

Trekking with Teresa

Trek report cultural safari 2015



December 4:

First to arrive, a few days ahead of the pack, were Mary's family; daughter Deb, son-in-law Lee and grandson Jesse. Mary did this same trip last season and also trekked to Muktinath with us in about 2006, at age 75! What a legend.

They took ages to emerge from the airport having trouble locating all their bags and, in the end, one was actually missing. It turned up two days later, thanks a lot Silkair! We walked over to Bouda for dinner. So sad to see the damaged stupa but it hasn't stopped the devout Buddhist community from coming out in droves each evening to circle the holy site. Lots of Sherpa, Lo Pa and Tibetans wintering over in Bouda made a colourful procession which we happily joined, spinning the prayer wheels with the chanting throng. Mary has injured her back somehow and stayed tucked up at home. The new arrivals delighted in everything they saw. Great to have such enthusiastic visitors.

December 5:

With time to spare before the rest of their group arrive we decided on a day trip to Dulikhel. Maureen, Isabel's volunteer at Bright Future, joined us and we all piled into Ram's comfy silver Toyota Hi-ace which was to become such a familiar sight over coming weeks. We visited the gigantic, if slightly kitsch, 'Big Shiva'. It really is BIG! Ram recommended the

Dulikhel Lodge for lunch. While sadly there were no views of the Himalayas, the lunch was good on a sunny patio overlooking terraced hillsides. On the way home we went for a wander around Thimi where we watched traditional potters at work in the narrow lanes.

December 5:

Dorje and Maureen took the three new folks up to KapanGomba via the paper making workshops and the pashmina factory; a 'behind the scenes' look at life in our suburb. I think we ate at Shambala tonight but I'm writing from memory and it was a few days ago now?? The poor Shambala has no gas and the electricity goes off every five minutes, making it rather difficult to run a restaurant. We tried ordering the spiced peanuts to jazz up the limited offerings. They did make us fried veg. momos though. Picked up Jane, sister of Louise (Langtang 2014) from Sydney, late tonight.

6 December:

Picked up our last two guests, Russ and Julie from Melbourne around 1.30 this afternoon. They were already outside when I arrived and trying to fend off hordes of 'helpful' locals. Feet up for a couple of hours and then over to Bouda again for a fab feed at the Roadhouse with Isabel and Maureen and the rest of the gang. Great pizza on a terrace overlooking the stupa. "Sex on the Beach" was a hit for Jesse –and we teased him about it mercilessly for the rest of the trip.

7 December:

We woke up early today and visited Isabel's Bright Future project where Jesse, a budding professional musician, wowed the kids with some really lively songs. I liked 'Here Comes The Sun' done in a more 'rocking' style, I think the kids liked 'Sadie, The Cleaning Lady'. So, with a full complement on board Ram picked us up just after breakfast (yes, we are still eating French toast with fried tomatoes) at Muna Cottage, our home away from home in Kathmandu . We were dropped at Swayambunath Temple. Dorje brought Laki along. The monkeys were EVERYWHERE! Deb made the mistake of getting her tobacco out. First one, then another monkey jumped on her, thinking she had something to eat. A helpful American woman yelled at her to 'let go' of whatever she was clutching but Deb hung on valiantly. Eventually the cheeky monsters let go but Lee swore he later saw a monkey in a tree smoking a cigarette!

We walked down to Bina's jewellery store and found a few gems. Deb's 'chandelier' earrings of silver-mounted citrine are gorgeous. Lee is acquiring a collection of hippy armbands. Can't resist a bargain. We kept walking down to Thamel where we exchanged our dollars for rupees – at 77 to the dollar! Good lunch at The Weizen bakery. Dorje took the customers for a walk around the old Durbar Square... some of the pagodas are just gone! Smashed to pieces on April 25th when a massive earthquake shattered vast swathes of Nepal. We had a quiet dinner tonight, some at Shambala, some at home with a stash of 'bakery items'.

I think this was the day Mary joined the ladies sewing group to show them some new ideas. She decided they definitely needed an over locker and has decided to donate one. I hear Isabel pushed Mary in the wheelchair up the hill at the end of our street!!

December 8:

Said goodbye to Maureen this morning before we headed off in Ram's bus again, this time to Pathan Durbar square which was a bit less damaged but still had a few large gaps due to the earthquake. Picked up a nice local guide and wheeled Mary about in her newly-acquired wheelchair. Under one hundred dollars and a little ripper. The Golden Temple never disappoints. I always forget how beautiful it is. All that glowing brass and so much detail in such a small space. We had a cuppa in the palace grounds and then drove on to Windy Hill for lunch. It was closed. The next option Ram showed me was a dive but we went back into the up-market ex-pat area to 8 Degrees. Very nice food indeed. The Chardonnay was chilled and Australian which is always a good combination.

