

Manaslu Tsum Valley track notes

Update November 2015 after earthquakes

Trails are in much better shape after the monsoon ended in September 2015 and with ongoing trail repairs by local residents. Days 3, 4 and 5 Soti Khola to Machha Khola to Doban to Philim are very strenuous due to the detours up and around slide areas. Exercise extreme caution crossing slide areas. Cross as quickly as safely possible, don't bunch up and look up slope at all times to spot any rock movement. As these trails serve the local residents as well as trekkers, improvements are being made in sections most heavily populated with available labour. Conditions improve somewhat once past Philim, both up the main Manaslu trail and into the Tsum Valley. Lodges have been repaired for the most part and food is available but, for those who had them, electricity and phones/internet no longer work. Camping is unnecessary.

Introduction

Track notes

Introduction

The Manaslu Valley Trek is more remote and spectacular than many, with rough steep tracks and less than luxurious accommodation. It is culturally fascinating with strong continuing links to Tibet in the upper Buri Gandaki (called Nupri 'the western mountains') and the Tsum Valley, and even has the Larkya La (5160m) as a challenge. The views of Mt Manaslu, eighth highest mountain in the world, are marvellous and close.

The trek around Manaslu can be done as a lodge trek while even Tsum now has several lodges, good homestays and toilets in most places. There are now phones throughout (although not mobile reception) in case of an emergency.

The remote Tsum Valley side-trip should not be missed. In fourteen trips to Nepal this was the absolute highlight, with strong, friendly, hospitable people, a living Buddhist culture and untouched wildlife because of Buddhist prohibitions on hunting. Tsum comes from the Tibetan work 'Tsombo', which means vivid and we can only agree. The people are poor, since they have been bypassed by development for centuries, but this means their unique culture has remained intact. However a road from China is already pegged out and will cause rapid change. Since the 2015 earthquake has blocked packhorse access from the Nepal side, yak trains from Tibet are increasingly supplying Chinese necessities to the area.

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

As my wife said: "Tsum Valley was FANTASTIC. To be honest, I wasn't expecting it to be very different from where we'd already been but as soon as we made that right turn off the main track it suddenly seemed we were entering a hidden valley full of untouched forest so beautiful we called it the Garden of Eden."

My wife and I trekked this route first in April 2010 and most recently in November 2012. We took 16 days actual walking (9 days for the Manaslu part and 7 days for Tsum) although we were fit and did some long days. Best to allow 18 days plus two days for travel to and from road heads, so at least 20 days in total as described in the track notes following. In particular, there are lots of ways to see Tsum Valley – this is what we did. The skies were far clearer in November than in April.

Hassles and costs: A special Restricted Area permit is required for Manaslu and a separate one for Tsum. These permits require that you have a registered guide and a party of two or more, although these requirements may be relaxed in the future. The Manaslu fees are: September – November \$US70 for the first week (then \$US10 per day) or December – August \$US50 for the first week (then \$US7 per day). For Tsum the same periods apply but the fee is \$US35 for the first week. You will need a TIMS card (Trekking Information Management System) as well if you are continuing on the Around Annapurna trek, so you'll need 8 photos for all this. In our experience if you are only circuiting Manaslu your special permit means that a TIMS card is not required.

In addition, you will need to pay both the Manaslu Conservation Area Park (MCAP) fee (Rs2000) and the Annapurna Conservation Area Park (ACAP) fee (Rs2000) for the section from Dharapani to Besi Sahar after you join the round-Annapurna trail. So you might as well farewell your guides in Dharapani and add the round-Annapurna leg, exiting down the Kali Gandaki as many do, making it a 30-35 day trek in total depending on whether you fly/take a jeep from Jomoson or walk out.

For guides, we very highly recommend Visit Himalaya Treks himalt@visithimalayastrek.com and www.visithimalayastrek.com who can provide Tibetan-speaking guides on request which is very useful for Tsum and Nupri and helps you to get an insiders' view of the culture. The Tsum Welfare Committee also runs www.tsumvalley.org.

It can be difficult to stay clean in Tsum. We found it useful to carry a tin cup and facecloth for washing most of the body in our room with black tea or warm water from the kitchen. Bring hand sanitizer for trips to the toilet.

Lodges and especially "imported" food gets more expensive as you climb further from the road head. That Tuborg Gold you were enjoying in Arughat for Rs200 can well cost Rs800 or more in Samagaon or Samdo. Someone carried it on their back for your enjoyment!

Maps and track notes: The most recent map, available in Kathmandu, is Nepa NS505 *Manaslu and Tsum Valley* 1:125,000 although with some mistakes (eg the bridge and trail from Domje to Ripchet is actually on the true left of the Siyar Khola). The spelling of village names from this map have been used in the following track notes but many alternative spellings are given.

Lodges are still sometimes local *bhattis* with only *dalbhat* on offer and hard beds above the smoky kitchen, but nearly every village now has a proper lodge as detailed below. You can certainly raise porridge, *tsampa*, noodles, omelette and *roti* at most places. While simple, they are clean and friendly for the most part. There are small shops in most villages with limited stock (soap, toilet paper, batteries, bottled water, biscuits, noodles, beer and whisky). Bring a water filter (Katadyn Hiker Pro or equal) or water sterilizer (Steripen Adventurer) and always filter or sterilize water from side stream sources and never from the Buri Gandaki or the main *kholas*.

There are signs in most villages pointing onwards to Larkya La, with times to the next village that are usually optimistic. Tsum is similarly marked.

