

# TREKking WITH TERESA

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## TREK REPORT – Cultural Safari, December 2019

### Members:

Teresa Williams – Group Leader, Ekkehard, Gray, Anna, Susie, Julie.

### Driver: Abisek

While the tour did not officially start till December 1, Gray and Anna came in a couple of days early at 10 pm. An easy pick up at the airport and straight to bed for the weary travellers.

We took the longest, slowest breakfast next morning – it was still nice enough to sit out in the hotel garden where I had discovered a new quiet corner. We wandered around Thamel, Assan Thole and Indra Chowk and of course we had a lassi on the way. It is just a hole-in-the-wall shop and the only option is small or large but what a lassi! We bought

a few things made of recycled sari silk at Amrita. We left Gray and Anna to ‘chill’ this afternoon as they had both worked hard right up until the very last moment. Later we got a taxi over to Bouda at dusk. The great stupa was completely garlanded with ropes of fresh marigolds. We had a super Tibetan dinner at the Rooftop Potala. Taxi rides at night in Kathmandu can be terrifying but Gray sat in the front and was fine once he found his ‘fear-cancelling sunglasses’. We had a nightcap at Artmandu, the rather noisy (good music) bar next to our hotel. So happy to have family here.

### 1 December:

This was a seriously busy day. An early breakfast and then up to Swayambu to the Benchen Vihar. It is a lovely guesthouse attached to a gompa (Buddhist monastery). Rooms sorted, coffee ordered at the



*Susie checks out the Goats in Coats*

Heavenly Tasty Café (the name says it all), we headed out to the airport to collect Susie, a German friend, who waited an hour and a half for her bags. The taxi driver was nice so I retained him for the second pick-up – Julie from Victoria. Julie actually rang me – a Facebook call on the airport wi-fi – as we were stuck in traffic on the way. I am sometimes astounded by technology. We didn't even park the car, just drove straight through and collected Julie from the footpath at the exit. Good work.

We all strolled out to the huge Buddha statues on the edge of Swayambu but it was too dark for a complete kora. We found some Australian red wine in a new supermarket on the way home so we bought a couple of bottles and ordered up big at the Heavenly Tasty. Seriously good veg pakoras and momos. An early night for weary jet-lagged travellers.

### **2 December:**

A long day in the city. We walked EVERYWHERE! Thamel, Assan Thole, Indra Chowk, Durbar Marg. Some rather good selections made at some of our favourite shops. I haven't written anything in the diary for this evening – too busy enjoying ourselves.

### **3 December:**

It was a long drive to Chitwan so we needed a bright start; the Heavenly Tasty opened early to give us a simple breakfast – best coffee in Kathmandu!

Kancha arrived with his wife Durga and started schlepping bags down the many stairs to the road where Abisek, our driver for the whole tour, was waiting in the Hi-Ace. We were so well-organised, we hit the road at 7.30 and were over the rim and out of the Kathmandu Valley by 8.30. It is much quicker from the Swayambu side.

At our first break, River Top, the group quickly ducked through the nearby shabby village to walk across the Trisuli River on their first suspension bridge. Tea was tasty, as ever. They put one peppercorn in the tea pot for a slightly aromatic flavour.

Riverside Springs Resort was perfect today. Cool enough now to pick a sunny spot in the pavilion. I think we all ate the veg pakoras with mint/chilli achar. Delicious and not too heavy.

The road to Chitwan is in great shape these days though there was a short delay for 'rock loosening' above the road. Better to dislodge them, on abseiling ropes, than to have them fall randomly on the traffic below. We used the chance to walk ahead and had Abisek pick us up. The road workers kindly waited just that minute longer for our ride to arrive.

We arrived at the Jungle Villa Resort at about 4.30 and were asked if we would mind doing our elephant ride NOW!! Yes, why not? The light was lovely and



*A very big croc!*



*Gray, Anna and Julie on the trail*



*An open billed crane dancing*

we got very close to a mum rhino with a 3-year-old junior. The sun set just as we returned through the jungle watching a large herd of spotted deer on the way. Ekki, Susie and I were on Jungle-kali. Gray, Anna and Julie on Villa-kali (really dreadfully unimaginative names).

Back at the resort we opened some more of our stash of red, to very good effect. It was soon time for the Cultural programme and the dancing was gorgeous. Of course, we joined in at the end. There were two other big groups visiting so we had lots of people to dance with. The Indian visitors were, sadly, rather rude and talked, joked and spoke on their phones quite loudly – during the spoken presentations. No consideration. Bogans from Rajasthan – all men. Over the coming days they often tried to photograph us women, without asking, especially when we were distracted. A bit odd.

