



## **TREK REPORT – MUKTINATH February 2022**

**Members:** Teresa Williams  
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**Support Team:** Lahar Pun  
Nabraj Tamang (Dorje)  
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**FEB 2:** We arrived rather early at Berlin's Brandenburg Airport as we drove down in Kati's car and everything went really smoothly. The Istanbul transfer was trouble free but we were delayed into Kathmandu due to low visibility. With the airport being in the middle of the city and the Kathmandu Valley being ringed by very large hills, visibility is kind of critical here. We were diverted to Delhi for refueling and it took rather a long time. We had been woken for breakfast at 2 am so the later morning refreshments were very spartan. No tea or coffee and the toilets were locked for the whole time we were on the tarmac at Delhi. Nothing at all after that. Bloody Turkish Airlines. Really disappointed – again!

**FEB 3:** Finally arrived at dusk in Kathmandu (11 am scheduled arrival). Immigration was the usual circus, despite the limited number of arriving bideshi (foreigners). Abisek, a driver of many previous trips, collected us and we dove into one of the new coffee shops lining the new car park below the arrival terminal. Double shot Americanos hit the spot. A pair of naive young Danish women shared our table and were a bit surprised when they could not pay for coffee and snacks with their Visa Card. I loaned them some rupees. A guy who had been tipped all day in euro coins was also happy to do a little exchange with me. The International Guesthouse was lovely but really cold. We ate at Yangling a nearby favourite of mine. Clean, simple Tibetan food.

**FEB 4:** We met Deepak this morning, to pay for our flight tickets. We went out for coffee across the road where the thoughtful waiter put a gas heater by our table – it was soon glowing comfortably. We met a bunch of rather well-dressed Mexican women doing a "Masters in Female Healing". Some kind of weird course which was probably mostly to do with singing bowls and chanting.

We taxied over to Netra's house this afternoon and sorted trekking gear. Kancha and Dorje came over and were very happy to see Netra after such a long time. I gave Kancha the jackets and kid's clothes we had brought with us.....he has 6 kids.

Taxied home. Yangling again for dinner. It is close and the food is great.

**FEB 5:** Bus to Pokhara. The stand is just at the bottom of the hill from our lodge so managed to roll my wheeled suitcase, just. The bus was the new small type, in between a micro and a big bus. Our seats were directly behind the driver with great views – not always an advantage in some of the exciting traffic manoeuvres. We were in Pokhara at 2.30, something of a record. The New Friendly Home is great. Two rooms on the top floor with stunning views and a terrace nobody else seems to use. Went local for delicious food this evening. Picked up some tonic on the way home and put away quite a lot of our dut- free gin. Cheers.

**FEB 6:** A really big day out. Headed off to the boat ramp around 8, though we stopped for a decent coffee at a lakeside café on the way. It was not perfectly clear but lots of peaks became more and more visible as we drew away from the shore in our brightly-painted wooden boat. A dream crossing to the base of the steep trail up to the Peace Stupa. It was quite a hot sweaty climb and we had not breakfasted so we ate first, with more good coffee, then up the stairs to the lovely stupa with its 4 beautiful Buddha statues and compelling views in all directions. I could even see the new airport for international flights coming along quite nicely on the edge of town. We descended by the forest trail. Really peaceful and hardly saw anyone except a few locals on a day out.

This afternoon we shopped for our last-minute trekking essentials, sunglasses for Kati, chlorine tabs (my Steripen is out of battery and C123s not widely available), a water bottle, over-glasses (mine are not dark enough). I was shocked that they cost 4000 NRS but it turned out to be money well-spent. Fitted perfectly over my specs, stable and very dark when trekking through snowy peaks in the sunshine.

Dinner at the Boomerang was very good. Indian style food taken in a little pavilion near the lake. A bit posh but why not? It is a holiday.

This evening I lost my credit cards. Unpacked EVERYTHING, looked EVERYWHERE. Dorje and Kancha had arrived and had a room in our hotel so came up to help me search. Of course, they were in a secret zip pocket in my daypack. Most sensible place for them of course. Doh!

Nice hot shower, could be the last for a while, though it took a while to tame the plumbing. Finally washed and dried hair, called Ekki in Germany. All set for the big trek starting tomorrow.

**FEBRUARY 7:** A fairly smart jeep arrived just after 8 am and we were soon barreling along on quite good roads, for about half the journey. After Beni the road was just ghastly. Work being done everywhere at once. Might be great if it is ever finished. Our planned stop at Riverside Lodge in Galeshwor was thwarted. Lodge closed, encroaching roadwork and a new bridge could mean permanently. We drove on to a dingy-looking dive that only a jeep driver could favour. The room they sat us in was dire. Dark, cobwebby and dirty. We wandered outside and found a patch of sunshine in the kitchen garden. Plastic tables and chairs were quickly organized. The veg noodle soup was astonishingly good. Full of fresh, bright vegetables.

We reached Tatopani on this bumpy road at 1.30 and the Trekkers Inn staff were very pleased to see us. Not much business for the last two years I guess, and we were some of the first to return to Nepal. The rooms have been refurbished a bit with new floor coverings and electric fans (not needed at the moment). The fresh orange juice was wonderful and we all had one.

We walked around the village. Many of the old houses and lodges have been demolished to make way for some hideous new hotels. The sound of the rock breaking machine just below the village and power tools in use everywhere created a really jarring, noisy atmosphere. Not like Tatopani at all. By the time they have finished it will be so ugly that nobody will want to stay there anyway.

We ate in the kitchen, same daal bhat as the boys. Played cards. Fun night.



