

TREKKING WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Cultural Safari, December 2013

Debbie arrived in Kathmandu before the Muktinath Trek had officially finished, as she wanted to spend some time volunteering at the Bright Future project. She had inadvertently timed her arrival to coincide with 16 students from La Trobe University who were here for work/study/volunteering/trekking. While she did manage to take some art classes and spend time with the kids, she also joined in with the planned activities of the students visiting a variety of hospitals, clinics, dog rescues, orphanages, schools etc. Whenever our paths crossed over the next few days she appeared to be having a ball with the youngsters. (Hell, when did I start calling them 'youngsters'?)

Sue and Mimi arrived on 3 December within half an hour of each other so there was just one trip to the airport with no problems. Just as well, as I was about to have a major 'airport drama' myself. We walked

over to Bouda for dinner but as we'd eaten such colossal plates of fried rice in Muna's garden in the afternoon we just were not hungry. We climbed up onto the 'Super View's' rooftop terrace and enjoyed a hot honey/lemon/ginger/rum concoction whose name I've forgotten. With the massive stupa glowing faintly in the moonlight it went down well.

By 11pm I was schlepping back out to the airport with Tarke. Nice man, good car. I watched and waited for two hours, till the airport closed in fact. I only saw one group of three women and that didn't include Ewa. In the deserted car park we asked some local taxi drivers if they had seen three women. 'Yes,' they said. 'They took a taxi to some place called Muna Cottage'. One driver had the guy's phone number, he dialled up and handed me the phone. He was lost anyway so I asked him to bring them back to the airport and arranged to meet him outside the gates.



At the jungle villa in Chitwan

I stood in the headlamps of our car to make myself obvious. Unfortunately, that attracted the attention of the police! When their car did arrive I opened the door and saw three strangers. ‘Oh God, you are not my customers’, I wailed. They were not impressed. It only took about a minute to see what had gone wrong. I had the WRONG Ewa in mind. This was in fact my group of three customers, EVA, Barbara and Ann and they would look a lot happier if I took them home to Muna’s and let them go to bed. It was nearly 2 am. You only get one chance to make a good first impression and I think I blew it.

Wednesday 4 December

With a good night’s sleep and a decent breakfast things looked a lot better for all of us. The four of us involved in the ‘airport saga’ needed a bit of a lie-in but by 11 am we were en route to Thamel where the group got cashed-up. By then everyone was hungry so we had a long, slow lunch at the Weizen and then Dorje took the group to see the Durbar Square and palace museum. The Kumari (Living Goddess) didn’t show but the open squares scattered with 16th and 17th century four- and five-storey pagodas never fails to impress. The group looked suitably culture-shocked when I picked them up at Indra Chowk a few hours later. We downed a lassi on the street and Dorje took half the group home. Enough is enough! Debbie, Sue and Mimi (real ‘stayers’ when it came to shopping) followed me through the narrow alleys choked with people, cars and motorbikes to Tahiti Thole where we bought good prayer flags. The Buddhists believe that if you put these long strings of colourful flags up outside then the wind will lift the prayers printed on them up to the heavens.

We squeezed into a taxi for the short trip over to Durbar Marg where we visited a favourite shop of mine called Grace – an up-market ladies’ clothing store. Almost too colourful but with a range of long cotton shirts which are very practical, especially for travelling here. We were home just in time to freshen up for dinner with the rest of our group at the nearby Shambala. We raided the supermarket for Australian red wine on the way which made the dinner a very cheerful one.

Thursday 5 December

Dorje and our ride were both a bit late this morning but by 10.30 we were away to Swayambu, an ancient collection of gombas, shrines, ashrams and of course the iconic stupa. The place lived up to its nickname

of ‘Monkey Temple’ with swarms of shrieking, chattering monkeys, especially babies. They don’t actually bother people, though it’s not wise to walk around eating peanuts! The views behind the hilltop village were clearer than the smog-filled city valley and peaks were glimpsed. After a good stroll about we walked down the easy roadway and stopped at Fine Grains, a newly-discovered hidden restaurant where the owner/managers have trained in London. Top spaghetti and an unrivalled chocolate mousse cake. I will definitely be going back there.

