

JEEP-TREKKING TO MUKTINATH, NOVEMBER 2024



NOVEMBER 21

With the departure of the Pike Guests it was time to focus on Pokhara, Muktinath and beyond. It is just me, Ekki and Helen so a real 'friends' trek. We are trying out a possible 'jeep trekking' itinerary. But today is just a recovery day. Washing clothes, eating chocolate, etc. The usual. We did eat out, with Deepak, at the French Bakery. It is not particularly French, or a bakery for that matter, but the menu is diverse, the wine is good and the owner is a jovial dude, with a strong connection to Werribee, of all places!

Chicken burgers with cold dry white wine, probably from Chile, went down a treat. After dinner, with \$5000 (minus three air tickets) we are taking nearly 4 Lakhs, 400,000 in 8 x inch-thick blocks. We hid them in our various luggage to spread the risks. Some in a sock, some in an overpants pocket. We do our final packing to the clatter of dishes being washed and packed up. There was a local wedding behind our house, all day today. Lots of smoke and chanting and singing and clashing of bells and cymbals. Just a little family wedding under a colourful marquee. I watched from the stairs a few times today. Their food smelled delicious.

NOVEMBER 22

An early alarm call. I feel faint. I hate flying in Nepal but needs must. The road to Pokhara was appalling last time we took it. I nibble on a bit of

toast and drink some weak black tea. Soon the Artmandu Café opens, just outside the hotel gate and I dash out for takeaway coffees. By the time our storage was safely stowed in the locker room, Kamal was there with the blue Toyota Hi-Ace and we were soon off to the airport, domestic terminal. The new building is great, the coffee delicious and we were delayed no more than an hour, something of a record in Nepal. Flight smooth but rather cloudy. The valley views on the left were beautiful, the 'low hills', and we had a few glimpses of the big peaks on the right. Faultless landing at Dhangadhi, Pokhara's new international airport. Even the loos there were spotless!

Taxi was squeezezy – 3 big bags, 3 hand luggage and 3 big bideshi. We managed. I had booked on-line Hotel Himalayan Inn because it was inexpensive and in 7th Street. Gaurighat, our usual hang-out in Pokhara. Our regular hotel's good rooms are on the third and fourth floors - my knees said no! Rooms not quite ready so we lunched at nearby AM-PM Organic Café. A treasure. Big menu, lots of fresh food, salads and smoothies. Ekki's Paneer Tikha Baguette caused a ripple of order envy.

The hotel is a bit underwhelming, but the bathrooms are modernised, and we have two big windows overlooking both the back gardens and a big open veggie growing area. Helen's room was not up to scratch so they gave her a strange room at the top of the hotel 'next door'. An excursion across the roof terrace required to get there. However, the bed was huge, and the shower apparently very hot and strong. 'Shabby' would be the most accurate description. One night and we will decide what to do tomorrow. Lots of nearby hotels.

Lizzie Dobson's group are trekking back to Pokhara from Australian Camp today. Hope to connect.



NOVEMBER 23 Ekki brought me coffee from the nearby Deutche Bakerei. Excellent coffee and good value though it was too early for croissants. Ekki had no trouble putting them away. After a more leisurely breakfast at AM-PM we strolled out to the shops for odds and ends. Lahar is still busy with our good friend Lizzie Dobson's group but we will try to catch up this evening – otherwise it will be another year, at least, till we meet her.

We have located a super hotel for our return to Pokhara. Blue Planet Lodge, Street 9A if you are looking for it, has beautiful décor, with singing bowls atop the sideboards in most rooms. Rear balconies have mountain views and dining is on the verandah, overlooking the pretty garden. At \$20 - \$30 it is a bit of a luxury – our reward for slumming it at the moment. The current place is adequate, and at \$12 it leaves plenty in the budget for nice restaurants.

We dined with Lizzie's group at the Nepali Kitchen, opposite the Temple Tree Hotel. We go there a lot. Lizzie's cousin Rachel, her nephew Dylan and a couple of other interesting women made up our group. Lively chat over the usual paneer tikha masala. Great to meet some new, very relatable Victorian people.



NOVEMBER 24 To go tomorrow, or not to go?? THAT is the question. Another day in Pokhara was an easy choice this morning. The ‘Deutsche Bakerei’ a small bakery-café with two tiny tables on the footpath and great coffee is turning into our happy place. Avocado baguette was today’s choice. Too big for one person and loaded with garlic.

