

TREKKING WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Solu District (Pike Peak), 10–26 November 2018

Members

Teresa Williams – Group Leader
Ekkehard Loeber – Germany (Thuringen)
Sharon Leonard – Canada (British Columbia)
Faseny McPhee – Australia (Brisbane)
Lynn McLauchlan – Canada (Montreal)
Chloe Walker – Australia (Melbourne)
Lizzie Dobson – Australia (Melbourne)

Support Team – All Nepali

Dorje Tamang – Guide
Lahar Pun – Assistant Guide
Bir Tamang – Porter (and cook)
Chapal Tamang – Porter (and host at his lodge in Lamuje)
Ramesh Magar – Porter
Ram Kafle – Porter
Nima Tamang – Porter
Phurba Sherpa – Porter



Teresa



Ekki



Sharon



Faseny



Lizzie and Dorje



Lynn

I travelled to Nepal this year with my new (ish) partner Ekkehard (Ekki). It was his first trip to Nepal and we had a few lovely days away in Pokhara and a short trek to Ghorepani before the rest of our guests arrived. We came back in poor shape having rather overestimated our ability to 'pop up to Pun Hill for a bit of training'. We succumbed to the offer of a jeep from upper Ulleri back to Pokhara. It was bloody fantastic.

The Peace Plaza has replaced the Lakefront for now as a gigantic 'Disneyland' has been built right next door to the latter – beyond noisy, we lasted ten minutes before checking out. Had a nice couple of days recovering at Muna Cottage. Love those breakfasts Muna.



Teresa and Ekki nearing Ghorepani

10 November

Settled Ekki into our nice new posh digs (no offence to Muna Cottage) at the Bitsugen Hotel and later headed out to the airport for Faseny and Sharon who arrived, rather considerately, within half an hour of each other this evening. The proprietor of our hotel is a gem, helpful, considerate and completely 'on the ball'. Sadly, her husband is the opposite. Still, have to say, best beds EVER!!

11 November

I collected Lynn from her 10am flight, only a bit late, from an astonishingly empty airport. There were parking spaces available in the upper car park and an empty waiting hall. I am not sure why but it sure made my job easy. Lynn put her feet up while I took Faseny and Sharon for lunch atop the eponymously named Stupa View Café. It was still surprisingly warm for mid-November but the breeze and a big umbrella made rooftop dining very appealing.

At 2 pm Dorje brought Chloe from the airport. She flew in from Pokhara where she'd been for a couple of days. Highlight – Bhai Tika at Purna's family home. Lizzie must have materialised from Muna Cottage at some stage this afternoon, which means we are all here.

We had a pre-trek briefing on the hotel's very pleasant dining terrace. They are a great bunch of women with a wealth of experience between them. Some of them have even done the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

I checked gear and set a shopping agenda for tomorrow. Dinner at the Garden Kitchen was pleasant. Our new hotel is only five minutes from the Bouda Stupa.

12 November

A rather large day today. We took taxis to Swayambunath which seemed to be over-run with monkeys. I had never seen so many there before. Fine Grains, my planned 'smoko' stop was not just closed but did not even appear to exist. A sweet little café down the road made us all drinks and cakes as varied as vanilla muffin, chocolate doughnut or Danish. 560 Rupees total (5 euro!!).

We walked all the way down to Thamel through the quaint and the disgusting sights which make up Kathmandu. We freshened up at The Riksha which is the old Weizen. Don't worry, the Weizen Bakery still exists out front on the street. Same spinach quiche or pineapple bagh (? I still don't know. In Nepali bagh is tiger). This café is beside my travel agent in the heart of downtown Thamel so it is sometimes easier to coo-ee up to his window than to try and phone. Refreshed, we hopped into the banking big time. Armed with dangerous amounts of rupees (me with enough for two weeks cash trekking and all the porters' salaries) we hit the shops. First to Mountain Sports for buffs, down jackets, head torches, all the usual necessities. Ekki got good gloves for 5 euros. A quick wander through Amrita Craft, my wholesale emporium, and we were ready for a really big lunch. We got it.

