

Kangchenjunga Trek

Updated January 2014

We found it hard to get reliable information on whether the north and south sides of Mt Kangchenjunga could be visited as a lodge trek. The answer is definitely yes, in season, and these track notes are offered as a guide for those interested.

Our reason for providing track notes is to increase the flow of money direct to locals, who tell us that "teahouse trekking is best", a force for positive local development better than the tented expeditions which carry all their supplies from Kathmandu.

Since these notes were first published in January 2013, trekking numbers on the north side have increased by 200-300% and on the south side by 50%, which has already resulted in more rooms and improved lodges and a higher standard of living for locals.

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Introduction

Kangchenjunga is the third highest mountain in the world at 8586m and difficult to access as it is located along the north-eastern border of Nepal with Sikkim (India) and Tibet. The area is also relatively undeveloped so trekking is seasonal. The usual trekking destinations are the climbing base camps and viewpoints on the south and north sides of this massive mountain. We found that the traverse between these was also highly enjoyable, making for a very satisfying and wild experience.

Don't expect the formed tracks of the Everest and Annapurna regions, although tracks are being rapidly improved up the north side. If you are grateful for a stone hut, wooden bed, evening *dalbhat* and daily wilderness, you will greatly enjoy this remote trek. Even today, only about 1,000 trekkers a year visit this place compared to over 70,000 in the Khumbu, so it is possible to walk blissfully all day and see nobody else. Most people you will meet will be in camping groups but you may meet some independent trekkers with their guides and/or porters. Note that there is considerable exposure on many of the tracks, so don't go if you have vertigo or a fear of heights.

This matrilineal Limbu ('the bearer of bows and arrows') homeland is not highly populated, particularly on the south side, and the people follow animist, Buddhist and some Hindu beliefs. Phale and Ghunsa on the northern side are uniquely Tibetan in architecture and religious practice but we were surprised by the general lack of outward religious signs that characterise the Khumbu region, for instance. There is a focus on *tongba*, warm millet beer served in brass-decorated wooden pots with a straw.

The trek around Kangchenjunga can be done entirely as a lodge trek in September-October-November and in March-April-May. At the start and end of these periods there may be some lodges closed, particularly at higher altitudes. Always enquire before relying on these notes.

There are toilets in nearly all places and phone access, limited on the south side. There is mobile reception (but not NCELL) on most of the north side and at the start of the south side.

My wife and I trekked the south-to-north route described below in October-November 2012 with a good friend from Germany and the north-to-south route in November-December 2013. The weather was superb both times. The first time we did 16 (should have been 17) days actual walking including some long days, plus 2 rest days and 4 days for travel to and from the walk. So we were 22 days from Kathmandu but had allowed some extra days for illness and bad weather if needed. The second time, due to strikes, we had to walk in from the airstrip at Tumlingtar, which required an extra 4 walking days and led logically to the north-to-south route, taking 18 walking days with no rest days. We were 26 days from Kathmandu.

We have now trekked Kangchenjunga south-to-north and north-to-south and these track notes separately cover both directions. However on balance we would definitely choose to trek to the southern side first, then cross to the northern side and exit down that valley. Some people regard the steep climb above Cheram as being a show-stopper, but these people generally came DOWN this climb. It is probably easier to climb than descend. If you climb it, then within 2-3hrs the day's climbing is over and you can enjoy the most marvellous traverse. Some people who had descended to Cheram chose not to go up to the south base camp because they were too tired, which is a great pity – another reason to trek south then north! An alternative view is that north-to-south is better for acclimatisation, if that is a known issue. More details below.

We hope that these track notes will make this trek more popular and so improve the lives of villagers and the number and standard of the lodges. It is a great and memorable trek that we hope you will enjoy.

Permits and guides

A special Restricted Area permit is required for Kangchenjunga. These permits require that you have a registered guide and a party of two or more. The fee is \$US30 per person payable in Kathmandu plus the Kangchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) entry fee of \$US20 per person, which can be paid on the walk. Unless you are continuing to the Khumbu (which is a great trip if you have the time), the Restricted Area permit means that you do not need a TIMS card (Trekking Information Management System) as well. You will need 2 photos per person for the permit.

To get a good view of the culture we recommend finding a guide who speaks Tibetan and Nepali as well as your native tongue.

We very highly recommend Visit Himalaya Treks himalt@visithimalayastrek.com and www.visithimalayastrek.com. Their principal Himal Tamang proved to be calm, capable and exceptionally good at getting us into and out of remote places with a minimum of fuss. Likewise, on both occasions our guide Mingma Bhote and porter Lakpa Bhote couldn't have been more friendly, helpful, useful and able to deal with the unexpected. We enjoyed our first Kangchenjunga trek so much that we kept the same happy team for another 20 days around Manaslu and Tsum and then engaged them for the second Kangchenjunga trek in 2013. Both Mingma and Lakpa were only too pleased to help us learn some Nepali and Tibetan which added another dimension to our trip. I cannot recommend this company highly enough.

Maps and track notes

We used a Nepal Map Publishing Pvt Ltd 1:100,000 *Kanchanjanga* map and found it accurate. The spelling of place names from this map have been used in the following track notes but alternate spellings are given. We also carried a copy of Kev Reynolds' 1999 Cicerone Guide to Kangchenjunga, which out-of-date regarding tracks but contains a lot of interesting local and historical information.

Lodges vary and menus and showers are an exception. You can certainly raise *dalbhat*, *tsampa*, noodles, omelette and *roti* at most places, but coffee is rare and you may want to take your own. There are very few shops and often stocks are limited to noodles, biscuits, toilet paper, tobacco and alcohol. Water, batteries and soap are not always available. Porridge, muesli and pancakes are arriving on the repertoire of many kitchens.

- Two complete sets of track notes are given: going to the [south side and then to the north side](#), and going to the [north side and then to the south side](#).
- 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 *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.
- 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

There are four ways to start and finish these treks. A guide is not required for these access and exit routes but there is a myriad of tracks and very few people to ask if you get off route. Usually your guide will come from Kathmandu since local guides are an unknown quantity at this time.

The following table allows you to estimate itinerary lengths using various access and exit options.

Trek	*Access/exit route	*Days for access or exit	Plus days for trek
South to north	Bhadrapur - Suketar/Taplejung	2	18
	Basantpur - Suketar	4	18
	Tumlingtar - Suketar	6	18
	Biratnagar-Suketar	Not currently available	18
North to south	Bhadrapur - Taplejung/Suketar	2	18
	Basantpur - Dobhan	3	18
	Tumlingtar - Dobhan	5	18
	Biratnagar - Suketar	Not currently available	18

*from and to Kathmandu

- **Fly Kathmandu-Bhadrapur, minibus to Fikkal, then bus/jeep to Taplejung/Suketar.** This alternative is best for south to north as it is fastest and cheapest in our opinion and could be used also for north to south with an extra day's walk down to Mitlung.
 - **Kathmandu to Fikkal (flight/minibus) 4-5hrs**

There are multiple daily flights to this quiet and charming area of coconut palms and rice on the eastern Nepal border with India. We took a Buddha Air flight at 1350hrs for \$US171 each plus Rs200 domestic departure tax, then a minibus for Rs2000 total

from the airport on uncrowded asphalt roads through teak forests up to the pleasant
Kanyam Inn (Rs1300 room with bath, db Rs160) 3km before **Fikkal (1468m)
looking over tea plantations, lovely cloudscapes and the Kangchenjunga massif.
There are several good hotels in Fikkal itself as well, some located in tea plantations.

- **Fikkal to Suketar (bus/walk) 9-10hrs**

Local buses are available in Fikkal itself but we organised a comfortable 4WD (\$US220-250) and enjoyed the empty quality road, passing through the major tea-producing town of **Ilam** (800m, tea and cardamom *elanchai* are grown extensively here) after 4hrs, from which you can access Darjeeling, and then **Phiddim** (1038m) for lunch. The road goes as low as a hot 800m and as high as a cool 2300m. The district headquarter of **Taplejung** (1870m; 'fort of King Taple') was reached after 8hrs. You can walk up to the airstrip at **Suketar** (2420m) in 1.5hrs or take a jeep for Rs100. **Hotel Everest View (Rs700, db Rs300) adjoins the airstrip.

- **Fly or bus Kathmandu-Biratnagar and take a 5-6hr bus trip to Basantpur then walk to Dobhan (2 days) or Taplejung/Suketar (3 days).** There are multiple daily flights to Biratnagar and it is possible to connect with a bus to arrive in Basantpur the same day. There is also a very long bus ride direct to Basantpur. Some of the teahouse trekkers we met had used this access route but thought the bus trip was hard. The route, the first day of which we have yet to walk, is as follows:

- Basantpur (2310m) - Chauki (2660m) – Mangelbari (2620m) – Gupha Pokhari (2870m) 20km, 1000m↑ 240m↓ 6-7hrs

- Gupha Pokhari (2870m) – Gurja (1925m) – Dobhan (640m) 2200m↓ 7 hrs – [details](#) under Tumlingtar below.

- Requires one more day's walk to Taplejung and Suketar but you may get a jeep.

