

# HIDDEN VILLAGE

An off-the-beaten trek guide to Gurja Khani

(plus further off-the-beaten treks in Dhaulagiri region, including Dhorpatan)



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## PREFACE

My first trek in Nepal was from Tansen to Dhorpatan in 1974. The area was untouched by development. I was entranced with everything. As we climbed towards the heights of the Jaljalla Pass, I felt we were as remote as one could get. But deviating from our path at one point I noticed a series of steep stone steps carved into a cliff, heading northwards. I could not imagine where this path was going. In that direction there was nothing but a vast wilderness of mountains and a great white wall. But there was a village, I was told. It was a large village, hidden in its own valley, a day's walk northwards. My curiosity was piqued. I knew I had to go there . . .I hope you feel the same way.

My husband and I spent 18 years working in Nepal with various development projects, including 5 years in Baglung district. During this period we did most of the well-known treks, and spent weeks on end walking 'un-beaten' trails to check on small development initiatives in far-flung villages. There were rarely any teashop-lodges in which to stay. Someone usually offered to put us up for the night, often vacating their bed for us, and serving us the best food they could rustle up. When we reflect on what Nepal means to us, it is those nights by the kitchen firelight that we especially recall. Their friendliness, generosity and hospitality towards total strangers and foreigners is quite hard to comprehend. Returning to Nepal in 2014 our aim is to promote trekking on off-the-beaten trails. Not only will this allow greater revenue from tourism to trickle down to the grass-roots level, but it will allow visiting tourists to experience the Nepali hospitality that we have enjoyed.

Joy Stephens

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Hidden Village

There are countless scenic mountain villages in Nepal but few so hidden, isolated, and inaccessible as Gurja Khani. Nestling on a sunny shelf in its own private valley beneath the Dhaulagiri range, Hidden Village is remote from all its neighbours. The nearest village lies a day's walk to the south across a 3,300 metre pass; to the east the approach is blocked by an impenetrable gorge; to the west lies the terrain of snow leopards in the high-altitude wilderness of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve; while northwards, the slope rises steeply above the slate roofs of the village to buttress the majestic south face of Gurja Himal peak – over seven kilometres high and a mere ten kilometres from the village in horizontal space.

Only a handful of trekkers and climbers have found their way to Gurja Khani village over the past decade. But if you wish to escape the well-beaten routes, enjoy a closer encounter with local communities, or ensure that more of your expenditure goes to help those most in need - yet still enjoy stunning views of the Himalayas - this is the destination and trekking guide for you.

In Hidden Village you will find a surprisingly large, bustling community earning their living from the land, barely touched by the modern world. Here you step back in time to a place where survival depends upon the generosity of nature and one's own resourcefulness.

### Off-the-beaten treks

This guide book describes four treks of varying lengths (2-7 days) and difficulty whereby you may visit Hidden Village. These routes have been carefully researched to avoid the burgeoning motor roads, and to take trekkers through the least touched and most scenic and culturally interesting areas of Baglung and Myagdi Districts (Dhaulagiri Zone). Access to the start of the treks is by road from Pokhara to either Beni/Darbang or Baglung, and at the time of writing (January 2015) there is no need of a TIMS permit. However, those passing via Dhorpatan valley need to purchase an entry permit for the Hunting Reserve.

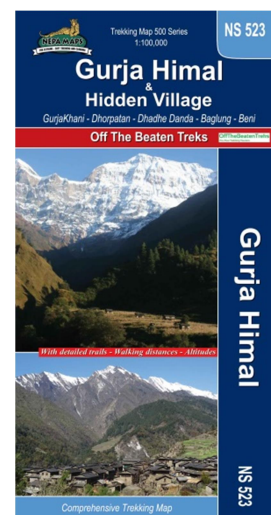
A visit to Gurja Khani can easily be combined with the Dhaulagiri 'Circuit' trek (French Pass), with a trek to Muktinath and Around Annapurna, or to the beautiful alpine valley of Dhorpatan, to Dolpo, or to Rukum and Rolpa (the Guerrilla trek).

There is no tourism infrastructure at present. Accommodation along the way will either be in basic 'tea-shop' lodges which exist to serve the local population, or in simple family-based 'homestays' where you will be invited to sit around the cooking hearth in the evenings and get a glimpse into family life. Homestays are in the process of being established in key villages along the routes, and the arrival of trekkers will help to spur on their development, providing a useful supplementary income source and a more family-friendly alternative to migrant work in Gulf countries and elsewhere.

### About this guide book and pro-poor tourism

This guide is designed to be a practical, carry-along handbook which provides you with all the information you need, whether you go with a trekking agency or strike out independently. However, it is recommended to buy the Gurja Himal & Hidden Village Trekking Map (NS 523 Himalayan Map Publishers – available in bookstores in Thamel/Kathmandu and at Pokhara Lakeside).

The publication is part of an initiative to promote 'pro-poor' trekking in new areas, thereby bringing economic benefits to neglected communities, and providing an enriching encounter for both visitor and host. The tourism development initiative for Hidden Village has the express support of the villagers of Gurja Khani, and key communities along the access routes.



### What is Pro-Poor trekking?

Pro-poor tourism promotes a style of trekking which maximizes the benefits to the local communities along the route, and ensures that the poorer households benefit in a more equitable and inclusive manner. While trekking agencies take care to leave minimal impact on the environment, they also leave minimal impact on the local economy, since their supplies are brought in from the outside, and a high percentage of the revenue goes to the trekking company owners. Along the major trekking routes, independent trekkers can stay in a range of small private lodges, but once again much of the benefit goes into the pockets of the already better-off. The recent concept of pro-poor trekking and the development of village homestays is an effort to channel more of the tourism revenues into the pockets of the less well-off, especially those living in remote areas who suffer from lack of modern conveniences, poor quality schools and health services.

### How is it anti-discriminatory?

Along the trails described in this book, a conscious effort is being made to encourage *dalit* communities to establish homestays and teashops. Stigmatized in the past by the label 'low-caste' or 'untouchable', *dalits* are accustomed to others perceiving their homes and hospitality as 'unclean'. Hence they have not been able to benefit from tourism except through employment as porters. Your visit can help to change this and boost their standing in local society.

## 2. TREKKING ADVICE

The style of trekking you choose mostly depends upon your personal taste, the state of your wallet, your physical fitness, and the facilities along the route. When making the decision, it is worthwhile considering not only the experiences and memories you wish to take away, but the impact and impressions you wish to leave behind.

### Going with a major trekking agency

Some prefer to book ahead and join an organized group trek where everything is managed by the trekking company with few hassles and no 'unknowns'. Trekking agencies offer both camping treks and lodge-based treks of this nature. The agency provides the itinerary, the porters (trekkers carry their own day packs), the camping equipment, and even the sleeping bags and other clothing gear if required. The organized camping treks are the easiest way to reach the high altitude routes where there are no lodges (e.g. Around Dhaulagiri). Trekkers on such treks usually build up a close relationship with their English-speaking guides, but may have quite limited contact with local inhabitants. Most, if not all, of the organized camping treks are environmentally sensitive and carry along kerosene fuel for cooking in order to conserve firewood, and take care to carry out, bury or burn their waste.

Expect to pay considerably more for your trek when you pre-book through one of the big Nepal-based trekking agencies, or one based in Europe. Read the reviews carefully. Most trekkers are very satisfied. But a minority are surprised to find, for example, that their tents are pitched each night not in the wilderness photo of the brochure, but in the courtyard of a trekkers' lodge, or that the 'luxury lodges' they paid for are not luxurious at all, and that other trekkers staying the night are paying a tenth of what they are paying.

From an ethical stance, the more you can make your money go to the people at the bottom, the better. With a group agency trek it is important to find out what they pay their porters, what training and equipment they give them, and other provisions (e.g. in the unlikely event of an

accident or death). And for your own safety to find out what training they give their guides, and how they would deal with a potential disaster such as the blizzard in October 2014 (See box). Paying more for your trek, or having genuine Sherpas, does not necessarily mean you are in safer hands.

There are many companies these days which claim to be green or have an ethical basis. Read the small print carefully and don't be afraid to ask questions. It may mean that their brochure is printed on recycled paper and they give an occasional donation to an orphanage. Or it may have more substance. There are also agencies which will organize a volunteer experience in combination with a trek.

Currently, a few trekking companies offer a camping trek to Dhorpatan via Jaljalla Pass, and camping treks of the Dhaulagiri Circuit. This is the closest they come to Hidden Village. If you ask them they will almost certainly be willing to organize such a trek for you – at a price! But why not be adventurous and try the option below?

### Going it alone – with some help!

This guidebook is written primarily for those who prefer the freedom and sense of adventure to trek independently of a large organised group. This does not mean that you have to go without a guide or that you have to carry all your own gear – though you may do both if you wish. With this style of trekking you do not need to pre-book; arrangements can be made after you arrive in the country.

If you wish to hire a porter or an English-speaking guide, there are countless small trekking agencies who will arrange it. If you prefer you can hire a guide-cum-porter. This person would carry for you a standard-sized rucksack, and have some basic English language. They may not yet be familiar with all the routes to Hidden Village, but they soon will be. Rates vary. Follow the advice above and check carefully what the agency pays their porters or recommends that you do. None of the treks described in this guidebook require one to carry camping equipment – although that can be done – but they do assume that trekkers are willing to stay in fairly basic local lodges (sometimes termed teashop trekking) or in local homes (homestays), eating local, largely vegetarian food such as *dal-bhaat*.

Awareness about possible negative impacts on the environment has grown greatly since the early days of trekking in Nepal, especially within the designated national parks, thanks to the work of agencies such as Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP). In these areas trekking lodges avoid the use of firewood as much as possible by installing solar-heated water systems and utilizing gas stoves.

### Selecting a trekking agency, hiring porters and guides

You can go online and book ahead, or wait till you arrive in the country. There are hosts of small trekking agencies around Thamel/Kathmandu or Pokhara Lakeside. The best advice is to go on the recommendations of others: talk to a satisfied customer who has just returned from a trek and book with their company.

We hesitate to recommend because there are many of equal standard. However, in our research, the one that stands out is the Three Sisters Trekking Agency at Pokhara Lakeside. Their porters are all women, they receive quality training and are paid fair wages. Their porter prices are on the high side, because the maximum weight which the women may carry is set by the agency, but you know that all the money goes to a worthy cause.. Profits go to support new training intake each year and small development projects in the women's communities.

Generally, all trekking agencies will be able to provide you with a porter or guide if you wish to strike out independently.

## Trekking permits

There is no need of a TIMS trekking permit for a trek to Gurja Khani. However, if you are passing via Dhorpatan valley you will need to purchase an entry permit for the Hunting Reserve. This costs a rather exorbitant Rs 3000 (there is no discrimination between hunters and trekkers) and can only be obtained in Kathmandu at Brikuti Mandap (the same building which sells the TIMS permits). If you are planning to trek beyond Gurja to Dolpo or around Dhaulagiri or Annapurna you will need to purchase the appropriate passes before setting out. TIMS permits and ACAP (Annapurna Conservation Area) entry passes can be obtained in Pokhara (office at Dam Side) or at Brikuti Mandap (National Tourism Board Office) Kathmandu.

## When to go

The best months for trekking are October and November when it should be dry and the views clear. Occasionally the dregs of the monsoon extend into early October. The first half of December is good for clear views but colder and there may be snow on the high passes. It can become very cold and cloudy with the short winter rains in late December and January which fall as snow at higher altitudes. February is generally dry and the temperature warming. The second most popular period is March – April. There is likely to be more cloud and the views more hazy than in the autumn, but any deficit in the weather is compensated by the spectacular flowering of the rhododendron forests in this area.

Even in the best season the snow peaks tend to become cloud-covered by midday. They can be more awe-inspiring with a cloak of cloud, and if you are close enough you will always be able to see portions of them through windows in the clouds. But if you wish for clear skies and impregnable views, make sure you time your departure each day to reach the viewpoints in the morning hours.

If you don't mind trekking in the rain, then go in the monsoon months of June-September. You will see Nepal in its greenest and most festive state, abuzz with field work and fertility. These are the only months for going with the herders up to their camps in the highest pastures and searching for *yarsa gumpa* – the greatly-prized aphrodisiac known as 'winter worm, summer grass'.

### More valuable than gold

*Yarsa gumpa* ... winter worm summer grass ...himalayan viagra ... *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*. This curious fungus is only found above 4000 metres in the Himalayas. In 2013 one gram of the substance cost a consumer in China \$100 (US) – more than a gram of gold – though gatherers receive considerably less. No wonder that in May and June every year the *yarsa gumpa* gold rush hits Nepal.

Its creation begins with caterpillar larva of the *Ghost Moth* which develop underground. Occasionally one of these becomes infected with the spores of the fungus. The caterpillar dies but its mummified body hosts the fungus which, as the snow melts, sends up a stalk-like shoot above the soil. A 15<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan text describes the fungus as 'the faultless treasure'. It is an aphrodisiac and said to strengthen the immune and circulatory systems.

It has become a major source of cash income for the poorest families in high-altitude villages such as Gurja Khani. During the harvest period, tens of thousands ascend to the high-altitude pastures in the search. Now there are fears that over-collection is depleting the spores and harvests are reducing.

## What to wear and bring

People vary greatly in their sensitivity to cold and the amount they want to carry. In October the temperature can be over 30°C (86°F) at lower altitudes as you sweat up the first hill.

By November it will be dropping to freezing point at nights in Gurja Khani (3000 m). Even in cold weather you can work up a sweat while climbing which will turn to shivers when you take a rest at a pass, so it is best to wear several thin layers which can be adjusted. At the end of the day the sun will rapidly set behind the nearest mountain and the temperature plummets. Be warned that Nepali homes are extremely well ventilated due to the gaps and cracks in their walls! This is when you will need your warm gear.

A lightweight waterproof is recommended in case of rain. Footwear should be comfortable and have a non-slip sole. Heavy boots are not necessary unless you are used to them; Nepalis walk these trails wearing broken trainers, gumboots, and flip-flops. It can be useful to carry a pair of lightweight slippers for use in and around the homestays. Some people find a lightweight telescopic walking pole useful for the downhill sections.

A torch is essential. Most trekkers carry a sleeping bag or at least a sheet sleeping bag. Warm covers will be provided but in the teashop lodges there is no knowing how many people have slept in them. Homestay hosts have been trained to provide clean linen but this does not mean it is guaranteed. If you are planning to trek higher than the trails described in this guide you need to be prepared to carry your own tent and all the necessary provisions.

Carrying some snacks can provide a quick boost of energy when teashops are far apart and provide a welcome variation from the local diet. If you are a coffee addict you may want to carry along a small tin of instant coffee as teashops only sell – guess what – tea. Small shops in the major villages sell a limited selection of sweets, biscuits and savoury snacks, and possibly drinks such as mango juice, sodas, and chocolate wafer bars. You are most unlikely to find bottled water so it is useful to carry some water purification tablets or bring an instant filter water bottle. Toilet paper is only available in Baglung and Beni where it can be purchased in pharmacies.

### Accommodation

Lodging will be in simple family-based ‘homestays’ or basic ‘tea-shop’ lodges which exist to serve the local population. There are no tourist lodges such as you find on the Annapurna circuit, except in Baglung and Beni. In the teashop lodges you are most likely to be given a simple private room though you might have to share a common room. Mattresses may be nothing more than two rice-straw mats covered by a blanket. There will be no glass in the windows and the shutters are unlikely to be a tight fit. Warm bedding in the form of heavy cotton-filled seracs (like a duvet) or blankets will be provided, but you may not be the first person to have slept in those sheets and covers! Toilet facilities will be a pit latrine in the courtyard with a bucket of water. But what these lodges lack in facilities they generally make up for in the friendliness of their personnel.

Homestays offer trekkers a small room in a private house with a family whose main source of livelihood is farming. This means they cannot provide food and drinks at all hours of the day, but they will do their best to meet your needs. It is assumed that guests will eat the evening meal with the family. The main attraction which sets them apart from teashop lodges is that guests are drawn into normal family life, invited to sit around the cooking hearth with other family members in the evening. This is a special time when the family relaxes and children play while the food cooks. If you stay more than one night you will undoubtedly be invited to share further activities with them and they will be eager to guide you to the best viewpoints.

It is a new concept for families to charge visitors for staying the night; traditionally lodging is provided free of cost to travellers if they request it. Homestays are planned to be opened in key villages along the routes during 2015, and the early arrival of trekkers will help to spur their establishment. Homestays target foreigners, so they are aiming for slightly higher standards of cleanliness and comfort than the rural teashop lodges. Initially, however, they may be rather rough and rudimentary. Facilities should improve as the number of trekkers increases and they understand better the needs of foreigners. As income from tourism increases they will be able to



afford further improvements such as the construction of a shower house. The basic homestay facilities are a private room with a double or twin beds, some type of mattress (may be rather hard!), clean sheets, and a clean pit latrine (generally of the water-seal type with a ceramic slab) with a bucket of water. Superior homestays will provide some type of shower facility.

The advantage of a teashop lodge over a homestay is that they are in the business of providing food and drink which you may order at any time. In a homestay the women have busy lives with their farming commitments and cannot provide food and drink at the beck and call of every tourist. They might provide tea when you first arrive but are unlikely to cook food until the evening hours when their other chores are over. However, there is nothing more pleasant than sitting on the verandah or around the cooking hearth of a home, and observing family life around you. Without fail, you will be the beneficiaries of the best that Nepali hospitality and friendliness can offer.

