

Himalayan trekking at Annapurna

Diaries of the two classic treks, into the Sanctuary and round the Circuit

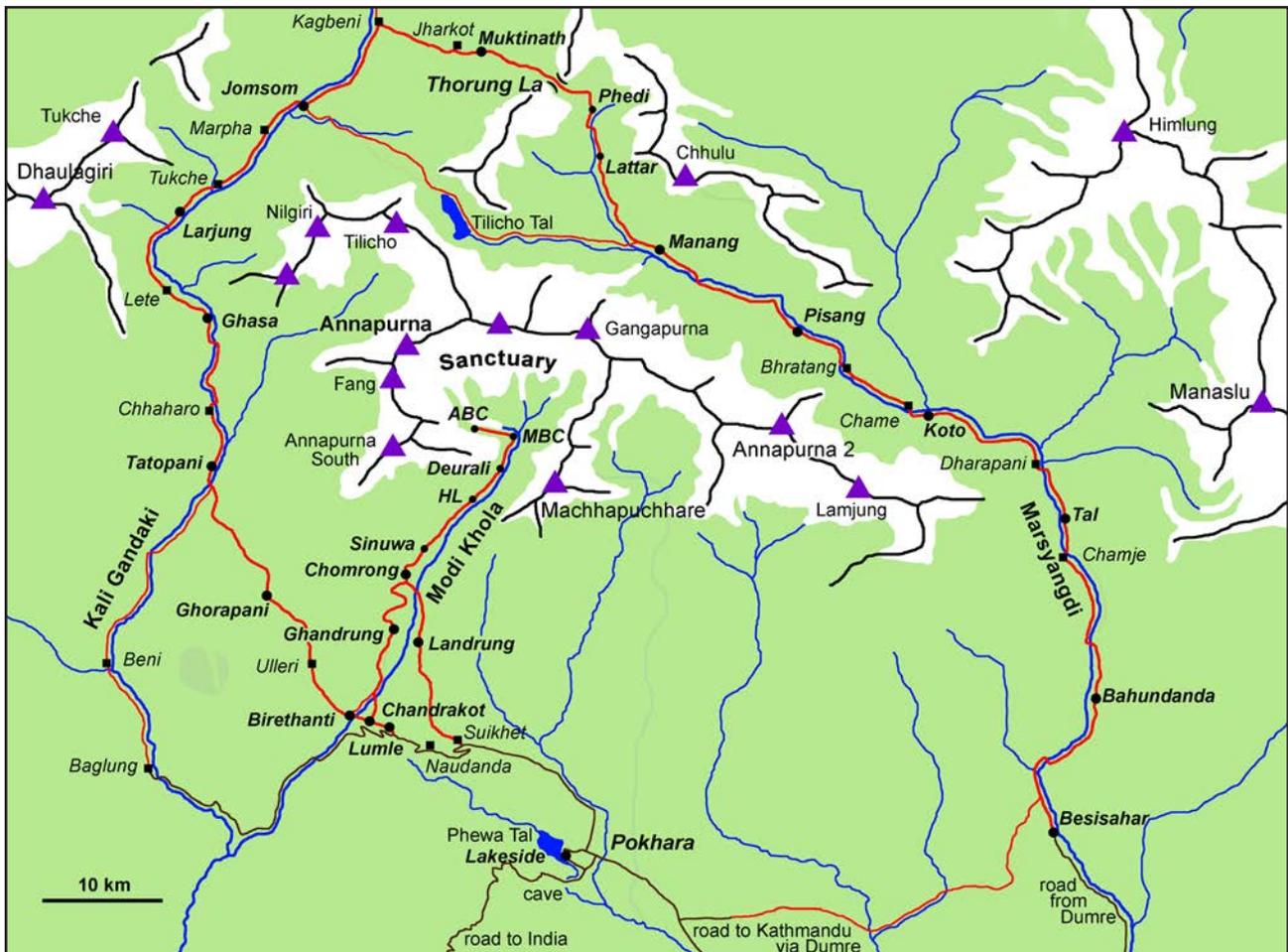
Annapurna has long been recognised as offering some of the finest trekking in the Himalayas, but the situation has evolved over the years. Expeditions of climbers led the way after Nepal first opened its frontiers in 1950. With a group of cavers, I walked up the Kali Gandaki Valley in 1970, from Pokhara (where the road then ended) to Jomsom, but could not get permission to continue to Muktinath. That trip was only possible with porters to carry supplies and full camping gear, when the villages could not accommodate visitors from afar.

By 1980, Himalayan trekking was in its heyday, and became even better by 1990 when nearly all the villages had opened tea houses and lodges, so that trekkers could go off on their own without having to carry camping gear or join organised groups with porters in support.

There are two classic treks, both of which start at or near Pokhara. The Annapurna Circuit, up the Marsyangdi valley and back down the Kali Gandaki valley, generally takes up to 20 days and climbs to 5416 metres at the high pass known as the Thorung La; this I walked on my own in 1991. The Annapurna Sanctuary is shorter and steeper, mainly there and back up the Modi Khola valley, takes no more than 10 days and rises to 4130 metres; Jan and I walked this together in 1994.

But progress had to happen and roads now reach to Manang and Muktinath, thereby round most of the Circuit. This rather disturbs the delightful remoteness that makes walking especially enjoyable in the Himalayan valleys, and means that car-loads of less energetic tourists can take the edge off the experience of the Annapurna Circuit. Consequently, many hardier trekkers have moved on to more remote areas. However, roads will never reach far up the Modi Khola valley, so the Sanctuary trek remains largely untouched, and is as popular as ever.

The roads have made life easier in the villages, but have changed much of the trekking, with its own impact on the village economies. The golden years of trekking had just enough tea houses and not enough roads, but life cannot stand still, and there is still much to be enjoyed in the Annapurna region.

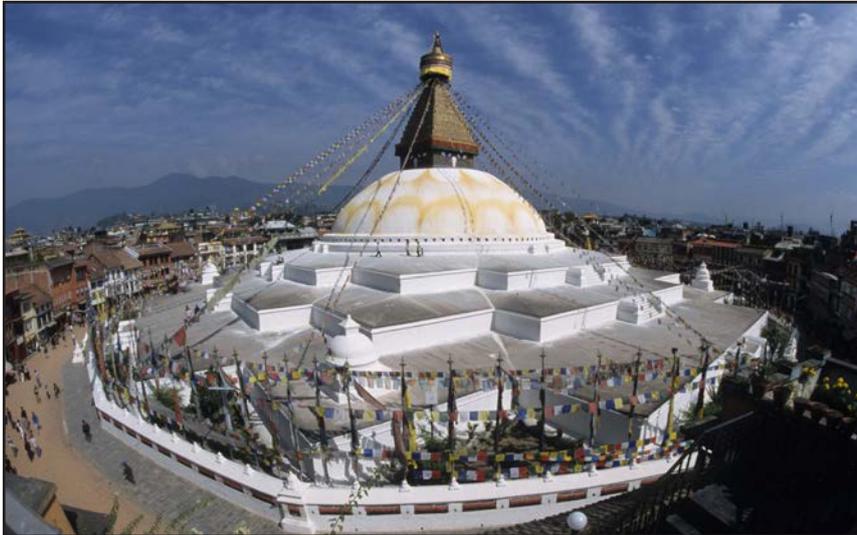


Annapurna Circuit, 1991

Sunday March 17, into Kathmandu

Fly in on RNAC overnight direct flight via Frankfurt and Dubai. Usual queues in the new airport terminal, change money at 60R = £1, then a taxi into Thamel (the trekkers' and climbers' district), and into a room at Potala Guest House. Will have to waste a day to wait for trekking permit; annoying.

Walkabout in Thamel; still the land of hippies, flowered dresses, Afghan coats, beads and beards; just like 1970, but now also a lot of trekkers; shops with climbing gear, and agencies for everything. Good chicken tikka dinner in a rooftop restaurant overlooking lively square on Chhetrapati.

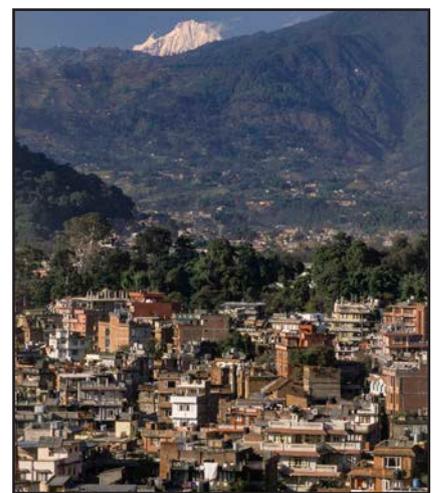


Kathmandu: the great stupa of Boudhanath, and the streets of Thamel.

Monday March 18, Kathmandu

Up at 6.30 and walk round to check on Pokhara buses; tourist expresses are better and faster than the locals; the same Tata but in better condition. Breakfast in the original Kathmandu Guest House, then buy Pokhara bus ticket from Student Travel for 140R, with no discount for only going to Dumre. Have to wait until 4pm to get the trekking permit.

Long day's walkabout in Kathmandu. Asan has colourful fruit market, Katesimnhu is a lovely stupa with Buddha's eyes; Durbar Square has the old palaces with fabulous wood carvings facing onto Kumari Chowk; Freak Street is a shadow of its former self, Bagmati Ghats are disappointing and dirty. To RNAC office for essential re-confirmation of flight home. Take trolley bus for 2R to Bhaktapur; lovely small town, with many potteries, fine temples and superb brick architecture. Back to Thamel for excellent steak dinner for 107R; it is almost impossible to spend money in this country.

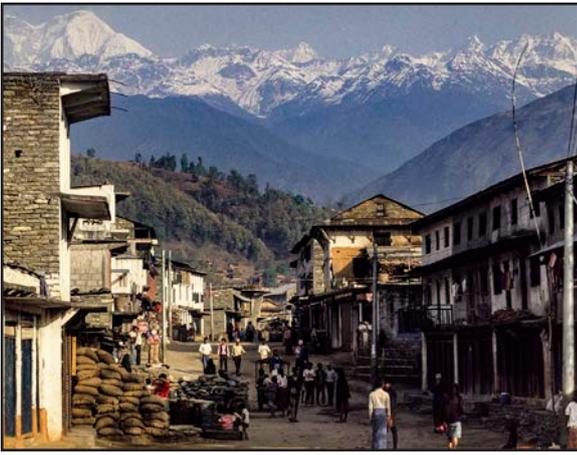


Kathmandu and the Himalayas.

Tuesday March 19, bus and truck to Besisahar

Up early to catch bus leaving at 7am. Slow out of town with endless roadworks along the road to India, through impressive terrain along the Trisuli valley. Lunch stop at Mugling with good oranges and drinks, and turn off onto Pokhara road. Soon into Dumre, where I and a few others leave the bus. Total chaos in the small new town, but I find a truck going to Besisahar for 75R; only later do I realise that a jeep for 150R would have been infinitely better, but none available so late in the day.

Leave at 3pm on horrendous five-hour journey. There are 42 folk (mostly trekkers) standing in the back of the truck, along with 42 bags and five canoes; rough, dusty and one of the worst rides ever. At dusk, one Nepali gets off and 18 get on; unbelievable; can only stand on one leg at a time, and hands sore from holding onto the frame. One Scots canoeist is ill and shits all over a German girl's rucksack. Dark and it gets worse. Into Besisahar at 8pm, and find a bed for 17R in a triple room. Dal and curry for dinner.



Way out of Besisahar.



Trail up the Marsyangdi valley.

Wednesday March 20, up the Marsyangdi valley

Late up at 6.30 because shutters were closed. Porridge for breakfast, and leave at 8.00, walking on my own. Buy a heavy-duty stick for 20R from a guy selling them to trekkers on the way out of town; a local who has seen an opportunity, and very welcome. Fabulous atmosphere straight away; Manaslu on skyline, lovely village street; porters everywhere. Then into the country; paddies dry until the monsoon, except for a few with irrigation, poinsettia trees, screw pines, hoopoes. Path rises and falls less than 100 metres; fine suspension bridges over tributaries; easy going on good path; plenty of teashops with drinks (which get 5R more expensive each day to cover porter costs from road-head; all food prices are fixed within the Annapurna Conservation Area). Warm, so shorts and T-shirt.

About 20 trekkers going north, only a few with porters (though more and more pick up their own porter as the days get harder and higher); almost nobody comes south because that is the hard way over the Thorung pass. Meet one guy who had come on the little-used trail from Pokhara, pretty, but steep and hard; Dumre was the better option. Rain for 30 minutes in afternoon; storm clouds on the mountains. Final 400 metres of climb is hard, but into Bahundanda after 8 hours. Share room with Paul (from Lincoln) in new lodge. Excellent place to stay; hostess speaks English, all learned from trekkers; dal bhat and veg curry for dinner.



