

Khumbu to Arun Valley track notes

A 6-8-day trek from the Everest area east to the Arun Valley is a great way to leave the Solu Khumbu and deserves to be more popular. We hope these track notes will help.

Trek east from Puiyan (two days below Namche, past Lukla) then out to Tumlingtar on the great Arun River in 6-8 days. From there you can fly or jeep/bus back to Kathmandu. It is not an easy trek but traverses a marvellous range of geography, botany, architecture and culture and is remote and uncrowded.

We like to take eight days although it can be done in less. The track is well-formed and small simple lodges are available since this used to be the main route into Everest in the 1930s when British climber Tilman was around, but you will see very few trekkers and meet very interesting Nepalis. Lunch can be hard to find so it is sensible to carry something to eat most days in case you can't find anything open. Some lodges are not open all year round so you may need to ask in villages sometimes for accommodation and meals.

My wife and I have trekked this route three times (in March 2007, 2008, 2010) carrying our own gear and not using any porter/guides. We are divided on whether we would start at Tumlingtar, which some guide books recommend, since the first uphill days from Tumlingtar can be very hot and tiring.

Here are some track notes which we hope will make the route more popular and so help improve the number and standard of the lodges.

1. Puiyan to Pangum 5-5.5hrs

From **Puiyan** (2770m; sometimes called Paiya or Chutok) bridge walk 40mins towards Kharte to find a track left that heads upwards across a rockslide after a gully. A nearby rock is marked 'Arun Valley Trek' in yellow paint. Climb steeply then right 40mins to Khare La where there is a herder's stone house. Say farewell to your views of the Khumbu and enjoy distant views of Pangum, left under the head of the valley, then drop SE past two *bhattis* after about 1hr where tea and *tsampa* is sometimes available. Extensive oak, beech and rhododendron forests are being turned into firewood adjoining cultivated areas.



The Arun Valley Trek climbs off to the left, 40mins below Puiyan. The track to Khari Khola and Jiri is on the right (2010)

The track from Kharte (which is favoured by some trekkers over the route above but misses the views) joins from the right after another 15mins, near two stone farmhouses. Keep left and drop in minutes to the Sherpa Hotel for lunch when open. Drop down and climb now in and out of a series of pretty valleys filled with birds and waterfalls, tending SE towards **Bhalukop** ('Bear Valley', where we heard a bear once), a small village and *chorten* in a saddle after 1hr. In March there can be many flowering magnolias here. Climb in 1.5hrs to **Pangum** (2850m; Pankong, Panggom) past six ancient *mani* walls.



Traversing to Pangum from Khare La in original forest (Mar 2008)

The Himalayan Trekkers Lodge (indifferent service and loud kid's DVDs), the New Panorama Lodge (if open) and, off the main trail to the right, Numbur Lodge (reported as OK) are your current choices in this pretty Sherpa village. A big new lodge is under construction at the lower entry to the village. You can visit Pangum Gompa, left from the New Panorama Lodge near the top of the village.

2. Pangum to Najingdingma 6-6.5hrs

Climb through the village to Pangum La (3173m; Satu La) in about 45mins, noting rapid deforestation. Enjoy views of Mera Peak (6476m; in the middle at the back), of wild forested valleys and of Najingdingma (on a shelf across the valley), so close yet so far. Descend through lovely old-growth forest, tending north to two Sherpa houses where food may be available. Another 30mins brings you to the top of **Sibucho** (2500m, also known as Basme, Sibuje and Chatuk), with food and lodging at the Namaste Hotel and a small *gompa*.



Looking to Najingdingma and Surke La (notch on darker ridge) after crossing Pangum La (Mar 2008)

The trail follows the steep ridge to the last house then drops like a stone to the invisible Hinku Khola bridge 1.5hrs jelly-knee steps down. The New Mera View Lodge at the bridge will offer limited meals and primitive sleeping in the future. Pause to enjoy the waterfalls in this wild corner, cross the high swing bridge into mossy wet jungle and climb steeply through the scattered hamlet of **Gaikharka** (2300m; 'cow pasture') where two new trekkers' lodges are under construction at the middle and top of the village. Enter bamboo, beech and rhododendron forest on stone steps after about 1.5hrs, then climb for 1hr tending left eventually into **Najingdingma** (2650m, 'wheat growing flat', Najing) after a stone porters' shelter.

The seasonal grazing meadows and mountains around give Najingdingma a great atmosphere and a stone *gompa* is now under construction. The Namaste Lodge of rustic and gastronomic fame is being upgraded to stone; the Hotel New Mera View is no longer in operation.



