



## **TREK REPORT – RUKUM DISTRICT AND PHOKSUNDO, NOVEMBER 2019**

### **MEMBERS.**

Ekkehard Loeber

Barbara Hardcastle

Debra Leyshan

Faseny McPhee

Teresa Williams – Group Leader

**SUPPORT** Lahar Bahadur Pun – Guide, Bharat Ghale – Assistant Guide , Akal Tamang – Kitchen boss – Nepali , Mahendra Rai – Kitchen boss – bideshi .

Lakpa Tamang, Chapal Tamang, Ekkha Budha , Ram Bahadur Kafle , Resham Ghale , Ramesh Magar , Singa Bahadur Tamang, Chiplung Tamang , Santa Tamang .

Seems like a lot of staff but they still carried far too much for my comfort. There were just a few days between the end of the Langtang Trek and the beginning of this one but Ekki and I plus Barbara and Debra passed the days very happily at the International Guesthouse in Paknajol, Kathmandu. Comfortable rooms and a beautiful garden. Highly recommended.

31 OCTOBER: Just one late pick up from the airport and it was very easy – one hour and fifteen minutes from hotel to hotel. We had a good espresso while we waited. Faseny is settled into a gorgeous traditional room (701); since she is happy to head straight out tomorrow morning, we are starting a day early. ....

1 NOVEMBER: A long day in the bus with Abisek driving. Plenty of good stops. Coffee at '20 Kilometre'. Tea at River Top. Lunch at Riverside Springs Resort. Pee stop at the horrid dirty little shrine favored by Abisek on previous trips. I am sure we can do better in future.

Lahar was waiting for an hour on the main road, just around the corner from our hotel, but we drove in from the backroads and he missed us completely. We ate at the new Black and White – the old one looks as if it might be demolished or renovated. Early night at New Friendly Home which is a bit of a find. The terrace in front of the rooms has a dining table and superb views of the Annapurna.



2 NOVEMBER: We went for an early walk around the misty lake. Breakfast here at the hotel was just OK. Coffee from 'The Coffee' next door. The name says it all really. Confirmed that the staff from the Solu area are on their way, carrying the trekking permits. Thank you, Deepak and Dorje.

Tents, stoves, pots and pans, sleeping mats, etc. are being hired. They want \$2000 now but assure us that this is mostly deposit to be refunded later. This turned out to be untrue as they only refunded \$350. We did a big money exchange (\$8000) while Lahar shopped for groceries for the trek – tinned and packet goods. We plan to buy vegetables and eggs along the way. All systems go for tomorrow.

3 NOVEMBER: The jeep ride was gruelling. Dorje's estimate of 6 – 7 hours was way out. OK, our leaf springs broke necessitating an hour's stop for repairs. Surprisingly efficient. We four in the broken jeep visited a nearby tiny shop and sat in the shade amongst the

vegie gardens. Our friends visited an old Hindu temple on the outskirts of Baglung while they waited.

The road to Nyapul is appalling but it deteriorates after that. Baglung was the preferred lunch stop of our driver, but I did not fancy it. Inner city, noisy, not quite clean. Big mistake. Our actual lunch was at 4 pm in a scungy roadside dive. Very good tea, potato crisps and a couple of boiled eggs was surprisingly ok. The road was still awful after the break only now it was starting to get dark. Our headlights were barely adequate; the left light was very dim indeed and right one shone off into the forest.

We gradually passed more and more prosperous little villages. It was a blessing that we could not see over the edge of the road – and into the abyss! Burtibang, our destination, is surprisingly large, with clean streets and lots of well-constructed new houses. It is Baglung district's second city. Our hotel is astounding. 6 floors of neo-modern steel and glass. Looked like something you might find in Ulan Bator or one of the 'Stans'. The rooms are carpeted, heated and clean with the latest bathrooms with 'rain showers' and hot water to die for after a 10.5-hour jeep ride. Darbar Hotel. Dinner was in a simple restaurant next door – the Sky Café. Great pakoras, excellent yogurt and an achar made with chili and Timur. Slept like logs though we could hear a roaring river nearby.

4 NOVEMBER: This morning we walked out of the hotel and across a suspension bridge over the river to meet our next jeeps. More dilapidated jeeps you have never seen. (How naive was I?) The one with all the camping gear in the back afforded six places – driver plus 5, so the bideshi fitted in – if a little snugly. The guys are in a 'normal' jeep – but there are 13 of them! The road was much worse today. Diabolical is the only word that covers it adequately. Debra was more generous 'A bit ruddy'. There was a lot of foot traffic as people apparently winter in the next valley. Beautiful old traditional stone and mud villages climbed the steep hillsides. Men, women, kids, horses and dogs, were all on the move. Scarcely any other vehicles.

