

Foreword

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Doug Scott is the founder and operations director of Community Action Nepal (www.canepal.org.uk), through which he pays back all of those people who helped him on 40 expeditions to the Himalaya. Doug and the late Dougal Haston made the first ascent of the southwest face of Everest and became the first Britons to reach the summit.

There is nothing so good as to get into that routine of exercise and rest, day after day, walking through the Nepal Himalaya. After five days, body and mind become completely adjusted, so that it seems this is all one ever did or needs to do. This is most likely to happen if the walk is a moving meditation with attention put on every step, being right there in the moment, until you stop to rest and lose yourself in wonder at the magnificent setting, taken out of yourself in that powerful landscape where for centuries holy men and pilgrims have lost and found themselves leaving, it is said, their good energy permeating the land itself.

The villagers of the Himalaya help reveal to us all that remains hidden during our everyday existence. To climb high we must attain a 'sherpa' physiology by allowing our bodies to adjust to the lack of oxygen. It's also wise to acquire a sherpa psychology, putting the emphasis more on co-operation than competition. It is salutary to find yourself among people who are at peace with themselves, who don't want to be anything they are not. As much as the mountains, it is the inhabitants of the Himalaya who lure us back time after time.

Trekking, as it is now called, started in 1963. The Himalayan climber and diplomat, Lt Col Jimmy Roberts, first considered that the pleasures of trekking could be enjoyed not only by mountaineers but also by a wider public. He was prescient, as the number of trekkers increased dramatically. If there are trekkers who are embarrassed that so much is done for them – bags carried, tent erected, food prepared in all kinds of weather – Roberts is to blame for applying the same high standards of service as were operating in the British Army in India. Roberts never took the hard-working porters for granted, becoming a well-loved expat.

The same could be said of another ex-British officer, Mike Cheney, who took a special interest in the plight of the porters and made sure the trekking industry in Nepal was more inclusive by involving Tamangs and other ethnic groups. Jimmy set the standards of service on a trek, and Mike set high standards of employment in the trekking industry. Not only is it the right thing to look after workers in the trekking industry, and to look after the environment, but it also makes economic sense, with many tourists alerted and eager to travel with companies operating and monitoring such policies.

Whichever company you travel with or whether you go as an independent trekker, your experience in Nepal will surely change your life. I have known many trekkers on a week-long trek who have been astonished to go to one of the poorest countries in the world, with very few of the facilities and amenities we all take for granted, and experience the tremendous hospitality, care and concern of the local people for complete strangers. It really does make us wonder who has got it right.

Trek Descriptions

In this book Nepal's main treks are described in detail, along with numerous suggestions for side trips, short cuts and extensions. The Table of Treks on p12 outlines the major factors you might consider as you choose a trek: length, difficulty, elevation and season.

Most chapters or regional sections have a brief overview of the trekking options possible in that region. The introductory trek descriptions also include information to help you plan your trek, including transport options and permit requirements.

ROUTE DESCRIPTIONS

Each trek account includes a general explanation of the lie of the land, but these are not self-guiding trail descriptions. If you are not travelling with a Nepali guide, you will sometimes need to ask about the correct path. Read the Route-Finding boxed text, p353, for the best ways to find the correct trail.

The terms 'true left' or 'true right' are used in this book to describe the banks of a stream or river. The 'true left' bank simply means the left bank as you look downstream. Remember that when following a river uphill the 'true left' side of the river will therefore be on your right.

The route descriptions are separated into daily stages, thus giving an overview of the number of days required for each trek. Your actual stopping place will depend on your fitness, health, the weather, trail conditions, arrangements with the porters and personal preference. Any moderately fit trekker can accomplish the suggested daily stages in one day.

At high altitudes, in order to avoid altitude sickness, you should proceed no faster than the ascent times recommended in the trek descriptions, even if that means ending the day's walk before lunch.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Each trek is rated according to difficulty in the Facts Box preceding each trek description. Our authors have used the following guidelines:

Easy – Shorter walks following well-travelled trails through villages with facilities for trekkers.

Most days of walking are less than six hours and ascend less than 500m.

Medium – Involves some steep climbs and perhaps exposed cliffs and bridges of dubious design. There are places to camp, and usually lodges, at all night stops. Some days may require as much as nine hours of walking.

Hard – May require basic mountaineering skills and route-finding ability. There may be long days without lodges or camping places.

The classification of many treks falls between these categories. Most treks graded as 'medium-hard' are in remote areas where you must camp.

TIMES & DISTANCES

The route descriptions list approximate walking times for each day, with cumulative walking times for the day placed in brackets at key points through the text, eg '(90 minutes)'. You can reckon that most walkers travel at about 4km/h in good weather, with an extra hour for every ascent of 300m to 500m. Times are based on actual walking time and do not include time for snacks, photography or side trips.

To help you plan a trek that offers alternative night stops, we've included a table with detailed walking times for each major trek in the

TREKKING TIMES

Some readers will trek slower than the timings in this book, others will trek faster. The walking times in this book are for a fairly fit male in his late 30s, carrying a medium-sized backpack. If you are 23 you will walk faster; if you have a heavy pack and it's snowing you will walk slower. Nobody gets a prize for trekking faster than our timings.

Everest Region, Annapurna Region and Langtang & Helambu chapters. After a day or so of walking you can figure out how to relate these times to your own pace and can then predict your own times between important landmarks fairly accurately.

It is notoriously difficult to determine distance in Nepal. It may seem simple to judge distances from a map, but with the many gains and losses of altitude – and all the turns and twists of the trail – a map measurement of the routes becomes virtually meaningless. Until someone pushes a bicycle-wheel odometer over every trail in Nepal we'll just have to be satisfied with the estimate that most of the days listed in this guide are 10km to 20km of trekking, depending on the altitude and steepness of the terrain.

MAPS IN THIS BOOK

The maps in this book are based on the best available maps of each region combined with differentially corrected GPS data. They are quite accurate, but not perfect. The maps do not show elevations of villages; these are given in the route descriptions.

The routes of the treks are shown by a wide coloured line, while a coloured dashed line indicates an alternative route. Suggested side trips are marked with thick coloured dots. Maps for the most popular treks have contour lines, shown at intervals of 200m. The other maps depict only ridge lines.

The maps show mountain peaks in their true position, but the position of villages may not always be precise. Besi Sahar, for example, spreads 3km from end to end. And what is the correct elevation for Bung, which extends almost 500 vertical metres up a hillside? Trails and roads follow the general direction indicated on the maps, but maps of this size cannot show all of the switchbacks and twists in the trail.

ALTITUDE MEASUREMENTS

The elevations given in the trek descriptions are composites based on our measurements with an altimeter or GPS unit and the best available maps. They should be accurate within a margin of 50m. The main reason you need to know the elevation is to help judge acclimatisation and to learn whether the trail ahead goes uphill or downhill and whether the ascent (or descent) is a long or short one.

TREK PROFILES

These profiles indicate the altitude changes for the treks. The unit of scale on the horizontal axis is hours of trekking, hence each profile only gives a rough indication of the steepness of the trail and the duration of the trek. Major high and low points are marked for each day, but some of the smaller ascents and descents are not shown. The vertical scale is the same on each chart, so it's easy to compare treks. The profiles all look rather like saw teeth because most treks in Nepal go from ridge top to river valley and back to ridge top.

Planning

A trekking trip to Nepal involves slightly more preparation than your average trip abroad. The high mountains are not a place to visit casually. You don't want to find yourself a week away from Kathmandu, ill-equipped, exhausted and unable to cope with the thought of walking all the way back.

Start early. International flight bookings and inoculations need attention several months before departure, especially if you're flying in the peak months of October and November. Start getting into physical shape a couple of months before your trek. Arranging your equipment will also take some time, especially if you are on a DIY camping trek. See p405 for a run-down of suggested gear, and p387 for your medical kit. Insurance and money also need some forethought.

Still, a trekking trip in Nepal is pretty easy and inexpensive compared with most other countries. You can get a visa at the airport, buy your maps in Kathmandu, jump on a bus and start on a teahouse trek within a few hours of leaving the city.

WHEN TO TREK

The trick to choosing when to start a trek is striking a balance between the period of best weather for the area you wish to trek and the crowds that this good weather attracts.

The most popular trekking season is October to May, with October and November recognised as having the best weather for trekking. This is also the high tourist season. During this time flights and hotels are tightly booked, and trails on the most popular treks can be uncomfortably busy.

During this autumn high season the nights are cold in the mountains, but the bright sun makes for pleasant daytime temperatures. At higher altitudes temperatures range from about 20°C down to perhaps -10°C at night. Mornings are usually clear, then clouds build up during the afternoon, disappearing at night to reveal spectacular starry skies. During winter (December to February) it is about 10°C colder.

Early December sees a lull in tourist arrivals, but the skies are usually clear and this is a good time for trekking. The Christmas period is cold, but this is the holiday season, and Japanese and Australians arrive in droves and fill up flights and hotels through to the middle of January. High passes, especially the Thorung La on the Annapurna Circuit trek, Ganja La in Langtang and Laurebina La on the Gosainkund trek, are

For climate charts, see p352.

MURPHY'S LAW

Nepal is an unpredictable place and you should bear this in mind when planning your trekking itinerary. Sudden strikes can paralyse public transport for a day or two, and fuel shortages, bad weather or mechanical problems can ground flights for days or even weeks. A sore tendon or a bad stomach can lay you low for a day and a snowstorm can easily delay a pass crossing. You may just stumble upon that fantastic once-in-a-decade festival or hear about some newly opened side trip you'd like to explore. The bottom line: figure at least one extra day into your itinerary for mess-ups, as well as at least one day 'off' during your trek, and budget a buffer of at least two or three sightseeing days in Kathmandu at the end of your trek before flying out of the country.

OFF THE BEATEN TREK

With 100,000 trekkers hitting the trails every year in Nepal, many regions, notably Everest and the Annapurnas, can get seriously congested. In late October and early November up to 50 flights a day can arrive at Lukla airport and tailbacks of yaks, porters and trekking groups can cause hour-long queues at the bottleneck bridge leading up to Namche Bazaar. To many trekkers it's counterproductive to leave the congestion of home only to battle the crowds in Khumbu and Manang during October, November and April.

However, it's surprisingly easy to beat the crowds. By choosing an unusual destination or just an alternative side route during the high season, or by going to popular places in the shoulder or low season, you can still recapture some of the spirit of unhurried life in the hills that so entranced early trekkers to Nepal.

Even on the main trails you can minimise crowds by throwing in one short or long day and then staying in smaller villages and lodges away from the most popular overnight stops. Hotels at traditional night-stops can be empty at lunchtime and the hotels where most trekkers eat lunch are often deserted in the evening. The table of trekking times preceding the main treks gives you an overview of distances between accommodation, allowing you to build your own itineraries (the exception to this is at high altitude, when we recommend you follow our stages for acclimatisation). By staying at smaller places, you will also be helping to provide much-needed income to lodges that don't get many overnight guests.

usually closed from mid-December to late February, as are treks to the remote regions of Dolpo, Mustang and Humla. Some high-altitude lodges, particularly at Gorak Shep, the Annapurna Sanctuary and Gosainkund, close in December and February, as well as during the monsoon (June to September), although there is almost always something open. February is still cold, although less so as the spring (March to April) trekking season approaches.

Because most of the precipitation in the Himalaya occurs during the summer monsoon, there is actually less snow on mountains and many high trails during winter. Everest itself is a mass of black rock during the trekking season, becoming snow-covered only during summer. There are always exceptions to this weather pattern, so be prepared for extremes. Winter snowstorms in December and January may make an early-spring pass crossing difficult and can often present an avalanche danger, especially on the approach to the Annapurna Sanctuary.

There are three excellent times to trek when you will often have camp sites or lodges to yourself and can usually rely on good weather. These little-known trekking seasons are the first two weeks of December, the entire month of February, and the second half of September.

The Middle Hills, especially around Pokhara, are dusty and hazy in April and May, but the high country is usually clear, making March and April the second-most popular time to trek. Mustard fields colour the farmlands with bright yellow flowers in February and spectacular spring blooms arrive in March and April, when rhododendron forests across the country paint entire hillsides in shades from pink to crimson.

Trekking tapers off in the heat of May, except at high elevations in the rain-shadow regions of upper Dolpo and Mustang. The monsoon season from June to September is a good time to visit Kathmandu, but there are few trekkers around. A monsoon trek can be a good experience if you are willing to put up with the rain, leeches and slippery trails (see the boxed text, opposite).

It makes sense to try to time your trek with one of Nepal's colourful festivals. Tihar, Holi and the Bisket Jatra festival in Bhaktapur coincide

TREKKING IN THE MONSOON

A monsoon trek (June to September) can be rewarding if you're willing to put up with a few discomforts. The monsoon is not a continual downpour. Most of the rain falls after sunset, which makes living in a tent fairly miserable, so unless you're trekking in the Himalayan rain shadow, do yourself a favour and stay in lodges. The lowlands will be uncomfortably hot and humid and you'll have to put up with muddy and wet shoes, and leeches above 1500m (see p354 for more on leeches). Seasonal bridges will have been washed away and you may have trouble crossing unbridged streams. Allow a few extra days in case of severe flooding, landslides, washed-out roads or torrential rain.

On the plus side, there are often long periods during the day without rain, and the sun filtering through the clouds gives a striking Gauguin-esque effect to the lush green of the rice terraces and surrounding valleys. You probably won't see much of the mountains, but if they do appear they will be magical, with clouds surrounding peaks draped in snow. Waterfalls are at their most impressive and cascades tumble from every hillside.

Most noticeable of course is the lack of other trekkers. You'll have your choice of lodges and prices will be lower, though menus may be limited (few hotels bake apple pie in the monsoon season). Flights operate to Lukla, Jomsom, Jumla, Simikot and other hill airstrips during the monsoon, although they are less reliable than in the normal trekking season.

Treks in the Himalayan rain shadow to places like upper Manang, Mustang, Nar-Phu, upper Dolpo and Humla are all good summer options. The snowline is very high in these high-altitude valleys and you'll be able to camp near meadows at 5000m in a panorama of alpine flowers.

with the popular trekking seasons. See p356 for a run-down of festivals and for details of trekking during the Dasain festival. Regionally specific festivals like Tiji in Mustang or Tengboche monastery's Mani Rimdu festival are superbly colourful events but they are very popular with groups so you can expect local lodges and camp sites to be overflowing during these times.

WHAT KIND OF TREK?

A trek in Nepal can be as short as three days, though the average trek in this book is about two weeks, and a long trek may be 30 days or more. Since a trek involves walking for many days, you'll need food and accommodation along the way. You can either rely on local facilities, or you can travel with an entourage that carries all of its food and tents with it.

DON'T HIT THE TRAIL WITHOUT...

- water purification, preferably liquid iodine (see p396 and p360)
- broken-in boots (p406)
- sunhat, sun cream, lip balm and sunglasses
- a good medical kit (see p387) and blister padding and tape, the latter to be carried on your person at all times, alongside an emergency supply of toilet paper
- a good briefing on altitude sickness and an emergency supply of Diamox (see p391)
- a good paperback (see p28), useful for passing those long evenings in lodges or tents
- a fist full of permits, including a TIMS card (p369) and either an ACAP permit, national park ticket or restricted-area permit (p370)
- spending at least one day on a trail or a night in a tent with your potential trekking partner, to experience the full range of snoring, farting, unusual smells and bad jokes that you may have to face on the trail

HOW MANY DAYS?

As you plan your trip, consider the reply one trekker made when asked, 'I've heard it's possible to do the Annapurna Circuit in 14 days.' He replied: 'It's possible to do it in 40 days, my friend.'

Take your time, grasshopper, and enjoy the people, scenery and villages.

The nature of your trek will depend partly on where you trek. If you stick to established paths in the Everest, Annapurna and Langtang regions, you can rely on frequent lodges to provide food and accommodation, which makes everything a lot simpler. You don't need to carry a tent, stove, food and camping paraphernalia.

You will still have to carry a certain amount of gear (warm clothes, camera, medical kit, chocolate supply) and you can either haul that around yourself or employ a porter to help you carry it, freeing you up to take photos and simply enjoy the trails. The freedom of carrying your own pack may appeal, but remember that that pack will weigh a lot more at 4500m than it does in your living room. For US\$10 a day, most people find it's worthwhile hiring a porter, though there are currently no requirements to do so.

Your next decision is whether to take a guide. The trails on the main teahouse trekking routes are not difficult to follow, with trekkers, villagers and porters at every turn, so you don't necessarily need a guide for route-finding, rather for helping with the logistics of travel and offering a Nepali perspective. When it comes to hiring a guide or porter you can try to find one yourself or arrange one through one of Nepal's many trekking agencies. For more on the issues related to hiring guides and porters, see p361.

Off the main trails there is often a network of often crowded and dirty *bhattis* (local-style inns), which cater mostly to porters. A few experienced trekkers travel with just a sleeping bag and sleep and eat dal bhat in these local *bhattis*, but life can be pretty uncomfortable at times and you'll need good language skills to pull this off. It's far more common for foreigners to travel through these areas with a contingent of guide and porters.

In more remote areas you can't rely on finding any accommodation so you'll need to arrange a full camping trek. You can arrange this independently, hiring a couple of porters and maybe a cook but providing your own tents and food, or you can let a trekking agency arrange the whole thing, from porters to a dining tent.

There are few wilderness areas in Nepal and people live in even the most remote trekking areas, so the classic self-contained trekking style of carrying all your own gear, a stove, freeze-dried food and a tent doesn't make much sense here.

Unless you are an experienced trekker and are heading on a popular teahouse trek, you should not trek alone. It's invaluable to have someone around in the event that you injure yourself, fall ill, get altitude sickness or simply need someone to watch your pack while you use the bathroom. Almost all deaths, disappearances and incidents of violent crime in Nepal have involved trekkers travelling alone. If you do not already have a travelling companion, then you should find one in Kathmandu, either a guide or another trekker, or consider joining an organised group.

Lodge/Teahouse Treks

The easiest way to trek in Nepal is to rely on local trekking lodges for your accommodation and meals. There are good lodges every couple

of hours on treks in the Annapurna, Langtang and Khumbu (Everest) regions, so you can operate with a bare minimum of equipment and rely on local facilities for food and shelter. See p348 for more on what to expect in a lodge.

By arranging your accommodation and food locally, you can move at your own pace, set your own schedule and take impromptu side trips or days off that are not possible with an organised group. You also know that your money is going directly to local lodge owners rather than to a wealthy Kathmandu-based trekking agency. You will have a good opportunity to see how the people in the hills of Nepal live, work and eat and you may develop at least a rudimentary knowledge of the Nepali language.

On the down side, because you are relying on finding food and accommodation every day, you are limited to the better-known routes and will be trekking in the company of other tourists. Much of your cultural interaction will be with foreign trekkers rather than Nepalis. Unfortunately, most lodge owners are too busy being short-order cooks to allow them much opportunity to talk to trekkers.