If you end up in a settlement where there is neither a lodge nor an established homestay, do not panic. You will still be able to find accommodation. Simply ask someone where you can stay, (*bas basne kahaa huncha?*) and they will probably guide you to the wealthiest household. Providing hospitality to unexpected travellers is part of the traditional code of rural Nepal. Your hosts will expect you to pay for the food you eat, but not for the accommodation. However, as foreigners, it is a nice gesture to offer them something for the accommodation as well, especially since they will probably have given up their own bed for you.

### Sanitation and water

Every teashop-lodge and homestay has its own pit latrine – as do almost all village homes. Though none of them will have a seat or a built-in flush mechanism, they are generally clean. Many of them boast a water-seal ceramic slab, and all of them should have a bucket of water and a jug for flushing. There may be a water tap in the courtyard with a bar of soap, but be conservative with the water you use as it may have to be carried from some distance away. This of course, is women's work.

If you feel in need of a shower your best bet is to find a waterfall or take a dip in the river. None of the teashop lodges or homestays currently have a purpose-built shower cubicle with piped water. But they can provide you with a bucket of water and you can shower down in the toilet. If you ask them nicely and offer to pay they will provide you with a bucket of hot water. Otherwise you can wash as they do at the public tapstand or local spring. Nepali women are extremely modest and never expose their private parts. With some practice you can learn to shower as they do, wearing a sarong or wrap. Hopefully such conveniences as private shower rooms will develop. Gurja Khani village is developing a plan to install solar-heated public shower house – so you may be lucky.

### Food and drinks

Without fail you will be offered the best food your hosts can provide. This will almost certainly be the traditional staple vegetarian dish of Nepal known as *dal-bhaat*. It always contains lentils or beans which provide the protein, together with rice and spiced vegetables whatever is in-season. This will probably be accompanied by some type of chutney or relish. A tomato-based one is common. These are extremely tasty but their hygienic preparation cannot be guaranteed. For the same price you will be offered as many helpings as you can eat. In Baglung district a delicious spice is made from the seeds of *cannabis sativa* and also from *timur* - the citrus-tasting fruit husks of a small wild tree. Rice is rich man's food, and for most of the villagers along the way, their staple grain is likely to be maize, millet, or wheat. However, you will have to press them to taste these foods, since their assumption is that tourists' delicate stomachs are unable to process the coarser grains (there is a grain of truth in this!). For breakfast, hosts may be willing to make you *roti* – the local flatbread – generally made from wheat, but occasionally from millet or buckwheat.

If they have it available they may also offer you meat (dried or fresh) or fish or egg. These are served in small quantities and double the price of the meal. If you need a quick snack, popcorn is the best bet since it is widely available, though it will not pop into the white fluffy variety available at cinemas. Nowadays, small wayside shops are likely to sell packs of *dal-mote* (roasted spiced lentils) or even potato crisps, as well as a variety of biscuits and candy sweets. Occasionally you may find a chocolate wafer bar. Fruit may be available but in limited quantities. In Baglung and Beni wonderful crisp apples from Marpha are available in the autumn months. Then in December and January, the trails in Baglung and Myagdi become littered with the peel of local tangerines and oranges. Enjoy them!

If you are staying in a Magar or Chantyal community, or in the home of an artisan, you are likely to be offered the local brew. Most probably it will be *rakshi* – a spirit distilled from millet or other grains. It is not unpleasant, having an earthy taste; its alcohol content varies. Alternatively you may be offered the local beer made from fermented rice or millet. This can be quite tasty, but the fermented grain is mashed into local water by hand – either of which may be unclean. The alcohol may eliminate some bacteria but not all.

In shops and lodges close to civilization you can buy bottles of coca-cola, sprite etc, bottles of beer, and Kukhri brand rum. If you are lucky you may find a tin of instant coffee, otherwise tea is widely available. But the one drink you are unlikely to find on off-the-beaten-trail routes is bottled water, so be prepared. (See health/safety)

### Rates for accommodation, food, and local guides

There are fixed rates in teashop lodges. In 2015 expect to pay around Rs150 for a standard dal-bhaat meal. Double this is you eat meat, or if you are high up in a remote area where ingredients have to be portered in. For sleeping you may be charged about Rs100 per person per night.

In the homestays there may be fixed rates, or they may ask you to give what you think. As a general guide offer around Rs200 per person per night. This is more than the teashop lodges, but the investment in a room, beds, linen, and an improved toilet is high for poor families, and they need to recoup this money as quickly as possible. For the food we suggest a minimum of Rs150 for a vegetarian dal-bhaat, but as a rule of thumb increase this by Rs50 for every day that you walk beyond motorized transport.

You are of course welcome to pay more than these minimum rates but do not be excessive since this raises unrealistic expectations for the future. If the family heat up water so that you can take a bucket shower, or if they boil water for drinking, offer them something for the firewood used.

Trekking agencies have fixed rates for the hire of their guides and porters – expect to pay around Rs2000-3000 per day all-in. When hiring locally in a village there are no set rates, and what they ask will depend upon demand and precedence. Offering a porter or guide Rs1000 a day plus food and snacks (and accommodation if required) should provide fair compensation – but you may have to pay more at festival times. If they guide you for a full day's journey, it is only fair to cover their return journey. Most guides are willing to carry your rucksack if asked, but may expect additional compensation.

### Cash and security

There are ATM machines in Pokhara, Baglung (bazar), and Beni, but nothing beyond these, so carry wads of rupees in cash with you. Shopkeepers in small settlements might be willing to change dollar notes but don't rely upon it.

One of the advantages of going off-the-beaten is that theft and other crimes are practically zero. In fact their honesty is legendary. Over the years we have accidentally left cameras, binoculars, and money wallets at resting spots, only to have breathless villagers run

after us to hand them back. Nevertheless it is wise to take sensible precautions with your money and belongings and not tempt an opportunistic thief or child.

Nepal is an extremely safe place for women trekkers, and on the trails described in this guidebook there is no need to be suspicious or worried if you encounter local men in a lonely spot of forest. It is not, however, advisable to trek alone – even if you are male. Just one small slip in an unguarded moment can send you over the edge. Every year hundreds of trekkers meet with minor falls, and one or two of them die.

Please note: The statements above concerning theft do not apply to the major trekking routes and tourist destinations – although they used to. Unfortunately the sheer numbers of tourists and the quantity of high-value equipment and money which they carry has attracted less honest elements from outside the local communities. Compared to many countries, the risk of theft in Nepal is still low, but **be careful**, especially in crowded urban areas.

### Health, safety, and first aid

The most likely sickness to hit a trekker is a water-borne diarrhoeal disease of some kind. Assume that all water sources are unclean, even those with pipes and cement tapstands. Either use water-purification pills or request your host to boil some water for you to drink. Nepalis commonly eat food with their hands but unless you have access to clean water, plentiful soap or surgical gel, this can be another source of contamination. It is not impolite to request a spoon.

Dehydration is the next most common risk, leaving one feeling faint and weak. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids, especially if you are suffering from diarrhoea. It is helpful to carry some rehydration packs in case of need. These are available in pharmacies and may even be available in small health centres along the trail. If not, the solution can be made by taking 3 cups of clean boiled water, adding 1 tablespoon of sugar, and a pinch of salt.

Altitude sickness is a serious condition, but rare below 4000 metres altitude. You will however find yourself out of breath initially on the climbs above 2500 m. The symptoms of altitude sickness – headache, breathlessness, nausea – are similar to other illnesses and conditions, and are not necessarily a sign to take immediate action and descend - unless the person becomes confused. The best antidote to altitude sickness is to acclimatize slowly. Altitude sickness hits the young and fit more than the old and unfit. The reason is that the former group are able to walk much faster and thus do not realize their body's need to acclimatize. The most important treatment is to descend as rapidly as possible.

#### Blizzard October 2014

In the peak trekking season of October 2014, when normally the skies are blue and temperatures mild, an unseasonably cold and wet weather mass hit Nepal (the tail end of a cyclone), causing heavy blizzards and ferocious winds in the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri region. 43 people lost their lives and 514 were rescued by helicopter, most of them on the Thorung La pass (5416m) on the Annapurna Circuit route. Half of the fatalities were foreign trekkers, and half were their Nepali guides and porters.

Trekkers criticized the trekking agencies for the inexperienced and ill-equipped guides and porters. The trekking agencies blamed the government for the lack of weather warnings. The government blamed 'trekkers without permits' who pushed on when they should have hung back. In short, everyone, and no-one, was to blame.

The Government is promising to improve its early warning system and construct hundreds of shelters, but the pace of action is likely to be glacial. The weather in October 2014 was an extreme event, but every now and then tourists are caught in avalanches, landslides, and earthquakes. Being prepared, and being confident of the right thing to do, can save your life.

One survivor of Thorung La commented: "As a trekker you have a responsibility to yourself, but also to the people who take you there. You must understand that the guides are not as competent as they seem." An Australian climber on a nearby peak saved himself and his Sherpa guide by digging a snow cave. His Sherpa, who had summited Everest several times, was not aware of this survival tip.

Skin infections are common and small wounds can easily turn septic if they are not properly treated. A small tube of antiseptic/antibiotic cream is useful, as well as band-aids. Some people carry a course of a broad-spectrum antibiotic with them if traveling to a remote area for a prolonged period, but to get this you will need to visit a doctor and explain your plans.

Should you fall sick, you will be obliged to self-treat, or return to base, or ask where the nearest health centre lies. Every VDC is supposed to have a health clinic or a health worker of some kind. Basic medications may be available, and the advice will generally be sound. Some years ago I had to have an infected toe nail removed by a village health worker in Dhamja and he did an excellent job.

### Communications while on trek

The penetration of mobile telephone communications into the remote valleys of rural Nepal has been remarkable. Hardly a village remains that is not in range of a mobile signal. A local SIM card in your mobile phone can be an economic and useful tool for communicating, not only in an emergency, but also in calling ahead for accommodation in your proposed destination. You can even get internet via a local SIM, although it will be very slow. The mobile service recommended for the widest rural coverage is NTC Namaste.

Keeping up its Hidden Village reputation, Gurjakhani is one of the few villages with no mobile signal! However, there are 3 fixed line public telephones operating via a satellite link, so telephone contact is possible. Where a Gurjakhani number is given, it is for one of these public telephones. You can call and the operator will forward your message *on foot* to the person concerned.

### Code of behaviour

Nepalis are tolerant people as a rule, and make allowances for tourists. However you will get a friendlier reception the more you can fit in with their code of conduct. The first rule is to smile. The second rule is to be patient and hold your temper. These are by far the most important. Aside from these try to remember and respect the following:

- Feet/shoes are unclean. Avoid touching other people with your feet or shoes. When entering a home it is a courtesy to remove your shoes and leave them at the entrance.
- Avoid sitting with your legs stretched out and feet pointing at somebody. It is considered discourteous to step over someone's legs (since this is to place yourself above them). Nepalis nearly always sit cross-legged but most foreigners find this position uncomfortable after a while. When sitting on the floor (homestays are unlikely to have chairs) it is alright to stretch out your legs away from other people, but make sure you lift them up when someone wishes to pass by.
- Food or drink which has been touched by your lips or by a hand which has touched your mouth, is unclean and cannot be eaten by others. To save wasting food, request a smaller portion initially while it is still ritually clean. You can always request a further helping later if you are still hungry. It is not considered good manners to share a spoon or plate of food with another, although this is acceptable for dry snacks such as popcorn. Avoid touching a common vessel of water to your lips.
- Before eating, you are likely to be offered a vessel of water with which to wash your hands. If Nepalis ask to share your water bottle, they will pour the water down their throats without touching their lips to the bottle. This takes some skill to do so without choking.
- For women skimpy shorts and tops are likely to attract stares. If the weather is very hot, then carry a loose sarong which can be quickly wrapped around your bare legs when entering a village. Otherwise it is better to wear something cool which covers knees and

shoulders. For men shorts are acceptable when trekking but will not win you any respect when entering a government office.

- Avoid giving children sweets, pens, or money. It is only along the well-trammeled tourist routes that they have learned to beg for these items. If you wish to give something special to the children of your homestay, this is a different matter, although it does start a precedent and requires careful consideration as to whether it is appropriate. The best gift you can give them is to spend some time playing with them and talking English. As a general rule it is best to give nothing but pay a fair price for the things you consume. If you feel compelled to give, then a donation to the school will help the whole community.
- Nepali people are unused to, and feel uncomfortable with, overt shows of affection between couples. Try to hold off until you are alone!

### Respect the environment

- The teashop lodges described in this book are still dependent upon firewood for cooking because they lack the capital and income to invest in alternative technology. Be considerate of the forests (and the labour in gathering the firewood) by coordinating your orders for cooked food and hot drinks.
- If you need to defecate where there is no latrine, make sure you bury your toilet paper and cover over your poop with dead leaves or straw to deter flies from carrying disease. Choose a spot away from the walking trail and avoid any sources of water.
- Do not throw litter. Carry it along with you and burn at the end of the day. [You will undoubtedly see a scattering of sweet and biscuit papers along the trail, dropped by Nepali travellers – and these are in fact useful for indicating that you are on the main trail].
- Turn off public taps, and shut any gates which you pass through.
- Avoid damaging the flora and fauna – though you will inevitably squash a few bugs as you walk along. In national parks, no picking of flowers is allowed.
- Be careful not to carelessly start a fire.

## 3. MORE ABOUT HIDDEN VILLAGE

### History

The name Gurja Khani derives from the word *Khannu* - to dig/mine - and it was the search for copper ore which first brought explorers of the Chantyal tribe into the Dhaula valley over two hundred years ago. Place-names scattered through Baglung and Myagdi districts such as Sisa Khani, Phalam Khani, Gurja Khani, record for posterity the unique history of mining in this mid-western belt of Nepal. Chinese pilgrims visiting Nepal in medieval times reported on significant exports of Nepali copper to Tibet and India. But it was during the later Rana period (1850-1950) that mining really expanded, with ores such as lead, copper, tin, and iron being extracted in this area.

According to their oral history, Chantyal people moved northwards from Gulmi district into Baglung, establishing mines in many of the higher valleys, including Dhorpatan. From Dhorpatan they continued north-eastwards, discovering further seams of copper in the rocks lining the Dhaula valley at the foot of Gurja Himal. Today's villagers recall that the explorers identified new sites for mining not just by searching for the quartz veins containing copper, but also by their sense of smell.

The Chantyal people were followed to Gurja by a distinctly different ethnic group – the *Kami* people, one of the artisan castes of Nepal. Mining was a partnership between these two – the Chantyls of Tibeto-Mongolian ethnicity, and the Kami blacksmiths of Indo-Aryan. While the

exploration and mining was done by the Chantyal, it was the Kami people who were guardians of the knowledge for purifying copper and the skills for working it into utensils.

Originally the miners lived in makeshift shelters, sleeping under rock overhangs or in tents of bamboo matting or wool, but as the seams of ore proved productive they began to build more permanent dwellings. Locals estimate that the settlement of Gurja Khani was established by their forefathers some eight generations ago – most likely around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 2014 the last of the Chantyal miners of Gurja Khani died at the reported age of 100 years, but mining ceased much earlier, around 70-80 years ago when the mines became uneconomic with the import of aluminium utensils from India. Above Gurja Khani and across the gorge, old mine tunnels remain hidden in forest. Some can still be seen and visited. Many of the mines seem to have been at high and inaccessible spots on precipitous cliffs or craggy mountain tops.

Life must have been miserable for the miners. The tunnels which remain visible have extremely narrow rock entrances; water seeps continuously through their walls, filling them with pools of water so that miners had to squirm along on their tummies through pools of water at temperatures near freezing point – and in the winter months they must have become iced. The copper ore deposits in the region south of Dhaulagiri are mostly chalcopyrite, occurring in quartz veins in the dominant phyllite rocks, and the miners' task was to follow these quartz veins, chipping away by hand. For illumination they would carry a lighted straw in their mouths as they wriggled forward to the face where they would chip away with crude hand tools. Presumably there was no method for air ventilation, and there is no sign of any attempt to shore up the walls. Locals say there is an extensive labyrinth of tunnels in the rocks above Gurja Khani village, some cutting right through the ridge from the south face to emerge below a cliff on the east slope.

If there was a flat spot the ore was processed close to the mine working, otherwise it was carried down to the village. Porterage was the women's job. At the height of the mining era there must have been a constant stream of women with *doko* loads of ore on their backs scrambling down unforgiving scree slopes near cliffs or slithering on muddy tracks through dense wet vegetation.

The next step was to grind the rocks containing the ore to a fine powder. The powder was sluiced in water, which allowed the denser metallic particles to sink to the bottom of the pan. Cow dung was mixed with these particles, rolled into balls and left to dry. This much was done by the Chantyal; then the Kami metal-workers took over. Using bellows made of goatskins to achieve the necessary temperatures, the balls were fired in charcoal furnaces. The dung would burn and the metal ore would reduce the copper sulphates and oxides to metallic copper which would liquefy and flow out of the fire in runnels forming crude ingots on cooling. These were sold or worked into utensils. Most of the copper from Gurja Khani was taken to Takam (See Trail Guide: Route One) for sale where Thakhali merchants controlled the trade.

There are four sites around Gurja Khani where you can see old copper mine tunnels:-

- Jemba – above and east of the village
- Burkhani – directly above village
- Arho – below and east of the village
- Kumse – directly across Dhaula river from village

The best ones to visit are Burkhani and Kumse. Locals will be willing to guide you to them, but entering the tunnels is entirely **at your own risk**. No inspection of their safety has been carried out since they were abandoned, and wild animals may use them as lairs. If you decide to take the risk, a head torch is essential – and a ball of string to find your way out, as the tunnels above the village are reputed to have various forks in them. Nearby the tunnels you can see the spots where no plants grow. These are where the refining was carried out, and the tailings remain.