- **Fly Kathmandu-Tumlingtar, walk for 4 days to Dobhan or 5 days to Taplejung** There are daily flights to Tumlingtar (324m) (eg Yeti at 1115h, 35mins, \$US123 plus departure tax \$US2). We consider it worth staying overnight in Tumlingtar and starting the walk the next day as it can be hot climbing to the first alternative accommodation. The pleasant **Arun Hotel (Rs500 double with mosquito nets and fan, db Rs130) is our choice but the Makalu and Kangchenjunga Hotels are also available. The walking route is as follows:

- **Tumlingtar to Chainpur 230m↓ 900m↑ 6-7h**

Walk south on the new tarmac road and drop 100m to vehicle bridge over the Sabha Khola after 1hr, climb steeply on shortcut immediately left after bridge, crossing the road several times and walking along it at times, passing **Gahati** and **Gairigaon**. At 5 wooden memorial seats, inside a big right hand turn, take narrow path and climb steeply on paddy paths tending NE to arrive in **Kharang** (1200m) after 4.5hrs. Great pumpkin *dalbhat* at the Swagat Hotel (db Rs250), the best on our trek. Climb on paths to a Hindu temple at **Katarigaon** (1350m) then on a dusty road down to **Chainpur** (1225m) large and prosperous and spread along a narrow ridge. The very flash Zibon Hotel was full so we stayed further up at the **Nisa Guesthouse (Rs500, db Rs150). Quite a hard first day but shady, water available and vintage trekking with views of Makalu and Chamlang. Note that you can hire a jeep from Tumlingtar to Chainpur, about \$US60 for 2.5-3hrs on winding dirt road.

- **Chainpur to Nundhaki 335m↑ 100m↓ 4.5hrs**

About 1.5hrs on quiet dirt roads in shade to busy and prosperous **Pokhari** (1375m, Khusi Hotel and two others) with a large school, then another 1.5hrs to **Chitlang** (1350m) where a nasty political extortionist bothered us. Drop to cross two swing

bridges then climb 200m and another 1.5hrs on steps through drystone walls and terraces with rice harvesting in full swing in November. Stayed in un-named inn to right of the **Nundhaki** (1450m) village square with great views down valley (Rs400, db Rs150).

- **Nundhaki to Gupha Pokhari 1400m↑ 4hrs**

Above Nundhaki, look for a rough link road left that takes you to the main road from Pokhari, after which you make a steady climb on a ridge through houses with a broad view opening below to Chainpur and even Tumlingtar, passing evidence of past Buddhist culture including some very fine small paintings on *chortens*. After 1.5hrs traverse for 30mins then steadily up for another 1hr for a view of the valley head and **Suke Bazar** (~2800m) on the ridge, 1hr away through pasture with remnant rhododendron forest and lovely clear streams. From here it is only 10mins on a bulldozed road to **Gupha Pokhari** (2850m), the scenic highlight of this route. The people here are of Tibetan stock and come from the ancient village of Olangchunggola (~3000m) in a valley near Ghunsa, so there are *dzopkyos* (cow-yak crosses), a cheese factory and a Tibetan wild-west atmosphere. The views of a very distant Everest, Makalu, the long ridge of Chamlang, Jannu and the Kangchenjunga massif are marvellous from a small hill to the south which overlooks the sacred lake from which the village takes its name and would be even better from the gazebo above Suke Bazar. The bulldozed road from Bhadrapur joins here from the south, complete with *dzopkyo* trains and their evocative bells, servicing villages higher up along the Milke Danda. The **Yak Hotel was expensive (Rs1000, db Rs250) but the alternative Makalu Lodge needs repairs. Cold at night with one lone dog barking at a full moon.

- **Gupha Pokhari to Dobhan 2200m↓ 7 hrs**

The day is a lovely traverse and ridge walk with reasonably intact forest before a long descent. Walk back through **Suke Bazar** and take a narrow traverse to the right across a bell-filled basin. After 1hr on a narrow track climb to the first of three 'passes' into rhododendron, beech and oak forest, grazed but beautiful with views of Kangchenjunga that demand photos. Top the second pass at 2670m after another 1hr and the third after another 1hr. Descend steadily for 1hr through silent forest to **Gorja** (1925m) **Sonam Tasi Lama Hotel (Rs500, db Rs300) with marvellous Kangchenjunga views. The Suketar airstrip and Taplejung can be seen on the opposite hill. We stayed in Gorja to avoid Election Day riots and passed through Dobhan with police and army protection the next day, but it is too short a day for most. So continue down a steep muddy track through a cardamom plantation shaded by beeches, then pines and finally giant bamboo to **Bopipal Suke** (~950m, Bhajogara) after 2.5hrs. The ancient *pipal* tree shades fruitsellers and we found giant seeded bananas *hatikheera* and sweet mandarins *suntala*. It is another 30mins to busy **Dobhan** (640m) with a long street of shops stocked with food, electronics, tailors and alcohol. There are several good hotels in Dobhan whose names we failed to record due to election strife. We continued instead to pleasant Mitlung.

From Dobhan, it is easiest to continue up-valley to the north side of Kangchenjunga. However, it is possible to climb to Taplejung (1870m) and Suketar (2420m) and so proceed to the south side of Kangchenjunga. Across the bridge from Dobhan there may even be a jeep that you can use to access Taplejung, otherwise it will take another day to climb the 1800m. Footings are in for a vehicle bridge at this point.

- **Fly Kathmandu-Suketar OR Kathmandu-Biratnagar, stay overnight and fly Biratnagar-Suketar.** Not currently available but watch this space: Tara Air intend a weekly 45min flight direct Kathmandu-Suketar starting March 2014 and the government-owned Nepal Aircraft Corporation NAC will shortly take delivery of new aircraft from China and intend perhaps two flights per week from Biratnagar-Suketar. There are

multiple daily flights to Biratnagar in Nepal's *terai* but no current flights to Suketar. With more demand from trekkers these flights may happen and would make a big difference to accessibility. Charter from Kathmandu costs about \$US3500 for 16 people and would require organising well in advance.

Two complete sets of track notes are given below:

- [south side and then to the north side](#), or
- [north side and then to the south side](#).

KANGCHENJUNGA SOUTH THEN NORTH

Stage	Hours:minutes	Accommodation?
1 Suketar - Lali Kharka	2:45	No
Lali Kharka – Simbu	1.45	Yes
Simbu - Kunjari	1:30	Yes
2 Kunjari - Khesewa	2:30	Yes
Khesewa - Phumphe	4:00	Yes
3 Phumphe - Mamankhe	1:30	Yes
Mamankhe – (junction)	1:00	No
(junction) – Yamphudin	2:30	Yes
4 Yamphudin - Dhupi Bhanjyang	2:15	No
Dhupi Bhanjyang – Lasiya Bhanjyang	3:30	Maybe
Lasiya Bhanjyang - Tortang	2:30	Yes
5 Tortang - Cheram	4:30	Yes
6 Cheram acclimatisation day		
7 Cheram - Ramchaur	2:30	Yes
8 Ramchaur – Okhordung	1:30	No
Okhordung - Cheram	3:00	Yes
9 Cheram – Sele La	2:40	No
Sele La – Misisay La	1:00	No
Misisay La – Mirgin La	1:30	No
Mirgin La – Selele camp	1:00	Yes
10 Selele camp – Selele La	1:30	Yes
Selele La - Ghunsa	2:00	Yes
11 Ghunsa - Khangpachen	4:30	Yes
12 Khangpachen - Lhonak	4:00	Yes
13 Lhonak – Pang Pema	3:15	Maybe
Pang Pema - Lhonak	2:40	Yes
14 Lhonak – Khampachen	2:25	Yes
Khampachen - Ghunsa	3:45	Yes
15 Ghunsa - Gyabla	4:00	Yes
Gyabla - Amjilosa	3:30	Yes
16 Amjilosa - Sekathum	4:00	Yes
Sekathum - Thiwa	3:30	Yes
17 Thiwa - Lingkhim	3:30	Yes
18 Linghim - Suketar	5:00	Yes
Alternative 17 Thiwa - Mitlung	4:00	Yes
Alternative 18 Mitlung - Taplejung	3:00	Yes

1. Suketar to Kunjari 450m↑ 1200m↓ 5-6hrs

Walk east up the airstrip onto a tractor road to the right and continue up to **Deurali** (2578m, Deurali Bhanjyang, *deurali* and *bhanjyang* both mean pass or saddle!). Take the right fork when a road veers left to the pilgrim-magnet Pathibhara Devi Temple (3794m), a day's walk away. Stay on the rhododendron-covered ridge to **Lali Kharka** (2266m) where excellent classic *dalbhat* may be obtained. The road now terminates here with tractor-trailers and maybe a jeep. Descend and circle through scrubby forest to **Tembewa** (~1800m) after 1hr, then through **Simbu** (1700m, Simbuwa). The **Aadamba Hotel with 4 beds and more being added was welcoming (Rs300, db Rs300) and served an unusual breakfast *khaja* (*khaana jaane*) of barley pancake with omlet. Or continue down a hot steep path, cross the Phawa Khola (1430m) and up steeply to the scattered bamboo and bananas hamlet of **Kunjari** (1800m). The one lodge on the right at the entry to Kunjari is adding two rooms which will improve overnights. The village lights were like constellations over the silent hills at night but the roosters start at 3am.

