

Dolpo track notes

four treks - Dhorpatan, Lower Dolpo, Upper Dolpo and GHT High Route (from Jumla to Shey Gompa)

These notes have been updated (Feb 2017) following treks in October 2016 for Upper Dolpo and GHT High Route

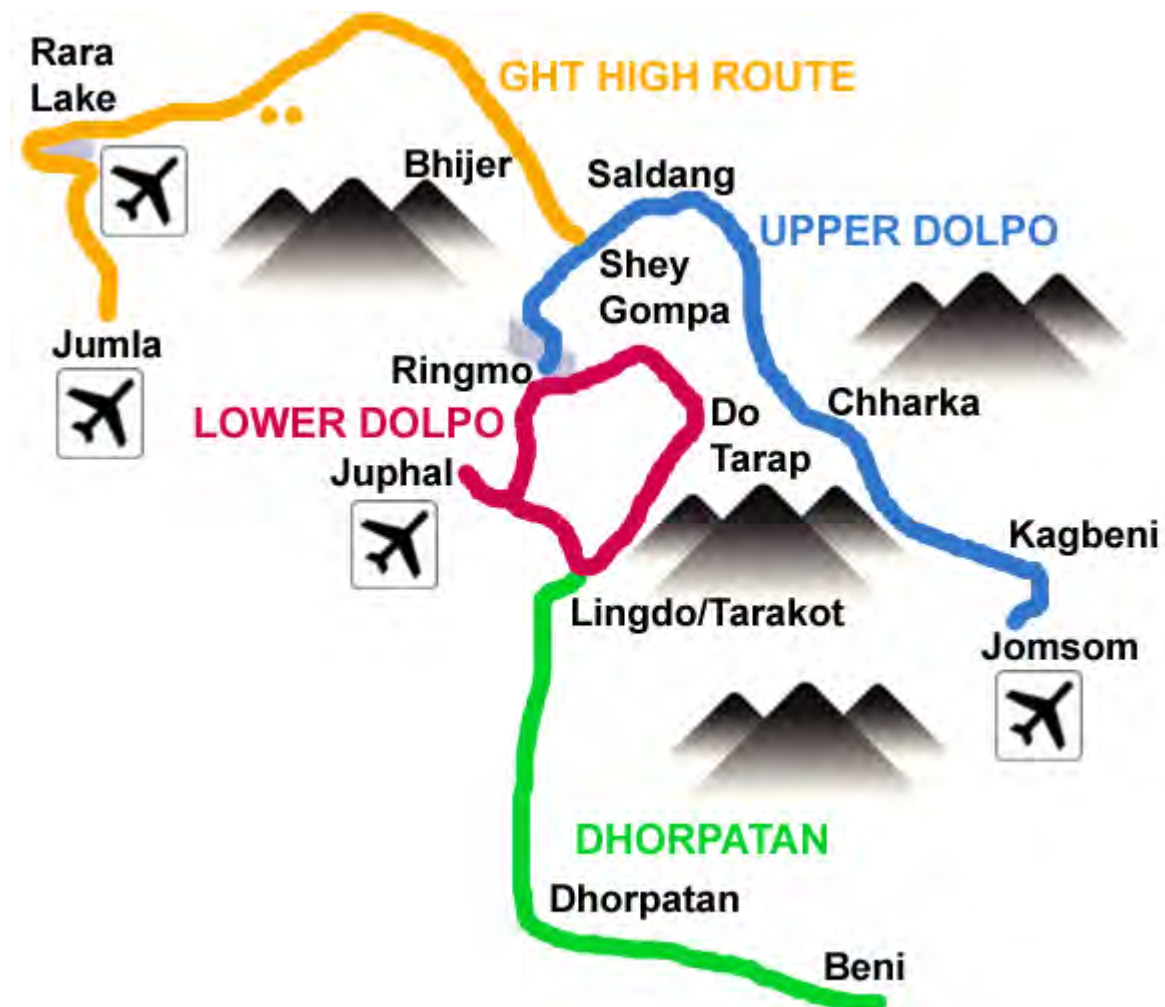
Here are track notes for four walks, with lots of variations possible. Each can be done individually or added together to make satisfying treks of from 15 - 40 days or more.

Dhorpatan walks from Beni near Pokhara to Lingdo/Tarakot in Lower Dolpo. There is lodge accommodation all the way and an exit by air from Juphal.

Lower Dolpo is a loop through Do Tarap and Ringmo (Phuksundo Lake). Entry and exit are usually by air at Juphal or by foot via Beni.

Upper Dolpo requires permits and takes in Phuksundo Lake, Shey Gompa, Saldang and Chharka out to Kagbeni/Jomsom.

GHT High Route is described from Jumla via Rara Lake to Shey Gompa and there are many options from there, all requiring permits.



These are mostly difficult treks and should be undertaken only by those familiar with trekking in Nepal. There are multiple passes over 5000m (16,400 feet), several with high camps in between. In 2014 we saw three helicopter loads of people being taken out of Upper Dolpo because of “extreme exhaustion”, which we had not encountered before.

There is an emphasis on using local lodges where available but they are marginal in some places. Upper Dolpo and the GHT High Route described cannot be visited without a whole expedition, guides, cooks, tents, porters and often horses or mules. Despite the high permit fees, in season Upper Dolpo is becoming very popular with large European groups. You are presently unlikely to meet any other trekkers on the Dhorpatan trek, a few in Lower Dolpo if you go via Do Tarap, and a lot of groups, in season, in Upper Dolpo. We met only one party on one night on the section of the GHT High Route described so only two parties completed the route in this direction in 2015. We met three small groups in 2016 all coming from Shey Gumpa. We know of only one party, from India, who trekked it in the direction detailed here.

There are various options to shorten or lengthen the treks; this is what we did and we hope you will enjoy as hugely as we did. We also hope that these free track notes will increase a more independent style of trekking in this region which will increase the flow of money direct to locals. Rather than taking all your food and supplies from Kathmandu, consider living on *dalbhat* twice a day and buying food and fuel and accommodation where available as you go, taking only selected supplies like breakfast foods and snacks from Kathmandu.

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Introduction

As expanding road networks improve villagers' lives in Nepal, trekkers seek out more remote areas to encounter solitude and ancient village rhythms. Nowhere is this experience more available than in Dolpo, north-west of Mt Dhaulagiri and straddling the Himalayas. Upper Dolpo is one of the highest permanently inhabited region on earth and one of the most remote. Dhorpatan and Lower Dolpo provide delightful access to Upper Dolpo and each is worth trekking on its own merits as a stand-alone trek or together. The trek in from Jumla via Rara Lake will provide even more challenges.

Culturally Tibetan Dolpo borders Tibet and is high and arid, surrounded by 5000m (16,400 ft) passes to the west, south and east. Much of it is in the Shey Phoksundo National Park, Nepal's largest at

3555 sq km and protecting the 800 year old Shey Gumpa under the pilgrim-magnet Crystal Mountain, the stunning blue enamel of Phoksundo Lake, and the spectacular Kanjiroba mountain range. Upper Dolpo is sparsely populated with mainly pastoral families and its people are generally adherents (Bonpo) of Bon, a religion whose origins predate Buddhism but which is accepted as a sect of Buddhism.

Upper Dolpo is said to be a *beyul*, one of the hidden valleys which Padmasambhava blessed as refuges to be discovered when the planet is approaching destruction and the world becomes too corrupt for spiritual practice. They are valleys reminiscent of paradise that can only be reached with enormous hardship.

Lower Dolpo is a mixed Hindu and Buddhist culture and provides excellent acclimatisation for enhanced enjoyment of the continued trek into Upper Dolpo, reducing risks of altitude problems, but also offers a superb wilderness traverse from Do Tarap to Ringmo and the stunning Phuksundo Lake. Rara Lake is one of the jewels of Nepal, tranquil and restful, while the GHT (Great Himalaya Trail) High Route onwards to Shey Gumpa is very remote, with seven days between villages.

The greener, southern part of the region, which we have called Dhorpatan since a hunting reserve by that name covers much of it, is culturally Hindu and is also fascinating. This region is rarely visited and offers trekking as it used to be - staying with polite friendly families or camping, eating varied local food and enjoying some of the best views in Nepal.

In spite of the inaccessibility of the region and tourism restrictions for the more remote parts, this region is becoming a popular destination for trekking groups since it was opened in 1989.

If you are looking for stark, ascetic beauty and ancient villages little touched by modernism, and are prepared to put up with the high costs and hassles of flights, fuel, permits and food, these treks will hugely repay your efforts.

Permits, guides, costs and gear

You need permits for Dhorpatan and Lower Dolpo and both permits and guides for Upper Dolpo and the GHT High Route, as follows. However a guide is also very useful in Dhorpatan and Lower Dolpo where finding food and shelter can be a real issue.

Dhorpatan requires a Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve permit (\$US35pp) and a Lower Dolpo Special Permit (\$US30pp valid 14 days). Because you have these permits no TIMS (Trekking Information System card) is required.

Lower Dolpo, if you are entering via Dhorpatan or flying in or out of Juphal, requires a Lower Dolpo Special Permit (\$US30pp valid 14 days). Because you have this permit no TIMS (Trekking Information System card) is required.

Upper Dolpo requires a Lower Dolpo Special Permit (\$US20pp valid 14 days) if you approach it through part of Lower Dolpo. In addition, a Shey Phuksundo National Park entry (\$US35pp) and an Upper Dolpo Special Permit (\$US750pp valid 16 days) are required. If you intend to exit at Jomsom you will need an Annapurna Conservation Area entry (\$US25pp). No TIMS is required.

GHT High Route requires an Upper Dolpo Special Permit (\$US750pp valid 16 days) and a Shey Phuksundo National Park entry (\$US35pp). If you intend to exit at Jomsom you will need an Annapurna Conservation Area entry (\$US25pp) and if exiting via Juphal a Lower Dolpo Special Permit

(\$US30pp valid 14 days). No TIMS is required.

The Upper Dolpo permit requires that you have a registered guide and a minimum party of two.

Our preference is for a light flexible team using local food where possible (*dalbhat* twice a day is great, plus *tsampa* where available and if not mouldy) and minimum equipment. For instance, for two of us, we had a team of five in 2014 and six in 2015: a guide, an assistant guide/cook/Tibetan translator, and three or four porters. We had a small tent plus a mess tent that doubled as the team tent, and a toilet tent. We had no horses or mules, unlike every other party we met. We carried a satellite phone, although there is some mobile reception using a Western Nepal Hello SIM but not on the GHT High Route. A small solar charger provided reliable power for the satellite phone, an SLR camera, a compact camera, UV water sterilizer, two headlights, and two Kindles. We took instant coffee, Snicker/Mars bars for over 5000m, some muesli bars, trail mix from Kathmandu and rolled oats and/or muesli (1-3kg) for emergencies. Staple food and kerosene fuel we purchased along the way, and carried honey, jam, oats, muesli, trekkers mix and muesli bars from Kathmandu.

For guides and professional organisation, we very highly recommend Visit Himalaya Treks www.visithimalayastrek.com run by Himel Tamang himalt@visithimalayastrek.com whom we have used on several occasions to complete satisfaction, negotiating daily rates for guide, porters, food and actual costs for necessary travel. Inclusion of a Tibetan speaker may help you to get an insiders' view of the culture.

We want to record our deep thanks to our team in 2014 of KB, Mingma, Kancha, Phurba and Suresh for enjoying the long trek as much as we did, for greeting every morning with a song and every adversity with smiles; and our deep thanks also to our team in 2015 of Issu Rai, Mingma Bhote, Dawa Bhote, Jamling Bhote, Sambhu Tamang and his twin Ramesh Tamang who all worked extraordinarily hard and well together. Again in 2016 we enjoyed the company of KB, Mingma Bhote, Kami Bhote, Dawa Bhote, Phul Kumar Tamang and Shambuddha from Daphne Lagna despite the late monsoon snows.

Maps and books

We used a Nepal Map Publishing Pvt Ltd 1:125,000 *Upper and Lower Dolpa* map and found it often inaccurate. Some passes were more than a kilometre from their actual location. Note that this map starts at Purbang on Day 9 of the Dhorpatan trek and you will need another for the earlier portion. The Nepal Map Publishing Pvt Ltd 1:125,000 *Dunai Jumla Rara* map, used for parts of the GHT High Route section, is also inaccurate and in particular shows as a major trekking route an impassable trail and does not include the essential major passes north near the Tibetan border. If attempting the latter route search out better maps in Kathmandu. The spelling of place names from these maps have been used in the following track notes but alternate spellings are given. We also carried the relevant bits of Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya (2009 edition)*, which was very useful although inevitably a bit dated. An alternative map is Dolpo & Mugu, Great Himalaya Trail Series, Map NP 109, 1:150,000, Himalayan Map House, ISBN 9789993347712 but the scale is small and there are some mistakes <http://www.greathimalayatrail.com/maps.php?cld=2>

There are two excellent background books.

Himalayan Pilgrimage by David Snellgrove (1981 out-of-print) describes a trek from March to October in 1956 when the author visited many *gompas* in Dolpo and catalogued in detail the various sects and idols before trekking east through Manaslu and Tsum valleys. The historical photos are fascinating and there is a very useful table of divinities' names in English, Sanskrit and Tibetan. This

helps if the lama guiding you in a *gompa* says that a painting is of *Sangs-rgyas sman-gyi lha* and you can look up that that is *Bhaishajyaguru* or Buddha Master of Medicine, etc.

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen (1978 out-of-print but now in ebook) is the sole reason why many Westerners know of the Dolpo area. This personal zesty log of an eight week trek with zoologist George Schaller was very popular during the 1970's hippy era when such eclectic literary spirituality was the fashion, but it somewhat dramatises the trekking and is annoying in endless doubt and searching for the present when one would fall over if one wasn't present on some of the paths. His descriptions of nature are crystalline but his insistence on wringing a personal cosmic significance from every event has an air of desperation that wears. Very useful for identifying birds in certain areas (eg hoopoes and Turkoman hill pigeons) but less so with plants where his advice would poison you (eg calling datura a gooseberry).

The Oscar-nominated film *Himalaya (aka Caravan)*; Eric Valli 1999) used local actors and provides an excellent introduction to the area if you can find a copy. Widely available in Kathmandu.

Lodges vary, no menu was sighted and showers are (almost) non-existent. You can certainly raise *dalbhat*, *tsampa*, noodles and *roti* at most places, but coffee is not available and you will need to take your own. There are very few shops and often stocks are limited to noodles, biscuits, toilet paper (once, in Ringmo!), tobacco and alcohol. Water, batteries and soap are rare. *Bhattis* are permanent teashops that usually have some porter accommodation and may be smoky and cramped but do provide food and shelter if needed.

A feature of the trekking, particularly Dhorpatan and Lower Dolpo, is the availability of seasonal tented camps where one can sleep and eat, or camp nearby and obtain *dalbhat*. They are more common in Lower Dolpo where some have been established to service the *yarsagumba* trade during the monsoon. *Yarsagumba* is a very expensive fungus-infested (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) caterpillar found above 5000m and much valued by Chinese as an aphrodisiac. Most tented camps close by the end of October.

On Day 8 of the trek from Beni to Kagbeni in 2014, Sue wrote in her diary "this is a very difficult trek. You will probably have to battle with leeches, mosquitoes, fleas, stinging nettles, torrential downpours (if the monsoon is late) and a boggy, muddy, steep, slippery, rocky, overgrown trail plus lack of toilets and places to wash. Probably not suitable for first timers to Nepal and no place for dragees (wives, girlfriends, friends,) unless they really want to be there." Of the GHT High Route portion, our guide Issu observed at one point "this not trekking trail, this mountaineering trail. Adventure trek."

Four complete sets of track notes are given below, for Dhorpatan, for Lower Dolpo, for Upper Dolpo and for GHT High Route from Jumla to Shey Gompa. They can be done as separate treks or combined for a fascinating and demanding experience.

- Track times given are actual hours walking, with brief rests. The times do not include lunch, for instance, which may add two hours if you are ordering or cooking *dalbhat*. This can be an issue: your guide and porter expect to eat at 10am or 11am depending on how early you start and often they use this waiting-for-lunch time to wash themselves and clothes. Our solution is to make a rule to walk for at least 3 hrs before stopping, which makes sure some good progress is made and then feel happy about a long lunch.
- Lodges we know have ** in the notes following. Room rate is given as (Rs300) where known and (db Rs250) gives the *dalbhat* price, a sort of Big Mac index for Nepal.

- Altitudes are from the map, in metres. Height gain/loss per day is cumulative and rough, from a cheap altimeter but may help you know what is coming. Net gain/loss can be derived by looking at the start and finish altitudes each day.
- Villages in **bold** in the following tables are the stages described, but of course you can vary these stages depending on fitness and availability of accommodation.

