

TREKKING WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Muktinath, March 2016

Sunday, 6 March

Jane, Frank and Rudy set off with Dorje to visit the Shiva Ratri (Shiva's Birthday) celebrations at Pashupathinath. It was mayhem but less chaotic than it would be tomorrow with half a million devotees. It is the one day of the year when Bhang lassi is legal so an aura of drug-induced religious fervour prevails. Shaivrites, as Lord Shiva's followers are called, are renowned for their religious devotion. Not for the faint-hearted.

Meanwhile, I collected Tom, Lin, Colin, Mike, Julian and David from the airport. The immigration bottleneck and the deathly slow baggage collection had left them undaunted. We took a wide-eyed trip through the bustling streets to the little 'tranquillity base' that is Muna Cottage in Kapan on the NE outskirts of Kathmandu.

We walked over to Boudanath for dinner. While the Bouda stupa itself is under repair the atmosphere amongst the hundreds of Buddhists chanting and twirling their prayer wheels was magical. The Garden Kitchen looked great with snapdragons planted out in abundance. Paneer Butter Masala was, as usual, a big favourite and the Gorkha Beer seemed to pass muster.

Monday, 7 March

Ram, possibly the best driver in Nepal, arrived in time for a cuppa this morning before taking us all into town for our 'big day out'. I had looked at everyone's clothing and equipment so that each member headed into town with a list of gear required. Some just needed a couple of small items – a drink bottle, a buff – others needed pants (the real North Face). Others needed sleeping bags, down vests and fleece



The view from Poon Hill is worth the early morning hike

track pants for lodge lounging on very cold evenings (North Fake). We made a 'base camp' at The Weizen Bakery and took turns quaffing coffee and Danish while we visited the money changer and ATM. After a huge shopping spree at a place with astonishingly low prices, we headed back to the Weizen for lunch. While Dorje took the crew around the old bazaars of Assan Thole and Indra Chowk, I finalised permits, flight tickets, porter insurance, etc. This evening we tried to fit all that new gear into our rucksacks, some more successfully than others. We ate at the Shambala with a small detour to the supermarket for overpriced Australian red wine. 'Drinkable' was our main criterion.

Tuesday, 8 March

Breakfast in the dark, packs at the ready and Ram was on time so that most of the bags were on the roof-rack by the time Dorje jogged in, breathless. Just in time mate! The bus would drop me, Frank and Rudy at the Riverside Springs Resort and then drive on down to Chitwan to the Jungle Villa Resort. Their stay was a lively one by all accounts with lots of photos of rhino and crocodiles; evidence of a successful safari.

Rudy, Frank and I had a simple lunch in rather posh surroundings till Deepak confirmed that the Swiss Bus was ten minutes away. The bus was less than

half full and both front seats were vacant. Nice! The tea break was at a place with dubious food (sorry, I didn't know then that the rest of you ate there en route from Chitwan) and possibly the best coffee in Nepal (and the hottest baristas).

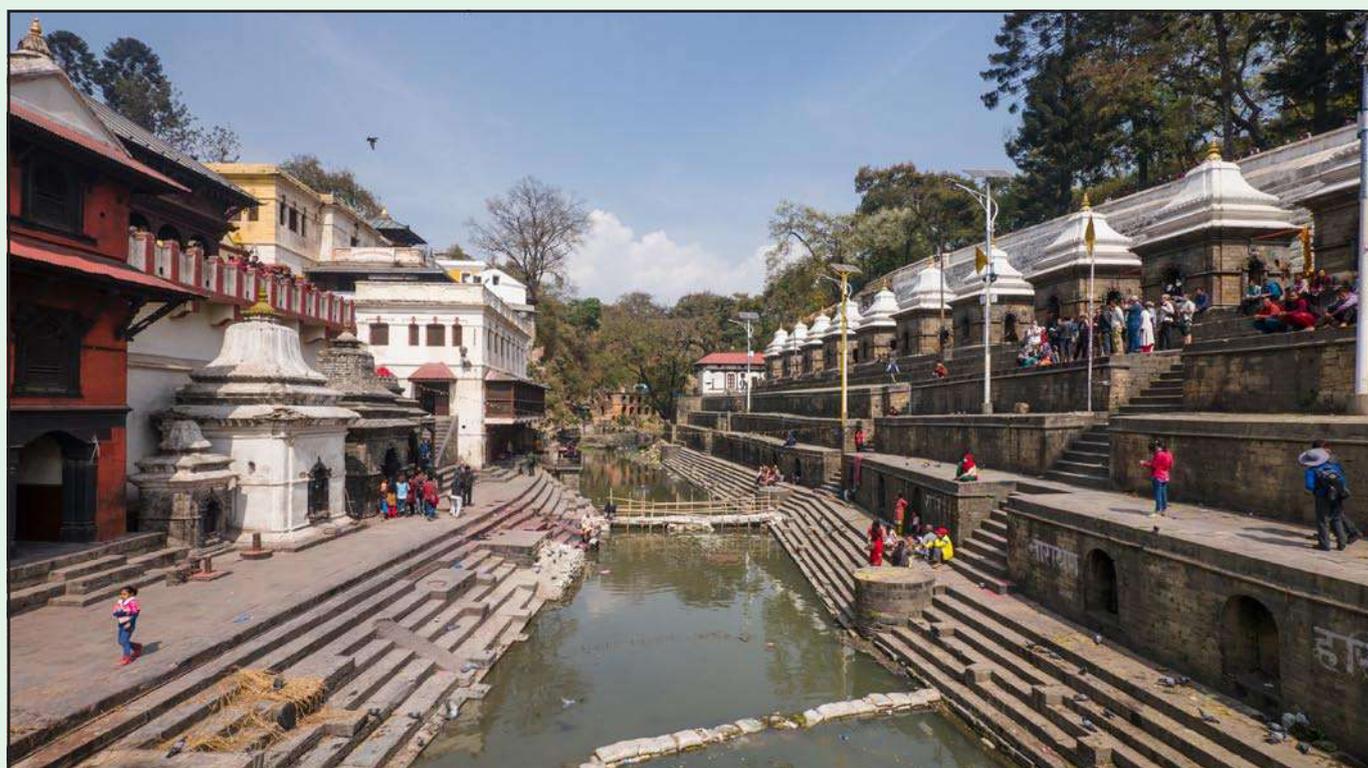
Lahar met our party of three at the tourist bus park and within ten minutes we had deluxe digs at the Hotel Lake Front. We 'ate in' and were joined by Eunice from Scotland with tales of woe from her volunteering experience. An early night for the boys who are heading off early tomorrow. I am writing this on a velvet warm night on my balcony overlooking the moonlit lake.

