

# TREKking WITH TERESA

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## TREK REPORT – Muktinath and Upper Mustang, Oct–Nov 2016

### *Sunday, 16 October – Kathmandu*

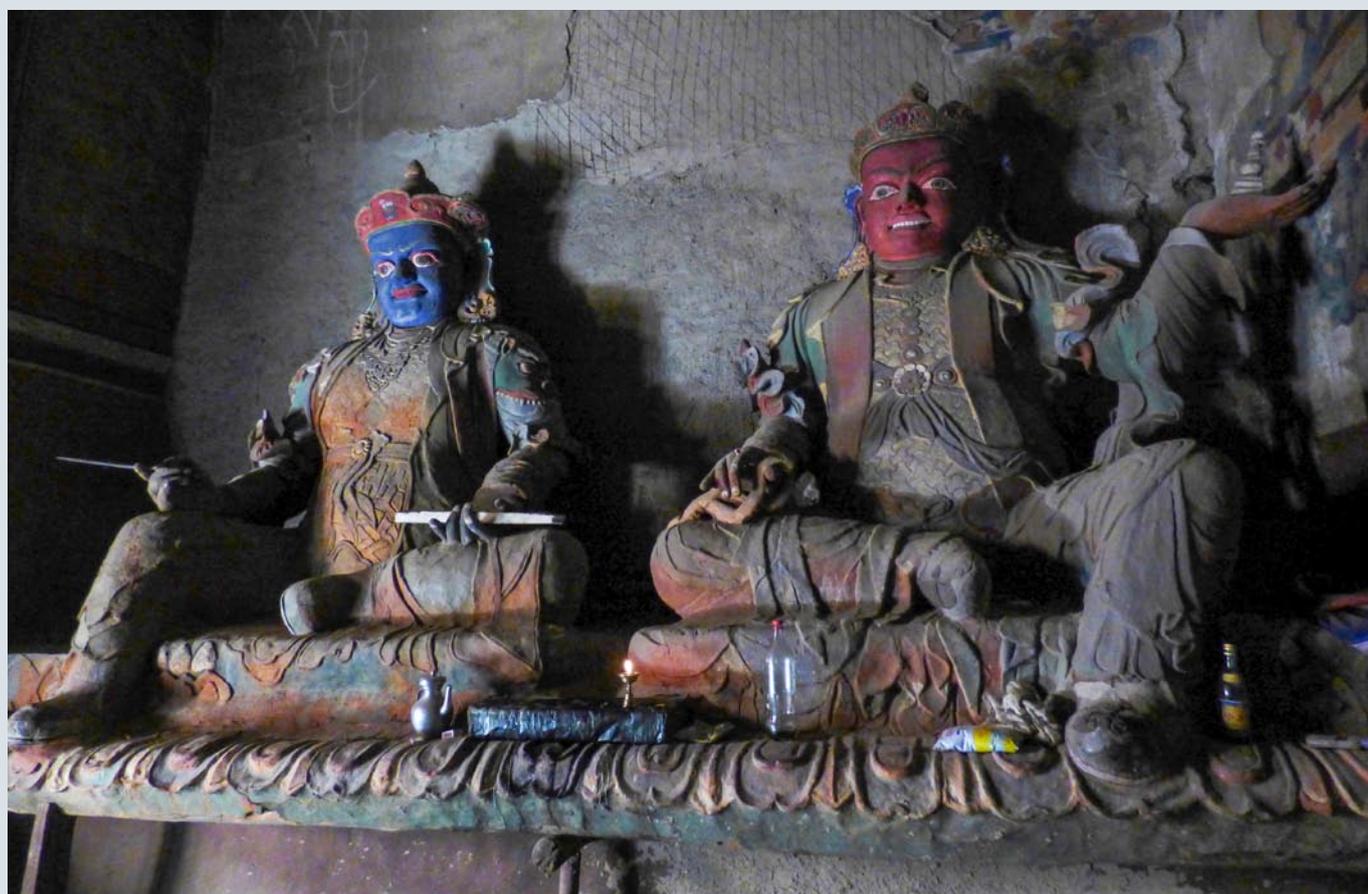
A light breeze kept the heat at bay while I waited outside the Tribhuvan Airport in Kathmandu this afternoon. Luckily, Marilyn (Mazzi) and Chloe arrived within half an hour of each other. Karen had arrived in Kathmandu some days earlier and was happy to be picked up from the confines of Thamel and taken to a sunny corner room at Muna Cottage, our oasis of calm in the outer suburb of Kopan. It doesn't seem that long ago that this area was mostly agricultural, now it is almost suburbia; at least it is on the extreme edge of the metropolis. Just the four of us then for the first part of the trek. This evening we walked over to Bouda for dinner at the Stupa View. The name says it all really. We drank Mega Magic, a concoction of hot lemon with honey and rum. Combined with good veg food, a full moon high above us and thousands of flickering butter

lamps illuminating the stupa, it was a great start to our trip.

### *Monday 17 October – Kathmandu*

Karen was up early to visit Bright Future, the local project run by Isabel and Netra. Kids come before and after school, and there's learning and dancing. There is a sewing and knitting workshop, and a computer school. More at [www.bfccnepal.org](http://www.bfccnepal.org).

The day before we head off follows a predictable pattern, and today was no exception except that we headed first to Swayambu, the so-called 'monkey temple', Kancha in tow. As I asked for three 'bideshi' tickets I was surprised to hear 'Hullo Teresa didi!' from inside the booth. It was Mangal's wife Juna. Slim pickings in the job market for graduates here. We walked down to Bina's modest little jewellery



*The Guardians of the Thupchen Gompa, Lo Mantang*

shop in Kimdol and then squeezed into a taxi down to Thamel. We banked, we ate, and we shopped. All went just fine, even the ATM co-operated. In between a serious Buddhist retreat and an imminent trip to Australia, my friend Jules managed to squeeze in lunch with us.