Access and exit for the treks

The weather window for trekking Upper Dolpo is very narrow so most large groups start from Juphal in the first two weeks of October. The best advice we received was to be heading OUT of Upper Dolpo by mid-October. If you are trekking in through Dhorpatan and Lower Dolpo as well this means you should aim to start trekking in mid-September. The monsoon used to end on 15 September in more settled times, but with climate change this has become very variable, so you can expect muggy hot and sometimes rainy conditions at lower elevations.

Dhorpatan can be accessed with one day's travel from Kathmandu by taking the 25 minute early flight to Pokhara (\$US117pp) and hiring a jeep for 3 hrs to Beni on the Kali Gandaki, draining between Dhaulagiri and the Annapurnas, then another 2 hrs to Darbang (\$US180). The road between Beni and Darbang may be closed by slips during the late monsoon but generally you can manage to walk for an hour or two extra to Darbang in one day if required. Note that there are hotels in Beni (Hotel Yeti, Hotel Namaste, Hotel Dolphin), Tatopani with popular hot springs (not to be confused with the village of the same name up the Kali Gandaki) (Milan Guesthouse, Himalayan Guesthouse) and Babiya Char (Shershan Guesthouse) if required.

Lower Dolpo is usually accessed by a flight to the high and narrow gravel airstrip at Juphal via Nepalgunj on the India-Nepal border. This requires two days at least and your planning should allow for delays if you are seeking to trek close to the end of the monsoon in mid-September, as clouds often delay the once-a-day early morning flight from Nepalgunj to Juphal. There is the large Mt Putha hotel in Juphal. On arrival it is possible to walk or take a jeep the same day as far as Dunai.

Upper Dolpo is usually accessed through Lower Dolpo, specifically via a flight to Juphal as above.

Dhorpatan and Lower Dolpo can be exited by air from Juphal or, by road or air, from Jumla. Brief details are given on Day 10. Allow four days to Kathmandu from Ringmo at least.

Upper Dolpo is usually exited by air or road from Jomson in the Kali Gandaki valley although some itineraries come back to Juphal using other passes. Allow two days to Kathmandu at least. You can also exit through Lower Dolpo and Dhorpatan by reversing the track notes below.

The section of the **GHT High Route** described, which includes Rara Lake, is usually accessed by air to Jumla or less often by an airstrip near Rara Lake. More details are given in the track notes for that section.



Recommended routes are:

- **Dhorpatan** as a stand-alone trek, in from Beni, fly out from Juphal (or reverse) 11 days with some rest days plus 2-3 days access and exit
- **Lower Dolpo** as a stand-alone trek, fly in and out of Juphal, 14 days including some rest days plus 2-3 days access and exit. We saw people turned back on this route by altitude sickness due to inadequate acclimatisation.
- **Upper Dolpo** as a stand-alone trek, fly into Juphal, exit to Jomsom, 20 days including some rest days plus 3-4 days access and exit). Requires consideration of acclimatisation.
- **Dhorpatan plus Lower Dolpo** as a stand-alone trek, in from Beni and fly out of Juphal, 22 days including some rest days plus 2-3 days for access and exit. Requires consideration of acclimatisation.
- **Both Lower and Upper Dolpo**, fly into Juphal, exit at Jomsom, 28 days including some rest days plus 3-4 days access and exit. Requires consideration of acclimatisation.
- **Beni to Kagbeni the hard way: Dhorpatan, Lower Dolpo and Upper Dolpo**, in from Beni, exit at Jomsom, 37 days including some rest days plus 2-3 days access and exit. We did this trek in 2014. While it is possible to do this suggested route in reverse, there are significant acclimatisation issues with hitting 5000m on Day 3 and so it is not recommended unless you are already acclimatised (which you could do by spending five days extra above Jomsom towards Thorung La as did one German couple we met).
- **GHT High Route from Jumla or Rara Lake to Shey Gumpa** and exit to Juphal, about 28 days plus 2-3 days access and exit.

Jumla to Jomsom: GHT High Route from Jumla or Rara Lake to Shey Gumpa and exit to Jomsom, up to 38 days including one rest day, plus 2-3 days access and exit. We did this trek in 2015.

Dhorpatan track notes

Stage	Hours:minutes	Lodge Accommodation?
1 Darbang - Dharapani	2:00	Yes
Dharapani – Takam	0.45	Yes
Takam - Sibang	0:45	Yes
Sibang - Machim	0:30	No
Machim - Paliyagaon/Muna	1:30	Yes
2 Paliyagaon/Muna - Lumsum	2:30	Yes
Lumsum - Moreni	1:00	No
Moreni – Jalja La	3:30	Bhatti
3 Jalja La - Gurjakot	3:00	Yes
Gurjakot – Chhyantu	2:00	Yes
Chhyantu - Dhorpatan	1:00	Yes
4 Dhorpatan - Bozekum	2:00	Yes
5 Bozekum - Phalgune Duri	3:15	No
Phalgune Duri - Takur	2:15	Yes
6 Takur – Khaim	3:30	Yes
Khaim - Pelma	2:00	Yes
7 Pelma – Hima	2:00	No
Hima – Gulbang	1:00	No
Gulbang – Dhule	2:00	Yes
8 Dhule – Seng Khola	6:00	Seasonal tents
9 Seng Khola – Panidal La	3:00	No
Panidal La - Purbang	1:30	No
Purbang - Majela	1:00	Seasonal tents
10 Majela - Jang La	1:15	No
Jang La - Samataling	3:15	No
Samataling - Sahartara	0:30	No
Sahartara – Lingdo	0:45	Yes
11 Lingdo rest day	REST	

1. Darbang - Paliyagaon/Muna 800m↑ 200m↓ 5.5hrs

The roadhead bazaar of **Darbang** (~1200m) on the Myagdi Khola is hot and steamy but has several hotels (Rainbow Thakali 4 rooms, **Surakshya 22 rooms including some with attached bathroom Rs500 db Rs200, at least two others). Enjoy this quality of hotel as it is the last one until Jomsom.

Cross the Myagdi Khola on a large suspension bridge and follow the currently unused road through quintessential middle hills. Climb steep zigzags, descend and cross the Danyga Khola and climb 300m steeply, rewarded by impressive views of Mt Dhaulagiri (8167m, 7th highest in the world; “dazzling white mountain” in Nepali). The road continues to Dharapani (Prena Guesthouse very friendly, Roka Hotel 2 rooms). Every piece of flat land is covered in vivid rice and the people are shy and polite, even the children. Contour above the village to Takam (Rojina Lodging) which provided an excellent *dalbhat* of tomato, potato and okra with our first hempseed *achar*. Mountain views to Nilgiri and the

Annapurnas continue to Sibang (1610m), which has Hotel Namaste. The road turns towards the Dhaulagiri circuit trek but branch left to Machim, with no hotel. Crest a ridge, descend on steps to the Ghatta Khola and traverse to **Paliyagoan/Muna** (~2000m) **Bisnu Guesthouse (7 beds, 2 low-roofed rooms) or (hot) camping in the schoolyard.



Mt Dhaulagiri from the south, entering Dharapani

2. Paliyagaon/Muna - Jaljala 1500m↑ 300m↓ 7hrs

Drop to a bridge across the Dhara Khola, climb gently on the true left bank then start a long climb past a picturesque waterfall to the poor Magar village of Lumsum (2150m) with Hotel Himalayan. There are reports of red panda in this area. Cross the Dhara Khola again and start the long climb to the pass, first through the scattered hamlet of Moreni (~2500m) with apple orchards and water then into scrubby forest and unrelentingly steeply up a ridge into rhododendrons to a notch at 3350m. Climb and traverse onto the large meadow of **Jalja La** (3510m; Jaljala) with a large smoky seasonal *bhatti* where it is possible to sleep although it may be more comfortable and quieter to camp. The evening *dalbhat* featured freshly picked *cheow pahelo* (yellow mushroom, a *Pleurotus* species) with potato and hempseed *achar*.

The evening and morning views are superb, better than those from Poon Hill given the serenity, spanning the entire Dhaulagiri massif including Putha Himal 7246m to the left to Nilgiri 7061m and the Annapurna range. We camped amid over 300mm (12") of torrential monsoon downpour, lightning, thunder and terrified goats but it cleared for the morning view.



Putha Himal 7246m from Jalja La camp

3. Jalja La - Dhorpatan 0m ↑ 650m ↓ 6hrs

Enjoy rare level walking across to a second meadow with great views then descend across small bridges past herders' huts and green flowered meadows amid rhododendrons. After an area of burnt-out pine forest make a sudden turn right up the Simudar Khola, crossed on a suspension bridge, before descending and reaching Gurjakot (3010m) with the Samir Hotel and fresh *saag* and carrot *dalbhat*. Saw our first exotic hoopoe and a redstart, characteristic of western Nepal, on this stage. Lonely Planet says to look for the red walls of Tashi Gedye Tarke Ling Gomba to the right before you arrive in the Tibetan refugee village of Chhyantu (2990m) after 2 hrs. There is a guesthouse on left and the village is the top end of the large wet plateau that is the home of the very dispersed town of **Dhorpatan** (2860m), with no bazaar or shops that we could find but many horses. Matthiessen has harsh words for the two weeks he spent here trying to find porters in the rain and reading all the books he had brought for several months stay.

Continue through the scattered houses past the deserted park headquarters and a hunting lodge available only to hunters to a disused airstrip, on the north side of which is a large echoing community hotel with electricity and comfortable rooms (**Dhorpatan Community Hotel Rs500, db Rs350, 10 rooms). 100 trekkers passed here last year, a record number. Note that an entry fee is payable for the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve even if you are trekking.

A new road is nearly completed from Pokhara to Dhorpatan so in the near future it may be possible, if one is prepared to miss the views from Jalja La and endure a long ride, to join the Lower Dolpo trek here.



Entering the rather dispiriting and spread out town of Dhorpatan

4. Dhorpatan - Bozekum 200m↑ 50m↓ 2hrs

We chose to do overdue washing in the morning then walk a short day to a farmhouse above Dhorpatan, traversing west for a saddle to the right of a round hill. Good views back over the largest flat piece of land in Nepal, but even better north into superb forest and meadows, spruce, juniper, hemlock, firs and pines. **Bozekum** (~3000m; Jaundi Bisauni 'twins resting place') consists of three farm houses, one of which has a dark room with two beds and authentic *asli* cooking. Very rural with bells and animals, running water, woodsmoke. Wild rhubarb by the river and wild strawberry (*Potentilla* sp) not yet fruiting at this time.



Resting outside our room in a farmhouse in Bozekum

5. Bozekum - Takur 1000m↑ 800m↓ 5.5hrs

A pleasant valley climb to three small passes called 'youngest sister died', 'middle sister died' and 'oldest sister died' after a local tragedy in a snowstorm, but we rested in sunshine. Then a very muddy and long climb up a gully to the empty Phalgune Dhuri (pass, 4061m) with wildflowers, principally purple asters, and views of Dhaulagiri, Churen Himal and Putha Hiunchuli if clouds permit. The swathes of wildflowers were the highlight of the day, but grazing animals had gone to lower altitudes three weeks before as the creeks had dried up. Descend through endless green grazing slopes into old rhododendron forest then steeply down a ridge into pines and a pine-fringed clearing. The furthest of three houses in **Takur** (3190m) has two private rooms with 8 beds and windows Rs500, db Rs350). Excellent *dalbhat* with a rhubarb *achar*.



Descending through wildflowers from Phalgune Dhuri (~4000m), looking south

6. Takur - Pelma 700m↑ 1400m↓ 5.5hrs

Drop quite steeply through a beautiful as-yet-untouched forest of deodar, spruce and hemlock, cross a bridge at 2710m then climb to Ghustung for tea. The violent red 'maize' under the eaves is actually poisonous for humans but used as a stockfeed called 'snake corn'. Then steeply up to a ridge at 3410m in broadleaf holly and oak, with viburnum, everlasting daisies, purple asters and many others. Continue along the ridge with a welcome cool breeze and excellent views both sides to Khaim (2890m; Khayam) for *dalbhat* of *tutsi karela* (a widely used green vegetable seed pod that grows on vines) and *saag* (ubiquitous mustard green) (Rs250) served at a table inside. Some beds are available.

There are two paths from here.

The right drops quickly and steeply through forest past two small hamlets, crossing the Jatlung Khola to a valley junction at Tatopani (2400m) with a tiny hot spring and pleasant-looking camping area. The open shelter is reputed to have bed bugs. The bridge over the Pelma Khola has just been repaired so this might be the best onward route if you are camping.

The left, which we took as we were told the bridge was out, follows the rocky ridge to the left, crosses a stony face then drops down into the tropics at **Pelma** (2400m) to a 'real' hotel with some rooms and a distant toilet (**Hotel Pupal Rs500 db Rs350, several rooms, not the cleanest).

Across the valley up some dismaying zigzags are arrayed the Tibetan-style stone houses of Yamarkhar where Matthiessen and Schaller were again stuck by lack of porters, but our way onward avoids that track.



Hotel in Pelma (2400m) with the onward route in the gorge below

7. Pelma - Dhule 1200m↑ 200m↓ 5hrs

A very rough jungly track leads north through fields and down to cross the Pelma Khola at 2227m, the lowest point between here and Kagbeni, then climbs very roughly and very steeply to rejoin the track from Yamarkhar under cliffs. The skeins of mist and tropical heat made this a demanding beautiful climb. Sighted a pair of jungle cats with brown bodies and long black tails. A profusion of wildflowers in the jungle and along the exposed traverse northwards made this a memorable day, with lunch in the Tibetan village of Hima (~2400m, Him) surrounded by 3-4m high maize, climbing beans and marijuana. Most of the maize goes for *chang* beer, not for food or stock. The hemp seed and rhubarb *achar* was a first.

Traverse and climb very high on an exposed trail with recesses into forest and running water to Gulbang (2680m) with no services then past a school which has the last water for a while then up steeply into forest to **Dhule** (3340m), a high bowl stripped of trees with three houses. **Hotel Base Camp was open and friendly (private room plus dormitory, new 'not ready' toilet; Rs500, db Rs 350), Hotel Copila of blue-sheep-on-the-menu fame was not open.

The highlight was to realise that the heap of blankets in the corner by the fire housed the 99 year old mother of our hostess, still mobile and only just stopped herding her 20 buffalo. It was an honour to meet this remarkable woman who had lived all her life here and in a lower village, and had only relatively recently started to eat rice instead of millet.



North up the Pelma Khola towards Hima and Dhule

8. Dhule - Seng Khola 800m↑ 300m↓ 6hrs

Climb out of the bowl steeply into forest and after 45 mins go left up a high route which was a real memory of the trek, like a vertical botanical garden with splendid old-growth rhododendrons, festooned oak, ferns and epiphytes among atmospheric rocks. A broken stone gate (*kani*) at the top, called Nautake Bhanjyang ('nine steps pass') from a Bon pilgrimage story, gives onto an exposed traverse with views in all directions, clouds permitting, and edelweiss. A griffon silently traversed below us in the cloud without a flutter of his wings, turning his head from side to side. The newly-finished lower route was taken by our team but took the same length of time and had some dangerous exposed parts by report.



Climbing to Nautake Bhanjyang



Open traverse on the west side after Nautake Bhanjyang, looking north

Descend steeply to rejoin the lower trail and contour up and down above the true right of the Seng Khola in open country, climbing above the tree line into a landscape with black castles of rock, green cliffs and snow pigeons. This area is just within the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve so it was disturbing to find armed young poachers in a tent with a newly killed blue sheep. Descend to the first tent camp we had encountered, several tents in two encampments with metal stoves and chimneys. Two Tibetan girls were able to supply food cooked or supplies for cooking so we camped nearby. **Seng Khola** (3820m; Panidal Phedi) can be cold and windy.

9. Seng Khola - Majela 1000m↑ 500m↓ 5.5hrs

Make sure that you take the first obvious track on the ridge upwards to the left, quite heavily eroded and about 1km up-valley. Matthiessen and Schaller got lost here taking the more northerly ridge. Climb steadily for about 700m with great views to the broad Panidal La 4530m, past a sacred lake and a gateway *kani* on the far bank. Many thousands of people had been camping up here over the monsoon and searching the grazing areas for the elusive and high value fungus-infected caterpillar called *yarsagumba*, Himalayan viagra. The huge amount of rubbish and damage to the landscape was obvious but they had all departed in the past few weeks.



Descending from Panidal La 4530m. Majela is on a shelf just under the distant Jang La 4540m

Continue on a broad eroded track down to Purbang (4020m, Purpang), a forlorn collection of empty tents, cross or wade the Saunre Khola and climb gently up to a basin with a seasonal tent camp and marvellous views back to Panidal La. Called **Majela** (4340m) tent site Rs400, db Rs500, the place was filled with silence except for distant streams. Being perched just under Jang La makes for an easier next day. Saw two *lammergeiers* (bearded vultures) chasing their huge shadows over the grassy slopes, with at least a 3m motionless wingspan, and the remote Sirma Daha lake in a high bowl to the east. Very frosty overnight.

