

TREK 1: Gurja Himal & Hidden Village

Grade Easy to Moderate. **Days:** 5-6
Highest point: 3250 m **Permits:** none at present
Map: Gurja Himal & Hidden Village
Lodging: Homestays & teashop lodges
Cautions: Snow possible Dec-Jan.

Overview

One of the best homestay treks. Discover the isolated, hidden village of Gurja Khani nestling beneath Gurja Himal. The trek features traditional villages, varied scenery, excellent views of Dhaulagiri 1 (8172m) and Gurja Himal (7193m). The return journey is by the same route (for alternative routes, see Trek 2 or 4). The trail is well-travelled by locals, so it is not essential to hire a guide to find your way. There may be snow on Gurja Pass, but local travelers usually forge a way through within a day or so.

To start:

From **Beni**, catch a local bus up the Myagdi Khola to **Darbang** (2 hours; Rs 200). Buses for Darbang (Thakhali Guest House) leave from the western edge of Beni beside a road bridge over the Myagdi Khola. Share taxis are also available (1.5 hours; Rs 500 per person). This is a bumpy dusty ride, sometimes teetering on the edge of landslides. If this doesn't appeal, you can walk from Beni to Darbang (7-8 hours). It is a verdant scenic valley, strung with small hamlets and terraced rice fields beside the rushing Myagdi river. The original footpath remains in most places, but occasionally you will have to walk on the dusty motor track. If you ride to Darbang, it is recommended to walk a couple of hours the same day and spend the night on the ridge at Dharapani or Takam. From Darbang there is a rudimentary bus service (2-3 per day) to Phalyagaon, with the plan to bulldoze a track to Lumsung. Be aware that the track is rough and hazardous in places, sometimes blocked by landslides, and buses in a dubious state of maintenance. We recommend walking in order to appreciate the stunning views of the Dhaulagiri range; it is almost as quick.

Day One: Darbang (1000 m) to Dharapani (1500m) 1:45 hours

From Darbang, cross the suspension bridge over the Myagdi Khola and follow the jeep track northwards along the right bank. Cross a side tributary after 30 mins. and follow a cement staircase which zigzags up a pine-clad spur to an important local Hindu shrine. The footpath rejoins the track and finally levels out to arrive at the attractive village of **Dharapani** [**Lodging:** Prena Guest House]. True to its name (tr: spring water) there are stone-clad water-spouts at the entrance, as well as splendid views of Dhaulagiri and Gurja Himal.

Day Two: Dharapani to Lulang 6 hours

Dharapani to Phalyagaon 1800m 2-3 hrs
Phalyagaon to Lulang 2400m 2-3 hrs

This is a scenic day, sprinkled with picturesque villages, and back-dropped by the Dhaulagiris. Continue on the jeep track which has little traffic except mule-trains. After

passing through terraced fields, where villagers are busy with ploughing, planting, harvesting or threshing, you arrive an hour later at the even more picturesque village of **Takam** [**Lodging:** Rojina Hotel; Tara Hotel; Mil Kumari Bandari Homestay Ph: 9746704493] with houses of ochre and white mud plaster and a pagoda temple set amid a wide crescent of rice fields with the ever-present Gurja and Dhaulagiri peaks.

From Takam, follow the jeep track as it climbs to negotiate a landslide-prone cliff section and winds around to reach **Sibang** (1790 m) [teashop lodges] in 30 minutes. For several years the jeep-track ended here, but in 2016 the route was bull-dozed as far as Phalyagaon. From Sibang, follow the footpath and after 15 minutes take the upper fork which climbs up to pass near the lower part of **Machim** village [[LINK](#), lower fork for Trek 15 Dhaulagiri/French Pass] There are good views up the valley which leads to French Pass. From here the trail is level to the school at **Phalyagaon (Muna)** [Bishnu teashop lodge]. For those who are already tired this makes a convenient night stop.

A footpath descends gently from Phalyagaon, passing below the village of Muna, to reach a bridge across the Dar Khola in under an hour. Upstream, the mountain ridges interlock in a fat braid. Shortly after the bridge there is a choice of trails. Either are okay. The lower (left) trail keeps closer to the river and climbs gently to **Lumsung**, via an attractive waterfall, while the upper trail climbs directly to the main village of **Lulang**, directly above Lumsung. We recommend spending the night at Lulang as this shortens the next day and allows one to reach the Pass before clouds obscure the view. The upper trail can be hot in the afternoon sun as the slope faces south and there is little shade on it. There is one respite provided by a side stream, where you might see girls resting their loads of firewood and cooling off in the water. Whichever route you take, you must negotiate a gigantic gash in the landscape carved by a landslide in 2016. It destroyed 4 homes and many fields.