2. Kunjari to Phungphung Danda 750m↑ 700m↓ 7hrs

A steepish climb on steps to Gurung **Kande Bhanjyang** (2130m, Sinchebu, Sinchewa Bhanjyang) with a friendly 5-bed inn. Enjoy the views of Kangchenjunga and a forest walk on steps down through hot and steamy but very prosperous hamlets growing millet, maize and rice to Delok (upper) **Khesewa** (2125m) for lunch. Drop steeply to a lovely waterfall under Khesewa and make a long climbing traverse, around a ridge and another long traverse lined with clear small waterfalls, to an endless flight of stairs and down to the neat houses of **Phungphung Danda** (1860m Pumphe, Pumphe Danda). Fresh red cardamom (*elanchai*) is harvested at this season from the ginger-like plants under shade trees, at the risk of snake-bite to the labourers. Very settled and rich countryside that exudes contentment. We very much enjoyed the **Phumphe Danda Teahouse (Rs400, db Rs350) with 4 beds in 2 rooms +977.9742625486, 024.680504 run by Gopi Bhattarai and his wife. The *golbheeda* (tamarillo) pickle was a winner and the *dahi* (yoghurt) was excellent. There is another lodge lower down.

3. Phungphung Danda to Yamphudin 650m↑ 800m↓ 5-6hrs

Down stairs through a cardamom plantation to a high bridge and then a gentle climb to the pretty and neat Limbu **Mamankhe** (1780m) where there are several teahouses with beds. Tea with real milk but no coffee. There is one steep climb afterwards in hot steamy conditions with little shade but welcome small waterfalls. We found lunch in a farmhouse 2hrs after Mamankhe.

One hour after Mamankhe it is possible to turn left on a higher route to Sherpagoan (2000m, upper Yamphudin), avoiding the descent to Yamphudin and reducing the amount of climbing and descent the next day. This route is on small tracks and includes crossing a grassy cliff at length with an exposed narrow trail where a mis-step would be fatal. If this is a concern go via Yamphudin. See more details on days 15 and 16 of north-to-south.

Yamphudin (1692m) was smaller than expected but has several comfortable lodges – we stayed in the friendly and helpful **Yellow lodge (Rs200 per bed, db Rs150 with the tastiest *bentah achar* made of tamarillo, chilli, garlic, salt and ginger). There is a TIMS and permit check here.

4. Yamphudin to Tortong 2100m↑ 800m↓ 8-9hrs

This can be a long day. It may be possible to overnight in the *bhatti* on Lasiya Bhanjyang on benches around the walls of the single room, which is currently the poorest accommodation on the described trek, but the proprietor is cheerful and friendly and the location beautiful. Before leaving, check with your hotel whether the Lasiya Bhanjyang *bhatti* is open – if it is not, then you will need to continue down another 2-3hrs to Tortong.

An early start makes the first climb, some in shade, less hot. Cross the Amji Khola and climb north to **Dhupi Bhanjyang** (2540m) and enjoy the forest views. Drop through ancient rhododendrons on a muddy track to a new swing bridge across the Amji Khola at 2340m then up the true right to a closed *bhatti* and camping area at Omje Kharka. From here, it is an unrelenting but pretty climb on good steps past a wooden seat *chautaara*, where the track comes in from the left from Sherpagaon, then 20mins later through a pasture marked as Chitre (2925m). Continue climbing on a stepped track in good condition through ancient rhododendrons to the welcome *bhatti* on **Lasiya Bhanjyang** (3415m; Lassi or Lamite Bhanjyang). If you choose to stay overnight here you can climb through silver pines up the hill behind the *bhatti* for extensive views of your onward route. We were in streaming cloud among the ancient rhododendrons and autumnal oaks the whole time when we stayed here in 2012.

Drop to the grassy pass overlooking an immense landslip with a view of Mt Jannu (7711m, Kumbakarna) to the northeast, then climb about 150m above it and descend on a muddy zigzag through lovely ancient forest with maples turning yellow and the deciduous larch, a

feature of the Kanchenjunga area, starting to turn in late October to early November. Cross the Simbuwa Khola and make a short climb to **Tortong** (2980m, Torontan) consisting of two good lodges with separate rooms, well-stocked shops with Snickers and Mars (the first since leaving Suketar) and even electricity. In common with most places on the south side of Kanchenjunga, the *dalbhat* was superb, albeit with unrequested lumps of fatty pork. These lodges may be open from September-November and often February then March-May inclusive although if demand increases so too may the length of the season.

5. Tortang to Cheram 900m↑ 4-5hrs

Most people can climb to 3000m without getting altitude sickness, but the altitude gain in these track notes above Tortang is triple the 300m per day suggested for safety. 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.

From here there is about 900m of ascent beside the river, a long way and tiring but one of the most beautiful walks we have seen in Nepal: the changing sounds of the river, moss-hung forests with huge pines and larches giving way to a huge range of rhododendrons, all mixed with various broadleaves turning with autumn. In warm sun with a following breeze there are few better places to be. Watch out for the grazing yaks, some are frisky.

About 1hr finds a yak *kharka* where you might get a meal or tea. We spent a memorable night among yaks there in 2013 as Tortong was closed for the season. After another 40mins there is a new basic lodge at Anda Phedi, but closed in December 2013. Yaks from Yamphudin are taken for grazing by the track that heads up to Anda Pokhari from here. After 30mins there is a beflagged Buddhist and be-tridented Hindu shrine with a snake shape in the rock, north of which there is supposed to be a prohibition on the killing of animals but there was *maasu* (meat) on the menu in **Cheram** (3868m; Tseram), a crossroads for those coming over from the north side of Kanchenjunga. In November 2012, there were two lodges open with 6-7 rooms and another big new lodge not yet open, plus about 100 people in four separate tent encampments; in 2013 early December we were the sole inhabitants. In 2012 we chose the ****Yalungkhong Guest House** (Rs250, db Rs450). There is electricity and there are well-stocked shops. In 2013 late in the season we were grateful to find that Da Chiring (+977.993242131 in Yamphudin) had kept open his comfortable ****Blue Sheep Guesthouse** (Rs500, db Rs 350) with 8 beds in 4 rooms, open March-May and September-November inclusive. In 2012 Cheram saw 250 teahouse trekkers; in 2013 400 teahouse trekkers total in both seasons.

6. Cheram acclimatisation day (5hrs)

We chose to take rest day in Cheram due to the altitude gain the previous day. We walked towards Ramchaur (see track notes for Day 7) to a lake with marvellous views and back again in an easy 5hrs and could easily have gone to Ramchaur. 16km on a rest day! You could also climb directly above Cheram, or just rest.

7. Cheram to Ramchaur 750m↑ 2-3hrs

Ramchaur is getting crowded in season and has only 3 rooms with 2 beds in each plus 10 on the floor in the dining room; ask ahead if you plan to stay but whatever you do don't miss going up there, even for a round day walk which can be easily done in 5hrs.

Head up through moss-hung pines and rhododendrons with a small clear stream, climb and cross a large loose gully and climb again into the seasonal yak pasture (*kharka*) at **Yalung** (wrong 3900m on map, probably 4100m). The Decherol Monastery with 6 monks, mentioned by Chandra Das in 1881, was located here but no trace remains of it or the surrounding village although a shrine is rumoured above. There follows a beautiful series of open ablation valleys, juniper, cinnamon-scented dwarf rhododendrons and moraines and lakes with the Kabrus, Rathong and Kokthang hanging above. Care will be needed crossing the many

frozen streams and seeps. Watch out for yaks, some are totally wild, and for herds of blue sheep. The hidden stone lodge of **Ramchaur** (4610m; Ramche) is beautifully located and open March-May and September-November but ask in Cheram first at each end of these seasons. There is a reasonable shop (muesli, dried milk, Snickers/Mars). The food was excellent and the proprietor Pasang Sherpa very friendly (bed Rs300, db Rs500). Climb the nearby moraine wall for Yalung Glacier and mountain views and watch for snow pigeons. In 2012 a flock of 30 blue sheep came right to the kitchen that night for the salt found in urine from the 'open toilet' and the kitchen slops. It also snowed heavily, complete with thunder and lightning, and drifted into the room through the wooden shutters. The lodge was closed in early December 2013.

8. Ramchaur to Okhordung to Cheram 150m↑ 900m↓ 4-5hrs

Leave your rucksack behind but take a daypack with warm and windproof clothes for the upward leg, an easy gentle climb to a flagged cairn on a high moraine wall with views of the Yalung Glacier and the south face of Kangchenjunga, quite shapeless and foreshortened but undeniably massive. **Okhordung** (4740m, Oktang) is regarded as the base camp but the actual camp is another 2km/1hr/100m up on a track collapsing due to glacial retreat. We did not regard the extra views as worth the effort, but if you do add 2hrs to the day. Okhordung is certainly worth an hour or so soaking it up then it takes about 1hr back to Ramchaur. Pick up your bag and enjoy going downhill to civilisation at Cheram again.

9. Cheram to Selele camp 1100m↑ 850m↓ 6-7hrs

This day and the next connect the south side of Kangchenjunga to the north side via a superb traverse smelling overwhelmingly, at altitude in autumn, of the honey-cinnamon of dwarf rhododendron. The traverse is remote and exposed to weather so consider a rest day in Cheram if the weather may spoil the views.