Liz and Sue, our trekking mates for Upper Mustang, joined us for dinner in the Shambala's garden café, along with Isabel. They had all been volunteering at Bright Future. The daal bhat was great and the G and T's hit the spot. I don't know how the others fitted in apple pie.

### ***Tuesday 18 October – Kathmandu to Pokhara***

Ram picked us up from Muna Cottage at 8 am in Deepak's jeep. Me, Chloe, Mazzi, Karen and Kancha. Not so squeezey! Traffic out of Kathmandu was slow, despite Ram's 'interesting' detour, but sadly the traffic on the descent off the rim of the valley was worse. 10.30 at River Top for a cuppa was later than usual but they have a nice new terrace. We were ready for lunch at Riverside Springs, always a welcome respite from the road. It was warm enough to stick our feet in the swimming pool while we waited for our order. One more stop, mainly for espresso for me and Ram (driver and co-pilot/lookout) to sustain us on the last leg. Very grateful to be parking outside Lake Front Hotel at close to 6 pm.

High pressure hot showers, a bit of a novelty in Nepal, followed by delicious food on the garden terrace served by Amrita, surely Nepal's coolest waitress. We deserved it. Wi-fi works, TV works, air-con works, and overhead fan works. Private balcony. Yay!



### ***Wednesday 19 October – Pokhara***

Lahar picked up our three guests just after breakfast and they were paddled across the lake to climb the steep trail to the Peace Stupa. I heard it was a hot, sweaty climb. After a reviving (hopefully) cup of tea at the top there was a light breeze on the descent as the afternoon gradually clouded over. I caught up with the group at the Black and White Café, a favourite haunt of ours in Pokhara. Best Alu Paratha ever! (The computer wants to change this to Alu Piranha which could be a bit different). I discovered that I had left without paying the bill last April – for eleven people! Nice of the head waiter to cover for me.

We ambled back to the hotel via the main shopping street, picking up a few last-minute trekking provisions along the way. Chloe got some light clothes run up at the tailors. It was warm in Pokhara and fleece track pants are almost impossible to even put on after a hot sweaty afternoon of hiking.

The pre-trek briefing culminated in the arrival of our porters. Great to catch up with Bharat and Karma once more. We dined in; too tired to go out really. I am writing this at 10.50 pm, showered, packed and ready to go trekking tomorrow. Tom Cruise is creating havoc chasing someone through the streets of Morocco on TV. Must be time to go to asleep. Night.

### ***Thursday 20 October – Pokhara to Hille***

Too early for the hotel's breakfast, we shared a cuppa and some lemon cake and peanut cookies in my room before being picked up promptly at 7 am. We drove through the foothills in fairly hazy conditions with just the odd tantalising glimpse of the big peaks; particularly Machhapuchhare which at times appeared to be following us.

Packs hauled off the bus for the porters to carry, last minute adjustments to daypack straps, trekking poles and shoelaces and we were off! Only 45 minutes to Birethanthi where we had a 'proper' breakfast on a pretty terrace overlooking a jungle-filled ravine. It was alive with butterflies, dragonflies and unseen cicadas.

The trek up to Sudame for lunch was hot, hot, and hot. Mazzi and Karen were soon way ahead of Chloe and me. Well, it is called 'slow trekking'. Excellent veg noodle soup and a nice long rest before more



*Ready to hit the road to Nyapul*



up, up, up. Arrived at Hille around 3.30. Nice old wood and stone lodge with really clean facilities. It was still warm enough to eat outside in the twilight at 6.30.

### ***Friday 21 October – Hille to Banthanti***

We tried for a 7 am start and got away by 7.30. Not bad for the first day and it was delightfully cool for the first section of the walk to Tikedungha. The line of the sunrise was racing down the jungle-clad hillside at an alarming rate so the bright sunshine hit us just as we started the 3500 Ulleri steps. It was a rather hard, hot slog so we just did a few at a time, pausing in every patch of shade. 60 percent done at the morning tea stop; I was counting. Karen, Mazzi, Karma and Bharat had long since disappeared out in front. We met some nice English folk who shared their sloe gin-soaked fig fruitcake from Betty's of Harrogate with us. Too kind!

We had chosen a lunch stop right at the top of Ulleri village. Not so much a long village as a tall one. 'Staggered in' aptly describes my arrival. Chloe was no better. A very long lunch break ensued. There was more uphill after lunch, but not for long. I was amazed at the number of new lodges completed this season. More people are finding a three-day ascent to Gorepani much more achievable (dare I say enjoyable?). We stayed at the Fishtail Lodge for the first time. I had spent three hours there last season waiting for a horse when my hip gave out on me (at the time I thought it might be permanent!). It was a really good choice.

### ***Friday 22 October – Banthanti to Ghorepani***

Another uppish day. 'A little bit up', as Lahar or Dorje would say. We were in the shade of old rhododendron forest almost all the time and the temperature was quite moderate now that we were up over 2500 metres. The pattern of Mazzi and Karen getting ahead of us till they disappeared from view was once more in evidence. Left to our own devices we stopped for tea and lunch. The clouds rolled in and it became much cooler as we closed in on 2800 metres at Ghorepani.

I love being back at the Sunny Lodge; I even got my usual 'Sunil Gavaskar' room. They are all named for famous international sports stars. Jacob's Creek cabernet shiraz was a treat and we danced our aches and pains away to traditional Nepali music and Bollywood pop.