A lakeside walk was a perfect choice today as the weather topped 24 degrees. We bought some Himalyan Java coffee for the trek, ground while we waited, and stocked up on De-Cold and Strepsils just-in-case.

Lahar has been alerted that it is ‘game on’ for tomorrow. Bharat and Sanchok (Lahar’s son) will make up the three support staff. There will probably always be one of us (me most likely) opting for a jeep, but if we do all trek then we need three porters.....plus, its family!!

A light dinner of spicy Chicken Sandekho at Thakali Kitchen. Bounty bars on the way home for desert.



NOVEMBER 25 Jeep ready at 8 this morning. We dropped our storage luggage (mainly dirty clothes) at the Blue Planet and booked to stay thre on 7, 8 and 9 December. It is lovely. Our jeep was a stunner. A Scorpio in top condition. With 6 passengers it was

very roomy. A dream ride through the foothills. We drove via Baglung for the better road. A bit narrow to pass busses and overloaded tractor trailers but our driver's skills were legendary. The strange duck pond 'Resort' lunch stop was 'adequate'. So warm and sunny even at the end of November. A little disconcerting.

The Trekkers Inn at Tatopani has a swanky new building. Our deluxe rooms are on the third floor. There is a huge terrace facing up the valley to Nilgiri South. Warm welcome from Rajesh (?) and the family. A stroll around the village revealed a lot of new developments, most of it not for the better. We found our guys playing some pretty serious pool. God only knows how they got that table up here, years ago. The sound of the river rushing by our lodge is soothing and we ate our dinner outside, still warm at only 1100 m.



NOVEMBER 26 Woken at 6.30 this morning with 'bed tea'. So happy to be back in this routine. A local jeep has agreed to take us to Kalopani for a very good price if we are ready before 8 am. At 7.50 we are on board and rolling. The road is still rubbish in places. Luckily the really large oncoming vehicles did not meet us on the worst sections of the road. Luckily, we are on the left, the inside, on the way up. Phew! The trashing of this valley with roads, hydro- stations and power lines is heartbreaking. However, these

things are a godsend to the locals, though tourists, particularly trekkers, are pretty thin on the ground.

Shortly after Ghasa the road improved spectacularly. Sealed, two lanes, with lane markings! Arrived at Kalopani at 9.15, the See You Guesthouse is another 'happy place' and we ate breakfast in the garden chock-a-block with gigantic marigolds – she feeds them crushed up eggshells. The views of Tukche Peak, Daulaghiri and the Anapurnas was astoundingly clear.



How many people, reading this, will have stayed in those rooms???

NOVEMBER 27

We awoke to a fabulously clear dawn of pink light illuminating Daulaghiri and then Tukche Peaks. A latish start for trekking as we only plan to trek to Tukuche. Only! It was quite a bit harder then I had imagined. Pretty pleased with myself though as this is the furthest I have walked since my knee packed up in February. It did take us pretty much all day. We took lunch at a funky old lodge where I stayed with the Codlins a few years back, the one with the poor old grandma who roams the house moaning and screaming – harmlessly, I should say. Why they took our order when there was nobody there to cook is beyond me. Eventually, Lahar took over and prepared veg noodle soup and chips for all of us. We ate in the kitchen. Back on the trail after 1.5 hours we meandered through old Larjung for a kilometre or so. Walled apple gardens and whitewashed stone houses, all with bright blue windows and doors. On the hillside above us were the ruins of many old salt trader's houses, now used as storage or animal byres.

The little settlement of new apple gardens an hour before Tukuche has grown. Two pretty lodges, plantations of the new type of apple trees (single trunk with many apples growing directly out of it) and a marvellous coffee shop. It was close to 4 pm when we took a

short-cut across the creek to the old village of Tukuche. The coffee really helped for that last little push.

I had not stayed at the lovely Tukuche Guesthouse since shortly after Samar, the owner, died about 5 years back. I was so happy to see that his son and daughter-in-law were running it, with a little help from her younger sister. The home is as well-kept as ever and we even have my delightful traditional room in the old part of the house. Time for a hot table.....

A cosy evening in these old familiar surroundings. We ate egg curry and had a drop of Kukri Rum and Coke then played Thirteen with Bharat and Lahar. The hot table was VERY HOT!! Perfection.









