

TREKKING WITH TERESA

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TREK REPORT – Cultural Safari, December 2018

Members

Teresa Williams – Group Leader, Ekkehard Loeber, Lesley Gillis, Faseny McPhee, Tamara Noy, Sharon Leonard.

Driver: Abisek

Guide (from Pokhara onwards): Lahar Pun

1 December:

Everything went according to plan today, which was a bit of a surprise. OK, Tamara's flight was about 90 minutes late but, considering that the 22nd South Asian Summit was underway with bigwigs from everywhere getting priority everything, that was acceptable.

Later on we toured the beautiful Bouda Stupa, even went onto the upper level. We bought Crocs, fake Nepali crocs. The five dollars we paid was probably well over the odds from the local price. We had Mega Magic (hot honey/lemon/ginger/rum) at Stupa View. We squeezed into a taxi and wandered the night market at Chahabil. We ate in our hotel's restaurant – the Alu Ghobi Masala with Ju Ju Dahi (Bhaktapur yoghurt) was so good for lunch I ordered it again for dinner. Perhaps rice AND a plain naan was a bit excessive?

2 December:

After breakfast – full house this morning – we commandeered a table in the coffee shop for a pre-trip briefing. Maps, travel times, likely scenarios, etc.



Faseny, Lesley, Sharon, Tamara and Ekki

I then checked Tamaras gear and noted a couple of simple requirements. (Trekking poles and possibly a poncho). Travelling in two taxis as it is almost impossible for a minibus to get into our hotel on the narrow lanes. First stop was Durbar Marg for Grace where we like their long cotton kurtas and ruched-ankle leggings. Entire group 'lookin good'. After changing some cash and hitting the ATMs in Thamel we needed coffee and Danish. Weizen of course.

Refreshed, we set off into the old backstreets of Kathmandu. Firstly to Assan Thole which smells of divine spices and incense one moment and stinky dried fish and rotting veg the next. Threading our way through crowds and motorbikes in Indra Chowk, with its ancient arched shopfronts piled high with copper and brassware, Sharon bought a lovely lidded water jug. At Durbar Square, which was badly damaged in the 2015 earthquake, I had a minor dummy spit. Just asking the hawkers to PLEASE! back off seemed to give great offence. Five guys at once *was* just too much. As we say in Germany 'Mein toleranz hat eine grenze!'

We enjoyed our slow walk back to Thamel. The small, calm stupa at Kaathe Swayambu Shee. We shopped for really good prayer flags at Tahiti Thole. Sharon got her 'simple white shawl' and looked a treat on a rickshaw – a real Memsahib. We had a long delicious lunch at The Roadhouse. A last lingering look around the shops yielded a few treasures but it was a mistake. We got a couple of taxis at 5.30... much too late. Traffic jam meant we took an hour and twenty minutes to get to Bouda Gate (myself, Ekki and Lesley). Taxi number 2 gave up and they walked from Rato Pul – 3 kilometres!! Sterling effort.

Not needing much in the way of dinner we did wine and chips (the great Tibetan ones) at Rooftop Pottala, our new favourite haunt in Bouda. I bought a small selection of red and white wines for the trip, plus a couple of kilos of oranges. Suntala; something in between an orange and a mandarin. All set for the road tomorrow.

3 December:

Breakfast service was a little tardy today – open at 7.30 but eggs didn't arrive till 7.50 and we were on



Sunset at Chitwan

a pretty tight schedule. Our jeep arrived on time and Abisek turns out to be a careful driver and a courteous helper which was much appreciated. River Tops was a winner for a cuppa and Riverside Springs Resort even more so. It was still warm for December and I think if Ekki or Tamara had brought togs they would have had a swim in the beautiful pool there. We all ordered the veg pakoras which are served with a mint achar (pudine) and generous bowls of creamy yoghurt to temper the green chilli in the achar.

As we turned onto the Chitwan road, off the Prithvi Highway, I was utterly astounded. Ian and Rhonda from 2016, you would not believe this road. Transformed from the bumpy dirt track with frequent while-u-wait landslide repairs into a smooth, sealed 2-lane road with ripple strips to slow traffic on the curves and bridges. Two and a half hours from Riverside Springs to Jungle Villa – arrival time 3.30 pm!!

