

THE GAURI SHANKAR TREKKING AREA

**(including Rolwaling)
a cultural tour book**



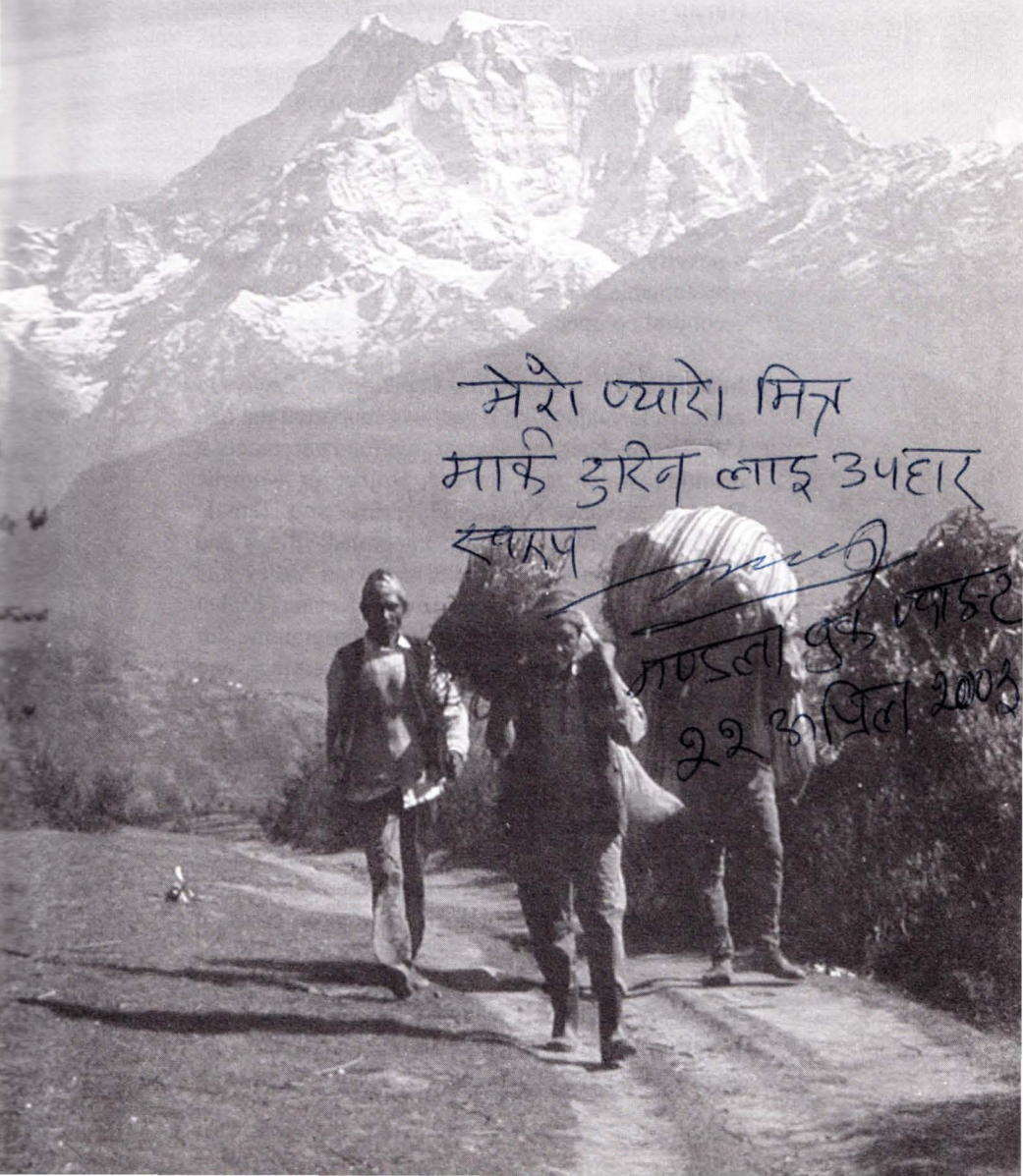
**Patricia East
Susan Höivik
Max Petrik
Sara Shneiderman
Mark Turin**

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मेरो ज्यारो मित्र
मार्के टुरेन लाइ उपहार
स्वस्व

गण्डकी
गण्डकी बुक स्टोर
२२ अप्रिल २००३





Eco Himal, the Society for Ecological Co-operation Alps-Himalaya, a non-profit INGO, has been working with local grass-roots organisations in the Himalayas since 1992. In line with the principles of Austrian Development Co-operation, its projects aim at generating income and bringing long-term benefits to the lives of the local population.

Eco Himal's involvement in Nepal focuses on four sectors:

- small hydropower and promotion of solar energy
- poverty alleviation and bio-diversity conservation
- sustainable tourism and manpower development
- cultural co-operation and heritage conservation

In addition to the ***Rolwaling Eco Tourism Project*** in northern Dolakha, Eco Himal has supported the 620 kW Thame-Namche Bazaar hydropower plant; a drinking water and sewage project in Namche Bazaar; advanced mountaineering and female outdoor leadership training; integrated village and rural development in Thame, the Arun Valley and Khotang; the restoration of the Keshar Mahal Garden in Kathmandu; a training programme for tourism management personnel; training and technical assistance to Nepal's first independent radio station, Radio Sagarmatha; and has been working with the Kathmandu University Department of Music to produce and preserve traditional music.

Together with a Tibetan partner organisation, Eco Himal also conducts projects in remote areas of Tibet.

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Prepared for Eco Himal by

**Patricia East
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Mandala Book Point

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a cultural tour book

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Cover photo: Gauri Shankar towers above the terraces of Orang
Back cover: Family scenes from the Gauri Shankar area

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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Foreword	9

PART I:

INTRODUCING THE GAURI SHANKAR TREKKING AREA

Orientation: The Gauri Shankar Trekking Area	13
What is the Gauri Shankar Trekking Area?	13
Why choose the Gauri Shankar area?	14
Appropriate cultural etiquette	15
Background to the Gauri Shankar Trekking Area	19
Geography, history and contemporary politics	19
Life in Nepal: The agricultural cycle	24
Religion, ethnicity and caste	26
Languages of the Gauri Shankar area	35
Some sacred sites	37
Buddhist gompas	37
Bigu Region	
Bigu Gompa (<i>Tashi Chime Gatsel Nunnery</i>)	38
Old Bigu Village Gompa (<i>Oyi Lhakhang</i>)	46
Chenjok Mendok Gompa and Bulukpa Village Gompa	47
Dolangsa Gompa (<i>Shyalbung Gompa</i>)	48
Suspa Gompa (<i>Sersang Gompa</i>)	50
Other gompas in the Bigu Region	51
Upper Rolwaling region	51
Simigaon Gompa	52
Beding Gompa	52
Hindu sites and temples	53
Bhimsen of Dolakha	54
Deolingeswari Shrine at Deolang	57
Kali Mai on Kalinchok	58
Religious holidays and festivals	61

PART II:

TREKKING IN THE GAURI SHANKAR AREA

General information	71
Getting started	71
When to trek	71
Maps	72
Packing tips	72

Trekking routes and time framework.....	73
Detailed route descriptions	87
Main trekking route: Barhabise circuit	
<i>Barhabise-Thingsang La-Bigu-Loting-Laduk-Orang- Gongar-Simigaon-Beding-Na-(Tashi Lapsa)-Beding- Simigaon-Singati-Charikot</i>	87
Side trips:	
- 1. <i>Thingsang La-Kalinchok-Charikot; or - Kalinchok-Lapilang-Singati</i>	111
- 2. <i>Bigu-Alampu slate mines</i>	112
- 3. <i>Bulukpa-Tselaphu</i>	113
- 4. <i>Beding-Daldung La-Simigaon / Tasinam</i>	113
- 5. <i>Simigaon-Tasinam-Jagat</i>	114
- 6. <i>Bhorle to Tenekhu Hindu temple</i>	114
Expedition treks:	
- 1. <i>from Singati (Suri Dobhan) to Na via Yalung La</i>	115
- 2. <i>from Na over the Tashi Lapsa to Namche Bazaar</i>	118
Afterword: The Rolwaling Ecotourism Project	119
Further Reading and Web Links	121

Boxed Materials

Gauri Shankar: Legends of a sacred mountain	16
The myth of daal bhaat	25
Kitchen gardens	26
Sacred sites	40
Buddhist terms and symbols	42
Some Hindu terms and symbols	56
Pilgrimage to Kalinchok	65
Watermills	88
Biographical sketch: Ani Sherab Wangmo Sherpa of Bigu Gompa	91
Biographical sketch: Kumar Thami of Alampu	92
The Alder and the Rhododendron: A Legend	94
Village schools	95
Biographical sketch: Bir Maya Tamang of Orang	97
Watch Out! Nasties lie in wait!	98
A botanical treasurehouse	100
Biographical sketch: Renorbu Sherpa of Simigaon	101
Life in Beding	105
Yeti tales	106
GLOF (Glacial Lake Outburst Flood) and Tsho Rolpa	106
Keep quiet at Kal Pokari!	116

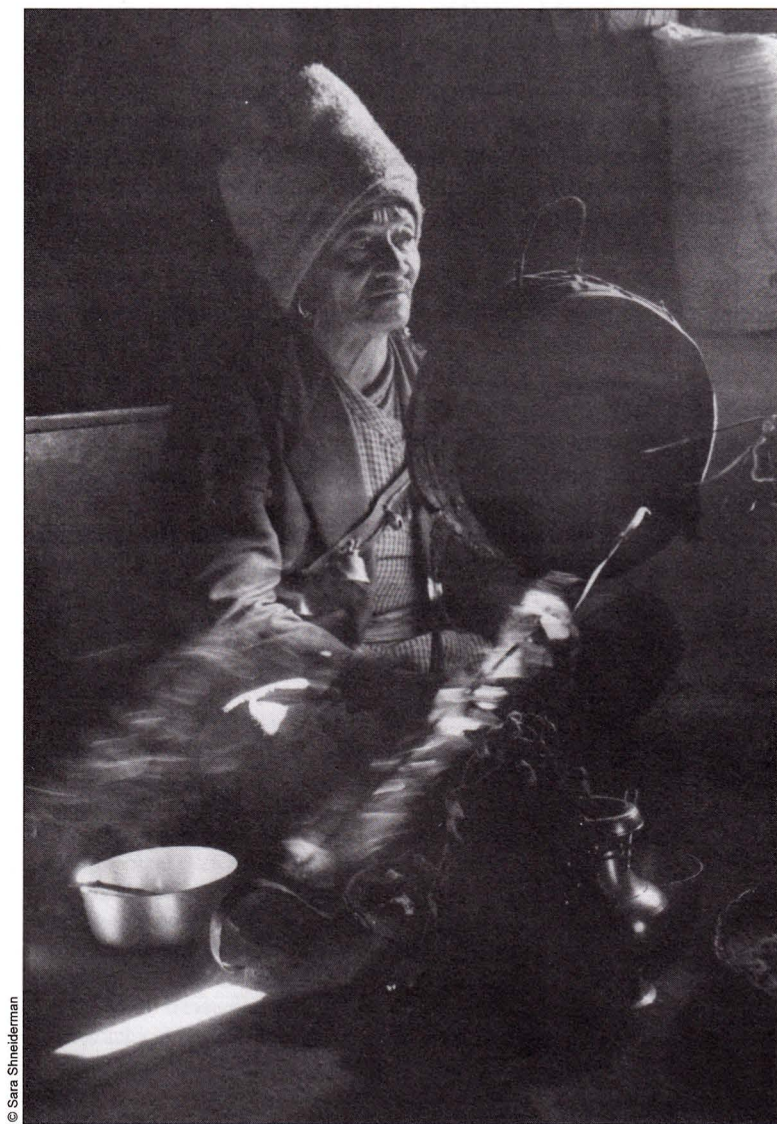
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In Nepal, as everywhere else, things change over time. We have thoroughly revised this book as of late autumn 2002, but the reader should note that in Nepal, you must ‘expect the unexpected’.

– the editors



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A Thangmi shaman prepares for a healing ritual

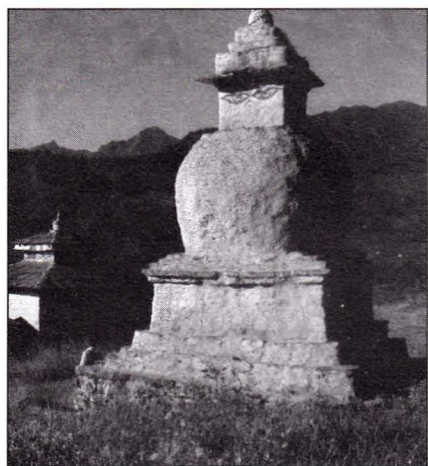
Foreword

Eco Himal, the Society for Ecological Co-operation Alps-Himalaya, is a non-profit organisation based in Salzburg, Austria, and registered as an international non-governmental organisation with an Asian regional office in Kathmandu. Since 1992, Eco Himal has been working with local grass-roots organisations on a range of social, ecological and cultural development projects aimed at bringing long-term benefit to the peoples of the Himalayan region.

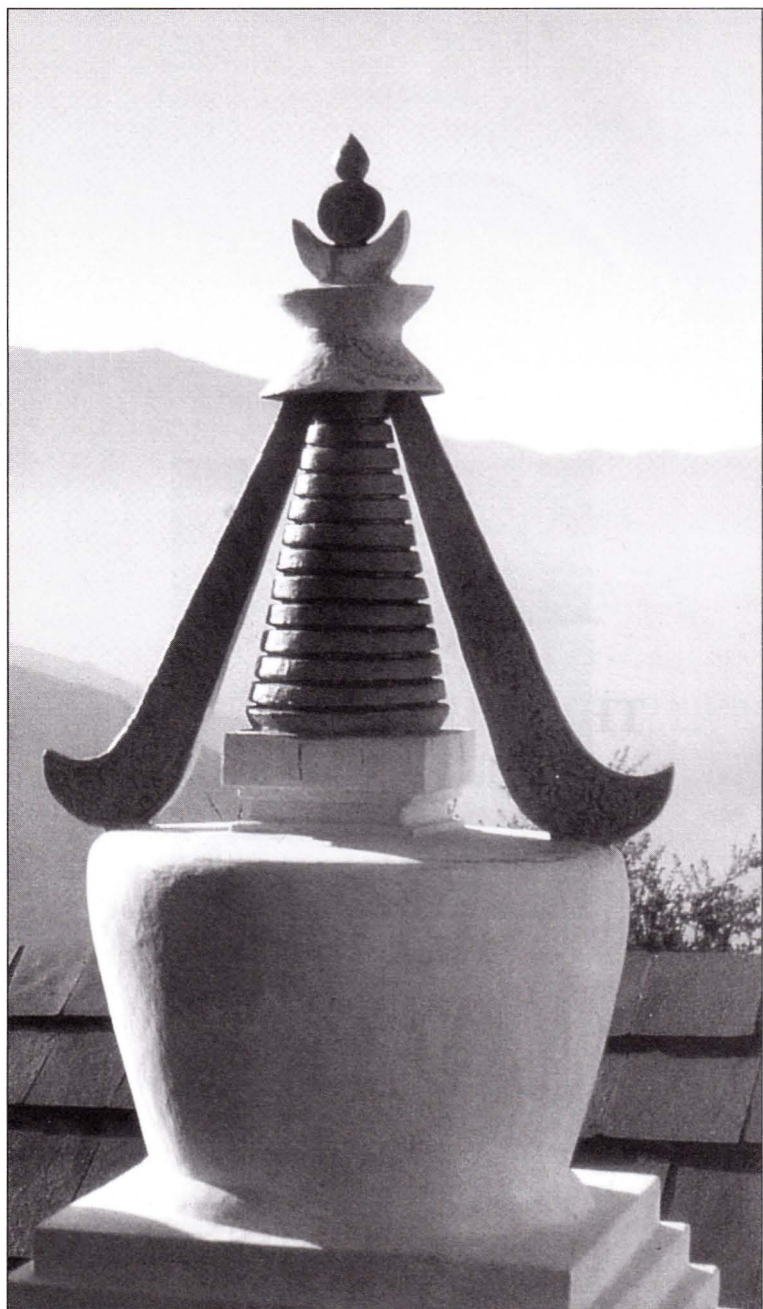
Tourism can become an essential component of community development, a potential source of much-needed employment and income in these beautiful but disadvantaged regions. In the Gauri Shankar area, due west of Everest, agriculture can sustain the local population for only about three quarters of the year. Faced with increasing impoverishment, many people are forced to seek employment elsewhere, usually as unskilled labourers. Income from tourism could help improve local living conditions and reduce rural outmigration. However, experience throughout the Himalayan areas has shown that the development of tourism must be carefully planned and monitored if it is to prove both culturally and environmentally sustainable.

Within the framework of promoting sustainable tourism and training, in 1996 Eco Himal set up the *Rolwaling Ecotourism Project* in the little-visited area south of the holy mountain of Gauri Shankar. This area is often referred to as 'Rolwaling', although the Rolwaling Valley proper constitutes only the northeastern corner of the region. The project works to pave the way for locally empowered ecotourism in settlements along the main communication and trekking routes. An over-arching principle is that all measures should benefit the local population – in addition come the advantages that improved facilities may offer to visiting tourists. (*For further details, see Afterword.*)

This guidebook was conceived within the framework of Eco Himal's Rolwaling project. We wish to make trekkers aware of the many opportunities offered by this unspoilt area, and to increase their understanding and cultural sensitivity. It is our hope that this manual will provide a useful introduction to the Gauri Shankar area and its people.



PART I:
INTRODUCING
THE GAURI SHANKAR
TREKKING AREA



at Bigu Gompa

Orientation

The Gauri Shankar Trekking Area

What is the ‘Gauri Shankar Trekking Area’?

We have chosen the name ‘Gauri Shankar Trekking Area’ to designate the entire region of northeastern Nepal covered by this guidebook, as described below. The Himalayan massif of Gauri Shankar remains a reference point on the horizon throughout the region, its majestic presence defining the area as a coherent geographical whole despite the ethnic, religious and ecological differences of its various components. We hope that in adopting the name of this famous mountain – sunrise on whose summit, incidentally, forms the reference point for the unique time zone of Nepal – an atmosphere of inclusiveness will be created that extends to every corner of the region. The ‘Gauri Shankar Trekking Area’ remains a descriptive term rather than an administrative one. However, perhaps it may draw the attention of the Nepali government and, in time, spur the creation of an administrative zone similar to the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area Project (KCAP), Sagarmatha National Park or Langtang National Park – all areas which have been named after the mountains that dominate them and which are managed with an eye towards developing environmentally sound tourism.

The Gauri Shankar Trekking Area is situated roughly 150 km. from Kathmandu as the crow flies. Dominated by the snowy dual summits of holy Mt. Gauri Shankar (7,146 m.), the area extends approximately 20 km. north–south between the Tibetan border and the Lamosangu–Jiri highway, and some 50 km. east–west parallel to the Tibetan border from the Sun Koshi River near Barhabise, up to the Thingsang La pass, and across the Rolwaling Valley proper, over the Tashi Lapsa pass to Sagarmatha National Park and the Khumbu district in the east.

The Gauri Shankar region, and with it the Eco Himal Rolwaling Ecotourism Project, includes northerly portions of two administrative districts – Sindhupalchok in the west and Dolakha in the east, with the ridge of the Kalinchok Danda forming the natural and administrative barrier between the two. Approximately 100,000 people of various ethnic groups and Hindu castes populate the area. Settlements at higher

elevations are dominated by the Buddhist Sherpa and Tamang, while the middle and lower elevations are populated largely by Newar and higher caste Hindus, as well as the Thangmi ethnic group (known as 'Thami' in Nepali) who are neither Buddhist nor Hindu. Also represented are other ethnic groups such as Magar, Gurung, Jirel and Sunuwar, as are the occupational Hindu castes like the Kami, Damai and Sarki. Whatever their ethnic group or faith, most people are subsistence farmers living in small scattered settlements.

Communication and trekking routes in this basically roadless area follow the north/south valleys of the rivers Bhote Koshi and Tama Koshi, and the valleys of the Sangwa Khola and Rolwaling Khola, which flow into the Bhote Koshi from the east (meeting at Singati) and the west (meeting above Chhetchhet). Settlements lie at elevations ranging from less than 1,000 m. along the Tama Koshi river basin, to the high summer pastures of Na in the Rolwaling Valley at 4,300 m. above sea level.

Why choose the Gauri Shankar area?

The 'Big Three' trekking areas of Nepal are the Annapurnas, the Everest region and Langtang/Helambu, all with an abundance of trekking routes. With so many well-known trekking destinations in this mountain kingdom, why choose the Gauri Shankar area? We feel that there are many reasons. Its attractions include:

- 1) *Easy access via a good road from Kathmandu:* four hours by bus from Kathmandu to Barhabise, or six hours to Charikot/Dolakha. The area is accessible even during the monsoon season, and there is no need to depend on flights or calculate extra margins for 'no-fly' days.
- 2) *Trekking with beautiful views of the valleys and mountains,* dominated by the massif of Gauri Shankar, as well as the Rolwaling and Lapchi ranges. The region offers trekking at relatively low elevations (generally below 3,000 m.), which means few worries about acclimatisation or altitude problems. The terrain is characterised by steep hillside paths connecting scattered villages, as well as some riverside trails. Higher altitude trekking (above 3,000 m.) begins above Simigaon, from where a special permit was required until recently.¹ Most of the area, however, requires no advanced trekking or mountaineering skills.

¹ Early in 2002, regulations were lifted on many previously restricted areas throughout Nepal. No special permits are now necessary for northern Dolakha/

- 3) *Great ethnic diversity* throughout the area, manifesting itself in a wide range of religious practices, lifestyle, food habits, clothing and architecture. Many villages are inhabited by several culturally distinct ethnic groups. This is a region particularly attractive to trekkers with time and interest in the local area and culture, visitors who want to experience Nepal, stopping and enjoying the places they stay in and the people they meet – rather than those who come solely in search of high-altitude mountain sensations and action-packed sporting challenges.
- 4) *A wealth of functioning Buddhist monasteries and Hindu religious sites* which welcome visitors, yet remain active places of worship and religious devotion. The warm welcome extended to tourists just passing through as well as to those coming for specific religious festivals is a major highlight of trekking in this area.
- 5) *A relatively 'untouched' region.* Only some 1,000 tourists visit the area each year, most of them on organised treks. All the visitors surveyed recently by Eco Himal cited the feature 'unspoilt' or 'untouched' as their main reason for choosing the Gauri Shankar area. Many were on repeat visits, having particularly enjoyed their first trek there and wanting to escape the 'overcrowding' and 'touristyness' of the main tea-house trekking routes of Nepal's Big Three.

In a nutshell: the Gauri Shankar area is 'off the beaten track', yet easily accessible.

Appropriate cultural etiquette

Maintaining this 'untouched' feeling is the responsibility of *all* travellers to the Gauri Shankar area. A little bit of cultural etiquette and consideration can go a long way towards making your own trip more enjoyable, as well as paving the way for future visitors to have positive experiences. Although in general the people of Nepal are very open and tolerant, we ask that you observe a few basic principles:

- *Dress appropriately.* Women should wear full-length skirts or loose trousers, and shirts with medium-length sleeves. It is inappropriate to trek in shorts or other revealing clothes. Men may wear shorts, but they should realise that it is inappropriate to walk

Rolwaling right up to base camp at the foot of the Tashi Lapsa Pass. This may change, however, so trekkers should always check on the latest regulations before setting out.

Gauri Shankar: Legends of a sacred mountain

With its twin peaks, 7,146 m.-high Mt. Gauri Shankar seems to tower above the rest of the Himalayan range. Before modern geography definitively fixed its height at 1,704 m. lower than Everest, it was long believed to be the highest mountain in the Himalayas.

As a holy mountain, home to the Hindu deities Shankar and Gauri (the great Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati), and the Buddhist deity Tashi Tseringma (goddess of luck and long life), it remained barred to mountaineers. When climbing permits were finally issued in the early 1960s, US, British and Japanese teams took up the challenge. However, Gauri Shankar long defied conquest, and its invincibility increased its attractiveness as one of the world's highest unclimbed peaks.

The breakthrough came in 1979, when an expedition led by the American Al Read and the Nepali Pertemba Sherpa succeeded in one of the most difficult ascents in Himalayan mountaineering history. On 8 May 1979, the team's John Roskelly (USA) and Dorje Sherpa (Nepal) stood on the top after climbing the western route, which they described as 'a 3,000m high, incredibly steep rock face endangered by avalanches – a challenge to climbers for generations.'

Local tales suggest why reaching the summit may be so difficult:

Legend has it that all Shankar wants is to be left in peace to enjoy the solitude of his meditative trance, and his annoyance at interruptions may bring out his destructive powers. It is said that he once granted a demon the power to destroy a person by laying his hand on their head. On this occasion, the Lord Vishnu (the Preserver) was able to save Shankar by taking the form of a beautiful woman and persuading the demon to try out his new powers on himself. So the demon laid his hand on his own head and was destroyed – and Shankar was off the hook.

The local people believe that Gauri continually intervenes in order to prevent the mighty Shankar from drifting off into unreachable transcendence. A contemporary tale tells how she keeps a vigilant eye while her consort is meditating on their mountaintop. Gauri sees a group of humans toiling up towards the lofty spot where she and Shankar are seated. 'My Lord,' she cries, 'an expedition of mountaineers is approaching!'

'How dare they come near me!' thunders Shankar in a towering rage, 'with a flick of my fingers I shall send an avalanche to destroy them!'

Gauri placates him: *'Let them come a little closer. I want to see the colour of the leader's eyes.'*

As the expedition struggles higher, Shankar becomes more and more indignant. *'They're disturbing my peace and quiet. I will blow mighty winds to sweep them away.'*

'Just let them come a little further,' pleads Gauri, 'so that I can see the colour of his eyes... oh, he is so handsome! His eyes are blue! Now, my Lord, you can do as you will.'

And Shankar sends death to the climbers.

around with their shirts off. Shorts are not correct garb for visiting holy sites.

- *Always ask before entering private homes or temples.* Not only is that common courtesy: high-caste Hindus have certain prohibitions on people of other castes entering their kitchens, and that includes foreigners. Never wander through a house unless you have been given permission. Both Hindu and Buddhist temples sometimes do not allow foreigners into their inner sanctum, so please make sure that you are indeed permitted to enter before going further. Do not argue if you are told you may not enter: this is a common restriction throughout Nepal and should be respected. After all, these are places of worship, not museums.
- *Always ask before taking photographs, and make an effort to send the photos you have taken.* Although these days most people are thrilled to have their photo taken, there are still those who feel that photography is an intrusion into their private world. Photography is frequently prohibited inside temples. Always ask before taking photos of people or religious objects. Many people will ask you to send them a copy of the photo you take of them: they consider this one of the best gifts they could possibly receive. Make an effort to send photos back to people you spend some time with – they will happily give you their postal address. If you feel that this is not possible tell them so clearly. Otherwise, they will spend months waiting for your photos in the mail, and will mistrust future visitors who want to take their photograph. Never offer monetary compensation for any photo you have taken, although people occasionally ask for money. This is not necessary and only encourages begging.
- *Do not give to begging children or adults.* This is far less of a problem than on the more touristy trekking routes, but children and adults in the area are learning to beg. You may be approached on the trail and asked for money, pens or sweets. Please do not hand out these items, as it simply encourages unnecessary begging. If you wish to give gifts to children, do so with those children you get to know better, whether by staying with their family or walking with them for a few hours on the trail. Or make a donation to the local school so that your gift has a better chance of being used appropriately.
- *Do not offer medicines.* Adults often beg for medicine, but in this case as well, giving is not advisable. Villagers may not understand the principles behind Western medicine and will not always follow directions when taking medicine. Even a well-intentioned gift can

cause further problems. Although local health care is often very poor, people in the Gauri Shankar region do have access to the relatively good hospitals at Barhabise and Dolakha. Additionally, Eco Himal is starting a small health post in Simigaon. There are functioning health posts in Bigu and in Laduk and Bulung, and good pharmacies in Singati. If necessary, help people to get to the nearest health post – but don't try to treat them yourself unless you are a qualified practitioner with time to follow up on your patient.



Take time to make new friends!