### ***Saturday 23 October – Ghorepani to Sikha***

I am writing this beside the fire in the dining room of the Moonlight Lodge in Sikha. I have to keep backing away as it is so hot. We have all had very hot showers and ordered veg spring rolls with chips and apple filters (fritters) for dinner.

It was a beautiful, easy, downhill day. Rhododendron forests gave way to terraced hillsides of wheat and millet. I like this region because it is not all about trekking and we passed lots of farming folk going about their harvest chores. Karen and Mazzi had a brilliantly clear Poon Hill ascent this morning. Well done, ladies. The view from the dining room over a late breakfast was not too shabby.

A very slow lunch at Serendipity's flower-filled garden was a welcome break for lunch and I bought some cheese for tomorrow's picnic lunch.

We can all feel each and every muscle in our legs. We are the only guests. I got my trekking towel back which I had left here last season.

### ***Monday 24 October – Sikha to Tatopani***

A nice early start in the cool morning saw us plunging down the steep valley through hamlets of stone cottages bedecked in marigolds, chrysanthemums, callas and riotous vines. We took morning tea under a canopy of bougainvillea. It was getting hot. Down, down, down on stone stairs and rocky trails. A short uphill on the jeepable (just) road bought us to Durbin Danda. Expansive views on both sides of a sharp ridge. Two of their kids were trying to kill each other as we arrived and the girl's schoolbook lay tattered on the ground. Despite her smaller size she appeared to give as good as she got.

Fuelled up on Coke and Sprite we descended on the dusty jeep trail till we reached the last spur which is topped with a small Hindu temple and some shady trees, high above the Kali Gandaki valley. Great spot for a picnic.

We had a nice big piece of cheese but Lahar had found no crackers. He felt other biscuits wouldn't go with cheese. OK, so we can just have the cheese and tomatoes? No, sadly, Lahar had not found any tomatoes. Not sure how hard he looked? Luckily Karen had quite a few muesli bars and Chloe had some cashews. Sustained us for the last, bone-jarring descent. Mazzi and I took the dusty road. Just

couldn't face the 'spiral staircase' of a track. Actually, though much longer, it proved a little quicker.

We traipsed up the hot, dusty road to Tatopani with jeeps, cars, trucks and motorbikes all beeping constantly. Peace enveloped us once more as we entered the garden of the Trekker's Lodge. Salad for lunch, with fresh orange juice.

Less than half an hour later Liz, Sue and Ian (our fellow Upper Mustang trekkers) arrived with Purna, Min (big surprise there) and Santos. They had survived their jeep trip (just) and were happy to be going no further today. I had not planned to meet them before Marpha so it was a lovely surprise. We had a lovely dinner with all the group.

### **Tuesday 25 October – Tatopani**

Big day off. Washing clothes, reading, lying around and a stroll to the village shops. More salad, more orange juice. I got the zip in my pants fixed (it gave out on day one) so I am now back to two pairs.

### **Wednesday 26 October – Tatopani to Ghasa**

We needed an early start for such a huge day and were away at 7 am, over the bridge and off the road fifteen minutes later. It was a beautiful and varied trail and, at this hour of the morning, hardly anyone on it except locals. We followed a riverside trail to Gharap where we took a long tea break. After tea we got a bit ahead of the porters and were 'guided' to the upper trail by some 'helpful' kids (boys!). We soon realised that we were headed for Kopchepani and not Rupse Chhahara so we backtracked a few hundred metres, squeezed past some buffalos and took the last of many rather tricky stone wall stiles. Lahar and Kancha were waiting for us at the main bridge across the Kali Gandaki. Bharat and Karma had gone ahead to get a daal baht happening. We needed a big lunch today.

A bus had turned on its side on the road and passengers were pretty shaken. A couple were badly hurt but there was nothing we could do to help, transport was already arriving and the police were



*Mazzi leading the pack above Tatopani*

there. We did help stop a herd of goats getting in the way of an injured man being put into a taxi. It was hot as we walked up the dusty road but lunch was in a shady garden on a ridge overlooking the huge waterfall at Rupse Chhahara. I met Robyn Sim's brother. Charming!

'What's the afternoon like?' asked Chloe optimistically. 'About the same,' I replied. Not the answer she was hoping for. It was hard, and hot at first too. Karen and I took Lahar on the old trail, off the road and steep in places. Karma, Bharat and Kancha took Chloe and Mazzi on the road. Vehicles can be a nuisance but the gradient is gradual and, more importantly, it gets a lot more shade.

I was all-in by the time we reached the Eagle Nest Lodge at Ghasa. Causilla was enthusiastic in her welcome and Siva did a great job in the kitchen, as ever. The rosti was so good we ordered another one to share. Tonight was our first 'hot table' though our host laughed at us when we said we were cold. I had my afternoon coffee way too late and consequently, physically tired as I was, I couldn't sleep before 1 am. Electric lights to read were a godsend.

#### ***Thursday 27 October – Ghasa to Kalopani***

I underestimated this day a bit. We had a nice lie-in with bed tea at 7 and breakfast at 8; freshly-picked

fried tomatoes on toast and tsampa (roasted barley) porridge for some. About five minutes out we found that the trail had a big chunk missing and had to backtrack to the road. Would have been a useful piece of advice? Ghasa was full of the sights and sounds of village industry. We walked quite a way on the road today but it was pleasant walking and the views were spectacular. Morning tea seemed really late so we opted for an early lunch.

Glad we did as the road ahead was much steeper and longer than I recalled. This often seems to happen. Ducking into the whispering pine forest at Lete should have been a delight but I was far too tired to appreciate it as yesterday's big trek and the late night suddenly caught up with me. Very happy to collapse in a heap at the See You Lodge in Kalopani. Sitar from 3 Sisters was there, and young Santos who had trekked with us in March, with Mike I think.