Bamboo bridge carrying a side trail.

Thursday March 21, up to Tal

Breakfast of porridge, and leave by 7am. Fine views on descent to valley floor; extensive terraces with bamboo, rice and corn; lovely biotite gneiss, having crossed the Main Central Thrust and left the Terai schists beneath. Starting to know some of the folks heading north, but I walk all day on my own; delightful, and I am feeling good. Lunch of omelette and Coke for a break at Jagat, but did not visit hot springs down by the river. Long climb up from Chamje bridge, but weather is good. Sad to see slash-and-burn clearance on the far side of the valley.



Village of Chamje.

Then rise 200 metres onto landslide debris that came from massive failure of gneiss and schist in east-side cliffs with a vertical fault as the headwall. River runs underground through boulder debris except at high flow. At crest, there is a beautiful panorama of the Tal basin, an alluviated flat now filling in behind the landslide dam. Tal means lake, which is recorded in folklore, and the landslide is probably just a few hundred years old.



Tal, seen from atop the pile of landslide debris.

Arrive at 3.15 in the village of Tal, a string of low, Tibetan-style houses beside the alluvial flat. Stay in a new lodge, paying extra for a second thin mattress, Share room with Paul and Ben (a Swiss who walks much faster). Dinner is good curried veg, but the chapatti would be better for making roads. Good social evening with various trekkers on different schedules, and already more with porters. Stories of Australian Willie, who I had met in Besisahar; his heavy rucksack was too much even on the first day, when he did not make it up the hill to Bahundanda; so he stayed in lodge by the river and off-loaded his large bottle of whisky, with which everyone got drunk; and next morning he hired a porter.

Friday March 22, up to Koto

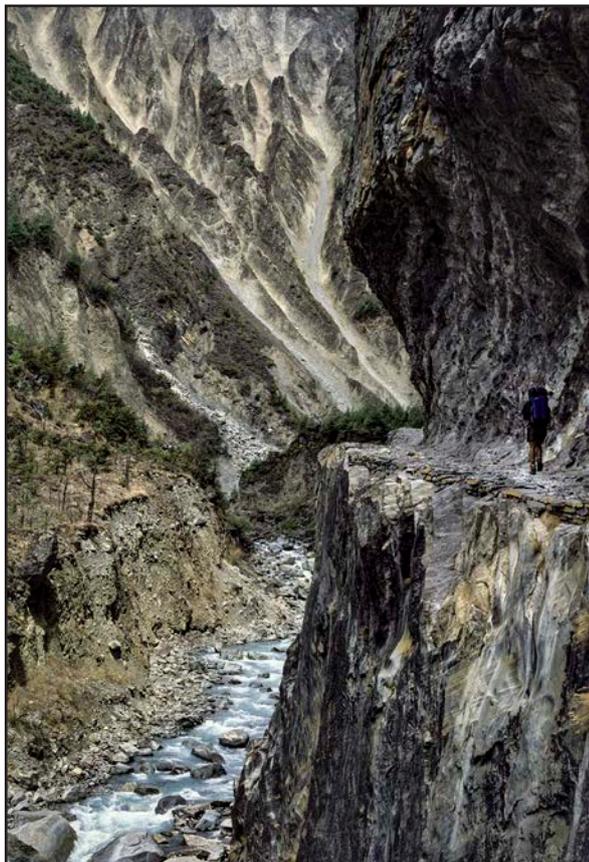
Set off at 6.30 after breakfast of porridge and hot lemon drink with sugar. Cloudy and cool. A new trail cuts out a steep rise over a narrow gorge. At Dharapani, valley turns west and is more alpine in character with tall blue pines and hemlock, and there are tufa springs from limestone in far bank. Then good lunch stop in Bagarchap, a typical village with house roofs of thin gneiss slabs. Continue west, steadily uphill through beautiful pine woods in deep valley with many landslides from both sides. Plenty of tree felling to build houses. Pass the first rhododendrons, deep red flowers on tall trees.



Trail beside the Marsyangdi.



Houses of Dharapani.



New trail before Bhratang.

Stop at 3pm in Koto, a tiny village with four small lodges. Ben already there and has picked a good room for the three of us; Paul comes in later; we had all walked on our own for the day but enjoy a sociable evening. Tibetan women carding and spinning wool, and weaving carpets; lots of snotty-nosed kids, and cows, goats, chickens; buzzards soaring overhead. Good dinner of veg soup, potato-and-egg rosti, apple pie and Coke. Cool with wind from southeast warning of a depression, then heavy rain at dusk, so early to bed to keep warm.

Saturday March 23, up to Pisang

Beautiful morning, clear and cold, with summit of Lamjung clear at nearly 7000 metres. Porridge breakfast then only half an hour into the regional capital of Chame; large town, post office, secondary school, good market, many lodges, and hydro-electricity from 100 metres fall in a 300 mm pipe, but too many people, and Koto was the better place to stay. Delightful walk on good trail through pine forest beyond town; more prayer walls and flags, chortens at each village, fewer rest walls except at the teahouses. A steep climb on the old trail is now avoided by a new trail cut into a vertical cliff above the river (good for donkey trains but not wide enough for a new road of the future). Pass apple orchard on way into Bhratang.

Valley is cut through Nilgiri Limestone; huge cliffs, steep dips, no karren, no risings but hot springs down at floor level. Climb over massive banks of ancient landslide debris, with terraced flats upstream. Valley opens out once through the main limestone scarp, with a huge stratimorphic bowl of bare rock in a plunging syncline round the outside of the bend where the river comes in from the west.

Good walking alone to enjoy the geology, then light snow in the afternoon and into Pisang by 2pm, just before an hour of heavy now. Ben and Paul already in a good lodge, and huddle round a smoky fire, snacking on excellent potato momos. Snow eases off, so cross river bridge and walk up to old Pisang, a rather bleak place with long prayer walls. Aqueducts feed mills in the new village. A good place to stop for the night.



After the snowstorm on the trail beyond Pisang.

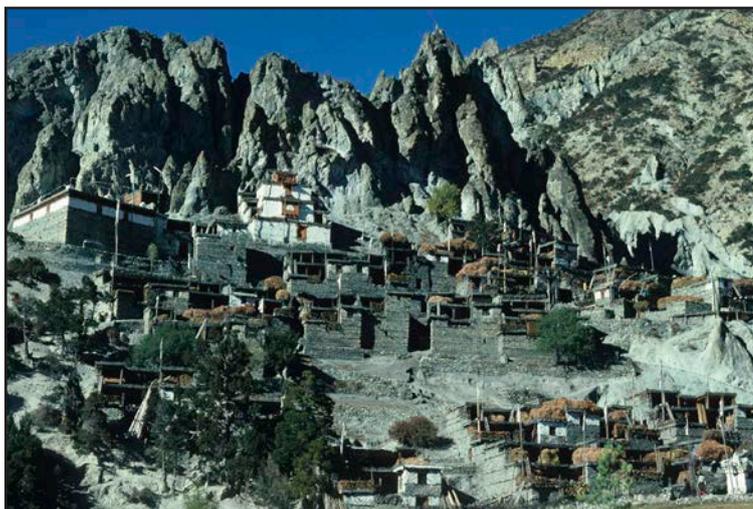
Sunday March 24, into Manang

Wake to 15 cm of snow forming a total white cover. Set off following footprints left by just one local, without which would not have found the way through woods that are a Christmas-card scene with snow piled on all the branches. Soon warm up, and down to a T-shirt, but proofed trousers are a success in the deep snow and boots good too as my feet stay dry. Climb steadily for 200 metres onto a huge terminal moraine, then have clear view ahead along Manang valley with alluvial terraces on both sides beneath fluted and pinnacled lateral moraines. Brief stop at tea shop and continue through light falling snow, though less on the ground here than in Pisang.

Up last rise into Manang at 2pm. Many lodges in a new strip before the heart of the old village; it is barely a town. Stay in the Annapurna. The storm has caught everyone; the pass is closed, and many trekkers have returned to Manang after a cold night at Thorung Phedi. It is cold, and we crouch round the fire in the dining room. Good dinner and then electric light makes sociable evening easier. But into sleeping bag by 9pm, wearing everything except the thick sweater.

Monday March 25, Manang

Wake to cloudless blue sky; the storm is gone, but the snow remains. Cold indoors, but warm in the sunshine and out of the wind. I have a steady headache, though altitude is only 3550 metres, and left knee hurts. Feel better after talking to NZ lady doctor at the clinic run during the two trekking seasons by the Himalayan Rescue Association, who are mainly concerned with acute mountain sickness, but she says my headache is not related. Anyhow, had planned a rest day here, partly to acclimatize to altitude, so just stroll around the town taking photos and enjoying the fabulous views across to Gangapurna.

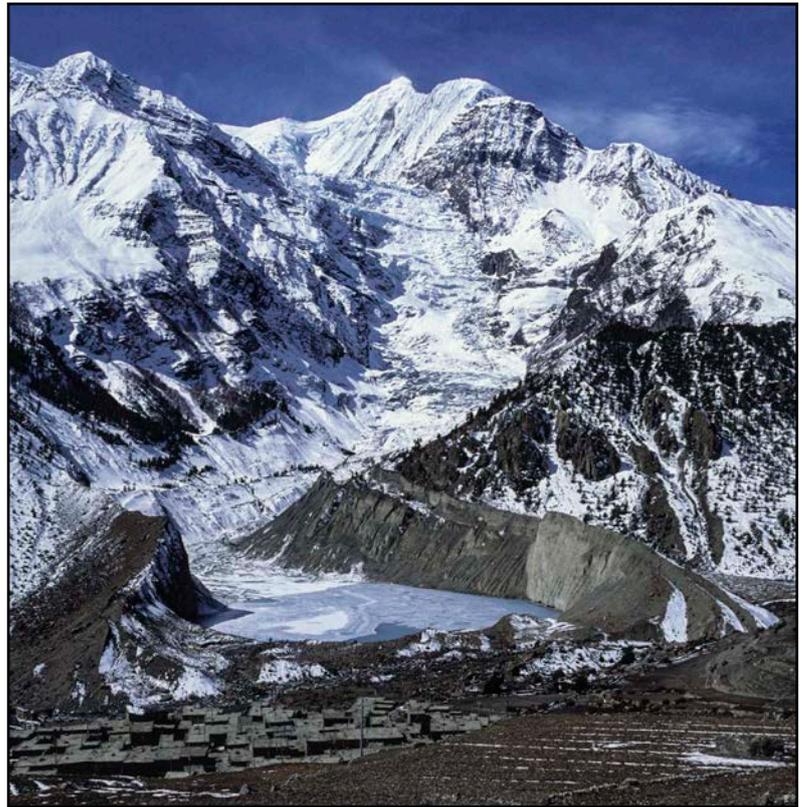


Houses at the eastern end of Manang, in front of pinnacled moraine.

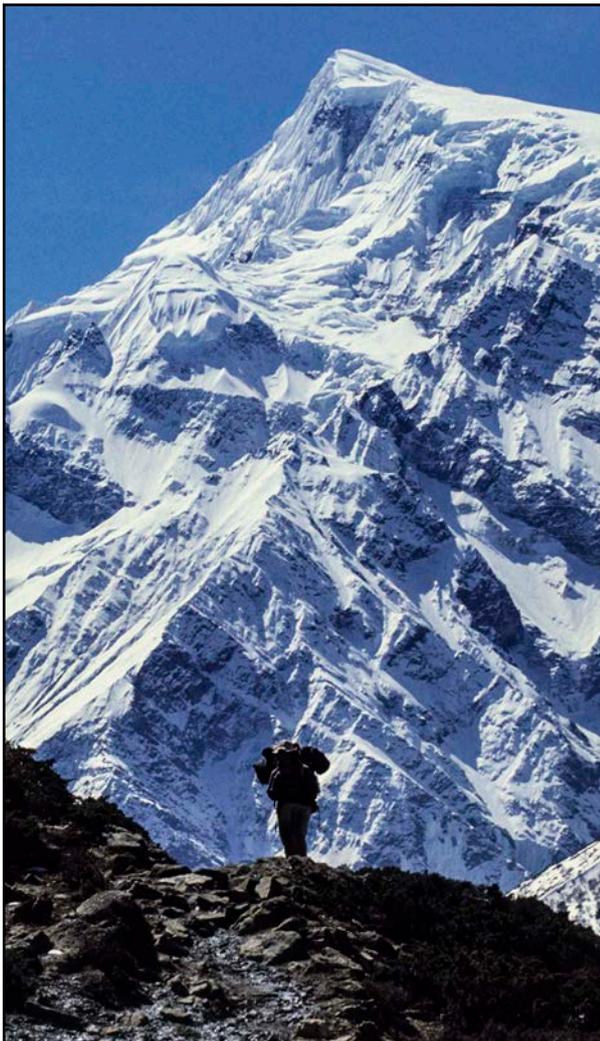
Tuesday March 26, around Manang

Wake at 7am and feel a lot better. Some folks head off towards the Thorung pass, but I decide on another day in Manang, and Paul and Ben go for the same. A day well spent, as the town, landscape and geology are all brilliant. A few collapsed buildings, probably from the earthquake of 1988.