After a couple of hours, we stopped at an old stone house which was a bhatti (a road or trailside café and lodge). Akal and Lahar set-to at the smoky fireplace and produced a delicious veg noodle soup.

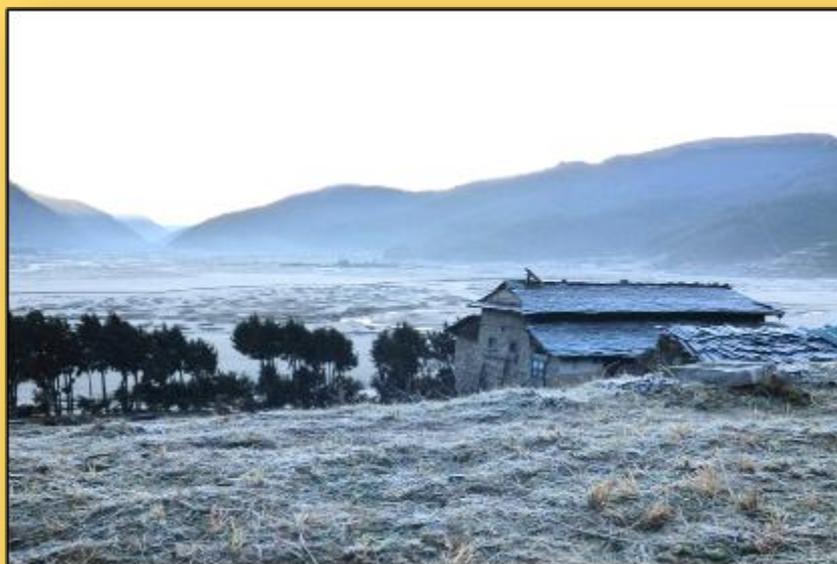
If anything, and it is hard to believe, the road was worse after lunch. We are talking about potholes as big as Volkswagens. Luckily, it was not for long. Half an hour up the road was a very pretty lake so we stopped and walked around it in the mist. Just half an hour later we stopped on a cold breezy ridge and Lahar suggested we get down and walk to the camping place, just twenty minutes below the ridge. Initially there was just thick white mist. Then, quite suddenly, the mist rolled away revealing a beautiful wide fertile valley surrounded by pine-clad hillsides. Gorgeous!

Camping. All new to me. The porters are scrubbing the hell out of our pots and pans prior to using them. The chairs we brought weigh nearly 2 kilos each. Iron and canvas – much

the same as Ed Hilary might have used at EBC in the 1950's. Our tents are small and bright yellow. They are being erected as I write. The old house near which we camp is a very handy dining area although there is rubbish all over their garden – this was to become a bit of a recurring theme and a source of irritation for me. It is a very long way down to the house toilet, so the toilet tent is being erected not too far from our tents. Not too close either! Hope I can sleep. Kancha told us about the bears yesterday!

Looking back, I was so excited, optimistic and naïve.

5 NOVEMBER. There was a winter wonderland outside the tent this morning. It was a heavy frost, and everything was white as far as the eye could see.



We trekked today on a jeep road, though only one jeep passed us. This meant that the trekking itself was very easy. It was warm and sunny all day. We trekked through villages of small farms and stone houses, though almost all were deserted. The harvest had been gathered and folks had moved on to winter somewhere lower down. We were over 3000 metres. Lahar said when he and Dorje were here to reconnoitre a month ago, the corn was huge and the villages were full of hard-working happy farmers.

The camp tonight was alongside a beautiful house and we sat on their balcony to eat dinner. The house was a wonderful example of the old traditional farmhouse. Well-constructed to last for generations, painted soft ochre, surrounded by grass nibbled short by grazing animals. A little stream ran beside the house and ducks and geese played in it. Reshan washed his hair under the freezing pump. Big-eyed cows looked on.



6 NOVEMBER: A truly fabulous day's trekking. On a small trekking trail which rose and fell fairly innocuously through pine forests. Sadly, the blue paint markers along the way are an indication of plans to push the road through here one day. Pity. Tourism could bring a bit more wealth to the area but the trekkers will not want to come and trek when all the trails are gone. We stopped in the middle of the forest to cook lunch. Fried rice.

We camped tonight on a ploughed field though the big clods were quickly trampled flat. We ate in an open-sided house. There was a huge clatter of washing up tonight and lots and lots of barking dogs. The local loos were only just OK.





.....we met some great people along the way.

7 NOVEMBER: More road again today but it is a dirt road and nobody much is using it. We took our lunch at Sera where I had 'words' with the locals who sat quite happily with nothing to do amid a mass of litter. We ate spaghetti with a creamy sauce – well done Mahendra. The older part of the village after lunch was a mixture of medieval and modern



At a village called Takha we camped on the maidan, near the edge, as the local kids played football till dusk. Everyone washed a few clothes as we are only wearing our lightweight stuff. Not cold at all. We had a shower in the 'toilet tent'. OK, it doubles – shower first then a hole dug later. We played cards outside in the fading light. We met the principal and a teacher from the local school. There were lights on the hill opposite – always seems to be a village near us that has electricity – just not our village.

