

TREK 10: Churen Glacier Sanctuary

Grade: Strenuous/Challenging

Permits: Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (purchase on entry)

Days: 12

Highest point: 4550m +

Map: West Dhaulagiri (Kanjirowa) or Gurja Himal & Hidden Village

Cautions: Local guide essential. Snow possible Oct-May.

Overview

For the adventurous, this trek through the land of the snow leopard to the junction of glaciers from 4 major peaks - Pyutha (7246m), Churen (7371m), Dhaulagiri 6 (7268m), Gurja (7193m) - combines the best of everything, with homestays, wilderness camping, glaciers and stupendous views at the four passes which are crossed. It is these mesmerizing views which make this trek more rewarding, in our opinion, than the trek to Dhaulagiri 1 Sanctuary (Trek 11). Trekkers may choose to return to Gurja Khani village, or return via Dhorpatan.

Gurja Khani village is the gateway. It is essential to take a guide or porters who are familiar with the route. Camping is necessary for 5 nights between Gurja Khani and Dhorpatan. Guides/porters and local food supplies can be organized after arrival in Gurja Khani, but trekkers must supply their own tent, sleeping bag and pad. During the monsoon many herders and their animals occupy the area, but from October-May it is deserted. You are likely to spot some wild Blue sheep, though the Snow Leopard which preys upon the Blue Sheep, will almost certainly remain a phantom.

To start: Take bus or share-taxi from Beni to Darbang (2 hrs)

Days 1-3: Same as days 1-3/Trek 1

Day 4: Altitude acclimatization day in Gurja Khani. Optional side trip to Gurja Himal South Face 5 hrs.

Note: From Gurja Khani there are two alternative routes to the Sanctuary. If the weather is fine and the south-facing ridges free of snow, we recommend the ridge route described below. Otherwise, your guide will take you via Phalyaghar Pass, still a good route (reverse of days 7-8) and taking the same time approximately.

Day 5: Gurja Khani to Herders' camp (3500m) 3-4 hours

This is a short day due to the need to camp near water and firewood. The route heads west from the village through fields and forest above the Dhaula Khola, dropping to cross the tributary Dalsin Khola after an hour or so. The path climbs steeply on the other side through beautiful forest. You are now on the ridge between the Dalsin and Phokse streams, and this ridge will be followed for the rest of the day and most of the next. As you emerge from the forest onto grazing slopes, views open up down the Dhaula canyon and southwards onto the jagged, often snow-covered barrier of the Darse Duri mountains (which will need to be crossed on the return route!) The path splits, the left fork heading the easier Phalyaghar route, while the right continues up the ridge. Camping is possible in flattish

spots where there are herders' sheds. Firewood can be gathered, but water may need to be carried some distance. We enjoyed superb sunset views and a moonlit night – but the beer was lacking!

Day 6: Herders' Camp to Kape Dobhan 7-8 hrs

Campsite to Beraka Tal Pass (4457m) 4-5 hrs

Beraka Pass to Kape Dobhan (4100m) 1-2 hrs

An early start is advised to reach the Pass before clouds obscure the views and bring inclement weather, even snow. Carry dry snack foods for the day and fill up water bottles as there is no water until the Pass is crossed.

The path is steep, only occasionally offering respite with a short-lived section of level or downhill. To compensate, there are glorious close-up views of Gurja West peak (sometimes called Ghustung 6529m), necessitating frequent pauses for camera-clicking. It becomes clear that the ridge you are walking up is the south-west buttress of this peak. Also visible during the early morning is Gurja Himal, Dhaulagiri 1, and, in the distance, the Annapurnas. When the path dips into north-west facing gullies, ice and snow are likely to be encountered. The path is sometimes beaten earth, sometimes loose scree, sometimes hard rock.