The rustic Namaste Lodge at Najingdingma (Mar 2010)

3. Najingdingma to Khiraule 3hrs

We choose to take a half-day rest and wash at Khiraule (*Kay-ra-ulay*, sometimes shown as Khirule, Khiraunle) as the old *gompa* with its circle of sacred junipers brought from Darjeeling is peaceful and inspiring, the hotel is comfortable with good food, and the next day breaks the huge climb from Bung to Sanam which many undertake; but of course you can continue to Bung after lunch at Khiraule if you want. This is an easy day with echoes of a Sherpa kingdom lost after a long-ago war with the animist Rais, whose culture is centred on Bung.

From Najingdingma climb for 1.5hrs, initially through a lovely forest of daphne and rhododendron, on stairs to the obvious notch of Surke La (3085m; Sipke La). The bamboo regrowth follows a fire in 1992 and the climb can be dangerously icy after snow. Be surprised by a new intrusive *bhatti* right in the pass, then drop your rucksack and climb up stairs steeply left 10mins for a great 360° lookout, including views of folded blue hills to Bung, Gudel and Salpa Bhanjyang, your next pass. From Surke La, drop down 10mins to a new village **Charakot** and a sign welcoming you to the Makalu-Barun National Park. Look around - this was virgin forest in 2006 except for the fire.



Surke La above Najingdingma in icy conditions (Mar 2007)

The track left (north) climbs towards Mera Peak, the track straight down goes to Cheskam, and a higher track to the right goes to Talkharka. The track you want drops from the central square and is the lower track on the right (south) through old-growth rhododendron forest which is being extensively logged.

After a while you will emerge into a clearing with a view towards your target in about 1.5hrs, huge old *mani* walls leading to an ancient stupa to the south, with the track traversing in and out of forest and flowing streams. From the stupa, take in the extensive views to Bung and the mighty Hongu Valley, which produces most of the rice and meat for the Solu Khumbu. Immediately below is a circle of giant trees around the **Khiraule Gompa** and in 20mins you're there by turning left down stairs off the main track to Bung.

The friendly owners of the Himalaya Lodge, adjacent to the *gompa*, are restoring this once highly revered building and grounds but no lama is in residence.



The gopma and sacred junipers at Khiraule, looking down the Hongu Valley towards Bung (Mar 2008)

4. Khiraule to Gudel 4–4.5hrs

Enjoy breakfast outside with a grandstand view of Bung, Gudel and your next pass, Salpa Bhanjyang, above and to the right of Gudel. Look carefully in the huge landscape and you will see old *mani* walls and ruined Sherpa houses, relics of the long-ago Sherpa-Rai conflict that gives the area the feel of Numenor from Lord of the Rings.

Allow about 2hrs to reach **Bung** (1900-1300m) by the obvious track below the *gopma* and through the blue-roofed schoolyard. You are leaving the area of Buddhist influence and will see decaying *chortens* and *mani* walls in the first hour. Bung is the centre of Rai culture, a collection of intensive smallholdings covering the hillside from 1900m down to the Hongu Khola bridge at 1320m. Note the whitewashed Rai houses, often thatched, with racks of drying maize protected from vermin, pigs, the varied agriculture and heavily pollarded trees. The long-drop pig toilets are being phased out. The Rai, once called Kirat, are nominally Hindu and claim to be the original inhabitants of Nepal before Hindu tribes arrived from the south and Buddhist tribes from the north, but they have no temples and practice animism.

Entering Bung, stick in the second bamboo-lined central gully, even though it looks like the local rubbish tip, and emerge right to drop into the 'centre' of town, where you will find the Pumori Lodge (lunch about 11am) opposite the entrance office for the Makalu-Barun National Park (Rs1000 entry and show your TIMS card). The Mera Peak Lodge (very ordinary) is nearby, the Sagarmatha Lodge (our choice if staying in Bung, if open) is at the

very bottom of the village with owners who cook great Rai food.

Descend for 10mins to the bridge, climb 1.5hrs through millet, potato, maize and rice terraces on good stairs with shade and running water for much of the way to the clean Rai village of **Gudel** (1900m)

Stay in the friendly Namaste Lodge with a garden and views of Bung spread hugely over the opposite hill. A bit higher up is the Kopila Lodge. The early explorer Tilman immortalises this walk with a limerick:

*For dreadfulness, naught can excel
The prospect of Bung from Gudel;
And words die away on the tongue
When we look back on Gudel from Bung*

And his fellow-climber Shipton said, "There is no greater vision of hell than the view from Bung to Gudel", but actually it is beautiful and quite short.



