

ABOUT DHAULAGIRI ZONE

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The treks in this guide lie in Baglung and Myagdi districts, part of Dhaulagiri zone in the mid-western part of Nepal. Filled with crumpled scenery and dramatic gradients, the Dhaulagiri range of mountains offers visitors all the photographic splendor of the Annapurna range, yet the area is less visited by tourists, and less developed in general. For many people this adds to its appeal.

Topography

Dhaulagiri zone straddles the Kali Gandaki river as it carves through the Himalayas in what is often referred to as the deepest gorge in the world. Guarding the western side is the giant stand-alone silhouette of Dhaulagiri I (8167 metres). It is followed westwards by eight peaks of the Dhaulagiri range, all over 7,000 metres.

Dhaulagiri 1: 8,167 metres (26,795 feet), seventh highest mountain in the world. Its name derives from the Sanskrit word *dhawala* meaning dazzling, white, beautiful, and *giri* meaning mountain. Its rise above local 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 great outstanding challenges in alpinism. Best views: Rahu Khola and Dhaulagiri Sanctuary trek (Route 6) – Todke Danda ridge (and many other spots); Dhamja Panorama (Route 5); Baglung bazar (Route 3)

Dhaulagiri 2: 7751m. Best views: Dhamja panorama pass (Route 5); Dansilek Pass (Route 3)

Dhaulagiri 3: 7715m. Best views: Dhamja panorama pass (Route 5); Dansilek

Dhaulagiri 4: 7661m. Best views: Dhamja panorama. Otherwise hidden by Gurja Himal

Dhaulagiri 5: 7618m. Best views: Jaljalla Pass (Route 2); Dhamja panorama; Dansilek

Dhaulagiri 6: 7268m. Generally hidden by Gurja Himal

Gurja Himal: 7193m. (23,599 feet) Views: Routes 1,2,3,4 & 5, and near Gurja Khani village. Gurja's south face is almost as dramatic as that of Dhaulagiri 1, rising some 4000 metres, near-vertical, from its base. Gurja Himal was first climbed by a Japanese expedition in 1969 from the west side.

Churen Himal: 7371m. Best views: Rugachaur pass; Jaljalla Pass, Gurjaghat Pass (Route 3)

Pyutha Hiunchuli: 7246m. Best views: Rugachaur Pass, Jaljalla, Gurjaghat Pass, Dhamja panorama.

Ethnic/caste groups

Nepal presents the amateur anthropologist with a fascinating complexity of ethnic groups (over 123 different languages), superimposed by the Hindu caste system. The latter arrived as Aryan people migrated into Nepal from the south and west. In the mountain areas they encountered a variety of Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic groups. The Aryans assigned these people to a middle category of caste. Over time they too adopted some discriminatory elements of the caste system, although most of them practice Buddhism or Shamanism. These myriad 'middle' tribes are sometimes categorized as *janajati* – an umbrella term used in India for indigenous people. But 'indigenous' is not strictly accurate, for the Himalayas have seen traffic in all directions, and

some of these northerners (e.g. Sherpas) have migrated into Nepal quite recently. To simplify things, it is helpful to think in terms of three major groupings of tribes/castes:

1. *Artisan castes (Dalits)* – comprises occupational groups (thought 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 others. Mother tongue: Nepali language.
2. *Janajati* – comprises all the Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic groups including Newar, Sherpa, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Thakkali, Chantyal, Tharu etc. Most have their own unique language.
3. Brahmin/Chhettri. Of Aryan ethnicity. Mother tongue: Nepali.

Here is a list of the ethnic groups/castes you will meet on the routes described:-

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: One of the smaller ethnic groups in Nepal, numbering around 10,000. Of Tibeto-Mongolian origin, they are today found exclusively in Baglung and Myagdi districts. Although sometimes erroneously referred to as Chantyal Magars, their language has greater affinity with Thakkali and Gurung. Gurja Khani is one of the few villages where the people still speak their own Chantyal language.

Chhettri: The largest caste in Nepal representing 16% of the population, though they are a heterogeneous group. Some are descendants of Aryan Khas people who moved eastwards into Nepal; others are the descendants of mixed marriages between Brahmins and Magars. Like Brahmins they commonly keep a *tulasi* plant in their courtyard

Damai: 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.

Gurung: A Tibeto-Mongolian ethnic group, largely located further east, but a few pockets of them occur elsewhere. Gurungs are largely Buddhists, and place prayer flags outside their homes.

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 sickles, hoes, and khukri knives. 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, comprising 7% of the total population. They are spread through the mid-western districts with considerable numbers in Baglung district. Most speak their own Magar language, but in Baglung this has been lost. The reason was an edict by the Raja of Galkot (in Baglung), placing a tax on people who did not speak the Nepali language – his way of sniffing out opposition to his rule. Kham Magars who live further west in Rukum and Rolpa districts speak their own distinct language, and may not be closely related. Many Magars were recruited into the Gurkha battalions of the British and Indian armies over the years. They are among the nicest people - relaxed, friendly, and humble, 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 18th century.

Sarki: An artisan caste of cobblers. There is a large community living close to Baglung town.

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.

Discrimination and human rights

At the top of the Hindu social order, is the priestly caste of Brahmins, closely followed by the Chhettris (from whom the royal family and the Ranas came). Despite strides towards equality, Brahmins dominate professions, institutions, and the government; they head nearly all the political parties, from the extreme left to the extreme right. They are wealthier than average, yet occasionally one encounters a Brahmin family living in poverty; high-caste does not necessarily equate with wealth.

Suffering the greatest discrimination (socially and economically) are the occupational castes. The term '*dalit*' is a recent import from India, meaning 'those who are oppressed'. In the past they were called *untouchables* and *low-castes*. In India, they are sometimes referred to as scheduled or occupational castes; Gandhi gave them the title of *harijans* (tr: sons of God). In this guide we prefer to use the term *artisan* – reflecting their traditional skills as blacksmiths, cobblers, tailors, musicians, jewelers. In the past one was born into a caste with a specific trade or skill, and that was how one earned a livelihood. Nowadays these caste-specific skills are dying out.

Traditionally, a high-caste person may not eat food prepared by a person of lower caste, and will not allow them to enter inside their homes. Caste has influenced settlement patterns in Nepal, with 'higher' castes owning more productive irrigated land in the fertile valley bottoms, and the *janajati* and *artisans* living at higher altitudes on steeper land. Baglung district has an exceptionally large population of *artisans*, due to its history of mining and the metal-workers (Kami) who came to work the mineral ores.

Despite strides towards equality, old prejudices die hard, especially in rural areas. *Artisan* families are among the poorest of the poor, with few productive assets, their children less likely to complete school due to the demands of earning a living.

Caste, gender, and ethnicity are sensitive issues in Nepal, underlying much of the current political turmoil, as the status quo of centuries is being challenged.

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. 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
- Pine 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! 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.