (or 'singal' as the Nepalis say). I wrote this the next day and I've now spoken with Dorje. I know that they all made it up the Ulleri steps. We always say that if you can do these steps you can do the whole trek. Today Lahar and I went up to the school at Rivian DC for which Louise and Paul had raised the funds. The jeep ride was exciting (1974 Toyota Corolla), the climb up was steep but only half an hour. It's a really lovely location and we met the headmistress and prepared them for a visit from their sponsors on March 28.



I asked Jan to take some notes and was so impressed with what she wrote that I've decided to just give it to you straight. So here it is – so fresh compared to my usual jaded observations. Hope you enjoy it as much as I did.



TREKKING IN NEPAL: 9 March – 4 April, 2012

My husband Ken had trekked with Teresa from Melbourne 16 months earlier, with our two grown sons Howard and Gareth. The website at www.slowtrekking.com shows you the 'stop and stare' approach with time to appreciate all the magnificence which surrounds you in Nepal and encourages you to meet the Nepali people. Teresa met our Jet Airways flight from Heathrow, via Delhi and took us to the Shambala Village Resort on the north-eastern outskirts of Kathmandu.

Saturday 10 March

We settled into the Annapurna Suite at the Shambala: two bedrooms plus sitting room, kitchen and bathroom – although hot water could not be guaranteed. The schedule for power cuts was on the coffee table. Two four-hour sessions per day. We had a look around and met our fellow trekkers, Paul and Louise Stefansson with their two children Matthew, 12 and Lauren, 6. They are Canadians who have made Singapore their home. We walked over to the Bouda stupa for dinner. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Unlike Ken's previous visit when the sky had been a phenomenal shade of red, tonight it was clear blue – contrasting with the white stupa. Monks and nuns in maroon robes chanted as they circled the stupa.

Sunday 11 March

Before breakfast Teresa took us to the Bright Future Community Centre where Netra runs an hour of extra schooling for children from various local schools. There were two rooms absolutely chock-a-block with happy children. They attend each morning from 7–8am; on Saturdays they play games instead. These kids take their studies very seriously and appreciate any effort made on their behalf. Efforts that we take for granted in the West perhaps. We also saw the computer school – the Dreamland Computer School now has solar power from the rooftop array – thanks in part to Gareth's efforts (our son). The sewing school is fairly new and they had made cushions for the hotel garden. (Isabel Armer set up these projects but Teresa is pretty heavily involved). Check out www.bright-future-Nepal.org.

The rest of the day was quite an experience. Teresa took us all into Thamel, the tourist area of Kathmandu where the colour on display in the

shops was dazzling; the women's clothing even more so. The roads are chaotic with no pavements. Dogs, cows and people roam freely and car horns sound incessantly – not in anger but just 'here I am – better move over'. We shopped for trekking gear, changed our money for rupees and ate a good lunch. Dorje took Louise's family for a little cultural sightseeing while Teresa took Ken and I to shop for fabrics and to visit a very quaint tailoring shop (for pick up after trekking – thanks Teresa).

Monday 12 March

Our porters joined us for breakfast in the garden at Muna Cottage, where Teresa lives. Dorje (our guide), Dhanraj (his brother), A.G., Ram, Kaji, Rajan and Pasang. We all piled into the minibus with our luggage and set off for Pokhara. It was a lovely sunny day and we stopped en route for lunch at a place with a beautiful garden. At Pokhara we settled into the Lake Diamond Hotel. Later we walked along the road parallel to the lake which is full of shops and restaurants. We had dinner at Café Olive.

Tuesday 13 March

This morning early we were paddled across the calm waters of Phewa Tal, a beautiful tranquil lake. Across the lake we climbed to the white Peace Stupa at the top of the hill.