The 800m climb above Cheram has a reputation for steepness gained from those who have descended it. It is steep but firm underfoot and soon overcome. Climb to **Sele La** (4720m, not shown on map) in about 2.5hrs past two frozen tarns and one large cairn without flags. Descend a little and traverse right, gently up and down in lovely high pastures and scree with views as far as Makalu and even Everest. After about 1hr, pass a left-descending track to the blue lakes Anda Pokhari and further down to Anda Phedi where there is now a lodge. Near here you can refill your waterbottle from the only flowing stream we saw. A short climb takes you to prayer flags and a stone heap on a distinct pass that people from Ghunsa call the **Misisay La** (4645m, Sinelapche Bhanjyang on map) after the death 20 years ago of a Tibetan and two yaks at this point.

Continue traversing, noting Lion Rock on the ridge above, and reach the windy and prayerflag-strewn notch **Mirgin La** (4645m) after about 1.5hrs, from which the views of Jannu are as good as any available, together with Makalu, the long ridge of Chamlang and even a glimpse of Everest. Drop steeply into a boulder-choked valley with underground flowing water, eventually arriving in a classic cwm with the Selele Khola flowing crystal clear though the middle. **Selele camp** (4130m, Mani Bhuk) (each bed Rs500, db Rs600, shop has biscuits, alcohol, no Snickers/Mars) is not shown on the map, but it is open from September to the end of November, has 4 rooms and 12 beds and good food. There is still no toilet so be careful of surprises behind the many rocks. This is a profoundly beautiful place, particularly towards evening as the valley clouds rise from below. The camp may be closed near the start and end of each season. You can ring Dawa and Pasang Sherpa in Ghunsa +977.994232334 and check and they may open it for a fee if closed. Usually it is open September-November and March-May inclusive.

The naming of passes on the traverse from the sides of Kangchenjunga appears to depend on whether people come from Yamphudin or Ghunsa, not helped by the fact the historical names were sometimes wildly applied to totally wrong places (eg Hooker referred to Mirgin La as Choonjerma Pass, which actually goes into Tibet above Olangchunggola). We think we

have sorted them out so email if you want details. Note that *la*, *deurali* and *bhanjyang* all mean pass or saddle in broad terms.

10. Selele camp to Ghunsa 100m↑ 800m↓ 3-4hrs

The sun doesn't arrive until 8am in late October, but it is short day so a late start is not an issue. Continue the northern traverse on a narrow rocky track to **Selele La** (4200m) with cairns and flags, continue circling with views down the Selele Khola, up to rocky peaks and rockfalls, across to the Nango (Nangba) La (4795m) which can be used to access Olangchunggola. Eventually there is a *chorten* and prayer flags named Tama La locally that mark the start of a steeper descent through old-growth rhododendrons, silver birch, silver pine and larches below towards **Ghunsa** (3415m), a large clean village of traditional wooden houses set in larch and pine forest. In 2012 we chose ****Peaceful Guesthouse** (Rs250 single, Rs500 double/triple, db Rs400) with a lovely family and a warm bucket shower. In 2013 we stayed at the ****Kangchenjunga Guesthouse** (Rs500, db Rs500) and were very comfortable with a good toilet, shower, food and family. The houses are charming, with rocks holding down shingles on roofs, dark weathered pine walls, a forest of prayer flags and juniper burning in the morning. Yaks, dogs, goats and chickens roam the main street. Fresh milk and *dahi* (yoghurt) may be obtained in season. Ghunsa was busy with people coming and going all the time, but in the last 10 days of walking we met only 23 'teahouse trekkers' in total, in 8 groups. There were also 6 large camping groups. In 2013, being later, we met only one German and 5 Russians.

In order from the bottom of Ghunsa, there is the new Snowline Lodge (R), Kangchenjunga Guest House (L), Selele Guest House (L), Sherpa Guest House (L), Ghunsa Guest House (L), Yak Hotel (L down lane), Peaceful Guesthouse (R), and another closed lodge (R). New lodge Kangchenjunga claims internet and TV but there was no internet or mobile reception that we could find although phones are available, as well as reliable electricity and several well-stocked shops.

In 2012 we took a rest day here the next day to wash clothes, and by afternoon it was snowing.

11. Ghunsa to Khangpachen 850m↑ 100m↓ 4hrs

Most people can climb to 3000m without getting altitude sickness, but the altitude gain this day is about 750m, double the 300m per day suggested for safety. 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. If you take a rest day in Khangpachen, there is a lovely side trip closer to Jannu described in north-to-south.

Take the obvious track up through Ghunsa and cross a bridge, icy in the mornings. The autumn larches above are like sunlight along the Ghunsa Khola in October-November, one of the highlights of many visits to Nepal. Gentle pleasant walking through larch, rhododendron, silver pine and cedar forest, with yaks coming down loaded with potatoes and the valley ahead blocked by the huge Jannu terminal moraine. After 2.5-3hrs cross a cantilever bridge to the true right, circle two big slips with significant rockfall danger and striking views of Jannu (7711m, Kumbakarna) and climb steeply. Then stop and admire the best views of Jannu! Traverse and eventually cross a small stream into **Khangpachen** (4145m; Khambachen) with about 10 stone houses. The ****Kangchenjunga White House** run by welcoming Norbu Sherpa (Rs500 double, Rs600 triple, db Rs595) has now 7 rooms with 16 beds, excellent food and is open September-October and maybe November depending on season, and April-May and maybe March depending on season. Call Norbu at +977.993242319 (Ghunsa) 993244578 or 993244579 (Khangpachen). Other places cater only to camping groups. The valley northwest up the Nupcha Khola calls out for an afternoon ramble.

In 2013 we were privileged to arrive 2hrs after the first Nepal capture and collaring of a snow leopard, just above the hotel, and two days later glimpsed a female snow leopard in the same place. The World Wildlife Fund scientists told us there are about 18 snow leopards in the valleys above Khangpachen, feeding on the numerous blue sheep.

12. Khangpachen to Lhonak 750m↑ 100m↓ 4-5hrs

Again this is double the 300m per day altitude gain suggested for safety. Watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge.

Climb past the chortens above Khangpachen then steadily on the true right bank with beautiful icy rocky peaks all around, though big areas of sea-buckthorn that fruit prolifically in October but are not harvested locally. There are at least two large flocks of blue sheep. At times there may be avalanche snow across the track that can make crossing streams problematic and recent snow in 2013 made the going icy at the finish. The last 30mins traverses a loose and exposed gully wall at length, crosses a rude bridge and then a sandy plain to seven scattered huts of **Lhonak** (4792m). One hut has a triple bed room, and two dark twin bed rooms (Rs1000, db Rs700). This is a very atmospheric place, mountains walls about a plain of yaks, particularly at night when you seek the 'open toilet' – be careful what you shelter behind! Walk up towards the Lhonak Glacier for the afternoon but take your warm clothes. Visitors in the days before us in 2012 reported -24°C and -17°C at Lhonak but they were in tents and we found the hut at -4°C warm enough. 2013 was also very cold.

13. Lhonak to Pang Pema to Lhonak 350m↑ 350m↓ 6hrs

This day takes you deep into the mountains with time to enjoy and acclimatize but glacial retreat is collapsing the moraine terrace, meaning that some sections require considerable care and there is an ever-present risk of stonefall. About two-thirds of the walk is on grassy terraces. The views of Kangchenjunga and the glacier are stupendous. We also saw Himalayan *pika* (rock rabbits), a big covey of *chukar* (Himalayan snow partridge), and more blue sheep. There is a single hut in **Pang Pema** (5140m) which is open from September to sometimes mid-November and in April to May and sometimes March and serves noodles for lunch (Rs500). A limited number of people could sleep inside. We regret that we didn't plan to spend a night here, although the altitude may make for a restless night. Pang Pema is generally regarded as the north base camp since it provides a complete view of the north face of Kangchenjunga, but it is possible to go further on deteriorating moraine walls – probably better to spend the time climbing the rocky ridge above Pang Pema for wider and wider views if you have the energy. Retrace your steps for a second night in Lhonak, usually into the up-valley wind after 10am.

14. Lhonak to Ghunsa 200m↑ 1600m↓ 7-8hrs

Very charming walk with full valley views of the golden larches in season. Retrace your steps down-valley to Khangpachen in 3-4hrs taking care on the icy bits. Lunch is available, then on to Ghunsa in another 3-4hrs, taking care on the two big slips which are now in the sun. The smell and sights of the forest are enchanting after the barren uplands. It is a 1600m descent today so watch your knees.

15. Ghunsa to Amjilosa 400m↑ 1400m↓ 7-8hrs

Cross the Ghunsa Khola on a swing bridge near the Yak Hotel, turn left, pass the ancient Tashi Choding Gumba (which welcomes visitors but is usually locked) and climb to a memorial to the many wildlife people killed in an horrific helicopter crash near Ghunsa in 2006. Look up right at the next bridge to the route to a yak hut just under Nango La (4795m), by which it is possible to reach the ancient village of Olangchunggola (~3000m) in two days. This village is reputed to be the original village settled from Tibet more than 600 years ago but there is no accommodation at present. Descend through the Tibetan refugee village of **Phale** (3215m) after 1hr. This atmospheric village offers a glimpse of authentic Tibetan

culture with two active *gompas*, carpet-weaving and traditional lifestyle. In 2013 coming up-valley we stayed at the friendly **Kangchenjunga Foday Hotel (Rs500, db Rs300) and there are at least two other good homestays with private rooms. People were very welcoming.

