

TREKking WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Muktinath, November 2013

The airport pick up for Helen and Chloe, mother and daughter from Victoria, was a bit of a disaster. The Thai flight came in nearly an hour early at 1215 so by 1530 I figured they were either a 'no show' or had ducked out of the airport in record time and taken a taxi before I even arrived. Wrong! They had emerged just AFTER 1530, totally exhausted, having battled the immigration queue for all that time. By a fantastic stroke of luck (or exceptionally good karma) Helen had Netra's business card in her wallet from her previous visit 3 years earlier. She rang his number and he sent Santosh back to collect them. Phew! Could have been much worse.

We drank tea in the garden, had a shower and a bit of recovery time, and then walked over to Bouda for dinner with the remains of the Langtang Group – Barbara, Maureen, Robina and Ian. The Kitchen Garden fed us well and the half hour walk home was a nice stretch after spending hours on the plane.

Tuesday 5 November

I took Helen and Chloe in a taxi up to Kimdol where we bought some very pretty silver jewellery at Bina's and then walked, slowly, up to Swayambunath. Dorje had been at Pashupathi with Ian and brought him up to join us on his motorbike. Swayambu is a big, white, round stupa with stunning brass ornamentation housing old statues of Buddha and inset with hundreds of prayer wheels. There are lots of monkeys and pigeons too which makes the place a bit on the grubby side. The adjacent Hindu temples, ashrams and monasteries and a village of terraced houses are all crammed onto a very small hilltop. We still managed to lose Ian for a while.

On the return walk Ian and I took a shortcut down the steep stairs to Kimdol and by the time Helen and Chloe joined us he had bought his wife a blue moonstone necklace and a silver bangle set with a star sapphire. To save time we taxied down to



Chhetrapati and were just in time to take the table Julie was desperately hanging on to at a very, very crowded Roadhouse Café – almost everything else was closed for the morning. We ate a lot of very good pizza and then shopped around Thamel for while. The shawl shop just outside the Weizen always does quite well from us. We picked up a few odds and ends at our favourite trekking shop. I bought matching down jackets for Dorje's boys. I think we ate at Bouda once more (it's good). Lizzie Dobson was there with Ian and Lynda, having dinner with Isabel and Netra. It's lovely when you walk into a big restaurant and see people you know.

Wednesday 6 November

Today I took Helen and Chloe into the old part of Kathmandu. We started at the Kumari's palace in Durbar Square and were lucky enough to see her within a few minutes. A sad little girl wearing a lot of make-up. Not too sure about the 'living goddess' idea. Lovely house though. We wandered the pagodas and squares for a while, browsed the market and then ate lunch on a rooftop terrace overlooking the multitude of carved windows of the oldest palace. After lunch we went into the museum and found we could climb up into the 'nine-storey house' and look down, with jelly-knees, on the restaurant. We bought inexpensive colourful shawls in Indra Chowk – sadly, the lassi shop was closed.

We met up with Dorje at Bouda as I still can't find his place without a guide through the maze of back streets. We went to celebrate Lagpa's birthday. It was a lot of fun. Good cake, nice wine, heaps of family in a very small room. Even Jackson was back from Pokhara. Quite a long walk home but pleasant on a cool evening and the streets seem strangely quiet now that Tihar is over.

Thursday 7 November

Today Dorje took Helen and Chloe to Pathan. Sounded like a beautiful day with lunch in the palace garden restaurant. Meanwhile, I took Jackson into town for his last big day of shopping. Jackson and Kancha left me for dead on the trail but I reckon I've got more stamina when it comes to shopping. Amrita Craft/lunch with Jackson's friends/the button and bead shop/a few street stalls/stop for a pair of shoes – piece of cake! Niurod (New Road) was jam-packed so we abandoned our quest for a laptop bag and taxied home in time to join Helen and Chloe for a friendly dinner at the Shambala

with Dorje, Kancha and Puri. Late night trip to the airport to see Jackson off and then a lot of packing to finish. Phew! That was a big day.

Friday 8 November

An early start today as we had a long drive ahead of us. Muna's French toast and fried tomato breakfast was so good that once was not enough! Deepak showed up in person with his flash new jeep. We dropped him in Purano Baneshwor and escaped Kathmandu in no time flat. So good to get out of town again. The unseasonal rain in October (courtesy of the late Typhoon in Eastern India) had left the countryside lush with vegetation and the rice harvest looked very good. We took tea at the tiny River Top Café, a friendly little place. We ate à-la-carte at the Riverside Springs Resort – a very good move and actually cheaper than the rather predictable buffet. The scenery along this route never fails to captivate but by the time you reach Pokhara enough is enough. Can't think of anything I would rather see on arrival than Lahar's wide smile.

We checked into the Superb View though I wasn't totally impressed. The hot water was not very; half the lights in my room didn't work and the room is so full of furniture I could hardly move around in it. The Black and White Café was a real find. Good food, great coffee and only 50 metres from the hotel. OK, that is a plus.