Statue of Buddha at the Peace Stupa, Pokhara

Although the mountains were mostly obscured by clouds the view was still lovely. It was sunny all morning and we went for lunch at a pizza house. I was pleasantly surprised as I had expected only Nepali and Indian food here. Later Ken and I took a walk along the main road and I bought some very light-weight embroidered tops. Within minutes of turning down a side road leading to the lake, the weather sent us scurrying home. A huge dust storm blew up as local shopkeepers dashed to bring in their wares and batten down the hatches. Massive rain drops began to fall as we reached the hotel. Windows and doors were banging and the upstairs corridor filled with dust. Loud thunder, great flashes of lightning, torrential rain and high winds – in the morning the garden showed the evidence of the severe weather.

Wednesday 14 March

The start of our trek! Teresa waved us farewell after breakfast as she had to leave us to join a trek to the Everest Base Camp. We set off in the minibus with our porters to drive to Nyapul (New Bridge). Dorje had obtained Trek Permits for us all the day before. We walked to Hille today and spent the night at the Shumla Lodge. The lodge was rather primitive by western standards but was clean. The upstairs rooms were really one large room divided into three rooms by plywood. There was a basic shower downstairs.

Thursday 15 March

Leaving Shuma Lodge after breakfast we walked towards the river and crossed our first suspension bridge. This took us to the point where the 3,280 stairs begin. The climb up was broken by a mid-morning and then a lunch break and the views were spectacular all the way. We passed people leading donkey-trains, local women carrying heavy baskets and school children tripping easily up and down the stairs. All of them wearing very light shoes – or none at all! I almost feel over-dressed. Our route took us through lots of little villages. The houses tended to have iron roofs though the buffaloes were often housed under thatch. The stairs lead to Banthanti where we will spend the night. The lodge there was very nice, cosy, friendly and comfortable.

There was a storm and no electricity from 6 pm and a surprisingly heavy fall of hail which cloaked the landscape in white. Lauren, a six-year-old who has always lived in Singapore, had not seen snow or hail and was quite fascinated.



Friday 16 March

A little extra care was necessary today where some of yesterday's hail had turned to icy patches on the trail. We walked through beautiful forests and saw rhododendrons in their natural habitat; mostly tall trees with red or deep pink flowers. One of the porters spotted white-faced monkeys swinging through the trees on the opposite side of the gully, another surprise. We also saw many waterfalls.

After the initial easy walking the trail became more difficult – lots of steps up and slopes down all the way but plenty of rest stops, including tea and then a lunch break. The last few steps up to Ghorepani were particularly difficult but Ken and I were not sure if we were just tired because of the huge climb the day before or was it just our age? (Note from Teresa: How about altitude?? Nearly 3,000 metres on Day 3! Give yourselves a break.)

Ghorepani is a lovely little village with a small stupa in the centre surrounded by little shops. We bought



Dorje pauses at a bridge in the forest between Banthanti and Ghorepani



Ghorepani

some yak cheese which was delicious and we wished we had bought more. The village has a background of majestic mountains, most impressive from the dining room windows of our lodge. Ghorepani had received even more hail than Banthanti and it was quite treacherous in the surrounds of the Sunny Lodge.

Saturday 17 March

We were all up at 0445 to climb Pun Hill in time for the sunrise. Dark enough to need torches to light the way. We had no idea what a long, hard, steep climb it would be but we all made it. (Nearly 400m!!). Our reward was a bright, clear morning as the sun illuminated one peak after another – Dhaulagiri, Nilgiri, Annapurnas, Machhapuchre, 16 peaks in all. It is a breathtaking view (quite literally) and well worth the effort. We had a cup of tea from a very enterprising tea-shop, took loads of photos and descended back to the Sunny Lodge for breakfast, taking time out once more to smell the beautiful scent of flowering Daphne; strongest at dawn and dusk. Meeting other trekkers later we realised just

how lucky we were to get a perfectly clear morning for our ascent.

On a personal note I did have a bit of trouble with my breathing at Pun Hill as it is over 3200 metres. Will look into the viability of Diamox for any future high-elevation treks as I've been told it is helpful.

We descended to Sikha after breakfast, through terraced farmlands and villages. We saw mule trains, bullocks, cows and chickens and, since it was spring, lots of young life. Beautiful views all along the route today with more rhododendron trees and Daphne everywhere. Arrived at Sikha around 4 pm.