Bina’s little gem of a jewellery store was next. My favourite purchase was Debbie’s ‘way out’ silver ear-rings. I will miss my own silver and coral ‘saddle ring’ but I had to leave it with Bina to have it copied for Anne. Another squishy tax ride home to dump our shopping and walk over to Boudanath for dinner. It was almost dark when we arrived – winter really is closing in – but the atmosphere was warm as hundreds of Tibetans and local Buddhist folk swarmed around the ancient stupa chanting ‘Om Mani Padme Hum’, fingering long strings of prayer beads and spinning prayer wheels. I love to see the older women with long grey plaited hair and traditional black chuba with striped wool pinafores denoting their regional differences. Dinner at the Garden Kitchen was a treat as usual.

We shopped a little on the way home. I was amazed to see Eva returning from a motor-bike ride with a new acquaintance she’d made while we were inside bartering for embroidered t-shirts and traditional door-hangings. Go girl!

Friday 6 December

Up early today and off into the hills in Deepak’s shiny new Toyota Hi-Ace. So good to get out of the smog-filled city. The great Himalayas were much in evidence as soon as we crested the rim. Sadly, we then caught up with a horrendous tail-back as traffic ground to a halt. We scooted off up a side trail on foot for a quick pee and then spent a lot of time photographing interesting trucks. The signage and decoration are amusing. Anne liked ‘Mom Says Drive Slow’. I like ‘No Time for Love’.

Though the traffic slowed our progress we made Hill Top for lunch. It was nothing special but we were hungry enough not to be too fussy. Once we turned off the main highway the traffic eased somewhat and the scenery was beautiful. The Seti Khola joins the

Trisuli River creating gorges in some parts and white sand beaches in others. At Bharatpur we stocked up on essentials at a local shop which, by chance, was adjacent to a dental surgery. Ann had broken her dentures that morning but the chap assured us he could make a repair for under \$20 which would be ready tomorrow. Impressive luck?

The road turned to a gravel track, the mountains gave way to flat farmland and the scent of flowering mustard filled the air at dusk as we arrived at the Jungle Villa Resort. What a treasure this place is. Sympathetically designed using local materials in an idyllic setting on the river bank. We just had time for a stretch of the legs through the local village before a slide show and dinner. Sahodur is a very well-educated naturalist and his pictures of tigers, rhinos, crocodiles and birds were a treat. Once you tune in to his heavily-accented English he is a mine of information. Dinner was good and the rooms are wonderful with private balconies overlooking the garden and riverbank. A hot water bottle in the bed was a lovely surprise.

Saturday 7 December

A very early start this morning with just tea and biscuits before setting off on elephant back to look for tiger and rhino, deer and peacocks in the jungle. My hip was giving me grief so I am sitting in my lovely room tapping away on my laptop instead of getting out and about. Dorje took my seat on the

elephant. I had better get out there with my camera to get a few shots of their return.

The crew returned in high spirits having spotted rhino up close as well as lots of spotted deer. After a very big breakfast it was almost time for the 'Elephant Briefing'. I thought we were just going to watch them wash the giant creatures but it was so much more than that. Sahodur had us sit down in the shade and listen while he told us ALL about elephants. Did you know that the height is always twice the circumference of the front foot? Or that these elephants can pick up much smaller objects than African elephants? After the briefing it was just a few metres down to the river and what fun that was. Eva and Debbie got in the water and helped with the washing – and were royally hosed down for their trouble.

We were given a truly delicious chicken daal bhat for lunch. One of the best I had ever had. After lunch it was all aboard a little open jeep for about fifteen minutes to the launching place for the dug-out canoe ride. About four or five metres long we boarded one by one and sat on short-legged chairs. We drifted with the current down the Rapti River, spotting birds such as the Fishing Eagle, Kingfisher, Egret and Siberian Ducks to name a few. We saw three crocodiles basking on the banks. Thereafter we stopped trailing our hands in the water! We disembarked on the far bank of the river and walked



Deer crossing a river at Chitwan



In company with the elephants at Chitwan



through the jungle to the crocodile breeding centre. These are very rare indeed. There were cages of various sized creatures. They didn't do ANYTHING. In the jungle we saw an albino deer which is also very rare, a wild boar and Eva saw a mongoose running up a tree. We saw a tiger's paw print – yesterday's!!!! Spooky. We reboarded the dugout and were expertly paddled back to the lodge.

