

TREK 7: Baglung to Gurja Himal

Grade: Moderate (1 steep pass)

Days: 6-7

Permits: Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (purchase on entry)

Highest point: Rugachaur Pass 3850 m

Map: Gurja Himal & Hidden Village

Cautions: Snow possible Dec-Jan. Local guide essential for Rugachaur Pass

Overview

This is a trek through the highlands of Baglung District, to Dhorpatan and Hidden Village, for those with a strong off-the-beaten itch. There are some teashop lodges, and 2-3 homestays, but if you fail to find these, accommodation will be of the “knock on someone’s door” variety. You are highly unlikely to meet any other tourists, and you will be in the peak of fitness by the time you reach Gurja Khani village. The return route follows Trek 1 in reverse.

To start: Baglung is a moderate sized town which has grown enormously in recent years. But nothing can destroy its dramatic setting on the clifftop of a raised river terrace above the Kali Gandaki, with the majestic south face of Dhaulagiri framed by the valley walls.

Lodging: Baglung offers many hotels, the best is Peace Palace Hotel with hot showers, Wi-Fi, and a garden.

Day 1: Baglung to Okhle 6-7 hrs See Day 1/Trek 4

Day 2: Okhle to Tarakhola gaon or Phedi 6-7 hours

Ask locals to direct you to the footpath which heads up NW to Kanchi Deorali and Sirkhu. The path climbs through scrub and fields, to **Bahun Karka**. Just beyond the white

Cannabis sativa

At some point on this trek you will certainly spot *cannabis sativa* growing – it is called ‘weed’ for a reason!

The plant is endemic in Baglung district and a local mountain carries its name - *Ganja Duri*. It is traditionally grown for making hemp twine from its stems, and chutney from its seeds. The grains are widely available in Baglung stores, and you are very likely to be served some of the famous chutney at one of the teashops or homestays.

The same plant provides the narcotic in *marijuana*, locally known as *ganja*, *charesh* or *bhang*. For centuries it has been grown and used – though rarely abused - without controversy. Then the hippie culture reached Nepal, and in 1976, with pressure from the U.S. government, the growing of cannabis was declared illegal. This is still the case today, and from time to time police raid and burn the crops of mountain villages.

tapstand take a footpath which forks right and leads up through oak/rhododendron forest to **Kanchi Deorali** (2400 m) – a minor pass marked with a stone chautara, reached in 1 hour from Okhle. Snow peaks are visible from here. The path meanders up and down for a further 30 minutes

to the pass of **Nila Jotin Dara** (2530 m) and then descends gently through the forest clad with ferns and orchids. As you descend make sure you keep on the right side of the valley. After crossing a side-stream emerging from a narrow cleft the path emerges into a meadow with the village of **Sirkhu** visible below. The upper houses of the village are reached in just over 1 hour from the last pass. There is a single teashop here but not much else except acres of *cannabis sativa*!

This section takes around 2 hours. From Sirkhu the footpath sometimes merges with the jeep track and sometimes takes a short cut. Halfway down a spur of land is the village of **Kaldara**. Keep your eyes skinned for the short-cut trails which leads to a small suspension bridge, but do not worry if you miss them since the jeep track also leads to the bridge. After the bridge keep on the jeep track which follows the right bank of the Halpu Khola, past **Halpu** village. Shortly after a micro hydro plant on the left bank, the track splits. Take the upper right fork to the hamlet of **Waba** and shortly afterwards follow the path which cuts over the ridge to the village of **Bhat Khane Dara** (Tr: *Eating Rice Ridge*) with – guess what – teashops serving dal-bhat!

The track descends and follows the Tara Khola river

Baglung bridges

Foot bridges made of chain links slung between stone cairns on the river banks are an indigenous design developed by the *Dalit* metal-workers (Kami) of Baglung district. Later, the design spread to other parts of Nepal as engineers recognized its simplicity and strength.