## The village today

Lying on a narrow shelf of land wedged between the cliffs of the Dhaula gorge and the southern flanks of Gurja Himal, the village basks in sunshine most of the short winter days. It currently comprises around 230 households; 160 being Chantyal, and 70 Bishwakarma (Kami).

The village is so compact that the corner slates of one roof almost touch those of the adjoining street. Alley-ways twist and turn through the labyrinth, some so narrow that oxen can barely squeeze through when they go out to plough. At intervals the maze opens into stone-flagged courtyards where children play, old women weave blankets, and grain is spread to dry. In the artisan quarter in the lower western quadrant, space is particularly tight so some families have begun to build on the steep slope above, saving the flatter ground for crops. All the houses are stone with a mud mortar, some with a façade of ochre-mud. The most striking feature of the older houses are their intricately carved wooden windows. (see Box).

When the village becomes snow-bound in the months of January and February, the villagers descend with their animals to temporary dwellings near the river. Recently, this custom has begun to change, partly because the severity and duration of snowfall has become less over the past few years – a symptom of climate change – and partly because with the arrival of electricity a few years ago, some villagers prefer to endure the snow and enjoy lighting in the village rather than descend to their un-wired winter shelters.

The village benefits from a strong sense of community and solidarity. You will find the villagers friendly and open, willing to answer tourists' questions and help in whatever way they can. But please be considerate: they are also very busy with the constant demands of herding and cultivation and the practicalities of life.

### The Carved Windows of Gurja Khani

The carved windows of Gurja Khani are a memorial to the skills and values of an artisanal community. While simpler than the celebrated Newari windows of Kathmandu valley, these ones decorate the everyday small cottages of peasant farmers. The designs and structure vary from twin and triple windows, to small single squares. Their motifs are taken from the natural world – sun, moon, stars, flowers, trees – and there is no overt religious symbolism. They appear to be motivated simply by the desire to make something beautiful and functional. One or two Chantyal men still retain the wood-carving skills, but these are in danger of being lost since the more recent homes have plain windows.

## Practical Information

- Homestays:- There are currently no tourist lodges in Gurja Khani but homestays are in the process of being developed. The following families already have the capacity to provide food and lodging to trekkers: Mohan Chantyal; Jhak Chantyal; Sita Chantyal (shop). Accommodation will be a small private room with a bed, a fairly hard mattress, and bedding in the form of a thick cotton duvet (*serac*). Every home has a pit latrine in their courtyard and some have their own tapstand.
- The village has its own small hydro-electric plant which supplies electricity during the hours of darkness, and sometimes during daylight hours. Homestays will have sockets where electronic gadgets can be re-charged.
- It also has a piped drinking water system though it is not advised to drink this water without boiling or filtering. There are plans to install public solar-heated hot showers in the near future.
- There are 3-4 small shops in the village selling basic food stuffs such as flour, rice, sugar, spices, tea, biscuits, boiled sweets, drinks such as mango juice, coca cola, beer, and

spirits, and household items such as soap, torches, and shoes. Eggs and fruit are occasionally available.

- Currently there are no mobile phone networks which reach the village, but there are three telephones which link via satellite (See Section 2 TREKKING ADVICE/Communications)
- The local school goes up to 10<sup>th</sup> class, and there is also a government Health Post with several health workers and beds, though it is limited what they can do in a serious emergency.
- A few people in the village speak elementary English. If you need help with translation, it is best to find a student, a teacher, one of the health workers, or someone who has worked in the Middle East.
- There is a Tourism Development Committee whose members will be happy to help organize guides for you and facilitate your other activities. Contact: Jhak Bahadur Chantyal

### Tourist activities

Gurja Khani is a pleasant spot to rest and spend a few days. The following activities may be possible to arrange depending on time and availability:-

1. Village craft tour A. During the tour you will view and learn all about the process of spinning, weaving, and felting. Contact: Mother's Group
2. Village craft tour B. During the tour you will visit the best of the carved windows, see a demonstration by one of the locals who still has the skills in wood carving. You will also visit a blacksmith's forge, understand more of their current work. (Contact: Metal-workers Laxman Bika; Dhani Bika; Jaule BiKa).
3. Short walk to apple orchards and Gurja Himal viewpoint. A gentle uphill walk of 30-45 minutes to the west of the village takes one through some apple orchards to reach a viewpoint onto Gurja Himal.
4. Visit to copper mines and upper viewpoint for Gurja Himal. The suggested itinerary is to walk up the ridge to the north east of the village. A flat break in the slope is reached in about 2 hours from where the whole of the south face of Gurja Himal is visible. On the return journey, descend through the forest where the old mine entrances lie. Alternatively, you can cross the Dhaula river and ascend to a different old mining site where a tunnel may be entered (at your own risk) for several metres. From here, one can hike higher to get a viewpoint for photographs which includes the village and the whole south face of Gurja Himal. For a guide, contact.
5. Pony trekking westwards up the Dhaula valley. If you wish to reach all the way to the Churen Himal base camp (also the approach used when Gurja was climbed by the Japanese expedition) this will involve an overnight camp out. Contact:
6. Walks. Flora/fauna/bird watching. With a guide. Will explain the uses of important forest species. Medicinal plants, yarsa gumpa, sea buckthorn, etc.
7. A visit to the school or the health post can be arranged with the Head Teacher or Health Post in Charge.
8. Cultural programme. The school or Mothers Group are happy to put on a cultural program of songs and dances in the evening for an agreed fee. 24 hours' notice is needed.

### Farming and other occupations

With mining a distant memory, the present-day villagers of Gurja Khani depend largely on subsistence agriculture. Scraping a living in this environment requires an incessant round of daily toil. Over the years every scrap of cultivable land up and down the valley has been turned into fields— small far-flung terraces up to four hours' walk from the village. Staple crops are maize, millet, buckwheat and potatoes, with barley or wheat grown as an additional spring crop on the warm sun-bathed fields surrounding the village. Vegetables are grown during the summer



months, especially items such as radishes and pumpkins which can be dried and stored through the winter.

Herding is a vital and integral part of the farming cycle. Buffalo are kept for milk, sheep and goats for their wool, while cows are kept purely to manure the fields. In the wet summer months the animals ascend to high-altitude pastures on the slopes of Gurja and Churen Himal. In the winter months they are quartered in temporary folds on the village fields, their droppings fertilizing the soil for the next crop. The herders sleep year round with their animals wherever they may be. They are mostly old men, assisted by a grandson - a hardy lot who think nothing of sleeping in sub-zero temperatures under a woolen blanket draped over a stick frame. Their large black and tan sheepdogs are a familiar sight around the village and a necessary guard against night predators.

Women spin the wool from their flocks, creating thick wool blankets and jackets which are worn by the men. After weaving the woolen strips on backstrap looms in their courtyards, it is the men's job to felt the wool. This is done by soaking the woven strip in water, rolling it into a tight ball, and kneading it with their feet. As you wander around the village you are bound to see some women engaged in these tasks.

Only three Kami families remain engaged as blacksmiths, serving the villagers' need for kukhri knives, sickles/scythes, and cooking pots. The single household of Damai work as tailors for the village population. In both cases, payment remains the traditional system whereby each household pays an annual retainer fee in grain (dependent on their size and wealth), rather than a job-by-job payment.

Further sources of cash income are the gathering of medicinal herbs including yarsa gumpa, *alo* fibre (a type of stinging nettle), and, most importantly, the remittances of foreign workers, although Gurja Khani is less affected by this recent trend than many other villages.

#### Nepal's migrant workers

Labour has become Nepal's major export. The number of men working outside the country continues to grow and nearly half of all Nepali households have at least one member working abroad. Altogether there are believed to be nearly two million Nepalis working overseas, the most popular destinations being Gulf countries and Malaysia. Migrant workers can earn 3-4 times the average Nepali wage. While their remittances provide a vital source of cash income, the men's absence puts a tremendous burden of work onto women – and children.

The men jokingly refer to their work as 3D – dirty, dangerous, and difficult. They arrive to start work unaware of the climate, the identity of their employer, their rights, the local language, culture, social norms, rules and regulations. In Qatar in 2014, Nepali workers died at the rate of one every two days, largely from heat-associated cardiac arrest and accidents at work. In Kuwait, there are believed to be 28,000 undocumented Nepali women workers. The Nepali Embassy has helped to remove over two thousand who complained of abuse at work, and there are currently 135 women sheltering at the Embassy awaiting permission from Kuwait to leave the country.

Despite the horror stories, queues at recruitment agencies remain long, and most rural schoolboys aspire to a job in the Gulf. The agencies have made enormous profits, some bogus agents disappearing with the hefty enrolment fees, leaving the would-be worker and his family with massive debts

## Social and development challenges

The local school goes up to 10<sup>th</sup> grade when children sit their SLC (School Leaving Certificate). Higher education requires children to board in a larger settlement. School enrolment is high in the early years, but absenteeism and drop-out increases during the teenage years. Pressure from families to help with herding means that students from low-income families may miss weeks of classes during the school year. Eventually they fall so far behind their peers that they drop out altogether. Girls are vulnerable to early arranged marriages which forces them to leave school before completion.

Although the village has a government Health Post, the difficulties in providing quality health care in a remote outpost are highlighted by the fact that three young mothers have died in childbirth in recent years. This not only reflects the challenges of remoteness and the poor standard of the government health system, but also the tremendous work load which women carry. Their lower status combined with their menfolk's fondness for alcohol, makes some of them vulnerable to domestic violence.

Agriculture and livestock husbandry, as practiced in Gurjakhani over the centuries, features environmentally sustainable techniques of terracing, irrigation, crop rotation, and use of natural compost fertilizers. The vast local forest resources have also been managed sustainably, with firewood and tree fodder collection controlled and shifted to allow natural recovery and regrowth. With increasing population, comes increasing pressure on soil, water, and forest resources – there is a limit to the population that can be supported by this fragile, high altitude environment.

The future of Gurjakhani very much depends on the hopes and aspirations of the young people. If they spend years of their lives working abroad (see Box Nepal's Migrant Workers) in a very different culture and lifestyle, will they later return to their remote home village and a traditional life of subsistence agriculture and herding, or will they seek greater opportunities for their families in the cities of Nepal? Some individuals have returned, determined to invest their savings locally. Pro-poor tourism seeks to provide such business opportunities, enabling families to live an improved quality of life in their traditional homes.

## Beliefs

Gurja Khani has been nicknamed the 'village of the temples'. It is true that every possible approach is guarded by a small temple, a sacred tree or rock; every footpath is strewn with leafplates from some ritual ceremony. The extraordinary high number of temples and shrines which encircle the village are perhaps less a sign of their devotion to Hinduism, than their sense of isolation and vulnerability to the myriad malevolent spirits hiding in the forests, rocks, and rivers ready to wreak mischief. Nominally the inhabitants are Hindus, but in most practices they are shamanists. Their shamans are referred to as *lama*, and one of their roles is to treat ill-health by identifying and exorcising the evil spirit which is causing the sickness. To do so they go into a trance and become possessed by the malignant spirit, speaking with its voice and giving instructions to the patient what they must do to be free.

A few people in the village have become Christians. They have constructed a small church about 15 minutes east of the main village in a small outlier settlement overlooking the Dhaula gorge.

## 4. DHAULAGIRI ZONE – topography, history, and culture

### Topography

The trails described in this guide lie in Baglung and Myagdi districts, part of Dhaulagiri zone in the mid-western part of Nepal. Filled with the crumpled scenery of what is often referred

to as the deepest gorge in the world, Dhaulagiri zone straddles the Kali Gandaki river as it carves through the Himalayas. Guarding the western side of the canyon the imposing silhouette of Dhaulagiri I (8167 metres) is the 7th highest mountain in the world. It is followed westwards by eight lesser-known peaks, but all over 7,000 metres (Dhaulagiri II – VI, Churen, Pyutha, and Gurja). The Dhaulagiri range offers trekkers all the photographic splendor of the Annapurnas, yet the area remains less visited by foreigners, and less developed in general. For many people this adds to its appeal .

#### Dhaulagiri I

Its name derives from the Sanskrit word *dhawala* meaning dazzling, white, beautiful, and *giri* meaning mountain. At 8,167 metres (26,795 feet), it is the seventh highest mountain in the world. Standing on its own, its rise from lower terrain is almost unequalled – 7000 metres from the Kali Gandaki river 30 kms south-east of the peak. Its south and west faces rise precipitously over 4000 metres. Dhaulagiri I was first climbed by a Swiss/Austrian/Nepali expedition in 1960. Despite many attempts, its stupendous south face remains unclimbed – one of the greatest remaining challenges in alpinism.

#### Gurja Himal

Twelve other peaks in the Dhaulagiri range lie over 7000 metres, including Gurja Himal (7193m/23,599 feet). The south face of Gurja Himal is notably immense, similar to Dhaulagiri's south face. Gurja Himal was first climbed by a Japanese expedition in 1969 from the west side.

#### Profile of Baglung District

- District capital is Baglung bazar, close to the Kali Gandaki river in the eastern border. In shape the district resembles Nepal, stretches long way east to west.
- Industries: Considerable forest resources. Highest point is Gumti Pahar (or above Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve). Dominant ethnic/caste groups: Chhettri and Magars
- Population:
- Ethnic groups/castes: Brahmins, Chhettris, Magars, Chantyal, Dalits (Damai, Kami, Sarki), Newars and Thakhalis in urban areas
- Highest point: Lowest point:
- Mining. Kami.
- Main occupations: subsistence farming
- Other sources of income: forest products, remittances
- History: old trading entrepot on major India/Tibet trading route. Mining of copper, slate, tin, lead, iron.
- Points of interest: Kalika temple (near Baglung bazar) and annual Chaitra Dashain fair; Galkot old fort/residence of ex King of Galkot; Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (species include blue sheep, snow leopard; bridges

#### Ethnic and caste groups

Nepal presents the amateur anthropologist with a baffling complexity of ethnic groups (over 123 different languages), superimposed by the Hindu caste system. Broadly speaking, as Aryan people migrated into Nepal from the south and west they brought with them the Hindu religion and caste system. In the mountain areas they encountered a variety of Tibeto-Mongolian tribes

practising Shamanism or Buddhism. These people the Aryans assigned to a middle category of caste, and over time many of them adopted elements of the discriminatory caste system, though never to the same degree. These myriad 'middle' tribes are sometimes labeled *janajati* – an umbrella term used in India for indigenous people. But to term these indigenous is not strictly accurate, for the Himalayas have seen traffic in all directions, and some of these ethnic groups – e.g. Sherpas - have migrated into Nepal quite recently.

To simplify things greatly, it is helpful to think in terms of three major groupings of tribes/castes:

1. *Dalits* – comprises artisan caste groups (assumed to be of Aryan or Dravidian ethnicity) such as Kami (metal-workers), Damai (tailors/musicians), Sarki (cobblers/leather tanners), Sunar (goldsmiths), Gaini (itinerant minstrels), and other
2. *Janajati* – comprises all the Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic groups including Newar, Sherpa, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Thakkali, Chantyal, Tharu etc,
3. Brahmin/Chhettri. Of Aryan ethnicity.

At the top of the social pecking order, is the priestly caste of Brahmins. Despite strides towards equality, Brahmins still dominate Parliament and the government civil service. Their entrenched status is demonstrated by the fact that they head nearly all the political parties, from the extreme left to the extreme right. Yet occasionally in rural areas one encounters Brahmin families living below the poverty line. High status does not necessarily equate with wealth.

The term '*dalit*' has been recently adopted in Nepal by the people themselves. Literally it means 'those who are oppressed'. Formerly these people suffered the even more discriminatory labels of *untouchables* and *low-castes*. In India, they are categorized as scheduled or occupational castes for official purposes, and Gandhi gave them the title of *harijans* (tr: sons of God). In this Guide we sometimes use the less discriminatory term *artisans* – reflecting the skills of these people e.g. blacksmiths, cobblers, tailors, musicians, jewelers. Traditionally, one was born into a caste with a specific trade or skill, and that was how one earned a livelihood, although nowadays these are dying out.

Caste discrimination particularly relates to food and drink. No-one of a higher caste may eat food cooked (or served) by a person of lower caste. No-one of lower caste may enter the home of a higher caste. These customs are beginning to change, but old prejudices die hard. In Baglung and Myagdi districts, social status still largely controls who lives where, with 'higher' castes owning land in the fertile valleys, and other castes the less-fertile and steeper slopes at higher altitudes.

Caste, gender, and ethnicity are sensitive issues in Nepal as the status quo of centuries is being challenged and overturned. While this happens the politically-correct terminology is constantly changing. Terms such as high-caste and low-caste are no longer acceptable, yet the discrimination which accompanies them still exists and cannot be glossed over by annulling those terms. The words used in this guide are not intended to cause offence or to sustain discrimination, but rather to recognize that some groups have suffered significant prejudice and discrimination in the past – and remain disadvantaged in the present. *Dalits* are always among the poorest households in rural society, with few productive resources, their children less likely to complete their school education due to the demands of earning a living.

Baglung has the highest incidence of *dalits* in the whole of Nepal, due to the large number of metal-workers (Kami) who settled here to work the mineral ores. It is also common to find a small community of artisans living close to Brahmin villages. Under traditional codes, Brahmins may not use oxen to plough their fields due to its sacred nature. To get around this taboo, they employ someone from a lower caste to do their ploughing.

**Brahmin:** The priestly caste. The men wear a sacred thread. The strictest ones are vegetarians and will not eat food cooked by people outside their family. They greatly value education and this has allowed them to dominate the government civil service. In rural areas they are farmers, shopkeepers, and money-lenders as well as being priests. You can recognize a Brahmin home by the presence of a *tulasi* (basil family) bush growing in a container in the courtyard.

