

HIDDEN VILLAGE TRAIL GUIDE

[Glossary and Nepali phrase book at end]

Recommended map: Gurja Himal & Hidden Village 1:100,000 (Nepa Maps)

Trekking routes to/from Gurja Khani (Hidden Village):

- **Route One:** from Beni via Lulang (2-3 days). Pass: 3,250 m
- **Route Two:** from Beni via Jaljalla and Dhorpatan (3-4 days). Two passes: Jaljalla (3,400 m) and Rugachaur (3,900 m).
- **Route Three:** from Baglung town via Baglung district and Dhorpatan (6-7 days). Many small passes and two major: Gurjaghat Deorali (3,400m) and Rugachaur (3,900 m).
- **Route Four:** from Gurja Khani to Beni via Dhaula Canyon and Mudi (3 days). No passes but steep descent.

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.

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

Routes 2 and 3 involve the Rugachaur Pass (3,900 m). This is an easy climb from the south side (Dhorpatan), but a formidable climb from the north (Gurja Khani); the final hour is very steep, there are no teashops, few resting spots, and rarely other travelers to ask for directions (though locals use this route when going to visit "maiti" (maternal home). There are some narrow sections on cliffs above the gully, though the feeling of exposure is reduced by the dense vegetation. In wet weather the path becomes extremely slippery and the river gully sections risk rolling stones. Even in good weather **it is essential to hire a guide** since the route is hard to follow where the trail disappears into the gully. The most certain place to obtain a guide is in Gurja Khani, but if travelling in the reverse direction, the owner of the teashop lodge at Gurja Ghat will be willing to guide if free, or you can try phoning Gurja Khani to arrange for a guide to meet you at Rugachaur Pass. There is a plan to widen and improve this footpath in 2016.

Route 3 is the longest route, taking you through untouristed valleys and virgin forest of Baglung district, through quintessential Nepali scenery and cultures. 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 1961 diaspora.

Route 4 is a splendid route high above the canyon of the Dhaula River. However, **be warned**, it involves a precipitous descent of 700 metres which occurs about 5-6 hours after departing from Gurja Khani (too late to change your mind and return to Gurja for the night). Nevertheless, this route too is walked by women and children on visits to maternal "maiti". A guide is essential as the route is not marked; guides can be hired in Gurja Khani village.

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

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.

Hiring a guide or porter

For names and contacts of guides/porters familiar with these routes, see separate pdf file labelled Practical trekking advice.

Trek times

People vary greatly in their walking speed. The times given below are approximate average times by our estimate. They include brief rest stops but not long ones.

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

This is a well-walked trail and it is not necessary to hire a guide to find your way. Porters can usually be found at the bus station in Beni or Darbang, but it is better to make arrangements ahead of time.

To start:

From the Baglung bus-stand in Pokhara take a bus to **Beni** (3 hours; Rs 200) or a share-jEEP (depart just north of bus-stand; 2 hours). [**Beni Accommodation:** Hotel Yak. Double room/en-suite hot shower Rs 1000 approx].

From Beni catch a local bus up the Myagdi Khola to **Darbang** (2 hours; Rs 200). 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 (1.5 hours; 500 Rs). 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 (7-8 hours). It is a verdant scenic valley, strung with small hamlets, The original walking trail still remains, though here and there you will have to walk on the dusty motor track. **Darbang accommodation:** Thakhali Guest House, and others. If time, better to start trekking immediately and spend the night at Dharapani or Takam (see below).

From Darbang a rudimentary bus service runs up to Sibang (beyond Takam) with 2-3 buses per day.

The track is rough, often blocked by landslides, and buses are past retirement age, so it is almost 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) >> Phalegaon (1750m) >> Lulang (2400 m) 7-8 hours

This is a longish day. If time, you can split it into two, or reach Dharapani or Takam on the day you travel from Pokhara. It is a scenic route, thickly sprinkled with picturesque villages and

Himalayan views. It is recommended to sleep at Lulang, in order to be sure of reaching Gurja Khani before nightfall. "The fit", however, can reach it in a day from Phalegaon.