Background to the Gauri Shankar Trekking Area

Geography, history and contemporary politics

Administrative geography

Nepal is divided into five 'development regions' – Eastern, Central, Western, Central Western, Far Western – that slice vertically across this long, narrow country. Within the five regions, there are 14 smaller 'zones', also often vertically laid out. Janakpur Zone, for example, encompasses both the sweltering lowland plains of Janakpur district and the Himalayan grandeur of mountains like Gauri Shankar to the north. Within the 14 zones there are a total of 75 districts. Last in the administrative hierarchy are the 3,915 village development committees (VDC, or *Ga. Bi. Sa.* in Nepali, short for *Gau Bikas Samiti*) and 58 municipalities. These are the smallest administrative units, with around 5,000 people per VDC. Each VDC is divided into nine wards to encourage community involvement at the local level. Every ward has an *adhyakshe*, or chairman, who is responsible to the VDC chairman and meets with that person regularly to discuss community matters. The VDC chairman is in turn responsible to the District Development Committee (DDC), presided over by the Chief District Officer (CDO). It is at the VDC level that most local decisions are made and national policy is implemented. Eco Himal often works with its village partners at the VDC level in planning and implementing projects.

The Gauri Shankar Trekking Area includes portions of two districts in two zones: the northern half of Dolakha district in Janakpur zone to the east, and the northeastern portion of Sindhupalchok district in Bagmati zone to the west. According to the still-disputed 2001 census, Dolakha district has a population of 175,912 and covers an area of 2,191 square kilometres; Sindhupalchok district has a population of 293,719 in an area of 2,542 square kilometres.

History

The entire region has long been an important gateway for trade with Tibet. Today's Arniko Highway, linking Kathmandu with the Tibetan border, follows the ancient trade route that ran through Sindhupalchok

and up to Khasa in Tibet. Another historical route ran through the town of Dolakha, where enterprising Newar merchants amassed wealth and status as middlemen in the trade between Kathmandu and Lhasa. This strategic location has been the area's main claim to fame.

The town of Dolakha itself (also known as Dolakha Bazaar) was founded by Newar traders – but where did they come from, and when? Dolakha is mentioned in the ancient Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, as the place whither the five Pandava brothers fled after their persecution. The local Newar are partial to the suggestion that they may be descendants of the god-like Pandavas themselves, and like to think that the Newar of the Kathmandu Valley migrated downwards from Dolakha, rather than the other way around. In fact, the Newar dialect of Dolakha is more conservative than that spoken in Kathmandu and is mutually unintelligible with other forms of the Newar tongue. It is essentially a more archaic dialect that was once spoken in Kathmandu but which split off from the main language community long ago.

Outside the town of Dolakha, the area was settled by many of the same Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups found there today: Tamang, Thangmi, Sherpa and ethnically Tibetan people along the northern border (often known as *Bhotes*, a term best avoided, as it has disparaging connotations in Nepali). While all these groups had northern origins, it remains unclear at what point in history they migrated to the Dolakha area. The Thangmi were probably among the earliest settlers. Only they hold Dolakha to be their 'homeland', while both the Tamang and Sherpa speak of their forefathers' migrations from elsewhere, either in personally remembered history or only a few generations earlier. The Sherpa of the Gauri Shankar area probably migrated from Solu Khumbu, or perhaps Ramechhap, in the 18th and 19th centuries; their oral histories speak of the Thangmi as already living there at the time of their arrival. Tamang migrants came from older settlements further west. The ethnically Tibetan groups living along the Tibetan border have been there for generations, owing their main political and tax allegiances northwards towards Lhasa rather than southwards to Dolakha or Kathmandu.

Inscriptions at the Bhimsenthan Temple in Dolakha tell that the southern part of the district came under the control of the Malla kingdom of the Kathmandu Valley in the 13th and 14th centuries. The town of Dolakha (originally known as Abhayapur, or 'fearless town') was the strategic centre of this vassal state, and the Tama Koshi Valley to the north was an important source of the copper and iron ore mined heavily by the Malla kings. (*Tama*, from which the Tama Koshi gets its name, means 'copper' in Nepali.) Between the 15th and 16th centuries,

Dolakha regained its independence, and once again became a principality under Newar rule. An inscription from 1567 AD describes three divisions of society at that time: Newar, Thangmi and Bhote, indicating that these three groups were present in the area some 500 years ago, with the Thangmi and Bhote subjects of the Newar rulers. Under the Newar, Dolakha minted the first silver coins of any principality in Nepal, in the early 16th century. This history provides a folk etymology for the name 'Dolakha', said to come from the words '*dui lakh*', meaning 200,000 – supposedly the number of coins first minted in Dolakha. It is more likely, however, that Dolakha already had its name, whose real origins remain unknown.

Independence did not last long, since each ruling dynasty of Kathmandu recognised Dolakha's strategic importance as an entrepot for the trade with Tibet, and sought to bring the area under its own control. In the late 18th century Dolakha became fully integrated into the emerging Nepali state under the Gorkha king Prithvi Narayan Shah, whose descendants rule Nepal even today. In 1754, Prithvi Narayan Shah addressed a letter to the Newar rulers of Dolakha, telling them to surrender to his control or risk a devastating invasion. In this letter, he also pledged to support Dolakha's trading interests – and once Dolakha did indeed surrender, he gave the Newar merchants of Dolakha a *de facto* monopoly on much of the trade with Tibet.

Throughout the 18th century, the Bhote populations of the Bigu and Rolwaling areas of northern Dolakha organised a number of rebellions to voice their dissatisfaction with the trade arrangements which gave the Newar of Dolakha an unfair economic advantage. Their rebellions were subdued and they remained subjects of the Nepali crown administered from the Kathmandu Valley, but these historical events are an early precursor of more recent ethnic dissent between the local Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman populations and the Hindu authorities.

As the descendants of Prithvi Narayan Shah consolidated their rule over the outlying regions of what is Nepal today, they revised the traditional structures of land use and taxation that had been in place for generations. These policies offended local sensibilities and also worked to create the origins of the extreme poverty now experienced by many Nepalis in remote areas. In Dolakha, ethnic groups such as the Tamang and Thangmi had traditionally been granted exclusive rights to large tracts of land on the basis of their historical claims. Under central control from Kathmandu, however, these land rights were gradually eroded. Ethnic people in the hills were compelled to devote large portions of their land to growing crops or raising animals

that were owned by the state. High-caste Bahuns (Brahmins) and Chhetris from Kathmandu, loyal to the central government, were sent to 'remote' regions such as Dolakha and Sindhupalchok to 'colonise' these areas – encroaching upon the areas of fertile land traditionally held by non-Hindu ethnic groups who lacked the political power to resist the changes. These upper-caste Hindu families first bought and later settled on small tracts of land. They employed local Tamang and Thangmi to work their lands, and set themselves up as moneylenders. With illiteracy and lack of cash economy prevalent in the area, these better-off newcomers could often build up large landholdings and gain advantage through complex money-lending schemes, greatly reducing the proportion of land owned by the Tamang and Thangmi.

Today many Tamang and Thangmi families subsist on small, marginal landholdings, often inadequate to feed a family for more than six months, while their high-caste neighbours may earn enough from the surplus from their large landholdings to buy property in Kathmandu. Some of these shifts in land ownership took place in recent history: several village elders can remember the exact events through which their families lost their land.

Rural outmigration

People began to look outward for new places to migrate, seeking paid work and, in some cases, land to buy. These shifts inside Nepal coincided with the development of Darjeeling by the British Raj in northeastern India. The earliest employment seekers left Dolakha in the 1850s and found work in the tea plantations and other industries of Darjeeling. Even today we can find descendants of Dolakha Tamang, Thangmi and Newar among Darjeeling's multi-ethnic community. The migrations have continued to the present, although a more common pattern now is for Dolakha inhabitants to spend time in Darjeeling as seasonal workers, and then return to their villages for the planting and harvesting seasons.

This rural-urban migration that many commentators lament as precipitating the decline of traditional cultures is thus nothing new. The difference is that today's migrant workers more often travel to Kathmandu than to Darjeeling, and the type of work they find is also different. Any family in Dolakha district usually has at least one member who lives and works semi-permanently in Kathmandu – whether in carpentry and road-building, or in hotels or restaurants. But jobs are hard to come by, and the pay is low, so many potential workers end up losing money in their attempts to find non-existent jobs. Those who do find work often end up living in difficult conditions in the city,

able to return to their families in the village perhaps once or twice a year. It is only the rare success story who can take his whole family to the city and settle there permanently. Most village families rely on their source of Kathmandu income for their cash supply, since there are even fewer well-paid jobs available in Dolakha. Thus, creating an infrastructure that can generate paid work locally so that families can earn well without having to work in Kathmandu is essential to the continued well-being of the area.

Political tensions

The gap between the wealthy of Kathmandu and the rural poor throughout Nepal has been increasing dramatically – as has awareness of it on the part of the poor themselves. More and more villagers travel to Kathmandu seeking work, and there they can see with their own eyes the disparity between their own impoverished lives and the wealth of urban dwellers. This understanding, coupled with other problems such as corruption and discrimination against minority ethnic groups, has given rise to a general frustration which has manifested itself at the political level.

From 1950 to 1990, after the Rana prime ministers were overthrown and before the restoration of democracy, Nepal lived under monarchical rule. Before the advent of the Village Development Committee system, rural areas were administered by local councils called Panchayats. With the return to democracy in 1990, many people nurtured unrealistically high hopes of sweeping changes, and the ensuing years have witnessed a considerable phase of disillusionment. In Dolakha, Sindhupalchok and other rural regions, the Communist movement has gained strong support at the district level.

The Communist Party in Nepal has splintered into many factions, such as the CPN-UML (Unified Marxist Leninists), ML (Marxist Leninists) and the so-called Maoists – the CPN (M). This last group has dissociated itself from the official political process and has been waging a guerrilla-style ‘People’s War’ since February 1996. For the most part, the Maoists have not specifically targeted foreigners, although tourism has fallen drastically since the imposition of an official State of Emergency in November 2001. The Maoist insurgents were declared ‘terrorists’ and by the Nepali government the Royal Nepal Army has been mobilised to fight throughout the country.

It remains to be seen how the insurgency will affect the long-term situation of the country. Check the local situation before setting out on trek by requesting the latest updates on Dolakha and northeastern Sindhupalchok districts from your embassy. Ask your trekking agency

and other recently returned trekkers about the current situation in areas you plan to visit, and consult Internet sites with current news reports from Nepal. (*See Web links at the end of this book.*)

Life in Nepal: the agricultural cycle

Many people of the Gauri Shankar area are primarily vegetarian – some for religious and ethical reasons, but more often simply for reasons of economy. Plants of all shapes and sizes form the backbone of the standard diet, ranging from wild berries and roots gathered in the forest, to domesticated cereals and grains, fruits and vegetables. Other plants are collected for their medicinal or ritual properties.

Farming in the Gauri Shankar area entails a yearly rotation through an agricultural cycle of two or, in a few places, three crops. Significant differences in elevation, soil quality and wealth make it impossible to generalise about what is planted and when, but the chart below gives an indication of what you may see in the fields of many villages. Lower elevations and/or wealthy households will usually have greater crop variety, while higher elevations and/or poor households will have less variety, due to the expense of seeds and the shorter planting seasons.

Ploughing, planting and harvesting are social activities involving whole communities. During the busy agricultural months, few of the able-bodied young men and women will be at home. They usually leave the house early in the morning to work on the land in family or age groups, not returning until late in the afternoon. During the day, grandparents are often found at home looking after younger children, where they pass the time grinding corn and millet in hand-mills found in virtually every house, or sorting through the grain seed.

Month	Agriculture (in the middle hills)
<i>January</i>	fields are fallow
<i>February</i>	fallow; some early potatoes are harvested; most potatoes are planted at this time
<i>March</i>	fields are ploughed with oxen
<i>April</i>	corn (maize), pulses and pumpkin are planted
<i>May</i>	corn growing in the fields; some space is cleared to plant soybeans
<i>June</i>	corn is high in the fields; rice is planted from mid-June till mid-July
<i>July</i>	rice planting continues in early July; pulses and pumpkins/squashes are ready to be harvested; millet is planted

The myth of daal bhaat

Daal bhaat, 'lentils and rice', is listed as Nepal's traditional food in every guidebook to the country. *Daal bhaat* is presented as being synonymous with 'food', and one gets the impression that all Nepalis throughout the kingdom eat little or nothing else their whole lives. There are even parts of Western Nepal, we are told, where people reckon distance in *daal bhaats* rather than in kilometres or miles: a distance of 'three meals' is one and a half day's walk, since people eat only two meals a day.

These statements have a grain of truth to them, but the reality is far more complicated and interesting. The first myth to be exploded is that Nepal is a country of rice-eaters. Unlike Thailand or Japan, rice-eating in Nepal is neither as widespread nor as firmly established as one might think. Rice was, and to an extent still is, a status food, eaten on special occasions, at festivals and during rituals. Not until recently has rice become something that many people in Nepal could eat – or strive to eat – twice a day.

Why? First of all, much of Nepal is simply too high or too steep to make wet-rice cultivation a realistic option. Only with increasing agricultural productivity in the lowland Terai, together with cheap imports from neighbouring rice-growing regions, has rice become a regular feature of the diets of the people in the Gauri Shankar area. Moreover, as many farmers in Nepal's hilly regions will attest, rice is not the best nutritional choice for people eking out an existence in challenging terrain.

So, if people don't eat all that much rice, what do they eat? You will see people eating heaps of a grain paste, somewhat akin to porridge or Italian *polenta*. Known as *dhiro* or *dhedho* in Nepali, it is made from the fine flour of maize, buckwheat or millet mixed with hot water and stirred up into a thick porridge. From the winter to the spring, people eat black *dhiro* (millet flour); in the autumn the yellowish corn *dhiro* is more common. If you get the chance, do try it, but bear in mind that the millet paste in particular is notoriously hard to digest and can cause minor stomach cramps. The grain paste is eaten with vegetables, often leafy greens of some type (*saag* in Nepali), white radish curry or delicious green soup made from the wild stinging nettle.

The second part of the myth of daal bhaat is the *daal* part: lentils are not widespread, either. Although some beans and pulses can be grown at middle elevations, lentils – like rice – come from the lower lands and are relatively expensive. A more representative national dish for the farmers of Nepal's middle hills might better be called 'corn porridge and nettle soup'.

August	corn is harvested; stalks are cut and used as animal fodder; potatoes and remaining vegetables are harvested from now till mid-September
September	soybean is harvested; buckwheat is planted in its place; some winter potatoes planted
October	wheat is planted; rice harvest begins
November	remaining rice harvested; beginning of the millet harvest
December	remaining millet and vegetables harvested

Kitchen gardens

by Peter Warbanoff

The visitor is likely to be disappointed at the lack of variety of fresh fruit and vegetables available in the Gauri Shankar area. It seems particularly surprising that there is so very little fruit, especially as the local people love it when they can get it – a piece of fruit is a welcome gift!

The vegetables you are most likely to see growing here are pumpkins/squashes and red peppers, and sometimes garlic, cucumber and rape leaves; potatoes are cultivated in the higher regions, especially in the Rolwaling Valley. Oddly enough, carrots, cauliflower and many otherwise common vegetables are hardly found here at all. A main barrier to more cultivation of vegetables and fruits is not adverse soil or climatic conditions (although irrigation is a problem throughout the area), but simply a lack of know-how. Additionally, food habits are conservative, and especially the older people are not accustomed to eating a variety of vegetables.

It was to improve this situation that the Eco Himal kitchen garden improvement scheme was set up in 1999 as part of the Rolwaling Ecotourism Development Project. The scheme began with training courses in organic vegetable cultivation, organised in co-operation with Nepali experts on sustainable and alternative agriculture. 'Leader farmers' were invited to attend – representatives from each community who would spread ideas and know-how back home in their villages.

New ideas have been eagerly received, and seeds and seedlings have been planted out. It is hoped that the programme will improve nutritional standards by encouraging people to increase the fresh vegetable content of their daily meals. This should also provide local farmers with an opportunity to supplement their income by selling garden produce, both locally and to vitamin-conscious tourists. Special mention should be made of the succulent avocados grown in the Malepu area, which ripen in the heart of the autumn trekking season.

Religion, ethnicity and caste

Names are significant in Nepal, and one can often tell a person's ethnicity or caste by his or her last name. It is more difficult to pigeonhole these groups and to give concise descriptions of their unique cultural features or history. Ethnicity is a complex issue, so what follows is only a sketch of the major groups living in the Gauri Shankar region.

Caste and ethnic group

In brief, '*caste*' is a Hindu concept in which people are part of a four-tiered system, with each individual's social status fixed at birth. In descending status order, the four classical castes were Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Shudra – the priests, warriors, merchants and

labourers, respectively. At the bottom were the so-called 'untouchables', who made up the artisan castes. In today's Nepal, Brahmins are called *Bahun* and Ksatriya *Chhetri*, but Vaisyas and Shudras do not exist as contemporary groupings. Within each of these caste groupings are many smaller sub-castes, often named by their occupation or place of origin.

The modern concept of 'ethnicity' encompasses both these caste groups and non-Hindu groups who were traditionally not part of the caste system. The Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups consider themselves as being outside of the caste system, although the Hindu hierarchy has at various times made attempts to incorporate these groups into it. In this book we use the term 'caste' to refer only to those Hindu groups which identify themselves as caste members, and the term 'ethnic group' to refer to those non-Hindu groups who do not identify themselves as part of the caste system.

Ethnicity is often linked to religion. Like the rest of Nepal, the Gauri Shankar area has populations of Hindus, Buddhists and animists, and the boundaries between these belief systems are often blurred.

Hinduism

Hinduism is the state religion of Nepal, and as such has wide influence throughout the country. What looks like a Hindu event will often have overtones of Buddhism and animism, and vice versa. The Hindu population of the Gauri Shankar area is made up of both the high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris, and the 'untouchable' artisan castes such as *Kami* (blacksmith), *Damai* (tailor) and *Sarki* (cobbler). These are all Indo-Aryan peoples who migrated northwards from the Gangetic plains, and who speak Nepali as their first language. The Newar of Dolakha are also Hindu, but their interpretation and practice of the religion reflects the influence of Buddhism. Historically, they maintained a separate caste system, parallel to that of the caste Hindus, yet divided along different lines. Unlike the case in many other areas, the Magar and Gurung people of this region have adopted many Hindu practices today.

Buddhism

Three major Buddhist ethnic groups live in the region: the Tamang, who farm the middle hills; the Sherpa, who have settled at higher elevations; and the Bhote, or ethnically Tibetan people, living in the northernmost stretches along the Tibetan border. The Tamang view themselves as Buddhists, but they also maintain animistic rituals and

now practice certain aspects of Hinduism as well, creating a unique multi-layered religious system that draws on all three of these influences. Buddhist lamas of the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages conduct Tamang death rituals and other major rites, but animistic shamans also play important roles in the Tamang religious world. The Sherpa and Bhote practise more traditional forms of Buddhism, maintaining ties to large monasteries in Solu Khumbu to the east and in Tibet proper to the north. They too belong mainly to the Nyingma and Kagyu sects of Tibetan Buddhism, and respect both celibate monastic lamas and married householder lamas as religious practitioners.

Animism

It is difficult to describe the third religious grouping: a combination of animistic beliefs and shamanistic ritual practices that takes different specific forms among the Thangmi, Jirel and Sural people. Although these groups join in the communal celebration at many Hindu or Buddhist festivals, they do not consider themselves to be devotees of either faith, and centre their own religious practices on territorial deities and life-cycle rituals.



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Two Thangmi shamans setting off on Janai Purnima pilgrimage

Bahun and Chhetris

Strictly speaking, these are two separate castes, with the Bahun one notch higher than the Chhetris. Together, they hold most positions of

political and economic power throughout Nepal. In Dolakha they are frequently perceived as a single group, despite their many sub-castes with a wide variety of different surnames. Bahuns and Chhetris are dispersed throughout the Gauri Shankar region.

The *janai*, or sacred thread worn by Bahun and Chhetri men, is a loop of three cotton strands worn above the left shoulder, looped across the chest and tied under the other arm. The three intertwined strands symbolise the mind, the body and the act of speech; and the wearer's mastery of all three is symbolised by the knots tied in them when the *janai* is given during the *bratabandha* initiation ceremony, which functions as a coming-of-age rite. The sacred thread signifies that the wearer is 'twice born': his birth by his mother is his first, his initiation into Hinduism his second. The *janai* must be kept literally and ritually clean, and is replaced once a year on the day of the August full moon, at the festival of Janai Purnima. (*For this and other holy observances, see section on Religious festivals.*)

Reverence for the cow and the symbolism of the *janai* highlight important aspects of Bahun and Chhetri life. They do not eat cow meat, as to do so would be to eat the goddess of wealth, Laxmi, herself. Devout Bahuns also do not drink alcohol or eat garlic and other spices, but not every Bahun maintains these prohibitions these days. A Bahun priest is known as a *pandit*, and is responsible for conducting life-cycle rituals such as marriages and funerals. The most important festivals of the Nepali year are *Dasain* and *Tihar*, both in the autumn.

Kami, Damai, Sarki

These occupational castes perform the jobs of blacksmith, tailor and cobbler/leather-worker respectively. Since they are considered untouchable by the high Hindu castes, they are not able to participate fully in the religious life dominated by the Bahuns and Chhetris. They are not allowed into other people's homes, as their presence would symbolically pollute the purity of these places. They are relegated to conducting their business outside, even though their work is essential to the overall maintenance of society. Almost every village area has at least one family of each group.

Within the occupational castes there is a clear ranking, with Kami at the top and the beef-eating Sarki at the bottom. The Damai also play an important ritual role as musicians at weddings, particularly for the Tamang and Thangmi. The Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups do not observe the pollution taboos against untouchability as strictly as do members of the Hindu population.

Newar

The Newar played a central role in the development of the town of Dolakha. From there, they gradually spread out into the surrounding rural areas. Today most major villages in the Gauri Shankar area have a few Newar households. The original Newar tongue is a Tibeto-Burman language, but one which has been significantly influenced by Sanskrit and other Indic languages. Newar culture reflects this pattern: the people are ethnically Tibeto-Burman, yet their culture and religious practices show Hindu-Sanskritic influence, and many outside Dolakha Bazaar no longer speak the Newar language. In the Kathmandu Valley, there are both Hindu and Buddhist Newar, as well as many families who practice an amalgam of both religions. The Dolakha Newar, however, seem to be exclusively Hindu. Perhaps only Hindu families migrated to Dolakha – or perhaps an original Buddhist minority died out at some point in history.

The Hindu Newar, although not as conservative as the Bahun and Chhetri, also observe certain restrictions surrounding purity and pollution. Although they are not to eat beef, they may eat water buffalo or goat meat instead. They distil their own potent alcohol, known as *ayla* in the Newar language. The Newar people are famous for their large community parties, or *bhoj*, and Dolakha is no exception. Other ethnic groups often joke that you can never finish business with a Newar friend in a timely manner, because he will be too busy partying!

The major temples in Dolakha are Bhimsenthan and Tripura-Sundari (see section on Hindu religious sites below), both managed by Newar community organisations called *guthi*. The big festival of Dasain is celebrated by the Dolakha Newar with many outdoor observances and rituals not practised in Newar communities elsewhere.

The Newar are renowned for their success in trade, and many of the businesses in the region are run by Newar families. This business acumen has also enabled them to enjoy a relatively high standard of living, and many of the best educated people in a given area will be Newar.

Tamang

The largest single non-Hindu ethnic group in Nepal are the Tamang. They are a Tibeto-Burman people who live mainly in and around the Kathmandu Valley, as well as in the more distant hills of Dolakha and Ramechhap districts. There are large Tamang settlements along the southern rim of the Gauri Shankar area in villages like Jianku, Suri,

Chyarsapa and Deolang. The Tamang generally farm land at lower elevations than do the Sherpa.

Speaking their own language and practising Tibetan Buddhism, the Tamang probably originated long ago in Tibet. They are historically related to today's Thakali and Gurung ethnic groups living to the west of Kathmandu, both of whom refer to themselves with related names: the Thakali call themselves 'Tamang' as well, while the Gurung call themselves 'Tamu'. Little is known about the etymology of this term, but one suggestion is the Tibetan *ta mak*, meaning 'cavalry', and it has been suggested that perhaps all of these groups originated as soldiers in the army of Songsten Gampo, the 7th century king of Tibet. In any case, although they may be Tibetan in origin, the Tamang have adapted fully to the unique environment of the middle hills in Nepal. In many ways, the contemporary Tamang look, act, and dress more like other Nepali ethnic groups than the Tibetans across the border.

The Tamang practice their own form of Tibetan Buddhism, which coexists with much older animistic rituals and more recently adopted Hindu practices. In addition to Buddhist lamas, the Tamang also employ their own shamans, or traditional healers, called *bonpo* or *labon*. Lamas and shamans often work side by side, employing different techniques to reach similar ends. Over time, the Tamang have been influenced by the Hindu state around them, and now may participate in the major Hindu festivals and worship at Hindu shrines. However, they have often found ways to integrate their own beliefs with the state-sanctioned Hindu faith. Many of the major Hindu deities, for example, are simply viewed as renamed manifestations of indigenous Tamang deities.

Sherpa

Perhaps the best known of Nepal's ethnic groups, the Sherpa also have a small population in the Gauri Shankar area, although their heartland lies to the east, in the Everest area of Solu Khumbu. Of Tibetan origin, the Sherpa migrated into Solu Khumbu some 400–500 years ago. It seems that their migrations across the Tashi Lapsa pass west into Rolwaling occurred later, in the 18th and 19th centuries. Well adapted to living at high altitudes, they claimed the higher reaches of both Sindhupalchok and Dolakha districts for their own. The Sherpa language, although closely related to Tibetan, is not mutually intelligible with the standard Lhasa dialect.

Sherpa areas are often noticeably different from those of their lower neighbours, with many *mani* walls (rows of stones with Tibetan mantras carved on them), *chörtens* (trailside shrines) and prayer flags.

These are partially explained by the Sherpas' deep Buddhist faith, but also by their relative wealth, largely accumulated in the trekking business. Although they live in the most 'remote' areas of the region, they tend to be better off than their other non-Hindu neighbours, the Tamang and Thangmi. In addition to their success in the trekking business, the Sherpa have a healthy income from their herds of livestock, largely yaks and cows, which graze in the open high-altitude pastures above the villages. Dairy products are a rarity in this part of the world, and the Sherpa are among the few herders with enough animals to sell their surplus milk or make it into dried cheese which is also sold.

The Sherpa are also Tibetan Buddhist, and practise a more orthodox form of the religion than the Tamang. Most Buddhist *gompas* (temples/monasteries) in the Gauri Shankar region have been built by Sherpa communities, although Tamangs may worship at the same *gompas* and even join them as monastics. Buddhism in its local forms is maintained by householder (married) lamas, who pass on their religious lineages to their sons. The monastic and non-monastic religious paths exist side by side and are seen not as conflicting systems, but as complementary means of achieving similar ends.

Like other ethnically Tibetan peoples, the Sherpa are known for their relative gender equality, especially when compared to nearby Hindu groups. Sherpa women are more often involved in the economic life of their household and also exert greater choice in their own marriage arrangements. However, the majority of older women are still illiterate, as is the case with women throughout most of rural Nepal.

Thangmi

The Thangmi number at least 30,000 throughout Dolakha and Sindhupalchok districts, forming a major population of the Gauri Shankar area. This group has long been overlooked by researchers and the Nepali government alike, and published information is sparse. The etymology of their name is uncertain, with two possible meanings in Tibetan: either 'barbarians', or 'people of the borderlands'. The latter seems more probable, since they live on the edge of the Tibetan cultural world and may well have been given their name by their northern neighbours.

The Thangmi speak a distinct Tibeto-Burman language, but, unlike the Tamang and Sherpa, do not practise Tibetan Buddhism. They maintain their own shamanistic religious complex, with shamans officiating at marriage, death and other life-cycle rituals. Since the Thangmi have no texts, the shamans act as guardians of their oral

tradition, and it is they who recount the stories of how the Thangmi came to be and how they came to settle in Dolakha. Even those Thangmi living in Sindhupalchok and farther afield see Dolakha as the land of their ancestors.

There are few conspicuous Thangmi temples or other evident forms of material culture, largely because these are extremely poor people. Thangmi villages like Suspa, Lapilang and Alampu have a very different feel from other villages around them. A far greater percentage of Thangmi men support their families through manual labour when compared with men of other ethnic groups.

Magar and Gurung

Both these groups have small communities in the Gauri Shankar region, although the Magar and Gurung are indigenous to areas west of Kathmandu, nearer to Pokhara. Magar and Gurung settlements in the Gauri Shankar region have their origins in the mercenary soldiers from these ethnic groups who fought in the conquering army of Prithvi Narayan Shah and were offered land in the east after his military success. These eastern settlers have lost their own languages and now speak only Nepali. Both groups practise their own blends of shamanism and animism, but have now adopted many mainstream Hindu practices.