8 NOVEMBER: A chilly morning. Cloudy with a slight drizzle. Chocolate pancakes for breakfast – delicious but possibly not everyone's cup of tea. We trekked back down to the big suspension bridge, about 20 minutes, then, after a short spell on the road we turned off for a steepish climb. Cloudy weather was nice as it was hard work. Views at the top were

stunning – even some distant snow on Sisne Himal. Back on the road very briefly and then down a ‘shuddely’ track to a tiny village for lunch, spinach and tuna pasta, sitting on the stairs of an old house. The neighbor, an elderly lady, asked for a cigarette which she shared with her even older husband. Afterwards, he picked up a plough and headed for his fields. She drew her shabby lungi over her head and curled up on a rattan mat in the sun for a snooze. Wonderfully unselfconscious.

It was a bit hot after lunch, steep down to a little river. Do I imagine another long hot dusty climb on a jeep track – or was that another day? The last up was ridiculous. Ekki pulled me and Faseny up. Should have waited for Lahar. There was an easier way, just five minutes further on.

The proposed camping place was the schoolyard but it was covered with litter, so we engaged the local kids in a quick clean-up and a fire. The kitchen and dining are in school rooms. We finally begged the local big kids to let us camp on the volleyball court. However, our tents were erected around the edge so that they continued to play noisily till dark. Actually, the last game was our own boys having fun. The toilet was rather horrible, though perfectly functional. Not advisable in crocs.

A very pleasant evening as we had a table for card playing and Deb’s music. We scored a cold bottle of beer which was nice. There were no dogs and we slept well – a little less altitude and consequently a bit warmer



8) NOVEMBER: Stunning day. Mostly on the road though some trails for part of the way. Extremely beautiful villages though cursed with rubbish on closer inspection. The road brings jeeps and consumer goods in plastic. I spoke to a local woman about how dirty it was. She said it was 'OK, the rain will wash it all away to the river'. I tried to ask what she thought about the water quality in the next village, but my Nepali wasn't good enough.

After lunch on a lovely sunny ridge, it was onwards and upwards. Over the ridge was a magnificent view of distant snow peaks and then a beautiful, shaded descent through forests of laurel, rhododendron, pine and chestnut. One of the three motorbikes seen today was a big surprise. They nearly all stop and say hullo but this one was Karma. WTF?

Lahar seems to know this village well and we are camped on a ploughed field overlooking a vast valley with huge hills and distant snow peaks. It is an unbelievably beautiful location. The usual local kids are wandering by – unashamedly curious. The older guys smoking and spitting, feigning indifference. We have requested daal baht for dinner – didn't enjoy the lunch today – lots and lots of potatoes and not that well done!

Today we scored a 180ml bottle of Kukri Rum. Ekki and I will drink a toast tonight to mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Prost!

10 NOVEMBER: The walk down to the next river was not as difficult as it looked, still my knees were glad when we reached the bottom. A high suspension bridge over a small river posed a problem – which path to take on the other side, there were two options. I was so busy being annoyed I failed to notice the arrow scratched on the ground. A few coo-ees later we found Lahar, Kancha and Bharat – they had found a fejoa tree.

A bit further on I picked up a furry-looking piece of cactus type plant. I thought Faseny might find it interesting. Saw that tiny fibres were coming off it, onto my hands so dropped it and tried to wipe my hands on each other. Useless. a few moments later a burning, itching, stinging sensation enveloped both hands. Ekki used all our drinking water trying to rinse them. Ram to the rescue. Ordered me to rub my hands through his bristly hair. I was reluctant – didn't want him to itch like hell too – but he insisted, and it worked, mostly. The stinging went on for about half an hour but was forgotten after that.

The rockslide before the bridge over the Beri River was quite difficult – glad to have a hand here and there. The other side was way harder, hotter and much longer than Lahar had led us to believe. I was too tired to eat my lunch! Recovered enough for a cuppa and a biscuit which was just as well because the afternoon was quite demanding. Not difficult, just long and hot. Really lush terraced grassland leading to sweeping views of Sisne Himal.

Another schoolyard campsite. More volleyball – our guys again. Where do they get the energy? Our dining tent was a schoolroom again tonight. Nettle soup and daal baht. Too

tired to socialise. The toilets here are horrid – lots of spiders and smelly. I peed outside in the field.