Upon arrival Sohodor, Chitwan's answer to David Attenborough, briefed us on lodge etiquette. Don't kill bugs and don't wander in the garden at night. We sat out on the terrace above the river over a glass of red wine while a big red sun dropped into the hazy horizon. Siberian ducks and pretty Ibis already in evidence.

Having watched the slide show here on many previous occasions I thought it would be a bit boring but a new presenter was very clearly-spoken and the information was interesting and relevant. Statistics on royal visitors slaughtering in hunting parties were too horrendous to repeat. How many leopards does one man need to kill to feel like a man??

Dinner on the first evening was barbecue. Not usually my favourite but I think the guests enjoyed some meat as we 'mostly don't'.

The rooms are gorgeous, the décor is lovely (I admit I had a hand in that) and the grounds, viewing decks and dining hall are beautiful. It is still a favourite after five years of visiting. It is set well away from any other lodges and fronts directly onto the Rapti River. Jungle Villa Resort (Google it!).

4 December:

What a day! Where to start? An early call for an elephant ride in the jungle. My hip was saying 'no way' but the others climbed onto the howdah a short drive from the lodge and returned an hour or so later having seen deer, rhino and lots of birds. Photos of this walk, posted on Facebook, created something of a controversy. I do know that elephants belong in the wild. The wild elephant population in Chitwan is threatened and the domestic elephants we use, well loved and cared for, are being used in a breeding programme with wild elephants to try to increase their numbers. Funding comes mostly from tourism. The mature domestic females who take tourists make one, or maximum two walks per day. They are bathed in the river (when it's warm enough), fed very well and loved. The vet comes weekly. It would be too dangerous for us to walk in the bush – tiger and rhino! There is no vehicle access. The elephants at Jungle Villa could not survive if freed. They could starve or worse, wander into unprotected areas and become the victims of poaching. What to do?

Breakfast, enormous, was at 8.30 and then off again, this time in open jeeps to the canoe station way upstream from our lodge. At first it was almost too



Our room at Jungle Villa



Our elephant at Chitwan



A mustard field at Chitwan

misty to see the opposite bank of the river from our boat, a long dugout canoe, but gorgeous as the sun broke through and started to burn off the haze. We saw a lot of interesting birds, which Sharon has noted for further identification and research. A few crocodiles, garial and mugger lazing menacingly on the banks; one even swam under our canoe. I didn't like that. We disembarked at the park headquarters, signed in and walked a shady forest trail to the Garial breeding programme. They are a seriously endangered species and research is focussing on ways to improve the birth-rate of 99% of females. The trail back to the river was pretty with more birds and evidence of sloth bears digging for termites.

Our lodge was just across the Rapti River and we had a spell of leisure time before lunch. I lay on a sunbed on a terrace overlooking the river and finished Anand Adiga's 'White Tiger' – for the second time. It really is THAT good. Afternoon was an elephant briefing – heaps of great information up close and personal with a beautiful fully-grown good-natured female. We then went for a village walk. We met lots of locals as Tamara shared packets of crayons with the kids. The houses were simple, mud-rendered bamboo, many with satellite dishes and solar energy poles, small scale but efficient. There were great kids everywhere.

In the evening there was a cultural programme. Girls of all ages in traditional costumes came and danced for us with really great loud drumming and singing. We joined in at the end of course. We have requested Nepali as opposed to 'western' food and tonight's dinner was a really good daal bhat with succulent curried chicken. Early night. Phew!

5 December:

We had the freshest orange juice imaginable at breakfast this morning. We waited around for a break in the mist before setting out on our birdwatching walk. Sohodur accompanied us and recognised most species without binoculars. Sharon and Faseny particularly enjoyed this activity but it was just another gorgeous walk for the rest of us. We did, however, seem to be walking where I have seen rhino on previous visits??

After another so-called 'light lunch' which was yet another fabulous daal bhat (with chicken) we hit the road. The Hi-Ace van is great and the first hour is especially lovely though tiny villages dedicated

to farming. Haystacks of rice grass were as big as the houses this year, each one surrounded by goats and chickens galore. Bougainvillea and Poinsettias, Hibiscus and Oleander abound in the small front gardens with evidence of vegetable gardens behind almost every house.

After we hit the highway there were bigger fields of mustard, a dazzling yellow, and lots of loaded trucks, motorbikes, tractors and even buffalo-drawn carts – though much fewer of the latter these days.