10. Majela - Lingdo 200m↑ 2200m↓ 6hrs

Just over an hour up to Jang La Bhanjyang (4535m, Jangla), which provides huge views back into the grassy basin and the excitement of views north into the Bheri valley and, over the grey ranges, the first glimpse of Kanjiroba Himal (6612m, Kanjiroba) which dominates the trekking north after Ringmo if you go into Upper Dolpo. Jang La is regarded as the entry point into the Dolpo region.



Descending from Jang La to the Bheri valley and looking north to Mt Kanjiroba 6612m

Make a long rocky descent, at first steeply to the last water until the Bheri then across rockfall with the strong smell of cinnamon and honey from dwarf rhododendons, gaining a small saddle at 4056m which drops to the east and gives views of the sacred Putha Himal (6182m, Pota Himal). The map shows a path direct to Dunai here but we couldn't make it out. Drop and traverse with a view of fort-like Tarakot perched on a ridge to the north east. Watch again for *lammergeiers* (bearded vultures) that love the updrafts here. Many horses but otherwise a disappointing absence of wildlife.

A hot and weedy descent follows through some pines, through the first flat-roofed village of Samataling and past the larger traditional village of Sahartara (2730m, Sahar Tara). This is the 'Tarangpur' of James Fisher's seminal book *Trans-Himalayan Traders - Economy, Society & Culture in Northwest Nepal*. Lonely Planet says that the village's Tanti Gompa has fine Tibetan-style murals including some of former King Mahendra. The track was virtually closed by huge shrubs of nettles and marijuana, steep and gravelly underfoot so it is with relief you will arrive on the valley floor at **Lingdo** (2391m, Namdo is the name of the police post here). The Thuli Bheri River was historically the main trading route between Buddhist Tibet and Upper Dolpo and the Hindu plains of India, so the unique blending of cultures is noteworthy here. The roadhead is Chaurjhari, five days down river. Many traders used the Jang La as well and with the road to Dhorpatan this may be the quickest way

out in the future. The upper Bheri was an ancient Tibetan kingdom called Tichurong (valley of fragrant waters) with Tarakot as the capital.

The Hotel Lindo (Rs600 db Rs300; 3 rooms, 10-12 beds) is a great spot for a rest day to wash clothes. We had both picked up fleas somewhere on this trek and recommend carrying some Thursday Plantation Insect Repellent to prevent flea bites, also soothing if already bitten. Fresh vegetables like *saag*, *mollah* (white radish) and an *achar* of tomato and coriander were also welcome. The Police Post, where you must check in, told us that only 90 trekkers a year come in from Beni although we saw none.

11. Lingdo rest day

You will need to wash yourself and your clothes at this stage. The water is warm and the place is very relaxing.

From Lingdo you can turn downriver for about 4 hrs to the pleasant Dunai (2030m) with large well-stocked shops including a pharmacy then either walk another 3 hrs up on a very dusty road to the airport at Juphal (2502m) or take a jeep. There is the large Mt Puta hotel in Juphal with camping area and private rooms. There are daily flights in the early morning to Nepalgunj; book at the many airline offices in Juphal. It is also possible to walk to a roadhead and airport at Jumla in 5-6 days.

From Dunai it is also possible to walk up to Ringmo in three days using lodges. This avoids the wilderness camping but means sharing the route with many large expeditions that fly into Juphal and trek into Upper Dolpo this way. The stages are Dunai to Chepka (5hrs 770m↑), Renje (4hrs 500m↑320m↓), Ringmo/Phuksundo Lake (3620m; 6hrs 880m↑ 90m↓).

But the real adventure lies upriver, through the stunning gorges to Do Tarap and across wild passes to Ringmo and Phuksundo Lake, as described below. This will also provide much better acclimatisation. About 2200 trekkers a year are now using this part of the route.

Lower Dolpo track notes

Stage	Hours:minutes	Lodge Accommodation?
12 Lingdo - Laisicap	2:45	Bhattis
Laisicap - Laina Odar	3:15	Seasonal tents
13 Laina Odar - Chhyugar	3:15	Seasonal tents
Chhyugar - Nawarpani	1:00	Seasonal tents
Nawarpani - Sili Odar	0:45	No
14 Sili Odar - Sisaul Khola	3:30	No
Sisaul Khola - Do Tarap	3:00	Yes
15 Do Tarap rest day	REST	
16 Do Tarap - Numa La base camp	3:00	No
Numa La base camp - Numa La high camp	2:00	No
17 Numa La high camp - Numa La	1:30	No
Numa La - Poyon Chu	2:30	No
Poyon Chu - Danigar	1:00	No
18 Danigar - Bagala	2:00	No
Bagala - Dajok Tang	3:00	No
Dajok Tang - Yak Kharka	1:00	Seasonal tents
19 Yak Kharka - Ringmo	3:00	Yes
20 Ringmo rest day	REST	

12. Lingdo - Laina Odar 1200m↑ 200m↓ 6hrs

Climb under the high fort of Tarakot and bear up valley to the left through pink flowering buckwheat, red amaranth and huge bushes of marijuana on a disused road. The road climbs high above the true left of the Thulo Bheri, now known as the Barbung Khola, then descends through cypress past a white *kani* to several *bhattis* at Laisicap (2600m) with meals and primitive accommodation. That disused road zigzagging up to the northwest is your onward route. Cross the large suspension bridge and start up the Tarap Chu (*chu* is Tibetan for river); the Barbung Khola to the right takes you to Chharka in 4-5 days and so on to Jomson. Lonely Planet says to look here for white-breasted dippers unique to Western Nepal, but we saw only black-breasted dippers. They also suggest a 15min detour to Chhandul (Sandul) Gompa across the river with an atmospheric chapel at the back.

Take short-cuts from the road climbing steeply through huge cypresses then climb above the end of the hand-made road on narrow stairs and wonder how the road will ever pass the cliff below you. The track has been blasted into sheer rock on the walls of the gorge, which is some of the prettiest and wildest country in Nepal. Many horse trains service the route through the ancient cypresses and juniper. The blue river drops away below, 600m in only 3km, and eventually with many ups and downs due to recent slips reaches a wider part of the gorge with the seasonal tents of **Laina Odar** (3370m, Laini; the map shows a second Laina Odar further up near Nawarpani; *odar* means cave). The huge cypresses above and the clear river provide a memorable camp. A pretty waterfall 10 mins further on provides another camping site.

Griffins were seen feeding on a dead mule in the middle of the river above Sili Odar. Despite the clarity of the river DO NOT DRINK THE RIVER WATER because it flows from Do Tarap. The increasing levels of plastic and rubbish as you move upstream should be enough warning. Insist on alternative side-stream or spring sources for your cooking and drinking in this gorge.



Track blasted into cliff face near Laini Odal, Tarap Chu below

13. Laina Odar - Sili Odar 400m↑ 100m↓ 5hrs

A very beautiful day's walk in spectacular country. An initial steep 200m climb opens onto a grand traverse very high above the river, with sheer drops and bonsai juniper trees because of the increasingly arid climate. Beautiful convoluted cliffs on both sides lead to four seasonal tents in Chhyugar (3441m) for lunch. Cross to the true left for a spell then back to the true right at Thanjam. Many redstarts and finches but little other wildlife due to the aridity. The tortured yellow cliffs support pines and cedars made monumental by dryness. Nawarpani (3475m, Pibuk) had two dirty tents but a large meadow further up at **Sili Odar** (3590m) proved more pleasant, particularly as we met our first trekkers in 13 days, a German couple who had come from Jomson in 21 days and were exiting via Beni. This is not a crowded route.



Campsite at Sili Odar (3590m) looking south, shared with a German couple

14. Sili Odar - Do Tarap 800m↑ 50m↓ 6.5hrs

Superb river canyon views continue despite an overcast and spitting rain, with tortured rock walls growing more bare by the hour. The path is cut into sheer rock faces and it is impossible to imagine that a road will ever be built here. Cross the Tarap Chu on a very short bridge with a narrow canyon to the left and climb steeply to two large *chortens* (3870m, Kesila, Serkam), remains of a checkpoint between Tibet and Nepal. Descend to another short bridge and regain the true right of the Tarap Chu. Over a ridge descend to a bridge on the Sisaul Khola, above which there are extensive summer grazing grounds for yaks. There are no services here.

For us this was October 1st, so we were privileged to travel in the middle of the annual yak migration when all the high monsoon pastures are emptied and genuine huge yaks, not the smaller crossbreds of the Khumbu, are moved down in one day to over-winter and graze the harvested barley fields in Tarap. Hundreds of yaks bearing their own loads of winter fodder, split into family groups of about a dozen yaks with horses and supplies, in an endless stream without pause for food or toilets, drove us rapidly to **Do Tarap** (4080m) in 3hrs nonstop.



The winter yak migration looking south from just below Do Tarap

The **Tinje Hotel (Rs1000 db Rs450; one room in a compound, no toilet) is just before the popular Caravan Hotel with more expensive conveniences. Friendly and comfortable but unmarked at present.

15. Do Tarap rest day

Particularly if you have walked from Beni, you will have found it relatively easy to climb to 4000m without getting symptoms of altitude sickness. But note that the daily altitude gain so far has several times been above the 300m per day suggested for safety. Therefore watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge. Consider using Diamox and remember that there are no clinics or easy communications in case of trouble. In 2016 there were multiple expensive helicopter evacuations from here.

For acclimatisation a day exploring Do Tarap and nearby *gompas* is well spent. At this time of the year there is huge rush to harvest all the local 'naked' (awnless) barley and get it inside walls before the arrival of the yaks, then there is a rush to thresh all the barley and store it before winter arrives. The metronomic thwack of flails is a constant background here and into Upper Dolpo, together with the slapping of prayer flags in the winnowing winds. In the stunning high altitude light there are timeless scenes in every direction.

The Ribo Bhumpa Gumpa just above the main village is marvellous and colourful with a range of original colour paintings from both Bon and Nyingma sects and great views of the eastern valley that leads to Chharka, the southern valley by which you arrived, and the other small villages of Tarap to the northwest.

The Doro Gompa to the east is a leisurely 1hr walk. Ask for the lama who will unlock it and show you progress with restoration. The original paintings with their marvellous authentic colours are unfortunately being painted over; your admiration of them might stop this process.

Across the river is the Bon Shipcock Gompa surrounded by characteristic *chortens* and with a memorable carved door and prayer wheel in the first room.

In visiting these *gompas*, always make a substantial donation to ensure that they remain conserved and valued by the local community, whose commitment is weakening as it is with many churches in the West. Rs500 each visitor is appropriate.



Do 'lower end of valley' Tarap looking north. There are more Tarap villages to the east and northwest



Guru Padmasambhava, the Lotus Born, in the Ribo Bhumpa Gompa. A huge contrast with the grey hills and houses outside

16. Do Tarap - Numa La high camp 770m↑ 0m↓ 5hrs

Head west out of Do Tarap, either near the river or higher up so as to pass through a huge decaying *kani*. Pass the Western-funded Crystal Mountain School with 150 polite articulate children instructed in English, Nepali and Tibetan, many boarding nearby, and a toilet if needed. Because of the extreme winters, the school is only open seven months of the year. There are numerous *gompas* marked on the map but it can be difficult to find someone to unlock them at this busy harvest time. Lonely Planet recommends the Dorje Phurba Gompa in Sakar ('white mountain', Kahakar) village which is richly decorated and has a collection of ancient weapons in the chapel. The guardian is said to live on the first floor. There are several shops and even a restaurant, but people were so busy with harvest that these were often unattended as we passed.

When the valley divides, keep left on the true right of the stream and keep up the first broad valley to the northwest, climbing above Tokyu (4180m, Tok-khyu). The path becomes indistinct as it crosses over-grazed pastures with yaks in all directions. Across the valley to the northeast and well above the stream are two *gompas*. The valley to ascend is directly opposite these *gompas*, to the southwest, distinguished by the stone walls of a house which you will find higher up to the true right of the small stream. This is sometimes called Numa La base camp (4440m). After lunch at this water source, cross the stream and climb the obvious broad ridge. There are several possible camp sites at different altitudes with the choice to be made based the availability of water. We camped with stunning views in all directions at **Numa La high camp** (4850m), finding water down to the south. Frost covered the tent within minutes of the sun setting and the climb and camp would be difficult in snow.



Looking southeast back over the Tarap valley from Numa La high camp

17. Numa La high camp - Danigar 550m↑ 750m↓ 5hrs

A high camp means the sun comes early and it is only 1.5hrs to Numa La (5290m, Numala Bhanjyang south), which is probably 1km south of the pass marked on the map. A bit steep to start, then less so into a high glacial bowl at 5000m, then a final push to the top. It can be windy on top and there is a great view by climbing 20m to the east. There were clear views back to Mt Dhaulagiri (8167m) and some of the northern Annapurnas, with snow remaining on many north faces after a recent storm. Shey Shikar (6139m) and Kanjiroba (6612m) are visible to the northwest. Numa La apparently means 'makes you breathless' in Tibetan. Danigar, between the two passes, is a bad place to be if you've got any altitude symptoms. Be careful and do not proceed over Numa La if there are altitude symptoms.



Arriving on Numa La (5290m) with Mt Dhaulagiri and part of the northern Annapurnas visible

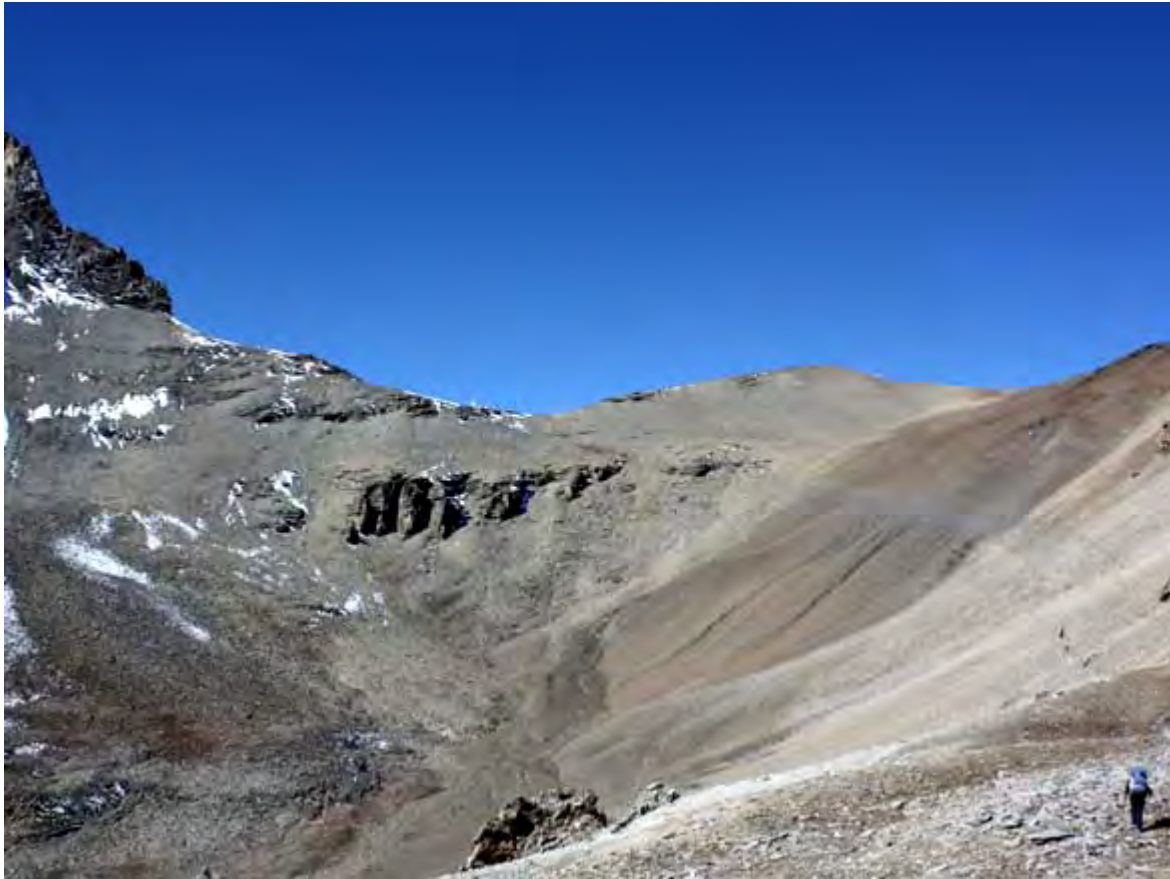
Lonely Planet says the valley 'drops like a stone' and that is accurate but it is straightforward unless there is a lot of snow. The scenic rocky valley swings sharply left and you can make out the next pass Baga La (5214m) to the southwest. The trickle of water turns to a chuckle and then to a full-blown gin-clear mountain stream with flowers. The Gyambu Khola comes in from the east to form the Poyon Chu, from which an intriguing trail heads direct to Saldang. Descend, cross and climb over a ridge to the Panklanga Khola where we sighted blue sheep (*ghoral*) and a snow leopard has been reported. There was an empty tent at **Danigar** (4631m, Pelung Tang, *tang* means meadow) and a pleasant camping meadow beyond it at the foot of the climb to Baga La. The river here flows into Phuksundo Lake and the beautiful glaciated peak at the head of the valley is Norbu Kang (6085m). A peaceful spectacular wilderness but a snowstorm here would make an exit problematic, particularly if you lacked food or fuel or had an altitude sickness problem.



