

# Trekking with Teresa

## TREK REPORT – CULTURAL SAFARI 2014



**December 3:** By the third of December, when Mary Vella arrived, everyone else had been here for several days. Barbera Hardcastle is still trekking in the foothills of the Annapurna with Lahar and plans to join us on the 6<sup>th</sup> in Chitwan. Elizabeth Sparkes (Sparkles) has been right here at Muna Cottage for weeks, helping out at Bright Future.

Jette has had a 'sleepover' at Dhan Sing's house in Monamaiju so that she could spend time with Pasang Kaji, one of our all-time favourite porters (college holidays only). She loved it!

Noelene and her daughter were here by the end of November too, visiting friends in Kapan and spending time with the kids at Bright Future (which is going gangbusters by the way).

On December 1 Margaret and Stephen (our lone mail) had breezed in from Kuala Lumpur in remarkably good shape, followed by Pam and Anne who were more than a little travel-weary. We walked over to Bouda for dinner but I think some of our members walked through the whole thing in a fog of jet-lag.

Doris, from Germany, who had been planning this trip for some time, finally made it on 2 December and then Mary was the last to arrive this afternoon, while we were all shopping our wallets dry in Thamel. I think even Stephen enjoyed it. It is NOTHING like shopping at home!

We did try a cultural walk today but at one point the crush of people and motorbikes cramming into the bazaar was bordering on dangerous so we bailed out. Durbar square will keep.

We had enjoyed our 'magical mystery tour' yesterday. Thank you Deepak. We went to Bunghamati, Kokarna and Kirtipur. Daal baht at the Windy Hill was very good. Traffic coming home was diabolical.



Tonight most of us walked over to Bouda for dinner. There was a huge full moon and subtle butter-lamp illuminations on the giant stupa as we dined on the roof of the 'Stupa View Restaurant'. The name says it all. Full of good food and with today's purchases unpacked we are rather happy campers. A great start.



**December 4:** Dorje took the whole group to Pathan Durbar Square this morning while I ducked into Thamel yet again – taking care of business. I saw my web guru Narayan at Nepal Media. I needed to take down the notice on my website informing everyone that we were all safe and well in the Langtang in October when wild weather struck many parts of the Himalayas and folks at home were justifiably concerned.

After their grand tour the customers hooked up with Isabel, a friend of mine who runs Bright Future Community Centre. She took them around the local neighbourhood to see how people really live and work. A bit of an eye-opener for some. A few stalwarts had the energy for a walk over to Bouda for dinner again this evening. Always worth the effort.

**December 5:** Ram drove us all to Swayambunath this morning. The day was warm and sunny, perfect for strolling about the ancient temples while monkeys scooted around us. We walked down the easy road to Kimdol Bazaar (thankfully somebody noticed that we didn't have Denise) where we had morning tea at Fine Grains. We visited my friend Bina's tiny little jewellery store – a treasure trove of silver jewellery in really original designs – and then we walked down to Durbar Square. It was a very long way. Between the road works, motorbikes, taxis and crowds it was a rather demanding walk. Well done Mary! Durbar Square was crowded and fascinating but it was getting late and the group was hungry. Rule one of being group leader – don't let them get too hungry. My choice of a restaurant with five floors of stairs didn't impress but the view from the rooftop terrace did. We could see all the way back to Swayambunath where we'd started from. It was a bloody long way. Ram collected us from the busy end of Niurod (New Road). Well done mate!



Muna made Nepali food for us at home tonight and we finished our packing for the big road trip which starts tomorrow.

**December 6:** It felt great to get out of the Kathmandu Valley. It is an endlessly fascinating place .....but, I had been there, with Jette, for ten days! By 8.20 this morning, having collected my friend Julie, we were over the rim in two Toyota Hi-Aces with terraced rice fields falling away beside the winding road.

River Top café was our morning tea stop around 9.45. It is a tiny place, mostly just used by locals, with delicious tea and clean loos overlooking the fast flowing Trisuli River. Not long after 11 we were at Riverside Springs Resort for lunch. We sat in the big new pavilion just as the sun broke through the morning mist. No hurry today. Lahar and Barbera were there to meet us as we pulled in. Despite all predictions to the contrary (she is a 'good eater') Barbera has really lost weight this season. The two of them had trekked back over Gorepani and even done the famous Pun Hill.