NOVEMBER 28

Helen's room was on the roof so we joined her up there at sunrise. It was a beauty. Daulaghiri looks spectacular from this angle and nearby Nilgiri dominates the Eastern skyline. At first Daulaghiri was only faintly visible in the early light but as the sun slid down the snowy peaks the surrounding hills came alive. Too beautiful for words.....

We breakfasted in the porter's diner, adjacent to the pretty kitchen. Our hostess, Deepa, placed a couple of coke braziers at our feet as we downed veg omelettes with toast (actually, it was fried bread – and none-the-worse for that). Lahar brewed up our own coffee in a saucepan and we all ate the same breakfast today. Deepa, the daughter-in-law, is doing a splendid job and the house is sparkling. In fact, nothing has changed at all. Tukuche Guesthouse in the old village. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.**

We decided on trekking today as the terrain is not so demanding. We set off in bright sunshine and had shed our jackets within ten minutes or so. There were many lammergeier on the way to the bridge across the Kali Gandaki. Dozens in fact. Helen's binoculars were put to good use. We had a decent rest, eating apples, on the far side of the bridge, watching locals ride their motorbikes across. The walk to the refugee camp at Chairo was a treat in the pine and juniper forests after a bit too much bitumen road yesterday. Gently up and down, culminating in a cuppa at the Chairo Refugee Camp – more of a village than a camp after almost 60 years. Highlight this morning was a rapidly descending herd of about 25 yaks, only about a hundred metres away – on OUR trail. I scanned for a place to stand off the track but quickly realised that the herd was forking off to the right, just below us. Phew! Then, four runaways came lurching through the bushes behind us, but passed us by before we had time to panic. Phew again.

Marpha has changed quite a bit. There are about twenty shops where there were once only half a dozen. The whole street is hung with prayer flags, rather like bunting. Each

shop has 'local costumes' which frankly look more Tibetan than Thakali. The Nepali tourists pay to try these on and then swan around in the narrow lane making tik-tok videos of themselves. All a bit Disney. Motorbikes are not banned from this narrow, picturesque lane, which adds nothing to the busy mayhem.

The Tampopo Lodge does have very nice rooms overlooking a garden full of rose bushes. However, there is no heating in the vaulted dining room or the glass-walled dining hall. None at all. Even with a crown of Spanish trekkers and their porters we were rugged up for dinner.

As dusk fell the entire village main street was illuminated with neon lights (LEDs I guess) which was truly hideous. A walk through the tiny backstreets was very rewarding though. Luckily, all the new hotels are outside the main village, down on the main road. The Nepali tourists in their black down parkas and fluffy pom-pom hats, seemed to be enjoying themselves. Times change. The recommended trekking route is on the east bank of the river and bypasses many of these old villages. There are signs of a road on that side these days.







NOVEMBER 29

Another sunny morning but too cold for an early start. The landscape is bleakly beautiful with sweeping valley vistas to distant whitewashed villages. However, the way is on the road today and it is dusty and windy with quite a lot of passing traffic. Helen got ahead of us with Sanchok so we stopped for tea ourselves. The little teashop owner said she was busy but her neighbour would make us a cuppa. A very simple home with whitewashed walls and swept clean wooden floors. A delight. I would definitely consider jeeping at least part of this section next time. The alternative trekking route is steep up over Dungba Lake, across the river, and my knees just said 'no way'. A viable alternative for some. Pretty pleased with just how much I can trek up till now.

The Mustang Taj in Jomsom was a joy to behold. I thought we were having lunch and deciding whether to jeep or trek to Kagbeni this afternoon but Helen was already ensconced in a room and Sanchok held out the key to 208 as we arrived. An easy decision then. Was I ever so slightly peeved or was it just the altitude.? They can be very similar. Off for a walk, after a top lunch. We circuited the town, stopping at Om's Home, a deluxe lodge, on the way home for exquisite hot chocolates and a look at some great local art. Helen seems very tempted.....

NOVEMBER 30

It was chilly in the deep shade as we trekked up to Kagbeni this morning. Following the sealed road, we walked for an hour or so behind a huge flock of sheep and goats. Perfect pace for us. Found a place to descend onto the wide riverbank and stayed on the east side, carefully navigating the multiple streams between big river pebbles and cracked sandy banks. Eyes down for fossils. Amonites and Trilobites are often found here. Sanchok and Sagar found some beauties. It was quite hot down there, but we soon found a path back onto the road and click-clacked (trekking poles on bitumen) past Frank's Bridge and into a warm and dusty Eklai Bhatti. We stopped at the old house where we always take our lunch, and six enormous yaks mooched around outside the dining room windows, clearly ignoring us. Excellent veg noodle soup and then onwards to Kagbeni.