Descending Numa La looking northwest to Shey Shikar (6139m) and Kanjiroba (6612m)

18. Danigar - Yak Kharka 600m↑ 1200m↓ 6hrs

The climb outside the tent door on frosted rocks will get your heart racing and it would be very tough in snow. Climb steeply on switchbacks on the left side of the valley, although there is an even steeper alternative across the creek to the right. The changing perspectives of heavily glaciated Norbu Kang made every rest enjoyable. Sweet cinnamon smell of dwarf rhododendrons in the sun, the smell of high Nepal. There is a possible high camp with water at about 4750m, where we sighted six Tibetan snowcocks running over grassy scree and calling hoarsely. Continue right towards the obvious saddle, passing an array of raised stones into a moraine bowl and traverse to Baga La (5214m) crowned with slapping prayer flags.



The final traverse to Baga La (5214m) coming up from the east from Danigar

The huge complex valley system descending into darkness on the other side was mysterious. Descend steeply at first and enter a rocky valley, staying high on the true right through large rockfalls and across two creeks, the second of which provides a sheltered lunch place. Look for Om Mane Padme Hum chiselled 10m long on a nearby boulder, blessing this most beautiful of valleys. Make a spectacular wild descent in moraine among arid cliffs. The valley turns a corner left where we encountered a yak train carrying timber towards us who did not want to be photographed, then drops very steeply past waterfalls onto zigzags for a long way down to a huge flat-floored valley with prayer flags at Dajok Tang (4080m, Bagala Phedi).



Descending from Baga La (5214m) with Kagmara (5960m) to the right

Now there is a very pleasant autumn stroll down the valley on the true right of a sparkling Maquwa Khola (Maduwa Khola) with snow-covered peaks including Kagmara (5960m) ahead and several possible camping sites with nervous marmots. Strong clean astringent smell of juniper after the aridity of the heights. There is a hut (*goth*) and seasonal tent, just as you sight the shapely Sonam Kang (6019m) up a valley to the east, called **Yak Kharka** (3820m, Bagala Base Camp). While the yak-covered meadow feels almost tropical with pine trees after the two high camps, the overnight frost will remind you that you are still at nearly 4000m.

19. Yak Kharka - Ringmo 200m↑ 500m↓ 3hrs

Pass several sod-covered *goths* in another meadow downstream, remaining on the true right, then start to traverse and climb high through thorny scrub, blue pines and juniper on an exposed trail. You may startle blue sheep here. The valley leading down to Dunai opens up to the southwest with views of Rike below and the Kagmara range beyond as the trail crosses the ridge at some *chortens* and heads north to Phuksundo Lake. With imagination you can make out the immensity of the long-ago earthquake and slips that formed the lake, unless it was indeed the spiteful female demon who gave the locals a turquoise that turned into a piece of dung. Climb and listen for the thundering 200m waterfall that spills from the lake, enjoy the autumn forest then descend gently through pines, yellow birches, stropky yaks and harvested buckwheat fields past *chortens* to cross the Phuksundo Khola and climb to the 25 houses of **Ringmo** (3640m). The ****Shey Shikhar Lakeside Hotel** has a sunny room with views of passing yaks and potato harvest. There are many camping sites by the lake, which is 10mins away, but the toilets are dire. There are two well-stocked shops in Ringmo, the best between Beni and Kagbeni. In 2016 we stayed in the Sherpa Hotel (**Rs1000, db Rs400) which is being expanded due to increased foreign and domestic tourists. Other hotels are also abuilding.

Phuksundo Tal is hypnotically surreal in colour and location, 5km long and 2km wide with a depth of 650m. The aquamarine clear water contains no life other than yaks fighting and slow-mo bathing at

the exit of the Phuksundo Khola beside the camping area. *Phuk* narrow *sun* three *do* join, where three rivers meet.



Looking down Phuksundo Khola towards Dunai, Kagmara (5960m) visible

20. Ringmo rest day

No matter which way you have arrived, a rest day for washing will be necessary after the wilderness. Exploration of the area is highly recommended. Don't miss, as do many big groups who rush through because they were delayed flying in, the Thasang Chholing Gompa (Tsova Gompa), a decaying Bon monastery about 40 mins to the east. Walk above the Park HQ past an army camp and circle above the lake among autumn birches at this time of year. Being a Bon monastery, walk to the left of *chortens* rather than the familiar right side and note the reversed swastikas. A lama is in attendance and claims the *gompa* was built 60 generations ago; Wikipedia says 900 years and that it was built to conserve wildlife. The paintings are worth looking at closely. Check out chicken man and be generous as the place needs repairs.

Climb above Ringmo and note that the flat roofs are used to store not firewood, as is common elsewhere, but winter fodder for yaks and goats. Being in forested country, there is plenty of firewood.

You will encounter large trekking groups coming up from Dunai in Ringmo. We met several European expeditions of 18-24 trekkers plus their support teams, which was a shock after 19 days of meeting only one other couple.

From Ringmo it is possible to descend rapidly to Dunai in 2 days overnighing in Chhepka and fly out

from either Juphal or, 5-6 days further away, from Jumla. See details on day 10 and day 24. Or continue on to Upper Dolpo as in the track notes following.



Ringmo (3640m) from south, Phuksundo Lake and onward path beyond



Thasang Chholing Gompa (Tsova Gompa), a decaying Bon monastery near Ringmo

Upper Dolpo track notes

Stage	Hours:minutes	Lodge Accommodation?
21 Ringmo - top zigzags above Phuksundo Lake	2:00	No
top zigzags above Phuksundo Lake - top of Phuksundo Lake	1:00	No
top of Phuksundo Lake - Phuksundo Khola campsite	2:00	No
22 Phuksundo Khola campsite - Nangdalo high camp	3:30	No
23 Nangdalo high camp - Nangdalo	2:30	No
Nangdalo - Shey Gompa	2:30	No
24 Shey Gompa	REST	
25 Shey Gompa - Sela Bhanjyang	3:30	No
Sela Bhanjyang - Namgung	1:45	No
26 Namgung - Saldang	2:00	Yes
27 Saldang (SNOWING)	REST	
28 Saldang - pass	3:30	No
pass - Khoma	1:30	Yes
29 Khoma - Shimen La	2:00	No
Shimen La - Shimen	1:00	Yes
30 Shimen - Phalwa	3:15	No
Phalwa - Tinje	0:45	No
31 Tinje - Rakpa	5:15	No
32 Rakpa (or beyond) - Mola	3:00	No
Mola - Chharka Bhot	3:00	Yes
33 Chharka - above Naliyang Sumna	2:30	No
34 above Naliyang Sumna - Molum Sumna	5:00	No
35 Molum Sumna - Jungben La	2:30	No
Jungben La - Sangda La	1:30	No
Sangda La - Sangda Phedi	1:30	No
36 Sangda Phedi - Sangda	3:30	No
37 Sangda - Jeula Danda	4:00	No
Jeula Danda - Kagbeni	3:00	Yes
38 Kagbeni - Jomoson	2:30	Yes
RETREAT ROUTE DUE TO STORM		
32 Rakpa - Mola Bhanjyang Phedi	2:45	No
Mola Bhanjyang Phedi - Taaka Samdo tent camp	6:00	Seasonal tent
33 Taaka Samdo tent camp - Cholla	2:15	No

Bhanjyang camp		
34 Cholla Bhanjyang camp - Chholla Bhanjyang Phedi	2:00	No
Chholla Bhanjyang Phedi - Chholla Bhanjyang	1:30	No
Chholla Bhanjyang - Do Tarap	4:00	Yes
35 Do Tarap - Toltol	5:00	Seasonal tents
36 Toltol - Chhyugar	2:20	Seasonal tents
Chhyugar - Laina Odar	3:40	Seasonal tents
37 Laina Odar - Lingdo	6:00	Yes
38 Lingdo - Dunai	4:00	Yes
Dunai - Juphal	3:00	Yes

Travel into Upper Dolpo requires a guide so they will determine your route. However if you want some ideas of what you might see, how long it takes and where you might stay these track notes might help. Note that because of the Cyclone Hudhud killer storm in 2014 we turned back from just under Chharka La and walked back out to Juphal to fly out. Brief notes are provided for both the onward leg from our 2015 trek and for the 2014 seven day retreat option, which crosses the 5051m Chholla Bhanjyang and descends past Do Tarap.

21. Ringmo - Phuksundo Khola campsite 550m↑ 550m↓ 5hrs

This is a most scenic and exciting day, setting out on a narrow track to the west contouring the alabaster lake then climbing steeply with spectacular views over the lake to Ringmo and back to Norbung Kang 6085m. The fibreglass yak in the film *Himalaya (Caravan)* plunged to its death about here. Look up for a nearby glacier descending from Kanjiroba Himal (Kanjiroba, Kanjeralwa 6612m). Descend on a steep and dusty track through yellowing birches and blue pines to the western lobe of Phoksundo Lake in a lovely meadow where it is possible to camp.

Climb gently on the true right of the Phuksundo Khola under the four glaciers that drain from Kanjiroba Himal with extensive autumn birch forests growing in the avalanche tracks. The magenta tamarisk, grey thorny bushes and red barberry below yellow birches and blue pines makes an unforgettable landscape. Arrive at a series of campsites, some of which have been flooded with monsoonal silt and so are very dusty but others are in beautiful forest. The fluted ridges and cornices of Kanjiroba were unearthly in the moonlight. By 2016 some parts of the track had washed away and high traverses to the right were required. A bridge is under construction.



Looking south to Ringmo over Phuksundo Lake, Norbung Kang 6085 to left



Glaciers draining from Kanjiroba (6612m) to the Phuksundo Khola

22. Phuksundo Khola campsite - Nangdalo high camp 1000m↑ 3.5hrs

Shortly after the campsites, in a narrowing gorge, there is an unlikely looking small stream to the northeast, Tuk Kyaksa Khola, which is the most used onwards path. Lonely Planet suggests another route further north with an intermediate camp at Lar Tsa, which confusingly is mapped as being up this Tuk Kyaksa Khola. Another alternative would be to include the *kora* (circumambulation) route around Crystal Mountain. Turn right and climb steeply up the narrow gorge with an indistinct track crossing the creek several times. After a long climb emerge into a meadow where it is possible to camp at several levels. There are many blue sheep (*ghoral*) and rock rabbits (*pika*) and Kanjiroba dominates the valley downstream. **Nangdalo high camp** (4600m) is a great place to be.

The Nangdalo (5360m Ngadra La, Matthiessen's dreaded Kang La) lies two climbs above these campsites, to the left, but an acclimatisation stop is recommended as you have certainly exceeded the recommended height gain of 300m per day above 4000m. Two people from another party were evacuated by helicopter the next morning for that reason.



Nangdalo high camp, with Nangdalo (Ngadra La, Kang La, 5360m) up valley to left

23. Nangdalo high camp - Shey Gompa 750m↑ 1000m↓ 5hrs

Climb steadily to the head of the valley then steeply up zigzags into another broad valley which Matthiessen called Snowfields Camp, whence they ferried many loads up to Nangdalo (5360m) to the north. The upward obvious path consists of steep frequent zigzags on slippery slate, hard in good conditions and very difficult in snow. An easier alternative is a longer sweeping path out to the right which is used by horses. Enjoy the views of the northern Annapurnas (Nilgiri and Tilicho?) and of the broad valley leading down to Shey Gompa. Descend very steeply on black frozen mud or snow into a

rocky bare valley, grey and brown with a sere beauty. Matthiessen's Black Lake is to the left but not marked on the map. Crystal Mountain (5400m), which Matthiessen raved over as he saw it in snow, is likely to be a formless black mass to the northwest at this time of year but is named for the large lumps of white quartz that have washed down and litter the valley floor.

Cross and recross the river, often on mud, descending in a supremely wild and mystical landscape. The first glimpse of the long-awaited **Shey Gompa** (4390m; wrongly shown on the map as 4160m) is exciting, nestled in the notch of the valley under such empty rugged country. But the 800 year old *gompa* itself is not particularly interesting, being small and the paintings have been redone in the 1970s. The statues are of Guru Rinpoche, Sakyamuni and Milarepa. There is a huge paddock of *mani* stones adjoining the *gompa* which Matthiessen speculated date back to the 11th century.

From here it is possible to do a pilgrimage (*kora*) right around Crystal Mountain; do it nine times and the water in a mystical lake turns to milk, a sip of which allows you to see Mt Kailash in Tibet. On a more mundane level, it is also possible to trek to Do Tarap in 3-4 days over the Sela Mukchung Bhanjyang (5126m, Sela Munchung La), Langmuse Bhanjyang (5140m, Langmosia She La) and Numula Bhanjyang North (5160m, Khyung Bhanjyang).

Some parties visit the northwestern Shyamling Gompa and the ancient Bon monastery at Bhijer (see Days 18 and 18A of GHT High Route) and continue via the Nangla Bhanjyang (5388m) to Saldang.



Descending Nangdalo 5360m **coming from** Shey Gompa in 2016, with the fluted ice of the Kanjiroba Himal 6612m beyond



The fabled 800 year old Shey Gompa (4390m) "crystal monastery"

24. Shey Gompa rest day

Don't miss having a rest day here, enjoying the frolicking marmots and the Turkoman hill pigeons whirling. The must-see destination is a 1-2hr climb to the 800 year old Tsakhang Gompa, spectacularly sited above the gorge on the true left of the Sephu Khola. Check with the lama at Shey Gompa that Tsakhang is open; if not he will open it for a donation. Be generous, Rs500 per person is suggested. Note that the adjoining Gamoche Gompa is not open and is regarded as in a dangerous state of repair. It was damaged in the 2015 earthquake.

At Tsakhang there is a sacred spring beside several ancient buildings hugging the ochre cliffs, with fine views of Crystal Mountain. Try to climb the ladders into a very small temple in the *gompa*, with some ancient paintings preserving the lovely genuine Tibetan colours if you look under the wall hangings. Tsakhang Gompa is used for long winter retreats and appears to be under the wing of a Thailand monastery which is training lamas and maintaining the building.

From Shey Gompa one can exit to Juphal for a charter flight. It takes 2-3 days to Ringmo then 2 days to Juphal if a jeep is organised to meet you on the road. Here is a brief outline of timing for this exit if required:

1. Shey Gompa - Nangdalo high camp 1000m↑ 625m↓ 5hrs - be careful if there is ice on the Nangdalo pass (5360m); a yak fell to its death the day before we arrived. Camping at 4600m can be very cold. More details Day 23 in [Upper Dolpo track notes](#).

2. Nangdalo high camp - Phoksumdo Lake inlet camp or Ringmo 1000m↓ 500m↑ 5 or 8hrs - the

Tuk Kyaksa Khola will be frozen in the morning so take care. In 2016 a bridge was missing so a steep bluff climb to the true left was required to progress. More details Day 22 in [Upper Dolpo track notes](#). See notes about Ringmo on Day 19 of [Lower Dolpo track notes](#).

3. Ringmo - Chhepka 900m↓ 100m↑ 6.5 hrs - a remarkably scenic and under-rated walk, unexpectedly beautiful with the views of the waterfall draining Phuksumdo Lake and the Suli Khola accompanying you all the way down the valley. Comfortable-looking hotel in Chunawa with camping and restaurant. Pass Amchi with large boarding school and traditional Tibetan hospital. Note bridge to right for the Kagmara Bhanjyang (5115m) trek back to Jumla and a metal swing bridge 10mins later, but keep on true left. Lunch can be taken in Rechi (2940m) after 3hrs. Beautiful mixed forest of pines, cedars, poplar and sycamore, more and more autumn colours as one descends and several attractive campsites, arriving in **Chhepka** (2838m) where three brothers each have a farm and a hotel (**Hotel Laleegurans Rs 500, db Rs 350).

4. Chhepka - Juphal 600m↓ 200m↑ 3.5 hrs - emerge from the forest back into dry farming land at Shyanta (2520m), cross wooden bridge to true right after 20mins then a metal swing bridge back to true left, arriving at Raktang (2260m) for lunch. Ring for a jeep from here. Another 1-1.5hrs to Sulighat and two bridges, the last a large one over the Thuli Bheri river to a police checkpost with water and shade while you wait for a jeep. More details on Day 38 of the [retreat route](#).



The small and remote Tsakhang Gompa on Crystal Mountain, about 1hr from Shey Gompa

25. Shey Gompa - Namgung 750m↑ 600m↓ 5hrs

It is entirely possible to trek from Shey Gompa to Saldang in one day 850m↑ 1400m↓ 7 hrs, combining Days 25 and 26 although Namgung is certainly worth some time. Keep an eye out for blue

sheep this day.