11 NOVEMBER: I still do not know quite why we have headed up the valley to Batachor and Sisne Himal. I thought we had agreed NOT to tackle the 4000 metre pass. Going over our plans with the local farmer on whose land we are camped, Lahar learns that it is 6 days trekking to reach the Shey Phoksundo National Park. This would be OK but the locals told us today that Batachor was ‘an hour or so’ up the trail. We allowed 3 hours – it took 8 hours! These 6 days ahead of us now do not always have water on the way where we can stop and make lunch. If it took us longer to cover a ‘day’s’ trek we would be in trouble. This would only get us to the Eastern end of the Shey Phoksundo Park – three or four hard days over 3500 metres to trek to the other end of the park.

We talked and then talked some more. Lahar thinks we should now revert to Dorje’s recommendation – a jeep from Due Khola to a place closer to the park entrance. Sadly, this is a half-day back track. Initially peeved, I could see that it was our best option. Not sure if all the rest of our guests really understood why we were changing our plans. I think that, just quietly, they thought that Ekki and I had just had enough as we had been complaining a bit.

The return trail is the high trail we reached at around 5 pm today, not the crappy, stony, overgrown, sweaty slog of today where I really thought I would peg out at times. Luckily, I got a second wind after lunch. The shade helped enormously and we are camped on a little farm on a pretty ridge. There is the sound of a waterfall not far away. A grueling day so we must all be getting stronger.

Half a day back, half a day into the next valley then phone for a jeep. Sounds like a plan.

12 NOVEMBER:

The return down the valley on the high trail was much easier. Often shady this morning and on some fairly level trails. (Nepali Flat ....a little bit up.....a little bit down). Around the first ridge was bright sunshine but the going was dead easy on dry hillsides dotted with massive Century Cactus. At a village half-way down, we watched 4 slick water buffalos slide into the shaded village pond. Fuelled by a few biscuits and a shared coca cola, we sent off downhill and back to the river. It was a rather hideous descent, zigzagging through bamboo thickets on loose, crumbly gravel. The jungle really closed in around us at the bottom and it grew hotter and more humid.

Lunch was at a scruffy little old village which straggled along the riverbank. Our gas had run out, but kindly locals allowed us to cook in their kitchen. The village shop had tetra packs of Frooti (local sweet mango juice). Tasted like heaven to me. Mahendra made his best ever noodle soup with lots of mustard greens. We left the village on a small then very big suspension bridge. The thin trail to Due Khola was hard but exhilarating, clinging to the rocky cliffs. Don't look down! The river was at least 300 metres below us.

We camped on some common ground outside the village, just above a loud river. Tonight, we had the dining tent, the toilet tent and A TABLE!!

The full moon rose shortly after we retired but we were quickly outside in time to see the massive ball of light emerge over the nearby clifftop. Magic. Badly bitten by jiri at the tap this evening as we washed our feet. Now very hot and itchy. Thank goodness for Stingoes!



13 NOVEMBER: A late start today with delicious porridge for breakfast. I am as itchy as hell in socks and boots. Ugh! We got away in our first jeep at around 9.30 - a bit late as it transpired. It was a grubby, broken-down wreck but the second jeep was worse. I kept my foot over the hole in the floor so that the leaking exhaust did not come inside. Eventually we followed the lead jeep very closely which was, predictably, very dusty. We boiled once so we got out and walked up a hill.

Lunch was at Rukumkot, at least I think so. Both of my expensive maps were turning out to be useless. It looked awful from the tin shacks on the roadside but Lahar knew a good place with a terrace. Freshly made chips and fried tomatoes. I think it was just great to get OUT of the jeep. Onwards and onwards after lunch with the road deteriorating more with each passing hour, and it was four hours. Lahar had planned to lunch and change jeeps at Rhadi Bazaar, but it was dark at 6.30 pm when we arrived. Expecting to be led through the café to a grubby backyard for camping we got a big surprise. A lodge, with clean little rooms, soft mattresses and attached bathrooms. OK, the bathrooms were, sadly, not fully functional but a flushing loo and running tepid water were very welcome indeed. Ekki and I had a beer. The food was good and we played cards till late. It is dark so we have no idea what this town is like.

14 NOVEMBER. Rhadi Bazaar is rather nice. The remaining old-style houses are well-kept. Streets are clean and we actually saw a rubbish cart. We walked over the wobbly suspension bridge to the grotty jeep station where we were met by a band of hard-faced taxi Mafiosi. They wanted an extravagant amount of money to take us two hours and warned us that we could expect to pay quite a lot more for the ensuing two two-hour trips. Time to reconsider.....

Knowing that most of the salaries would not be paid till after the trek I had brought with me \$5000 for food and jeeps. Ten days into the trek we have only \$2000 left. If we pay the \$600 required today for jeeps, we would have to reserve all remaining cash for the return jeeps. Yes, we really did have to come back the same way. I took the gut-wrenching decision to pull the pin. I hated to do it.