Jirel and Surel

These two very small groups are indigenous to the Gauri Shankar area. They both speak their own languages, known as Jirel and Surel respectively. Their populations are low: a recent estimate puts the total Jirel population at 3,500–4,000 individuals, while the Surel population may be as low as 150–300. The Jirel originate from areas southeast of the Gauri Shankar area proper, closer to the town of Jiri, from which the group derives its name, but populations are also found in Ratomate, Yarsa and other villages within the Gauri Shankar trekking area. The Surel live primarily in and around the village of Suri. Both groups have integrated their own animistic religions with the more widely practised forms of Buddhism and Hinduism that surround them.

Languages of the Gauri Shankar Area

Nepal is home to over 70 languages, from four different families. Nowhere is this linguistic diversity more apparent than in the regions east of Kathmandu, starting with the area around Gauri Shankar. Major languages spoken here are Nepali, Newar, Sherpa, Tamang, Thangmi

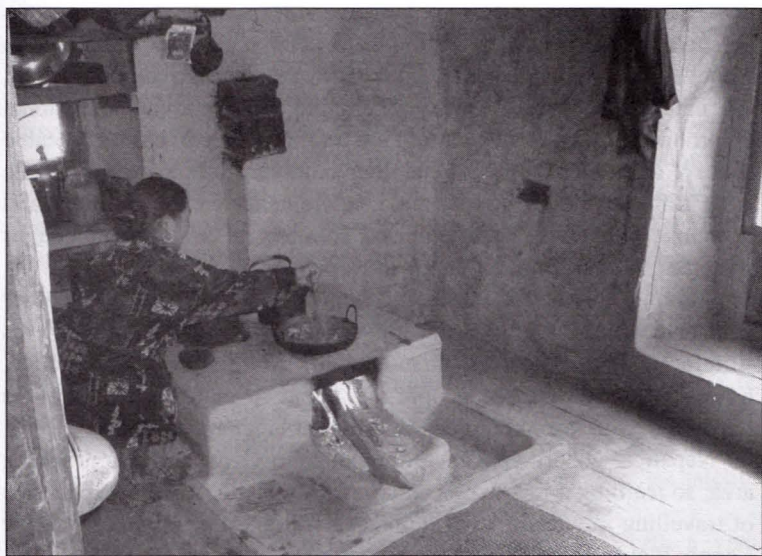


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Living traditions: a Thangmi grandfather weaving a bamboo cradle for his newborn grandson



Traditional Sherpa kitchen



New smokeless stove (chulo).

and Tibetan, with smaller groups of Sural and Sunuwar speakers. Minority tongues other than Nepali are often inaccurately labelled as 'dialects', but they are distinct and mutually unintelligible languages. Many of the major languages spoken in Nepal have two or three widely different dialects, bringing the total number of dialects spoken in Nepal to well over 100. Nepali is written in the Devanagari script which runs from left to right and has no capital letters. Letters are joined into words by a line written along the top. The Tibetan script also follows a syllabic structure and is used for Tibetan religious inscriptions as well as local documents. Although Nepali and Tibetan are totally unrelated languages, their scripts both derive from the writing system used in ancient India.

Language has always been a vehicle for the transmission of culture and history, but here we should bear in mind that many of the tongues spoken in Nepal are non-written, with no textual tradition. For these languages – such as Thangmi, – everything is passed down orally. Poems, songs, stories, jokes, history, rituals and place names – all are lost when a language dies. Sadly, many of these smaller tribal languages are now endangered and some even face imminent extinction.

Language death is a complicated issue, and many of the causes are developments which also have positive sides when viewed from the perspective of a modern nation-state. The particular challenge to Nepal's minority languages is the ever-increasing currency of Nepali, the national language, used both on the radio and in educational environments such as schools and job trainings. Nepali has had notable success as a *lingua franca* enabling communication among people from different backgrounds, but its dominance in the political and economic spheres has marginalised speakers of minority languages who lack mother-tongue fluency in Nepali.

Although literacy is increasing rapidly, there are still many older men and women living in the hills who cannot read or write. This illiteracy should not be mistaken for linguistic incompetence, however: many of these people are fluent in at least two or three languages, often from completely different language families!

Nepali is widely spoken throughout the Gauri Shankar trekking area, so learning a few words and phrases will add to your experience of travelling in Nepal. A basic phrasebook, like the one published by Lonely Planet, is invaluable for all trekkers.

Some Sacred Sites in the Gauri Shankar Trekking Area

Buddhist gompas

The higher reaches of the Gauri Shankar area, in particular the Bigu and Rolwaling regions, are home to large Tibetan Buddhist populations from the Sherpa and Tamang ethnic groups. Wherever there is a Buddhist community, a *gompa* cannot be far away. Literally translated, *gompa* means 'place of meditation', and is not necessarily synonymous with 'monastery' in English. Although all monasteries are gompas, not all gompas are monasteries, since gompas are often village temples or prayer halls that do not have any clergy in residence. It is more useful to think of a gompa as a village temple where meditation or prayer sessions may take place, conducted by any religious practitioner, including celibate monks or nuns, or non-celibate householder lamas.

In fact these householder lamas are the most common religious practitioners in most Himalayan Buddhist communities. In the Bigu and Rolwaling regions, lamas usually belong to the Nyingma or Kagyu sects of Tibetan Buddhism, and pass their religious knowledge on from father to son in a hereditary lineage. Many of the older householder lamas studied in Tibet when they were young, whereas the younger generation has studied largely in monastic institutions in Kathmandu or India. In recent years, however, the tradition of householder lamas seems to be dying out as it becomes less and less acceptable to be a married lama within the mainstream Tibetan Buddhist world.

Today most gompas in the Gauri Shankar area are small, village-based gompas run by householder lamas with no permanent monastic community. The one major exception is **Tashi Gompa** (also known as *Bigu Gompa*), a large residential nunnery that is home to over 60 female monastics. With no active residential monastery in the area, the nuns take on many of the roles that might be played by monks in other areas, and Bigu nunnery serves as the centre for many other satellite gompas that do not have their own monastic population.

All the gompas of the Gauri Shankar area are worth a visit, particularly on festival days when extended prayer sessions are held. Tourists are almost always welcome, but there are a few basic points of etiquette that should be followed. It is customary to give a donation

(minimum Rs. 100) when you are admitted to the inner prayer hall. In exchange you may be offered small butter lamps to light at the altar. Be sure to ask whether it is permissible to take photos inside or not – and do respect the answer. Take your shoes off before entering, and make sure that you are dressed modestly: neither men nor women should wear shorts or shirts that expose the stomach and shoulders. Eating and smoking are never appropriate behaviour in a gomba or at any holy place.

Buddhist sites in the Bigu region

The Bigu area is located just south of the valley of Lapchi, all of which is a sacred site for Buddhists from throughout the Tibetan world. Historically, the area was part of a larger Buddhist pilgrimage circuit, known for its high-altitude meditation caves and a landscape conducive to miracles. The Tibetan saint and mystic Milarepa (1040–1123 CE) is believed to have opened the region to Buddhist practice by subduing and converting five female demons who resided on Gauri Shankar; he then sanctified the area by meditating at length in a cave. Despite their illustrious histories, the sacred sites inside Lapchi have fallen into disuse due to political restrictions on the border area.

Bigu Gomba (Tashi Chime Gatsel Nunnery)

[Access: Bigu (2,330m) can be reached in 3 days' trek from Barhabise via Dolangsa and the Thingsang La (pass), or in 3–4 days from Charikot/Dolakha via Singati or Kalinchok. Visitors may stay in the very simple gomba guest rooms for a small charge, or at the local CDC² lodge or campsite when these are open.]

Tashi Gomba is barely visible as you climb uphill, until you stumble into the courtyard. The nunnery is nestled in a grove of old junipers at the boundary between lush green foothills and the snow-capped Himalayas to the north. The location offers a perfect retreat from the bustle and intrigues of village life, yet is comfortable enough to encourage a religious existence of serious meditation and study. As you mount the final steps rising from the banks of the Amatal Khola, it is hard to believe that just above lies one of the largest nunneries in rural Nepal, home to around 65 nuns and the religious centre for Buddhists throughout the entire region. After passing a long

² CDC: Community Development Committee (now Cooperative); see Afterword.

succession of mani walls and chörtens, you suddenly find yourself by a holy spring. A young woman garbed in maroon-red lifts her shaven head from the chore of washing, smiles and greets you with a warm '*Tashi Delek!*'. Then she points around the corner to the left, and you can see the large prayer hall that forms the nucleus of the nuns' world. You have arrived at *Tashi Chime Gatsel*, better known as Bigu Gompa.

Founded in 1934 by an itinerant lama from Bhutan and a local Sherpa headman, Bigu is one of the oldest functional centres for Buddhist women's religious studies in eastern Nepal. Whereas the nunneries founded in Kathmandu and Dharamsala after the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet in 1959 cater largely to refugee Tibetan nuns, Bigu was founded for the benefit of the local Buddhist population. To this day, most nuns at Bigu come from Sherpa families in the area, with a few Tamang and Thangmi nuns as well. The gompa and the surrounding villages have a symbiotic relationship: the nuns are dependent on economic support from the villagers, while the villagers depend on the nuns to generate merit for the benefit of the entire community.

History

The massive 1934 earthquake that rocked Nepal was followed by a drive to build and renovate areas damaged by the upheaval. It was during this era that a high lama known simply as 'Drukpa Lama' (the Bhutanese Lama) of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage passed through Bigu in the course of an extended pilgrimage. When the Drukpa Lama broke his journey in the village of Bigu, the village headman, Nima Pasang Sherpa, requested his help in establishing a new gompa. Just before the Drukpa Lama's arrival, Nima Pasang had experienced a prophetic dream which he interpreted as an instruction to build a monastic institution on a large piece of unused land above the Sherpa village of Bigu.

The Lama's original intention, which still holds true today, was to provide facilities for women wishing to pursue religious studies and live a quiet life of meditation, as well as for widows or otherwise destitute women in need of refuge. As soon as the plan to build the nunnery became public knowledge, there was no shortage of women wanting to join, as until then there had been no realistic options for local women who wished to live a religious life. The first nuns came from Sherpa villages in the immediate vicinity and Tamang settlements further to the south and east, such as Sailung and Jiri.

These early nuns carried out the original gompa construction work themselves, with the assistance of unpaid local labour, as well as with

Sacred sites

by Gabriele Tautscher

In the worldview of the Nepali peoples, with every forest where people settled and wanted to use the plants and the wood and hunt the game, or with every new plot of land which they cleared for agricultural use, the supranatural forces – of the world above, intermediate world and underworld – first had to be identified and 'tamed' and their power directed towards the well-being of the people. Otherwise these otherworldly beings and owners of the whole universe would remain a threat to humans, making the place uninhabitable. Outstanding topographic features, like unusual rocks, caves, mountains or high lakes, were identified as their seats and become the site of their worship.

The maintenance of the cosmic and social order and – until the beginning of the 20th century – the right to use the land was reinforced through periodic communal rituals at these sacred sites, linked to the agricultural cycle and lunar phases. That is why every region in Nepal, including Dolakha district and the Gauri Shankar area, has its local sacred sites by rivers, on mountains, in caves or by high lakes, where the villagers celebrate their community festivals, worship their local 'protector deities' and remember their dead. Visiting these sites, particularly at a festival time, can introduce you to local worldviews in a very immediate and tangible way.

These local religious cults are intimately related to the history of the area. The many different myths which sanctify these sites and the many names which refer to one and the same deity (depending whether you ask a Thangmi, a Tamang, a Newar or a Bahun) reflect different interpretations of the religious traditions which arrived with each new migration and each shift in political power. In Dolakha, the shamanistic beliefs of the earlier Thangmi, Jirel and Sunuwar settlers were overlaid by the Buddhist traditions of the Tamang and Sherpa and by the Hindu traditions of the Newar, Chhetri and Bahun. These later settlers migrated from the Buddhist monastic states in Tibet and the Hindu Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley and claimed the local 'power places' as their own. Old gods were replaced by new ones, and the sacred places were re-mapped according to the concept of the Buddhist and Hindu geographic *mandalas*, and thus integrated into new political and order.

Major sacred sites in the Dolakha region are the following:

- **Bhimsenthān:** a large temple in the town of Dolakha (Dolakha Bazaar), where the god Bhimsen is represented by a large black rock
- **Kalinchok:** a rocky summit (3,810m), a main pilgrimage destination
- **Deodunga:** a huge phallic-shaped rock (3,779m) perched atop a mountain behind Bigu Gompa
- **Deolang:** A shrine north of Bulung and Orang important for the northern pasturelands
- **Baula Pokhari:** The 'crazy lakes' nestled deep into the mountain valleys of the Lapchi Khang range.

Each smaller locality has its own sacred sites. These five, although particularly sacred to Hindus, transcend religious distinctions and are held in esteem by all inhabitants of the region.

helpers and craftsmen from Tibet and the Lapchi area north of Lamabagar, close to the Tibetan border. The craftsmen responsible for the paintings and frescoes were called in from Bhutan, Solu Khumbu, and the nearby Tibetan border town of Khasa. Subsequent construction and repairs such as the re-roofing of the gumpa have been undertaken mainly by the nuns themselves: the heavy tin sheets for the roof, for example, were carried the entire way from Kathmandu before the motorable road to Barhabise had been built, with each nun carrying three sheets at a time and making two or three journeys.

The Drukpa Lama himself supervised the construction and remained the spiritual head of the nunnery, but spent much of his time elsewhere attending to the demands of his growing religious network. He installed a series of junior lamas to act in his stead as abbots at the nunnery, many of whom left their lasting mark by overseeing the construction of a set of buildings, establishing certain standards of education, or teaching the nuns specific meditation practices. At present, there is no head lama, so for the first time ever, a nun herself serves as abbess (*see boxed text in Trekking Section*). The nunnery is occasionally visited by lamas from the Drukpa Lama's head monastery in Kathmandu, and in the summer months one lama usually takes up residence, offering teachings to the nuns.

Architecture and layout

In its original form, Bigu Gumpa consisted of a small prayer hall (*lhakhang*) and two rows of private residence rooms for the nuns, located just down hill from the prayer hall. Two major renovations have seen the expansion of the prayer hall in the mid-1950's, and most recently the addition of two new rows of nuns' rooms above the prayer hall. At present, the nunnery can house up to 65 nuns, who live individually or in pairs in small rooms that serve as bedroom, kitchen and meditation room all in one. There is also a large communal kitchen to the right of the prayer hall, but this exists primarily to serve visitors, such as temporary lamas-in-residence and tourists. Although nuns may occasionally be served from the main kitchen on prayer days, they are largely responsible for cooking their own meals. The nuns rotate through the position of kitchen manager/cook, each holding it for a year at a time.

You reach the prayer hall by walking from a courtyard up a large set of stone steps. The chörten in the courtyard was built in memory of the Drukpa Lama, who spent his last years in meditation in a rocky mountain hermitage two days' walk north of the gumpa, just over the Tibetan border. The *lhakhang* consists of an outer foyer and an inner

Buddhist terms and symbols

chörten

Literally meaning 'Buddha field', a *chörten* is a trailside Buddhist shrine. They can be built of stone, brick or clay, and usually have a broad square base topped with a small round or oval dome, or a steeple-like point. Chörten are often constructed as memorials to someone who has passed away. Relics of a respected lama or sacred prayer scrolls may be kept inside the structure, but they can also be empty. Chörten, like other sacred structures, should always be circumambulated in a clockwise direction.

mani

The word *mani* ('precious jewel' in Sanskrit, but used metaphorically by Tibetan Buddhists to refer to prayers including the mantra *om mani padme hum*) can refer to almost any religious structure in which the words of the mantra *Om mani padme hum* are included. *Mani* wheels and *mani* walls are the two most frequently found '*manis*'. A *mani* wheel is a prayer wheel, and can be small or large, free-standing or in a row of many others. They are often found alongside paths, or housed in small separate buildings within gumpa compounds. *Mani* walls are stone walls, where many of the stones are inscribed with the mantra *Om mani padme hum* or other sacred texts and symbols. These are built along trails and often include a ledge on which to sit and rest.

om

Also part of the mantra *Om mani padme hum*, this single syllable is often used to represent the entire mantra. The mantra itself cannot really be translated literally, but a common attempt glosses it as: 'Hail to the jewel in the lotus'. The syllable *om* (or *aum*) has many-layered significance, representing all the sounds of the universe.

dorje or vajra

A symbol pervasive throughout Tibetan Buddhism, the *dorje* is a stylised lightning bolt. Called *vajra* in Sanskrit, the symbol is associated with the term *Vajrayana*, which is usually translated as meaning 'Lightning' or 'Diamond' Vehicle. This refers to the core belief of Tibetan Buddhism that enlightenment is attainable in this lifetime if one can cut through all attachments and distractions with a powerful tool like the *vajra*.

sanctum, where the nuns conduct prayers and practices. The foyer is painted with the protector deities of the four directions, and the diagrammatic Buddhist Wheel of Life. To the left of the entrance stands a small low table with rows of butter lamps to be lit as offerings to the deities. In the dark inner sanctum, you marvel at the walls, richly painted with religious images, and the finely-wrought metal and ceramic statues at the front of the altar. In the centre of the altar stands the golden figure of *Chenrezig* (*Avalokitesvara* in Sanskrit), in his thousand-armed aspect as the Tibetan Bodhisattva of Compassion. To

his left stands the smaller figure of *Guru Rinpoche* (*Padmasambhava* in Sanskrit), the 8th century Indian saint and mystic credited with restoring Buddhism in Tibet, and a central figure in Himalayan Buddhism. Various other deities flank these two central ones, and on the far left side of the altar stands an ornate bookcase filled with the sixteen volumes of the *Yum* or *Bum*, an abbreviated version of the teachings of the Buddha. Set into small depressions in all four walls are one thousand miniature statues of Chenrezig. In the middle of the hall are four long rows of cushions and small tables, where the nuns sit each morning to pray.

Outside the prayer hall and to the left stands a small new building. Completed in the summer of 2000, this is a *mani*, or large prayer wheel packed with scrolls inscribed with the mantra *Om mani padme hum*. By turning it and releasing these prayers into the world, both nuns and laypeople can generate religious merit. Just behind the *mani* stand a few small houses, reserved for the lamas when they come to visit.

High above the prayer hall just before the forest begins is a row of retreat rooms. Here, nuns spend anywhere from a few months up to seven years in silent meditation retreats. They may be attended to by junior nuns or relatives from nearby villages who bring them food and other supplies, but they do not leave these retreat rooms for the designated period. A handful of nuns are currently engaged in such long-term retreats.

Daily routine

The nuns rise early every morning to begin their daily prayer session at 5 am. *Geling*, traditional Tibetan horns, call them to prayer and for an hour and a half every morning, they recite prayers to the deity *Tara*, the female deity of compassion. After the early-morning session, nuns return to their own rooms to take care of business, eat breakfast or begin their personal meditations. The day is largely their own, with few other regularly scheduled commitments. Some nuns may be engaged in meditation, study retreats or 'courses' in religious literature and thought given by senior nuns, and they will spend most of their day studying. For others, it may be their turn to provide labour for the communal good, so they will spend their day working on a building site within the nunnery grounds, tilling the fields, or otherwise contributing to the shared economy. Still others might be called for a few hours to perform a ritual at a village house. Such a ritual might be for general good luck, or for a specific purpose such as an upcoming journey or marriage.

Often two or three nuns agree to cook cooperatively, taking turns every day so as to lessen the burden of cooking each meal alone. Each nun also works her own vegetable plot, but must get the other food supplies she needs from her family or other supporters at home, since the nunnery does not provide basic food items. She must also collect her own firewood, which involves long trips to the nearby forests. Nuns from poorer families or from distant villages have a harder time, since they do not receive as much economic support from their families. They must spend more of their day cultivating crops or engaged in income-generating activities, such as performing additional household rituals, for which nuns are always paid in cash or kind. Those with greater resources have more time to devote to studies and meditation. Disadvantaged nuns sometimes even act as 'servants' for a wealthier nuns in exchange for support in food or cash.

Occasionally, lengthy *pujas*, or prayer ceremonies, lasting anywhere from one full day to a few weeks are held in the prayer hall. On the full moon each month a day-long ritual is held, as well as on other special days throughout the year such as Buddha Jyanti, the date marking the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. Other long-term sessions such as the *nyungne*, a practice which alternates days of fasting with days of complete silence, may be held a few times a year. At these times, the nuns set aside all other activities and personal business, devoting themselves fully to their religious practice.



Puja inside Bigu Gompa

Many nuns also spend time away from the gompa, conducting 'official' nunnery business or prayer sessions at other regional gompas, going on religious pilgrimages, or visiting their families. Some nuns will be assigned to overseeing the harvests on the large plot of gompa-owned land in the Sun Koshi valley, just above Barhabise, a job which requires them to spend up to a month in residence in the village. Still others might be asked to travel with one of the high lamas as an attendant, or to spend time in Kathmandu in an administrative capacity. Pilgrimages can be to relatively close sites such as Phuma, the trans-Himalayan mountain valley two days' walk from Bigu where the Drukpa Lama spent his final years meditating, or to more distant Buddhist centres such as Bodh Gaya and Sarnath in India. Although they still have many responsibilities at home, the nuns have far greater opportunities for travel than do local laywomen.

The religious life

What compels a young woman to choose the life of a nun? This is one of the first questions that springs to a Western visitor's mind, but most nuns do not feel comfortable explaining their life circumstances in such ways. Some women are simply devout Buddhists who wish to devote their lives to spiritual practice. Often however, a constellation of pragmatic factors makes the nunnery seem the most prudent lifestyle choice. Some women come from difficult home situations from which they wish to distance themselves, others are escaping unhappy marriages or undesired betrothals, while a few are shamed by a physical defect which makes marriage difficult. In contrast to the tradition of sending boys off to become monks at the very young age of four or five, girls are rarely sent to the nunnery by their parents, so they must be old enough to make a conscious decision to join. The majority of Bigu's nuns joined when they were between 18 and 20 years of age, when pressure to marry is high. A few nuns entered later in life after being widowed or having left bad marriages, but these women rarely achieve the same level of ordination and religious training as those who enter at a younger age.

Impact of tourism

The growth of local tourism has directly affected the nuns of Bigu Gompa. In addition to passing trekkers, there are many Westerners who wish to do their own meditation retreats at Bigu. Some nuns are now trying to learn English so that they may communicate more effectively and thereby avert future misunderstandings. There have been difficult situations in which foreigners have taken pictures inside

the gumpa, where photography is in fact prohibited, or have not left enough money for tea or meals served in the communal kitchen, or have simply assumed that the nuns would be available to serve them while they were in retreat. Although the nuns would like to host more tourists, they are also concerned about the effects that increased tourism may have on the religious environment of the nunnery. As a visitor, you should respect this attitude. Try to get to know the nunnery and the individual nuns before taking many photographs or asking many questions. Everyone is welcome to attend the daily morning prayer session, and this is an excellent way to become familiar with the monastic lifestyle and to make a good impression. Bigu, with its peaceful and meditative atmosphere, may become one of the most memorable stays of your entire journey.

Old Bigu Village Gumpa (Oyi Lhakhang)

[Access: 20 minutes' walk downhill (or 40 minutes going back up) from Bigu nunnery, on the main path between Rupthang and Bigu Village. It can be visited as an afternoon trip while staying at the nunnery.]

The village gumpa in Bigu predates the now more prestigious nunnery above it by at least 200 years. At around that time, it was relocated from an earlier site to the east of Tashi Gumpa to the current auspicious site where a famous lama had left his footprint imprinted on a rock. It was built in conjunction with a reincarnate lama from Marming, close to the Tibetan border, who gave the people of Bigu grazing rights for their yaks on his high-altitude land in exchange for the right to preside over the gumpa in Bigu.

With Bigu nunnery the main attraction, the village gumpa has ceased to receive local support and donations at the traditional level. Tsewang Tenpa Sherpa, a senior lama originally from Bigu, recognised the plight of the village gumpa a few years ago, and has put substantial efforts into renovating it together with his son, Lobsang Sherpa. In spring 1999, a renovation effort began, focused on building a new enclosed prayer wheel and re-roofing the main structure. The entire community was involved in these building efforts, with many local Thangmi and Magar working to earn some payment in grain, although they are not Buddhist devotees themselves.

Inside, the gumpa is still in fairly good shape, with a full set of statues along the altar and 56 brightly painted wood panels inlaid in the walls. The altar includes images crafted by Lobsang Lama of Dolangsa Gumpa. From left to right across the altar, the statues are: Chenrezig,

Dorje Senpa, Sakyamuni Buddha (the historical Lord Buddha), Guru Rinpoche, Konchog Sangbo, Guru Tragmar and Guru Senge Dolma. The wall frescoes include representations of the major teachers of the Kagyu lineage, the major teachers of the Sakya lineage, the historical kings of Tibet and several deities. These paintings were commissioned about 30 years ago, but the original painter died of snake bite, so five of the panels were completed after his death by a second painter, in a noticeably different style.

The gompa possesses two sets of the 16-volume concise teachings of the Buddha, or *Yum*. Unfortunately, the older set has been damaged by water, and is now kept in storage in the attic of the gompa, while the newer set was purchased recently in Kathmandu and is used actively. Nuns from Bigu conduct periodic prayer sessions here; the lamas also conduct rituals on important festival days. The two biggest events of the year at the gompa are a *cham*, or traditional masked dance festival, held in the summer, and a *nyungne*, or fasting retreat, held at the same time as the Hindu festival of Dasain, in the early autumn. The positive *karma*, or merit, generated during the *nyungne* is believed to counteract the negative *karma* created by the many blood sacrifices offered by Hindus during Dasain.

To enter the village gompa you first have to find the caretaker, or *konyer*, who keeps the key.

Chenjok Mendok Gompa and Bulukpa Village Gompa

[Access: Directly above Bulukpa, the small village gompa sits in a pasture. Continue straight up from here on the path through the woods for 1–2 hours to Chenjok Mendok gompa (3000m). Alternatively, walk directly from Bigu through the higher reaches of Alampu village, across the bridge under the village of Khartal, and up through Khartal to the Bulukpa village gompa. Then continue as above.]

Chenjok Mendok gompa is hidden away in the woods above the village of Bulukpa, across the valley from Bigu Gompa. One of the oldest gompas in the region, it has been undergoing restoration with funding from the Freunde Nepals, an association based in Munich, Germany.

The presiding lama of both Chenjok Mendok Gompa and the small gompa in Bulukpa itself is Chongel Sherpa. He lives in the village of Khartal, further down the valley on the hillside opposite Alampu. To enter either of these gompas, you must seek him out and get the key.

On the altar of Chenjok Mendok Gompa sit four large clay figures, dating from the foundation of the gompa: Milarepa, Chenrezig,

Sakyamuni Buddha and Guru Rinpoche. The walls are decorated with 20 wooden panels, painted with religious scenes in beautifully preserved original colours. These are being mounted on a new wooden frame in order to protect them from the damp of the walls. In addition to the main prayer hall, there are five small buildings used for three months a year as a meditation retreat by fifteen boys from a new monastic school based in Bulukpa.

According to the local people, Chenjok Mendok Gompa was built 1,000 years ago, but its real age is closer to 200 years, contemporary with the Bigu village gompa. It was built by a Kagyu lama of the lineage of Milarepa, the great Buddhist mystic and saint. A local version of the tale of Milarepa and the founding of the gompa goes as follows:

Milarepa came to meditate in a cave in the forest about two hours' walk from where the gompa now stands. At this time, Hindus used to come here to hunt. In order to protect the animals, Milarepa used magic to make their weapons ineffective. In anger, the Hindus set fire to the forest and burnt it down, killing all of Milarepa's 80 disciples. Milarepa himself managed to snatch up his cat and fly away. Hundreds of years later, the red Buddha figure that is now on the altar was found unharmed in Milarepa's cave, and transported up to the site where a village lama planned to build Chenjok Mendok Gompa. Being very heavy, the statue was difficult to carry, and at the point where the gompa now stands the bearers put it down to have a rest. They had planned to build the gompa at the top of the hill, but the figure refused to be moved further. So the final site for the gompa was decided by the will of the statue, and the half-finished walls further up were abandoned.

Dolangsa Gompa (Shyalbung Gompa)

[Access: On the main trail to and from Bigu Gompa when travelling from the Barhabise side. Can be reached in two full days from Barhabise, or in one full day from Bigu.]

Shyalbung Gompa (or *Syolpu Gumba* in Nepali) is located in the village of Dolangsa in Ghorthali VDC, Sindhupalchok, a day's walk from Bigu Gompa. It was founded in the mid-1940s by Lobsang Lama, a Nyingma practitioner from just over the Tibetan border. Perched right below the final ascent to the Thingsang La, the gompa looks out over the entire Sun Koshi river valley and provides a perfect place to rest before tackling the pass.