People could construct these bridges from locally available materials – stone and iron bars. No imported cement or steel cables were needed. Local blacksmiths forged long chains of heavy-duty iron links from iron bars and these functioned as the hanging structural element. Dry stone masonry was used for chain anchorages as well as the suspension ‘towers’. A few iron-link bridges still exist on this route, notably at Karmila, and at Sioul Khola near Bonga Dobhan. Even where they have been replaced by steel cables, the structural design is based upon the original.

upstream on the left bank (i.e. the right bank as you face upstream!). This valley has changed little over the past 20 years, and you will see many traditional Magar villages clinging to the steep sides of this deep valley. If you fancy a detour, cross the river to the compact Magar village of **Hila** where there are teashops. Otherwise, remain on the left bank and in about an hour you reach the village of **Tarakhola gaon** which has some 3 storey ‘town’ style houses and a teashop lodge [Caution: Locals are careless and imprecise with names, and they may well refer to Hila and other villages in the Tara Khola valley as Tarakhola gaon].

Continue on the track upriver, and after 15 minutes cross a tributary on an iron-link bridge. Continuing upstream is a pretty stretch of the river like a Chinese painting with high cliffs, waterfalls, sprays of pink flowers in the banks, and twisted trees dangling long catkins and vines. Each bend reveals a new vista. Pass through the villages of **Dogadi and Chhedi** to **Karmila** where there is a local hotel.

If you have time and energy there is a more congenial homestay accommodation further on. Cross the Tara Khola

to the right bank and continue upstream to **Dhapling**. Cross the river again, and continue up-river through the hamlets of **Machar, Barthan, and Khorekarka**, finally reaching **Phedi** at the confluence of two tributaries in 2.5 hours from Bhat Khane Dara. The homestay (Ph 9867641878) is at **Sipa**, a little above Phedi (follow the western tributary for a few minutes), in the home of Keshab Gharti Magar and his delightful family. If you have a spare day, Keshab will be happy to guide you to the top of the local mountain (Dadhe Lekh 3500m) from where there is a phenomenal panoramic view of the Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges.

Day 3: Phedi to Rum (1900m) 4 hours

During our research we explored a route which would lead directly into the Taman Khola valley, but after various insanely steep and slippery goat-paths on the octopussy ridges of Dadhe Lekh, we admitted defeat. So until some pioneer trekker discovers a direct route (could this be you?), it is necessary to divert into the Myagdi Khola watershed, losing much of the height you have gained, crossing back into the Baglung watershed via the relatively 'easy' pass of Sole Lek (2,600 m) to enter the Taman Khola valley. This is why you will be fit by the end of this trek!

From Phedi, follow the well-beaten path much-used by locals over Dansi Lek pass (2,800 m) – panoramic views of the Dhaulagiris and Annapurnas - descending to the interesting Magar village of **Rum**, where there is a teashop and embryonic homestays.

Day 4: Rum to Bonga Dobhan 6-7 hrs

Rum to Sole Lekh 2600m	3 hrs
Sole Lekh to Taman 2000m	2 hrs
Taman to Bong Dobhan 1500m	1.30 hrs

Ask villagers to direct you onto the footpath which leads to a long ridge and the main trail to Sole Lek from Darbang. The hamlets of Galkot, Kiteni and Pakhapani are strung along the ridge. Although there are no teashops, inhabitants may be willing to cook food for you if they are not too busy. **Sole Lekh pass** is reached in around 3 hours.

A jeep track descends to the left of a derelict stone *dharmashala* shelter and *chautara*. Follow this, and further down, take a footpath which diverges on the left. It leads to a frame bridge over the Taman Khola. Rejoining the track on the right bank, descend through the Magar village of Lammela. High-altitude herding is the main occupation here and you will see Magar herders wearing homespun wool jackets. The trail continues to descend reaching the slate roofs of **Taman** nearly 2 hours below the pass. There are two teashop lodges. Taman village contains many abandoned houses; people left as life was difficult as many found life too difficult in this remote valley, especially during the Maoist insurgency.