Dhaulagiri was a constant feast for the eyes all day with Annapurna and Nilgiri and Bharasikhar looming larger as we gained altitude. It should be a fabulous sunrise view.

#### ***Friday 28 October – Kalopani to Tukuche***

Actually it was a bit cloudy this morning, although behind our lodge Tukuche Peak was beautifully illuminated at dawn. Annapurna was a gigantic





*Afternoon winds swirling over the Kali Gandaki near Larjung*

silhouette as the sun rose from behind it. It was quite chilly as we set off; I noticed that several of the group had gloves on.

Our first break at Kopchepani, where we got some useful local information, was only an hour away. Due to the volume of water in the river this year the seasonal bridges, which link the east bank to Larjung, had yet to be constructed. We crossed the river on a large metal suspension bridge and walked along the road for a while. The Kali Gandaki's bed is over a kilometre wide here with half a dozen streams which change course every year. The view up the valley was stupendous as the morning cleared.

We attempted a short cut across a wide loop in the main stream but were baulked by a fast flowing creek pouring out of the Dhaulagiri range. Karen, Karma and Bharat managed to cross at a shallow point; they may have taken off their boots. The rest of us detoured over an endless riverbed of big pebbles to the road bridge. A couple of more successful short-cuts later we were in Larjung for lunch. A lovely old lodge and super chips.

The wind was up as we set off after lunch and fairly blew us to Tukuche. A warm welcome from Samar and Uma. I love my room in the old part of the house and the members were very happy with their attached bathroom quarters with spectacular views on the roof. Our hot table was topped up several times this evening as we played cards over a rum and coke.

### ***Saturday 29 October – Tukuche to Jomsom***

This morning we strolled around Tukuche for an hour and visited the largest gumpa. The sun shone as we walked, on the road, to the big steel bridge 40 minutes north of the village. Walking through the juniper woods on the east bank is a delight. We were running a bit late at Chairi and, since the monastery was closed, we skipped morning tea and headed straight for Marpha. On arrival at the Paradise Lodge we found Liz, Ian and Sue, as planned. They assured us that we were not too late and the Lama dancing at the monastery was in full swing. Colourfully-robed monks and lamas in huge papier-mâché masks were a huge hit with the visitors.

Marpha's narrow, winding central lane blocks ALL the wind but as we exited the village the full force hit us. Luckily, it was soon at our backs as we traversed a moonscape of landslide rocks. The road bridge





*Yak traffic on the Kali Gandaki riverbed*

was a joke; luckily we were walking. The scale of the glacial valleys is mind boggling when you see how small a village seems in this landscape. Every precious drop of snow-melt water is channelled into small terraced fields of buckwheat and apple trees.

Jomsom was smelly with the fumes of jeeps, buses and motorbikes. Noisy and chaotic. I rather like it. The Mustang Taj is as good as the name suggests. Cosy rooms, warm dining area and great food.

### ***Sunday 30 October – Jomsom to Kagbeni***

I spent the first couple of hours today trying to organise a jeep for our bags as we are not keeping all the porters from here on. Min, Santos and Purna are leaving us. Bir will join us soon (we hope). No jeeps, all busy. Kancha and Karma were only too happy to ride the swaying local bus. The rest of us trekked as it is just an almost flat three-hour walk. It was time for lunch as we were buffeted into Eklai Bhatti and fried rice with veg and egg seemed like a nice easy order. An hour later, as we were ready to eat the legs off the chairs, the food arrived. Worth waiting for and, as they say, 'Hunger is the best sauce'.

A howling wind blew us to Kagbeni and the sky stayed a clear and brilliant blue all day. As I write this in the warmth of the many-windowed 'solar

dining room' at the Asia Lodge the sky is still clear and Nilgiri looms as a stunning backdrop every time I look up.

It is Tihar, which is mainly a Hindu festival but widely celebrated across Nepal, much like Christmas in Australia. After dinner about sixty local kids poured into the courtyard of our lodge and started to dance, with a very loud loudspeaker. The singing and dancing were infectious, especially the five-boy hip-hop routine. We joined in and I reckon we danced off the big lasagne dinner.

### ***Monday 31 October – Kagbeni to Jharkot***

Chloe, Sue and I opted for the local bus today. It is a stiff climb and there were no ponies to be had. Kancha and Karma were assisting with all the bags. The bus ride was beyond terrifying and Kancha and I were crouched on the step behind the driver's seat, next to two jerry-cans of diesel. Once the steep part of the climb was done we three bideshi (foreigners) bailed out and walked the rest of the way.

We took tea at the Paradise, which was a bit silly as our intended stop, the Blue Sheep, turned out to be just ten minutes further up the track. Of course we had to stop again as we are friends with the didi there. We were given boiled new potatoes and



*Suspension bridges are fun! Near Tukuche (above) and Ghasa (below)*





chilli achar. While tucking in, the rest of our group arrived. More potatoes.

The walk up through Khingar was a treat with autumn colours on the poplars and the millet harvest in full swing. We were now at 3400 metres so an afternoon spent sitting around in the sunny dining room and a roam around the medieval ruins of Jharkot were enough activity.

***Tuesday 1 November – Jharkot to Kagbeni***

A very big day today so we rose early for the steep climb up to Muktinath. Only an hour but another 200-odd metres up. Some of our crew walked up to the temples but some of us had been there several times and opted to sit on an upstairs terrace with coffee/hot chocolate/honey-lemon-ginger.