Wednesday, 9 March

Bharat and Anil, Frank and Rudy's support team, showed up early with Lahar so we gave them a big breakfast before they headed off in a taxi to Millanchowk on the outskirts of Pokhara.

Frank and Rudy trekked to Dhampus today on a lovely trail which is little-used by tourists. Instant gratification for Rudy on his first day on trek, as the weather was fine and clear and there were fabulous views of Machhapuchhare and the Annapurnas.

Meanwhile in Pokhara, I had a day off. The sunset was especially beautiful.



Pashupatinath, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Kathmandu



Sunset over Lake Fewa, Pokhara

Thursday, 10 March

The 'Magnificent Seven' arrived around 2.00 pm with tall tales and true of their jungle safari and adventures in Chitwan. After some casual walks around the town and the lake, we ate on the dining terrace of the hotel. We held the pre-trek briefing outdoors. It went well. The porters all showed up and we managed to pair them up with the trekkers. While most of our trekkers are first-timers to Nepal they have a profound depth of experience between them and have trekked all over the world.

The 'advance party' of Frank and Rudy were treated to another fine day as they headed northwards from Dhampus, over the ridge at Deorali and up the Modi Khola valley towards Landruk. From here they could see Ghandruk high above them on the opposite side of the valley, and were relieved that their route avoided what, from their viewpoint, looked like a rather horrible climb. It was agreed that this would certainly be a 'fun' experience for the rest of the group in a couple of days time!

Friday, 11 March

After breakfast we followed Lahar and Dorje down to the jetty, donned bulky orange life vests and piled into two blue wooden boats to be paddled across the lake. The climb to the Peace Stupa was enjoyable. Just under an hour and a chance to try out the gear. We lingered over tea at the top. The Annapurna views were not perfect but enticing nevertheless as we compared the peaks in front of us to the map of our proposed trekking route.

Descending the far side of the hill, we piled into a local bus which took us most of the way back to Lakeside. We were warmly welcomed back at the Black and White Café. Very good lunch and excellent coffee.

With a little more last-minute shopping done and all our unwanted gear stored away for the duration, we headed to the Boomerang Restaurant. The place was jam-packed but the food was tasty. Some of the group tried the goat?? We tried for an early night



Good morning from Dhampus!

but Jane, my room-mate was still 'sorting' when I nodded off.

Meanwhile, Rudy and Frank forged on further up the Annapurna Base Camp trail, with the weather following the pattern of the previous couple of days – nice views in the morning but becoming hazy and cloudy as the day progressed. The enormous wooden-decked bridge over the Modi Khola at New Bridge looked anything but new, however a more modern one was under construction.

The ensuing big climb up the other side of the valley is fortunately broken by the small village of Jinhu, which contains a couple of nice lodges. The well-appointed Namaste Lodge (with attached bathrooms) was a very welcome spot for lunch and a restful afternoon.

Saturday, 12 March

Deepak sent us a huge bus this morning which easily fitted all the trekkers, porters and gear. The bus dropped us at Nyapul where Lahar bought plastic

sheets for each porter as the rain looked imminent. I headed off in a jeep with all the bags to Kimche. Not taking chances with my arthritic hip after last year's disastrous first day. I still found the climb up to Ghandruk 'quite challenging' so the customers were quite within their rights to look stuffed when they started staggering in at 4.30. They had walked almost three times as far as Kancha and I. It had been a tough opening day. We ate, we slept, we survived 'Day One'.

Frank and Rudy's 'Day Four' was a tough day too, with their destination of Chhomrong within sight only a short distance ahead, but high above on the other end of a long stone staircase. The vertical climb of perhaps 500 metres in warm conditions was hard work, and took about 2½ hours before they arrived at the Fishtail Guest House on the edge of town.

The Fishtail Guest House is the highest point in town at about 2200 metres, deliberately chosen as it was close to the junction of the following day's trail to Tadapani. Guidebooks and maps give wildly



The Hotel Namaste at Jhinu Danda

different estimates of the altitude of Chhomrong, and from here the reason is apparent as the village sprawls down the side of the valley.