After a wash and brush up it was time for the cultural show. About twenty local girls in fetching white costumes with black and red trimmings performed a series of local dances. I especially liked the one with sticks which were clicked in increasingly intricate patterns as the rhythm intensified. We were invited to dance with the girls for the last number – I don't think we looked that great but we had a ball. Dinner was a barbecue – not really my thing but nicely done. We were pretty tired after such a full day of activities.

Sunday 8 December

The group went for a walk through the village with a local guide this morning and got a chance to see inside a typical house. They adored the local kids. I had cut my foot (while dancing barefoot last night) so I piked out. I had a delightful encounter

while they were gone. The mahouts rode over on their elephants to get some breakfast off the dining room veranda just above my own. I went out to see them and was able to feed them biscuits. I loved the way they curled the end of their trunks so delicately around the little cookies. They were rather competitive which was a hoot.

After breakfast we headed off in the bus. It is about four or five hours to Lumbini and there was never a dull moment. Cows, buffaloes, goats, dogs, hay carts, trucks, bicycles, motorbikes, busses, people carrying impossible loads and kids, kids and more kids. Our driver, Ram, was something of a genius behind the wheel. The pit stop in a small town was far nicer than expected with a clean loo and delicately spiced tea.

We arrived in Lumbini at Buddha Maya Garden in time for a walk into the village. It is really quite poor with very small houses. The millions spent on the Lumbini Master Plan are supposed to include an element of local development. I saw little evidence of it. The local people were inordinately friendly. The beggars near our hotel were a nuisance. On reflection, I think I would rather stay at a more modest guesthouse. Our hotel was well-appointed but ultimately rather boring. I did like the small



Opposite the Jungle Villa Resort



Traffic en route to Lumbini

pavilion in the garden with a big roaring log fire though.

Monday 9 December

It was great having a kettle and cups to make tea in the morning and the buffet breakfast was quite good. Straight after breakfast we set off for the park which contains the site of the birthplace of the Buddha and many beautiful temples created by all the different countries in the world that have some interest in Buddhism. We hopped on rickshaws as the park is three miles long and one mile wide.

First stop was the Sri Lankan temple. Modern, clean and not that beautiful, though the host there was a charming Sri Lankan volunteer from Cardiff. Next was the great white temple built by Thailand. Entirely white with red lacquered doors and shutters. Bright green parrots posed on the pretty roof. Next door was a nunnery from Myanmar. From there (I think) we travelled quite a way to get our tickets and then into a huge open grassy area surrounded by temples. We had been advised to see the German contribution. You can't see everything. It was a great choice. The domed structure was decorated inside with a light, airy touch and the outside paintings were exquisitely

executed. The visiting schoolchildren had a bizarre interest in being photographed with us.

By eleven o'clock it was definitely time to visit the Maya Devi Garden, the garden in which Maya Devi gave birth to the Lord Buddha. It is a serene little area with ancient ruins dating to the 6th century B.C. The exact spot where the birth occurred was rather moving and I hadn't expected that. The ruins include an old bathing pond and are bordered by ancient trees hung with prayer flags. Under the trees some Thai devotees were singing softly. A very pretty picture indeed.

Our rickshaws took us back to the hotel (for a price) and after a quick cuppa we hit the road again. The nearby town of Bairahawa is rather awful and I was glad when we'd passed it. The city of Bhutwal is a bit of a surprise. It is huge and I had never heard of it till we drove through it last year. At the edge of this town is where we stopped at the Nanglo Bakery. The main dining area is the garden and there we were served another splendid daal bhat.

After lunch it was straight uphill. Within minutes we were snaking through a steep-sided valley on



The whole gang at the Thai temple at Lumbini



Lunch – daal bhat – on the road

terrifying, narrow, winding roads. Exciting stuff. Very glad to have the trusty Ram at the helm. It was a real ‘scenic drive’ to Tansen Palpa and cameras were clicking madly through the windows of the bus. Perhaps a little too madly at times. We arrived in Tansen Palpa and found the Srinagar Hotel a friendly place. The bathrooms had been upgraded since last year but I think I liked the old-fashioned white and grey marble better than the bland new tiles. Dinner was good and the view over the town by night was special.

