



Trekking with Teresa

## **TREK REPORT – CULTURAL SAFARI NOVEMBER 2023**

**Participants** Christine and Des, Lahar and Loyan, Barry, Kath, Lucy, Rita, Helen, Ekki and Teresa \*group leader

### **WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 18: KATHMANDU**

Late night pick up was easy. No traffic, no crowds at arrivals. Des, Chris, Kath and Barry were all from Perth, W.A. Most of the rest of us, were staying on after the Everest Trek. All four arrivals in high spirits despite the late hour and their long flight.

### **THURSDAY NOVEMBER 9: KATHMANDU**

Started today with a slow breakfast; some of our group are still in trekking recovery mode, and then a short walk into Thamel for a few errands prior to hitting the road tomorrow. Cash exchange was a priority, then some sunglasses for Kath, a browse around Amritacraft and then an excellent coffee at The Roadhouse.

We opted for a taxi up to Swayambunath as it was still surprisingly warm for Mid-November. 24 Degrees! A bit hot for wandering amongst the stupas with at least a hundred monkeys. Not that fond. We meandered down slowly to Benchen Monastery for lunch on the terrace. A trip down memory lane for Des and Christ, who stayed here on their first Everest trek in 2008. Long walk back to the hotel, though we paused for a while at the Bijeshwori Temple for a spell on the way down.

We dined at the Yangling. Best momos in Kathmandu and only 100 metres from our hotel. A pre-dinner drink at Artmandu, the funky Hippy-era café we like so much was a great icebreaker for the four 'newbies' and the three 'stayers on'. With me and my partner Ekki that is the whole group.....so far.



## **FRIDAY NOVEMBER 10: KATHMANDU TO CHITWAN**

Happy to see our regular driver Kamal in the distinctive dark blue Hi-Ace arrive on time this morning. We put the big luggage on the roof, making more space inside the bus. We were away at 7.30 and over the rim of the Kathmandu Valley by 8.20. A record. The first hour out of the valley was rough with serious heavy roadworks. It will be great when it is finished – but when will that be? Soon, though not soon enough, we hit some decent bitumen, the traffic cleared somewhat, and we were soon pulling into River Top Café for morning tea. It was deserted, not even any staff, until we made a concerted effort and a few very loud coo-ees. Just an hour and a half later we were at the Riverside Springs Resort, our lunch destination. It was only 11.15! Food was rather slow to arrive, but the drinks were cold and the surroundings could not have been more pleasant. Best of all, our well-kept surprise held, just, and Lahar and Lohan joined us for the trip. Des was thrilled to be reunited with Lahar after quite a few years since their three treks together.

The drive to Chitwan was lovely. Sweeping vistas of soaring hills and deep valleys of green rushing rivers – The Trisuli in fact, heading south to the Ganges. As the flatlands of the Terai hove into view the air was warm and soft. The lodge is beautifully designed and sits on a riverbank teeming with life – birds especially, but also crocodiles and, on occasion rhino and, on rare occasions, tiger. The evening stroll to a local Tharu village was the perfect stretch. Sohodhur, our Nepali guide is a font of wisdom regarding wildlife. However, he tends to give way too much detail with little humour and then tells jokes which only he finds laughs at. He means well and is very kind-hearted, and extremely knowledgeable but most of us did already know how to mix hot and cold water for a shower. I was sickening with something so perhaps it was only me..... The chicken for dinner was fantastic. Feeling quite ill by dinnertime but still found it utterly delicious.



**SATURDAY NOVEMBER 11:**

**CHITWAN**

I was ill today. Just a serious throat infection but I missed everything. Ekki and Lahar, along with Sohodhur, have everything under control so I spent the whole day in bed, dosed up with antibiotics, ibuprofen and Strepsils.

I had worried that it would be hot in an open jeep and canoe but, luckily, today was overcast. The morning programme of open jeep ride to riverbank jetty, canoe ride on the Rapti River, Jungle walk to the Crocodile Conservation breeding programme, was enjoyed by all.

After a huge lunch – more delicious chicken – the jeeps took everyone out on a safari. Only moderately successful at first, they had a picnic afternoon tea and then resumed the safari. Eventually found a single youngish rhino as close as you would wish. Lahar could have reached out and touched it apparently. All very happy with the encounter.