Lulang

Lulang is unusual because all its 250 households belong to the *Dalit* caste of metal-workers (Bishwakarma or 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 mud.

Economically, it is a poor and neglected village. Nowadays, most families eke out a living from farming rather than metal work, with many menfolk absent for employment reasons, children are obliged to drop out of school to help in the home.

Fortunately no-one was killed, but the loss of fields can tip families into real deprivation, such is the shortage of cultivable land. The landslide may still be active when it rains. Check for falling debris before crossing, and when you go, do not stop until you reach the other side.

At last **Lulang** comes into view and you think you have arrived – but the final climb on stone steps up to the village is very steep.

Lodging: -

Lulang: Chadeni Homestay (Rati Maya B.K. Ph: 97420380); Ram Bahadur Rasaili 9746704177; Lali Gurans Homestay (Pabisara Ph: 9746717362).

Lumsung [Himalayan Lodge Ph:9746722209; Prem Kumari Pun Homestay Ph: 9746712308] the next day there is a direct path up to Lulang.

Day 3: Lulang to Gurja Khani 8 hrs

Lulang to Gurja Pass 3250m 3-4 hrs
Gurja Pass to Dar bridge 2500m 3 hrs
Dar Khola to Gurja Khani 2700m 1 hr

There is no habitation between Lulang and Gurja Khani except for a rudimentary teashop at the Pass, so it is wise to eat something before starting and carry some snacks. It is a moderately strenuous route with two ascents and one descent, but a good, easy-to-follow trail. Snow is possible in winter, but the path is rarely closed. Follow any footpath through Lulang to reach the main trail which emerges from the village on the upper left side as you look uphill. Once on the trail it is

Himalayan Cedar

The *Cedrus deodara* trees near the pass and along the ridge, mark the westernmost occurrence of this majestic tree. One of the giants of the forests, it grows up to 80 m high - nearly as high as the famous *Sequoia* in California. It is used for timber, and fragrant oils can also be extracted.

impossible to lose the way since the route is well travelled by mule trains and women with bamboo baskets heading out to gather firewood. It is a pleasant climb through oak-rhododendron forest, the tree-trunks are almost hidden by a thick cloak of moss, ferns, and orchids. In 3 hours or so Gurja Pass is reached with a rustic teashop run by a delightful Dalit family [Siddhiman & Naru B.K. 98636775111; 9741344450, food + rudimentary sleeping facilities], and stupendous views of Gurja Himal – if you arrive before noon. The best views are obtained by walking a short way above the teashop, to the east. The teashop closes for 2 months from December – check in Lulang whether it is open or not..

Follow the only path down the north slope of the ridge. A landslide in the monsoon of 2014 felled many of the Himalayan cedar trees and destroyed sections of the path. The path has been repaired and the landslide opened up views of Gurja Himal which can be enjoyed much of the way down. In December and January you may encounter snow (in 1998 our children sledged down on their bums). After descending moderately steeply, the gradient lessens as the path heads in a more westerly direction for the final hour of the descent to the bridge over the **Dhuala Khola**, 3 hours from the Pass. 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.

The river crossing used to be a single cedar log spanning the narrowest point of the gorge, but nowadays there is a modern suspension bridge installed by the Gurkha Welfare Fund. The last leg to the village involves another climb. It is not far, but it is steep when legs are tired. Follow the main track upwards. 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 meadow. There is a water tap and an empty building on the right, with the sheer face of Gurja Himal partially visible above this. The dense roofs of **Gurja Khani** are visible to the left and the village is reached in a gentle 15 minutes.

Homestays: Road of Life Ph.9866004340; Yesoda (Bhim Maya 9847772458); Sita (9867768412); Shristhi (9866044571; 9866044573)

Option: R&R day: Gurja Khani is a pleasant place to spend a few nights. The villagers have built a community bathhouse with hot showers heated by green hydropower. Things to do include pony riding, walks (flora & fauna; temples; village crafts; mining tunnels), and day-hike to foot of Gurja Himal. You can do these things alone or take a guide. For advice, contact Tourism Committee Chair: Jhak B. Chhantyal (Ph 9847 772458). It may also be possible to arrange a 2-3 day camping trip to see the amazing panorama at Phalyaghar viewpoint (4000m); or 4-5 days to the even more amazing Churen Glacier Sanctuary. Contact for camping trips: Tam Bahadur Chantyal (9846815677).

Days 4-5: Return to Pokhara. Allow 3 days for a leisurely return; fast walkers can reach Darbang in 2 days and catch a bus to Beni or even Pokhara the same day. For those who are short of time, it is possible to reach Phalyagaon (Muna) on Day 4, from where a bus departs for at 7.30 the next morning (expect a rough ride!) For alternative return routes, see Treks 2 and 4.