Still, teahouse trekking in Nepal is a luxury that few other places in the world can match. It's an unrivalled way to trek in freedom and comfort right into the heart of the mountains.

Camping Treks

If you intend to trek off the beaten track, it's better (and, in some places, required by government regulations) to trek with a full complement of tents, porters and camp staff. Nepal's porters, sherpas and guides rank as the best in the world and are the envy of trekkers in nearby Tibet and China.

A group camping trek follows a tradition and a routine that trekkers and mountaineers have developed and refined for more than 50 years. If your interest in the Himalaya was kindled through reading such books as Hunt's *The Ascent of Everest*, Herzog's *Annapurna* and Ullman's *Americans on Everest*, you still have the opportunity to experience this delightful way to travel. See the boxed text, below, for a run-down of a typical day on a camping trek.

If you want to organise your own private camping trek, you would do best to contact a Nepal trekking company (or an adventure travel

A DAY ON AN ORGANISED CAMPING TREK

On a camping trek, the day generally begins at 6am with a cup of hot tea in bed. While you eat your breakfast of porridge and eggs or pancakes, the sherpas take down the tents and pack up loads for the porters. The entire group is usually on its way by 8am to take advantage of the cool morning air.

Even on a group trek, many trekkers find an opportunity to hike alone for much of the day. The porters are slower and the sherpas, especially the cook crew, race on ahead to have lunch waiting for around 11am.

The afternoon walk is shorter, ending at about 3pm, when you round a bend to (hopefully) discover your tents already set up in a field near a village. The kitchen crew again prepares tea and coffee and there is then an hour or two to nurse blisters, read, unpack and sort gear, wash or explore the surrounding area before dinner.

The sun sets early during the autumn trekking season, and it is dark and cold by 6pm. There is time to read by candlelight in the tents or to sit around talking in the dark. To conserve firewood there is never a campfire. Most trekkers are asleep by 8pm or 9pm, after tossing and turning on their blow-up mattresses.

company in your own country) well in advance so the arrangements are complete when you arrive in Nepal. It takes a day or more to organise the gear and logistics for a camping trip, longer for a remote trek that involves flight bookings, permits and logistical issues such as pre-arranging supplies of kerosene and yaks. If you have not organised the trek in advance, you should be prepared to spend up to a week choosing a company, settling the details, waiting for permits and meeting your trekking crew.

It's possible to travel light in a small group of two or three but you'll still need a minimum number of crew. You'll likely need a porter to carry some of your gear, and that porter will also need to carry his own gear and tent, so you'll need another porter to help him carry that, as well as his gear and probably a stove for them. Two trekkers can get away with two porters and a cook-porter but it's harder to travel any lighter than that.

Your staff will carry a kerosene stove, kitchen gear and a certain amount of dried foods, restocking with rice and fresh vegetables in local villages as you go. Because you'll carry tents and a stove for the crew, you do not have to camp near villages, and can trek comfortably to remote regions and high altitudes, enjoying the solitude of remote valleys and your own private Himalayan views.

On the flip side, because itineraries and camping spots are quite standardised on many treks, you may find yourself sharing sites with other camping groups and even in competition with other groups to get to the best sites first. Just because you are on a camping trek or in a restricted area, don't think that you'll necessarily have the place to yourself.

There's little point camping on a teahouse trek, unless you are exploring side valleys or have a large group in high season, when finding enough rooms in a lodge can be a problem.

ORGANISED TREKS

When Jimmy Roberts organised the first trek in Nepal, independent trekking was a logistical nightmare – no lodges, email, fax or direct-dial telephones. Most trekkers, therefore, joined group camping treks organised by adventure travel companies abroad, a tradition that continues today. It's also possible to arrange an organised trek directly with a company once you arrive in Kathmandu or Pokhara. The group size may be as large as 20 or as small as one.

An organised trek is normally under the control of a *sirdar* (trail boss), who is responsible for arranging accommodation, whether it is a lodge or camping area, and ensuring a full complement of porters every day. If there are fewer than three trekkers, the *sirdar* will also serve as guide; with a larger group there may be several guides. On a camping trek, the trekking crew will also include a cook and kitchen staff.

Types of Organised Treks

A number of adventure travel companies offer escorted lodge treks, which they often call 'teahouse treks'. Porters carry your gear, and a guide travels with the group during the day and handles all of the arrangements for meals and dealings with bureaucracy. You'll generally pay a per-day inclusive fee that includes food and accommodation (but not beer), but this is open to negotiation. This arrangement works best with single trekkers or groups of less than five.

Most group camping treks are organised in advance by adventure travel companies abroad. A few Nepali companies do offer treks with fixed departure dates and these are advertised on bulletin boards in

Thamel and Pokhara. These treks can turn out to be good deals, especially if your time is limited and the trek happens to fit your schedule. If you have little or no experience trekking or travelling in Asia, consider joining one of these trips.

On the Trail with an Organised Trek

If you are on an organised trek, whether it's a lodge or camping trek, the resources of the *sirdar* will include only the food, equipment, money and instructions that the trekking company has provided. No matter how scrupulous the arrangements and how experienced your sherpa staff, there will be some complications. A trek is structured according to a prearranged itinerary and the sherpas expect to arrive at certain points on schedule. If you are sick or slow, and do not tell the sherpas, you may discover that camp and dinner are waiting for you far ahead. Be sure to communicate such problems and other desires to the staff.

Most sherpas are true professionals. They will make a lot of effort to accommodate you if they understand what you want. If you do not wish to follow their daily routine, you must decide this early in the trek. A routine, once established with the sherpas, is difficult to change.

A usual condition of a group trek is that the party must stick to its prearranged route and, within limits, must meet a specific schedule. This means you may have to forgo an appealing side trip or festival and, if you are sick, you will probably have to keep moving with the rest of the group. You also may not agree with a leader's decisions if the schedule has to be adjusted due to weather, health, political or logistical considerations. Personal dynamics can become strained when subjected to the stresses of tiredness, sickness, poor sleep and not washing for days at a time. A group trek offers few opportunities for solitude or personal space. Others of course relish the sociability and security and form lifelong friendships on organised treks.

Foreign Trekking Companies

Most adventure travel companies abroad have a Nepal trekking program. They normally operate group treks, often escorted by a Western (or sometimes Nepali) leader, although many can also organise private trips.

Adventure travel companies mostly cater to people for whom time is more important than money. If you have just three weeks' vacation, an organised trek from abroad will give you the best bang for your time, if not your buck.

One of the advantages of booking a trek abroad is being able to telephone a knowledgeable person locally for advice on equipment, health and travel logistics. The company should also be able to either recommend a group flight or arrange flights, hopefully at a reasonable rate, on seats it has prebooked. In October, early November and late December these may be the only seats available to Nepal. Be aware that various trek organisers provide different equipment and facilities. The best provide kit bags, others require you to bring your own mattress and sleeping bag.

The following list includes the most established companies that specialise in Nepal trekking.

AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

Footprints Tours (☎ 03-548 0145; www.greenkiwi.co.nz)

Peregrine Adventures (☎ 03-8601 4444; www.peregrineadventures.com)

World Expeditions (☎ 02-8270 8400, 1300 720 000; www.worldexpeditions.com.au)

CONTINENTAL EUROPE

Allibert (☎ 08 25 09 01 90; www.allibert-trekking.com) Based in France.

Dav Summit Club (☎ 089-642400; www.dav-summit-club.de) German company.

Diamir (☎ 351-312077; www.diamir.de) German-based.

Explorator (☎ 01 53 45 85 85; www.explo.com) French company.

Hauser Exkursionen (☎ 089-235 0060; www.hauser-exkursionen.de) German-based.

Intertreck (☎ 071-278 6464; www.intertreck.com) Based in Switzerland.

Terres d'Aventure (☎ 08 25 70 08 25; www.terdav.com) French organisation.

Viajes Trekking y Aventura (☎ 91 522 86 81; www.trekkingyaventura.com) Based in Spain.

UK

Community Action Treks (☎ 017687-71890; www.catreks.com)

Exodus Expeditions (☎ 020-8675 5550; www.exodus.co.uk)

Explore Worldwide (☎ 0845-0131539; www.explore.co.uk)

High and Wild (☎ 017496-71777; www.highandwild.co.uk)

High Places (☎ 0845-2577500; www.highplaces.co.uk)

KE Adventure (☎ 017687-73966; www.keadventure.com)

The Mountain Company (☎ 020-7498 0953; www.themountaincompany.co.uk)

Mountain Kingdoms (☎ 014538-44400; www.mountainkingdoms.com)

The Walking and Climbing Company (☎ 01964-551029; www.walkingandclimbing.co.uk)

World Expeditions (☎ 020-8545 9030; www.worldexpeditions.co.uk)

USA & CANADA

Above the Clouds (☎ 802-482 4848; www.aboveclouds.com)

Adventure Center (☎ 800-228 8747; www.adventure-center.com)

Canadian Himalayan Expeditions (☎ 416-360 4300; www.himalayanexpeditions.com)

Geographic Expeditions (☎ 800-777 8183; www.geoex.com)

Hi Himalayas Treks and Tours (☎ 780-989 6025; www.hihimalayas.com) Canada-based.

Ibex Expeditions (☎ 541-345 1289; www.trekibex.com)

iTrek Nepal (☎ 503-636 0998; www.itreknepal.com)

Journeys International (☎ 800-255 8735; www.journeys.travel)

Mountain Travel Sobek (☎ 510-527 8100; www.mtsobek.com)

REI Adventures (☎ 800-622 2236; www.rei.com/travel)

Snow Lion Expeditions (☎ 800-525 8735; www.snowlion.com)

Wilderness Travel (☎ 800-368 2794; www.wildernesstravel.com)

Trekking Companies in Nepal

At last count there were more than 500 trekking companies in Nepal whose business it is to organise treks and provide sherpas, porters and equipment. By shopping around, you can certainly find a company offering a trek for a price and style that matches your budget.

Trekking companies range from large organisations that operate in cooperation with major adventure travel companies to small operations supporting a single family. One measure of protection when choosing a trekking company is to verify whether it is a member of the **Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal** (TAAN; ☎ 01-4443003; www.taam.org.np). Only 190 trekking companies are TAAN members; if you trek with one of these companies and have a problem, TAAN may be able to help you gain redress.

A walk through the bazaars of Kathmandu will uncover many trekking companies that are not on this list or the TAAN membership list. Many of these are reliable and easy to deal with, others will fail to deliver on their promises and swiftly absolve themselves of responsibility in the event that things go wrong.

As you make arrangements for your trek, be specific in your communications and be sure the company understands exactly who will provide

what equipment, what kind of food you expect, whether you need to bring your own sleeping bag etc.

You can get a lot of advice from trekking companies, but remember they are trying to sell their services. You will be more welcome, and get more comprehensive information, if you choose one company, work with it while planning your trek, and then buy your air tickets and rent equipment through it. You'll also have just one point of reference in case you need to cancel or change flight dates or arrange refunds.

The following is an arbitrary list of agencies that have a reliable history. The list includes the biggest and best trekking companies, those that have office staff and can deal with correspondence, as well as a few small ones that have been recommended by readers. A complete list of trekking companies is available from the TAAN website. Unless noted, all of the following are in Kathmandu (☎ 01).

A1 Excursion Tours (☎ 4411448; www.a1excursion.com)
Adventure Mountain Club (☎ 4410856; www.adventuremountainclub.com)
Adventure Treks Nepal (☎ 4266534; www.adventurenepaltreks.com)
Ama Dablam Trekking (☎ 4415372; www.amadablamadventures.com)
Asian Trekking (☎ 4415506; www.astrek.com)
The Blue Space (☎ 9841 659875; www.thebluespace.com)
Crystal Mountain Treks (☎ 4428013; www.crystallmountaintreks.com)
Dharma Adventures (☎ 4430499; www.dharmaadventures.com)
Earthbound Expeditions (☎ 4701051; www.enepaltrekking.com)
Explore Himalaya (☎ 4418100; www.explorehimalaya.com)
Friends in High Places (☎ 5533258; www.fihp.com)
Hard Rock Treks (☎ 4259067; www.hardrocktreks.com)
High Spirit Treks (☎ 4701084; www.allnepaltreks.com)
Himalayan Encounters (☎ 4700426; www.himalayanencounters.com)
International Trekkers (☎ 4371397; www.intrekasia.com)
Journeys International (☎ 4414662; www.journeys-nepal.com)
Langtang Ri Trekking (☎ 4423586; www.langtang.com)
Malla Treks (☎ 4423143; www.mallatreks.com)
Mountain Travel Nepal (☎ 4361500; www.tigermountain.com)
Multi-Adventure (☎ 4257791; www.multiadventure.com)
Nature Trail (☎ 4701925; www.allnepal.com)
Sherpa Shangrila Treks (☎ 4810373; www.trekandclimb.com)
Sherpa Society (☎ 4470361; www.sherpasocietytrekking.com)
Sherpa Trekking Service (☎ 4421551; www.sts.com.np)
Summit Nepal Trekking (☎ 5525408; www.summit-nepal.com)
Sunny Treks & Expedition (☎ 4432190; www.sunnytravel.com.np)
Thamserku Trekking (☎ 4354491; www.thamserkutrekking.com)
Three Sisters Adventure Trekking (☎ 061-462066; www.3sistersadventure.com)
Tin-Tin Trekking (☎ 4248404; www.tintintrekking.com)
Trek Nepal International (☎ 4701001; www.treknepal.com)
Trekking Team (☎ 4227506; www.trekkingteam.com)
Yeti Mountaineering & Trekking (☎ 4425896; www.yetimountaineeringntrek.com)

Western trekking companies based in Nepal include the excellent **Project Himalaya** (www.project-himalaya.com) and **Kamzang Journeys** (www.kamzang.com).

COSTS & MONEY

If you plan to stay in lodges on the main teahouse treks, estimate your daily food and accommodation costs at between US\$10 and US\$18 per day. Food costs rise above 4000m but this is a good average for a trek. An addition to beer, soft drinks and apple pie will increase the cost. Add on around US\$10 per day for a porter and around US\$15 to US\$25 for a guide.

Other costs include permits and entry fees, which range from Rs 2000 (US\$30) for an ACAP permit to US\$500 for a week-long restricted-area

HOW MUCH?

Trekking-lodge
accommodation per
night Rs 100-250

Permit for Mustang or
upper Dolpo US\$500

ACAP permit for the
Annapurna region
Rs 2000

Porter per day Rs 700

Views of Mt Everest
from Kala Pattar free but
priceless

permit in Mustang or upper Dolpo. Flights to destinations in the far east and west can add up to US\$270 each way. A flight to Lukla currently costs around US\$120. If you bring your guide and porter from Kathmandu you'll have to pay for their flight or bus ticket. Nepalis get discounts of up to 60% on domestic flights but bus fares will be comparable to yours.

Local trekking companies charge US\$40 to US\$100 per person per day for a camping trek and US\$30 to US\$50 per day for a lodge trek. Costs depend on the destination, size of the group and the length and style of the trek. If you book a trek from abroad it will cost you anywhere from US\$100 to US\$150 per day, excluding international flights, and possibly more if the trip includes the services of a Western leader.

There are some items that the larger, more reputable local companies include as a matter of course, but which some smaller companies add later as extra fees. Check whether the cost of your trek includes the national park or conservation area fees, porter insurance, transport from Kathmandu to and from the trailhead, sleeping bags, foam pads, tents, a 'fuel surcharge' for the use of kerosene, and advancing money on your behalf for emergency rescue. Be especially careful to ascertain whether Nepal's 13% tax and 10% service charge are included in the quoted cost.

If you are trekking above 3300m, the trekking company should provide warm clothing for the porters. Check to be sure this is included. If you have been quoted a price less than about US\$30 a day, the company probably cannot afford to equip the porters properly.

BACKGROUND READING

Books that specifically relate to individual treks or regions of Nepal are listed in the appropriate chapters. See also the Environment (p31) and Culture (p64) chapters for books on those subjects.

National Geographic magazine (www.nationalgeographic.com) has published some fine articles on Nepal, including on the Sherpas (December 1992 and May 2003), Hillary and Tenzing's ascent of Everest (May 2003), Nepal's Maoists (November 2005), Nepal's women (September 2000), Mustang (November 1997) and upper Dolpo (April 1977).

Lonely Planet's *Nepal* is a guide to the country's lowland sites, from the Terai through to the Himalaya, and includes a special trekking chapter. Lonely Planet's *Nepali Phrasebook* is a valuable introduction to the language.

Nepal Himalaya, by HW Tilman, is a favourite among explorers. It's a delightful book filled with Tilman's dry wit and describes the first treks in Nepal in 1949 and 1950, touching on Langtang, the Annapurna Circuit and the Everest region. The book is available in Kathmandu. Abroad, you might find it as part of the Tilman anthology, *The Seven Mountain-Travel Books*.

Himalayan Pilgrimage, by David Snellgrove, is a timeless account of a Tibetan scholar's epic seven-month-long explorations of the Tibetan Buddhist border areas of Nepal in 1956. It contains still-unmatched detail on every monastery of significance between Dolpo and Manaslu, including the Mustang, Nar-Phu and Manang areas.

The Ascent of Rum Doodle, by WE Bowman, is the classic spoof of mountaineering books, full of deliciously dry English wit. The title refers, of course, to the world's highest mountain, at 40,000½ft, and features a cast of characters that includes Pong, the expedition's disastrous 'Yogistani' cook. It's a good diversion after you've read a few expedition accounts that take themselves too seriously.

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen is, on one level, an account of a trek to Dolpo in the west of Nepal and, on another level, a profound meta-

TOP FIVES

Top Five Coffee-Table Books

- *East of Lo Manthang* by Thomas Laird and Peter Matthiessen
- *Caravans of the Himalaya* by Eric Valli and Diane Summers
- *Himalaya* by Eric Valli and Anne de Sales
- *Along the Kali Gandaki* by Ratan Kumar Rai
- *Homage to the Himalayas and Buddhist Himalayas* by Olivier Follmi

Top Five Everest Books

- *Everest: The Unclimbed Ridge* by Chris Bonington and Charles Clarke – a classic 1980 expedition.
- *High Adventure* by Edmund Hillary – the first ascent.
- *Chomolangma Sings the Blues* by Ed Douglas – addresses the cultural and environmental effects that tourism and climbing have had on the Khumbu.
- *Everest, A Mountaineering History* by Walt Unsworth – definitive and weighty.
- *Everest: The Best Writing and Pictures from Seventy Years of Human Endeavour* by Peter Gillman – a well-illustrated collection of expedition tales and eye-witness accounts.