These track notes have helped make this trek more popular, have played some part in improving the number and standard of the lodges, and in particular have focussed the benefits on the villagers and away from Kathmandu camping tours. We hope that you enjoy this area as much as we do.

- 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*.
- Recommended lodges 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.
- Villages in **bold** in the following table are the stages described, but of course you can vary these stages every which way depending on fitness and inclination.
- The following track notes allow 20 days from Kathmandu or Pokhara return (2 days in buses/jeeps, 10 days around Manaslu plus 8 days in the lovely Tsum Valley).

Manaslu Tsum Valley track notes

Stage	Hours:minutes	Accommodation?
2 Arughat to Arkhet Bazar	1:30	Yes
Arkhet Bazar to Soti Khola	1:15	Yes
Soti Khola to Lapubesi	2:30	Yes
3 Lapubesi to Macchakhola	2:15	Yes
Macchakhola to Khorlabeshi	1:00	Yes
Khorlabeshi to Tatopani	1:00	No at present
Tatopani to Dobhan	1:00	Yes
4 Dobhan to Yaruphant	1:20	No
Yaruphant to Jagat	1:00	Yes
Jagat to Salleri	0:20	No
Salleri to Sirdibas	1:00	No
Sirdibas to Philim	1:00	Yes
5 Philim to Ekle Bhatti	0:45	No
Ekle Bhatti to Gum Pul (bridge)	0:45	No
Gum Pul (bridge) to Lokpa	2:00	Yes
Lokpa to Chumling	3:30	Yes
6 Chumling to Rainjam	1:30	No
Rainjam to Chhokang-Paro	2:15	Yes
7 Chhokang-Paro to Nile	3:00	Yes
8 Nile REST DAY	REST	
9 Nile to Mu Gompa	1:30	Yes
10 Mu Gompa to Nile	1:10	Yes
Nile to Rachen Gompa	1:30	Yes
11 Rachen Gompa to Chhokang-Paro	1:30	Yes
Chhokang-Paro to Gho	1:00	No
Gho to Domje	0:20	Yes at nunnery
Domje to Gumba Lungdang	2:20	Yes
12 Ganesh Himal Basecamp day trip	8:00	No
13 Gumba Lungdang to Dhomje	2:00	No
Dhomje to Ripchet	1:40	No
Ripchet to Lokpa	3:15	Yes
14 Lokpa to Gum Pul (bridge)	1:00	No
Gum Pul (bridge) to Sirdibas/Pewa	1:25	Yes
Sirdibas/Pewa to Deng	1:00	Yes
Deng to Bihi Phedi	1:20	Yes
Bihi Phedi to Ghap	2:15	Yes
15 Ghap to Namrung	2:00	Yes
Namrung to Banjam	0:10	Yes
Banjam to Lihi	1:00	Yes
Lihi to Sho	1:00	Yes
Sho to Shrip	0:10	Yes
Shrip to Lho	0:30	Yes
16 Lho to Shyala	1:00	Yes
Shyala to Samagaon	1:30	Yes

17 Samagaon to Samdo	3:00	Yes
18 Samdo to Dharamsala	2:00	Yes
19 Dharamsala to Bimthang	8:00	Yes
20 Bimthang to Kharche	3:45	Yes
Kharche to Goa	1:00	Yes
Goa to Tilije	1:00	Yes
Tilije to Dharapani	1:00	Yes

1. Kathmandu to Arughat Bazar by bus/jeep 7-12hrs

You can take a direct bus from Kathmandu to Arughat (Gongabu Bus Park, 6am and 8am, about Rs500) or to Dhading and change, or to Malekhu on the Kathmandu-Pokhara road and change twice. In any case, allow a day for travel due to breakdowns and the very rough unsealed road from Dhading to Arughat, which can become impassable with rain.

Alternatively, a 4WD jeep (6h) may get you there more quickly but costs around \$US170-250 for 4-6 people.

In **Arughat** (600m), a pleasant market town straddling the Budhi Gandaki river (also called Buri Gandaki on some maps), walk into town, cross the suspension bridge, turn right and stay at the **Manaslu Hotel (Rs600, db Rs300, hot gas shower). Himalee Hotel 20mins out of town looks very pleasant too. The Arughat Bamboo Resort where the bus stops is reported as less salubrious despite its upmarket appearance.

Alternative access, which currently requires camping out two nights, is to take the quicker and better road to Ghorka (5h) and trek through Barpak, cross a pass at 2670m and rejoin the main trail at Khorlabeshi.

2. Arughat to Lapubesi 310m↑5-6hrs

Many now take a jeep to Arkhet to save 2hrs of walking but the road remains untrafficked and passes through pleasant fields and villages.

Trek through Gurung and Magar villages on the more scenic upper road where there is a choice, staying on the left bank (true right) of the Budhi Gandaki, which you will be following to its source. It can be hot and humid so wet rice, maize and millet are the main crops and you may see monkeys in the forests. The spotless **Manaslu Lodge and the Market View Lodge at the pretty bazaar town of **Arkhet** (760m) could easily be your first night if you arrive early enough from Kathmandu. Climb on stairs as the valley becomes wilder, prettier and narrower and descend to **Soti Khola** (710m) with the ABC Hotel, Satkar, **Samjhana and then Muneil through the village over a bridge. Packhorses ply the trail from here on. Trek on through shady *sal* forests then climb up and down for some time on an exposed track blasted from the cliff and views way below of wild rapids, eventually dropping to the Gurung **Labubesi** (880m; Lapubeshi). Stay at **Lapo Guest House, Sunita, Manaslu or Lali Gurans lodges. Depending on the season, you may be offered fiddlehead fern *dalbhat* and the local mint-flavoured *achar* ('*shilong*') to which some trekkers report allergic reactions. Be careful not to brush up against the stinging nettle (*sisnu*) you will see growing along the trail from here up to 3500m. It penetrates clothing and gives a nasty sting for a day or two.

