

TREK 3: Gurja Himal & Dhaula Canyon

Grade: Moderate, but exposed

Permits: none **Days:** 6

Highest point: 3250 m

Map: Gurja Himal & Hidden Village

Caution: exposed trails. Local guide essential for canyon section

Overview

This trek follows Route 1 to Gurja Khani, but returns to the start-point via the wild, almost impenetrable Dhaula Canyon. A local guide is essential for this section. This route is a stupendous one even though the mountain views are more limited than Trek 2. The final section of Day 4 involves a dizzying 700m descent of the canyon's north side, angled at 60°. The slope is bare, with nothing to impede one's view of the blue-green river directly below. Even Nepalis acknowledge that vertigo is a risk. But if you have a head for heights, the path is not bad. Women from Gurja Khani walk it with their children when going to visit their maternal homes. The trail is firm dirt with no loose stones on which to skid; there are one or two resting spots where the gradient lapses to 45°. As the path zig-zags, you are facing sideways to the slope, so a minor stumble is unlikely to send you over the edge. The danger is mostly in the mind!

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

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 Arche 8 hrs

GK to Khoribus 2800m 3.30 hrs
Khoribus to Arche 2000m 4.30 hrs

A guide is recommended as the trail is not marked and there are many 'grazing' paths. Guides can be hired in Gurja Khani for the day (pay for the return day as well). It is necessary to carry food and drink since there is unlikely to be anyone living in the seasonal shelters which are passed. Water bottles can be refilled at springs. There are no major passes but the trail is constantly up and down to cross tributary rivers, the only level sections being where one contours around a cliff. In places the trail passes through fields and seasonal shelters of Gurja Khani farmers, and you will be impressed how far they walk to grow a few stalks of maize.

From Gurja Khani head east to the small satellite settlement huddled on a wind-swept *bhanjhyang*, above the main trail. The path drops down steeply to a suspension bridge across the Khegas khola gushing from the snows of Gurja (30 mins). This is the first of several tributaries which must be crossed. The second is 1.30 hrs further on. From there the trail climbs to its highest point (Khoribus) in 1.15 hrs. Two hours beyond, the last patch of Gurja Khani fields and huts are reached at a place called Phubas. With the trail high above the canyon, this is wild 'Lord of the Rings' scenery of dark chasms, needle-like peaks, and forests with wispy cloaks of moss and lichen. Poking through at every tributary gap is the white face of Gurja Himal.

Beyond Phubas, follow the shoulder of land downhill until it terminates in a cliff where a tributary gorge descends from the eastern flank of Gurja Himal. With a cliff ahead and a cliff to the right, it is logical to conclude that the trail must turn left onto the north-facing slope. instead it turns right - into the void. This is the famous descent. Keep your eyes focused on your feet. It takes roughly an hour to make the 700m descent. If you are used to heights, you can pause at each hairpin bend to contemplate the serpentine river far below. Only Nepalis would create a trail

on such a slope; only they would use it for a family outing to visit the grandparents!

Cross the river and climb up through rich virgin forest chirping with birds to the small hamlet of Arche in one hour. There are no organized homestays as yet, but several families will put you up for the night if you ask them. Try the home of Beg Bahadur Gharti Magar (9840601334) in Ward Number 5.

LINK: Trek 15 *If you wish to connect with Round Dhaulagiri 1 trek, there is a direct path to Bagara from the bridge below Arche. Gurja Khani people make the trip to Bagara in one day, but it would be a long day, and we suggest breaking the journey at Arche even though this means one must re-trace 30 minutes the next day.*

Day 5: Arche to Sibang	5-6 hrs
Arche to Mudi 1700m	2-3 hrs
Mudi to Sibang 1700m	2-3 hrs

One hour beyond Arche, **Nerbang** is a spread-out village in which it is easy to lose the main trail. Keep asking anyone you meet for the way to **Mudi** (pronounced Muri). After a further hour the trail drops down to cross a side tributary and climbs again on the other side. The trail splits into two but both routes will arrive at Mudi in 2-3 hours. Mudi (1700m) is a large typically dense-packed Magar village. At this point you are back *on*-the-beaten track followed by agency camping groups doing the Dhaulagiri/French Pass route walk through Mudi. From the village one can look up the Myagdi khola gorge which they follow.

From Mudi, the trail veers west to cross the Dar river. It then climbs up through fields and a lower settlement of **Phalyagaon** village to arrive at **Sibang** in 2-3 hours. At both villages there are local lodges and you have the option to catch one of the irregular buses to **Darbang** (Warning: rough road, in places precipitous and landslide-prone).

Day 6: Sibang to Darbang (1000m)

From here on you are back on the main trail of Route One but travelling in the reverse direction. See Route 1/Day 1 for details.