

## Strolling around Manaslu: an inconsequential travel log

### Kathmandu to Arughat

6:30am. A full sized 4x4 truck picks us up from our little guest house in Thamel and ferries us all the way to the bus station, only a few streets away. Marketing ploy or psychological boost, all dignified trekking departures seem destined to take place by 4x4, even if just to switch a few minutes later to a far less glorious form of transport.

The local bus is also a 4x4 machine, its structure built in India and strung together in some local Kathmandu workshop. It looks like any third world rural workhorse, in a state of controlled and functional decay, leaving little doubt as to the necessity of godly protection. There is plenty of that around the driver, who resides at the heart of a mini Hindu Disneyland, each tiny holy figurine decorated with painted flowers and plastic ribbons.

We are the first to take our seats; an hour of chaos ensues as a slow trickle of passengers boards, each little group with its load of canvas or plastic bags of all shapes and forms - 'Hello Kitty' design is a local favorite - discussing at length seating arrangements, stepping on each other (and everyone else) for no understandable reason. The process is painfully slow, senseless, even infuriating in its total inconsistency; any notion of efficiency lags far behind the freedom of individualistic fantasy. Yet, the end result is a fairly compact human mass, every free space filled by some passenger's limb or precious belongings.

Then we have motion. We crawl through Kathmandu, picking up more bodies on the way in an incessant shuffle of objects and flesh. Finally, we speed on, joining the crawling line of trucks, buses and unidentified wheeled objects heading out of the valley.

Slow is the word of the day. We overtake and get overtaken in an endless concerto of horns, winding our way down on the steep single lane road linking Kathmandu to the rest of the world. Inevitably, the engine coughs, splutters and dies; we drift to a halt, stranded on the middle of a blind bend on the busiest road in Nepal. Nothing serious though; the excited conductor wields a small tree branch, getting every passenger to witness its dryness after a ceremonious dip in the mouth of the fuel tank. Yes! we are out of fuel, may the god be praised for their leniency! And half an hour later, a triumphant conductor returns on the back of a motorbike with a 20 l can of diesel. The engine roars, the cargo of flesh settles and we head off.

We soon leave the highway, crawl on to lunchtime on a country lane and enjoy a road side dhal bhat, cheap and good.

Then back in the box for an other hour of asphalt; we are in luck, the music system has died, and the shrieking speaker above our head has gone silent. Our painful progression has lost at least one of its most insidious dimension.

We leave the tarmac, to wind our way up a dirt track, a deep rutted road climbing sharply up the foothills of the Himalayas. We are now high above the valley floor, navigating around a complex networks of rice terraces, precariously clinging to the hill side, the whole bus rocking madly on the unpredictable waves of the road. A glimpse of our shadow in the low sunlight reveals that our human cargo has now spread to the roofrack of the bus and I build in my mind a stability model of our human load; the equation is worrying. I share this top heavy information with the smiling Ganesh figurine dangling by the driver, who winks at me in return as it takes a mighty swing at the end of its little chain.

We arrive in Arughat 4 hours later, as night falls, and walk across the large village in complete darkness, headlamps on our foreheads. The electricity fairy is off duty tonight. We soon arrive to a small cluster of guest houses, lights flickering to the hum of private generators.

There are a fair few trekkers around, most of a non interactive breed. Never mind, they will loosen up further afield,

We are showed to our room, a 2 x 3 plywood box with 2 inches mattresses.

Dinner and bed.

### Arughat to Macha Khola

A 6 am start, again.

We walk to the bus stand, and board a bus to Soti Khola, the road head some 15 or 20 ks away. If yesterday's bus was of the local type, then today's is squarely rural. After a few attempts, the vehicle is

bump started and 3 dozen passengers board, most of them on their way back to some remote hill villages after taking care of worldly business down town.

There is less plastic, a lot of woven baskets stuffed with market goods, and a few live animals. An old lady boards and squeezes herself on the floor in front of Sissy, resting her back on Sis legs. We all are family now. All she carries is a long, beautifully hand woven hemp rope, perfectly coiled by her side. She pulls a few notes from a fold of her robes, tosses one to the bus boy, and sighs heavily as she rests her buttocks on Sissy's shoes.

It is once again a slow trip, though much shorter this time, along a barely driveable track. The early morning light is beautiful and, coming from Kathmandu, these first sights of rural life as we drive by tiny hamlets captivate all our attention.

We arrive in Soti Khola by mid-morning, where the jeep track finishes abruptly. All disembark. Some set on adjusting their baskets' forehead slings, whilst others put on their backpacks or strap on light metal frames stacked with boxes of goodies, all tweaking their assigned load of the next few days. Aitak, our porter, adjusts his 25Kg pack with a smile; I do the same with my 15 kg. Sissy and Aishing travel light.

And off we trot, on a large and fairly busy trail following the right bank of the Buri Gandaki river, that will take us all the way to the Larkya pass, 110km ahead and 4,5 km above.

The going is easy, with some occasional steep climbs and drops; it becomes obvious that tripping off the trail is not a good option, at least on the exposed river side of the track. Soon, we come across our first donkey and mule caravan, to which we respectfully give way. Their driver pushes his beasts on with short whistles and shouts, throwing small stones at any misbehaving animal and whipping the slowest to keep the momentum going. It is very hard work, mule driving is a young and fit man's job. Porters are expendable, they can be whatever age, if they collapse under their load, no drama, there are plenty of hungry souls around to replace them. But mules... they fetch a high price, and need a keen, fit and able driver to lead them safely and efficiently. Basic economics.

We reach the rice terraces of Lapubesi, beautifully layered above the river. It is peaceful, and we settle for lunch on the veranda of a lodge overlooking the valley; our first noodle meal is on its way. A group of Italian returning from the Larkya pass sits at the table next to us; their guide turned them back because of the uncertain snow conditions. They keep their morale up with a big block of parmesan cheese.

Walking away from the modern world is exciting, and we are filled with wonder about the road ahead. We push on for another 3 hours, to reach Macha Khola as our legs start to wobble. An uncomfortable moment follows, as I decide against the lodge we are shepherded into by Aishing to the benefit of the one across the street. The choice is a no brainer, a fairly comfortable room with bathroom vs a gloomy box room with a gigantic wasp nest on its doorstep; even Aishing accepts defeat gracefully.

The desk girl, daughter of the lodge owner, is mesmerized by Sissy, and at the end of a loooong stare tells her that she is 'sooo beautiful'. Satisfied to have successfully embarrassed us, she then pouts and goes back to painting her fingernails, prepping herself for a procession of young males soon to appear, all keen to attempt a small flirt with what is obviously the most desirable chick in the village.

We go for a walk around; Aishing gives us his blessings, in the form of "dont go to far, watch the animals, it will get dark soon". Freedom from our chaperon feels good, but it does get dark fast and we return to the fold, for the first of many DBB evenings to come. Dinner, Beer, Bed.

#### Macha Khola to Jagat

An early start it is. A routine sets in, to remain unchanged.

6am, first light. 6:15, quick ablutions, then pack away in the dim light all non essentials conveniently scattered around the night before. 6:30, Sissy's first wake up call, finish packing my stuff. 6:40 Sissy is up, I put away sleeping bags and start packing Aitak's load. 7 am, breakfast, pancakes or chapatis with honey and jam. 7:15, pick up bags, get ready to move. 7:30, on the trail. Easy.

There is something satisfying about setting off early, even more so after a ten hour sleep. The day ahead feels just as endless as the renewed energy powering one's step, and it is as if the clutter of cumbersome thoughts, feelings and experiences of the day before has been sorted, classified and shelved overnight.

Reset button pushed, mind cleared, start anew. The light is crisp, the air is fresh, the sky clear; the sound of our boots on the rocky trail travels undisturbed in a world without combustion engines, only muffled at times by the song of running water cascading down some side stream.

The valley is deep, the sun will only reach us later. Villagers are already out tending their fields, and the trail is busy with mule caravans and porters. No, not rush hour busy; there is time to exchange a smile, give a short bow and a 'Namaste' with others on the path; not too loud of course, as to preserve the peace of the moment.

The trail continues on the right bank of the Buri, mostly level, crossing tributaries on suspension or wooden bridges. We arrive by mid morning at Tatopani, where the pani is indeed tato, that is, where the water is indeed hot, gushing out of the mountain side in sulphuric spurts.