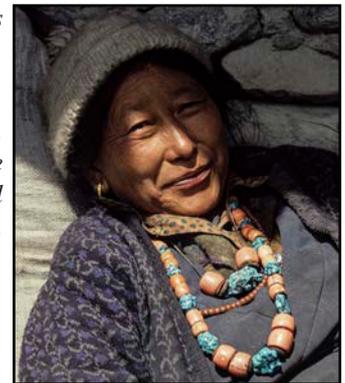
Walk up into terraced fields above the village, for views across to the entire Annapurna Himal; most of the snow has now melted and fields are bare earth. The Gangapurna Glacier is a classic with its lateral moraines forming tall ridges that project across the main valley floor, left since the Neoglacial advance about 400 years ago; between them a proglacial lake is retained by the remnants of the terminal moraine (most has been eroded away by the main river), and a delta fan now separates it from the retreated glacier. And in the



Gangapurna, with the moraines around its proglacial lake.



The lodge owner in Manang, wearing a traditional necklace of Tibetan turquoise and coral from the Mediterranean.



On the trail that climbs towards the Thorung La.

main valley upstream of the moraine, terraces remain from the rapid fill of an ice-dammed lake. Walk down to river and across bridge to reach the lake; partly frozen over, and the moraine walls are nearly vertical where the ice had supported them; one small icefall on the glacier, but no large avalanches.

Groups of porters come up to Manang in the afternoon, each carrying around 70 kg and walking in bare feet or flip-flops; also donkey trains. Then a group of Japanese laden with cameras; they had walked in for a few kilometres from the landing spot for their three helicopters; then they stayed for just an hour before leaving the same way; part of a seven-day tour costing \$5000 each. Weather has stayed good all day, with just some afternoon clouds farther down the valley.

Wednesday March 27, up to Lattar

Up with daylight, and catch first sun on Gangapurna; clear morning with Manaslu visible down the valley. Pack up and away by 7am; my bill just 440R (£7) for three days,

though I did have a few Cokes at other places. Walk up through village; still snow drifts between the houses, but the track is clear. Turn into Thorung valley; good views to distant Tilicho peak, and recognise it as last seen from above Jomsom. Lias limestones have small springs from them. Walk most of the day on my own; easily graded trail along valley side, and then up moraine to Lattar.

I go slowly and need the break so stop, though soon after midday. Some younger trekkers, and all those with porters, carry on to Phedi; which is good because the two lodges at Lattar are small and already crowded. My lodge is run by one family, with the kids running errands all the time. Terrain is open grassland and low juniper, good for an afternoon stroll in the sun without a rucksack. Porters come past with supplies for Phedi, and more porters are each carrying two trekkers' bags. Omelette for dinner and then a good night.



The trail up from Lattar.

Thursday March 28, up to Thorung Phedi

Late start because sun is behind the hill, and it will only be a short day's walk; porridge breakfast then set off at 8.45. A kilometre out and realise I have left my stick behind; dump bag on a rock and go back for it; will really need the strong stick for going downhill with a bad knee. Well graded path climbs over banks of landslide debris, then crosses the river and traverses on scree, landslide debris and moraines within a narrower valley. Large herd of grazing yaks, many crows, one lammergeyer, and an unexciting group of 'blue sheep' (actually bharals, like goats with big horns, and brown).

After only about two hours walking, up steep rise to Phedi; or Thorung Phedi, meaning at the foot of Thorung, Large complex of houses in traditional style, with 100 beds, built by a Kathmandu entrepreneur purely for the trekking industry; and invaluable because it fills the gap at the only place on the Circuit where tents were needed, because Manang to Muktinath cannot be walked in a single day. I am early so take a good room for myself, Paul, Ben and Michael. In the afternoon, Paul and I walk up 150 metres higher to take in the views and acclimatize before going down again, which is the best way of getting a good night's sleep. Some muddy ground from the snowmelt; but it is warm in the sun, out of the wind and on dry ground. A limestone terrace has some good microkarren, but this is barely a karst environment. Good dinner and meet Karen from Calgary, who knows many of the Castleguard cavers: small world. Wear everything inside sleeping bag; golden rule is that clothes not worn for the highest night are just excess baggage.

Friday March 29, Thorung La

Up at 4.15 which is too early, but some folk are already leaving by moonlight, which may be OK until the moon sinks behind a mountain. So porridge breakfast, and then leave with first light at 5.20; on refectation, perfect timing, as any later with slow ascent would run risk at the pass of unwelcome high winds that increase through each day. Ground now frozen hard, so solifluction debris easier to walk on than in the afternoon thaw. First 300 metres are steep straight up from Phedi. Pink clouds for a few minutes herald a beautiful sunrise over Annapurna 2. Slope eases off, with long gentle



Morning walk up to the Thorung La.



Approaching the Thorung La in snow from the recent storm.



Icefall above the Thorung La.

ascent over moraines, snowfields and felsenmeers of small stones. Plenty of snow, but all frozen hard even after sun is up. Could only see the way by following the footsteps of locals who had broken a trail through the new snow during the previous two days. I was lucky with my timing.

Fabulous mountains on both sides, with some beautiful cornices and icefalls. One of the finest walks I can remember; altitude is not a problem, but it is cold; wear both shirts, both sweaters, woolly hat, snow goggles, and socks on hands. Cold stopping to take photos, and too cold for any longer stops. I reach the Thorung La (that's the pass) just before 9am, at 5416 metres, after a climb of very nearly a thousand metres. Feel good, because it's a blue-sky day and ahead is nearly all downhill. About ten trekkers up there, all happy to have made it, but there are many more still coming up; up to 50 people make the crossing on a good day. But good weather is essential [in 2014, an unexpected storm dumped a metre of snow with in a few hours, and 43 trekkers and porters died on the pass, some from hypothermia, others in avalanches].

Set off down slowly with left knee not very good. Descent to west is not as inspiring as the eastern side, with only a distant Dhaulagiri on the skyline, one nearby icefall, but otherwise endless lateral moraines. Unrelenting downhill, not as steep as the up-side but without any break for 1600 metres of descent to Muktinath. Progressively warmer lower down, so layers of clothes go into the rucksack and the ground gets softer and muddier. Just one teashop for a drink-stop rather late in the day.

Then round a corner to spectacular view with Muktinath laid out below, Kali Gandaki beyond and Nilgiri, Dhaulagiri and Thapa along the skyline. Muktinath is a cluster of ten villages and temple complexes amid terraced fields, some already green. Just below the Ranipawa pilgrim site, a group of trekker lodges lies next to the police post. Mid-afternoon when I check into the first one, and relax in hot sun; it is warmer than Manang even though it is 500 metres higher. Meet up with Germans who had crossed the day before; everyone has two nights and a break day here. It is a good place with a great atmosphere about it.



Approach to Muktinath, with Dhaulagiri on the skyline beyond the Kali Gandaki valley.

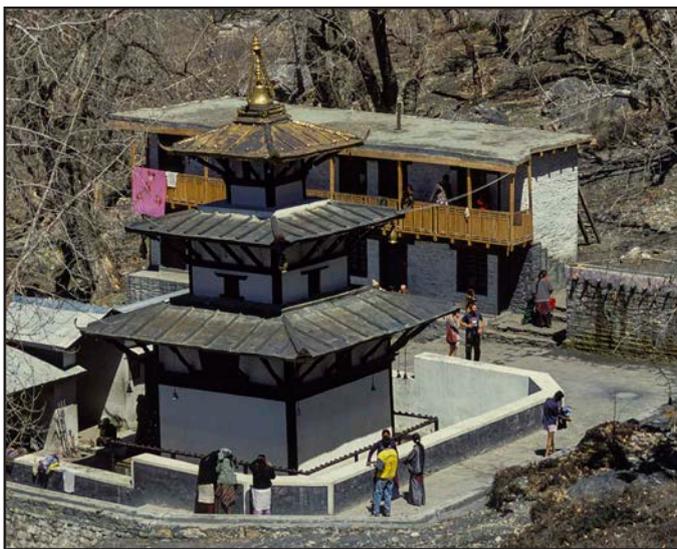
Saturday March 30, Muktinath

Sun is up at 7.40, with beautiful views to Dhaulagiri. Lazy breakfast and then walk up to the temples for the morning. Full-moon day, so many pilgrims at both the Hindu shrines and the Buddhist monastery. The main karst spring produces more than 50 litres per second from scree at the foot of a limestone cliff, where much of the flow is diverted into the 108 waterspouts around the Hindu temple courtyard. Groups of women in long dark dresses with colourful aprons and details, dancing round in circles, singing with shrill melodic voices; absolutely lovely. About 100 metres to south, Buddhist shrine of Jwalamai, has the burning spring in a recess beneath the altar. Blue flames dance on methane emerging from fissures right next to a spring (flow only a litre per second), both in the black Jurassic limestone that also yields the pyritised ammonites worshipped as saligrams. The combination of burning water and gold animals makes Muktinath a mega-religious site that attracts a steady stream of pilgrims.

Back to the village for a sociable afternoon. From 3pm the day's trekkers start arriving, about 40 in all, and right at the end Australian Willie; he had paid off his porter at the top of the pass and managed to carry his own bag downhill; 12 hours on the go, and he has his first cigarette for six hours. He did well, and more adventurous than the trekkers just up from Jomsom, mostly just with day packs and porters carrying their over-large bags. Nobody is allowed to stay at the temples as they would contaminate the site, so the village below has all the trekkers' lodges, the campsites for trekking groups, and a huge (and very unsavoury) lodge for Indian pilgrims. Good social evening at the North Pole lodge, with Ben, Paul, Willie and many others who have crossed the Thorung in the last two days.

Sunday March 31, down to Jomsom

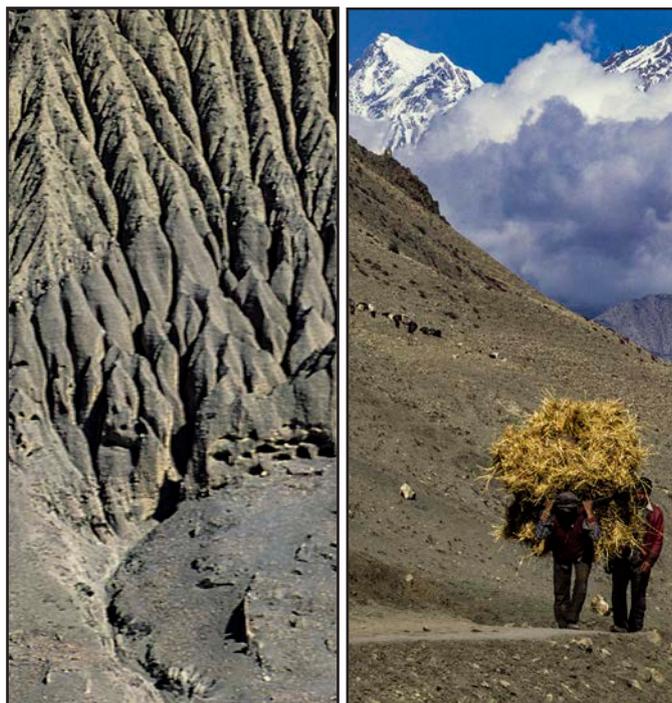
Up at 6.30 for breakfast porridge, and then walk on my own all day; slowly because left knee is painful on the downhill; could not have made it without the heavy-duty stick, but once on the flat at Kagbeni the knee gives no grief. Despite difficult walking, a magnificent day with great views ahead. Jharkot has a cluster of houses against a dramatic background, then Khinsar has terraced fields and rice paddies. Down through a barren zone with deep gullies, earth pinnacles and abandoned cave houses (hermit retreats) in a huge thickness of ancient alluvium on north side of valley. Kagbeni has fields of wheat and barley, and there is a good tea-house for a lunch-break.