Our best option, as I wrote this, seemed to be – find a couple of local jeeps to take us down to Serpu Tahal – a beautiful lake near Rukumkot where we can just chill in beautiful surroundings for a night or two. ....

We had to wait a couple of hours for jeeps. It was an awkward wait as a couple of the customers were very, very disappointed not to be going on to Shey Phoksundo. Some shit you just cannot fix.

The jeep ride was horrible – and not because the scenery was not magnificent. Our jeep was literally a ‘heap of shit’. The driver did a sterling job, but the jeep had bald tyres, one with a big gash in it. It was filthy, though the seat covers were wet when we got in. ‘Washing!’ said the driver with a malicious grin. An extra bloke, who was probably the owner, rode on the side, then the roof, then pretty much demanded a seat on the squeezey 3 abreast back seat, every time we passed a checkpoint. You would think that this could not get any worse. Think again! The front left brakes smouldered, then smoked to the point of ignition. We jumped out and waited for them to cool down. ‘Normal’ was the driver’s response.

Not far from our destination, Serpu Tahal, the clanking sound from under the jeep got louder and louder until – ker-klunk! Kaput! Not drivable, not movable. We grabbed our packs and sticks and headed up the road. Soon found our guys, the first jeep, and a lovely grassy campsite right at the edge of the lake. Incidentally, the jeep had dropped a crankshaft.

The tents went up, the dinner was great, and we had a campfire. As darkness fell, lights came on across the lake and were reflected in the still water. Finally, the moon rose, still quite full, beautiful, again.

The nearby park office has a clean toilet, almost overgrown with poinsettia. We will decide whether to go on or stay when we see how the weather looks in the morning.



15 NOVEMBER: Fabulous day. Not a cloud in the sky save a smudge of cirrus at 5.30 this morning as the moon set behind our camp. 'Stay' was the consensus. We had scrambled eggs with light Tibetan Bread(Ekki and I dined in our tent – breakfast in bed). I fear the real coffee is about to run out, but we are so happy and comfortable here we really don't mind.



We washed almost all our clothes. Since abandoning our plan to reach Phoksundo, all our warm clothes and thermals are obsolete and our light clothes are filthy.

We had a shower. Entering the shower tent, I was appalled. It must have been about 35 degrees in there. Then I discovered that the bucket of water was cold – bliss. We have been reading and chatting most of the day – though Barbara (the brave) did a lap of the lakes walking trail. A few Nepali tourists come by from time to time and go out on the little paddle boat, local pop music blaring, customers singing and clapping along. I will finish here as I have to put all those clean clothes away. Clean clothes, clean hair. Happy days!

16 November: I really liked the first part of today, on a little-used jeep road, meeting lots of interesting locals along the way. After three hours it did get a bit tiresome as we climbed up a rather dusty stretch. The lunch break was most welcome though it took ages to cook today. I could make fried rice for 5 people in under an hour myself! The setting was a very dilapidated private boarding school. A real wreckage of corrugated iron 'corals' as classrooms. The outlook was magnificent over fields of yellow mustard and the local women working nearby were really engaging.



The last couple of hours today were fairly easy. More fields, irrigation canals and shy but friendly locals. We stopped short of our planned destination of Pokhara (not the famous one) at yet another shabby school with spiders in the toilets. Drove of kids clinging to the railing fence above the camping place peering in, endlessly fascinated.. They were annoying and engaging by turns. Deb named it the 'refugee camp'. Dinner was delicious; pumpkin soup, served with pakoras. Must try that combo.

17 November: Lahar's 'easy day' was short but hot and rather grubby at times. The litter here in towns and villages is really driving me nuts to the point where I have started chiding the locals – quite vociferously at times. The lake – The Lotus Flower Lake – is small and pretty with not many people around and grass for camping. I was a little disconcerted by a rather flighty water buffalo sniffing the air nervously just two metres from where I sit writing this journal. Later we had sheep, goats, cows wandering through and then ducks on the lake. A very pleasant environment under a rattling Peepal tree which sounds exactly like rain – all night! We heard a pack of jackals not that far away just on dusk.

We are drinking Nescafe!!



18 November: I got up a couple of times last night but was reassured that it was just the rattling tree making all that noise. The jackals, and it did sound as if there were quite a few of them, did not return – or, if they did, they were very quiet. Lahar had psyched us up for a hard day today but it turned out to be not too bad and we reached our destination, Rakim, around 1.30. It did seem a bit early but a nice campsite was located above the village with a panoramic view over a row of banana palms. Tents were quickly erected, on yet another volleyball court, while Mahendra produced our favourite lunch – spaghetti with cheese sauce, covered in cheese. Huge plates of it. It was now 6.5 hours since a porridge breakfast so every plate was cleaned. Not much longer to trek now so ‘using up’ our supplies.