**Chantyal:** The Chantyal are one of the smallest ethnic groups in Nepal, numbering around 10,000. Of Tibeto-Mongolian origin, they are today found exclusively in Baglung and Myagdi districts. Since they are commonly found mingled within Magars and resemble them in looks and manners, they are often erroneously referred to as Chantyal Magars, but their language has greater affinity with Thakkali and Gurung than with either of the Magar languages. Only around 2000 people are believed to still speak the Chantyal tongue, and Gurja Khani is one of the few villages where it can be heard.

**Chhettri:** The largest caste in Nepal representing 16% of the population, though they are a heterogenous group. Some are descendants of *Aryan* Khas people who moved eastwards into Nepal; others are the descendants of mixed marriages between Brahmins and Magars. It is also known that in the past some powerful Magars were awarded the honour of becoming Chhettri. Like Brahmins they commonly keep a *tulasi* plant in their courtyard

**Dama:** An artisan caste of tailors, who also double as musicians for weddings and funerals! With the influx of ready-made clothes and women from other castes entering the tailoring business, few of them can earn a living from sewing these days.

**Kami:** An artisan caste of black-smiths, also known by their surname *Bishwakarma* or *Bika* (B.K.) for short. In the past it was common to hear the tap-tap of their hammers ringing across the valleys as they mended metal pots, sickles, hoes, kukhri knives, and plough-heads. Now that sound has become rare, replaced by factory-made implements. It is hard for them to survive on subsistence farming since their landholdings are so small.

**Magar :** The largest Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic group in Nepal, Magars comprise some 7% of the total population. They are spread through the mid-western districts with considerable numbers in Baglung district. Most speak Magar language, except in Baglung district where this has been lost. The reason was an edict by the Raja of Galkot (based at Harichaur in the Tara Khola valley) placing a tax on people who did not speak the Nepali language – his way of sniffing out opposition to his rule. The Kham Magars who live west of Baglung in Rukum and Rolpa districts still speak their own distinct language and may be a totally unrelated group of people. Many Magars have been recruited into the Gurkha battalions of the British and Indian armies over the years. Despite their Gurkha soldier reputation, Magars are among the most gentle, friendly, and endearing people you will meet in Nepal. They are renowned for their bravery, honesty, and strong community spirit.

**Newar:** A Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic group having their own language. Small numbers of them are shopkeepers and business entrepreneurs in the larger urban settlements of Baglung and Myagdi. Originally from the Kathmandu valley, their ancestors fled the invasion of Prithvi Narayan Shah (he spread terror by cutting off the noses of the Newars of Kirtipur) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Sarki:** An artisan caste of cobblers. There is a large community living just below Baglung bazar.

**Thakhali:** A Tibeto-Mongolian group from the Thak Khola valley (upper Kali Gandaki). In the winter they used to descend to warmer altitudes where they would erect small teashops along the major porter trails. When we first lived in Baglung there was no roadlink and one had to walk for 2 days. Along the trail there were thousands of porters carrying loads and the route was strewn with small temporary open-walled teashops called *bhatti*, run by Thakhali women, at which travellers

could buy food, and even sleep the night. Though simple in style, the Thakhali women kept them immaculately clean, and their food was renowned. Nowadays most Thakhali have settled in Pokhara with the profits from tourism. But some remain in Thak Khola, and others are still running teashop lodges in small settlements in Baglung and Myagdi districts.

#### Reforestation: A success story

Until 1990 most of the forests were under government control. Nobody cared about sustainability; corruption was rife, and deforestation was rapid. Following the People's Revolution of 1990, a great effort was made to build awareness on the theme: *Hamro ban, hamro dhan* (our forests are our wealth) and to place them under community management.

All over the country Forest Users Committees (majority women) control and monitor the cutting of trees in their local forests, setting quotas on what type of wood may be gathered and how frequently. It has taken time, but it is fair to say that this has been one of the most visibly successful of all development initiatives. Any flight over Nepal bears testimony to the amount of regrowth over the past 2-3 decades.

### Flora and fauna

The trekker who ventures into these areas will be rewarded with a great diversity of flora and fauna. All of the treks described start from the Kali Gandaki river at around 1000 metres. This valley is not only an important migration route for birds such as demoiselle cranes, but also a dividing line for species of flora and fauna, since the western half of the country receives less rainfall than the eastern half. For most of its route the river is deeply incised and it is still common to see vultures soaring effortlessly beside its cliffs.

### Flora

At the lowest elevations much of the land is farmed, but in the valley gorges and cliffs there are pockets of sub-tropical forests with broad-leaved species and bamboos (planted). Above 2000 metres the vegetation changes to temperate forests, dominated by oaks and rhododendrons. In the Tara Khola valley of Baglung District there remains a large virgin forest cloaking a series of 3000 metre peaks, and a similar area of virgin forest lies on the north-facing slopes of the Dhaula Khola gorge. A vegetation belt of canes commonly occurs around 2500 metres. Besides being an important source of food for the Himalayan Panda, the canes are used for construction purposes, and as walking sticks.

Above 3000m trees begin to thin out with the colder temperatures and the vegetation shifts to sub-alpine and alpine with grassy meadows, shrubs such as junipers, and occasional stands of coniferous trees and birch. The treeline lies at around 3600 metres. Above 5000 metres there is little in the way of vegetation. In between these two altitudes lie extensive alpine grasslands interspersed with rocky crags – much of them nowadays being designated as the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve – home to herds of wild ungulates such as the Blue Sheep and the Himalayan Serow and their predator, the elusive Snow Leopard. In the summer season an additional 80,000 domestic livestock enter the Reserve accompanied by their herders.

There is such a vast array of indigenous trees and plants in the region that if you are seriously interested you should invest in a botanical guide. Here, we highlight just a few points:

1. Do not miss the opportunity to take a guided walk at Gurja Khani to learn about the wide range of plants which are eaten or used for medicinal or other purposes.
2. The flowering of the rhododendrons (March to early May) is a sight not to be missed, when the forests are transformed from sober green into an extravaganza of scarlet and crushed pink. There are many varieties, some of which grow into mature forest trees.

They are found in a band 1500-3600m, with the red-flowering variety (the national flower of Nepal known as Lali gurans) found at the lower altitudes.

3. In the forests there are some spectacular wild orchids which flower during and immediately after the rainy season. Even into late November some of them will still be in flower. Look for them on the branches and trunks of forest trees.
4. Stands of the Himalayan Cedar tree on the ridge between Lulang and Gurja Khani (See Box under Route One). One of the giants of the temperate forests, it can grow up to 80 metres.
5. At lower elevations the village paths are ablaze with scarlet poinsettias and marigolds. In fact, neither of these plants are indigenous, but the flowers are popular at festival times.

#### Lokta - the paper plant

Baglung District is famous for its traditional paper made from the shrubby tree *Daphne papyracea* which grows among its extensive oak-rhododendron forests between 1700-3500 metres altitude. In early spring the shrub produces pale pink flowers which give off a strong fragrance, and members of the genus are commonly planted as an ornamental shrub elsewhere. The fine paper, made from the inner bark of the tough fibrous stems, is renowned for its durability and resistance to tearing, humidity, insects and mildew. For hundreds of years it has been used for official government records, while the oldest surviving piece - possibly 2000 years old - contains a sacred text.

A UNICEF supported project promoted the Baglung-based paper to a wider market, but the source forests became badly depleted. Some paper is still made locally and you may spot its distinctive drying racks beside rivers. The typical process is to harvest (pruning) the stems and porter them down to lower altitudes near rivers for further processing. The stems are soaked, beaten, and mixed with caustic soda to soften them. The pulp is then mixed with a water solution and caught on flat mesh trays which are placed at angles to dry in the sun.

#### Fauna

The list of animals is very long since the area includes the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (DHR). The following presents a selection of the larger mammals, likely to be familiar to locals. The Nepali name is given in brackets:-

##### Generally above 3500m

- Snow leopard (Hiu chitwa or 'seto kira'). Endangered. Alpine zone up to 5600m. Preys on blue sheep, tahr, goral, marmots, domestic livestock, and birds such as partridges,
- Blue sheep (Naur) Alpine zone. 3500-5500 m.
- Tibetan sheep (Nayan, Argali) Alpine zone; meadows or light forests. 3000-5000 m.
- Brown bear (Khairo Bhalu). Grassy slopes above the tree line close to the snow.
- Red fox (fyauro) alpine and subalpine meadows up to 5500 m
- Wolf (bwaso). Endangered. Listed as present in DHR.
- Musk deer (Kasturi mirga). Endangered. 3000-4600 metres. Survives the snow by feeding on lichen. Hunted in the past for their musk which is used in perfumes.
- Himalayan marmot. 3500-5200m. Alpine meadows. Lives in burrows.

##### More likely below 3500m

- Himalayan Panda (Habre, Or). Temperate forest with canes on which it feeds.
- Lynx (Pahar Biralo). Alpine and sub-alpine terrain, but descends in winter to 2000m

- Himalayan Ghoral (Ghoral). Steep grassy hillsides or mixed deciduous forests, 300-3000, sometimes up to 4000 m.
- Wild Boar (Bandel) Habitat: forests and fields from tropical to temperate range.
- Himalayan Black bear (Himali kalo bhalu) Winter: temperate forests around 1500m; Summer: sub-alpine near the treeline 3000-3600 m.
- Himalayan Tahr (Jharal). Temperate and subalpine forest on precipitous slopes 1500-5300 metres but mostly around 2000-4500 m.
- Himalayan Serow (Thar). 1800-3000 m. Steep, rugged slopes covered by dense oak-rhododendron forest, and grassy meadows. Common around Gurja.
- Barking deer/Muntjac (Ratuwa, Raate). Forest dwellers. Tropical up to temperate zone.
- Common leopard (Chitwa). Wide range of habitats from tropical up to 4000 m.
- Jackal (syal). Scavenger. Hunt rodents, reptiles and sometimes small deer. Wide range
- Langur monkeys (langur). Temperate forests and cultivated fields. Up to 3600m.
- Yellow-throated marten. Broad-leaved and coniferous forests in hilly terrain up to 2500m
- Stone marten (Mau khane?). Wide range of habitats 1500-4000 m.
- Common mongoose (nyauri musa). Tropical to temperate, often near cultivation.

However, you will be extremely lucky to set eyes on any of these! During years of trekking in this region, the only mammals which we have spotted are a large wild boar which galloped past me on the pass to Dhorpatan (2014), and years ago a pair of Himalayan pandas on a disused trail between Baglung and Pokhara. This was before the road was built and, if they have any sense, the pandas are long gone from that spot. In Baglung in the early 90s, packs of scavenging jackals used to invade the bazaar on nights with a full moon, and one night a large cat bit the throat of our dog and carried off her puppy. Farmers in Gurja Khani and similar remote villages report bears eating their maize, and leopards taking young lambs. But realistically, the only animal which you have a chance of seeing is the *langur* monkey with its graceful long tail and distinctive sooty face. Look out for them in autumn in the lower altitudes close to the fields where they like to steal the grain.

Besides mammals there are many varieties of reptiles (snakes, lizards) and insects, but none of these represent any danger to a trekker. While the mammals will be hiding, the birds are not so shy, and the early morning hours from 6-9 am are the best for bird watching. Even without binoculars you will spot many while trekking. For those interested it is worth investing in a bird book. For novices, some of the more spectacular or recognizable ones to look out for are:-

- Blue magpie. A large bird with an extremely long tail. Slaty grey with black head and yellow or red bill. Forests. Red-billed up to 1500m; yellow-billed 2000-3600m
- Blossom-headed parakeet. 34 cm. Up to 1500m. Green plumage; male has red head; female black.
- Himalayan Tree Pie. 40 cm. Up to 2600m. Shades of grey and brown with long tail. Noisy with a variety of calls. Forests near habitation
- White-cheeked bulbul. 20 cm. Common up to 3000 m. Brown, jaunty crest, white cheeks, and yellow vent
- Impeyan pheasant (danphe). 60 cm. High grassy slopes in summer; forests in winter 2600-4500m. Iridescent feathers of 9 colours, but looks black from a distance. Large white spot on rump. Found around Gurja Khani. National bird of Nepal.
- Paradise flycatcher. Up to 1500m; near villages. Mature males have extremely long tail which flutters like a ribbon when they fly. Black head, white body and wings.
- Scarlet Minivet (Rani chara). 23 cm. Up to 1800m. In flocks. Males are brilliant scarlet, and females yellow.
- Sunbirds. Small birds with brilliant iridescent plumage (scarlet, purple, or blue-green), hover like humming birds as they drink nectar through their slim curved bills.



- Verditer flycatcher. 15 cm. Up to 2600m. A striking turquoise colour. Commonly seen sitting on the very top of trees.
- Vultures. The largest is the Lammergeier or Bearded Vulture: 122 cm. 1200-7300m. A variety can be seen above the Kali Gandaki at Baglung and Beni.
- Wall creeper. 18 cm. Up to 4500m. Common on cliffs – and nowadays often spotted on cuttings for tractor roads. Grey bird with striking crimson wings.
- White-capped River Chat. 19 cm. Up to 4800m. Common on all rivers. Bright white cap, remainder black and maroon.

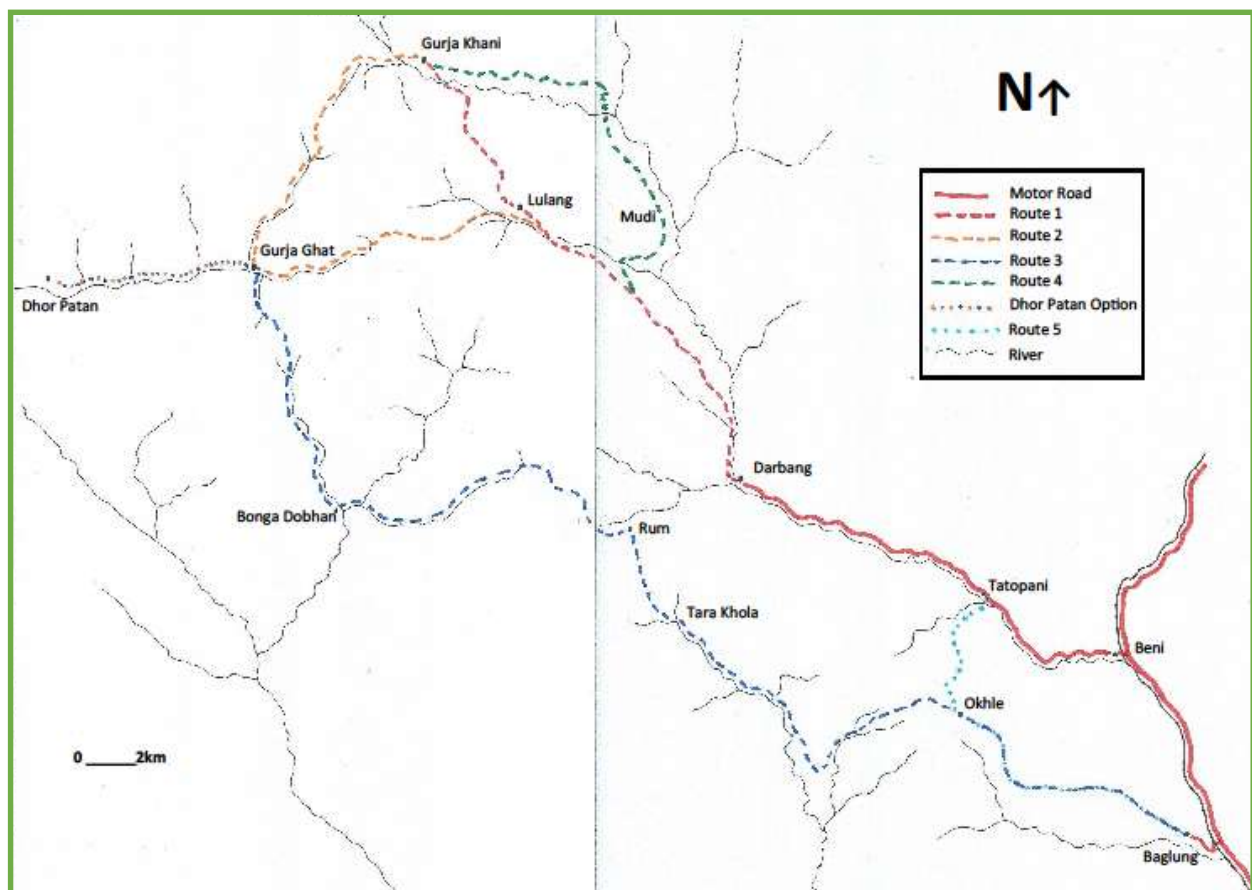
## 5. TRAIL GUIDE

### Trekking routes to/from Gurja Khani:

- **Route One:** Beni/Darbang to Gurja Khani via Lulang (2-3 days). Pass: 3,250 m
- **Route Two:** Gurja Khani to Beni/Darbang via Dhorpatan valley (3-4 days). Two passes: Rugachaur (3,950 m) and Jaljalla (3,400m).
- **Route Three:** Baglung to Gurja Khani via Dhamja, Tarakhola and Dhorpatan (6-7 days). Two high passes: Gurjaghat Deorali (3,350m) and Rugachaur (3,950 m), and two minor ones below 3000 m.
- **Route Four:** Gurja Khani to Darbang/Beni via the canyon route and Mudi. (3 days). No high pass but involves a vertiginous descent.

### Mini-trek

1. **Route Five:** Baglung to Myagdi Tatopani/Dharbang/Beni via Dhamja pass (2,560 m) (2 days). Good views of Annapurnas and Dhaulagiris. May be combined with Route One.



### Advice on which route to choose

All the above routes offer stunning views of the Himalayas so the main criteria for your choice will be the amount of time available and your degree of fitness. Any of the routes can be walked in the reverse direction, the choice depending on where guides may be obtained, and one's preference for uphill versus downhill when the route is very steep.

