

TREK 12: High & Wild around Dhaulagiri Massif

Grade: Challenging

Days: 19-21

Permits: Lower/Upper Dolpo, ACAP, TIMS

Highest point: 5500 m

Map: West Dhaulagiri & Kanjirowa

Cautions: Snow possible Oct-May. Licensed Guide essential.

Overview

This is the ultimate trek – around the whole of the Dhaulagiri range (9 peaks over 7000m), crossing 5-8 passes (depending how you define a pass) over 4000m, through the extreme topography and wilderness of Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (DHR) to the arid, trans-Himalayan district of Dolpo and its remote untouched villages with ancient Buddhist/Bonpo monasteries, prayer walls, and chortens. This is how the Round Annapurna Trek used to be before tourists and roads arrived.

This trek requires a level of fitness and determination but is worth every laboured breath and aching muscle. You will get a sense of the breath-taking scale of the Himalayas, and the extraordinary stamina and endurance of the people who live in its highest corners.

Alert: High and Wild is just that - it is not a route to do on your own, there are no easy exits such as roads or airfields, nor mobile networks to call up a helicopter should you fall sick or break your leg. With unmarked trails and very few permanent habitations, a guide is essential, and is compulsory for all Dolpo treks. This route is not recommended late November to March, as snow is likely to block the high passes. We did the trek in June – not ideal, because cloud obscured some of the views, but it was warmer. Even so, there was ice when we camped at 4000 metres.

All food and camping gear has to be carried; there are no villages for the first 6 days from Gurja Khani. Where habitation is encountered in the Bharbung Khola in Dolpo, impromptu homestays can be arranged, but should not be relied upon as they may not have food to spare. Basic food supplies (rice, lentils, tea, sugar) can be purchased in Gurja Khani and in Laisicap and in Chharka, but other foodstuffs should be bought in Pokhara.

The expense of purchasing an upper Dolpo permit can be avoided by taking an alternate route on Day 13 over the Mukut La Pass, to re-connect with the main route at Nulungsumda Kharka (Day 17).

Option: If you don't have time to orbit the whole range, you can end your trek in Dunai/Lower Dolpo and fly out (**Trek 13**). This trek's day-to-day guide describes the route and night stops which we made on the single occasion that we did this trek. Some of the days were quite long, and we would advise breaking your trek into shorter stretches where possible.

To start: Bus or share-jeep from Beni to Darbang (1.30-2 hrs)

Day 1 -3: Darbang to Gurja Khani (2700m). Homestays. Same as days 1-3/Trek 1

Day 4: Altitude acclimatisation day in Gurja Khani. Side trip to base of Gurja Himal 5 hrs

Day 5: Gurja Khani to Phalyaghar Phedi (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 Phaleghar pass. 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 herder's seasonal shelter called a *goth*. You will encounter many of these; they are only inhabited during the warm monsoon months (June-September). The route traverses around the upper Gurja Khani watershed, crossing 3 tributaries of the Dhuala Khola before reaching the campsite just above a ford of the Phaleghar Khola. There are good views of Gurja Himal from the campsite.

Day 6: Phaleghar Phedi to Nauri

7 hrs

Phedi to Phalyaghar Pass (4075m)	3 hrs
Phalya Pass to Munsung (3650m)	2 hrs
Munsung to Nauri Kharka (4080m)	2hrs

A steady 3 hours' climb up the Phaleghar Khola and the pass is attained. 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 DHR, which you now enter. The Ghasdung (Ghustung) Khola gorge dominates the scene. At the western edge of the grazing area, the path descends steeply down a dry river course and after 1-2 hours the collection of huts that is called **Munsung** (3650m) 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.