The Roadhouse has a few new pizzas but still has Lahar's old favourite, Tandoori Chicken Pizza (I thought that was a uniquely Australian thing). My notes let me down here but I am pretty sure we met my friend Julie and a business associated Rudra, for

lunch too. Strong coffee perked us up enough for a quick round of the supermarket – wet wipes, muesli bars, Strepisils, lollies, lip balm...

Almost done, we meandered out of Thamel, via a few favourite shops. Lahar was with us today and he has heard that Karma cannot come trekking with us due to lack of transport. It is Dashain and he is way out west in Rukum; the buses are full. Pity. Good news comes in the form of a phone call from Bir. In a few minutes he will say goodbye to his German customers and come with us to Solu District. Woo-hoo!! Five minutes later he is with us in the street.

A taxi-ride home in peak hour in Kathmandu is never dull. This one was no exception. Always a little relieved to see the guests in the other taxi have actually arrived home.

It is 10pm as I write this with very full packs propped at the end of the bed for a 6am start tomorrow. Everyone is ready. How did we ever do this before smartphones???

13 November

OK, it is a really long jeep ride but fair weather (not hot), good jeeps and five passengers in each vehicle made the going easy. A small drama at our hotel when the husband of the owner, not the sharpest tool in the shed, decided we may not leave our storage luggage at his hotel because our November return booking was not confirmed. Sadly, he just lost our business for good. Pity, his wife was really nice. Arrangements were quickly made with Nima's taxi and our luggage went to Dorje's apartment for the duration – including Fasenya's bag!!

At morning tea we ate our breakfast boxes from the hotel with our own coffee (thank you Lahar). It was a basic place with lots of chickens wandering in the scruffy backyard near the loos. Our driver had lovely taste in music – soft Nepali. I rejected a couple of dirty lunch options for the little place I'd used last year. Daal bhat – with fried bitter melon – in a tiny Bhatti on the hill, just after we crossed the Sun Khosi.



Lizzie, Sharon and Fasenya at the Pattale Clinic



Hem, the Medical Officer at Pattale

It cooled off a lot as we climbed the winding road to Okaldungha where we bought bananas at the grotty little jeep interchange at Ramailo Danda. We stopped for a cuppa at an extremely chilly Khade Danda, which was good preparation for the Eco Lodge at Pattale with absolutely no attempt to warm the dining room at all. The food was good – thanks in part to Bir’s cooking.

Slept like logs in snug individual cabins.

14 November

Acclimatising in Pattale. 2850 metres is noticeable. It was a super day. First we went to the school, funded by Belgians, where we watched the kids doing their morning exercises and then strolled about the classrooms which were bright, airy and festooned with the kids’ work. We got a super reception at the clinic where most of the committee had turned up to festoon us with garlands of marigolds. We felt like visiting royalty, which was a bit embarrassing.

We took lunch at Dorje’s house. Mum and Dad still going strong. They made Ril Dukh (spelling is

beyond me). You beat your spuds till glutinous then drop globules into a very tasty soup. Much nicer than it sounds.

After lunch Dorje took us behind Pattale to a ridge overlooking Tuhure, his old village. We saw the new house Lek is building. The clouds rolled up quickly from below though we just managed to stay above the fog on the walk back.

Another freezing evening in the dining room, somewhat abated by the erection of a slate slab platform for a brazier. Still, a very small fire in a very large room.

Chloe is unwell and certainly disinclined to trek. A jeep has been organised and we will probably put the big packs on it since it is a reserved jeep.

15 November

Our first day on trek was absolutely fantastic. Sometimes cold and windy, sometimes hot and sunny. Some uphill, some down. Some forest, some grassland.



A goat at Pattale



Break time between Pattale and Japhre



Sunset at Japhre



Japhre



A Black-faced Langur monkey between Japhre and Lamuje

Quote from Sharon: *'Can't quite believe this. A great breakfast of porridge, toast, peanut butter and bananas; a clear view of Everest and now I'm sitting in the sun... and it's only 9.30!'*

Chloe, with Kancha, is on a jeep and so are all our heavy bags. All trekked really well to Sigane for lunch of daal bhat with local garden-fresh chokos.