Trekkers Inn at Tatopani

**FEBRUARY 8:** What a huge day. We started fairly early and I very soon realized that I was more than a bit out of shape. The first hour was kind of easy and then we stopped for fresh oranges and some shared fried potatoes. We had opted for the harder route to Ghasa, over the ridge directly into Kopchepani as the road construction on the other side was not really conducive to trekking on the road. It was quite hot and way harder than I had expected, despite being on a gradual, jeepable trail. It took one and a half hours to slowly climb up and then just seven minutes to trip lightly down the stone stairs on the other side. Everything was closed in Kopchepani but a kindly lodge owner made us tea and biscuits. We sat on their flagstone terrace with a very large sheep.

The climb up to Pairo (Landslide) was as hard as ever but these days the trail was only one stone short of the actual steep landslide in many places. We strolled down through the old village, got another cuppa and then, expecting to cruise to the bridge, found yet another huge landslide. The detour, over the top of the slide, had been only recently, and very roughly, hacked out. It was a long and slippery slope back down to the bridge. After the bridge I knew it was just a short stroll to the Eagle Nest Lodge. No. The lodge was deserted, requiring a further 2-kilometre trek to Upper Ghasa. The road was easy going but by this time I was so bloody tired I could hardly keep



going. Of course, I did and was very grateful for a lovely little room with attached bathroom.

Our hostess lit a very hot table indeed and the veg omelette and chips went down a treat. Hot table, in case you are unfamiliar, is where a pit is made under a very sturdy, metal lined dining table into which a little brazier of hot coals is brought and then topped up through the evening. The table has a heavy blanket which hangs like a skirt around the table top. You kind of climb in, leaving your Crocs outside, and tuck the blanket over your lap. Warm as toast.

We were given lots of warm blankets and, yet again, did not need our sleeping bags.

**FEBRUARY 9:** This was the only really shit day of the trek. The weather was cold and the road was wet and muddy with rain and sleet towards the end. Horizontal sleet on the last bend before Kalopani. Kancha and I hid in the bus shelter, a rather exposed concrete bunker, but were soon called across the road to a tiny crowded Bhatti. Nescafe was produced, to which we added some Khukri Rum we just happened to be carrying. I knew that lightweight metal bottle would come in handy. A rare bus came by so we took the chance for the ten-minute ride to our lodge just two kilometres away. It was a Godsend but getting in and out was tough as the aisle was chock-a-block with sacks of onions, carrots, potatoes and who knows what else. Someone took my daypack and stocks and gave them back to me on the way out. It was still snowing.

The rooms at the Black Horse are brand new and lovely with new pillows and doonas and a pristine bathroom. However, there was no heating in the dining room. No fire – too new and modern. No hot table – they had one but it was not in use. No electric heater, no gas heater, nothing. The lodge owner was not the slightest bit sorry and more than a bit arrogant. I am afraid I did tell him what I thought. We ate hot veg noodle soup in the dining room with our sleeping bags over our laps. The weather got progressively worse. Howling wind, driving rain, hail and finally horizontal snow. I guess you could call it a blizzard!



If we opened our bedroom door the snow went straight onto Kati's bed. There was a two-inch gap under the door which I eventually stuffed with a large plastic bag.

The guys brought us up a thermos of hot honey-lemon-ginger and a small bottle of rum plus two veg daal bhats. No way could we leave our warm beds as we were upstairs and the stairs were the iron-frame style and fast icing up. We hunkered down for the night with two doonas each. We took the plastic off the pillows (restored next day) and slept really well. It was Minus 20 degrees overnight!!

**FEBRUARY 10:** A beautiful sight to behold this morning. Clear blue skies and a stunning sunrise shining out from behind Annapurna 2, with Annapurna 1 and Annapurna South clearly showing their peaks. The sun poured onto Dhaulagiri and Tukche Peak. Glorious.

We skipped breakfast after the lodge owner barked in my face because we had eaten, drunk and smoked in his room. Not interested that we could not, physically, get out of the door because of the blizzard. Quick coffee on the icy terrace and away.....

There were icy patches on the trail at first today but, after a very cosy cuppa in a traditional kitchen at Kockethanti, we were soon over the bridge and walking in full sun on the road on the Western bank of the Kali Gandaki River. There was no wind and negligible traffic. To date we had seen three other trekkers in three days. We soon peeled off the layers, hats, gloves, buffs, jackets. My new over-specs, very black and polarized, were extremely effective against the blinding whiteness of the peaks shining around us all day. We opted to loop around to the bridge on the road to Larjung, remembering the last time in 2018 when it was impossible to cross the stream tumbling out of the mountains. Dorje and Kancha determined to give it a go and cut across. They had to take their boots off, roll up their pants and wade through knee deep freezing water on loose round rocks.



Lunch at Larjung was the stuff trekking dreams are made of. We ate on the sunny rooftop amid drying chillies and a goatskin. The view all around was astounding, especially the Dhaulagiri Icefall which looked so close but was actually about 12 kilometres away. Scenery far too big for the camera.

Pushing on to Tukche was equally delightful as there was very little wind today – most unusual in this part of Nepal. A lovely dog, we called Switi, followed us all the way. We had to mount a pretty serious defense of her in Tukche against the local dogs.



Some local kids have taken her in, knowing that she joined us at the police checkpoint in Larjung and may need to return.

Our beautiful Tukche Guesthouse was closed, as was almost everything in the town. At last, we found rooms at the Dutch House, minus the grumpy Dutchman thank goodness. We sat in the baking sun while our rooms were prepared – they had not expected guests. The rooms were pine-lined with attached bathroom and two huge warm blankets each. Rumours of hot water turned out to be exaggerated. Do hope they have heating in the dining room as my hands are cold writing this.