With breath stops, it takes 4-5 hours to reach Beraka Tal Pass. There are frequent false summits when hopes are raised. The Pass is a major watershed divide; the south-flowing Dalsin khola drains into the Kali Gandaki river system, while the north-western Kape Khola that you now enter drains into the Bheri and Karnali river system. As luck would have it, by the time we reached the pass, clouds had obliterated the views, which otherwise must be stunning. In good weather, the descent on the northern side is relatively gentle, but we found ourselves in thick mist and deep snow. This is when local guides are worth their weight in gold: no-one else could have found the way down safely. Descending slowly below the cloud, the snow lessened as we reached the small lake at Beraka Tal. Lower down, a grassy plateau near the dobhan (junction) of Beraka Tal stream and the Kape khola river makes a good snow-free camp spot. Water is plentiful but there is no firewood. Blue sheep were grazing on the nearby slopes.

Day 7: Kape Dobhan to Glacier Sanctuary & return to Kape Dobhan

7 hrs

Kape to Churen Base Camp 4300m 2-3 hrs

B.C. to Dhaulagiri VI viewpoint 4500m 1-2 hrs

Return to Kape Dobhan camp (4100m) 2 hrs

This is the climactic day when your camera overheats! We had excellent views until about 2.30 p.m. but in case clouds gather sooner, make an early start – and it's the best way to warm up after a cold frosty night. It is not necessary to strike camp before setting out unless you plan to sleep at Base Camp.

The easiest route is to drop down to the stream and follow it to the junction with the Kape Khola and follow that river upstream. In the Kape valley Churen and Pyutha Himal reveal themselves, their peaks glowing and glistening the moment the giant spotlight in the sky is switched on. This is followed by the nearly-as-good moment when the sun hits the narrow valley floor and your limbs begin to thaw out. Soon you can be stripping off your layers and sun-

bathing. Make sure you apply sun-screen. Ultra-violet rays are extremely strong at this altitude.

Churen Base Camp (4300m) is reached in around 2-3 hours. Nothing marks the spot aside from a dismantled shelter and a blank stone - a memorial to an Italian climber who died on Gurja Himal. The junction of the glaciers is a further 45 minutes or so and a good viewpoint is on the bend of the lateral moraine of Churen glacier (4400m). Watch out on the moraine – it overhangs, and the sides are crumbling. Here, one is truly in the Sanctuary, looking down on the glaciers. There are snow mountains in all directions: from the east: Pyutha Hiunchuli, Churen, the west and backside of Gurja and West Gurja.

To view Dhaulagiri VI (7268), it is necessary to follow the Churen glacier moraine eastwards as far as it is walkable (4500m approx.). This second viewpoint lies directly below the sheer south-west face of Churen, and close-up one can see the impressive rock wall which forms its foundation. Glaciers flow from all the peaks; extensive ice-falls are visible on Pyutha and between Dhaulagiri VI and the east slope of Churen. No less impressive is the view southwards, down the narrow access of the Kape Khola, to the snow-covered ridge of Darse Duri towering in the distance.

To descend, re-trace the route. Some might choose to camp at Base Camp (water but no firewood); others to camp again at the previous night's spot near Kape Dobhan. We elected to descend even further to a spot called Jogi Bas below the treeline in order to have a camp fire to sit around. This adds an extra hour to the descent. By the time we reached Jogi Bas, our porters had the fire going and tea brewing. The perfect ending to an exhilarating day.

Day 8: Kape Dobhan to Phalyaghar NW 4 hrs

Kape Dobhan to Jogi Bas 3750m 1 hr
Jogi Bas to Phalyaghar NW (3837m) 2-3 hrs

This is a longer day's hike if you spend the night at Churen Base Camp. The reason for its brevity is that it's too far to cross the Darse Dhuri ridge and reach water on the other side. It may seem tempting to camp at the stupendous viewpoint above Phalyaghar which is on the next day's schedule – but be warned, it is exposed to fierce winds. If you are returning to Gurja Khani, it is possible to cross Phalyaghar Pass (4000m) and descend to a sheltered forest camp site.

The Kape valley is serene, and views of Churen keep poking through. Keep on the left bank. Near a bridge (don't cross unless going to Dolpo [LINK: Treks 13 & 14](#)) the path leaves the valley floor and ascends the eastern slope through stands of tall conifers. The path leaves the Kape valley and contours around a plateau to follow up a small tributary to the east. The camp site is on sloping grazing land where there is a herder's hut with firewood and water close by.