[LINK: Trek 11: *If you have the time to visit Churen Glacier Sanctuary on your way – do so. You can go there from Munsung – don't cross the bridge but remain on the left bank]*

Continuing for Dolpo, cross 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 7: Nauri to Dokari Khola (3600m) 7-9 hrs

via 4 passes (4350m, 4460m, 4540m, 4660m)

This is an exhausting day, combining 4 passes (minor descents between each) and 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 Ghasustang Khola, a major river draining the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve. The Ghustung Khola gorge is the major feature spied from the top of Phalyaghar Bhangjyang the previous day. Each of the 3 tributaries ends in a high lake basin, whose drainage plunges precipitously into the Gustang 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 a short descent to a small lake and up the next pass (4460m), a further descent to a lake and climb to the third pass (4550m) followed by a descent to the final lake and climb to the highest pass,

Asare Lekh, at 4660m. These lakes are shallow and dry up in the winter, otherwise they would make a good campsite. The view over the rugged terrain of DHR is worthy of some photo-shoots. We had a lot of cloud cover, but we believe the Dhaulagiri range should be clearly visible from these passes.

Descending from the pass a bridge across **Dogari Khola** is reached in just over an hour. Crossing to the north bank, the final 2-3 hours is spent following a path on the north bank of the Dogari Khola. While the gradient is gentle, the path is poor and progress slow. If the day is getting long, there are many camp spots along the Dogari. We chose to keep going to **Thado Dogari** near the confluence with the Sangling Khola.

Day 8: Thado Dogari to Gurghat (4010m) 6 hrs

via 2 passes (4020m, 4500m)

Cross the Sangling Khola on a log bridge (good views of Pyutha to the east) and climb steeply for 1½ hours to a ridge at 3900m. The route then traverses around two side valleys on somewhat exposed trails to a second ridge point at 4020m. After a steep descent a good lunch spot on the Lamsar Khola is reached in an hour or so. From there it is a steady climb of 2+ hours to **Lamsar Pass** at 4500m. The final hour's descent to **Gurghat** camp (4010m) on the Sen Khola is very steep. It might be preferable to descend lower to **Phuphal Phedi** where there is firewood.

Day 9: Gurghat to Purbang (4010m) 5 hrs

via Panidal Pass 4520m

From Gurghat camp it is a 1.45 hr steep climb to **Phuphal lake** at 4350m. If you visit in the *yarsa gompa* season, you will see the vast tented camp set up by the treasure seekers of "Himalayan gold". (see box below). A gentle climb of an hour from Phuphal takes one to **Panidal Pass** (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.

Day 10: Purbang to Tarakot 7-8 hrs

Purbang to Jangla La Pass (4550m) 2.15 hrs

Jangla La Pass to Tarakot (2320m) 5 hrs

The final day to Dolpo is a long one, crossing the Janga La Pass which separates the green southern slopes of the Himalayas from the high altitude semi-desert of trans-Himalayan Dolpo in the north. 1.15 hours' after leaving Purbang, the **Majila yarsa gompa** camp is reached. From here, a further 1 hr steady climb and **Janga La Pass** is conquered, 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 Janga La col impassable and trap him in Dolpo for the winter. Nowadays, flights from Jughal provide other escape options for the Dolpo trekker, and on a sunny, snow-free day Janga La does not seem at all ominous. The spectacular view north to the arid, snow-dusted mountains of Dolpo, conveys the humongous scale of the Himalayas,

and contrasts starkly with the well-watered foothills to the south.

The daunting challenge now is the 2200 m unrelenting descent to the Barbung river of Lower Dolpo. A short way below the Pass the path forks. Take the right fork to Tarakot.

LINK: *Trek 14: the left trail heads to Dunai, capital of Dolpo. Take this route if you wish to fly out from the*

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 volley ball court and 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.

airfield at Jughal. It is too far to make Dunai the same day from Purbang, so camping is necessary).