Big surprise tonight was a wonderful open fire in the dining area. Enough room for all our little gang to gather round and share drinks and stories.

**FEBRUARY 11:** We left Tukche in cold bright sunshine this morning. Easy on the road to the bridge and then lovely in the Junipers on the east side of the river. We had a cup of tea and biscuits at the Tibetan Refugee Camp at Chairö. The gompa was, sadly, closed up. There is a wonderful ancient Guru Rimpoche statue in there that is really worth a look. We met a lively old lady on her way home to Lo Mantang.

It was still warm and sunny up through Marpha and of course the architecture there completely protects the inner village from any wind at all. The Japanese owned Tampopo Lodge was a great choice for lunch. I checked out the rooms and might stay here on the way back down.

Onwards then, on the road now, and huge engineering works are afoot where a new bridge is under construction. All previous bridges have been swept away so it was good to see that they were building a seriously big solid bridge at last. We stopped at a friend, Mangal's house at Shyang on the way to Jomsom. Good to see him after at least three years. He gave us local apple juice and peanuts. He does seem a little care-worn.

Blowing a little harder now, but at our backs, so we scooted pretty quickly into Jomsom, arriving around 4 pm. It looked like a ghost town. Not many locals, not many jeeps, no horses or donkeys and most lodges closed for the duration. The Hotel Majesty was rather fancy though the loo gurgled up a fountain of water (clean) at random intervals. A wet bottom was not a pleasant experience. Hot water eventually appeared in the basin tap so we were able to shower with a plastic jug. After the shower the sun was still streaming in the windows of our room.

Dinner was fine though the gas heater was turned so low it had just a tiny flickering blue flame. The boss was rather stern with me when I suggested it could be turned up till it actually glowed warm red.

We ordered our usual thermos of honey-lemon-ginger, added a modest amount of rum and snuggled under our respective blankets. Had a wi-fi call to Ekki in Germany (as I do most days). Isn't technology wonderful.

**FEBRUARY 12:** It was way too cold to set off before 9 am. 2800 metres now with a light northerly out of Tibet! Actually, it was way too cold after 9 am so, when we reached the jeep station at the end of Jomsom, it was an easy decision to make. The driver was great, the road was good and in half an hour we were in Kagbeni. We have booked him for tomorrow for Muktinath.

The day was splendid with snow peaks glittering all around. We were given a lovely late breakfast in a sunny spot in the beautiful dining room of the Hotel Lhasa. Highly recommended. We roamed around the ancient village where folks still live and keep animals in the ruins of the medieval fort. Just like the locals we found a sunny spot, out of the breeze and gazed up in awe at Muktinath. The snow line was more than halfway down to Kagbeni.



The wind dropped to nothing after about 1 o'clock so we rugged up and crossed the river to trek to Thiri, technically inside Upper Mustang. We need not have bothered with the warm clothes. I was down to a t-shirt before we were half way there. We

clambered up the little gully, following the ancient water canal. It is lined with willows which look just as old and there is a lovely pani tanki in the middle. We just went far enough to see the meditation cave with its tiny access track and timbered façade. We filled our water bottles with fresh snow melt. Conditions were still warm as we wandered the village. A collection of about twenty houses, joined by covered walkways, housing about 80 people. Only a few old people seemed to be around at the moment. The others may return in Spring to work the riverside fields. The wind did pick up a bit on the way back but nothing like the howling gales we usually associate with Kagbeni. We spotted Kancha and Dorje way below us in the river bed looking for fossils. They arrived back at the hotel shortly after us with a treasure trove of found fossils. Trilobites are the long ones I think. The round ones are Ammonites, called Shaligrams when taken as an incarnation of Vishnu and venerated all over India.



A full-on gas heater right at our table tonight and we were served our best daal bhat yet. Thick yellow daal, alu-ghobi (curry potatoes and cauli) and the famous local

spinach. There was a veg omelette on the side. Yum! In this windswept dry environment, it is rather surprising that they grow this amazing spinach.

**FEBRUARY 13:** Far too much snow and ice to trek up to Muktinath so we took a decent breakfast, planning not to stay too long up there. Our jeep arrived at 9.30, there were only a few seriously icy patches on the road and we arrived at Rani Pawa, the village below Muktinath, in about half an hour. Another half an hour on muddy, snowy and sometimes icy trails took us to the temple. Just a couple of hundred stairs up and we were there. There were some pretty raucous groups of Indians heading into the Hindu temple so I headed off alone for a bit of quiet time at the Ani Gompa which is built over the famous flame-and-water in the rock. It was all locked up. It is still winter. The sweet young Ani I spoke to at the entrance turned out to have the key but I only learned this on the way down. Never mind. I had a lovely spell alone in that magical place. Later, Kati and the boys clambered down the icy way to get bottles of 'holy water' from the rock. There is probably natural gas in there somewhere as the flame never goes out. The atmosphere, with so much snow, was truly magical.

The jeep ride down was a delight, only a few moments of skidding on the ice, and we did as planned, driving past Jomsom on to Marpha where the Tampopo Lodge had so impressed us on the way up. We had a very nice lunch in the sunshine and then a hot shower. I mean really, really hot. I nearly added cold water! It had been "quite a few days" since our last proper wash. There is only so much you can do with wet-wipes. I am writing this in a glass-walled sun room. Kati has gone walkabout with the guys to visit the monastery and view the village from above. It is a spectacular thing to see as the houses have no gardens but each has a very neat, well-kept rooftop bordered by a metre-high wall of firewood all around. This wood is a bit of a local status symbol.