Saturday 9 November

I had rather optimistically left the curtains open the night before and was blown away by the view as soon as I blinked open my eyes this morning. I quickly woke our guests and we took the buffet breakfast downstairs. Lahar soon showed up and took Helen and Chloe out across the lake in a little boat. I heard within a couple of hours that they had made it up to the Peace Stupa. That was my signal that they were 'good to go' for the trek. I tried the 'byanjan' restaurant. Best coffee and nice menu in a light, airy atmosphere.

Helen and Chloe looked 'all in' after walking down from the stupa, via Devi's Falls. It was a hot day, especially in the open sunshine. We took a little siesta after lunch and then a soft knock at my door – Purna was back; he'd been on another trek. Helen, Purna's 'Mum' was overjoyed and Purna was a bit shy at first with his new 'sister' Chloe. We piled into the Black and White Café for a cuppa and then spent

ages planning our next fab dinner there. I had green papaya salad and the chef made me chicken Sekuwa (though not on the menu). Helen and Chloe couldn't go past the curries. Beautiful one day, perfect the next.

Sunday 10 November

Another gorgeous morning. The hotel was definitely starting to grow on me. It has really fast Wi-Fi and breakfast in the sunny courtyard was pleasant – I've since suggested they consider offering real Nepali organic coffee in the mornings. I needed a visa extension and was lucky enough to get the forty days I needed. I knew Helen and Chloe had gone walkabout so I set off hoping to run into them in the street. Found them a few doors down from the hotel. We shopped for our last-minute trekking gear – fleece tracky-dacks, sun hat, pack covers, etc. but as the evening wore on it became less and less certain that transport would run against a planned strike starting tomorrow. The rumour mill was rife but our transport guy assured us we would have a ride to Nyapul next day. We packed before dinner

just in case we had to make a quick getaway this evening. Retired early after another fab meal at Black and White.

Monday 11 November

I was a bit nervous when our 7 am jeep was nowhere to be seen at 7.45. To save face the transport company fobbed us off with small fibs until it became clear that the offer of a shared bus ride with a group going our way was a good option. Our hotel's minibus quickly whizzed us over to the waiting bus. We dropped off 23 people at Khare and then the driver took us on to Nyapul. I gave him a good tip.

Clear skies beckoned as we set off for Birethanti with a great view of snowy peaks to lure us on. The pretty terrace above the jungle-clad gully at the end of Birethanti was the setting for freshly made banana lassi and then it was up, up, up to lunch. This trail has been 'upgraded' to a jeep road but we only saw one jeep and the going was easier on the reasonable gradient of the road. It was hot though. We took a daal bhat at a traditional bhatti with a quaint



Hitting the trail near Birethanti

wooden dining hut overlooking the river. More up after lunch but, once again, on a jeep road. I was saddened to see the way the old stone-paved trail from Sudame to Hille had been brutally trashed but it did save a lot of stairs up and down. We stayed at the Amanta Lodge in Hille. I'd taken tea here often enough but never stayed there since March 2003 so it was a trip down memory lane. Luckily the loo and shower had been dramatically improved. I reflected on all the 'rustic' facilities we had experienced on the recent Langtang Trek as I gazed in awe at a clean, white, western toilet in an immaculate white-tiled room. It actually flushed! Our rooms were cosy.

Tuesday 12 November

The trek from Hille to Banthanti is hard. No way round it. It starts gently enough with a stroll along a lovely old trail through farmland to Tikedungha. Two suspension bridges, very close together, take you across two big waterfalls. Once across the rivers the real work begins. 3500 stone stairs. We had a vague plan to camp at a lovely old traditional lodge in Ulleri if we felt we needed more than three days to get to Gorepani. It wasn't necessary. With judicious tea-breaks and a really long lunch break we easily made Banthanti around 3.30. The lunch lodge was a bit of a dive but the food was fantastic. The lodge at Banthanti is really friendly with a huge, warm stove in the dining room. This lodge has always sloped downhill slightly – into the abyss – but I think it is getting worse. The playing cards, and then the dinner plates, had a strange tendency to slide downhill. A bit disconcerting. As usual the girls who work in the lodge ran around giggling and squealing like mad before bedtime – I think our guys tease them mercilessly. It's a happy household.

Wednesday 13 November

It was still dark when Lahar brought our bed tea this morning. Though the way is less arduous today it is still an 800 metre climb. The trail wound through Banthanti for about twenty minutes and then dove into deep, cool forest. Crossing small waterfalls on winding trails which didn't climb ALL THE TIME was a pleasure. We made Nangathanti by 10.30 and decided on an early lunch. Proved to be a good move as it took another two and half hours to reach Ghorepani. The view awaiting us was dazzling. It was only the second time in twelve years that I have arrived to clear skies and stunning mountain views in the afternoon. The last time was 2010 when Helen was also with us. As dusk stole across the landscape

the entire Dhaulagiri, Nilgiri and Anapurna South range was bathed in a deep pink glow. Later the sky turned a deep, velvety blue in which Anapurna South was bathed in an eerie glow by the waxing moon. There was a roving masseur in the dining room this evening. As I write this Chloe has had a 500 rupee (\$5.50) session and Helen is now 'on the bench'. It was cold here at 2850 metres – we needed blankets tonight.