Dinner was an excellent BBQ.

#### **4 December:**

A really 'full programme' today. The mornings are really misty here at this time of year so we were well-pleased that we had our elephant ride yesterday. Once it started to clear we headed off in an open jeep to the river bank where dugout canoes were waiting. It was a dream to drift downstream, with a little help from our boatmen who poled the shallows. We took almost an hour to reach the far bank of the Rapti

River downstream at the entrance to the Chitwan National Park. The Garyal and Muggar Breeding Centre was impressive – there are some REALLY large crocs here. Ram Dinh, our guide, was Chitwan's answer to David Attenborough. He also has a wealth of medicinal knowledge as he is a third generation herbalist, currently training his daughter. Some of his remedies sound quite ghastly – drinking cow urine for example!

We took a walk through the nearby Tharu village late this afternoon. Such friendly local people who mostly work at mixed farming. The fields of mustard were beautiful in the late afternoon light.

This evening was the information slide presentation. Once again Ram Dinh proved extremely knowledgeable. Dinner was another huge Nepali feast and then off to enjoy the comfort of our luxurious rooms – such a treat after trekking lodges for the past few weeks.

#### **5 December:**

The mist cleared during breakfast so Ram Dinh took us birdwatching. We saw some brilliant birds with proper names I can't recall. The buff-throated bul bul comes to mind. Kingfishers, woodpeckers, storks, egrets (lesser and greater), ducks and ibis... and who could forget the open-billed crane?

The last lunch at the resort was yet another magnificent daal bhat. Amazed that we could fit in the bus afterwards.

The journey to Lumbini takes about 5 hours through farmland and forest and some hectically-busy towns. Chitwan itself was chaotic. The last stretch this evening was through very dusty roadwork and, as dusk fell, it was often hard to see where the road actually was. Never a dull moment and rather relieved to arrive.

The Buddha Maya Garden was a bit of a fizzer as hotels go. The staff were quite rude, in the tradition of the Kathmandu Guesthouse. They have attractive rooms but a very ordinary buffet dinner. No tonic! No diet coke! No cocktails! Wine was 1,000 Nepali rupees (almost \$13) a glass!

Breakfast was no better with some of the pancakes quite obviously left over from the day before. Unimpressed. Will not be going back.



*Spotted deer*





*Rhinos at Chitwan*



**6 December:**

The Maya Devi Garden at Lumbini was something special. It is the birthplace of the Buddha so extra special for Durga and Kancha who are Buddhists. In the greater park there are many temples but we chose just the German (traditional Nepali, exquisite workmanship) and the Thai (traditional Thai in style and pure white) for a complete contrast. We had a laugh bombing about in the electric Tuk-Tuks.

We departed around 1230 for Bhutwal, just an hour away if you know the back roads through delightful farmland. Nice one Abisek. The new name for the old Nanglo Bakery there is 'Lavish'. Situated right at the far end of the town it has very loud pop music, groovy waiters and an all new blue and white paint job. The food was nice enough and we made a little complimentary video for their Facebook page. I rather liked it as it was.

The winding road over the hills to Thansen Palpa was scenic in the extreme. Deep gorges with green rivers flowing way down below us. Thansen is strung across a ridge and looked beautiful in the late afternoon sunshine as we approached it from the South. Best of all, the Himalaya shone superbly as we crested the ridge near the hotel. We actually leaped out of the bus and almost ran to the lookout.

It was bloody amazing. Shining peaks from east to west. Wow! Wow! Wow!

**7 December:**

We love the hotel at Thansen Palpa, The Srinagar, not least for the astoundingly good view, front and back of the hotel. Staff were lovely and we played cards in the dining room till late last night.



*Susie with Jungle Kali*



*Checking out the local plants*



*A dangerous beastie – good that he is tied up!*

We walked down through the town this morning from top to bottom, stopping to say hi to the friendly locals and to buy some hand-woven dakka fabrics. Abisek was waiting at the bottom of town and we were soon on our way on winding roads through more stunning scenery. Up and down and around we go. Our planned lunch stop did not happen. The place was closed up. A roadside bhatti was almost good enough with a rather oily chow mein and cold Coca-Cola in the sun.

Back on the road we made it to Pokhara just an hour or so later. It was perfectly clear on arrival with ALL the Annapurnas, Dhaulagiri and Manaslu on display. We walked straight down to the lake – Phewa Tal – where the lowering sun turned the mountains a glittering pink and the lake to molten metal. Stunning.