Frank and Rudy had enough energy left to explore Chhomrong in the afternoon, even though it involved a fair descent back down into the main part of the village. A passing trekker had tipped them off about the famous chocolate cake here – but where was it? Of course the first eatery they came across claimed to be the ‘famous one’ and although the coffee was nice, the cake out of the fridge was disappointing.

A bit further down the street, the Chhomrong Cottage was found to be THE one. The chocolate cake was indeed worthy of the name, and when a nearby lodge was spotted with a prominently displayed coffee machine, the scene was set for a decadent afternoon.

Sunday, 13 March

Cloudy again today so no super views. We set off slightly downhill to see the beautiful old village

of Ghandruk, a charming collection of old stone houses with slate roofs. Each house had its own wide courtyard humming with activity and farm animals. A bit of a slog up to morning tea but bubbling streams and flowering rhododendrons made the going pleasant. Local wood-cutting techniques seemed to interest the guys more than the flowers.

After tea we really hit the steep part of today’s walk. It was merciless. Just steep stone stairs in places, many places. Skies were overcast as we stopped for lunch at Baisi Kharka (buffalo grazing field) which was a blessing after yesterday’s heat. The soup was delicious and the chips were ‘real’.

After lunch we did one of my absolute favourite walks. Still uphill but very gently, meandering through ancient stands of rhododendrons. The under storey was a mass of Daphne which smelled heavenly.

Meanwhile, Rudy and Frank left the Annapurna Base Camp trail at Chhomrong and headed westward to



Rudy savours the coffee (and the view) in Chhomrong, but the best chocolate cake was to be found elsewhere

rendezvous with us at Tadapani. The trail for the first two or three hours stayed high above the river and was pretty straightforward. Eventually their party crossed the river and commenced their own climb, pausing for lunch at the brand-new Hotel Rainbow Attractive at Chuile. It was just as well the satisfying lunch gave no cause for complaint – who would protest to a lodge owner called ‘Hitman Gurung’?

This year, finally, we stayed at the Green View Lodge. The location, on the very front of the ridge, is magnificent. It was cloudy and cool on arrival, over 2500m, but a warm stove created a cosy atmosphere in the dining room. Just after we arrived Frank and Rudy joined us. This was their fifth day on trek and Rudy’s first time in Nepal. I could see by the look in his eyes, he was ‘hooked’. It hailed, and then rained, just after we all got in. Great timing team! Around 4 pm things began to look up. Although the clouds never completely cleared the views were quite beautiful as Annapurna South then Hiunchuli and finally Machhapuchhare revealed their freshly snow-dusted peaks.

Monday, 14 March

We got dressed in all our wet weather gear this morning but we need not have bothered. It was our

toughest day. Descending over 250 metres down to the river from Tadapani, we then climbed and climbed and climbed. A short rest for tea at the top of the first climb and then a very welcome easy stretch before the next climb. It was a ‘pig’. Emerging out of the forest at Deorali was a relief. Tom, Lin, David and Jane took the Gurung Lookout trail while the rest of us, slowly, climbed to 3200 metres through the pines to the chauthara on the ridge overlooking Ghorepani at 2800. The occasional rhododendrons were a mass of blossoms with great swathes of Daphne at their feet. Views were non-existent except for down into the valleys which were pretty spectacular. (I think that made the next morning all the more special.)

The Sunny Lodge was almost full. The dancing started after dinner but most of our crew had hit the hay by then. Did I mention that it was a really hard day? Clear night skies hinted at a great morning to come.

Tuesday, 15 March

Just as I had hoped, the morning broke clear. We woke everyone up just before 6 am and they headed up to Poon Hill. 400 metres of unforgiving vertical ascent BUT, if you were ever going to make the effort, this was the day to do it. Absolutely fan-



After a big storm at Tadapani the clouds part to reveal Machhapuchhare



Our support team at Banthanti. L-R: Anil, Lahar, Bharat, Santos, Sunil, Dorje, Samil (top row), Ram, Akhal (top row), Bir (top row), Karma

bloody-tastic! We breakfasted at leisure, the views from the dining room being almost as good as Poon Hill. Around 9.30 we headed off on our first totally downhill day. By the time our knees were overheating we arrived at the lovely lawn in front of the Dhaulagiri Lodge. Several cups of tea later we were off downhill again. Some stairs, some broken, rocky trails but also some delightful earthen trails through little farming communities. Terraced fields are fertile and the climate is temperate. It all looks rather idyllic though I suspect it is not an easy life.