Big surprise, there is another trekker here. Our fourth. He had crossed the Thorong La (5400 m) in chest-deep snow a couple of days earlier. Madness! A great trek but very risky in these conditions. His face was very, very sunburned. We played cards tonight with Paul from Stuttgart and Rajan, his guide.

**FEBRUARY 14:** A long trek today. Marpha to Kalopani would normally be one and a half days for us but in reverse, very slightly downhill (200 metres over about 20

kilometres) it was not hard. My feet did not like the tarred road but that was only a portion of the day. There is almost no traffic. We took lots of sunny breaks and another super lunch at Larjung. This new lunch place is a real find but they do not have rooms.....yet. We searched for fossils in the river bed and the sun shone almost all day. Dorje found a small stone with a perfectly-formed fossilised fern leaf on it in relief.

I was really on my last legs as we trekked into Kalopani but the clouds, which had begun to gather on the peaks around midafternoon, suddenly vanished. The full moon rose pale in the sky behind Nilgiri as the sun shone on EVERYTHING. Kati and I set up on the verandah with our usual drinks and cameras working overtime. Had not seen it look this good since our 2010 Annapurna Circuit.



The See You Lodge is a great place and the hot table is now gas fired and very effective indeed. Even so, I was so tired I bailed out early. The power went out for a couple of hours leaving the whole village eerily dark and quiet as a heavy mist blanketed everything. It was not that cold overnight as a result.

**FEBRUARY 15:** I think it was Lahar's idea to stay. We had spent less time than originally planned up at Muktinath (adapting to conditions) so he thought a rest day at the comfy See You Lodge was in order. Of course, we went out on a really long day-walk so hardly a rest. To visit Titi Lake we first had to go back a little way on the main



trail and then climb up steeply through fields and farms on an old stone stair trail. It was quite hot in the sun with very little breeze. It was much easier once we hit the jeep road through the pine forest. As we crested the ridge the road down into Titi was often snow-covered. The lake looked marvelous, and larger than previously; there is evidence of a dam wall on the far side. There were about 50 ducks and the Annapurnas sparkled in white contrast behind the pine forest. But it was freezing cold with a howling wind so we took a couple of photos and then scuttled back into the village for a cup of tea. Everything was closed. A local house was persuaded to make tea for us but we didn't linger long in the cold. We gave them the rest of our grapes. A little luxury in this region.



We soon warmed up climbing back uphill and, as we crossed the ridge, we descended into a little Shangri La of warm, sunny farms. Locals were friendly. They had not seen any trekkers for two years, though this trail is not a busy one.

Back at the lodge we snuggled under our blankets to await a decent hour for a drink. Hot table, good food, cards and great company. Perfect ending to a lovely day. Great idea Lahar.

**FEBRUARY 16:** Wow! Another fab day. We set off in a jeep but only got as far as Upper Ghasa when a brake line broke. We were stopped at the lodge we had stayed at on the way up so decided to lunch there. I think the guys were hungry. We had chicken momos. Kati probably not. Her vegetarian principles are way stronger than mine. It was soon clear that the jeep needed serious repairs so, after lunch, we set off on foot. We actually walked all the way to Rupse Chahara, about 3 hours down the road.

A team of roadbuilders had laid explosives in the towering rock wall. Trying to make the road more than one vehicle wide, I guess. It was being carefully monitored by the army. Luckily, our timing was good and we were allowed to pass the blast zone on foot. We were about a kilometre down the road, having a cuppa, when the explosions thundered around the valley. It was a precipitous drop to the river thundering below us on a narrow, bumpy road. Very happy to be on foot.



While taking photos at the Rupse Chahara waterfall a twin-cab jeep came up the road and offered to come back for us shortly. Great. A lift down to Tatopani. But what a road. Narrow and very muddy in places with huge boulders embedded in the road and

no passing room. Luckily, we didn't meet any other vehicles on the road. I did wonder how the two young Belgians on the Vespa would be managing?

Writing this in Tatopani. Hot shower and hair washed (first time this trek) The guys are down at the hot springs but the solar hot water in our rooms is just so convenient. Another great day.

**FEBRUARY 17:** Bit chilly this morning and Lahar insisted we eat breakfast as it is a climbing day and there may be nowhere to take an early lunch on the way. So lovely to wake up to green trees and songbirds. There are several large Bottle Brush trees (Kalistamon?) in the garden. Tibetan bread with local honey was delicious.

A wobbly little wooden local bridge out of the village and then out into the sun on the road. The big suspension bridge over the Kali Gandaki has been repaired at last (no need to trek around to the road bridge) and the smaller bridge has been replaced, thank goodness. The missing planks on the old wobbly suspension bridge were a bit disconcerting.

Lahar and I opted for the jeep road, slow and steady, while Kati, Kancha and Dorje ascended the steep stairs to the temple on the first ridge. Lahar and I saw a short-cut up some stone stairs, cutting off a long loop in the road. Through tiny farms and groves of orange trees the next short cut took us way east of where we might expect to meet the others. Then we found ourselves on the old trekking trail to Durbin Danda. It was a killer. Once a beautiful set of stairs made of green and yellow marble stone, it was now very broken up and a lot of the stairs were wobbly or broken. And really, really steep. It was short though. We got into Durbin Danda about half an hour ahead of the others, despite stopping for a breather after every 30 stairs. The others joined us for tea and biscuits as we admired the view in both directions. Acres of steeply terraced green fields strewn with stone cottages, haystacks, small orange groves and little wooded areas.