Saturday 18 March

After breakfast we set off for Tatopani which means 'hot water'. This lovely walk was downhill through woods, farmland and villages. The scenery was phenomenal with deep valleys of terraced farmland and mountains behind. We saw more mule trains, and farmers ploughing with bullocks. We saw gentians, saxifrage, orange trees and bananas. We



Pun Hill, with Dhaulagiri (8,167m) in the background

crossed the new road in several places – it was very rough for walking or jeeps.

Tatopani has a row of shops and is renowned for its hot springs and pools. We stayed at the Dhaulaghiri Lodge which was rather nice with a good restaurant. We stayed for two nights – plenty of time to wander around and relax. We were able to get some washing done – actually saw it by the tap in the village where local women were all washing outdoors by hand in cold water.

Sunday 19 March

We slept late and then explored the village of Tatopani. Shops and cafés along the main street with a poorer neighbourhood at one end overlooking the shabby new area of shacks which have sprung up alongside the jeep station above the river. We sat in the garden of our lodge reading and relaxing. We tried to use the internet but it was not running. We spent some time with Lauren and Matthew in the afternoon while Louise and Paul went to check out a nearby school which they had helped to finance. Later on we tried the hot springs. Concrete pools just above the river are flanked by the road on one side and a 3,000 metre steep jungle-clad hillside on the other. Access was through our back garden. Rather surprisingly, both pools were quite hot, with a cold shower in between where people came and soaped and rinsed off. There was also a little café which gave

the place a leisurely atmosphere. We sat in ‘tato pani’ at Tatopani!

Monday 20 March

We set out for Ghasa after breakfast, along the jeep road as the walking track is rather demanding on this section. The old salt traders’ houses along the way, especially through Dana, had beautiful carved wooden windows and doors. This type of carving is best known in the Kathmandu valley and is usually done by Newari craftsmen, reaching its peak in Bhaktapur, at the eastern end of the valley.

There was a big landslide here a couple of years back and the ‘temporary’ trail at about 20 cm wide leaves a lot to be desired. I was horrified by the look of it but Dorje took my wrist in an iron grip and I focused on my feet. Dorje then went back for Ken. We ate some delicious soup while we waited for Louise’s family to arrive by taxi. In the end they decided to taxi all the way up to Ghasa. Ken and I had a look at the ‘world’s deepest gorge’ (yeah right!!). It was impressive and the walls of the canyon were draped in beautiful white orchids (*Coelogyme christata*). We crossed another big suspension bridge after lunch and then climbed up a steep trail. At the top we saw a man making baskets from split bamboo. Along the way we saw piglets, in a very clean sty, chickens, young buffalo, puppy, kitten, lizards, many butterflies and interesting flora. The trail climbs to an altitude of





View near Ghasa, with Dhaulagiri (8,167m) and Tukche Peak in the distance



Fantastic morning views from Kalopani

well over 2,000 metres, to where we looked down on the road across the other side of the valley. Several new landslides had to be negotiated – with the help of our porters. The last bridge into Ghasa was very long and high above the Kali Gandaki River. The Eagle Nest Lodge was lovely.

Tuesday 21 March

Leaving Ghasa after breakfast we passed more beautiful old houses, some up to 500 years old. The craftsmanship on the carved windows and shutters had stood the test of time. We saw women sorting grain in shallow baskets and more baskets being made of split bamboo. Again, lots of young animals. I was once again grateful for the help of the porters as we descended a slippery shale slope to the next bridge. Soon afterwards we arrived at the super lodge in Kalopani. The ‘See You’ Lodge was very comfortable and we arrived early enough for a long wander around the village observing village life and visiting the old monastery. We climbed over a wall at the back of the secondary school, curious and well worth the visit. Early next morning the view from the lodge roof was fantastic.

Wednesday 22 March

Short-cutting across the river bed on plank bridges we skirted the edge of a huge bend in the Kali Gandaki. Through a shady pine-forested trail we saw women gathering moss and bracken. A.G. helped one woman pick up a huge bundle onto her back for the long walk home. We crossed the Kali Gandaki diagonally on more seasonal plank bridges for lunch at Larjung. This house was another lovely example of a house built in the heyday of the salt trade.