Thursday 14 November

Since the view from bedroom and dining room windows was so spectacular this morning there were no takers for the 400 metre climb up Pun Hill. Phew! I thought the view was actually better in the soft light yesterday evening. Leaving Ghorepani, the first twenty minutes were on very steep stairs but the trail gradually became a bit less demanding though relentlessly downhill. Dhaulagiri stood proud of the landscape right in front of us all day. We passed a lot of small farms where millet was being threshed and winnowed by hand. These people work extremely hard for their food. Through shady glades and along sunny ridges we found ourselves on the expansive lawn of the Dhaulagiri Lodge for a cuppa at 10.30. After morning tea we ploughed on down through rocky gullies until the Serendipity Lodge came into view. Lunch. It was a relief to stop pounding downhill. The garden was ablaze with marigolds and I bought a piece of Nak Cheese and some crackers. When the soup and fresh, soft chapattis arrived I found I had spoiled my appetite by bolting the 'entrée'. Another hour or so of stone stairs diving over one ridge after another restored my appetite for an early dinner at the Moonlight Lodge. Being only three people we snagged both 'attached bath' rooms. The showers were high pressure and scalding. It was my first for four days – it was GOOD! We sat around the stove in the evening with our guys and Tabea, a young German woman who was good company. We explored Helen's fabulous collection of Australian essential oils and went to bed smelling great.

Friday 15 November

The view from our rooms of the sun striking Dhaulagiri this morning was one to treasure. It was quite chilly as we ate steaming bowls of milky porridge. Tabea appreciated a cup of our real Nepali organic coffee. Within ten minutes of setting out – more downhill stairs – we were into the sunshine and 'jackets off'. The small fields were exquisite with rows of harvested crops drying in the sunshine

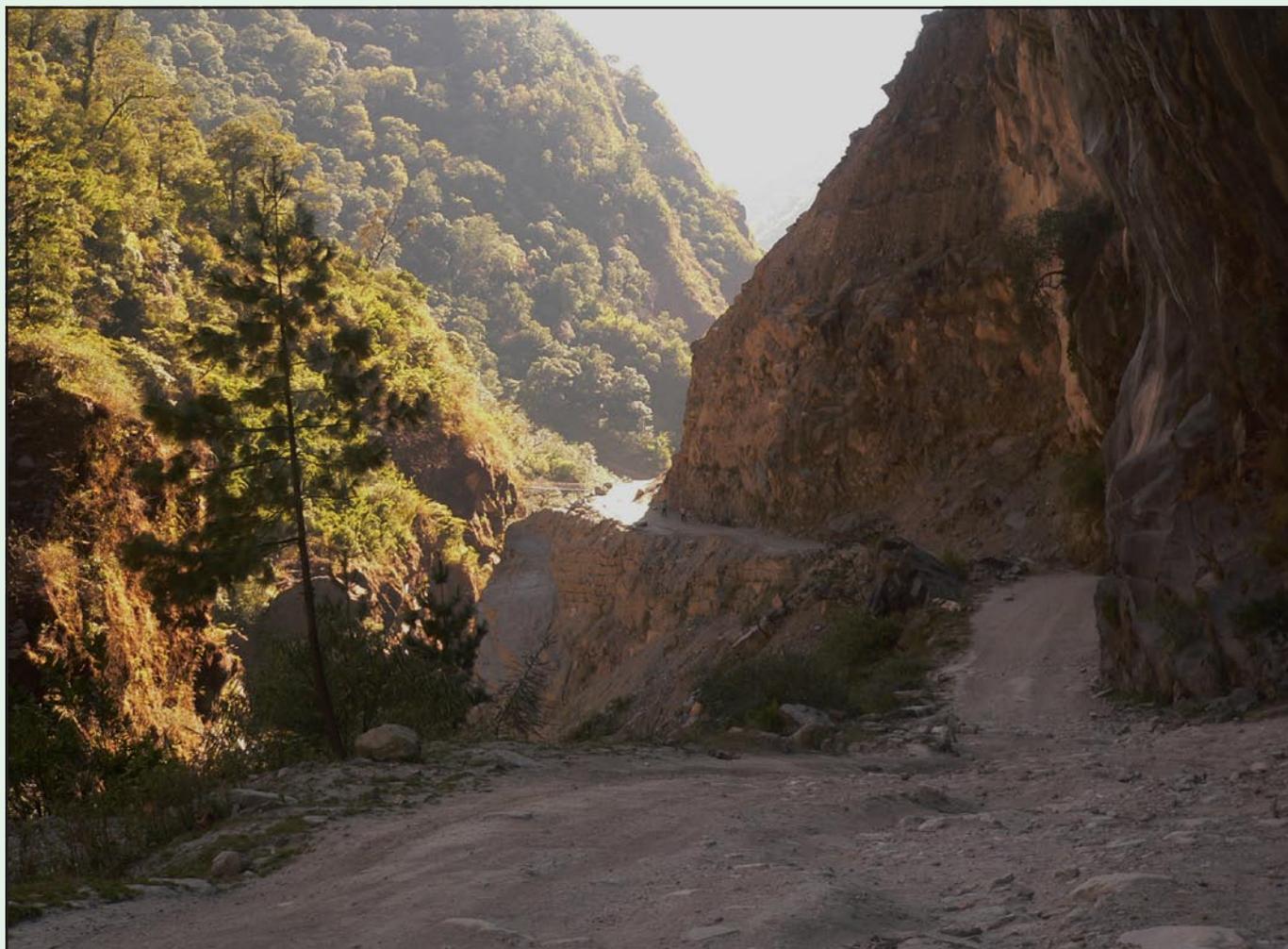
between ancient stone walls. The millet gradually gave way to rice as we descended. By midday the crops were gone and the fields were being flooded prior to ploughing for winter cropping. Here and there pairs of oxen were pulling wooden ploughs through dark soil enriched with baskets of manure being hauled out of buffalo and cow sheds. Baby goats, cows and buffaloes abounded.