We tried to visit Bungamati and Kokarna. The first was so earthquake-damaged we thought better of it and the second was, sadly, really badly smashed to pieces, especially the beautiful old town square. Really heart-breaking.

Baht Bateni supermarket on the way home and another fairly Spartan meal at the Shambala, made somewhat nicer by good company and Isabel's Merlot. Home to pack for the 'big trip'.

December 9:

What a huge day this has been. Pretty tired as I sit up in bed typing this at eleven pm. Sorry if my recollection of the past few days is less than perfect. Up at seven this morning. Netra and Isabel came down to say goodbye and we got away around 8.30. Not much traffic due to fuel shortages. Passed several huge fuel queues but rumour has it that the negotiations are getting somewhere. We live in hope. (False as it transpired)



Great to get out of the Kathmandu Valley where I'd been for two weeks! It's a long time to be in a smoggy city. Nice cuppa at RivertopCafé and then lunch at Riverside Springs Resort. The burgers were not the best choice on the menu but at least the guests have now figured it's better to order Nepali options. Scenery was stunning though traffic and road conditions were a bit startling at times.



Jungle Villa Resort is a delight. Beautiful rooms, pleasant surroundings, barbecue food for dinner and then a concert of music, drumming and dancing from local youngsters. Top day. Early start tomorrow so time to sleep in my soft bed. M-m-m-m-m. Night-night.



December 10:

Woke early to the sound of a trumpeting elephant. Rounded up the group for a cuppa before heading over to the 'mounting yard'. They clambered on the 'howdah' in the misty dawn light and headed off into the jungle in search of wildlife. Back nearly two hours later having seen deer and rhino but, sadly, no tiger. Maybe tomorrow?? One of the howdah's was on a dreadful lean, meaning the passengers spent a lot of their time 'hanging on for dear life'. Need to fix this.





After a huge breakfast and a little free time we attended an 'elephant briefing' with a chance to get up close and personal with two beautiful middle-aged female elephants. After lunch we boarded an open jeep for a twenty minute ride through Tharu villages to a riverside spot for embarkation onto long dug-out canoes. Local fisher-folk, wood-gatherers,

bird life and finally crocodiles were spotted along the banks. Actually, one croc was, in my opinion, way too close for comfort. I may have used some colourful language urging our boatman to get going. After a jungle walk to the crocodile conservation project we walked out through more jungle, very quietly, to our waiting canoes and were quickly paddled across the Rapti River to the lodge.





There was an extremely informative slide show before dinner but we'd all had a very early start so there was no trouble sleeping tonight.

December 11:

After an early morning bird-watching walk it was onwards then, slowly at first, on dusty dirt roads through farms and hamlets. Rice harvest must have been good this year if the size of

the haystacks is anything to go by. Once we hit the main road the travelling was quicker and smoother – though always something interesting to see along the way. We had a packed lunch from the lodge which we ate at a modest café by the roadside. Would consider eating their food next time. We sang along to every Beatles song you've ever heard. Russ sat up front and played DJ.

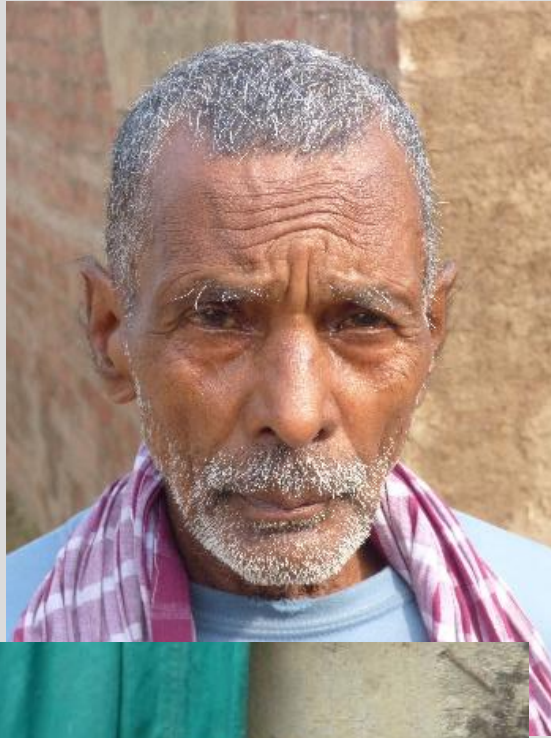
Late afternoon saw us pulling into the rather too fabulous Buddha Maya Gardens. Super rooms, decent food but no water pressure and the power was off on arrival. Expect a little more for the price. The stroll through the Lumbini Bazaar was a treat at dusk. Local people were extremely friendly.