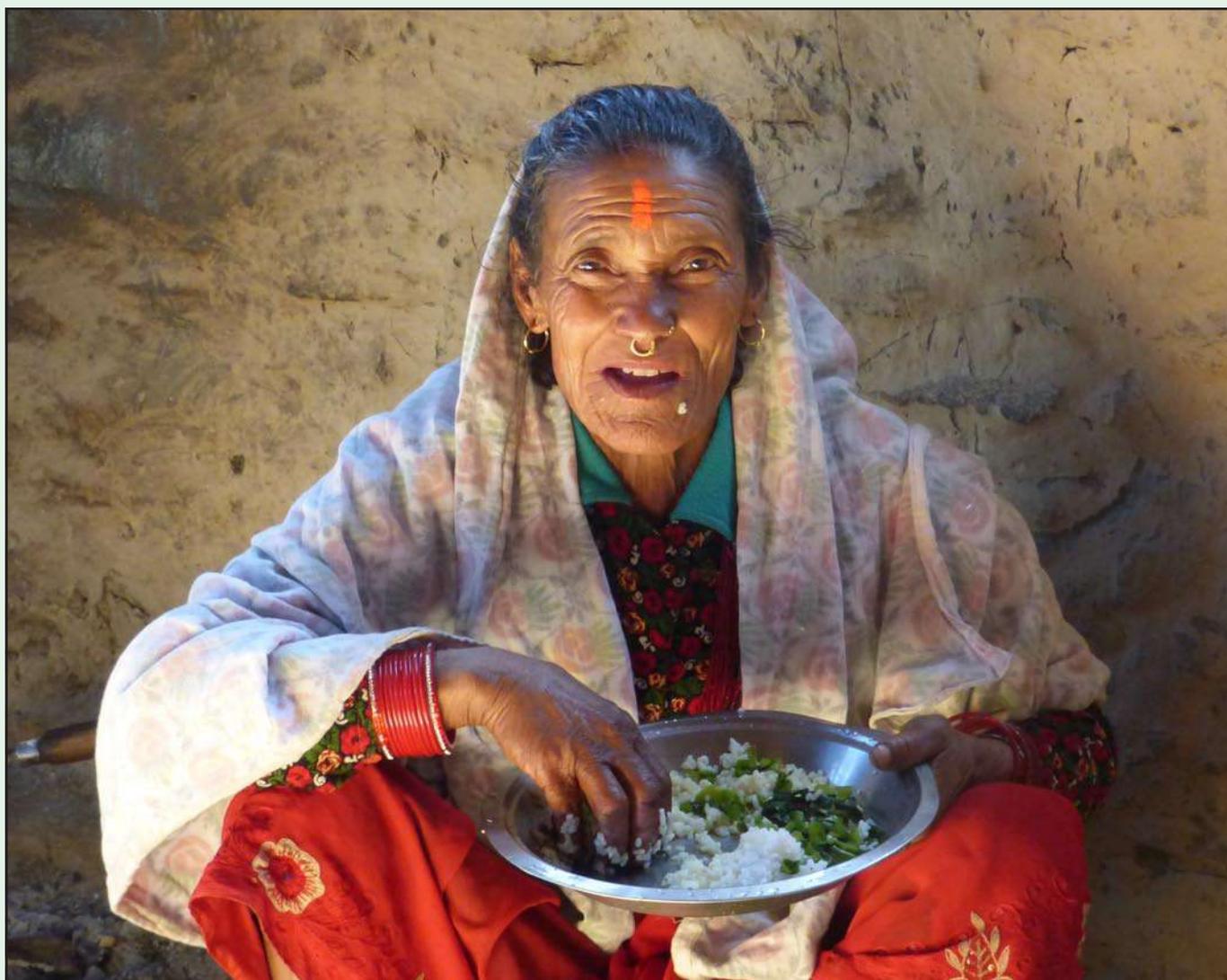
We lunched at the Serendipity Lodge which left only an hour down to Sikha. We arrived around 2.30. Such a lovely day NOT fighting gravity. Plenty of time to stroll around or observe village life from the rooftop – a naughty dog running down the street with a chicken in its mouth perhaps? A rum and coke and a general knowledge crossword (thank you Jane) with the stove almost too warm in the dining room. Bliss.

Wednesday, 16 March

I heard the whoops of delight while I was still in bed this morning as folks looked out of their bedroom windows and saw Dhaulagiri in clear, bright sunshine. It is much closer now. It actually held fair all day today which meant that it got pretty hot as we descended another 800 metres. More stunning views of the valley of the Ghar Khola; pretty houses, baby buffalos, new babies and friendly villagers.

We had crackers, cheese and boiled eggs for a snack at the temple ridge just before the final descent. At Durbin Danda I ran into the guy, Prem, who had slept on my right, on the ground, under a Red Cross tarp on the nights following last April's earthquake. It was a rather joyful reunion.

The last descent really killed my knees but the group all handled it without complaint. Toughen up princess! The final couple of kilometres into Tatopani is on the road but I only counted five vehicles in



A lovely old lady having lunch at a small lodge near Ghara



A small temple on the ridge above Ghar Khola offers a superb view of the Kali Gandaki valley



Teresa and Rudy on a large suspension bridge over the Kali Gandaki river near Tatopani, with Nilgiri South (6,839m) forming an impressive backdrop.

forty minutes so not too bad. We had our proper lunch in the garden of the Trekker's Lodge. Spinach Soup, Coleslaw salad and Chips. YUM! We had a few drinks this evening – no trekking tomorrow.

Thursday, 17 March

Holy guacamole! Do my legs ever ache? I passed on the day-walk but all the customers went up to Narchyang, the village by the big waterfall. Lunch in the garden again and then a very lazy afternoon watching our washing dry. It was a little overcast today but it stayed warm. Not sure what to expect weather-wise tomorrow?