We walked on along the river bank over pebbly streams to Tukche. Our lodge there, the Tukche Guest House, was one of the best examples of local architecture. The owner there (Samar) told me that his parents and grandparents used to trade salt and wool from Tibet in return for rice and other household goods from the lowlands of Nepal. The old stabling area of this ‘caravansera’ was now bathrooms and kitchens and the guest rooms were up a beautiful carved staircase.

Ken and I strolled around the village and visited one of the monasteries where monks still live, albeit in modern accommodation. We saw carved manistones on a wall of 108 prayer wheels. We visited the nearby distillery but as it was out of season for the

apples, apricots, plums etc., from which the brandy is made, the place was not open.

Thursday 23 March

We took the road alongside the Kali Gandaki this morning, crossing the new suspension bridge to the opposite bank and a pleasant walk to the Tibetan refugee camp at Chairo. The clean little village was enhanced with blossoming fruit trees but the old Guru Rinpoche gomba was closed. We saw masses of dried firewood (a sign of wealth here) and a strange solar cooker with an array of shiny panels which concentrate the sun onto the cooking pot in the centre. Impressive!

We then walked into Marpha for lunch. The village has extraordinary whitewashed houses fronting a narrow lane lined with shops selling handicrafts – most of which are made in the refugee camp at Chairo.

On our way from Marpha to Jomsom we climbed the short but very steep trail up to Shyange where we met the family that our son Howard is sponsoring. As Ishneha’s mum was working in the fields we were met by her older sister, a lovely young woman who made us feel very welcome in the courtyard of their traditional house. We were served tea with biscuits





Ishneha

on the best china and then met Sneha (Ishneha) who is now 7 years old. Her school report gives her full name as Sneha San Thakali, and she loves going to boarding school in nearby Jomsom. She likes to come home on weekends. We photographed her school report for our son and his wife Sharyn.

We also met Ishneha's auntie who looked to have led a pretty hard life. Dorje, AG and Ram also had tea and enjoyed their visit. We received prayer scarves on departure which we sent to Howard and Sharyn. The family had gone to a lot of trouble and we were humbled by their generosity. It was a wild and windy walk into Jomsom afterwards, certainly got good use out of the buffs. Sent an email home.

Friday 24 March

This morning we set off through Jomsom, with its airport and huge military base, crossed the Kali Gandaki once more and trekked along the river bed to Kagbeni. The Asia Lodge was very comfortable with hot water in attached bathrooms and a local speciality the 'hot table'. A coke brazier is placed in a shallow pit under the dining table and the heat kept in by means of a thick blanket over everyone's knees. Cosy!

Kagbeni is a fascinating ancient town. Health and Safety regulations are unheard of. Streams run alongside the street, stone staircases have no handrails, crumbling ruins standing for years – but looking as if one good rainstorm would wash them away. There is almost no rain here. All farming is done with careful irrigation of melted snow from the surrounding mountains. We had tea and apple pie at the Red House, an old 3-storey Tibetan tea-house which is hundreds of years old. The wind howled outside, though the sun shone brilliantly. The entrance to the village is a massive stupa which houses beautiful Mandala paintings – you have to really duck down to get inside to see them. The other end of the village is marked with statues from the Bon religion (pre-Buddhist) but only the male statue remains.

Saturday 25 March

On his previous trek here Ken had taken the jeep up to Muktinath. He said it was to be avoided at all costs so we opted for the pony ride. Our horses were ready for us at 8.30 and I confess the steep trail and our lack of experience with horses meant that we were quite relieved when we arrived at our destination. The horses have saddles made of blankets and cushion over a wooden frame. Little Lauren was completely at home on horseback. After a tea break at the Blue Sheep we were passed on the trail by a contingent of Nepali soldiers. They were so friendly, one officer even thanking us for visiting Nepal. We left the luggage at Jharkot and continued to Rani Pawa which is just one long poorly-made dirt road lined with hawkers selling jewellery and knitted or woven scarves.