We set off uphill again. Really, there is nothing but uphill today. Wandering between farmhouses we stopped to buy oranges and then sat in the sun eating them all. Kancha had to knock them off the tree with a long stick. They call them Suntala. As easy to peel as a tangerine and really sweet. After loads of stone stair trails and a few level

sections through wooded hillsides we reached Ghara. Nothing open. We shared a few packets of chips and then took a second break for tea and biscuits.

We knew that Moonlight Lodge, our usual overnight stop when descending from Gorepani, would be closed. Still, I did not realise just how many bloody stone stairs it would take to reach Upper Sikha. At least the new See You Lodge (they do love that name) was open, full in fact, mostly with locals and one Italian. Roberto. I did my best to dig up my 1974-learned Italian with some success. Bideshi Number 6!

We changed into our 'evening clothes' (thermals, warm trackie-dacks, three layered tops and a down jacket) and wandered just down the street to a darling little shop. We bought cigarettes, rum and some lollies. Lurking in the smoky shadows of this tiny Bhatti were none other than our three musketeers. No Nepali likes to miss his lunch.

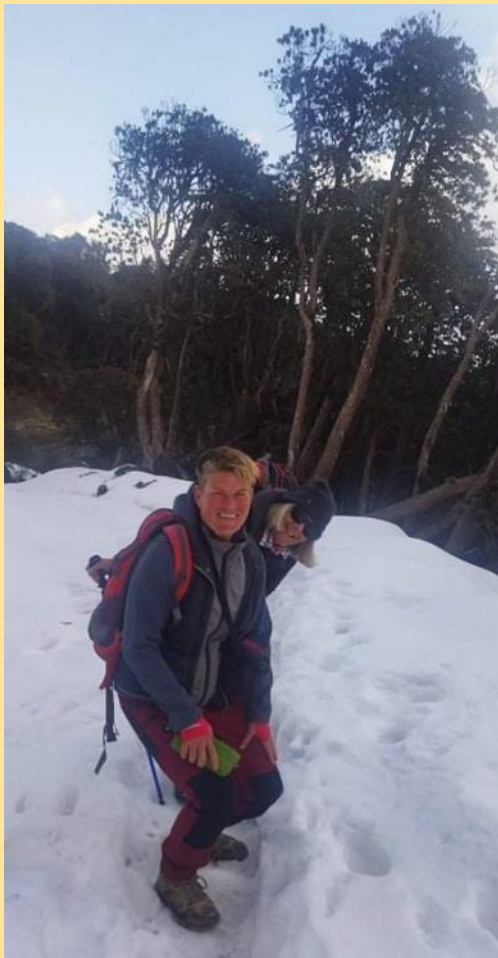
Hot honey-lemon-ginger on the table, rum added, gas heater quite close to us and my pen flying over these words as our dinner is being prepared. A little early perhaps but we missed lunch and we trekked hard. Veg momos and soup for Kati, veg egg fried potatoes for me. Sikha is at 1835, though this is Upper Sikha so I reckon about 2000m. Gorepani is 2850 and not that far away so another big day of 'up' tomorrow.

**FEBRUARY 18:** What a day! Setting out in just a thin cotton shirt and pants we were still hot and sweaty at the first break. Loads of stone stairs but lots of little farms, baby goats, chickens, buffalos, even a turkey! We found a roadside house prepared to make tea and then plodded on, sometimes on the jeep road but often on the old trail that I know so well. We had lunch at the Anapurna Lodge and, with only two more hours to Gorepani, we had clearly abandoned the idea of an overnight halt at the lovely Daulagiri Lodge. It was deserted anyway.

Being the slowest and not fancying any lunch (I had eaten my saved breakfast Tibetan bread wrapped around a banana at the last tea stop) I set off on my own. It was bloody hard but I just plodded slowly. As the trail got more and more covered with snow, then ice, I was pleased when the trail intersected with the jeep road coming up. The others soon joined me and we set off up the road, which was also soon covered in snow, deeper and deeper as we neared Gorepani. It took all my energy for the last hour of fairly steep climbing on snow and ice. The Sunny Lodge was open. The fire



was already lit in the dining room and we quickly occupied two tiny rooms in the old wing.



As I write this the dining room is filling up with what feels like a hundred Portuguese. More trekkers than we have seen in two weeks. We ate well, we danced a little, we slept well under two huge heavy quilts.

**FEBRUARY 19:** A very downhill day, for a change. Icy steps at first, then muddy steps, through a beautiful rhododendron forest. Did not see any rhodis flowering on this side of the ridge but lots of Daphne sweetening the air. The trail was broken in half a dozen places and I gradually realized it was not natural damage. A jeepable road has been constructed above the trail almost all the way to Gorepani. They have just dumped broken trees and masses of rocks over the edge of the road....and onto the



trekking trail. Very disappointing ACAP. At Bhanthanti the road has just smashed straight through the village. From the scent of Daphne to diesel fumes in just a few minutes. Luckily, the trekking trail continued, away from the road.



After a long lunch we set off once more down to Ulleri but spotty rain made us turn back. The fire was lit in the dining room. It was tempting to stay. Very tempting. Eventually pushing on, we did not get far before it started to rain again. We found ourselves outside a very appealing lodge, not far short of Ulleri. It turned out to be a good call as they had big attached bathrooms with amazingly hot showers, even high pressure. What a treat. And only three days since the last one.