This is a neat little place, with two teahouses facing each other across the beautifully slate paved trail. A gaping, empty and derelict school Danasyon (donation) box tells the story of bygone ambitions. We do morning tea here, stretching our limbs in the newborn sun, shedding a couple of layers in the process.

Soon we cross to the left bank of the Buri on a long suspension bridge, passing high above a derelict shed with the words 'Police Checkpoint' painted in huge blue letters on its sides. We are stuck behind two large mule caravans going upstream; following the universal rule by which the pace of a group is always set by that of its slowest members, we crawl behind the animal road train, climbing slowly but surely along the east bank of the river.

An hour later, it is lunch stop in a brand new daning hole (dining hall) built on stiles on the steep slope of the valley. It is a tourist place – or trekkers' place maybe, to appease the minds of those on a journey with a deeper meaning- where we meet a few more retreating parties that got stuck in Samdo at the top of the hike, their guides only too willing to turn their flock back rather than face the uncertainties of the Larkya pass crossing ahead.

A lady walker distributes party balloons to the local children; they love it, and I can still hear the chorus of "Balloooooonnnns Misssta" that would greet us at the entrance of every village for the next two weeks.

Soon after lunch, we have our first real climb. In Nepal, half measures are rare. Either the going is easy or it is not, and that was our introduction to the double negative. Imagine rocky and uneven stairways winding their way upwards endlessly, taking you up hundreds of meters in one shot, in long and relentless swoops. Obviously, the steps don't take you; you take them. And equally soon, we are seriously overheating, dripping with sweat as we overcome successive sections, only to be greeted by yet another flight of uneven stairs. We have now become the slowest moving objects in the universe.

But all things come to an end, and an hour later, 500 meter higher, we start our decent on the other side of the rocky buff that we have just overcome.

Back at river level, we drag ourselves along the banks towards the last climb before Jagat, our stage for the day, and on to the village itself. We congratulate each other, agree that that was hard, that Jagat is cute, and that we are happy to rest our sore buttocks on double inches mattresses in our bare cement box room.

Jagat is indeed cute, impeccable streets paved with black slate, well finished houses, even painted doorways sometimes. Most of all, it is spotlessly clean; not a sign of litter, and we get a first taste of what a world devoid of plastic could look like.

I vaguely remember a wash at the communal tap; the rest must have been a serious case of DBB.

## Jagat to Lokpat

6 am, the rooster squeaks, the dawn light seeps, the night retreats. Or something like that.

La routine.

We set off to the village square, where the officer on duty, presiding behind a small wooden table set on the side in the open air, checks our permits and Aishing's credentials. It is a relaxed session of al fresco paper shuffling, where small talk and little smiles are obviously de rigueur.

There is a Mani wall in the middle of the square; a few of the larger mantra laced slates have been painted over with sickle and hammer symbols, just to show who is boss around here. The signs are clumsy and pathetic, with paint drips and childish curves, and clash violently with the elegance of the carved mantras in Tibetan script they attempt cover. Some are already fading out, proving that, Maoist or not, the jewel is still in the bloody Lotus.

We walk along the riverside, following a group of school kids; one of them has a hessian sack over his

head and staggers blindly on the uneven ground; two of his school mates stop him from tripping over and falling, laughing loudly at his clumsy movements. Rite of passage or plain bullying, hard to tell. Adults passing on the way ignore the whole thing.

We arrive at sunrise to a long and narrow village, stone houses with slate roofs under a bright blue sky. Buddhist flags are flying over every household in the morning breeze, the valley floor basks in the young sunlight, and the track is teeming with village life, all hands tending to daily chores. It feels warm and happy.

We push on, cross the Buri once again to arrive in Phillim, a large and wealthy village with its own mobile phone antenna, and the taunting promise of internet access displayed at many lodges. It is still early, so we keep going on a fairly level trail for another hour or so, to Chiso Pani, where the Pani is indeed Chiso, that is, freezing cold.

Lunch drags on here, the Dhal Bhat is not ready and the frigid water takes a long time to boil. A nearby cauldron resting over a smoky fire is said to be brewing raksi, the local tippie, or so says Aishing, wink wink. In the mean time, we drink tea.

A couple of hours later, we are back on the trail. The valley is narrow and green, with many waterfalls spurting out of the hillside in elegant cascades. The going is easy, the scenery captivating, and the early afternoon rolls on effortlessly.

And we get to the Tsum valley crosstrail, landmark of the day; we take a right towards Tsum and leave the Buri Gandaki behind and below. Nearly there, just a last climb to Lokpat 500 meter above us. Despite the steep trail, we gain altitude easily in the cooler air, winding our way ever upwards in a shaded pine forest: and soon arrive at Lokpat farmstead, half a kilometer higher, gateway to Tsum, a region where Tibetan blood and beliefs takes precedence.

Farmers are busy threshing the barley harvest on a high platform. It is a joyful rhythmic ritual, almost a dance, where two team of men and women face each other, armed with articulated sticks, threshing the hell out of their harvest laid across the slab floor.

Close by, an older lady collects the thrashed grain and husks. She whistles, summoning the wind to its cathartic duties, and lets the mixture trickle between her fingers in the breeze. The grain drops down into deep woven baskets, the husk flies down the valley. An ageless process, repeated endlessly till the basket is full, the grain stored, and night falls.

It is as if the 20th century missed a beat here, we could be in ancient Greece, medieval Europe, pharaonic Egypt or Mayan central America. Remove the combustion engine and it is almost as if the industrial revolution never happened.

There is a large group of frogs camping by the farm. They have taken over the common room, so we have dinner in the smokey kitchen. Here, we meet an other French couple, and elderly pair of independent hikers; she has a terrible cough, caught in some snow storm somewhere in remote Mustang; bravely, they push on, little stage by little stage, unwilling to give their ailing bodies the chance to spoil their bright spirits. Soon, we fall asleep to the echoes of desperate coughing spreading through the lodge's thinly planked rooms.

### Lokpat to Chumling

In the grey light of dawn, we split our load. We will be returning here in a few days, on our way back to the Manaslu trail, and I take full advantage of this opportunity to leave a few kilos behind: avoiding carrying the useless is a lesson easily learnt.

We bid our farewell to our elderly coughy froggy friends -they are going back down- and we are off again, walking through a dense forest. There are large monkeys in the trees, shy grey haired creatures the size of large dogs. After walking on fairly level ground for over an hour, we cross a suspension bridge and attack the mainstay of the day, a two hour, 700m climb over a buff on the side of the valley. The going is monotonous, Sissy is tired, and by the time we get to the other side of the hill we are quite exhausted. We soon reach a bridge over the Shya Kholo (the Tsum valley river), guarded by a freshly built tea shop. We put it to good use and do tea here, at the edge of the forest, before crossing the river on the long and wobbly suspension bridge spanning the valley.

It is just over half an hour climb to Chumling from here, our stage for the day. We get there before 11 am, pretty tired and quite happy not to push on any further.

The lodge is a two storey building, haphazardly put together in a very rustic fashion. Our box room has a window, complete with glass on the see through bits, so all is well.

We are quite a way from the village proper, so Aishing and I take a small hike that way after lunch while Sis has a rest. It is obviously Aishing's first time here, so he is just as curious as any proper tourist, but also eager to hide his lack of local knowledge to maintain his guidance credentials.

We eventually find our way to the village, a small and quite poor stone built settlement, surrounded by fields punctuated with chortens and mani walls. The surroundings are beautiful, we are at the foot of some minor 4 and 5,000 meter summits, walking in the bright sunlight through blond fields of barley ready for harvest. The wind carries the laughs and rhythmic sounds of a team threshing in a nearby farm. It is all once again completely timeless, extremely peaceful. and the obvious extreme material poverty appears somehow offset by a sense of purpose, a general busyness and a rich cultural heritage. No doubt that life is suffering, but these guys do prefer to suffer happily.

Aishing returns to the lodge, I head down to the river for a wash al fresco. The fresco part is all that it should be, the wash and subsequent cleanliness is a far more relative success, but I feel revived after splashing some soapy water where it matters most.

A group of Russians have arrived at the lodge, a team of middle aged men and women with a 12 year old kid. They are self contained, rather loud, and a bit invasive. But they are nice enough even though their leader is an oaf who seems to like to do things 'because he can'; the rest are relatively more subdued. They carry salami and vodka, and thank fk they are going downhill.