Jhong was our lunch destination, on the far side of the Muktinath Valley. This was my first time as it used to be inside Upper Mustang and off-limits without a permit. It was a wonderful surprise. The villages of Chuger and then Jhong are charming. Old cottages and neat terraced fields. Men singing directions to their oxen as they plough. Women sowing next year's millet and buckwheat. The rocky



*Meeting the locals is half the fun*



*Dhaulagiri, viewed from Jhong in the Muktinath Valley*

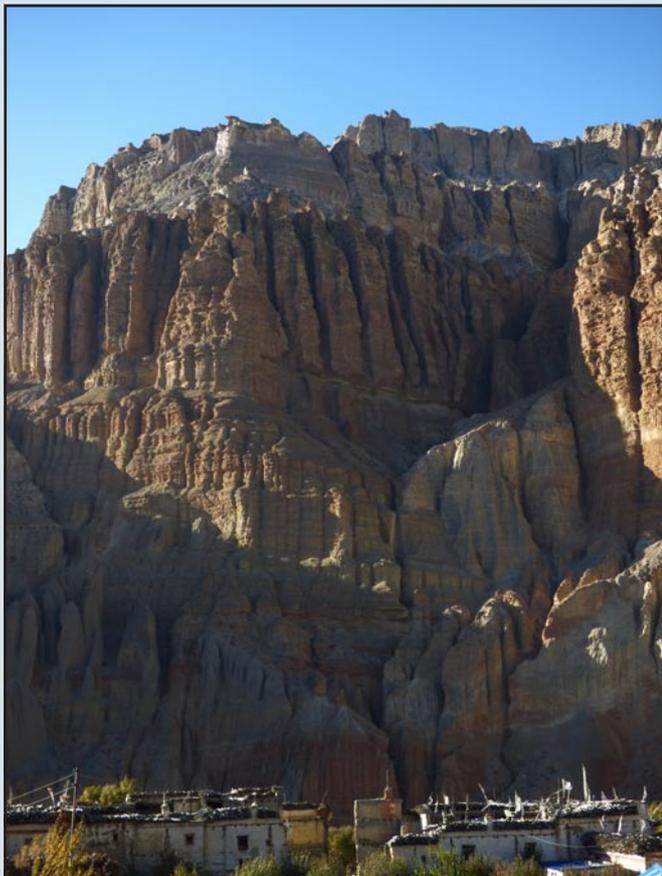
promontory on which Jhong stands is dominated by an ancient red gompa and the last remnants of a fort. I have begun to imagine a trek where we do this more slowly, spending the night here to watch the sun set over Dhaulagiri. October 2017?

The walk down after lunch took three hours on a completely deserted jeep track; the wind howled and the sun shone. Chloe and I walked slowly, looked at everything, took lots of photos and loved it. However, it was a long way and we were mighty glad when the distant figure turned out to be Karma, come to take our day-packs. Heaven. At the shortcut 'death wall' just outside Kagbeni we were glad of Karma's helping hand. Christened 'The Orc Chasm' (say it fast) by some bright spark. Bir was there at the lodge to meet us. Something else going according to plan. Woo-hoo!

### **Wednesday 2 November – Kagbeni to Chusang**

Most of us set off on foot this morning, excited to be finally entering the 'forbidden kingdom'. Sue opted to travel with Kancha and Bir in a jeep with all the bags. This was our planned pattern for the next

week. Two guys in the jeep with all the bags, two guys with the trekkers. One up front, and one with the 'lollygaggers'. Chloe got a bit fed up with walking uphill (we had described today as flattish) and flagged down our jeep as it passed us. We had hoped that this would sometimes be possible. We lunched at Tangbe, a pleasant break; I bought an old hand-woven traditional apron from the cheerful daughter of the house. She knew us from the wild dancing at Tihar in Kagbeni. We reached Chusang by 2 pm and were well-pleased to find that the new rooms had been completed. Dire warnings from me about 'extremely rustic' accommodation were scoffed at as we spread ourselves out in huge rooms, each with two double beds and an attached bathroom. Not all the facilities were fully functional but hot showers and electric lights were much in evidence. Karen, Kancha and Lahar went for a walk (what else?) to explore Tatang village. Apparently well worth the 40 minute hike. The rest of us crossed the river to explore the crumbling ruins of the old village. It is ancient, though still occupied here and there. Dinner was cosy and we met a Tibetan guy (Tashi?) who knows my mate Julie. Small world indeed.



### ***Thursday 3 November – Chusang to Samar***

Today I jeeped with Chloe, Sue and Kancha, leaving Mazzi, Karen, Ian and Liz to trek. The river was pretty high so it looked as if we would take a different route to Chele, but no, the driver just dove in and put his foot down. I wound down the window and undid my seat belt – just in case. All jeep rides in Upper Mustang are hair-raising and this one was no exception.

We arrived at Samar in an hour or so. Chloe and I found a sunny room and then we washed our clothes in the freezing stream which ran past the front of the house. The trekkers arrived at 1.30, a bit shell-shocked at the degree of technical difficulty on their route today. We talked it through and it was agreed that more detailed briefings each evening would make for better-informed choices regarding jeep or trek. We walked round the village and got a glimpse of tomorrow's trail. It doesn't look easy.

We ate in the kitchen with the guys and a drink. We met a charming Japanese group. The rooms were



*Chusang village, dotted with Buddhist monuments*



*Taking a break from the jeep. Karma and Kancha (above), Teresa, Chloe & Sue (below)*





*Chungsi Gorge and Chungsi Cave. Bigger and better than photos would suggest*



warm overnight. Ian now has the cold that has been going around the group.