## **SUNDAY NOVEMBER 12: CHITWAN TO LUMBINI**

After lazing around the viewing decks for most of the morning Kamal brought the Hi-Ace around after lunch. It was a stupendous lunch. I had asked for traditional Nepali food. Best chicken daal bhat ever !! The veg curry of sweet potato and aubergine was excellent.

After the first 20 minutes of winding country roads the main road was truly appalling. I do admire the Nepali authorities for trying to upgrade their roads, but why are they tackling the whole route at once? The dusty ride got progressively bumpier until everyone was sick of it when we stopped on a high ridge for a welcome break and a cup of tea. The tea was great – a bit of cardamom perhaps?

Onwards then through billowing clouds of dust. To be fair we had the windows shut and the air-con on and it was nowhere near as rough as many of our more recent jeep rides between Phaphlu and Bupsa. We made good progress and reached Lumbini accompanied by the huge red orb of the setting sun. The good bitumen started 50 km from Lumbini. Air-con off, windows open. The air was soft and warm.

The Five Elements Hotel is a real find. 5-star rooms at 3-star prices. Brand new with super bathrooms. Buffet dinner was a bit hit and miss but the food kept coming and we all found something to like. Barry bought a bottle of Chilean Chardonnay which went down very well. They handed out festival sweets after dinner, a nice touch. Thoroughly impressed.

## **MONDAY NOVEMBER 13: LUMBINI TO POKHARA**

Fairly early breakfast then a walk over to the Mahadevi temple, the actual birthplace of the Buddha. We were early enough to beat the crowds but I did not like the families of monkeys which lined the entry way. However, with a stray dog for company they pretty much left us alone. There were lots of monks and pilgrims from all over the world. I heard some chanting in Thai. Very peaceful indeed. Felt quite touched as we passed the place where the Buddha was born. Such a strong presence in the world, even after more than 2000 years.



After a short, rather sunny walk, we hired tuk-tuks which took us to two of my favourite temples, though we passed many other lovely ones. Cambodia was a standout. The Russian one is BIG! The Singaporean one looks like a Japanese pagoda. It would take a month of Sundays to see them all and it was getting hot – though never too hot for Des or Lucy. The two we visited were in completely contrasting styles. The German temple is in the traditional Nepali style but executed in extremely fine detail. The outside wall paintings are exquisite and from inside the main hall the German etched glass is a big feature. Sadly, the central dome no longer has skylights, which gave it an airy spacious feel. Impractical to maintain? The Thai temple is a complete contrast. Stark white. White marble floors, white stone buildings and white painted everything. The only touch of colour are a few heavy wooden doors, painted in a dark red lacquer with large dull brass fittings. Perfection.





Our three tuk-tuks raced each other back to the exit and then, for a small additional fee, took us to the door of the hotel. An exciting ride.

Lunch was not the best daal bhat I have ever had but Jungle Villa Resort yesterday was a tough act to follow . It was 'good enough'. By 1 pm we were back on the road in the big blue bus. The road back to the highway was good, flat and open. The road to Bhutwal just as good. Leaving Bhutwal, a big city with an air of organised prosperity, the road climbed steeply and dramatically out of the plains. The road deteriorated but the views were spectacular. Steep gorges covered in green forests and rivers which were tiny ribbons of silver and green very far below us.

After a couple of hours, we pulled over for a break, only to see from the back terrace of the café that we had almost reached Thansen. The café was built almost on top of a stream. The garden was full of statues of Hindu deities and little shrines. Huge marijuana plants were thriving on the riverbank under the balcony. A very pleasant stop for most although the constant winding road was proving a 'bit much' for some. Within an hour we were pulling into the garden of the Hotel Srinagar at Thansen Palpa. The view from here can be amazing but today there was only the merest hint that the distant clouds had mountains in them. The sunset was pretty. Our hotel is on top of a ridge overlooking the town, most of which is festooned in holiday lights. A few fireworks going off in the town below us as I write, though the air up here is clean and fresh. Joy at 1500 metres.