At Durbin Danda we could see right down the valley – lunch looked a long way off so we snacked on oranges and Snickers. On the final descent, a kind of rocky spiral-staircase, we passed a lot of government officials carrying ballot boxes, guarded by armed police. One particularly beautiful young female soldier looked stunning in dark blue camouflage with a rifle slung over her shoulder. At the bottom we opted for the new road bridge as the last time I took the high suspension bridge one of the sides was hanging outwards at a terrifying angle. We passed it shortly afterwards and it had been repaired. The road into Tatopani was very hot and dusty but, thankfully, there was almost no traffic due to the

general strike. Some parties are trying to disrupt the election which they say are not ‘free and fair’. The Trekkers Inn gave us a warm welcome and our usual upstairs rooms. It is a joy to spend two nights. We found a nice (well, OK, reasonable) bottle of Spanish red wine and dinner was delicious. The evening was mild and the orange trees were laden with fruit. So good to be back here.

Saturday 16 November

This morning I had a cup of tea and toast in bed and didn’t get up till 9 am. Lovely. Chloe and Helen did much the same, though I did glimpse them in the dining room getting a ‘proper breakfast’. The pair of them went down to the hot springs, we all did our washing, washed our hair and just daggged around in the sunshine till the sun slipped, rather suddenly, behind the steep ridge at 3.30. I found some nice jewellery for the market in Germany. Pasang is a Tibetan refugee who has a nice way with beads. I like her style and her prices are good as she makes the necklaces herself. I found a bottle of Nottage Hill Shiraz gathering dust in a little shop and we drank it



The road near Ghasa

with our lasagne and tacos. A bit exotic for a trekking lodge but they have a great cook at the Trekkers Inn. We packed up ready for an early start tomorrow.

Sunday 17 November

I was sleeping soundly when the tea came this morning. Still dark at 6 am but we have our longest walk today. Chloe has a cold but soldiered on bravely all day. The road is almost flat to Dana and there was no traffic at all. It was easy going in deep, cool shade. Being back down to 1100 metres altitude it got quite hot once we started to walk in the sun and we were tired and sweaty when we clambered up the stairs to the Rupse Lodge for lunch. It was a very pleasant break, sitting under the old apple tree which shades the dining terrace. Sadly, the tree has almost had its day. The daal bhat was superb. We've learned these days that the best food to order is 'whatever the porters are having'.

From Rupse Chhahara to Ghasa we chose the road. It is not my usual choice but with Chloe fading fast it seemed an easier option. It is a more gradual track and it is on the shady side of the valley. Three local buses passed us all afternoon. The river really does thunder through the deep gorge and my legs turned to jelly a few times when I stood close enough to look into the precipitous chasm. The sound of



raging water echoed off the overhead cliffs. It took just over three hours and we were very, very happy to reach the Eagle Nest Lodge. Bad news though – no rooms left. Quite a few people were 'holed up' awaiting transport. We were pretty despondent as we were given popcorn and tea to refuel for the climb to Upper Ghasa – next lodge an hour away. Our luck changed when Cowsilla arrived home. She phoned the French group – they only wanted four rooms, leaving two free rooms; one double, one single. Yippee!!!

Monday 18 November

There was no need for a hot table last night as the dining room was packed to the rafters. A very hostile 'Germanic' type claimed the biggest table for the exclusive use of his group of nine. We ignored his rudeness and further hostilities and sat there anyway. Most of his group, particularly the women, were rather friendly. Pumpkin soup and garlic toast were great but we must remember that three plates of chips for three people is way too much. A tall Dutch boy caught everyone's attention with the stripiest trousers I'd ever seen. The 'quiet American' was very pleasant. The French, sharing our wing, were hysterical as usual. 'Oh, je vais au pipi'. 'Oh, moi aussi.' What are they on?