Head east up valley on a gentle contour, with views across the frozen river to impossibly remote farmhouses and grey rounded hills. Bear northeast past *mani* walls up a narrower icy and muddy valley, a zigzag and finally a long dry traverse to the Sela Bhanjyang (5010m, Shey La, Se La, Ge La). Enjoy the last views of Kanjiroba behind and the brown, red, grey and white hills of Tibet from horizon to horizon ahead then descend until in a narrow fold below you will see the perched houses of **Namgung** (4430m, Namdrung). The reds, blacks and ochres of the tortured sedimentary rock cliffs around are stunning. Descend steeply, cross the Namgung Khola and climb onto the terraces that can be used for camping. There are only 3-4 families left here, mostly in the farming season, and at this time of year all the buckwheat and barley is stooked and being threshed. There is a large untenanted *gompa* surrounded by a forest of huge *chortens* and a nearby cave complex worthy of exploration.



Namgung (4430m) from south showing cave complexes

26. Namgung - Saldang 100m↑ 800m↓ 2hrs

Climb high above the true left of the Namgung Khola on an exposed track with views back down to Namgung's abandoned fields and houses. This track is not marked on the map but appears to be the major route, not the track shown as down on the river itself. Pass many large *mani* walls to a small pass with wide views of dun eroded hills and drop quite steeply down to **Saldang** (3770m), the major village in this area with an active school. Most people from the Shey area winter here. The flat-roofed houses have battlements of kindling and fodder. The Hello mobile phone network is still not working in 2016 in Saldang and in villages through to Tinje. There are at least three *gompas* in the spread-out village, with the major one on the right although apparently it can be hard to persuade

the lama to open it. Above it the onward track to Khoma can be seen climbing from right to left. This track is not shown on the map we used although it is on others.

From Saldang it is possible to go up river over several passes to Do Tarap or north through Dora Sumda to Shimen, visiting Dolpo's oldest monastery at Yangster Gompa (3750m). The latter route takes three days to reach Shimen, the same time as these track notes.

If there is not so much talk of food in this portion of the trek, it is because there is mostly parched barley porridge (*tsampa*) for breakfast and potato *dalbhat* for other meals. Cabbage is a real treat. Boiled potatoes with a ginger, garlic, salt and chili *achar* are also very welcome. But in Shey we got a carrot and potato *dalbhat* and some fresh yoghurt (*dahi*). If you do eat *dahi*, ensure that it is not mixed with local water



Descending into Saldang (3770m) looking towards Tibet 20km away. The main monastery is at right

27. Saldang rest day

We took an enforced rest day in Saldang in 2014 due to the huge storm triggered by Cyclone Hudhud (Arabic for hoopoe bird) which killed 47 people just to the east. We had received a telephone warning and in any case would not have travelled in such a storm, which arrived very suddenly at 11pm and lasted 24 hours. Saldang received only about 600mm of snow, while the Annapurnas received over 2000mm. The lesson is to not attempt to move in such a storm, no matter what, unless it is absolutely essential to find a less avalanche-prone campsite.



View south from Saldang (3770m) after Hudhud storm

28. Saldang - Khoma 1000m↑ 700m↓ 5hrs

It is possible to trek from Saldang to Shimen in one day 1300m↑ 1200m↓ 7.5hrs, combining Days 28 and 29 and bypassing Khoma (keep right on a gravelly path past a small dam or lake until eventually joining the track from Khoma to the bridge hidden upstream). Don't miss seeing the paintings in the large Saldang Gompa on leaving Saldang. While modern, they are truly superb, imaginative and technically brilliant. Don't forget to carry plenty of water.

Descend past the Saldang Gompa, cross the Nagon Khola on a rude bridge and start a steady climb from right to left around a ridge and up the gully behind. This track is not shown in the map recommended. The final climb to a narrow notch of a pass (~4500m) is tiring and there is no water. This is not the Khoma La (4515m) shown on the map. The glutinous mud can make this crossing hard work if horses and rain coincide. Traverse a high basin in and out of muddy creeks then swing more easterly and descend to **Khoma** (4060m, Khomagaon) below. A friendly camping lodge in a compound on the left offers a comfortable five bed room (Rs1000) and has a toilet outside. Water can be obtained from the school some distance below for washing clothes.



Descending past Saldang Gumpa, onward track across valley to left



Detail from Saldang Gumpa wall painting

29. Khoma - Shimen 300m↑ 500m↓ 3hrs

A very short day and it would be possible to travel from Saldang to Shimen in one day if desired. Descend through Khoma heading east along a line of *chortens* to a bridge on the Koran Khola and climb up a gravelly path to a *chorten*. The route now contours in open country with views in all directions, climbing gently to Shimen La (4270m) in 2hrs, then descends quite steeply to **Shimen** (3870m, Shimengaon) across a bridge to the southeast over the lovely clear Paniyan Khola. This is a prosperous and picturesque place of homes built like forts, with a lively school, intelligent and polite children and some fine wooden carved windows.

A feature of this valley is the white granite river boulders used for building and *mani* walls. Another feature was a marvellous meal of potato, *sag* and tomato with cucumber (*kankro*) and the surprise of a small bowl of fresh yoghurt (*dahi*). Many houses in this valley have plastic sheets over an outside room, used for warmth as a sitting room and also as greenhouses.



Shimen (3870m) from Shimen La (4270m)

30. Shimen - Tinje 300m↑ 0m↓ 4hrs

The track southeast from Shimen is almost a road, clear and level, lined with acres of rounded white *mani* stones and *chortens*. Walk steadily through dry rounded hills above the deep green river to the very Tibetan village of Phalwa (4092m, Pha), from which a major trading route goes to nearby Tibet. Motorcycles use tracks in this area, the fuel presumably carried on yaks from Tibet. Cross a small stream and pass some very picturesque old *chortens* and gateways (*kani*). Continue again on a level road used by motorcycles to the scattered town of **Tinje** (4150m, Tinjegaon), a huge prospect which retains a very Tibetan character. Tibet is only 10km away as the high altitude actinic light reminds. At

this season the people work from dawn to dusk threshing barley, the haunting rhythmic thwack of the flails echoing from history. People are busy, tired and covered with barley chaff but must use the winnowing wind before winter arrives. There are many camping sites below the houses although clean water is an issue. A well-known *thangka* artist lives in a small village directly above Tinje and is visited by many groups. These same groups have taught the local kids to expect balloons and pens unfortunately – teaching them some English is more useful.



Arriving Tinje (4150m) looking south

In 2015, the two days from Shey Gumpa had been characterised by evening ‘welcome to winter’ snow showers. On the day to Tinje the sky filmed over and 20 minutes before arriving there was an almighty peal of thunder and a wall of dust struck us with 50-60kph winds, quickly turning to driven sago snow, grit and stones. When the storm eased we walked on and camped in the shelter of a wall but the local kids seem to have been driven mad by the storm, running screaming around the tent for hours and even throwing themselves on it, quite uncontrollable and such a difference from their intelligent politeness last year.



After a stormy night in Tinje (4150m). The route onwards is up the right hand valley

31. Tinje - Rakpa or beyond 400m↑ 50m↓ 5-6hrs

Wander across fallow fields to the south, crossing the Polte Khola on an unusual gateway bridge with old paintings and climb into the broad Paniyan Khola valley, marked by a disused airfield from the 1950s time of clandestine CIA support for Tibetan independence (see *Buddha's Warriors* by Mikel Dunham 2004). After about an hour a bridge leads right to Chholla Bhanjyang and Do Tarap. A road is being constructed in 2016 from Tinje to Do Tarap which will change this area considerably. The described route however continues on the true right in and out of grazing meadows (*kharka*) with some broad views ahead and a narrow river valley through slate scree in reds and browns to eventually reach the large yak-infested *kharka* of **Rakpa** (4535m). There is good water but it will be very cold overnight. An alternative campsite about 1hr above Rakpa, which puts the sometimes difficult river crossing behind you, makes for a shorter next day and is recommended. Continue across the Rakpa *kharka* and up valley, crossing the river to start up the valley towards Mola (Chharka) Bhanjyang. Among the low thornbushes is a clear area in about 10-15 minutes, maybe Ghajyan Sumna 4600m shown on the map, where camping is possible.

In 2014 we were unable to complete the trek onwards to Jomsom due to the Hudhud killer storm. The 7 day retreat route we used, via Do Tarap to a flight from Juphal, appear below for those who may want to exit by that enjoyable route. The track notes below to Jomsom were completed in 2015.



The yak meadow of Rakpa (4535m) is just ahead south of here

32. Rakpa (or beyond) - Chharka 500m↑ 920m↓ 6hrs

After the cold night, making an early start for this long day will be no trouble. Continue up the gentle valley about 1.5hrs through thornbushes, keeping right to minimise river crossings and maybe passing a motorbike with a broken chain that managed to get this far from Tinje. A track to the right leads up and over to Do Tarap but is not recommended for trekkers. Start the easy climbing and discover that there are successive *kharkas* gently climbing ahead, past a beautiful lake and finally a little more steeply up to a flagged *chorten*. This would be a dangerous pass in storm or fog as there are multiple paths and few landmarks. We had snow flurries just as we completed the long open section to Mola (5027m; Chharka Bhanjyang).

There is now an endless long descent in and out of dry side valleys on the left of a large valley above the Barbung Khola. Back to the right is another route to Do Tarap or Dunai in about 3 days. Descend past large *chortens* to reach **Chharka Bhot** (4110m, Chharka), a large and vigorous community of 450 people involved Bruegel-like in harvesting in mid-October with the endless *thwock thwock* of flails from dawn to dusk. The town is expanding and picturesque, with walls against the wind, shops and at least five lodges. We camped in the yard of the **Himalaya Hotel and enjoyed fresh vegetables.



Crossing Mola (5027m; Chharka Bhanjyang) with the final pass on the left skyline



Entering Chharka Bhot (4110m) with onward route ahead and then right up snowy valley

33. Chharka - above Naliyang Sumna 400m ↑ 2.5hrs

In the morning we visited the village and the old *gompa*, above left as you enter the village. After delays over the key, the *gompa* itself was disappointing with store-bought *thankas* from Kathmandu and uninteresting wall paintings. There was one intriguing painted slate carving in the corner which resembled those found in the nunnery at Tirigaon on the Kali Gandaki so, given our interest, the lama asked off-handedly would we like to see the old monastery room which contained another 16 of these coloured slate carvings. By the Kashmiri style they could date from the 12-13th century and were very lively.

Cross the bridge to lower Chharka and cross to the true left of the Barbung Khola shortly thereafter on a second bridge. Keeping straight ahead here rather than crossing takes one to Lo Manthang in Mustang. Circle and climb northwards with many blue sheep across the valley before descending to a bridge over Thasan Khola which drains from the onward valley to the right. These bridges are not as shown on the map. In the past three days we had seen droppings and paw prints of snow leopard many times on the path. Now, we had major excitement. As we climbed steeply above the bridge there were very disturbed yaks showering us with rocks. As we reached the top our guide Issu said he saw a snow leopard leap onto a small yak then flee because of our arrival. We watched the snow leopard down into a creek and right across the opposite hillside, beautifully camouflaged for the dun thorn bushes and rocks as it stopped from time to time to check on us, long tail held out behind. Yaks stampeded in all directions.

Continue up a series of yak-filled *kharkas* about 2hrs until a campsite **above Naliyang Sumna** (4560m) by the last available water. The next water is at Norblulung *kharka* (4750m) and would make for a much colder night.



Coloured slate carving from old *gompa* in Chharka Bhot



Chharka Bhot (4110m) lies behind the shadowed right skyline ridge and beyond is Mola (5027m; Chharka Bhanjyang)

34. above Naliyang Sumna - Molum Sumna 400m↑ 5hrs

Continue up among herds of yaks taking the sun, spotting many snow leopard scat and tracks in the dust, on a frosty trail which climbs gently into a short narrow gorge. Pass Norbulung *kharka* (4750m) looking out for large herds of undisturbed blue sheep and scramble around an ancient terminal moraine cut by the river. After 500m the landscape opens out with broad open valleys to the right and sedimentary layer-cake fantasy cliffs to the left. Wind up a gentle stony riverbed in silence until the *goths* and corrals of **Molum Sumna** (4860m, maybe 4990m) between two broad rivers. The wind is biting here and the team enjoyed the shelter afforded by the *goth* but by 2016 it was reported as so broken and dirty as to be unusable and campsite was strewn with broken glass. '*Molum*' means crossing/crossroads in Tibetan, probably referring to the junction with the trail to Mukot and so to Dunai.



Approaching Norbulung *kharka* left (4750m) with Molum Sumna left at end of valley



The shelter (*goth*) at Molum Sumna (4860m). The path onwards is to left above yellow rucksack

35. Molum Sumna - Sangda Phedi 560m↑ 1400m↓ 5.5hrs

After what is certain to be a cold night, welcome the sun and head along the southeast river bank, staying on the true left. Cross the first creek on the right from which a trail leads to the very remote village of Mukot and thence to Dunai. Start a long rising traverse left across empty *kharkas* amid an empty land of dun hills. The bridge shown on the map does not exist. A rather nondescript heap of stones seems to mark Niwar La (5130m), about 130m above Molum Sumna and the valley below right drops out of sight. Instead follow the multiple tracks climbing left on steep scree to the clear notch of Jungben La (5560m), a further climb of 430m (NOTE that some maps have this pass as Niwar Pass or Sangda La) after about 2.5hrs. The brown landscape of Mustang is now visible to the northwest, the gash of the Kali Gandaki can be made out and the end of the Annapurnas. Nearer are Dhampus (6012m) and Hongde Himal (6556m) in front of Dhaulagiri (8167m), with the streams below draining behind the latter.

A steep zig zag 400m descent keeping to the left brings you to the stream at 5160m, sometimes entirely ice at this time of year, within 1hr. If it is frozen, it is worth getting over swiftly before the daily flood of meltwater arrives from the left and makes the crossing difficult. While there is a campsite here, it was the scene of a tragedy in the big 2014 October storm, subject to avalanche and impossible to escape from in deep snow. Better to continue. A damaged hut is now reported near here too.

On the true left, traverse quite gently left on loose steep shale to the second pass, variously described as Sangda Bhanjyang, Tuchela Bhanjyang or even Lower Sangda La. Since the campsite beyond is called Sangda Phedi (meaning the foot of Sangda) and the nearest village is Sangda, the name Sangda La (5130m) seems most appropriate (NOTE that the map shows it as 5185m but is clearly lower). Sangda La (5130m), as I will call it, marks the boundary between the Shey Phoksundo and Annapurna National Parks. Make sure you have your permits.

Make a slow amazing descent on soft shale, almost organic like pine needles so it is safe even though very steep, arriving among welcome thorn bushes and juniper amidst large cliffs bearing a notable waterfall. Watch for a large flock of blue sheep. There are several flattish areas for camping at various levels at **Sangda Phedi** (4190m), with lovely views of the valley below as far as Mustang and of the remote village of Ghok on the same side of the valley. Sangda can be seen on the far side down valley. Note that Sangda Phedi seems to be seriously misplaced on the map.



The final climb to Jungben La (5560m), visible on the left skyline, takes you out of this valley. Dhampus (6012m) and other Dhaulagiri massif peaks beyond.



From Sangda Phedi (4190m) Mustang to the left over the Kali Gandaki and Sangda itself 3.5hrs away on the right down the valley

36. Sangda Phedi - Sangda 660m↓300m↑ 3.5hrs

Take some time to admire the morning views in all directions. Head to the right through juniper and descend on a dusty steep track marked with snow leopard scat and prints with wildly eroded cliffs above left to the bridge at Chalung Khola (3750m) and start a long high traverse to a *chorten* at about 4100m. Descend through a fabulously eroded conglomerate landscape and juniper scrub haunted by Tibetan snowcock *kangma* into Jharche Khola (3850m). The dust is unbelievable. Continue up and down to the compact settlement of **Sangda** (3710m) above extensive harvested buckwheat fields ends a short day (or continue above for warmer and less dusty campsites). We planned for food and fuel here but the village was entirely deserted for winter in 2015 but not in 2016 at the same time. Foraging returned a hidden garden with mustard greens *sag* and white radish *mula* and an exiting Swiss expedition with horses yielded rice, macaroni and kerosene which were welcome. Dhampus (6012m) towers above. There is only one source of water here, a rubbish-choked spring that is apparently decreasing with climate change.



Across Sangda (3710m) buckwheat fields to Sangda La (4900m), the skyline notch furthest to the right



Down valley across Sangda (3710). The path lies out of sight directly above the village.