Friday, 18 March

A fine day and a very early getaway. 7.15. We crossed the first bridge we came to but walked the lower trail. We had fresh orange juice after harvesting our own oranges. It was my first time on this trail and I loved it. We stayed by the riverside most of the way and crossed back to the road just before Rupse Chhahara. Lunched at a place with views of the big waterfall. After an excellent lunch of noodle soup,

loaded with spinach and tasty fried rice, surrounded by pesky chooks, we set off in warm sunshine. Feeling the heat a little, Jane and I opted for the road as it is in the shade of the cliffs most of the afternoon. Everyone else took the high trail though Pairo. Jane and I slowed the pace a little with a stop for a Coke, a sit down at the chautara and then a rest on a big flat rock to listen to the birds. The river thundered below us, way below us, all afternoon. A grass fire was a slight hazard. We reached the bridge at Ghasa just ahead of the pack and watched as they crossed the huge suspension bridge.

The Eagle Nest Lodge has great rooms though no hot showers due to lack of gas. Not sure if we believe them as Colin spotted a full bottle in the yard. Played 13 tonight around the 'hot table'. The heat, from a little charcoal brazier under the table, was heaven on aching legs.

Saturday, 19 March

Today broke fine and after breakfast we walked through the old village of Ghasa and then Upper



Colourful but thorny flowers line the trail through Narchyang



Washing the dishes at Ghasa



Rudy crosses a large suspension bridge, 141m long and about 100m above the river, near Ghasa

Ghasa. The Kali Gandaki River roared around a bend a couple of hundred metres below us as we wove between whitewashed houses on an ancient paved trail. Everyone was outside, washing clothes or dishes. It was Saturday (the weekend) so I saw lots of school uniforms being hung, rather haphazardly, to dry. I saw a child of only 3 or 4 (hard to tell here when the kids are so much smaller than ours) washing steel mugs on her front porch. 8 am and the village could not have been busier.

At the top of the village was a grotty bus station and we were back on the road. It is a dirt road with only a smattering of jeeps, motor bikes and the odd colourful bus – jam packed.

Soon Tukucho Peak hove into view and then gradually more and more of Dhaulagiri. Bharasikhar was peeping over the ridge behind us. We stopped for tea at the Green Forest Guest House in Ghumaune where a photo Frank took in 2003 was proudly displayed in the kitchen. The husband's foot has healed but it will never be 'OK'. We left some paracetamol.

After tea some of the group took the high trail and were rewarded with great views back over the Annapurna. Frank and Rudy, myself and Julian took the road and spent a glorious half hour basking in the sun on the grass by the bridge. It has a great view. A bit of a slog up off the bridge, around a windswept corner and then we dove into the deep shade of the pine forest. So good to walk on a carpet of pine needles. 45 minutes later we emerged back onto the main road almost directly opposite our destination. See You is a very comfy lodge.

After lunch, some of us still had enough energy to investigate one of the alternate trekking routes to Titi Lake. This involved a stiff climb up the side of the Kali Gandaki valley, eventually levelling out at Titigaon. The shallow lake was half full of reeds and even had power poles running through it; together with the hazy conditions it was perhaps a bit underwhelming. On the way back Dorje and Lahar arranged a tea stop at one of the lodges in Titigoan. A card game was in progress, with money changing hands, so indoor photos were 'not a good idea'.



Titi Lake

Sunday, 20 March

We always hope for a clear morning at this brilliantly-situated village of Kalopani (2500m) and this morning we got a beauty. It clouded over early so it was great that we were up for the sunrise.

We set off in cool, overcast conditions but the weather kept improving all morning. We stayed on the Eastern side of the river on a flat trail in the pine forest. After morning tea we walked, very slowly, across the wide bed of the Kali Gandaki, picking up interesting rocks and fossils. We used the little seasonal log bridges to get across to Larjung on the West bank.

It started to rain while we were eating lunch so we hurriedly dragged the packs inside and kitted up for wet weather. Once again, I was too lazy to dig my jacket out of the bottom of my pack. I had a sheet of plastic. I didn't need it. We just got into Tukuche, with a strong wind at our backs before the rain got serious.

Sadly, Samar and Uma, owners of the Tukuche Guesthouse, were away at their son's wedding in Kathmandu so we opted for the Laxmi Guesthouse right across the street. Very sadly, the standard of housekeeping here was not up to scratch – by a long shot – so I am off to chew someone's ear about cleaning the bathroom!

Monday, 21 March

More clear weather this morning as we took a walk around Tukuche. Brilliant views of Dhaulagiri and Nilgiri as we wandered the back lanes to an old gompa (monastery). Richly painted walls and a riot of warm coloured silks made a startling contrast to the 'black and white' landscape.

We trod the road for half an hour in bright sunshine but once over the suspension bridge the pines and juniper sheltered the trekking trail to Chhairo, the Tibetan refugee camp. It was established over fifty years ago during the first Chinese invasion of Tibet. There was a time when the Tibetan fighters were trained and supported by the CIA (they were fighting communism) but when the USA and China formed a 'détente' they dropped the Tibetans like a hot potato. The camp has become a progressive village with a great little school. After a cuppa in a sheltered courtyard and a look around the partially-restored monastery with a beautiful Guru Rimpoche statue, we had to run the gauntlet of a row of trinket sellers. Sadly, most of their offerings were just the usual 'tourist tat'.

We crossed the Kali Gandaki on the much-needed new suspension bridge and were swept into Marpha on a strengthening southerly. Lunch took ages but we were glad of the rest. Marpha is snuggled into the hill so closely that hardly any wind penetrates



The stony bed of the Kali Gandaki near Larjung



The narrow main street of Marpha



A view of the Nilgiri mountains perfectly framed by the Syang Gumpa



A brightly painted gumpa dominates the northern approach to Jomsom



A view of the Kali Gandaki valley overlooking the village of Thiri, with Kagbeni in the distance

its narrow lanes. It was a different story after lunch when the wind howled – at our backs luckily.