Back on the bus we had time to visit Deoghat on the way – a first for me. The little village is full of small ashrams and a cave where Sita is said to have sheltered from demons before being rescued by Hanuman. The surprise was that it could only be reached by inflatable raft. We crossed a pebble beach and piled into two rubber rafts which had a fair bit of water sloshing around in the bottom and no sign of life vests. It was only about fifty metres across and the oarsmen skilfully paddled very close to the shore and then let us drift across the fast current downstream to the other side. I had visions of ending up in the Ganges around Christmas.

Back in the bus the road deteriorated into a dusty, bumpy dirt track as we descended into the Terai, which is mostly flat plains of small farms interspersed with jungle. Colourful bungalows, huge new haystacks, fields of glowing yellow mustard, buffaloes, goats, chickens, children, bicycles and overcrowded tractors and local busses kept us entertained.

The Jungle Villa Resort is 'tranquillity base'. So quiet you can hear the river burbling over the shingle banks. Lots of birds and deer coming down to drink at dusk. There are Siberian Ducks and Egrets wading around just below my balcony as I write this. Dorje, Barbera, Jette and I thought we saw a tiger in the long grass on the far bank. There were doubters. It was almost dark but what we saw was long and low, it moved in slow motion and it was yellowish /orange and black. "If something looks like a duck and walks like a duck....."

The slide show was most informative and held in the outdoor theatre with wine and popcorn. Dinner was Nepali. Wine was Australian. Company was good.

**December 7:** Our group has gone out on an elephant safari to look for wildlife so I am writing this on the back veranda of our room. The river is flowing past just twenty metres away. More later.....I hear them coming back.



Of course they had a fantastic time. They saw everything bar the elusive tiger. Mother rhino with calf, deer, peacocks, wild boar, crocs, monkeys and lots of birds.

The elephant briefing was the high point in my day. Sohodhur gave us lots of great info. An elephant's height at the shoulder is always twice the circumference of the front foot. We got to feed them their 'sandwiches' of rice hay packed with molasses, salt, chick, peas, and other seeds. They eat 150 of these things a day.



After a western style lunch (why do they bother?) we set off in open-topped jeeps to the jetty. Lots of smiles and waves from the local people as we drove through tiny hamlets, of bamboo and thatch. The Tharu are a remarkably open and friendly people. The canoes were dug-outs with tiny seats so we drifted downstream on the Rapti River quite comfortably for nearly an hour. Sohodhur is like a Nepali David Attenborough as he whispers 'greater egret at 9 o'clock'.

We disembarked near the Chitwan National Park headquarters and walked, extremely quietly, to the garial breeding centre. The crocs hardly move but some of them were a terrifying size. Another short walk took us back to the canoes which were waiting to take us back to our lodge where afternoon tea was set out on the back terrace.

In the evening local Tharu men entertained us with throbbing drums and traditional dances. The 'stick dance' is a cross between dancing and martial arts and harks back to a time when sticks were the only defence against some pretty wild animals. We joined in the last dance which amused the locals I think. Tired and sweating we moved to the dining terrace where a superb barbecue had been prepared. It was a warm evening with a huge moon. Our wine store is holding out very well with the reassuring clank of bottles in the back of the bus as we travel over bumpy roads. I didn't want this evening to end but tiredness won out in the end.

**December 8:** While the group went for a walk through the nearby Tharu village I organised the bills and bags and made a few phone calls while it was quiet. All during breakfast a huge rhino had posed on the opposite riverbank. The villagers gave our group a warm welcome, especially the kids and they were interested to see the inside of the traditional houses – an odd mix of medieval tools and mobile phones.



The journey to Lumbini was always interesting. On a small dirt road for the first hour we travelled slowly enough to check out all the little houses with yards crammed with haystacks, goats, chickens and flowers. Things speeded up on the main highway which is a well-made blacktop. All sorts of landscapes from lush irrigated farmland to dried up rivers. From huge sugar cane plantations to forested hills. The assortment of traffic was mind-boggling. I especially liked the Brahmin cows.

Lumbini has its own slightly unreal atmosphere. We strolled through the old village of Lumbini Bazaar around dusk. Everyone and everything was coming home down the one, dusty main street. There were monks, farmers, goats and their herders, motorbikes and tractors. A large group of farm workers were hard at it threshing and winnowing at the end of the village.