Top Five Everest Websites

- **Everest News** (www.everestnews.com) Expedition news and a history of the iconic mountain.
- **National Geographic** (www.nationalgeographic.com/everest) Collection of NG articles, photo galleries and interviews on Everest, including an interactive 360-degree photo taken from the summit.
- **Way to Everest** (www.waytoeverest.de) Online Everest version of the *Around Annapurna* book and website (see Internet Resources, p30).
- **The Rest of Everest** (www.therestofeverest.com) Video podcast of a trip around the Himalaya.
- **Mt Everest Net** (www.mounteverest.net) For mountaineering reports and Everest information.

physical discussion on the nature of reality – as much an inner journey as an external trek. It's a trekkers' classic and one of our favourite books.

Into Thin Air, by John Krakauer, is a popular and gripping emotional page-turner that chronicles Everest's disastrous 1996 climbing season. Krakauer's criticisms upset quite a few of the guides involved and has spawned an entire mini-industry of copycat 'I Survived Everest (But Only Just)' books and documentaries.

Annapurna, by Maurice Herzog, is a classic of mountaineering and one of the best-selling mountaineering books of all time, with 11 million copies sold. Herzog tells the tale of the first ever ascent of an 8000m peak and the harrowing descent that cost the fingers, toes and lives of several of the team. For a different version of what happened on that climb, read *True Summit: What Really Happened on the Legendary Ascent on Annapurna* by David Roberts, which strives to set straight Herzog's controversially one-sided expedition record.

Fallen Giants, by Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver, is a grand history of Himalayan mountaineering, 'from the Age of Empire to the Age of Extremes'.

Buying Books

You can buy many of these books, and others not available in the West, in Kathmandu. Speciality mountaineering bookshops also have an

extensive stock of books on Nepal. In the US, contact **Chessler Books** (www.chesslerbooks.com), and in the UK try **Cordee** (www.cordee.co.uk) or **Stanfords** (www.stanfords.co.uk).

Kathmandu has some of the best bookshops in Asia, with a large variety of books about Nepal and Tibet. **Pilgrims Book House** (Map p80; www.pilgrimsbooks.com) and **Vajra Books** (Map p80; www.vajrabooks.com.np) both offer a mail-order service. Pilgrims has a rare-book room with out-of-print books about the Himalaya as well as an online bookstore (www.pilgrims.onlineshop.com).

INTERNET RESOURCES

Annapurna Base Camp (www.4dgraphics.net/abc) Personal website, with interactive maps, photos and trail descriptions from the ABC Trek.

Around Annapurna (www.aroundannapurna.de) Online black-and-white photobook that will give an idea of what to expect on this popular trek.

Destination Manang (www.destinationmanang.com) General introduction to the Manang region, with trek routes, festival information and community development projects.

Digital Himalaya (www.digitalhimalaya.com) Download maps, scanned books such as Tilman's *Nepal Himalaya* and the archives of journals like *Himal*.

My Himalayas (www.myhimalayas.com) Inspiring personal website from Carsten Nebel, with trail info and wonderful photos of treks in Mustang, Dolpo and Manaslu.

Nepal News (www.nepalnews.com) Up-to-date Nepal news. Try also www.nepalmountainnews.com.

Nepal Tourist Board (www.welcomenepal.com) Official tourism site. See also www.tourism.gov.np.

Trek Info (www.trekinfo.com) Helpful collection of links, some dated, with a useful message board.

Trekking Agencies Association of Nepal (TAAN; www.taan.org.np) Trekking regulations and registered trekking agencies.

Trekking in Nepal (www.nepal-dia.de) Personal website from Andréas de Ruiter, with photos and overviews from the main treks, plus Nar-Phu, Manaslu and the Nangpa La, recommended guides and lots of good links.

Yeti Zone (www.yetizone.com) Decade-old but still useful route descriptions and photos of the main treks, plus a trekking forum.

Environment

Nepal is blessed by, and is hostage to, its incredible environment. Its economy, its history, its resources and its culture are all intrinsically linked to the string of mountains that rise like icy giants above the plains. Often, this daunting landscape is as much a hindrance as a benefit – development has been massively set back by the logistical problems of bringing roads, electricity, health and education to remote mountain communities, and the rivers that provide Nepal with most of its drinking water and electricity are the same rivers that flood the plains after each monsoon, destroying farmland, villages and lives.

If there is one lesson that can be drawn from Nepal, it is that man underestimates the power of nature at his peril. Many of the natural disasters that blight Nepal year after year – floods, forest fires, droughts and landslides – are directly linked to human activity. Faced by environmental issues of this scale, you may feel that one person cannot make a difference, but the reality is that every trekker who carries a piece of litter downhill and every lodge owner who switches to solar power is making a genuine difference to the environment of the Himalaya. See the Responsible Trekking chapter (p45) for more ways you can help while trekking in Nepal.

THE LAND

Nepal is a small, landlocked strip of land, 800km long and 200km wide. However, it fits a lot of terrain into just 147,181 sq km. Heading north from the Indian border, the landscape soars from just 150m above sea level to 8850m at the tip of Mt Everest. Around 64% of the country is covered by mountains, yet almost half the population lives on the flat plains of the Terai, which account for just 17% of the landmass of Nepal.

This dramatic landscape provides a habitat for an incredible range of plants, animals and people – Nepal is home to 59 recognised tribes, which make up 37% of the total population. In Nepal, it is not just the flora and fauna that have adapted to life in the mountains. The Sherpas and other hill tribes have a unique physiology that enables them to carry more oxygen in their blood than people from the plains.

The landscape of Nepal is defined as much by its rivers as by its mountains. Draining down from glaciers in the high Himalaya, these mighty watercourses have carved the landscape into soaring ridges and plunging valleys. Villages tend to be close to water, so trails cut across the valleys rather than following ridges – something that will become exhaustingly apparent when you start trekking.

Geology

Imagine the space currently occupied by Nepal as an open expanse of water, and the Tibetan plateau as a beachfront property. This was the situation until 60 million years ago, when the Indo-Australian plate collided with the Eurasian continent, bucking the earth's crust up into mighty ridges and forming the mountains we now call the Himalaya. Fossils of the squid-like ammonites that once flourished on the bottom of the Tethys Sea are found above 3000m in the Kali Gandaki Valley. Nepali Hindus have for centuries revered these fossil *saligrams* as symbols of Lord Vishnu (see the boxed text, p193).

The upheaval of mountains caused the temporary obstruction of rivers that once flowed unimpeded from Eurasia to the sea. Simultaneously,

There is no such thing as the Himalayas – the proper term is Himalaya (meaning 'Abode of the Snows'). A single Himalayan peak is a Himal (meaning 'snow-covered peak'). Pronounce it correctly as they do in the corridors of the Royal Geographical Society, with the emphasis on the second syllable – *himaarliya*, darling...

Nepalis divide the year into six, not four, seasons: Basanta (spring), Grisma (pre-monsoon heat), Barkha (monsoon), Sharad (post-monsoon), Hemanta (autumn) and Sheet (winter).

The Kali Gandaki Valley between the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri massifs is considered the world's deepest gorge, with a vertical gain of 7km.

new rivers arose on the southern slopes of these young mountains as moist winds from the tropical seas to the south rose and precipitated. For the next 60 million years, the mountains rose and the rivers and glaciers cut downwards, creating the peaks and valleys seen across Nepal today.

The modern landscape of Nepal – a grid of four major mountain systems running northwest to southeast, incised by the north–south gorges of rivers – is not the final story. The Indo-Australian plate is still sliding under the Eurasian Himalaya at a rate of 67mm per year, adding 5mm to the height of the Himalaya every 12 months. As fast as the mountains rise, they are being eroded by glaciers, rivers and landslides, and chipped away by earthquakes and the effects of cold and heat.

Physiographic Regions

Nepal consists of several physiographic regions, or natural zones: the southern plains, the four mountain ranges, and the valleys and hills in between. Most people live in the fertile lowlands or on the sunny southern slopes of mountains. Above 4000m, the only residents are yak herders, and even they retreat into the valleys with the onset of winter.

THE TERAI & CHURE HILLS

The only truly flat land in Nepal is the Terai (or Tarai), a patchwork of paddy fields, mango groves, bamboo stands, tiny thatched villages and sprawling industrial cities. The vast expanse of the Gangetic plain extends for 40km into Nepal before the land rises to create the Chure Hills. With an average height of 1000m, this ridge runs the length of the country, separating the Terai from a second low-lying area called the Inner Terai or the Dun.

More than half of Nepalis live in the Terai, which makes up less than a fifth of the land.

MAHABHARAT RANGE

North of the Inner Terai, the land rises again to form the Mahabharat Range, or the 'Middle Hills'. These vary between 1500m and 2700m in height, and form the heartland of the inhabited highland territory in Nepal. Although steep, these valleys have mineral-rich, water-retentive soils and locals raise rice, barley, millet, wheat, maize and other crops on cascades of terraced fields set among patches of tropical and temperate forest. These hills are cut by three major river systems: the Karnali, the Narayani and the Sapt Kosi.

PAHAR ZONE

Between the Mahabharat Range and the Himalaya lies a broad, extensively cultivated belt called the Pahar zone. This includes the fertile valleys of Kathmandu, Banepa and Pokhara, which were once the beds of enormous lakes, formed by trapped rivers. After the Terai, this is the most inhabited part of Nepal, and the expanding human population is putting a massive strain on natural resources. Only a few areas of forest remain intact and firewood collectors are travelling deeper and deeper into the mountains in their quest for timber.

THE HIMALAYA

One-third of the total length of the Himalaya lies inside Nepal's borders, and the country contains 10 of the world's 14 tallest mountains. Because of the southerly latitude (similar to that of Florida) and the reliable rainfall, the mountains are cloaked in vegetation to a height of between 3500m and 4000m. Human habitation is mainly found below 2700m – from here to the treeline, the forests are fairly well preserved.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the official height of Everest in Nepal is 2m lower than the accepted height in the rest of the world.

The Himalaya does not form an unbroken wall of peaks. Instead, the range is broken up into groups of massifs divided by glaciers and rivers draining down from the Tibetan plateau. The mountains are crossed by passes that have been used for centuries by Himalayan traders, migrating peoples and, more recently, Tibetan refugees, as well as countless trekkers and mountaineers.

THE TRANS-HIMALAYA

North of the first ridge of the Himalaya is a high desert region, similar to the Tibetan plateau. This area encompasses the arid valleys of Mustang, Manang and Dolpo, as well as the Tibetan marginals, a smaller range of peaks averaging less than 6000m. The moisture-laden rains of the monsoon drop all their rain on the south side of the mountains, leaving the Trans-Himalaya in permanent rain shadow. Surreal crags, spires and badlands eroded by the scouring action of the wind are characteristic of this bleak landscape.

WILDLIFE

The Himalaya is a region of exceptional biodiversity, with a unique variety of landscapes and climatic conditions. The following is a guide to the species that trekkers are likely to see, or would like to see. If you are a nature buff, it's worth carrying a spotters' guide.

Animals

The diverse environments of the Himalaya and the Middle Hills provide a home for a remarkable array of birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. However, many mammal and bird species are threatened by poaching and hunting. Your best chances for spotting wildlife are in national parks and conservation areas, or high in the mountains far away from human habitation.

For the most part, the 'big ticket' wildlife attractions of Nepal are found in the Terai, not the Himalaya. Tigers, rhinos, elephants and crocodiles all prefer the hot, humid grasslands of the plains. To see these wonderful creatures before they vanish into the pages of history books, you must visit Chitwan National Park, Bardia National Park or one of the other conservation areas in the Terai.

The large animals of the Himalaya are rare, widely distributed and exceedingly wary of humans. Your chances of spotting a snow leopard are almost zero – even Peter Matthiessen failed to see one while researching his famous book *The Snow Leopard*. However, you stand a good chance of seeing various species of deer and other herbivores, along with scores of birds, lizards and butterflies.

Before leaving Kathmandu check out the noisy camps of Indian flying foxes – the largest species of all bats – that roost in the trees near the Royal Palace and in the chir pines at the entrance to Bhaktapur. Although they look fearsome, their diet consists mainly of fruit.

MONKEYS

Because of Hanuman, the monkey god from the Ramayana, monkeys are considered holy and are well protected in Nepal. You will often see muscular rhesus macaques trooping across the trails in the Middle Hills or harassing tourists and pilgrims for food scraps at monuments and temples in the Kathmandu Valley and the Terai. These monkeys are often openly aggressive towards humans and they carry rabies, so appreciate them from a distance (and if that doesn't work, carry a stick to warn them away).

Birds of Nepal, by Robert Fleming Sr, Robert Fleming Jr and Lain Singh Bangdel, is a field guide to Nepal's many hundreds of birds. *Birds of Nepal* by Richard Grimmett and Carol Inskipp is a comprehensive paperback with line drawings.

Most of the yaks you see in Nepal are actually *dzo* or *dzopkyo* (male yak-cow hybrids). And there is no such thing as 'yak' cheese or 'yak' butter – a female yak is actually a *nak*.

The Snow Leopard Conservancy (www.snowleopardconservancy.org) is fighting to save the endangered snow leopard from extinction across the Himalaya.

You may also spot the slender common langur, with its short grey fur and black face, in forested areas up to 3700m. This species is more gentle than the thuggish macaque but, again, watch your bananas.

BIG CATS

The alpha predator in Nepal is the Bengal tiger, but this endangered cat is only found in the Terai. In the hills, the animal to watch for is the common leopard. This spotted cat roams up to the treeline, but deforestation has severely encroached on its habitat and leopards often target domestic livestock. Attacks on humans are rare – revenge attacks against leopards by angry farmers are much more common.

The rare snow leopard hunts on the edge of the treeline, preying on herds of blue sheep and other ungulates. Its thick, silver-grey coat blends superbly with the muted alpine colours of scree, rock and low vegetation. Snow leopards are so elusive that many locals believe the animals have the power to vanish at will. Conflict with humans for resources and habitat has pushed the snow leopard to the brink of extinction.

It's estimated that there are fewer than 500 surviving snow leopards, spread across a territory of 30,000 sq km, which is one reason they are so rarely seen.

OTHER PREDATORS

The predator most commonly seen in mountain areas is the Himalayan black bear. This large omnivore frequently raids crops on the edge of mountain villages. The biggest threat to bears in Nepal is farmers and the trade in animal parts for Chinese medicine. Bears rarely attack humans, but they may become aggressive if they feel threatened – if a bear attacks, the best defence is to lie face down on the ground. Nepal's bears are known to roam in winter instead of hibernating.

Himalayan wolves are known to roam to heights of around 6000m, preying on game birds and grazing herds, but packs will also prey on domestic livestock. There are believed to be just a few hundred wolves left in the wild because of conflict with humans. Another endangered canine is the small, reddish-brown dhole, or wild dog, which hunts in small packs in tropical and temperate forests.

Several members of the mustelid family prey on smaller mammals, birds and insects in the Himalaya. The yellow-throated marten is found in subtropical and temperate forests, while the Himalayan weasel roams above the treeline – it can often be spotted rearing up on its hind legs for a view over the tundra.

HERBIVORES

Deer are abundant in the lowlands, but a handful of species has adapted to life in the mountains, providing a food source for snow leopards and other mountain predators. Because their territories frequently overlap with zones of human habitation, large herbivores are becoming increasingly rare. However, there are several species that are commonly spotted while trekking along forest trails and alpine slopes in Nepal's national parks.

In forests up to 2400m, you may hear the scream-like call of the muntjak or barking deer, the oldest species of deer on earth. Another herbivore you stand a good chance of spotting is the pocket-sized musk deer, which stands just 50cm high at the shoulder and roams in small groups up to 4000m. Musk deer are genetically quite distinct from other deer – they have no antlers, and males have tusks formed from oversized canine teeth. These animals have been severely depleted by hunting for the musk gland found in the abdomen of male deer.

The endangered red panda survives on a diet of bamboo shoots, but it belongs to the same family as the racoon and it is not a true bear like

Gram for gram, the musk extracted from the scent glands of musk deer is worth more than gold, and poaching is still a major threat to the survival of this ancient species.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

You might think that the mountains and jungles would provide some protection for wildlife, but many of Nepal's most famous animals are on the list of endangered species. In the mountains, time is running out for the snow leopard, clouded leopard, red panda, wild yak, musk deer, great Tibetan sheep and hispid hare. In the Terai, Bengal tigers, Asian elephants, one-horned rhinoceros, Gaur bison, swamp deer, gharial crocodiles and Gangetic dolphins are clinging on in the face of extinction.

The greatest threat to Nepal's wildlife comes from hunting for food and from poaching to supply animal parts for Chinese medicine. In just one raid in 2005, the Nepali army seized five tiger skins, 36 leopard skins, 238 otter skins and 113kg of tiger and leopard bones, destined for sale in China and Tibet. International organisations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, World Wildlife Fund; www.wwf.org) are attempting to ensure the preservation of these wonderful, endangered animals.

the giant panda. These rare animals are occasionally spotted in remote bamboo groves in Makalu-Barun National Park (p247) and the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (p260).

When trekking through alpine meadows above the treeline, look out for the Himalayan tahr, a shaggy mountain goat, and the blue sheep (*naur* in Tibetan, *bharal* in Nepali), which is genetically stranded somewhere between a goat and a sheep. The tahr prefers habitats in the vicinity of precipitous cliffs – you can identify males by their shaggy manes. Blue sheep have curving horns and a steely grey coat and are commonly spotted on scree slopes and high pastures around Kanchenjunga, Dolpo and Mustang.

RODENTS

The boulder fields and forests of the Himalaya provide shelter for several small rodents. The pika, or mouse-hare, is commonly spotted scurrying nervously between rocks on trekking trails. You must climb higher to the Trans-Himalayan zone in western Nepal to see the Himalayan marmot, related to the American groundhog. Marmots live in large social groups and sentry animals keep watch for predators by standing on their hind legs, issuing a shrill whistle in the event of danger.

Various species of squirrels and chipmunks live in the forests, including rare flying squirrels, which glide through the canopy using extended flaps of skin between their legs.

BIRDS

More than 850 bird species are found in Nepal. However, most birds are found in the Middle Hills and the Pahar zone – only a few specially adapted species can survive the cold and scarcity of food at higher altitudes. Nepal attracts large numbers of migratory birds travelling southwest from Siberia in February and March – birdwatchers will want to visit the waterways and grasslands of the Terai, as well as migration corridors such as the Kali Gandaki Valley.

Before you even start trekking you will spot some striking birds soaring over the roofs of Kathmandu. Vultures scavenge the city outskirts and fork-tailed pariah kites circle ominously overhead in the haze. In the mornings, you may hear the melodious song of the dayal or magpie-robin.

Around Pokhara, the Indian roller is conspicuous when it takes flight and flashes the iridescent turquoise on its wings. According to local legend, it is a good omen to spot a roller before you embark on a journey.

Nepal covers only 0.1% of the world's surface area but is home to nearly 10% of the world's species of birds, including 72 critically endangered species.