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

1:45 hours

Cross the suspension bridge over the Malang Khola and follow the jeep track northwards on right bank. After 30 minutes, cross a suspension bridge and rejoin the jeep track. On the second hairpin bend above, take the old footpath which zigzags steeply up a pine-clad spur overlooking the river. Higher up the footpath rejoins the jeep track and continues to climb to the attractive village of **Dharapani** (1500 m) (tr: spring water). True to its name there are several stone-clad waterspouts at the entrance. Ethnic groups include Chhettri, Magar, Gurung, and artisans. There is a teashop lodge (Prena Guest House), and splendid views of Dhaulagiri and Gurja Himal.

1. **Dharapani > Takam > Phalegaon** (1750 m)

2:45 hours

Continue on the jeep track with stunning views of Dhaulagiri range – there is little traffic except for mule trains. 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 pagoda temple sitting on a wide crescent of rice fields. **Accommodation/Takam:** Mil Kumari Bhandari's homestay with hot shower (!) (Ph 9746704493). Teashop lodges: Rojina Hotel and Tara Hotel.

Follow the jeep track out of Takam. It climbs to negotiate a landslide-prone cliff section and winds around to reach **Sibang** (1790 m) in 30 minutes. The jeep track used to end here, but it is being extended. **Sibang accommodation:** several 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**. The village lies just beyond (teashop lodge: Hotel Bishnu available.)

1. **Phalegaon > Lulang village** (2400 m)

2:45 hours

From Phalegaon the path descends gently to reach a bridge across the Dar Khola in less than an hour. Across the river there is a choice of trails. The lower (left) trail keeps closer to the river and climbs gently to reach **Lumsung** (in Lulang VDC), while the upper right trail climbs more directly to the main village of **Lulang**. Choose the former if you are heading to Jaljalla Pass (Route 2) or wish to sleep at the Lumsung lodge). Lulang is a large village on a steep slope; it is nearly 1 hour walk from Lumsung at its foot to the topmost house.

Lumsung accommodation: teashop lodge (Himalayan Lodge – 9746722209) and a homestay (Prem Kumari Pun 9746712308) just below the Health Post. If you stay at the teashop lodge at Lumsung, the next day there is a direct path between Lumsung and Lulang.

Lulang accommodation: rudimentary homestays can be found (Rati Maya B.K. 97420380; Kali Maya 9746062298; Susmita Rasali (9746057517 – English spoken; Ram Bahadur Rasaila 9746704177 – at top of village!). Homestays should see improvements in 2016, and new ones are anticipated.

Lulang village of blacksmiths

Lulang is an unusual village because all of its 200 households belong to the *artisan* caste of metal-workers (Kami). Fanned around a steep stadium of terraced fields, the village is colourful with marigold flowers, pumpkins and maize cobs drying on roofs and verandahs, and 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 >> Gurja Pass (3300 m) >> Gurja Khani (3061 m)

7 - 8 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 breakfast and/or carry some snacks. It is a moderately strenuous route with two ascents and one descent, but the trail is easy-to-follow. Snow is possible during December/January, but the path is rarely closed.

1. Lulang > Gurja Deorali (3250 m)

3+ hours

The main trail emerges from Lulang village on the upper left side (looking uphill). 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. Note: the teashop closes for 1-2 months from mid-December.

Himalayan Cedars

The *Cedrus deodara* trees on the pass and along the ridge, mark the westernmost occurrence 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.

2. Gurja Deorali > Dhaula Khola bridge (2500 m) 3 hours

Follow the path down the ridge's north slope. A landslide in the monsoon of 2014 felled many of the majestic Himalayan cedar trees. The path has been repaired and the landslide opened up some of the best views of Gurja Himal. In December and January you may encounter snow on this section. After 1-2 hours 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.

3. Dhaula Khola > Gurja Khani (3061 m)

1:15 hours

After crossing the bridge 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. 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 south face of Gurja Himal partially visible above this. Hidden Village is finally visible to the west, and is reached on a level footpath in about 15 minutes. **Gurja Khani accommodation:**

Arrival at Hidden Village

If you visit in November after the harvest, you may think you have arrived at an animal park as you walk the final 15 minutes to the village, for the 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.