Continue downstream on the Taman khola, it crosses to and fro between the right and left banks. Where the gradient flattens out, cross the tributary Khum Khani Khola - another example of the iron-link sling bridge - and continue till you arrive at another tributary, the Bonga Khani Khola. Across the bridge lies the small bazaar town of **Bonga Dobhan**. There are several teashop lodges here run by Thakhali families offering food and lodging. Thakhali lodges are renowned in Nepal for their spotlessness and delicious food.

Day 5: Bong Dobhan to Gurjaghat 8hrs

Bong Dobhan to Lamachaur	2.45 hrs
Lamachaur to Gurjaghat Pass (3300m)	4 hrs
Pass to Gurjaghat (3000m)	1 hr

This is a long day with a considerable climb of nearly 2000m: leave early and carry snacks. At the northern end of Bong Dobhan, cross the river and follow the path upstream past a Police Check Post. Higher upstream the path crosses the river several times, arriving at **Bong Khani**, an attractive Dalit village, in about 1:45 hours. It may be possible to get food and lodging here, if necessary. Higher up the right (west) bank the hamlet of **Lamachaur** is reached in a further hour. There is a Chantyal family who offer homestay and will prepare food if they are at home when you arrive.

Above Lamachaur the river splits into two. Cross the left tributary on a suspension bridge. From here the real climb begins up the ridge between the two tributaries. The path is easy to follow, zigzagging through light forest, eventually it emerges above the tree line, and the pass is reached in about 3-4 hours. From the pass there are good views of Churen and Gurja Himal. This is a major watershed divide between 2 big river systems of Nepal, the Kali Gandaki, and the Karnali.

The path descends into the wide gentle valley of the upper Uttar Ganga river, commonly called the Dhorpatan valley. There are hundreds of springs and streams so it is inevitable that you will get your feet wet. Locals have constructed log-pontoons to avoid the worst of the swamp. In the monsoon, hundreds of families bring their herds up here and live in temporary dwellings, descending in early October for the big Dashain festival. This means that if you visit after this date, the place may be deserted. The temporary settlement of **Gurja Ghat** lies where the side valley you are in joins the main (west-flowing) Uttar Ganga river. Cross the latter river to its right (north) bank on a small wooden bridge, and follow a path downstream on the right bank. Just before the signboard for Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve there is a homestay/lodge run by a friendly Chantyal couple (Lokendra Chantyal Ph. 9867633453). Their food is good, and their toilet spotless. They offer a private room with 3 beds, and further beds in the kitchen which usually has a fire burning in its hearth. Nights are cold at this altitude and frost is likely in the morning.

Option: rest day in Dhorpatan valley. By now you are probably ready for a rest day, and this is a good place to take one and explore the beautiful alpine-style Dhorpatan Valley, with a Bonpo monastery and Tibetan Medicine school at Chentung, 2 hours gentle walk downstream from Gurjaghat.

Day 6: Gurja Ghat to Gurja Khani 7-8 hours

Gurjaghat to Rugachaur Pass. 3850m	4.30 hrs
R/Pass to Gurja Khani. 2700m	3.30 hrs

The day's trail is identical to Trek 2/Day 4 in reverse. A local guide is essential for the section from Rugachaur Pass to Gurja Khani, and Lokendra at the lodge will organize one for you if you give him time. If no-one is available, it may be possible for a guide from Gurja Khani to meet you at Rugachaur Pass to guide you on the crucial descent.

Suggestion: rest day in Gurja Khani. Hidden Village is another good option for a rest day, with the enticement of hot showers, and activities such as a day-hike to the foot of Gurja Himal.

Days 7-9: Return to Pokhara. Allow 3 days for a leisurely staying in Lulang, and Phalegau, route described in Trek 1. 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 and very good walkers, it is possible to reach Phalyagaon (Muna) on Day 7, from where a bus departs for at 7.30 the next morning (expect a rough ride!) For alternative return routes, see Trek 3.