**TUESDAY NOVEMBER 14:**

**THANSEN PALPA TO POKHARA**

This morning Daulaghiri, Machapuchre, Anapurna and Manaslu were very pretty catching the first light but by breakfast time the view had faded to 'nothing much'. We ambled down through the old town to the Tundikel. The steep, narrow lane was flanked by three and four storey houses, many in the traditional style and most with shops on the ground floor. They were just opening as we strolled by. Not many tourists come here and we were greeted warmly by almost everyone we passed. Kamal was waiting with the blue bus at the bottom of town and we were soon whizzing through more mountainous countryside. After ascending and descending many times we stopped to look at a huge new suspension bridge. 380 metres long and very, very high. Most of our group walked over it. Not me. Enough of that on trek.





We put together a scratch lunch – crisps, kit-kat, soft drink. Needs must. Onwards then, until we saw the Himalayas about an hour before we reached Pokhara – well, they are quite big. Pokhara was very lively; the final days of Dashain. Singing and dancing in the streets. Firecrackers, some really big ones, going off randomly and a few crazy youngsters on motorbikes cruising the main street in a bunch. We ate at Nepali Kitchen, our favourite place in Pokhara for traditional food. Their Paneer Butter Masala is heavenly. Happy to be back in our familiar stomping grounds.

### **WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 15: STAY IN POKHARA**

It was a brilliant morning. I watched, from our hotel balcony, as the sunrise kissed the tips of the biggest peaks with gold. I am still not well but everyone else is in fine fettle. Lahar came by at 7.30 to take the group across the Phewa Tal in traditional boats and then climb up to the Peace Stupa. The skies remained clear all day and photos of the day-trek from the top of their climb, show spectacular views of the Anapurna range of the Himalayas. Rita paddled back to Lakeside – I mean, she actually PADDLED the boat herself! Later I found five of our group at a sunny table not a hundred metres from our hotel. Happy Hour was in full swing.







We gathered at 7 to walk to the oddly named Boomerang restaurant where we had reserved a big table right at the bottom of the garden, lit with candles and lamps, overlooking the lake. The food took ages (half of the staff are away on holiday for Dashain) but it was delicious when it arrived. I joined the dancers on stage for a complicated little routine. There was singing and dancing on the streets all the way home. Happy Tihar.



**THURSDAY NOVEMBER 16:**

**POKHARA TO BANDIPUR**

We went up to Sarangkot this morning, a local viewpoint. Pretty easy in the minibus but a steep 20-minute climb for the best view. A glorious morning. We could see EVERY peak. No takers for a hike down to Lakeside so perfectly content to get a lift from Kamal. A last buzz around the shops – shopping is good in Pokhara – and then a good lunch at the Organic Café.

The road to Bandipur is the Prithvi Highway which is the main road between Pokhara and Kathmandu. It is in a terrible state. I do realise that the road needs improvement but the authorities have decided to tear up the first fifty kilometres in anticipation of the coming roadworks. Fifty kilometres! Metres on either side of the road have gone under the bulldozer – trees, houses, roadside shops. Massive cliffs of earth loom over the road looking as though they will wash away during the next monsoon – covering the road of course. We were very happy to turn off the highway for the decent winding 9 kilometres up to Bandipur.

This town, or big village really, has great views of the Himalayas and the view stayed clear all day today, making the evening a stunner. Pink peaks at a height that is hard to believe, illuminated by the setting sun above a purplish-grey mist .



Our hotel tonight is a new one for us. Bandipur Durbar. Exquisite spacious rooms of rustic tiled floors and wooden shuttered windows. Brand new. The huge beds of dark carved wood

sported heavy white bedlinen. The bathroom had pretty tiles and top quality porcelain. I like this hotel – you can tell, right? The manager was a mild-mannered, helpful chap and the young female staff carried our bags upstairs like Sherpani. The village is quaint but we will explore in the morning.....

## **FRIDAY NOVEMBER 17: STAYING IN BANDIPUR**

A lovely slow day as we all just mooched around in this pretty village. Traditional houses, many festooned with flowering bougainvillea, lined a long pedestrian precinct, totally devoid of traffic. Bliss.