The famous view of Bung from Gudel (Mar 2007)

5. Gudel to Sanam 4hrs

Stairs right outside the lodges continue to the top of the village and a Hinduised *mani* wall, then take the gentle track to the right, not straight uphill. After 1hr, do not take the track

climbing to the left; 5mins later take the upper trail rather than the descending trail. Continue for 2.5hrs to **Share** (2640m; Sorung), where in March you may see daphne bark being made into paper for official government correspondence in Kathmandu, and there is an active Buddhist *gompa*. You may find tea and food here by asking at houses. Continue past a large rock carved with Buddhist mantras, past a schoolhouse and waterfall and over a covered bridge. Another 30mins gentle climbing brings you to **Tiu** (2740m; Diure) with the simple Arun Valley Lodge. You re-enter some reasonably intact forest of rhododendron, chir pine and brown oak for the final climb to **Sanam** (2850m), a single row of Sherpa homes dominated by a new *gompa*. There are extensive potato fields and many cattle graze the forest, so ask for milk, buttermilk (*moi*) and curd (*dahi*).

Accommodation is the Gumba Lodge (dark but adequate, next to the old *gompa*) or the friendly Sanam Lodge (our choice, through the village and 5mins below on the track to the pass).

You can also choose (as we have) to walk a further 3hrs this day and sleep out in a pilgrim shelter at the sacred lake 30mins from Salpa Bhanjyang (3350m), reducing the length of the tiring descent to Salpa Phedi the next day and enjoying a superb sunrise. Simple food is available at a *bhatti* on the pass for dinner and breakfast, or carry your own.

6. Sanam to Salpa Phedi (7.5 – 8hrs)

Drop below Sanam heading up valley on the obvious track, heading into largely intact and lovely forest with moss and lichen. Pass through the settlement of **Hwa Ka** which is rapidly despoiling the surrounding forest (four years ago it was a single simple *bhatti*), climbing over fences on stiles to gain the continuing track at the head of the settlement. Climb steadily on the left hand side of the stream (true right), crossing a bridge to stairs after about 1hr. The stairs run up a pretty valley to the south, then turn more east for the final gruelling climb to **Salpa Bhanjyang** (3350m, 'Salpa pass'), which divides the Hongu and Irkhuwa valleys, after about 2.5hrs from Sanam.

The views back to the distant Solu Khumbu over the forested valley and out over the foothills are stupendous. A welcome *bhatti* does tea and noodles at certain times of the year and it can be cold on top: always check that it is passable before leaving Sanam.

From the top, a path to the right leads eventually to Bhojpur after two days, a district HQ with an airfield. A side-loop track left along the ridge brings you in 30mins to the sacred wish-fulfilling lake **Salpa Pokhari** (3414m) with open-fronted stone pilgrim shelters where you can camp, then continue the next day down to rejoin the main track at Bilbate (2800m). The remote feeling in hemlock and fir forests make this an interesting side-trip in any case.

The main trail is straight down past a huge renovated *chorten* and drops through rhododendron forest to **Gurase** (2280m; Guranse) past moss-covered *mani* walls after 1hr, where food, water and simple lodging is available at the Mera Hotel. 30mins further on are some shallow pools and locked houses at **Bilbate** (2800m), where the trail from Salpa Pokhari joins from the left. Water is available here, so fill your waterbottle as the long ridge ahead is dry.



Start of exposed ridgewalk from Bilbate down to Salpa Phedi (Mar 2008)

A classic ridge walk follows, with big views and shady oaks, birch, rhododendron and bamboo inviting rest as the valley plunges south. After about 1.5hrs you reach the top of **Thulo Fokte** (2140m) then descend to **Jaubari** (2040m) with the simple Sherpa Hotel Lodge, a *gompa* and more water. It takes 2h from here to descend on very steep stairs to **Salpa Phedi** (1680m, 'foot of Salpa Pass' also known as just Phedi). At the bottom of the village are the Hotel Irkhuwa and Sherpa Hotel (now run by a Rai) side-by-side, each with a breezy pavilion looking at the confluence of the Irkhuwa Khola and Sanu Khola through fat bamboos. A ruined stupa and tiny disused *gompa* mark the end of Buddhist influence.

7. Phedi to Ghote Bazar 5.5–6hrs

Be careful with navigation today as there are many formal and informal bridges as you follow the Irkhuwa Khola – a wrong choice may see you lost. Leaving Phedi, unless the river is very high you need not take the northern swing bridge but drop below the two lodges, cross the river on stones and climb a little over a ridge to the left. After traversing left for a few minutes you may see an arched bamboo bridge ahead. Do not cross this bridge but turn left, follow the main river for 5mins to a low-level bamboo bridge which you cross to the south (true right) bank.