We were not overly-impressed with the Bamboo Palace. Our previous groups had stayed at the Buddha Maya Gardens but the service there was dismal, despite the lovely rooms. Dinner at the Bamboo Palace was a redeeming feature and some of us stayed up late playing cards. This place redefines 'kitsch' but it is growing on me.



**December 9:** Up nice and early today but the advantage was lost when breakfast was slow. We soon got organised with entry tickets (thanks Dorje) and then we found two rather dodgy bikes for Barbera and Jette. Barbera's test ride had to be seen to be believed and by the time she hit the dirt she had a good-sized audience. I got a firm commitment from four rickshaw wallahs for a decent but fair price. They were quickly away with Julie and Dorje in one, Pam and Ann (PamAn)) in the second, Doris and Jodie shared and Margaret and Stephen brought up the rear. Noelene, Mary and Elizabeth squeezed into a slightly inadequate 'big taxi' with Lahar. I waved them off rather nervously and went to scout out a better hotel for next season.

Everyone had a good experience. Consensus was that the German temple was far and away the most impressive. The architecture and the wall paintings are stunning. The pure white Thailand temple was popular with Korea and Cambodia rating special mention.

All were touched by the actual birthplace of Lord Buddha. Even if you don't worship Buddha it is still the place where a hugely significant and saintly man was born.

A quick lunch at our odd little hotel and we were on the road by 1 pm and soon through the grotty town of Bairawa. An hour of intensely farmed flat plains and very colourfully painted houses brought us to the thriving city of Butwal. Growing up around the hydro power industry, it is a modern city with bustling, wide avenues. A bit of a surprise the first time you see it. Exiting Butwal the road goes straight up into the misty hills; the road is as rough as guts at first but soon settles down to a winding surfaced road clinging to a precipitous river valley. It was scenic, a little scary and soon much cooler than the plains of the Terai. As wooded hillsides gave way to rocky cliffs every tiny flat area was terraced and farmed.

Ram stopped at a really scungy looking tea stall. When we tried the snack food on offer we found out why. Little cakes of savoury polenta dipped in a chutney of tomato and garlic, spiced with timur disappeared off the tray so fast that Dorje could hardly keep count. At least

37. Tiny fried potatoes cakes with chilli and fresh coriander inside were a close second. The young woman doing the cooking did a blinding job.

Tamsen Palpa is sprinkled across a steep ridge where hanging gardens of poinsettia and golden daisies festoon the walls as we drive through town in late afternoon sun. As we crested the ridge to our hotel I was amazed to see a beautiful clear vista of the Himalayas. My third visit here and the first time I'd seen the famous view which stretches from Manaslu to Daulagiri. The first view of the main Himalayan range for most of our group.

Candles on the dinner table and good food created a charming atmosphere tonight.

**December 10:** We walked down through the old town of Thansen Palpa this morning. It is a Newari city with narrow streets of old houses. Not a wildly interesting place but a nice, normal old town with friendly people and hardly any tourists. Its main claim to fame is the view and a hand-loomed fabric called dakkha. We bought some attractive shawls and scarves. Dorje looked like a new man wearing a tie.

We had views of the big peaks today every time we cleared the looming foothills. The views got better and better as we neared Pokhara. While the scenery was fantastic, the winding road took its toll on one or two of our group. Motion sickness remedies were in high demand. Fresh ginger to sniff periodically is mine. We made it to Pokhara in good time with one quicker stop for chocolate bars.

The Temple Tree is a wonderful hotel. Sympathetic architecture surrounding a very old bodi tree. The rooms are quite small but thoughtfully decorated. Once we had 'settled in' (that makes us sound like a bunch of old crocks) we walked to The Boomerang for dinner in the garden overlooking the lake. Paneer Thika with mint chutney was delicious. Do, I write too much about the food?