December 12:

Ram and Lahar took our guests around the temple complex nice and early this morning as we needed time to visit a nearby village to obtain more fuel. Due to a blockade of fuel and gas supplies at the Indian border the black market is thriving and the border, not far from here, is fairly porous away from the main towns. We spent a very pleasant hour in a tiny village where locals were earning more cash than they had from farming for a while. While Ram and Lahar haggled and filled the jerry cans we mingled with the locals who probably hadn't met many 'Bideshi' before.





Onwards then to a lunch stop on the edge of Bhutwal. The Nanglo was not open (booked for a wedding) so we crossed the road to a local 'dive' I had used before. Simple but tasty. Lots of momos. The road then wound very quickly up into the hills but not before Ram made one more top at his favourite snack hut. A really 'rustic' joint with tasty snacks, much favoured by locals' en-route from Thansen and beyond. The road was seriously winding, steep and scenic. Great. We arrived in Thansen Palpa a bit earlier than planned but, sadly, no views of the Himalayas. Maybe tomorrow? Lovely dinner tonight as we work our way through our stash of Australian wine. It is cold up here at 2000 metres!

December 13:

Another long, winding road today. Our preferred lunch stop was closed but we stopped at a new roadside shack for crisps and soft drinks to tide us over. The Lakefront Hotel was bathed in sunshine and temperature was mild in Pokhara for lunch on their sunny terrace. Rooms with balconies overlooking the lake were pleasant. Three brave souls opted for paragliding in the morning. Sadly, a strike by pilots was in force next day. Was that relief or disappointment on their faces when they heard the news? Dinner at Café Olivegood as ever.

December 14:

Lahar came to collect Deb, Lee, Jane and Jesse this morning. They set off to cross the PhewaTal in a little traditional boat, most of them to climb up to the Peace Stupa, Deb to enjoy a leisurely solo paddle back across the sparkling lake. Mountains were not crystal clear but they were visible. I took Mary shopping, with Ram doing duty on the wheelchair. The group got together at the newly-discovered Jiva for a tasty lunch and a 90-minute massage. They certainly looked very relaxed when we gathered later for dinner. Russ and Julie had a 'sickie' today. Just a cold, but what a cold!

Dinner at Black and White, an old favourite. Deb, Lee, Jesse, Jane and I decided to walk home. The live music emanating from Club Amsterdam was too much... we dived in and hit the dance floor. "Cocaine" was very danceable, the band were great and when they took a break ACDC was blasting out of the sound system. We chatted with some fellow Aussies and still enjoyed the walk home.

December 15:

Ram persuaded me to get the group up early to see the sunrise over the Anapurna range of the Himalaya, so we set off in the dark for Sarankot, about half an hour out of town. We hadn't had much luck with mountain views so far but this morning was great. Not perfect but pretty good especially when the sun illuminated the peaks in subtle pinks and gold's. We nursed a welcome hot cup of tea as we watched nature's light show. Ran into Subas which was an added bonus.

Back at the hotel for breakfast and then a bit of free time for the customers to troll the local shops. There are some really cute things out there. Jesse's hemp guitar case was my favourite, though Mary and Julie bought stunning shawls. It was an easy decision to return to Black and White for lunch before heading off to Bandipur. Only three and a half hours away and no need to hurry. The Russian paragliding pilot with his lime green custom motorbike was probably a bigger attraction than the food. Royal Enfield I think.

The trip to Bandipur was uneventful – in a good way. There's always something to see on a road trip in Nepal. We arrived on a very chilly late afternoon, back up to 2000 metres. This

is an older, much simpler lodge but the heater soon fired up in the dining room – much to the manager's surprise. We ate local food, drank some rather-to-easily chilled Aussie chardonnay and taught Russ and Jane to play 'thirteen'.

December 16:

We asked for a nice 'late' breakfast today and set off to walk into the village shortly before eleven. We climbed a small hill and followed a local trail to a tiny Gomba. The caretakers were very welcoming and immediately set out chairs in the sun and made us a cup of tea. Descending into the old village we mooched around the charming streets strung along the ridge. No cars inside the town so a delightful walk. We stopped by a weaving studio where a woman I'd met last year was making shawls and scarves from local wool, silk, nettle, banana and cotton fibres on a 200 year old loom. Lunch was in a local eatery; piles of freshly-made samosas, served with home-made yoghurt and banana lassi, a new favourite. The afternoon grew chilly as we wandered home but sadly, no views of the Himalayas. The view down over the valley at night was very pretty though.

December 17:

This morning broke fair so Jane, Russ, Julie, Lee and Jesse joined me for the 8km hike down to the main road at the bottom of the valley. A winding bitumen road with a gradual descent was a piece of cake and we were almost at the bottom by the time Ram caught us up with Mary and Deb in our bus. We grabbed a quick cuppa at a rather simple place near the main road. I like to stop here so that we can walk around to a local suspension bridge. Every visit to Nepal should include at least one.