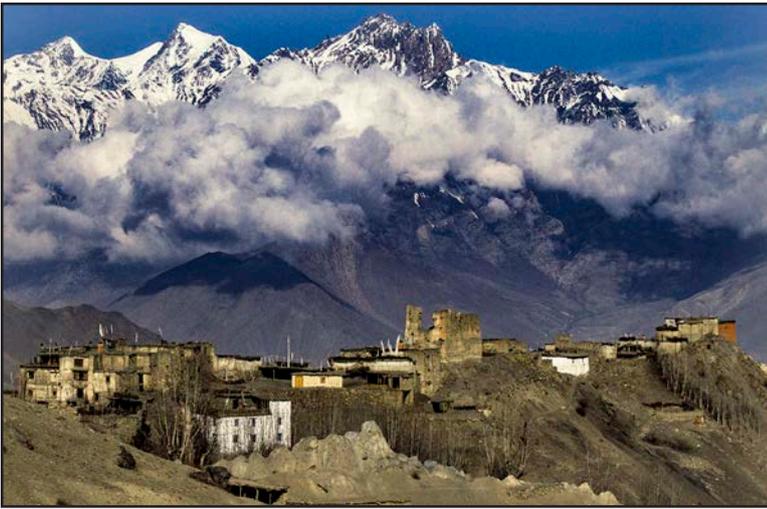
The very modest Hindu temple at Muktinath.



Pilgrims at the Muktinath temple..



Gullies and caves above Kagbeni. Carrying up to Jharkot.



The lovely setting for the village of Jharkot.



Zho train on the gravels at Jomsom.

Head south into wind along the great alluvial plain of the Kali Gandaki, though some stretches of large cobbles are not so good for walking. Hindu pilgrims, sadhus, donkey trains, zho trains, goats, porters all make it a busy trade route along this main valley through the Himalayas. Paul and Ben catch me up, and then go ahead; they will stay in Jomsom tonight and I will too, but I am still walking slowly. Sheer magic just before Jomsom; a donkey train bedecked with plumes, and laden with sacks, heads north, past two zho trains heading south, one with empty crates, the other with firewood. I am caught in the middle and it is lovely, while the bells are pure Mike Oldfield.

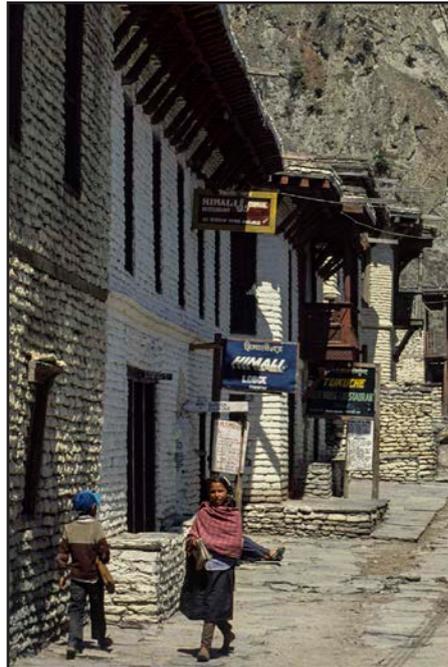
Into Jomsom and a room in the lodge advertised as where Jimi Hendrix stayed (wow!). Soon out to walk round the town; larger than in 1970 and now on both sides of the river; shops, army base, bank, court house, dirty streets; donkeys, zhos, a few tourists; water and electric everywhere. Good dinner of chapatti, egg, fried rice.

Monday April 1, along the Kali Gandaki

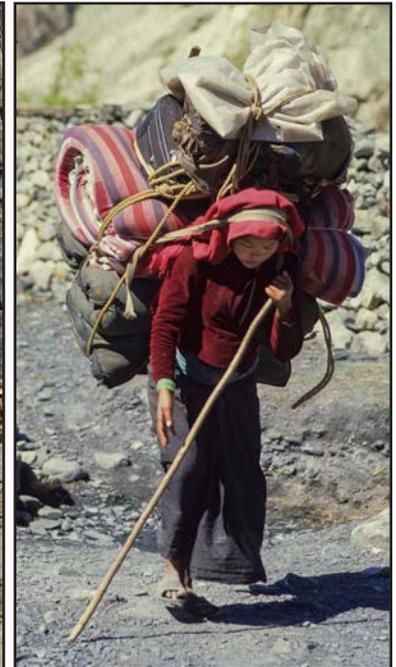
Set off by 8am and soon into the sun that was behind the mountains. Walk past the airstrip, where there are queues of people; yesterday's plane could not leave Kathmandu because of fog, and today's has gone first into Manang and cannot now get out from there; no sight of a plane all day, so many folk on the shorter treks are delayed by a good few days; it is always the risk with relying on a flight in or out of Jomsom. Good trail continues down the valley in warm sunshine and my knee already feels better. Through Syang with fields of wheat and barley, and women threshing by hand. Many people on the trail; Thakkali trekkers, donkeys, horses, zhos, porters with huge loads of hay, an Indian pilgrim in bare feet.



Nilgiri and the Kali Gandaki.



Main street in Tukche.



Equipping a new lodge.



Morning view down the Kali Gandaki; White Peak is in the centre; Dhaulagiri and its icefall are on the right.

Marpha is still a very attractive village, with a long main street of stone slabs over a stream. Also now a major agricultural centre; apple orchards, fields of wheat, experimental plastic greenhouses, seed control centre, electric power and a Tibetan refugee camp. Then into Tukche, with north end of town all new since 1970. Ben and others are waiting at a good restaurant, so omelette for lunch. Site of 1970 camp has not changed, but town now has a string of lodges. Trail south easier on the gravel plain, as river is low, but the high rock trail is still there. White Peak rises ahead; I went to its top in 1970, but not this time.



Ghattekhola bridge.

Lete landslide, with its source on the inclined gneiss slabs, and its debris pile below.

Through the distinctive village of Khobang where the street is in tunnels beneath the houses (designed like this to protect against the valley's strong winds). Shortly into Larjung, and stop in last lodge before trail goes back out onto the gravel. Excellent place; triple room with Ben and Paul, good restaurant with fire beneath the long table in the evening, 60s music on tape. Lodges are geared to a higher standard for the larger numbers of trekkers on the easy option along the Kali Gandaki.



Tuesday April 2, down to Ghasa

Clear morning for beautiful views up to the Dhaulagiri icefall. Main trail crosses to east side of the valley, but Ben and I follow the minor trail on the west side partly through pine woods. The Ghattekhola tea-shop is still there, but closed; it was the best of the few along the whole valley in 1970, but is now off the main route. The adjacent single-log bridge over the stream would have been a challenge without a stick. Lovely wooded trail down to Kalopani on the edge of the giant pile of landslide debris. The Annapurna Coffee Shop is a new, fancy and very touristy spot, packed with groups of Jomsom trekkers supported by porters. The village of Lete, close beyond, is a delight of new houses made of gneiss blocks with phyllite roofs.

The Lete landslide is an amazing feature when it can be fully comprehended. The huge mass of rock slipped off the western flanks, failing along the steeply dipping schistosity. The valley was blocked by a pile of debris probably more than 500 metres deep; this impounded a lake that extended up the valley for more than 10 km and was subsequently filled with sediments; these in turn were buried by the huge spread of gravel that form the wide valley floor all the way back to beyond Tukche. The debris dam itself extends along the valley floor for nearly three kilometres, now nearing all the fields of Lete. Where the main trail descends 400 metres off

the end of the pile, the adjacent river channel is cut deep into the debris, exposing blocks up to 15 metres across, all of gneiss from the source slopes above. Truly a major landslide, but of a date that is unknown.

Off the slide debris, an easy walk through pine woods, down to Ghasa with rice paddies and water buffalo within a lower and warmer climatic zone. Starts to rain so stop in lowest lodge in Ghasa; a short day but why walk in the rain just to make the next day's walk short.

Wednesday April 3, down to Tatopani

Leave at 6am with Paul. Good trail at first, but then over a bridge to a new, rough trail on the east bank; too many loose rocks, and too many donkey trains coming through. Fewer porters now on the better track along the Kali Gandaki; they seem to have moved to the Manang valley. Twist my ankle on a rock while dodging a donkey's load; not bad at the time, but gives trouble later. Can see the old trail (which we followed in 1970) across on the west bank, now largely destroyed by landslides.

Over a bridge back to the west bank and pass the picturesque set of cascades and adjacent, water-driven, flour mills at Chhaharo, then onto the better, old, paved trail down to Tatopani. The first lodge has the usual crowd already in. Check into a single room, and take boots off; ankle is now painful. Stagger down to the hot springs, by the river just below the lodge. Two hot pools with paved rims, lots of locals, trekkers and pilgrims, drinks stall to hand; a right little tourist spot. Shops and lodges make Tatopani into an active village. Nearly back to the outside world, and there is roast chicken on the menu, whereas all the hill villages are devoid of meat.

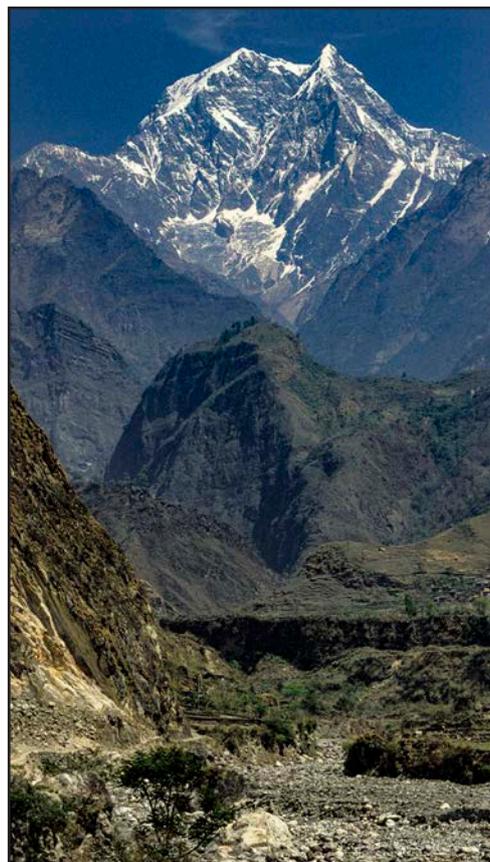
Thursday April 4, Tatopani

No choice for today; has to be a rest-day to give the ankle a chance. Ben and Paul and many of the Marsyangdi crowd head on out. But Tatopani is a delightful place to rest up. Lazy breakfast, then a long talk with the lodge owner; she wants to know about the Gulf War, tells of her dislike for Israeli trekkers who are the most demanding of all and are generally unpopular, has another house in Pokhara, and waits for electricity to be switched on in the village as the hydro-plan has been in progress for some years.

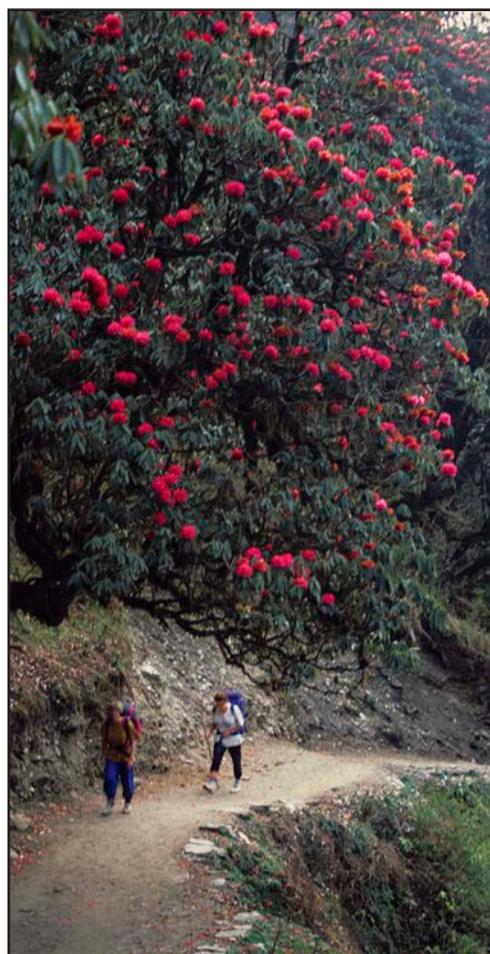
Friday April 5, up to Ghorapani

Feel better in the morning and set off at 8am, cloudy so not too hot. Down through the village, then onto dipping schists with many small landslides, and over a new bridge. Walking slowly, but uphill is easier on the knee and ankle, so make it up to Ghorapani in a bit over six hours, rising more than 1600 metres along 14 km of good trail including long flights of stone steps. A hard day but with plenty of great scenery in grand panoramas. Through a mix of forest and farmland, but the farming is rich, with rice, bamboo, oranges, bananas, and a few monkeys in the trees. Still many donkey trains, and even more trekkers on the short loops out of Pokhara.