We met lots of schoolkids and their headmaster this afternoon. Also, some mothers and babies who wore traditional baby hats covered in small hanging metal beads. Everyone is very inquisitive having previously not met any foreigners. The kids all seem happy and mostly well-behaved. There are always a couple of naughty boys wherever one travels.



It is really warm and sunny and several people have washed their hair. I have no idea what tomorrow will bring but we are rather enjoying our last few days of this 'alternative trek'. The air is good here, around 2000 metres. Local people are growing an abundance of vegetables and fruit and their front yards are chock-a-block with animals – buffalos, cows and goats. As I write this at 4.30 pm the sun is still shining.

We were almost in our sleeping bags at 8 pm when Kancha knocked – well, rustled gently (it's a tent!) 'Did we want to come and see the local Mothers Committee singing and dancing?' Of course, we did. Every man and his dog squeezed into the small community centre which had been our dining room earlier in the evening. The singing was a bit of a drone at first but the crowd, and especially our boys, soon got stuck into a rousing competition of Pan Ko Pat, an old traditional folk song. It went on for almost two hours and we joined in the dancing when there was room. Akal took the prize for dancing – the local girls were extremely flirtatious – but Mahendra from our side was the standout singer and tabla player. Their leading lady singer was tuneful and unstoppable. Banana Dancing Camp!

19 November: A nice late start today but quite hard to enjoy as it was cold this morning and we were in deep, deep shade. Delicious Tibetan Bread for breakfast. A gradual zig-zag climb led to the top of the ridge and then, very suddenly, we were in a different environment. The sunny side of the range. There were pine trees at the top which gave way to exquisitely terraced fields and mud-rendered two-story houses. And hardly a piece of litter in sight.

We headed for the school on top of the next ridge for a cuppa. Lahar checked the local situation and discovered that our preferred camp, two hours further on, had no water in

the afternoons. Logical then to stay here. We are on a splendid, open grassy slope with widely-spaced school buildings and a small permanent clinic. See the first picture of this report. Of course, the kids are curious and flock to our tents at each school recess. They are well-kept, clean, healthy-looking kids and seem very bright and happy. In some of the poorer regions we visited this was not always the case.



Just tried the toilets – very disappointing!!

20 November: The ridge on which we camped was rather exposed, so it was quite a cold night – and winter is closing in a little now towards the end of November, at this altitude anyway. This morning's walk was delightful. In and out of woodland, firstly on a little-used tractor trail and then on a tiny trekking trail. By 10.30 it was hot in the sun. Lahar had suggested we would have a 5-hour walk to Sima, his home village. Oddly, it took only 3 hours. The village is a very pretty cluster of houses which climb up a steep hillside. They are all painted turquoise, to good effect. The jeep road skirts the bottom of the hill leaving the village intact.

Not much room to camp in these farming communities where every bit of flattish land is cultivated but we made camp near the road at the bottom of the village where a massive rack of dried corn cobs provided shade for three of the tents. It was quite hot so front and back tent flaps open, affording uninterrupted views of a passing parade of women carrying extraordinary loads, along with cows, goats, chickens and ducks.....and children, smiling, joking, naughty children. There was a village shop – neat as a pin. Never a dull moment.

This evening, just on dusk, we climbed up through the village to Sunder's auntie's house. The house was traditional in the extreme and we sat on the immaculate swept earthen veranda till dark. Unfortunately, Ekki and I had worn our sunglasses so it was a rather interesting walk back down in the dark. Thanks for holding my arm Kancha.





21 November: We are completely out of real coffee and the coffee sachets we located last night are nasty – do they use detergent to make the ‘coffee’ so frothy? To quote Dennis Potter – it is an IBB, Interesting Brown Beverage sometimes referred to as the ‘Barely Bloody Drinkable’.



Jeep Wars: One of the main reasons for our inability to reach Phoksundo was that I was mightily under-funded for the Jeep Mafias who run their decrepit vehicles around Rukum, despite having brought along quite a lot of money. Last night at 1230 am two such wrecked jeeps showed up and parked right next to our tents and started yelling that we should get up and pack. Kancha calmed them down and suggested they sleep in their jeeps till early morning. Unfortunately, due to the commotion the local 'bastard dog' had really found his voice. He barked like a machine for hours. Ekki finally drove him off with some well aimed rocks. In the morning 'quelle surprise' two more jeeps showed up insisting they were the actual booking. A heated debate ensued in which I took no part at all. Incidentally, the second jeeps were way, way better. They had ALL their windows and the windscreens were intact. Allowing a reasonable time for a resolution amongst themselves did not produce a result so, via Lahar, I ventured a compromise. I offered to pay 'something' to the rubbish jeeps if they would leave us to take the good jeeps. Incidentally, the jeeps had blocked each other in the road? Oddly, they were exactly, and I mean exactly, the same price. (Did I mention that this was a Jeep Mafia??). They settled on 5000 Nepali Rupees each – about \$60, the price of a tank of diesel. I was quietly pleased with that.