We booked some massages for tomorrow at Jiva and dined at the Black and White – some of us were hankering after salad and not all restaurants

in Nepal are really clean enough to order uncooked food. Delicious.

### **8 December:**

Up early today and out on the lake, as is our custom here. Two boats for eight of us (Abisek declined this year) expertly paddled across the lake to the bottom of the steep trail to the Peace Stupa. We all made it up, slowly, and it was perfectly clear all the way. After a little tour of the lovely white stupa – such a contrast against the blue sky – we took a coffee with a view. Easy descent on the shady jungle path back to Pokhara where we got a ride to Lakeside. Lahar took Kancha and Durga to his house for lunch while we tried the Buddha Bakery. It is operated by the Black and White management, actually it is their bakehouse, and proved an excellent choice. This afternoon there was a lot of shopping and Susie had a massage. Glittering skies at 4.30 pm.

Robert, a guy I met about 17 years ago, recognised me at Benchen Vihar. I recommended our hotel in



*View from the back of the hotel at Thansen Palpa*



*A friendly local in Thansen Palpa*



*Kancha and Durga*



*An interesting menu*



*The view from the New Friendly Home hotel in Pokhara*



*Lake Phewa, Pokhara, at dusk*

Pokhara, the New Friendly Home, and he is here with his wife and half a dozen friends. He and his wife keep turning up in the same place as us to a degree that is almost comical.

Nice low key Nepali place for dinner tonight. Super friendly and normal (Nepali) food.

### **9 December:**

Up very early for the sunrise. We did not quite catch it, though we saw it from the bus as we drove up. Lingered for a while at the stupendous views at the top – mountains and valleys on both sides. We left Julie taking photos at Sarangkot lookout, knowing Abisek would take her home, and walked down a little to a very small local bhatti where omelettes and toast were made one by one as we drank in the view. Spicy noodle soup for Durga and Kancha – at 7.30 am!!

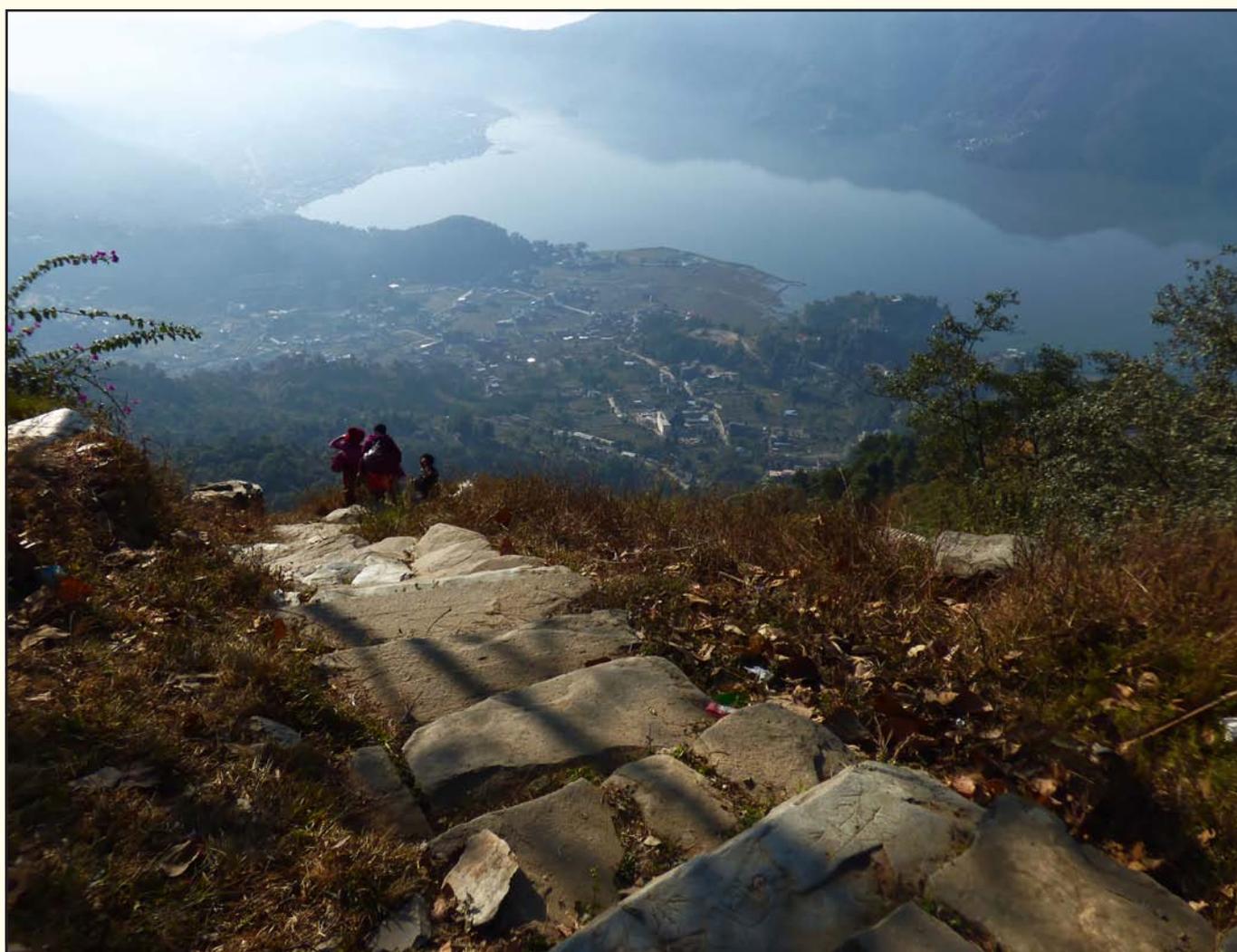
The trek back down to Lakeside was brilliant. Little farmhouses, baby goats and a view of the lake to