The stove in the dining room was huge and the food was really good; including a plate of cheese no less. We played cards, then music and sang along while tippling on our.....you guessed it.....hot honey-lemon-ginger with rum.

**FEBRUARY 20:** Twenty minutes down to Ulleri where the road transected the village a little more discreetly than at Bhanthanti. I could not face the 3300+ stairs on

my aching knees so I set off down the jeep road with Kancha, hoping a jeep would come along later rather than sooner. It took about an hour. Kancha and I arrived at Hille, our agreed meeting place, around 11 am. The others arrived at 11.30, despite a half hour break. Not bad from a 9 am start. As I write this, it is raining again and we are tossing up various plans for the afternoon.

We stayed in Hille. Dorje made a fire in a metal tray, a bit like a huge wok, and we sat around it for the rest of the afternoon. It was mild and misty and rather beautiful. Kati wandered off when it stopped raining and photographed lots of different birds. I watched Doc Martin on Netflix for an hour. Technology!

Dinner in the kitchen was way warmer than the empty dining room. We are so low down now that they do not have heating, or doors and often no window glass. They made us Spring Rolls (the size of pasties) with chips, served with local achar. Tree tomatoes (tamarillos) with salt and garlic and chilly and timur. Delicious.



**FEBRUARY 21:** We had a big complicated plan for today but it all worked out perfectly. First a nice easy 'soft' trek down to Birethanti. Rather ordinary soup but a super banana lassi. We then had a bit of a schlepp up to Nyapul. The old bridge is



hanging in shreds so no shortcut. We located a super jeep to take us down to Khade to continue our trek. Only in Nepal can you book a jeep, agree a price and then, after fifteen minutes the driver pulls into a shabby tea shop and says he needs his lunch. I was a bit miffed as time was marching on but the guys just looked at me like “well, the guy needs his lunch”. He dropped us at Khade though and we were soon climbing again. Hundreds and hundreds of stone stairs. We did stop for tea at a lovely traditional house but if I thought that was the top, I could not have been more wrong. Lahar kept saying ‘not far then not so hard didi’. We just made it into Australian camp as it started to rain. Lahar and I slowed to make sure an exhausted plump lady made it in ok. Her son had just left her slumped on the side of the trail.



All was forgotten as we arrived. On the far side of a lovely wide maidan or playing field was a row of beautiful little cottages with clean bedding and hot showers....again! Only two days. This is getting ridiculous. I had to get out when the temperature hit 58 degrees. We went first to the dining room where the stove was lit and they had a COFFEE MACHINE! Praise be to CIMBALI. Two double shot Americanos please. Heaven.

We played cards with great enthusiasm tonight. Ran into Roberto again and he has agreed to join us for breakfast tomorrow. Two lovely Nepali young women, bank workers, were really friendly. We tried to dissuade them from trekking up to Gorepani

and Tadapani. The snow was deep and thick in the forest when we left and there has been heavy rain, and snow, since then. We did not succeed.

Luckily, the dining room was in two separate parts. In the other half a family of Nepalis was drinking way too much. This included the plump lady who had struggled so badly on the trail. She could not stand up by the time someone put her to bed and staggered past us laughing. By midnight the older man was still lying outside our room yelling that he did not want to go to bed. The amazing thing is while they rose an hour after us next morning, they seemed utterly unfazed and did not even acknowledge the drama they had created.

**FEBRUARY 22;** Divine views this morning. Breakfast outside with Roberto visiting and local cats and dogs playing nearby. The stairs down to Pothana were a bit hard on knees made sore from yesterday's steps up. Ow! Ow! Ow! Onwards then to Damphus through very pretty forests and not so steep now. The first rhododendrons are out at this low altitude. I am writing this at the lodge where I had been before. I recalled staggering in here at dusk with Jette, Barbara and Sebastian, having walked across the ridge from Millanchowk. Quite a few years ago now. Kati and I were here in time for lunch but sadly the mountains had clouded over. Pity, as the view is great.

We wandered around Damphus for a couple of hours with the guys, Kati taking bird photos, and found a tiny tea stall/bakery in what used to be centre of the old village. We played cards till late tonight.

**FEBRUARY 23:** Shining misty views this morning. Macha Puchre is so close! Kancha had always planned to take the three big bags on the bus to Pokhara while we trekked across the ridge today. My tummy was a bit troublesome in the night so I have decided to go with him. Kati set off with Lahar and Dorje to trek over the long ridge top to the Eco Lodge and then descend to Millanchowk for a taxi into Pokhara.

I was terrified in the local bus at first as it rocked and rolled over bumpy curves with lots of bags and sacks of veg and with goats (restrained but walking about overhead) making the bus very top heavy. I soon got used to it and the scenery through farms and villages was quite lovely. We exchanged the bus for a taxi near the edge of town

and ten minutes later I was ensconced in my old room on the top floor of the New Friendly Home, Gaurighat, Pokhara. Clouds are shrouding the Anapurnas, so I wash a few smalls and pack a vast quantity of dirty clothes for the laundry service around the corner. I soak up some sun. It is almost too hot.

We ate with our guys tonight at our favourite Nepali restaurant. Paneer Butter Masala seemed a bit rich after two and half weeks of daal bhat and veg noodle soup. A lovely evening. Dorje and Kancha are sleeping downstairs in our hotel, ready for an early departure tomorrow.

**FEBRUARY 24:** A nice lazy day today. Just after 7 we set off to farewell Kancha and Dorje at the tourist bus park for the deluxe Swift Bus to Kathmandu. So much bigger and safer than their usual cheap micro, which is fast but dangerous. There is a real coffee place at the rear corner of the bus park, take note all you fellow addicts. We met Bethany there, a sparky and rather adventurous Sydney-sider.