Lahar advised that the trip to Burtibang would take 7 – 8 hours. Ugh! The road was excellent and around midday I asked the driver if he planned a tea stop. '5 minutes to Burtibang was his answer. Delighted does not begin to cover it. It was more like 15 minutes on a really scary, cliff-hugging bit of dusty track but we were pleased to be arriving in such good time.

We ordered strong Nescafe and banana lassi with veg pakoras all round. Then we hit the showers. It is a posh hotel – I mean it has towels and toilet paper – but, even better, it has 'rain showers. Extremely hot water falling like rain OMG! It is a big town to stroll about in the late afternoon, but an early night was welcome after losing sleep last night – dogs, jeeps, etc. A gigantic bed and clean sheets. Luxury indeed.

22 November: Finally, after a bit of argie-bargie with the local jeep mafia over passenger numbers (they want us to sit 4 across the middle seat and we big bideshi just don't fit). Despite my offer to pay for the extra seat, a half-hour negotiation ensued. I have so had it with these jeeps!

The road was really dusty and rough but the drivers were very good. The lunch stop looked unappealing but freshly made veg samosa were sensational. In fact, Ekki and I took the last couple in our bags and ate them for our dinner later. We arrived in Pokhara at 4.30. The New Friendly Home was very welcoming. Smallish, clean and family owned and run. More showers - two days in a row!! Clean beds with sheets and blankets...and wifi! Ekki and I

went out and hit the ATMs for cash for the porter's wages tomorrow – with great success. 1000 rupees per day for 13 guys for 25 days!!!

Television in the room, hundreds of people in the street from all over the world, brilliantly-lit shops full of colourful wares, music everywhere, very fancy restaurants and cafes full of trendy people. All a bit much really.

23 November: Slowing down today. Not trekking. Not hurtling along bumpy roads in jeeps. The background noise here is phenomenal – even the washing machine below our terrace. We had the most beautiful breakfast this morning. Muesli with fruit and yoghurt. The fruit included pomegranate and fresh mint. Divine.

The porters who come from the Solu District are heading home today. They will bus to Kathmandu and then jeep up to Pattale – two more days on the road. They worked so hard. I found the trekking a bit testing at times – Char Gaon to Batachor for example – but these guys did the same tiny, steep, crumbly, rocky, overgrown, stinging nettled track as us with all our camping gear on their backs. RESPECT!



24 November: Up fairly early today though not 'crack-o-dawn' as it is cloudy. We crossed the lake in small boats in a rising mist and climbed up, nice and slowly, to the Peace Stupa, a Pokhara landmark. The mountains were not clearly visible but appeared to be hanging in the clouds like a mirage. We took coffee, real organic Nepali coffee, at our usual viewpoint café and then strolled back down to Pokhara through the forest on soft earthen trails. About 50 monkeys, many of them youngsters, were picking over the harvested rice fields.

We took our lunch at Jiva, a lovely shady restaurant and massage place. Super salads – watermelon/mint/fetta for example. Recommended. I think we washed clothes all afternoon. Dinner was at the new Black and White place, Buddha Bakery, just around the

corner from our hotel. Super dinner with a glass (or was it two?) of Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon. Not bad at all. I bought a dress on the way home.

25 November: We all like our breakfast so much we are reluctant to try anything else now. By 8 am Lahar was at our hotel to take Debra, Barbara and Faseny up to Sarangkot. Not a good enough day weather-wise for a sunrise trip. We have just heard that they all trekked back down and are lunching now at Café Olive.

Meanwhile, I ran into Chimi Dorje, owner of Snowfall Lodge at Thulo Syabru, not seen since the earthquake when he choppered down to Dunche.

We had a very traditional daal baht at Lahar's house. They serve us so beautifully and the food and drink are excellent always.....but they don't ever join us. I know this is their tradition but it does feel weird after we have been so close all season.

26 November: By 7.30 we were on our way to Kathmandu in what now felt like a sumptuous vehicle – a 15-seater Hi-Ace driven by the very careful Krisna. The five of us had plenty of room. We stopped for a 'proper coffee' at about 9 am – most welcome. Next stop was actually a detour to Bandipur, only twenty minutes off the main road and well worth a look even for a lunch break. We ate at the local bhatti – samosas with creamy yoghurt, spicy achar and banana lassi. It was a slight subterfuge as I wanted to locate a nice guesthouse for the upcoming Cultural Safari. The Bandipur Mountain Resort just not quite good enough these days, though the location is wonderful. Cooking and plumbing issues!