die for. Lots and lots of well-made stone stairs – a beautiful old traditional path. Stunned to see a new chairlift under construction above the trail.

We lazed over lunch in the garden of the German Bakery then walked, slowly now, back to our hotel where hot showers were the order of the day. Day-trekking. Love it.

Julie had organised a gyrocopter flight but it didn't eventuate – too cloudy. I think she may have been slightly relieved.

A glass of wine this evening on the terrace of our hotel and a bit of 'show and tell'. Anna has lovely silver earrings and a bag from the Women's Development Co-op (we buy a lot of things there). Susie has exquisite embroidered cushion covers. Gray has found a great source of larger-sized t-shirts with stylish Nepali graphics. Ekki bought yak-horn salad servers!



*The trail down from Sarangkot*



*Trekking down from Sarangkot*

Dinner at Café Concerto – really good Italian food with background Jazz. Up to date at 10.45 pm and mostly packed up for tomorrow.

**10 December:**

Another fantastic day. Not such an early start but cloudy anyway. Lahar visited to say goodbye – we have had a long season together – and Robert and Irene (our Viennese stalkers) needed a little info on ‘Muktinath in 3 days’. Off at 10 am with a well-rested Abisek. Highlight en route was goats wearing little shawls and jackets grazing contentedly across the road from our coffee stop. Yes, we have all the best ones mapped out. Reached Bandipur, 9 km uphill off the Prithvi Highway about half way between Pokhara and Kathmandu, for lunch.

Our hotel today, a new one for us, Bandipur Schhen, is a thoughtfully renovated old house. It is a Rotary project which funds five local schools. There are

only 4 rooms and each has a tiny wooden balcony, hung with bougainvillea.

We took lunch at the bhatti next door – pakoras, samosa, banana lassi and local doughnuts. We then just strolled around all afternoon. It is a lovely village with many restored traditional buildings. Lots of young Nepali tourists and maybe half a dozen bideshi spotted all day.

The football was on in the open-fronted dining room when we returned – but what a game! Nepal versus Bhutan in the final of the South Asian Games. Nepal won. Woo-hoo!!

A couple of gin and tonics later we crossed the road to a local eatery, simply named The Hotel. Four hours later we lurched back to our hotel full of delicious curry (paneer butter masala). We had sung for hours – occasionally attracting an audience.

Some friendly Chinese even made a video of Hey Jude. Ni Hao!

Writing this in our beautiful room feeling very satisfied indeed. Great night. What a super group.

### **11 December:**

A long slow breakfast in the dining room, which is actually a nice café, open to the street. Not much to see of the Himalaya today, just the tops of Annapurna and Manaslu emerging above the clouds – way higher than where you expect them to be.

The walk down was very easy as we descended into the clouds on a bitumen road. Not enough traffic to be a bother and we were almost at the highway when Abisek picked us up. The road trip was a bit tiresome as we drive through one of Nepal's less attractive valleys. Still, it was always interesting. We entered the Kathmandu Valley at 2.45 having stopped once for a very forgettable lunch. At least the fruit and veg stalls provided delicious bananas and oranges.

We hit Kathmandu around peak hour. The traffic was bad and it was extremely slow going on the

southern Ring Road. Again, always interesting. It is not every day that you see two men and a fully grown goat on a motorbike.