After lunch we walked up to the temple complex of Muktinath itself. First we visited the Hindu temple but were not allowed to do more than peer inside. Ken was a bit disappointed as he had been allowed to go inside in 2010. The temple is flanked by shallow pools of very cold water but two brave Indian pilgrims doused themselves, fully-clothed, in the freezing water. We ran our hands under the 108 taps shaped like dragons behind the temple. Some people collect this 'holy water'. After visiting a small but very old Buddhist temple we walked across the temple grounds, lined with chortens and prayer flags as far as the eye could see up the mountain behind us. We arrived at the little Buddhist gumpa of Air, Earth, Wind and Fire. It is an unusual natural phenomenon where a little methane flame burns

continuously from under a burbling brook. It was venerated over the years and has become a place of sacred pilgrimage, attracting visitors from all over the world but especially India. I slept for a couple of hours before dinner – exhaustion? Altitude? Relief?

Sunday 26 March

We took a stroll around the crumbling ruins of Jharkot this morning. The monastery and the fort remains are around 600 years old. The landscape looked too dry for the cows I saw wandering about. It was so much easier walking back down to Kagbeni even if it was a rather long and dusty road. We met a bunch of Indian pilgrims around midday just setting off for Muktinath in flimsy clothing and footwear, carrying their own food. Hope they made it. Likewise the broken down bus.

The Stefansson family left after lunch by jeep for Jomsom as they were flying down to Pokhara the next day. In the afternoon AG, Dorje and Ram took us to the old gumpa, which is about 600 years old. Dorje snuck us in the back door of the Red House

where we drank tea in their 350-year-old timber-beamed kitchen. We walked out over the river bed of the Kali Gandaki to Thiri in Upper Mustang, the previously ‘forbidden kingdom’. Very old and very poor. A pleasant night at the Asia Lodge.

Monday 27 March

We avoided the worst of the wind by leaving early to walk back to Jomsom though it was just starting up as we arrived there. An incoming flight did a wide, banking turn above us to land into the wind. It looked as if it would surely crash – naturally, it didn’t. We had a hot shower at the Marco Polo and then took our books to an upstairs café across the road. Later we said goodbye to AG and Rajan as they took the bus back to Pokhara, with an overnight stop in Beni. Ram was due to fly out at 0700 next day; we were scheduled for 0630. Ram flew first!

Tuesday 28 March

We caught our flight, a small 16-seater plane, in clear bright sunshine. There were no delays and the views of the mountains and the settlements below



A contingent of Nepali soldiers near Jharkot



The temple complex at Muktinath; some of the 108 taps can be seen to the left of the main building



Green crops around Kagbeni village contrast with the desert landscape

were stunning. It only took about 15 minutes. So this flight really marked the end of our trek. We had enjoyed it so much. We loved the Nepali people and it was a truly amazing experience.

Dorje had to head back out to the airport for an 11.30 flight to Kathmandu. He would visit his family briefly and then join Teresa on the trek to the Everest Base Camp.

Teresa had arranged a programme of sightseeing with Kaji for our stay in Pokhara. However, we spent today lazily walking along the streets of Pokhara checking out shops en route to the narrow end of the Phewa Lake. A lovely walk. Trees in blossom, boats on the lake, very peaceful. The hotel gardens were a riot of colour; lots of dahlias, geraniums, antirrhinums, amaryllis (in the ground not in pots!), and bougainvillea in a variety of colours. The temperature rose to 28 degrees. We met Kaji for dinner, bought a tiger t-shirt for Felix and walked home in the cool evening.

Wednesday 29 March

A blissful lie-in this morning. Kaji hired a taxi to take us to old Pokhara, the second largest city in Nepal. We went to the indoor market (much like our own) where Kaji said it was more expensive than outside. Driving to Devi's Gorge we stopped to look into a deep ravine which Kaji feared was becoming undermined and might collapse in the not-too-distant future. There were lots of schoolchildren at Devi's Gorge which is also very deep and narrow. A Swiss man disappeared into it in the 1960s and was never seen again. Kaji took us to see the new Pokhara monastery with its airy rooms and lovely wall paintings. It is only 20 years old.