[LINK: Treks 13 and 14](#). Note that on the West Dhaulagiri map, a trail is shown following the Kape khola all the way downstream to connect with the route over Phalgune Pass (Trek 9), but locals insist there is no such trail.

Day 9 Options:

1. Return to Gurja Khani in one day. The route crosses Phalyaghar Pass (2 hrs) and descends directly to the village.

2. Continue to Dhorpatan. This route is described below.

Day 9: Phalyaghar NW to Barse Phedi 7-8 hrs

Phalya NW to Phalya Pass (4000m) 2 hrs
Phalya Pass to Darse Dhuri Pass (4459m) 2 hrs
Darse Pass to Barse Phedi (3650m) 3 hrs

This is another camera-charged day! It is a gentle 2 hour climb towards the broad grasslands of Phalyaghar Pass. Before the Pass proper is reached, the route to Darse Dhuri veers southwards and climbs a slope which rises south from the col.

Along this trail is a broad flat shoulder which provides eye-boggling views of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges. It is the most eye-watering view point that we have discovered in western Nepal. Ridge after ridge of blue mountains fade into the eastern horizon. It is worth a special side-trip from Gurja Khani (or, for that matter, flying halfway round the world). From here, the trek can be curtailed by descending directly to Gurja Khani village.

Do not get too distracted with photography. It is a stiff climb to Darse Dhuri Pass (4459m), and being a north-facing slope, snow is likely from October onwards. Trust your guide to make the judgement on whether it is feasible to cross. If not, descend to Gurja Khani, and the next day cross into Dhorpatan via Rugachaur Pass (Trek 2). Assuming snow is no hindrance, the pass is reached in around 2 hours from the viewpoint. The reward is views, for the first time, towards India.

The path descends a steep scree gully and then angles across a broad grassy bowl with the headwaters of the Barse Khola, which we name the Barse Bowl, where we saw large herds of Blue sheep (*Naur*) grazing. From this bowl, a number of alternative routes present themselves – all offering a challenge of one kind or another. Probably, the best route is to cut up over a series of high ridges to the south-east which eventually connects with the Simudar valley (Rugachaur Pass Trek 2) and hence to Gurjaghat (Dhorpatan valley). Allow 2 days.

We opted to try to identify a more direct route to the Dhorpatan valley – and discovered there is no such thing as a 'direct' route! Lal Chhantyal, our guide, had already done a steep landslide-pitted route on the eastern Barse tributary which he did not recommend. Instead, we picked a promising goat-path heading south-ish.

Sooner or later all routes from the Barse Bowl descend into dense tangled vegetation of the canyons, where water is plentiful but camp spots unavailable, so it is better to camp somewhere part-way down. As dusk was falling we found a herder's hut above the Barse Khola, and named the place Barse Phedi.

Day 10: Barse Phedi hut to Gurja Ghat 4-5 hrs

Barse Phedi to Gurgad Log (3100m) 2 hrs
Gurgad Log to Gurgad bridge (3000m) 1-2 hrs
Gurgad bridge to Gurjaghat (3015m) 1 hr

Whichever trail you are on, the challenge is the very steep final descent into the Gurgad canyon. Our goat-path landed us at a fallen log bridge which we crawled across. Once on the other side, the challenge is to burrow one's way through the dense barrier of canes which quickly re-colonize the paths that locals slash through them. Eventually the canes disappear (sigh of relief) the valley

broadens and joins the valley of the Uttar Ganga river (Dhorpatan).

Cross the Gurgad khola on a new bridge just upstream of its junction with the Uttar Ganga river. Gurjaghat lies an hour upstream, but before heading there we recommend going downstream to visit the Bonpo monastery and Tibetan Medicine school at Chentung (1 hour).

Days 11 & 12 Gurjaghat to Darbang via Jaljala Pass (same as Trek 2/days 5-6)