We were considering changing the name of this trek to the 'Gourmet's Guide to the Kali Gandaki Valley' when our garlicky potato omelettes and thick toast arrived for breakfast. Suresh and Cowsilla's daughter Sophie is a beautiful young woman now and really efficient around the lodge (on uni. Vac.). Reminds me of Sweeti in her younger days.

The walk through Ghasa was a treat. Clear, bright sunshine splashed across whitewashed walls. Chickens, cows and buffaloes observed our passing with disinterest. Chloe's cold was worse and she looked worn out after just fifteen minutes. We spied a rickety bus about to head for Jomsom and in a flash we despatched Kancha and Chloe for Kalopani. We took two morning tea breaks (one with a friend) and then put in some hard yards to the bridge. The views of snowy peaks ahead and behind us were perfectly clear. In fact, there was not a cloud in the sky all day save a gathering mist around the summit of Dhaulagiri.

I spoke to Julie today. She is on schedule to join us at Marpha.





The Annapurnas ablaze with colour

Sundown set the Anapurnas ablaze in golden, then peach, then reddish hues. It was a spectacular show. Later a full moon illuminated Tukche Peak with a gentle glow well before it rose.

We played cards tonight. Thirteen, thanks Jackson.

Tuesday 19 November

Today was Election Day for Nepal. The local polling booth had been set up in the high school behind our lodge and there is a strong police and military presence. Probably an effort to forestall vote rigging, intimidation, double voting and even theft of ballot boxes. I hope they had more success than in the past. Our local member here at Kalopani, one Romi Gauchen Thakali, was much in evidence, surrounded by family and political cronies. He represents the Congress Party, or conservative, free-market adherents. The UML (United Marxist-Leninists – surely an Oxymoron) had called a ten-day strike which had paralysed the trekking season at its height. It will not have won them many votes in this district which is heavily dependent on tourism.

Chloe stayed in bed nursing her cold while Helen, Kancha, Lahar and I headed up to Titi Lake. It was a really beautiful day. Not a cloud in the sky as we

headed up the valley and turned up a steep trail before Kokethanti. After half an hour climbing steep steps and crossing potato fields we reached a rough jeep trail that led through the pine forest to the little village of Titi Lake. It is just a cluster of about 30 old whitewashed stone houses where the people look fairly impoverished. I figured they were getting some serious outside help as the village boasts a primary and a secondary school of modest proportions but well built and cared for. The lake is rather insignificant but its setting is perfect, nestled in a little valley with Nilgiri to the north and Anapurna dominating the eastern view. Each mountain is clad in masses of dark green pine forest which contrasts beautifully with the snowy peaks. Behind you is the entire Dhaulagiri range, also towering over 8,000 metres. We gazed at the view for a while and then hot-footed it back to the lodge – we were ravenous and devoured our daal bhat in record time.

The hot table was almost too hot tonight and the babble of local political big-wigs was a bit much. I retired early to read my Dan Brown. There were only two English books at the lodge and I had read *Seven Years in Tibet* twice. We met Julie-Anne from America and Roger 'Over and out'. A strange man but then he was Belgian.



Lahar, Helen and Kancha on the trail



Dhaulagiri, its icefall and Tukucho Peak viewed from Titi Lake

Wednesday 20 November

No hurry this morning as Tukche is a flat walk and not that far. As we neared Kokethanti we saw a beautiful sight. Around 40 yaks were near the bottom of the valley on the opposite side of the Kali Gandaki river. Half of them were standing in the river, the other half were headed that way. I think they were just enjoying themselves. We stayed on the eastern side of the river and took the long, shaded forest walk via the small village of Sauru. It was lovely, as ever, with views through the trees that had the cameras clicking away. After about an hour we left the trail to cross the river on a series of flimsy log bridges. The last bridge over the main flow was sturdier but the speed of the water rushing beneath our feet was dizzying. We fossicked among the fascinating rocks as we made slow progress across the Kali Gandaki river, which is almost two kilometres wide at this point.

The daal bhat at Larjung was a winner and we all had seconds of everything. The walk to Tukche was pretty easy with the wind at our backs but the rate of new development outside the village was astounding.

A new road bridge spans the Yamkin Khola and the road itself is much improved. Luckily, or wisely, the road doesn't go through the lovely old village. The architecture here hasn't changed since it was built apart from a few new coats of whitewash and the odd solar panel. Samar and Uma's Tukche Guesthouse is still a delight to stay in. The cosy little rooms on the rooftop are in a perfect location for gazing up and down the valley at the dazzling peaks.