Thursday 30 March

Kaji arrived, as promised, at 7 am this morning to take us by taxi to the Greenline Bus office for our trip back to Kathmandu. We found the ride back very interesting, particularly being high up in the bus as we could see much more. There were houses clinging precariously to the hillsides, green, fertile valleys, deep gorges, waterfalls, sandy river banks and lots of vegetables and a few quarries. We stopped at the Riverside Lodge again on the way home. The coach arrived in Kathmandu around 1430 but, alas, not at the Greenline terminus, due to road works. Dhanraj went to where we were dropped off – but at the same time we went to the terminus. In the end

a taxi was arranged for the Shambala and Netra met us there. Phew! The roads were chaotic with dogs, people, cows and taxis all competing for space. There was a huge thunderstorm just after we arrived at the Shambala and settled into the Himalaya Suite. We dined with Netra at the hotel's restaurant and hoped the rainstorm would clear the air a bit the next day.

Friday 31 March

The hotel wasn't open for breakfast till 8 am so we took the opportunity to visit the Bright Future Community Centre's school, just up the road. Netra manages this project, amongst others. Saturday is play day and the kids were really enjoying themselves.

After breakfast Dhanraj came to the Shambala with his nine-year-old daughter Remisa. He took us to the paperworks where they turn the stalks of the Daphne plant into beautiful hand-made paper. It was closed but we got a bit of an idea. We then visited the nunnery which has about 300 nuns or 'anis' which is housed in a beautiful building surrounded by lovingly-tended flower beds. It was then on to the much larger monastery at Kopan. Here they take boys aged from about 10 and educate them broadly, not just in Buddhist teachings. Westerners also study short and long-term courses here. Monks and nuns alike dress in dark maroon robes with yellow undershirts. Both buildings were bright and cheerful places inside and out.

Dhanraj then took us to Durbar Square in the centre of old Kathmandu. This is an interesting journey to the heart of the old city. The square is stupendous with the King's palace and lots of beautiful old places of worship in the traditional pagoda style. Saturday is 'the weekend' here in Nepal and the place was crowded. I was horrified to see blood from a sacrifice on the ground nearby. The cow is sacred here but, sadly, the buffalo is not. Leaving the square we collected the dresses that I had ordered from a tailor before we went on trek.

We then met up with Julie, a friend of Teresa, for a bit more of an insight into Nepal. Julie is a 61-year old retired theatre nurse from Melbourne who lives in Nepal in a Buddhist monastery. She used to help design operating theatres and has worked in London at the Cromwell Hospital. She is considering going into a long retreat later in the year. She took us to a really nice restaurant where we talked for ages. We really learned a lot from her as she has a unique

understanding of the Nepali people. She even took us back to our place in a taxi before going home herself.

Saturday 1 April

Dhanraj and AG came to the Shambala at 0700 to take us to Bhaktapur, an ancient city not far from Kathmandu. As Dhanraj was needed at the Kuwait Embassy to get on with his job/visa application we excused him from coming with us today. Our driver stopped at the Club Himalaya in Nagarkot for breakfast and then the viewing tower where it was a bit too hazy for serious peak viewing.

We travelled on to Bhaktapur, a Newari city which is around 600 years old. It was severely damaged by earthquakes in 1945 and, to a lesser extent, in 2010. This city is the sight of much serious renovation work, mainly by the German government. The streets are narrow and paved with bricks in block patterns. The Durbar Square contains many Hindu shrines and a bathing well of the old royal family. There are a lot of these wells around the town; few of them had water running when we were there. Nepal's most perfect pagodas are also to be found here. There is a stark contrast between the wealthy and poor areas of the city. Bhaktapur is renowned for arts and crafts, particularly pottery, wood-carving, paper-making and printing. Potter's Square has thousands of newly-formed pots drying in the sun prior to firing in a charcoal-fired kiln later on.