The shortest and easiest way in and out of Hidden Village is Route 1. This is the regular route used by locals and mule trains. From the roadhead (Darbang) a fit person can reach Gurja Khani in 2 days. If you have the time and energy it is more interesting to make a circuit and return (or arrive) via a different route. Route 3 is the longest route, taking you through un-

touristed valleys and passes, through a varied mix of scenery and tribes/caste groups. If you begin with this route it ensures that you are well-acclimatized by the time you hit the higher passes. It traverses the Dhorpatan valley, a beautiful alpine valley with a small remnant of Tibetan refugees from the 1959 diaspora. A further variation is to follow Route Five from Baglung to Dharbang. Then continue on Route One to Gurja Khani.

A trek to Gurja Khani can be combined with some of the better-known treks e.g. Around Dhaulagiri (begins from the lower Dhaura valley or from Phalegaon); Around Annapurna (connects at Beni); Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (connects at Gurja Ghat); Dolpo (via Dhorpatan). See maps.

### Via Rugachaur Pass (Routes 2 and 3)

On Routes 2 and 3 the pass of Rugachaur (3,950 m) is an easy climb when walked from the Dhorpatan (south) side, but a formidable climb of five hours from the Gurja Khani (north) side; the final hour is very steep with no comfortable resting spots. There are no teashops, and few locals on the trail for asking directions (though women and children regularly walk this route when going to visit “maiti” (maternal home). It is essential to hire a guide since the route is hard to follow where the trail descends and disappears into a boulder-strewn river gully. There are some narrow exposed sections on cliffs above the gully, though the feeling of exposure is reduced by the dense vegetation. If the state of the path remains the same as in 2014, **you are not advised** to attempt this route without a guide, or in wet weather when the path becomes extremely slippery and the river gully sections risk rolling stones. The easiest place to obtain a guide is in Gurja Khani. But if going in the reverse direction, it may be possible to obtain a guide at Gurja Ghat (Dhorpatan valley) or to phone Gurja Khani to arrange for a guide to meet you at Rugachaur Pass. There is a plan to widen and improve this footpath in 2015.

### Via the Dhaura Canyon (Route 4)

Route 4 is a splendid route high above the canyon of the Dhaura River. However, **be warned**, it involves an extremely exposed descent of 700 metres which occurs about 5-6 hours after departing from Gurja Khani (i.e. too late to change your mind and return to Gurja for the night). Nevertheless, this route too is walked by Gurja women and children on visits to “maiti”. A guide is essential as the route is not marked, and it is easiest to find a guide in Gurja Khani village.

### Getting lost!

Not everyone is familiar with the convention of referring to ‘left bank’ and ‘right bank’ of rivers. Remember that these are always in reference to a person facing downstream.

Footpaths proliferate in Nepal. There are main trails, minor trails, paths for going to cut firewood, paths to access fields, paths diverting around a landslide, paths for herding animals, paths to sacred spots . . . At times you will face a bewildering choice of paths not mentioned in this guide book or on the map.

The standard Nepali advice to avoid getting lost is: “Stay on the path, and you won’t get lost.” They also assume that we are clairvoyant. A typical response to a request for directions is: “You know that big tree over the hill, don’t you – that’s where you should take the upper path.”

Assuming there is nobody around to ask, how do you decide *which* path is the one you should stay on? Look for clues in the way of footprints or evidence of beaten compacted dirt, suggesting heavier traffic on one than the others. The right path is not necessarily the most broad and level. If the way is rocky, look for the rocks which look whitish where dust from boots has been deposited. If you are on a trail with regular local traffic, another clue is sweet wrappers - or tangerine peel in season. Should none of these things help, do not panic. There are two choices: you can sit and wait till someone turns up, or you can pick the most likely and continue. If you do the latter, keep checking for footprints especially in soft muddy spots. If in doubt turn back and try an alternative option.

**Don't teach children to beg!**

In off-the-beaten areas children have not learned to beg from tourists. Let's keep it that way!! However photogenic they may look, control your impulse to offer them sweets, pens, or other things. You can make an exception if you are staying in their home, but time spent playing with them is the best gift. If you want to help financially, a donation to the local government school is the best means.

**ROUTE ONE: Darbang » Lulang » Gurja Khani (2-3 days)**

It is not necessary to hire a guide for Route One. Porters can usually be hired at the bus station in Beni or Darbang, but it is better to make an arrangement with a Trekking Agency in Pokhara lakeside since porters are becoming difficult to recruit nowadays.

**To start:**

From Pokhara take a bus to Beni (3 hours) on the Kali Gandaki/Jomosom road. From Beni catch a local bus up the Myagdi Khola river to Darbang (2 hours). Buses for Darbang leave from the western edge of Beni beside a road bridge over the Myagdi Khola. There are several every day; share taxis are also available (double the price, half the time). This is a bumpy dusty ride, sometimes teetering on the edge of landslides and precipices. If this doesn't appeal, it is also possible to walk from Beni to Darbang (6 hours). It is a verdant scenic valley, strung with small hamlets, The original walking trail still remains in most places, though here and there you will have to walk on the dusty motor track.

In Darbang there are several basic hotels such as the Thakhali Guest House. If time, it is preferable to complete the first leg of the trek and spend the night at Dharapani or Takam. From Darbang a rudimentary bus service runs up to Sibang with 2-3 buses per day. The track however is extremely rough, often blocked by landslides, the buses are past retirement age and wait until they are full before leaving, so it is often just as quick to walk. Anyway, it would be a shame to ride this section as the mountain views are stunning and cannot be appreciated inside a cramped bus.

**Darbang landslide**

Some 25 years ago a massive landslide occurred close to Darbang on the opposite side of the Myagdi Khola. It swept with it forests, fields, and villages. Two hundred people are said to have died. The debris dammed the waters of the river for several hours which caused further devastation downstream when the dam broke. The disaster illustrates the extreme steepness and fragile nature of the slopes in the Himalayas, particularly along the Myagdi Khola and its tributaries.

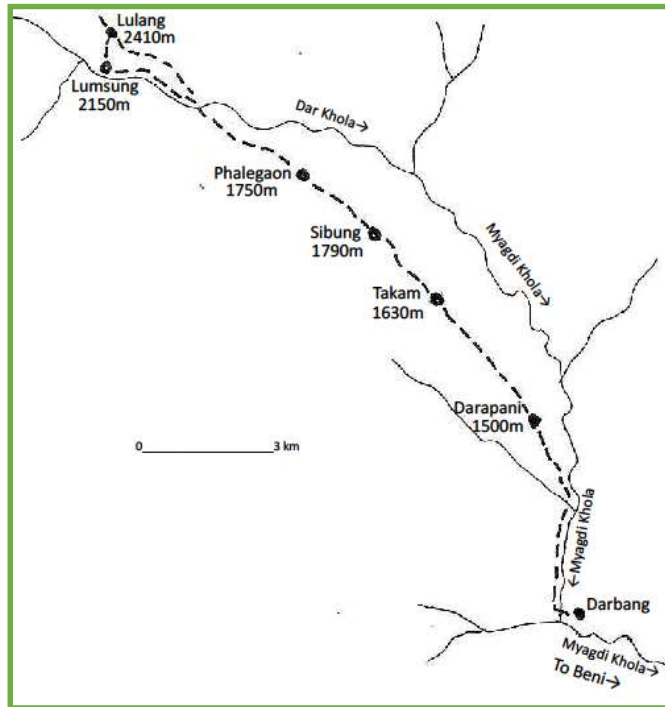
**Day One: Darbang (1000 m ) >> Lulang (2410 m )****7-8 hours**

This is a longish day which can be eased either by splitting it into two with an overnight at a homestay in Takam or the teashop-lodge at Phalegaon, or by gaining Dharapani the night before. It is an extremely scenic route, thickly sprinkled with picturesque villages. The following day there is no habitation between Lulang and Gurja Khani, so it is recommended to sleep at Lulang (or Lumsung) in order to be sure of making Gurja Khani. Those who are fit, however, can reach Gurja Khani in a day from Phalegaon.

1. **Darbang (1000m) > Dharapani (1500 m)**

1:45 hours

Cross the suspension bridge over the Myagdi Khola and follow the jeep track northwards along the right bank of the river. After half an hour cross a side tributary on a suspension bridge and rejoin the jeep track. After the second hairpin bend, take the old footpath on the right which zigzags steeply up a pine-clad spur overlooking the river below. Higher up the footpath rejoins the jeep track and continues to climb until the attractive village of **Dharapani (1500 m)** (tr: spring water) is reached. True to its name there are several stone-clad waterspouts at the entrance to the village. Ethnic groups here are largely Chhettri and Magar with a few dalit households.



There are teashops and at least one teashop lodge should you wish to spend the night, and splendid views of Dhaulagiri and Gurja Himal.

2. **Dharapani (1500m) > Takam (1630m) > Phalegaon (1750 m)**

2:45 hours

Continue on the jeep track – it is dusty or muddy in a few places but little traffic except for mule trains and there are stunning views of the Dhaulagiri range to compensate. It passes through woodland interspersed with terraced fields, where you will see villagers busy with different tasks depending on the agricultural season – ploughing, planting, harvesting, or threshing. In about an hour you arrive at the even more picturesque village of **Takam** – slate roofs, stone walls, front façades of white and ochre mud plaster, and a small pagoda temple sitting on a wide crescent of rice fields with an unbelievable backdrop of snow mountains. Just before Takam, take the lower right fork in the track (shorter, and less dusty) which leads past a stone *dhara* water spout. Homestay accommodation is available here as well as teashop-lodges. Continuing, follow the jeep track as it climbs to negotiate a landslide-prone cliff section and winds around to reach **Sibang (1790 m)** in 30 minutes. The jeep track ends here (Dec 2014). Accommodation is available in teashop-lodges. Follow the footpath which continues and in about 15 minutes take the upper fork which climbs up to pass near the lower part of **Machim** village (the lower fork descends to cross the river for the Dhaulagiri Circuit route) from where there are good views up the valley which leads to French Pass. From here the trail is level to the school at **Phalegaon** (teashops and local accommodation available.)

3. **Phalegaon (1750m) > Lulang village (2410 m)**

2:45 hours

From Phalegaon the path descends gently (passing below the village of Muna) to reach a bridge across the Dar Khola (tributary of the Myagdi) in less than an hour. Looking westwards upstream the villages die out and the mountains rise higher and steeper, the ridges intersecting each other like a fat braid of mountains. Across the river there is a single teashop (cannot be relied upon to be open – and it is a longish climb to the next teashop at Lulang). Just past the teashop there is a choice of trails. The lower (left) trail keeps closer to the river and climbs gently to reach Lumsung village (in Lulang VDC) while the upper right trail climbs steadily to the large and fascinating village of **Lulang**. The

latter is the more direct trail which you should take (unless you are heading to the Jaljalla Pass and Dhorpatan). At Lulang there is one local lodge about halfway up on the left (Rati Maya B.K. 97420380), and friendly but very simple homestay accommodation further up and further left at Kali Maya's (9746062298) – though the room is very small the toilet is spotless. Further homestays are anticipated in the coming year. [If you are too tired to climb the steep stairs to Lulang it is possible to stay at the teashop lodge at Lumsung. The next day there is a direct path between Lumsung and Lulang.]

### Lulang Village

Lulang is an unusual village because all of its 200 households belong to the *dalit* caste of metal-workers (Kami). Fanned around a steep stadium of terraced fields, the village is colourful with marigold flowers, rows of pumpkins and maize drying on roofs and verandahs, the houses decorated with splashes and stripes of red, white and black muds. It is however a very poor and neglected village, with a high rate of absentee men who have gone to seek their fortune in the Gulf countries.

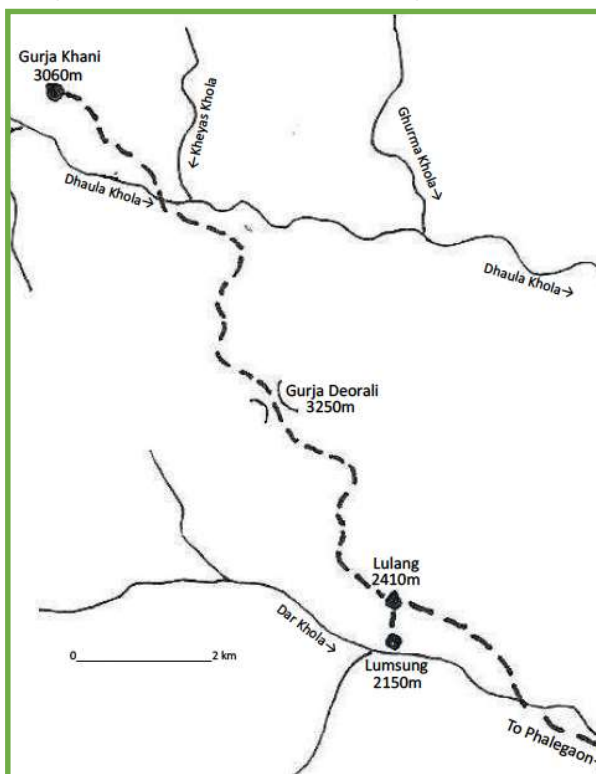
**Day Two: Lulang (2410m) > Gurja Pass (3250 m) > Gurja Khani (3061 m) 7+ hours**

Note: There is no habitation between Lulang and Gurja Khani except for a rudimentary teashop at the Pass, so it is wise to eat something before starting and carry some snacks. It is a moderately strenuous route with two ascents and one descent, but a good, easy-to-follow trail.

#### 1. Lulang (2410m) > Gurja Deorali (3250m)

**3 hours**

Follow any footpath up through Lulang to reach the main trail which emerges from the village on the upper left side as you look uphill. Once on the trail it is impossible to lose the way since the route is well travelled by mule trains. You are also certain to be accompanied by women heading out with empty *doko* on their back to gather firewood and fodder. It is a pleasant climb through oak-rhododendron forest – not too steep except for the final section. The branches and trunks are almost hidden by a thick cloak of moss, ferns, and orchids. At the pass there is a draughty teashop (tea, noodles, biscuits) and stupendous views of Gurja Himal – if you arrive before noon.



#### 2. Gurja Deorali (3250m) > Dhaura Khola bridge (2500 m) 3 hours

Follow the only path down the north slope of the ridge. A landslide in the monsoon of 2014 felled many of the majestic Himalayan cedar trees and destroyed sections of the path.

The path has been repaired and the landslide opened up views of Gurja Himal which can be enjoyed much of the way down. In December and January you may encounter snow on this section (in 1998 our children sledged most of the way on their bottoms). After descending moderately steeply, the gradient lessens as the path heads in a more

westerly direction for the final hour of the descent to the bridge over the Dhaula Khola. On the opposite side you will see fields and temporary dwellings of the Gurja people, who descend to live in these when snow falls up in the village.

#### Himalayan Cedars

The *Cedrus deodara* trees on the pass and along the ridge, mark the westernmost occurrence in Nepal of this magnificent tree. One of the giants of the forests, it can grow up to 80 metres high (similar to sequoia trees of California). It is used for timber, and fragrant oils can also be extracted. A few years ago a devastating fire destroyed many trees on the western slopes of this ridge.

### 3. Dhaula Khola (2500m) > Gurja Khani (3060 m) 1:15 hours

There used to be a wooden bridge spanning the narrowest point of the gorge, but in the past year a modern suspension bridge has been installed. The last leg to the village involves another climb. It is not so high but it is steep and has to be done when legs are tired. Follow the main track upwards. By this hour you are likely to encounter villagers heading home with farming tools or loads of firewood and grass on their backs, so there is no risk of getting lost. The path arrives at a flattish grassy meadow. There is a water tap and an empty building on the right, with the sheer face of Gurja Himal partially visible above this. The village of Gurja Khani is also visible to the left and is reached on a level footpath in about 15 minutes from here. Near the village, avoid the path which forks right and rises up to the school.

#### Arrival at Gurja Khani

If you visit in November after the harvest is in, you may think you have arrived at an animal park as you walk the final 15 minutes to the village, for these fields will be covered with thousands of sheep, goats, cows and buffaloes, guarded by large but friendly sheepdogs, all of them wearing bells, including the dogs. As evening approaches a tremendous bleating and ringing arises as lambs that are penned call out to their mothers returning from grazing. Shepherds in homespun jackets wander around checking that animals are safe, and relocating those which have turned up at the wrong address.

In Gurja Khani, basic homestay accommodation is available at the following households: Jhak Bahadur Chantyal - house just above the entrance to the village; Sita Chantyal - shop in the middle of the village; Mohan Chantyal - house on western edge of the village. Other homestays are anticipated by the end of 2015. There is a Tourism Development Committee who will be happy to help with any questions (Contact: Jhak Bahadur Chantyal). Persons in the village can be contacted by telephoning 994690014. The telephone rings in Sita Chantyal's shop. They will forward a message on foot to the persons concerned.

Gurja Khani is a pleasant place to spend a few nights. For activity suggestions, see Section 3.

## ROUTE TWO: Gurja Khani > Dhorpatan > Jaljalla Pass > Darbang

3-4 days

#### To start:

This route may be walked in either direction, but is described here as a *return* route for trekkers who have reached Gurja Khani by Route One. Starting from Gurja Khani guarantees you obtain a guide without delay.

### Advice and warning

Do not be misled by locals who say they jog up to Rugachaur Pass in two hours. This is a steep unremitting climb (or descent in reverse direction) at altitude. The path is hardly more than a goat-track, and where it passes along the gully bed the disposition of the boulders and the crossings of the stream are constantly changing. If descending in the other direction, missing the correct path can leave one marooned at the crest of a high waterfall. A guide is essential, until such time as the villagers improve the trail and add paint markings. (This might happen in 2015). So please understand that the description of the first day below is not sufficient to allow trekkers to make their way alone, and to do so **could be dangerous**.