Like most nights, Aishing briefs us on the tribulations of the day to come. He has been fishing for info amongst his fellow guides, and shares some of his newly acquired knowledge with us. It matches roughly the guidebook descriptions, so we find peace in the knowledge that we are going in the right direction.

Tonight, we have two beers, to appease our overheated spirits after so many hours of rest. DBBB.

#### Chumling to Burji

6 am, coughs, splutters, bodies shuffling, steps stepping, zips zipping. The lodge is awake. It is chilly in the grey light of dawn. Aishing and Aitak didn't have the best night sleep; one of their fellow guides was a virtuoso snorer and the lodge blankets had bugs.

Lodges in Nepal have a symbiotic relationship with guides and porters, as they provide them with low cost food and free accommodation, usually in the common room after all tourists have gone to bed. This is a sign of appreciation for herding the paying flock into one's specific lodge or restaurant; in some cases, guides will also receive a commission, but not always. It is also the duty of guides to take food and drink orders from their punters and perform the related table service. The system works generally well, guides get free food, lodgings and sometime baksheesh, lodges get punters. However, if a lodge has a monopoly on an area, like today in Chumling, things are off balance, and guides' blankets tend to have bugs in them.

But this morning we walk away from Chumling towards the upper reaches of the Tsum Valley, and Sissy and I have a bounce in our step after nearly 24 hrs of rest.

The going is again easy on a wide cliff edge path through sparse forest; the scenery is very alpine, we pass by small clusters of houses, usually set next to patches of arable land. Some have been deserted, their owners obviously lured away by the shimmering lights and promises of comfort of the 21st century. We walk by a good number of temples and shrines on the way; every house has a set of prayer flags floating in the breeze.

Soon we arrive at a small hamlet called Gho; Sissy is steaming ahead, so we charge on and attack the final climb to upper Tsum. Later, after an honourable fight and much panting and sweating, we pass the 3000 meter line; suddenly the valley opens up into a pristine meadow, edged by the Ganesh range to the east. Not far is the village of Checkempar, comprising roughly 50 stone houses, a gigantic mani wall up its high street, about a thousand prayer flags and banners, our first yaks, and a very welcoming lodge cum tea house.

Few descriptions of upper Tsum can really make it justice, but it is worth a try. We have landed in Shangri La, in a place where the vast majority of people seem to be happy despite evident material poverty. Here, Tibetan tradition is obviously the basis of daily life, as witnessed by the mani walls splitting village traffic, the many prayer wheels, the huge number of flags flying over each dwelling;

probably a lot more so here than in communist Chinese Tibet, where religion is only tolerated and comes a poor second after Maoist dogma. To top the whole thing, the valley is beautiful... and here photos say a lot more than words.

Anyway, it is lunch time so we settle around a table in a courtyard basking in sunshine, and wait for lunch to be ready. Soon a team of American hikers rocks up, on their way down, and give us an enthusiastic description of the road ahead – hell yeah! They are quite a funny bunch, a team of males in their early 50's having left wife and family back home and attempting to reconnect with their hippy selves of a bygone past (I relate to that), without quite shaking off the crust left by 30 years of rat racing in Boston...

Eggs, chapatis, dhal for the professionals and here we go again, back on the trail to complete the last two hours of today's stage. The ground is flat, the going is again easy and I stray behind, clicking away at the scenery with my image box, at a frequency that would have easily competed with that of any bona fide Japanese tourist, had there been any around.

We get to Burji by mid afternoon, after walking on a pretty path following the grassy meadows, crossing dry stone hedged fields and meandering around the poplar and birch clusters lining the river side. Burji, and our guest house in particular happens to be right across the river from Rachen Gumpa, a large and modern monastery where a very large quantity of people are gathered today. We decide to take a stroll over the bridge a few kilometers downstream and see what all that fuss at the Gumpa is about.

Our arrival there is perfectly synchronised with the apparition of a black chopper at the bottom of the valley, Hollywood style, that makes a neat approach and lands squarely in front of the Gumpa, sending a few dozen yaks running for their lives in the process. A chaotic reception committee made up of overexcited monks in burgundy robes, inquisitive nuns in full dress and loitering civilians gathers around the flying machine; a stern man jumps out and single handedly pushes back the crowd to a safe distance, showing little concern for the emotions created by the helicopter's arrival. Again, la routine.

Six young Asian guys and girls hop out of the chopper; the girls do a little dance in the short grass, arms outstretched as to absorb the fresh mountain air and presumably embrace the glory of their surroundings; little house in the prairie meets Himalayan Gumpa, prompting quite an understandable reaction if they have just flown in from the chaos of Kathmandu.

We have a stroll around the monastery as the chopper departs; there are at least two hundred people here, probably more. Kids are chanting in a class, ladies are discussing the meaning of life in an other, and a few men are sitting around enjoying the last of the afternoon sunshine, doing what a large proportion of men worldwide do best, that is, very little.

The helicopter passengers have now entered the complex and are being channelled to the VIP corner of the monastery, fenced off from the commoner's dwellings. As they walk through the access gates, a recording (or so it seems) sings "welcoooooome" "welcooooooome", in a tone probably inspired by a theme titled 'alien greets human in a far faraway galaxy'. It is odd, absurd, and very funny.

But the sun is setting, so we troddle back through the countryside, over the bridge and on to our guest house, slightly baffled by the amount of people we have seen and speculating about the identity of the new arrivals at the monastery; religious tourists? worldly do gooders? contenders for Buddhist saint hood?

Back at the guest house, we meet our landlady, a young American girl in her twenties with a big smile, partner of a local gentleman with whom she has opened the lodge. When pressed as to the whys and hows of her presence here by a rather tactless guest, her reply is 'I thought I d'stay for a while'; a humble and elegant understatement that instantly triggers my sympathy.

She does shed light on the chopper saga and the high human concentration at the Gumpa: a group of medics are doing their yearly visit to the monastery, and rather than travelling from remote village to remote village, residents of the valley have been asked to gather here if in need of medical attention. Obviously this is much more than a doctor's appointment, a religious, social and probably political catch up for all the isolated communities dotted along the Shya khola banks and beyond.

We have a pleasant evening in the warmish common room; our host is a good photographer and has some stunning pictures framed on the walls. The lodge 4 rooms are full and there are half a dozen nationalities represented tonight here in cosmopolitan Burji. Beer and bed.

## Burji to Mu Gumpa

We gather shortly after 7 in the lodge courtyard, breaths steaming in the grey chilled air. And once more, we walk upstream, along the Shya Khola, making our way along the wide and level valley floor, its steep flanks topped by summits towering many thousand meters above us. We go through cultivated land, up small hills crowned by chortens or mani walls, circumnavigate various minor gumpas and side step many hamlets, clusters of 3 or 4 stone dwellings brought to life by a myriads of colourful prayer flags gently flying in the morning breeze.

We arrive to the twin villages of Chhule and Nihle by sunrise, that is, by mid morning, and opt for morning tea at Nihle premier establishment, a local farmhouse with a few rooms for visitors and a nice courtyard kitted with a plastic table, 3 chairs and a wonderful set of medieval farm instruments.

A lady sets a blanket on the yard floor in the sunshine, puts a white sheepskin on top of it and fetches a new born sprog, that she lays down carefully on this comfortable looking bed. It all feels very biblical, this new Nihlist generation playing on a sheepskin in a hay strewn yard, with yaks mooing next door and horses tied up outside.

After tea, we move away from Nihle, to complete the last leg of our journey up the Tsum Valley, to Mu Gumpa, one of the most important monastery in the region. To get there, we have to drag ourselves up a further 500 meter in altitude, not an easy task as Nihle is already at 3100 meter above sea level. The valley quickly becomes narrower, and we move into a more mineral world, with a few patches of blond pasture and red coloured shrubs dotted along the way. The trail crosses some snow drifts, and we climb steadily in the thin air. We are all feeling the altitude and the progression is slow. There is a strong wind blowing up hill, and it is quite cold. We finally come in view of the Gumpa, a large stone complex hanging high up on one side of the valley, and struggle up the last few hundred meter on a steep scree slope. We enter Mu totally winded and on very wobbly legs.

Mu Gumpa is straight out of Tintin in Tibet. The core of the monastery is timeless, with slate paved courtyards, large sweeping stairways running through the complex, stone buildings with heavily shingled slate roofs manned by a handful of monks in heavy saffron robes. The scenery is stunning, we are high up and facing south, high enough to see far beyond the rim of the valley and look over to Tibet, half a day's walk away.