Arrived at Japhre in good time and were shown around the gompa by the local lama who has made some serious renovations to his nearby lodge so we might try it next time. However, as I write this in the small dining room of our lodge the big iron stove is going like a train. The sunset was lovely, though completely different from last season. Snug cabins promise a good night's sleep.

16 November

The climb up to Kancha's place, Lamuje, was on a dusty jeep road. We saw two jeeps, the same tractor twice and a motorbike. The views were so mind-blowingly fantastic that we didn't think too much about the trail. At every turn we saw the Himalayas

arrayed across the horizon from the Rolwaling Wall to Kanchenjunga. Highlight of the day was a troupe of perhaps 40 Black-faced Langur who eyed us distractedly for a good twenty minutes with no inclination to move on. Lowlight was finding the tea shop for morning smoko completely deserted. In itself not a problem but Rames said it was about half an hour to Bul Bulle for lunch. It took two hours so we were pretty damn hungry on arrival. Dorje, bless him, had veg noodle soup (bright yellow and really tasty) ready to go as soon as we arrived.

It was only an hour and a half after lunch to Lamuje. From a long way out we could spot Chloe's red down vest on the veranda of Kancha's Lodge (the only lodge on the way to Pike). Cold and windy on arrival the stove was soon cranked up as we figured out how to sleep 7 people in three rooms. The joinery in this lodge is mostly Kancha's own work so 'draughty' doesn't begin to cover it. Consequently, we were a bit cold overnight despite thermal clothes and good sleeping bags. (Kancha knows we could improve this). On the up side, the new toilet is fantastic, even if you have to go downstairs, tiptoe through the



Ekki on the the road less travelled



Distant Everest – every day



View above Jastabanijang

sleeping bodies in the dining room and unbar the front door to get out there. The food was fantastic, especially the cheese omelettes for breakfast. It was great to meet up with Kancha's wife Durga and two of the kids again.

17 November

Chloe has jeeped thus far but from now on there are no roads. She and Kancha's family have decided to trek down to his village together. It is on a steeply descending track below his lodge. Chloe and Kancha will meet us in Jumbesi in three days' time.

The first section of our trek was a delightful traverse through shaded woodlands and rocky outcrops. We had lost a few hundred metres of altitude by the time we stopped for morning tea. A beautiful Sherpa couple with a toddler that we had met on the trail this morning made us tea in their cosy stone house.

Straight after morning tea the trail climbed steeply. Huffing and puffing we hit the ridge and the trail flattened out to an easy amble – after a suitable amount of collapsing on the grass of course. Cold and windy on arrival we were soon fed in a grubby area of the kitchen house – actually the porters' sleeping area by night. After a brief respite we headed

up to Pike Peak II. Only 4100 metres but quite a slog in the cold wind. The reward was a stunning 360 degree panorama.

So glad to have made it, so happy to descend off the cold windy top. So easy going downhill and by comparison with the windy summit it felt quite balmy.

Dinner was a treat in the same grubby area. The lodge is run by an elderly Sherpa couple (well, they



Durga, Kancha's beautiful wife



A Sherpa teahouse between Lamuje and Diary



The whole gang at Lamuje



Pike Peak





Bir and Dorje at Pike Peak

look elderly). Mum tucked us in with quilts front and back while we waited for dinner. The food was fine considering the remoteness of our lodge and the grotty old kitchen. Bir supervised I suspect. After dinner Dad got out his ancient Serangi. We watched a few lively Sherpa dances. Lovely to see Nima and Phurba come into their own. Dad and another local both found harmonicas and started a duel which upped the tempo. Of course we joined in the dancing – it was a good way to keep warm at least. Although we are higher up than Kancha's lodge the rooms were not as draughty – we slept a lot better.