Stay on this bank for the next 3hrs, winding in and out of charming and increasingly tropical houses, running streams and patches of forest. Watch the transition from maize, potato and grazing to intensive irrigated agriculture, bamboo, bananas and butterflies. There are big

areas of cardamoms (which look like ginger but bear their seeds underground) often grown under beech trees. The large Sisuwa Khola valley joins from the left. Finally climb over a small forested ridge and drop to **Dhobane** (920m) where you may (or may not) raise lunch.

Do not cross the swing bridge north to Lhikhim and Khatangma but cross one south over the Phedi Khola and keep low on the river heading east. After 15mins there are some great washing/bathing access points. After another 15mins there is a wood and steel swing bridge crossing to the north bank. Take it and turn right, traversing wet rice paddies and water channels, interspersed with dry rocky ridges, to reach the picturesque **Ghote Bazar** (775m) at the Benkhuwa Khola 2hrs from Dhobane.

There is a teashop with good food on the right near the big tree before you cross the river. The daughter is profoundly physically but not mentally disabled by cerebral palsy and is surviving against all odds due to the heroic and loving care of her mother. This is a good place to make a donation to help a needy child. On the other side of the river is the small friendly Kirat Lodge in traditional style of open bamboo second storey and thatch. Sleep to the sound of running water and the Irkhuwa Khola, complete blackness and the smell of extinguished cooking fire.



Hotel Kirat at Ghote Bazar (Mar 2008)

8. Ghote Bazar to Tumlingtar 8 - 8.5hrs

Continue downhill, making an early start since this can be a long hot day. Stay on the north bank for 30mins, cross to the south bank on a swing bridge and walk through rice paddies and small hamlets with houses on stilts and evocative haystacks until there is a short steep climb and a long climbing traverse through tropical jungle to cross a ridge to the Arun Valley. Ignore the swing bridge and inviting track you may see down on your left and the steep right hand track at the same place. You may see monkeys in this forest as you climb steadily.



Picturesque haystacks below Ghote Bazar (Mar 2007)

After about 1hr you will see the village of **Chalise** across terraces to the left. When level with the whitewashed house, follow the clear track left, go left of this house and continue through the village. Continue traversing and climbing through the terraces to the villages of **Marduwa** and **Sano Marduwa** (1500m), sticking to the horse track that circles the village to the right (or you'll get lost as we have).

The main Arun track is about 40mins from Chalise and you will soon see the broad Arun River way below, draining from Tibet past Mt Makalu. Stay on the foot trail rather than the horse trail for 1hr down through a *sal* forest and terraces, reaching the market town of **Balawa Besi** (320m) at the foot of the ridge where you can get food and water. This is a major trading point for *rudraksha* seeds, sacred to Vishnu. A new road to the ridge above Balawa Besi may change these directions in time but no road traffic is yet using it.



First view of the Arun River, above Balawa Besi (2007)

Cross a metal bridge, walk 30mins through rice paddies to dusty **Kartike Pul**, with tailors, a school, and phones. There are simple hotels here if you want to break your journey, or continue to Chyawabesi or Tumlingtar. Cross the Arun River on a long suspension bridge and walk, usually on hot river sands, for 30mins to **Chyawabesi** (250m; Chewabesi).

The new road has removed the lovely garden from the Samir Hotel and there are two other hotels (Arun Koshi and Welcome Santosh) if you want to stop. After another 30mins on the road you will find **Bheteeni** which has a row of fast food shops where we caught severe food poisoning from chowmein. Regain the river sand track since the road now switchbacks up to Khandbari, and enjoy walking beside the mighty rolling river. Pass a large suspension bridge and another small fast food settlement, regain the new road but 5mins later take the uphill track to the left. Climb in two stages to the broad plateau between the Arun River and the Sabha Khola and walk for 30mins on a dusty road with motorbikes, buses, trucks and tractor/trailers into **Tumlingtar** (460m).

The hotel of choice is the clean and comfortable Arun Hotel, whose courteous owner can get you flight tickets. Enjoy a beer in their gazebos under the bougainvillea. Opposite the airstrip are the Hotel Makalu and Hotel Kangchenjunga.

It may not be possible to fly out immediately if the Asian haze is in place. Delays of several days can occur but the alternative of a jeep and two buses can take 24 hours to Kathmandu. Enjoy the colourful Friday markets if you are stuck there. The flight cost is about \$US112.



Friday market in Tumlingtar, Arun Hotel behind (2008)

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More track notes at <http://fedup.com.au/information/nepal/nepal-information>