It is pleasant day dominated by the awesome river and beautiful silver pines, blue spruce, rhododendrons and autumn larches. Two short steep climbs separated by a bridge bring you to **Gyabla** (2725m, Gyabru) for lunch. There's a 9-bed expensive guesthouse and camping. Make a very messy steep descent into thick bamboo forest, dark as night but reputed to harbour red pandas. Black bears have been sighted in broad daylight across the river. The stony track goes up and down in bamboo until a small farmhouse at 1.5hrs where we got lovely fresh *dahi* (yoghurt) and boiled potatoes, followed by a steep 45mins climb and traverse on a narrow exposed track until finally **Amjilosa** (2400m) is sighted across a large slip. There's a good **lodge (Rs800, db Rs300) with 12 beds in 3 rooms and claims to be open all year. No Snickers/Mars, toilet paper, phone or electricity. A common vegetable on both sides of Kangchenjunga at this altitude is the *tutsi karela*, a sort of small bitter gourd that grows on vines and features in most meals.

16. Amjilosa to Thiwa 200m↑ 1400m↓ 7-8hrs

A beautiful day's walking with many bridges. The track is close to the Ghunsa Khola and is being steadily improved with newly-laid slabs in good order. Cross a bridge to the true left and at a big cave look across the river to see monkeys. Shortly thereafter cross to the true right on a new bridge. Eventually cross a new bridge to the true left again, pass a slip and cross again to the true right. After 30mins reach pass one lodge then reach the basic Hotel Handuring (5-6 beds) just downriver from the invisible **Sekathum** (1650m) for lunch (db Rs200 but it took more than 2hrs), or climb 150m to **Lelep** (1650m) which is headquarters for the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area with a pleasant courtyard and excellent *dalbhat* at the Lelep Guesthouse.

There are a lot of child porters on this section, with some as young as 12 years old carrying up to 50kg. They are paid about Rs2000 per day and have expenses of about Rs600-700, so earn about Rs1400 in a region where a good daily wage is Rs400.

A long swing bridge crosses the Tamor Nadi which drains the valley that contains Olangchunggola and subsumes the Ghunsa Khola. The shortcut immediately left on leaving the bridge saves the climb through Lelep but is narrow and rough in places and climbs up to rejoin the main trail through Lelep. The cliffs across the valley have native honeycombs hanging in their sheltered places. Don't cross the next swing bridge below on the left but climb up to regain the track through Lelep and continue on the true right for about 1hr. A broad stone path eventually drops to a flat and beautiful walk through rice, millet and buckwheat fields interspersed with cardamom plantations. Much of the track is in welcome shade. Cross to the true left at **Tapethok** (1322m) with a Kangchenjunga Conservation Area checkpoint for those entering but not for those leaving the area. Turn right, sidle the river and eventually cross a landslip of truly immense boulders. In 30mins suddenly arrive in busy civilised **Thiwa** (1185m, Chiruwa 'corner') with pretty thatched houses, well-stocked shops and ISD/STD phones. **Hotel Tamang (Rs500, db Rs250) and **Hotel Kangchenjunga vie for your custom opposite each other, with verandahs overlooking the main track.

17. Thiwa to Lingkhim 300m↑ 3-4hrs

Our choice here was to take the upper trail towards Suketar rather than continue down the Tamor Nadi to Mitlung and climb up to Suketar. Either way would work and maybe the lower track is more straightforward and the guesthouse at Mitlung is one of the best on the entire trail (see north-to-south day 1)- an alternative exit to Taplejung described below takes advantage of that.

If you intend to exit via Basantpur or Tumlingtar then you would continue south on the river at this point.

Walk south below Thiwa for 45mins to a swing bridge and immediately afterwards turn off the main trail and climb steeply for 30mins to a new tractor road. Follow this new road to the south, always looking for the shortcuts to cut off long zigzags. **Lingkhim** (1460m; Lingkham) is reached after only 3.5hrs but is easy to miss as it is a spread-out hamlet. A school above the road is the sign you have arrived, with the sole guest house a little further on. This is on the outside of a zigzag, so if you shortcut that particular zigzag then you will miss it. This is important because if you fail to find this accommodation there is no other between Lingkhim and Suketar at this stage, although building suggests the situation is changing rapidly.

18. Lingkhim to Suketar 950m↑ 5-6hrs

We actually walked all the way to Suketar on Day 17, which was rather long, because we missed the guesthouse! Note that the track shown on the map is not the new road route described here.

Follow the tractor road and arrive in **Mayam** (2000m) where you may score noodle soup. Afterwards, cross a swing bridge below the road and, taking numerous shortcuts steeply up to avoid zigzags, reach another new road and shops on a pass. From here, follow the road direct to **Suketar** (2420m) in about 2.5hrs, circling and descending in the last stages. You can see Taplejung ahead and below. A tractor-trailer (*gharry*) comes along this top road daily from Suketar and returns in the early evening but it is best not to rely on it. Treat it as a bonus if it happens and if you want a rough and dusty ride.

Getting out of the region is as big a challenge as getting there. Himal of Visit Himalaya Treks did a miracle cheap backloading to Biratnagar in 2012 on an English charter flight that arrived at Suketar the next day. In 2013, we used a jeep to Bhadrapur over 10hrs and then a flight to Kathmandu. Or walk to Basantpur and take a bus/flight.

Alternative 17. Thiwa to Mitlung, 200↑, 500↓ 4hrs

It is possible to walk to Taplejung in one day. But keep in mind that the trail to Mitlung is at low elevation (1200m to 900m), so the air is humid and the heat may be oppressive. The steep climb after Mitlung will make you sweat even if you start in the morning.

Climb steeply uphill, then continue up and down, up and down (this is Nepal!) until you descend to some fields and soon arrive at busy Sinwa (1055m) with three lodges (Tamor Khola, Paudel, Sinwa) after 2.5hrs. Climb again over a bluff, walk down on steps and follow a road for half an hour until you arrive in **Mitlung**, 1.5hrs from Sinwa. The comfortable ****Mitlung Guest House** is run by an experienced guide (Krishna Shrestha 9814367998), at top of village on right (Rs500, db Rs300). Sleep well on white sheets to the sound of the Tamur Nadi.

Alternative 18. Mitlung to Taplejung, 950↑ 3hrs

Note that the track described here is not shown on the map.

Leave Mitlung downriver on the main trail. Bypass an old sign (Taplejung) on your left, stay on the main trail then go left and soon start to climb steeply. After some time traverse a suspension bridge and continue to climb steeply past some houses and terraced fields. To avoid zigzags the trail makes a lot of shortcuts. Get to a tractor road at ~ 1400m. The grade lessens and soon Asahangpati (~1600m, 2 hrs) is reached where Dirk had the best lunch on this trek opposite the health post. Continue on the tractor road, pass through cardamom plantations and arrive after another hour at **Taplejung** (1870m). Buses leave from the other end of town (15 mins).

KANGCHENJUNGA NORTH THEN SOUTH

Stage	Hours:minutes	Accommodation?
1 Dobhan-Mitlung	5:00	Yes
Alternative 1A. Taplejung to Mitlung,	2:30	Yes
Alternative 1B. Suketar – Lingkhim - Thiwa	7:30	Yes
2 Mitlung-Sinwa	1:45	Yes
Sinwa-Thiwa	3:15	Yes
3 Thiwa-Lelep	3:15	Yes
Lelep-Amjilosa	4:15	Yes
4 Amjilosa-Gyabla	3:15	Yes
Gyabla-Phale	2:50	Yes
5 Phale-Ghunsa	1:00	Yes
6 Ghunsa-Khangpachen	4:00	Yes
7 Khangpachen-Lhonak	4:00	Yes
8 Lhonak-Pang Pema	3:15	Maybe
Pang Pema-Lhonak	2:40	Yes
9 Lhonak-Khangpachen	2:25	Yes
Khangpachen-Ghunsa	3:30	Yes
10 Ghunsa-Selele Camp	3:30	Yes
11 Selele Camp-Mirgin La	1:30	No
Mirgin La-Misisay La	1:15	No
Misisay La-Sele La	1:00	No
Sele La-Cheram	1:30	Yes
12 Cheram - Ramchaur	2:40	Yes
13 Ramchaur – Okhordung	1:30	No
Okhordung - Cheram	3:00	Yes
14 Cheram-Tortong	3:00	Yes
15 Tortong-Lasiya Bhanjyang	3:00	Maybe
Lasiya Bhanjyang-(junction)	1:20	No
(junction)- Sherpagaon OR	2:10	Yes
(junction)- Yamphudin	3:30	Yes
16 Sherpagaon-Mamanke	3:40	Yes
Mamanke- Phungphung Danda	1:30	Yes
17 Phungphung Danda-Khesewa	3:45	Yes
Khesewa-Kande Bhanjyang	0:30	Yes
Kande Bhanjyang-Kunjari	1:00	Yes
Kunjari- Simbu	1:00	Yes
18 Simbu-Lali Kharka	2:00	Yes
Lali Kharka-Deurali	1:30	No
Deurali- Suketar	1:00	Yes

1. Dobhan to Mitlung 300m↑ 100m↓ 5hrs

Cross the Tamor Nadi (Tamur River) on a swing bridge, immediately turn left on a tractor road then after 15-20mins drop to the river on an unlikely loose track to find paddy tracks up-river. Cross to bustling **Handrung** (700m) after 30mins. Those bales of cardamom the porters are carrying are worth about \$US1000 each. An alternative is to stay on the true right from Dobhan to Handrung – there are footings in for a vehicle bridge and road construction has started on the true right. From Handrung, head up-river on a new road and after about 500m drop onto tiny paddy tracks for 2hrs through rice harvesting, threshing and haystack building at this season. Enter a horror stretch of jungly rockfall, the track scarcely visible in the tall grasses, very up and down and sometimes very muddy through cardamom plantations, emerging into rice paddies after 2hrs. Drop and climb steeply to a welcome house and from here it is less than 30mins to the quiet string of white and ochre Chhetri houses of **Mitlung** (900m) with a avenue of frangipani trees. Just before the village join a broad trail and turn left. The track from the right comes down from Taplejung. The very comfortable **Mitlung

Guest House is run by an experienced guide (Krishna Shrestha 9814367998), at top of village on left (Rs500, db Rs300). Sleep well on white sheets to the sound of the Tamur Nadi.