18 November

Although technically a descent today, we did a fair bit of climbing through shady rhododendron forest where thick ice from frozen streams made the going hazardous in places. Helping hand holds from our porters made it possible to get over the worst stretches.

Climbing up and down through rocky ridges in the

forest was exhausting so we were happy to throw ourselves on the ground at a grassy knoll in the sunshine. Dorje had brought cheese and biscuits which went down a treat.

There were more frosty forest trails for the next hour and then, quite suddenly, there was Jastabanijang quite close below us. It was just 1 pm and we were happy to eat again. I am really impressed with the renovations at this lodge. Small, well-made warm rooms, electric lights and, best of all, a new dining area with a big wood stove. Two people had a hot bucket shower. Happy campers!

19 November

It was a huge climb out of Jastabanijang this morning – luckily, I felt strong. Up – up – up and then across a huge ridge of jagged dark brown rocks, emerging onto an idyllic grassy knoll with possibly our best views yet. Such a clear day.

The descent seemed endless but was extremely varied. First, a gravelly gully which was almost



Crossing a frozen waterfall at Jastabanijang



View from the saddle above Jumbesi



Forest near Jumbesi



Close to Jumbesi



The last uphill climb before Jumbesi

too steep. Then steep rocky trails through forests of immeasurable beauty. The trail became less and less steep till, finally, through boggy fields we saw the settlement of Tactor. We took a cuppa, while the porters, and Ekki, had noodle soup; then back on the trail.

It was very wet in the bottom of the valley with stepping stones over the worst patches. Everywhere cows looked on impassively. We soon found the new dirt road which has been bulldozed over the old trail – it seemed to go on for ever but we were just getting tired. At the top of the long staircase which descends into Jumbesi we had a phone call from Kancha. The beautifully renovated and very up-market lodge, Zhambala, has said ‘no Nepalis’. No room for guides or porters, though he had negotiated a deal where they could sleep on the floor of the dining room. No way! (I may have used stronger language.) I then let Dorje and Kancha sort it between themselves so we ended up back at the Apple Garden which has been somewhat updated and is now quite comfortable. After an ultra-hot shower and a deluxe room

Chloe, already ensconced, was made to pack up and decamp to the Apple Garden Lodge – without the full explanation that would have made it seem more reasonable. Sorry Chloe.

20 November

Our rest day started with a nice slow breakfast and then lots of washing – by hand in very cold water. Most of the group, minus Ekki, myself and Sharon, who felt rest days were for resting, climbed half an hour back up yesterday’s stairs to a large local monastery. A very big puja was in progress. Hundreds of monks and anis and some very highly-placed Rimpoches gathered for a day-long ceremony. Sharon had a nice long read in bed in her sunny corner room. Ekki and I wandered the village for an hour or so, bought chocolate and peanuts and then read and nibbled all afternoon. One by one we all had hot showers – the first for a week for most of us.

The dining room was almost full tonight with international trekkers. We had a wee dram and relaxed in the warmth. A-h-h-h-h 2750 metres.



Ruins at Ringmu

21 November

We climbed up a steep wooded hillside first thing this morning. Soft pine needles underfoot, smelling divine where the sun toasted them on the forest floor. We passed tiny farms with exquisite cows and grubby kids. The ridge-top tea shop at Everest View made us a super lunch (unless you didn't like coriander, sorry Sharon). The descent to the Solu Khola was a dream. In and out of shady gullies, some with bubbling brooks and waterfalls, past a village of wheat-filled terraces, down, down, down. We passed a massive landslide which had cut a fifty metre wide swathe through the forest. One concrete bridge was broken completely but planks had been improvised. Finally, at the bottom, a metal suspension bridge, the first for this group, so photos were in order.

The day ended, predictably enough, with a nasty 20-minute climb. Happy to be back at Sunrise Lodge in Ringmu, though its shabbiness only gets worse. Sitting at the big table in the garden with a beer at 3.30 with the sun still shining we did not feel like

complaining. Late afternoon Ekki and I strolled over to the old part of Ringmu as there was a tumbledown house there I wanted to investigate. I'd passed it by in a jeep last April and it seemed abandoned but beautiful. It was, though we could not go inside. Nearby were some remarkable stone ruins.