Lobsang Lama had been called to the area by the village people, who had heard of his capabilities and were eager to establish a gompa.

He first built a small mud hut north of the site of the present gompa in an area which was then thick forest. Soon afterwards the villagers gave him a patch of land on which to construct a proper gompa, in a grove full of bael fruit trees (*Aegle marmelos*). These are known locally in the Sherpa language as *shyalbung*, whence the name of the gompa derives. With donations from a Sherpa family in the area of Solu, a wood-roofed gompa was built on the site. The original roof was replaced with slate in the late 1960s, which stood until about the mid-1980s, when it was replaced with a high-quality aluminium roof. At this time, the paintings and statues inside the gompa were also repainted and renovated, and the entire structure of ornate supporting beams inside the gompa was altered so as to make the prayer hall larger. You can still see where the beams have been shifted, an unusual insight into gompa construction methods!

The current presiding lama at Dolangsa is Tsultrim Lama, the son of Lobsang Lama. Tsultrim Lama, who also studied briefly in Tibet before the closing of the border in 1959, took over the position of head lama after his father died at the age of 58. In addition to his religious knowledge, Tsultrim Lama is known for his skill as a statue maker. You may see him in the process of moulding images of the Buddha and other deities from clay. Piece by piece, an undefined lump gradually grows into a graceful shape with well-wrought limbs and a meditative face. Tsultrim Lama is responsible for many of the religious statues at gompas throughout the region, including a few held at Bigu.

The five statues on the altar at Dolangsa, all hand-crafted by Tsultrim Lama, are as follows (from left to right): Chenrezig, Sangye Midrugpa, Sangye Dorje Chang, Sangye Shagyathug and Guru Rinpoche. On either side of the altar sits a bookcase, each containing the sixteen-volume set of the sacred *Yum*. The set to the right of the altar are antique books brought by Lobsang Lama when he left Tibet, while those to the left are were purchased in Kathmandu recently.

Dolangsa Gompa has a close relationship with Bigu Gompa, and the nuns from Bigu often conduct prayer sessions at Dolangsa. In addition to minor rituals, the nuns conduct the requisite yearly reading of the antique *Yum*. Since Dolangsa is on the main trail from Bigu down to the roadhead town of Barhabise, it also serves as a useful waystation for the Bigu nuns when they are travelling on official business.

This is a typical village gompa as found throughout Nepal, with its hereditary householder lama and small scale of operation. The lama and his family welcome visitors. A night spent here on the way to or from Bigu can be greatly rewarding. Do make a donation to the gompa if you stay with the lama's family.

Suspa Gompa (Sersang Gompa)

[Access: Most easily reached by walking uphill from the small settlement of Deurali, on the main trail from Charikot to Kalinchok. It can be visited as a pleasant day trip from Charikot, with most of the journey along the wide, flat trail (five hours round trip) or as a stop while walking in either direction from Charikot–Kalinchok. Alternatively, it may be visited as a day trip from Dolakha Bazaar or one of the nearby villages, such as Suspa, but this route requires an arduous uphill climb (at least eight hours round trip).]

Located in the midst of a dense pine forest above the Thangmi and Bahun/Chhetri village of Suspa-Kshemawoti, at least two long days' walk from Bigu, the Suspa Gompa attests to the broad sphere of influence of the Sherpa religious community from Bigu. *Sersang Gompa*, 'The Gold-Plated Gompa', was founded in the mid-1980s by Tsewang Tenpa Lama, a disciple of the same Drukpa Lama who founded Bigu Gompa. Tsewang Tenpa also trained in the Kagyu lineage in Tibet, and became the main caretaker for the Bigu village gompa, a post which he held for almost 50 years. He also occasionally acted as temporary head of the Bigu nunnery when the Drukpa Lama was away.

Later in life, Tsewang Tenpa did an extended meditation retreat in a temporary hut in the forest above Suspa, and decided that it would be an ideal place to build a small gompa specifically for meditation retreats, far from any major settlement. He raised money from friends, family and the followers of Drukpa Rinpoche, and purchased the land from a Suspa Bahun family. The main prayer hall building itself was constructed soon thereafter; auxiliary buildings have been under construction ever since.

Now nearly 80, Tsewang Tenpa Lama presides over the gompa, although his sight is failing and he must be constantly attended by a nun from Bigu. His son, Lobsang Sherpa, is also a monk, and shares in many of the responsibilities of managing Suspa Gompa. However, Lobsang lives full time in Bigu itself, where he is now the head lama of the Bigu village gompa (*see above*).

Suspa Gompa serves primarily as a retreat site for the Bigu nuns. At any given time there may be up to eight nuns here, cloistered in the small retreat rooms above the prayer hall. The few Sherpa families living in Suspa use the gompa as their primary place of worship, and some local Thangmi families with Buddhist inclinations also make occasional visits.

On a clear day, there are excellent views of Gauri Shankar from the gompa, and the surrounding forest is full of flowering rhododendron in the spring. The place remains very quiet, and is an ideal side trip off the beaten track.

Other gompas in the Bigu region

Two other small gompas, both in Sindhupalchok district, are part of the regional religious network centred at Bigu. One is *Bimthali Gompa*, a new structure located in the Tamang village of Bimthali near Tungathali. This is headed by a Tamang lama, Dawa Lama, and has been built with VDC funds. The other is *Masekharka Gompa*, a very small village gompa in Masekharka, above the village of Karthali on the west bank of the Sun Koshi River. This is headed by a Sherpa lama, Sangye Dorje Lama. The Bigu nuns occasionally conduct prayer sessions here as well.

The Upper Rolwaling region: a hidden, sacred land

Like Lapchi, the entire Rolwaling Valley is considered a sacred area. Buddhists believe it to be a 'hidden land', or *beyul*, where Tibetan Buddhism can always be protected and revitalised, even in the face of challenges from the outside world. The entrance to the valley is marked by the sacred 'footprint' of a wandering Buddhist priest, left on the steep slope between the bridge over the Tama Koshi and Simigaon. According to local legends, in the 8th century Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) meditated in a small cave in the upper Rolwaling Valley. Here he subdued those same infamous five female demons residing on Gauri Shankar that Milarepa is also believed to have battled.

Due to their sacred status as a 'hidden land', the high summer pastures of Rolwaling cannot be used until they are officially opened through a ritual conducted by local lamas each year. In line with local Buddhist tradition, the slaughter of animals is not allowed, nor is the eating of pork meat or garlic. The Buddhist settlements in Rolwaling are relatively young, founded mostly by Sherpas and Tibetans who have migrated from points further east and north over the past 200 years.

See Part Two for other points of interest and for route descriptions.

Simigaon Gompa

[Access: Simigaon can be reached in about a week's walk from either Barhabise or Charikot/Dolakha. The village is on a hill at the beginning of the Rolwaling Valley, and marks the border of the area for which a peak permit has been required until recently. The gompa is on the ridge above the village (2,100m), with a magnificent view of the valleys in both directions, the Bhote Koshi and the Rolwaling Valley.]

Simigaon Gompa has been under extensive renovation since 1998. The construction is funded by local and tourist donations, partly collected through a 'buy a roof slate' appeal, whereby tourists are encouraged to make a Rs. 100 donation for a new slate roof tile. Some private sponsorship has also paid for the cement and the labour for plastering the inside of the gompa.

Like other village gompas, this one houses devotional clay statues, including the usual trio of Chenrezig, Sakyamuni Buddha and Guru Rinpoche, with the additional figure of Opame. The statues were made here in Simigaon by two lamas from Solu Khumbu. An additional two bronze figures, several photos of the Dalai Lama and about 30 old Tibetan books were brought from Tibet via Lamabagar when the Dalai Lama escaped to India in 1959.

One of the lamas of Simigaon Gompa, the father of the Simigaon schoolmaster and lodge-owner, once worked as a 'Sherpa' for mountaineering expeditions. He served as one of Sir Edmund Hillary's 12 mail runners (taking only 8 days instead of the customary 18 days to get to Everest base camp), and spent one year with Hillary in Calcutta.

Among the many festivals at the Simigaon gompa is the spring festival, held during the millet planting season. This is celebrated by a day of prayer in the gompa, followed by a special ceremony to generate good luck for the future.

Beding Gompa

[Access: Beding (3,700m) is two days' walk up the Rolwaling Valley from Simigaon. The gompa is situated in a small courtyard in the middle of the village.]

According to local beliefs, Beding Gompa was founded 1,000 years ago but has been rebuilt many times since. Its present decoration of painted walls depicting the strife between the forces of good and evil, including some violent and some erotic scenes, dates from 1955. The gompa houses 108 antique books and 216 newer ones. The antique

Tibetan leaf books with wooden covers are made of *lokta* paper produced in Beding, which was taken to Lhasa for printing. The newer books are printed on rice paper, 'reprints' of older texts. The altar consists of a glass case containing brightly-painted butter sculptures, and behind them three large clay figures, said to have been made in Beding long ago. Each is about a metre high, set in glass cases in the wall. One represents Sakyamuni Buddha; the other two are locally renowned high lamas. Outside the main door, an adjoining room houses a large, ornately painted mani wheel, with walls painted with thousands of Buddhas.

One of the lamas at Beding is a former mountaineer who has climbed K2, Manaslu and Dhaulagiri, and has travelled to Switzerland and Japan. Once a month, he conducts a day of prayer here, always held on a Monday. This all-day ceremony may have a specific focus, such as prayers for a safe return for the local men who have gone off on mountaineering expeditions. In the morning, prayers are sung to the accompaniment of drums, cymbals, conch shells and horns, with repeated offerings of rice at the altar. The Sherpa women from the family sponsoring the ritual provide large quantities of locally brewed beer and Tibetan salt tea throughout the ritual. At the afternoon session, each of the old books is taken out and dusted, and a few pages of each read aloud by one of the monks, who read simultaneously in a melodic chant. In this way, explains the lama pragmatically, all the books get dusted and checked for insects regularly.

High up above Beding there is an old gompa nestled into the rock. It is here that Padmasambhava is believed to have meditated. Four times a year, a prayer ceremony is held here in his honour. The site is also used as a meditation retreat by those following the path of Guru Rinpoche, or 'precious teacher', as the great Padmasambhava is known in the Tibetan world.

Hindu sites and temples

As the state religion of Nepal, Hinduism is pervasive throughout the kingdom. Striking natural sites often form the basis of Hindu temples, most of which are not housed in special buildings of any particular architectural interest. Instead, they consist of a sacred stone or spring inside a small shelter. Hindu cremations are always held at river confluences, such as Singati or Sorang Khola. Such natural spots are thought to be the abode of one or another Hindu deity, often Shiva or Kali, who have unique manifestations in local belief. Shiva is more popularly known as *Shankar* (the form in which he sits atop Mt. Gauri

Shankar), or as *Bhimsen* (the form he takes at the temple of the same name in Dolakha), or *Mahadev*, the more general title 'great god', used to refer to him when he takes animistic forms such as rocks and other natural sites. Kali takes the name *Kali Mai* when she resides atop the mountain of Kalinchok, which is named after her, and is also known as *Devi* or *Tripura-Sundari*, the form which she takes at the temple of the same name located just outside the town of Dolakha. Many of these deities are also worshipped by non-Hindu ethnic groups such as the Tamang and Thangmi, who see them as animistic powers who happen to be associated with a Hindu figure as well.

Shrines to Shiva can be identified by the clutter of iron tridents of all sizes piled outside: the trident is the symbol of Shiva, and these are left by devotees who visit the shrines on calendrical holy days. Shrines may also be identified by the red vermilion powder and rice smeared upon them as offerings. Some local shrines may be the site of daily prayers or offerings by those living in the immediate vicinity, while others are visited only on festival days. Many Hindu deities must be appeased with blood offerings, so any important ritual day will see scores of devotees bringing a chicken, a goat, or even a buffalo to the shrine to be sacrificed.

The main Hindu temples in the region are the *Bhimsenthan* temple in the town of Dolakha, the mountaintop shrines of *Kalinchok*, the *Deolingeswari* temple at Deolang, the *Chakreswori* temple at Sangba, the temple at *Tenekhu*, and the sacred lakes of *Baula Pokhari*. Non-Hindus are prohibited from entering the inner sanctum of any Hindu temple, but there is usually a great deal to observe on the outside as well. Leather products are taboo, so leather shoes, belts and wallets must be removed before you enter even the courtyard or outer rooms of some temples.

Bhimsen of Dolakha

[Access: This temple is located in Dolakha Bazaar itself. The walk takes you through the old cobbled streets of the town, where the local people will happily point you toward the temple if you ask for 'Bhimsenthan'.]

The most important and impressive shrine in the entire area is the Bhimsenthan temple at the northern end of the old town of Dolakha. The god *Bhimsen* has a different identity to every ethnic group in the area, but there is no question that he is one of the central figures for all of them.

For the Newars, Bhimsen was originally called *Bhima*, one of the five Pandava brothers who first established the settlement of Dolakha. Bhima, which literally translated means 'the terrible', was known for his great strength and wrathful temper. As a Pandava, he was a great warrior who served the Hindu gods in their efforts to fight the demonic forces of evil. The story goes that in one of his battles, Bhima drowned in a river, and his body sank into the realm of the serpents. There he was endowed with even greater powers, and took the form of a black rock. The rock drifted down the Tama Koshi river, where it was found by a porter, who tried to use it as one of the three rocks in a makeshift hearth he had made upon which to cook rice. The slick black rock remains ensconced in the shrine at Bhimsenthan.

Bhimsen became a prominent figure in the Dolakha Newar Hindu pantheon. According to legend, his worship was introduced to the Kathmandu Valley when a princess from Dolakha married a prince of the ruling Malla dynasty and brought Bhimsen to Kathmandu as her patron deity. From this time onwards, Bhimsen became the chief protector of the Newar traders, who constructed temples dedicated to him in each area in which they settled. After Prithvi Narayan Shah united Nepal in 1769, he assigned religious sites from all far corners of the kingdom with political value. The Dolakha Bhimsenthan was identified as one of the 64 Shiva figures that defined the political parameters of the kingdom, with Pashupatinath in Kathmandu at the centre. This aspect of the god was renamed as 'Bhimeswor', the title that Hindus still use to refer to him.

According to Tamang myth, however, Bhimsen originated in Rolwaling, where he was a local protector deity associated with the 'five long-lived sisters': the female demons who ruled the area before the advent of Buddhism. An early Buddhist priest challenged and defeated this powerful local deity in a battle near Deolang, and threw his lifeless body in the Tama Koshi river. Once again, he was rediscovered in the form of a stone washed up on the banks of the river further south, and installed in his current position at the temple in Dolakha. The Tamang consider him a regional 'master of the land', and make offerings to him for good luck before they plough or harvest their fields.

In times of political crisis or threats to Nepal's royal family, Bhimsen has been known to 'sweat' with liquid oozing from the shiny black stone. This was recorded in 1949, just before the hereditary Rana prime ministers lost power, and again in 1990, during the political upheaval after pro-democracy demonstrations threatened the Panchayat government. During this episode, Bhimsen's sweat was

Some Hindu terms and symbols

trisul

Shiva is often depicted holding a *trisul*, or trident, so this symbol identifies a temple as one devoted to Shiva. Trisuls are made of iron and are left at shrines as offerings, or painted upon walls and doors.

satakon or six-pointed star

Not to be confused with the Star of David, in the Hindu context the six-pointed star represents Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom. For this reason, the star is the symbol of education and schools; it is often seen painted on school signboards or roofs.

swastika

This symbol does not have the same negative connotations that it does in the West. It is an ancient icon representing the sun, and is often found adorning religious shrines. It connotes prosperity and well-being, and is used also by Buddhists.

tika

This is an offering, most commonly made of vermillion powder or rice, which consists of a dot of the blessed material being placed in the middle of the devotee's forehead. *Tika* can be received on almost any occasion: upon worshipping at a temple, conducting a personal ritual, or wishing luck to another family member. *Tika* may also be made of milk, blood, or other substances on special ritual occasions. If you are offered *tika* at a temple or a festival, it is good manners to accept it.

carried to the royal court in Kathmandu on a cotton pad for a sacrificial ceremony to appease the god. Most recently, the stone was said to sweat again just before the June 2001 palace massacre of 14 members of the royal family.

The Bhimsenthan temple has been renovated several times, and has many layers of architecture and statues dating from different eras. A large stone-paved courtyard encircles the temple, and small sitting areas along its perimeter are maintained by the *guthi*, or Newar community group, responsible for the temple's upkeep. From here, you enter through an iron gate leading to a second courtyard, which is decorated with large metal bells mounted on stone pillars, donated by well-to-do patrons. Many devotees circumambulate the entire temple before making their sacrifice or other offerings to the central shrine. The black rock representing Bhimsen himself is ensconced in a gold-plated inner shrine, which, however, which cannot be entered by non-Hindus. It is covered in red powder and rice left by devotees as offerings. The temple is the site of major festivals on Dasain and at other holy times throughout the year.

Deolingeswari Shrine at Deolang

The name 'Deolang' can be interpreted as meaning 'place of the god'. This shrine is believed to be the local seat of Mahadev, the form of Shiva most widely worshipped in the area. Deolang is the site of a large festival held on the full moon of the Nepali month of Pus, usually in mid-January. On this full moon, it is believed that Shiva and Parvati, in the forms of Mahadev and Gauri, are married on the peak of Gauri Shankar. Known as the 'Deolang Jatra', the festival draws pilgrims from all over the region and from all ethnic groups, although the ritual itself is conducted by a Tamang shaman who appears publicly only this one time each year.

There are many versions of the story about the origins of Deolingeswari, but the basic outline is always the same: A wandering cow, perhaps an incarnation of Gauri, discovered Mahadev's presence at this site and only later showed it to her human caretakers. One version goes something like this, as adapted from Father Casper Miller's telling of the story in his book *Faith Healers in the Himalaya*:

There was once a cow who came from a herdsman's shelter on the eastern side of the Tama Koshi. She crossed the river and climbed up the steep hillside to a point of the Deolang Valley several thousand feet above the river. Here she left her footprints on a large boulder. Another boulder was blocking the northwards path ahead of her, but suddenly it opened just long enough for the cow to pass through. She continued around the curve of the hill to the Thadi Valley, until she came to the spot where the shrine now stands. Only she knew that Mahadev was present there. As an offering to the god, she left her milk, and then returned home by the same route. The huge rock opened once again to let her pass. When she arrived back at the shelter, her calf was crying for milk, and her owners became suspicious when she had no milk to give. The next day, she returned to pay her respects to Mahadev in the same way, but this time the herdsmen followed her, holding on to her tail. The rock blocking the path opened up again and let both the cow and the men through. This time, however, the rock remained open. The men witnessed the cow offering her milk to Mahadev, and became aware of his presence themselves. From that time onwards, they started to worship him regularly in that place. Eventually they built the shrine that still stands there today.

People believe that worshipping at the temple will help preserve the well-being of their livestock, and also help them find any animals that have strayed. Due to its association with the cow, the temple is

also held to bring fertility, so many women visit the temple to pray for a son.

According to Hindu legend, Gauri, the cow-like incarnation of Parvati, died near this spot, but her bones were removed and placed in the temple of Guhjeswori in Kathmandu. In order to be close to her even after death, Mahadev also left the area, going to live in Pashupatinath in Kathmandu instead. But both the imprint of the footprints of Gauri the cow and the mythical memory of the holy pair's residence here remain, and this shrine continues to be respected and maintained by the Nepali state as well as by local caretakers.

Kali Mai on Kalinchok

[Access: Kalinchok is accessible from two sides: 1) The main route to the temple is a wide path that leads straight up from Charikot; the climb takes one day (six hours' hike); 2) From Barhabise or Bigu, the trail from Thingsang La to Kalinchok is a good clear path and easy to find; it follows the spine of the ridge and skirts the highest points on the west side.]

The most interesting of the Hindu sites is undoubtedly the one atop Kalinchok (3,750 m.). The temple itself sits upon a remarkably small rocky outcrop joined to the rest of the mountain by an iron bridge that traverses a dangerous crevice. This unusual spot serves as a place of pilgrimage for all ethnic groups, particularly Hindu, Tamang and Thangmi people. Animal sacrifices take place here every dawn, accompanied by singing and dancing, in addition to major festivals here every full moon.

Kalinchok is a mountain sacred to various ethnic communities, visited by pilgrims from all over the area for festivals throughout the year. The mountain top is held to be the abode of the goddess Kali Mai, one form of Kali, the wrathful female deity. Kali Mai is the oldest sister of all of the female deities inhabiting the region, senior yet related to all the other important shrines such as Tripura-Sundari in Dolakha and Sailung Mai farther south. For Bahun and Chhetri men, this is one of the most auspicious places to conduct the yearly ritual through which they replace their *janai*, or sacred thread. Tamang and Thangmi shamans believe that the climb to Kalinchok gives them life force and healing power, and that the offerings they make to the goddess will assure the efficacy of their rituals for the year to come. The sacrifice of goats and chickens always takes place just after daybreak and is accompanied by prayers, singing and dancing. At particular full moon festivals, such as *Janai Purnima* (in July/August)

and *Kartik Purnima* (October/November), shamans from all ethnic groups and perhaps over a thousand followers travel all night to begin their devotions to Kali Mai on the mountain top at daybreak.

At Kalinchok, the main temple rock sits just to the east of the true summit of the mountain. You approach the temple area by mounting the rungs of the iron ladder connecting it with the flatter area below. Today the small temple area is encircled with a protective metal railing, installed after one visitor too many fell to his death by stepping too close to the steep edge of the outcrop. It is easy to imagine how this could happen during a festival, as thousands of pilgrims crowd their way onto the tiny summit, some of them very drunk. Within the confines of the railing are three main areas of worship, divided into two categories: shrines where blood offerings can and should be made, and one where such offerings may not be made under any circumstances. The two shrines at the far end of the area fall into the first category, while the one closest to the entry point belongs to the latter category. The two sacrificial shrines are both marked by large rocks which represent the deities they are dedicated to: Ganesh to the left, and Kali Mai herself to the right. The one representing Ganesh is a one-metre high vertical stone at which only chickens and other fowl (such as pigeons) are sacrificed, while that representing Kali Mai is a flat square stone at which only virgin female goats may be sacrificed. Recently a relief statue depicting Kali in her many-armed form has been placed behind this stone, so that the blood of the sacrificed goats splatters both the original rock itself and the newer, more easily identifiable icon just behind. The non-sacrificial shrine is perhaps the most important one of all: a small pond known as Bhagawati Kunda, it is devoted to Shiva (Mahadev) and Kali (Seti Devi) in union in their peaceful forms. No sacrifices may be made here: instead pilgrims present offerings of rice, incense, light, flowers, milk and coins. In homage to Shiva, they also add roughly fashioned iron *trisuls* to the large and ever-growing pile behind the pond. Among other notable structures within the temple area is a brass lion mounted on a stone pedestal about four metres high, donated in 1916 by a colonel in the Nepali army. On the other side of the pond sits a large metal bell donated in 1946 by the son of the then Rana prime minister. Two other large bells were donated by another colonel in 1909. Near the entrance to the area there is also a small *dharamsala*, or resting place, which serves as a shelter for wandering religious men and other pilgrims who may stay overnight at the temple.



© Sara Schneiderman

Wedding serenade in the Thangmi village of Suspa

Religious Holidays and Festivals

Nepalis joke proudly that there are more holidays and festivals than days of the year in their country – a claim not far from the truth. One of the highlights of trekking in any part of Nepal is the constant opportunity to witness and participate in large religious festivals as well as smaller-scale local rituals.

The word *jatra* means ‘festival’ in Nepali, and implies a large gathering (often in the thousands) celebrated at one particular site only, such as the Swasthani Purnima Jatra at Deolang, the Machhendranath Jatra in Dolakha, or Janai Purnima at Kalinchok. Other holy days, such as Maghe Sankranti, are celebrated at the local level in almost every village, with small gatherings at local temples and household rituals. Still other days, such as Bhai Tika, are celebrated on the family level, with each family group organising its own version of the prescribed rituals. No matter where you go, you are likely to see many forms of religious devotion, and you may even be invited to participate.

Determining the exact date of festivals is difficult, since there is not one, but three, religious calendars to be consulted. Festivals do not fall on the same calendrical date every year, but are instead determined by the lunar cycle. Even local people may be vague about the dates of festivals, and can usually only give an approximate Nepali date. It is worth arming yourself with an inexpensive ‘religious calendar’ which offers the Nepali and Western calendars in parallel view.

The official Nepali Vikram Sambat calendar has 12 months, each between 29 and 32 days long; the length of a month may vary from year to year. The new year starts with Baisakh (mid-April); while the Nepali government’s fiscal and budgetary year starts in Saun (mid-July). The months of the year correspond to those of the Western calendar roughly as follows:

<i>Baisakh</i>	April/May	<i>Kartik</i>	October/November
<i>Jeth</i>	May/June	<i>Mangsir</i>	November/December
<i>Asar</i>	June/July	<i>Pus</i>	December/January
<i>Saun</i>	July/August	<i>Magh</i>	January/February
<i>Bhadau</i>	August/September	<i>Phagun</i>	February/March
<i>Asoj</i>	September/October	<i>Chait</i>	March/April

Weddings and funerals, although personal rather than calendrical rituals, also usually involve entire communities. Both marriage and death rituals are colourful and fascinating examples of local culture, so if you happen upon such an opportunity, it is well worth taking the extra time to stay. Bear in mind that you may be expected to make a small offering to the new couple or to honour the deceased.

The main festivals held in the Gauri Shankar area are as follows:

January/February

Maghe (Makar) Sankranti

1 day, Hindu

This is celebrated at the local level in almost every village, with larger festival gatherings in Tenekhu (east of Singati) and Sangba. These festivals include big markets, singing and dancing and all-night worship. After the large Dasain festival in the autumn, this is the main occasion for water-buffalo sacrifice in the area. Most communities join together to buy a communal buffalo and then divide the meat between all of those who have donated to the cause.

Swasthani Purnima

(full moon of Nepali month of Pus)

2 days, Hindu/Buddhist/animistic

Held at the Deolingeswari Mahadev temple in the village of Deolang, this festival honours the Hindu god Mahadev and also showcases the Tamang shamans of the area. The image of Mahadev is 'crowned' with various jewels and golden ornaments taken out only once a year. A Tamang shaman goes into trance, and is believed to bring good luck to women who wish to conceive a son. Many villagers throughout the area make the journey to Deolang to receive this shaman's blessing.

February/March

Losar

approximately 10 days, Buddhist

This is the Buddhist New Year, and the major Buddhist festival of the year. It is celebrated with plenty of local beer, or *chhyang*, and food, including special fried bread twists called *kapse* in Tibetan. The lamas give ceremonial blessings, and every house puts up a new white prayer flag outside.

Shiva Ratri

(held on the new moon of the Nepali month of Phagun)

1 day, Hindu

Shiva Ratri is the 'night of Shiva', when the god is thought to descend to earth and bring good luck to his worshippers. It is celebrated in all Hindu villages, where everyone visits the village temple, taking water and food as offerings. Big bonfires are also tended throughout the night, and people gather around them, singing songs to honour Shiva while some smoke hashish, which is one of Shiva's symbols.

Bhime Ekadasi

1 day, Hindu

This is a Newar festival, held only in Dolakha at the Bhimsenthan temple to honour the god Bhimsen. Traditionally, the Thangmi community of Suspa, about one hour's walk from Dolakha town, was required to provide a sacrificial goat and many other ritual items as a form of tax payment to the Newar rulers of Dolakha. This tradition is fading, although certain Thangmi families still travel to Dolakha to participate in the festival. Otherwise, a great crowd gathers at the Bhimsenthan, bringing sacrificial offerings to the god. Dances and political programmes are also often held on the occasion.

March/April

Holi

1 day in the Gauri Shankar region (several days in the Terai), Hindu
Holi commemorates the triumph of Krishna over the demoness Holika. The celebration of her destruction evolved into the present practice of *rang khelne* (playing with colour), which consists of throwing red and coloured powder at people and spraying them with coloured water. Young people lie in wait for each other, turning it into a game of chase which also gives boys a chance (not always welcomed) to grab and touch the girls. Tourists are also considered suitable targets for the coloured powder – so if you are travelling on this day, wear old clothes, protect your camera, and then join the fun.