37. Sangda - Kagbeni 800m↑ 1500m↓ 7hrs

It was eerie to sleep in a deserted village with just the sound of flapping prayerflags. A steep bare climb starts the day, directly up 400m to a ridge at 4100m then into a frosty valley with camp platforms and water below the track (which might make a better overnight camp than dusty Sangda), or climb a little further for a warmer campsite. There are a series of nine huge sweeping traverses with views up to Dhampus (6012m) and into Mustang to a high point at 4550m. Keep traversing until the bottom of the Kali Gandaki comes into view at Jeula Danda. From here, take a series of loose shortcuts across various disused army roads to a dry village with dogs then lower down past the lake of Tiri Tal there is a welcome spring. Drop on a dreadful trail of loose rocks onto a road above Kagbeni then head downriver for the bridge into **Kagbeni** (2800m) itself with lodges, shops and all the trappings of civilisation.



Descending to Kali Gandaki with Thorung La (5416m) left, Tilicho Pass and Mesokanto under Tilicho (7134m) and Kagbeni hidden below



Howard and Sue Dengate on Sangda La (4900m), the last big pass of the 40 day trek.

38. Kagbeni - Jomsom 70m ↑ 690m ↓ 2.5hrs

It is a brisk pleasant walk in the morning to Jomsom (2700m), planning to arrive before the daily wind starts at 10:30am. Take various shortcuts across the Kali Gandaki riverbed by watching what the locals are doing. Or you can take a jeep.



Thanks Team! from left, Issu Rai, Sue Dengate, Dawa Bhote, Jamling Bhote. Sambhu Tamang, Howard Dengate, Ramesh Tamang, Mingma Bhote

RETREAT ROUTE DUE TO STORM

This is the retreat route we used after the Hudhud killer storm in 2014, via Do Tarap to a flight from Juphal, for those who may want to exit by this enjoyable route.

32. Rakpa camp - Taaka Samdo tent camp 450m↑ 400m↓ 9hrs

The path above Rakpa proceeds up the broad valley on the true right of the Kehein Khola for 30-45mins, then makes a wet crossing and heads up the narrower Lakyan Khola to the south, despite the tempting broad valley ahead. We climbed to the very base of Chharka La in 3hrs before descending yak herders told us that all passes beyond Chharka were closed and that everyone was being evacuated by helicopter. We turned around and descended past Rakpa to a tent camp at **Taaka Samdo** (~4200m), requiring a dark and icy river crossing, and camped inside the walls there. This is the junction of the Sulung Khola and the Kehein Khola. Food (including *saag* from their greenhouse) and kerosene was available and there might be limited accommodation.



Looking southwest to Mola Bhanjyang (5027m, Chharka La) at left, yaks descending

33. Taaka Samdo tent camp - Cholla Bhanjyang camp 100m↑ 0m↓ 2hrs

Because we were short of food we ate an early lunch at Taaka Samdo tent camp and had a pleasant stroll to the campsite marked on the map, which we called **Cholla Bhanjyang camp** (~4300m). There are many worse ways to spend a day than in beautiful hills with more than 25 blue sheep for company. It would be a very long day to Do Tarap if keen.



Above Cholla Bhanjyang camp with the climb to Cholla Bhanjyang (5051m) itself just coming into view on the left

34. Cholla Bhanjyang camp - Do Tarap 750m↑ 1100m↓ 7.5hrs

Continue up the flat valley floor heading southwest, taking care not to ascend the Penjong Khola directly south. Motorcycles were being used to herd yaks in this valley. After about 2hrs leave the valley floor and climb quite steeply to a shoulder with a *chorten*, then traverse southwest with fine views to Chholla Bhanjyang (5051m). We saw a very scared blue sheep here, fleeing what might well have been a snow leopard in a canyon below. From the pass there were views of endless heavily snow covered mountains, so for the first time we understood how serious the Hudhud storm had been further east.

Descend tiresomely on gravelly tracks into a gorge with many herds of blue sheep above Tokyu (4209m) and emerge into the wide valley that leads eventually a long way down to **Do Tarap** (3944m). The ****Tinje Hotel** (Rs1000 db Rs450; one room in a compound, no toilet) is just next door and downhill of the popular Caravan Hotel with more expensive conveniences. Friendly and comfortable but unmarked at present.



Chholla Bhanjyang (5051m) is across the traverse, in the centre



View east from Chholla Bhanjyang (5051m) to storm snow on northern Annapurnas



Arriving lower Do Tarap (3944m) from the north

35. Do Tarap - Toltol 50m↑ 500m↓ 5hrs

Continue down the valley as for day 14 in reverse. Autumn has arrived, with brilliant red barberry leaves, bare birches and black juniper berries. **Toltol** is at 3523m.



Part of the upper gorge south of Do Tarap

36. Toltol - Laina Odar 400m↑ 600m↓ 6hrs

Continue down the valley as for day 13 in reverse. Blue sheep have been driven down by the snows. This day is really wild, no-man-seen, soaring cliffs and tiny ecosystems surviving in crevices. **Laina Odar** is at 3370m.

37. Laina Odar - Lingdo 200m↑ 1200m↓ 6hrs

Continue down the valley as for day 12 in reverse. The Jang La of our inward passage is now covered in snow. **Lingdo** (2391m, Namdo) has a friendly lodge.



Laisicap (2772m) is in the valley floor and Jang La (4535m) is on right skyline

38. Lingdo - Juphal 350m↑ 250m↓ 4-7hrs

From Lingdo turn downriver for about 4 hrs to the pleasant Dunai (2030m) with large well-stocked shops including a pharmacy then either walk another 3 hrs up on a very dusty road to the airport at **Juphal** (2502m) or take a jeep, which is recommended. There is the large Mt Putha hotel in Juphal with camping area and private rooms. There are daily flights in the early morning to Nepalgunj; book at the many airline offices in Juphal. It is also possible to walk to a roadhead and airport at Jumla in 5-6 days.



Many people waiting for a flight out in the grounds of the Mt Puta hotel in Juphal

GHT High Route

combining two treks - Jumla to Rara Lake then GHT High Route to Shey Gompa

Here are track notes for walking from Jumla in western Nepal via Rara Lake through the Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) High Route in Upper Dolpo to Bhijer and so to Shey Gompa. Those few we met coming the other way, from Shey Gompa, found the long waterless climb from Pho to Nyingma Ganzen La to be very exhausting and certainly we would prefer the direction detailed below.

Various routes can then be trekked to exit at Jomoson (upper Kali Gandaki, with airstrip), Juphal (airstrip), or even Beni (road transport).

We went from Jumla to Jomoson which takes about 40 days and is best done early enough to avoid winter snows which might come at any time from mid-October. We started on 18 September 2015 from Jumla in 2015 and 2 October in 2016.

Entry

An overnight stop in steamy **Nepalgunj** (150m; 50 minutes flight from Kathmandu \$US156, make sure you get a seat on the right for the best Himalayan panorama, or by bus from Pokhara) allows you to catch the early morning flights to either Jumla or Rara Lake. We have stayed at the Hotel Karnali (Rs1200) which has one well-screened deluxe room with air conditioning when the electricity is available and adequate *dalbhat*, and at **Himal Restaurant and Lodge (Rs1500) +977.81.565078 just outside the airport gates, air conditioned with backup generator and excellent *dalbhat*. There are more expensive options such as Hotel Siddhartha with a swimming pool.

The frequent delays with flights to Jumla and Rara are due to clouds but also to priority being given to Indian pilgrims flying to Simikot and thence overland to Mt Kailash in Tibet. A 35 minute flight \$US133 through towering clouds takes you to cool and green **Jumla** 2370m, once the capital of a vast empire which stretched from Mustang to the state of Uttarakhand in India but with no sign left now. The large **Hotel Kanjirowa (Rs2000) is expanding and you can camp also. Fresh *dalbhat* Rs200 with the local delicious bean *dal*.

The direct Nepalgunj-**Rara Lake** flight to Talcha airstrip above Gamgadhi (2074m; regional centre for the Mugu District) costs about \$US160 for 40 minutes, is not a scheduled flight and can be delayed or cancelled in cloudy weather. It takes about 2.5hrs to walk to Rara Lake or 1.5hrs to Gamgadhi. A Dutch party camping by the airstrip reported thefts from their tents.

Stage	Hours:minutes	Lodge Accommodation?
1 Jumla - Chauriyachaur	3:00	No
Chauriyachaur – Daphe Lagna camp	3.00	Maybe
2 Daphe Lagna camp - Chautha	5:00	Yes
3 Chautha - Bulbule	1:00	Yes
Bulbule - Ghurchi Lagna	1:00	No
Ghurchi Lagna - Odar Khola	2:45	No
Odar Khola - Dhuir	0:45	Yes
4 Dhuir - Rara Lake	4:00	Yes
5 Rara Lake rest day	REST	

6 Rara Lake - Gamgadhi	2:45	Yes
Gamgadhi - Lusa	2:45	No
7 Lusa - Chhaila	1:45	Yes
Chhaila - Dhunggadhora	2:00	Yes
Dhunggadhora - Pulu	2:45	Yes
8 Pulu – Maila	5:00	Yes
9 Maila - Chyarga La camp	5:00	No
10 Chyarga La camp - Chyarga La high camp	2:00	No
11 Chyarga La high camp – Chyarga La	1:45	No
Chyarga La - Takla Khola	3:15	No
12 Takla Khola - Chyandi Khola	5:00	No
Chyandi Khola – Yala La high camp	3:00	No
13 Yala La high camp - Yala La	4:30	No
Yala La - Pung Kharka	1:30	No
14 Pung Kharka - Nyingma Gyanzen La high camp	3:00	No
15 Nyingma Gyanzen La high camp - Nyingma Gyanzen La	3:00	No
Nyingma Gyanzen La - Phophagaon	4:00	No
16 Phophagaon - Potalgaon	2:30	No
Potalgaon - ridge camp above Potalgaon	2:00	No
17 ridge camp above Potalgaon - Yambur La	1:00	No
Yambur La - Bhijer	2:30	No
18 Bhijer rest day	REST	
19 Bhijer - Den Khola	5:00	No
20 Den Khola - Shey Gompa	3:00	No

1. Jumla - Daphe Lagna camp 1120m↑ 260m↓ 6hrs

The asphalt main street in Jumla (2370m) has no traffic and excellent shops for those last minute purchases. Pass a huge new hospital being built. Walk on the road past the extensive Karnali Technical College 1hr and orchards of apple, walnut and peach then climb using short cuts to grassy tops and a lunch (note use of red rice, distinctive of the area) at Chauriyachaur (3010m). There is now a road passing but no traffic yet. The trail branches here indistinctly. Keep right behind the *bhatti* for the most direct route to Rara Lake. Climb through pines with Jumla views if clouds permit to a pass with *chorten* and prayer flags. This is Daphe Lagna (3720m; *danphe* is the national pheasant of Nepal, *lagna* means pass in Western Nepal) then descend through a parklike pine forest to the rather dirty set of *bhattis* **Daphe Lagna camp** (3460m) where dry flat land is at a premium. This is a very pretty open valley, largely cleared, with a wide range of wildflowers in the late monsoon. Rs300 for *dalbhat* at a nearby *bhatti*. There are also some good campsites below by the river at Tharmari (3290m) 30mins further or at Navri Gad bridge after 2hrs.



Daphe Lagna 3720m

2. Daphe Lagna - Chautha 790m↓ 300m↑ 5hrs

A gentle forest descent through *chir* pine, firs, sycamores and large birch trees on a recently graded road without traffic to cross the Nevri Gad (2600m; gad means stream in Western Nepal; 2:00h). It is possible to stay on the true left to Himdhuski (2840m) with hotels, or cross the bridge to the true right. Both trails join through the small village Bhiunaula then after about 30mins take a little traversing foot trail to the right, or climb up to a cave and waterfall a little further on. In either case, leave the road and climb eventually to *bhattis* under a cliff at 2668m for lunch at Kapra Odar. The black walnuts growing among the pine, beech, Himalayan oak, sycamore and birch are a feature of this area and we even saw a red fox. It can be a hot and steep climb to Bharbhare (2386m) and round the final ridge before descending to **Chautha** (2770m), a pretty village tucked under cliffs, which is quieter than Bulbule on the road a little further on. **Karnali Hotel (Rs500, excellent db Rs300) has several rooms, a friendly owner and a cool pleasant river view and river sounds.



Descending to Nevri Gad 2600m

3. Chautha - Dhuir/Jhyari 700m↑ 930m↓ 4.5-5.5hrs

An easy grade in forest to the checkpoint at Bulbule (3120m). The road now continues on to Gamghadi through here, with buses, trucks and tractor-trailers but the trail avoids it. NOTE: there is no water for the next 4hrs! Just after the large army camp beyond Bulbule head left onto a grass footpath and circle right climbing gently one hour to Ghurchi Lagna (3446m), with a view of glaciated mountains above Rara Lake. Drop steeply in old-growth broadleaf and pine forest and after 45 minutes take the less obvious trail left over a little ridge and enter a long soft traverse in scented pine forest, descending to a buffalo camp where there was no water but yoghurt (*dahi*) and pounded dry rice (*churra*) for lunch in 2015 but nothing in 2016 as the stock water was finished. Drop steeply to welcome water at Odar Khola (2360m; cave stream). Continue on a road through **Dhuir** (2410m) and **Jhyari** (2635m) with pesky kids. There is a comfortable local hotel on the right (**Rs500, db Rs500) but it is now a truckstop so expect noisy music, or there is a surprisingly quiet and pleasant campsite below the road just 10 minutes beyond. Still a bit too hot at night at this altitude but no mosquitos.



First view of glaciated mountains to north over the Mugu Karnali River, from Ghurchi Lagna 3446m

4. Dhur - Rara Lake 530m ↑ 4hrs

Cross the creek and climb steeply through the rest of Jhyari (2655m) past ancient deodars to the road which levels out through pine and meadows to a broad saddle (3052m), then drop through a dense pine forest to emerge in a meadow with a wide view of Rara Lake only 500m away. The views demand sitting and slow strolling around the western margin towards the campground and lodge of **Rara** (2990m) visible to the north.

The 10 km² freshwater lake, biggest and deepest in the Nepal Himalayas, has a very tranquil air because no vehicles, including motorbikes, are permitted. Even swimming is prohibited, so the waters are superbly clear and full of fish.

The Danphe Guesthouse, popular with domestic and Indian tourists, has 13 rooms (ph 985 802 9050) and the best *dalbhat* (Rs300) of the trip. There are many more lodges in the villages west of the lake but they have no views.



Monsoon clouds persist in late September over Rara Lake 2990m

5. Rara Lake rest day

At night, listen for the eerie howls of jackals in the pines, picked up and echoed at various removes around the lake. It would be a crime to not take a rest day in such a soporific location, watching the clouds or dawdling and dozing in the lakeside pavilions. For the more active, there is a climb to a Hindu temple above the lodge, with views to the north if you go high enough. We washed our clothes and worked on getting rid of fleas. The local crows are very clever: leave nothing out that they can open or steal!

From Rara Lake it is possible to return to Jumla by a different route to the west in 4-5 days, making a satisfying circuit.



Dawdling in a pavilion by the side of Rara Lake 2990m

6. Rara Lake - Lusa or beyond 1230m↓ 100m↑ 5.5-6hrs

It takes about an hour through pines and juniper to reach the lip of the valley then descend quite steeply on a dusty track to Gamgadhi (2074m), stretching down a long ridge above the Mugu Karnali Nadi (*nadi* river). This is the lively Chhetri-Baon regional headquarters of the Mugu District, now reachable by road and served by the Talcha airstrip about 1.5hrs above. There is as yet no road bridge over the river below so no traffic disturbs the trekker. We can recommend the Nitesh Hotel Lodge for lunch, with a cool dining room and great *dalbhat* (db Rs300). This is the last shopping experience until Jomoson or Ringmo!

Continue down a very steep zig zag track to a swing bridge over a side valley east of Gamgadhi, at 1752m the hot lowest point on this trek, then climb to the lower unused road that goes to Mugu village and eventually Tibet. There is good camping with water at this bridge after 1hr, and again below the road at 1.5hrs. These would be better places to camp than Lusa. Unfortunately in 2015 we continued with long ups and downs in dust to the rather unfriendly **Lusa** (1875m), with very pestiferous kids and reports of thefts from the Dutch party ahead of us. We camped in the school yard and mounted guards. Note that on some maps there is confusion about Lumsa and Lusa - you are heading to the second village beyond Gamgadhi named by either name despite the locals calling both Lumsa. In 2016 we continued 40mins to a campsite with difficult water access by a swingbridge; there is further limited camping 10mins further on.



Mugu District HQ Gamgadhi (2074m) on ridge below, route onwards up Mugu Karnali Nadi

7. Past Lusa - Pulu 380m↑ 6-6.5hrs

Leave early to enjoy the cool of the day, traversing up and down on a road and then on a stepped path, staying on the true left of the cloudy Mugu-Karnali Nadi which drains glaciers from Tibet via Mugu. After 40 minutes at a swing bridge there is camping with water and no pestiferous kids and again a little further on. These would be better places to camp than Lusa. The neat Buddhist village of Chhaila (2010m) has restaurants and a lodge and well-behaved kids. While the valley is hot, steamy and strident with cicadas, there is shade and it gets greener the higher you trek, particularly given the ubiquitous marijuana 2m high. After 50-50mins take the lower track unless you want to climb up to Mangri (2110m), going up and down to arrive at the Dhunggadharra swing bridge (2088m) with a pleasant 8-bed hotel for lunch.

