

High and Wild to Dolpo

Introduction to the Route

We aim to promote homestay trekking and not camping treks, but this a camping trek offered by a guide and porters from Gurja Khani, and thus benefits the Gurja Khani community. This trek is a direct walking route between Gurja Khani and Tarakot, Dolpo, that goes through the high and wild country of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve. At Tarakot, one can connect with either the Lower Dolpo or Higher Dolpo trekking itineraries.

The usual way to start a Dolpo trek is to fly into Juphal via Nepalganj, which takes a minimum of 2 days but can take considerably longer because Juphal flights are often cancelled due to weather. Taking the High and Wild route to Dolpo from Pokhara by walking via Gurja Khani takes a minimum of 8 days (2 days Pokhara to Gurja Khani and 6 days Gurja Khani to Tarakot), but this alternative walking route is a spectacular and beautiful route on its own. Since it involves 5 passes over 4000 meters, one arrives in Dolpo well acclimatized for the high walking there. This route is not recommend in the period late November to early March, as snow is likely to block your way on the high passes.

Unless you do this trek in the mid-May to mid-June *yarsa gompa* hunting season (see box at end of guide), you are likely to meet very few people, and thus all food and camping gear has to be carried for your trekking party. Other than high-energy trail snacks, food for the journey can be purchased in Gurja Khani, but you will have to carry in most of your camping gear from Pokhara. Once in Tarakot, food can be restocked for your onward Dolpo trek.

Guide and Porters

High and Wild is just that – this is not a route to do on your own, since there are no permanent habitations, the trails are not marked or easy to follow, and you may only meet a few shepherds, if anyone, during the entire trek. A guide is absolutely necessary, and in any case a licensed guide is required on all Dolpo treks. Lal Prasad Chantyal, the guide from Gurja Khani, is a government licensed guide, and he is able to obtain the permits you need for Dolpo in Pokhara. He will advise you on what gear and supplies must be carried in from Pokhara and accompany you from Pokhara to Gurja Khani, where you will meet your porters for the trek to Dolpo. Lal Prasad can be contacted on tel: +977 9846208598 or email: lalbdr_150@yahoo.com For this camping trek, you can expect to pay around USD 25 per day for the guide and USD 10 per day for each porter and also provide food for both guide and porters. As a rough guide, one trekker doing this itinerary can probably get by with one guide and one porter. Two trekkers will probably require one guide and two porters, but this does depend on how much gear you carry yourself.

Maps

The trail description that follows is therefore not to help you find the way, but rather to give you an idea of the challenges you will face on the way. Nepal Topological Survey Map Sheets 2883 05 Gurjakhani, 2882 08 Takagaun, and 2882 04 Dunai cover the area of this trek at 1:50,000 scale. Himalayan Map House produces two useful trekking maps: NS514 Dhorpatan which covers the entire trek at 1:150,000, and NS523 Gurja Himal which covers the trek from Gurja Khani up to Gurghat (as well as Beni to Gurja Khani) at 1:100,000. You will note the these trekking maps do not mark the trail between Gurja Khani and Gurghat – high and wild indeed.

Trail Description

Day 1 – Gurja Khani to Phaleghar Phedi (2900m ascend to 3300m, 5 hrs) – The first challenge is to climb out of the Kali Gandaki river basin and into the Karnali river basin. The boundary between these two basins is the western pass out of the Gurja Khani upper watershed. The pass can be reached in a long day, but because of lack of water or firewood on either side of the pass, the recommended first night campsite is at Phaleghar Phedi, some 3 hours short of the pass. Phaleghar Phedi is a *goth*, or cow herders' seasonal shelter. *Goths* are normally only inhabited during the warmest monsoon months from June through September, so you will most likely find them empty during the usual trekking seasons. The route traverses around the upper Gurja Khani watershed, crossing 3 tributaries of the Dhaula Khola before reaching the campsite just above a ford of the Phaleghar Khola. There are good views of Gurja Himal from the campsite.

Day 2 – Phaleghar Phedi to Nauri (3300m ascend to 4075m pass, descend to 3650m, ascend to 4080m, 7 hours) – A steady 3 hours' climb up the Phaleghar Khola and the pass is attained. This is Phaleghar Bhangjyang. In contrast to the steep ascent, the pass itself is a large level grazing area. From here there are fine views of Dhaulagiri massif to the east and, to the west, the astoundingly severe topography of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, which you now enter. The Mustang Khola gorge dominates the scene. At the western edge of the grazing area, the path descends steeply down a dry river course and after 1 hour the collection of *goths* that is called Munsung is reached. This is a good spot for lunch, as you will need extra energy for the afternoon climb to Nauri. The path from Munsung follows the Kape Khola north on the east bank until a bridge is reached in a little over an hour. If one continues up the Kape Khola for a further day, you reach Churen Himal base camp, and the route so far is the classic expedition approach march from Gurja Khani. Crossing the bridge, the route climbs very steeply for 1½ hours to reach Nauri campsite. Nauri is a sheep herders' camp with water available, but no firewood – the camp will be abandoned during the normal trekking seasons.