- Belmoti Pariyar (first house on left at entry to main village);
- Bhim Maya (2 star homestay, above/right on reaching of path on reaching directly above Belmoti's 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.
- Gyan Devi/Chitra Lal/Dil Bahadur Bishwakarma – new house on western edge

There is a Tourism Development Committee who will be happy to help with any questions (Contact: Chairperson Jhak Bahadur Chantyal who speaks English). Persons in the village can be contacted via the satellite phone link (Numbers: 94690012/3/4/5. -phones are frequently busy – keep trying!) Gurja Khani is a pleasant place to spend a few nights. For activity suggestions (e.g. trek to glaciers), see pdf document labelled “About Gurja Khani”.

ROUTE TWO: Darbang » Jaljalla Pass » Dhorpatan » Gurja Khani

3–4 days

To start: Start at Darbang, as for Route 1. The first day is almost identical to Route 1/Day 1.

Day One: Darbang >> Lumsung (2190 m)

6:30 hours

Follow the description for Route 1 until you reach the bridge across the Dar Khola beyond **Phalegaon**. After crossing the bridge, take the lower trail (left fork) which keeps closer to the river. After 30 minutes cross a tributary stream on a suspension bridge below a magnificent waterfall. The path rises steadily to reach the village of **Lumsung**. In a further hour. There is a brand new Health Post here, and a teashop-lodge where you can stay. Alternatively, you can continue to the hamlet of **Moreni** (teashop lodge) in order to shorten the next day's climb.

Day Two: Lumsung/Moreni >> Gurja Ghat/Dhorpatan valley (3015 m)

8 hours

Beyond Moreni there are no villages or teashops, so it is wise to start early and carry some food for the day. The lodges will be happy to provide some snacks to carry along (popcorn, or spiced potatoes and roti).

1. Lumsung > Jaljalla Pass (3400 m)

5 hours

From Lumsung, continue upstream on the left bank of the Dar Khola, crossing shortly to the right bank. From here the trail bears away from the river to climb up to **Moreni** (2275 m) an hour above Lumsung. A teashop lodge offers accommodation here. Follow the trail onto the upper part of the village and continue above into the forest. As height is gained stunning views of the Dhaulagiri range begin to appear. They are a good excuse for frequent rest stops as the altitude begins to take its toll. About 3:30 hours after leaving Moreni the wide pastureland of the Jaljalla Pass is reached with its magnificent panorama of mountains.

2. Jaljalla Pass > Gurja Ghat (3015 m)

3 hours

Descend gently through scrub and pasture in a westerly direction, which develops into a shallow valley with a small stream (the Uttar Ganga). Jaljalla is a major watershed between the Gandaki and Karnali river systems. The trail passes by a flattish meadow with herders' huts an hour (Lower Jaljalla), and after 3 hours reaches the small settlement of Gurja Ghat, nestling at the confluence of the Uttar Ganga and the Simultar tributary. There are hundreds of herders' huts, but most will be empty as these people descend for the winter. **Accommodation:** Next to the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve Ranger Post there is one teashop-lodge (no signboard) run by a friendly Chantyal family (Lokendra Chantyal Ph. 9867633453), with a dormitory and a private room. The kitchen is a cosy spot to sit in the evenings. Nights are cold at this altitude and ice/frost is likely in the morning.

If you need a guide for the trek to Hidden Village, ask Lokendra. If he is not available, you may have to wait until locals are going that way, or you can try phoning Gurja Khani (994690014/15) to ask them to send up a guide from that side.

Dhorpatan (2900 m)

If you have the time we recommend spending 2 nights at Gurja Ghat in order to explore the 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 the Dhorpatan valley is a beautiful alpine valley with stands of conifers, rushing rivers, rocky crags, clear mountain air, and silence apart from bird song. There are sunny glades with carpets of brilliant green moss to relax in. On the way there is a community of *Sunars* (artisans) 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 is a small but growing settlement with a community-owned lodge, some shops, and a jeep track recently reached the village from Burtibang.