3. Lapubesi to Doban 190m↑ 5-7hrs

Continue up-river, climbing sometimes and at other times down on the gravel riverbed, passing through **Machhakhola** (930m) where there is a good lodge **Hotel Chum Valley (Rs300, db Rs260). If you stayed in Soti Khola last night Machhakhola is a good destination for the day with two good lodges with showers and adequate food. Continue on the same side of the Buri Gandaki, up and down again and across sandy river flats. The monkeys and langurs in the jungle above can knock rocks down, so watch out. Large Gurung villages are way above while the track passes few houses, like lower **Khorlabeshi** (960m) which was largely destroyed by a huge rock slip 24 years ago. A survivor has built a botanic garden and nice lodge from which he sells his organic coffee. Shangri La and Manaslu lodges. Goat herders passing through this area wear the distinctive smoke-browned capes called *bokkhu* made famous in the book *Honey Hunters of Nepal*. Continue up and down over a couple of ridges to **Tatopani** (930m; 'hot water') where there are warm water spouts under the sheer cliffs that provide a delightful evening shower and soft skin due to natural minerals. As of November, 2015 the two lodges close to the springs sustained heavy earthquake damage and are no longer operational but the one family still in the village was serving lunch to trekkers. Climb over a ridge and cross the Buri Gandaki on a new suspension bridge, circle under cliffs and climb a little to **Doban** (1070m; Duvan) where there is the Himalayan lodge (Rs500, db Rs260).; The Shyaule Bhatti lodge is 40mins later then 20mins to Manaslu Santi and Thulodhunga ('big rock') lodge which commands views of the wild gorges ahead.



Typical narrow Manaslu track, north of Lapubesi

4. Doban to Philim 520m↑ 5-6hrs

Another long, hard day so start early. After a landslip and **Yaruphant** (1140m; Indur) you cross a temporary wooden bridge through a massive rock fall that chokes the river. The original trail with a new suspension bridge and the Sandbar Hotel at Yaru are no longer accessible due to a recent slide. As of late November 2015 another new temporary wooden bridge crosses to the true left of the Buri Gandaki and avoids a torturous 3 hour climb up Gurung village trails. Just past the river flats at **Yaru** (1140m), cross to the true right bank and enjoy easy up and down to **Jagat** (1410m), a neatly flagstoned Gurung village where *jagat* ('tax') is collected on Tibetan trade. The pleasant **Budhi Gandaki lodge (Rs400, db Rs350) is 10mins before Jagat and in town there are the Shantih and Rubinah lodges. You will need to show your MCAP permit at an office on the left. Jagat was a Maoist stronghold and not all people are friendly. In this area, potato, maize and climbing beans are all planted at the same time – the potato for food and to suppress weeds, the maize for food and to supply a trellis for the beans, which are an important source of protein. Marijuana is a major weed problem in season.

Walk up the riverbed then climb over a rocky ridge to **Salleri** (1440m) with views of Sringi Himal (7187m), then descend to **Sirdibas** (1430m; Setibas, Tara). You'll see your first signs of Buddhist culture here. Look out for *rakshi* spirit being distilled from millet beer in roadside kettles on this day. Continue up-river on the left bank, up and down before crossing Nepal's longest suspension bridge to the east bank and a tiring climb up to prosperous **Philim** (1590m; Dodang) surrounded by rich fields of maize, potato and millet. There are shops and rooms (some smoky and dark) in three or four lodges (Maila, new New Kharki, **Hotel Philim Village with chalets). There are signs of building and a broad camping area also available.

5. Philim to Chumling 770m↑ 7-9hrs

If you are not taking the Tsum Valley side-trip then today you may continue onto Ghap (see Day 13 below) towards the Larkya La.

Once again a hard day of climbing with altitude beginning to make its presence felt! This is likely to be your second longest day trekking (Larke La crossing being number 1) with a lot of uphill climbing. Traverse north out of **Philim** on the obvious track signposted to the Larkya La, through some pretty forest with views up the narrowing valley. After 1hr climbing enter the increasingly misnamed **Ekle Bhatti** (1600m; 'lone teashop') with at least six *bhatti*, then traverse high above a spectacular gorge, entering a largely uninhabited area of pine trees. Eventually drop to a trail junction going left to Ghap and right to the Tsum Valley, just above Gum Pul ('bridge'). Climb on a well-graded but exposed track through pines and rhododendrons, looking down on the other trail across the river. If the slopes here have recently had their annual burn there is a real risk of stone fall from the cliffs above, especially if there are goats grazing. Climb on zigzag steps, increasingly exposed, and gain your first glimpses of the narrow lower Tsum Valley gorge, very steep across the Siyar Khola (Shiar Khola) which drains from the very top of the valley. Across the Buri Gandaki is Himalchuli (7893m) above steep cliffs. Walk through a largely intact and peaceful temperate forest into **Lokpa** (2240m; Lakuwa), surrounded by barley fields, where there is a new two storey 10 room 20 bed lodge (Rs550, db Rs350), extensive camping terraces and very good food for lunch (allow 2 hours!).

Descend through beautiful forest, crossing two new wooden bridges, circle under a huge bluff on the river then climb steeply on deteriorating exposed stairs. After about 30mins start to traverse north through pines and rhododendrons, still climbing and with very steep slopes.