After Rugachaur Pass there are no further challenges, the gradient lessens and the path is easy to follow.

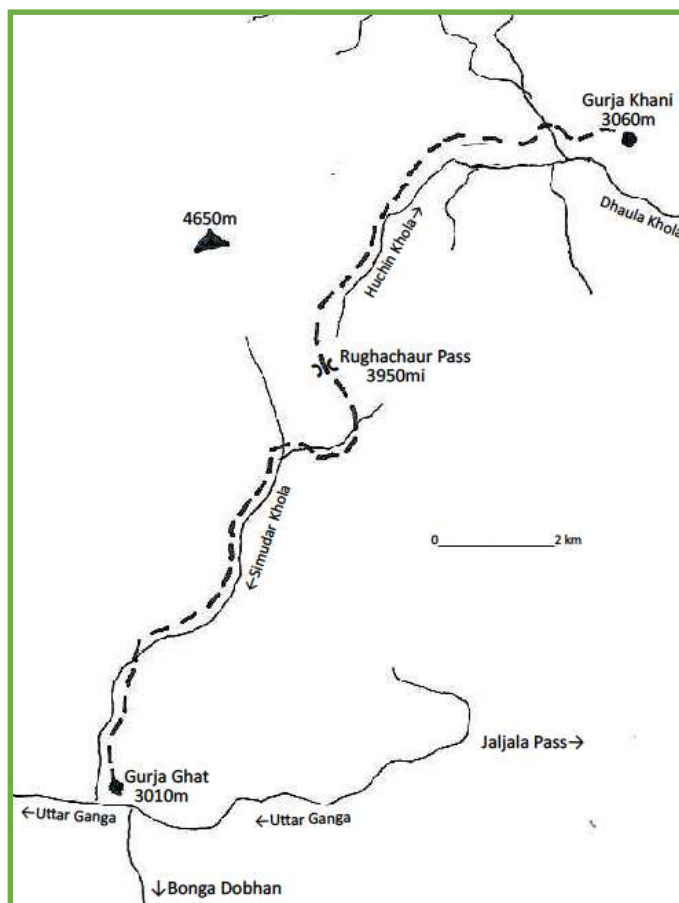
**Day One: Gurja Khani (3060m) > Gurja Ghat (3015m)**

**8-9 hours**

**1. Gurja Khani (3060m) > Rugachaur Pass (3950m)**

**5 + hours**

It is advisable to make an early start. Follow the main path heading west from the village. Shortly afterwards take the left fork which leads down to the Dhaula river where there is a temporary bridge in the dry season. Cross and climb the limy-white landslide scree.



Follow the path upwards for 30 minutes or so until it reaches a ridge and emerges into open fields with temporary shelters. Continue up past the shelters. Beyond these the path passes through dense vegetation of canes and trees, dipping up and down. At times it follows a precipitous route above cliffs and waterfalls. The feeling of exposure is lessened by the dense vegetation, but the sense of safety is an illusion and feet must be carefully placed. In rain this path becomes a treacherous mud-slide – canes make strong hand-holds if needed. From time to time the path descends to the stream bed and follows the gully upwards. There are no bridges for the multiple crossings of the stream, and if the water is high one has to wade.

After about 4 hours, the path leaves the gully for good, and the really steep climb begins. It is challenging because there are hardly any spots where one can place two feet flat on the ground and no *chautara* for a rest stop. The rewards, however, are the amazing views that develop behind one. Finally the path crests the Pass. There is a perfect picnic spot on a wide grassy meadow with a *chautara*. Alpine flowers abound in season. But it can be cold. Rugachaur means “the meadow where you catch a cold”! There are breath-stopping views (if you have any left) of Pyutar, Churen, and Gurja Himal with many of the other Dhaulagiri peaks also visible.



## 2. **Rugachaur Pass (3950m) > Gurja Ghat (3015m)** **3+ hours**

If the sun is shining this is an idyllic gentle walk through alpine meadows and craggy peaks. After your exertions on the pass you will be tempted to relax in many spots. But don't dawdle too long as there is no permanent habitation for the night until Gurja Ghat is reached. Follow the broad grassy meadow gently downhill, keeping the small stream on your right. Pass a single isolated hut on your left. Continue to descend passing more huts on your left. Where the stream bed flattens, cross it to the right bank, and continue downstream. The path rises slightly above the stream bed and contours around before descending to cross a side tributary on a log bridge. This occurs approximately one hour or so from the Pass.

Continue to follow the path downstream on the right bank. The stream drops steeply but the path continues more or less level, leaving it some distance above the river. After a further hour, the path descends to rejoin the river (locals know a dry season short-cut through the brush and your guide may lead you that alternative route). The path crosses the river to the left bank and shifts back and forth. After a further hour or so the path descends some steep stone steps and enters the broad flat valley of the Uttar Ganga river. Turn left (east) and in a short while the settlement of Gurja Ghat is reached. The teashop lodge is immediately on the left, across from the compound of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve. There may be rangers here who wish to see your entry permit.

There are hundreds of summer season dwellings, but everyone except the teashop people descends with their herds in early October, so the place is nearly deserted. The teashop is run by a friendly and helpful Chantyal couple (Lokendra Chantyal Ph. 9867633453). Accommodation is basic and consists of a large dormitory room with further beds in the kitchen, but the toilet is spotless. Nights are cold, but there are plenty of blankets, and with a fire burning in the open hearth, this is a cosy place to sit and watch food being prepared.

### **Dhorpatan (2900 m)**

If you have the time we recommend staying an extra day in order to explore the beautiful Dhorpatan valley. The valley is almost flat and the village of **Dhorpatan** lies a gentle 2 hour walk downstream. Although the high Himalayas are not visible (except for the tip of Annapurna), the Dhorpatan valley is reminiscent of an alpine valley with stands of conifers, rushing rivers, rocky crags, clear mountain air, and a rich silence broken only by bird song. There are many sunny glades with carpets of vivid moss beckoning one to rest and contemplate. On the way there is a community of *Sunars* (goldsmiths) at **Khalti Kutti** (they descend for the winter months) and a Tibetan refugee settlement at **Bharte** and **Chentung** with a Bonpo Buddhist monastery and Tibetan medicine school. At Dhorpatan there is a community-owned lodge, some shops, and a jeep track recently reached the village from Burtibang. From Burtibang there are regular buses to Tansen and Baglung should you need a quick exit, but the ride will be rough, and winding and will take you all day.

Note: It is advisable to stay at Gurja Ghat the night before you cross the Jaljalla Pass, rather than Dhorpatan, so that you are not caught short the next day – there is no habitation until Moreni is reached.

## **Day Two: Gurja Ghat (3015m) > Moreni (2300m) > Lumsung (2190m)** **7-8 hours**

### 1. **Gurja Ghat (3015m) > Jaljalla Pass (3400m)** **4 hours**

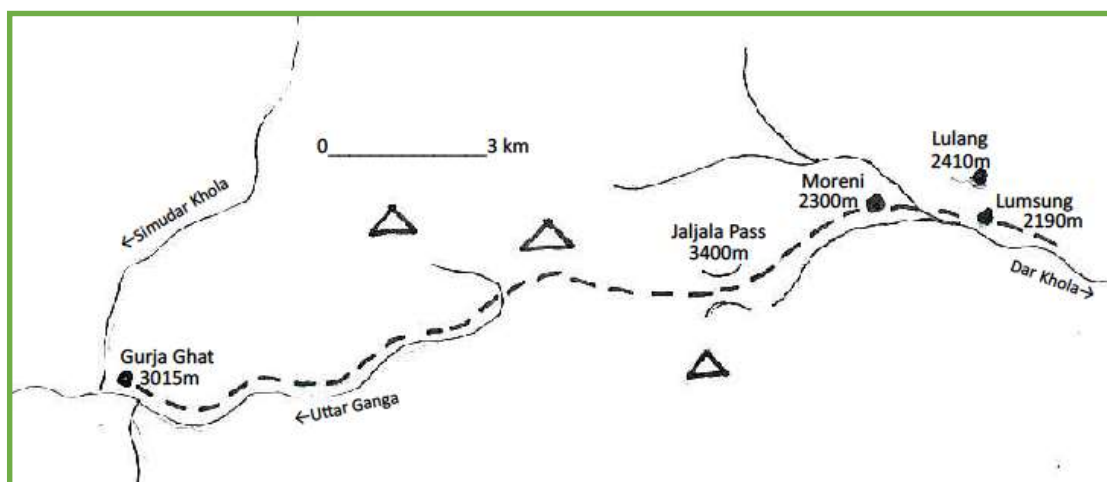
Follow the Uttar Ganga valley upwards, keeping the river on your right side (i.e. walking up the right bank). The trail is well-trodden and passes by many herders' huts. Ignore any

trails which deviate to left or right and continue in an easterly direction, climbing steadily. After around two hours the path cross the Uttar Ganga (by now a small stream) and continue to ascend eastwards. In another hour or so the Jaljalla Pass is reached with magnificent views.

2. **Jaljalla Pass (3400m) > Moreni > Lumsung (2190m)**  
**hours**

3-4

The views continue to entertain as one descends. The path is clear and easy to follow. It



descends through scrub and then light forest of moss-draped trees which frame the white mountains. After two and a half hours you will see open fields below you with temporary dwellings. The path descends through these to reach the village of Moreni where there is a teashop-lodge. If you have the time, continue to descend, cross to the other side of the Dar khola and continue downstream a short distance to Lumsung where there is also a teashop lodge.

**Day Three: Lumsung (2190m) > Darbang (1000m)**  
**hours**

6

After Lumsung, the route is the same as Route One, but in the reverse direction. There should be no trouble in finding the way as the trails are well-travelled by locals. Darbang can be reached in a day on foot, with time to continue by bus to Beni, Baglung, or even Pokhara if you reach Darbang in good time.

**ROUTE THREE: BAGLUNG >> DHORPATAN >> GURJA KHANI**

6-7 days

**To start**

Baglung is reached in 2-3 hours by bus from Pokhara, or by share taxi or jeep. Ask for the Baglung Bus Park in Pokhara. There are many buses every day and the road is pitched all the way. Baglung is a moderate sized town which has grown enormously in recent years. But nothing can destroy its dramatic setting on the cliffs of a raised river terrace above the Kali Gandaki river, with the majestic south face of Dhaulagiri framed by the river canyon. There are many local hotels, the best one being the Peace Palace Hotel which offers rooms with *en suite* hot showers, Wi-Fi in the restaurant, and a small garden. English is spoken.

## Baglung

The town of Baglung is reached by bus from Pokhara in about 3 hours. It has a dramatic setting atop the cliffs of a raised river terrace high above the Kali Gandaki river, with the white face of Dhaulagiri looking down on the town like an elderly statesman. Situated on a narrow peninsula at the confluence of two rivers, it developed as a trading town for a wide hinterland to the north and west long before motor roads and vehicles arrived. During the Maoist insurgency period (2000-2005) the rice fields of its plateau sadly gave way to cement buildings as people fled rural areas to the safety of towns. But Baglung still has some charm and is largely traffic-free; its old Newari bazaar remains in the western corner with some beautiful traditional stone and brick buildings with carved windows and slate roofs.

On the tip of the peninsula surrounded by an ancient holy forest is a temple dedicated to Devi. In the month of Chaitra (March/April) a large *mela* (fair) is held here which in the past attracted traders and revelers from as far afield as Mustang, Rolpa and Dolpo. There is also a dramatic cliff-to-cliff suspension bridge which is an experience just to walk. It crosses the side tributary of the Kathe Khola to Titeng VDC. The bridge begins from near the bus station in Baglung.

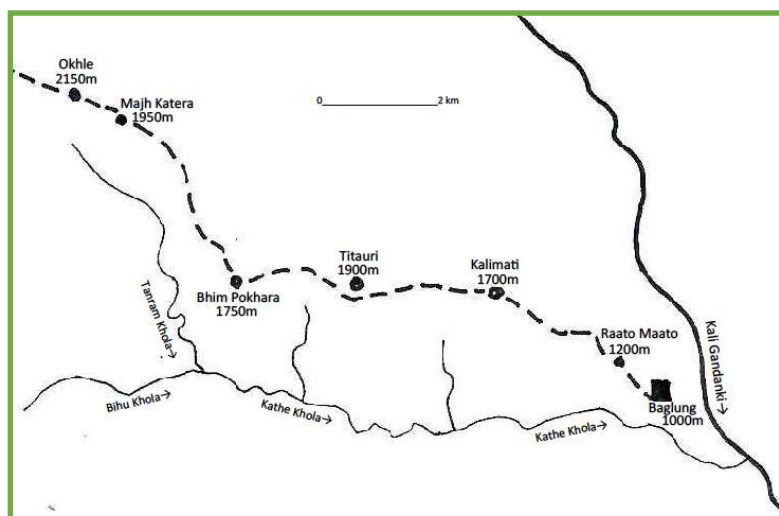
**Day One: Baglung Bazaar (1,000 m) >> Okhle (Dhamja VDC) (2,150 m)**

**6-7 hours**

**1. Baglung (1000m) > Dikichaur/Kalimati (1700m)**

**2 hours**

It is advisable to set out early to complete the climb before the heat of the day. **Start:** In Baglung bazaar make your way to Vidhya Mandir Chowk (left side of Vidhya Mandir Secondary School) where you will find a footpath leading to a cement staircase with a hand-rail. After about 15 minutes the staircase ends at the Town Office (pink building on right) and merges with a tractor road. Follow this upwards (do not diverge left onto a wide level track) until you see a well-trodden footpath rising through pines and bamboos on the left. You will follow this path for the next hour or so. At times the footpath is crossed by the new tractor road. Make sure you find the old walking trail continuing on the far side, always heading upwards and westwards. After 10 minutes you pass near the village of **Raato Maato** (tr. red mud) on your right, but continue up the walking trail. This is a delightful path as it gets higher, rising through rocky crags and sweet-scented pines with stone steps in the steeper spots. There are many shady *chautara* tempting a rest stop. Nowadays this trail is little used and you can enjoy the silence and loneliness. After 1-2 hours you reach the delightful village of **Dikichaur** set amid wild cherry trees (flowering October-December), and the trail merges with the jeep track. Follow the track



to the right up through the village and at the top contour to the left. In 15 minutes this leads one to **Kalimati** (tr. black mud). There are two teashops near the school.

2. **Kalimati (1700m) > Bhim Pokhara (1750m) 2 hours**  
This section follows an un-trafficked jeep track and is fairly level. New jeep tracks are proliferating and at times it may be unclear which one to pick. In general you need to keep heading westwards and gently upwards. If in doubt ask for the next villages of Titauro or Bhim Pokhara. **Titauro** is reached in about 1 hour and here, if you glance back, you will see the upper half of Annapurna South and Machapuchare peaks. There is a teashop. Continue westwards on the jeep track. It descends to negotiate a cliff (high above in the forest there is rock face which resembles an Easter Island statue) and then climbs again reaching the village of **Bhim Pokhara (Multana)** on a narrow shoulder of land after another hour. More teashops.
3. **Bhim Pokhara (1750m) > Okhle (Dhamja) (2150m) 2:30 hours**  
Continue level on the same jeep track (north-westwards). The track curls around the ridge revealing a large bowl of slopes surrounding the upper tributaries of the Kathe Khola. Dhamja and the village of Okhle is visible at the top arc of the bowl. In just under an hour the village of Sima is reached. Take the left fork which descends a short distance. After about 100 metres there is a house on the right and the track bends to the left. The house has a signboard on its wall. Take the footpath behind this house beside an irrigation ditch (it seems an unlikely path). The path follows the irrigation canal and then descends to cross a waterfall stream with a small suspension bridge. The path climbs very steeply up the cliff on the far side to rejoin a jeep track. After a further 10 minutes level walk the village of **Majh Katera** is reached in the VDC of **Dhamja**. There is a local teashop-hotel here. There is another local lodge half an hour further on by the secondary school at Sayakatera, but if you have the energy we recommend carrying on up to the higher village of **Okhle** (the climb will not be wasted since it reduces the climb the next day). A short distance after the lodge at Majh Katera a footpath ascends on the right, leading to Okhle.

For Homestays in Okhle, contact Jit Bahadur Bishwakarma (Ph 9847682248) or Okhle means to *crack* and the village is named after a hole in a large boulder where people would bring their rice to hull in the old days. Bishwakarma (metal-workers) and Magar and Chantyal people settled here during the copper mining days of the Rana regime. Mining ceased around 100 years ago.

**Day Two: Okhle (2150m) >> Tarakhola gaon (1800m) >> Phedi (2230m) 7 hours**

Note: The names on the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve map for this section are different to those in local use. We provide the latter, in case you have to ask the way. The village of Tarakhola gaon (not marked on the map) lies on the left bank of the river, downstream a little from Sagubot (marked on the map).

1. **Okhle (2150m) > Sirkhu (2350m) 2:30 hours**  
In Okhle (or in Majh Katera), ask locals to direct you to the footpath which heads north-westwards and upwards to Kanchi Deorali and Sirkhu. The path climbs gently through scrub and fields, passing **Bahun Karka** (named after a single Brahmin family who live here). Just beyond a white tapstand take a footpath which forks right (up) which will lead you up through oak/rhododendron forest to **Kanchi Deorali (2400 m)** – a minor pass marked with a stone chautara, reached in 1 hour from Okhle. Snow peaks are visible from here. Continue on the same path, which meanders up and down and in half an hour reaches the pass of **Nila Jotin Dara (2530 m)** Note that Dara is spelt Danda on maps, but it is pronounced as we have spelt it here] Continue gently downhill through the forest clad with ferns and orchids. Cross a stream emerging from a narrow cleft in a rock wall and lower down the path emerges into a meadow with the village of **Sirkhu** visible below.