Alternative 1A. Taplejung to Mitlung, 950m↓ 2.5hrs

Note that the track described here is not shown on the map.

If you arrive early in Taplejung you may walk down to Mitlung in the afternoon. If you start early in the morning it is also possible to walk to Thiwa in one day.

Start at the north eastern end of Taplejung and follow a tractor road through cardamom plantations to Asahangpati (~1550m, 45mins). Continue on the tractor road until a steep descent starts at ~1400m. The trail makes a lot of shortcuts to avoid zigzags and drops through terraced fields and scattered houses. Cross a suspension bridge and continue the steep descent to arrive at Mitlung, 1.5 hrs

Alternative 1B. Suketar – Lingkhim - Thiwa 1250m↓ 7.5hrs

After arriving in Taplejung take a jeep to Suketar and stay there for the night. **Hotel Everest View (Rs700, db Rs300) adjoins the airstrip. Follow the description of days 17 and 18 of the south-to-north text in reverse. You should get to Lingkhim in about 4 hrs and to Thiwa in another 3 hrs. This alternative saves you the lower trail from Mitlung to Thiwa, so the air will be less humid and the heat less oppressive. It is possible to walk from Suketar to Thiwa in one day.

2. Mitlung to Thiwa 500m↑ 200m↓ 5hrs

Follow road for 30mins then climb on steps over a bluff for 75mins, and down to busy **Sinwa** (1055m) with three lodges (Tamor Khola, Paudel, Sinwa). After a total of 3hrs we found an isolated farmhouse with views down the wild Tamor valley. Lunch included ginger *dal*, fat brown local rice and the inevitable *saag*. Continue up and down, up and down (this is Nepal!), heading for the obvious right hand skyline ridge, at the base of which lies the pretty thatched village set in a huge rockfall of **Thiwa** (1200m, Chirwa, Chiruwa 'corner') after 1.5hrs. 45mins before Thiwa is a swing bridge from whose southern end a track climbs to Lingkhim (1466m) and thence to Suketar (2420m) if you choose to exit this way. **Hotel Tamang (Rs500, db Rs250) and **Hotel Kangchenjunga vie for your custom opposite each other, with verandahs overlooking the main track.

3. Thiwa to Amjilosa 1400m↑ 200m↓ 7-8hrs

This is a day of bridges from large to very informal, with some steep up and down. After 15mins take the lower river track and after 1hr cross a wooden swing bridge on a side stream, then after another 1hr cross the Tamor Nadi to the true right on a swing bridge at **Tapethok** (1322m, Taplethok). There is checkpost for those entering but not for those leaving the area. The track for several hours is now on well-laid flagstones, walking through lovely cardamom groves in the early morning shade with the river roaring below as you climb over a bluff for 1hr. There's a welcome teashop with bananas to reward you. Make a final short climb into **Lelep** (1650m) which is headquarters for the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area with a pleasant courtyard and excellent *dalbhat* at the Lelep Guesthouse. Continue through the houses and take the middle path in a bamboo grove to drop about 150m and cross the Tamor Nadi for the last time on a long swing bridge to Hotel Handurung in 15mins. The village of **Sekathum** (1650m) is to the left but not visible and the remote Tibetan village of Olangchunggola (Walungchungkhola) is further up the same valley. Rather than the final climb to Lelep you can bypass it and go direct to Hotel Handurung but may not find it open for lunch. 10mins further on there is another lodge.

From here upwards the track follows the Ghunsa Khola, draining from the Kangchenjunga and Kumbhakarna (Jannu) glaciers and the major tributary of the Tamor Nadi. Turn right onto a rough riverside track just after the hotel. After 15mins don't take the wooden swing bridge but 10mins later take the metal swing bridge to the true left then 10mins later cross back to the true right. 15mins after the bridge climb up, still on flagstones, past bluffs where we sighted two musk deer right on the track. After 1hr, cross to the true left – we sighted monkeys on the true right above the bridge. There's another 1hr of up and down including some exciting riverside trails and informal bridges before the last bridge of the day crosses to the true right and climbs steeply for 400m in 1hr, traversing right over several ridges to **Amjilosa** (2400m). The **lodge is the third building with comfortable 12 beds in 3 rooms and Tibetan hospitality (Rs800, db Rs300). It claims to be open year-round. A common vegetable on both sides of Kangchenjunga at this altitude is the *tutsi karela*, a sort of small bitter gourd that grows on vines and features in most meals.

4. Amjilosa to Phale 1200m↑ 400m↓ 6hrs

This is a day of waterfalls. Sidle the huge visible slip with some exposure and climb further to round a bluff, then descend up and down across rockfalls set in dense bamboo to arrive at a teahouse after 1.5hrs. Look out all day for the red pandas reputed to be in this area. After 1hr cross a substantial wooden bridge near the third waterfall, 20mins to another wooden bridge and the fourth waterfall, then climb steeply 30mins in a nasty wet gully to arrive in **Gyabla** (2725m) with 9-bed lodge and expensive Rs500 *dalbhat*.

Descend to the roaring river confined by cliffs and continue up and down on a rocky path. Black bears have been sighted in broad daylight across the river. After about 2hrs arrive at a pleasant sandy beach then climb, cross a slip then an extensive slip and exit at the top of a third slip onto a terrace of yak pastures. It is a very pleasant walk through juniper and rhododendrons to the Tibetan refugee village of **Phale** (3125m) about 1hr above the beach. While it is only another hour to the food, shops and bathing delights of Ghunsa, this atmospheric village offers a glimpse of authentic Tibetan culture with two active *gompas*, carpet-weaving and traditional lifestyle. We stayed at the friendly **Kangchenjunga Foday Hotel (Rs500, db Rs300) and there are at least two other good homestays with private rooms. People were very welcoming. It is possible to continue to Ghunsa the next day early enough to do washing and take a rest day, particularly as the sun is in Ghunsa only from 10am-4pm, a much shorter day than in Phale. Many people in Ghunsa have a house in Phale for the winter.

5. Phale to Ghunsa 200m↑ 1hr

A very pleasant walk through pines, rhododendrons and the deciduous larches for which this area is famous, although most have lost their colour and needles by the end of November. Look up left after the next bridge to the route to a yak hut just under Nango La (4795m), by which it is possible to reach the ancient village of Olangchunggola (~3000m) in two days. This village is reputed to be the original village settled from Tibet more than 600 years ago but there is no accommodation at present. Later there is a memorial to the many wildlife people killed in an horrific helicopter crash near Ghunsa in 2006. Pass the ancient Tashi Choding Gumba (which welcomes visitors but is usually locked) before crossing a swing bridge into **Ghunsa** (3415m).

The Ghunsa houses are charming, with rocks holding down shingles on roofs, dark weathered pine walls, a forest of prayer flags and juniper burning in the morning. Yaks, dogs, goats and chickens roam the main street. Fresh milk and *dahi* (yoghurt) may be obtained in season. Ghunsa can be busy with people coming and going all the time, but in the last 10 days of walking in 2012 we met only 23 'teahouse trekkers' in total, in 8 groups. There were also 6 large camping groups. In 2013, being later, we met only one German and five Russians although there had been many more just weeks earlier.

In order from the bottom of Ghunsa, there is the Snowline Lodge (R), Kangchenjunga Guest House (L), Selele Guest House (L), Sherpa Guest House (L), Ghunsa Guest House (L), Yak Hotel (L down lane), Peaceful Guesthouse (R), and another closed lodge (R). In 2012 we chose the **Peaceful Guesthouse (Rs250 single, Rs500 double/triple, db Rs400) with a lovely family and a warm bucket shower. In 2013 we stayed at the **Kangchenjunga Guesthouse (Rs500, db Rs500) and were very comfortable with a good toilet, shower, food and family. Phones are available, as well as reliable hydroelectricity and several well-stocked shops.

In 2012 we took a rest day here the next day to wash clothes, and by afternoon it was snowing.

6. Ghunsa to Khangpachen 850m↑ 100m↓ 4hrs

Most people can climb to 3000m without getting altitude sickness, but the altitude gain this day is double the 300m per day suggested for safety. 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. You may want to spend a rest day in Khangpachen - see side trip notes below.