Onwards then for the long drive to Kathmandu and beyond. We did stop for lunch but it was not particularly memorable. We picked up my friend Julie at Benchen Gomba in Swayambu. It was still a long drive across town and up to the rim of the Kathmandu Valley to the Dulikhel Lodge. No views again. Well, there were some vague pink outlines amongst the clouds, just hinting at the view which might have been. Maybe tomorrow??

The lodge here is rather fabulous, especially the dining room with a big, round log fire. Much appreciated, as were the extremely generous gin and tonics. Thanks Jane and Julie. Buffet Nepali food was excellent.

December 18:

Big day again today...a little bigger than we planned. Ram dropped off Russ, Julie-la, Lee, Jesse, Jane and myself at Telkot for a hike across the ridge to Changu Narayan. The sun shone and the walk was only moderately demanding. Still, it took a few hours and we were ready for lunch by the time we got there. Great to get up above the smog of Kathmandu. Sadly, no mountain views. We checked out the old temples, complete with erotic carvings, and ate our lunch while deciding whether to take the local bus, call Ram or walk down to Bhaktapur. Locals said it was twenty minutes if we took the short cut. Sounded reasonable even on tired legs. After a steep trail to the bottom of the ridge it was up and down for

ANOTHER twenty minutes. We asked some more locals how far to Planet Bhaktapur (might as well have been another planet at this stage). TWENTY MINUTES! Up, up, up and then down, down, down, all very lovely rural landscapes, attractive in the fading light. Plodding by this stage we asked some local ladies???TWENTY BLOODY MINUTES! Total time for the walk from lunch to lodge was one hour and forty minutes. Luckily the lodge was a beauty. Big soft beds in attractive, parquet-floored rooms. There were quite a few 'little lie downs' before dinner. Gas is getting scarce now so the meal was cooked outside on a fire in the garden.

Deb, Mary and Julie B rode into Bhaktapur with Ram and strolled peacefully about the old city in the afternoon without the group to slow, them down. They seem to have enjoyed themselves.

December 19:

After breakfast we drove right into the old city. Earthquake damage was seriously evident but there was still plenty to see and the two largest, most beautiful pagodas are fine. Ram took control of Mary's wheelchair and we did the full, tourist bit – ooh-ing and ah-ing at the gorgeous old architecture.

Having had our 'cultural hit' we piled back into the bus and took lunch back at Planet Bhaktapur.....a hotel I'd seriously recommend. An hour after lunch we were 'home' at Muna Cottage in Kapan, time to change into serious shopping gear. Russ and Julie found a wonderful (if a little weird) hotel, others shopped and shopped. We all had a good day, finishing up with the traditional ending to a Nepali holiday – a big pizza dinner at The Roadhouse. Even Ram and Lahar made it in the end.

December 20:

We headed back to Thamel today. Just can't get enough of that shopping! Russ and Julie moved to their swanky new digs for three days till they fly to Dubai. Bye Russ and Julie Deb, Lee and Jesse did some 'independent' shopping and Julie-la took Jane out to Parphing for the day for a bit of spiritual enlightenment.

Isabel took Mary into town with Netra where he bought an over locker for the woman's sewing group. Thanks Mary.

Isabel joined Julie-la, me and Jane for slim pickings at Shambala and I sent four serves of fried chicken momos home to Muna's for an indoor picnic for Mary's family. I think they got the better meal but we did the red wine more justice. We've all agreed to have a very, very late breakfast tomorrow. Took Jane to the airport late tonight (though not quite as late as I'd planned). Bye Jane.

December 21:

Last day for Mary's family was very low key. Long lie in, slow breakfast with one last serve of French toast and fried tomatoes (ok, well two if you are Jesse). Jesse, Deb and Lee went

up to 'the library' to play for the kids, Julie-la headed off in a taxi. By Jules. Mary formally donated her wheelchair to Bright Future and then it was all Katta farewell scarves, photos in the garden and one last trip in Ram's bus. Bye Deb, Lee, Jesse and Mary, great to know you all.

This Cultural Safari just gets better and better as we dine tune it. There were several cancellations this year as anxiety over India's blockade of fuel and gas were fuelled by media coverage which showed the worst. Despite the undeniable problems we had a great trip. Hope to run this again in 2016, probably about a week earlier, so very early December. Do get in touch if you want to join us. Email me at vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com or teresadb@hotmail.com. Or keep an eye on the website at www.slowtrekking.com or the 'slow trekking' page on Facebook. Hope to see you here.

Cheers

Teresa did