The upper houses of the village are reached in just over 1 hour from Nila Jotin Dara. There is a single teashop here.

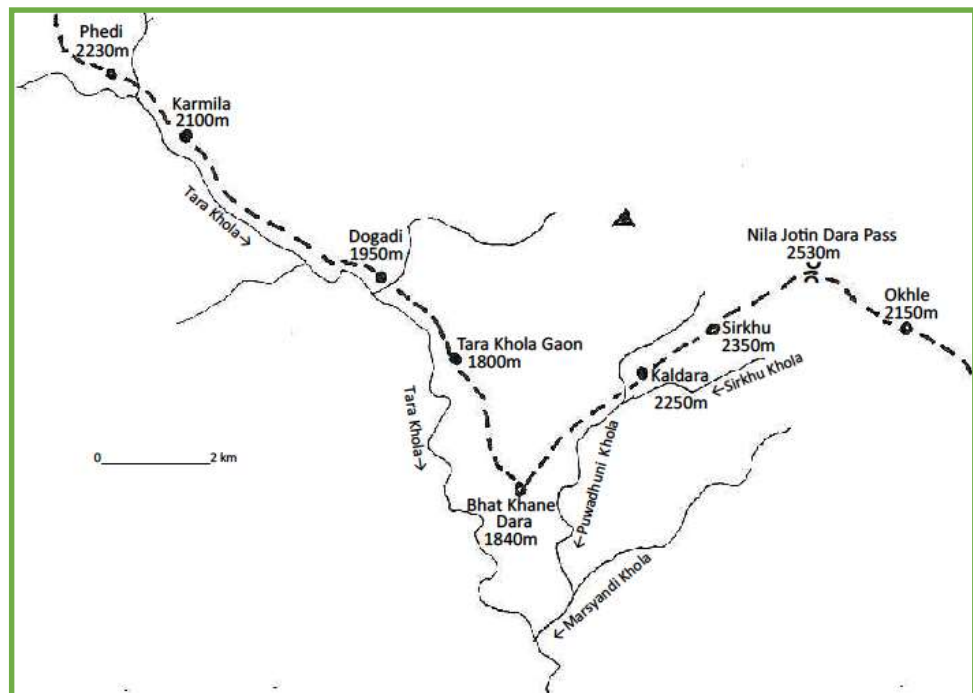
### **Cannabis sativa**

At some point on this trek you will certainly spot *cannabis sativa* growing – it is not called ‘weed’ for no reason. The plant is endemic in Baglung, and is a traditional crop. Locals use its seeds for chutney, and the stems for hemp twine. But of course it is the same plant which provides the narcotic in *ganja*, *charesh*, and *bhanga*. For centuries it has been grown and used without controversy; in fact a mountain near Baglung bazar is named Ganja Duri. Then the hippie culture reached Nepal and the growing of cannabis was made illegal. From time to time police arrive and burn the crops of the villagers. Yet it has legitimate uses as a cash crop. The seed grains are widely available in Baglung stores, and you will almost certainly be served some of the chutney with your dal-bhaat at one of the teashops.

### 2. **Sirkhu (2250m) > Bhat Khane Dara (1840m) 2 hours**

At Sirkhu the footpath turns into a jeep track which you will follow for most of the day though you are unlikely to meet any traffic. From Sirkhu follow the track gently downhill. After 15 minutes, look for a footpath on the left which descends a steep spur and

shortcuts the jeep track. Halfway down the spur is the village of **Kaldara**. Further down the jeep track criss-crosses the footpath. Keep your eyes skinned for the



short-cut trails which will lead down to a small suspension bridge, but do not worry if you miss them since the jeep track will also lead to the bridge. After the bridge keep on the jeep track which follows the right bank of the Halpu Khola, past **Halpu** village. Shortly after passing a small micro hydro plant on the left bank, the track splits. Take the upper right fork which leads up to the hamlet of **Waba** and shortly afterwards cuts over the ridge at the village of **Bhat Khane Dara** (literally *Eating Rice Ridge*). There are shops and teashops here.

### 3. **Bhat Khane Dara (1840m) > Tarakhola gaon (1800m) > Phedi (2230m) 2:30 hrs**

Continue on the jeep track which contours a right bend to enter the Tara Khola valley proper and heads in a more northerly direction gently downhill (but heading upstream on the left bank of the river). Despite the jeep track the Tara Khola valley is little changed and you will see many traditional Magar villages clinging to the steep sides of this deep valley. If you fancy a slight detour, cross the river to pass through the compact village of **Hila**.

The main route stays on the left bank and in about an hour you reach the village of **Tarakhola gaon** which has some town houses (not to be confused with all the other villages in the Tarakhola valley! Be warned: Nepalis are quite careless and imprecise with names). There are teashops and local hotels here if you wish to stay the night. The one run by Melina is recommended: good food, friendly hostess who speaks English, but prison-cell rooms.

If you still have time and energy follow the jeep track upriver, and after 15 minutes cross a tributary on an iron-link bridge (see box) Continuing upstream is a pretty stretch of the river like a Chinese painting with high cliffs, waterfalls, sprays of pink flowers in the banks, and twisted trees dangling long catkins and vines. Each bend reveals a new vista. Pass through the villages of **Dogadi and Chhedi**. At **Karmila** there is a local hotel, or cross the Tara Khola to the right bank and continue upstream to **Dhapling**. The path crosses the river again and continues up through the hamlets of **Machar, Barthan, and Khorekarka**, finally reaching **Phedi** at the confluence of two tributaries. Just above Phedi at **Sipa** (follow the western tributary for a few minutes), homestay can be arranged with the delightful family of Keshab Gharti Magar (Ph 9867641878). If you have a spare day Keshab will be happy to guide you to the top of the local mountain (Dadhe Lekh 3500m) from where there is a phenomenal view of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges.

### Chain-link bridges of Baglung

Chain link suspended trail bridges are a unique design first developed in Baglung district, and later spread to other areas of Nepal. People could construct these bridges from locally available materials – stone and iron bars. No imported cement or steel cables were needed. Local blacksmiths forged long heavy duty chains from iron bars which functioned as the hanging structural element. Dry stone masonry was used for chain anchorages as well as the suspension towers. Largely superseded by more modern steel cable designs, one can still cross rivers at several points in Baglung on one of the traditional chain-link bridges, including at Karmila, Tara Khola, and at Sioul Khola, Bong Dobhan.

### Day Three: Phedi (2230m) > Rum (1900m)

4 hours

From Phedi, you may be able to arrange a guide who can lead you (along slippery goat-tracks!) around the octopus-like ridges of Danse Lekh directly into the Taman Khola/Bonga Dobhan valley to the north.

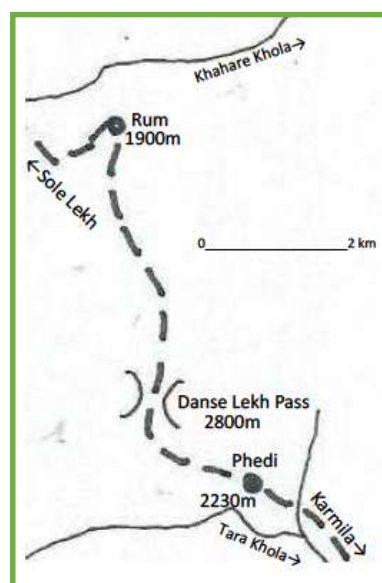
Otherwise it is necessary to divert briefly into the Myagdi Khola watershed by following the well-beaten path from Phedi over the Dansi Lek pass (2,800 m), descending to the village of Rum. This is a short day.

The next day (day 4) the trail crosses back into Baglung District via Sole Lek pass (2,600 m) to enter the Taman Khola valley in the watershed of the Budigad Khola.

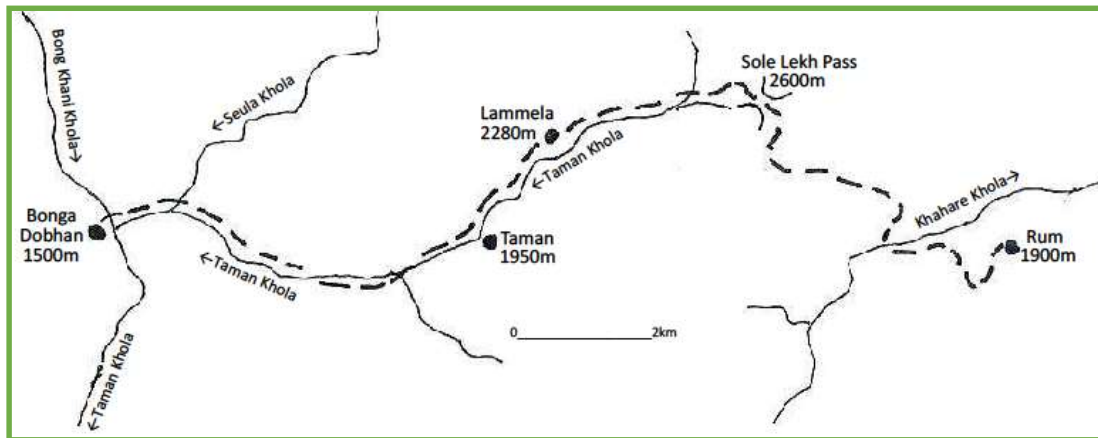
### Day Four: Rum (1900m) >> Bonga Dobhan (1500 m) 5 hours

#### 1. Rum (1900m) > Sole Lek (2600m) 3 hours

Ask villagers to direct you onto the footpath which drops down to cross the Khahare khola just below its junction with the Beli Khola. Follow the Khahare river upstream on the left bank. After 10 minutes take the path on the right which climbs



steeply up the ridge passing near the villages of Diliban and Majhdhara to reach Galkot, where it joins the main ridge trail. Keep climbing on the ridge line passing through the villages of Kiteni and Pakhpani. Near the top of the ridge the trail merges with a tractor



road. Follow the tractor road as it bends northwards through forest. Just before the pass is reached the trail deviates to the left from the tractor road. Follow this and within 5 minutes you reach the pass of Sole Lek where there is a grassy meadow and some *chautara* and a *dharmshala* shelter for porters.

2. **Sole Lek (2600m) > Taman (1950m)** **2 hours**  
 From the pass, follow the jeep track which descends to the left of a derelict stone dharmashala shelter and chautara. After a short distance look for a footpath which diverges on the left side of the track and follow this down to a solid frame bridge across the Taman Khola stream. The path rejoins the jeep track and descends on the right bank passing through the Magar village of Lammela. Livestock is the main occupation here and you will see Magar herders wearing homespun wool jackets. The trail continues to descend reaching the compact village of Taman nearly 2 hours below the pass. There are two teashop lodges. Taman village contains many abandoned houses; people left as life was difficult as many found life too difficult in this remote valley, especially during the Maoist insurgency.
3. **Taman (1950m) > Bonga Dhoban (1500m)** **2 hours**  
 Follow the jeep track down the right bank of the Taman Khola. Cross to the left bank on the second suspension bridge (1 hour after Taman) and a short while later cross back to the right bank walking beside an irrigation canal. At the bottom of the hill cross the side tributary of the Khum Khani Khola on another example of the iron-link sling bridge and continue down the path till you arrive at the Bong Khani Khola. Cross this on a suspension bridge to enter the small bazaar town of **Bonga Dobhan**. There are several Thakkali teashop lodges here offering good clean food and lodging. As the next day is a long day you may prefer to continue and stay the night either at Bong Khani or at Lamachaur (see Day Five).

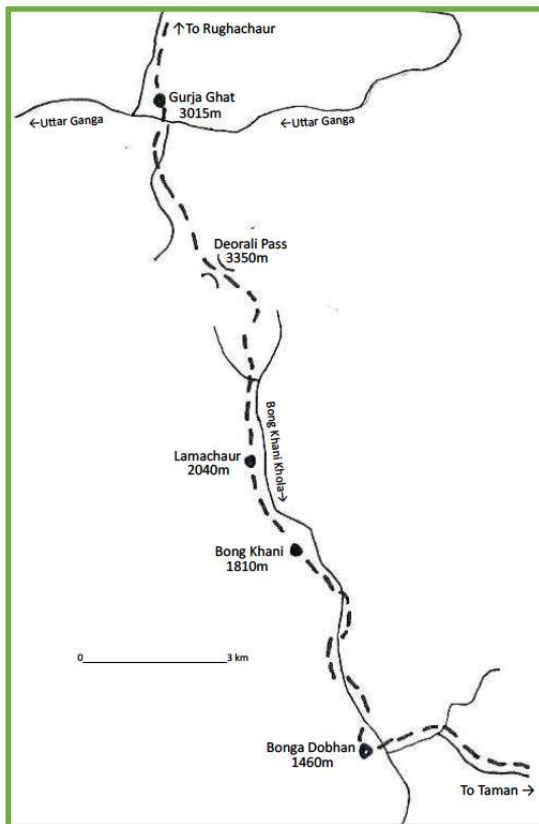
**Day Five: Bonga Dobhan (1500m) >> Gurja Ghat (3,015 m)** **8-9 hours**

1. **Bonga Dobhan (1500m) > Lamachaur (2040m)** **2:45 hours**  
 At the northern end of Bong Dobhan, cross the river to the left bank and follow the path upstream past a Police Check Post where you may be asked to register your name and destination in their log book. Higher upstream the path crosses the river several times, arriving at **Bong Khani** (right bank) – an attractive village of artisan caste people – in

about 1:45 hours. Continuing on the right bank the hamlet of **Lamachaur** is reached in a further hour. There is a Chantyal family here who offer homestay.

2. **Lamachaur (2040m) > Deorali Pass (3,350 m)**

**4 hours**



Approximately 15 minutes after leaving Lamachaur the river splits into two tributaries. Cross the left tributary on a suspension bridge. From here the real climb begins for the pass, up the ridge between the two tributaries. The path is easy to follow, zigzagging up through light oak-rhododendron forest, eventually it emerges above the tree line, and the pass is reached in about 3-4 hours. From the pass there are good views of Churen and Gurja Himal.

3. **Deorali (3350m) > Gurja Ghat**

(3,015 m)

**1:30 hours**

From the pass, the path descends a wide gently sloping valley. There are hundreds of springs and streams in this valley and it is inevitable that you will get your feet wet. Lower down, locals have constructed 'log-walks' – a kind of log-pontoon - to avoid the worst of the mud and swamp. In the summer months hundreds of families come up with their herds to the valleys

around Dhorpatan and live in temporary dwellings. They descend for the winter some time around mid-October after which there may encounter nobody until you reach **Gurja Ghat** where the side valley you are in joins the main Dhorpatan valley and the Uttar Ganga river. Cross the river on a small wooden bridge to the north bank and follow a path downstream on the right bank. A short distance on you will reach a signboard announcing the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve. Just before this there is a small dwelling in which a friendly young Chantyal couple run a small homestay-lodge type business. (Lokendra Chantyal Ph. 9867633453) The accommodation is basic, but there is a hygienic toilet, and it is cosy sitting with the family around the fire in the evening. Their young daughter will happily engage with foreign trekkers. Nights are cold at this altitude and frost is likely in the morning.

**Day Six: Gurja Ghat (3015m) >> Rugachaur Pass (3950m) >> Gurja Khani (3060m) 8 hours**

The route is the same as Route Two/Day One but in the reverse direction. Please read carefully the warning not to attempt this route without taking a guide from Gurja Ghat.

It is highly recommended to spend a rest day and two nights at Gurja Ghat in order to explore the beautiful Dhorpatan Valley, and to organize a guide for the final day's trek to Gurja Khani. See the section in Route Two between Days 2 and 3 for further details and advice.



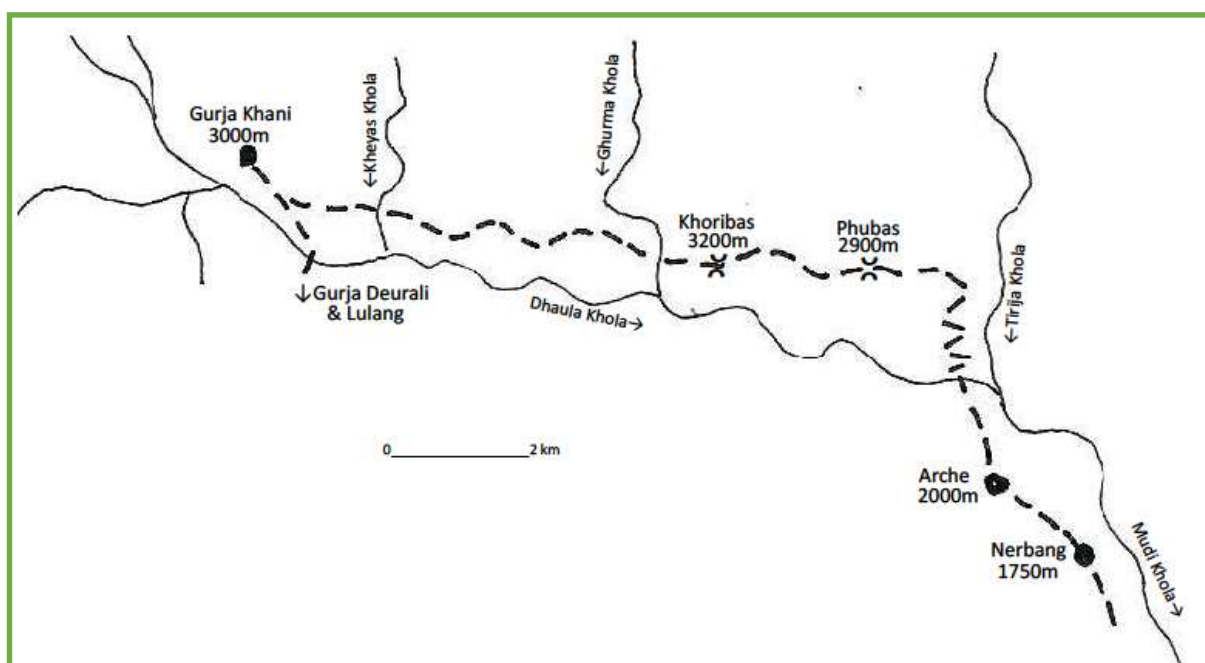
## ROUTE FOUR: GURJA KHANI » MUDI » SIBANG » DARBANG

3 days

This route is a stupendous one but comes with a **warning**. The final section of the first day near Arche involves the dizzying descent of a precipitous 700 metre slope angled at 60-70° peppered with vertical crags and overhangs. The slope is bare, with only grasses to clutch hold of - no bushes or trees to impede one's view of the river gorge directly below. Even Nepalis are aware that vertigo is a risk. But if you have a head for heights, the path is not bad. Certain women and children of Gurja Khani walk it when going to visit *maiti*. The trail is firm dirt with no loose stones on which to skid; there are one or two resting spots where the gradient briefly lapses to 45°. As the path zig-zags most of the time you are facing sideways to the slope so a minor stumble is not likely to take one over the edge. The danger is mostly in the mind!