Conversely, if you see a crow – one of the most common birds in Nepal – it spells misfortune.

Eight species of stork have been identified along the watercourses of the Terai and demoiselle cranes fly into Nepal for the winter, before returning to their Tibetan nesting grounds in spring. Herons and egrets are common in the tropical and subtropical regions, and can be distinguished in flight by their curved-neck posture.

Several raptors are found high in the mountains, where they survive on a diet of small birds and mammals. The graceful Eurasian kestrel is often spotted hovering above trails, and you may see the sweeping silhouette of a huge Himalayan griffon (look for the white feathers on the bottom of its dark wings) or a lammergeier (look for the light-coloured body and diamond-shaped tail). The top avian predator of the Himalaya is the golden eagle – spotting one of these graceful giants swooping effortlessly in a mountain thermal is one of the most breathtaking sights in the Himalaya.

There are six species of pheasant in Nepal, including the national bird, the Himalayan monal or impeyan pheasant. Females are a dull mousy brown, while males are an iridescent rainbow of colour. In areas frequented by trekkers, these birds are often quite tame, though they will launch themselves downhill in a falling, erratic flight if disturbed. Another ground-dweller to look out for is the snow pigeon – its slate and pale-brown feathers provide camouflage while it forages in boulder fields, but it reveals its white underside when it takes flight.

Nepal hosts 17 species of cuckoo, which arrive in March, heralding the coming of spring. Despite their appealing call, cuckoos are social parasites, laying their eggs in the nests of other birds. While trekking through forests, keep an eye out for members of the timalid family. The spiny babbler is Nepal's only endemic species, and the black-capped sibia, with its constant prattle and ringing song, is frequently heard in wet temperate forests.

Another colourful character is the hoopoe, which has a retractable crest, a long curved bill, eye-catching orange plumage and black-and-white stripes on its wings. Nepal is also home to 30 species of flycatchers and 60 species of warblers, as well as bee-eaters, drongos, minivets, parakeets and sunbirds.

Watercourses are a favourite haunt for birds in the Himalaya. Look out for thrushes such as the handsome white-capped river chat and the delightfully named plumbeous redstart. Near streams and ponds, scan the trees and electric cables for the black-and-white pied kingfisher and the iridescent turquoise jacket of the white-breasted kingfisher.

Crows are common in Nepal, but different species have adapted to different altitudes. The yellow-billed blue magpie and Himalayan tree pie are commonly seen in the temperate zone. Above the treeline, red- and yellow-billed choughs gather in flocks in areas frequented by humans. In the Trans-Himalayan region, you will also see the menacing black raven, which scours the valleys looking for scavenging opportunities.

Plants

There are 6500 known species of trees, shrubs and wildflowers in Nepal, but perhaps the most famous is *Rhododendron arboreum* (*lali gurans* in Nepali), the national flower of Nepal. More than 30 species of rhododendrons are found in the foothills of the Himalaya and the rhododendron forests burst into flower in March and April, painting the landscape in swathes of white, pink and red. The huge magnolias of the east with their

Nepal Nature (www.nepalnature.com) runs bird-watching and botanical tours to Shivapuri National Park at the start of the Helambu Circuit trek (see p224).

Bird Conservation Nepal (www.birdlifenepal.org) is an excellent Nepali organisation based in Kathmandu that publishes books, birding checklists and a good quarterly newsletter.

Rhododendron arboreum is Nepal's national flower, but it might better be described as a tree, reaching heights of 18m and forming whole forests in the Himalaya.

VEGETATION ZONES

As you trek in Nepal, you will notice marked changes in the surrounding trees, plants and shrubs as you gain altitude. The vegetation in the Himalaya can be broken up into the following categories.

Tropical (up to 1000m)

Below 1000m, forests are dominated by sal trees. Other signature plants found in the tropical zone include tall elephant grasses, acacia and rosewood trees and silky cotton trees, which produce bright red flowers every spring.

Subtropical (1000m to 2000m)

As you start to gain altitude, the sal forests give way to more cold-tolerant species, including the distinctive chir pine. Deciduous trees include autumn-blooming chestnuts and the spring-blooming schima, a fruiting tree species distantly related to the tea bush.

Lower Temperate (1700m to 2700m)

As you climb above 1700m, evergreen oaks start to appear. Where there is sufficient water, you may also spot horse chestnut, maple, walnut, alder and birch trees. The deciduous forests are broken up by swathes of blue pines, which flourish on south-facing slopes.

Upper Temperate (2400m to 3000m)

In the upper temperate zone, the brown oaks are joined by dozens of species of rhododendron, the most distinctive plant of the Himalaya. Pine forests at this elevation are made up of blue pines, spruces, firs and hemlocks.

Subalpine (3000m to 4000m)

As you approach the treeline, silver fir, birch and oak trees dominate the forest. Exposed ridges and passes are dominated by shrub rhododendrons and dwarf bamboo. On dry slopes you may see stands of twisted junipers, though this species has been almost eradicated in many areas by harvesting for firewood.

Alpine (4000m to snowline)

There are almost no trees at all above 4000m, though a few species of ground-hugging rhododendrons persist almost as far as the snowline. In the alpine meadows that define this elevation, you will see distinctive alpine flowers like edelweiss, gentians, anemones and stellara, which can survive up to 5500m.

showy white flowers on bare branches are also spectacular, as are Nepal's dozens of species of orchid.

The best time to see the wildflowers of the Himalaya in bloom is during the monsoon, when the trails are muddy and the skies overcast. The views may be obscured, but the ground underfoot will be a carpet of mints, scrophs, buttercups, cinquefoils, polygonums, ephedras, cotoneasters, saxifrages and primulas.

Many of the alpine species found above the treeline bear flowers in autumn, including irises, gentians, anemones and the downy-petalled edelweiss. In subtropical and lower temperate areas, look for aree pink luculia, mauve osbeckia and yellow St John's wort, as well as flowering cherry trees and the autumnal leaves of deciduous maples.

Historically, the Nepalis have been avid gardeners of exotics such as hibiscus, camellia, cosmos and salvia. You'll often see these plants in

Many of the plant species in the alpine zone in Nepal are also found in the alpine zone in, well, the Alps. Keep an eye out for altitude-adapted flowers such as edelweiss in mountain meadows.

Himalayan Flowers & Trees, by Dorothy Mierow and Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha, is the best field guide to the plants of Nepal.

The Himalayan hemlock (*Tsuga dumosa*) is so named because its needles have a similar smell to the poisonous European herb.

the gardens of trekking lodges and Buddhist monasteries. Marigolds are commonly grown in the villages of the Rai tribe – the yellow flowers are strung into garlands for Hindu religious ceremonies.

TREES

In the foothills of the Himalaya, as well as in the plains, look for the magnificent mushrooming canopies of banyan and pipal trees, which often form the focal point of mountain villages. The pipal tree has a special religious significance in Nepal – the Buddha gained enlightenment under a pipal tree, and Hindus revere various species of pipals as symbols of Vishnu and Hanuman.

At lower altitudes, forests are dominated by round-leaved sal trees – the distinctive deciduous hardwood of the Terai. Sal is a climax species, meaning its seedlings can grow in the shade of the parent tree, ensuring that sal trees dominate the forests generation after generation.

At higher altitudes, you'll find mixed forests of oaks, birches and unbelievable numbers of rhododendrons. These hardy trees produce a dense, toxic leaf litter that discourages the growth of other species, and their flowers appear in a staggering variety of shapes and colours every spring.

Numerous species of pines thrive at higher elevations. The drought-tolerant chir pine can be identified by its long wispy needles, while the blue pine has short needles and long pendulous cones. Other pines include the pyramid-shaped hemlock and the Christmas-tree-shaped silver fir (the name comes from the silvery undersides of its needles). Around the treeline, look for gnarled and stunted juniper bushes. Pines are extensively harvested for building and firewood and the needles are burnt as incense.

Notable deciduous trees include the true and horse chestnut, which are also common in Europe and the Americas, and the schima, a member of the tea family, which has irritant sap and fragrant white flowers that

THE NATURAL LIFE

Before porters and trekkers brought plastic to the Himalaya, the inhabitants of the mountains made everything they needed from materials found in nature. You can still see signs of this ingenuity today – in the foothills, giant bamboo stalks are transformed into water pipes and utensils, and lengths of dwarf bamboo are beaten flat and woven into walls for houses, animal shelters and temporary roofs for goths (seasonal herders' dwellings). Bamboo fibre is also used to weave baskets, including the *doko* (back basket) used to transport goods all over Nepal. Water jars and stills for the preparation of alcohol are still made by hand using river mud, baked inside earth-covered kilns.

In eastern Nepal, the bark of the *Daphne papyracea* bush is pulped and dried on silk frames to create *lokta*, a form of paper that is naturally impervious to insects. Cannabis is widely grown to provide fibre for rope, though the resin is also put to use by sadhus (Hindu ascetics) and bored teenagers. A relative of cannabis, the stinging nettle is picked with tongs and eaten as a green vegetable. At lower elevations, the leaves of the sal tree are stitched together to form disposable plates and bowls.

Nepal has an incredible array of medicinal plants, many of which are used in traditional Ayurvedic medicine. According to one report, around 55% of plants in Nepal have some kind of medical application, and wild herbs are still widely used for reducing fevers, treating wounds and managing symptoms of common diseases. Many crops are grown to make alcohol as well as food – fermented rice is the base for *rakshi* (fortified rice wine) and *chhang*, the soupy rice beer of the mountains. In western Nepal, people prefer *tongba*, which is a warm, alcoholic beer prepared from fermented milled seeds.

appear in late spring. Due to the popularity of chestnut wood as a source of fuel, the forests where it appears are often severely depleted.

Evergreen oaks are common in temperate zones – the leaves of the brown oak (*kharsu* in Nepali) are spiny like holly when young and smooth and rounded when mature. Oaks appear in many unusual shapes as a result of pruning by villagers for fuel and fodder. In the wet forests of eastern Nepal, you will see brown oaks encrusted with mosses and epiphytes that take all their nutrients from the host tree.

The Sherpas of Solu Khumbu burn juniper fronds and the sweet-smelling leaves of ground-hugging dwarf rhododendrons as a natural form of incense.

NATIONAL PARKS & CONSERVATION AREAS

Nepal's first national park was established in 1973 at Royal Chitwan National Park in the Terai. There are now nine national parks, three wildlife reserves, three conservation areas and, somewhat incongruously, one hunting reserve, protecting 18% of the land in Nepal. Most of the reserves lie in the Terai, but many trekking routes pass through national parks and conservation areas in the mountains, so you must pay the park entry fee on top of any other trekking fees. See the table (below) for a list of the national parks likely to be visited by trekkers.

Sagarmatha National Park was founded in 1976 to protect 1148 sq km of mountain wilderness on the slopes of Mt Everest.

The main agency overseeing national parks and conservation areas in Nepal is the **Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation** (www.dnpwc.gov.np). However, the last few years have seen a shift in the management

NATIONAL PARKS & CONSERVATION AREAS

| Name | Location | Features | Best Time To Visit | Entry Fee (Rs) | Page |
|-------------------|------------------------|---|----------------------|----------------|------|
| Annapurna CA | north of Pokhara | most popular trekking area in Nepal, high peaks, diverse landscapes and varied culture | Oct-May | 2000 | p143 |
| Kanchenjunga CA | eastern Nepal | third-highest mountain in the world, prolific wildlife, blue sheep and snow leopards | Mar-Apr, Oct-Nov | 1000 | p260 |
| Langtang NP | northeast of Kathmandu | varied topography, diverse culture, a stop for migratory birds travelling between India and Tibet | Mar-Apr, Sep-mid-Dec | 1000 | p203 |
| Makalu-Barun NP | eastern Nepal | bordering Sagarmatha NP, protecting high mountains and diverse hill landscapes | Oct-May | 1000 | p247 |
| Manaslu CA | west-central Nepal | rugged terrain, 11 types of forest, bordering Annapurna CA | Oct-Nov, Mar-Apr | 2000 | p318 |
| Rara NP | western Nepal | little-visited, is the location of Nepal's biggest lake and many migratory birds | Oct-Dec, Mar-May | 1000 | p265 |
| Sagarmatha NP | Everest region | highest mountains on the planet, World Heritage sites, monasteries and Sherpa culture | Oct-May | 1000 | p104 |
| Shey Phoksumdo NP | Dolpo, western Nepal | Trans-Himalayan ecosystem, alpine flowers, high passes, snow leopards and musk deer | Jun-Sep | 1000 | p270 |
| Shivapuri NP | northeast of Kathmandu | close to Kathmandu, many bird and butterfly species, good hiking and biking | Oct-May | 250 | p224 |

NP = National Park, CA = Conservation Area

The King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation has been spearheading conservation work in the Annapurna Conservation Area since 1986. Now that Nepal is a republic, it continues its work as the National Trust for Nature Conservation (www.ntnc.org.np).

of protected areas away from the Nepali government to international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The **National Trust for Nature Conservation** (www.ntnc.org.np), formerly the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, runs the Annapurna (ACAP) and Manaslu Conservation Area Projects, and the **Mountain Institute** (www.mountain.org) runs a number of conservation projects in the Makalu-Barun and Kanchenjunga Conservation Areas.

The first protected areas were imposed with little consultation with locals and initially without their cooperation. Recent initiatives have concentrated on educating local people and accommodating their needs, rather than evicting them completely from the land. The focus is on sustainable development, the preservation of culture and balancing conservation efforts with the legitimate needs of local people.

The community forest model has been particularly successful in Nepal – many protected areas are surrounded by a buffer zone of community-owned forests, whose people have a stake in their continued existence. See the website of the **Federation of Community Forest Users** (www.fecofun.org) for more information.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The ecology and environment of Nepal are fragile and a rapidly growing population is constantly putting more pressure on the land. Much of the land between the Himalaya and the Terai has been vigorously modified by humans to provide space for crops, animals and houses. Forests have been cleared, wildlife populations depleted, and roads have eaten into valleys that were previously accessible only on foot. Shangri-La is hovering on the edge of environmental collapse.

Population growth is the biggest issue facing the environment in Nepal. More people need more land for agriculture, and more natural resources for building, heating and cooking. The population of Nepal is increasing at a rate of 2.1% every year, and tourism is providing a financial incentive for the settlement of uninhabited mountain areas.

Many NGOs are now working with the Nepali government to reduce the damage to Nepal's fragile ecosystems, including the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (see p44). The following sections cover some of the environmental challenges facing Nepal.

Alternative Energy Sources

There have been some environmental successes in Nepal. In the Annapurna Conservation Area, Kanchenjunga Conservation Area and Sagarmatha National Park, efforts have been made to promote alternative energy sources. Foreign NGOs have provided thousands of solar panels to farms, trekking lodges, schools and monasteries across the Himalaya, providing villagers with reliable electric lighting and giving children the opportunity to study after dark.

Another leap forward has been the introduction of biogas-powered stoves and parabolic solar heaters, which focus the sun's rays onto a central cooking vessel, providing hot food and hot water at zero cost to the local environment. The use of LED technology has also had a positive effect on the Himalaya by reducing the build-up of spent batteries from inefficient incandescent torches. One thing every trekker can do to help the environment is to carry their batteries downhill to Kathmandu for disposal.

Heating in village homes is usually provided by a metal stove fuelled by animal dung and agricultural waste. However, many villagers still depend

For more on Nepal's environment, check out www.iucnnepal.org and www.wwfnepal.org.

For information on alternative energy projects in Nepal, visit the websites of the Centre for Rural Technology (www.crtnepal.org), the Foundation for Sustainable Technologies (www.fost-nepal.org) and Drokpa (www.drokpa.org).

on inefficient wood-powered stoves for cooking, even in areas where trekkers are banned from using firewood. In national park areas, some villagers have been persuaded to switch to kerosene-powered stoves, but this movement has faltered with the rising price of kerosene.

Several NGOs are now teaching villagers to build more efficient wood-burning stoves to decrease dependency on firewood and to reduce smoke pollution inside village homes (the cause of the permanent cough that affects so many Nepali children). The amount of firewood required to cook a meal can be halved by using an enclosed mud stove with space for two pots, and the heat from the cooking fire can be utilised to heat water in a pipe running through the stove.

Deforestation

Almost 80% of Nepali citizens rely on fuel wood for heating and cooking, particularly in the mountains, leading to massive problems with deforestation. Trekkers are contributing to the problem by requesting complicated slow-cooking meals and by taking hot showers at lodges – a typical trekking lodge can burn as much as 100kg of firewood per day. Simultaneously, villagers are clearing more and more woodland to provide building materials for new lodges and pastures for the huge herds of livestock that money from tourism has enabled them to buy.

As well as robbing native species of their natural habitat, deforestation can have devastating knock-on effects. The loss of wild food sources drives animals directly into conflict with human beings, and bears, leopards, wild goats and deer are frequently shot or poisoned by farmers to protect crops and livestock. Human habitation in forest areas brings an added threat to wildlife in the form of rats, cats and dogs.

The loss of tree cover is also a major contributing factor to the landslides that scar the valleys of the Himalaya after every monsoon. These often-massive rockfalls destroy homes and trails and wash valuable soil down into rivers, where it blocks watercourses, causing localised flooding, before washing out into the Bay of Bengal. Many locals were killed in severe landslides in Mustang in 2006 and at Khobang in eastern Nepal in 2002. The increasing severity of floods in lowland Nepal is partly a consequence of excess rainwater running off denuded slopes in the foothills of the Himalaya.

Nepal has lost more than 70% of its forest cover in modern times, and halting deforestation has been one of the major priorities of Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. Trekkers have been banned from using firewood in Nepal's national parks since 1979, but villagers are still allowed to gather firewood for heating and cooking, and this includes lodge owners. You can reduce your 'firewood footprint' by taking fewer hot showers and by eating dal bhat instead of asking cooks to make a different meal for every trekker.

It's not all doom and gloom though – in recent years, a number of community forests have been established on the boundaries of national parks, creating an invaluable buffer zone for wildlife. The forests are communally owned and the sustainable harvest of timber and other natural resources provides an economic alternative to poaching and resource gathering inside the parks. See the website of the **Federation of Community Forest Users** (www.fecofun.org) for more information.

There have also been some highly successful afforestation schemes. Juniper plantations were established above Namche Bazaar in the 1980s, providing a natural barrier against landslides, and the **Mountain Institute** (www.mountain.org) is campaigning for a ban on the harvesting of juniper

Himal South Asia (www.himalmag.com) is a bimonthly magazine devoted to development and environmental issues. It's an excellent publication with top-class contributors.

until the surrounding forests recover. Several trekking organisations offer special tree-planting treks – see the Responsible Trekking chapter (p61).

Poaching

Nepal's decade-long Maoist insurgency did not only affect human beings. Soldiers were withdrawn from national park checkpoints, leading to a massive upsurge in poaching. Nepal's rhino population fell by more than 25% between 2000 and 2005 and elephants, tigers, leopards and other endangered species were also targeted.