Bahaiwara was a dump, as usual. The main road through town is finally finished but now the road to Lumbini is being widened. It is a chaotic mess as they seem to be working on every section at once. We closed the windows to keep out the dust, turned on the AC and laughed at the chaos. Trucks swerving through a fog of raised dust as tiny tuk-tuks, dicing with death, squeezed past buses, tractors and cars. It was a joy to arrive at the Little Buddha Hotel to discover that it wasn't quite as down-market as I had feared. It was almost dark so we just dropped our gear in our rooms, grabbed a pullover and walked around a few rubbish-strewn corners and over a partially-installed drain and found a 'quiet spot' in Lumbini Bazaar for beer and crisps. Traffic roared past but, oddly, we just got used to it. Dinner was adequate but forgettable.

6 December:

A terrific morning. We walked into the Buddha Maya temple, took off our shoes with everyone else, and then I went and bought a ticket. (In hindsight, the other way round would have been better.) Buddha's actual birthplace is set amongst 2600 year old ruins of a palace. The bricks are small, finely-made and closely-fitted. Inside it is indeed a very special place. Masses of schoolkids meant a few obligatory selfies but mostly they were polite, friendly and enthusiastic – unlike the few westerners we encountered who would have happily ignored us if we hadn't 'namasteed' cheerfully as we passed.

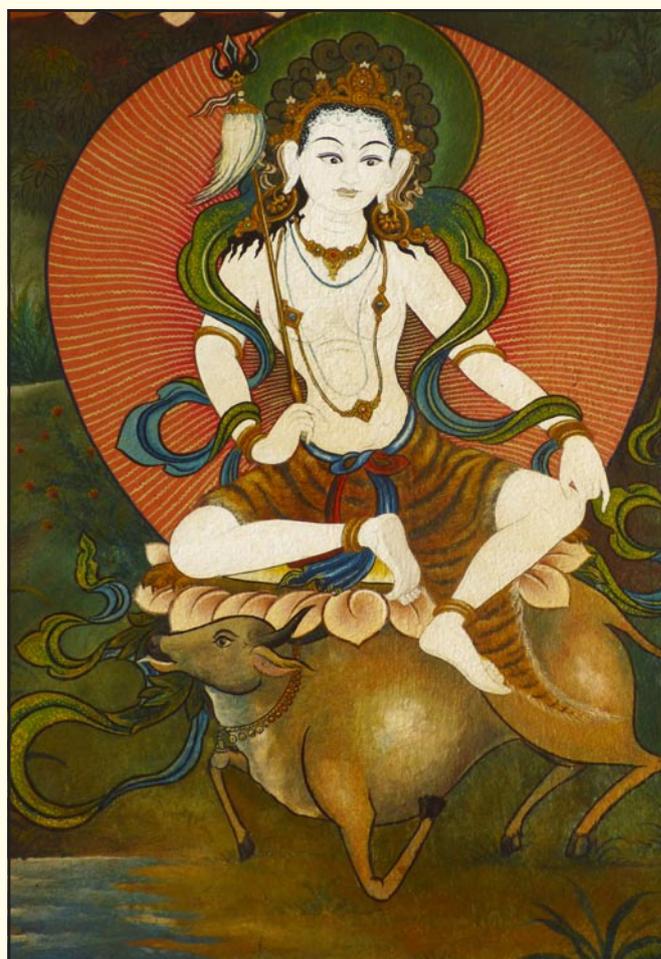
After the Buddha Maya temple with its various groups of chanting devotees we picked up a couple of electric auto-rickshaws and churned up the dust finding the German and then the Thai temples. Almost every country in the world, with the resources to do so, has built a temple in the Buddhist style of their native land. It was a warm sunny morning once the mist cleared and two completely contrasting temples



A monk and his reflection at Lumbini

was enough. The German one is so beautiful it takes a while to see the details. A physically beautiful architectural style of a huge dome with skylights and paintings around the outside exquisitely rendered. Inside is just as detailed with the images appearing to float in a blue heaven. Bougainvillea glowed through the etched glass windows. A real treat. The Thai temple was a pure white marble construction. The simplicity was profound. I loved the huge doors and shutters of massive wood painted in red lacquer. A gift from the Thai government was an eye clinic; triage was taking place on the temple lawns in a big marquee.