### *Friday 4 November – Samar to Shyangbochen*

A truly fabulous day's trekking. From our ridge top village the trail sank way down to the river, climbed back up the next ridge and then we crossed a level valley dotted with juniper and then skirted some irrigated walled fields. One more short but brutal climb and the 'grand canyon' of Chungsi Gorge came into view. The scale of the thing was mind-boggling. I could not seem to fit it in my camera. And so we dropped down and down and then down some more. It was quiet and warm near the bottom so we sat on the rocks to eat our chocolate. We continued down on a skinny but do-able track.

At the very bottom was another stream, near the Chungsi Caves, and here we unpacked our boiled eggs and biscuits. Our lodge had said 'too busy' when we asked for chapattis this morning. As we arrived the cook and kitchen hand of the Dutch group we seemed to encounter daily were just packing up. Would we like three big Tibetan breads, left over?

Would we ever. Karen, ever the adventurer, walked up the valley nearby to see the caves which have a self-emanating Guru Rimpoche.

Meanwhile we were alerted to the presence of a small flock of blue sheep by falling rocks from above; just a little disconcerting. I saw a huge lammergeier land on its massive nest of sticks on a ledge in the cliff. Borrowing Karen's binoculars I saw that they were a pair. Beautiful. The climb out was shitful, a technical term, but the day had been so amazing it was well worth the effort.

Sad news on arrival. Sue and Ian have left in a jeep. Both feeling the effects of altitude and health problems to the point where they could not enjoy the trip at all. A good decision, well-taken by Kancha. I soon sent Bir down after them. Permits for Upper Mustang, ACAP permits, flight tickets and cash. Go Bir! He hoped to catch a jeep. He didn't. I have since heard that Ian and Sue are 'not feeling too bad' in Chusang and, later still, that Bir had arrived. Two days trekking in four hours. Well done mate.



*Ancient chorten on the trail above Ghiling*



*Traditional hospitality, lunch with Lizzie, Mazzi and Karen*



**Saturday 5 November – Shyangbochen to Gami**

Chloe and Kancha jeeped while Mazzi, Liz, Karen and I took the open, windswept trail. One big pass, just over 4000 metres and a lot of gradual trails, some of them on the road, which we find easier and scarcely used by jeeps. Lunch was offered by two charming old Lo Pa women in a very rustic house. Karma rolled the chapattis and Lahar cooked them while the women made veg noodle soup (well, it did have a carrot in it). It was actually delicious and the chapattis were the best.

The last pass was easier and then a nice long downhill run into the village. Just as well because I was fading badly. It was a long way today. Gami is a beautiful village of whitewashed houses, their roofs covered with ancient firewood and fresh hay. There are apple gardens and Buddhist prayer wheels and chortens dotted everywhere. After the best ever pakoras for lunch we explored the village. The reviving power of food. We were urged to visit the gompa by a man feeding his cows and I am so glad we did. A full-on puja was taking place. Monks and lamas in curved red hats were chanting, cymbals were clashing,



*Monks and Lamas around every corner*



drums thundering and clarinets wailing. It was almost weird when the doors of the gumpa were locked and it was made clear with gestures that we were NOT to open them to leave. Ten minutes later something was finished and the doors flung wide. Truly remarkable.

We ate dinner in a dining room of painted tables, carpeted benches and carved cupboards. Excellent cooking too. Rooms in the newly-completed building were exceptional. Missing Sue and Ian but have heard that they got a jeep to Jomsom today, are in the Mustang Taj and have flights to Pokhara.

### ***Sunday 6 November – Gami to Tsarang***

Leaving our delightful rooms; Chloe, Kancha and me by jeep and Karen, Mazzi and Liz trekking with Lahar. We all headed out on yet another bright blue sky day. The trek today involved some serious climbing, though the jeep made it over rough terrain in about an hour. Tsarang is a fair-sized village with a gumpa on a promontory which is said to be over 600 years old. The lodge offered slim pickings in the room department. Chloe and I had a little ‘hutment’ on the roof while the three others shared one small dark room. Our Japanese friends were there of

course. Dinner in yet another beautifully painted and carpeted dining room which was, sadly, unheated. The gumpa was opened up for us this afternoon and I was rapt to discover that it is in beautiful original condition.

### ***Monday 7 November – Tsarang to Lo Mantang***

All trekking today, though Kancha has taken the bags in a jeep. Leaving Tsarang today was by no means as flat as Lahar had described it, as we had to descend into a deep gully, cross on a tiny bridge and then climb steeply up the far side before the ‘flat’ started. I should probably point out that this is ‘Nepali flat’ which means ‘a little bit up and a little bit down’. Even a gradual incline takes its toll when trekking at 4000 metres.

We stopped at a huge chorten to eat our packed lunch of omelettes in chapatti. The short but brutal little pass after lunch made me wish I’d taken Liz’s advice and climbed first and eaten later. When a private jeep passed by, Chloe was ready for a lift. For an exorbitant fee the rather sullen driver dropped us at the last pass above Lo Mantang. I was slightly concerned when I couldn’t actually see the town once we dropped off the ridge. Locals assured



*Beauty in small things. A traditional ‘Tibetan’ saddle*



*The landscape and the monuments share a colour palette*





*Lo Mantang*

us that we were on the right track and the town gradually materialised out of the sandy rubble of the high desert. I followed my nose, trying to recall the location of the Himalaya Lodge and was delighted to see Kancha looking out for us up ahead.

It was very cold in the room so, assured of hot water, I jumped into the shower. It had been some days. The water was barely lukewarm so the shower was over in a flash. My wet Crocs seemed to freeze my socks onto my feet – I am talking about actual pain here – so I sat on the rickety staircase in the sun to thaw out. I was soon peeling off my jumper as it was so hot. Our building was not quite finished so the first floor balcony had no railing at all. A bit disconcerting, especially at night when we backed, rather gingerly, around the corner. Soon the rest of the crew rolled in tired and dusty but pleased to have made it to our final destination. We walked around Lo Mantang in the late afternoon. It was f---ing freezing. Thank you goddess for the electric heater in the dining room. Rather charming French company.