A recently-constructed floodwater barrier on our side of the river has been almost demolished. Bulldozed rocks covered the familiar trail. Eventually found the red and white trail markers. Sadly the trail petered out until it was only about 6 inches wide on a crumbling cliff over the river, some 40 metres below. Ekki got across but both Helen and I baulked. I think I may have whimpered 'no, no, no' but looking back over my shoulder the section we had just done was almost as bad. With Helen behind me, retreat seemed ridiculous. Bharat took my left hand. Both poles in my right I dug them hard into the bank above me and sidestepped, very gingerly, across. It got worse. I could have cried but forward seemed the best option. Within half a minute there were a few firm footholds and then a steep track out of there. So glad we have porters. Alone, with a big pack would be bloody dangerous. Cruised into Kagbeni in warm sunshine, rather relieved at having survived. As Posy from Colac famously once said 'At least you know you are fuckin' alive!'

Major construction work at the entrance to Kagbeni and motorbikes parked under the historic chorten gate, do nothing to enhance its appearance. An afternoon stroll revealed the full extent of the damaging floods last year. The Muktinath River (not the Kali Gandaki) has ripped the guts out of the centre of the village. The Red House, the Gompa and most of the old village and fort are undamaged. Happy to see that the Lhasa Lodge, where I stayed with Kati last time I was up here, has repaired their damaged ground floor and are back in business.

The Asia Lodge and its owners are remarkably unchanged. I even got my old room. The veg cheese lasagna was a winner tonight with garden-fresh veg and wild dried mushrooms.

DECEMBER 1 This was definitely the high point of our trip, in both senses of the word. We awoke to a clear blue sky day. Jeep booked for 9 am and NO PACKING as we are returning to Kagbeni this evening. At first the jeep lurched over the stony track behind Kagbeni, made worse by the flooding Muktinath River last year, but we soon joined the main road to Muktinath which is now paved all the way to the top. I have been told that this highway, which is sealed from Kalopani onwards, now goes all the way to Lo Manthang. Strategic considerations perhaps, as the road goes to the border with Tibet (China).

Apart from a few icy patches, the drive up was easy, and took less than half an hour. We alighted at Ranipawa amidst hundreds of Nepali pilgrims all haggling for a pony ride up to the temples. At 400 NRS, \$5 Australian, I probably could have taken a ride but we opted to stroll into the village with the throng and had a very posh coffee in one of the many new hotels. Too many, probably.

The stairs up to the temples were tough and more than once I regretted my decision to walk. However, there was a rather festive vibe amongst the local visitors and every second person stopped for a breathless chat. The bathing pools and 108 taps were thronged with pilgrims young and old. I sidled over to the Ani Gompa which houses the 'flame and water in the rock'. Nice and quiet, very few visitors. I was touched, as always, by the beautiful Buddha statue here. A picture of kindness, with a definite Thakali cast to the features. I love it. Taking a fill of holy springwater we descended on floating tread. We had done it. All happy.

Our jeep driver had arranged to collect us just below the temple, down a pretty steep and shabby track, but he had good news. The road was jeepable back to Kagbeni on the Dzong side, the northern side of the valley, which was once part of the forbidden Kingdom of Upper Mustang. It was an utterly magnificent drive. No lunch available at Dzong but tea and lots of biscuits sitting on stone walls in this idyllic place will not be easily forgotten. A rare treat. The photo on the opening page of this report. We plan to stay overnight here if possible next year. The drive home was magical with Daulagiri always looming in the background and nameless huge mountains on the northern horizon, all the way to Lo Manthang and Tibet. A super day.

Evening saw Ekki and I strolling around the old Kagbeni village. Ended up in a little curio shop where we both found some charming antique artefacts, Ekki in particular bought a gorgeous ancient prayer wheel. The shopkeeper was a delightful man.