At midday we hurried back to our hotel for a quick check out. The road back through Bahairawa was just as brutal today and, sadly, that was our route to Thansen Palpa. The drive out of town now seems to go on forever, joining up seamlessly with the outskirts of Butwal. This city does impress though. It just looks organised. The people strut around purposefully. Nobody looks underfed or has time to waste. Industrious is the word that comes to mind. Except for the cows. Huge Brahmin beasts which



White tara at the German temple, Lumbini

stand or curl up on the metre-wide nature strip in the middle of the highway. They look bored to death.

At the edge of Butwal we stopped at a restaurant which used to be part of the Nanglo Bakery chain, now Olive Tree Café. It has been nicely spruced up with very friendly staff, cool music and fantastic food. Of course you can't go too far wrong with a veg daal bhat.

I am writing this at the Srinagar Hotel in Thansen Palpa. No view whatsoever. I can't help remembering 2016 (Ian and Rhonda again). What a super view that was. We hope for better things in the morning.

7 December:

We had a longish drive today but we started off with a pleasant walk down through the old town of Thansen Palpa. Abisek, our driver, was waiting at the bottom and we were soon winding our way in and out of steep tree-clad gullies with dizzying views to river valleys below. Did I mention that there was NO view of the Himalayas today? Not a thing. Nothing from the heights of Thansen, nothing on the way. It was a rather long 'half hour' for a tea and pee stop which Abisek had in mind. Nearly two hours in fact. I am not so familiar with this route, or I would have known that my favourite café, with real coffee – even a coffee bush in the garden – was just five minutes further down the road. We were in Pokhara shortly before 3 pm which was not bad for a 10.30 start. Lahar was waiting for us at our hotel – great to see that smile at the end of a long trip. The Peace Plaza

is not quite as good as the old Lakefront but since a kind of 'Disneyland' has been built right next door to Lakefront the noise is quite impossible to endure – machinery and screaming. Ugh! I feel so sorry for the owners.

We ate at the new Roadhouse. A bit over the top but a fabulous building and the food was as good as ever. We dropped into the Paradiso for a drink on the way home – well, some of us. The band played Cocaine on request and so Sharon and I hit the dance floor. Woo-hoo!

8 December:

We got up early and went out across the Phewa Tal in local boats. We took Lahar – or should that be Lahar took us – and our driver Abisek. We needed two boats. Most of us made the climb up to the Peace Stupa. Sharon, who'd already done a two-week trek, opted to return with the same boat for a few hours at the spa and I must say the results were remarkably good. We did not have a perfect view today but I think we almost convinced Tamara that at least some of the white things in the sky were peaks if you half closed your eyes and squinted slightly. We had a terrific organic Nepali coffee at one of the rooftop cafés and then a long easy descent on the old trekking trail. It comes out at Damside just near the dhobi ghat. It seemed to be wash day as we crossed the rickety bridge, onto the local bus and then into Black and White Café for a great lunch. 5 x Greek Salad with Naan from the tandoor. Lahar took Abisek home for daal bhat at his house. I thought that was cool.



On the lake at Pokhara



Ekki, Lahar and Abisek at the Peace Stupa, Pokhara



Faseny contemplates Pokhara



Prayer flags and Poinsettia at the Peace Stupa, Pokhara

We ate at our own hotel tonight, joined by Subas Magar. He is having quite some success organising his own treks at Step Nepal. He is on Facebook and TripAdvisor. Sharon shouted the drinks and Lesley and I enjoyed the Happy Hour deal on Singapore Slings.

9 December:

An early start again, before dawn in fact, as we drove towards Sarangkot before 6.30 and climbed up a bit to a café with a rooftop view. Subas joined us. The friendly proprietor offered organic beans coffee – he did not have to ask twice! Views were inspirational.

After breakfast we did a little more strolling about while I gathered a few essentials – wine, coffee, lollies for the road trip. We lunched at Black and White again – we really like it.

A lovely surprise was a visit by Sunder and Sopana. Both looking great. Sunder has ‘filled out’, grown his hair into a slicked-back pony tail and his skin has cleared up as he has matured. Great to see him.

Sopana looks a real young woman with blond tips in her hair (apparently, mum was furious) and tight jeans. She will re-sit her SLC chemistry and biology exams in May, with tutoring, and hopes to get into nursing eventually. Ram, our old driver, also joined us for lunch. Another nice surprise.

Back on the road it was rough and dusty as they are widening the Prithvi Highway. Once we passed the roadworks it was a lovely drive and only took three hours to reach Bandipur, just 9 kilometres off the main road, though 1,000 metres higher. No views on arrival.