We had heard there would be lama dancing in the gomba tonight so we wrapped up warmly and headed out around 7.30. The gomba was packed to the rafters and there were hundreds of carved butter statues decorating the altar. The drums throbbed across the village and everyone thronged to see the lamas and monks dressed in amazing costumes with ghoulish papier-maché heads. Totally thrilled by the atmosphere (well, me anyway) we followed the procession down the road till a bizarre ceremony took place. A dead dog's head (signifying all your bad karma from this and past lives) was buried in a pit in the sand then covered with fire and stomped into the ground with much chanting and tossing of



Yaks taking it easy in the Kali Gandaki



Sunset on Nilgiri viewed from the Tukche Guesthouse roof



Lama dancing in the Tukche gomba



Young boy in Tukche

rice which drew rousing cheers from the crowd. An interesting evening.

I thought it might be very dark in my room when I turned out the lights but Dhaulagiri glowed brightly in the moonlight illuminating the whole landscape – and my room.

Thursday 21 November

It looked cloudy as I took my bed tea from Kancha this morning but it soon cleared as the sun rose higher. We had told Julie, whom we planned to collect at Marpha today, that there might be more lama dancing this morning. Julie and Sunder were already walking down to Tukche by the time I heard about it. It turned out that the dancing was to take place quite a bit later in the day but Julie and I went to the gomba anyway. An intense puja was taking place so we sat in for a while. We strolled around the village and then had a bit more breakfast – Uma's home-made jam was just too much temptation. Helen and Chloe, meanwhile, set off at a leisurely pace with Kancha and Purna. Julie and I crossed the bridge upstream from Tukche and walked through pine and juniper woods and delightful little apple orchards to the Tibetan refugee camp at Chhairi. Sadly, the old monastery was not open. Pity, as it is slowly being restored and houses one of the finest Guru Rimpoche statues I have ever seen.

By the time we reached Marpha the strain of walking to and from Tukche had taken its toll on Julie's feet. On her first day of trekking ever Julie got off the plane at Jomsom and climbed up to way above Dungba Lake to see the shrine at the footprint of Guru Rimpoche. No wonder her feet were a bit worn out. We opted for the local bus after lunch. It was a bit of a rattletrap and the spare tyre, sitting just inside the door, didn't make it easy to get in and out. As we boarded the bus someone called out 'Hullo Teresa didi'. It was Sophie from the Eagle Nest. Nice surprise and a lovely girl.

We reached Jomsom about ten minutes after Chloe and Helen. Lahar made us a nice strong cup of coffee – we could indulge a bit now as Julie had brought us another packet.

There was no charcoal for the hot table and it was bloody freezing; our coldest evening so far. Wearing all our clothes we arrived at dinner to the bad news. The lodge owner was apologetic and dragged out

a rather inefficient kerosene heater. It smoked like hell, it stank too but it was hot. We had a tot of rum and as the wind died and clouds came over it was actually less cold than the bitter chill of 6 pm.

Friday 22 November

Another early start today as we want to walk to Kagbeni before it gets windy. When I got up to take my tea from Lahar I noticed that my light-bulb was sitting in the middle of the floor. Odd.

We had all sorted our gear so that we were only taking what we needed for three days in a cold climate. My pack was half its former weight. Dirty clothes and unnecessary toiletries made up the bulk of what I left behind. The porridge was good this morning but overall I wasn't that happy with the Marco Polo. The previous owner/manager had left for America and the place was not the same. Lahar has found us a better place for the return trip.

Just before we left this morning a rather handsome and obnoxious Danish man strutted around asking questions about the quality of the lodge. I didn't like him. I told him it was great!

It was very cold and clear as we set off through Jomsom. Goats and sheep poured across the wooden bridge. They are coming down from the high country in their hundreds as autumn turns to winter. We were in deep shade for almost an hour so we took the first opportunity to sit in the sun for a little break. Soon Julie and I were lagging behind so we sat down on some rather inviting flat rocks and ate oranges and walnuts. A friendly Czech couple stopped for a chat, Sunder played his flute and the scenery was inspiring.

Onwards over the stony river bed, stepping aside for more and more jeeps, we arrived at Eklai Bhatti down to t-shirts. The tea was already on the table in the shady old lodge. A tiny, frisky calf entertained us. Forty minutes later we were almost in Kagbeni but we lingered at the edge of the village to watch farmers ploughing with oxen. Their singing was a joy. After lunch and hot showers we strolled about Kagbeni, a wonderful crumbling ruin of a place. We took a hot chocolate at the new 'Applebees Café'. The location, at the checkpoint for Upper Mustang (no further without a \$500 permit) is sensational. It was almost dark as we stumbled home through the narrow covered alleys of the old citadel. Its



A very male deity in Kagbeni

crumbling mud walls contain a maze of dwellings and stables. I didn't recognise the entrance to the gomba where enormous two-storey accommodation blocks have gone up since last season. The gomba looked magical in the fading light.

Our dinner was great. Sorry to carry on about the food all the time but the macaroni with veg and tomato sauce, topped with melted cheese was brilliant. The chips were an excess but so good we ate them anyway. The apple fritters with custard were just too much. Sunder and Kancha helped us out.