A monk shows us to our room, slightly dilapidated but comfortable, and more or less sheltered from the wind howling on the guest quarters' veranda. Aishing goes out in search of the cook, and we order some lunch. Oddly (or not) the 6 items on the menu are in English, but the prices are in Chinese. I guess that leaves a some leeway to creative translations and probably lucrative transactions.

Lunch takes a couple of hours to get ready on the single fire of the kitchen, so we have a wander around the monastery complex, playing with the cameras while trying to immortalize the jaw dropping scenery; and, having put the beautiful light to good use, we bask in the sunshine. A German lady has pitched her tent in the middle of one of the courtyard; she is in her early 60's, hiking alone with a guide, and obviously prefers the comforts of her tent to the debatable luxuries of more permanent dwellings. Maybe a wise choice. She is much thrilled by her surroundings, and rightly so, so we exchange a fair few heartfelt and enthusiastic superlatives on the awesomely awesomness of it all. She suffers from a bad case of conjunctivitis.

Once food is over -gastronomic achievements in Mu are very modest, so it is plainly food-, we set off to a close by nunnery, some 45 minutes away at the end of a narrow path climbing up and up on the steep edge of the valley. Being so high above the valley floor is thrilling, our surroundings are almost totally mineral and I am in complete awe of the view; the Himalayas in all their immensity and majestic beauty are right here, just in front of us. Some of the peaks might be a hundred kilometers away but in the thin blue air, they just hang here in all their might, just a bit further then a stone throw away.

As a young boy, I used to spend hours day dreaming in front of a coffee table book called "Caravans of the Tartars", an outstanding compilation of travel photographs taken by a French couple in the Pamirs and beyond in the 1970's. It had a huge influence on me and, somehow, this landscape resurrected in me the same feelings as those provoked by the armchair travels of my youth. Euphoria of the high altitudes...

The nunnery is a modest building set on a small promontory with a huge view. The lady on duty opens the temple for us; it is richly decorated and furnished, the paint is bright, the demons scary, the books freshly printed, all signs of a wealthy enterprise, supported by substantial earthly investment and a

dedicated staff. A picture of the Dalai Lama presides close to the altar.  
We donate, withdraw, and walk back down the hill to Mu in the orange light of the late afternoon.

About 10 of us foreign devils are chatting in the monastery's main courtyard when Aishing rocks up and invites everyone to cram into the small Puja room where the evening readings have already started. We all respectfully dismount from our boots and proceed to compress ourselves in a dark room of little more than 3 by 3 meter in size, without disrupting the ongoing service held by the 3 monks on duty. Soon, a couple of foreign Buddhophiles already in the box take their leave, exasperated by our clumsy invasion; they know their procedures and perform a complicated set of bows and courtesies in front of the altar, much to the embarrassment of the foreign devil (myself) sat right under it. I guess they are a step closer to Nirvana for it.

Sissy is squeezed in a corner right next to a middle aged and well fed monk manning the drum. He beams a huge smile at her from time to time, probably part of the Tantric procedure. An older monk sits next to him, reading pages after pages of a book in a nasal, fast and monotonous tone, seasoned and punctuated by random but determined strikes of the cymbals. Oddly, the resulting overall noise is not dissimilar to that of a digeridoo, a monotonous, mosquito like, high frequency buzz, with the odd zing bang bang bang bang zing bang in between. It certainly favours deeper thoughts, and I catch myself wondering if the ultimate galactical truth could lie in a frequency of 42... hertz of course. After 15 minutes, it dawns on us that we are bloody stuck here. None of us know the exit procedure, it is getting dark outside and it is bloody cold. Half a life later, we are saved by the withdrawal of one of the guides who just gives a quick bow towards the celebrants and slips through the door. His flock follows suit, and in less than two minutes the Puja room is emptied of all non professionals worshippers.

Who in turn all attack the galley, all at the same time, placing orders for a dozen of various earthly delights to be cooked lovingly on the very single fire. To cut the night short, we opt for what is cooking right now, Tibetan bread, a deep fried dough very much like our western doughnut, delicious with honey.

We eat in the corner of the kitchen, not too far from the warmth of the fire; no beer tonight, not that Buddha cares but out of a boring but probably sensible respect for the altitude.

When we emerge, the main temple has open its doors for the tourist to admire the inner sanctum (and donate in the process). We take a tour of the ancient building, polished and embellished by the patina of time. We walk on a creaky wooden floor, once hand planed and now worn down by a million footstep, admire tankas softened by eons of candle smoke, look at books worn by years of handling. It all feels as it should be, bathing in ancient wisdom and timeless tradition. Human or inanimate, the ancient always rings true, even if the old and past is usually no wiser than the young and present.

Bed does not mean sleep tonight; the temperature limitations of my sleeping bag are becoming evident and despite being fully clothed it is hard to warm up. And then there is the altitude, sending normal breathing patterns haywire, numbing normal reflexes and promoting erratic gasps for oxygen every few minutes. Getting used to being high is not always pleasant.

## Mu to Chumling

We leave Mu at dawn, after a quick chapati. The water in the kettle by the fire struggles to heat up and we give up on coffee and tea; Nihle is only an hour away. Aishing has a moan about the cost of the stay in Mu; poor value for us, true, scenery excluded, but certainly expensive for guides and porters as their input is clearly not needed to attract punters... which is largely why many guides try to dissuade clients wishing to spend the night here.

So we bounce down the valley, the spring in our step gets springier as the oxygen returns to our lungs. Sissy is in fact bouncing ahead, closely followed by Aishing, while Aitak is in charge of slow me (I stop frequently to play with my camera) and makes sure I don't fall off a cliff.

In Nihle, we discover that our premier establishment has been overrun by young monk-cubs and nun-cubs, apparently here on their way back from Rachen Gumpa and commissioned to give the lodge a blessing or two, on the go. It is very lively, the baby Jesus of yesterday has been replaced by a plethora of laughing creatures in burgundy robes, and Sissy attracts as much attention as ever. We have tea and doughnut, say hi to a Canadian couple taking their maple leaf flag on walkabout,

warm up in the morning sunshine... and Breathe!

We have opted to go back all the way to Chumling, a good 5 hours away so we speed on. Sissy has plugged herself to her musical phone, and just steams ahead to the rhythm of her private beat before and disappearing behind a bend, closely followed by a less bouncy but still rather fast Aishing. I just settle for being a slow coach, even Aitak gives up on me after a while, the light is great and I feel trigger happy with my camera... so I bag in a million pictures, in a rather futile attempt to transform the instant in zillions of immortal pixels.

We blaze through Burji, and reach Chekempar for lunch. Just two days have past since we were last here, somehow it feels like two weeks. Far too much thrill and excitement. We have some yak cheese, at 3 bucks a slice it is a luxury, but the appeal of eating some animal protein other than eggs is strong. Yak cheese is not much different from cow cheese, just in case anyone is wondering.

Now on for the big downhill to Gho and onwards to Chumling. Sissy is not only springy but has had enough of Aishing's caring attentions. I can't blame her, our guide's repetitive leitmotiv of bye bye apple pie, hello coconut, good morning my darling and dahl bat power twenty hour (or something like that) would make anyone cringe.... and then there are the cultural differences, that anyone who has travelled Asia will have had to deal with. Those who claim to have never faked interest to some Asian person's long winded funny joke or story, whilst in truth wishing they would just shut up, is a liar. One has only to watch 10 minutes of local TV to know what I am on about,... and we did watch the finals of Miss Nepal 2014, an ethnological master piece and a cultural challenge.

In any case, Sissy has got the grumps and starts to walk around the mani walls and chortens anticlockwise (the wrong way), takes shortcuts when Aishing goes straight and goes straight when Aishing takes shortcuts. And eventually disappears ahead. I am a bit worried, this is a cliff side path in a very remote area with a fair few very poor and frustrated young males and well, a dad's curse is to worry. But all is well and we meet up at the lodge in Chumling.

We do a riverside wash, and on our return to the lodge, find a chatty Canadian couple waiting for someone with whom to share their life story. They are in their mid 60's, have been hiking for almost 3 months in various areas of Nepal, they just came up from Jagat – a very long stage, probably 8 to 9 hrs solid hiking, nothing for them... They are obviously very fit, he is an ex heliski guide.