We strolled into the village and found a café with a terrace. Gin and Tonic seemed appropriate but honey-lemon-ginger tea was a popular alternative. Daal bhat at our hotel was just OK; we have been a bit spoiled. The rooms at the Bandipur Mountain Resort are slightly improved. Tiled floors replacing worn carpets, new paint, a better-maintained garden, reverse-cycle a.c. and a new bar. My fears of a steady descent into shabbiness were unfounded.

10 December:

Lahar's presence heralded the welcome return of 'bed tea' this morning. Breakfast was almost good enough and we could just make out Manaslu floating in the mist, impossibly high above the horizon.

After breakfast we left Tamara at home (chucking a sickie) and Sharon (relaxing) and headed out on the ridge above the village. It was really beautiful up there. Fresh air and warm sunshine in a gentle landscape.

We descended into Bandipur on a tiny trail which wound between tiny farms; one or two cows, a few chickens, a vegie patch and a beehive. At the old village we followed an unbelievably pretty winding lane of houses, many of them festooned with bougainvillea, deadly nightshade, poinsettias, roses, chrysanthemums, callas and dahlias. We wandered back to the centre of town which is dominated by a wide traffic-free pedestrian mall. We easily spotted Sharon who had come to meet us for lunch.

We dined at one of the old, traditional bhattis on vegetable samosas, served with a spicy achar and a bowl of creamy yoghurt. We all had seconds!

After lunch Abisek was roused to drive us down a winding road to the government silk worm farm. At this time of year they were not producing cocoons but Anjuna, a delightful well-spoken young woman, explained how it all worked and showed us the buildings where these 250,000 worms do their thing each season.

We wandered a bit more this afternoon – this is the main activity at Bandipur – and became a little lost off-piste but found a steep track back to civilisation. The mountains were almost clear at 4.30. Spellbinding. We gathered for dinner at 6 pm and decided to walk the ten minutes back into town for a 'progressive dinner'. First stop was a local dive for chicken momos with spicy achar. Ekki and I had an Everest beer with ours. Returning to our nice bar from last night we had snacks of chips, chilly



Streets of Bandipur



A beautiful house in Bandipur



Making friends in the streets of Bandipur

veg and spicy (not very) potatoes. This with a few gin and tonics and local boys singing and playing guitar in the background. Desert was across the road – fruit pancakes with honey, served with hot chocolate. Nice!

I am writing this at 11.45, watching television in our room (DWTV), the heating is on (drying our washing) and I must close as Lahar is waking us at 6 am tomorrow for a 9 km trek.

11 December:

The trek down was delightful. Very easy on a made road, winding downhill all the way. Sunny at first, we descended into the clouds after about an hour and trekked the second half in the mist. Right on time, Abisek collected us just as we arrived at the village on the Prithvi Highway at the bottom of the valley.

The road trip was interesting, if a little long, especially over the roadworks from the rim of the Kathmandu valley down to the ring road. Traffic

was chronic even at 4 pm so it took another hour to reach Bhaktapur. Planet Bhaktapur is a great little hotel and the food was marvellous. Mostly Italian, reflecting the background of the owner. I like the parquet floors in the big rooms and the gas heaters were a boon, once we got the hang of them.

12 December:

Another huge day. Abisek came a little late but we were soon dropped at Telkot for a day of trekking. We climbed up through a pine forest with tantalising glimpses of the Himalayas through the trees. Walked through a stand of huge eucalypts where we saw a brilliant kingfisher. Near the tea stop we witnessed a weird phenomenon. About 20 eagles were circling a small hilltop, possibly catching small bugs which were in the air and on the ground. Fasenya and Sharon (the birdwatchers) drank their tea on the roof top terrace.

We arrived at Changu Narayan in need of lunch but pickings were slim. We ended up on a rather grubby rooftop where the food was actually fine. Fasenya



On the outskirts of Kathmandu



Himals viewed from Telkot



Changu Narayan detail



More tender than erotic – Changu Narayan

rated the loo at 4.5/5 but since it was a sit down toilet without a seat, or paper, which did not self-flush, I think she was being a bit generous.

The temple at Changu Narayan is the oldest in the valley, dating back 600 years, to a time when Changu Narayan was the capital of a small local kingdom. We walked on from here for another hour and a half, all the way back to our hotel on the outskirts of Bhaktapur. This was great day of trekking – not always pretty but always interesting. A skink, some squirrels, the eagles and a kingfisher were the natural highlights – and the mountains of course – but it was the cheerful, open friendly people that made the day for me.