22 November

This was a fabulous day weather-wise so, after a slow start (no packing as we are staying two nights here) we walked up to Taksundo La at 3050 metres. We walked mostly on the jeep road which was nice and easy. We saw one tractor. We paused at the old stupa below the donkey grazing kharka and then kept going to the ridge for a look over the top. From here you can see Taksundo, directly below, Nuntala, not far away, even distant Kharikhola and the long winding trail we had taken last year on the way to Gokyo.

After a cup of tea we headed up the lovely little local trail to a ridge high above us. No real purpose or

destination, just a nice walk through a variety of woodland environments. Fасыny, Dorje and I headed for the little summit for even more spectacular views and 'because it was there'. The others sat in the sun for half an hour, then slowly headed back to Taksundo La for lunch. The walk home was quite hard on my knees and I don't think I was the only one.

23 November

Our last day on this trek and it was another good one. We followed the jeep road which was easy on the legs and little-used by actual vehicles. At first we descended gently through magnificent forest. It was perfectly clear this morning so we were afforded beautiful glimpses through the trees of a sparkling Numbur. The road grew very dusty after morning tea – which had loud video dancing and singing in the dining room. The lunch stop was so warm that most of our group opted to sit in the shady dining room. Another fab veg noodle soup, possibly the best, which Ekki and I ate outside in the sunshine – boots and socks off. It was almost too hot... almost! Heaven after all that high and cold. It really had



Sharon near Ringmu

been colder than at the same time last year. Quite a bit colder.

The road grew dustier and traffic became more frequent. We saw a couple of light aircraft land at Phaphlu and learned later that Isabel and Netra left on the second of these two planes. Soon we were walking beside the runway where Bir waved us into the Peace Hotel. It's a modest place, clean(ish) with pink painted rooms, new mattresses and the friendly services of our lodge-owner from Ringmu. (Ringmu was only rented and he has given it up as it was mainly just lunches). Tonight there was only a small brazier in the dining room but once the doors and shutters were closed it was fairly cosy. The daal bhat was great and we all had seconds on the pappad. We cosied up to the porters after dinner.

Salaries paid, tips and thanks given – the nice warm feeling of success in a shared endeavour.

24 November

By about 9 am, after a really lovely visit to the old ani gomba, it was clear that Summit Air had no intention of collecting us at Phaphlu airstrip. There had been a worrying silence this morning as NO planes or choppers flew overhead to Lukla – in marked contrast to the last few days when the incessant air traffic was almost annoying.

The up side was that it was early enough, just, to find two jeeps. Most jeeps headed to Kathmandu at 5am. Dorje seemed well-connected and our lodge owner had a jeep available (bit lucky there). Since all our porters were still with us we squeezed into two jeeps just, to nearby (80 minutes) Pattale and guys were dropped here and there as we passed near their homes. After a nice fried rice lunch near Pattale (I wish I had known that Subas was at home) we spread ourselves over the two jeeps and hit the road. No need for a long stop: we were in Kathmandu at Lotus Gems at 9.15 – not bad from a 1.30 departure from Pattale.

The river valley we followed was beautiful in the dusk light and then the night drive over Dulikhel with house lights twinkling all over the hillsides. Turned out to be much easier to drive around the blind corners at night – lights or not? There was also very little traffic after dark till we hit the outskirts of Kathmandu at Banepa. We snacked on junk food as we went along. I shelled peanuts for the driver.



Trekking down to Phaphlu

Lotus Gems, in the heart of Bouda, has a restaurant which they had agreed to keep open for us. They did not. 9.30pm in Bouda with 10 hungry people. The receptionist was great. She rang the Rooftop Pottala and they agreed to stay open for us. We dropped our bags and went right away. The food was fantastic – so good that we went back there the next evening. Lotus Gems seemed very luxurious after trekking lodges. Beautifully painted rooms in a Tibetan style, masses of hot water and spotless white bed-linen. Heaven.