Happy to arrive at Planet Bhaktapur where we quickly warmed up the chilly rooms with gas heaters and ate rather good Italian food. Sad to say goodbye to Kancha and Durga but Abisek was giving them a lift and we planned to have lunch with them in a few days time. We played Thirteen with a vengeance tonight, well-fuelled on Italian red wine.

### **12 December:**

A very misty morning here on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley. A beautiful pink sunrise and a late start for trekking at 10.30. It was not so hard as we started at Telkot. A cool day and no mountain views but lovely in the woods. A long pause at a little tea shop on the trail for momos and pakoras and black tea from a very leaky thermos.

Onwards to Changu Narayan through messy backyards with chickens and goats and rubbish and endless 'Namaste' from smiling locals. A sleeping Abisek was parked near the temple. Good



*Breakfast at Sarangkot*

timing for a lift up the hill for Julie with her heavy camera bag. Changu Narayan was full of desperate vendors, their season almost over. The temple is undergoing some much-needed repairs (earthquake damage) but enough medieval statues to please the most discerning day-tripper. We scuttled back to Bhaktapur in 1 hour and 20 minutes with hardly a pause except to ask locals if we were indeed on the right road. Dusk fell as we arrived, rather surprisingly, at the gates of Planet Bhaktapur. Who needed a guide?

More good Italian food and wine tonight and more Thirteen played with gusto – Ekki and Anna dominating the play.

### **13 December:**

We walked into Bhaktapur on a very grey drizzly day. It spat and then rained after a fashion but we managed to see the best pagoda – Nayantapolo, complete with a bamboo structure which seems to have been erected for a huge deconstruction/reconstruction job. A slow coffee at the Siva Hotel where a quick check of the recommended rooms yielded an absolute NO! Bhaktapur is a maze but we found our way out – thanks Ekki – and were soon speeding (Nepali style, about 30 km/h) back to Swayambu and Benchen Vihar. Home.

Dinner at the Heavenly Tasty Café was delicious. Alu Paratha with Alu Dum and fresh yoghurt. Hot chocolates afterwards. Our Buddhist Barista really has his coffee machine humming.

### **14 December:**

Big Day Out. We walked down to the city – not always pretty but always interesting. We did Amrita Craft first – a gigantic wholesale emporium. We were happy to break for coffee and cake at Weizen (now called Riksha but the bakery is Weizen and you can take your cakes inside). I then let them all ‘off the leash’ for an hour or so before lunch, at The Roadhouse of course. We ate so much pizza we only ordered one Hot Chocolate Fudge Brownie and 5 spoons for dessert. Kancha and Durga joined us. There was more shopping this afternoon and then the long schlep up to Swayambu. Have to keep up our hard-won fitness!

Back to the Heavenly Tasty for dinner tonight. Gray and Anna ducked out for a walk and came back with Jacobs Creek Cabernet Sauvignon. Yay!

### **15 December:**

Another big day, despite it being Gray and Anna’s last. First, up to Swayambu, via the road not the stairs. Lots of monkeys of course and loads of Nepali and Indian tourists. A super lunch at Fine Grains on the way down. Homemade wholegrain rolls filled with yak cheese and salad.

A few hours of rest this afternoon, it has been a pretty hectic schedule but we gathered at 3.30 for a bus ride to Bouda. Abisek, our favourite driver, was a nice surprise. Gray and Anna were packed for departure so we left their bags in the bus and took a few turns around the Bouda Stupa – beautiful in the fading light, strung with a million marigolds and crowded with Tibetans, Lo Pa, Humla and Dolpo folk, down in Kathmandu for the winter. Dinner at the Rooftop Potala – again!

Abisek took Gray and Anna off to the airport while the rest of us squeezed into a taxi. It is nearly over.

### **16 December:**

More departures today. Susie and Julie. Traffic was appalling as we made two consecutive trips to the airport. Ugh!

All gone now except me and Ekki. A very quiet dinner tonight and nobody with whom to play Thirteen. It was a great Cultural Safari and I know I often say that. We just got lucky in so many ways. The elephant ride at dusk and not dawn; the astounding clarity of the sunset over the Himalayas from Thansen; the evening spent singing at Bandipur (special thanks to Gray) and the many happy evenings of wine, cards and laughter along the way. Top group, top tour. Gray, Anna, Julie. Suzy, Kancha and Durga. DHANYABADH.

Cheers,  
**Teresa didi and Ekki Bhena**

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

*Back cover: The end of our elephant ride at sunset*

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