Continuing the right fork to Tarakot, the first part of the 5-hour descent is not that steep. The path traverses one side of the Jangla valley to a point (4070m) on the ridge between the next valley. 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 – the front terrace of one house is the roof of the house below. Prayer flags, carved wooden windows and notched log access ladders feature in this attractive village. Homestays may be possible in Tarakot; if not, on the Barbung river below there are a couple of tea-shop lodges - again the first since Gurja Khani - where beer is available and sore knees can be rested. It is recommended to take at least a half-day respite here, to enjoy a shower of sun-warmed water from a black hose-pipe, and to wash clothes, re-stock food supplies, and recuperate.

LINK: *From Tarakot there are a choice of routes. One can detour to Ringmo/Phoksundo lake and Dho Tarap, or one*

can follow our "off-the-beaten" route below which wraps its way around the Dhaulagiri peaks:-

Day 11: Morning R & R in Tarakot. Afternoon stroll to Laisicap (2600m) 3 hrs

This is a delightful stroll – it is flat, or nearly flat! – beside the rushing Barbung Khola through pines and persimmon trees, with rocky crags and prayer walls. At **Laisicap** there are lodges where one can sun-bask on the flat roof, or take a stroll across the bridge to a Buddhist monastery. Food supplies will need to be re-stocked here or at Tarakot.

Day 12: Laisicap to Kakkot 7-8 hrs

This can be a very hot and dry day with little shade at midday. Carry plenty of water with you. The springs are few and far between and the river water laden with sediment. There is no habitation until Kakkot is reached. The trail follows the Barbung khola eastwards, through towering architectural cliffs and the occasional gnarled pine tree. **[Link: an alternate route to Chharka follows the Dharap khola to Dho Tarap. This takes an extra 1-2 days. From Dho, it crosses Chan La pass 5378m to Chharka.]**

After an hour or so the trail crosses to the right bank, following close to the river all the way to **Kakkot**. The final hour one has to negotiate a classic Dolpo staircase on a nearly vertical cliff. It is constructed by building up flat stones one upon the other. It is wise to keep to the inside and hope that you don't meet a herd of yak coming the other way.

Kakkot is a typical Dolpo village with narrow alleys, flat roofs, painted windows, and prayer flags, sheltering under a towering cliff. We visited the year after the 2015 earthquake in central Nepal, and Kakkot villagers were discussing whether to re-locate their village in case a future quake hit their region. If you arrive in the *yarsa* season (as we did), you will find the village deserted with the inhabitants (including monks) camping in the *yarsa* pastures. Since we could not enjoy a homestay as anticipated, the Lama invited us to pitch our tents on the 'lawn' of the *gompa*.

Box: Police alert

At midnight in Kakkot we were woken by a party of four exhausted and dehydrated policemen carrying their superintendent who was suffering with altitude sickness. He was newly assigned to duty at Chharka (4500m) and had entered the direct route from Jomosom via Jugben La pass (5600m) and succumbed to altitude sickness. Unable to summon up a rescue helicopter, they had set out from Charkke following this circuitous route in order to evacuate him by air from Dunai, there being no other exit other than the 5600m pass which was clearly not advisable. It was their third day since departing; they had lost the trail and been walking for 18 hours.

Day 13: Kakkot to Seri (4100m) 8 hrs

The first couple of hours are relatively easy. A short distance beyond Kakkot the trail crosses a bridge to the left bank. The river bed is wide and flat but the sides rise steeply. At times the trail follows the river bed, and at other times climbs **above** and around side gullies and tributaries. Keep your water bottles filled and cook food at any spot where there is fresh clean water. The trail crosses back to the left bank on a small suspension bridge spanning a

narrow gorge. Then the climb begins. There are several trails, one passing through the higher villages of Pimarigaon, Chinang and Gharengaon. The route we found ourselves on avoided them.