Saturday 23 November

Good breakfast and then the first of our ponies appeared in the courtyard. Chloe and Julie had opted to ride up. Suddenly we were informed that an empty jeep was waiting at the road above the village. It is a very steep trail and we had to move quite quickly to catch the jeep – a great heart-starter! We took Kancha and Sunder and all the bags with us and were in Jharkot in about 20 minutes. Helen tried NOT to look out of the window. It is a pretty exciting ride. We got the two best rooms; not that



En route to Kagbeni

*Lahar and Purna
in Kagbeni*



this says much as the lodge is fairly 'rustic'. Sunder accompanied Helen and I to Muktinath on foot. It was pretty hard going from 3,500 metres up to nearly 4,000 metres at the temple. We walked very slowly but still had to wait a long time for the ponies to arrive. Given the setting it was no trouble at all to sit on the temple stairs and gaze at the view. The temple visit is always a joy. Helen and Chloe put up some prayer flags for the wellbeing of family and friends, including their 92 year old nana.

The little ani gomba housing the 'flame and water in the rock' under the altar was a chance to reflect on how far we had come. We filled our bottles with the 'holy water' and there was definitely a spring in my step as we trotted back to Muktinath. Lunch was rather disappointing. I had tipped the pony-wallah to order us a daal bhat at the Mona Lisa on his way down. He forgot. The walk back down to Jharkot took about an hour and the light was beautiful. We all copped a bit too much sun today as the snow cover reflected the strong sunshine through the thin, clean air. The daal bhat at the New Plaza Hotel (fancy name, simple lodge) was delicious and the hot table was just right. We played 'Thirteen' till 10.30 last night. Sunder kept us entertained playing his winning cards with great drama.

Sunday 24 November

A magical day and a long one. We walked at least twenty kilometres. Rising early we set off on a perfect, if cool, morning. The sun soon caught up with us as we stopped for tea at the Blue Sheep. The little tea-shop was barely recognisable with its new 2-storey block of rooms with 'attached bath'. Could be a bit of overkill considering its location in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps folks will start taking two days to walk up to Muktinath.

The walk down to Kagbeni on the long, flat roads was easy and luckily the wind didn't really get up until we were almost there. After another superb daal bhat (we all took seconds of everything) we set off for the village of Thiri in the previously forbidden kingdom of Upper Mustang. After the brief formality of requesting permission at the checkpoint and being asked to return by 5 pm we descended to the river bed. We crossed on a series of seasonal bridges – and I use the term 'bridges' loosely here – and with the wind at our backs we reached Thiri in about half an hour.

There was evidence of recent landslide damage down the river which feeds into the village and the new plastic and concrete pipeline was in pieces on the



Helen putting up prayer flags at Muktinath

ground. Pity, as the traditional 'tanki', a charming, walled pond overhung with ancient cedars, was empty. Progress?

We called at Pema's house but she was away. Her sister, a young 'ani' or nun, made us tea in their interesting old house. Returning into the wind was harder but we were well rugged-up and we walked quickly. At the Asia Lodge we found a modicum of warm water and had very good Mousaka for dinner. The lodge was pretty full with a large group of mountain bike freaks (a mania* of cyclists?). They had cycled up to Muktinath and then cycled back the same day. You have to ask yourself WHY?

** Editor's note: Collective noun for a group of cyclists coined by Teresa on 9/1/14. You read it here first!*

Monday 25 November

We succeeded in getting away at 7 am this morning and the wind came gently from the North. Three hours and fifteen minutes later we were ensconced in the Mustang Taj. It is a great lodge. The rooms

were well-appointed with clean, functioning attached bathrooms. It was new. The dining area upstairs was sunny and, as I write this, we've just eaten yet another superb daal bhat. This traditional dish is never boring as it varies every time. Different lentils or beans in the daal, each spiced differently. Today's curry had big pieces of cauli and potato and a serve of fresh, bright green spinach. Three kinds of chutney (Hindi word chut-ni) completed the tray with a big, dry pappadam and a bowl of runny yoghurt. Mitho-cha!

I have just paid the wages and given the boys money for the bus and I am off to wave them goodbye. We have a flight booked for 8 am tomorrow morning so – fingers crossed. The porters will probably arrive before us. (They did).

This afternoon I took a walk back to the Dhaulagiri Boarding School to visit Howard's little protégé Ishneha Thakali. The headmaster informed me that she is an average student and her charming teacher Tashi said that she is a 'good little girl'. She



Ishneha and teacher at the Dhaulagiri Boarding School



Jomsom

has almost finished Grade 2 and understood lots of English though she was a bit shy using it herself. She is adorable.

Tuesday 26 November

It was a 'bit breezy' even at daybreak as Lahar woke us up with bed tea. Though we were due at the tiny local airport (100 metres down the street) at 7 am for an 8 am flight we knew from bitter experience that there was no point showing up till the first flight arrived. We waited and waited, had a second cup of coffee and were just starting to make tentative enquiries about jeep prices when the siren went off – first flight was on its way.