The main engines driving poaching are the trade in animal parts for Chinese medicine and the trade in animal pelts to Tibet for the manufacture of traditional costumes known as *chubas*. Trekkers directly contribute to the problem by buying souvenirs made from skins, ivory and other animal parts. Also be alert for shahtoosh shawls, which are made from the pelts of the critically endangered chiru (Tibetan antelope).

Fuel Shortages

As well as shortages of water and electricity, Nepal is facing a chronic shortage of petrol and kerosene – a consequence of rising global prices and political infighting between the Nepali government and petroleum companies. Petrol stations run dry on an almost daily basis, and petrol and kerosene prices have more than doubled since 2005.

In the mountains, the problem is exacerbated by a shortage of helicopters to transport kerosene to the trailheads. Many of the operators who used to transport freight in Nepal have shifted operations to Afghanistan to take advantage of lucrative contracts working for NATO. Kerosene now has to be transported to many areas on foot, further adding to the cost. Many villagers who previously used kerosene have returned to using firewood, adding to the problem of deforestation.

Hydroelectricity

On the face of things, harnessing the power of the rivers that drain from the Himalaya sounds like a win-win situation. Funded by international NGOs, micro-hydroelectric projects are already bringing luxuries like electric lighting and telecommunications to many remote communities.

Scientists estimate that Nepal has the potential to generate 80,000 megawatts of hydroelectric power, but only 1% of this power is currently being exploited. Unfortunately, the focus is not on small community-level schemes, but on vast coffer-dam projects to provide energy for the massively overpopulated Kathmandu Valley and spare capacity for export to India and China.

The Nepali government has long regarded the export of water-generated electricity as a vital cash engine for national development, but several hydroelectric schemes have been cancelled following high-profile campaigns by environmentalists. The World Bank withdrew funding for the 404 megawatt Arun III project in eastern Nepal in 1995, after campaigners raised concerns about the environmental impact of the development.

However, similar schemes on the Sapt Kosi, Kali Gandaki and West Seti rivers have gone ahead, with massive investment from India and China. This might seem like good news for local residents, who have to endure up to 11 hours of load-shedding every day, but most of the electricity generated by these schemes will be channelled across the border, leaving local people literally in the dark.

Pressure cookers make an unlikely contribution to the environment in Nepal – water boils below 100°C at altitude, and cooks can reduce cooking times, and therefore firewood consumption, by cooking in a pressurised pot.

You can read the government take on the controversy over hydroelectricity on the website of the West Seti Hydro project (www.wsh.com.np).

As well as displacing local people and damaging the environment in valleys that are flooded to act as reservoirs, large hydro schemes affect the flow of water downstream, disrupting the passage of nutrient-rich silt to agricultural land in the plains. Another concern is the vulnerability of dams to earthquakes and flooding caused by the bursting of glacial lakes in the mountains.

Water for the People Network (www.w4pn.org) and the **Water & Energy Users' Federation** (www.wafed-nepal.org) are just two organisations campaigning for the environmentally sensitive development of Nepal's hydroelectric resources.

Tourism

Trekking and mountain tourism has brought health care, education, electricity and wealth to some of the most remote, isolated communities in the Himalaya, but it has also had a massive impact on the local environment. The population of the Himalaya more than doubles during the trekking season and forests are being cleared at an unprecedented rate to provide timber for the construction of new lodges and fuel for cooking and heating. Trekkers also contribute massively to the build-up of litter and the erosion of mountain trails.

Even the apparent benefits of tourism can have environmental implications – the wealth that tourism has brought to villages in the Everest and Annapurna regions has allowed many farmers to increase the size of their herds of goats, cows and yaks, leading to yet more deforestation as woodland is cleared to provide temporary pastures. Seeing the wealth that tourism can bring, many hill people have become dependent on the trekking industry, which caused major problems when tourist numbers nosedived during the Maoist uprising.

Trekkers should take steps to minimise their impact on the environment – see the Responsible Trekking chapter for tips and advice (p45).

Water Supplies

Despite the natural abundance of water, water shortages are another chronic problem in Nepal, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley. Historically, water was supplied to the capital from a reservoir inside the Shivapuri National Park above Kathmandu (see p224). However, demand

FLOODING IN THE HIMALAYA

Every year, Nepal faces severe flooding problems in the Terai because of increased drainage from the mountains caused by the monsoon rains. In recent years, these problems have been exacerbated by deforestation, which increases drainage from mountain slopes, and by elevated levels of rainfall, linked to climate change. In August 2008, unusually heavy rainfall caused the Sapt Kosi to burst its banks near Loki, displacing millions of people from their homes in Nepal and Bihar (India).

In the mountains, the flood risk comes from a different source. Rising global temperatures are melting the glaciers that snake down from the Himalaya. The Khumbu Glacier near Everest has retreated 5km since 1953, increasing the flow of the Dudh Kosi and Imja Kosi. Increased glacial melting is also swelling glacial lakes to dangerous levels. In 1985 a natural dam collapsed in the Thame Valley, releasing the trapped waters of the Dig Tsho lake and sending devastating floods roaring along the Dudh Kosi Valley.

Scientists are now watching the Imja Tsho lake in the Chhukung Valley with alarm. Since 1960, the lake has grown by 35 million cubic metres – when it ruptures, experts are predicting a 'vertical tsunami' that will affect one of the most heavily populated and heavily trekked parts of the Himalaya.

SAGARMATHA POLLUTION CONTROL COMMITTEE (SPCC)

The Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) was founded in 1991 with the help of the Nepal Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation and the World Wide Fund for Nature. Staffed by villagers and managed by community leaders, including the Rinpoche of Tengboche monastery, the SPCC is involved in a wide range of environmental and social development projects in and around Sagarmatha National Park.

The SPCC mandate includes a commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage, as well as conservation, litter removal and education. An important part of the SPCC's work involves educating lodge owners and schoolchildren about fuel efficiency, health, hygiene and environmental issues. For more information on the work of the SPCC, drop into the **visitor centres** (☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) in Lukla and Namche Bazaar.

from the expanding population of the valley has outstripped supply for more than a decade.

The Asian Development Bank is backing a new scheme to pipe water 26km underground from the Melamchi Khola in Helambu, starting in 2011. However, the project has already accelerated road-building in this once pristine valley, and when finished it will reduce the amount of water available to local people for irrigation. For more information, see the websites of the **Water & Energy Users' Federation** (www.wafed-nepal.org) and the **Melamchi Khola Water Supply Project** (www.melamchiwater.org).

Where water is available, it is often contaminated with heavy metals, industrial chemicals, bacteria and human waste. Arsenic poisoning from contaminated drinking water in the Terai is now one of the biggest problems facing the Unicef child development project in Nepal. In the Kathmandu Valley, the holy Bagmati River has become one of the most polluted rivers on earth; see www.friendsofthebagmati.org.np for more on this sorry story.

In the mountains, the problem is often too much, rather than too little water – see the boxed text, p43.

Useful Organisations

Contact the following organisations for more information on environmental issues in Nepal.

Bird Conservation Nepal (www.birdlifeneal.org)

Himalayan Nature (www.himalayannature.org)

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (www.icimod.org)

National Trust for Nature Conservation (www.ntnc.org.np)

Resources Himalaya (www.resourcehimalaya.org)

Wildlife Conservation Nepal (www.wcn.org.np)

World Conservation Union (www.iucnnepal.org)

World Wide Fund for Nature Nepal (www.wwfnepal.org)

Responsible Trekking

In the 50 years since Nepal opened its borders to outsiders, tourism has brought many benefits, in terms of wealth generation, employment opportunities, infrastructure, health care, education and transport. However, the massive influx of trekkers and travellers has also brought problems in the form of environmental degradation, social breakdown and the loss of traditional culture.

The positive effects of tourism are plain to see. Villagers who once struggled to survive in one of the harshest environments on earth now have running water, electricity, schools and health centres. Roads and trekking trails have brought prosperity to marginalised rural people and tourism has created a level of social mobility that would have been unthinkable in the past – many of the Nepalis who own trekking companies today worked as porters themselves 20 years ago.

Sadly, the negative effects of tourism are also clear. Begging is widespread and litter chokes mountain trails. Forests are being cut down at an unprecedented rate to provide timber for the construction of new trekking lodges, and firewood to keep trekkers supplied with warm showers and hot meals.

There is endless discussion among trekkers about the most environmentally sensitive and culturally rewarding way to trek. Some trekkers make donations to charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the areas they pass through. Other people undertake a period of volunteering while they trek, planting trees or building health centres, classrooms and reservoirs for mountain villages.

What is certain is that making a positive contribution is as much about the way you behave as the money you spend. Well-heeled travellers may spend thousands of dollars on a single trek, but much of the money goes to agents and fixers in Kathmandu and only a small portion filters down to people in the hills. Budget travellers spend less money but have a greater impact on poverty alleviation, by contributing directly to the mountain economy.

A growing number of tour operators, both abroad and in Nepal, are making conscious efforts to address problems associated with tourism. Look for trekking agencies that have a serious commitment to protecting fragile ecosystems, and those who direct at least some portion of profits back into local communities.

The following sections cover some of the issues you will need to think about, but drop into the Kathmandu offices of **Kathmandu Environmental Education Project** (Map p80; KEEP; ☎ 01-4216775; www.keepnepal.org.np; Jyatha, Thamel) for more advice.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Travellers may find the traditional lifestyle of the mountains to be picturesque, but in many places it is a meagre, subsistence-level existence that could be improved in numerous ways. The challenge faced by the many charitable organisations working in the Himalaya is how to bring a modern standard of living without destroying the traditional culture of the mountains.

The Nepal Mountaineering Association (www.nepalmountaineering.org) publishes its own guidelines for expedition groups. Click on the 'trekking guidelines' link on its website.

Smoking is forbidden at Buddhist monasteries and other sacred sites across Nepal. As legend has it, even the great Guru Rinpoche believed the demon weed was an obstacle to enlightenment!

You can do your bit by showing respect for local traditions – this will also demonstrate to local people that the relationship between locals and foreigners is one of equals. Many of the problems experienced by trekkers in the mountains have been caused by members of well-funded expeditions handing out money and gifts, leading many locals to regard foreigners as walking cash-dispensers.

For information on cultural dos and don'ts, see p68.

Leading by Example

One of the best things trekkers can do to reduce their impact on Nepal is to lead by example. By electing to stay in lodges that have solar-powered showers, or use biogas- or kerosene-powered stoves instead of firewood, you are providing an example to other travellers and an incentive for other lodges to adopt the same practices.

Even small gestures can have big effects. By picking up rubbish that you find on trekking routes, you will provide an example to local people who might never have considered the environmental impact of dumping waste beside the trail. Until recently, there was no plastic waste in the mountains – the massive litter problems seen today are a direct consequence of demand from trekkers for water, soft drinks and snacks in plastic packets.

Begging

Seeing a daily tide of foreign travellers with expensive gear and money to spend, many Nepalis have taken to begging for gifts or money. Children are the worst offenders, but adults may also ask for pens, money and other free gifts. Don't encourage this behaviour. Most Nepalis find it offensive and demeaning (as do most visitors), and it encourages a whole range of unhealthy attitudes.

It is important to realise that poverty is not the only factor that drives begging. Many of the children who beg foreigners for 'one pen, one bonbon, one rupee' come from families who can easily afford these inexpensive items. You only need to look at the standards of dentistry in the mountains to realise that handing out candy to children is neither appropriate or responsible.

If you want to give something to local villagers, make the donation to an adult, preferably someone in authority, like a teacher or a lama at a local monastery. Appropriate gifts include toothbrushes and toothpaste, pens and paper, biodegradable soap and school books, preferably with lessons in Nepali, Sherpa and English.

If you really want to give money, make the donation to somebody who is in a position to do something useful for the community. Monasteries run all sorts of social projects for local villagers, or consider making a donation to a local or international NGO that is working in the area.

SUSTAINABLE-TREKKING TIPS

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Nepal, consider the following tips when trekking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as foil, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers.
- Collect rubbish where you see it on walking trails. If you cannot carry it out of the area, take the litter to a local rubbish collection depot or incineration centre.
- When buying things from shops, do not accept plastic bags.

Stuff sacks. Now there's a good idea. Bring a couple of spares from Kathmandu and use them to compact litter that you find on mountain trails to be disposed of in Kathmandu.

Sugar plus a lack of dentists equals tooth decay. Rather than handing out sweets in the mountains, consider donating toothbrushes and toothpaste to village schools.

Plastic bottles don't have to end up as landfill – the clothing firm Patagonia is one of several organisations spinning discarded bottles into fleeces. It takes just 25 plastic water bottles to make a new fleece jacket for an adult.

THE ACAP MINIMUM IMPACT CODE

Assist in the Annapurna Conservation Area Project's (ACAP) efforts to maintain the natural and cultural equilibrium along trekking routes by following its 'minimum impact' code during your Himalayan sojourns:

- Avoid the use of nonbiodegradable items, especially plastic mineral-water bottles. Iodine drops are available at any ACAP office and a network of safe drinking water stations line the Annapurna Circuit.
 - Dispose of your trash responsibly. Use ACAP recycling and compost bins wherever available, take your used batteries home to your country, and incinerate all other wastes.
 - Use ACAP toilets en route. If your trekking agency carries its own portable toilet tent, make sure the pit is covered on departure. Please encourage your porters to use toilet facilities as well.
 - Insist on using kerosene for cooking and heating purposes. This should apply to your porters as well. If possible, avoid lodges and teashops that use wood for fuel, and only take hot showers with solar-heated water.
 - Trek gently. Do not trample or collect the flora of the region. It is illegal to hunt in the area or buy items made from endangered species. Please do not remove any religious artefacts from the area.
 - Respect the culture by wearing modest clothing, asking permission before taking photographs, avoiding public displays of affection, behaving appropriately while at religious sites and respecting local customs in your dress and behaviour.
 - Encourage young Nepalis to be proud of their culture.
-
- Never bury your rubbish. Digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion, and buried rubbish may be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it.
 - Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
 - Sanitary napkins, tampons and condoms should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.
 - Respect local regulations – for example, plastic bags are banned in Mustang.

Eating & Drinking

- Water from streams, wells, cisterns and taps in Nepal is not safe to drink until it has been filtered or purified. Purify your water with iodine or a portable water filter and carry it in a reusable bottle. Don't buy bottled mineral water on a trek. For more on water purification, see p396; for more on the perils of buying bottles of mineral water, see the boxed text on p173.
- Seek out lodges that use kerosene, biogas or other alternative fuels for cooking, instead of firewood.
- Talk to other trekkers and try to order the same food at the same time so that lodges can do all the cooking at once on the same fire.
- Never throw rubbish onto the fire used for cooking – this is strictly taboo.
- When camping, cook on a lightweight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) powered stove and carry your own fuel.
- Avoid stoves powered by disposable butane gas canisters unless you carry all the spent canisters out with you when you leave.
- If you are trekking with a guide and porters, supply enough stoves for the whole team.

Boiling is not recommended as a means of purifying water in Nepal because water boils at below 100°C at altitude, see p396 for more information.

Firewood gathering is just one threat to mountain forests in Nepal – every year, hundreds of hectares of forest are destroyed by forest fires that burn out of control after herders use fire to clear land for grazing.

The Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) was set up to combat the growing problem of pollution in the Everest Region – drop into its offices in Lukla or Namche Bazaar for information on current issues and campaigns (p44).

Campfires & Showers

- Trekkers are banned from using firewood for heating or cooking in all of Nepal's national parks and reserves.
- The use of open fires should be discouraged even where it is not directly prohibited. Firewood gathering is the main cause of deforestation in the Himalaya and wind-blown embers are a major cause of forest fires.
- At high altitude, ensure that all members of your group are outfitted with enough clothing so that fires are not a necessity for warmth.
- Heating in lodges is generally provided by metal burners fuelled by animal dung or agricultural waste, but wearing warm clothing will reduce the amount of fuel that needs to be burnt.

Human Waste Disposal

- Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil. Ensure that these guidelines are also applied to portable toilet tents.
- Toilet paper should be buried, or preferably burned, not left on the surface. If you can get used to the local 'hand and water' technique, even better.
- If you use a toilet in a lodge, put your used toilet paper in the container provided.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) away from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Stick to existing trails – walking off the track can damage plant life and expose new areas of ground to erosion.
- Resist the temptation to take short cuts, particularly where trails switchback on steep slopes. As well as killing vegetation, these short cuts form a natural channel for rainwater, which increases erosion.
- If a well-used trail passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud rather than around it, so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Take care not to remove the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

Wildlife Conservation

- Don't buy items made from endangered species.
- Do not kill rodents or other pests in huts or camps. In wild places, they are likely to be protected native animals.
- Discourage the presence of wildlife by not leaving food scraps behind you. Place gear out of reach and tie packs to rafters or trees.
- Do not feed the wildlife as this can transmit diseases and lead to animals becoming dependent on handouts, which leads to unbalanced populations.
- Do not engage in or encourage hunting.

(Continued on page 61)

PRAYER FLAGS, PASSES & APPLE PIE

On peaks and passes, colourful prayer flags serve to pacify pre-Buddhist mountain spirits

RICHARD FANSON



A trekking party in the Everest region (p84)

JEFF CANTARUTTI

With the magnificent peaks and glacial valleys of the high Himalaya as its backdrop, it's no great surprise that Nepal hosts some of the world's best trekking. A walk in Nepal takes you not only in the shadow of the world's highest mountains but in the footsteps of Hillary, Tenzing, Tilman and other pioneers of the Himalaya, through a country that has captured the imagination of mountaineers and explorers for over a century.

The combination of physical exertion, natural beauty and fleeting moments of spiritual clarity make Himalayan trekking an addictive pastime. Leave the clamour of Kathmandu behind and you can walk for weeks into remote mountain villages whose lifestyles have not changed in generations. In this section we'll try to give you a flavour of the unique taste of trekking in Nepal and an overview of some choice routes.

LIFE ON THE TRAIL

So what exactly does a trek entail? Certainly, there is an element of physical challenge here. Nepal's crumpled and folded topography means that trails have a nasty habit of climbing to high passes, only to descend into deep gorges, cross a river and then reascend the far side. During the 300km trek from Jiri to Everest Base Camp and back, for example, the trail gains and loses more than 10,000m of elevation during its many steep ascents and descents. That's more than the height of Mt Everest! High altitudes compound the physical difficulties of many treks.

And yet trekking in Nepal is not the Ironman challenge you might imagine. Most treks require a not-outrageous five to seven hours of walking a day. On teahouse treks there are places to break for a cup of tea every hour or two, and with the help of a porter you may be pleasantly surprised at how easy hiking can be when all you carry is a light day-pack.