If the weather is clear, there should be brilliant views of the backsides of Churen Himal and Dhaulagiri peaks 2-6. We were unlucky. Even so, the views to the south were impressively rugged, with deep mysterious canyons disappearing into dark rolling clouds which briefly parted, like curtains, to reveal a diamond pane of a glittering ice face. Across the khola, one can clearly see a trail winding up a forbidding ravine to the isolated village of Mukutgaon which lies a mere 8 kms north from the 7751m peak of Dhaulagiri II

[LINK: it is possible from Mukut to cross the Mu La pass to connect with Nulungsumda Kharka/Day 17 of the current route. This is a short-cut which saves one forking out for the Upper Dolpo permit since you do not enter Upper Dolpo (from Chharka northwards) and avoid the Police check-post in Chharka. We have not done the route ourselves, so cannot vouch for its safety and feasibility.]

Below the trail, the thin strips of green fields and rows of chorten of Terangaon can be seen. This would be an alternative place to camp or homestay. Having climbed higher, we were reluctant to lose the altitude we had gained at such breath-taking cost, that we continued higher to the village of **Seri**. One is now high above the deep canyon of the Barbung river. The views onto the north slopes of the Dhaulagiris must be magnificent when the weather is clear. The only flat ground to pitch our tents was in the school yard, but we ate our meals in the home of a friendly young couple.

Day 14: Seri to Dhadgaon (4200m) 6 hrs

Seri to Dukot/Pangan 4 hrs
Dukot/Pangan to Dhadgaon 2 hrs

The trail follows the course of the Barbung, but at some height above the river. Most of the altitude has been gained, so it is a matter of covering horizontal rather than vertical distance. The landscape is dramatic, with painfully-contorted strata, and an extraordinary fantasy of rock architecture which rises up in cathedral spires. Dotted between the rock walls are tiny oases of green fields, scattered birches and shrubs, surviving on the trickle from springs.

After 4 hours or so, the trail reaches a cluster of hamlets: **Dukot, Pangan, and Lonkun**, near the tributary Pangan khola. If you are lucky you may be able to get food in one of the homes, but many are deserted, for various reasons. There is a small *gompa* at Lonkun, but the primary school which served the 3 hamlets has closed down, and children are now obliged to travel to Seri for school. There are signs of a more substantial population in the past - paintings inside Buddhist chortens are peeling and *mani* walls collapsing although the skills are still alive, for we met a man chipping new prayer stones for a *mani* wall.

Dhadgaon hamlet is reached in another 2 hours. The Lama's family offer basic homestay accommodation – one large room – which makes a break from camping, and they can prepare *momo*, a delicious Tibetan dish (akin to Chinese *dim sum*), and Tibetan tea made with salt and clarified butter (ghee).

Day 15: Dhadgaon to Chap Chui 4300m 4 hrs

It should be possible to reach Chharke in a day. We took things easy due to a sick member in our party, knowing there was a canyon section ahead which might require a longish detour if the river was high. The extraordinary rock scenery continues, with beautiful colours evolving and disappearing as the sunlight and clouds move. There are no villages or hamlets on the trail, although 1-2 are visible across the valley. After around 4 hours we set up camp below **Chap Chui**, on flat grass in the shelter of a mani wall near the confluence of the tributary coming from Dho Tarap, with a warren of furry marmots not far away. Himalayan marmots are quite yellow in colour compared to their alpine relatives. As the sun set, we watched a train of loaded mules descend from a Pass of Rilbuk Danda to the east, which must be the shortest route between Dho Tarap and Jomosom.

Day 16: Chap Chui to Chharka 4300m 3-4 hrs

Rather than climbing up to skirt around a narrow canyon section, we were able to wade the river. Several crossings must be made through the canyon, and it is necessary to scramble through some big sized boulders and scree. Once this section is accomplished the remaining kilometres are covered quickly due to the easy nature of the terrain. Turning a corner, a chorten with prayer flags greets one, and through its arch are seen the green fields and mud houses of **Chharka Bot**. As we walked the final stretch we passed an encampment of herders living in black goat-hair tents. Above the village rows of red and white painted chorten encircle the village.