The little plane flew past the town, circled in the valley and then landed into the stiff southerly which had just replaced the light northerly breeze. I was not optimistic but we piled into the airport, completed the check-in formalities and then waited again. Around 11 am our trusty little plane showed up. It only took about five minutes to exchange incoming for outgoing passengers and luggage.

The flight was a beauty. Clear views of all the peaks with just a little thin cloud over Pokhara itself. Perfect.

It was warm and moist and green in Pokhara. The View Point eventually sent their little minivan to pick us up and we took up residence in similar rooms to last time – great views, fast Wi-Fi and a bit of telly – seems quite luxurious this time round.

Lunch at Café Olive was a treat. Julie bought some copy Keens trekking sandals and we went over to Lahar's place for a cup of tea. His rooms are so basic yet the family are so happy.

Since Ram's death Lahar has responsibility for Mina and her four children. Tough job. However, Mina has a job as a receptionist/house mother at a boarding school in Pokhara. The salary is a pittance but the job includes room and board for her and her four-year-old son. The little boy also attends the kindergarten class at the school. It's only half an hour from Lahar's place and she comes home every Saturday overnight.



Lahar, Julie, Helen, Kancha, Chloe and Sunder at Lahar's place



Teresa didi with Lahar's family

I have yet to meet her as I write this but hope to meet her when I go back to Pokhara in a couple of weeks. The other kids are doing great in Lahar and Loyal's care – partly due to some very generous help from our customers past and present.

We ate dinner at our favourite café, Black and White. The Paneer Butter Masala was as good as we remembered and the shared Chicken Thika was a special treat. Jules was not totally pleased that they had no green papaya salad but she got over it with a couple of glasses of very drinkable red wine.

Wednesday 27 November

Nice easy day today. Deepak's jeep and driver Binod took us to Gorka. The Gorka Inn was a rundown old lady but it does retain a 'certain charm' – a bit like myself. The garden was a treat.

Purna came with us and his mum brought his two kids, Mari and Moti down from the village to meet Helen and Chloe. They are helping Purna put the kids through school. Purna's mum was a stunner. You could certainly see where he gets his good looks from.

We ate on a sunny terrace and then strolled about the town. It is quite a large town these days, though not quite a city. It appears to be thriving. We were a bit late for a visit to the museum and were herded

around by an attendant who had no intention of working past 4 pm. I didn't really mind, though the palace is a lovely building in the traditional Nepali style with hundreds of intricately-carved wooden windows. It was the home of generations of the Shah dynasty, including Prithvi Narayan Shah who united Nepal in the 1760s.

We bought some hand-loomed shawls in the bazaar. We were just too tired to make the long climb up to the fort and it was too cloudy for view over the top of the ridge. It will take too long tomorrow morning so we will just have to come back another day. I would like that.

Thursday 28 November

Sad farewell to Purna this morning and then off to Kathmandu – just the four of us now. Julie, Helen, Chloe and me. It was a lovely drive, misty at first but fast in a good car. We took just a cuppa at the Hamlet and decided to push on for a late lunch at home. We made Muna Cottage at 2 pm to a very warm welcome. Always feels like 'coming home' here. Muna made us heaped plates of fried rice. I have tried to duplicate this dish at home but it is nowhere near so light and fluffy.

We ate at the nearby Shambala and bought some lovely Australian red wine. We stumbled home in the dark a bit the worse for it. Good to be back.



Al fresco dining at the Gorka Inn



Helen and Chloe dining al fresco at Bhaktapur



Helen, Kancha and Chloe

Friday 29 November

Tarke took us over to Swayambu in his nice car and dropped me, Chloe and Helen at Bina's where the women had jewellery to collect. Of course they bought even more than planned. The blue moonstones were especially popular.

Julie was dropped at Benchen Gomba where she lives some of the time but she rejoined us for a coffee at Fine Grains. A real find. Thanks Julie.

From there we said bye to Jules and taxied into Thamel where we met Kancha who would give us a hand with our shopping. We visited Merino as Helen also buys a bit of wholesale gear there for the markets in Australia. From there we got almost everything we needed at Amrita Craft and then ate way too much pizza (as usual) at The Roadhouse.

Our taxi home had great music and we sang along most of the way. We walked over to Bouda for our 'last supper' and swirled around the stupa with the Tibetan community. It is the best way to finish a trip to Nepal. We did try to eat dinner but after so much pizza it was something of a struggle. Wandering

home through darkened streets we were all a bit sad that something good was ending.

Saturday 30 November

Nice lie-in and lazy breakfast in the garden. Muna's special breakfast of course. Dorje came over to say goodbye and then, suddenly, it was all over and we were driving out to the airport, making plans to do it all again in the not-too-distant future.

I loved our trek. Small group but good energy. I miss you already. Luckily, we live close enough to catch up in Melbourne. See you soon – Julie, Helen, Chloe – thanks for making this such a good one.

If you would like to join us next time then do get in touch at teresadb@hotmail.com and have a look at our website www.slowtrekking.com for more stories and pictures.

Cheers,
Teresa didi

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





TREKKING WITH TERESA

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