

## Trail Guide Trek 1: Gurja Himal and Hidden Village (5 days)

From Pokhara take a bus to Beni (3 hours) on the Kali Gandaki/Jomosom road. From Beni catch a local bus up the Myagdi Khola river to Darbang (2 hours). 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 (double the price, half the time). 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 (6 hours). It is a verdant scenic valley, strung with small hamlets, The original walking trail still remains in most places, though here and there you will have to walk on the dusty motor track.

In Darbang there are several basic hotels such as the Thakhali Guest House. If time, it is preferable to complete the first leg of the trek and spend the night at Dharapani or Takam. From Darbang a rudimentary bus service runs up to Sibang with 2-3 buses per day. The track however is extremely rough, often blocked by landslides, the buses are past retirement age and wait until they are full before leaving, so it is often just 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.

### Day One: Darbang (1000 m ) >> Lulang (2410 m ) 7-8 hours

This is a longish day which can be eased either by splitting it into two with an overnight at a homestay in Takam or the teashop-lodge at Phalegaon, or by gaining Dharapani the night before. It is an extremely scenic route, thickly sprinkled with picturesque villages. The following day there is no habitation between Lulang and Gurja Khani, so it is recommended to sleep at Lulang (or Lumsung) in order to be sure of making Gurja Khani. Those who are fit, however, can reach Gurja Khani in a day from Phalegaon.

#### 1.1 Darbang (1000m) > Dharapani (1500 m) 1:45 hours

Cross the suspension bridge over the Myagdi Khola and follow the jeep track northwards along the right bank of the river. After half an hour cross a side tributary on a suspension bridge and rejoin the jeep track. After the second hairpin bend, take the old footpath on the right which zigzags steeply up a pine-clad spur overlooking the river below. Higher up the footpath rejoins the jeep track and continues to climb until the attractive village of Dharapani (1500 m) (tr: spring water) is reached. True to its name there are several stone-clad waterspouts at the entrance to the village. Ethnic groups here are largely Chhettri and Magar with a few dalit households. There are teashops and at least one teashop lodge should you wish to spend the night, and splendid views of Dhaulagiri and Gurja Himal.

#### 1.2 Dharapani (1500m) > Takam (1630m) > Phalegaon (1750 m) 2:30 hours

Continue on the jeep track – it is dusty or muddy in a few places but little traffic except for mule trains and there are stunning views of the Dhaulagiri range to compensate. It passes through woodland interspersed with terraced fields, where you will see villagers busy with different tasks depending on the agricultural season – ploughing, planting, harvesting, or threshing. 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 small pagoda temple sitting on a wide crescent of rice fields with an unbelievable backdrop of snow mountains. Just before Takam, take the lower right fork in the track (shorter, and less dusty) which leads past a stone dhara water spout. Homestay accommodation is available here as well as teashop-lodges. Continuing, follow the jeep track as it climbs to negotiate a landslide-prone cliff section and winds around to reach Sibang (1790 m) in 30 minutes. Accommodation is available in 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 (teashops and local accommodation available.) The jeep road ends here (Jan 2019).

### 1.3 Phalegaon (1750m) > Lulang village (2410 m) 2:45 hours

From Phalegaon the path descends gently (passing below the village of Muna) to reach a bridge across the Dar Khola (tributary of the Myagdi) in less than an hour. Looking westwards upstream the villages die out and the mountains rise higher and steeper, the ridges intersecting each other like a fat braid of mountains. Across the river there is a single teashop (cannot be relied upon to be open – and it is a longish climb to the next teashop at Lulang). Just past the teashop there is a choice of trails. The lower (left) trail keeps closer to the river and climbs gently to reach Lumsung village (in Lulang VDC) while the upper right trail climbs steadily to the large and fascinating village of Lulang. The latter is the more direct trail which you should take (unless you are heading to the Jaljala Pass and Dhorpatan). At Lulang there is one local lodge about halfway up on the left (Rati Maya B.K. 97420380), and friendly but very simple homestay accommodation further up and further left at Kali Maya's (9746062298) – though the room is very small the toilet is spotless. Further homestays are anticipated in the coming year. [If you are too tired to climb the steep stairs to Lulang it is possible to stay at the teashop lodge at Lumsung. The next day there is a direct path between Lumsung and Lulang.]

### **Day Two: Lulang (2410m) > Gurja Pass (3250 m) > Gurja Khani (3061 m) 7+ 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 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.

#### 2.1 Lulang (2410m) > Gurja Deorali (3250m) 3 hours

Follow any footpath up 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 impossible to lose the way since the route is well travelled by mule trains. You are also certain to be accompanied by women heading out with empty doko on their back to gather firewood and fodder. 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.

#### 2.2 Gurja Deorali (3250m) > Dhaula Khola bridge (2500 m) 3 hours

Follow the only path down the north slope of the ridge. A landslide in the monsoon of 2014 felled many of the majestic 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 on this section (in 1998 our children sledged most of the way on their bottoms). 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 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.

### 2.3 Dhaula Khola (2500m) > Gurja Khani (3060 m) 1:15 hours

There used to be a wooden bridge spanning the narrowest point of the gorge, but in the past year a modern suspension bridge has been installed. 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. 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 grassy 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 village of Gurja Khani is also visible to the left and is reached on a level footpath in about 15 minutes from here. Near the village, avoid the path which forks right and rises up to the school.

#### **Arrival at Gurja Khani**

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

In Gurja Khani, homestay accommodation is available at the following households:

Jhak Bahadur Chantyal (tel: 9847772458) house just above the entrance to the village

Bel Moti Pariyar (tel: 9866823371) house across the main road from Jhak Bahadur

Sita Chantyal (tel: 994690014) – shop in the middle of the village

Daniel Bishwakarma (tel: 9846882003)

Mohan Chantyal (tel: 9846750582) on the west side of the village near the main road

#### **Days Four and Five – Return to Pokhara**

Return for Trek 1 is along the same route as the walk in. Good walkers can return to Darbang in time to catch the last bus to Beni and Pokhara on the fifth day. Anyone can make it in two days if they avail themselves of the bus service from Phalegoan to Darbang.

Trek 2 and Trek 4 offer different return routes from Gurja Khani and are described in our website.