Advice

Although Gurja Khani can be reached in a day from Dhorpatan it is advisable to return to Gurja Ghat for the night to shorten the next day's walk and ensure a safe arrival in daylight hours. It is essential to hire a guide since it is easy to lose the path in this unfrequented wilderness.

Day Three: Gurja Ghat >> Gurja Khani (3061 m)

8 hours

1. Gurja Ghat > Rugachaur pass (3,900 m)

4 hours

An early start is recommended to ensure that the mountains are not clouded over by the time you reach the pass. From the lodge at Gurja Ghat, follow the northerly path up the tributary river. The trail begins with a stone staircase (on the nearside left bank). After a short while it crosses a small bridge to the right bank and shifts back and forth. There is one section where it climbs up quite high above the river on the right bank to avoid a cliff section (though locals know a dry season shortcut through the brush). After nearly three hours a side tributary is crossed on a log bridge. The path follows the side tributary a short while and then veers away to rejoin the main river. An isolated summer-season shelter is reached a short while later in the valley bottom. Ignore the path which continues to the left. Instead cross the stream and follow the tracks which lead across a wide grassy meadow. Some more summer shelters appear. Leave these on your right side and curve left – the gradient is fairly gentle – heading towards a single isolated hut. The pass of **Rugachaur** (tr. 'the meadow where you catch a cold') is now visible above this. It is marked by a stone chautara – and breath-stopping views (if you have any left) of Pyutar, Churen, and Gurja Himals with Daulagiri visible in the distance.

2. Rugachaur > Gurja Khani (3061 m)

4 hours

Warning: The following description is not sufficient to allow trekkers to make their way alone, and to do so could be dangerous. 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. Missing the correct path can leave one marooned at the crest of a high waterfall.

The path begins just to the right of the *chautara* as one looks northwards, and descends steeply through scrub. The path is narrow, there are few comfortable resting spots, indeed few spots where one can place two feet side by side on the ground. In rain this path becomes a treacherous mud-slide – canes make strong hand-holds if needed. After about 40 minutes descent the path enters the stream bed. From here on there are multiple crossings of the stream (no bridges - when the water is high one has to wade) before the trail takes off again on the left bank following a sometimes precipitous route (the feeling of exposure is lessened by the dense vegetation, but the sense of safety is an

illusion and feet must be carefully placed.) After about three hours from the pass, the path emerges into grazing lands and fields with temporary shelters. It winds around a ridge and descends to cross the Dhaula river (flowing eastwards) via a landslide scree. After crossing the river, walk about 100-200 metres downstream along the river bed until you see a well-trodden path climbing the bank on the left. Follow this path, and within 30 minutes you arrive at the gently sloping ledge of land on which you will see the crowded slate roofs of **Hidden Village** (Gurja Khani). For accommodation options, see Route One.

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. **Accommodation:** 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.

Day One: Baglung bazaar (1,000 m) >> Okhle (Dhamja VDC) (2,000 m)

6-7 hours

1. Baglung > Dikichaur/Kalimati

2+ hours

It is advisable to set out early to complete the climb before the heat of the day. *Start:* In Baglung bazar 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. 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** 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 almond trees (flowering October-December), and the trail merges with the jeep track. Follow the track to the right up through the village

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 district, and also 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/bhang*. 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 *daal-bhaat* at one of the teashops.

and at the top contour to the left. In 15 minutes this leads one to **Kalimati**. There are two teashops near the school.

2. **Kalimati > Bhim Pokhara** **2 hours**
This section follows the 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 Titauri or Bhim Pokhara. **Titauri** 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 > Okhle (Dhamja)** **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 >> Sirkhum >> Tarakhola >> Phedi **7 hours**

1. **Okhle > Sirkhu** **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). 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 but not much else except for (fields of *cannabis* – this is grown not for smoking but for its seed which is used as a spice in Nepali chutney).