*Our lodge at Lo Mantang*

**Tuesday 8 November – Lo Mantang**

Chloe, Liz, Mazzi and Karen headed off with Lahar and Kancha this morning, all mounted on Tibetan-saddled ponies. Destination Chosar Caves. It was bitterly cold under clear blue skies. I found a warm spot in the kitchen to read; I get claustrophobic.

The group were back around 2.30 impressed with all they had seen. We visited Lo Mantang’s inner city again this afternoon in much sunnier conditions. Narrow lanes and huge chortens form a maze around the huge central palace of the Raja. He is in Kathmandu since his palace sustained some damage in last year’s earthquake. He owns some very fine horses which were parked out front with nose-bags on. I heard great feedback on the photography exhibition; Chloe bought a print. The photographer is a monk and I met him when he delivered the photo to Chloe later in Kathmandu. A picture of an ancient chorten seen against a midnight blue sky full of stars. Beautiful. Chloe also bought a very delicately-painted thangka (Buddhist religious icon).

Naturally the Japanese group are here. They work for an INGO as volunteer teachers. Our common language is Nepali.

**Wednesday 9 November – Lo Mantang to Gami**

We stayed in Lo Mantang this morning and took the gompa tour. Conservationists are doing wonderful work here. The Thupchen Gompa is a truly remarkable place. Supported by UNESCO, it is being restored with Italian experts (they really know painted secco walls) and local craftsmen. Truly wonderful. No cameras allowed.

It was warmer again today so no trouble to laze around after lunch waiting for our jeep. The Japanese group’s jeep had a problem (well, several) so they didn’t get away much before us. It was rather warm in the jeep which none of us minded at all. It was a large jeep with a separate rear section under a canvas cover. Karen volunteered, very readily, to ride in the back; it turns out that some people don’t want to see how scary it is. Who knew? It was very, very dusty. Windows up vs windows down. Suffocate or choke?

Gami had only the more basic rooftop rooms this time but the little earthen rooftop terrace is a marvellous vantage point. Walking around the village at twilight was a treat as everyone was bringing in their animals. The huge orchard of apple

and walnut trees was tranquil as three horses grazed on the windfall apples.

**Thursday 10 November – Gami to Chusang**

It is a very, very hairy jeep ride down to Chusang. It was fascinating to try and pick out our ascending trekking route as we passed each hour what had taken a day to trek. The driver was excellent, except when he answered his phone and drove with one



*Karma, Lahar and Karen – unbelievably dusty*

hand. He handled rocks, bull dust, sheep, detours, ice and hairpin bends around 300 metre drops. He earned his tip.

Chusang was warm on arrival (2800 metres) with the 'hottest of hot, hot water you've ever seen'. We all showered but Karen, Lahar and Karma really needed it most. They were barely recognisable when they climbed out of the back of the jeep.

As I write this Mazzi, Karen and Liz have gone for a walk, again, up to Tatang village. It does sound lovely but it is uphill and I am tired after 21 days on trek. The sun has just set, rather early, due to the massive



*A couple of days before the giant moon*

cliff face on the west bank of the Kali Gandaki. A pale three-quarter moon has risen behind the village to the East. 4.45 pm. Must be time to take the dinner orders as I hear the walkers returning.

I am writing this postscript just after 9 pm as I have just been outside for a cigarette. I climbed up the metal stairs to the roof to get a better view. The moon is illuminating the entire valley. Despite the bright moon, thousands of stars are visible in a midnight blue sky. Across the river a 200 metre high rock wall, layered like a coffee and chocolate cake, glows menacingly above us. A few lights glimmer in cottage windows in the distant village of Chele. The only sound is water rushing and the muffled jangling of bells as cows and donkeys shuffle about nearby. Heaven.

### ***Friday 11 November – Chusang to Kagbeni***

What a fabulous day. At 8.30 the sun was low enough to cast the surroundings in a fabulous light. Neat fields, whitewashed houses and soaring cliffs set against a cerulean sky. I think this is my favourite village. Just one and a half hours later we reached Tangbe, though it was a bit more uppish than I remembered – again! Easier walking now, though, at under 3000 metres. At the village of Tangbe two



*Lizzie saying goodbye to Chusang*

yaks had been slaughtered, very recently, and the ensuing butchering was a bit of a spectacle. We had a great vantage point from our outside table at the lodge but Karen, with binoculars kept us a little too well-informed as the innards were extracted. Veg food for dinner tonight.

There was a bit more of a stiff climb out of Tangbe but then the road levelled out so we powered on to Kagbeni in the face of a powerful headwind. The trail is on the jeep road which is cut into the cliffs forming the banks of the Kali Gandaki. The various streams coalesce here and there into swiftly flowing green rivers which swirl around the tighter bends. The high wind meant that trickling rocks from overhead could have been a problem, not helped by grazing goats, so we just kept moving. I took lots of photos, especially when we rounded a ridge to see Nilgiri totally dominating the landscape. Karma and I took the off-road shortcut, which was fine for the first ninety percent of the trail. The descent back onto the road was on an extremely slight trail over fine scree so we lost any advantage by having to be slow and careful.

The Asia Lodge's warm solar dining room was a treat upon arrival. I think we were all just happy to get out of the wind. I took ANOTHER hot shower; such unaccustomed luxury to have two showers in two days after a ten-day break. Well, I did have that lightning fast sluice off in tepid water at Lo Mantang and a bowl of warm water somewhere.

Chloe had sad news from home today. Her Nana has died.