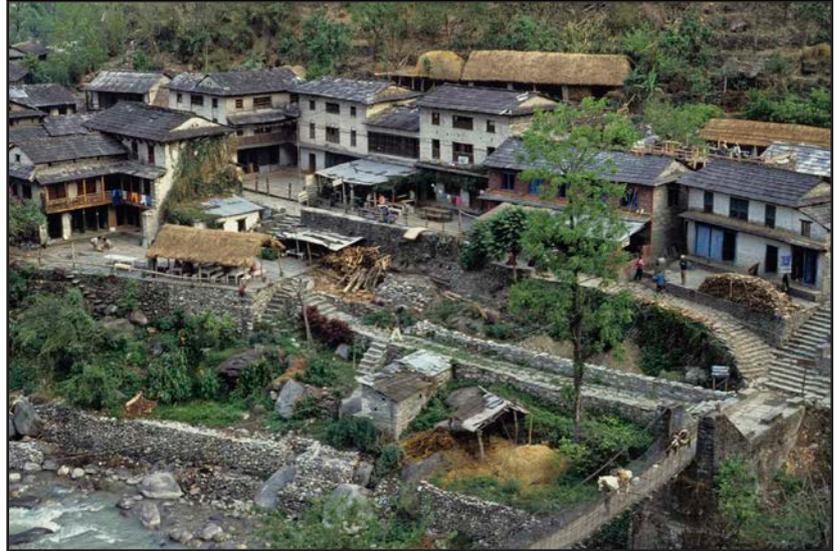
Climb higher into rhododendron forest, beautiful red flowers on trees 20 metres tall; fabulous sight. Top of the pass has twelve lodges, where there was only one small shelter in 1970. Stop in a good lodge, cold wind, rhododendrons everywhere.



Nilgiri, seen from near Tatopani.



Rhododendrons of Ghorapani.



Birethanti, beside the Modi Khola.

Village below the Ulleri ridge.

Saturday April 6, down to Birethanti

Up early for the dawn walk to Pun Hill, 300 metres higher up, but total waste of effort as cloud base is at 4000 metres and the classic view of Dhaulagiri is just not there. Set off down good main trail at 8am, and walk on my own all day, all downhill. Lovely rhododendron forest, then mixed forest with bamboo, then lower still to farmland with endless terraces. Numerous donkey trains come past, also many mini-trekkers, notably Japanese carrying nothing at all; also one hospital case facing backwards while sitting in a porter's basket. On a high ridge to the long village of Ulleri, before going down 1800 stone steps. Stop for a Coke in a teashop to wait out an afternoon thunderstorm.

Then only a short level walk into the large old village of Birethante. Stop in lodge next to the suspension bridge over the Modi Khola. Enjoy a cool early evening watching trekkers and locals walking past.

Sunday April 7, back to Pokhara

Up at 6am and start walking in the early shade. Steep and relentless uphill for 500 metres to the lovely village of Chandrakot. Then a delightful stroll along the high part of a massive slope to Lumle. Down below, the new Chinese road to Baglung scars the terraces where it is still under construction; still many donkeys and horses on the main trail, and rice instead of dry grains on the terraces. At the far end of Lumle, the new road climbs up from the right.

Catch a ride on a construction truck for 100R, with a few other trekkers, but slow with delays at roadworks. Continue past Naudanda, just below the village's splendid main street along the crest, and then zigzag down into the Seti Khola valley. Work on a bridge stops the truck, so we all have to leave, but receive 50R refunds from a delightfully honest driver. Walk for an hour down traffic-free road to Suikhet, then share a taxi with two Finns



Trail from Chandrakot to Lumle, part on the level, and part inevitably not.



A karst rarity: the collapsed cavern at the downstream end of Harpan River Cave, with its huge blocks of fallen limestone.

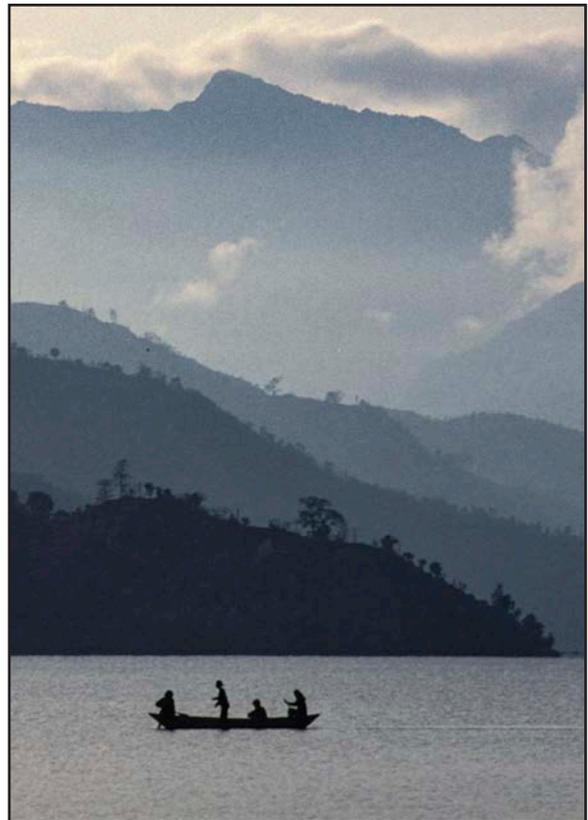
Phewa Tal, seen from the Lakeside district.

for 70R each, past the large Tibetan camp with its coloured gumpa, and round the edge of Pokhara to Lakeside. Into a small hotel for 150R for a room with a shower, but the cold water stops flowing half way through: ouch.

Afternoon walk along the Lakeside road; endless restaurants, bookshops, Tibetan shops, hotels, jewellery stores; all new where there were just green fields in 1970. Steak for dinner costs less than £1.50, with Coke and good music. Lakeside is a spectacular backpacker centre, as the Nepalis certainly know how to develop their tourist trade.

Monday April 8, around Pokhara

Still have an extra day in hand because the Circuit had actually taken only 14 days of walking (though it would be madness not to enjoy rest days at Manang and Muktinath). So lazy breakfast then off for a long walkabout. Follow lakeshore of Phewa Tal round to its exit channel, past the dam, and along beside the gorge to the Devis Fall sinkhole, which drops into the Harpan River Cave that we found in 1970. Head south and across the river for photos of the gorge that is a rare example of a collapsed cavern at the downstream end of the cave (but it is only in the weak limestone that is actually the distal part of giant debris flows from the limestone cliffs of Annapurna between 1000 and 500 years ago).



Head round past airport that is still only a few small buildings beside a grass apron and a gravel runway with no landing lights. Footpath goes straight across the runway to the impressively narrow Seti Khola gorge, 60 metres deep and crossed by a footbridge only eight metres long. The river may have underground sections but is far too polluted for any fun exploration.

Back into town passing multiple political parades with thousands of chanting followers, all in preparation for the forthcoming elections. Through bazaars and into the centre of town, where the usual chaos, but I am found by the tout on a bus back to Lakeside for 2R. Back into hotel a bit before 3pm, when the sky goes black, the wind rises and a massive thunderstorm lasts until dusk. As usual, electricity is off all afternoon, and only returns at reduced voltage for the evening.

Tuesday April 9, Pokhara Lakeside

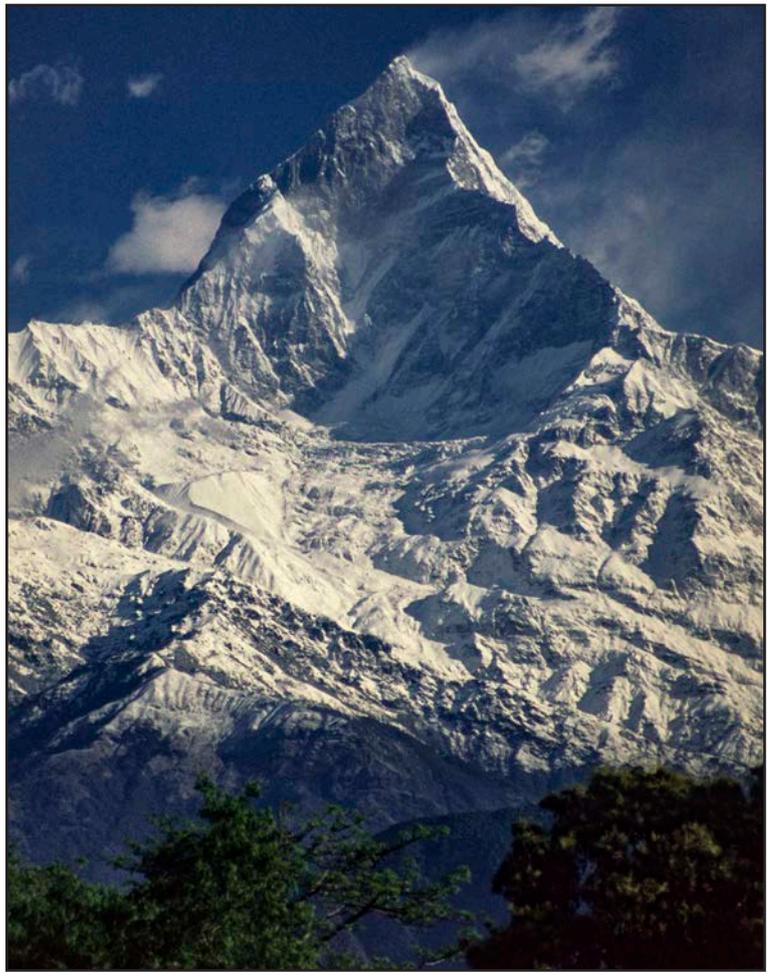
Storm has cleared the air, so the mountains are visible before clouds come in and it rains for most of the day. Reading a book is the best option, until the rain stops and the skies clear for a beautiful evening and a short walk.

Wednesday April 10, bus to Kathmandu

Leave on 6.45 bus from Lakeside; 12 hours to cover the 202 km. Slow start and then a puncture, which is conveniently at a spot with a great view up to Machhapuchhare. Good tarred road across the Pokhara terraces and then through to Dumre; endless rice paddies and villages, but mountains are lost into cloud by 10am. Pass other buses that are broken down, and into Kathmandu in daylight. Short walk to Thamel, and get a single room in the Kathmandu Guest House, then another excellent steak dinner at a ridiculously low price.

Tuesday April 11, Kathmandu

Lazy breakfast then off for walkabout at 6.45. Head east through suburbs to Pashupatinath Temple, with one cremation fire going, and early bathers in the holy river. Through Gorakhnath woods with numerous monkeys for a distant view of Bodnath, then wander over to the airport, but no chance of reserving a seat for the next day. Walk back past the temple, then take a bus into town centre, absolutely packed but only a rupee. Walk across to Thamel and buy a Kamchatka book. By now have seen enough of Thamel, so lazy afternoon before an early start the next morning for the flight back home.



Machhapuchhare in the early morning.



Lined up along a Buddhist prayer wall, the brass drums are spun round by devotees; the prayers printed on rolls of paper inside each drum are the important bits, so drum improvisation is good.



Street scene in Kathmandu.

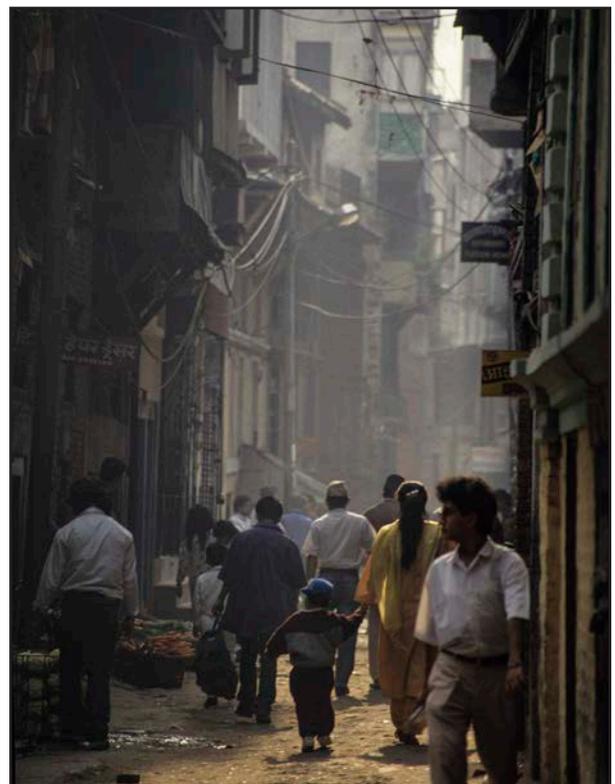
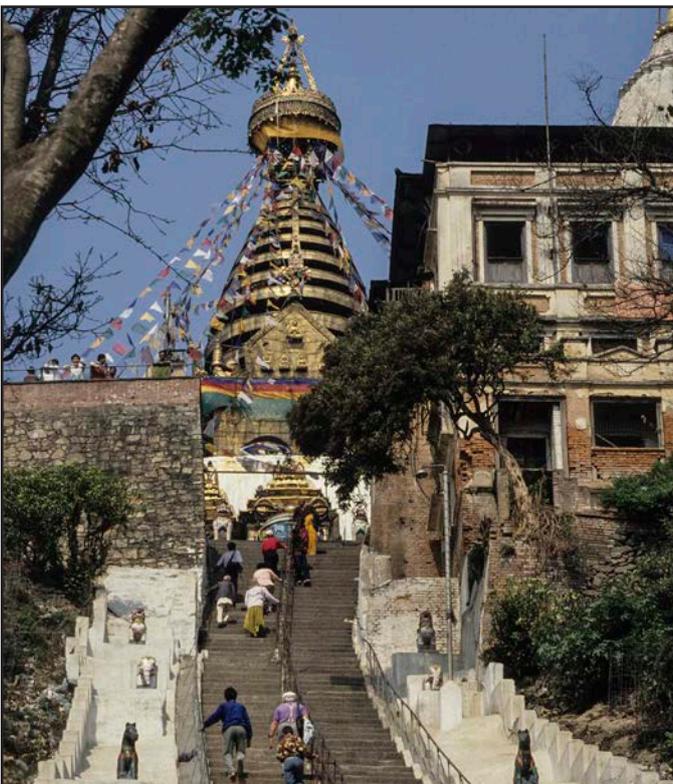
Annapurna Sanctuary, 1994

Saturday April 2, into Kathmandu

Jan and I fly in on RNAC overnight direct flight via Frankfurt and Dubai. Usual queues, and change money, now at 72R = £1, then a fixed-price taxi into Thamel. The Kathmandu Guest House is full, but we take a good room with balcony in nearby Hotel Nana. Walkabout is a delight, with Jan's first taste of the Indian sub-continent. Durbar Square and Kumari House look good, and plenty of street life, twice we are offered grass, before having a good rooftop dinner. Remarkable night, with every dog in Kathmandu howling at its neighbours, and only went quiet at dawn.

