

TREK 2: Gurja Himal & Rugachaur Pass

Grade: Moderate (1 strenuous pass)

Days: 6-7

Permits: Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (Rs 3000 - purchase on entry)

Highest point: Rugachaur Pass 3850 m

Map: Gurja Himal & Hidden Village

Lodging: Homestays & teashop lodges

Cautions: Snow likely Dec-Feb.

Overview

A great circular trek to Gurja Himal & Hidden Village, returning via a high pass into the beautiful Dhorpatan valley. The trek features traditional villages, Tibetan refugee settlement and Bonpo monastery, alpine valleys, and three passes with panoramic views of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges.

This route involves one long and strenuous day. Rugachaur Pass is not only quite high (3850m) but very steep on the north side. Stamina and balance are required.

This trek is being used for altitude acclimatization by groups prior to doing Round Dhaulagiri 1 (Trek 13). It saves 1-2 days' acclimatization in cold, avalanche-prone camp sites on that trek.

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 thrashing, 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

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.

a landslide in 2016. It destroyed 4 homes and many fields. 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

Himalayan Cedars

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.

on the trail it is 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).

Day 4: Gurja Khani to Gurjaghat 8-9 hrs

GK to Rugachaur Pass 3850m	5+ hrs
Rugachaur to Gurjaghat 3000m	3+ hrs

This is off-the-beaten path adventure. Ask your homestay to prepare some food (e.g. chapati/potatoes) to carry with you since there are no teashops or homes on the route.

The most difficult part of the climb to Rugachaur pass was greatly improved in 2018 with bridges and a totally new path, so there is less risk of getting lost. Even so, hiring a local guide for the day (cover the cost of their return the next day) is advised, since any deviation will compromise arriving at Gurjaghat before dusk. Depart early to obtain the best views from the pass. Snow is possible on the pass any time October to April.

Exit the village to the west, forking left to drop down to the Dhuala river (15 mins) which is crossed on a temporary wooden bridge built anew each year by locals. After winding up a landslide scree and ridge (20 mins), the path turns left at a stone *chautara* to cross a grazing area and enter a tributary valley. On the steep slope the trail narrows and can be wet with dew in the early morning as it passes above cliffs and waterfalls. The feeling of exposure is lessened by the dense vegetation, but the sense of safety is an illusion, and feet must be carefully placed. In rain this section becomes a treacherous mud-slide – bamboo canes make strong hand-holds if needed. There are 3 bridges plus a gigantic log to test your balance as the trail weaves from one side to the other. As altitude is gained, the Himalayan peaks appear and provide the excuse for rest stops.

After 3.5 hours the steep part of the climb begins. **Rugachaur Pass 3850m** is reached in a further 1-2 hours [don't be seduced by the times locals quote you; it is a formidable climb!] In fine weather the Pass makes a good picnic spot, covered with gentians. The views to the north of the Dhaulagiri range are spectacular - Pyutha, Churen, Ghustung, Gurja, Dhaulagiri 1 and 6.

The descent on the southern side is much more gentle. You are now in the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve where blue sheep and other wild animals may be spotted. The path follows the Simudar khola downstream, mostly on the left

bank, past deserted herders' huts (good for emergency bivouac!). After 30 mins cross the small stream on two beams, and a side tributary after a further 30 mins. Keep to the trail near the main stream, descending steadily into pretty alpine scenery of conifers and juniper, with sunlit glades which tempt one to lie down and fall asleep in their vivid mossy softness. Several more bridges are crossed, leaving one on the left (east) bank. After 3-4 hrs of descent the broad flat valley of the upper Uttar Ganga river comes into sight, with the seasonal settlement of **Gurjaghat** at the junction of the two rivers.

As you enter, there is a ranger's post for Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve where you may be asked to purchase an entry permit 3000Rs). We have never yet met a ranger, but make sure you have cash in case.

Lodging: there is currently one reliable teashop lodge, located the furthest on the left, close to the craggy slope: [Lokendra Chhantyal Ph 9867633453]. They can accommodate a dozen people, with a common room and a private room with 3-4 beds. The toilet is spotlessly clean and a fire constantly burning in the kitchen hearth with a warm carpet to sit on. Nights are cold at this altitude and ice/frost is likely in the morning. There is a second teashop named Samir Hotel, but it was closed when we last passed through (Oct 2018). Even Lokendra's teashop may be closed mid Dec-mid Feb.

Optional Rest day: If you have the time, we recommend spending 2 nights at Gurjaghat in order to visit the Bonpo monastery & Medicine school and the small remnant of Tibetan refugees at **Chentung** which lies 2 hours easy flat walk downstream from Gurjaghat. Some refugees were settled here in 1959 following the Chinese invasion of Tibet. [See Box under Trek 8] The town of **Dhorpatan**, with a road connection and buses to Baglung lies a further hour downstream. There is nothing particularly appealing about the town.

Day 5 Gurjaghat to Lumsung	6 hrs
Gurjaghat to Jaljalla Pass (3450m)	3-4 hrs
Jaljalla to Lumsung (2100m)	2-3 hrs

Upper Uttar Ganga valley

In this valley you will notice hundreds of rustic herder huts, for during the summer months the valley is filled with more than 10,000 domestic animals, accompanied by herder families. Termed 'transhumance', this seasonal migration exploits the rich grazing at high altitudes during the monsoon months.

Tibetan refugees used to be the only people who remained resident through the winter, but in recent years a community of *Dalits* at **Khaltekhulte** have built permanent homes around their potato fields.

This is another day where it is advised to carry food and snacks with you. The lodge will prepare some. Possibly more teashops will open up on the route, as trekkers' footfall increases.

Leave early to get the best views. You are now 'out of the wild' and the path more travelled by locals and occasional trekking agency groups. Follow the Uttar Ganga upstream, heading due east. Where there are offshoot paths, always select the most tramped one. After 2-3 hours the spot called lower Jaljalla (3300m) is reached. The

panoramic views of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges are well worth a 5 minute diversion to the low grassy ridge north of the path. A little further on **Jaljalla Pass** (3435m) is reached in around 3-4 hours from Gurjaghat.

The descent tests the knees, but the panoramic views of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna massifs keep you smiling. The path descends steeply through what used to be moss-drenched oak-rhododendron forest but is progressively disappearing. It is hard to lose the way. After 2 hours or so, the upper houses of **Muna** hamlet come into view, followed by **Moreni**. If you are feeling tired there are a couple of homestay/lodges here, but otherwise press on to cross the river and the short climb to **Lumsung**. [**Lodging:** Himalayan Lodge Ph: 9746722209; Homestay: Prem Kumari Pun Ph: 9746712308] on the left bank of the Dar khola. Alternatively, if you arrive early and are not tired, you can continue to **Muna** or **Phalyagaon** [Bishnu Hotel] in 2 hrs, and from there you are certain to reach Pokhara the next day. You have now completed the loop, and are back on your earlier route.

Days 6-7 Lumsung to Darbang	6-7 hrs
Same as Days 1-2 in reverse. Most trekkers reach Darbang in one day, and fast walkers can make it to Beni or even Pokhara for the night. It is also possible to catch a bus from Muna. The first bus leaves around 7.30 a.m.	

Note: If doing this route for altitude acclimatization prior to the Dhaulagiri/French Pass trek (#13), do it in the reverse direction. From Gurja Khani one can either follow Trek 3 route below or return via the Gurja pass to Lulang from where there is a direct trail via the village of Dar to Mudi in the Myagdi valley.