DECEMBER 2

After another super breakfast, we made an exciting jeep trip for just two hours, covering our 4 -day ascent. We collected Helen's watercolour painting from Om's Home Gallery and at Marpha Lahar collected a huge bag of lentils, courtesy of Mangal Thakali and delivered by his sister, the lovely Sumitra. The air was so clear at Larjung that we had to stop the jeep to gape at the Daulaghiri Ice Fall, which really does appear to 'hang' over the village. As we neared Kalopani we drove very close to the yaks we had seen from a distance, across the river, on the way up. Huge and beautiful. Writing this on the sunny balcony of the See You lodge where the massed marigolds are still putting on a show.

These are almost entirely Ekki's photos, taken on his phone. I cannot bear to crop them.





DECEMBER 3 We trekked down to Ghasa today. At first we trekked over the fields behind the Kalopani village and through a forest of 'swishing' pines. No other forest sounds like that. We emerged at a tiny village of the whitest houses with the bluest windows and doors. Various crops drying in immaculate courtyards. Within an hour or so we were back on the bitumen road. Without doing a big trek back over Titi Lake, this really is the only way down. There is a nice off-road trail above Lette Khola but it is a big schlep up and then down, on a fairly overgrown and ill-defined track. While we do not really 'like' the road, it is easy and the views up and down the valley are a stunning distraction. After a couple of hours, we reached the tiny settlement of Misi, where the off-road detour joins the main road. It is one of our favourite tea-stops and we now know the owners very well. There was a baby buffalo in the idyllic backyard and, best of all, four six-week old Tibetan Mastiff puppies. Their own dogs. Noisy chickens strutting through the house completed the picture of a rural idyll. Decided to lunch here and soon Didi was out in the garden gathering a huge bunch of spinach for veg noodle soup. Sanchok was not happy to be leaving without a puppy. He was smitten.



The afternoon saw us descending a couple of hundred metres into warmer softer air. Eagle Nest proprietors Dinesh and Kausila were very happy to see us. We had very hot showers in our ATTACHED bathrooms. Then a hot table with a charcoal brazier underneath. We had pumpkin soup, a bit of a tradition here, and then some rousing games of Thirteen.

DECEMBER 4 We ordered a jeep for today. It is quite a long walk to Tatopani, the easy way on the terrifying road or the hard way trekking on the Eastern side of the river, and we were all 'feeling it a bit'. The price was good if we would head off at 8 am. I am guessing he had a pick-up in Tatopani. After a frightening jeep ride on some pretty crappy roads – you might recall that there were severe landslides and flooding during my last Muktinath Trek in 2022 with the Codlins – we were in Tatopani at a very chilly 9,15. Despite the low altitude, only 1100 metres, the steep-sided valleys do not get the sun till late in the morning, and it is gone by 2.30 pm. A few phone calls scored us a jeep back to Pokhara if we would wait till midday. It was a delight to sit in the garden as the sun came over the ridge and warmed us up.

We drove to Pokhara on the old road, not sure why. It was very rough indeed as far as the big bridge which goes off to Baglung – nowadays a massive city. From then on, the road was sealed, mostly. We had beautiful, fleeting views of Machapuchre, Anapurna South and Anapurna 1 as we sped through increasingly affluent villages towards Pokhara.

Blue Planet had great rooms ready for us. Beautifully-matched décor, singing bowls, attached bathrooms with little back balconies to sit outside – mountain views of course. We walked around to Nepali Kitchen, with a stop on the way for much-needed coffee. We had only had a Nescafe this morning at Tatopani. We all had the Paneer Butter Masala – despite offering Helen a long-promised chicken dinner. This restu is opposite the famous Temple Tree Hotel. Much better food at a quarter of the price.

DECEMBER 6 A bit of a blur. Recovery day. Eating, sleeping, snoozing, washing a few smalls. Lunch at AM/PM . Dinner at Thakali Kitchen was odd. The place was booked out for a wedding, but they seated us outside by an open fire. It was lovely and the wedding guests were spectacularly well-dressed.

DECEMBER 7 My turn to get up and find coffees while the breakfast was being made. The upper loggia of the building is a super nice place for breakfast. 3,000 NRS for the 'deluxe' rooms, including whatever you want for breakfast. 20 euros or \$35 UAD. Great value for two people. W could almost live here – why don't I???