Dead pleased. Back to Kathmandu on the scheduled date. Phew!

25 November

We had a long, slow, rather up-market breakfast (individual omelettes) and then went into Thamel for shopping. We started at Grace in Durbar Marg so that at least I could buy a clean kurta (long shirt). I bought two and so did Sharon. Chloe went for the fab leggings. We rounded out the afternoon with trekking shops, handicraft shops, shawl shops,

bookshops and an excellent lunch in the garden at The Roadhouse.

Later, taxis took us back to Bouda main gate (much easier than trying to drive in to our hotel) and, surprisingly, we were just hungry enough for supper at Rooftop Pottala. The Miracle Mile red was very nice but perhaps the French Bordeaux was sheer indulgence. Hey, we deserve this!

26 November

Sadly, Lynn left today – back to Montreal – we miss you already. Bon Voyage. The rest of us – me and Ekki, Sharon, Faseny and Chloe decamped to more economical digs at the Benchen Monastery's nice guesthouse in Swayambu. I loved being back after many years. Rooms have been well re-furnished and the new café has really excellent coffee. 'Giant espresso'.

27 November

OK, the Pike Peak Trek is officially over but with two guests 'staying on' for the next adventure and

Chloe departing later we were still a group of sorts. I collected Lesley (from Melbourne) from the airport today, easy as.

Ekki and I did washing, washing and then more washing. Faseny, Sharon and Chloe visited Kapan where Isabel and Netra gave them an excellent day. Chloe is staying there as she leaves tomorrow from that side of town. Faseny and Sharon arrived back late, having eaten and shopped to perfection. As I understand it they saw our project Bright Future, the New Sadle leprosy project shop, the Daphne paper-making workshop, the pashmina factory and had lunch and dinner at Netra's house. Happy campers!

28 November

A quick phone call this morning confirmed that Dorje was taking Chloe to the airport. Another quick call to Julie's regular taxi driver Sham and we had a 10 am date to pick up Sharon, Faseny and Lesley for a day-trip to Pathan.

As I write this I've done yet another big bucket of washing. The washing lines below the café are full so I am risking the balcony of our room – keeping a watchful eye out for monkeys. None so far though the painters are hanging off the next balcony in a rather ape-like fashion. Might drift down to the Heavenly Tasty Café for another alu paratha and Americano...

Because Ekki and I, Sharon and Faseny are all taking part in the upcoming Cultural Safari there is no clearly defined end to this group so I will make a somewhat artificial cut here. Actually, Ekki and I moved back out to Kapan to Muna Cottage to sort out our gear for the next group and Sharon, Faseny

and Lesley kind of did their own thing till December 1, the official start of the Cultural Safari.

I had a really great time on this trek, partly because I trekked with Ekki for the first time and it was great to feel that support all the time and to share my joy and wonder at this amazing land. It was also a good team. Grown women who had the art of 'getting along' down pat and had all done this sort of thing before. It was a privilege to share the journey with you. Thank you.

It is an irrefutable fact that we could not have done this without the support team. A huge thank you to Dorje, Lahar, Rames, Ram, Kancha, Bir, Phurba and Nima. You guys really are THE BEST. Thank you.

Next year I am planning a different autumn season – Langtang in October, Rukum to Phoksundo (CAMPING!!!) in November and, of course the Cultural Safari in December. I reckon we will be back to Pike Peak around November 2020 (which would include Chloe's jeeptrekking.com version). Actually, Peter and Lici Spear have already signed up for this. Let me know if you would like to take part in any of these expeditions. There will soon be more information at www.slowtrekking.com or on Slow Trekking on Facebook. My email is teresadb@hotmail.com or vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com.
YOU CAN DO THIS!

**Cheers,
Teresa didi**

*Thanks to Frank Jones, Desktop Dynamics, Geelong
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TREKING WITH TERESA

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