Take the obvious track up through Ghunsa and cross a bridge, icy in the mornings. The autumn larches above are like sunlight along the Ghunsa Khola in October-November, one of the highlights of many visits to Nepal. Gentle pleasant walking through larch, rhododendron, silver pine and cedar forest, with yaks coming down loaded with potatoes and the valley ahead blocked by the huge Jannu terminal moraine. After 2.5-3hrs cross a cantilever bridge to the true right, circle two big slips with significant rockfall danger and striking views of Jannu (7711m, Kumbakarna) and climb steeply. Then stop and admire the best views of Jannu! Traverse and eventually cross a small stream into **Khangpachen** (4145m; Khambachen) with about 10 stone houses. The **Kangchenjunga White House run by welcoming Norbu Sherpa (Rs500 double, RS600 triple, db Rs595) has now 7 rooms with 16 beds, excellent food and is open September-October and maybe November depending on season, and April-May and maybe March depending on season. Call Norbu at +977.993242319 (Ghunsa) 993244578 or 993244579 (Khangpachen). Other places cater only to camping groups. The valley northwest up the Nupcha Khola calls out for an afternoon ramble.

In 2013 we were privileged to arrive 2hrs after the first Nepal capture and collaring of a snow leopard, just above the hotel, and two days later glimpsed a female snow leopard in the same place. The World Wildlife Fund scientists told us there are about 18 snow leopards in the valleys above Khangpachen, feeding on the numerous blue sheep.

An interesting side trip for a Khangpachen rest day will bring you closer to Jannu. Check in Khangpachen for the current location of a seasonal bridge over the Ghunsa Khola. Cross the meadow after the bridge and walk uphill on a trail to the northern side of the Kumbakharna (Jannu) Glacier. After about 2.5hrs reach a shrine (~ 4650m) marked by many prayer flags, bells, tridents, letters and other objects of worship. Rest and enjoy the view of Jannu and its neighbours. It is possible to continue for at least another hour but the ground is prone to landslides. Return to Khangpachen in about 2hrs. Elevation gain and loss is about 600m.

7. Khangpachen to Lhonak 750m↑ 100m↓ 4.5hrs

Again this is double the 300m per day altitude gain suggested for safety. Watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge.

Climb past the chortens above Khangpachen then steadily on the true right bank with beautiful icy rocky peaks all around, though big areas of sea-buckthorn that fruit prolifically in October but are not harvested locally. There are at least two large flocks of blue sheep. At times there may be avalanche snow across the track that can make crossing streams

problematic and recent snow in 2013 made the going icy at the finish. The last 30mins traverses a loose and exposed gully wall at length, crosses a rude bridge and then a sandy plain to seven scattered huts of **Lhonak** (4792m). One hut has a triple bed room, and two dark twin bed rooms (Rs1000, db Rs700). This is a very atmospheric place, mountains walls about a plain of yaks, particularly at night when you seek the 'open toilet' – be careful what you shelter behind! Walk up towards the Lhonak Glacier for the afternoon but take your warm clothes. Visitors in the days before us in 2012 reported -24°C and -17°C at Lhonak but they were in tents and we found the hut at -4°C warm enough. 2013 was also very cold.

8. Lhonak to Pang Pema to Lhonak 350m↑ 350m↓ 6hrs

This day takes you deep into the mountains with time to enjoy and acclimatize but glacial retreat is collapsing the moraine terrace, meaning that some sections require considerable care and there is an ever-present risk of stonefall. About two-thirds of the walk is on grassy terraces. The views of Kangchenjunga and the glacier are stupendous. We also saw Himalayan *pika* (rock rabbits), a big covey of *chukar* (Himalayan snow partridge), and more blue sheep. There is a single hut in **Pang Pema** (5140m) which is open from September to sometimes mid-November and in April to May and sometimes March and serves noodles for lunch (Rs500). A limited number of people could sleep inside. We regret that we didn't plan to spend a night here, although the altitude may make for a restless night. Pang Pema is generally regarded as the north base camp since it provides a complete view of the north face of Kangchenjunga, but it is possible to go further on deteriorating moraine walls – probably better to spend the time climbing the rocky ridge above Pang Pema for wider and wider views if you have the energy. Retrace your steps for a second night in Lhonak, usually into the up-valley wind after 10am.

9. Lhonak to Ghunsa 200m↑ 1600m↓ 7-8hrs

Very charming walk with full valley views of the golden larches in season. Retrace your steps down-valley to Khangpachen in 3-4hrs taking care on the icy bits. Lunch is available, then on to Ghunsa in another 3-4hrs, taking care on the two big slips which are now in the sun. The smell and sights of the forest are enchanting after the barren uplands. It is a 1600m descent today so watch your knees.

10. Ghunsa to Selele Camp 800m↑ 100m↓ 3.5-4hrs

This day and the next connect the north side of Kangchenjunga to the south side via a superb traverse smelling overwhelmingly, at altitude in autumn, of the honey-cinnamon of dwarf rhododendron. The traverse is remote and exposed to weather so consider a rest day in Ghunsa if the weather may spoil the views.

Climb past the hydroelectricity station below Ghunsa and cross the Yamatori Khola to a sunny meadow, on the other side of which the track climbs on a beautiful rhododendron ridge for 1.5-2hrs to a viewpoint (known locally as Tama La) of Phale, Nango (Nangba) La which leads to Olangchunggola, and the terminal moraine under Jannu. Leaving the trees, circle on a very rocky track with mounting views. After another 1.5-2hrs take the short steep climb to Selele La with its pile of stones and prayer flags. Lie in the sun and soak up the views, then in 30mins through rockfalls arrive in ****Selele Camp** (4130m, Mani Bhuk) with 4 rooms and a total of 12 beds and the clearest stream running through the rocks on the flat (Rs1000 db Rs600). There is still no toilet so be careful of surprises behind the many rocks. This is a profoundly beautiful place, particularly towards evening as the valley clouds rise from below. The camp had been closed towards the very end of November but we arranged for Pasang to come up from Ghunsa and open it for us and cook for a small extra fee. Usually it is open September-November and March-May inclusive. If near the start or end of the seasons, ring Dawa and Pasang Sherpa in Ghunsa +977.994232334 and check.

11. Selele Camp to Cheram 850↑ 1100m↓ 4.5-5.5hrs

The sun arrives about 8.30am in winter. Steady climbing up valley, largely through silent boulders with the stream deep in the rockfall and mounting views. Late snowfall can remain on north-facing slopes, making icy the ascent to the windy prayer flagged notch of **Mirgin La** (4645m) in about 1.5hrs. The views of Jannu from here are as good as any available, together with Makalu, the long ridge of Chamlang and even a glimpse of Everest. From here, traverse two obvious watersheds on fallen rock, up and down noting Lion Rock on the ridge above and finally climb to a second pass with flags and stones after 1hr 15mins. People from Ghunsa call this the **Misisay La** (4645m, Sinelapche Bhanjyang on map) after the death 20 years ago of a Tibetan and two yaks at this point. Just after this pass a track drops steeply right past two blue lakes (Anda Pokhari) to Anda Phedi where there is now a lodge. Near here you can refill your waterbottle from the only flowing stream we saw. Keep traversing left with growing views down valley where it is possible to make out the huge slip near Lasiya Bhanjyang. After 1hr a steep climb reaches the *chorten* and prayer flags of **Sele La** (4720m) and spectacular views of the Kabrus, Rathong, Kokthang, Khang La and the Yalung Glacier. The best view is 15 mins below the pass and also includes a part of Kangchenjunga.

Scramble down 30mins on loose rocks to a sacred lake then past a second sacred lake and a long long way down reach welcome **Cheram** (3868m, Tseram) in 1hr. Cheram is a crossroads with new lodges still being built. In 2012 there were two lodges open with 6-7 rooms and another big new lodge not yet open, plus about 100 people in four separate tent encampments. In 2012 we chose the **Yalungkhong Guest House (Rs250, db Rs450). There is electricity and there are well-stocked shops. In 2013 late in the season we were grateful to find that Da Chiring (+977.993242131 in Yamphudin) had kept open his comfortable **Blue Sheep Guesthouse (Rs500, db Rs 350) with 8 beds in 4 rooms, open March-May and September-November inclusive. In 2012 Cheram saw 250 teahouse trekkers; in 2013 400 teahouse trekkers total in both seasons.

The naming of passes on the traverse from the sides of Kangchenjunga appears to depend on whether people come from Yamphudin or Ghunsa, not helped by the fact the historical names were sometimes wildly applied to totally wrong places (eg Hooker referred to Mirgin La as Choonjerma Pass, which actually goes into Tibet above Olangchunggola). We think we have sorted them out so email if you want details. Note that *la*, *deurali* and *bhanjyang* all mean pass or saddle in broad terms.

12. Cheram to Ramchaur 750m↑ 2-3hrs

Ramchaur is getting crowded in season and has only 3 rooms with 2 beds in each plus 10 on the floor in the dining room; ask ahead if you plan to stay but whatever you do don't miss going up there, even for a round day walk which can be easily done in 5hrs.