Another of our endless Pokhara days seamlessly merging into one another. I bought a watch, in Mahindraphul, the main 'downtown' for locals. Is this the day we visited the Mountaineering Museum? The cultural exhibits were great and the environmental exhibits very informative, especially regarding global warming and its effects on glaciers agriculture in mountainous regions. Many alpine villages are being abandoned due to lack of reliable snowmelt to water crops. Several glacial lakes have broken through, and large lengths of glacier have just melted away. All in the past fifty years. At the same time Monsoon rains have become more sporadic and extreme.

One bright patch on the horizon is the number of EV in Nepal these days, mostly the cheaper Chinese models such as MG and BYD. Scooters and Motorbikes too. So quiet. A great idea for a country with a lot of hydroelectricity and no oil.



DECEMBER 8 On our last day in Pokhara we invited the whole Pun family and Bharat to join us in Mahindraphul for dinner. Helen and I had lunchd at this place the

day before and it seemed great. It was Saturday evening. Almost everything was 'off'. We ate a lot of tandoori chicken pizza. Helen had bought a huge assortment box of sweets from the famous sweet shop out front of the restaurant. Watching the joy on Lohan's face as she bit into the Ladhus was a unforgettable.

Last day in Pokhara.....ok, I have officially 'lost the plot' here. I wrote this in Kathmandu on 12 December, long after I had forgotten what we did, or when. We spent one day wandering through Lakeside to the German Bakery which has a quiet spacious garden and very good 'bakery items'. Along the way, Helen and I succumbed to expensive cashmere knitwear. A rare treat.

I have totally missed our evening visit to the Pun family home. We had brought a nice bottle of Jacob's Creek Merlot/Shiraz. It was NOT a screwcap! Neither the Pun household or neighbours had a corkscrew. Sanchok held a light to the neck of the bottle, as advised remotely by Sagar, to no effect. I thought we should just pick at the cork. We started slowly but, with the right pointy knife, we had that it out in under twenty minutes. Poured the wine into the glasses through a tea strainer. Effective. Of course, the daalbhat with boneless chicken was fantastic. Sopana had to leave for her night shift at the hospital. She is now a fully qualified, degree-wielding nurse, earning a good wage. A lovely evening indeed – whichever date it was??

DECEMBER 9 Shortly after 8 am we are on our way in yet another big Scorpio jeep back to Kathmandu. The Anapurna were a little hazy but clearly visible, appearing to float above the horizon. By Damauli we were in thick fog. The road was appalling in parts and then superb in others, where it was finished. Coffee on the way and then a 'scratch lunch' at Hilltop. A place I really dislike. I was prepared to give it a chance – but it is still crap. Refusing the tired old lukewarm buffet daalbhat we had very few choices so had to take the Orange Choco Pies with coffee. Turns out they are nice. Helen is so taken with them that she has stocked up for her return flight to Melbourne. An interesting alternative to airline food. All went well till the final winding ascent into the valley – it was heavy with traffic and dust from half-finished roads. Our driver took an abrupt left turn off the road and drove on a well-made winding dirt road behind Nagarjun, surfacing in Kathmandu just opposite the Swayambu Buddhas on the Ring Road. Nice one.! Reached the International Guesthouse half an hour later at 3 pm! 7 hours total travel time. Woo-hoo!

We are in the old house rooms at the back of the garden. It is a little chilly at night now, but brand-new electric fan heaters were handed out with the room keys. Dinner at Yangling – of course. Chicken Kothey Momo. Yum!

DECEMBER 11 Kathmandu. What to do? So many choices.... Helen and I set off to find the TAKAPA gallery in Lazimpat. Not that easy but we found it eventually, upstairs from a small lane. A very modern exhibition space. Current exhibits were all by

the same, Sherpa artist, whose name I did not note. Sorry. The work was very finely executed – he is a trained thanka painter – though the subjects were rather bizarre and included quite a lot of balloons! We wandered back slowly, shopping along the way. Dinner at the French Café – the Chilean wine by the glass is a big drawcard.



DECEMBER 11 (Surely not again...)

We have given a lot of our market purchases over to Deepak for sending. He will do all the packing, weighing and customs documentation for export. We then headed over to Netra's house in Kapan by taxi and stored a big suitcase of trekking gear. Helen donated all her camping food supplies – dried meat in individual packages – to the 'dog lady' who rescues strays. Helen was given a couple of bales of knitwear to carry home for Isabel. Netra is a dear friend but also the manager of Bright Future, Isabel's project in the suburbs of Kathmandu at Kapan and out at Netra's home village area of Kangel. She does great work. If you EVER want to donate to a charity which gets the job done, this is it. In Melbourne Isabel is always looking for donations of saleable items for the Camberwell Market, which funds a lot of her work, along with Rotary.