2. Sirkhum > Bhat Khane Dara

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 > Tarakhola gaon > Phedi

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.

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.

If you still have time and energy there is more accommodation further on. 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 **Chheddi**. 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.

Day Three: Phedi (Tara khola valley) > Rum (Myagdi valley)

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 Dadhe Lekh directly into the Taman Khola valley to the north. Otherwise it is necessary to divert briefly into Myagdi District and 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, and then crossing back into Baglung District over the Sole Lek pass (2,600 m) to enter the Taman Khola valley in the watershed of the Budigad Khola.

Day Four: Rum (1900m) >> Bong Dobhan (1500 m)

1. Rum > Sole Lek (2600m)

3 hours

Ask villagers to direct you onto the footpath which will cross the khola below and lead you up to join the main trail which ascends a ridge from Darbang up to Sole Lek through a series of small villages (names:

2. Sole Lek pass > Taman (2,000 m)

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 > Bong 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 **Bong 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: Bong Dobhan (1500m) >> Gurja Ghat (3,015 m)

8-9 hours

1. Bong Dobhan > Lamachaur

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 > 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 > 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 >> Rugachaur Pass >> Gurja Khani

8 hours

The route is identical to Route Two/Day Three. 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. Some 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 (3000m) >> 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 a tributary river 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. 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 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 use it for a family day's 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 (lower) Arche in one hour. **Accommodation** consists of informal homestays. Ask for Man Prasad Gharti Magar (9867636818) or Lal Bahadur Bishwakarma (ph 9847741372), or climb the hill to upper Arche.

Day Two: Arche >> Sibang (1600m)

1. **Arche > Mudi (1700m)** **2-3 hours**
Nerbang, reached after 1 hour, has been rapidly depopulated over the past two years as people have relocated to upper Arche due to the new school. It is easy to lose main trail here. 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. There are many teashop lodges here since large rousps trekking the Dhaulagiri Circuit pass this way.
2. **Mudi > Sibang** **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 >> Darbang

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.

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.

- Kholā – river or stream
- Deorālī – a pass
- Bhanjhyang – 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)?
I want to go to (Pokhara)
Is the path difficult?
Is the path dangerous?
I need a guide

Yo (Pokhara) jaane baato ho?
Ma (Pokhara) jaana chahanchu
Baato garho cha?
Baato dor-lagdo cha?
(Malai) ga-ide chahincha

Food and accommodation

Cooked rice/lentils/vegetables
Cooked food
Water
Boiled water
Drinking water
Clean water
Bottled water
Filtered water
Drinks
Tea
Black tea
Coffee
Sugar
Do you have sugar?
Please give me tea without sugar
How much?
I am hungry/not hungry
I am thirsty/not thirsty
Where can I get (cooked) food?
Is the food ready (to eat)?
Is this clean water?
Is this boiled (filtered) water?
Please boil water for me
Where can I find accommodation?
I need somewhere to sleep
Where is the hotel (teashop)?
How much does it cost?
I need some blankets
Do you have a clean sheet?
Where is the toilet?
Do you sell/have toilet paper?

dal-bhaat
khana
paani
umaleko paani
piune paani (may still contain bugs!)
safa paani (may not meet tourist standards!)
Mineral water (chupa ko paani)
Filta paani
piune chij
chiya
phika chiya /raato chiya/dudh na-bhaeko chiya
cofi
chini
Chini chha?
chini na-bhaeko chiya dinos
kati lagcha/kati parcha/kati bhayo?
Malai bhok lagyo/lagena
Malai tirka lagyo/lagena
Khana kahaa pahincha?
Tayar cha?
Yo safa paani ho? (be careful!)
Yo umaleko (filta) paani ho?
Paani umali dinu holaa.
Basobas kahaa pahincha?
Sutne thau chahanchu
Hotel kahaa cha?
Kati laagcha?
Sutne lugaa chahincha
Safa tanda cha?
Toilet (charpi/paikhana) kahaa cha?
Toilet paper cha?

Miscellaneous

Yes/No
There is/I have/He has

Ho/Hoina
Cha

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

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