The hidden valley of Tsum stretches enticingly ahead. Eventually descend to a tea shop *bhatti Ghumlong* (2130m) on the river. The path straight ahead climbs steeply to the remains of **Ripchet** (2470m; Ripche), almost entirely destroyed in the earthquake, in about 1hr; the path to **Chumling** (2360m) crosses the Siyar Khola on a wooden bridge and up. It is not for those afraid of heights - several locals have fallen to their death from this track while drunk. After about 30mins, below Chumling, take the level track to right (east) for 15mins to arrive at a lodge with 6-8 beds. This isn't the friendliest lodge on the trek but the proprietors will heat water for a warm bucket shower-the last shower you are likely to have for 5 days).

Make sure you climb up to Chumling and check out the old *gompa*, the traditional houses, orchards, clinic and beautiful stone streets. This is Buddhist agriculture, with conical pine needle haystacks among the prayer flags. From here on trails are lined with artistic *chortens* and *mani* walls made of thousands of stone slabs carved with deities and prayers.



The next valley to the right is Tsum, taken from above Philim



Entering lower Tsum Valley, after Lokpa

6. Chumling to Chhokang-Paro 600m↑3-5hrs

An easier day after yesterday. Cross the suspension bridge just east of the hotel and traverse through rich farming land of maize and potatoes. The houses are classic Tibetan with barricades of firewood on the roof, but without flat roofs as it rains and snows here. Cross a huge slip where rocks and flood cleared the area even up onto the opposite bank, killing five in 1999, but is now covered with a forest of new trees. Up the gorge to the east are superb views of several of the 7000-7400m Ganesh Himal, of long suspension bridges on the opposite bank, and far above the perched village of **Ripchet** (2470m) which has been destroyed and largely abandoned. Your guide may find somebody willing to cook lunch at **Rainjam** (2400m), a single *bhatti* with enclosed courtyard.

Cross the Serpu Khola and climb for over 2hrs on well-graded but exposed track to upper Tsum and the joined villages of **Chhokang-Paro** (3010m), stone houses with a few iron roofs nestled under cliffs. You leave the gorge and the valley opens here into spacious fields of barley, maize, buckwheat and potato, but wheat has been abandoned due to 'hill bunt', a disease which turns the heads black and causes total crop failure. Herds of *thar* often graze the wild cliffs to the north, coming right down to the fields. The Tashi Delek lodge has been heavily damaged and is now a 3 room 4-bed simple lodge (bed Rs400, db Rs300). Hygiene is very basic with no shower. Avoid sickness by using your hand sanitizer frequently! There is another lodge being built on the far side of the village which should be open in time for the 2016 season. There is a police check point here. Let your guide present your permits and deal with them. If the air is clear Himalchuli (7893m) can be seen down valley.



Walking north above Chumling, Siyar Khola below



Upper Tsum, with Chhokangparo below amid barley fields

7. Chhokang-Paro to Nile 350m↑ 3-4hrs

Most people can climb to 3000m without getting altitude sickness, but the altitude gain in these track notes above Chhokang-Paro is right at the 300m per day suggested for safety. Watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge.

Take time to explore the village and climb north to a retreat where Lama Kongchog died after 26 years of meditation. His child reincarnation, found in the village, was subject of the award-winning DVD *Unmistaken Child* (available in Kathmandu). *Thar* are often sighted near here. The friendly people speak Tsumba, related to Tibetan, but often little Nepali and are quite unused to visitors. This is classic Tibetan culture and likely to be one of the most memorable days of the trek.

Head east through small villages and past a local school, climb over a ridge of *chortens* and past **Lamagaon** (3202m) through the flat fields, looking across the extensive crops and river to the huge courtyard of the **Rachen Gompa** (3240m) with excellent pilgrim accommodation (see Day 9). This nunnery is the female equivalent of the main Kathmandu Kopan Monastery. Lamagaon claims to have a lodge. At the ****Yak Hotel**** 6 room 12 beds in **Pangchhe** (Lar) (3245m) you can pay and get a key for a visit to Milarepa's Cave (**Piren Phu**), where the bringer of Buddhism to Tibet is reputed to have meditated. The cave is being extensively restored and a donation of Rs500 is suggested.

Cross the Siyar Khola, pass through hamlets of **Phurbe** (3251m) and **Pangdun** (3258m) and pass an unusual round *stupa* before reaching the larger village of **Chhule** (3347m)

through an impressive entrance gate (*kani*). There is one home stay in Chhule, turn right above the bridge. The children here all wear the Tibetan dressing gown called *chubas* and there are many yaks. Head upstream to cross the bridge and climb to **Nile** (3361m; Nyile, pronounced Nee-lay). Both villages are in traditional style with inclusion of livestock compounds into the houses and sheltered verandas for drying crops. **Mingma Hotel and Lodge (room Rs450, db Rs350) is a comfortable lodge run by a very friendly young man, Mingma Lama and his family who will invite you sit around the fire in the kitchen and enjoy a cup of *rakshi*. Nile is the last village in the Tsum Valley before climbing to Mu Gumpa and the high passes into Tibet. Mingma is the leader of the village, a former guide and will provide horses for trips further up the valley. Good place to take a rest/acclimatization day. Two years ago there was no toilet in this village; now there are 14 and plans for all households to have one within two years, partly as a result of money flowing from teahouse trekkers.

8. Nile REST DAY

9. Nile to Mu Gumpa 350m↑1-2hrs

You can leave your rucksack behind with Mingma and visit Mu Gumpa as a day trip, continuing on to Rachen Gumpa or Chhokang-Paro, or stay overnight in Mu Gumpa and visit the isolated Dhephu Doma nunnery and gumpa and even climb above it for great views – ask at the nunnery.