Chharka Bot is a fascinating ancient fortified village. Its name means 'salt' due to the presence of salt mines nearby which the people used to mine and trade to distant places, regular caravans carrying salt in the summer months. The small 'town' used to mine and trade in salt from salt mines nearby.

There are 3-4 tourist lodges in Charka. This is probably a good place to take another rest day before the final effort of the highest pass of all. It has clearly seen better days. Rammed earth is a common construction material in Dolpo, and this crumbles with the passage of time, leaving scenic ruins which blend into the landscape.

There are several tourist lodges in the small town, as trekking agency groups touring Dolpo pass through this spot. None of them, however, follow the Barbung khola route, and few of them exit via Jungben La Pass. If you have an afternoon in Chharka, there is plenty of interest. Inside the fortified walls, old men and women sit in the sunshine turning their prayer wheels and counting their prayer beads. Outside the town a trail of chorten mounts up the mountain side. There is a gumpa, and a primary school, and 1-2 shops, even selling such luxuries as chocolate bars.

Day 17: Chharka to Nulungsumda Kharka (4990m)

7-8 hrs

The day begins with a gentle amble beside the Barbung khola, now known as the Chharka Tulsu khola, crossing from the right to the left bank part way along. After an hour or so, the river splits, and the trail crosses the first tributary (flowing from the south) called the Thasan khola, below a dramatic ochre-red cliff face. The trail then rises steeply through crumbling turrets of river deposits. Having

accomplished this challenging section, the gradient eases somewhat, the trail crosses some small streams and negotiates a narrow cliff section. After a short descent to the Yalku khola the valley widens and the gradient eases.

From here onwards there are no particular obstacles, other than the altitude which is slowly gained. In the monsoon season we passed encampments of herders living in black wool tents tending their herds of yak as well as sheep and goats, and various mule trains serving villages such as Chharka with goods shipped from Jomosom. That mules have the strength and stamina and sureness of foot to conquer this exposed and gruelling route with an 80 kg load in the reverse direction (much steeper), is testimony to their extraordinary genetic strength or forced labour – and probably a mix of both. One thing is certain, those who live in these parts - both man and animal – test their species' endurance levels on a daily basis.

Reaching the herders' camp on a wide flattish spot between two streams, known as Nulumsumda, we camped alongside a train of mules. The hut served as our kitchen/dining room, giving some protection from the cold. For the muleteers, every night's stopover involves removing the harnesses, saddles and loads, allowing the animals time to graze and then tethering each by one leg to a line of rope which they stretch between two hammered-in posts. In the morning, this operation is repeated in reverse, and so on, day after day. Each mule is given a munch bag hung around their neck containing a mix of grains to supplement their browsing. Do not expect to sleep well at this altitude. In our case, altitude-sleeplessness was compounded by a herd of yak who thundered through our camp site in the middle of the night so that we feared for our lives.

LINK: *From here a trail heads south-west over the Mukut La to Mukutgaon or Terangaon on the lower Barbung khola. Estimated time: 2-3 days, camping essential).*

Day 18: Nulungsumda to Ghalden-Ghulden (4150m) 6-7 hrs

Nulungsumda to Jungben La (5550m) 3-4 hrs

Jungben to Ghalden-Ghulden (4150m) 2-3 hrs

All the earlier outlay of energy pays off now, for by the time one reaches the highest pass, one is truly in shape, and marvellously adapted to the altitude. None of our party suffered so much as a minor headache, although breathing is always an effort. Our luck and the weather finally changed and we headed for the pass in glorious sunshine, the snows of the north side of Dhaulagiri and its siblings shining down on us.

The route is curious, for the highest point today, and indeed, of the whole trek - Jungben La Pass 5600m – does not mark the watershed between Dolpo and Mustang (Karnali river and Kali Gandaki) to the east. That watershed is visible *below* the trail; in fact it is an easy pass from the west, being fairly flat and broad, around 5100m, but the canyon into which it abruptly drops on the east side is totally impenetrable, a dangerous labyrinth of fragile cliffs and torrents which hurtle off the Himalayan heights. Hence, one has to summon up the energy to climb above the watershed pass to a nick point in a rocky side ridge, all the while looking down on the 'easy' pass below.