### Day One: Gurja Khani (3060m) >> Arche (2000m)

A guide is recommended since the trail is not clearly marked and there are many competing trails heading to grazing areas or wood-cutting paths. A guide can be hired in Gurja Khani for the day (pay for the return day as well). It is necessary to carry food and drink for the day since there is



unlikely to be anyone living in the seasonal shelters which are passed. Water bottles can be refilled at springs if you are not fussy. There are no major passes to be climbed but the trail is constantly up and down to cross tributary rivers, the only level sections being where one contours around a precipice. Much of the way the trail passes through fields and seasonal shelters of Gurja Khani farmers, and you will be impressed how far they will walk to grow a few stalks of maize.

1. Start on the main trail heading eastwards out of Gurja Khani village. A short while beyond the temple with the painted tiger, take the left fork (right fork heads towards the grassy meadow for the main trail to Lulang) which rises very slightly to pass through a new annex of Gurja Khani settled by some *dalit* households. From here it drops down through fields to a small suspension bridge across the Kheyas Khola gushing from the snows of Gurja (30 minutes). This is the first of several tributaries which must be crossed. The second crossing is an hour and a half further on, at the Ghurma Khola. After this the trail climbs to its highest point (Khoribas) in 1 ¼ hours. Two hours further on the last patch of Gurja Khani fields and huts are reached at a place called Phubas. Throughout this whole

section the trail is high above the canyon. It is wild Tolkien-esque scenery, with dark chasms, tree-clad needle-like peaks, and forests with wispy cloaks of moss and lichen. Poking through at every gap in the ridge is the white face of Gurja Himal.

2. Beyond Phubas, follow the shoulder of land down until it terminates with a vertical cliff where a major tributary (Tirija) flows down from the eastern flanks of Gurja Himal. There is another cliff on the right, and it seems the trail must go left where trees can be seen on the north-facing slope. But no! It twists south – over the precipice into the void. This is the famous descent. Keep your eyes firmly focused on where you place your feet. It takes roughly an hour to make the descent. If you have a strong heart you can pause at each hairpin bend to contemplate the river far below. Only Nepalis would have created a trail on such a slope; only Nepalis would consider using it for a family outing to visit the grandparents!
3. Cross the wild Dhaula river on a suspension bridge and climb up through rich virgin forest full of birds to the small hamlet of Arche in one hour. There are no organized homestays yet, but several families will put you up for the night if you ask them. If you have time, there will be greater choice at the larger village of Nerbang which is reached in another hour. Try the home of Beg Bahadur Gharti Magar (9840601334) in Ward Number 5. Both villages offer breath-taking views of the Dhaulagiri range.

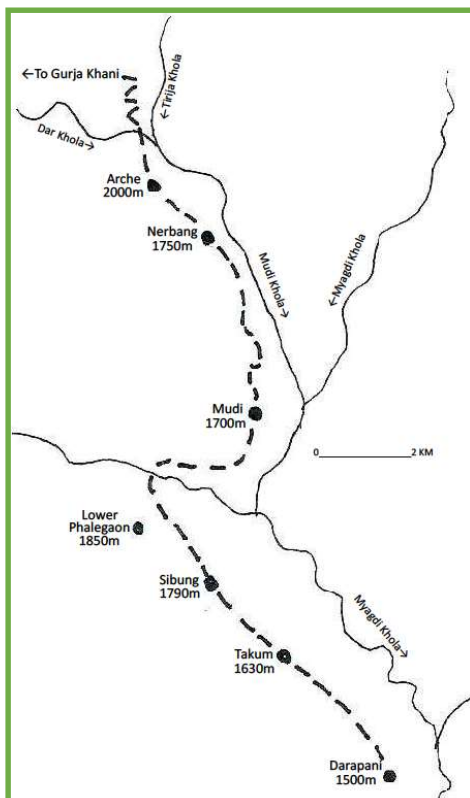
**Day Two: Arche (2000m) >> Sibang (1790m)**

**4-6 hours**

1. Arche (2000m) > Mudi (1700m)

**2-3 hours**

Nerbang is a spread-out village in which it is easy to lose the main trail. Keep asking anyone you meet for the way to Mudi (pronounced Muri to foreigners' ears). After an hour the trail drops



down to cross a side tributary and climbs again on the other side. The trail splits into two but both routes will arrive at Mudi in 2-3 hours. Mudi is a large typically dense-packed Magar village. At this point you are back in relative civilization since large camping groups trekking the Dhaulagiri Circuit pass through Mudi. From the village one can look up the valley which they follow.

2. **Mudi (1700m) > Sibang (1790m) 2-3 hours**

After Mudi, the trail which has been heading southwards, veers westwards away from the Mudi/Myagdi Khola valley to contour into the Dar Khola valley, dropping down (take the lower left fork where there is a choice) to cross the Dar river. It then climbs up through the lower reaches of Phalegaon village to arrive at Sibang in 2:30 minutes from Mudi. There are several teashop-lodges at Sibang.

**Day Three: Sibang (1790m) >> Darbang (1000m)** From here on you are back on the main trail of Route One but travelling in the reverse direction. See Route 1/Day 1 for details.

**ROUTE FIVE: BAGLUNG >> BENI via DHAMJA****2 days**

This is a stand-alone mini trek for those who lack the time or stamina for a longer trek, but who wish to have an off-the-beaten trail homestay experience and see a stunning panorama of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri ranges. Both the start and finish points are easily reached in a few hours from Pokhara and there are regular buses throughout the day. The climb is gradual and the pass at 2,560 m poses no altitude problems. The route offers the best close-up views of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges to be seen anywhere in Nepal. On this count alone, it is highly recommended. The descent to the Myagdi Khola river is steep in places but not difficult. You will inevitably take many breaks along the way for the Himalayan views continue on the descent, forcing one photograph after another.

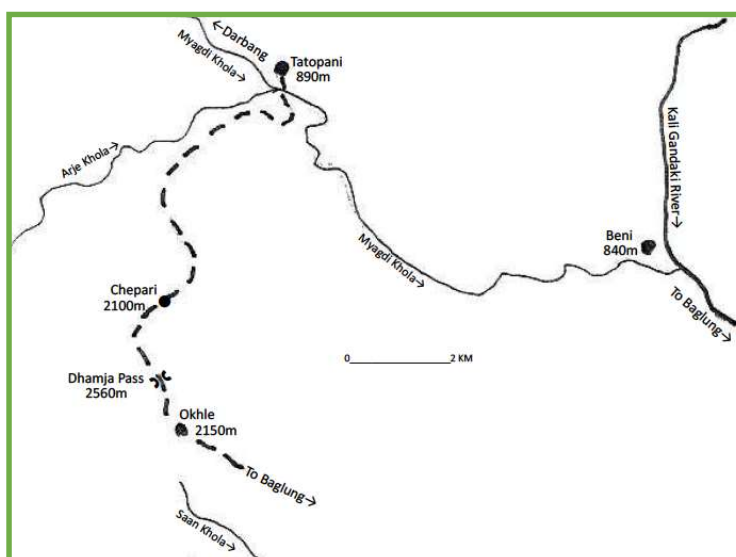
This mini-trek can also be an add-on option to the start of Route 1 (the main trail to Gurja Khani) – replacing 1-2 hours of the bus ride between Baglung (Maldhunga) and Darbang. As such it provides a panoramic view and warm-up to what lies ahead and the contorted maze of rivers which must be traversed in order to reach the foot of Gurja Himal

**Day One: Baglung (1000m) >> Okhle (Dhamja VDC) (2150m)**

This section is identical to that described in Route Three/Day One. It is advised to spend the night at a homestay in the village of Okhle (or in the teashop lodge in the lower hamlet of Majh Katera).

**Day Two: Okhle (2150m) > Tatopani/Myagdi Khola (890m)****4 hours****1. Okhle (2150m) > Dhamja Pass (2560 m)****1 hour**

From Okhle Primary School, follow the trail leading upwards. After 10 minutes an open grassy meadow is reached with a stone *pokhari* and a small plantation of pines on the left. Near the pines you will notice a flat patch of ground devoid of grass with a scant



covering of moss. This is the old slag heap where copper was processed in the past and the resulting toxic waste still deters plants. However, the trail you should follow heads around to the right from the meadow and you climb steadily up from the village on some old stone steps through oak-rhododendron forest. The trail is obvious and in just under an hour the path cuts over the ridge. A stone *chautara* marks the pass. This ridge marks the

border between Baglung and Myagdi Districts. The views from here show the Annapurna range from an angle rarely seen, and a complete panorama of the Dhaulagiri range provides those heading on to Hidden Village with an idea of the twists and turns of ridges and rivers you will negotiate

**2. Dhamja Pass (2560m) > Chepari (2100m)****1.5 hours**

Follow the trail which descends from the pass bearing gradually left (north-west). After 15 minutes a small trail diverts to the right. This dead-ends at a small temple atop a rocky pinnacle. Returning to the main trail, continue descending to reach a grassy shoulder

with yet more panoramic views. (The village lying just below on the right is the hamlet of Musum). The trail continues down past a communications tower where it merges with a jeep track at the village of **Dole** and a school with yet more incredible views. Just beyond the school, leave the jeep track to follow a footpath which descends on the left. The next village on the route is **Chepari**.

3. **Chepari (2100m) > Tatopani/Myagdi (890m) 1.5 hour**

From Chepari onwards there are many villages and a maze of alternative footpaths and jeep tracks, with no clear main trail. However, one cannot get lost for long, and taking an alternative route will not waste much time. Just keep asking anyone you meet for **Tatopani** which lies on the major Myagdi Khola, close to the confluence with the tributary which flows in the valley directly west of Dole and Chepari. The shortest route makes a very steep and sometimes slippery descent through forest to emerge on a small precipice directly above a suspension bridge across the Myagdi Khola. To reach the bridge it twists eastwards and then returns westwards across the cliff. Cross the bridge and the village of Tatopani is right there.

#### Tatopani hot springs

Tatopani on the Myagdi Khola is not to be confused with the Tatopani on the Kali Gandaki river (Jomosom and Annapurna Circuit treks) which also – confusingly – lies in Myagdi District. Tatopani simply means *hot water*, and there are hundreds of villages with the name Tatopani in Nepal. While the Tatopani on the Kali Gandaki is visited mainly by tourists nowadays, Nepalis say that Tatopani/Myagdi Khola has stronger healing properties and its hot pools attract a continuous throng of patients seeking healing. A ticket for the modest price of a few rupees gives entrance to a cement pool divided by rope into two halves – one half for men, the other for women - covered with a tin roof for shade. The modesty normally shown by Nepali women is loosened, and they bathe in cotton shorts and tank tops. These can be bought from the shops lining the main street. Most come here to seek treatment for arthritic pain, and they may stay 2-3 weeks. There are cubicles where one can change. Taking a bathe here will be a cultural immersion experience – you will probably be the only foreigner and someone is bound to strike up a conversation with you in English. After soaking in the hot pool you can wash off with clean hot water on a rocky outcrop beside the Myagdi river where there is a small temple. There are numerous teashop lodges in Tatopani if you wish to stay the night. Alternatively you can catch a local bus back to Beni and reach Pokhara the same day, or you can catch a local bus going west to Darbang and stay the night there before proceeding onwards towards Gurja Khani or Dhorpatan.

## Section 6: GLOSSARY and PHRASEBOOK

### Acronyms/abbreviations/nepali words used in the guide

- Chautara – a stone ledge constructed along footpaths on which to rest porter-loads, sometimes with a banyan and pipal tree in the middle to provide shade.
- VDC – Village Development Committee. The lowest political unit in Nepal. A VDC will typically contain several villages.
- Khola – river or stream
- Deorali – a pass
- Bhanjyang – nick point on a ridge
- NGO - Non-Governmental Organization
- Dhara – water spout
- Phedi – the foot of a slope or ridge
- Dobhan – the meeting of two rivers
- Danda (dara) – ridge or hill
- Khani – a mine
- Danda (pr. Dara) – hill or mountain
- Duhre (pr duri) – hill or mountain
- Chiya – tea
- Dudh – milk
- Bazaar – town or settlement with several shops

### Note on pronunciation

This has been simplified.

- There are four 'd' sounds. These have been simplified to two: d and dh (aspirated)
- There are four 't' sounds. These have been simplified to two: t and th (aspirated)
- There are several 'r' sounds. These have been simplified to one.
- There are two 'a' sounds: long 'aa' (as in a sheep's baa; and short 'a' (as in 'material')
- 'e' should be pronounced 'eh' as in 'hey'
- 'i' should be pronounced as 'ee' as in feet (short, not a diphthong sound)
- Nasal sounds

### Asking Directions

Path	baato
Motor-road	Motor-baato
Uphill	ukalo
Downhill	uralo
Flat/level	terso
Easy/difficult	sajilo/garho
One hour/ two hours	ek guntaa/dui guntaa . . .
Right/left	dayaa/bayaa
Here/there	yahaa/tyahaa
Over there	para
Upper/lower	upallo/uwallo (or) tala
Village	gau
Town	bajar

Pass/col	bhanjhyang/deorali
Can I get a bus?	Bus cha?
How far to the bus?	Bus sama kati cha?
How far to (Pokhara)?	(Pokhara) sama kati cha?
Which way goes to (Pokhara)?	(Pokhara) jaane baato kun ho?
How long does it take?	Kati ta-im (time) laagcha?
Is it far?	Tara cha?
Am I on the right path to (Pokhara)?	Yo (Pokhara) jaane baato ho?
I want to go to (Pokhara)	Ma (Pokhara) jaana chahanchu
Is the path difficult?	Baato garho cha?
Is the path dangerous?	Baato dor-lagdo cha?
I need a guide	(Malai) ga-ide chahincha

Food and accommodation

Cooked rice/lentils/vegetables	dal-bhaat
Cooked food	khana
Water	paani
Boiled water	umaleko paani
Drinking water	piune paani (may still contain bugs!)
Clean water	safa paani (may not meet tourist standards!)
Bottled water	Mineral water (chupa ko paani)
Filtered water	Filta paani
Drinks	piune chij
Tea	chiya
Black tea	phika chiya /raato chiya/dudh na-bhaeko chiya
Coffee	cofi
Sugar	chini
Do you have sugar?	Chini chha?
Please give me tea without sugar	chini na-bhaeko chiya dinos
How much?	kati lagcha/kati parcha/kati bhayo?
I am hungry/not hungry	Malai bhok lagyo/lagena
I am thirsty/not thirsty	Malai tirka lagyo/lagena
Where can I get (cooked) food?	Khana kahaa pahincha?
Is the food ready (to eat)?	Tayar cha?
Is this clean water?	Yo safa paani ho? (be careful!)
Is this boiled (filtered) water?	Yo umaleko (filta) paani ho?
Please boil water for me	Paani umali dinu holaa.
Where can I find accommodation?	Basobas kahaa pahincha?
I need somewhere to sleep	Sutne thau chahanchu
Where is the hotel (teashop)?	Hotel kahaa cha?
How much does it cost?	Kati laagcha?
I need some blankets	Sutne lugaa chahincha

Do you have a clean sheet?  
Where is the toilet?  
Do you sell/have toilet paper?

Safa tanda cha?  
Toilet (charpi/paikhana) kahaa cha?  
Toilet paper cha?

Miscellaneous

Yes/No  
There is/I have/He has  
There isn't/I haven't/He hasn't  
Okay  
Very  
I like  
I like Nepal  
I need/I want  
Do you speak English?  
Is there someone who speaks English?  
I come from (France)  
Do you sell (biscuits)?  
Where can I get (biscuits)?  
Okay

Ho/Hoina  
Cha  
Chaina  
Huncha  
dherai  
Manparcha/manlagcha  
Nepal manparcha  
(malai) chahincha  
Inglish bolnu huncha?  
Kohi inglish bolne cha?  
Ma (France) bata aaeko  
(Biscuits) chaa?  
(Biscuits) kahaa painchha?  
Theek chha.

Health and safety

I have lost my way  
I am very tired. I can't walk any more  
I had a fall  
I have hurt my foot  
I hit my head

Baato birayo  
Ekdam thakai lagyo. Hirna sakdina.  
Lardyo  
Kutta lagyo  
Thauko lagyo