Ram Nawami/Chaitra Dasain

(in the Nepali month of Chait)

1 day, Hindu

These two festivals often occur on the same day or soon after each other. The first, Ram Nawami, celebrates the birthday of the deity Rama, an incarnation of the Lord Vishnu. The second festival, Chaitra

Dasain, is similar to the much longer and more elaborate Dasain festival in the autumn. Held exactly six months before the beginning of the Dasain festival, Chaitra Dasain serves to placate the dark goddess Durga/Kali and remind her of the larger sacrifices to come in the autumn. Chaitra Dasain also involves animal sacrifices and worship at Durga/Kali temples.

April/May

Machhendranath Jatra

8 days, Hindu

This Newar Hindu festival is celebrated in many of the historically Newar town centres: particularly in Patan in the Kathmandu Valley, as well as in the town of Dolakha. A large chariot built of bamboo and wood upon which the figure of the Machhendranath deity sits is paraded through the town over the course of eight days, culminating in a tug of war in which two competing village 'teams' attempt to gain control of the chariot. Devotees make offerings to the god on the chariot, adorning him with ornaments and sprinkling coloured powder over the wheels of the chariot.

Buddha Jayanti

1 day, Buddhist

This day commemorates Buddha's birthday, as well as his enlightenment and death. It falls on the full moon of the Nepali month of Baisakh (April or early May). In every Buddhist gumpa and home, as well as at many local animistic shrines, offerings of food and drink are made and candles are lit beside Buddha images. In the Thangmi village of Suspa, a large festival of shamans is held at the small village temple, Suspa Bhumithan. This is also a national holiday, so all public institutions are closed.

July/August

Nag Panchami

1 day, Hindu

Literally meaning 'day of the snakes', this is the time when devotees venerate *naga*, or the serpent gods. Paper snakes are hung over the door of every Hindu house, as snakes are held to protect the house and home from the heavy monsoon rain and other evils.

Pilgrimage to Kalinchok

(with Gabriele Tautscher)

The primary festivals held at Kalinchok take place on *Janai Purnima*, the first full moon in the Nepali month of Bhadau (August/September); *Kage Ashtami*, the first new moon after Janai Purnima; and *Kartik Purnima*, the full moon in the autumn month of Kartik. All of these are particularly interesting times to visit the temple, but it is also extremely crowded on these occasions, so choosing a non-festival day can be a more peaceful way to experience this special site. Since all festivals begin the previous night or very early in the morning, it is advisable to arrive at Kalinchok summit the evening before, set up camp and rise early if you wish to experience the festival to its fullest.

In addition to high-caste Hindu men who journey to Kalinchok on Janai Purnima to renew their sacred thread are the many Thangmi pilgrims. Large groups from each major Thangmi village follow their shamans as they dance their way up the mountaintop. In contrast, on the festival of Kartik Purnima, the primary pilgrims are Tamang shamans and villagers.

When Tamang or Thangmi pilgrims reach Kalinchok, they first circumambulate all the godly manifestations present there in the form of sacred rocks and a pond hidden under a shrine. Then they stop at the enormous pile of tridents above this shrine where Mahadev and Seti Devi are believed to be present in union. After adding more tridents to the pile, the pilgrims and shamans or healers proceed to give blood-offerings at the stone platform representing the wrathful aspect of Kali Mai. Here, they dip their fingers into the sacrificial blood and smear it onto their foreheads as a *tika*, or ritual blessing.

The last of the deities to receive an offering from the pilgrims is Ganesh, the commander of the attendants of Shiva and the remover of obstacles. The Thangmi refer to the same deity as 'Sikari' and believe him to be a non-human being living in the forests who kidnaps children and inflicts disease, but who also teaches the shamans their magic formulae. Thangmi pilgrims put a small amount of water from the pond into a sacred vase to take home with them as the blessing of Seti Devi. Before the pilgrims together with the shamans leave the summit, one of the followers stabs a knife into the earth in order to pin down the goddess, so that she will not be able to follow them to their homes and harm them. For the Tamang, the ritual on the summit of Kalinchok is incorporated into the Buddhist tradition in which the Tamang Buddhist priests perform fire offerings on mandalas and purifications with holy water, in order to strengthen the life force of living beings and to remove moral obstacles.

Janai Purnima

(full moon of Nepali month of Saun, usually August)

1 day, Hindu and shamanistic

Janai Purnima has two distinct versions: one as celebrated by high-caste Hindus, and the other as celebrated by the Tamang and Thangmi shamans of the area.

Bahun and Chhetri men reassert their status as 'twice-born' by changing their *janai*, the sacred thread draped around their left shoulder and under their right arm, which only the twice-born may wear. After a day of fasting, bathing in the river and giving money to a Bahun priest from whom they receive a *tika*, they replace their old thread with a new one. The celebrations can best be observed in the main Hindu temples: Tenekhu (east of Singati), Deolingeswari temple in Thadi (between Orang and Gongar Khola), Sangba (below Bigu) and especially at the top of Kalinchok and at the lakes of Baula Pokhari (most easily reached from Loting via Bulukpa and Tselaphu).

On the same day, Tamang and Thangmi shamans worship the goddess Kali Mai of Kalinchok. Through their ecstatic dances and blood offerings, they call upon the goddess to 'ride' them and bestow her power upon them for the coming year. Dressed in ritual finery including crowns of peacock feathers and porcupine quills, necklaces of snake vertebrae and bells, the shamans dance up the hillside trails from their villages, playing their two-sided drums, called *dhyangro*. On the steep summit of Kalinchok, events of the night often include shamanic competitions in which the shamans from various villages try to outdo one another with demonstrations of their 'magical' powers.

Back down in Dolakha town, Janai Purnima is followed by Hile Jatra, a seven-day festival with masked dancing devoted to the gods Bhairab and Kumari. A large market is set up, with villagers from all over the region selling produce and crafts.

August/September

Krishna Asthami

1 day, Hindu

To celebrate the birthday of the Krishna, the beloved avatar of the Lord Vishnu, Hindus bathe in the early morning and make offerings at shrines devoted to Krishna.

Tij

3 days, Hindu

Tij is Nepal's only Hindu festival exclusively for women. On the first day they eat heartily, as on the second day they will fast to commemorate how Parvati fasted while praying for Shiva to love and marry her. Parvati's prayers were answered, so Hindu women believe that their fast will bring them good fortune in their marriages. Dressed in the auspicious colour red, groups of women gather by rivers and streams during the day, bathe in the water, visit their local temples, and

then sing and dance into the night. The festival is especially prominent in major Newar or Bahun/Chhetri towns such as Charikot and Dolakha.

September/October

Dasain

10–15 days, Hindu

Dasain commemorates the victory of good over evil, in the form of the goddess Durga destroying the demon Mahisasura who terrorised the earth as a huge water buffalo. Durga is herself a blood-thirsty deity who must be propitiated with blood sacrifices in order to ensure her support in the coming year. On the first day of Dasain a container of soil is planted with barley seeds. The ensuing days see specific household rituals, including different types of blood sacrifices. On the ninth day each household sacrifices an animal, usually a chicken or a goat, sometimes even a water buffalo. The blood is dripped everywhere to ensure Durga's protection for the next year. The sacrifice is followed by a big feast. The tenth day celebrates the actual victory of Durga over the demon, at which point people don new clothes and visit friends and relatives to exchange greetings and *tikas*. On the eleventh day the barley, which has by now sprouted, is distributed by the head of the house and worn as a sign of blessing.

Of particular interest in the Gauri Shankar region are the unique local festivals held in Dolakha Bazaar on the ninth and tenth days of Dasain: *Devikot Jatra* and *Khadga Jatra*. Devikot Jatra re-enacts the killing of the demon Mahisasura, in the form of ritualised slaying of baby buffaloes. While the buffaloes are slowly bled to death through a puncture in one vein, their blood must be drunk by two previously designated Thangmi shamans from the village of Dumkot. This takes place in the temple of Tripura-Sundari, otherwise known as Devikot, on the northern edge of Dolakha town. The next day is Khadga Jatra, or 'The Sword Festival', in which twelve specially trained Newar dancers traverse the town while performing a dance involving sacred swords, thought to contain the blessing of the goddess.

Dasain is the most important Hindu festival of the year. Due to Hindu influence and its status as the major national holiday, nowadays Dasain is also observed to some extent by non-Hindus – somewhat akin to the social celebration of Christmas in the West, in which non-Christians often join. Nepalis will do all they can be at home for Dasain, so public transport will be jam-packed these days. All offices are closed for about two weeks, and many schools for even longer. It can also be difficult to hire porters or other help at Dasain, and it is

customary to pay an additional 'holiday bonus' to anyone working with you during the holiday.

October/November

Tihar

5 days, Hindu

Tihar comes one month after Dasain. Although Hindu in origin, is also now celebrated by many non-Hindus of the middle hills. Five creatures are worshipped during Tihar, receiving tikas on their heads and flower garlands, as well as special foods. On the first day the crows are fed; on the second the dogs are fed (although they are kicked and maltreated for the rest of the year); on the third day, called *Laxmi Puja* or *Dipawali*, the festival of light, cows are worshipped as the symbol of the goddess of wealth and good fortune, Laxmi. Cows are bathed and garlanded, and candles are lit in every house to receive Laxmi, who at midnight rides out on her owl to visit deserving households and bless their valuables. People eat special sweet *roti* (flat bread) and other delicacies. The fourth day is the turn of the bulls, and the fifth day is called *Bhai Tika* ('brother blessing'), when brothers and sisters give each other tikas. Tihar is celebrated on the household and family level, so try to get invited into a family home if you wish to observe this holiday.

Haribodhini Ekadashi (Thulo Ekadashi)

1 day, Hindu

This late-autumn festival commemorates the awakening of the god Vishnu from his four-month annual sleep. Throughout the night previous to the festival, villagers dance and do *puja* (prayer and worship) in their homes. The next day, all along the rivers, villagers wearing garlands of flowers bring offerings of fruit as well as flower petals and rock sugar to riverside confluences, where they bathe and pray. Families in which someone has died the past year string colourful garlands – at some risk! – over the swift current, to ensure a safe passage to the heavens for their loved ones. The entire village turns out to celebrate. Visitors should try to catch this colourful festival, which takes place during the main trekking season.

PART II:
TREKKING IN THE
GAURI SHANKAR AREA



Zen-like garden at Dolangsa

General Information on Trekking in the Area

Getting started

There are three main starting points for treks in the Gauri Shankar area. The best is *Barhabise*, some four hours by bus from Kathmandu on the Arniko Highway to Tibet, just about two hours south of the border town of Kodari. The second is *Dolakha*,¹ six hours by bus from Kathmandu, and about fifteen minutes' ride from Charikot, where the Dolakha road splits off the main easterly road towards Jiri and heads northwest. This road was recently extended all the way to Singati, but washouts and landslides make road travel to Singati an unreliable option. The third approach requires considerable mountaineering experience: crossing the *Tashi Lapsa* pass from Khumbu in the east, and then trekking out through the Gauri Shankar area.

Possible treks range from five days to several weeks, since the area offers many possibilities for side trips and excursions. Although the trekker's natural inclination is to keep moving, you will experience the best that this region has to offer by staying for a few days in one spot, getting to know the local culture and day-hiking and exploring in different directions.

As of this writing (late autumn 2002), no special permits are required for most of the Gauri Shankar area. Regulations and restrictions are constantly changing, so double-check with your trekking agency, the immigration office and/or your guide before setting out from Kathmandu.

When to trek

As throughout most of Nepal, the best trekking season is from late September until early December – i.e. after the summer monsoon and before the worst of winter. Even in winter, however, it is only the highest routes that become impassable. Spring can also be a good time; the lower valleys get hot from April onwards, but the upper reaches remain pleasant. Trekking during the summer monsoon (basically mid-June to late September) is not recommended: trails and bridges may

¹ Also known as Dolakha Bazaar, since Dolakha is the official name of the entire administrative district.

get washed away, landslides pose a real danger... and leeches are an ever-present irritant.

Maps

There are no up-to-date commercial maps that show all the topography, settlements, and trails accurately. The best ones available are the maps produced in 1974 (with various later editions) for the *Nepal-Kartenwerk der Arbeitsgemeinschaft für vergleichende Hochgebirgsforschung* by Erwin Schneider et al. Two maps in this series are needed to view the entire Gauri Shankar region – no. 3, ‘Lapchi Kang’ and no. 4, ‘Rolwaling Himal (Gaurishankar)’. There is also no. 6, ‘Tamba Kosi–Likhu Khola’, but that is needed only for the southwesternmost corner of the region, from Charikot and Dolakha Bazaar up to Malepu. These maps are topographically accurate, but some of the river names along the upper reaches of the Tama Koshi have been confused, and paths and settlements marked on the map do not correspond to today’s reality. These maps will be referred to as ‘the Schneider maps’.

The small topographical map prepared by Eco Himal and included in this book is the most accurate regarding trails and village names. The best strategy is to combine it with the Schneider maps, or with any of the new maps that have begun to appear on the market as the area becomes better known.

Both *khola* and *koshi*, found in many place names, mean ‘river’ in Nepali. Note also that *la* is the Tibetan term for a mountain pass, equivalent to *deurali* in Nepali.

Due to the vagaries of transliteration, different maps will often have widely differing spellings of place names. Patience and slow, careful enunciation should help!

Packing tips

A small English–Nepali *phrasebook* like the Lonely Planet’s (available in many editions) is invaluable. Although Nepali is not the first language of many of the people of this ethnically diverse region, it is spoken and understood by almost everyone.

Two additional items that can prove useful are *salt* and *tape*. Salt – easily carried in an empty film canister – is invaluable for leech removal in the summer and early autumn. And Sellotape (Scotch tape) can be used for safe removal of the allergenic hairs of the woolly caterpillars. (See boxed text on ‘Nasties’ for further details.)

Trekking Routes and Time Framework

Main trekking route

*Barhabise–Thingsang La–Bigu–Loting–Laduk–Orang–Gongar–
Simigaon–Beding–Na–(Tashi Lapsa)–Beding–Simigaon–Singati–
Charikot*

Side trips:

- *Thingsang La–Kalinchok–Charikot;
or –Kalinchok–Lapilang–Singati*
- *Bigu–Alampu slate mines*
- *Loting–Bulukpa–Tselaphu*
- *Beding–Daldung La–Simigaon / Tasinam*
- *Simigaon–Tasinam– Jagat*
- *Bhorle to Tenekhu Hindu temple*

Expedition treks:

- *from Singati (Suri Dobhan) to Na via Yalung La*
- *from Na over the Tashi Lapsa to Namche Bazaar*

Time framework:

*(actual walking days; allow additional time for rest days, visiting
sites, etc.)*

4–5 days:

Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa–Thingsang La–Kalinchok–Charikot

7 days:

*Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa–Thingsang La–Bigu–Loting–Singati–
Ratomate–Dolakha Charikot*

9 days:

*Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa– Thingsang La–Bigu–Alampu–
Bulukpa–Loting–Singati–Ratomate–Dolakha/Charikot*

74 / *The Gauri Shankar Trekking Area*

<i>From</i>	<i>Elev. (m.)</i>	<i>To</i>	<i>Elev. (m.)</i>	<i>Time: this direc- tion</i>	<i>reverse direc- tion</i>	<i>Facilities</i>
Kathmandu	1350	Barhabise	800	4h bus, 3h car	same	Bus, Ls, T, Sh
Barhabise	800	Karthali	1500	3-4h	2h	CS, L, Sh
Karthali	1500	Dolangsa	2500	5h	3½ h	L, CS
Dolangsa	2500	Thingsang La	3319	3-3½h	2½	
Thingsang La	3319	Rupthang	2200	3½h	3h	
Rupthang	2200	Bigu Gompa	2500	1½h	1h	L,CS, Hp
Bigu Gompa	2500	Loting	1900	3½h	4h	L, CS
Loting	1900	Chilankha	1800	1-1½h	1½h	L, CS, Hp
Chilankha	1800	Chyarsapa	1900	1h	1½h	
Chyarsapa	1900	Laduk	2000	2½h.	2½h	L, CS, Hp
Laduk	2000	Bulung	1900	1½h	1¼h	CS, Hp
Bulung	1900	Yarsa	1750	1-1½h	1¼h	CS
Yarsa	1750	Orang	1900	1h	½h	L,CS, Hp
Orang	1900	Thadi	1800	2½h.	3h	
Thadi	1800	Gongar	1200	2h	2½h	L,CS, Hp, Sh
Gongar	1200	Chhetchhet	1350	1½h	1¼h	
Chhetchhet	1350	Simigaon	2100	2½-3h	1h	L,CS, Hp, Sh, Go
Simigaon	2100	Kyalche	2850	4-5h	4h	Cp
Kyalche	2850	Dongyang	2800	½h.	½h.	Cp
Dongyang	2800	Beding	3700	5h	3h	Cp, PR, Go, Sh
Beding	3700	Na	4200	3h	2h	Cp
Na-Yalung La-Suri Dobhan	4200	Tsho Rolpa	4550	2h	1½h	
		Yalung La	5200	5h	4h	
		Suri D.-Singati	1000	5 days Full trek	5 days Full trek	

Remarks	Side trips	Short exit to
market town, but not the best place to stay		
after steep steps for nearly 500m, the remote area begins		
first good viewpoint		
partly steep, with spectacular first views of Gauri Shankar	Kalinchok–Charikot 2 days	
deep forest	Sangba 2h, Singati 8h	Singati 8h
Bigu Gumpa: large nunnery, best valley views, place to stay	Alampu slate mines ½ day	
nice rest stop, but no shops	Bulukpa ½ day	Singati 7h
nice rest stop, but no shops		Singati 6h
no shops or accommodation		Singati 5½h
pleasant rest stop, but no shops		Singati 2½h
pleasant rest stop, no shops, lovely CS, beautiful GS views		Singati 3h
pleasant rest stop, no shops, lovely CS, beautiful GS views		Singati 4½h
pleasant rest stop, no shops, lovely CS, beautiful GS views		Singati 5h
panoramic views to Rolwaling, Tasinam and Jagat		
impressive steep-sided valley		Jagat 1½, Singati 6h
very scenic: rich tropical forest, wild gorge, high waterfall	Lamobagar (2h, but restricted area)	Singati 7h
steep up, pleasant rest stop, best GS view	Daldung La–Beding, Tasinam	Singati 8h
scenic area: tropical forest; also very basic food and shelter	Daldung La–Simigaon	Singati 12h
very basic food and shelter available		Singati 12½h
scenic trail, remote village perched like an eagle's nest	Daldung La–Simigaon	Singati 15½h
green valley surrounded by icy peaks, holy sites, many excursions	Yalung Ri, Ramdung; Yalung La, Suri Dobhan	
spectacular viewpoint, trail to Tashi Lapsa	Dudh Khunda Lake 2h, Na 3h	
guide necessary: dangerous in bad weather, no food or shelter		

76 / The Gauri Shankar Trekking Area

Na- Tashi Lapsa- Namche	4200	Tashi Lapsa	5755	2 days	2 days	Cp
		Thame	3900	6h	9h	Ls, CS Sh, Go
		Namche Bazaar	3440	2½h.	3h	Ls, CS Sh, Go, T, Hp; e-mail
Beding- Daldung La- Simigaon	3700	Daldung La	3970	6h	5h	Cp
		Simigaon	2100	5h	6h	L, CS, Hp, Sh, Go
Beding- S'gaon- Singati	3700	Simigaon	2100	7h	9h	L, CS, Hp, Sh, Go
		Singati	1100	8h	9h	Ls,CS, Shs, T, (bus)
Gongar- Singati	1200	Jagat	1150	1½h	1½h	Ls, Cp, Sh
		Manthali	1150	½h	½h.	Cp, Sh
		Suri Dobhan	1100	2½h.	2½h	CS, Sh
		Singati	1100	1½h	1½h	Ls,CS, Shs, T, (bus)
Singati- Charikot	1100	Gumu Khola	1000	¾h	¾h	Ls, CS, Shs
		Malepu	950	2h	2h	CS
		Ratomate	900	½h	½h	Ls, CS, Shs
		Dolakha	1650	2½h.	2h	Ls, Cp, Shs, T, bus
		Charikot	1970	1h on foot, ¼h bus	¾h on foot, T,HP, bus	Ls, Shs
		Kathmandu	1350	6h bus, 5h car	6h bus, 4h car	
Singati	1100	Dolakha	1650	4h bus	4h bus	Ls, Cp,Shs, T, bus
		Kathmandu	1350	4+6h bus	6+4h bus	
Thingsang La- Kalinchok- Charikot	3200m	Kalinchok	3810	5h	5h	
		Kuri	3600	½h	¾h	Ls, Cp, Sh
		Charikot	1970	6h	7h	Ls, Shs, T,HP, bus

Facilities: abbreviations Cp = camping, HP = hospital, PR = private room, CS = campsite, Hp = healthpost,

full expedition gear required, 2 days and 2 nights in ice, rockfall. Not midwinter	Pacharmo 6187m (not covered here - expedition trek)	Thame 6h, Namche Bazaar 9h
major bazaar town of Everest Region	gateway to Everest	helicopter rescue, 1 day to Lukla airfield
spectacular in good weather, not possible in rain or snow	Tasinam 6h, Jagat 8h	
panoramic views, fantasy-like forests, always steep, good weather required		
	Simigaon–Tasinam 2h, Jagat 4h	
	Tasinam 3h, Simigaon 5h	
shortly after Manthali is a stretch with rare subtropical vegetation		
	remote 5 day trek to Yalung La-Na	
busy bazaar/ roadhead, bus trip on new track is uncertain – better done on foot	Laduk 2½, Bulung 3, Loting 6h	
pleasant location along Tama Koshi, bustling marketplace	about 20 minutes walk to the road	
quiet settlement along Tama Koshi, mostly in shade-rich forest		
good to spend the night before/after Dolakha Bazaar		
steep, impressive entrance / exit to the area, GS view		
6h by bus to Kathmandu, 5h by car; Dolakha District HQ.	Kalinchok 7h, Jiri by bus 4h	
very adventurous trip, winding scenic road		
superb viewpoint, very holy place, pilgrimage site with many festivals		
only place in this area with overnight accommodation		
6h by bus to Kathmandu, 5h by car; Dolakha District HQ		

Sh, Shs = shop, shops, Go = gompa, L, Ls = lodge, lodges, T = telephone

10 days:

Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa– Thingsang La–
Bigu–Loting–Laduk–Orang–Gongar Khola–Singati–Ratomate–
Dolakha/Charikot

12 days:

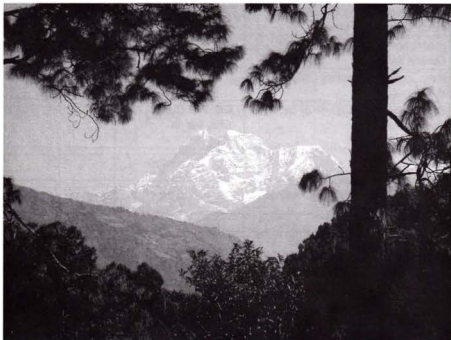
Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa–Thingsang La–Bigu–Loting–Laduk–
Orang–Gongar Khola–Simigaon–Tasinam –Jagat–Singati–
Ratomate–Dolakha/Charikot

17 days:

Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa–Thingsang La–Bigu–Loting–Laduk–
Orang–Gongar Khola–Simigaon–Kyalche/Dongyang–Beding–Na–
Beding–Daldung La–Simigaon–Singati–Ratomate–Dolakha (*can be
shortened by one day by omitting Daldung La*)

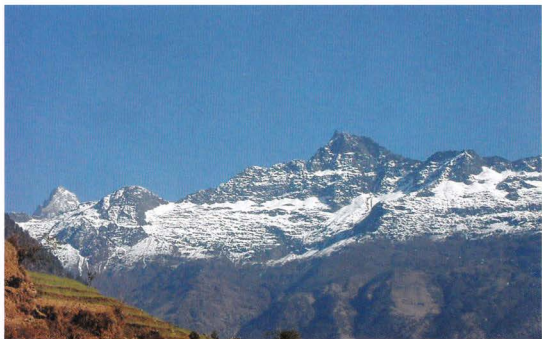
15–20 day expedition trek for mountaineers: Khare Khola–Yalung La:
Dolakha–Singati–Suri Dobhan–Sikpasor–Kalding–Honobu
Kharka–Tsare–Ramdang–Yalung La–Na–Beding–Simigaon–Singati–
Dolakha

*(alternative hike out: Simigaon–Orang–Laduk–Bigu–Thingsang La–
Dolangsa–Barhabise)*





1. On the wide high trail near Bulung



2. Ama Bamare over the terraced fields of Alampu



3. Waterfall by Chhetchhet



4. On the trail to Bulung



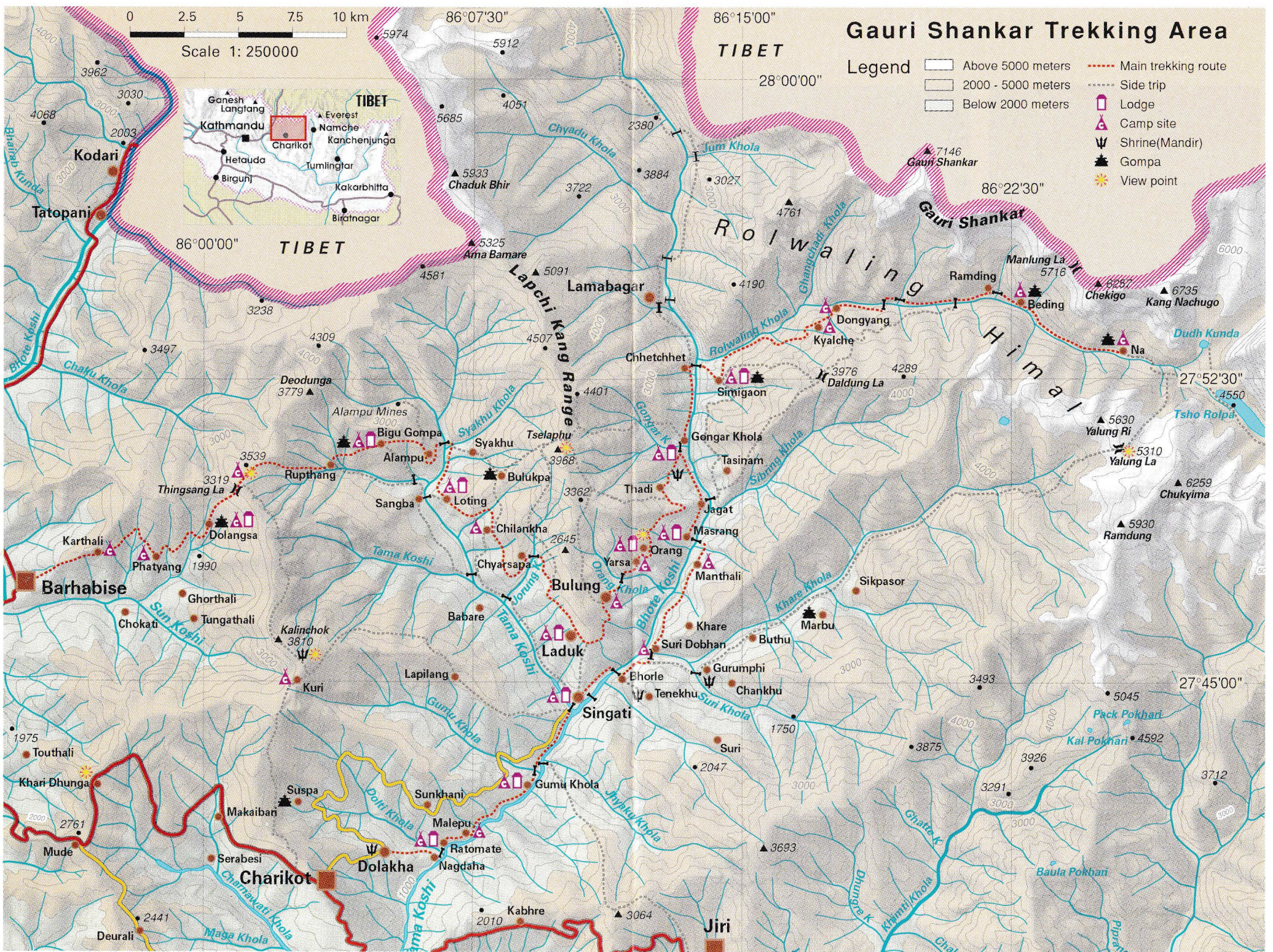
5. Bigu Gomba proudly overlooking the valley