The faster trekkers got away from me quite quickly, as we stopped to view Marpha from the high vantage point at the top of the monastery stairs. Jane, Frank and Rudy were easily persuaded to climb the steep trail to Upper Syang where our friends, Mangal Thakali's family, made us tea in their beautiful old house. Rustic in the extreme, and yet remarkably comfortable. Views from the roof to die for. An hour later we blew into Jomsom where we've made ourselves very comfortable at the Mustang Taj.

Tuesday, 22 March

It was a very easy walk to Kagbeni, almost entirely on the river bed trail. Pity most of the jeeps and motorbikes (it was Holi festival) decided to use that trail too. We spent time looking for ammonite and trilobite fossils, and found a few river-worn pieces. You can buy perfect specimens but there's nothing like the ones you find yourself. We had a cuppa, snuggled out of the wind, at Eklai Bhatti; a lovely old house with its time-worn wooden floors.

We arrived in Kagbeni in time for lunch in the warm upstairs dining room. Two entire walls of windows

affording great views and loads of sun. This afternoon most of the group went for a walk (what else) to Thiri and got a cup of tea at Pema's house. Thiri is a tiny village of about fifteen interconnected houses where around 80 people eke out a living farming the little delta which merges onto the river bank. The cows and donkeys there are miniatures.

We ate lasagne with wild dried mushrooms tonight, sitting around a hot table. The wind has stopped, the stars are out. Should be a good day tomorrow for our final ascent.

Wednesday, 23 March

Ponies were ready for five riders at 8 am. Jane knew how to ride and the Pony-Walla went with them. 'Just watch Jane' I yelled into their dust as they disappeared up the first bit of steep track. Another four hardy trekkers, Lin, Tom, Mike and Julian opted to walk (climb?). Since they had no room for us at the small lodge in Jharkot we had to go directly to Muktinath. The ride in the jeep for me, with all the bags, was easy and I managed to meet both groups on the way. All doing fine. As advised, they mostly walked after morning tea for a stretch, giving the porters a chance to ride – some more willingly than others.



Our group dismounting near Khingar



The Goddess of Fire Temple at Muktinath is the custodian of the holy flame



At about 4,000 metres near Muktinath, the trail to the Thorung La Pass (left of photo) crosses a frozen river

The crew were all up for a walk to the temples this afternoon. I believe Santos did the full Hindu thing; wearing jocks he splashed under 108 icy taps and then plunged into the holy pool. The water is snow-melt and the snow line was not far away. Some of the group then climbed up behind the temples, determined to reach the 4000m mark. Well done you!

The Royal Mustang was good enough. 'Rani-bloody-pawa', the collection of lodges below Muktinath is not an attractive place, however the outlook in all directions makes up for the less-than-glamorous surroundings. Dinner was not a success but most of us were too tired to care. At 3800 metres everyone is a bit lethargic and it had been a huge day. I actually got one of those massive altitude headaches that strike rarely but randomly. My own fault for coming up in the jeep!

Thursday, 24 March

Six of the group opted to try the new trail on the far side of the valley via Dzong. They took Dorje and Lahar and reported fabulous views and a very reasonable trail with almost no traffic – cars or people. I believe the exit off the trail was a bit dodgy.

Frank and Rudy did the 4000m thing this morning while Colin and I, both feeling less than hunky-dory, walked slowly down the main trail, as did all our porters with the bags. We had tea at Jharkot (actually, I had breakfast) and Colin took a stroll around the lovely old village. Later, it is often these little solo jaunts that stay with you. We stopped again at the Blue Sheep for fresh lemon squash and apples. As



The view from Dzong

we ambled down on an easy trail (no need to watch your feet here) we could see our friends across the wide valley. Way too far for a coo-ee to carry. We picked up a lost Japanese lady on the way. Headed for Kagbeni, from Jomsom, she had gotten off the bus a bit late and was disorientated. Who wouldn't be? This landscape is on a massive scale and often hard to relate to the map.

I am happy to be back in my usual room at the Asia Lodge. I heard that this afternoon's walk around town ran into the local version of peak hour with ponies, donkeys, goats and cows filling the narrow lanes.

A strange haziness filled the valley this afternoon. I'd never seen anything like it before. A little disconcerting.

Friday, 25 March

I wrote this in my comfy room back at the Mustang Taj in Jomsom. The walk from Kagbeni was fairly straightforward for some of us this morning, except that we are, mostly, exhausted. It has been a fairly long, hard two weeks.

Below Eklai Bhatti, at 'Frank's Bridge', Mike, Lin, Tom, Frank and Rudy crossed the river and trekked over Windy Pass via the villages of Pangling, Phalyak and Dhagarjung. Writing this at 3 pm there is no sign of them.

Bad news is that the haze in the valley is worse today and is apparently being caused by bush fires, like the one Jane and I walked under on the way to Ghasa. I can't see the situation improving by tomorrow



Traditional methods of farming near Dzong

morning so will go out and locate some decent jeeps.

The 'A' Team staggered in fairly late. The views had impressed even Frank and the hospitality had heartened them all. The descent from Windy Pass to Jomsom on 700 metres of vertical scree had taken its toll. Will definitely go up to the villages next time, but backtrack over Eklai Bhatti I think.