Helen and Rita headed out with Lahar to hike up to a local viewpoint. They certainly picked a good day for it. Ekki and I walked into town but it was soon clear that I was still sick and better off in bed. Ekki found the group in a nice restaurant – clearly, a guide is superfluous for this part of the trip. A quiet day, ending with a few quiet drinks in a hotel with which we are all rather pleased.



## **SATURDAY NOVEMBER 18: BANDIPUR TO BHAKTAPUR**

Descending in the bus out of the sunshine into the mist was rather atmospheric but we were soon back on the 'rubbish road', though only for an hour. After crossing the huge bridge where the Trisuli meets the Sun Khosi and heads south to India, we hit some decent bitumen and barrelled along at 50 kph. Never a dull moment as we passed or were passed by a wide assortment of vehicles. Slow tractors and dirty busses spewing black exhaust smoke. 'Chimney Bus' Kamal calls them. Barry, once more up front, was following on Google Maps but Kamal's complete disdain for 'Google Madam' made us all laugh. We stopped for coffee – a flash coffee machine, lots of clean toilets but strangely weak, bitter coffee. Onwards then to '20-Kilometre'. Looks like a dive but the loos were up to scratch. Food here is decidedly dodgy so we reverted to childhood – crisps, a chocolate bar and a soft drink.

The climb up to the rim of the Kathmandu Valley is usually clogged with traffic. Not today. And the descent into the valley was even better. Within 45 minutes we were in Bhaktapur. Our funky little boutique hotel is outside the bustling city on a patch of farmed land behind a wall of giant bamboo. Once a private boarding school, the conversion was made by Italians



and the café is called La Bella. After a drink in the garden, we ate pizza, mostly, and found some nice Australian wine. Lindemans Cawarra Chardonnay. Probably way overpriced at \$35 but it was there, in Nepal. We even chilled it. Lucy bought a second bottle and the other end of the table found an equally drinkable red. A very pleasant evening indeed. Such soft beds.



**SUNDAY NOVEMBER 19: BHAKTAPUR - 'HOME' INTERNATIONAL GUESTHOUSE, KTM.**







After an excellent breakfast we walked the 15 minutes into Bhaktapur. Firstly through little backstreets and then out into some of the wonderful main squares. Some great restoration has taken place since the 2015 earthquake. The huge Nayantapola Pagoda is breathtaking. We had a coffee in a sweet little sidestreet café. Nice and quiet in a bustling town centre. We cruised some more lanes, some with interesting shops, and found the potters quarter. This is a World Heritage listed city with some fabulous monuments but two hours was probably saturation point. Sampling the local 'Juju Dahi' or Queen of Yoghurts was a welcome pause. We ambled back to Planet Bhaktapur where Kamal was waiting with the blue bus. He is not only a great driver and really reliable and, in his way, a funny guy. 'Google Madam'!

Back at the ranch, the International Guesthouse, many of us in our old rooms. We strolled over to Pumpnickel in Thamel. Their avocado salad is a winner with me and the Chicken Pesto baguettes were a hit, again.

Storage bags reclaimed, I located my forgotten bottle of Tanqueray gin \*thank you Helen, and we appear to have inherited, were gifted?, a tin of tonic. Kath? Thank you, whoever it was. The Roadhouse for dinner and Ekki's favourite, Penne Truffle Mushroom in Cream Sauce was very popular. The Indian Chardonay is very drinkable indeed. Caught up briefly with Veita, Kerrie and their mate who had just done Around Manaslu with Dorje's WIN Himalaya trekking team. They were well-pleased with the experience. So lovely to see them again.

Shortly after settling in back at the hotel my phone pinged. Subas Magar had spotted Ekki in the street. We threw on pullovers, alerted Des and Christine and ducked down into the garden for a brief hullo and a hug. It had been about 4 years since I had seen him, though we stay in touch. Subas was Christine's porter on the Everest Trek in 2008. A nice surprise.



## **MONDAY NOVEMBER 20: KATHMANDU**

Rita was off to the airport at 9.30, the first of our little posse of 9 to leave. A sad farewell. She had been with us for the prior Everest Trek. Sent this great pic from the window of the plane.