**December 11:** The weather looked pretty gloomy as we walked to the boat ramp for a trip out on the Phewa Lake. We set off hopefully (colourfully?) in two long blue boats wearing matching orange life vests. Barbara, Jette, Julie, me, Lahar, Margaret and Stephen wanted to climb the forest trail to the Peace Stupa, a famous Pokhara landmark. Being December it was chilly at first on the misty lake but after about twenty minutes the mist rose rather eerily, the sun came out and all the peaks shone for us. It was the clearest day I've had in Pokhara for years and we lingered for ages over tea at the top of our climb. A nasty landslide has ripped some of the foundations from under the Peace Stupa. It has torn straight downhill clearing the forest in its path. The little restaurant on the lake shore was completely destroyed. It was a devastating sight though it happened months ago during the monsoon. The rest of the day was sunny and warm. We were in t-shirts all day today.

Lots of shopping and a few indulgent spa treatments at our hotel kept us occupied this afternoon. I rounded up seven for lunch at Café Olive. It was a real treat as usual. Dinner at Black and White was cheery, especially since we arrived at 'happy hour'.

**December 12:** Up fairly early today for the big buffet breakfast. I particularly liked the 'omelette dude' who makes to order right in front of you. I snuck Dorje and then Lahar in for a serve. Once again the weather did not look promising. It remained cloudy all day in Pokhara today but, ever optimistic, most of us piled into Ram's bus and headed up to Sarangkot. It stayed misty right until the very last minute and then, suddenly – bingo! ALL the himals from Daulaghiri to Manaslu as clear as a bell. Even the Ganesh Himal in the far Eastern distance. There was a blanket of cotton-wool clouds below us. Glad we took the chance.



Getting the most out of our five star luxury hotel, we didn't check out till midday. The trip to Bandipur only took three hours and the mountains haunted us all the way. And I do mean all the way. From the balconies of our rooms upon arrival we could see a huge sweep of peaks once more, even the Langtang range. The whole thing took on a rosy glow at sunset.

Julie planned to leave next morning so we took the chance for a quick look around the village this evening. Bye Jules! We had an excellent daal bhat tonight but it was very cool weather. Having been to Gossainkund this year I just can't bring myself to call it 'cold'.



**December 13:** What a relaxing day this was. Under gloomy skies we moseyed around the quaint old Newari village. Too chilly for the planned picnic we ate our lunch in a local café. We watched as the didi skilfully made a fresh batch of vegetable samosas. They were served piping hot, crisply fried, filled with lightly curried potatoes and mixed veg. I've not had better. Her ladoos went down well too. We found a weaving workshop with traditional handbooks on our walk. We bought beautiful shawls of wool, local silk, cotton, banana and nettle fibres. A great find. The sun broke through now and again today but as I write this, at 5 pm, it has become very chilly indeed. Now, where are my warm trackydacks and down jacket?



We finished the last three bottles from our little 'wine cartel' but the last bottle, a Spanish 'red fizz' – proved unpopular. We played cards till late. I shared a hand with Jette. We were an unbeatable team, notwithstanding the 'red fizz'.

**December 14:** Well if we had to have one day of lousy weather then this one was a good choice. Steady rain made the hotel pick-up a bit of a challenge on the boggy jeep road so most of us donned our rain jackets and walked, rather quickly, to the road terminal about fifteen minutes away. A local jeep brought Mary, Noelene and all the bags up to the road. Well done guys. It was cosy in the bus and not far to the Riverside Springs Resort for lunch. It was a pity we couldn't do our planned trek today but a leisurely lunch and then a decent run in the traffic saw us back in Kapan by 5pm. We were rather happy to be 'home'.

Jette, Pam and Ann have volunteered to take the apartment at Shambala as Muna Cottage is full up to overflowing. Thank you. We dined at Shambala with Isabel, Netra, Sarmilla and Jan (a visiting physio from Australia). We replenished our supply of Gossips and had a great time.

**December 15:** Off again this morning but no packing required as we kept our rooms at Muna Cottage. Ram took us all in one bus for the one hour trip to Nagarkot. It was a heavily overcast morning and had rained most of the night so I was not too optimistic about having a view from the rim of the Kathmandu Valley. It was definitely good enough weather for the planned day-trek so we persevered. Mother Nature turned it on for us one more time. Above Telkot the

sun shone on splendid views. The overnight rain had dusted the entire Himalayan range with fresh snow down to around 2500 metres. Stunning!

Elizabeth and Mary opted to go directly to Bhaktapur in Ram's bus while the rest of us set off on foot. It was a little muddy on the trail here and there but bright sunshine soon had us down to t-shirts. We had tea and biscuits at a funky old hotel whose name I can never remember. "Splendid View" or some such. Oddly, I've never seen any guests there.