Bandipur Chhen is one of the renovated old houses in the main street, which is a pedestrian plaza. The hotel is part of an ongoing Rotary project which funds at least five local schools. It has clean, sunny rooms with whitewashed walls and local fabrics. At \$70 a double it is expensive for Nepal but pretty standard for cute, touristic Bandipur. A nice guy managing it and a good coffee machine in the restaurant which is open to the street.

This afternoon we made good progress, with a quick break for the driver's lunch and then a further coffee at '20 Kilometre'. We unloaded at 4.30 in Paknajol in good condition. This road trip, Pokhara – Kathmandu, can be a bit of a drag but today it was quite pleasant.

27 November: Today Debra has headed down to Pathan to buy some brass and copper lamps. Ekki and I are sorting trekking gear. Netra came by and took away some sleeping mats which left us a bit more space in our room. We have scrubbed out filthy rucksacks

with detergent in the shower and set them in the sun to dry. We had a rather lazy afternoon. Have not done that for a while. Dorje is safely back from Everest, only one day late, and plans are made to meet somewhere tomorrow with Lee, an old friend.

28 November: I have not written very much about this day ..... it gets a bit like that at the end of a trip. I believe we went over to Kapan, collected Isabel and walked up to Kapan Gomba which was closed due to teachings in progress. We walked back to Faika and had pakoras at the Shambala. Late this afternoon Debra was sent off to the airport. Ekki and I headed to our favourite new 'noisy bar' next to our hotel for dinner. Barbara and Faseny preferred the peaceful surrounds of our hotel's pretty dining area.

29 November: A very easy day. A little shopping, a little packing, a little mooching about. Faseny and Barbara shared a taxi to the airport around 6 pm. Awfully quiet with NO guests.....till tomorrow!!

Camping in Rukum was a very different kind of trek for us and, when we set out, we didn't really know what to expect. Interesting now to read the proposed itinerary. It was harder than I had been led to believe but maybe I just wasn't fit enough though coming off two weeks in the Langtang you would have expected to be OK. I had given Lahar and Dorje quite a lot of money to do a thorough reconnaissance of the region. It appears that they never actually walked further than Chargaon themselves and were quite surprised when locals further up told them what we might expect in coming days. Also, the alternative jeep route we tried to take had not been tested and they had no real idea what the jeeps would charge or how long each section would take. I don't really know why. I know Lahar could not go up for a look around because of late snow, then heavy monsoon. By the time he could go Dorje only had about a week to spare before his Everest customer arrived in Kathmandu. This restricted what we could plan for.

Having said all that, Lahar and I tried to talk things over and compromise as best we could with the resources we had. I had \$5000 in Nepali cash. Wages were to be paid later, back in Pokhara. We had all our camping gear and basic food supplies. This money was for fruit and veg along the way and jeeps. After just 10 days we had just \$2000 left – and I had to imagine our return jeeps would cost just as much! What to do? My decision NOT to proceed to Shey Phoksundo was a great disappointment to some of the group and I totally understand that. However, we ALWAYS said it was a test run. No guaranties.

Ekki and I and even Fasenya rather enjoyed the lower level trekking. We also would have preferred to make it to Shey Phoksundo but, since we could not, we tried to enjoy what we had – warm, low level trekking through diverse environments. We saw a lot of beautiful villages, met some great people and trekked up and down every day. The weather was kind to us and we survived without serious incident or injury. In a small way then, for some of us, it was a success. The porters certainly went home smiling.

I don't think I would be rushing off on another a camping trek any time soon – unless it was just me and Ekki with good back up and no particular timeframe or destination in mind. The camping thing does allow us the freedom to visit some more remote places without worrying about fooding and lodging. I ate and slept really well. Thank you guys.

If you have persevered to the end of this trek report you may want to know what we plan for 2020?

As I update this report in September 2020 a lot has changed. Until a couple of weeks ago we held out a firm hope that we could trek in Nepal this autumn. In fact, our itineraries are on the website....which I am unable to update as my web guru has been in lockdown. While Nepal is about to open up for trekking visitors I feel its better to stay put this year and not go gallivanting around the globe in search of holiday fun. I would encourage anyone reading this to stay safe and stay home, for now. We will almost certainly put something together for Spring in Nepal 2021.

You can reach me at [teresadb@hotmail.com](mailto:teresadb@hotmail.com) or [vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com](mailto:vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com). There is a Facebook page called Slow Trekking.

Hope you might join us next season – the 2021 season will be way easier than the one you have just read about.

Thanks to Fasenya, Barbara and Debra for giving it a go with us. Huge thanks for our fabulous team of Nepalis, led by Lahar, you were all bloody marvellous.

Cheers ,Teresa didi and Ekki