Later on, they share a beer with their guide, a young guy in his early twenties. He is full of Marxist Maoist dribble, and gives out a poorly rendered analysis of "the problem with Nepal". They listen politely, but then things heat up a bit when they talk about the way ahead... guide doesn't want to stay in Mu, they are walking too fast, lunch stops are insufficient etc.... Each party delivers its gripe, but as they are all stuck with each other, the end result is only an awkward status quo. There is little doubt that their guide is rubbish, but there is also little doubt that the Canadians move on at a pace much faster than the accepted norm. They have a further two weeks to enjoy each other's company... Yuk.

On our side, we make up for last night abstinence, and do a DBBB to guarantee the smoothness of well earned and well oxygenated dreams. Sissy gets invited in the process on a heliskiing outing in Canada.

## Chumling to Dheng

Most visitors to Chumling opt to perform their toilet necessities in the wild... The communal single squat cubicle is certainly unappealing and insufficient for the 30 or 40 people that stay here in trekking season; walkabout seems to be a popular alternative.

After a quick breakfast in the open air dining area, we wish good luck to our troubled Canadians and head off down the hill back to Lokpat. We maintain a good pace, and negotiate the big downhill to the farmstead in no time. On the way, I quiz Aishing on the friction between the Canadians and their guides. He says that they are in trouble, and that their guide is planning to report them to the police in Chekempar; his main grudge being that they were going too fast and too far, with insufficient lunch breaks and that it was generally 'unsafe' to trek that way. We never saw those guys again, so the conclusion of the story is unclear, but it seems unlikely that 'they were happy ever after'.

We pick up our gear left at Lokpat, and, after the ritual morning tea, head down and out of the Tsum valley; leaving Shangri-La feels bitter sweet, but there are plenty more adventures ahead... and soon it is uphill again. It takes us a little while to adjust to the main stream Manaslu trail with its denser traffic, trekking groups and donkey caravans.

We stop in a fairly unkempt two house hamlet, where a single lady presides behind a few pots and

pans; a French group of 4 has already settled here for lunch. As the lady of the house is struggling to fulfil the various orders, Aishing takes over the cooking, and feeds every one within half an hour, and even manages to prepare a Dhal bhat for guides and porters. Hero of the moment, with an obvious soft spot for the landlady.

I get talking to the froggies; they went all the way to Samdo, the last village before the Larkya La, but opted not to cross the pass, as they thought the risk too high. I find this information a bit unnerving; these guys are quite well equipped, live in the Alps and seem competent. I promise myself to go around the chortens the right way around and to spin prayer wheels (also the right way round) from now on. Every little helps.

Aishing is in a private universe, so we walk on without him. He catches up soon enough, a big grin on his face. He certainly likes that pit stop.

This is a long afternoon, with a lot of ups and downs on the banks of Buri, up buffs, around cliffs, along ledges, crossing to the right bank, left bank, right bank again. By the time we arrive in Dheng, we are done. The lodge here is a large corrugated iron building, painted bright blue. It is a trekker churning machine, and we find ourselves eating dinner in a darning hole with some 50 other walkers. We shed a sad thought for the seclusion of the Tsum valley, but do enjoy the wonders of electric light seasoned with Gorkha beer and egg fried noodles. DBBBBB.

### Dheng to Namrung

The extra Bs are a good enough source of motivation for a head start towards the communal pee hole. There is already a queue, Helmut is holding the ground for himself, as well as for Ingrid und Hubert. German people consider queuing a waste of time, and I am fully with them on that one, but are at the same time far too pragmatic to deny the universal values of timely presence, and have therefore developed the art of virtual queuing to a tee, leaving only the mark of their souls in the line rather than their earthly bodily presence. Towels on the poolside, devoted boy/girlfriend taking one for the team (of 12, sometimes), all little 'I was here' marks, not unlike cat spray, to guarantee the continuity of their geo-chronological credentials.

So I aim for the wild in the semi darkness, clearly like many have done before.

Pay the lodge and head off.

It is an easy morning, the valley is narrow here and the trail jumps from bank to bank over a roaring Buri Gandaki. We have lunch in a place called Ghap, where a friend of Aishing keeps a trekkers' restaurant. It is next to a large and well attended school, where kids are actually sitting down in front of exercise books and being taught a lesson by a seemingly keen and motivated teacher. A rare sight.

Here we meet for the first time Tobi, his dad, Nina and Wai, with whom we will run parallel lines for the next week, all the way down to Pokhara. They are a nice bunch of no fuss no nonsense Danish-Ozzies on holidays.

After sharing a deep fried Mars bar, we keep going through dense forest; a porter follows us, with tinny tunes blaring out of his telephone. The Nepalese top 20 is not foreigner friendly, but once it has been Nokia'ed or LG'ed, it is pure torture. We eventually take a lengthy break to let the offensive phone take its leave, echoing down the valley before being drowned by the roar of the stream.

We soon come across a forest of gigantic trees, redwood or cedar like. The tallest ones reach well above 50 meters, with a 4 or 5 meter diameter at their base. Some have been fallen, and there is something horrible and sad in the sight of these century old giants lying there waiting for human ants to slice them, stack them, plank them and sell them; in a valley where animal killing is strictly prohibited, falling these trees larger than nature seems sacrilegious, even downright criminal.

Further along, we come across a brand new guest house, alone at the heart of the forest, outstandingly well built in pointed dry stones and fresh timber panelling. Oddly, this kind of more recent, high quality constructions will be a recurring sight as we travel further and deeper in the mountains.

We arrive in Namrung by mid afternoon, and pick a room in an other brand new and architecturally remarkable lodge. One wing of the building is still in construction, and a team of 20 stone masons are busy hammering rocks to shape to build the dry stone walls. The building technique is quite unique; as we are at least 5 days away from the road head and modern building materials have to be either donkeyed in or flown in by helicopter. As a donkey can carry at the most two bags of cement, and concrete iron have to be brought by teams of porters or by chopper, the concrete structure of the

building is slender, if not anaemic. Nevertheless it supports two thin concrete slabs forming the first and second storey floors; the external walls are then dry stone built and the structure thus reinforced, whilst all partitioning is made of local timber as well as the doors, window frames and so on. Our room is large, smells of fresh timber, and the beds have 10 cm thick mattresses (that is thick!). There is electrical power and.... there is internet!!! So Namrung becomes 'Magical Namrung', paradise city where the wifi is good and the lodges are pretty... even if the toilet/washrooms are already edging on the grotty side. One can not change Asia in a day, and probably shouldn't.

Sissy and I send and receive a few messages, thanks to our direct link via some geostationary satellite 33km above us (we are almost 3k above sea level), a link to the world activated for us by the guest house for 5 \$ with unlimited data transfer. Real magic, god knows who subsidises Nepal telecoms, but, thank you.

We sleep well tonight, greatly comforted by the knowledge of the world's continued existence.

Namrung to Syala

We depart from Magical Namrung in the grey light of dawn. I will miss these early morning departures; even now, weeks later, my alarm is still set at 6:15, but rest reassured, I don't get up.

We stroll on, following the deep valley and a much smaller but still powerful Buri Gandaki. and head up on a gentle wooded slope towards the villages of Sho and Lho. There are quite a few hamlets on the way, the local population is once again predominantly of Tibetan origin and the prayer flags fly high. It is harvest time here as well, and many people are in the terraced fields preparing for winter.

Morning tea in Sho, where we meet again our Scandinostralian friends. We carry on together to Lho and catch our first glimpse of Manaslu, popping its head in the clear blue sky at an altitude of 8,200 meter. Seeing this giant for the first time comes as a total surprise, and once again there is a distinctive lack of adjectives to describe the magnificent awesomeness of it all.

We soon reach a very large and quite garish Chorten marking the entrance to Lho, that we circumnavigate respectfully all the way to a comfortable guest house where we settle for lunch.

The village is rich, even very rich judging by the amount of concrete buildings and lodges popping up along the main path. It is unclear whether this wealth is primarily derived from the hiking or from the religious industry; there is a very large and busy monastery, Lho Gumpa, situated on a hill just above the village and populated by a myriad of young student monks.

We have a great lunch basking in the sunshine, admiring the silhouette of Manaslu looking over the monastery sitting atop of a hill dressed in autumn colours, in a very photogenic arrangement; we all burn a fair few megabytes of digital reality.