We got the music fired up tonight. The rum and coke flowed, the floorboards took a pounding and we are feeling rather pleased with ourselves.

Saturday, 26 March

While the airline 'Simrik' were saying yesterday that they would be 'trying to fly' today, I had decided last night to jump the gun and cancel our flights. It gave us about a four hour head start on the official cancellation. It also gave us access to decent jeeps and not just the leftovers at 10 am. The two jeeps which arrived around 7.30 this morning looked clean and reliable. With 13 passengers between two

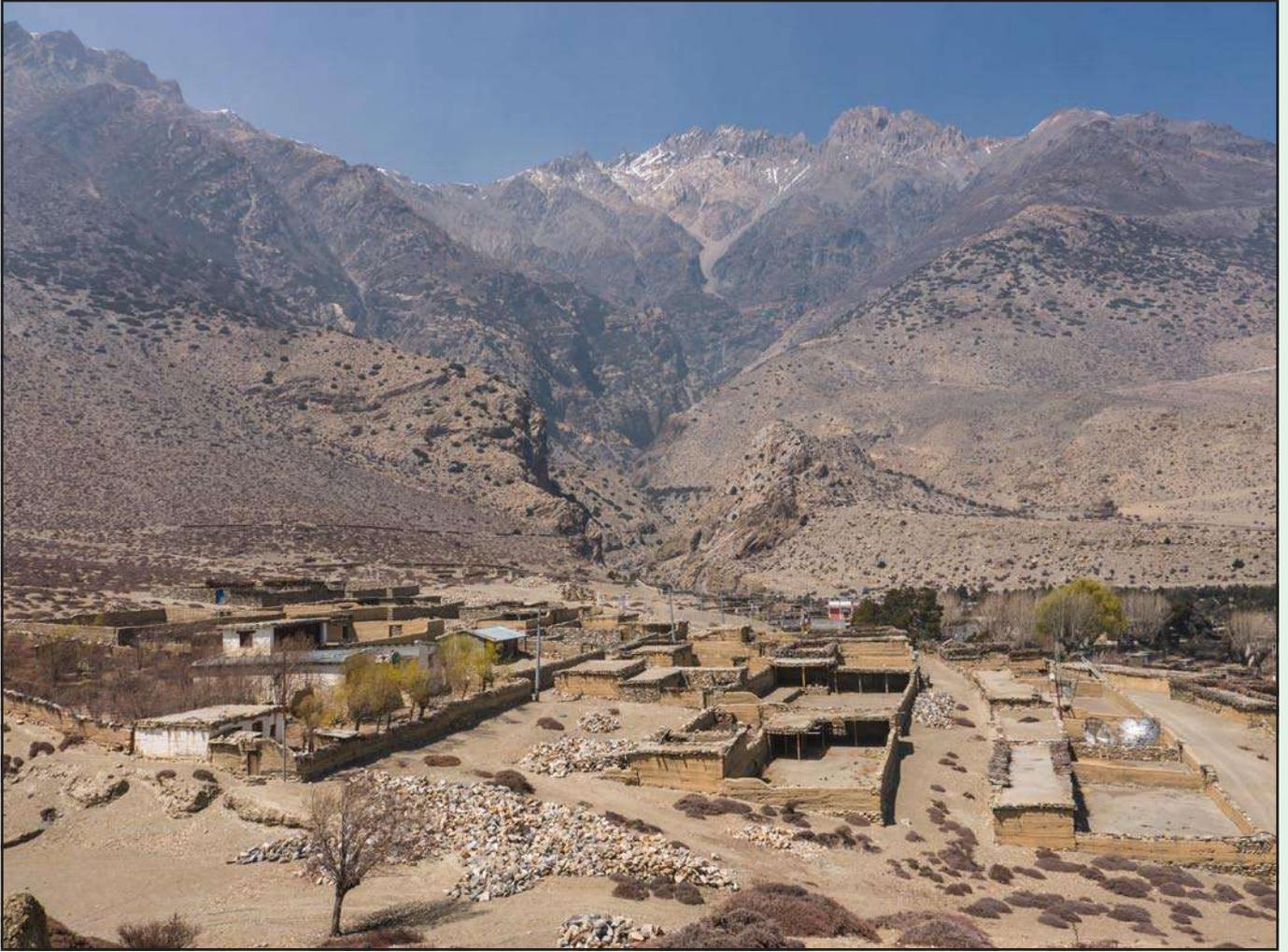
long wheel base jeeps we were 'almost comfortable'.

The haze from the bush fires was really thick today as we headed south, mainly on the river bed trails – the road itself being in far worse condition. Shortly after Larjung we came upon a broken down bus, raised at the rear on a very insubstantially improvised jack. It was in the middle of the road. Undaunted, we set off on foot for Kalopani, less than an hour and a half away, and trusted that the jeeps would follow, with bags, as soon as the road was clear. We cut across a wide loop in the road only to discover that the temporary log bridge had washed out. Two decent logs were still there so we quickly improvised a bridge over a smaller then larger section of the river. It was rather fun. Our jeeps arrived just as we reached the road and we soon arrived at Kalopani's lovely See You Lodge for morning tea.