Stay on the true left, through fields of millet (*kodoh*) and brilliant red chillies (*korsanee*) being harvested and dried, until under Riisa where it is possible to cross to the true right on a local bridge or continue 20mins to cross a new metal swing bridge. More hot and dry trekking up and down follows until arriving in **Pulu** (2257m; Pulugaon) with two lodges and a police post, not bad for just 6 houses. Water is available at the police post.

In 2015 we met the only other party that season to complete the high GHT route ahead, albeit in a very different style as they had 38 support staff for 9 Dutch and Belgian clients, plus ponies, and had carried their food from Kathmandu rather than buying local. Their horseman had been attacked with knives and sticks the night before, when camped near Chhaila, by a gang of 20 youths in a dispute about *yarsagumba* rights. In defending their party, several of their porters had been injured and the clients were understandably upset. They all camped on top of the police post and were escorted onwards the next day in case of a recurrence which did not eventuate. It was very much quieter in 2016.



Gorge after Chhaila (2010m) heading east

8. Pulu - Maila 600↑ 5hrs

Described below is the usual day's stage towards Mugu village and Tibet until the turnoff right onto the GHT high route. However we spent four days attempting to use a non-existent 'main trekking route' shown on maps direct to Phophagaon and Bhijer before we retreated and rejoined the GHT high route, which we then completed without the benefit of maps. For those interested, these off-route days are described in [Annex A Dolphu](#).

There is a major error on Nepal Map Publisher's Dunai: Jumla Rara trekking map ISBN 978-9937-8180-7-0 1:125000 (and on other publishers' maps).

The "main trekking route" shown east of Gamghadi via Dolphu then via Jhoripala Bhanjyang to Phophagaon **does not exist**.

The bridge at Tiyaar does exist but the track does not continue up the river side and does not exist according to locals, who say that the valley is impassable. A high level route through Kimri, Karti and Dolphu does exist and is used by locals to Dolphu. The bridge beyond Dolphu (near Kimdong Khola) does not exist. There is a cable and a pulley can be hired from Dolphu. However according to locals and to our experienced mountain guide the route beyond is impassable due to slips and has been for some years. The locals do not and have not for many years passed through that way. We spent four days trying and retreated over the Tirim La Danda and went over the GHT high route to Phophagaon. Locals in Phophagaon confirm that the track west towards Yalma Bhot exists but does not continue and is regarded as dangerous.

Nepal Trekking & the Great Himalaya Trail by Robin Boustead (2015 ISBN: 9781905864607) describes the 'route' from Dolphu to Pho as "only accessible when trekking west to east as the only

local guides who know it live in Dolphu...If you want to try this route all your party should have rock-climbing experience and equipment as there are three difficult rock sections plus two wire-rope river crossings that require pulleys etc.”

Continue up the river on the true right past several gateways (*kani*) with a new hotel after 1 hr and pass the Tiyar bridge to the right that accesses Dolphu 20mins further on. Do not cross but continue up the true right on a straightforward path that enters black walnut and broadleaf forest when it nears the river. Ladeghara offers lunch and limited accommodation 2.5hrs from Pulu. The village of Chitai can be seen high on the opposite bank, accessible by swingbridge. Staying on the true right, cross a blue steel bridge on a large sidestream after 1 hr. After another 1hr a village (sometimes called Shilenchaura Kharka) is sighted ahead which is used as the winter retreat village for people from Mugu, but this village is deserted in late September. Instead, cross a bridge to a new lodge called **Maila** (2820m) with excellent *dalbhat* (potatoes, pumpkin, bean dal with fennel and a radish *achar*) and several rooms. Try their *saag paratha* with *mollah achar* for breakfast!

Maila is a good place to wash clothes, get rid of fleas if you have them and prepare for the coming remote area. We strongly recommend taking an insect repellent that contains DEET. Our herbal Thursday Plantation citronella and tea tree (*melaleuca*) oil that had worked the previous year, was simply not good enough.

NOTE THAT THIS IS THE LAST PLACE FOR FOOD AND FUEL SUPPLIES FOR 6-7 DAYS!



Straightforward track above Pulu, Mugu Karnali Nadi below and Maila (2820m) far ahead



Lodge at Maila (2820m) with Mugu village up valley to left and GHT high route up gorge to right

9. Maila - Chyarga La camp 1200m↑ 5hrs

Note that the height gain this day may cause some people to experience altitude symptoms like shortness of breath and headaches. The only other party to complete this part of the GHT high route in the 2015 season, a Dutch and Belgian party of 50 people in total, sent their horses back from here but in 2016 we met a party coming the other way with mules.

A narrow forest track leads up the gorge to the right after the Maila lodge, through black walnut and pines with the Chham Khola raging on your left and sheer cliffs above red in the rising sun. Take the second local bridge to the true right and climb steeply over endless large rockfalls into autumn broadleaf forest and dwarf rhododendrons without the common cinnamon-honey scent. There is an excellent forest campsite after 2.5hrs at 3450m and further up signs of massive winter avalanches. Commercial-scale traditional medicine collection occurs in this subalpine forest to judge by campsites and tarpaulins. Look out for wild rhubarb beside the streams. In another 1.5hrs take a crude bridge to the true left over the gin-clear stream and climb another 1hr to a cairn marking a river crossing back to the true right. Camping is just over the rim, an open grassy campsite finally above the treeline with glaciers above and a huge amphitheatre that dwarfs the tents. We called this delightful place **Chyarga La camp** (~4000m) and is just above Thajuchaur (4050m) as shown on some maps.



Approaching the treeline under Chyarga La (5250m), note avalanche debris 2015



Camp at 4000m before Chyarga La (5250m), which lies up valley to left 2015

10. Chyarga La camp - Chyarga La high camp 400m↑ 2hrs

Particularly if you have walked from Jumla, you will have found it relatively easy to climb to 4000m without getting symptoms of altitude sickness. But note that the daily altitude gain beyond here is above the 300m per day suggested for safety. Therefore watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge. Consider using Diamox and remember that there are no clinics or easy communications in case of trouble. It would be possible to trek in one long day from Chyarga La camp over Chyarga La (5250m) to Takla Khola camp in 7-8hrs without too much altitude risk, saving this day.

For acclimatisation reasons we took an easy day here and simply moved to a higher camp after lunch, a very pleasant walk through native grassland free of weeds and not grazed by yaks or even by wildlife. Seekers of the highly lucrative aphrodisiac *yarsagumba* had been here during the monsoon and may have shot out the wildlife but even *choughs* were not in evidence. There were small burrows under tussocks used by some seed-eating rodent, to judge from the weasel scats full of brown hair, and flocks of small grass-seed-eating birds but otherwise the country was strangely empty and silent despite the presence of adequate water. The last of the monsoonal wildflowers were struggling with the coming winter. The late monsoon in 2016 meant that we camped here on snow.

The **Chyarga La high camp** (4400m) was a sunny sheltered nook among tussocks and boulders with marvellous snow and mountain views all around. A short acclimatisation walk to 4650m and dozing in the sun were all the activities available but the night was very cold, a just waning moon making the frost sparkle. In 2016 we made tracks in the snow towards the pass to save time on the morrow and had a full moon over the down-valley mist. A glorious camp.



Climbing to a high camp at 4400m on the Chham Khola under Chyarga La (5250m) 2015



Descending to Chyarga La high camp (4400m) after acclimatisation walk 2015

11. Chyarga La high camp - Takla Khola 750m↑ 1750m↓ 5-6hrs

The first 5000m pass of many to come was a straightforward climb of 750m on grass, keeping left against the cliffs, and then across a slope of large rocks to the line of *chortens* and prayer flags marking Chyarga La (5150m). Keep an eye out for Tibetan snowcocks. A marvellous view of unknown snow peaks and domes to the north along the border with Tibet. This pass marks entry into the Shey Phoksundo National Park. In 2016 the late monsoon snows meant that an extra 1hr was required for ascent. We had concerns about descending the other side which was filled with snow over ice, but our local porter Shembuddha guided us down safely despite many falls.

Descend steeply on a rockslide about 1hr to water then down valley past a small lake to enter beautiful autumn birch forest shedding leaves, in early October at least, after 1.5hrs. The valley below was bridged by many avalanche cones among bare trees in 2015. Traverse above the stream, noting that the tree-filled gash in the cliffs below will be the path ahead on the morrow, then eventually come down into an enchanted glade of pines and white birch. The **Takla Khola** (3500m) itself, coming from the north, is a murky glacial stream from Tibet, undrinkable and swollen in the afternoons. Clean water is available in the stream above which you have descended.

Even in this remote place there was a reminder of the profound social effects of the *yarsagumba* trade in the form of a horse train in 2015 collecting excess food stores from the collecting season, taking them back to Maile. In 2016 it was deserted and leaves had gone from most trees in mid-October. Beware of the clever crows who stole our coffee!



Approaching Chyarga La (5250m) in 2015 with high camp at base of scree slope on left below



Descending Chyarga La (5250m) in 2016. The onward route lies directly up the centre to the left of the snow dome. Yala Khang in Tibet is in clouds to left.

12. Takla Khola - Yala La high camp 1100m↑ 400m↓ 8hrs

This is a long and tiring day. There is a solid local bridge 15-20mins downstream that may have ice on it, bear left then climb steeply through briars on loose rocks up the white birch-filled gully above and traverse for 2.5hrs to *chortens* at 4300m. Descend a little over 1hr to the first water where two tent platforms have been hacked out. Traverse open grasslands with some cliff descents and great views back to the Kanjiroba massif and across the valley to autumn birch forests. Descend in increasingly prickly subalpine scrub towards the Chyandi Khola, finishing with 45 minutes down a truly horrible ball bearing and deep dust very steep track. Someone had burnt out the prickly barberies by 2016 but everyone took several falls. The side creek far below at 3900m will be very welcome.

Cross the Chysandi Khola if at all possible so as to remain on the true left and start a slow rocky scramble on a track with short sharp climbs above the Chyandi Khola, pretty but rough through birch forest and huge boulders until emerging above the treeline again. In 2016 the rude sapling bridge to the true left of the Chyandi Khola had disappeared and the true right traverse above the Chyandi Khola was truly long and desperate and eventually we were forced to take a crude sapling bridge back to the true left. Flowering dwarf rhododendrons of a species we hadn't seen before and frost-bitten wild rhubarb were some consolation in 2016. Above the treeline, look for a ford to the true right and a path upwards on grass and do not continue among the barberies and mauve flowering tamarisk. The excellent grassy **Yala La high camp** (~4500m) is just over the lip of the valley. Old scat of blue sheep and snow leopard were in evidence but no animals were sighted.



Views south to Kanjiroba massif with the Takla Khola over the ridge to the far right 2015



Looking east up the Chyandi Khola with the Yala La high camp site in grasslands under snow dome 2015

13. Yala La high camp - Pung Kharka 900m↑ 850m↓ 6hrs

This is one of the most scenic days of the GHT high route, with a sense of space and remoteness that we have never experienced elsewhere in Nepal. Continue up valley on a gentle grassy track on old moraines, crossing one stream which may delay you with ice. Good views of a glacial snow dome to the left and of the long yellow valley of ungrazed grass unspooling behind. After about 3hrs start a climb on slippery exposed shale all dipping the wrong way, dangerous if there is ice, then onto slate scree and across a second shale band to the narrow cairn-encrusted Yala La (5414m) in a further 1.5hrs. Sathya, who trekked in the same direction in 2016 notes that some maps show the wrong location for Yala La and used the photo below for navigation. The desolate valley beyond was like a coffee swirl of earthy colours, with the snow dome above a scoop of icecream, very pretty. The views reach right along the Tibetan border with the obvious snow dome to the north identified as Yala Khang, part of the Palchung Hamga Himal if the map is to be believed, actually in Tibet. It seemed unlikely to us that horses or mules could climb over this pass but they had come the other way; even our guide said "this is not a trekking trail, this is a mountaineering trail".

Allow time to appreciate the marvellous earthy colours and jumble of mountains above then descend on loose shale to a small spring in 30 minutes for a welcome drink if unfrozen. Drop through untracked snowgrass tussocks, steep and greasy at times, to the braided river in the flat valley floor below in about 1hr, then enjoy the level walking to a lonely campsite at **Pung Kharka** (4550m) past or before an unusual gravel glacier front with waves of advances and retreats preserved in stone. We counted 23 blue sheep across the valley and still yaks grazing in 2016. Our remoteness and smallness was impressed on us by the scale of the landscape, the north end of the valley filled with icefall. The river turned to ice as the sun set, beautiful under a full moon in 2016.

This would be a very cold place in wind or snow and it was cold as soon as the sun left the valley, the river swiftly falling silent and our waterbottles freezing in the tent. A very peaceful place.



Four porters traverse the second shale band to Yala La (5414m) 2015



Descent from Yala La (5414m) towards gravel glacier with Pung Kharka (4550m) just beyond 2015

14. Pung Kharka - Nyingma Gyanzen La high camp 300m↓ 400m↑ 3hrs

A lazy day as the landscape seemed to demand time for it to soak in and some recovery was needed from the last two hard days. The icecream confection up the valley seemed like part of a leisurely breakfast in the sun.

Descend the valley through various braided streams, many frozen, aiming to settle on the true right and staying low as the valley narrows and the deeply incised cliffs rise around you. We passed a high-volume spring which wasn't frozen and saw a large herd of blue sheep on the opposite cliffs, very unafraid. In 2016 yaks were still grazing in this area. The stream below continues through wild country to Kuwagaon, a very remote village. Unfortunately bandits, armed during the Maoist uprising, were reported to have robbed the village recently. If you look carefully to the left on the ridge walk on day 15 you may glimpse this astonishingly lonely village as shown on the map.

At this point you are back on the Nepal Map Publisher's *Dunai: Jumla Rara* trekking map but the pass over the Marumthang Danda is not named; this is the Nyingma Gyanzen La (5400m).

About 2hrs from camp, when further progress is blocked by a shale bluff, climb the bluff with some difficulty and continue up the narrow limestone gully to the southwest. Some tent platforms were hacked out where water briefly appears and disappears in the stream, **Nyingma Gyanzen La high camp** (4650m) was made then it was time to sit in the sun. There is another small campsite about 30 minutes higher but water there is very limited. Camping here is warmer than on the valley floor.



View to Palchung Hamga Himal in Tibet from Pung Kharka (4550m) 2015



Nyingma Gyanzen La high camp (4650m) above stream from Pung Kharka 2015

15. Nyingma Gyanzen La high camp - Phophagaon 900m↑ 1500m↓ 7hrs

This was one of the best mountain days we have ever had in both 2015 and 2016, with a 5km ridge walk all above 5000m in perfect weather and with views from Tibet to Nepal on both sides. Note however that there is NO WATER all day, so carry plenty from camp. The ridge would be dangerous in high winds or cloud. If coming in the reverse direction, from Pho, it is a very long waterless climb of 1500m; we made a mental note never to do it in reverse and two Italians we met coming the other way were shattered, not entranced as we were.

Climb steadily over limestone scree hummocks in the early morning shadows, with grass in places, then make a final steeper zig zag through rocks to the classic notch of Nyingma Gyanzen La 5400m. Amusingly, the Japanese cartographer who recorded this name thought he was hearing the name of the pass but it was the name of the person of whom he asked the question! Beyond is the Kanjiroba range in all its complexity and a labyrinth of valleys amongst which must be the route we attempted in [Annex A Dolphu](#). The Kanjiroba range was surveyed in the 1960s by Scotsman John Tyson, who died recently aged 85 after a very adventurous life http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/obituaries/13150778.John_Tyson/.

Make a climbing traverse left on loose scree to the actual ridge and climb to the beflagged highest point at 5564m, then commence a long up and down traverse with deep views to the right and long views across wild mountains into Tibet. Look out for the remote village Kuwagaon way below left. The panorama stretches from Mustang, Manaslu, Tilicho, Nilgiri, the Annapurnas, Dhampus and Tukucho, round to Dhaulagiri, Puthong and the separate peaks of Chaganath. The ridge starts to open out into classic more rounded Dolpo landscapes, tortured rock and a wide palate of earth colours from white to dark red until finally a large *chorten* (~4700m) is reached from which a view below of the first village in 7 days can be gained. Drop on a dry and stony ball-bearing track to **Phophagaon** (4070m; Pho), surviving on a single clear spring near which we camped. The wind nearly

took our tents away overnight so we were lucky on the ridge walk which would be most uncomfortable in high winds. In 2016 we camped on the roof of a village house protected from wind by a barricade of firewood and ate downstairs.