The key is to pace yourself. One of the first phrases you'll learn from your porter is '*bistari, bistari*' (or '*gule gule*' in Sherpa), which means 'slowly, slowly', and this is indeed wise advice. Take your time, you're on holiday. A trek is an evolving experience, not simply a race towards a particular destination. There is little point in rushing the trip only to get to some place that may not be as engrossing as where you are, right now.

A trek in Nepal is essentially different from other parts of the Himalaya in that few treks offer a true wilderness experience.

THE NATURE OF TREKKING

Each trek in this book has a distinct character, but there are some common threads to all treks. Wishing your knees were 10 years younger will soon become familiar to anyone over the age of 35, as will the wheezing breathlessness that comes from high altitude, or the sting of sweat in your eyes during a long switchbacking ascent. Innate to trekking is the enormous amount of time spent faffing around: pitching and breaking camp, packing and repacking your gear or searching for that one essential item lost deep in the black hole that is the bottom of your backpack.

Many of the joys of trekking are intangible. Most people enjoy the peace and settling of the mind that the rhythm of a long trek can bring. You'll have time to think, to breathe the mountain air and enjoy the sense of feeling fitter and stronger as each day passes. A highlight might be enjoying a section of trail to yourself in the silent early-morning light, surrounded by glorious mountain peaks, or simply sitting in a sunny lodge garden sipping sweet milky tea, reading that Dostoyevsky novel you never had time for. On a trek, the stripped-down simple pleasures of life come to the fore.

Women share tea outside Kasthamandap on Durbar Sq (p75), Kathmandu

RICHARD T'ANSON





Snow-draped valley in the Everest region (p84)

CHRIS BELL

Even at high altitudes there are intermittent herding settlements and pastures linked by centuries-old shepherds' trails.

As you trek through the Middle Hills it becomes clear that Nepal's trekking trails are bursting with life. You'll pass kids in matching blue uniforms skipping to school; old men hauling firewood; and porters, with skin like elephants, wearing flip-flops and carrying gigantic loads of anything from chickens to furniture. You'll pass Hindu pilgrims, Buddhist monks in crimson robes and even the occasional dreadlocked hermit or sadhu. Turn off your iPod and you'll notice that you haven't heard the sound of a motor engine for weeks, only the clank of a porter's kitchen pots, the clicking of trekking poles and the tinkling bells and groaning ropes of a passing mule train.

GREAT HIMALAYAN TRAIL

If you walked all the treks in this book, you would traverse almost the entire country, something that the authorities are trying to make a reality through the planned Great Himalayan Trail.

A few trekkers do attempt the full traverse, mostly over a period of many years and in bite-sized chunks, such as from Shivalaya to Tumlingtar (35 days of teahouse trekking via Everest Base Camp), Jomsom to Jumla (22 days) or an epic 36-day Around Manaslu/Annapurna Circuit/Annapurna Sanctuary combo.

The relationships that you form on the trail are an essential aspect of trekking in Nepal. Joining your porter for a game of cards or glass of *rakshi* (distilled spirits), swapping English for Nepali words or playing a trailside game of *carom* (Nepali finger snooker) with your sherpa can open the doors to a lasting relationship with both the country and its people.

Finally, it's the variety of a trek that creates its satisfying sense of journey. As

you ascend valleys and cross ridges in the Middle Hills the buzz of cicadas peters out, the flora changes, the air cools and even the houses change shape. Prayer flags replace Hindu shrines, hairless buffalo give way to shaggy yaks and jungles turn to hillsides of blossoming rhododendrons or soft carpets of pine needles. Trees shrink to shrubs and then disappear completely, replaced by alpine tundra or barren Trans-Himalayan deserts, which frame a looming horizon of snowcapped peaks and broken glaciers. All along the trail you'll pass awesome viewpoints, whose deep silent gorges or horizon line of whipped-cream peaks invite you to stop and soak up the grandeur.

Framing the day are the priceless dawn and dusk mountain views, sometimes huge sweeps of 150km, sometimes close-ups of vertical rock, slowly shifting from pink to purple, as a hidden sunset drapes dusk over your camp.



On an organised camping trek, the day begins with a cup of hot tea in bed

RICHARD L'ANSON

TEAHOUSE TREKKING

The overwhelming majority of trekkers in Nepal opt for a teahouse trek, which essentially means the Everest, Annapurna and Langtang regions. Over 90% of trekkers visit these three areas and it's easy to see why. Treks here are cheap, easy to arrange and scenically spectacular, offering all the views you'd hope for without any of the logistical hassles of a camping trek. The trails are easy to follow and at the end of the day you are guaranteed a reviving cup of tea, a slice of apple pie and a softish bed for the night. The standard teahouse treks are well within the capabilities of most people.

Number one on most people's wish-list is the Everest Base Camp trek (p101), a 16-day scenic tour de force that climbs gradually through Sherpa villages and glacial valleys into amazing high alpine scenery. EBC is a busy trek these days but you can still enjoy large sections of trail to yourself by walking the old expedition approach routes in from Shivalaya (p133) or out to Tumblingtar (p236) in the east.

Lakeside camping, Gokyo village (p127)

RICHARD L'ANSON



The Annapurna Circuit (p170) is the second-most popular option, offering more cultural variety and a clearer sense of journey than the Everest trek but still offering amazing (though slightly less-close-up) mountain views. The trail follows the Marsyangdi Valley to the spectacular side trips around Manang (p182), before crossing the 5416m Thorung La (p186) high pass to Jomsom. Road-building is nibbling away at the trail in sections but it remains one of the world's classic treks.

Teahouse treks are sociable events. You'll bump into the same people again and again on the trail and then at lunch and overnight spots. The hill lodges are a melting pot for trekkers from around the world and a great place to share the camaraderie of the trail. On the downside, the sheer number of trekkers walking the Everest and Annapurna trails in high season can be off-putting.

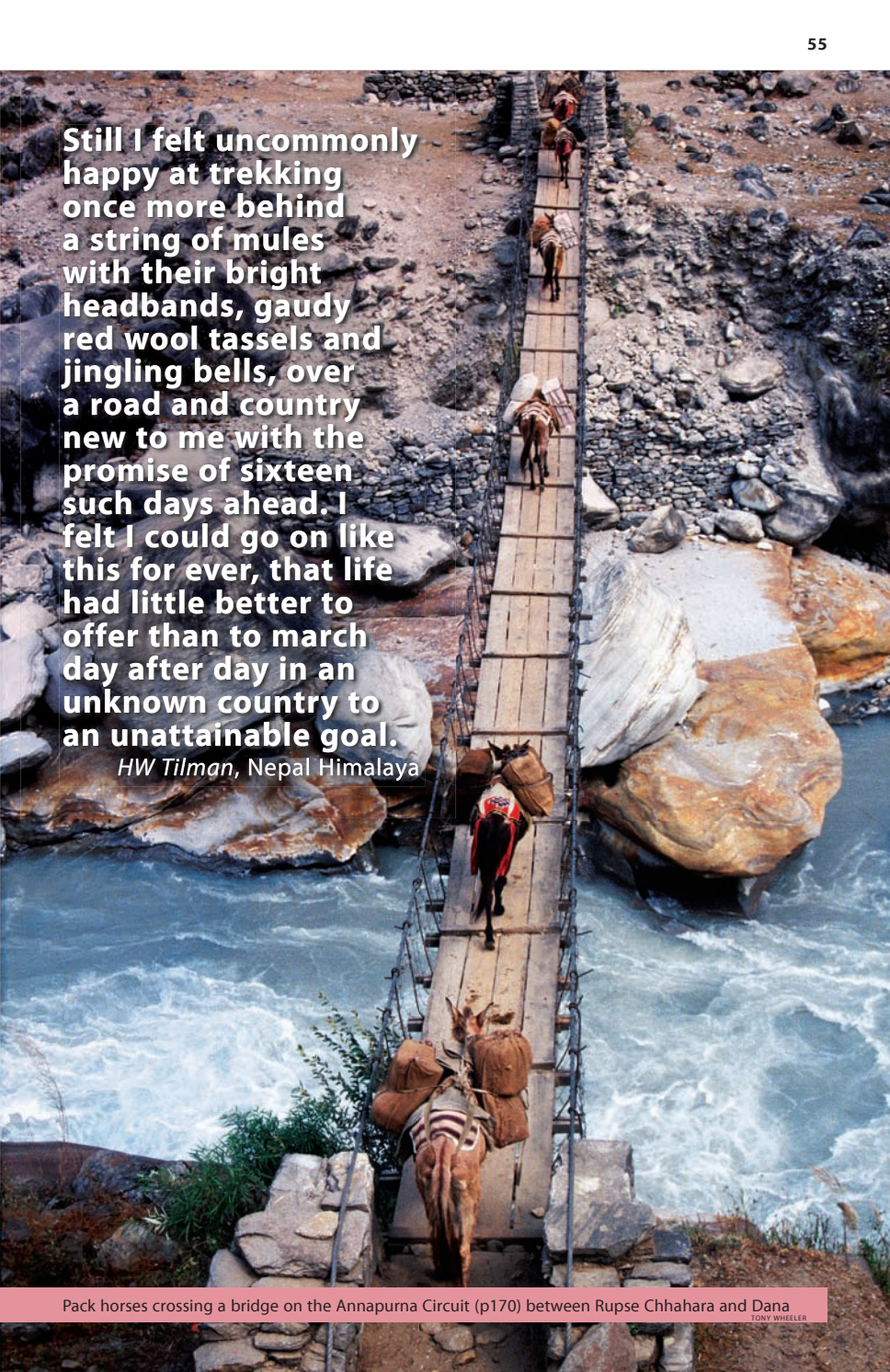
One excellent place to shake the crowds but still enjoy good teahouse facilities is the Langtang Valley (p204). Three days of walking through forests of bamboo and birch gets you to the gorgeous alpine valleys around Kyanjin Gompa, where you can strike off on superb day hikes into the heart of the mountains. Add on the seven-day trek back to Kathmandu via Gosainkund (p217) and you'll be rewarded with sweeping Himalayan skylines, a sprinkling of sacred high-altitude lakes and a high pass crossing.

'The hill lodges are a melting pot for trekkers from around the world and a great place to share the camaraderie of the trail'

Mountain *sadhus* (p71) on a spiritual search

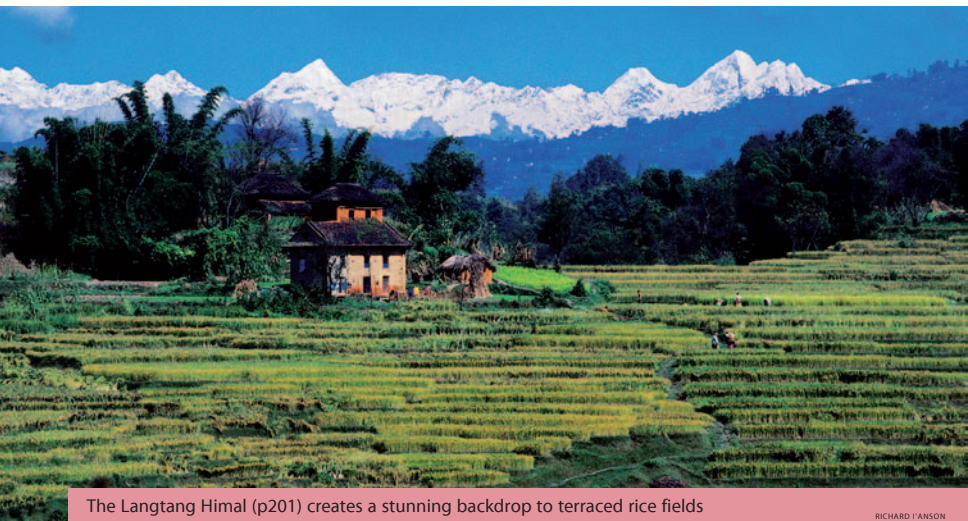
JONATHAN CHESTER





Still I felt uncommonly happy at trekking once more behind a string of mules with their bright headbands, gaudy red wool tassels and jingling bells, over a road and country new to me with the promise of sixteen such days ahead. I felt I could go on like this for ever, that life had little better to offer than to march day after day in an unknown country to an unattainable goal.

HW Tilman, Nepal Himalaya



The Langtang Himal (p201) creates a stunning backdrop to terraced rice fields

RICHARD I'ANSON

Shorter teahouse treks wind around the southern foothills of the big peaks, but bear in mind that a shorter trek or lower-altitude trek isn't necessarily less strenuous. The approach routes to the Annapurna Sanctuary on the Annapurna Panorama trek (p149) or the three-day loop to the lovely village of Ghandruk (p151) involve plenty of ups and downs, mostly on knee-bruising stone steps. For a fine introduction to trekking at lower altitudes (thus a fine winter trek), and easily accessed from Kathmandu, try the week-long loop through the Sherpa villages of the Helambu region (p224).

INTO THE HIGH PEAKS

With eight of the 10 highest mountains in the world to choose from, it's no surprise that for many trekkers, Nepal is all about the big peaks. Annapurna, Manaslu, Makalu, Langtang Lirung, Kanchenjunga and Everest all form the focus and goal of their own treks. After days of meandering through the Middle Hills on these trails, the trails finally peter out at the feet of giants, from whose astonishing heights huge glaciers tumble earthwards in slow motion. It's here in the thin air of the high-altitude wilderness that you're most likely to spot the most enigmatic wildlife: ghoral and Himalayan tahr in the Khumbu, blue sheep and snow leopards in Dolpo and marmots, pikas and lammergeiers everywhere.

Mt Everest is of course Nepal's high point and you can get views of the great peak from the hill of Kala Pattar (p120) on the Everest Base Camp trek, before visiting Everest Base Camp itself. What you soon realise however is that Everest itself isn't all that impressive from this angle (in the words of mountain writer Ed Douglas, 'Everest is like a grossly fat man in a room full of beautiful women'). Far more stirring are the mountains you may not have heard of: Kantega, Ama Dablam and Pumori. The epic views of the glacial highway and turquoise lakes of the Gokyo valley from Gokyo Ri (p128) are perhaps more impressive than anything you'll see on the main route to Everest Base Camp. For the ultimate high-altitude roller-coaster ride try the challenging Three Passes trek (p130), which takes you over the region's three most spectacular trekking passes.

The Annapurna Sanctuary trek (p160) is another teahouse trek that gets you right into a mountain amphitheatre, surrounded on three sides by the silent peaks of Annapurna, Hiunchuli, Fluted Peak and Machhapuchhare.

If you have the time to get well off the beaten track, head into the wild east to Kanchenjunga North (p252) and the little-known peak of Jannu, the 'Peak of Terror'. The views of the world's third-highest mountain from Pang Pema rank as some of the most impressive in the Himalaya. The Makalu Base Camp trek (p243) is another that gets you into a stark high-altitude world of rock and ice, with stunning views of Makalu and Baruntse.

For longer-distance views, it's hard to beat the distinctive fishtail curve of Machhapuchhare viewed from Tadapani or Ghandruk on the Ghorepani to Ghandruk trek (p168). Another classic Annapurna viewpoint opens up from the high villages of Ngawal and Ghyaru (p178), which ranks as one of the most scenic day's trekking in this book. Far less frequently experienced are the sublime sunsets that break over the Dhaulagiri massif from the Jaljala meadows on the Beni to Dolpo trek (p287).

The literal high point of many treks are the high passes, which take you temporarily into a stark world of cairns, prayer flags and astounding panoramic views. The Thorung La (p186) on the Annapurna Circuit, Baga La (p286) on the Do Tarap trek in Dolpo and the Larkya La (p328) on the Around Manaslu trek are all highlights of those particular trips. Less known are the Kang La (p317) on the Nar-Phu trek, which offers unrivalled views of Annapurna III and IV, the challenging camping-only crossing of the difficult Ganja La (p216) between Langtang and Helambu, and the ascent of the Kagmara La (p277) in the west, which offers a challenging alternative route into Phoksumdo Lake from remote Jumla.

'Everest is like a grossly fat man in a room full of beautiful women'

A TASTE OF TIBET

From a cultural viewpoint, many of Nepal's most otherworldly trekking gems are in areas of strong Tibetan influence on the remote borders with China. Here, the Tibetan-style

Surveying the landscape from a 6000m summit in the Langtang Himal (p201)

GRANT DIXON



Climbing Annapurna III (7555m) in the Annapurna Himal (p142)

JONATHAN CHESTER



flat-roofed villages are dotted with Buddhist shrines and draped with multicoloured prayer flags, and the surrounding valleys are dotted with monasteries, whose golden statues are lit by flickering butter lamps.

One of the most interesting enclaves is Mustang (p296), a restricted area where a 10-day trek winds through the arid, desert-like canyons of the Trans-Himalaya to the fabled walled city of Lo Manthang. If you can't afford the high permit fees of upper Mustang, you can visit the lower Mustang region around Kagbeni and Jharkot on the Annapurna Circuit trek (p187), where the fortified villages offer a flavour of Mustang alongside trekking lodges and backpacker bakeries. The scenery in these areas is spectacular – white snow peaks, barren brown and yellow eroded cliffs, splashes of bright green irrigated fields and red-walled gompas, all set against a cobalt-blue sky.

Just north of the Annapurna Circuit, the valleys of Nar-Phu (p310) offer another pocket of pristine Tibetan culture, with permit fees a fraction of those in Mustang. The timeless village of Phu in particular is one of the most photogenic in the Himalaya.

For something even more remote, Tibetophiles should head to Dolpo, known amongst trekking aficionados for its spectacularly remote gompas and colourful yak caravans. The 12-day combined Do Tarap (p281) and Phoksumdo (p278) treks offer a superb circuit



PHOTO: CROZIER

PRAYER FLAGS, PRAYER WHEELS & MANI WALLS

Wherever you trek in highland Nepal, strings of coloured prayer flags and walls of carved *mani* stones indicate you're getting close to the Tibetan world. Prayer flags are strung across passes, streams and houses to sanctify the air, pacify the gods and bring merit to the owners. There are several types of prayer flags but in all the colours are highly symbolic and arranged in a specific order: white (representing air), red (fire), green (water), yellow (earth) and blue (space or ether). Flags can be horizontal (called *dardings*) or vertical (*darchok* or *chatdar*), but all are printed with an image of the wind horse (*lungta*), which carries the prayers to the four corners.

Large piles of *mani* stones (pictured above) mark the entrance to most villages and monasteries in highland Nepal. They are normally inscribed with the Tibetan Buddhist mantra '*om mani padme hum*', which is often simply translated as 'hail to the jewel in the lotus' (though its true meaning is far more complex). *Mani* walls are joined by long lines of prayer wheels, which pilgrims spin to activate the thousands of prayers wrapped inside. On a trek you'll see everything from personalized, hand-spun prayer wheels to huge house-sized wheels called *mani dungkhor*, which come with their own private chapels.

Remember, always walk to the left of *mani* walls and *chortens* (stupas) and spin your prayer wheels in a clockwise direction.