Tuesday 10 December

We agreed with Ram, our wonderful driver, that it would take about half an hour to walk through the bazaar of Thamsen Palpa, have a quick decko at the palace (outside restored, inside not) and meet the bus at the bottom of town. Two and a half hours later and a lot of local shopping for hand woven shawls and scarfs of ‘Khada’ we reached the bottom of this lovely small city. Architecture was interesting and we saw not another tourist. We picked up some snacks for the road as lunch options were pretty dire. By 11.30 we were back on the road. It is a spectacular drive to Pokhara. We ducked down under the clouds and were enthralled by rugged hills, plunging ravines and, best of all, gravity-defying terracing. The road wound through old villages and the variety of cows, goats, babies, farms etc. kept us goggle-eyed most of the way to Pokhara. We must have been getting peckish when Debbie overheard me mention a bag of ‘cinnamon buns’ – sadly we were discussing rubbish and I mentioned that I had a bag of ‘cigarette butts’. Not the same thing at all. We did stop for a cuppa and biscuits and bought the local kids a chocolate bar each as they streamed past on their way home from school. Their whoops and hollers of delight were ample thanks.

The Temple Tree in Pokhara was a special treat. Sympathetic architecture surrounding a beautiful old bodhi tree. Lahar came over and we drank perfect coffee beside the pool. Luxury! We ate at Black and White Café, my new favourite, with cocktails before and red wine accompanying a delicious meal.

Wednesday 11 December

This was a huge day. We rose fairly early, though my alarm was half an hour late. Lahar collected us after a fab buffet breakfast and we walked down to the jetty for boats across the lake. It was a stiff climb up to the Peace Stupa for those unused to trekking.

We were rather lucky to have mountain views at every rest stop and the views were still good at the top for about half an hour. The Peace Stupa, in its white simplicity, is a great vantage point – enhanced by our ‘international man of mystery and intrigue’. Some of us opted to walk back down the steep trail and take a boat home while Sue and Barbara took the slightly easier route back to our waiting bus. Lahar took them to Davis Falls and the cave which I believe they found interesting. For lunch we walked round to Café Olive; always a taste sensation and a quiet courtyard setting.

The afternoon was devoted – and I mean devoted – to shopping. Shawls, jewellery, hats and clothing. The shop inside the hotel didn’t do too badly from us either. I think the prize has to go to Debbie for ‘total shopaholic’ of the trek but Mimi gave her a very good run for her money. Sue and I hooked up with Netra and Isabel for a pre-dinner drink and then scoured the Kashmiri traders for some very lovely embroidered wall hangings. Sue considered her options overnight and went back next day for the pickup. We ate snacks only in our hotel and possibly a little bit too much red wine – too full from lunch to do justice to a real dinner.

Thursday 12 December

Today was a very special one for Anne and Eva. They were picked up by a crowded jeep at 9 am for PARAGLIDING. I have to say that to look at them you wouldn’t really pick them as paragliding types but they absolutely loved it. I am sure it is an experience they will treasure. Pity I am such a wimp in that regard. With a bit of free time to spare the rest of us went shopping, naturally. Pokhara is a great place to buy clothes, jewellery, cashmere, scarves, paintings, handicrafts... you get the picture.

Great to see Subash, who is working as a waiter at a Chinese Restaurant for the trekking ‘off season’. Sad to say goodbye to Lahar. By about 1 o’clock we were back on the road. It didn’t take long to reach the Akala Temple and the nearby roadhouse made us a passable lunch. The drive to Bandipur, along the Prithvi Highway was as interesting as any drive in Nepal. Always something happening – including a very, very near miss with an old lady crossing the road in front of our bus. Well done Ram!