Sunday April 3, flight to Pokhara

Morning walkabout west to bridge over Bisnumati River; incredible amount of rubbish; kids and pigs playing around black water, with a scatter of dead pigs and dogs. Along country lanes past large houses to the long steps up Swayambhu hill to the splendid Buddhist temple, with the big eyes above the dome; beggars on the steps, monks playing music, and monkeys everywhere. Walk down far side and back via southern bridge, where a fisherman is wading in the sewer-river and women are washing clothes in it!



Swayambhu: the Buddhist temple on the hill, the street below, prayer flags above, and social security Nepal-style.

Taxi from Thamel out to the airport. Leave bags in the old terminal that is now the domestic, then walk to Pashupatinath temple; many locals gathered at three cremations on the ghats along the mini-river; one large event has a row of men sitting to watch the pyre, while the women are at a distance. Flight to Pokhara leaves at 3.10 in small plane, not full; mountains are hidden by afternoon cloud, but a glimpse of Manaslu and some views of the foothills.

Share a taxi to Lakeside, and into Snowlands Hotel with a good room for \$7. Short walkabout but place is noticeably uncrowded; some scared away by early impact of the Maoist troubles perhaps? But the tree in the Palace grounds is again crowded with storks in the evening.

Monday April 4, out to Chandrakot

Murky morning, good breakfast, then an agency obtains our trekking permits, though we pay extra to have them by 11am instead of 4pm. Pick up a taxi to go to the Baglung bus station, but he offers a not-too-bad price to go to Lumle; so we take it and manage a few photo stops of the Pokhara conglomerate and the classic hilltop village of Naudanda.



Houses of Naudanda spread along the top of its ridge.

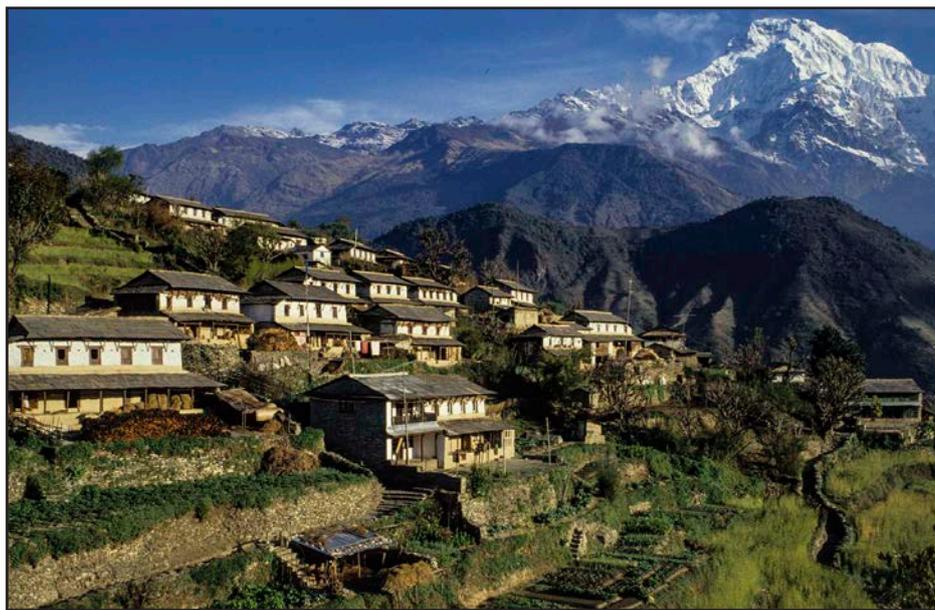
From the trailhead set off walking at last. An easy start through Lumle village and along the superb stone paved trail that almost contours the giant hillside, and little more than an hour into Chandrakot. Still early but the best place to stop, so a room in the Pashupa Lodge, hopefully with a great view when the afternoon clouds are gone. Can see and hear trucks on the new road far below, but this is a lovely village to stay in, and the sonorous bells of the donkey trains continue through the night.

Tuesday April 5, up to Ghandrung

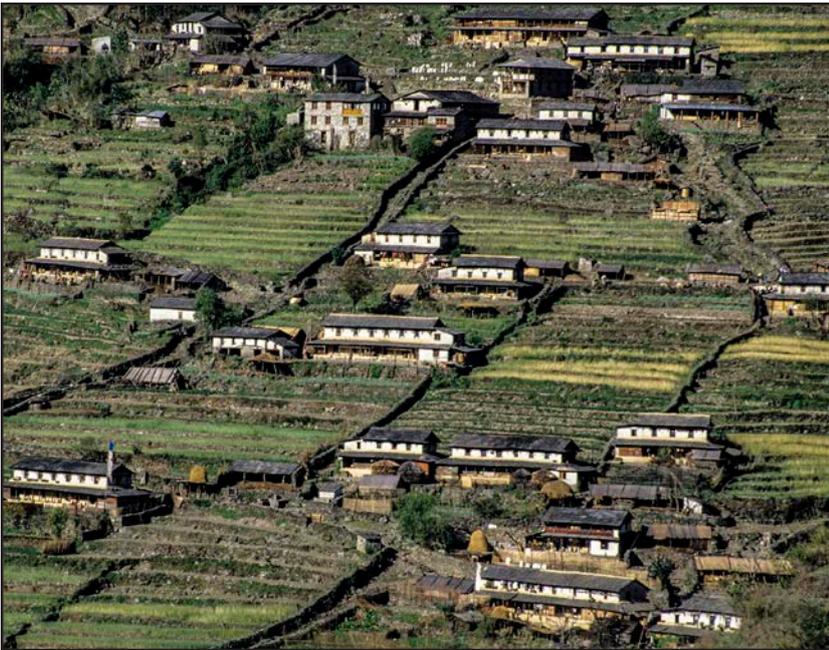
Wake at 5.30 and Annapurna South is clear and sparkling in the sunlight. Breakfast of porridge, eggs, rosti and lemon tea out on a high balcony, then leave before 7.30. Down main trail for five minutes, then turn off right onto a minor trail that descends through two small villages and endless terraces. Cross the Modi Khola on a suspension bridge. We both have unstable knees on our first long downhill, but then feel better through the day, and even alright going uphill.

Along river at first, then gently up through birch woods, before a long flight of stone steps up to a ridge. Gradient then eases for good walk along terraces and past farms, and a tea house for drinks after a few spots of rain. Stop to see a chameleon change colour from red to green to brown. Then a last flight of steps up to the sprawling village of Ghandrung with numerous stone farmhouses on a terraced slope; with a school just below and a dozen lodges. Have climbed 800 metres up from the river bridge.

In at 2.30 to a large room for 60R in the Milan Lodge built just two months ago. Gentle stroll round the village then a sociable afternoon with Australians, English and UN workers. Small ACAP visitor centre has statistics on trekkers: 100,000 per year in Nepal, of which 40,000 in Annapurna region, including 10,000 up into the Sanctuary; of those 5000 are independent, 3000 have guides/porters, 2000 are in groups. October and November are the main months, followed by April; some come in winter, though only as far as Chomrong, as trail up into the Sanctuary is closed by deep snow. We are happy to be without porters; Jan has the bulky sleeping bags and foam mats, and I have the heavier gear, so we are then well matched for pace, and everything neatly fills the two rucksacks.



Trail up towards Ghandrung, and the village on the slopes in front of Annapurna South.



The grand farmhouses of Ghandrung.

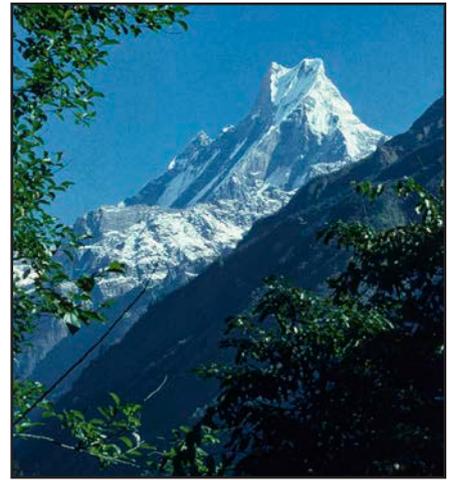
Wednesday April 6, up to Chomrong

Up at 6.00 with the mountains all clear. Jan not feeling so good after a bad night, so small breakfast followed by a stroll round the village. Then she decides to go for it, so we collect the bags and set off slowly on a beautiful sunny morning. Meet up with Ruth (who we had seen with her group in Chandrakot, before they stopped down at Birethanti) to walk up to the first col, very slowly as Ruth is feeling even worse.

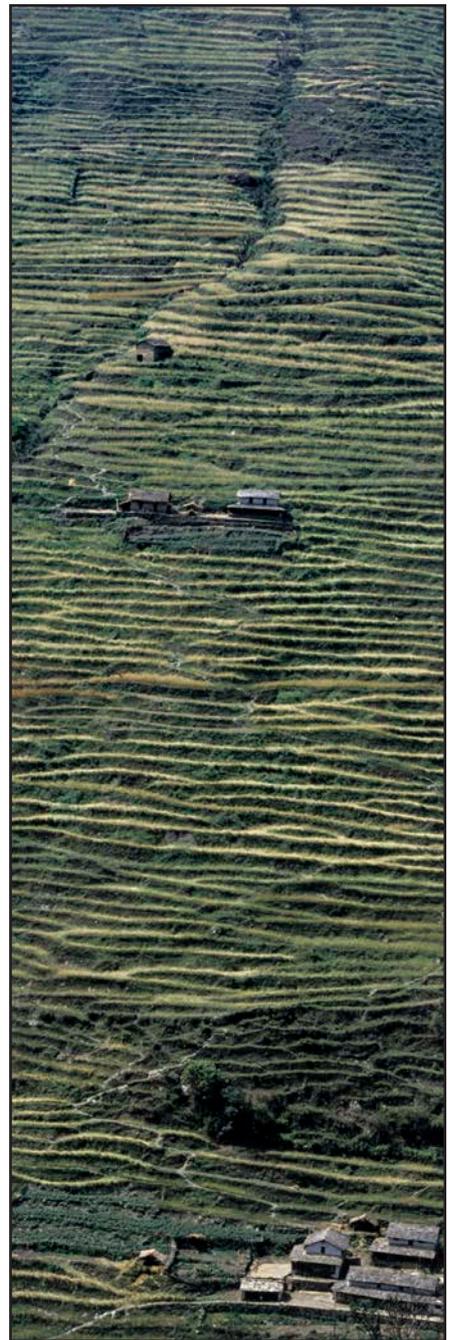
Good views ahead from the col, but then we have to descend 400 metres into the Kuymnu valley, on a steep trail through woods with many orchids on the trees. The bridge has been washed out, but a plank suffices until the monsoon. Then steep zigzag climb on rough path to regain height onto a level trail past beautiful rhododendron trees, lovely coloured birds and butterflies. Good trail and easy going except for a horde of Singaporean students plodding along in unison. Stop for drinks at Taglung with view of an amazing flight of terraces on a hillside down to the Modi Khola. Short walk then to first of the Chomrong lodges, and we find a good room in one of them at 3pm.



Weaving in a farm courtyard near Ghandrung.



Machhapuchhare.



Terraces opposite Taglung.