TREKKING ADD-ONS

To maintain the natural high from trekking, consider adding on an elephant safari in Chitwan National Park, a whitewater rafting trip on the Bhote Kosi or a weekend canyoning trip to Borderlands or the Last Resort near the Tibetan border. Trekkers to the far west can visit Royal Bardia National Park, while Annapurna trekkers can easily add on a kayaking adventure on the way back to Kathmandu. For more details, see Lonely Planet's *Nepal* guide.

Trekkers on a moraine below Cho Oyu (p127), the world's sixth-highest mountain

PAUL DYMOND

of monasteries, wilderness and natural splendour, taking in Nepal's tallest waterfall and its most beautiful lake, at Phoksumdo Tal. For an off-the-map, expedition-style trek, the ultimate goal for fans of Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* is Shey Gompa (p330), where an insanely remote trek continues to the gompas of Saldang, Namgung and Yangtser, across the roof of Nepal, from Shey Gompa to Jomsom (p332).

You don't have to walk to the ends of the earth to get a taste of Tibetan culture. The Sherpa villages of Khumjung, Thame and Tengboche on the first few days of the Everest Base Camp trek (p101) offer a fine introduction to Sherpa Buddhist culture, along with one of the region's most colourful monastery festivals, Mani Rimdu (p89), in November.

Finally, and much less visited, is the Tibetan region of Nupri on the Around Manaslu trek (p319), long considered a *baeyul*, a hidden Himalayan valley that offers refuge in times of trouble (and the inspiration behind the notion of Shangri-La).

THE END OF THE TRAIL

Whichever trail you choose, the end of your trek will be a bittersweet moment. The rush to check your emails and reconnect with the world becomes irresistible, while your first post-trek shower, shave and sizzling steak will feel and taste better than ever before.

Back at home weeks later, maybe in your office cubicle, you'll long remember the place where the mountain air was crystal clear and the only traffic jams were the yak and mule caravans. Then it's time to plan the next trip. Your first trek in Nepal is unlikely to be your last.



Himalayan tahr (wild mountain goat) surveying the Everest region

(Continued from page 48)

Entering Private Property

- When camping in inhabited areas, always seek permission to camp from the landowners.
- Many trails pass through the gardens and fields of village houses – show the same respect for private property that you would show at home.
- It is acceptable to cross private property without permission where public land is otherwise inaccessible, so long as safety and conservation regulations are observed.

TREKKING FOR A CAUSE

A number of trekking agencies use the proceeds of trekking trips to support charitable projects and some offer a chance to volunteer while you trek, making a direct contribution to the communities you pass through. Many trekkers also undertake sponsored treks and climbing expeditions in Nepal to raise money for specific charities and projects. The following organisations run fundraising and volunteer treks in areas covered in this book.

Community Action Treks (www.catreks.com) Organisation founded by Doug Scott, offering various treks that contribute to the work of Community Action Nepal (www.canepal.org.uk).

Crooked Trails (www.crookedtrails.com) Runs fundraising treks and volunteer programs that can be combined with treks.

Cultural Restoration Tourism Project (www.crtp.net) Treks to the Kali Gandaki Valley to help with the restoration of Chhairo Gompa.

Dolma Ecotourism (www.dolmatours.com) Runs cultural-immersion treks that provide income for a remote village in Langtang.

Exodus (www.exodus.co.uk/responsible-travel) UK agency offering various treks; proceeds help fund tree-planting in Mustang and an orphanage in Patan.

Global Vision International (www.gvi.co.uk; www.gviusa.com) Offers one-month volunteer placements on educational and conservation projects as part of the Everest Base Camp trek.

PACK IT OUT – TO WHERE? Sir Edmund Hillary

One of the pressing problems in Nepal is the large amount of trash that trekkers and mountaineering expeditions generate in the hills. The problem is compounded as Nepali villagers use more and more cans, bottles and plastic items in their daily lives. Environmental groups have been active in making both trekkers and villagers aware of the problem, and the hills are now much cleaner than they were a decade ago.

Part of the conservation ethos is to pack out those items that cannot be properly disposed of in villages. This is an excellent solution for items that can be recycled, such as soft-drink and beer bottles, but you might think twice before you pack up a load of tins and plastic bottles to bring to Kathmandu. The rubbish-disposal facilities in Kathmandu are poor and are rapidly running out of space. Patan's garbage ends up at the side of the Ring Rd or in the Bagmati River. Kathmandu's garbage ends up in a poorly maintained landfill on the road to Sundarijal.

You should carry any bottles back to Kathmandu and see that they are recycled. The huge pile of beer bottles at Shyangboche airport is a dramatic example of why you should do this. Spent batteries are toxic waste, and you should carry these back home to suitable disposal facilities. You would, however, contribute more to a long-term solution to Nepal's conservation efforts if you were to encourage the use of local rubbish-disposal facilities in the hills rather than bringing other forms of unrecyclable trash back to Kathmandu for disposal. Villagers should be encouraged to develop their own properly maintained rubbish dumps that both they and trekkers can use.

Helping Hands (www.helpinghandsusa.org) US organisation that places medical volunteers at clinics around Nepal.

Himalayan Healthcare (www.himalayan-healthcare.org) Arranges medical and dental treks around Nepal.

Himalayan Travel (www.himalayantravel.co.uk) UK agency offering treks to support the Nepal Trust (www.nepaltrust.org).

Journeys International (www.journeys.travel) American agency offering tree-planting treks in the foothills west of Kathmandu.

Kangchenjunga School Project (www.kangchenjunga.org) Arranges treks with volunteer placements in health and education at villages in the Kanchenjunga region.

Mount Everest Foundation (www.everestparivar.com/mount) Runs an annual service trek providing health care in remote parts of Solu Khumbu.

Mountain Fund (www.mountainfund.org) Offers various volunteer opportunities, including an annual volunteer medical trek.

Nepal Trust (www.nepaltrust.org) Runs spring and autumn treks in Humla in northern Nepal, working on health and community projects.

Nepali Children's Trust (www.nepalichildrenstrust.com) Runs an annual trek for volunteers and disabled Nepali children in the Annapurna region.

Rural Community Development Programme (www.rcdpnepal.org) Arranges placements on volunteer projects that can be combined with organised treks.

Social Tours (www.socialtours.com) Can arrange volunteer placements as part of treks around Nepal.

Sponsortrek Nepal (www.sponsortrek.nl) Dutch agency offering various treks with a donation to medical projects in Nepal.

CONTRIBUTING TO PROJECTS IN NEPAL

Many trekkers either during or after their trip decide to give something back to Nepal by making a donation to a charity or non-governmental organisation. There are hundreds of organisations out there, from small, grassroots NGOs working in a single village to huge international aid organisations that provide food and shelter to thousands.

One of the most famous Himalayan NGOs is Sir Edmund Hillary's **Himalayan Trust** (☎ 01-4412168; www.himalayan-trust.org; Dilli Bazaar), which supports education, health care, cultural projects and afforestation in the Khumbu region and across Nepal. The Himalayan Trust has inspired a number of similar organisations, including the **Sir Edmund Hillary Foundation** (www.thesiredmundhillaryfoundation.ca) in Canada and the **American Himalayan Foundation** (www.himalayan-foundation.org) in the USA.

For information on initiatives in the Dolpo region, see p280.

Other organisations you could contact if you wish to offer assistance to Nepal:

Britain-Nepal Medical Trust (www.britainnepalmedicaltrust.org.uk) Joint venture providing health care in Nepal since 1968.

Community Action Nepal (www.canepal.org.uk) Charity founded by mountaineer Doug Scott, working in porter villages in the Middle Hills.

Eco Himal (www.ecohimal.org) Austrian organisation that runs development projects across Nepal, including an ecotourism scheme in the Rolwaling Valley.

Educate the Children Nepal (www.etc-nepal.org) Provides education and training opportunities for children and women in rural areas.

Ford Foundation Nepal (www.fordnepal.org) Runs education, development and cultural projects across Nepal.

Fred Hollows Foundation (www.hollows.com.au) Australian organisation treating cataract blindness in Nepal.

Himalayan Cataract Project (www.cureblindness.org) Works to cure Nepalis of blindness caused by cataracts.

Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust has founded more than 30 schools in Solu Khumbu.

Doug Scott is just one of dozens of mountaineers who have returned to Nepal to establish development projects for the people who helped them to the top. The first British person to summit Everest, Doug now runs treks to support the charity Community Action Nepal (www.canepal.org.uk).

Himalayan Light Foundation (www.hlf.org.np) Provides solar power and renewable energy to villages across Nepal.

Himalayan Projects (www.himalayanprojects.org) Belgian organisation that supports education and health projects in the Annapurna region.

Himalayan Rescue Association (www.himalayanrescue.org) Provides emergency medicine to villagers and trekkers at high altitude.

Kathmandu Environmental Education Project (KEEP; www.keepnepal.org.np) Pioneering organisation providing environmental education to trekkers and villagers.

Nepal Trust (www.nepaltrust.org) Runs integrated development programs in northwestern Nepal.

Read Nepal (www.readglobal.org/nepal.asp) Provides education at a village level across Nepal.

Room to Read (www.roomtoread.org) Establishes libraries and other educational facilities around Nepal.

Culture

The word 'trek' comes from the Afrikaans word for travel or migration in an ox wagon, with roots in the Dutch *trekken*, meaning 'to travel'.

Confronted with problems, many Nepalis will simply respond with a shrug of the shoulders and the phrase *khe garne?* ('what is there to do?'), which can be both frustrating and highly addictive.

Sherpa names often reveal which day of the week the person was born – Dawa (Monday), Mingmar (Tuesday), Lhakpa (Wednesday), Phurba (Thursday), Pasang (Friday), Pemba (Saturday) and Nyima (Sunday). Unfortunately they don't reveal whether the person is man or woman – Sherpa names are unisex.

The beauty and charm of the Nepal Himalaya emanate not only from the mountain scenery, but also from its amazing variety of cultures and traditions. Wherever you tread in the mountains you will pass communities whose traditional culture, religion and beliefs continue to define and shape local life, and even the landscape. The more you learn to see the world through Nepali eyes, the more local people reveal their traditional hospitality and the richer and more successful your trek will be.

POPULATION

Nepal's population is over 27 million people, and is growing at an alarming rate of 2.1% per year. Almost half of Nepalis live in the Terai, and most of the rest are spread throughout the country in remote hill villages. Only about 15% of the population lives in cities. That said, the bright lights (when the electricity is working, at least) of the Kathmandu Valley continue to attract thousands of hill people each year, and the valley's population has grown to an estimated 2.5 million.

Even in the high mountains, small settlements of stone houses and yak pastures dot every possible flat space. The average population density in Nepal is more than 142 people per square kilometre, but so much of the country is high mountains and steep hillsides that population density feels much higher.

ETHNIC GROUPS

Anthropologists divide the people of Nepal into about 60 'ethnic groups', a convenient term to encompass various shades of tribe, clan, caste and race. All are proud of their heritage and there is no need to feel unsure about asking someone's ethnicity (*thar* or *jaat* in Nepali). Often it's not even necessary to ask, as many people use the name of their ethnic group, caste or clan as a surname.

Most ethnic groups have their own language, though almost everyone speaks Nepali as a second language. Perhaps surprisingly, there is little overt ethnic tension in the hills of Nepal.

People of the Middle Hills

You will encounter **Tamangs**, one of the most important groups in the hills, on almost every major trek. Tamangs speak a Tibeto-Burman language and trace their roots back to Tibet. *Ta-mang* literally means 'horse soldier', and Tamang lore says they migrated to Nepal at the time of Genghis Khan as Tibetan cavalry troops. They practise a form of Tibetan Buddhism but they have no monks, nuns or monasteries. Tamang priests are usually married and participate in regular day-to-day activities.

Most Tamangs are farmers and live at slightly higher elevations than their Hindu neighbours, but there is a lot of overlap. Tamang women wear gold decorations in their noses and the men traditionally wear a *bokkhu* (sleeveless woollen jacket). The rough black-and-white blankets, called *rari*, that you see in homes in the hills and in shops in Kathmandu are a Tamang speciality. Many Tamangs have moved to Kathmandu, where they work in the Tibetan rug and *thangka* (Tibetan religious painting) production industries, as well as rickshaw drivers and porters.

The hills of eastern Nepal are the heartland of the 200,000 **Rais** who live between the Dudh Kosi and Arun rivers. You will meet them on

treks to Everest, Makalu and between Solu Khumbu and Hile. Like the Tamangs and Sherpas, Rais speak a Tibeto-Burman language but their 15 different dialects are mutually unintelligible, so Rais from different parts of the country converse in Nepali. Rais practise an indigenous animistic religion influenced by Hindu practice and are skilled in using bamboo for the construction of houses, baskets, fences and water pipes.

Both Rais and **Limbus** are known collectively as Kiranti. The Kiranti are the earliest known population of Nepal's eastern hills, where they have lived for at least 2000 years. Early Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* refer to the warlike Kirantis of the eastern Himalaya. Most Limbu people live in the region east of the Arun river. You will be in Limbu country during a trek to Kanchenjunga. Many have adopted Subba as a surname and serve either in Gurkha regiments or in the Nepal army. Limbus are the inventors of *tongba*, a tasty, but very potent, millet beer that is sipped through a bamboo straw. Their religion is a mixture of Buddhism and animism and they have their own shamans known as *dhami*.

Throughout the Annapurna region, as well as at major settlements in the east, you will meet **Gurungs**, a Mongoloid people who trace their ancestry to Tibet. Gurungs often serve in the Nepal army and police, as well as in the Gurkha regiments of both the British and Indian armies, and military salaries and pensions are an important source of income in Gurung villages. It is not unusual to meet ex-soldiers on the trail who have served in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and the UK.

Many men wear the traditional short blouse tied across the front and the short skirt of white cotton material, or often a towel, wrapped around their waist and held by a wide belt. In the Ghandruk area near the Annapurna Sanctuary, Gurung men fashion a bag called a *rhang* (or *bhangra*) out of a piece of coarse cotton looped across the shoulders. Gurung funeral traditions and dance performances are particularly exotic, and it is often possible to witness such aspects of Gurung life during a trek in Gurung country. Access to many high pastures, including the Annapurna Sanctuary, is possible because of trails built by Gurung sheep herders.

Although generally living south of their Gurung neighbours, **Magars** live throughout Nepal and are the largest ethnic group in the country. Traditionally they are farmers and stonemasons, but many serve as soldiers in Gurkha regiments and in the Nepal army. Magars can be either Hindu or Buddhist. Hindu Magars practise the same religion as the Brahmans and Chhetris and employ Brahmans as priests. Magar women often wear necklaces of Indian silver coins.

The **Thakalis** originally came from the Kali Gandaki (Thak Khola) Valley, but they have migrated wherever business opportunities have led. They are traditionally excellent businesspeople and own hotels, inns

The website www.mountainvoices.org/nepal.asp has an interesting collection of interviews with Nepali mountaineers on a wide variety of topics.

The shrines at Muktinath on the Annapurna Circuit are held sacred by Tibetan Buddhists, Hindus and Bönpos.

CHAUTAARA

As you trek through Nepal you'll pass dozens of convenient stone resting spots. These are *chautaara*, built by locals as an act of piety, often in the name of a deceased relative, for porters to rest their loads upon as they pause during the hot, steep climbs. In the lowlands *chautaara* are normally built under the shade of a large banyan or pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*; also called a bodhi tree). Both the banyan and the pipal tree are members of the fig family; you can tell them apart by the long roots that droop down from the limbs of the banyan. Sometimes one of each variety is planted, symbolising a male-female relationship. It was under a pipal tree that Buddha attained enlightenment over 2000 years ago.

and other businesses throughout Nepal. Their religion is a mixture of Buddhism, Hinduism and ancient shamanistic and animistic cults, but they claim to be more Hindu than Buddhist. Despite their history of trade with Tibet, the Thakalis are not of Tibetan ancestry. They are related to Tamangs, Gurungs and Magars.

One of the dominant groups in the region from Shivalaya to Everest is the **Sunwars**. They worship their own gods, but often employ Brahmins as priests. You will be in Sunwar country at the start of the trek from Shivalaya to Everest. The Jirels are a small subgroup of the Sunwars who live in and near Jiri. Unlike the Sunwars, they use Buddhist lamas as their priests.

Despite associations in the West, Sherpas actually do very little portering, focusing mostly on high-altitude expedition work. Most of the porters you meet on the trails are Tamang, Rai or other groups.

High Religion, by Sherry B Ortner, is probably the best introduction to Sherpa history, culture, religion and traditional society, though it's a bit dated (written in 1989). Also worth looking for is *Sherpa of the Khumbu* by Barbara Brower.

Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal by James F Fisher offers a 1990 anthropological snapshot of how tourism and modernisation has affected Sherpa religious and cultural life. Fisher worked with Edmund Hillary in the Khumbu in the 1960s, bringing the first schools and airstrip to the region.

Himalayan People

Most inhabitants of the high Himalaya are Tibetan-related peoples, sometimes called Bhotia (or Bhotiya) by other Nepalis, who settled in Nepal so long ago that they have built up their own traditions and culture. Many Bhotia groups wear the Tibetan-style cloak called a *chuba* and during festivals Bhotia women will bring out their best turquoise jewellery.

The most famous of Nepal's ethnic groups is the **Sherpas**, even though they form only a tiny part of the total population. Sherpas first came to international prominence when the 1921 Mt Everest reconnaissance team hired Sherpas from Darjeeling, and the Sherpa economy has since become highly dependent on tourism. Although the most famous Sherpa settlements are in the Khumbu, near Everest, six times as many Sherpas live in the Solu region to the west, and communities are found from Helambu to far eastern Nepal. Sherpas often add the prefix 'Ang' to their name (similar to the English suffix 'son' or abbreviation 'Jr'). You would call Ang Nyima 'Nyima' for short, but never 'Ang'. The Sherpas of the Helambu region call themselves Yomlo and speak a distinct dialect. See also the boxed text on p136.

The main group you'll meet on the Annapurna Circuit is the **Manangis**, well known as regional traders thanks to special trading privileges granted to them in the late 18th century. Manangis call themselves Nye-shang, but many Manang people adopt the surname Gurung on passports and travel documents, even though they are more closely related to Tibetans than to Gurungs.

Many Himalayan groups are essentially Tibetan peoples who are simply named after the region they live in. **Dolpopas** are traders, yak herders and farmers from the Dolpo region northwest of Dhaulagiri, while **Lobas** live in the once-forbidden kingdom of Mustang (Lo) and travel mainly on horseback. Both groups have long specialised in the exchange of sheep, yaks, grain and salt between Nepal and Tibet.

Other Groups

The **Brahmins** (or Bahuns in Nepali) are the traditional Hindu priestly caste. They are distributed throughout the country in both the Terai and Middle Hills, where they are often influential businesspeople, land-owners, moneylenders and government workers. They are extremely conscious of the concept of *jutho*, or ritual pollution, of their home and food. Always ask permission before entering a Brahman house and never enter a Brahman kitchen. Brahmins traditionally do not drink alcohol.