Bandipur is only 8 km from the highway but it is reached on a winding road that gains altitude at an

alarming rate. The Bandipur Mountain Resort is unpretentious but comfortable. The manager was welcoming but the views of the high Himalayas were non-existent. Clouds obscured everything, despite the wind. Instead of sightseeing we gathered round my laptop in the dining room and checked out the photos and video of Ann and Eva's amazing paragliding trip. It cost about \$95 plus nearly \$20 to have the pictures. Worth every penny I would say after seeing the videos. We had daal bhat for dinner. It was very good, especially the chicken curry. Barbara, very kindly I thought, shouted us a bottle of Australian merlot. Thank you.

Friday 13 December

The cook made us a very nice breakfast and then we set off in trekking gear to walk around the area of Bandipur. We strolled about the village for an hour or so, looking at pretty little bougainvillea-clad houses and then took a cuppa in the main square. The village is gradually being restored and is a delight to walk in because all traffic is halted at the edge of town. After morning tea we headed out of the village and climbed down and then up through terraced fields. We met local kids letting off steam after their school exams and then found a quiet spot for a picnic. After the picnic we headed uphill to the Buddhist Gomba. On the way we saw a divine little village of painted houses where the owners invited us to come over and check out their place. The Gomba was a very simple affair but we lit butter lamps and incense and then meandered home slowly. The women eating their daal bhat in the fields sitting in a circle with a small child and a dog made a perfect picture of rural Nepali life.

We picked up some local rum and whisky on the way home and spent the evening playing cards and then eating yet another amazingly good daal bhat. A little music, some Wi-Fi, good company and a few drinks. Can't beat that.

Saturday 14 December

We had a couple of options this morning. I had been told that the deepest cave in south Asia was nearby. It was a half hour's drive and then an hour's climb on a steep trail so only Anne and Debbie volunteered. Dorje agreed to take them.

Meanwhile I set off with Barbara, Sue and Mimi to walk the 8 km from Bandipur to the highway. It is a paved road and quite a few buses passed us at first.

Saturday is 'picnic day' in Bandipur. After an hour the traffic almost ceased and it was easy going, gently downhill, on a scenic, winding road. No mountain views today but the surrounding countryside was very pretty. We checked out the goat breeding research centre where the kids were adorable.

We had almost reached the main road when Ram showed up with Eva who had opted for a couple of extra hours in Bandipur. Ram found a shabby little restaurant which backed onto the river. The tea was good and Dorje's party soon found us there. They had loved the cave. They found a local guide there who was 'as nice as Dorje'. High praise indeed.

We walked out on the suspension bridge of the nearby village just for the experience. It wasn't half as scary as they had expected. These bridges look flimsy from a distance but are in fact sturdy, steel structures.

The rest of the ride home was easy with a long stop at Riverside Springs Resort for lunch. The new pavilion which houses a modern bar and more dining tables is very posh.

Muna was very pleased to see us. Single rooms were very welcome – a spare bed for all that shopping!! Julie was waiting for us to join our Nagarkot trip next day.

Sunday 15 December

Up early today for a quick bus ride with Ram up to Nagarkot. The morning was as gloomy as you could imagine. Thick fog and no sunshine whatsoever. As we wound up the steep hill to the rim of the Kathmandu Valley we were suddenly aware that we



Me, Sue, Anne and Debbie with a friendly farmer near Bandipur



The whole gang plus Julie, and Dorje at Nagarkot

were climbing through the clouds. We emerged at Nagarkot above the fog with clear views all the way to the Himalayas. Every range from beyond Everest in the East to the faint glimpse of the Anapurnas in the West. Oh lucky day! We took loads of photos and then found a rather dreary little place for a cup of tea. We walked down the trail towards Telkot in full sunshine. Through little farms and backyards full of flowers, crops and animals; always looking back over our shoulder to see the peaks behind the nearby hills.

We encountered a new shop along the way. A nice English woman and her Nepali partner had gathered a collection of interesting ‘wearables’ into a little renovated cottage. It took so long to check out her gear that we were tired and ravenous by the time we made Telkot. Ram found a tiny local bhatti for lunch. It only had two rickety wooden tables and open sides but they made us a beautiful lunch of traditional daal bhat.