By chance we were in Bhaktapur at the time of a Hindu festival so it was very crowded with the women dressed in fabulously coloured saris or shalwar-kamiz (loose trousers under an A-line dress) in shades of red, gold, yellow and green. A tall structure was being built to carry an effigy of a God and rice was being offered in a ritual that saw an ever-increasing pile on the ground. There are Buddhist stupas around the city too and the two religions not only co-exist but overlap in some areas. We stayed at the Cosy Hotel off Potters Square. Almost hidden and run by a charming host who had spent time in France. We had our dinner on the roof terrace while watching the everyday life going on below us – carrot-sellers, water carriers, vendors with wares on bamboo poles, hole-in-the-wall tailor shops with men at the machines. We were particularly intrigued by the all-purpose 'tractor' which can be hooked up to a wheeled trailer to drive on the road, a pump, a plough, a chaff-cutter. A hundred different uses.

We were surprised to see how a family of four travelled on a motorcycle. Dad driving with young son standing in front of him (hands on the handlebars). Mum sits behind, often side-saddle, with young daughter in her arms, sari billowing out behind dangerously. No helmets of course. Bhaktapur was a fascinating ancient city teeming with colourful life. Dhanraj joined us for dinner.

Sunday 2 April

We traded Dhanraj for AG today and walked around Bhaktapur a bit more. We were swept along in a peaceful demonstration, the women all dressed in colour-coded clothing under the banner 'Co-operate Enterprises Build a Better World'.

AG got us a taxi from Bhaktapur to Patan, another very old and beautiful city, also known as Lalitpur (Beauty or Jewel City). We saw more lovely old architecture and temple buildings. We visited the museum but found it a bit top heavy on Hindu religious material and not much about the Nepali people. From our lunch place we looked down on a ritual bathing place which was entertaining.

We spent a quiet afternoon back at the Shambala.

Monday 3 April

Dhanraj came by around 8 am and took us to Bouda, the amazing stupa we visited on our first night in Nepal. It's a very busy spot and even early in the morning the stupa was surrounded by nuns, monks and ordinary folk (mostly elderly) doing 'Kora' (circling the great stupa three times while chanting in praise of Buddha). The shops around the outer circle were doing brisk business and cafés were opening up. We saw a funeral procession – a noisy business in Nepal. We then climbed up to the restaurant where Ken had photographed the phenomenal red sky on his last visit here. Dhanraj then took us over to meet Dorje's wife Laki, his sister Monju and his two delightful boys Sonam (8) and Lagpa (4). Dorje and Laki's marriage, like most in Nepal, was arranged. (Teresa's note: I happen to know that Dorje's parents 'arranged' for him to marry the girl he secretly loved). Laki gave us tea and potato chips and then cooked a full daal bhat with rice, lentils, spinach and achar (hot chutney). After lunch we saw some of Dorje's photos. We wondered how they manage when there is no trekking work. We were delayed there by a big downpour and Laki gave us even more food – this time beautiful tiny, sweet bananas. We took a taxi

home but the rain, thunder and lightning persisted well into the night. We enjoyed Netra's company one last time for dinner tonight.

Tuesday 4 April

Netra put us in a taxi for the airport. Dhanraj and AG were there to greet us. Pity they couldn't come inside till we departed. They had made the journey to the airport just to say a quick farewell on the doorstep. Our flight was a bit late departing but we had plenty of time for our Delhi connection so we weren't worried.

★ ★ ★

I am sure you will agree with me that Jan's diary made great reading. Such a fresh perspective. Thanks Jan. I am finishing this off on a yet another dreary summer day in Germany. It is mid-July and we are still waiting for summer. Finishing touches have been made to our itineraries for next season. I haven't had a cigarette for 14 weeks and I have gained 8 kilos. I really need to go trekking again, and soon. October 16 is the starting date for the Langtang Trek – finishing on November 6. On November 8 the trek

to Muktinath starts in Kathmandu. This trek will follow almost exactly the journey outlined in Jan's diary. There are currently places available on both treks.

Drop me a line to teresadb@hotmail.com if you are interested or have a look at www.slowtrekking.com on the Next Treks page for a bit more detailed information.



*Cheers,
till soon,
Teresa*

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