A walkabout without being loaded with the rucksacks is always an afternoon delight; we stroll down to the main village just ten minutes ahead. But there are huge numbers of trekkers, many groups in their own tents, lots of noise. We retreat to our more peaceful lodge. Heavy black clouds roll in, but no rain. Good dinner, then it is soon dark, so the social evening is short.



Bridge across the Modi Khola.

Thursday April 7, up the Modi Khola gorge

Up by 6.00, but clouds on the mountains. Eggs and chapattis for breakfast and we leave before 8.00. Long descent on stone steps through Chomrong village, steps and houses built with bedded quartzite. See a massive powder avalanche high on Annapurna 2 and far away; appears as a great slow-moving cloud that descends a few thousand metres, and then nothing. Cross stream and steep climb up steps and zigzags, rising 300 metres to welcome tea house on the crest; we take a break and let the morning rush-hour go by (always the threat of “here come the Singaporeans”). Good views back, and can see down to Ghandrung.

Easier gradient through lovely rhododendron forest to Khuldighar, which has an agricultural station and the ACAP Sanctuary checkpoint. Descend into bamboo forest, parts of which are really beautiful. Take a break at Bamboo tea house for excellent chicken soup; there at midday and both feeling good. Well-graded trail climbs steadily from Bamboo, still in shady forest, last part of which is regarded as a holy forest.



Looking back down the Modi Khola gorge.

Clouds build up in the afternoon, with a few spots of rain; Jan makes a splendid effort, and we make it up to Himalayan Lodge, having climbed 1000 metres from the Chomrong stream crossing. We get one of the last rooms in the two lodges, and ten minutes later a thunderstorm produces heavy rain and then a complete cover of hailstones; but clouds clear by dusk. Great social evening with 16 people round the long table, and a paraffin heater beneath and a Tilly above. Good veg soup, curried potatoes and egg, tea and hot lemon. Rather colder in the bedrooms, that are separated by curtains and thin partitions beneath a leaky roof.

Friday April 8, up to MBC

Leave at 7.00 beneath clear blue skies but still in deep shadow in the gorge. Steep climb through bamboo scrub, and short unintended diversion on a side trail. Pass Hinko Cave, with its tea house and just two beds beneath the huge boulder of gneiss. Waterfalls all around in a beautiful, steep valley with snow cones (of avalanche debris) and alluvial fans. Good trail into Deurali lodge, where many of our friends from last night were taking a break; they cheered our arrival as they had been concerned as to where we oldies had got to, having passed us while we were on our side trail.



Crossing the new avalanche debris.

Steep trail beyond, and a diversion across the river onto a poorer path to avoid a zone threatened by rockfall. Then steep down a snow bank to re-cross the river to Bagar. Plenty of fresh snow. Steady climb beyond beneath cliffs of gneiss, with limestone above. First large snow cone has avalanche onto it just as we arrive: spectacular roar, and then cascade of snow down the cliff and across the trail. Second cone has avalanche onto it just after we cross. Exciting. Fresh snow debris across the path makes us wear goggles, and boots make it easy for us to kick steps in the steep slope to help porters wearing only plimsolls. Last steep rise as snow starts to fall more heavily. First lodge is old and basic, so we climb through snow to the

pair of good lodges just above; known as MBC (Machhapuchhare Base Camp); all are spread up the outside slope of a huge lateral moraine from the Neoglacial (Little Ice Age of around 1550 AD)

We arrive soon after 1pm, for a late lunch, and it then snows steadily for five hours. We walk to the upper lodge for a sociable afternoon with drinks and excellent spring rolls. One girl suffers with altitude, and we give her some Diamox, but it's not serious. We both feel good. Cold during the snowfall. but the evening mellows before a cold night, when we wear all our clothes inside our sleeping bags (so we had got the planning right).



Annapurna Glacier, wasting between tall lateral moraines.



In the Sanctuary, in front of the great South Face of Annapurna.



Walking back down to MBC.

Saturday April 9, Sanctuary

Up at 6am after a cold night, and it is still below freezing. Put some spare clothes in one bag, and leave the rest of our kit in our room. Head off out by 6.30, with sunlight already catching the tops of Annapurna 2 and Fang. Trail climbs steadily on the moraine, steep and over new snow. Everyone is slow and a few turn back because of altitude; but Jan is OK, just breathing harder. A steep hour, then gradient eases onto solifluction lobes and scree; I climb to crest of the moraine, but it is a knife edge not practical to follow; the other side is 100 metres straight down to the glacier.

At 8.30 we arrive at ABC (Annapurna Base Camp), a large stone lodge at 4130 metres altitude, with fantastic circular views of peaks all the way round. Hiunchuli to Annapurna 3 are in sunlight, and Machhapuchhare is in silhouette. We walk up onto the moraine for the best views; South Face of Annapurna is a huge scarp face with horizontal banding within the limestone sequence; glaciers converge in front and flow off between high laterals with steep and undercut faces. A truly grand spot.



Drinks stop at MBC on the way back down.

We leave soon after 9.30, and take just an hour back down to MBC for drinks and cool off in the warm sunshine. At 11am, we pay up and set off down; easy going downhill, though wet underfoot; clearer than yesterday, so good views all the way. At 2pm we stop at the Deurali lodge. Enjoy afternoon sun until clouds come in at 4pm, then into the dining room for warmth, and momos for dinner later on. Paraffin heater under the table is good again; there is no wood burning above Chomrong. The rooms are good, always for two, and notably better since 1991, and also better on the Sanctuary trail than on much of the Circuit. End of a really superb day, and now the walking ahead of us is mostly downhill, so even more enjoyable.

Sunday April 10, down the Modi Kola gorge

Up at 6am to a murky morning, so we hit the right day to be in the Sanctuary. Snowfall varies from light to heavy so we wear cagoules, but no overheating problems going downhill. Break at Himalaya Lodge for egg and chapatti breakfast. Long descent through bamboo then rhododendrons, then lots of thunder and a bit of rain before we get into Sinuwa at 2pm. Check into a room with a polythene skylight just before half an hour of torrential rain.

Good views to Chomrong come clear with a little sun, but we have had enough, so soup, omelettes and drinks before relax in our sunny room. Only two others in the lodge, so a quiet and early night.

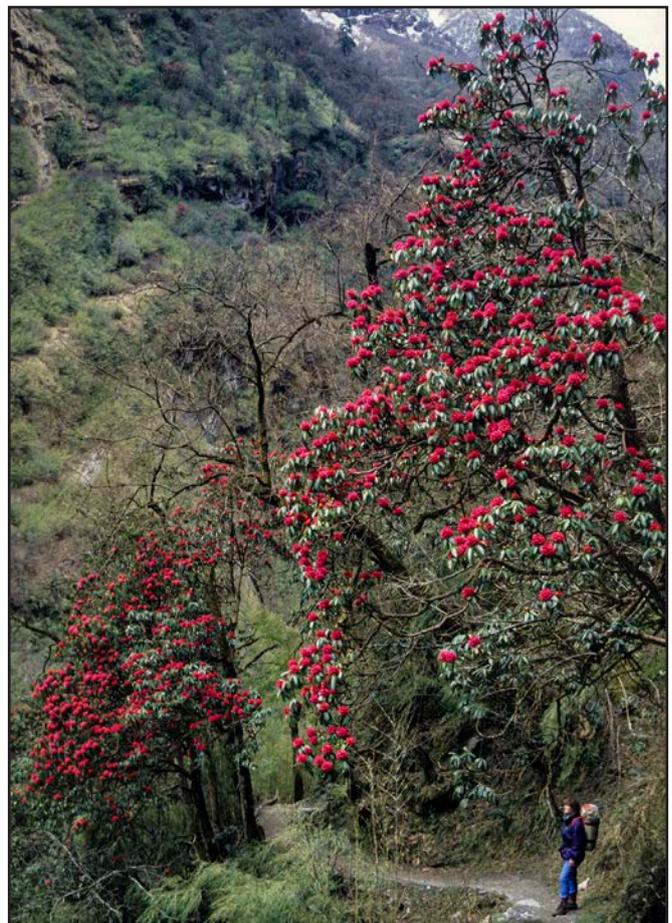
Monday April 11, down to Landrung

Up before 6am, aided by light and a lovely clear morning. Leave at 6.30 for gentle then steep descent to the Chomrong Khola bridge, where we meet the morning rush hour going up towards the Sanctuary. Our long climb up steps through the lovely Chomrong village is broken by a stop for breakfast midway.

The descent to New Bridge is on a rough and steep path down an endless series of zigzags; this definitely needs a health warning for folks coming up; we avoided it by coming in via Ghandrung, but we now pass people who are struggling on the relentless climb of nearly 800 metres. We take a break at the tea shop beside New Bridge, the new suspension bridge that made this direct route to Chomrong possible. A lovely walk along the left bank of the Modi Khola we have almost to ourselves, with numerous birds and butterflies in the woodland, aided by a sun that stays with us into the afternoon, even though hazy and then cloudy on the mountains. Climb steadily up to Landrung, and it is hot, so we adapt a T-shirt as a sun hat for Jan.



Annoying up-hill bit on the way down the Modi Khola gorge.

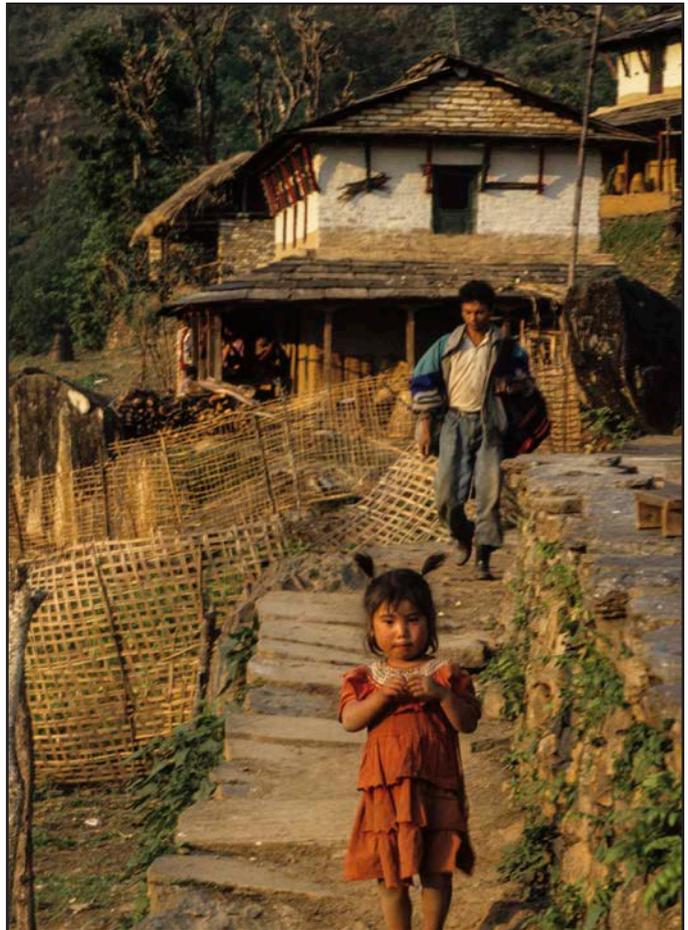


Rhododendron forest above Chomrong.

Done climbing by about 3pm, and then a lovely stroll up through Landrung, a fine Gurung village with a paved street and many lodges but few trekkers in them for now. Stop at one near the top end and enjoy a couple of hours on the sunny terrace; probably our sunniest day yet, and even the wind is warm at the lower altitude. Work out the total climbing on our trek, and it's somewhere more than 5000 metres, with just 400 metres more of uphill tomorrow morning to complete the trek. Walk around the village in lovely evening light, then dinner with a couple from Jersey while lightning plays on the mountains, but we have no rain.

Tuesday April 12, down to Pokhara

Up before 6.00 and the mountains are hazy. Quiet and enjoyable walk up to Tolka where we catch the first sun and have the usual breakfast. Then long steep climb up through woodland, but each forest is different from the last. Lovely ridge walk through open woods, gentians, cuckoos, hornbills, mynahs, lots of other songbirds, and butterflies everywhere; two red pandas rush across the path just in front of us, most exciting to see them in the wild. Easy descent through Dhampus, but upper half of village rather dead; the lodges have suffered when the new road means that in-bound trekkers now walk

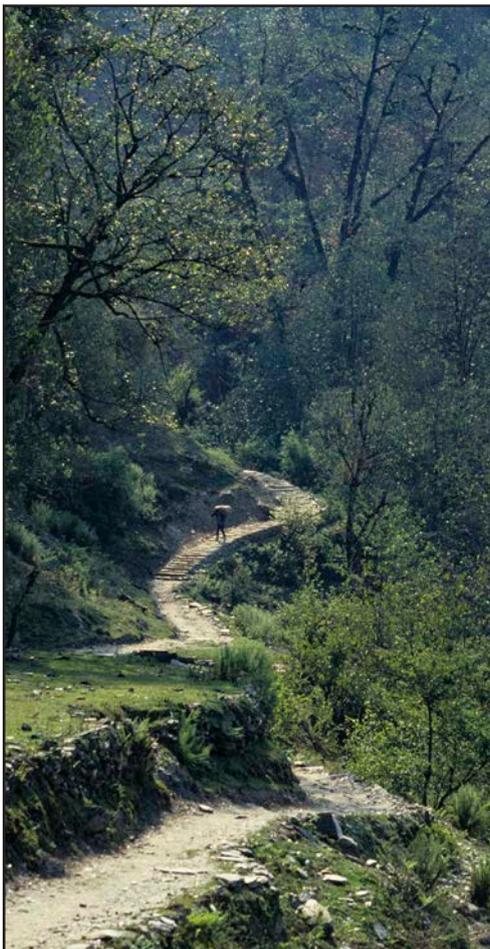


Evening light for a walk round Landrung village.