It was far too late to continue to Changu Narayan (our original plan) so we piled into Ram’s bus and got dropped off at Bhaktapur. This is a fairly large city which was originally a separate kingdom from Kathmandu. It has been lovingly restored over the past thirty years. During the day it is a bit of a tourist trap but in the evenings the tat-sellers disappear, the vegetable-sellers come out and the bazaar is a delight. We wandered the darkening streets till dinner. The huge pagodas glowed in the moonlight just metres from our hotel. I shared a room with Julie and our carved ornamental windows framed the view exquisitely. I found some beautiful old strings of beads from Western Tibet and Debbie found more old treasures. The Sunny Hotel did us a very decent dinner.

Monday 16 December

No hurry this morning though Julie was picked up fairly early. We walked through the famous Potter’s Square and bought little terra-cotta ornaments; some still warm from the kiln. During the day the hawkers are particularly pesky and we felt we had seen enough by eleven. A short walk out of the city (we only took minimal luggage) found Ram waiting for us. He looked refreshed after a night at home with his family in Kathmandu. We whizzed home to Muna Cottage for a twenty-minute turnaround. ‘Change into shopping gear’ was my instruction.

First stop was a visit to the other great stupa of the Kathmandu Valley – Swayambu. Lots of monkeys and lots of visitors, many of them from India. There is a lot to see on this tiny hilltop. A gomba, a Hindu Temple, some ashrams, a small museum, a square full of beautiful old statues, a village of terraced, three and four-storey houses and of course the great, white stupa itself. It is decorated in great detail with brass adornments which glow warmly in the winter sunshine. Views over the valley can be stunning but today the valley was full of ugly smog. Rather nicer from the back of the hill towards the Himalayas glowing white in the distance.

We descended on Bina’s little jewellery store in a flurry of excitement. Things to collect, orders to place, new temptations to discover. Always a treat.

As I finish writing this report in Melbourne, I can’t really recall just how we got to Thamel. Perhaps we shared a couple of taxis?

Shopping this afternoon was a serious business. We combed through Amrita Craft where all the goods have price tags – a unique experience in Kathmandu. We had a very long, boozy lunch at The Roadhouse. The Indian Chenin Blanc was a real find. Pizza to die for and lots and lots of rucola salad.

Fuelled up we hit the shops once more. Shawls, felt, maps, hats, cards, pictures, and trekking gear – you name it, we bought it. As we traversed Thamel to Durbar Marg I heard that Ram was waiting for us with the van. We still walked over to Sherpa Mall for a look into Grace for cotton shirts but we set a limit of half an hour and then got picked up by Ram for the last ride home. We were almost too late for the supermarket and the restaurant at the Shambala but they very obligingly held open for us. Not that we

needed much dinner after all that pizza for lunch. The Shambala is strangely quiet without Isabel, Netra and the La Trobe students.

Tuesday 17 December

Time to go home? Dorje came by with his wife Laki and the two boys, Sonam and Lagpa. Soon afterwards Eva, Barbara and Anne set off in Santos's trusty taxi for their Malaysian Airlines flight. I would normally go along and actually make sure they do leave but I would have been 'one too many' for the taxi. Mimi left an hour or so later. This time there was plenty of room in the taxi so Sue and I availed ourselves of a ride into Thamel after the airport drop-off. I wanted to meet Mangal and talk to Kabita so we met them at the Roadhouse for a coffee. Kabita has grown into a lovely, soft-spoken young woman. Her gentle ways and earnest manner really impressed me.

Sue and I ran around to a few more shops. We split up and re-connected a couple of times and then taxied home (I think). I didn't realise it at the time but I think, in retrospect, I was running on auto-pilot. I spent the evening till 1 am packing up to leave the following morning. I've just done Christmas with my family and I seemed to have all the presents I bought over three months in Nepal.

I left Sue and Debbie behind in Nepal as they were both planning to enjoy a day or two of peace and quiet WITHOUT the group. I've since seen them both in Melbourne so I know they made it back OK.

This Cultural Safari was a bit of an experiment and I thought it went splendidly well. We were exceptionally lucky with the participants – all women by chance. They were a funny, intelligent, generous group and I hope we do as well next season. I will certainly be up for it again next December – any takers???

Cheers,
Teresa didi



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



Lunch near Swayambu





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