Aishing seems happy to settle here for the night but we decide to push on to Syala, two hours away and 500 meters higher, visiting Lho gumpa on the way. After a bit of grumble we head off. The Gumpa itself is modern but very rich; the Dalai Lama, or rather his picture, is singularly absent from the altar area. The religious school here is obviously of a great importance, and hundreds of young boys between 6 and 12 years old are in residence, running around the complex in their dark red robes, and doing what kids do best, that is playing. It is all very joyful, not much different from any other school yard, in Europe or beyond. 3 or 4 large buildings accommodate the young flock and more are in construction, demonstrating at least the material success of this educative venture. Syala is a long and narrow village on a small open ridge. At 3400 meter the trees are getting smaller and the forest around the village has been harvested, leaving many tree stumps sticking out of the rocky ground amongst the newly built houses.

There is only one lodge open, and its twenty box rooms soon fill up, mostly with eastern European walkers. The flow of downhill walkers has ebbed, a positive sign; it look like we will have our chance to go over the Larkya pass. Only two people on the way down today, a couple of Russians whose guide got sick and had to be helivaked the day before.

There is a nicely isolated communal tap not too far from the lodge; we do basic ablutions and laundry in the freezing water, trying to ignore tingling nerve ends and shrivelling extremities.

A pretty pink sunset on Manaslu is followed by a radical temperature drop. We chill in our room, puffing little clouds of steam and listening to our neighbours' conversations through the 6mm plywood partitions, till dinner time arrives. We still have a beer despite the altitude, and retreat to our sleeping

bag; the limitations of mine are once more obvious, and breathing whilst sleeping is again an adventure. A long night.

### Syala to Sama via Punggen gumpa

6 am, a distant alarm sings its tune, soon followed by an other; bodies turn, stretch, beds creak and floorboards squeak. Then comes the coughs, farts, yawns and whispers; the day has officially started. I decide that it looks like it is going to be a good one, as I stroll down to the stream; and return to get my camera to immortalize the glory of the coming sunrise.

'Bloody awesome if you ask me' quantifies quite well the impression of the moment, at least for those with a grasp of traditional English. For the others, I can only say that the play of shadows on the slopes of Manaslu and Himal Chuli chased by the early golden sunlight is stunningly beautiful; the sky is bright blue and the plump moon is lingering a few degrees above the slope of the mountains as if on queue, and my camera SD card is harvesting all this data at full speed.

Early morning is chilly at this altitude, so we head off at a good space. We have to extract Aishing from the lodge kitchen where he is once again helping out churning chapatis, pancakes and Manaslu bread. Today's plan is a bit different then the usual walk up the hill; we are to visit Punggen gumpa, a three hour side trip towards the foot of Manaslu, after which we will head to Sama, a further 45 minutes away on the main trail. Aitak will take our bags straight to Sama on his own.

So we arrive at the turn off to Punggen, where Aitak skilfully ties mine, his, and Aishing pack, plus all our daypack extras, into a neat bundle. With a long sling around his forehead he pulls the lot off the ground onto his back and troddles off to Sama with his 60 kg load. With a smile.

We leave the main trail on our wee adventure and start to go up and up and up some more, following a semi frozen stream. Patches of snow appear, the scenery is more barren and we eventually reach a large plateau at about 4000 meter, stretching all the way to the root of Manaslu. We walk towards the mountain, and eventually prayer flags, followed by low buildings appear in the distance, right at the foot of the mountain. It is still early, the light on the peaks is beautiful, the sky cobalt blue; there is no one around and the silence is perfect, put aside the odd grumble from a nearby glacier brought by the light breeze. We are at the heart of a deep amphitheatre, surrounded by ridges floating at some 7,000 meters, with summits well over the 8,000 meter mark, the lot within arms' reach. There are only a handful of places in the world where one can get to the highest mountains easily, and this is one of them; the most perfect mountain scenery I have ever seen.

The gumpa is locked but looks rather modest. Apparently it was wiped away by an avalanche shortly after the mountain was first conquered in the 50's, killing some two dozen nuns in the process. The gods' revenge, befittingly drastic, terrible and spectacular.

Eventually, it was rebuilt nearby, in a sheltered area, following the accepted view that even the creators of the universe can do little when confronted by the challenges of Nature; snow does not roll uphill.

An hour or so later, a small army of hikers appears on the horizon, marching at a steady pace over the flats towards us, swinging ski poles in the endless rhythmic movement of pole swingers. I am thankful that we had at least an hour of solitude in this magical spot, and, giving due consideration to the fact that the line of frozen dribble coming out of my mouth is about to touch the ground, the time to head back down has come.

Sissy's knee is playing up a bit on the way down, it is quite steep. But, eventually, we get back to the main track and reach Sama shortly afterwards.

Samagaon is a large village of some 200 houses or more, set on flat lands at the bottom of the open valley. First we come across a very large and very well attended school. This is positive. Then, further along, comes the local gumpa, surrounded by huge fields of mani stones and decorated with a nice pair of blue eyes, guarding the entrance to the village proper. A beaten up panel nearby warns of hefty fines should anyone dare to ride a horse along the village lanes, so we continue silence our coconuts and continue on foot towards our lodgings.

Sama lives in two different time zones, one firmly anchored in the middle ages whilst the other ebbs towards the 21st century. At the core of the village, two long lanes are lined with what could be almost be described as attached houses, 16th century style, with small front courtyards where firewood is stacked, covered stable for the livestock at the back, a first floor kind of terrace and an upstairs room large enough for communal living. Firewood, animal feed, grain and all the necessities for winter

survival are crammed into each household; window panes, or doors, are almost non-existent, and the only electricity often comes from a small solar panel linked to a small car battery.

On the edge of the medieval dwellings lies a cluster of concrete and stone buildings, built along the main track heading towards the pass. These are the lodges, the houses of a few affluent Samagoanians, and a number of semi-official-looking shacks. This is where houses have electricity, windows and doors, and the lodges boast internet.

The contrast between the rough affluence of the later and the ultra-basic poverty of the former is striking, but not shocking; there is no obvious misery, and oddly enough I suspect that the modern district would find survival difficult without the fruits of the labour of those living in medieval times. Besides, the village is full of life with people coming back from the fields, passing yaks loaded with firewood, young porters playing football on the main tracks, mules and horses wandering around, old ladies and young girls bowed under large baskets containing the day's cow dung harvest, kids playing and men doing what they do best – once again, very little.

Our guest house is comfortable enough, and offers the luxury of a tiled communal bathroom with a flushing toilet and a pay-as-you-go gas water heater. There is also a stove in the common room that gets stoked up as the sun tips over the horizon. Unforeseen bliss.

I go on a village photo shoot. Taking pictures of people in their daily environment is a great pleasure to me, and I always do so in a sympathetic way. But I always feel very embarrassed as I point my camera; images tell a story that goes far beyond physical representation, and that is precisely what makes the photographer to be such an intruder in the private world he attempts to grasp.

Here, there is no lack of subjects. A village house decorated with two freshly impaled crows on sticks by its entrance, older women heaving home firewood baskets larger than their bodies, kids playing in the mud, ladies sorting and sieving the grain.... Most villagers are finishing stocking up for winter; in less than a month tourists, porters, guides, and half the younger population will be gone, leaving them to hibernate just like their forefathers did for eons before.

Sissy and I eventually head up towards one of the bigger lodges, stuffed to the rim with tour groups, where we bask for a while in the warmth of the wifi network. We then acquire a deck of cards and enjoy the first of a fair few card game evenings with our Danish/Ozzy friends, which pushes back bed time to a daring 8 o'clock. Yes, indeed, things run wild in Sama.

Tonight, I get an extra blanket from the lodge as my sleeping bag and I have now reached the limits of our thermal endurance.

## Sama to Samdo

The race is on. Samdo, our destination, is 3 hours away and has only 3 lodges; the foreseen uphill tourist migration of the day is way over the village's absorption capacity, so time is of the essence.

And at 7:30, the line of guides by the permit checkpoint shack at the exit of Sama is already substantial; little files in hand, all await the benediction of the officer on duty to proceed.

Little groups set off at a hurried pace as soon as they have received their blessing, making the most of the administrative handicap..... exciting stuff for those missing the rat race.

With the re-opening of the pass, it is also time to make up for lost business.