Back on the road, it was very dusty but too hot to close the windows (suffocate or choke??). There was not much to hang onto in the back of the jeep and a pretty hair-raising ride so it was with some relief



Frank on 'Frank's Bridge' over the Kali Gandaki near Eklai Bhatti



The village of Dhagarjung, looking back from the trail to Windy Pass



'Build a bridge and get over it' – near Larjung

that we piled out at Tatopani for lunch. A group of rather unhappy-looking Japanese were clearly not enjoying what looked suspiciously like our ordered lunch. Toasted egg sandwiches with chips and salad. Undaunted, a fresh batch was soon whipped up, which was a great effort considering the arrival of a group of 28 Singaporeans coinciding with our own. The dining room was a bit smelly but once I persuaded a Nepali group not to burn the hair off their freshly-killed sheep in the courtyard things improved considerably.

The road became even dustier between Tatopani and Beni. The jeeps were wallowing in it. It was hot. Not pleasant. A cold drink at Beni and a stretch of the legs (smoko?) helped a bit and pretty soon we hit the bitumen – what there was of it. At least it was less dusty and it began to cool down in the late afternoon. At 5.30 pm, from an 8.25 am start, we drove into the Hotel Lake Front in Pokhara. A real hotel with electricity, power points, fans, air-conditioning, toilets without wobbly seats (actually,

toilets with seats, wobbly or otherwise were most welcome). They even had – wait for it – toilet paper! A sure sign of a classy establishment.

The porters all rocked up for a good curry dinner on the terrace in that typical Pokhara speciality, the warm soft evening, then we slid between our clean white sheets and slept like logs. A long dusty day was something of a trial but we were down in Pokhara in one day. Could have been worse.

Sunday, 27 March

We had a late, lazy breakfast. Frank and Rudy are out on the lake with Lahar. Jane and Mike are arranging paragliding. The rest of us shopped and mooched about Lakeside enjoying a 'recovery day'. Ram had arrived so we piled into the Hi-ace for a visit to the Tibetan Refugee Camp. Three of us bought very attractive wool carpets. Lahar's sister Asha is married to a Tibetan and we were invited into their home for a cup of tea. A very modest house, well-kept and really delicious tea. The ancient mother,



The cliff-hugging road near Rupse Chharara

deaf and blind, sitting on the bed spinning her prayer wheel was a classic touch. Rain started spitting so we made a dash for the bus. Way too late. At first the rain just bucketed and we spread out and took cover wherever we could, then it turned to hail, then heavy hail, then REALLY HEAVY BIG HAIL! Lahar and I were last in and didn't make it to shelter. For ten minutes me, Lahar, a Tibetan guy we didn't know and a scared dog, cowered in a corner OUTSIDE. We couldn't stop giggling as we held each other tight. The walk to the bus though six inches of water, full of ice balls, in sandals was 'not nice'. Home then to hot showers and reverse cycle air-conditioning to dry our clothes.

Dinner at Café Olive was a hit. Yak feta bruschetta being the favourite.

Monday, 28 March

Another long drive but this time in the Hi-ace with Ram at the wheel. An excellent coffee (at an accident blocking the road) and then a posh lunch at Riverside Springs Resort broke up the journey. There was some delay getting over the rim of the Kathmandu Valley (if only these guys knew how long it could take). There was another intense storm which seemed to be mostly wind. The ensuing rain settled the dust and we arrived at Muna Cottage just on dusk. Same familiar rooms, some with en suite bathrooms. Who knew? Shambala, still a bit of a dive, provided a very tasty dinner, chicken sekuwa in particular. I must learn how to make that. They say dogs barked a lot tonight. I heard nothing.

Tuesday, 29 March

This morning the entire remaining group were collected at 5.30 for an Everest Mountain Flight.



A huge hailstorm at the Tibetan refugee camp

Last night's rain had really cleared the air and they got spectacular views. Back in time for breakfast. Ram drove us into town for some fairly disorganised 'settling up', shopping and sightseeing. Gradually everyone found what they were looking for; the promised kurtas for Lin and Mike's wives. And David couldn't resist one more for Sally. We had our traditional big pizza dinner at the Roadhouse where we were joined by Ram, Netra and his wife Sarmilla, and David's son Mark and partner Miranda. We were having such a good time that I almost forgot about Frank and Rudy's imminent departure. Got home with forty minutes to finish their packing. It was only just enough. Bye guys.

Wednesday, 30 March

They have gone! Well, Jane is reading in the garden and flies out later today and Mike has been deposited at the Hyatt where the beds are big enough and they have a pool. You earned it Mike.

I always round up these reports with the 'great group, etc'. However I need to tell you that these guys really went for it. They were strong trekkers and a bit too fast for me most of the time but they did every little extra thing that was on offer. The lookout trail above Ghorepani, Poon Hill, the village walk behind Tatopani, Titi Lake, the Dzong trail, Thiri village in Upper Mustang. They climbed above Muktinath to the 4000m mark and then, the final challenge, the Windy Pass. I can't recall a more enthusiastic group.

We hardly donned our rain jackets and forgot about over-pants. The slight drizzle out of Ghandruk resulted in the beautiful 'reveal' at Tadapani and their Poon Hill morning was so clear it surprised the locals. The weather goddess was definitely smiling on us.

I now have a week to recover before the April trekkers arrive. I will need it. Thanks for your enthusiasm and mutual support. Much appreciated. See you in Melbourne.

Cheers,
Teresa didi

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

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The 'Magnificent Seven' taking a break near Sikha