Onwards then, through the backyards of mud-walled cottages. I lost count of the number of baby goats we petted. With occasional views of the mountains we made our way along the ridge to the temple at Telkot. Three hundred steps later (sorry Pam, did I say about one hundred?) we reached the cluster of shabby shops which is the village of Telkot. Our lunch stop, the Bhir Café was just as scruffy as the rest but serves authentic Nepali food. A cold coke was most welcome. No diet coke here.

We lost Doris and Jodie at that point. Not literally of course. Subas Jr. took them down to Bhaktapur by local bus. Down to seven members the group pushed on, uphill now for a while through pine forest. We walked for an hour or so along a high ridge with great views down into the Kathmandu Valley. The rain had certainly cleared the air.

It was too late and we were too tired to explore Changu Narayan when we got there just after 5 pm. We soon located the local bus which was about to depart for the 'disco ride' of our lives. It was a fair walk into the town from the northern gate – no cars inside – so it was fully dark by the time we arrived at our hotel. ; The Sunny Guesthouse has gone to the pack a bit. They appear to have lost the lease on half of the building. The rooms are not as clean as they used to be and the dining room was cramped. Food was 'so-so'. The location is gorgeous though with shadowy pagodas looming outside the intricately carved windows. 10/10 for atmosphere.

**December 16:** Most of us woke really early this morning due to the massed temple bells next door to our guesthouse. Dorje and Subas Jr took the group to the pottery square and then around the beautiful city of Bhaktapur. A lot of money, mostly German, has been spent on restoration here and it really shows. A really charming old city.

By late morning we were ready to head off, though we did take a short detour on the walk out to our bus to avoid smouldering, sparking power lines overhead. Nasty! We had an easy drive on the new highway back to Muna Cottage in Kapan where we quickly changed into serious shopping gear. Ram waited for us and then we all piled back into the familiar bus for one last trip – to the shopping Mecca of Thamel.

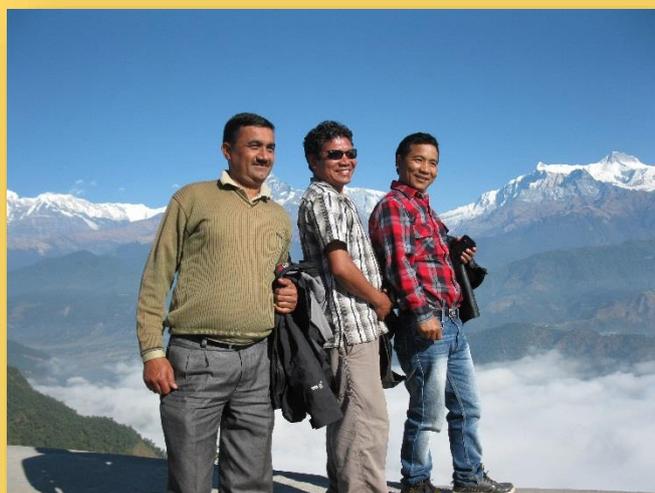
First stop was Grace, my favourite up-market Nepali women's clothing store. It has really colourful cotton kurtas. We then made our way over to Thamel for a quick bite at the Weizen. Fuelled up for more shopping we got serious. Felt, clothes, books, paintings, jewellery.....yes, we had fun! My pick of the day was the hand-crocheted hemp and cotton sun hats for \$3. (I actually sell these myself in Germany and in Melbourne).

An early dinner at the Roadhouse for everyone, including many of our porters. Even Dhan Raj was there, he'd shown up somewhere around Sherpa Mall. We taxied home but had a nightcap or two at Muna's – our last night together.

**December 17:** A tinge of sadness as I put one person after another into taxis for the airport. The last to go were Jette and Barbara at 9 pm. Elizabeth, Stephen and Margaret stayed on.

Bye all, we had a grand time.

Teresa didi.



Ps If this trip sounds like something you might enjoy yourself the dates for 2015 are now set for December 6 - 20. Three confirmed participants so far. I am considering running this trip again in the second half of March 2016. You can reach me at [vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com](mailto:vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com), phone me in Australia on 0452 233 607 till the end of March or go to the website at [www.slowtrekking.com](http://www.slowtrekking.com) and follow the links. Plenty of room so far.