13 December:

We visited Bhaktapur this morning. Of course, some of the beautiful old temples and pagodas were destroyed in the 2015 earthquake, but many remain intact, especially the magnificent 5-tier Nayatapolo Pagoda. Impressive in 2018 – how much more so hundreds of years ago.

We were bussed back into Kathmandu around 12.30 and traffic was, as ever, horrible. Happy to squeeze, quite literally, into Bouda. Lotus Gems does have nice rooms. The charming young Gurkha-uniformed guard out front always ready with a snappy salute and a big smile. The group had a free afternoon so Ekki and I went to Kapan to rejig our luggage for Singapore and Australia.

I had a few anxious moments this evening when I could not find my phone. It was fairly easily recovered by ringing ceaselessly (thanks Ekki) and then hot-footing it over to Muna Cottage. ‘Too much ringing!’ said Djangbu pointing to my stored laundry bag. (It was my Kathmandu handbag for the past 15 years.) Duh!

Dinner was great. Lahar and Dorje joined us at Rooftop Pottala – our new favourite eatery in Bouda. The food is fabulous and the service faultless but friendly. I heartily recommend it. (They have Australian and French wine).

14 December:

Into Thamel this morning for our last big shop, started at Karuma near Durbar Marg. They make everything from skin-friendly materials – cotton, linen, hemp, silk, wool, bamboo. Many purchases made – I certainly warmed up my Mastercard.

We walked then to Thamel and one by one fulfilled various requirements – some hand-block printed fabric here, some warm trekking gear there, a little jewellery, a few scarves... till lunch at The Roadhouse lured us away from the shops. Julie joined us, and Deepak. Dorje and Lahar were around but preferred a local daal bhat at a quarter of the price. They like pizza well enough but it is no substitute for a proper rice lunch.

Back at our hotel in Bouda, Ekki and I were packed and ready to go, our luggage parked in Tamara's room till departure time. It's the first time I have ever left Nepal before the group so it feels a bit weird. Dorje and Lahar have everything in hand. Hotel bills all paid, cash left for tonight's dinner, taxis booked for tomorrow's departures – Tamara and Sharon to the Kathmandu Guesthouse, Fasenya and Lesley to the airport. Of course I have since heard that everything went according to plan but I could not help having misgivings as Ekki and I drove out to the airport.

I have just written this report in Singapore, in the air-conditioned comfort of my sister-in-law Anna's spacious apartment on the Tamasek Poly. campus. There is a huge swimming pool complex next door which hardly anyone uses. We leave tomorrow, after 18 days. What a holiday! Time to eat and sleep and read and swim. Is this what other people do??

Our Cultural Safari just keeps getting better and better. Just as much fun as trekking but without the hardships. Some of the hotels are really quite lovely. With my partner Ekki on board for this one, two customers 'staying on' from the Pike Peak trek

(Fasenya and Sharon) and two customers (Lesley and Fasenya) travelling with us for the second and fourth time respectively it felt like a bit of a family at times. Of course some folks like more culture, some like more nature, some like as much shopping as they can get. I don't think anyone went home disappointed. Thank you all – fun times, easy laughs and good memories.

It is now 2019, 2nd January as I write this, so time to think about this year. No trekking planned for Spring this year. I will be in Australia, in Melbourne, till mid-March so do get in touch if you would like to chat about possible participation in an upcoming adventure. We want to trek to Langtang starting 10 October. It will be our first return since the earthquake. We need to 'lay some ghosts to rest' and they really need our business up there. It is also a fantastically beautiful place. In November I am planning something really radical – CAMPING! We want to explore the area north of Rukum, Lahar's home area, up to Phoksundo Lake. Mules, tents, camping. Anything is possible. Looking for customers prepared to take a chance on a trial trek. November 1 – 28. Lahar knows what he is doing.

December 2019 of course we will be repeating our relaxing Cultural Safari; in fact we already have a few bookings. December 1 is our start date. Contact me at teresadb@hotmail.com or vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com. The website will be brought up to date soon at www.slowtrekking.com and you can find me on Facebook at Slow Trekking.

What are you waiting for? **YOU CAN DO THIS!**

Cheers,
Teresa didi

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

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