We did some serious fashion shopping today. Very rewarding with Chris and Kath finding lovely kurtas. I bought Ekki a tailored, Nehru-collared red vest at Fabindia. Bought the matching pants as well but, as they were a bit short, I was happy to inherit them. Pottala for lunch – as slow as ever despite very few customers. The season is coming to an end.

This evening we were driven over to Bouda, the biggest, holiest Buddhist stupa in the world. I dropped Lucy at the airport for an 11 pm flight to Singapore and was back in time to join our group for dinner at Rooftop Pottala, great Tibetan food. Chilli green beans, tofu, eggplant, chicken with peanuts. Driving back to through the city there are still lots of Diwali lights.



## **TUESDAY NOVEMBER 21:**

## **KATHMANDU TO HOME**

Suddenly we had an extra day to play with. I had not updated my Day Planner with the departure time for our four Perth people. Duh! Not leaving at 1.30 this afternoon, leaving at 9.30 tonight! A day-trip to Nagarkot was decided upon. Kamal, in the by now familiar blue minibus arrived at 11 and we had a dream run up to Nagarkot, a big village on the north-eastern rim of the Kathmandu Valley. Great views and a very pleasant lunch at Club Himalaya,

highly recommended for the beautiful terrace dining. There are some way cheaper rustic eateries along the ridge but we opted for posh today, especially since the extra bus trip was Des' shout. Thanks mate. Only just back in time for a quick freshen up while the bus waited to take them to the airport. They soon sent pics of some pretty classy lounge arrangements in Kathmandu and Kuala Lumpur. These folks know how to travel.

Just Helen here tonight, with me and Ekki. Des had left behind an almost full bottle of red so we toasted their departure and then sacked out early. Phew!

### **WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 22: KATHMANDU**

Luxury to wake up and then stay in bed till we felt like breakfast. Only Helen left and she knows how to feed herself. After a coffee and a bit of 'admin' in Thamel the bus arrived to take us to Netra's place in Kapan. Just three of us but SO MUCH LUGGAGE! Not all ours. The trekking customers left behind unwanted packs and clothing for their respective porters and we will deliver that later. We have a job to do sorting trekking gear but Helen leaves in the morning and Ekki and I are in Nepal for weeks yet. Sarmilla's daal bhat with chicken was a treat. So good to sit and chat about old times after dinner tonight. A great night in.



### **THURSDAY NOVEMBER 23: KATHMANDU TO HOME**

Another warm sunny day, this late in the season? Slightly disturbing. Cooked ourselves masses of fresh tomatoes for breakfast. Fried with butter and garlic and served on brown toast. Love being in Netra and Sarmilla's house. Feels like home. Taxi at 10 for the airport. Once Helen had a trolley and a porter we dashed off – our lift was triple parked.

Our Cultural Safari was about three weeks earlier than usual this year and I had not counted on it being so warm. It was never a problem; in fact a few balmy evenings were most welcome. The end of elephant riding safaris at Chitwan was a disappointment but it is considered unethical these days. While our elephants at Jungle Villa were extremely well cared for and had very 'light duties' I can see that any domestication of wild animals is not acceptable. Not that our old female elephants can return to the wild, too used to the soft life. They will be used to patrol the Chitwan National Park for poachers. Not a single rhino lost in over 5 years now.

This was a lovely group. The mix of trekkers staying-on and new arrivals joining from Perth was a good fit. Kath and Lucy were good roommates. Shopaholics who liked a chat. Barry

was the odd man out for rooms so got a single everywhere – which he considered a bonus. Helen, a snorer, shared with Rita, hard of hearing. Perfect. The rest of us were couples. Me and Ekki, Des and Christine and Lahar and Loyan. This was Loyan's first ever actual holiday, and I know she enjoyed it – even if she did check on the kids by phone quite frequently. A nice, easy-going team makes all the difference on a trip like this. You guys nailed it.

Thank You

Teresa didi and Ekki



Thanks to Deepak at Sahara Nepal Treks and Travels for all those complicated bookings and a few choice recommendations. And special thanks to Kamal, possibly the best driver in Nepal. Missing you all.  
Namaste.