We don't quite make it to pole position but set off in decent time. The line of ants progressing up the wide valley stretches for a mile. I walk with Tobias' dad for a while, till the lack of oxygen makes conversation too painful. So I catch up with Sissy and Aishing, already amongst the scouts, and we get a first glimpse of Samdo by 10 am, a few km up the barren valley. We overcome one last steep hill and enter the village, a collection of about 100 stone houses on a rocky ledge. We purposefully chose the most rural of the lodges, to set a safe distance between ourselves and the tour groups. At 3800m, the temperature is far from tropical, so we sit and bask on the sunny terrace with a pot of tea, admiring the peaks surrounding us and watching the trail ahead, a faint and clear line threading its way up the golden brown slopes of the valley beyond.

Samdo is a 100% Tibetan village, first established in the 1950s by refugees fleeing Maoist China. The Tibetan border is only a few hours away, just a short hop over a 5000 meter pass, and, in the summer months, most of the village's provisions come this way on poney or yak. It makes a lot of sense, as Soti Khola is a full week walk away.

Sissy and I take a stroll around the village, yet another perfectly medieval rural settlement. A few electricity cables run over the roofs, powered in better days by a local hydroelectric plant, presently suffering from a popped water supply pipe. We wander around the narrow lanes, sloshing in the snowy mud, the smell of manure and hay heavy in the air.

There is a small local school, attended by a dozen children. Class takes place outside in the sunshine, and all the kids are studiously scribbling in their exercise books. The teacher is a young-ish girl who seems dedicated and certainly maintains perfect class discipline. No one looks up as I sneak a picture... out of focus of course.

After lunch, I slip away from Aishing and climb up a steep ridge just behind the village. The slope is steep, and after almost two hours of heavy duty panting I reach the highest set of prayer flags. A Russian walker is also up here; his GPS sets us at 4400m, and we enjoy a great view to the west towards the Larkya pass, Larkya peak and the glacier of the same name. Barren, big, wild and rocky. Just beautiful.

Samdo looks like a doll's village at our feet, and we watch the various tour groups that have failed to secure accommodation set up camp in the fields nearby, the little green and orange dots of their tents popping up randomly on the barren ground.

It is windy and cold, so I roll down the hill, greeting a few froggies on their way up as I go by. They are mostly in advanced middle aged, shepherded by 3 French speaking Nepalis, very self contained and find solace from their alien environment by recreating the summer camp atmosphere of their childhood.

Soon the sun sets behind Manaslu, the temperature drops and it is time to play a few rounds of card in the common room. We are now too high for beer, so it is just dinner and bed for a long and breathtaking night.

#### Samdo to Dharmasala

Yet another beautiful day, clear skies and crispy air. The valley ahead is blond brown, laced with white snow lines. We depart well before the daily transhumance has finished breakfast, and walk up the barren valley, leaving behind us the last settlement till Bhimtang. Dharmasala, also called Larkya Phedi, or Larkya base camp is a three building summer farm, transformed into a guest house to accommodate the needs of hikers crossing the Larkya pass. A series of tents has been put up around the main building as the tourist traffic now by far exceeds the lodge's capacity.

It is only 3 hours away, and for now we crawl up the valley; the Buri Gandaki at our feet has become just another small stream, fed by the many glaciers hanging down the mountain side.

About half way up we come by a blue sheep carcass, laid on its back, its ribs picked to the bones by vultures. There is also a second sheep head next to it, but no trace of body, prompting wild speculation about a possible snow leopard presence in the area. A pleasant thought, the snow leopard coming down from the ridges attracted by a trail of well fed tourists...

Soon Dharmasala comes into sight, set in a grassy meadow by the river. At 4400 meters, the air is cold in the shade, while the temperature in the sunshine is around 15 or 20 degrees.

We settle in our allocated tent, rest, drink tea and try once again to adjust to the even more oxygen depleted atmosphere. Aside from shortness of breath and a pretty high heart rate, we have had so far no symptoms of altitude sickness. Fingers crossed.

There is not much to do, so we try to have a sleep, lie in the sun, watch as the flock arrives and the meadow slowly turns from a peaceful haven to a human bazaar. Tents pop up, people discuss toilet paper location, lunch menus and crampon trial meetings. We don't have any so that last one is not for us, bloody amateurs.

The afternoon rolls on slowly, Sissy and I take a small stroll, that we promptly abort as a strong and freezing wind is now blowing up the valley. We just try to rest and gather as much energy as possible for the pass crossing; it is a 3 am start tomorrow.

We have dinner as the sun sets. The dining hall is about 30 meters long, and the single long table covers the whole length of the building; there is not a spare seat on either side, and the lodge is jam packed with hikers. Aishing tells us that the local population is of 150 people tonight, and that he has

fought for our meals... that he brings out at 6:30 on the dot. I believe him, it is chaos.

Despite the high density of bodies, the temperature soon plummets. We aim for the tent and our sleeping bags. I have rented an extra blanket from the lodge; sleeping fully clothed, I am just about tepid. For the first time, Sissy's genuine North Face -20 degree sleeping bag is put to the test. Warmish but certainly not hot is the final verdict.

We dose, toss, search for oxygen in the hidden corners of our lungs and enjoy fitful spells of slumber. I have had a recurring nightmare for the past few nights, in which Sissy slips in front of me on the icy slopes. I always wake up at once, so there is no outcome but it still shakes me to bits each time.

Dharmasala to Bhimtang

I sleep through my alarm, Aishing wakes us at ten past three. It is bitterly cold, and we pack up as fast as we can; at least there is only the slightest breeze. Outside, I aim for the wild under the bright moonlight for a discreet pee, and soon find myself in a field of frozen human turds that were not there at sunset. Obviously the lodge has a crap picking wallah, cleaning up every morning after the crowds have moved on and before the fresh punters arrive... In any case the sheer volume of waste created by the flock is impressive, and I retreat on my tiptoes back to safer grounds.

The dinning hall is buzzing with activity; dozens of breakfast are being served to as many pale faced and groggy mountain heroes to be. We don't linger, don our bags, and set off at a swift pace. Aishing recons the temperature is around -25... probably not that bad, but it is mighty cold.

The moon light is quite bright, our headlight easily reveal the trail ahead, and we start the long climb to the pass. We are going fast, a bit too fast for my taste given the lack of oxygen, but Aishing leads on and I soon adapt to the rhythm of the night. A trail of headlights follows ours; I count at least 50, confirming that this is the Larkya trail rush hour.

I remember little of the climb to the pass aside from a feeling of dull boredom; there is little to see but the swinging of the lights ahead and the shadows of the relief. We eventually reach a stone hut, where we have a short break, and push on. We are now walking on well packed snow, following a trail of markers showing the way.

The first light of dawn appears; sunrise at this altitude is very much like seen from an aeroplane, with vivid colors incredibly brighter than those seen at sea level. With day break comes an icy wind, chilling us to the bone as soon as we stop walking. A landscape of ice and snow slowly reveals itself, first bleak, then brighter with a promise of warmth as the first sun rays appear at the top of the peaks.

We have now reached the hump over the valleys, and walk on more level ground, in deep snow. Up a small hill, down an other, up an other and that's it, I am drained, zero juice left. But there is no stopping and we push on, plunging leg deep in the snow each time I stagger off the trail.

Finally, a large set of prayer flags marks the pass proper, and after one last, gigantic effort we are there. Sissy is as drained as I am, our hands are numb pieces of wood; we sit in the snow, catching our breath and admiring the pristine beauty of the Larkya la.

We celebrate with a photoshoot, and soon recover enough to stand up and look around in the newborn sunlight. The wind has dropped, it is silent, getting warmer fast and its is all downhill from here. Happy days! A landscape of glacier and peaks welcomes us on the Annapurna side, it is time to push on.

The going is easy at first, then the way becomes steep and very icy, at first only mildly exposed.

We walk down carefully, losing about 500 meters in an hour. Some tour group porters overtake us, running down the slope in their fake 'All Star' canvas shoes. And I thought I was a hero... Everything is relative I guess.

Further on we have to pass a dodgy 300 meters, on exposed icy snow, high above a glacier. The ski poles we carried all the way from Kathmandu come to good use; I have doubts we would have passed safely without them, especially on a small stretch that looked very much like the one in my dreams. But all is well, and while we keep slipping and skidding down, the trail becomes far less exposed, and it all soon turns into a good laugh.