The trail angles up a moderately steep scree slope at a steady pace. At this altitude it is a matter of plodding and stopping, but to keep one company are spell-binding views

to the south of the north faces of Dhampus and Mukut peaks. **Jungben La Pass** (5550m) is reached in 3-4 hours, depending how many out-of-breath or photography stops, you are obliged to make. This is one of the highest passes in Dolpo, and like all passes in Tibetan regions, it is marked with a rough cairn of *om mani padma hum* stones. It provides a stunning, almost 360 degree view - mostly high dry ridges to the north outlined with snow in places, and dramatic scenery to the south, and views of the Annapurnas and Thorang La pass to the east.

On the eastern side, the trail zig zags very steeply down. After crossing the **Lhanhimar khola**, one descends into a jumble of rocky cliffs surrounding the Kyalungpa khola. This location is called Ghalden Ghuldun, the best translation of which is 'higgledy-piggledy', with the higgledy-piggledy being in the vertical plane. The path is steep and rough, but not dangerously so providing you remember to always keep on the inside of passing mule trains, and never to walk and look at the view at the same time. If you wish to view-gaze, stop first, or it might be your last trip (excuse the pun). After 2-3 hours the only camp spot with remotely flat land is reached. It is identified by the blue tin roof of a new refuge which was constructed in the wake of the 2015 October blizzard which hit trekkers on high-altitude routes, including this one.

Day 19: Ghalden-Ghulden to Kagbeni 8-9 hrs

Ghal/Ghulden to Santa (3777m)	4 hrs
Santa to Kagbeni (2810m)	4-5 hrs

Continue carefully down the higgledy-piggledy path into the canyon chasm. Photos cannot do justice to this contorted scenery. Villages which seemed at arm's length from the camp site will take all day to reach. It takes around 30-45 minutes to reach the suspension bridge over the **Kyalunpa khola**. There is no respite however, for a steep climb welcomes the trekker on the other side. The chaotic topography continues for most of the morning.

We ate a cooked lunch produced by a cosy teashop at **Santa** (3770m), a small village half-inhabited. On the opposing side of the valley is a totally abandoned village. They told us that the spring had dried up forcing the people to leave. This is happening throughout the region. Whether it is climate-change or not, the change in rainfall patterns is leading to significant occupational and demographic changes.

One can either spend the night at Santa, or camp further on. However, after 19 days without hot water, there was one driving thought on the minds of our party: hot showers! We decided to press on, whatever the cost, to Kagbeni and a tourist-standard hotel. One final high pass stood between us and this dream. From Santa village the trail climbs steeply at first and then contours more gently around a wide bowl, avoiding a sizeable landslide below. After another shoulder and broad bowl, you are truly on your final, final climb of the trek. **Bhima Lojan La pass** (4460m) is reached in 2-3 hours. The view of the Annapurnas and Nilgiris and the Damodar peaks to the east is staggering, but so too is the view into upper Mustang to the north. In the late afternoon sun, the rocks glow with colours, particularly the distinctive organ-pipe citadels of the Narsing khola.

A new dirt road is being bulldozed along here, which saved us some time. The final descent to the Kali Gandaki valley and Kagbeni takes around 2 hours via some herders

huts at Yak kharka, passing near a monastery at Tirigaon. At last, the ancient town of Kagbeni hoves into sight, with its crumbling rammed-earth walls, and its famous pair of guardians possessed of distinctly engorged genitalia to ward off evil spirits and demons. By contrast, at the south end lies the modern town with its road access and cement hotels. Finally, the longed-for hot shower and scrub. And so to bed – yes, a proper bed.

Days 20-21: Return by bus (8-10 hrs) or flight to Pokhara