Nepali medevac.

Trail beyond Tolka.

Farm near Dhampus.



through early on their first day. The lower village is better, then steep steps down to Suikhet, and an even steeper flight down to Phedi at the roadside; another reason why we did not walk in this way, even though it is the most frequented route.

Taxi fuhrer offers 400R, but we haggle down to 200R just before the bus arrives, and then enjoy a pleasant ride right through to Lakeside, arriving at 3pm. Stop in Snowlands again; collapse into shower, then go for a gentle walkabout without rucksacks. Chocolate cake at the first cafe. Re-visit the suede shop and arrange a design change on a jacket with good colours for Jan; haggle a bit and fix on \$54, to be collected next day. Red sun setting over the lake of Phewa Tal for a picture, then dinner with the best steak yet. End of a great day.

Wednesday April 13, Pokhara

Lazy hazy morning and sleep till 8.00, then traditional roti breakfast at the Hungry Eye. Share taxi to town, then wander round the central area. A widening in the Seti Khola gorge has many women bathing in its waters that are tributary to the Ganges, in preparation for New Year 2051 on Thursday; holy men receive rice offerings, and the red blaze of saris is magnificent. Take a crowded bus back to Lakeside, then collect the suede jacket. A relaxing day, and very pleasant. Sunset by the lake for another very fine dinner in an ambience rather more hippy than trekker.

Thursday April 14, bus to Kathmandu

Up before 6.00 and collect takeaway breakfast from Hungry Eye. Bus leaves at 6.40 instead of scheduled 6.45, after a bit of hassle to get decent seats after the booking idiot had put an impossible six westerners across the back row. Then a good journey, with three meal stops, including Mugling. Many rafts on the Trisuli River, but hardly a wild experience just below the road.

Bus terminates on the Kathmandu ring road, so we take a tuktuk into Thamel. Only 3pm, but many hotels already full, so into a basic place for a good room with a fun balcony overlooking Tahiti Square. Walk up Thamel to browse the book shops; temple bells dearer than in Pokhara, and turquoise is 40–100R/gram; then dinner and a quiet evening on our balcony

Friday April 15, Kathmandu

Up soon after 6.00 with noise from the square below. Gentle walk around town, via the filthy river lined with squatter tents, to Durbar Square, then reconfirm our flights at RNAC, and move our bags to the better room back in the Nana Hotel.



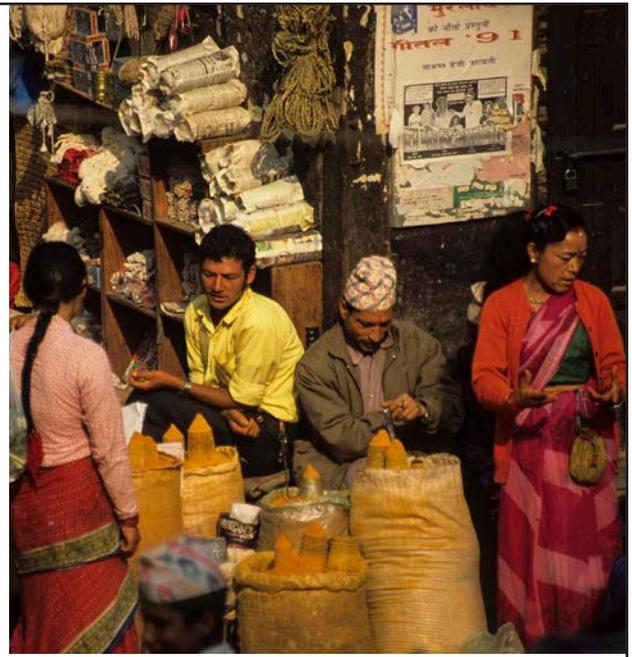
Local women at the Seti Khola gorge in Pokhara.



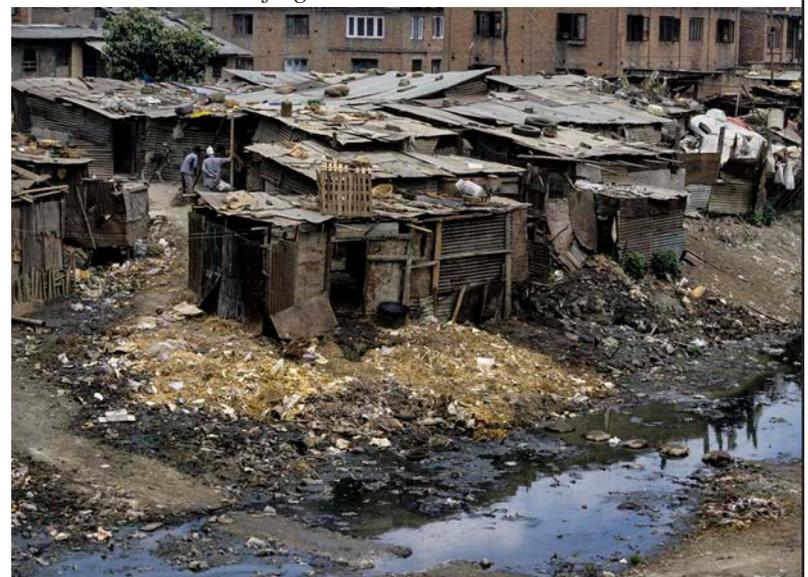
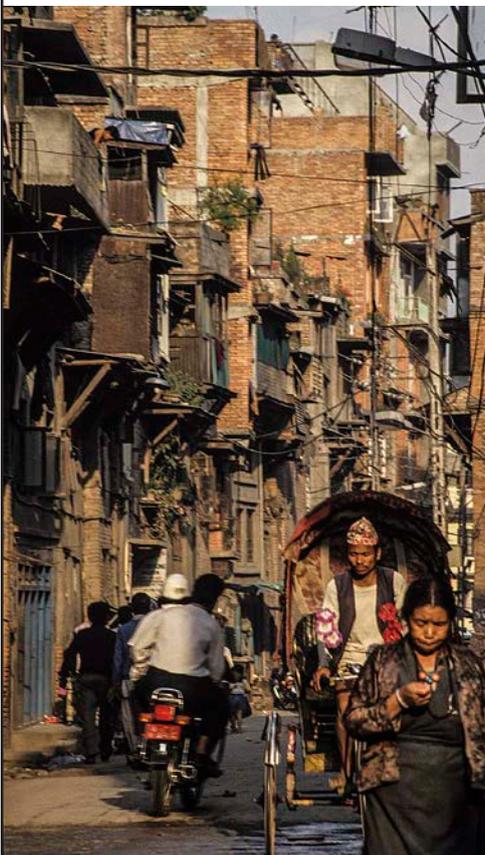
Bathing in a tributary of the Seti Khola.



Washing clothes at sunset in Phewa Tal.



Life goes on in Kathmandu.



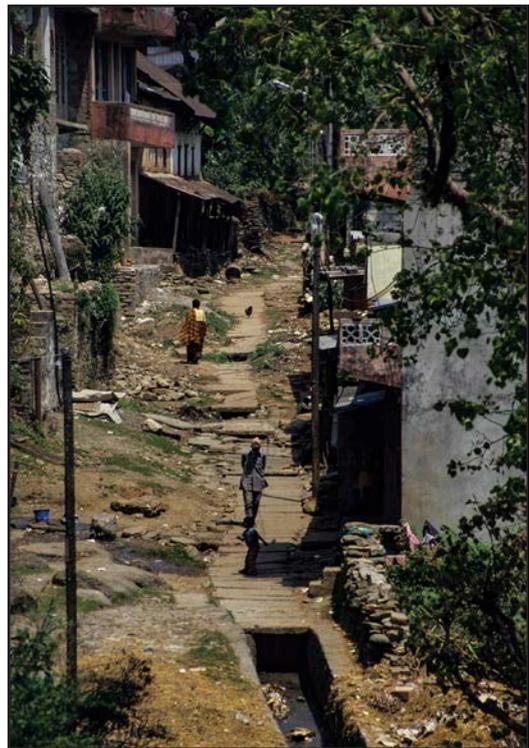
Take a tuktuk across town and then the trolley bus out to Bhaktapur. Now has an entry fee of 50R towards the cost of conservation work. Still a delightful place to wander round, and great fun with the celebrations of New Year; processions and bands; almost no westerners in the back streets once away from the main square. Back to Kathmandu centre and Thamel, which are both more lively in the evening.

Saturday April 16, Kathmandu

Lie in till 8.00, then oranges for breakfast on the balcony. Rather murky, so not worth the walk to Swayambhu. This was our contingency day, so nothing planned, and just enjoy a gentle stroll around town. Durbar Square is good and we spend time people-watching. Then an early night, because due up at 5.20am, for the Sunday's early flight back to London and then home.

Tony Waltham

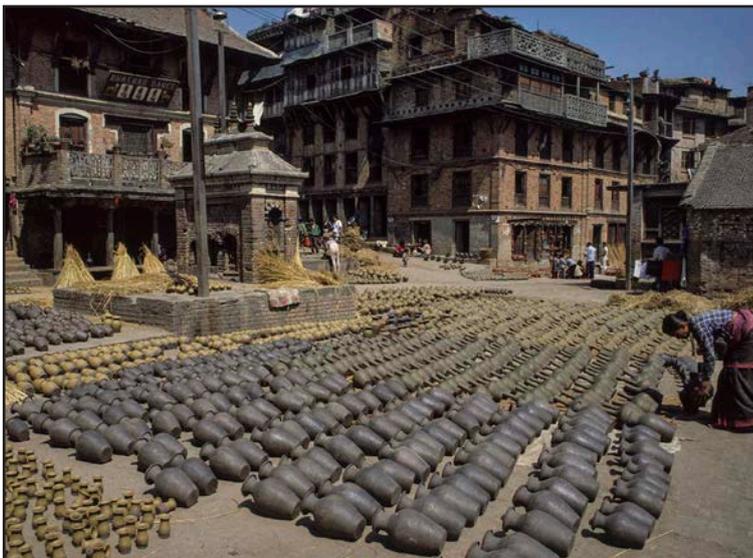
tony@geophotos.co.uk



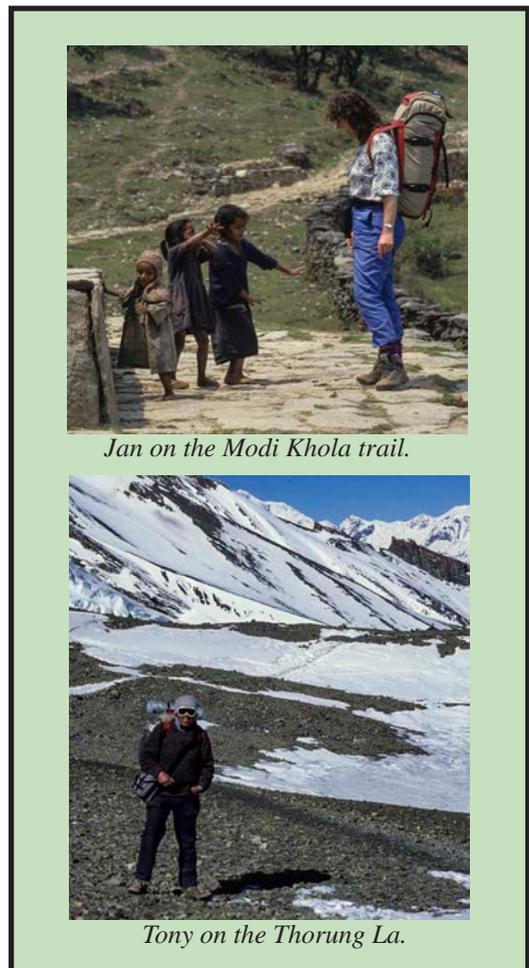
Back road in Pokhara.



In Kathmandu's Durbar Square.



Drying pottery in the square at Bhaktapur.



Jan on the Modi Khola trail.

Tony on the Thorung La.