

## Trekking off the Map, Nepal 1984

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June 2017

Trekking in Nepal was already quite a big business in 1984. Our route, the Annapurna Circuit including the crossing of the Thorong La, was a moderately difficult trek that could take up to three weeks. It had only been open since 1977, but was already quite popular. The small hotels and tea houses that dot the route now were mostly absent then, and the great majority of travellers joined larger self-supporting trekking parties like ours.

Our trek (organised by Australian Himalayan Expeditions, now World Expeditions) had an extra feature: a 'side trip' through the Ghanpokhara region that itself took nine or ten days, and would extend the whole trek to a rather formidable 26 days. This excursion was into an area little known at the time, and altogether more adventurous than the standard route; this account will focus on that side trip. We had only a rough idea of the route; one of our Sherpas said he knew the way, and we were certainly putting a lot of trust in him.

A trek like this was a fairly large project with a hierarchy of staff. There were about 15 paying 'passengers' so to speak, and we had a trek leader (a charming Welsh woman, Jane), a Sirdar or head Sherpa, half a dozen Sherpa guides (Sherpa here indicates a status rather than a tribal affiliation), a head cook and various kitchen assistants, and a head porter with a small battalion of porters.

Our bus dropped us off at a roadhead at a lake called Begnos Tal; we would not see another motor vehicle for almost four weeks. We were allowed to take only a portion of our clothes and gear on the 'side trip'; the rest would be taken by mule along the easier standard route, where we would meet up later. The early walking days were through foothills, and picturesque if impoverished villages. Foreigners were an unfamiliar sight in the area, and whenever we stopped in a village we would attract a crowd of young onlookers. I guess that we were 'spoiling' the area in a way, but we did try to help by handing out useful things like pencils to the kids rather than the sweets that they would have much preferred. The picture overleaf shows some of the children, and you can see how this region marked the meeting point between the Indian/Nepali peoples and the Tibetan people.



Begnos Tal

These first days were a blur to me because I was struggling with a classic gut problem picked up in India, and I was barely keeping up. Then we had our first major challenge, an 800+ metre elevation climb to the Ghanpokhara ridge. It was a long haul, but I made it eventually, collapsing on the ground, thinking myself utterly spent. After a few

minutes flat on my back, one of the Sherpas came along and insisted that I join their volleyball game. I realised that I had some energy left and maybe I wasn't so sick after all. For me it was a turning point.



Sunset and Himalayan foothills

Next day we came to the larger village of Ghanpokhara, nestled in various hollows just below the ridge line. Our large group set up camp higher on the ridge above the town, perhaps unwisely, because a short but severe storm descended on us almost immediately. There were lightning strikes way too close, and some in the group reported feeling electrical shocks. I



huddled in my tent hoping my weight would stop it blowing away; we did lose our mess tent which went flying off the ridge and was never seen again. When the wind abated, we moved some tents including mine; most of us retreated to the village where we were invited to the 'Town Hall'. We sat in a circle lit by gas lamps eating dinner, watched by children jostling quietly for position at the windows and doors.



Ghanpokhara School

The ridge walk ahead of us was a very long one, taking a couple of days of gradually increasing elevation. Signs of civilisation grew fewer and the scenery wilder. The weather improved and we were rewarded with grand views. A feature of the Himalaya is that there is always an extra 'layer' of mountains above you, in this case Manaslu, one of the great Himalayan peaks.



Manaslu (left, 8163m) and its Range

Eventually we camped above the snow line at about four thousand metres. The next day we had to climb over a pass, at almost five thousand metres our first experience of real lung-burster high altitudes. There was a trail; we were told it was used by religious pilgrims. I reached the top in cloud and snow and there was little to see. On the other side I found that the snow slope was just right for 'skiing' on the soles of my boots, and so a few of us descended rapidly, heedless of risk; God knows what I would have done if I had turned an ankle in a place like that. (We had been warned that there were only two helicopters in the whole of Nepal, so evac was not an option; the only ways out were to walk, or crawl, or be carried.)