The 12 houses in the village looked very dusty with the harvest, the *thwock thwock* of flails the signature sound throughout Dolpo at this time of year. We were able to obtain rice and delicious local beans but neither vegetables nor kerosene were available. 35 years ago the village consisted of 110 houses, meaning 350-400 people, but water has decreased with climate change and there have been threats from armed gangs, so many have moved to India and Nepalgunj we were told, leaving the population at 40 people. Urbanisation and desire for education and medical care must also be a factor. Most people also have a house in Kathmandu for the winter. Food comes in from China via Tinje mostly. Apparently in winter, when the river is low, it is possible to go to Pung Kharka in 6hrs Nepali-speed but usually the grazing yaks are taken over the top. Snow leopards take 50-60 goats a year and even full-grown yaks, particularly in March when they are said to hunt in concert.



The final pitch to Nyinmga Ganzen La 5400m lies to the right, in 2016



View northeast to Tibet from peak 5564m south of Nyingma Gyanzen La in 2015



View southwest as the Nyingma Gyanzen ridge descends towards Phophagaon in 2015. The large peak right is Dhaulagiri (8167m) and the Annapurna range to the left.

16. Phophagaon - ridge camp above Potalgaon 800m↓1000m↑ 4.5hrs

After the tiring climb yesterday, a clever solution is to have a late lunch and trek halfway to Bhijer to a source of water, but it is possible to reach Bhijer in one 8hr day. Visiting children were polite and friendly but their parents were very busy with harvest.

On the way out in 2015 a Kathmandu-educated resident with excellent English opened the 800 year old *gompa* for us, but the paintings and manuscripts are largely ruined by water leakage and hay is being stored upstairs. Still, an all-day *puja* was planned for the next day by a local *lama*, which the whole village would attend. Usually a *lama* comes from Bhijer.

Descend to the Tora Khola in 1.5hrs, cross it on a hoary cantilever bridge reflecting on the lack of trees to build such a structure, then climb in 1hr to willows with reliable water and 7 campsites for a small group. Continue through thorny scrub up to a shelf shown as Potalgaon (4070m; Pho Kharka) with ruins of houses abandoned for a generation as there is no water except in the monsoon. Continue southwards to the left of the red cliffs above towards a pass on the right shoulder. A thorny **ridge camp above Potalgaon** (~4400m) provided two campsites right on the path adjacent to water down to the right, with views back over the Nyingma Ganzen ridge and Pho. In 2016 water was very hard to find as it was 150m up the gully and frozen.



The remaining 12 houses of Phophagaon (4070m) supported by a single spring



Southwest on leaving Phophagaon 2016, with Yambur La (4865m) in the distant notch to the right of Yambur Danda

17. Ridge camp above Potalgaon - Bhijer 300m↑1000m↓ 3.5hrs

Note that there is NO WATER in this stage, so take some with you. Continue climbing through red autumn thorn bushes to Yambur La (4865m) under the beautiful cliffs of Yambur Danda (5485m) and start a long dry and very thorny traverse to above Bhijer. Descend slowly on dry marbles with gentian violets in season to camp by the welcome Phulak Khola in the surprisingly large and active village of **Bhijer** (3850m) dominated by a dark red *gompa* and surrounded by extensive barley fields. The high altitude awnless barley was evident. This is classic grey-brown rounded Dolpo landscape. Here Mingma obtained fresh cabbage and fuel, just in time as supplies were exhausted.



Near Yambur La (4865m), view over Potalgaon to the willows of Phophagaon on the opposite hill left, below the Nyingma Gyanzen ridge running back. The snowy hills are the border with Tibet



First glimpse of Bhijer (3850m) on descending after Yambur La 2016. The onward route to Shey Gumpa is left up the ridge

behind and for Shyamling Gompa through the shallow saddle on the far right

18. Bhijer REST DAY

It was time to wash clothing and try again to get rid of fleas, successful this time. Time also to sit in the sun and watch the Turkoman hill pigeons and *choughs* compete in waves in the pure blue sky. Although there is a phone tower, it has not worked for some years.

The highlight of the day was a visit to the Vijer Bonpo Chakhang Monastery (also called “Nesar Temple in Bicher”) downstream in the older part of the village. Snellgrove in 1956, calling it Phijor said the temple “contained nothing of note”. The very charismatic *lama* welcomed us to his kitchen and patiently took us through the amazing *gompa* with its unique and world famous illustrated manuscripts and carved book covers dating from the 11-16th century. This library of 642 volumes spanning the 11-16th centuries had been hidden behind a sealed wall but was opened to researchers in 2000 and has since been fully digitised. It forms the core of *Hidden Treasures of the Himalayas* by Amy Heller (Serindia Publications, Chicago USA 2009 ISBN 978-1-932476-44-6, see <https://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Treasures-Himalayas-Manuscripts-Sculptures/dp/193247644X>). The fluid illustrated figures, living colours and flowing Tibetan calligraphy were fascinating, illuminating the Prajnaparamita (perfection of wisdom or wisdom beyond knowing). The Monastery has a relatively new Tibetan traditional medical centre adjoining it. In 2016 the lama was rather distracted as he was delivering a baby.



The Vijer Bonpo Chakhang Monastery (Nesar Temple) in Bhijer with adjoining lama's house (right) and hospital (left)



Lama Tensing of the Vijer Bonpo Chakhang Monastery in Bhijer displays respect with his tongue and a gold-illustrated page dated 1150AD from the treasure library

18A. Bhijer - Shyamling Gompa 300m↑ 200m↓ 2hrs

In 2016 we added in a visit to the remote *bonpo* Shyamling Gompa, having first sought out the lama caretaker in Bhijer who followed us with his horse to show us the buildings. Leave Bhijer by the gully to the right of the dark red *gompa*, then take a track to the right towards a *stupa* overlooking Bhijer. Continue gently upwards to a shallow saddle then traverse left until a ridge gives the surprising view below of **Shyamling Gompa** (Samling Monastery, 4163m) set over a deep valley with a ring of mountains beyond. The complex includes the 738 year old main *gompa* and a subsidiary *gompa* (both restored 30 years ago so not very ancient inside), several large family retreat houses with their own prayer rooms for people from Bhijer and Tata, *stupas* and fields of *mani* stones, all usually deserted unless there is a ceremony planned. 67 year old Yangton Lama Sherib Tenzin Rinpoche ("precious one"), who is an *amchi* (traditional medicine practitioner with 17 grandchildren whose forebears have been the caretakers since building the main *gompa* in 1278, was very engaging. He conducted a memorable 30 minute puja with drums, bells, cymbals and incense and said that 25 people were expected to meditate there over winter. Restoration is underway with one family house, funded by Amy Heller of Bhijer fame, and the Rinpoche showed us an ancient scroll ceding the area from China to Nepal. We camped in the yard outside the main *gompa*. Be generous with donations as considerable repair is underway; the Rinpoche's son can be contacted lamasuphu@yahoo.co.in

To continue to Den Khola or Shey Gompa, the Rinpoche was very clear that it is better to climb steeply above the complex tending left to a visible skyline *chorten*, then follow the ridge east to join the main trail from Bhijer at the flagged pass (Tora La?) at 4500m after 2hrs rather than take the trail through Tata. Continue as for day 19 below.



The 738 year old Shyamling Gomba complex 4163m in 2016, path to Tata beyond but preferred route to left



Yangton Lama Sherib Tenzin Rinpoche ("precious one") bids farewell outside the main gompa Tsechu Lhakhang 4016m in 2016

19. Bhijer - Den Khola 950m↑ 300m↓ 5hrs

It is certainly possible to walk to Shey Gompa in one 8hr day but it will be tiring. We chose to slow down.

Climb the gully to the right of the dark red *gompa*, keeping left as other trails go to Shyamling Gompa and Tata (unless you want to go there as in day 18A above), reaching a flagged pass (Tora La?) at 4500m after 2hrs with a view down over the basin containing the now-deserted summer camp of Tora. A fluffy collie-like wild dog (*dhole*) fled from us here in 2015, climbing the ridge above in record time. Keep just above the *goths* aiming for a steep climb above a distant stream. There are many marmot burrows on this section but no animals were sighted as it is too cold in October. Take water and climb to the right about 300m to ~4600m, circling the ridge. Tracks are indistinct. There are broad views right back to the Nyingma Gyanzen ridge over vast deserts of rock and scree and the canyons below are frightening in their savage remoteness. The fluted face of Kanjiroba Himal (6612m) rises above the grey-brown hills. There is an exposed scree traverse to another pass ~4700m and yet another. Descend steeply to a small *kharka* with rings of stones and access to **Den Khola** (~4500m) that provides water for a remote camping site. A very cold night both years due to altitude.



'Purple mountain' (5260m; Snellgrove *smug-po'i rong*) above Bhijer. The route lies past the summer village and over the right flank of the rounded peak to the far right



Looking northwest, Bhijer (3850m) lies well behind 'Purple mountain' (5260m) on the right with the path on the left ridge

20. Den Khola - Shey Gompa 400m↑ 500m↓ 3hrs

Traverse under a high summer village and climb 300m of the mountain to the right, trending right around the shoulder then make a climbing traverse with views across a deep canyon to the 800 year old Tsakhang hermitage, a spectacular meditation retreat for monks from Shey Gompa. There are also good views of the even more remote Gamoche Gompa on the circuit around Crystal Mountain. The Nandalo La which accesses Ringmo and Phuksundo Lake can be seen in the distance to the left of Crystal Mountain (5566m). Climb again to about 4800m then descend and traverse deeply to the left until finally **Shey Gompa** (4390m, wrongly shown as 4160m on map) is glimpsed below. The forests of bright tents of large guided groups were a shock after our sojourn in the wilderness as was the first snowfall of the trek that evening.

Continue trek either out to Kagbeni/Jomsom from Day 25 in [Upper Dolpo track notes](#), or to Ringmo and Juphal as briefly under Day 24 in [Upper Dolpo track notes](#).



Tsakhang hermitage across the Tartan Khola, tucked under cliffs at 4700m



Shey Gompa (4390m) below, the stream to the Nandalo (5340m; Ngadra La) and Ringmo beyond

ANNEX A Side trip to Dolphu

The "main trekking route" shown from Gamghadi via Dolphu then via Jhoripala Bhanjyang to Phophagaon **does not exist**. Here are track notes for those who might want to explore the remote valley we attempted, offering some of the steepest and wildest country we have seen. The route described below does rejoin the trail towards Mugu and thence to the high GHT route.

Pulu - cowshed before Tukche 1000m↑ 200m↓ 6hrs

Continue up the river on the true right and cross a bridge to Tiyar that accesses the Namlang Nadi valley and Dolphu after about 1.5hrs. Inspect the romantic and deserted *gompa* by climbing upstairs if you want, then take the steep climb up to Kimri (2720m), on the left before the *gompa*. The river track beyond the *gompa*, which looks so inviting to start with, does not continue. Kimri is reached after about 1.5hrs and is a traditional Tibetan village that sees few visitors, with flat roofs, pole steps and communal spaces.

Climb diagonally upwards for 40 minutes to a white *stupa*, reaching Karti (~3000m) in another hour. Karti is also a smaller very traditional village excited to see visitors. The track beyond is an extraordinary feat in stone steps through cliffs and bluffs, utterly wild and 2km above the river. There is no water until about 2hrs when, just beyond some **cowsheds** (3049m) built under bluffs, there is a small spring that can supply enough for a small party overnight. Due to limited flat ground we spent the night in a stone cowshed under the cliffs, erecting wooden barriers to keep out company.



Mugu and GHT high route left, Dolphu turnoff to right over bridge



Kimri looking north to Mugu-Karnali valley



Cowshed which provided shelter near the only water between Karti and Dolphu

cowshed before Tukche - Dolphu 400m↑ 200m↓ 4hrs

A bed of bracken provided a great night's sleep, somewhat marred by cows determined to join us despite other empty shelters nearby and the presence of many fleas. In the morning, climb a serious zig zag to the ridge that marks the boundary of the Shey-Phoksundo National Park then eventually take a sweeping traverse down to Tukche Khola after 1.5hrs, with thick trees and running water but no shelter. Zig zag and traverse up and over, finally climbing steeply through pines and autumn birch and beech to emerge at two separate *chortens* (3445m) after 1.5hrs with a cold but welcome wind and the sound of *choughs*. The views up and down the wild valley confirmed that the valley path shown on maps was impassable, as some passing locals confirmed.

Descend 200m taking the lower path through ripening wheat and buckwheat fields with harvest in full swing in late September and climb past a wall of *stupas* and a gate (*kani*) to reach the village of **Dolpu** (3242m), glimpsed from the ridge, in 1hr. Again this is a very traditional village with shared floors and roofs and very curious children, scattered across a rocky slope with a *gompa* above and separate family agglomerations. At the far end past a welcome waterfall is a decrepit school where we camped in high winds with views of the Kanjiroba massif through clouds.

Mountain guide Issu and fit young porter Ramesh spent 5hrs reconnoitering upriver because locals told us that the route onwards was very dangerous and did not exist. Certainly the views we had were frightening, very wild and steep. The answer was unequivocal: impassable without a much larger party and many more days, if at all. The options were to

- retreat to Jumla and go over Kagmara La to Ringmo and thence to Shey Gompa (taking many days of hot walking but food and fuel were available) OR
- go through the Wangri valley attractively visible to the south and emerge near Talphi and thence to the Kagmara La (which looks to be a passable and very scenic route but requires food and fuel, neither of which was available in sufficient quantities in Dolphu) OR
- rejoin the GHT high route and pass through Phophagaon and Bhijer to Shey Gompa (for which food and fuel might be purchased en-route but for which we had no maps. Luckily Sambhu had been through this route in the reverse direction as a porter)

We chose to attempt the third option, the [GHT high route](#).



Typical track between Karti and Dolphu, looking east



Arriving at *chortens* above Dolphu, looking back west over track from Karti



Descending through buckwheat to Dolphu, glimpsed just above the two people, looking east towards the impassable Jhoripala Bhanjyang

Dolphu - Tirim La Danda 1200m↑ 800m↓ 5hrs

Reverse the inwards route and climb 200m to the *chortens* (3455m), descend 800m in pretty autumn broadleaf forest to Tukche Khola (2950m) after 2.5hrs. This is the best place for lunch since water is at a premium in this whole valley. Some 300m back along the track down valley, turn up and climb 1000m on an obscure dusty track steeply into ancient birch and beech forest with some pines (we used a local guide for this portion). The campsite on the **Tirim La Danda** (3915m, *danda* ridge) was one of the most evocative and picturesque we have used in Nepal - a high perched platform in autumn broadleaf forest with views north east to a glacier, views ahead up towards Dolphu and the inaccessible Jhoripala Bhanjyang and views south to clouds moving over Kanjiroba North (6289m) and nearby peaks as the sun set.

The water pipeline to Karti can be accessed for water. Young local hunters from Karti had filled a nearby cave with various shot animals, blue sheep and deer, which they carried down for winter next morning to the great interest of a flock of ravens.



Looking southeast to Kanjiroba massif from climb above Tukche Khola



Idyllic shelf campsite on Tirim La Danda (3915m) with glacier to northeast



Kanjiroba North (6289m) to southeast of Tirim La Danda campsite

Tirim La Danda - Maila 1400m↓ 320m↑ 4.5hrs

The play of sunlight and mist in the vast amphitheatre at our feet, filled with eagles and ravens and glimpses of the Kanjiroba western massif, made it hard to get moving the next day. Climb in minutes to the ridge then descend on a clear track trending northeast. The forest was unique in our experience of Nepal, being entirely broadleaf of birch, white birch and beech with a few rhododendrons, lightly grazed but not logged. Further down it became entirely autumn yellow white birches then finally descended into pines and firs. The traditional village of Chitai (3100m) is reached after 1.5hrs, then descend another 1.5hrs to a forest of black walnut and the sandy riverbed of the Mugu-Karnali Nadi (2500m). Keep on the true left through beautiful forested rockfalls to a local bridge which takes one back to the main trail from Pulu to Mugu village. After 1.5hrs a village (sometimes called Shilenchaura Kharka) is sighted ahead which is used as the winter retreat village for people from Mugu, but is deserted in late September; instead, cross a bridge to a new lodge called **Maila** (2820m) with excellent *dalbhat* (potatoes, pumpkin, bean dal with fennel and a radish *achar*) and rooms. A good place to wash clothes, get rid of fleas and prepare for the coming privations.

Continue trekking from [Day 9 of GHT trek above](#).



Ridge hiding Dolphu on left and Kanjiroba massif to southeast



About 3500m, descending from Tirim La Danda towards Chitai



Traditional Tibetan village of Chitai (3100m) with Mugu trail heading northeast glimpsed below on Mugu Karnali Nadi

Sue and Howard Dengate (September-November 2014, September - October 2015, October 2016). All changes, comment and corrections welcome at confoodnet@ozemail.com.au. Thanks to Dirk Leker (Germany) again for useful input following his trek in 2016 and to Sathya (India) for altitude and other corrections. His lovely photos and an electronic map download can be seen at <http://sathyatravels.blogspot.com.au/2016/11/mugu-to-upper-dolpo-oct-2016.html>