The other hideous news is that Donald Trump has won the U.S. presidential election. Holy shit America! What have you done?



*Welcome back to Kagbeni*

### ***Saturday 12 November – Kagbeni to Jomsom***

Super walk with an early start to beat the wind. Less than three hours including a delightful spell at the new Roc Café. We ran into Kaji, with two dickhead Australian customers.

Jomsom: jeeps, buses, trucks, donkeys, cows, dogs, motorbikes and trekkers. A cacophonous combination but exciting somehow. Wi-Fi: yes! Phone: yes! Karen's money has finally been deposited into our travel agent Deepak's account – a month after it was electronically transferred. Bloody, bloody Nabil bank.

Communication with Kathmandu confirms that Sue and Ian are okay. Sue is going home Monday so we will just miss her. Ian is working at Bright Future teaching photography.

Hope we get a flight tomorrow.

### ***Sunday 13 November – Jomsom to Pokhara***

Perfect flight on a perfect day. Clear skies and great views all the way. A couple of sudden nosedives on our approach to the airstrip were mildly disconcerting but by 8.15 we were claiming our bags at Pokhara Airport. Due to a strike we had to wait rather a long time for a jeep ride to our hotel. The Maoists called the strike in protest at the Congress Party's youth wing elections which they claim are corrupt, or rigged, or both. And they are; just like the youth wings of the Communist Party Nepal ML (Marxist-Leninist), or is that the Trotskyists... ah, the comedy that is the left in Nepal.

We just dagged around today, luxuriating in our super rooms with balconies overlooking the lake. Strolled about the shops in the afternoon. Tonight Lahar, Kancha and Karma joined us for dinner with Sagar, Sanchok and Sahas (Ram's son). What a beautiful bunch of boys. They ordered Red Bull, chicken curry and banana and apple fritters with custard. Nothing left on their plates. Go kids!

We slept like logs, or should that be dogs? No, the dogs here sleep all day so that they can bark all night. Slept anyway!

### ***Monday 14 November – Pokhara***

We shopped, we ate, and we dozed. We had a nice lunch at Café Olive. In the afternoon we went to the Tibetan Refugee Camp where Liz and Karen bought

gorgeous small carpets patterned like a Tibetan apron. I bought one last year. We drank delicious tea in the home of Lahar's sister Asha. All good.

### **Tuesday 15 November – Pokhara to Kathmandu**

Everything went according to plan today. 7 am breakfast, which is a decent buffet at Lake Front, especially the chocolate croissants. At 7.30 we loaded our gear and ourselves into Deepak's new HiAce and were leaving Pokhara by 8 am. For the first hour the road is bumpy but we were mostly transfixed by the clear mountain views. The Annapurnas are very impressive at this distance. Must be amazing to see them every day as you peg out the washing.

We didn't need a break before Riverside Springs at 10.45 so we opted for an early lunch in the garden pavilion and then made Muna Cottage by 3.30. Nice driving, Raj Kumar. We dined at the Shambala with Australian cabernet merlot. Soft beds, made up with white sheets and warm quilts (now needed at night). Power is now on ALL THE TIME!

### **Wednesday 16 November – Kathmandu**

A long, slow start to the day this morning with plunger coffee and French toast with fried tomatoes. How I've missed this breakfast. Karen, Liz and Ian went to Bright Future to help with the kids this morning before 7 am. It was all I could do to make it to breakfast at 8 am. Ian, Liz and Karen shared a taxi into town. Karen has an alternative hotel for a few days and the others had some serious shopping to do. After taking Mazzi to the airport Chloe and I also headed downtown. After a little lunch (well, quite a big lunch actually) Chloe took a cab up to Kimdol to hang out with Bina. I ran into Deepak with his wife who is expecting their second child. They both looked rather pleased with themselves.

Dinner at Shambala, again. Must go somewhere more interesting tomorrow.

### **Thursday 17 November – Kathmandu**

Mazzi and Karen have gone, Ian is off this morning and Sue is long gone. The group is diminishing daily. After Ian left, Kancha accompanied Chloe to Pashupatinath. We will all meet in Thamel later for divine pizza at The Roadhouse. Maybe Karen will join us as her hotel is nearby? The power has just gone off unexpectedly and my phone is flat. Bugger!

★ ★ ★

I didn't write any more in my journal. We did do the big pizza lunch but I can't recall anything else particularly interesting. Chloe stayed another day or so and then I got busy with my own stuff. Mostly shopping for the market in Germany and catching up with a few friends. I think Liz and Karen flew home together, but I might be wrong.

This was a huge trek – 24 days for some of us. It was a pity Ian and Sue had to leave earlier than planned, but I think they had a good time before that. One of the highlights for me was the far side of the Muktinath Valley. Definitely want to do that again. Upper Mustang has a strangely compelling charm but some of that is apparent in Mustang. I adored the Chungsi Gorge day and the villages at twilight almost everywhere in Upper Mustang. It really is an unforgettable landscape. It is not like anywhere else.

Thank you Mazzi, Karen, Chloe, Sue, Liz and Ian for being such good company. Thank you Lahar, Bharat, Karma, Kancha and Bir for helping us keep it all together. Thank you Purna, Santos and Min for getting your group up to Jomsom to join us. A great team effort.

Immediate future plans are Everest Base Camp and Gokyo on 15 March, 2017 and then a shorter, easier Mustang, with an Upper Mustang option, in late October. Possibly a short Solu expedition in mid-November. Stay tuned and keep an eye on [www.slowtrekking.com](http://www.slowtrekking.com) or Slow Trekking on Facebook. Email still [vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com](mailto:vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com).

Cheers,  
**Teresa didi**

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



*Early morning on Phewa Tal, Pokhara*