6. Chyarsapa trail, high above the Jorung Khola

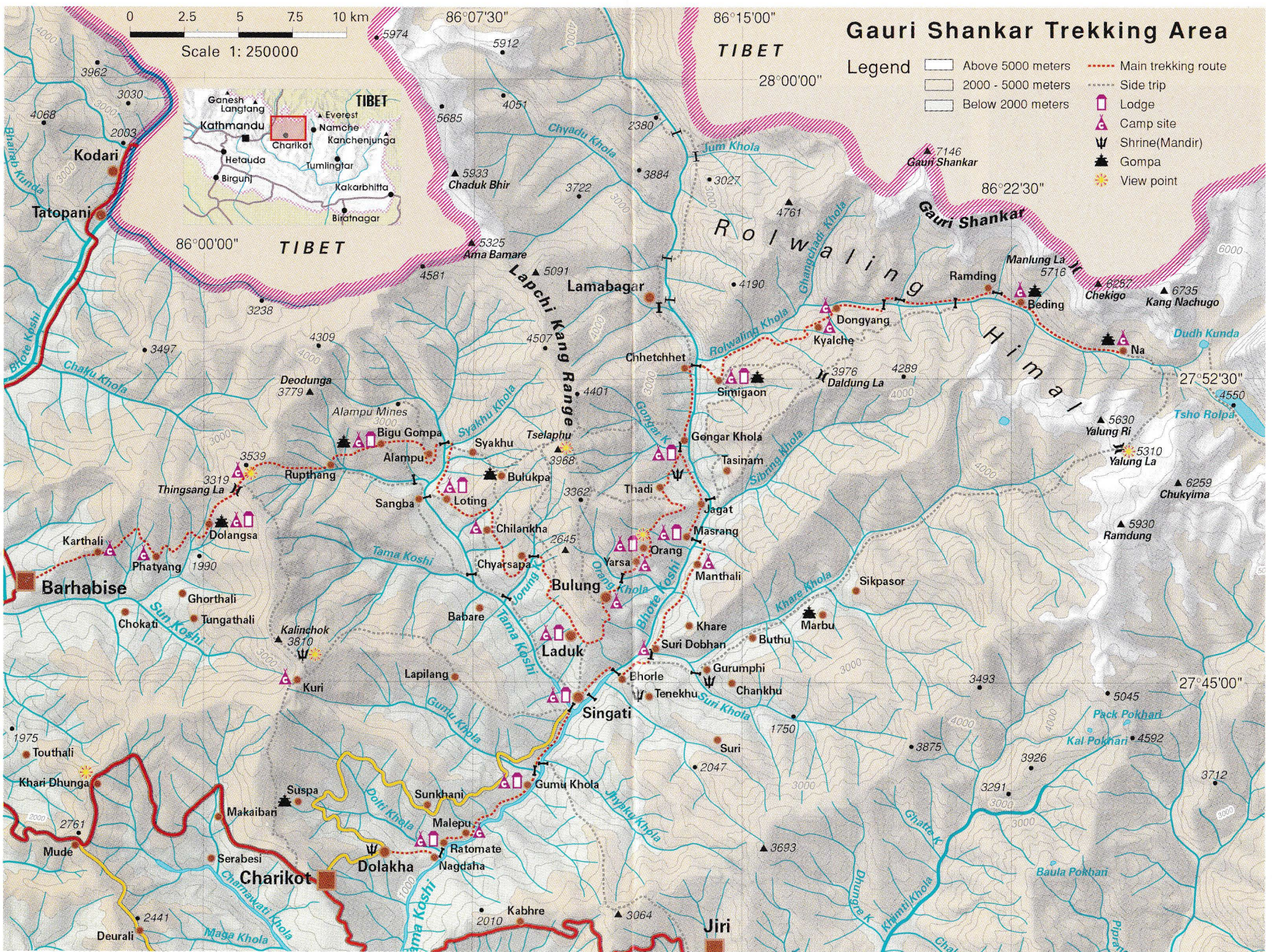


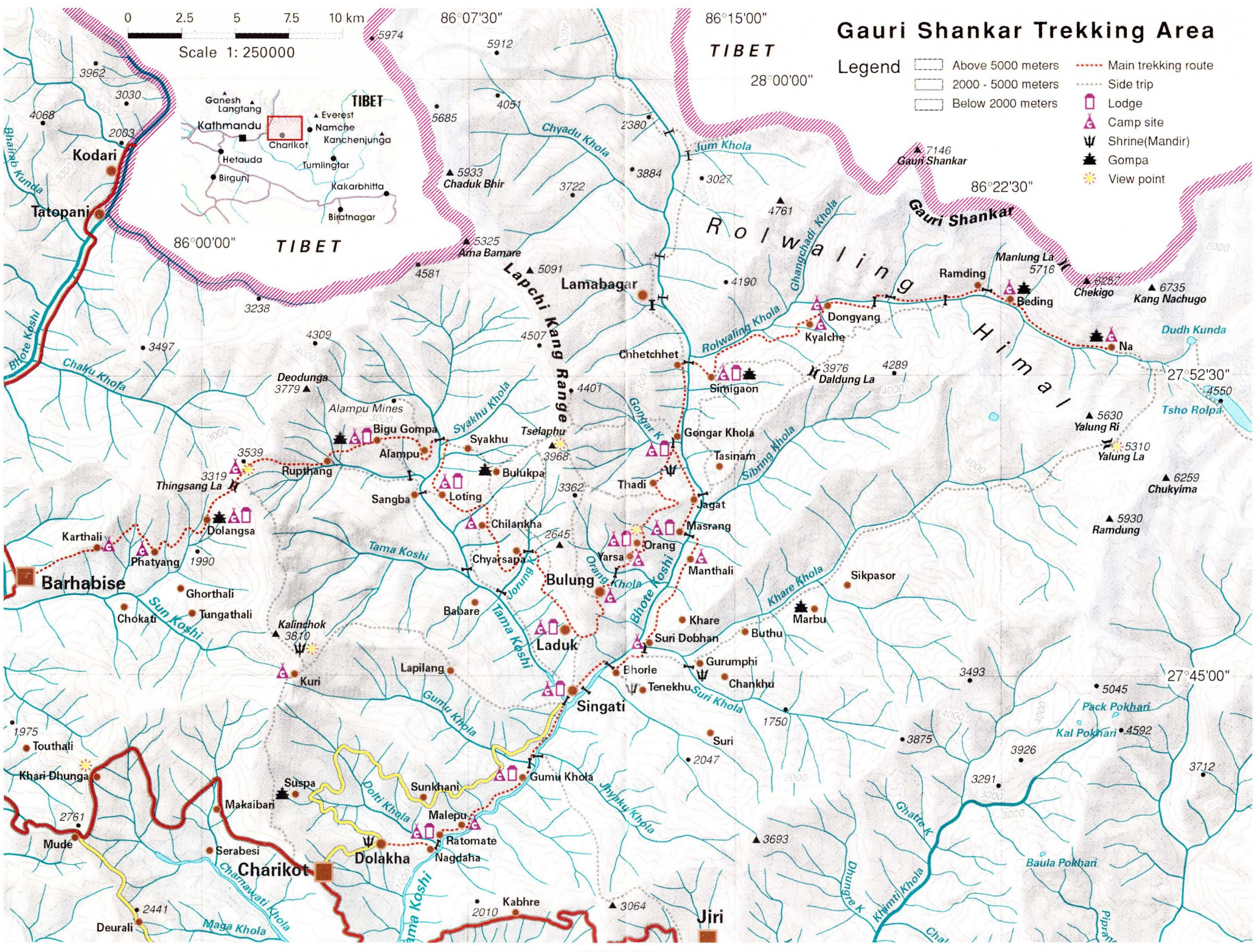
7. Kami beauties near Bigu



Gauri Shankar Trekking Area

- Legend
- Above 5000 meters
 - 2000 - 5000 meters
 - Below 2000 meters
 - Main trekking route
 - Side trip
 - Lodge
 - Camp site
 - Shrine(Mandir)
 - Gompa
 - View point







8. Jhankris on Kalinchok



9. Lush monsoon vegetation



10. Two Sherpa ladies of Beding



11. Tamang children of Chyarsapa



12. Jagat far below Tasinam



13. Haribodhini Ekadashi celebrations in Gumu Khola



14. Jagat villagers



15. Everything has to be carried



16. Making lokta paper in Singati



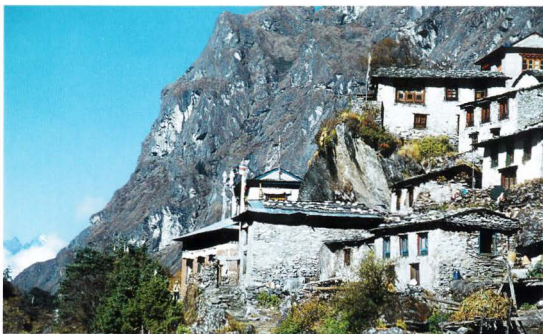
17. Laying water pipes near Beding



18. Chekigo on the Tibetan Boarder



19. Tsobjé, above Tsho Rolpa Lake



20. Beding, at 3,700 m.

Detailed Route Descriptions

Main trekking route: Barhabise circuit

Kathmandu–Barhabise

(Kathmandu–Charikot/Dolakha)

All our trekking route descriptions start from Barhabise. It is easy to access, you can start trekking the same day – and it is the most beautiful way to leave everything quickly behind you. Immediately after Karthali, a different world begins. In Dolangsa you will feel that you are far away from Kathmandu, and by Thingsang La you have reached the gateway to the beautiful Gauri Shankar Trekking Area! From now on, you can decide how far and how long to go: two days to Kalinchok–Charikot, five days to Bigu–Loting–Singati/Dolakha, or two weeks roaming the entire Rolwaling area. The central location of Singati always offers a quick way out.

Barhabise is a three- to four-hour bus ride from Kathmandu, with several departures throughout the morning. You can reach Charikot/Dolakha in five to six hours from Kathmandu's old bus station by Ratna Park, travelling on a good Swiss-built road with spectacular mountain views. There is one daily express bus to Charikot and Dolakha leaving at 7 am, and local buses to Charikot, Dolakha, and Jiri leave throughout the day until 2 pm. The express/non-stop bus is faster and more comfortable since the seats are ticketed in advance and this bus does not stop en route to pick up additional passengers with their baggage and livestock. Tickets cost approximately Rs. 68. to Barhabise and Rs. 135 to Dolakha, although fares are always subject to change.

The bus takes three hours to reach Khadichaur, twenty minutes before Barhabise. In Khadichaur the Charikot–Jiri road branches off eastwards, and crosses a long bridge over the Bhote Koshi, while the Arniko Highway to Barhabise and the Tibetan border continues due north. Barhabise itself is a bazaar town where basic items are available, together with an amazing variety of cheap Chinese goods. Accommodation exists, but most trekkers will prefer to forge ahead.

For those travelling to Charikot/Dolakha Bazaar, from Khadichaur to Charikot the road climbs and snakes along for two and a half hours, rising above terraced hillsides until it reaches Charikot. The non-express buses stop at Khadichaur for lunch, whereas the express bus continues another hour onwards to Mude on the high ridge. In

Charikot, Dolakha-bound buses stop for a few minutes to pick up local passengers, and then continue the remaining fifteen minutes or so to Dolakha.

Alternatively, a private vehicle can be arranged from Kathmandu to Barhabise or Dolakha. This costs approximately Rs. 3,500 to Barhabise and Rs 5,000 to Dolakha as of summer 2002.

There are several basic lodges and tea stalls in Dolakha, but most trekkers who start from Dolakha descend to Ratomate the same afternoon. From Dolakha some buses may continue along the new fair-weather road to Singati.

Barhabise–Karthali–Dolangsa–Thingsang La

Barhabise

In Barhabise you can buy all kinds of supplies. There are several basic lodges and ditto local eateries, a bus stand, telephone and many shops selling cheap Chinese goods.

If possible, start the same day towards Karthali, where you will find a campsite and very basic accommodation. There are no commercial maps showing the right trail. Most misguide you along the Sun Koshi, down in the valley. Just remember that the main trail is always high above the Sun Koshi, along its northern slope.

Barhabise–Karthali (3–4 h.)

The trail to Karthali starts in the middle of the bazaar, with steep stone steps 500 metres up. At the end of the steps you come to a ridge overlooking Sun Koshi valley deep below. Now the trail levels out, and after passing many small settlements, you reach the small village of Karthali.

Watermills

In this area, any mechanisation of agriculture is largely limited to harnessing natural and animal power. Oxen and buffaloes are used to plough and press oil, whilst water-mills are used to grind hard grains into flour. Many villages in the Gauri Shankar area have at least one water mill operating on a small river or tributary somewhere on the outskirts of the village. A water mill may be communally owned, but more often it will be owned and operated by one miller who charges his clients a small percentage of the corn or millet flour he grinds.

Other than horizontal wheels in the form of millstones, mini-turbines and oil presses, the hillspeople of the Gauri Shankar area are essentially living in a 'pre-wheel' society – in the sense that wheels are useless in such extreme topography, not because people haven't seen them or invented them yet. Some technologies are simply not suitable for Himalayan villages.

Karthali–Phatyang (3 h.)

Leaving the wide fields of Karthali behind, the trail takes several steep steps to gain elevation. You pass some attractive watermills, and the first *chörtens* and *mani* walls that indicate Buddhist Tamang settlements. Halfway to Dolangsa you will find the only teashop, which also has a campsite (Phatyang).

Phatyang–Dolangsa (2 h.)

From Phatyang you start on the first forest walk of your climb, passing a huge waterfall which is at its most impressive after the summer monsoon and until November. The shady trail continues through rhododendron forest, ending after a short descent to an open place with few houses.

Cross the small suspension bridge and climb up to Dolangsa, the first houses of which start soon after. Mainly Sherpas live here; it will take another hour to reach the gompa, the campsite and the lodge. While the lodge is still under construction, ask at the gompa kitchen for shelter. The same applies throughout the area: where Community Development Committee² lodges are not yet open, other accommodation will always be available on request.

Dolangsa (2,500 m.)

The name Dolangsa comes from the Sherpa word *do*, meaning ‘stone’, and *sa*, meaning ‘standing’: in the middle of the village stands a sacred stone with a hole in it. This represents the god Bhume, an animistic earth deity. Nearby are two large spreading brown oak trees that have escaped the usual stunting process caused by continuous leaf- and branch-cutting. The trees owe their size to the fact that the goddess Devi is believed to reside beneath their roots.

Majestically overlooking the Sun Koshi valley and the sprawling village is the gompa. Above are the campsite and the CDC lodge. For trekkers without tents, there is no more shelter until Bigu (7–8 hours) or Kuri behind Kalinchok (also 7–8 hours).

Dolangsa–Thingsang La (3 h.)

The trail to Thingsang La first winds up steeply through rhododendron forests, which bloom red and white from late March to mid-April. After 1½ hours you reach pleasant meadows and a temporary Sherpa

² Community Development Committees (now Cooperatives), or CDCs, are local bodies formed under the auspices of Eco Himal's Rolwaling Ecotourism Project, described in greater detail in the Afterword to this book.

kharka (high pasture) before the last, bare, rocky and steep ascent to Thingsang La (3,319 m.).

On reaching the actual pass, which is marked by two old chörtens, you can look down the impressive trail you came up and see the lower land on the one side, and then gaze over to Gauri Shankar and the Rolwaling range on the other. Continue northeast towards Bigu – or follow the ridge to Kalinchok. (*This route is described in side trip 1: Kalinchok.*)

Thingsang La–Bigu Gompa 5 hours

Thingsang La–Rupthang (3½ h.)

The trail to Bigu leads northeast through a forest to a huge open space with a very long mani wall and wonderful clear views. This is Thulo Thingsang La ('Big Thingsang Pass'). However, this clearing has no water source, making it difficult to camp overnight here.

Only ten minutes further down, at 3,120 metres there is another large clearing, Sano Thingsang La ('Small Thingsang Pass'), where there is a roofed stone shelter, a large open space and a small stream. Here trees block the view, but in the nearby forest is another excellent viewpoint for Gauri Shankar as well as Ama Bamare (5,325 m.). A small lodge and campsite are planned here.

Another 15 minutes down is the last pasture with temporary seasonal shelters used by yak herders, and a small stream. Except from one pasture below, this is the last good viewpoint for Gauri Shankar until Bulung. The hillside here was ravaged by fire some years ago, and only bare and charred tree trunks remain standing.

Proceeding through dense stands of rhododendron and enormous firs and cedars, at 2,910 metres you reach a tiny clearing which is used as a yak pasture in season, called Khasrubas or 'brown oak' camp – a fitting name, since the last oak trees before the pass stand here. From the clearing, you descend mainly through dense forests to Rupthang. The colourful Danphe (Impeyan) pheasant, Nepal's national bird, can often be sighted in this area.

Soon after crossing the Amatal Khola over a wooden bridge you come to the junction Bigu–Gaglate–Sangba. Take the left fork and continue along the main trail to Bigu. After passing the stone steps, you reach the first of the few houses that comprise Rupthang, where there is also a very basic teashop.

Rupthang–Bigu Gompa (1½ h.)

A mostly gentle ascent of 1½ hours brings you to the nunnery of Bigu Gompa. There is a community lodge and campsite, both with

overwhelming views to the mountains, the valley and the gumpa. Private rooms are available.

Bigu Gumpa (2,500 m.)

The area around Bigu Gumpa is definitely a place where you could spend several days. Visit the gumpa (morning prayers are from 5–7 am), or stroll around in the villages nearby. Climb behind the gumpa as far as you wish, see some *lokta* paper production, and enjoy the tranquil atmosphere. (See also description in Part I.)

Visitors can stay in the simple guest rooms between the public well and the gumpa kitchen for about a hundred rupees a night (including kitchen charge for self-caterers). Basic meals can also be arranged with the nuns in their kitchen beside the gumpa.

A short walk from Bigu:

There is a nice option for an afternoon hike 1½ hours above Bigu Gumpa, up the hill directly behind the gumpa. This short climb offers

Biography:

Ani Sherab Wangmo Sherpa of Bigu Gumpa

by Ramyata Limbu

She has spent more than half her life in the maroon robes of a Buddhist nun. Sherab Wangmo Sherpa, the kindly-looking abbess, or *loben*, of Bigu Nunnery, joined when she was 18. Today she supervises some 60 women who have chosen to live in prayer and meditation.

In the more three decades she has lived in Bigu, the place has become bigger, brighter and better. It's home. *'We used to have tiny cells, and the whole place was like a jungle over-run with thorny fields. It's really improved'*, says the elderly head nun. The picturesque nunnery, with its rows of little houses, a central prayer hall and a community kitchen, is set amidst fir trees, green meadows, crystal-clear streams and small patches of vegetable gardens. It is a good place to break a trek, an ideal retreat for introspection and reflection. Although Bigu is already a popular rest-day stop for organised trekking groups, the nuns expect to get even more visitors. Says Ani (*'ani'* translates as *'nun'*) Sherab Wangmo, *'As long as they don't disturb the peace and tranquillity, visitors are more than welcome.'*

Unlike many gompas or monasteries in the urban centres of Kathmandu and Pokhara, donations are not rolling in at Bigu. However, the nuns know that they are much better off than their counterparts inside Tibet itself. Over time, the nunnery has not only survived, but also established itself as the religious centre for Buddhists from all over the region.

As a result, the nuns feel that Bigu is truly blessed. They believe the prayers of a renowned high lama, who pronounced before his death that the nuns of Bigu should never want, have been answered.

fantastic views of the valley and mountains in all directions, and verdant rhododendron woods at the top. The path is used by the nuns for collecting firewood and is easy to find. At the top (3,100 m.) you are almost level with the Thingsang La pass (3,319 m.).

Bigu-Loting 3-4 hours

Bigu-Alampu 2 h.

From the nunnery area, several trails run down to Sangba and to Alampu. The steepest one leads to Sangba; it starts north of the gumpa at the public well. The Alampu trail also starts there but turns north after the first houses on the left past the gumpa compound. The Alampu trail is much more scenic. After about an hour you will come to a viewpoint with a chörten, from where you can reach the **Alampu slate mines** in about 1½ hours. (*See Alampu Slate Mines, side trip 2.*) Below lies the sprawling village of Alampu with its slate-roofed houses and yards, dominated by the blue roof of the school. This settlement has perhaps the largest Thangmi population in the region and the most traditional lifestyles.

Down at the ridge before the school, turn left down to the suspension bridge over the Kothali Khola.

Biography: Kumar Thami ('Thangmi') of Alampu

by Ramyata Limbu

Kumar Thami is a man of many talents. On a trek, the slender, cheerful young porter is quick to light the stove, brew the tea and pluck a local chicken for dinner.

When the need arises, he also serves as the expedition medicine man. Hailing from a family of shamans or faith-healers, Kumar is intent on mastering the art of healing. Despite the good-natured teasing of other porters, he persistently believes that his healing strength lies in the six-inch pigtail wound around the top of his head in a traditional style. And he will wax enthusiastic about the annual pilgrimage the shamans make up to Kalinchok, a two-day walk from his village, where they drink, dance, pray and call on the spirits.

When not searching for the cause of a patient's illness by examining a the movement of a live chicken or the shape of a cracked egg, Kumar farms the land, fishes in the Tama Koshi river, and offers his services as porter during the trekking season. He has also worked the slate mine, about an hour's walk from his family's home-village of Alampu.

Kumar's greatest ambition is to become a respected healer like his father. *'We do our best to try and cure patients, to reassure them when they're ill. But if patients don't get well, we advise them to visit the health post or hospital',* he explains.

Alampu–Loting (1½ h.)

Leave Alampu, keeping the blue-roofed school building to your right, and head steeply downhill for 45 minutes through the village to the suspension bridge over the Kothali Khola. Cross the suspension bridge over this river and the little wooden bridge over the next one. In the fork between the bridges there is a little hermitage built by a wandering yogi. From here you can start the side trip to Tselaphu via Syakhu and Bulukpa, but for this you will need a local guide. (*See side trip 3.*)

The path to Loting follows the broad riverbed (keep the river on your right for some 20 minutes), and then, at the small village of Golep, climbs up steeply to about 300 metres above the river. From here you can spy the white hermitage in the rocks below, on the other side of the river. Before reaching the sprawling village of Loting, you can see the small bazaar and the bridge of Sangba far below.

Now the trail levels out. After passing the first houses of Loting, you come to the community lodge and the campsite, located on a superb sunny spot with good views of the mountains around Bigu and Kalinchok, and over the valley.

Loting is largely a Chhetri settlement, with prosperous white houses. There are also some Tamang houses, easily identifiable by the Buddhist prayer flags flying outside. In the lower part of the village there is a small Newar settlement of four or five houses. If you run out of supplies, you can go down to Sangba (20 minutes) for basic needs.

Loting–Laduk 5 hours**Loting–Chilankha (1 h.)**

Half an hour further on from Loting you come to a large *lapsi* tree (*Spondias axillaris*) with a Hindu shrine to the goddess Devi (also known as Bhagawati or Kalika) underneath it, with a bell and a number of tridents. The *lapsi* tree has tiny red berries which turn black when dried; they are used for making a delicious sweet and sour pickle.

The next village, an hour on from Loting, is Chilankha (1,800m), named after the *chilaune* tree (*Schima wallichii*; the Nepali name means ‘itchy’: the bark is an irritant). Chilankha is a large, prosperous settlement spread across the hillside, with beautiful old houses, farmlands with some big old trees remaining, a lower secondary school, a health post, a flour mill and a shop. The last houses in the village are grey with black carved wooden windows; these all belong to Chhetri families from the Khadka sub-group

Chilankha boasts another beautifully situated CDC campsite, with views over to Bigu Gompa on its hillside, and to Kalinchok.

If you need a quick exit, from Chilankha you can reach Singati in four to five hours, by descending to the confluence of the Sangba Khola and Tama Koshi rivers.

Chilankha–Chyarsapa (1 h.)

Leaving Chilankha and walking up and down on the open hillside for about one hour, you reach Chyarsapa at the little primary school high above the Jorung Khola. You can bypass the 20 houses of this Tamang village and descend to the river, crossing the metal bridge. The whole hillside here shows evidence of a major landslide in the past, and is notable for the many alder trees that have sprung up here recently.

The Alder and the Rhododendron

One winter, when it was not in bloom, a rhododendron tree asked an alder tree for its hand in marriage, but the alder was not interested: *'You're not beautiful enough for me!'* The rhododendron hung its head and was silent.

Then came the spring. When the alder tree saw the rhododendron in its full flowering beauty, it thought otherwise, and proposed. But the rhododendron was still smarting from the previous rebuff and turned the offer down, rejecting the alder as proud and selfish. Realising what it had lost, the alder flung itself down a landslide in despair.

And so now, wherever there is a landslide, alder trees are the first to start growing in its wake.

Chyarsapa–Laduk (2½–3 h.)

About one hour after Chyarsapa, you reach Jorung Gu on the Jorung Gu Khola. Continue for another hour and a half or so at the same elevation, and you come to the attractive village of Laduk.

Laduk (2,000 m.)

The upper village with the large school complex is on a plateau with lovely views up across the Tama Koshi valley with the peak of Kalinchok behind it in one direction, and further down the valley towards Singati in the other direction.

You enter the village by the school. Nearby are the campsite, the CDC lodge, the health post and a shop. Near the health post, some basic accommodation is also available.

Laduk–Bulung–Yarsa–Orang 3–4 hours

Laduk–Bulung (1½ h.)

This is one of the easiest and loveliest stretches. Always level, no ups and downs. After leaving the school area, the trail winds through the fields, with views down to the lower part of the sprawling village and



Farmhouse architecture in Bulung

Village schools

At the top of Laduk village is the secondary school with some 350 pupils, 14 staff, and two peons who run errands and do minor duties. Most schools in Nepal have a uniform; here in Laduk it consists of pale blue shorts for the boys, or dresses for the girls, with a dark blue tie, and black shoes.

Village schools such as these are supplied by the government with teachers from all over Nepal. Their basic salaries are low: graduate teachers earn Rs 7,500; lower secondary teachers Rs 4,900; and primary teachers Rs 4,100 per month. Unfortunately, it is all too common that teachers do not actually go to work regularly, leaving the students to fend for themselves. In some ethnic areas, high-caste Brahmin or Chhetri teachers from outside are not always equally motivated to teach minority Tamang or Thangmi students. Another major factor is that school teachers – like everyone throughout rural Nepal – are also farmers, and will often give priority to necessary work in the fields: food first.

Literacy levels in village Nepal remain low, and many bright local students are unable to pass the 10th grade national board exams (School Leaving Certificate) due to the poor quality of teaching in the villages. This creates a vicious cycle: village students cannot afford to leave to study elsewhere and receive the kind of education that might enable them to return to their villages as teachers who could then work to improve the quality of and commitment to teaching.

There are also a number of private schools, commonly known as 'boarding schools', which claim to offer better standards of education. However, these schools are often staffed by poorly-paid young college graduates from Darjeeling, many of whom have little teacher training or experience. Students seeking an education up to the national standard must travel to either Kathmandu or their district headquarters to study – an option beyond the financial reach of most villagers. Many organisations across the country are calling for educational reform, but it remains to be seen if or how the government will address the problem.

its gumpa. Far below you are Singati and the Tama Koshi river. After passing some five white houses of a blacksmith settlement, you come to the junction Bulung–Singati. To get to Bulung, always keep left. A pine forest accompanies you for a short while before you turn north at some broken chörtens. Just after these come the first close-up views of holy Mt. Gauri Shankar and the Bhote Koshi valley. Passing the few houses of Chisopani (not shown on our map), you again come to a small pine forest, pass a pleasant resting place with a well, and reach the first houses of Bulung.

You will be impressed by the wealth of this high village. There are gardens around the beautiful old houses with carved windows and doors, and the boundaries of the fields are dotted with trees. The village seems to have no beginning and no end; the only centre is the school. Just a few minutes after passing the school compound you come to stone steps leading to the health post, the post office – and surely the loveliest CDC campsite of all. Small platforms between huge rocks give space for single tents, with superb views to Gauri Shankar, with the Orang ridge in the foreground.

Bulung–Yarsa (1½ h.)

It is an easy descent to the bridge over the Orang Khola. After crossing the river, stay on the trail on the left side. Before the ridge, there is another fork in the trail: to Yarsa campsite to the left (ten minutes), or straight ahead to Yarsa (five minutes) and Orang village. Also here the CDC campsite is a beautiful place with superb views.

Yarsa–Orang (1 h.)

Many small trails lead to Orang, visible on the ridge ahead. The main trail comes in from Bulung, passes under the central part of Yarsa and climbs to the lowest part of the Tamang settlement of Orang, where you will find the school, the community lodge and the CDC campsite. From here there are stunning views of the Bhote Koshi valley, Tasinam and Simigaon, and the Rolwaling range with Gauri Shankar. Look back to Bulung, and you get a panoramic view of what are probably the longest and steepest terraced fields you have seen – extending more than 1,000 metres down to the valley floor.