Back to bed then for an hour or so with the BBC World Service broadcasting almost exclusively about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I do understand that the Russians are made nervous by the ever-increasing proximity of NATO forces on their borders but invading Ukraine to create some kind of buffer seems madness to me. And Putin is a tool! He is well-known in East Germany, where I live, as Moscow's KGB boss, their link to the Stasi. As I said, a tool!

Kati and I spent four hours today just moseying around (gumna jane) poking around in shops which took our fancy. I found a nice light, white self-embroidered cotton kurta which I soon changed into as the day got quite hot around midday. We found more inexpensive cotton kurtas, some silver earrings for Kati, a few special beads for an Indian friend back in Germany. 5-sided and said to protect heart health. We collected our big bags of laundry.

After a few more hours of lazing about; Kati in the sun, me in my room dosing up my cold and my inflamed joints, we dined at nearby Café Concerto. Many years ago with Eric (does anyone remember Eric?) this was 'our place'. Great to break that spell. We



had veg pizza and Greek salad beside a circular fireplace. We washed it down with a couple of glasses of Chilean white wine, each!

Ready to fall over into bed as I write this. Quick call to Ekki and I am asleep, perchance to dream?

**FEBRUARY 25:** My cold was the 'real thing' by the morning, so when Lohan and Lahar came to pick us up for a day trip to Begnas Tal, I opted to stay home. By the time they returned I had recovered somewhat and was up, showered and packed for tomorrow's bus trip back to Kathmandu.

Meanwhile Kati had enjoyed a great day out playing tourist. Local bus into town then a very local bus to Begnas Tal, a boat ride on the lake, a spot of lunch at a lakeside café. The perfect day trip. They saw an eagle dive into the water very near their boat to extract a red fish in its talons and fly off with it. Nature! So much more entertaining than anything on the internet.

We took pot luck on a local café. The food was fine, though my fried rice could have fed a family of four.

**FEBRUARY 26:** So, back to Kathmandu on the bus. Lahar brought us a taxi and we had plenty of time for a decent coffee prior to departure. How things have come on in Nepal in that department. I never did like sweet chai, once the only choice.

I was reading Chasing the Monsoon by Alexander Frater (highly recommend it) which passed the time really quickly. It was very cloudy with no mountain views so I didn't miss the usual sparkling scenery. In between chapters and stories of driving rain in Goa, I would look up and see the warm smiling eyes of Nepalis going about their daily lives, steadfastly 'not minding' the rain.

By 3.30 we were dropped at Swayambunath on the ring road where a taxi transfer into Paknajol was so much easier than at bustling Balaju. We have our old room, 105, at the International Guesthouse, the password automatically engages the internet and we are 'home'. The garden looks well after recent rains, particularly the huge bougainvilleas.

I think this is the evening we ate at the French Café. Silly name. Nothing remotely French about it but the owner is very friendly. His son has a café in Werribee. Portions are rather large and the roast potatoes with garlic and rosemary served on the side are impossible to resist. We took the long way home; Paknajol is a nice suburb these days. Not touristy but well-kept with some really pretty houses.

**FEBRUARY 27:** We met Deepak for breakfast at the Potala Guesthouse. It was a bit chilly (hard to believe this as I type at Netra's house and the last few days have been 30 degrees!). They lit a gas heater in the courtyard for us. By 10 am we were off to the Immigration Office. My 90-day multiple entry visa ran out yesterday. Fawltly Towers has nothing on this place.

There are six computer terminals where you may fill in your own application for a visa extension. Four of them do not work. One is available but currently busy. The last is operated by a bossy but competent Nepali woman who agrees with Kati's loud 'Ladies First'. Told to 'go to Window 1' Kati sees that it is the same service as Window 2 without the queue. Then Window B exchanged my \$80 for a slip of paper and we were ordered to 'wait for name call, 1 hour'. We step outside and find a bottle of water and delicious Samosas. Inside, half an hour later 'Tera Villa' comes crackling over the intercom. I was there in a flash. New visa in 1 hour 20 minutes. A record!

We walked back to Durbar Marg, asking directions here and there, as it was only about 2 kilometres. Further than it sounds on Kathmandu's broken, rubble strewn, pot-holed, rubbishy footpaths. Still, we did not used to have footpaths. We landed eventually at Sherpa Mall a temple of middle-class indulgences. Coffee first then a deep dive into Fabindia. New to Kathmandu but a favorite of both Kati and I. Kati bought a long turquoise cotton kurta with red embroidery. I might go back for the same one later?? I bought a long, loose, full-skirted dress in terra-cotta with a tiny allover gold motif. Not my usual colour but our faces are brown from trekking in the sunshine on the snow and it looked good. A snap at 40 euro.

Next stop was Grace where I bought yet another of my famous pintucked kurtas / soft denim blue with a slight motif. Kati bought four or five items, I think. All VERY colourful. We found Biba after a bit of trial and error and, you guessed it, another kurta for Kati and some plain red cotton pants for me (to go under all those kurtas!) They turned out to be a bit short and I have already given them to Sarmilla.

We toasted our success with Khukri Rum and Pineapple juice (needs must – there is literally NO tonic water in Nepal).