We reach the top of a gigantic moraine on the southern side of the glacier that we will follow all the way down to Bhimtang. Here we can witness the effects of global warming first hand; the moraine continues for miles beyond the point where the ice stops, revealing the extent of the glaciers shrinkage. It is sad

and scary food for thought.

Soon we dip behind the moraine towards the valley floor; slowly the snow becomes patchy, then disappears altogether. Lunch stop is at 10 am, all food and drinks are frozen, so we suck on energy bars and melt ice cubes out of our water bottles.

We get to Bhimtang well before noon, starving, pretty much exhausted and happy. The village is a small settlement, and the first thing that greets hikers is a modern, neat and tidy bungalow type lodge with loads of solar panels, sun water heaters and huge 'Wifi here' signs. It comes as a shock, and we steer well clear of this monstrosity, all too aware it will be plagued with leaping fellow froggies later on. We choose a more low key establishment, where we crash out straight after lunch for half the afternoon.

Later, I head out, take a stroll around the village, built on the valley side of the ancient moraine. It is small, rather tidy, and obviously far less remote than Sama and Samdo, reminding us that we are only a day away from the road head at Dharapani. Climbing over the moraine, I spot a few turquoise green lakes, small water traps locked away in the rocky mass once upon a time covered with ice.

We are still at 3800 meter but there is no lack of trees, and the whole area is green like any alpine meadow.

We have an early dinner; the American 'would be boys' that we met in Chekempur, Tsum valley, are here too, on a local Rhum bender. Despite their offers to join in, we remain modest and settle for a couple of beer to celebrate pass over, and aim for bed; they keep going till late, and by the sound of it, it gets a bit messy.

The lodge owner is a nice guy and takes Aishing and Aitak to his house for the night.

#### Bhimtang to Gho

A short walk today, only 3 or 4 hrs, all down hill. It is as though we have all swallowed a set of Duracell batteries this morning and we bounce and leap down the trail in the early morning light. Tobias' dad, who is a GP, explains that we are just enjoying the benefits of all the extra red blood cells we developed at a higher altitude... and that unfortunately they will soon vanish as we reach lower ground.

So we make the most of this natural doping, and sprint along down valley on a clear forest track till lunch time, losing altitude fast. A small lunch and we are off again, reaching Gho by very early afternoon.

Where we find a room with an attached bathroom, hot water on tap, and a beautiful garden to bask in the sunshine. The Ozzy Scandy gang is here too. The Scandy contingent goes down to the river for a skinny dip in the freezing water and come back with a huge, perfect marijuana head, one of the zillions growing in the wild. We discuss the possibilities of smoking the thing; Tobias dad is not keen so we leave it aside, much to the disappointment of Tobi.

This is a day of lazing around, and I manage to do a vast amount of laundry at the communal tap.

Evening is spent by the stove; Wai and Nina's guide, a young, slightly arrogant Brahmin whose only probable claim to guidehood aside from high cast is a decent command of English, decides to get drunk on the local tittle, a sort of distilled rice wine.

And boy does he get drunk... the stuff comes out of the kitchen in teapots, and after 3 or 4 of those he is well on his way to some supreme state of being. We steer clear of the grog and its headache promises, but are greatly entertained by the utterances of his guideness. He is utterly shocked by the skinny-dipping practices of the Danes, and the conversation is laced by regular high pitch squeal going sort of "Are you crazzzzzey?" "You must be crazzzzzey" "this is not righhht". He is obviously not referring to the freezing water, but rather to the exposed willies in an open air environment. I can't help thinking there probably wasn't much willy left to see after a dip in 3 degree water, and that his reaction is a bit out of place in a country where a large portion of images and carvings include erect phalusses on their way to some orifice or another.

But then again he is a Brahmin..

After a game of card and a bit of TV (yes TV...) we go and crash, leaving him to brew his hangover in peace.

#### Gho to Jagat

This is come down day, last stage of the hike. We have no plan, just to get to the road, stroll down and catch a Jeep from somewhere in the direction of the bus stand and whatever lies beyond.

It is still 2 or 3 hours down to Dharapani, and we enjoy the last few kilometers of the trail. There are more people about, and we can almost smell the 21st century waiting for us, just around the corner. And soon enough, after crossing a last long suspension bridge, we hear the sound of the first jeep... then it is shops, a muddy trail, concrete, and most of all rubbish.

There are a lot of people about, the village is of importance. Central Asian features have vanished, we are back in Hindustan; we stop at the police station to register, just another bunch of foreigners lost in the myriad of those trodding along the Annapurna trail.

We keep walking downhill, and soon switch from the driveable track to the old trail on the other side of the Kali Gandaki. The scenery is beautiful, we are in a gorge dug deep by a roaring river, but one element is missing: magic. Somehow, the jeep track has robbed the valley of all its mystical appeal and well, it is very nice. Just not mind blowingly awesome.

I have a little spat with Aishing, who feels his standing is somehow threatened as he is no longer a legal requirement, and who has opted to turn into a cocky idiot to compensate. I get annoyed, a rare occasion, but hey ho, tomorrow he will be far gone and on his way home.

We have lunch in an oversized but peaceful village called Tal. It is a slow lunch, Aishing ends up cooking.... and we push on, all the way to the next large settlement, called Jagat.

There, it becomes clear that we will not get a Jeep tonight so we team up with our Scandi Ozzies friends and charter one for the next morning. And settle for the night.

In the evening, I give the customary tip to Aishing and Aitak for their good services, 4 days pay each. They are happy, and while I would have gladly given Aitak more, my patience has run thin with Aishing. It is time to part ways.

There is a small fiesta in the village tonight. The local school is having a dance, doubling as a fund raiser. A corner of the square has been curtained off, behind which giggling teenagers don traditional dresses; they then each step on the square to perform a dance in front of a couple of hundred local and foreign spectators.

Each time a girl (or boy) comes out to wiggle her or his bits on the impromptu dance floor, onlookers have the opportunity to join in and slip a few notes in the folds of the dancer's costume, for the school benefit. This is all done to the sound of the local musical hits of the moment, a stacato of high pitch squeals sung to a bouncy and irregular rhythm. I am not a fan.

Nevertheless, we end up watching Ingrid from Basel, Walter from New York, Pedro from Argentina and Boris from Kiev attempt a few steps, armed with little folded banknotes, slipping them to the dancers at the closest opportunity, much to our entertainment and that of the local population.

Local girls have obviously spent a long time training, and are very fluid in their rendition, while the boys are incredibly effeminate in their movements and posture, swinging hips and curling fingers as if they were trying to attract focus on their dainty hands and bouncing bums. I can't help wondering if the village specializes in the breeding of ladyboys.... but apparently, this is the norm.

In any case, Jagat's crazy do finishes at ten.

The end.

We board the jeep at 7. The young driver has painted nails and gelled hair.

12 of us cram in, we drive off, down the dirt track, back to the real world.

It is bumpy, uncomfortable, but rather fast. We soon reach a gigantic hydro electric project, as series of three dams on the Kali Gandaki. It is a Chinese led venture, and we are surrounded by Chinese workers, Chinese signs and Chinese number plates. The project spreads on some 10 Km, and a huge trail of mud bleeds down the raped valley. Industrialisation at its worst, impressive, hugely invasive, and despairingly gloomy. It will provide electricity to the rabbits below, who will thus have more opportunities to produce more bunnies, who will need in turn more electricity and.... bloody cursed human race.

We are glad to escape from the building site, and soon end up in Besisahar.

We board a bus, set off a few hours later; the next hundred kilometers to Pokhara melts in a mixture of impatience and boredom. We are back in the world of car horns, mechanised chaos, loud egoes and accumulated rubbish. Modern Nepal really sucks. We dismount from our bus in a dusty, squalid, and rubbish filled roadside area in some Pokhara suburb, after 6 hours of bumping, tooting, puking, and suffering. To be greeted by more of the same.

Too many people. There is far too many of us. In a world where science saves lives and extends longevity, human procreation must be constrained, for the sake of the quality of life of the living, for the sake of nature, and for the sake of our children's future.

In a time where wisdom comes a distant second to ego and self gratification, there is little hope. Common good is inconsequential in front of individual freedom and comforts, and unless humanity is taught to look beyond the end of its nose and to adapt wisely to its newly found power to destroy, instant gratification will remain the rule of the day.

And that is bad news.