Orang (1,900 m.)

Orang (sometimes written ‘Woran’) is inhabited mainly by Tamang. Up behind the CDC lodge, you will find beautiful farmhouses with terraces, filled with children, livestock and an incredible number of

Biography: Bir Maya Tamang of Orang

by Ramyata Limbu

Meet Bir Maya Tamang. Nearly 70, she is the petite mother of four and the grandmother of eleven children. She never went to school and was married in her early twenties. Before she got married, she lived in her father's home in the nearby village of Deolang. Now, with the exception of two visits to Kathmandu, Bir Maya has lived for more than four decades in Orang, a picturesque village with ochre-red houses, situated on a lush green hillside with views of Gauri Shankar.

Much has changed in Bir Maya's years in Orang. Coins have been replaced by paper money. Clothing has taken on a brighter hue, in keeping with the changing fashions. *'A lifetime has passed', says Bir Maya, 'Now development has come.'*

Bir Maya's life, however, remains largely untouched. Her weather-beaten face, work-worn hands and cracked feet bear testimony to a lifetime of toil. Life for her is a cycle of seasons, of planting and harvesting crops: a rotation of wheat, millet and potatoes. She is up at the crack of dawn every day, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, fuel, and fodder, tending the livestock and keeping an eye on her grandchildren.

'I'm quite old. But there's no time to rest', says Bir Maya. 'Walking up this hill after a day's work is becoming harder and harder. I don't even have time to play with my grandchildren.'

At village meetings, she hovers on the edge of the group, listening intently but rarely saying a word unless she's asked directly. The women group into twos and threes, discussing the practicalities of the village decisions. Work is underway to develop the village as a tourist site, with basic tourist facilities like toilets, water, a lodge and camping site. Bir Maya's sons work part-time as porters to earn extra income, so she understands the value of tourists, and the income they can generate. Tourism seems like a good idea, but installing toilets means using up valuable agricultural land, and with the growing population this is a problem. Bir Maya is concerned that her family might not get an equal slice of the development pie.

dogs. From Orang you can climb higher towards Tselaphu with its stunning views.

Orang–Thadi–Gongar Khola 4–5 hours

Between Orang and Gongar Khola are many villages, but as yet no teashops. Start from the CDC lodge at the same level along the fields, and after about 25 minutes, cross the suspension bridge over the Deutasing Khola. After another 25 minutes you reach the first houses of Deolang (not indicated on our map). Stay at the same level, pass the little school and then climb steadily upwards.

At the highest point of the trail, at a rest place, you will be standing 1,000 metres above the Bhote Koshi, with the Masrang bridge directly

Watch out! Nasties lie in wait!

The furry **caterpillar** found in large numbers nose-to-tail on the woody parts of the trail causes severe skin irritations and may provoke allergic reactions if you touch it. It feeds first on alder leaves, then on rhododendron. Watch carefully where you sit down, since they also string themselves across the stone resting platforms. If one lands on you, brush it off – and then take a piece of Sellotape (Scotch tape) to remove the allergenic hairs.

Another unpleasant critter is the **leech**. Numerous in the summer monsoon months, the common black ground leeches climb over the edge of your boots and attach themselves to your feet and ankles. Even worse are the larger red tree-leeches of higher elevations, which fling themselves down from above and attach to your head and arms. Both varieties suck your blood until they have had their fill and then drop off. They do not carry any disease, and you rarely notice them until you see the blood later. If you find leeches on your body, sprinkle them with salt, which will make them curl up and fall off. Do not pull them off directly, as their mouths will get stuck under your skin and can cause infection. The good news: leeches are rarely found above 3,500 metres, and they disappear soon after the monsoon.

The poison ivy/ oak/ sumac of the Americas is unknown in Nepal, but has an equally unpleasant counterpart in the **stinging nettles** found in profusion along the trailside and wherever there has been human habitation. Contact with nettles produces an immediate stinging sensation that can persist, often with an irritable rash. Long trousers and long-sleeved shirts help to provide protection. On the positive side, the same nettles are useful both for food and for cloth – see boxed text on Plants, below.

below. Continue through a small rhododendron forest and descend gently to Thadi, another Tamang settlement. Below Thadi, the trail comes to a ridge with mani walls and chörtens, leading steeply down. At its bottom is the famous shrine of Deolingeswari, a site visited by thousands of pilgrims on the full moon of the month of Pus, usually in mid-January.

From here it is approximately one hour down to Gongar Khola, on a trail that is stone paved most of the way. Before the last steep descent, you pass the blacksmith settlement of Sanku. Here all the families are Kami, the Hindu occupational caste. It is they who produce iron tools and curved khukuri knives for the entire area. From the last steps you can see the school, the CDC lodge and campsite, and the suspension bridge leading to the main part of Gongar Khola across the river.

Gongar Khola (1,200 m.)

Gongar Khola has only ten houses, peopled by Gurung, Chhetri, and Tamang. On the south side is the primary school, the CDC lodge and a campsite. A huge suspension bridge brings you over the Gongar Khola to the main centre of the village, where there are two shops. The first one is usually well stocked. This is the final stop for buying staple provisions like rice, lentils, kerosene and instant noodles. Further on these may not be available and, if they are, they will be significantly more expensive. The shop also offers two or three beds. You can find other basic accommodation upon request.

If you do not plan to go on to Simigaon and the high Rolwaling area proper, this is the turn-off point to Singati (six or seven hours' hike downstream).

Gongar Khola–Simigaon 4 hours (2½ hours down: gradual incline, steep between Chhetchhet and Simigaon)

Gongar Khola–Chhetchhet bridge (1½ h.)

The next stretch takes you through many different ecological regions, including dense subtropical forest, damp jungle passages with orchids and moss growing on thick tree trunks, impressive gorges and splendid waterfalls.

One hour after leaving Gongar Khola, along the trail that largely follows the Bhote Koshi, you reach the first houses of Chhetchhet, but there is no visitor accommodation here. The suspension bridge over the Bhote Koshi comes just after Chhetchhet. The path on the east side of the river continues north to Lamabagar and Tibet, but this route is still strictly off-limits to tourists.

After passing the few simple teashops of Chhetchhet, cross the suspension bridge over the Bhote Koshi. After the bridge, there is a good resting place before the climb up to Simigaon.

Left of the steep trail winding up to Simigaon, under the rockface, look up to see hanging orchids and swarms of wild bees on the boulders above. Below, Shiva tridents and Buddhist prayer flags are placed harmoniously side by side. Higher up in Simigaon itself, again you will see this interesting combination of the two religious symbols outside the Sherpa houses – Buddhist prayer flags topped with a Shiva trident.

Chhetchhet–Simigaon (2½ h.)

From the river it is a long steep climb up to Simigaon, on a trail vulnerable to monsoon landslides. You now have 300 metres of

A botanical treasurehouse

Paper made from the lokta (daphne) bush

Traditional papermaking can be seen in many places in the Gauri Shankar region. Keep your eyes peeled for the paper drying on frames in the sun. The plant used is the daphne bush (*Daphne bholua* and *Daphne papyracea*), found in the forests between 1,500 metres and 3,000 metres. It is easy to recognise and a delight to walk past during the spring on account of its pretty pink flowers and heavy sweet scent.

The inner bark of the bush, *lokta*, is collected in the forests and brought down and boiled, then beaten to a pulp, washed and sifted onto a frame, and dried in the sun for two or three hours. Much of the paper produced here is sold to wholesalers in Kathmandu, although some makes its way to Europe.

Unfortunately, there is a danger of over-exploitation. The high demand has already caused a marked decline in the occurrence of the plant, but new projects are beginning to establish daphne nurseries to manage this natural resource.

The **Himalayan giant nettle**, *allo* in Nepali, is an important and versatile wild plant. Growing at elevations between 1,000 and 3,000 metres, the nettle (*Girardinia diversifolia*) contains strong fibres that are used for weaving mats, fishing nets, rope and sacks. Traditionally, *allo* fibres were used to make clothing, and many older villagers will have worn nettle clothing as children. The idea of having a change of clothes is a relatively new concept: a nettle-fibre suit would be worn until it quite literally fell off their backs. As with other nettles, fresh *allo* leaves are used as food: cooked as a highly nutritious soup for humans, and raw for sheep and cattle. *Allo* is also used medicinally: it is widely believed that an extract of the leaf can bring down a fever when applied to the forehead.

Over the past generation, however, *allo* use has decreased so much that some young people have never seen the plant. There are two main reasons for this. First, it is getting harder to find suitable *allo* plants to harvest due to the increasing deforestation and utilisation of wild lands for cultivation. Second, with the growing availability of cheap Chinese ready-made clothes, labour-intensive and time-consuming *allo* production cannot compete. Some villages have tried to implement nettle-weaving programmes as cottage industries for income generation, but they have not been overly successful.

Cactus may not be what you expect from Nepal, but the **common milk hedge** (*Euphorbia royleana*) is indigenous to the Himalayan region and you are sure to see it along the trail in the lower stretches of the Gauri Shankar trekking area. Despite its rather prickly appearance, it has many uses. Known as *syuri* in Nepali, the plant's medicinal applications include eating the boiled pith to ease stomach troubles, applying the latex to cuts and wounds to stop bleeding or using it to relieve earaches, coughs and asthma. However, the milky juice is so potent that it has traditionally been used to poison fish. If you should you get the milk on your fingers, take care not to rub them in your eyes!

Other outstanding plants in the area include the many varieties of **rhododendron** and **orchids**; the **tree ferns** found between Manthali and Suri Dobhan; the **conifers** – especially fir and cedar; the **gentians** and **edelweiss** that bloom at higher elevations before the monsoon season – and of course the **juniper**, a central ingredient in the incense burned in gompas and private homes.

elevation to gain before coming to the first houses of the village, and 600 metres to reach the gompa at the top of a 2,100-metre bluff.

You pass several little stupas and mani walls while the trail leads steeply up through this beautifully laid-out Sherpa village. On top of the ridge you will find the school, one of the two campsites, a Sherpa lodge with a shop, the new CDC lodge and the health post. It is from here that you get the closest and most impressive view of the twin peaks of Gauri Shankar. Over the hillside to the right are forests of magnolia and rhododendron, both in bloom in March/April.

Biography: Renorbu Sherpa of Simigaon

by Ramyata Limbu

Seated in the midst of a drying cornfield, a sickle strapped to his waist, Renorbu Sherpa looks as if he would be more comfortable standing atop a mountain. A runner for Edmund Hillary in the early 1960s, Renorbu recalls the times he travelled through the heat of the Calcutta plains, the freezing cold of the Himalayas and the more moderate climate of Kathmandu while helping the mountaineer set up schools in the Everest region. This initiative helped to foster the growth of the Khumbu region, today one of the most popular trekking areas in Nepal.

Now in his 60s, Renorbu is engaged in trying to attract tourists to his own village of Simigaon. Along with other villagers, he is intent on completing construction of the CDC lodge. They are optimistic that the lodge, perched on a plateau, overlooking a green valley sliced through by roaring white waters from Tibet, will provide weary trekkers with a spectacular view and a place to rest and eat. It will also mean that trekking groups will not have to carry everything in loads up the steep trails or travel in big expeditions. *'They'll be spending money in the village, providing much-needed income to the community'*, says Renorbu.

The growth of tourism, he hopes, will reduce out-migration and will help to jump-start development in the region, which is now largely sustained by agriculture and animal husbandry. Local harvests of corn, millet and potatoes are often inadequate to see families through the year, so many supplement their income by portering and joining trekking expeditions to the more prosperous Everest region. How much better it would be if they could do all the same at home!

Simigaon 2,100 m.

Simigaon translates as 'Beanville'. The story goes that the village was founded by a hunter who inadvertently dropped a handful of beans he had brought with him to eat during the day while hunting. These beans took root, and when he returned to the spot and found them sprouted a year later, he settled here and gave the place its name. Today there are more than eighty Sherpa houses and a small Tamang community here.

Simigaon is a good place to take a rest day. If you do not plan to proceed to Beding, you can take the scenic trail towards Tasinam; that will bring you down to the Bhote Koshi by Jagat in about four hours. (*See side trip 5*)

The Rolwaling valley from Simigaon to the Tashi Lapsa pass

Simigaon–Kyalche/Dongyang–Beding–Na: two days up, one day down

There are two trails to Beding, which is two days' walk up the Rolwaling Valley.

The main trail (*described in the next paragraph*) proceeds gently to Kyalche/Dongyang and Beding, while the other one heads steeply up from the Simigaon Gompa to the Daldung La pass, at just under 4,000 metres. With such rapid ascent, there is a danger of mountain sickness (AMS)! Don't use this steep trail for the ascent – keep it as an alternative for coming down from Beding, when you are already acclimatised. That being said, it is lovely, passing through thick rhododendron forest with mossy brown oak and juniper trees, as well as summer pastures where there are water sources in the autumn, but not in the spring. This is the route commonly used by the people of Tasinam (the Tasinam path joins it a couple of hours above Simigaon), but it is in parts difficult to find and may be impassable when there is snow. It affords some close views of Gauri Shankar, Kukur Raja (the 'Dog King' mountain at the head of the Bhote Koshi valley past Lamabagar), and all the mountains to the west, including Kalinchok in the distance. Even if you do not opt for this path to or from Beding, it is worth climbing some way up in this direction for a day hike from Simigaon just for the views.

Simigaon–Beding–Na (main trail)

Simigaon–Kyalche/Dongyang (4–5 h.)

The main trail starts from the Simigaon CDC lodge towards the Rolwaling river, through spectacular forest. Rhododendron and magnolia, enormous oak trees with acorns the size of apples, and the famous Himalayan cedar (*deodar*) grow in this special climate. The warmer air from the Bhote Koshi valley is funnelled through the steep Rolwaling valley, where it condenses and moistens the steep slopes. The result is the outstanding flora, with rare ferns and lichen, iris and orchids.

Look for monkeys in the trees, as they are often spotted in these forests, as well as many kinds of songbirds. The noises of Himalayan ravens will accompany you as you climb gradually on a wide and clear

path to Kyalche (2,850 m.), reached four hours after leaving Simigaon. With its summer pasture and tea stall, manned by Sherpas from Simigaon in the trekking seasons only (March–May and September–November), Kyalche appears as a cluster of small, smoky bamboo huts, where you can find shelter and basic food. There is a muddy camping space outside, among the grazing yaks. Although a bit dirty, this is a safe place to spend the night. A CDC lodge is planned for construction here.

Mild-tasting dried yak cheese,³ called *churpi*, is made in some huts and hung above the fire to dry. It goes rock hard, and is then stuffed away in Sherpa pockets as a protein-rich treat on the rough trails ahead.

From Kyalche there is also a trail up to Daldung La.

Kyalche–Dongyang (30 min), Beding (5–6 h.)

Half an hour beyond Kyalche, the path gradually opens onto a hillside of rhododendrons, pine trees, and charred tree-stumps left in the wake of a forest fire some 30 years ago. The trail descends past a little waterfall and over two streams to Dongyang (2,800 m.), where there is the added bonus of a toilet, and some prayer flags fluttering.

Continue along the river. One hour after leaving Dongyang you reach the bridge over the Rolwaling river at 3,000 metres, and ten minutes later you arrive at a little bridge over a tributary (Mahadev Khola). It is easy to cross the river in the dry season, but difficult for the villagers in rainy season. A suspension bridge is planned here.

At this point, from the cairns and prayer flags up on the rocks you get the only direct clear view of Gauri Shankar. From here continue to climb steadily, with the rocks rising up steeply on your left and the river down on the right. The white mountain peak ahead of you is Chekigo (6,257 m.).

Three hours after Dongyang, the trail comes down to the Rolwaling river and diverges to Daldung La (alternative route to Simigaon) over a two-log bridge. The valley is narrow at this point, and there is a holy site with many trisuls and prayer flags. *NOTE: All maps (except the one in this book) show the diversion of the trail to Daldung La incorrectly!*

Half an hour later you reach Nimare, the first of a string of Sherpa settlements (Nimare, Ramding, Gyabrug and Chameka) which are the winter homes of the inhabitants of Beding. Most local Sherpa families have three houses: one here, one in Beding itself, and one further up in

³ More correctly, *nak* cheese – the female of the species is called ‘nak’.

Na. In February/March they move from here up to Beding, in April/May onwards up to Na, returning to Beding in September/October. Then in November they move to their winter quarters lower down.

Beding (3,700 m.)

You reach Beding after a total of about five to six hours' walk. The valley here is slightly wider, with the ice flanks of Chekigo rising steeply behind the village.

The village itself is a cluster of some fifty typical Sherpa houses at the bottom of the hillside, many of them with painted window-frames and glass windows. Yaks wander through the steep, narrow and muddy little paths between them. At the entrance to the village is the gumpa with its small stone courtyard; a notice hanging here strictly forbids photography and smoking inside.

Although there is no lodge in Beding many families will take in passing trekkers for overnight stays. Boiled potatoes and soups, tea and *chyang* (local beer) will be available. Everyone lives and sleeps in the one family room upstairs, while the animals live below at ground level. You could also camp in the empty fields between the houses, with the stone walls offering a little protection against the sometimes strong and cold winds.

High up, about an hour's walk above Beding, there is an old gumpa nestled into the rock. Four times a year a prayer ceremony is held here, during which families take turns lighting butter lamps and making other ritual offerings. This edifice has also been used as a retreat for meditation by both monks and wandering yogis.

The Tibetan border is only one day away from Beding via the Manlung La pass (5,616 metres), reached by turning off the Beding-Na trail about half an hour outside Beding. Please note that tourists are not permitted to use these border crossings! The local people, however, can move freely and often drive their yaks over Manlung La. Because Rolwaling is a sacred valley, the slaughter of animals is not allowed. The Beding Sherpas therefore take their yaks to Tibet and return with dried yak meat.

About thirty years ago a huge fire swept the hillside behind Beding. It is said to have been caused by people staying in the forest and illegally shooting mountain goats. At any rate, the hillside is now bare. This fire also destroyed some houses above the village, which were never rebuilt. As in many other places in this region, the charred tree trunks and stumps are mute testimony to destructive hillside fires.

Life in Beding

Permdoma Sherpa of Beding is originally from Tibet. Her family moved from a village two days beyond the border at Lamabagar in 1943, long before the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959 and before the ensuing stream of Tibetan refugees into Nepal. She has never been back to Tibet. Her husband was born in Beding, although his parents originally came from Tibet.

The old couple have a son in Kathmandu who is a trekking and mountaineering guide and has reached the summit of Everest. Photos of him and the 1994 Norwegian expedition he accompanied hang prominently in their house. They have visited their son in Kathmandu, but chose not to live there since they do not like 'the smell of the city'.

The local school was founded by Sir Edmund Hillary and later handed over to the government. Theoretically it has some eighty pupils, but standards have fallen drastically since it became a government school. Most teachers come from outside. Being neither Sherpa nor accustomed to living in this high area, they often abscond, so it happens that no classes are being taught at all. No Sherpa in the village is interested in teaching for a meagre government salary, since the trekking business is much more lucrative. About one fifth of the people here are well enough off to send their children to school in Kathmandu.

Beding–Na (3 h., gentle climb)

Ask people in Beding to give you a room in Na if you have no tent or you think it will be too cold. Someone will accompany you to Na and open a house for you, where there will be basic shelter and maybe food.

The trail to Na follows the river up through the narrow valley, with a high rockface to the left and the steep valley wall to the right. Just before Na, the valley opens up into a wide pasture, spectacularly enclosed in the bowl of the surrounding mountains. About twenty minutes beyond Beding a path goes up to the left, looking as though it disappears right into the rock face. In fact, this is the restricted path to the Tibetan border pass at Manlung La.

After just over an hour, some 130 metres higher than Beding (3,830 m.), you get the last good clear view of the tops of Gauri Shankar before they disappear completely behind Chekigo. Two hours after leaving Beding you round a bend in the trail and suddenly find a whole new set of mountains in your line of vision. The fields of Na spill into the broad alpine arena before you. In summer edelweiss and gentian are in bloom, and behind them towers Tsoboje (6,689 m.), the sheer-ice faced mountain above Tsho Rolpa Lake. Another half hour brings you to a large mani rock, where a two-metre high Buddha is painted on a huge boulder up on the left. High above on the cliffs to your left, you see the prayer flags of the famous holy cave of Guru Rinpoche

(Padmasambhava), where he used to tether his horses when not flying about on them.

After a long mani wall you reach the summer settlement of Beding: Na.

Na (4,200 m.)

At Na there are many small stone houses, yaks and sheep, potato fields and much space for camping, also on the other side of the river further up. This area is home to the snow leopard and the golden eagle, as well as a variety of snowfowl.

When the weather is nice, Na is a good place to stay, offering the possibility of several interesting day hikes.

Yeti tales

Many people in this region are firm believers in the existence of the Yeti, or 'abominable snowman'. One of the Beding lamas will tell you that he saw the Yeti when he was a boy, and that his father often saw him close to the village. *'He is like a man, but his feet are turned backwards and he has long black hair all over his body. The male has a white band around him, and the wife is black all over.'*

According to this lama, one of the Tibetans who escaped to Nepal when the Chinese invaded in 1959 arrived with a Yeti skin and made a lot of money selling it to a German tourist group. The lama saw the Yeti with his own eyes when he was a boy: it looked like a twenty-year-old man with eyes, nose, mouth and teeth, but was very hairy!

GLOF (Glacial Lake Outburst Flood)

Throughout the Himalayan ranges, GLOFs are becoming an increasing hazard, due to the documented effects of global warming.

The prospect of the Tsho Rolpa glacial lake bursting and flooding the Rolwaling and Bhote Koshi valleys is a very real threat hanging over the settlements along these rivers. Although it is impossible to assess the timing and likely extent of such a flood, the glacial melting and growing size of the Tsho Rolpa lake have been raising the pressure alarmingly.

Projects to install a siphon and to carry out a controlled water release have failed. In spring 1998 a siren warning system was installed down the two valleys by the British Columbia Hydro International (funded by the World Bank), which would give people between ten minutes and one hour – depending how close they are to Tsho Rolpa – to try to scramble up the hillsides to safety. In June 2000, the first phase of a project to lower the water level in the lake through a man-made canal was opened. Engineers predict that the danger will be greatly lessened as this project proceeds in the coming decade, to lower it by twenty metres.

- Tsho Rolpa and from there to Dudh Kunda (a holy lake situated on the Ripimoshar Glacier, surrounded by countless snowy peaks)
- Towards Yalung La, Ramdung Glacier, or Yalung Ri (after only two hours of climbing the views are breathtaking – as is the elevation)
- Or just stroll up northwards, and climb for a while towards Bamongo, or visit Guru Rinpoche's cave.

Bear in mind that the local weather likes to change at lunchtime. It can be difficult to find the way back in fog or snow, or when the rocky trail is covered with ice.

For the return from Na you have the following routes:

Na–Beding 2 hours

Beding–Kyalche–Simigaon 7 hours, or

Beding–Daldung La–Simigaon (or Tasinam) 2 days (local guide necessary)

Beding–Simigaon–Singati–Charikot 4–5 days

Gongar Khola–Jagat–Manthali–Suri Dobhan–Singati: 5–6 hours

Gongar Khola–Jagat–Masrang (1–1½ h.)

Only one hour after leaving Gongar Khola you reach the first houses of *Jagat*, with a suspension bridge for the trail leading north (2½ hours to Tasinam, 5 hours to Simigaon). The part of Jagat by this bridge is called Magar Gau ('Magar Village'), as it is inhabited by people of the Magar ethnic group. It is also called Old Jagat. Jagat straggles along, and after heading south for some ten minutes you come to another cluster of houses by a second and bigger suspension bridge. This area is Jagat-Masrang, which has two lodges and several teashops, one with a sign proclaiming: 'Welcome to Shrestha cold store. See you me for enjoy!'

Jagat–Masrang–Manthali (20 min.)

Cross the big bridge and walk towards Manthali, a village peopled by Tamang and Newar. There are thatched and slate-roofed houses, a school and a little shop selling packets of biscuits, sweets, cigarettes and drinks. Traditional paper-making from the shrub *lokta* can be seen here, below the highest point of the trail in the village, down at the riverbank.

There are no tourist facilities, although here as elsewhere you could find a room in a private home if necessary.

Manthali–Suri Dobhan (2½ h.)

After leaving Manthali, on the rocks to the left you may note the swarms of wild bees from which local honey-hunters collect honey. After twenty minutes, the trail climbs high above the river; here you enter a unique ecological zone, with dense forests and very tropical vegetation. Descending to the river again, you will see a waterfall on the other side. This place is called Tatopani, which means ‘hot springs’. Unfortunately, the actual hot springs can no longer be found: they used to be near the river next to the waterfall, but were buried in a landslide in 1996.

The Rolwaling Valley proper lies now behind the hill to the northeast. You can see the village of Tasinam up on the hillside that blocks the view towards Gauri Shankar.

The hillside here is very steep, with a few tiny terraced fields and a number of small houses, as well as one public well, decorated with mani stones. Heading south along the easy trail by the river and through open fields, after two hours you reach a little chörten and some prayer flags above the Bhote Koshi; these announce that you are coming into Suri Dobhan.

Suri Dobhan–Singati (1½ h., level, riverside trail)

In Suri Dobhan there are some teahouses, and accommodation is available on request. At the confluence of the Khare Khola and the Bhote Koshi you find the CDC campsite, a pleasant place with a good view of Gauri Shankar. It is from here that expedition trek no. 1 to Yalung La–Na begins.

At Suri Dobhan, cross the old suspension bridge over the Khare Khola and follow the Bhote Koshi downwards. After about half an hour you come to Borle Bazaar (*see side trip 6, to Tenekhu Temple*), where you cross the river over the suspension bridge and proceed southwards for another hour to bustling Singati. Immediately upon reaching Singati you will see the CDC campsite down by the river.

Singati (1,100 m.)

Singati has become a busy little market town with well-stocked shops, and it is advisable to buy supplies here before trekking on. There are several small, basic lodges here as well as a CDC campsite. Singati has housed the small Eco Himal site office which functions as headquarters for its Rolwaling Ecotourism Project (*see Afterword*).

There is also a public telephone (not 100% reliable), and there are several pharmacy shops as well as the normal marketplace activity. A colourful local market is held here twice a month, on the 10th and 25th of the Nepali calendar, when hundreds of village people come to sell and buy local goods.

When the fair-weather road is passable, buses should bring you from Singati to Dolakha in four to five adrenaline-filled hours. More prudent souls may prefer to walk.

From Singati you have easy access to most places in the trekking area.

Approximate walking distance to:

- *Gumu Khola 1 hour*
- *Ratomate 3 hours*
- *Dolakha 5–6 hours*
- *Bigu Gompa 8 hours*
- *Loting 5 hours*
- *Laduk 3 hours*
- *Bulung 3 hours*
- *Orang 5 hours*
- *Suri Dobhan 2 hours*
- *Jagat 4 hours*
- *Gongar Khola 5 hours*

Singati–Dolakha 5–6 hours

Singati–Gumu Khola (1 h.)

Start at the south end of Singati, pass below the schools and walk for 45 minutes along the picturesque Tama Koshi. Shortly before Gumu Khola you come to a suspension bridge leading to Pikuti and Jiri. Do not cross, except for the views of Gauri Shankar, or if you want to stay at the small private campsite on the other side.

Continue on the right side of the river, past the small, narrow bazaar squeezed between the mountain and the river, and you will come to a suspension bridge over the Gumu Khola, with a fortress-like village in front of you. Up the small stream is the attractive CDC campsite. Entering Gumu Khola over the bridge, you will find a bustling marketplace, with many shops, teashops and several basic lodges.

Gumu Khola–Malepu (1¼–2 h.)

Again you follow the river downstream, through pine forests, jungles and terraced fields. There are a few teashops along the trail, and orange and pineapple plantations. In late fall and early spring, migrating birds

like cormorants, duck and geese can be seen fishing, having a food stop on their way from Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet to their warmer winter quarters in the Terai and Northern India.

Just before Malepu, there is the pleasant CDC campsite under huge pine trees. Malepu is the heart of Dolakha's avocado-growing area. If you would like to buy some good avocados – a real treat; they ripen in November – ask at the houses near the campsite. You will not find any lodges or eating places in Malepu, however.

Malepu–Ratamate (20 min.)

After 20 minutes you come to the somewhat ramshackle village of Ratamate. The small bazaar has a few very basic lodges. Walk three minutes down to the Doni Khola, and you will find another fine CDC campsite along the river, and, on the other side of the Doni Khola, a good lodge by the big suspension bridge, near where the steep trail up to Dolakha Bazaar begins.

Ratamate–Dolakha (2–2½ h.)