Make up valley on the west bank, enjoying sunrise on the narrowing valley walls and yaks being put to pasture. The final climb up to the large **Mu Gumpa** (3700m; Mugumba) is through dry Tibetan country, with rows of *chortens* and widening mountain vistas. This is a large monastery with over 100 monks and an ancient *gumpa* visited by David Snellgrove (*Himalayan Pilgrimage*) in 1956. There are many rooms available and nearby toilets (bed Rs250, db Rs300). The food is basic. Try *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) for breakfast with tea or even Tibetan butter salt tea.

On three sides now are tantalising views of the border with Tibet, with frequently used passes to the east (Ngula Dhojyang or Mailatasachin Pass, 5093m) and west (Thapla Bhanjyang, 5104m) just out of sight. Some people climb to **Kalung** (3820m) or **Bhajyo** (4030m) and camp, making a daytrip to the passes for a view into Tibet. Mingma Lama (enquire in Nile) can organise accommodation and/or horses if you want to do this. It takes about 4hrs to climb to the pass from Bhajyo and 3hrs down. From Mu Gumpa there are extensive seasonal yak pastures in all directions, the Lungdang Glacier to the east and high peaks in all directions.

In the early monsoon, in pastures at 5000m, many Tsumba collect the most expensive natural medicine in the world, known as *yarsagumba*. This is the caterpillar of a ghost moth parasitised by a fungus *Cordyceps sinensis* and is worth \$10,000/kg in China as an aphrodisiac and cancer cure.

The isolated 600 year-old **Dhephu Doma Gumpa** (3900m) is 30-45mins uphill on the obvious westward track and has two resident nuns who report seeing snow leopards and musk deer and may give you tea. The inside of the gumpa has been repainted by monks from Tibet and there are some ancient *thankas*.



The final climb to Mu Gompa at 3700m – Tibetan border behind



Young orphan monks in Mu Gompa, Tsum Valley

10. Mu Gompa to Rachen Gompa 460m↓ 3-4hrs

Return down valley through **Chhule**, collect your rucksack if you left it there, and continue down as far as **Phurbe**, where the Sheraps (sic) Home stay with camping looks clean and comfortable. Stay on the east bank of the Siyar Khola and cross flat boulder-covered plains following the power lines to **Rachen Gompa** (3240m), where it is possible to inspect the ancient *gompa* if you want and the many young nuns are very friendly. Families in the Tsum usually have at least one family member as either a monk or a nun.

At Rachen Gompa you can stay in comfortable **pilgrim rooms (Rs600, db Rs400), wash clothes and eat *dalbhat* in shifts with the nuns, enjoying electric light and maybe a solar hot shower.

11. Rachen Gompa to Gumba Lungdang 780m↓ 740m↑ 5-6hrs

Continue south until a bridge crosses to the west bank and pass again through Chhokang Paro then drop below on the previous trail towards Chumling. After about 2hrs, see a small white *gompa* on the left at **Gho** (2485m). Descend on a narrow rough local trail passing the *gompa* on your left and drop to a wooden bridge over the Siyar Khola. This is a good place to wash clothes and yourself after the lack of water further up the Tsum. Cross the bridge to **Domje** nunnery (2460m, Dhumje, Tumje) which has a Tibetan herbal medicine clinic at the convent and provides both food and lodging. The track onwards climbs just behind the clinic, which may be out of sight so take any clear trail that heads upwards.

MAKE SURE THAT YOU ENQUIRE ABOUT ACCOMMODATION AT GUMBA LUNGDANG AS SOME PEOPLE REPORT THAT IT WAS BADLY DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE. THE NOTES BELOW ASSUME IT IS NOW AT LEAST PARTLY REPAIRED.

Climb very steeply through pines and rhododendrons until the track starts traversing at a *mani* wall with prayer flags. The track is exposed and narrow. Finally, in the pine forest, take a prayer flag marked uphill trail and make a zigzag climb through huge silver pines to reach **Gumba Lungdang** (3200m), perched on a ridge with small cells for the nuns scattered through the beautiful rhododendrons above. This small *gompa* with 40 nuns has an intense and engrossing *puja* from 6.00-7.30pm each night unless the nuns are on holidays or elsewhere, which is for some months each year – enquire in Chhokang-Paro. There is no lodge or formal camping area but permission may be obtained for a limited number of people to sleep on the *gompa* veranda or to camp in the *gompa* forecourt and use their kitchen. There is a toilet although you may have to ask for water. The mountain views in all directions are amazing and being here was the absolute highlight of our many trips to Nepal.



Gumba Lungdang nunery (3200m) with Ganesh Himal behind (photo by Lobsang Lama)

12. Day trip to Ganesh Himal Base Camp 1000m↑ 7-8hrs

Your guide may be required since the track is poorly marked. Altitude can make this day difficult for some, but the intact forest wilderness and views make it an outstanding trip.

Circle from the *gompa* through a white gateway (*kani*) and below the nuns' housing, between two houses and traverse down and up through two small valleys, then drop right on dusty or muddy zigzags on a shortcut to regain the lower track and continue up valley through the forest. After about 5mins pass through a small clear pasture (*kharka*) and 5mins later take the right-hand descending track and drop to the river. This is about 30mins from the *gompa*.