Night was falling as we drove home. I love a taxi ride through Kathmandu at night. Because of electric lights you can see into so many houses and shops which are just dark doorways in the daytime. Shop windows with glittering saris in jewel colours, immaculately stacked fruit shops and people just hanging out in little clusters around glowing braziers. To some it is an overcrowded, polluted dive, but I just love it.

DECEMBER 12

After a bit of 'admin' this morning, Helen and I headed over the Hyatt in Chahabil, the location of the Taragaon Gallery. It was pointed out to us, a bit snootily I thought, that the gallery was actually back down the drive where it was on the main road adjacent to the hotel's main gate. OK. But by then we had spotted the gorgeous dining area. Set beside a vast atrium filled with statues and a pool with a

tinkling fountain., a band of traditional musicians was playing folk music. We had a fab lunch. Thanks Helen.

The Taragaon Gallery Museum was a real find. No modern art but a modern collection of buildings housing lots of old photos, lithographs, watercolours and sketches of historical Nepal. While the work was great, I particularly liked that the gallery was public, anyone could walk in off the street and there were quite a lot of Nepali youngsters and kids wandering around. Did not meet any bideshi.

Too lazy for dinner tonight, I raided the little grocery store for chocolate, chips, and nuts for a night in. Found the 'other' bottle of Tanquehanx Julie). Finally, after seven weeks in Nepal, we tried the tv in our room. It works not.



DECEMBER 12 Swayambu was warm and sunny as we alighted from our taxi at the Benchen Monastery gates. Seeking the Artudio Gallery we strolled to the end of Military Hospital Marg where we found a delightful garden, populated only by two maroon-clad monks in deep discussion. At each of the four corners stood a larger-than-life bronze statue of a Gurkha soldier. We never did find the gallery. Swayambu was swarming with people, mostly Buddhists, many older folk in traditional clothes. There was a special puja at Benchen. It was too crowded for a comfortable visit. I heard later

than 7000 people attended today! The diversity of ethnicities was wonderful. The devotees have come from Lo Mantang, Burma, Sikkim and all of India. Chinese, Mongolian, Kashmiri, Eurasian, Indians of various regions. Many of our smiles were returned as we wove through this river of humanity. We visited Bina's little jewellery shop for a chat and then found the Kathmandu Café. Swish décor, fancy menu but ultimately a bit disappointing – apart from Helen's Mocha Iced Coffee, which was the only really successful order. Waiting an hour for poached eggs on avocado toast did not help. My sandwich was dry and chewy. Why did I order it??

We walked all the way back down to Thamel, stopping at the little Tibetan shops which make 'antiques'. They are very good. Traffic was ghastly, though the prevalence of EV is helping a little. Breathing toxic fumes in narrow lanes while dodging motorbikes is no fun but we really need a stretch. It has been a lazy couple of days with far too many bars of Cadbury's Bubbly!

We took a coffee with Deepak at the Roadhouse. Such a lovely ambience now that the tourist season is over. And such clean toilets!! We just had time for a last G and T before Purna Sherpa's EV taxi glided silently through the traffic to the crowded airport. Not a serious problem as 90 percent of those in the departure forecourt are there to say goodbye to family and friends. Almost no queue.

Bye Helen. We loved having you here. We tested our jeep-trekking idea thoroughly. Clearly, it works. I wonder who will come with us next time??

Cheers, Namaste, Pheri Betaunla

Teresa and Ekki.



Thanks to Lahar, Bharat and Sanchok for putting in the hard yards with the rucksacks and the bed tea. We love you guys.

Thanks to Deepak and Sahara Treks and Travels. Flights, jeeps, hotels, and permits, and insurance, all worked seamlessly. Thank you.

And to the people of Nepal. In this crazy developing world, how have you managed to stay so kind?

We have an itinerary planned for November this year, 2025. It is pretty flexible. Contact me at teresadb@hotmail.com or vonschwichtenberg@gmail.com if you would like to do this trip or the Pike Peak trek. Both itineraries are on the website at www.slowtrekking.com. We are also considering a Spring 2026 trek? Would that suit anyone??

Cheers, Teresa didi