This is a good trail but steep throughout, with only one teahouse halfway up. There is very little shade, so try to avoid the midday heat. Before entering Dolakha, turn back to get your final glimpses of Gauri Shankar.

Dolakha (1,650 m.)

Dolakha Bazaar is an attractive Newar merchant town of historical interest, surrounded by endless rice terraces and forests. It has a lovely old marketplace with a stupa and two Newar Hindu temples, the famous Bhimsenthana and Tripura-Sundari, as well as several other temples close by: Kumari, Balkumari, Bhairabnath and Harisiddhi, which are closed to non-Hindus. (*See descriptions in Part I.*)

There are several basic lodges and guest houses. In the dusty market square near the bus stand you will find shops and small cafes, as well as telephone services. Buses to Kathmandu leave in the morning – at 6, 8, and 10 am. However, it takes only 45 minutes to walk to Charikot, where there are buses for Kathmandu until 2 pm. Always check locally for current bus times and fares.

Charikot (1,970 m.)

Besides good views of the Rolwaling massif, a busy bazaar with some basic accommodation, a bank and a bus stand, as well as the district administration, Charikot has not much to offer for the trekker. There

are several buses from 6 am until 2 pm to Jiri and to Kathmandu. From Charikot you can hike to Kalinchok in six to eight hours.

Side Trips:

Side trip 1: Thingsang La–Kalinchok–Charikot (2 days) or Thingsang La–Kalinchok–Lapilang–Singati (3 days)

Thingsang La–Kalinchok : 5 h.

The trail from Thingsang La to Kalinchok is a good clear path that is easy to find; it follows the spine of the ridge and skirts the highest points on the west side. For the entire day you have spectacular views of the Ganesh and Langtang Himal, Lapchi Kang and Rolwaling. The path climbs and dips gradually, sometimes open and sometimes through rhododendrons. You pass little pastures: in the monsoon season this is a path frequented by herdsmen. After about one and a half hours you reach a *chautara* (resting wall for porters) at 3,600 metres, where a breathtaking panorama spreads out below.

The only difficult part of the trail comes three hours from Thingsang La, where the path goes very steeply up an old landslide for a short stretch. This can be dangerous in snow, especially for porters with loads and no trekking boots. Otherwise the route presents no difficulties at all.

Just after passing the highest point (3,810 m.) you reach the Kalinchok rock where the temple boasts thousands of iron tridents, and numerous bells of all sizes. The largest of these were donated by some of the hereditary Rana prime ministers who controlled Nepal from 1845 to 1950. The main attraction of Kalinchok are its three shrines. Early every morning pilgrims come up to sacrifice goats and chicken with prayers, singing and dancing. At the August and November full moon, shamans and several thousand worshippers come up for all-night celebrations (*see description in Part I*).

Kalinchok provides the best viewpoint in the region: On clear days you can see all the way to Dhaulagiri and the Annapurnas, in line with Manaslu, Ganesh and Langtang Himal to the west, the rocky peaks of Ama Bamare and Lapchi Kang to the north and Gauri Shankar and Yalung-Ramdung peaks to the northeast, followed by Lamjura La and Hanumante to the east, and Sailung to the south.

Beside the temple rock there is an open two-storey building intended for use as an overnight shelter, but it is now smelly and dirty. A good idea would be to set up your tent inside the building for warmth and wind protection, as it is chilly even in the spring and summer. On top of the mountain ridge you will not find any water;

some 90 metres below the temple on the Charikot side there is a spring, but it is not easy to find.

Kalinchok–Kuri (½ h.)

A better option is to stay in the Sherpa village of Kuri half an hour below Kalinchok on the way to Charikot. This cluster of houses around a Buddhist stupa has a few shops, as well as simple rooms with wooden board beds and straw mats for overnight guests.

Kalinchok (Kuri–Charikot) (5–6 h. down; 6–7 h. up – steep incline)

This is the main route used by pilgrims heading to and from Kalinchok. It is broad and open, largely along a ridge, with good views of the entire Gauri Shankar massif.

About four hours down, an hour before reaching Charikot, you come to the small settlement of Deurali. This is where the trail heading uphill to Suspa Gumpa begins (*see description in section on Buddhist Gompas, in Part I*).

Kalinchok–Lapilang/Lekh Kharka (5–6 h., mainly downhill);

Lapilang/Lekh Kharka–Singati/Gumu Khola (3 h., downhill)

No water, no food, no accommodation

Go down from the Kalinchok hilltop temple to Kuri (below Kalinchok on the Charikot side), and from there climb gradually to an open pasture called Tutwan, where a path branches off to the north. It leads you through rhododendron forests straight along the ridge, with a clear view of the entire panorama of mountains and valleys spread out below, and Kalinchok temple behind you.

Five hours' walk brings you above the large sprawling village of Lapilang, inhabited by Thangmi and Brahmin/Chhetri. As there is no water at all on the ridge, go down to the right to find somewhere to stay in this village. Ask at the centre of the village near the Ayurvedic hospital and health post. Here there are also two small stone temples.

From here it is an easy three-hour walk down to the Tama Koshi at Singati or Gumu Khola, where you join the main route from the valley to Dolakha Bazaar and Charikot.

Side trip 2: Alampu slate mines (1½ h. one way)

The slate mines in Alampu produce most of the roof tiles for the entire district. The mining business is all in the hands of the Thangmi community, who work at breaking the stone from the rockface, splitting it into thin slates, and then cutting them to size. From here

they carry the heavy load to wholesalers or directly to house construction sites. The Alampu slate quarry is a far cry from the modern, mechanised mines of wealthier countries. Work here is very hard and dangerous, all done by hand under difficult conditions. All the same, the mine largely creates its own economy, affecting every aspect of life in Alampu.

To visit the slate mines, take the trail that branches off by Bigu (*described earlier*). You will need good trekking boots to climb up the steep mining slopes, strewn with small broken bits and pieces. Watch out for falling stones and rocks. From time to time the miners clear their working places of unsuitable slates, which then come down like landslides. There are several other small mines in the area, but none is as big or fascinating as Alampu.

Side trip 3: Bulukpa–Tselaphu

One and a half hour's walk directly above Loting (at 2,450 m.) you come to the village of Bulukpa (2,400 m.) with a little gumpa on a pasture above it, the site of a pleasant place to camp. You can continue up from here to another very old gumpa in the woods, Chenjok Mendok Gumpa (*see section on Buddhist gumpas in Part I*). From Bulukpa there is a lovely view across the valley to Kalinchok.

The trail to Bulukpa marks the start of the high route to Tselaphu (3,968 m.), which is the closest and most spectacular place for views of Gauri Shankar and the Lapchi Kang and Rolwaling ranges. From there you can round the mountainside and come down to Bulung, Orang or Gongar Khola on the other side, a trail taken by some trekking groups who are not dependent on lodges for overnight stops.

Side trip 4: Beding–Daldung La

Beding–Daldung La–Simigaon (or Tasinam) 2 days

For this two-day trip you will need a guide, whom you can hire in Beding. You also will need dry weather, a tent and provisions.

At the small shrine with prayer flags and trisuls 15 minutes below the last houses of Nimare, cross the Rolwaling river. On the left side you walk through a small bamboo forest and dense jungle, which is very muddy and soft when wet. When you come to the small valley opposite the Mahadev Khola river, ascend until you reach a ford where you can cross the small river. Continue climbing up, passing high pastures with meadows. There is a last piece of flat ground ideal for camping half an hour before the pass. A spring, towards the pass, is nearby. Here you are right opposite Gauri Shankar.

On the other side of Daldung La, you have panoramic views for a short while, before entering the dense rhododendron forest. Below this forest is the unmarked junction to Simigaon or Tasinam–Jagat. Do not underestimate the enormous difference in elevation, a steep descent which can be hard on knees and ankles.

Side trip 5: Simigaon–Tasinam–Jagat (4–4½ h.)

Instead of retracing your steps back to Simigaon, there is a scenic alternative route via Tasinam, which takes about half an hour longer to Jagat.

Start below the CDC lodge in Simigaon and follow the trail beyond the lodge and the health post. Stay at the same level until you reach a small stream; cross it and then descend gently through the woods on a good trail. This leads to a viewpoint west of the gompa, overlooking the entire village from the opposite side. From here a very scenic trail begins, with steep steps cut in the bare rockface, a thousand metres above the Bhote Koshi and Gongar Khola.

When this trail comes to open fields, all the houses up and down the hillside are part of the settlement of Tasinam. Take the first trail down through terraced fields, pass a gorge with a waterfall and a small bridge, continue past the primary school, and from there you will find the way to the broad, winding steps that lead through pine forest towards Jagat.

Side trip 6: Bhorle to Tenekhu Hindu Temple (1½ h. each way)

From Bhorle you can take a short side trip up to Tenekhu, the site of a Hindu temple that serves as one of the main places for celebrations of the Janai Purnima festival in August.

Coming from Singati, cross the suspension bridge at Bhorle and climb up the hill directly behind the village; then follow the path round the hillside under the ridge. As you enter the village of Tenekhu you pass several old mani walls, as this is a mixed Buddhist and Hindu village with mostly Tamang (Buddhist) and Chhetri (Hindu) families. Walk past the village tap under a spreading tree and on through the village, to the secondary school.

The temple, built by a retired army officer in the 1940s as a sign of his religious devotion, is directly beneath the school with a pair of pipal and banyan trees (*Ficus religiosa* and *Ficus bengalensis*) above it. It consists of two unassuming little stone buildings with corrugated iron roofs, and what looks like a pile of rusty iron outside it. In fact,

this is the accumulation of thousands of tridents, the three-pronged iron staff of the Lord Shiva, brought here by pilgrims and worshippers. Inside each building there is another pile of tridents, bells hanging from the ceiling, and in one building two small bronze lion figures.

Expedition Treks

Expedition trek 1: from Singati to Na via Yalung La **Minimum 9 trekking days**

Note: this very demanding trek is a far more difficult undertaking than the map suggests. It involves hiking on little-used trails and over high passes (Ramdang 4,400 m., Yalung La 5,300 m.). There are hardly any settlements and no facilities whatsoever along this route, and it is essential to have a local guide who knows the way. You must be fully equipped with tents, camping gear and provisions. Note also that sudden snowfalls at any time of the year can make it impossible to cross over the Yalung La pass into the Rolwaling valley.

Day 1: Singati/Suri Dobhan–Tamru–Sikpator

Coming from Singati, follow the main trail to Suri Dobhan as described above. At Suri Dobhan, do not cross the suspension bridge but leave the river (the Suri Khola) on your left and go on to Boru. Here you cross the Suri Khola and walk along the Khare Khola valley trail to Tamru at the end of the valley. (Do not take the much longer and more strenuous higher route via Marbu!) This long day's hike ends with a steep climb through the terraced fields to the village of Sikpator.

Day 2: Sikpator–Niding–Kisep

From Sikpator on you will need a local guide who is familiar with the route. You may be able to find somebody in Sikpator, especially in the autumn when the herdsmen have come down from the high pastures (*kharkas*).

The steep path leaves Sikpator through terraced fields and then goes through lush mountain rainforest. It's tough going, but after a full morning's hard climb (approx. 1,500 m.) you reach Niding, a large clearing and the first of a series of *kharkas* on the way to Yalung La. After another couple of hours you get to the next high pasture, Kisep, where you should pitch your tents for the night. Fill up on water just off the track to the north – you won't be meeting any other water sources for several days.

Day 3: Kisep–Kalding–Thulo Lorku–Honobu Kharka

The first half of the day takes you up some 600 metres, past a series of kharkas to Kalding and on to the Thulo Lorku (or Kalding) pass. This is marked by prayer flags and cairns, and offers a stupendous view of Gauri Shankar and the mountain ranges. From here, descend to Honobu Kharka and spend the night beside the stream.

Day 4: Honobu Kharka–Tsare Deurali–Chhokum Kharka

From Honobu Kharka, follow the cairns along the eastern ridge, past the herdsmen's huts (empty in autumn) on the Tsare Kharka, up to the Tsare pass (*Tsare Deurali* in Nepali) at approx. 4,100 metres. The descent to Chhokum Kharka, about 100 metres further down, follows a well-trodden path.

Day 5: Chhokum Kharka–Lamo Pokhari–Ramdang Deurali–Kal Pokhari–Ramdang Kharka

Ascend the eastern flank of the valley, and about half way up you reach an ideal resting spot at a little lake (Lamo Pokhari, 'the long lake'). Then climb up the steep hillside to the Ramdang pass (approx. 4,400 m.) from where you get the first spectacular views of the Rolwaling glacier system – including the Ramdang glacier, the Yalung glacier and the Nubre glacier. On the way down to Ramdang Kharka you pass the fabled Kal Pokhari. Here you should keep quiet so as not to disturb the spirit that guards the peace and calm of the waters (*see boxed text*). You can camp on the open pasture on either side of the stream.

Keep quiet at Kal Pokhari!

The herdsmen tending their sheep and yaks on the high pastures below Yalung La will tell you to keep very quiet as you approach Kal Pokhari, the little lake by the Ramdang pass. For in the lake there lives a spirit who guards the peace and quiet of the waters and the mountain, and on no account should it be disturbed. The slightest noise can drive it into a rage so terrible that it whips up the water to a screeching storm that pitches and tosses the offender into the foaming waves.

While most herdsmen creep by silently without even casting a glance at the lake, some others say they have been so bold as to challenge the spirit by singing and shouting – and claim to have escaped unscathed. But it's never a good idea to tempt fate. Perhaps respectful trekkers are more likely to have the gods on their side – you never know...

Day 6: Ramdang Kharka–Pamalka Pass–Pamalka

Start off following the stream out of the valley and the open pastures of the Ramdang Kharka. The climb up to the Pamalka Pass snakes up

steeply, and then descends steeply, along a path well trodden by cattle, to Pamalka (at approx. 4,200 m.). The flat grassy moraine makes an ideal camping spot – but please take all your rubbish away with you!

Day 7: Pamalka–Ramdung (Yalung) Base Camp Yalung La–Yalung Kharka

Follow the right-hand side of the valley along the moraine, making your way from cairn to cairn. It is a steep climb between huge boulders up to Ramdung base camp, the last point before Yaldung La. You can get water in this dry stony desert from the nearby Dudh Pokhari, a small lake (not marked on the available maps) to the north of the trekking route, at the end of the moraine formed by the glacier that once stretched down from Yalung Ri.

There is not really space for more than three or four tents here, so larger groups will have to go on over Yalung La and then down to Yalung Kharka – an extremely long and strenuous day with over 1,000 metres of ascent and descent, not to be underestimated at this altitude!

Day 8: Ramdung (Yalung) Base Camp–Yalung La (–Yalung Kharka–Na)

The path is well trodden, but becomes steeper in the top section. It leads to the highest point and indeed the highlight of the trek: the pass of Yalung La (5,310 m.). The pass itself is a narrow gap on the narrow peak ridge, marked by a big cairn and prayer flags. There is hardly any space here to stop and celebrate, but this is the link between the Khare Khola and Rolwaling valleys.

Going down on the colder northern side of the pass is harder than on the southern side, because the path is steep and in places broken away, and the stone slabs are partly covered with snow and ice. Experience, courage and a good sense of balance are needed to deal with this section of the hike. In wintry conditions no one should attempt it without full winter mountaineering equipment (crampons, ice-axe, rope, etc.) – also for the porters!

Down from the pass to the high pastures you walk between man-sized boulders, following the little cairns which mark the way, until at last you reach the open pastures of Yalung Kharka – an inviting place to pitch camp and look up and back on the day's achievement.

Day 9: Yalung Kharka–Na–Beding

It's an easy descent from the high pastures into the Rolwaling Valley, and in a few hours you reach Na, the summer settlement of the Beding Sherpas. In late autumn you won't find more than a few yaks grazing

here, as the Sherpas will already have moved to their houses in Beding, a few hours further down the valley.

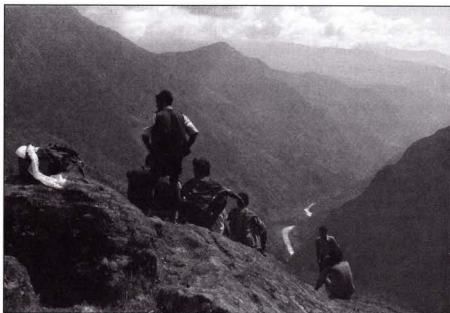
Expedition trek 2: From Na over the Tashi Lapsa pass and into Khumbu

From Na, a difficult route leads up past the Tsho Rolpa glacier lake to the Tashi Lapsa pass (5,755 m.) which connects the Rolwaling Valley with the Everest region. It takes a minimum of three days to get to the first major village on the far side of the pass – Thame, in north-western Khumbu District.

Beware! This is *not* a trekkers' hike but a demanding and often dangerous ascent/descent for which it is absolutely essential to have advanced mountaineering skills, full climbing equipment, and guides with experience of the route. According to the Lonely Planet's Stan Armington, it is 'a true mountaineering project'.

Suitably equipped, and armed with the essential permit, from Tashi Lapsa you can try to climb Pacharmo, a 6,187-metre trekking peak.

More detailed descriptions of the Tashi Lapsa pass can be found in several guidebooks, among them Stan Armington's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* or Jamie McGuiness' *Trekking in the Everest Region* (published by Lonely Planet).



Porters resting after a hard climb

Afterword:

The Rolwaling Ecotourism Project (RETP)

In order for trekking tourism to achieve the maximum positive effect on the local population, the local people must be fully involved in the whole process.

– Toni Hagen
noted Swiss geographer and development writer

Currently about one thousand tourists visit the Gauri Shankar area each year. Most come as members of organised tour groups which adhere to the 'take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints' principle of minimal impact.

Although this form of trekking tourism can rightly claim to cause little environmental damage, it also brings little benefit to the local people. They remain outside the organised tour industry, their lives following the traditional rhythms of seasonal agriculture. Of course, this is also part of the charm of trekking in this unspoilt area. And yet, as in most rural places, the people who make their homes here desire modernisation and progress, and are looking for ways to improve their own lives. Poverty is not 'picturesque', nor is poor health, or lack of empowerment. The villagers are not interested in preserving their communities as museums of idealised archaic lifestyles for a few curious visitors from the outside world: instead, they want to move forward by trying new economic strategies over which they themselves can have control – and here *ecotourism* is a promising possibility.

What is 'ecotourism'? Is it just anything 'green'? We would suggest the following definition: *a form of tourism which is appropriate to the needs of the local population as well as those of visitors, and suitable for the fragile natural environment.*

The work of Eco Himal's Rolwaling Ecotourism Project has been conducted by a small team of permanent staff based in the region, with headquarters in the village of Singati. They work closely together with the local people, through the Community Development Committees/Cooperatives (CDCs) which have been set up in more than 20 villages. These CDCs act as the village voice and the local organising body, and are fully responsible for the organisation of project activities in their community.

Thus, it is at CDC request that over 100 kms. of pipes for good drinking water have been laid, with technical and financial support from Eco Himal. More than 1,100 eco-specification toilets have been installed throughout the area; and Eco Himal has provided assistance for bridge building, trail repair, the improvement of school buildings, and emergency aid following natural disasters such as landslides. The CDCs send representatives to attend programmes organised by Eco Himal; these range from local training schemes like workshops on campsite management and kitchen gardens, plumbing training, hygiene and sanitation training in schools and villages, first aid, family planning, literacy and English classes, to study-tours to the more developed tourism areas in Nepal. Several Nepalese NGOs work together with Eco Himal on programmes to promote community development, management and leadership skills, and environmental protection.

Trekking accommodation must be environmentally friendly – thus the concept of *eco-lodges*, where Eco Himal provides training and support in building work and in marketing, as well as checking quality standards (passive solar energy, compost toilets, kerosene for cooking, no trees cut for cooking, etc.). Where there are no existing lodges, Eco Himal is building model lodges which will be run by the community on a joint or tenant basis, with any profits accruing to the local community. These are multi-purpose structures which will be suitable for trekker accommodation but equally useful for community meetings, courses and workshops. In addition come the many *CDC campsites*, located at scenic spots and run according to sound environmental principles.

The measures planned and in part already introduced in the RETP are meant to assist the local people to forge ahead with the development of their region in a spirit of self-reliance and with respect for the environment, without unduly disrupting the age-old rhythms of the Himalayan villages. It is our hope that you too will help to contribute to these goals, while you experience the Gauri Shankar Trekking Area.

Bibliography and Further Reading

We have drawn upon the works listed below in preparing this guidebook. Many of them are readily available at Mandala Book Point and other leading bookshops in Kathmandu.

Armington, S. *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*. Hawthorne, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, many editions.

The standard guide to trekking in Nepal, full of useful information although with little on the Gauri Shankar area as such.

Bajracharya, D. and T. B. Shrestha. *Dolakhako Aitihasik Ruprekha*. Kathmandu: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, 2031 V.S.

The most comprehensive work on the history of Dolakha and its environs, including transcriptions of many of the important historical inscriptions found in the area. This book is available only in Nepali, but is essential reading for a more thorough understanding of the early history of the region.

Baumgartner, R. *Trekking und Entwicklung im Himalaya. Die Rolwaling-Sherpa in Ost-Nepal im Dilemma zwischen Tourismus und Tradition*. Diessenhofen: Verlag Rüegger, 1980.

A doctoral thesis study of the population of Beding in the late 1970s and the potential effects of tourism in the region. Thorough and well documented fieldwork, readably written, particularly interesting a quarter of a century on. Available through libraries; in German only.

Burbank, J. *Culture Shock! Nepal*. Singapore: Times Editions, 1992

A goldmine of interesting tidbits of information about Nepalese life and culture, useful for understanding the country and its people.

Dixit, K. M. and S. Ramachandran, eds. *State of Nepal*. Lalitpur: Himal Books, 2002.

A compilation of essays and scholarly articles by some of Nepal's foremost intellectuals. Many of the contributions deal with contemporary issues, including the royal palace massacre and the Maoist insurgency.

Dunsmore, S. *Nepalese Textiles*. London: British Museum Press, 1993.

This classic introduction to the textile crafts of Nepal is a beautifully designed book with many full-colour photos and illustrations. It details the process of making traditional fibre cloths from beginning to end, and is an interesting read for anyone interested in plants, fabrics, or traditional crafts. The book is available in Nepal as well as in Europe.

East, P., K. Luger and K. Inmann, eds. *Sustainability in Mountain Tourism: Perspectives for the Himalayan Countries*. New Delhi: Book Faith/Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 1998.

Central for understanding the background to mountain tourism in the Himalayas, not least the Austrian involvement in promoting tourism for local development.

van Ede, Y. *House of Birds: A Historical Ethnography of a Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in Nepal*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1999.

A historical ethnography of Bigu Gomba, this is both an in-depth study of the largest nunnery in the Gauri Shankar region and a broader attempt to describe the life of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in general. Although currently available only as a doctoral dissertation, this work is due to be published in Nepal.

von Fürer-Haimendorf, C. 'A Nunnery in Nepal', *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*. Vol. 4, No. 2, 1976, pp. 121-55.

The pioneering ethnographic study of Bigu Gomba, with historic photographs of many of the nuns still resident there.

HMG National Planning Secretariat. *Statistical Pocket Book of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, issued regularly.

Published almost every year by His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG), these small 'pocket books' combine yearly national statistics with the most recent national census information to provide a statistical outline of the country. This is a good reference book for anyone interested in population data or other statistics, and is available from most bookshops in Kathmandu.

Gellner, D.N.; J. Pfaff-Czarnecka and J. Whelpton. *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.

This ground-breaking collection of essays by anthropologists, political scientists and other scholars focuses on nationalism and ethnicity in Nepal. It provides a broad overview of the different issues shaping contemporary Nepal from a number of insightful perspectives. Widely available in Kathmandu, or available by order in Europe.

Holmberg, D., K. March and S. Tamang. 'Local Production/Local Knowledge: Forced Labour From Below', in *Studies in Nepali History and Society*. Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 5-64, June 1999. Kathmandu.

An excellent article discussing the history of forced labour and land exploitation of ethnic hill groups in Nepal. Although the specific study region of this article is outside of the Gauri Shankar area, many of the general historical patterns described here apply. It gives a real insight into

the dynamics of ethnicity, caste, and economics that have shaped Nepal's current situation. The journal Studies in Nepali History and Society (SINHAS) is available in many bookshops in Kathmandu, and is an excellent general source for insightful new scholarship about Nepal.

Kotan Publishing. *Mapping the Tibetan World*. Tokyo: Kotan Publishing, 2000.

A general guidebook to the entire 'Tibetan Cultural Region', this Japanese-published book contains good maps of the entire region, including the Gauri Shankar area. It can be ordered online from booksellers like Amazon.com.

Miller, C. *Faith-Healers in the Himalaya*. Delhi: Book Faith India, 1997 (orig. 1979).

To date, this remains one of the few books to explore the ethnography of Dolakha district, and particularly the practices of shamans and faith healers from the Thangmi and Tamang ethnic groups. Written like a travelogue, Miller's book takes the reader on an ethnographic journey through the hills of Dolakha and the spiritual world of its shamans. Recently reprinted, it is available at most bookshops in Kathmandu. A real must for anyone with a serious cultural interest in the Gauri Shankar region.

O'Connor, B. *The Trekking Peaks of Nepal*. Wiltshire, UK: Crowood Press, 1989.

Invaluable guide for anyone attempting Rolwaling's Pacharmo or any other of the mountains declared as 'trekking peaks' in Nepal.

Polunin, O. and A. Stainton. *Flowers of the Himalaya*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1984).

The best-known botanical guide to the entire Himalayan region, this book details many of the plants found in the Gauri Shankar region and beyond. Highly recommended for naturalists and others with an interest in the flora beneath their feet. Available in Kathmandu.

Pradhan, K. *The Gorkha Conquests*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1991.

A wide-ranging history of the Gorkha unification of Nepal, with interesting historical detail about Dolakha district. This is difficult to find, but may be ordered from Oxford University Press.

Sharma, P., ed. *Tourism as Development: Case Studies from the Himalaya*. Kathmandu: Himal Books/Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2000.

A basic compilation of writings on the role of tourism in development. Together with East et al. it presents the underlying rationale behind Eco Himal's involvement in tourism infrastructure and local development.

Shrestha, K. *Dictionary of Nepalese Plant Names*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 1998.

A useful complement to Polunin and Stainton's Flowers of the Himalaya as described above. This 'dictionary' includes local names of each plant, making it easy to match local descriptions with scientific ones. Available in Kathmandu.

Tautscher, G. 'Kalingchok and Sailung: A "Female" and a "Male" Mountain in Tamang Tradition', in *Tibetan Mountain Deities: Their Cults and Representation*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998. pp. 169–182.

A detailed discussion of the mountain Kalinchok and the role it plays in Tamang religious life. Tautscher offers a more in-depth description of the pilgrimage to Kalinchok than that given in the present guidebook. The 1998 volume book is difficult to find in Kathmandu, and is best ordered directly from the publisher or online in Europe.

Some web links

<http://www.ecohimal.or.at> the Austria-based development agency Eco Himal

<http://www.digitalhimalaya.com> historic Himalayan films and photographs

<http://www.himalmag.com> pre-eminent South Asian news magazine

<http://www.info-nepal.com> basic information on Nepal

<http://www.Nepalhmg.gov.np> new government website

<http://www.nepalhomepage.com> information on Nepal, with useful links

<http://www.nepalnews.com> up-to-date media reports on Nepal

<http://www.nepalresearch.com> extensive bibliographies on Nepal

<http://www.newslookmag.com> online newsmagazine about Nepal

<http://www.south-asia.com> with useful links to institutions and organisations

<http://jhunix.hcf.jhu.edu/~deschene/sinhas> excellent scholarly journal

<http://iiias.nl/host/himalaya> Himalayan languages project

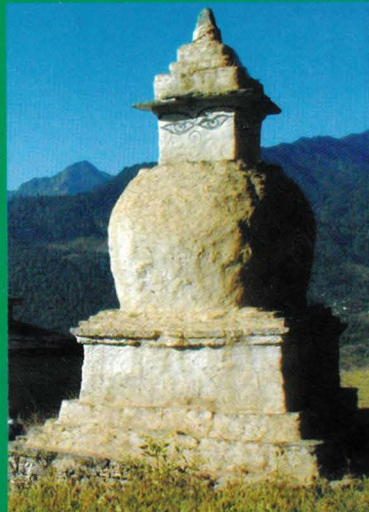


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Under the auspices of the Austria-based INGO Eco Himal, the Rolwaling Ecotourism Project has been promoting the development of environmentally friendly tourism in the Gauri Shankar region. This book, written for Eco Himal by five experts on the area, provides detailed information on trekking routes as well as an in-depth introduction to its rich culture and history.



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