**FEBRUARY 28:** We headed over to the BhatBateni supermarket this morning. Kati wanted some authentic Indian and Nepali groceries. We picked out various chutneys and masalas, papaad, pickles, laddhus, soan papdi, coconut biscuits and daalmoth. We found our chilli/timur mixed powder available in jars, as we had used on the trek. Of course, the fresh achar they made in Mustang was incomparable but, with some ripe tomatoes or even tamarillos, some salt and garlic, you could rustle up a good achar at home using this mix. We loaded a taxi with all the shopping and, back at our room, Kati managed to fit it all, with her new clothes into my giant suitcase, just. I heard later that the case checked in at 37 kg!!!



We taxied back to the Nag Pokhari where I was pleased to find that 1905 Restaurant was still operating. It was a really luxurious lunch in the garden of what was once a small palace. We sat on this terrace in dappled shade on iron-framed couches (1 each) upholstered with loads of cream calico-covered cushions. The food was beautifully presented. Kati had something Tibetan I had never heard of. We ate huge salads and a glass of very chilled white wine, Chilean, I think. Bit of luxury.

**MARCH 1:** Today was Kati's last day but, as she is not leaving till 11 pm, we had time for one last adventure. After breakfast with Deepak to finalise departure papers, we took a taxi down to Pathan. We alighted well away from the main entrance as I like to wander the backstreets first and arrive from the northern gate. Twisting and turning into ever smaller alleys we were soon disoriented. It was Shiva Ratri so everyone was out in their holiday finery visiting temples and family and friends. We bought ridiculously cheap samosas and pakoras on the street and then found a café in a tiny house on 4 floors, connected by really dodgy stepladder/stairs. Main thing was, they had a toilet.



We soon found ourselves outside the Golden Temple and, shaking off a couple of rather annoying guides, we toured around for a while there. After finally locating a money-changer we were ready for the main attraction. Pathan Durbar Square and Museum. At the museum they said we should buy an entry ticket to the square first. We headed south. Nobody at the gate selling tickets. We headed north. Same deal. Cannot enter the museum without a ticket. Cannot buy a ticket. It was actually rather glary and hot in the main square and the vibe was not half as interesting as the back lanes so we just dove back into the deep shade once more. Scooters, babies, dogs,



bikes, cats and kids. The kids strung a tape across the road and you had to pay a fee to cross. It's a holiday tradition. We found a little shop which served the best lassi ever, I kid you not. Bet I will never find that place again. Think Pathan Dokha, south of the boating pond. It really was THAT good.

Still early after lunch for Kati to sit up on the roof and soak up a few last rays of sunshine. I think we had 22 degrees, 5 degrees in Germany. We confirmed Kati's PCR test results. Negative. Deepak then prepared the exit papers which are now required. It is a new government initiative which does not seem to do anything except employ a few nieces and nephews in government jobs.

We lay on our beds this afternoon sipping the rather ghastly rum and juice combo, nibbling daalmoth, just too lazy to go out for proper food. The sun went down as we reminisced about the trip, talked about our past and carefully avoided any mention of leaving.

We rode to the airport by a very circuitous route, avoiding the massive gathering at Pashupatinath. The Shiva Ratri festival can attract more than half a million devotees, especially on the evening, with Sadhus coming from all over India. Even near the airport the footpath and roads were thick with crowds of happy revelers coming home.

The airport was astonishingly jam-packed. Every available standing space in the outdoor departure area was full. The place where you get your exit papers stamped was blessedly deserted so in just one minute, we were cleared to enter the airport. As only one access gate was operating the queue was enormous. However, it was rather disorganized (it's not London!). We used this to our advantage, working in tandem. A little nudge there, a wheel past there, an elbow, a chest and hey, we are at the front. Kati is soon through and I am ordered, quite sharply, to 'clear area madam'. I did. My next challenge was to find my driver in the large carpark. I had a vague notion of a silver jeep with a roof rack and a youngish driver in a denim jacket. I had no sooner set foot in the carpark than a quiet voice beside me said 'Hi' and opened the car door for me. I love riding through Kathmandu at night, especially a warm Shiva Ratri night. Winter is officially over.

Bon voyage Kati

Ramro sanga janus, pheri betaunla Germanyma.

This was not our typical trek to Muktinath. Firstly, I had no customers as such, just a really good friend in Kati. Being only the two of us we could go as far as we liked or stay an extra day when we felt like it. Total freedom in fact. We also had along my three favourite people in Nepal, if not the world, in Dorje, Lahar and Kancha. What a dream team. Dhanyabad, you guys were bloody fantastic.

As I finish writing this report at Netra's house in Kapan on a sunny spring day, waiting for my PCR test, I have had some interest in a trek to Muktinath in October this year. October 1 – 20 seems likely. It will be warm and sunny so early in the Autumn season. Also, a couple of people are interested in my idea for a late October start for a trek to the Everest region. Jeep in over Pattale and Karikhola, almost to Lukla. This would take two or three days with overnight stops at trekking lodges along the way. We will then trek up to Namche, 3 days, then out to Thamo and Thame. I would like to stay at Thame for a few days doing day treks. So, no Everest Base Camp and a bit more off the beaten track. Flight or chopper out?

I can be contacted at [teresadb@hotmail.com](mailto:teresadb@hotmail.com) or [vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com](mailto:vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com). Do get in touch if you fancy joining us for the coming season.

My Permanent Resident Visa for Australia, which I have had for 48 years, has apparently expired! Who knew? I stayed away just a bit too long....bloody Covid! I am unable to come to Australia as planned. Next available flight to Germany on my original ticket is April 13. I have just telephoned Dorje to arrange two jeep tickets to Pattale. We are going trekking. Woo-hoo!!

Cheers,

Teresa didi

.....a few more random pictures. I lost my camera on the way so most of the photos in this report are from Kati, or my phone.