An informal bridge takes you to a steep bank – look for cairns upstream and climb the bank. Traverse through forest on a passable track with a lot of wind-thrown trees for 30mins and cross the Laudang Khola to the west bank on a rickety wooden bridge. Climb steeply for 30mins through pristine pines and rhododendrons on a ridge, bearing left to two rude stone huts beside a large boulder in a *kharka*. The track continues between the huts and up, veering to the left, not straight up! The track is clear through cut silver pines then into birches and up the true right of a birch-lined dry creekbed. Eventually you emerge into grassy flats behind the lateral moraine of the Torogumba glacier. Continue climbing past seasonal yak huts and you will find several tracks on the moraine wall that give superb views of the cirque of mountains. The camp is somewhere about here and it is a most beautiful spot.

It takes about 4hrs to reach the **Ganesh Himal Base Camp** (4200m). The map shows another base camp on the east side of the glacier, but there appears to be no obvious track between them, so return to Gumba Lungdang in time for the evening *puja* by retracing your steps. Make sure that you find your 15mins shortcut up to the *gompa*; the alternative takes 45mins.



Descending from Ganesh Himal Base Camp, about 4200m

13. Gumba Lungdang to Lokpa 960m↓ 7-8hrs

This can be a taxing day so start early. Descend to Domje and cross the Laudang Khola on a new swing bridge between the two lowest houses in Domje and stay on the south (true left) bank of the Siyar Khola (contrary to the map). Traverse 10 mins on a new trail through lovely forest until a choice of upper or lower trails – either works, the lower is best. Cross some very deep gorges on new swing bridges to picturesque **Ripchet** (2470m; Ripche)

which unfortunately was completely destroyed by the 2015 earthquake and has been abandoned for now. Take time to look around at this perched fertile valley of barley and buckwheat with evocative *chortens* in the fields backed by pine forest. Descend on steep loose stairs to the deserted *bhatti* **Ghumlong** (2130m) on the river, which you passed through some days ago. Climb again through the pristine temperate forest to **Lokpa** (2240m), enjoy a comfortable bed in the lodge there and solar shower in the toilet.



Farewelling nuns at Gumba Lungdang on headshaving day



Young girl in Ripchet, Tsum Valley (photo by Lobsang Lama)

14. Lokpa to Bihi Phedi or Ghap 440m↓ 360m↑ 6-8hrs

Continue from Lokpa down the exposed track until the track from Philim comes in from the left. Turn right, cross the Buri Gandaki on a solid bridge after about 1hr and traverse to a welcome *bhatti* just around the corner for tea and a last look up the Tsum Valley. Enter a very narrow gorge with loose tracks, up and down, up and down. Cross to the east bank (true left) at one point and then back again to the west bank on a new suspension bridge. After about 2hrs reach **Sirdibas** (1860m) with comfortable Manaslu and Rubinda lodges. In another hour enter Nupri ('the western mountains') through bamboo forests to **Deng** (1800m), inhabited by Gurungs who practice Buddhism. Lodging at Manaslu Trekker Home (10 rooms, hot shower), Bodhi Himal Hotel and **Shangri-La. Just beyond Deng recross to the east bank and climb to **Rana** (1980m) and pass **Bihi Phedi** (1990m, Himal and Manaslu hotels) with the trail up to the stone-carving village of **Bihi** (2130m; Bhi). The river roars below. Continue in and out of continuous wild canyons, with a village perched in every conceivable cropping situation, cross the Serang Khola coming from the north and climb

steeply again before finally circling into **Ghap** (2160m; Tsak) past Mountain View lodge where the horses stay, **Budhi Gandaki Lodge (Rs250, db Rs370, run by a trekking cook with 20yrs experience). The *mani* walls here and onwards as far as Bimthang often display intricate quality carvings of various Buddhas in meditation, incised in the hard local stone by a family of carvers from Bihi. The Manaslu Thakuri lodge and Kyimolung lodge and camping ground are in Ghap itself and building is underway.

A side-trip from a bridge below Bihi can take you up to **Prok** (2380m), with an ACAP office and emergency radio and an excursion to Kal Tal (3685m; Kalchhuman Lake), then back down to Ghap. Two lodges are reported in Prok and those who visit really enjoy the experience, including a lake 1200m higher for which a local guide is advised.

15. Bihi Phedi or Ghap to Namrung or Lho 1010m↑ 5-6hrs

Enter a beautiful forest of fir and rhododendron with many birds, staying on the south bank, cross north on a wooden bridge with a roaring narrow canyon below then cross back to the south bank on a new swing bridge with grey langurs watching. The main trail climbs up an exhausting series of well-made stairs, but a highly recommended narrow shortcut to the right just after the bridge and along the riverbank is far quicker and through superb pine forest. After about 1hr, climb a zigzag from the river to the neat village of **Namrung** (2660m) with some of the best shops and restaurants and the Thakali, Thakuri and **Namrung lodges on the Manaslu circuit about the flagstoned square. While waiting for a meal it is worth wandering around the village, where carvings from Bihi have been painted in colours above a gateway. The architecture characteristic of upper Nupri starts here: several houses gathered together about a common courtyard and livestock shelters on the ground floor, with heavy wooden shingle roofs and log stairs to dark verandas.