Head up through moss-hung pines and rhododendrons with a small clear stream, climb and cross a large loose gully and climb again into the seasonal yak pasture (*kharka*) at **Yalung** (wrong 3900m on map, probably 4100m). The Decherol Monastery with 6 monks, mentioned by Chandra Das in 1881, was located here but no trace remains of it or the surrounding village although a shrine is rumoured above. There follows a beautiful series of open ablation valleys, juniper, cinnamon-scented dwarf rhododendrons and moraines and lakes with the Kabrus, Rathong and Kokthang hanging above. Care will be needed crossing the many frozen streams and seeps. Watch out for yaks, some are totally wild, and for herds of blue sheep. The hidden stone lodge of **Ramchaur** (4610m; Ramche) is beautifully located and open March-May and September-November but ask in Cheram first at each end of these seasons. There is a reasonable shop (muesli, dried milk, Snickers/Mars). The food was excellent and the proprietor Pasang Sherpa very friendly (bed Rs300, db Rs500). Climb the nearby moraine wall for Yalung Glacier and mountain views and watch for snow pigeons. In 2012 a flock of 30 blue sheep came right to the kitchen that night for the salt found in urine from the 'open toilet' and the kitchen slops. It also snowed heavily, complete with thunder

and lightning, and drifted into the room through the wooden shutters. The lodge was closed in early December 2013.

13. Ramchaur to Okhordung to Cheram 150m↑ 900m↓ 4-5hrs

Leave your rucksack behind but take a daypack with warm and windproof clothes for the upward leg, an easy gentle climb to a flagged cairn on a high moraine wall with views of the Yalung Glacier and the south face of Kangchenjunga, quite shapeless and foreshortened but undeniably massive. **Okhordung** (4740m, Oktang) is regarded as the base camp but the actual camp is another 2km/1hr/100m up on a track collapsing due to glacial retreat. We did not regard the extra views as worth the effort, but if you do add 2hrs to the day. Okhordung is certainly worth an hour or so soaking it up then it takes about 1hr back to Ramchaur. Pick up your bag and enjoy going downhill to civilisation at Cheram again.

14. Cheram to Tortong 900m↓ 3hrs

This descent by the Simbuwa Khola is one of the most beautiful walks we have seen in Nepal: the changing sounds of the river, a huge range of rhododendrons giving way to moss-hung forests with huge pines and larches, all mixed with various broadleaves turning with autumn is all very restful. In warm sun with a breeze there are few better places to be. Be careful of grazing yaks.

After 30mins there is a beflagged Buddhist and be-tridented Hindu shrine with a snake shape in the rock, north of which there is supposed to be a prohibition on the killing of animals but there was *maasu* (meat) on the menu in Cheram. After another 40mins there is a new basic lodge at Anda Phedi, but closed in December 2013. Yaks from Yamphudin are taken for grazing by the track that heads up to Anda Pokhari from here. Another 40mins finds a yak *kharka* where you might get a meal or tea. We spent a memorable night among yaks there in 2013 as Tortong was closed for the season. **Tortong** (2980m, Torontan), 1hr further down, consists of two good lodges with separate rooms, well-stocked shops with Snickers and Mars and even electricity. In common with most places on the south side of Kanchenjunga, the *dalbhat* was superb, albeit with unrequested lumps of fatty pork. These lodges may be open from September-November and sometimes February then March-May inclusive although if demand increases so too may the length of the season.

15. Tortong to Sherpagaon 1100m↑ 2100m↓ 7-8hrs

Cross the Simbuwa Khola on a bridge, traverse and climb through old forest for 1hr then start a steep ascent for 1.5hrs with zig-zags and considerable yak damage to the track as they have been taken to and from pasture. There is a huge unstable slip to the right that needs to be climbed 150m above before a bypass drops to the grassy **Lasiya Bhanjyang** (3415m; Lassi or Lamite Bhanjyang). 200m on is a *bhatti* in which you may be able to sleep on benches around the walls if it is open; the proprietor is cheerful and friendly and the location beautiful but it closes when water runs out. Climb through silver pines up the hill behind the *bhatti* for distant blue hills through ancient pines plus a view of Mt Jannu (7711m, Kumbhakarna) to the northeast. We were in streaming cloud among the ancient rhododendrons and autumnal oaks the whole time we were here in 2012 but it was closed in December 2013 as there was no water.

The track condition improves below as the yaks are taken another way, but the descending stepped track is endless and there is no water until Amji Khola. After about 1hr cross the open *kharka* of Chitre (2925m) then in 20mins there is a wooden seat *chautaara* at an important junction.

For Yamphudin, which is not visible from here, go down left to a small camping site called Omje Kharka in the valley, drop through ancient rhododendrons on a muddy track to a new swing bridge across the Amji Khola at 2340m, climb over the bare saddle called **Dhupi Bhanjyang** (~2500m) visible to the south then drop to **Yamphudin** (1692m) down on the Kabeli Khola.

For Sherpagaon, which you can see on the terrace to the south, go right and drop very steeply on a narrow trail to the Amji Khola at ~1500m through pretty autumn forests. After a welcome drink there is 1.5hrs of up and down, during which we saw two deer on the lonely track, to reach the pretty village of **Sherpagaon** (2000m, upper Yamphudin) with good views. The ****Yamphudin Guesthouse** (Rs400, db 350) has 5 rooms and 15 beds. +977.993244556; they run the Yalung Guesthouse in Cheram too. The alternative ****Talung Guesthouse** +977.993242124 at the other end of the village has a good reputation.

Sherpagaon does not appear on most maps and is sometimes called upper Yamphudin. **Yamphudin** (1692m) is 300m below and has several comfortable lodges. In 2012 we stayed in the friendly and helpful ****Yellow lodge** (Rs200 per bed, db Rs150 with the tastiest *bentah achar* made of tamarillo, chilli, garlic, salt and ginger). There is a TIMS and permit check here.

16. Sherpagaon to Phungphung Danda 650m↑ 800m↓ 4-5hrs

This day includes crossing a grassy cliff at length with an exposed narrow trail where a mis-step would be fatal. If this is a concern it is possible to go via Yamphudin and up the main trail.

Climb up past the Talung Guesthouse on a paddy trail to start a day of high traverses, dropping in and out of sharp valleys with waterfalls and forest and occasional houses. Yamphudin is visible below on the Kabeli Khola. A feature of the morning is a high, well-built but narrow track across a bare grassy and very steep face for 1hr. We found a delicious *korella dalbhat* lunch in a Limbu farmhouse just before joining the main track between Yamphudin and the pretty and neat Limbu village of **Mamanke** (1780m) which we reached after 1.5hrs. There are several teahouses with beds; tea with real milk but no coffee. Drop to a long suspension bridge over the Takshewa Khola and climb 300m to **Phungphung Danda** (1860m, Pumphe, Pumphe Danda) in about 1.5hrs. We very much enjoyed the ****Phumphe Danda Teahouse** (Rs400, db Rs350) with 4 beds in 2 rooms +977.9742625486, 024.680504 run by Gopi Bhattarai and his wife. The *golbheeda* (tamarillo) pickle was a winner and the *dahi* (yoghurt) was excellent. There is another lodge lower down. This is very settled and rich countryside that exudes contentment.

17. Phungphung Danda to Simbu 900m↑ 1100m↓ 6-7hrs

A pleasant day, cool in the shade with deep forests and lots of waterfalls. Climb on stairs with an excellent view of Jannu, make a long traverse and drop down to a welcome shady waterfall after about 3hrs. Climb more stairs for 400m 45mins for lunch on the lawn at Delok (upper) **Khesewa** (2125m). Fresh red cardamom (*elanchai*) is harvested at this season from the ginger-like plants under shade trees, at the risk of snake-bite to the labourers. Climb onwards over saddles through hot and steamy but very prosperous hamlets growing millet, maize and rice and traverse to Gurung **Kande Bhanjyang** (2130m, Sinchebu, Sinchewa Bhanjyang) with a 5-bed homestay in 30mins. Drop steeply to **Kunjari** (1800m) in 1hr where the lodge is adding two rooms which will improve overnights. Descend on an endless ridge, cross the Phewa Khola (1430m) and climb steeply to **Simbu** (1700m) in another 45mins. The ****Aadamba Hotel** with 4 beds and more being added was welcoming (Rs300, db Rs300) and served an unusual breakfast *khaja* (*khaana jaane*) of barley pancake with omlet. The village lights were like constellations over the silent hills at night but the roosters start at 3am.

18. Simbu to Suketar 1000m↑ 200m↓ 4-5hrs

Leave early to catch the cool as the trail is up on continuous stairs and awkward riprap, arriving at **Lali Kharka** (2266m) with a road now running through it after about 2hrs. More climbing on road and shortcuts to **Deurali** (2578m, Deurali Bhanjyang!) after 1.5hrs for an excellent classic *dalbhat*. The pilgrim-magnet Pathibhara Devi Temple (3794m) is a day's walk to the right from here. **Suketar** (2420m), the runway clearly visible below, is a further 1hr on road and shortcuts to the left. **Hotel Everest View (Rs700, db Rs300) adjoins the airstrip.

See a recent lovely collection of photos from Oleg Bartunov at
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/obartunov/sets/72157638505259604/>

Sue and Howard Dengate (October-November 2012 and November-December 2013)
All changes, comment and corrections welcome at confodnet@ozemail.com.au - thanks in particular to Dirk Leker for his constructive comments.