Day 3 – Nauri to Dokari Khola (4080m ascend to 4350m, minor descent, ascend to 4460, minor descent, ascend to 4540m, minor descent, ascend to 4660m, descend to 3600m, 7 hours) – This is an exhausting day, combining the crossing of 4 high passes with a long descent to the campsite on the banks of the Dokari Khola. The first 3 passes are high ridges separating the upper end of 3 tributaries of the Mustang Khola, a major river draining the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve. The Mustang Khola gorge is the major feature spied from the top of Phaleghar Bhangjyang the previous day. Each of the 3 tributaries ends in a high lake basin, whose drainage plunges precipitously into the Mustang gorge. During the day, good views of Churen Himal and Pyutha Hiunchuli are obtained. The first pass, Nauri Deorali (4350m) is reached after about an hour's climb. Then it is about 40 minutes to descend to the small lake and climb to the 2nd pass at 4460m. ½ hour later you have descended to the 2nd lake and climbed to the 3rd pass, Warmi Lekh, at 4550m. It takes a further 1¼ hours to descend to the 3rd lake and climb to the highest pass, Asare Lekh, at 4660m. Asare Lekh is the watershed boundary between the Mustang Khola and the Dokari Khola. Descending from the pass via the Asare Kharka high pasture area, a bridge on the Dokari Khola is reached in about 1 ¼ hours. Crossing the bridge to the north bank, the final 2 ½ hours of the walking day is spent following a path on the north bank of the Dokari Khola down to the campsite near the confluence with the Sangling Khola. If the day is getting too long, you will pass good campsites higher on the Dokari Khola.

Day 4 – Dokari Khola to Gurghat (3600m, ascend to 4020m, descend to 3860m, ascend to 4500m, descend to 4010m, 6 hours) – There are good views of Pyutha Hiunchuli peak from time to time throughout the day. Leaving Dokari Khola campsite and crossing the Sangling Khola on a *sango*, or temporary log bridge, the path climbs steeply for 1½ hours to the ridge at 3900m separating the

Sangling Khola basin from the Lamsar Khola basin. Traversing around two small side valleys via somewhat exposed paths, another ridge point at 4020m is reached in ¾ hour. A steep descent of 150m and a good lunch spot on the Lamsar Khola is reached in ½ hour. After lunch there is a steady climb for 2 ¼ hours to reach Lamsar Bhangjyang at 4500m. From there, it is a very steep 1 hr descent down to Gurghat camp (4010m) on the Sen Khola.

Day 5 – Gurghat to Purbang (4010m, ascend to 4520m, descend to 3900, ascend to 4020m, 4¾ hours) – From Gurghat camp it is a 1¾ steep climb to Phuphal lake at 4350m. If you are here in late May, you may just be able to see the temporary camp set up here by hunters of *yarsa gompa* (see box below). A gentle climb of ¾ hour from Phuphal and one reaches Panidal Bhangjyang, 4520m. This is followed by 2¼ hours of descent, gentle at first and steepening before reaching the Purbang Khola at 3900m. Purbang is reached after a short 20 minute climb up the north bank of the Purbang Khola. Purbang, at 4020m, is the site of another *yarsa gompa* camp during the mid-May to mid-June hunting season, and if you are here during that time, you will be able to enjoy the only food and accommodation available on this route.

Yarsa Gompa – Himalayan Viagra

Yarsa Gompa is a medicinal fungus stalk that grows on the dead body of the Ghost Moth caterpillar and is prized as an aphrodisiac by the Chinese. Each year, as the snow melts between 4500m and 5000m elevations, Himalayan villagers in the Dhaulagiri region set up camps just below these altitudes to search for *yarsa gompa*. Entire village populations abandon their permanent homes for the camps, leaving only a small population of the very old and very young behind. The price successful hunters receive for the fungus is around USD 50 per gram, which is higher than the current price of gold. “Himalayan Gold” is a good metaphor for the fungus, as the high camps at Phuphal and many other places throughout the high Himalaya definitely have the atmosphere of wild west gold rush settlements. Here you will find hotels, bars, gambling halls, prostitutes, mobile phone charging facilities, and cinema halls, all housed in tents or under tarpaulins. At Purbang camp we spotted a diesel powered 8m diameter Ferris wheel, which had been dismantled into pieces, carried by porters up to 4020m, and re-erected to provide entertainment for *yarsa gompa* hunters. And just as fast as these camps appear in mid-late May, they disappear around mid-June, when the fungus is exhausted. Fungus hunters report that the yield of *yarsa gompa* is declining each year, possibly indicating that there has been over-harvesting during the frenzied, one-month annual gold rush.

Day 6 – Purbang to Tarakot (4020m, ascend to 4550m, descend to 2320m, 7½ hours) – The final day is a long one, involving crossing the Jangla Bhangjyang which separates the green Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve into the high altitude semi-desert that is trans-Himalayan Dolpo. 1¼ hours climb after leaving Purbang, the Majila *yarsa gompa* camp is reached. From here, a further 1 hr steady climb and one reaches Jangla Bhangjyang, notorious from the book *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen. Matthiessen was obsessed with the fear that, after a summer looking for blue sheep and snow leopards in Dolpo, autumn snows might make Jangla Bhangjyang impassable and trap him in Dolpo for the winter. Nowadays, flights from Juphal provide other escape options for the Dolpo trekker, and on a sunny, snow-free day Jangla does not seem at all ominous. The spectacular view north over the dryer trans-Himalayan landscape contrasts with the well-watered Himalayan foothills to the south. What is daunting is the over 2200 meters of unrelenting descent from Jangla to Tarakot that now faces the trekker on this route. The first part of the 5-hour descent is not that steep, traversing the side of the Jangla Khola valley to a point on the ridge separating the Jangla Khola from the Chayuda Khola at 4070m. From there the path plunges steeply down the final 1700m to Tarakot. On the way one passes Sahatara village, the first permanent habitation since

leaving Gurja Khani, 6 days ago. Here, flat mud roofs testify to the much lower rainfall in the Himalayan rain shadow. Tarakot houses, like most you will encounter in Dolpa, spill down the hillside – one house's front terrace is the roof the house below. Carved wooden windows and notched log access ladders are the interesting features of this very attractive village. At Tarakot (actually below Tarakot on the Barbang Khola) one will find a couple of tea-shop hotels - again the first since Gurja Khani - where beer is available and sore knees can be rested.