But we all reached our objective in one piece. That objective was Dudh Pokhori or 'Milk Lake', set in a high valley among the wildest scenery I had ever seen, with everything stark monochrome. We camped in the snow, a cold night. My body warmth gradually melted my way through the soft snow beneath my tent and I ended up on rough uncomfortable ground.

The next day would prove to be the most challenging of the trek. Our Sherpa guide seemed vague about how long it would take to the next suitable campsite, and our trekking maps were of no use in this little-known area. Nothing we saw corresponded to the maps we had: we were dependent on the guide.



Dudh Pokhori



Campsite at Dudh Pokhori



My problem was the cold. As it happened, I had not waterproofed my boots adequately and my feet (and my socks) were constantly wet. Also as it happened, some of the porters had no shoes at all, and I had loaned my only spare shoes to one such unfortunate (the trekking company should have provided for this). So I had nothing dry to change into. We set off early, and I was already really feeling the cold.



Breakfast. We had lost our mess tent in a storm

We soon faced a significant challenge. We had to cross a steep snow slope of unknown stability – no way around it. One of the Sherpas set off and cut steps in the snow.



Sherpa making a trail in the snow



We followed, in trepidation. The slope was so steep that we could reach out and touch it on one side. Falling was not an option; it just got steeper further down.



Glad to report that there were no incidents, and we celebrated reaching safer fields by having a snow fight. I was getting miserable, though: I was cold and starting to feel lethargic, perhaps early signs of hypothermia. Just at the right time, someone gave me a hot cup of tea, then another; the effect was magic and soon I could keep up once again.

The rest of the day was gently downhill, but with hours of hard work as we dropped towards the snow line. At one point we got a fine view of the drop to the Marsyangdi valley, kilometres below.



[Looking down toward the Marsyangdi](#)

We stayed on a ridge, and walked at hard pace for the rest of the day, passing through whole forests of rhododendrons in flower. The group strung out, some falling behind. Up on that ridge, the Sherpas could not find water, but finally, thankfully, the lead Sherpa called a halt. I had been walking for eleven hours, not including rest stops. We set up camp while the rest of the group straggled in over a period of hours. Last in was an American woman who shuffled in hours after dark (accompanied by the tour leader, who always brought up the rear and made sure no one was left behind); she crawled into her tent without a word, in the final stages of exhaustion.

Not that there was anything to stay up for. We had just about run out of food; dinner, after all that effort,

was basically a cabbage broth. There was no water for washing, and in fact we had not had a proper wash in a week of hard yakka. Dreams that night were of luxury hotel rooms and hot baths.

The final day was a steep descent to the Marsyangdi River. With almost two thousand metres of elevation change, this was hard on knees, ankles and toes, but the prospect of a wash in the river, not to mention food in the village of Syange, kept us hustling. Eagles and vultures soared effortlessly around the cliffs. Reaching the river, with thanks, I found it glacial in temperature, but the feeling of getting clean (at last!) as I immersed myself was worth the shock of the cold. We made our rendezvous with the other Sherpa, with his mules laden with supplies and the rest of our clothes and gear, and we were so happy to see him. Once again, the group straggled in over several hours – not everyone's knees were in good shape, and one trekker limped in, having lost his big toenails to the wear and tear of the steep descent. Carmen, the American woman, was still out of it, and had to be carried down the somewhat hazardous trail by the Sherpas, taking turns. She recovered enough to finish the trek, however.

With that we had re-joined the well-known Annapurna Circuit route. The next morning (Anzac Day, my diary says) was memorable for an encounter with some hot springs and the most luxurious bath of my life. Ahead lay another two weeks of rough and exciting trekking, including the Thorong La at 5,400 metres, but the greatest challenges had already been met.

*Post Script:* we spent the 26 days of the trek in complete isolation from the outside world. No news, radio, TV, telephone or even electricity. I would recommend to anyone – experience this at least once in your life – but I don't think I could do it again. Even a day or two without Internet is too stressful to me now.