Pass *mani* walls, fields and houses through **Banjam** (2800m, Banzam) with Nubri Trekkers Inn. Enter the fir, rhododendron and oak forest before climbing to **Lihi** (2900m; Li, Ligaon) with the Lihi Hotel in 1hr, then onto **Sho** (2950m, Syogoan) where there is a *bhatti* but no lodges yet. The platforms in the fields are where people keep overnight watches to chase bears from their crops. Most people from here onwards wear traditional Tibetan dress, with the children in small *chubas* like dressing gowns, asking for *shim shim* (Tibetan for candy). Some have impeccable English due to an Australian aid project. There are some particularly fine paintings in the *kani* (gate arches) that you pass before Sho. **Shrip** (3000m) boasts the Nupri Eco-hotel. A leisurely walk onwards, in and out of gullies to **Lho** (3180m; Logoan) with the large **Tashi Delek lodge (Rs400, db Rs400). The Ghorka Manaslu Home should function next season. Pity about the wedding-cake stupa donated from Taiwan which dominates this otherwise picturesque village focussed on yak herding.

There are excellent views of Manaslu (8163m) and Manaslu North (7157m) from the *mani* wall at the far end of the village and from the gompa on the hill to the west.



Resuming round Manaslu trek, between Li and Lo



Mt Manaslu (8163m) from Lo

16. Namrung or Lho to Samagaon 350m↑ 2-3hrs

This short day takes you into the mountains with time to enjoy and acclimatize. The views of Manaslu are stupendous. Easy walk to **Shyala** (3520m, Syal, Syalagaon, Shyaula) up a pine and rhododendron gully with moss and gin-clear stream. Enjoy 360° views from here due to a fire and extensive deforestation and extensive building including the largest lodge on the trek under construction, currently Manaslu Pik 21 Hotel and Gurkha Manaslu Homestay. Another easy hour to the large village of **Sama** (3530m, Samagaon, Ro), losing the gigantic views of Manaslu but entering a world of yaks, pastures and houses which seem to have grown from the stones. Only potatoes and barley can be grown at this altitude. There are many almost identical lodges on the far end of the village, all about same level of comfort. Norbu Lodge on the left on entering, **Samagaon Lodge (Rs500, db Rs350), Peace & Happiness Lodge and the enlarged Manaslu Hotel further up on the right. Samagaon is the principal village in the Nubri and has a large *gompa*, many shops, a health post, heliport and telephone/wifi access, during the good times. For those disposed to taking Diamox for altitude sickness prevention could begin taking it here.

Day-long acclimatisation trips can be taken from here to **Pungyen Gompa** or to **Manaslu Base Camp** (4900m) An afternoon walk to the **Kargyu Chholing Gompa** is recommended.

17. Samagaon to Samdo 330m↑ 3-4hrs

Another short day because of the altitude, with time to go via the iceberg-covered **Birendra Tal** (3450m) under the Manaslu Glacier, wade the exit stream depending on the time of year and drop down to pick up the main trail from Sama to Samdo. Easy walking through yak pastures up a broad valley with long *mani* walls, marmots in April but not November standing on their burrows. Finally leave the tree line behind, although low-lying juniper is all around, climb to a ridge and drop to cross the Buri Gandaki on a wooden bridge. It takes some time to reach the white *kani* above but immediately behind is **Samdo** (3860m), a very picturesque village dedicated to yak herding, so much so that there are more animal and fodder shelters than human accommodation. Lodges are Chez Kyrang, Yak Lodge (both not open) and Tibetan Twins (Rs350, db Rs440), comfortable although likely to be cold at this altitude.

Side valleys and Samdo Peak call out for afternoon wandering but take a jacket as cold wind can come up at any time. The Larkya La trail is ahead up valley and left. You can see the main track for Tibet over the Larjyang La (Lajyung Bhanjyang, 5098m) sloping up to the right from the Larkya La trail and you can make an excellent afternoon acclimatisation walk of 4-5hrs return to 4500m up this trail, seeing lots of blue sheep and yaks and entrancing views, but the pass itself is a full day trip. The first village and road in Tibet is about 2hrs beyond the pass with access currently blocked by China even for locals. There is a lot of Chinese and Tibetan alcohol and food for sale in Samdo.



Entering Samdo, track to Tibet on right



Valley above Samdo – Dharamsala and Larkya La lie up valley to left

18. Samdo to Dharamsala 620m↑ 2-3hrs

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. If you take a rest day in Samdo there is a marvellous acclimatisation day walk to the border described in Day 17.

Descend beyond Samdo on a broad trail, dropping to cross the much-reduced Budhi Gandaki at 3850m. Pass the trail to Tibet to the right and climb left after a *mani* wall, traversing through juniper with many marmots in April but not November when they hibernate. Cross two ravines on narrow tracks, very icy towards winter. You will likely be challenged by the high altitude although the hike is not particularly difficult. There is no Larke Bazar despite what many maps assert; at one time traders from Namche Bazar came through Tibet to trade in this area and maybe some of the scattered stone shelters you will pass were part of that market. **Dharamsala** (4480m; Larke Phedi, Larkya Resthouse) is now a seasonal village with dark stone rooms and tents for at least 50 people (bed Rs400, db Rs700), and a dirt-floored but efficient dining hut. Even toilets are available. In 2012 this entire place opened 1 October and closed for winter on 24 November, so check in Samdo before counting on staying here. The camping area is filthy with toilet trenches, rubbish and blowing toilet paper so be careful where you get your water and boil it well if camping. It is relatively expensive to stay here so expect to pay about double the places further down the valley where you previously stayed. The views are marvellous. A large herd of blue sheep

call the tussock-covered hills home and we saw snow leopard prints in fresh snow around the toilets.

19. Dharamsala to Bimthang 620m↑ 1400m↓ 7-9hrs

Note that if snow has fallen overnight and there have been high winds, then there may be less snow as you climb making the pass still crossable. This will be by far the most difficult and potentially dangerous trekking day you will encounter. Lack of sleep, darkness, altitude, snow, cold, wind and terrain all conspire to make this a very challenging day. Keep your wits about you and go slow, especially on the way down. Remember you can easily descend back down to Dharamsala or even Samdo if altitude sickness or fatigue overtake you - a better option than a high altitude, risky and expensive helicopter rescue attempt. Trek with a buddy. Many are woken at 3am, served breakfast and on the trail by 4am; some prefer to wait for the sun. It can be disorienting in the dark so make sure your headlamp has fresh batteries. Also, your water is likely to be frozen and you'll need your full cold weather gear including windproof mitts, gloves, sunglasses and a warm hat.

Climb steadily over the ridge behind Dharamsala and beside the large lateral moraine of the Larke Glacier. The climb is not difficult but it is long and rocky underfoot, particularly as you top the moraine. Look for cairns and metal snowpoles which assist route finding. Descend past four frozen lakes and make a final tiring climb to the left up to **Larkya La** (5160m), marked by prayer flags. It is not a particularly beautiful pass but the stunning scenery all around makes up for the that failing. It takes about 3-5hrs to reach the pass and it can be very cold and windy with a risk of exposure if under-equipped or ill. The peaks to the west are Himlung (7126m) near Tibet and Kang Guru (6981m) and Annapurna II (7937m) in the Annapurna Range.

Trek west on a high moraine ridge exposed to wind for some distance, on the right side of a deep gully, then drop steeply on loose scree, eventually traversing left on more steep scree. There are several places where snow or ice would make this treacherous and some groups fix a rope on the steepest piece. Make a long descent on loose gravel to a welcome more level area with grassy moraine, where the angle eases. The track now runs left of the large lateral moraine, rocky at times, in a widening and beautiful valley all the long way to very scenic and welcome **Bimthang** (3720m; 'plain of sand'), a descent of 1400m in about 3hrs. The views during the descent are huge – icefalls and mountains in all directions, a medial glacial lake (Pongkar Tal) between the Pongkar and Salpudanda Glaciers, and the joining of these two glaciers with a third glacier to form the Bhimdang Glacier whose lateral moraine towers over Bimthang. The new chalet-style **Hotel Ponkar Mountain (Rs400, db Rs400) is the first lodge but two new lodges are now built and there are 4-5 older-style *bhattis* with rooms.



Part of the tedious ascent to Larkya La (5100m)



Descending from Larkya La to Bimthang, Pongtar Tal and three glaciers joining below

20. Bimthang to Dharapani 1400m↓ 7-8hrs

Walk south below Bimthang behind the moraine wall for some time before crossing the Bhimdagang Glacier, which can be loose underfoot. Climb up the far moraine wall quickly to avoid stone-fall and enter some of the best forest in Nepal. If you are in rhododendron season, the mauves, reds, pinks and whites are stunning amongst the huge pines and the views of the back of Mt Manaslu are superb. Descend rapidly along the true right bank of the aptly named Dudh ('milk') Khola through a *bhatti* at **Hompuk** (3420m) in a forest clearing. Gentle riverside walking continues rapidly to **Karche** (2700m; Karache, Surki Khola, Suti Khola) for lunch after about 3.5hrs. This is a great place to spend a night, especially after yesterday's ordeal, with Saat Kanya Hotel or **Himalayan Cottage chalets with a hot shower and good food owned by the brother of the Bimthang man that built **Hotel Ponkar Mountain. In the next hour you will see many signs of a glacial flood, with tree trunks smashed and banks undermined, the track becoming quite rough. Climb steeply over a ridge and drop to Gurung **Goa** (2560m, Gho), the first real village since Samdo. There are two new lodges here and Hotel Manaslu would also be comfortable for overnight, or lunch if continuing. The valley becomes more agricultural as you pass fields and copses of oak and rhododendron, staying on the north (true right) bank until **Tilije** (2300m; Tiljet). The Larke Pass Hotel offers beds and a dining room and there were several other closed lodges here.

Pass under a stone arch, cross the Dudh Khola and descend rapidly towards the Marsyangdi Valley through scrubby forest. Cross back to the north bank just below **Thonje** (1900m; Thangjet, Thoché) and climb up to join the main round-Annapurna trail, over the Marsyangdi Khola on a long suspension bridge. Turn left into **Dharapani** (1860m) and take

your choice of hotels spread for a kilometre down the hill. Our favourite is **Hotel The Seven. Hot showers and washing facilities will suggest a rest day here.

For those not in a hurry, a casual hike from Bimthang down to Karache for the first night and Tal the second will let you enjoy Manaslu a bit longer and give you a bit of a flavour for the Annapurna Circuit. The road head is now up-valley at Syange (1100m). Jeeps now ply for a seriously scary ride back to Besi Sahar (2.5hrs) where you can catch a bus or continue on a jeep to Kathmandu (6-8hrs, US\$200-220). Only travel this road during daylight hours! An hour north of Besi Sahar you will pass through a large hydo-electric project being built a Chinese contractor. The wild Marsyangdi Nadi River will be a placid lake by the end of 2016!

Turning right takes you over the Thorung La and down the Kali Gandaki valley in about 10-14 more days and many people do complete the trek above by going around Annapurna and down the Kali Gandaki.



The back view of Mt Manaslu from the beautiful forest below Bimtang

Sue and Howard Dengate (2010, updated November 2012) confoodnet@ozemail.com.au with much appreciated update from Jack Clise (November 2015). More than 20,000 copies of these track notes have been downloaded with a measurable positive impact on facilities and local communities who asked us to write these notes back when the circuit was barely a lodge trek.

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