The other major Hindu group is the **Chhetri** caste. In villages, Chhetris are farmers, but theirs is the warrior caste. They are known for being outstanding soldiers, and a large part of the Nepal army is made up of Chhetris. Thakuris are a group of Chhetris descended from the Rajputs

CHORTENS

You'll pass *chortens* (stone Buddhist monuments) on every trek in Nepal. The very first *chortens* were built to hold the remains of Buddha (*chorten* literally means 'receptacle for offerings') and act as a symbol for the new faith. Many *chortens* still hold religious relics or the ashes of lamas inside them.

Each of the elements of a *chorten* has a symbolic meaning, from the square base (earth) and the hemispherical dome (water) to the tapering spire (fire), whose 13 step-like segments symbolise the steps leading to Buddhahood. On top of the 13 steps is an ornament shaped like a crescent moon (air), and a vertical spike, which symbolises ether or the sacred light of Buddha. The central rectangular tower is painted with the all-seeing eyes of Buddha. What appears to be a nose is actually the Sanskrit character for the number one, symbolising the absoluteness of Buddha.

There are *chortens* in most villages and on mountain passes in regions of Buddhist influence. A special type of *chorten* is a *kani*, which is an arch-like monument erected at the entrance to villages. A large *chorten* is commonly called a stupa; there are stupas at Bodhnath and Swayambhunath in Kathmandu.

in India and have the highest social, political and ritual status among Hindus. The Chhetri clans include the Ranas; the hereditary kings of Nepal, the Shahs, are Thakuris.

Other peoples you may meet en route to your trek are the **Newars** of the Kathmandu Valley and groups of Nepali Muslims known as **Musalman**.

Tibetan refugees are found mostly at Bodhnath and Jawalakhel in Kathmandu and in pockets in Jumla, Dhorpatan, Hile and Pokhara. Most came to Nepal in 1959 in the wake of the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet, while others are descendants of Khampa rebels who fled to Nepal in the 1960s.

The word **Gurkhas** is a non-ethnic term referring to Rais, Limbus, Gurungs and Magars who have enlisted in the British and Indian armies. The name is derived from the ancient town of Gorkha, near the Annapurna region, which was the home of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder king of Nepal. The British army applied the name Gurkha to all people in Nepal and coined the name Gurkhali for the Nepali language. The Nepali word for Gurkha soldier is *lahure*. Gurkhas are major agents of change in the Middle Hills, bringing home a fresh influx of money and new perspectives to remote communities.

TRADITIONAL LIFE

The people in the hills are more traditional and conservative than those who live in Kathmandu. Nepal remains a very family-oriented society, though family life has been disrupted to some degree by the large numbers of hill people forced to leave their village to look for work. In the far western hills, a system of polyandry (one woman married to two brothers) developed over time in response to limited amounts of land and the annual trading trips that required husbands to leave their families for months at a time. Religion remains the anchor of village life.

Most rural Nepali families are self-sufficient in their food supply, raising all of it themselves and selling any excess in the nearest town, where they'll stock up on things like sugar, soap, cigarettes, tea, salt, cloth and jewellery. Throughout Nepal this exchange of goods creates a significant amount of trail traffic and you'll pass traders, porters, mule caravans and roadside inns throughout your time in the hills. That said, the money from trekking lodges has become the major source of income in many hill villages. The hills are increasingly becoming a cash-oriented society.

Bahun and Chhetri men can be recognised by their sacred thread – the *janai*, which they wear over the right shoulder and under the right arm – which is changed once a year during the Janai Purnima festival (see p357).

The excellent Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (www.himalassociation.org/kimff) screens over 60 Nepali and international mountain-related films every December, alongside a program of talks.

Changes in trading patterns and cultures among Nepal's Himalayan people are examined in the rather dry *Himalayan Traders*, by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf.

Tibetan Diary: From Birth to Death and Beyond in a Himalayan Valley of Nepal, by Geoff Childs, is a peek behind the curtain of a Tibetan-style Himalayan community, in this case the Kutang region of Nupri, near Manaslu.

High Frontiers: Himalayan Pastoralists in a Changing World, by Kenneth M. Bauer, offers an insightful portrait of life in Dolpo, from traditional lifestyles and herding practices to changes in Himalayan trade patterns and how Dolpopas are adapting to encroaching modernism.

As you get higher into the mountains the amount of available arable land shrinks and village houses become closely packed together, often stacked atop another up a hillside and sharing common roofs. People climb from one level to another on carved log ladders outside the house. In dry, semi-arid regions such as Dolpo, Mustang and Nar-Phu, houses are constructed from rammed earth and the flat roofs are stacked with firewood. The ground floors are always home to livestock. For more on Tibetan-style houses, see the boxed text on p307.

In these marginal zones, locals rely on a mix of herding, agriculture and trade to survive, sowing crops in April or May before the village youth take the animals up to higher pastures for summer grazing. At higher elevations villagers raise a mixture of yaks and *dzum* or *dzopkyos*, which are even-tempered cattle-yak crossbreeds that combine endurance, milk production and a willingness to plough (yaks make good pack animals but can't be used for ploughing). Herders in Dolpo and other border areas used to graze their animals in the neighbouring summer pastures of Tibet, until the Chinese closed the border in the 1960s.

The winter months often see families move to lower altitudes or depart on trading trips to India, the Terai or Tibet. Once a cornerstone of the Himalayan economy, the annual exchange of Tibetan salt and wool for lowland grain, spices and manufactured products has ground to a halt in the last 50 years, causing considerable upheaval to communities in Mustang, Dolpo and the Kali Gandaki Valley.

Most remote communities are remarkably self-sufficient. Milk products are converted to hard cheese and yak butter, which is used in tea, butter lamps and even as hair conditioner. Goats and yaks are sheared during high summer and women weave the hair into cloth on backstrap looms.

The rhythms of village life are determined by the seasons and marked by festivals, with the New Year, harvest and monastic festivals the most important, alongside such summertime fun and games as archery and horse racing. Dasain (p357) remains the biggest event of the calendar in the Middle Hills and a time when most Nepali families get together.

Dos & Don'ts

Nepali people are traditionally warm and friendly and treat foreigners with a mixture of curiosity and respect. 'Namaste' (literally 'I salute the divine inside of you') is the universal greeting, accompanied by placing the hands in a prayer-like position. To show added respect you can use the formal version, *namaskar*. Do as locals do by addressing strangers of roughly your age as *dai* (elder brother) or *didi* (elder sister).

This section offers some suggestions and considerations that will make your trek more enriching. There are many tourists in Nepal, and the people in the hills have seen every kind of cultural faux pas. They will not chastise you if you flaunt your sexuality, bathe naked, litter or act disrespectfully in temples. But they will be embarrassed, will talk about you, make fun of you and may act rudely to you in return.

For more cultural tips, see the Responsible Trekking chapter on p45.

VISITING RELIGIOUS SITES

You should not enter a Hindu temple if you are wearing leather shoes or a leather belt (cows are sacred to Hindus). Buddhist gompas (monasteries) are less restrictive, but you should still ask permission to enter. Follow the lead of the caretaker and remove your shoes if appropriate, and leave an offering in the donation box or on the altar. Always wear long trousers

when entering a religious site. Always ask permission before photographing religious festivals, cremation grounds and the inside of temples.

If you meet the head lama inside a Buddhist gumpa it is appropriate to present him with a white silk scarf called a *kata*. It is traditional to include a donation to the gumpa inside the folded *kata*. The lama will remove the money and either keep the *kata* or place it around your neck as a blessing. Place the *kata* you are offering on the table or in the hands of the lama; do not place it around his neck. Monetary offerings should be in odd numbers, like Rs 101; a donation of an even amount like Rs 100 is inauspicious.

Always walk clockwise around Buddhist stupas, *chortens* and *mani* walls (walls built of stones carved with Buddhist prayers), even if this involves detouring off the trail.

PHOTOGRAPHING PEOPLE

Always ask before photographing women. You may be able to overcome shyness with a smile or a joke or by using a telephoto lens, but don't pay people for taking their picture. Many photos of hill people in Nepal, especially Sherpas, have been printed in books, magazines and brochures. Many women are afraid that a photo of them will be reproduced in quantity and eventually burned, thrown away or even used as toilet paper. It is a valid fear that should be respected.

DRESS & BEHAVIOUR

These are important considerations for the trekker, and points to observe include the following:

- Nudity is completely unacceptable and brief shorts on either men or women are not appreciated. Men should always wear a shirt.
- Public displays of affection are frowned upon.
- Don't pass out balloons, candy or money to village children, as it encourages them to beg. Trekkers are responsible for the continual cries from children for *mithai* (candy), *paisa* (money), 'boom boom' (balloon) and 'one pen'. For more on this, see p46.
- Don't tempt people into thievery by leaving cameras, watches and other valuable items around a hotel or trekking camp. Keep all your personal belongings in your hotel room or tent.
- Don't point the soles of your feet at people.
- Avoid touching children on the head, particularly young monks, as this is considered extremely disrespectful.
- When giving or receiving money, use your right hand and touch your left hand to your elbow as a mark of respect.
- Raising your voice or shouting shows extremely bad manners in Nepal and will not solve your problem, whatever it might be. Always try to remain cool, calm and collected.

FOOD & ETIQUETTE

Most Nepalis eat with their hands. They use only their right hand for eating and will expect you to do the same. If you eat with your hand, manners dictate that you wash it before and after eating. A jug of water is always available in restaurants for this purpose. In small teashops you may not be offered a spoon, but one is often available if you ask.

- Don't touch food or eating utensils that local people will use. Any food that a (non-Hindu) foreigner has touched becomes *jutho* ('polluted') and cannot be eaten by a Hindu. This problem does not apply to Sherpas.

Nepal is such a hilly country that the Nepali language has two different words for steep: *ukaalo* (steep uphill) and *oraalo* (steep downhill).

Nepalis do not like to give negative answers and will always try to give some answer, even if they do not know the answer to your question. If you are given incorrect information, this may be through fear of disappointing you.

Rhythms of a Himalayan Village, by Hugh Downs, is a portrait of Thubten Choling village in the Khumbu, offering fascinating insights into a traditional lifestyle governed by the seasons, the gods and the family. It's hard to find but well worth it.

NEPALI FOLK SONGS

You are almost certain to hear folk songs in the hills, either from your porters or from villagers, and often accompanied by a two-headed drum called a *madal*. Most songs consist of an endless series of verses and a chorus. One or two people who know the words usually take the lead and everyone joins in the chorus. Here's one song you are bound to hear at some point on the trail, along with a translation of the lyrics.

Resham Pheeree Ree

Chorus: *Resham pheeree ree, Resham pheeree ree*

Udeyra jaunkee danda ma bhanjyang

Resham pheeree ree

My heart is fluttering like silk in the wind
I cannot decide whether to fly or sit on the hilltop

Ek naley bunduk, dui naley bunduk, mriga lai takey ko
Mriga lai mailey takey ko hoeina, maya lai dankey ko

One-barrelled gun, two-barrelled gun? Targeted at a deer?
It's not the deer that I am aiming at, but at my beloved

Repeat chorus

Kukur lai kutti kutti, biralo lai suri

Timro hamro maya priti dobato ma kuri

To the dog it's puppy, puppy, to the cat it's meow meow
Our love is waiting at the crossroads

Repeat chorus

Saano ma sano gaiko bachho bhirai ma, Ram Ram

Chodreh jana sakena mailey, baru maya sanghai jaun

The tiny baby calf is in danger at the precipice
I couldn't leave it there, let's go together, my love

Repeat chorus

Kodo charyo, makai charyo, dhan chareko chaina

Pachi, pachi na au Kanchi, manpareko chaina

Millet is planted, corn is planted, but not the rice
Don't follow me little girl, because I don't like you

Repeat chorus

- Don't let your mouth touch a water jug or your water bottle if you are sharing it with others.
- Do not put more food on your plate than you can eat. Once it has been placed on your plate, food is considered polluted.
- Don't throw anything into the fire in any house – Buddhist or Hindu. In most cultures the household gods live in the hearth.
- A Nepali person will not step over your feet or legs. If your outstretched legs are across a doorway or path, pull them in when someone wants to pass. Similarly, do not step over the legs of a Nepali.
- The place of honour in a Sherpa home is the seat closest to the fire. Do not sit in this seat unless you are specifically invited to do so.

RELIGION

These Himalayas of the mind are not so easily possessed.

There's more than precipice and storm between you and your Everest.

'Transitional Poem' (1929), Cecil Day-Lewis

The Nepal Himalaya represents the meeting point of the Tibetan Buddhist world and the Hindu culture of the Indian subcontinent. These two religions overlap and blur in the hills of Nepal and most treks in this book are, in essence, a journey between these two great faiths.

Siddhartha Gautama, also known as Buddha, was actually born in southern Nepal. Over the centuries Buddhism lost ground to Hinduism until the Tibetan Tantric form of the religion made its way back across the mountains once more into Nepal from the 8th century onwards.

Today, lowland Nepal is a predominantly Hindu country but Tibetan-related peoples of the high Himalaya, from the Everest region to upper Langtang, Manang, Mustang, Dolpo, Nupri (upper Manaslu) and the Limi Valley, follow Tibetan Buddhism. In other places, Buddhism and Hinduism have intermingled into a complex synthesis that is often impossible to pick apart.

Hinduism & Buddhism

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion with 3500-year-old roots reaching back to the Aryan tribes of Central India. The religion has three basic practices: *pūja* (worship), the cremation of the dead, and the rules and regulations of the caste system. There are four main castes: Brahman (priests), Chhetris (soldiers and governors), Vaisyas (tradespeople and

The lives and roles of Nepali women are examined in the insightful *The Violet Shyness of Their Eyes: Notes from Nepal* by Barbara J Scot, and *Nepali Aama* by Broughton Coburn, which details the life of a remarkable Gurung woman.

According to the 2001 census, 81% of Nepalis describe themselves as Hindu, 11% as Buddhist, 4% Muslim and 4% other religions (including Christianity).

SADHUS

A sadhu is a Hindu ascetic on a spiritual search. They're an easily recognised group, usually wandering around half-naked, smeared in dust, with their hair and beard matted. Sadhus most often follow Shiva and generally carry his symbol, the trident (*trisul*).

Sadhus are often people who have decided that their business and family lives have reached their natural conclusions and that it is time to throw everything aside and go out on a spiritual search. They may previously have been the village postal worker, or a businessperson. Sadhus wander over the subcontinent, occasionally coming together in great religious gatherings such as Maha Shivaratri at Pashupatinath in Kathmandu (see p356) and the Janai Purnima festival at the sacred Hindu lakes of Gosainkund (see p217). You may also see sadhus trekking up the Kali Gandaki Valley towards Muktinath.

A few sadhus are simply beggars using a more sophisticated approach to gathering donations, but most are genuine in their search.

VISITING GOMPAS

From Lhasa to Langtang, Tibetan-style gompas share a striking continuity of design. Most are located on a hillside with a fine view, demonstrating their strategic importance, while others are in villages.

Most small monasteries in remote communities have only one room, the *dukhang* or assembly hall, while others also have side chapels. The vestibule features colourful painted representations of the Wheel of Life alongside the Four Guardian Kings, while the ceilings of both monasteries and *kanis* (entry *chortens*) are decorated with kaleidoscopic mandalas, a kind of geometric visual aid to meditation.

The main altar will have photos of important lineage holders such as the Karmapa or Dalai Lama, plus bowls of water, butter lamps and some plastic flowers. Hanging in the semi-darkness are demonic festival masks and sometimes ceremonial trumpets.

The main statues are likely to include Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha; Jampa (Maitreya), the future Buddha; and the 'lotus born' saint Guru Rinpoche. Bodhisattvas include Chenresig (Avalokitesvara) representing compassion; Jampelyang (Manjushri) representing wisdom, and Drolma (Tara), a female deity symbolising purity and fertility. Fierce protector gods such as Channa Dorje (Vajrapani) and Mahakala (Nagpo Chenpo), the Great Black One, guard the entries.

Another common figure is the popular 11th-century magician and poet Milarepa, who is said to have travelled widely throughout the Himalayan borderlands, including to Shey Gumpa, the Manang Valley and Nupri.

farmers) and Sudras (menial workers and craftspeople). These basic castes are then subdivided into occupational cases and beneath all of these are the Harijans, or 'untouchables' – the lowest, casteless class for whom all the most menial and degrading tasks are reserved. Westerners and other non-Hindus are outside the caste system and are therefore unclean. Any food that is touched by a Westerner, or put on their plate, becomes 'polluted' and must be discarded. The cow is, of course, the holy animal of Hinduism and killing a cow in Nepal brings a jail sentence.

Buddhism is in many ways more a philosophy than a religion. After years as prince and then a poor ascetic, Buddha developed his rule of the 'middle way' – moderation in everything. The Buddha taught that all life is suffering, but that suffering comes from our sensual desires and the illusion that they are important. The attainment of nirvana brings release from the cycle of suffering and rebirth. Buddhism prohibits any form of killing, a contrast to Hinduism, which often requires animal sacrifices to appease the bloodthirsty goddess Kali.

Despite their many differences, Buddhism and Hinduism share a belief in karma (the law of cause and effect) and rebirth, and even share some religious sites and gods (Hindus consider Buddha to be a reincarnation of Vishnu). Both Hindu and Buddhist temples can be confusing because of the vast pantheon of deities, each with their own vehicles, consorts, aspects and subtle variations in costume and hand gestures. In essence, you can look upon both Hindu and Buddhist gods simply as pictorial representations of the many attributes of the divine, or even the ego.

Several ethnic groups, including the Tamangs and Gurungs in the Middle Hills and the Newars in the Kathmandu Valley, practise a blend of both Buddhism and Hinduism and, in fact, religious tolerance is the defining hallmark of Nepali society. Consider the fact that the Tibetan deity Chenresig (Avalokitesvara) is considered by Hindus to be a manifestation of the Hindu god Shiva, who then appears in the Kathmandu Valley as Machhendranath. Is he Hindu? Or Buddhist? The answer to both, of course, is yes.

The Navel of the Demon-ess: Tibetan Buddhism and Civil Religion in Highland Nepal, by Charles Ramble, explores the complex blend of Buddhism, Bön and animism that defines so much of Nepal's borderlands.

Shamans, Lamas & Magicians

An important figure in the religious history of the entire Himalayan region is the great 8th-century saint and magician Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava in Sanskrit). Born in what is now northern Pakistan, the guru was a historical figure but is most famous for his miraculous powers in vanquishing demons, from Samye in Central Tibet to Phoksumdo Lake in Dolpo. 'Overcoming demons' can also be read as removing the resistance of the political and religious establishment to the introduction of Buddhism. Either way, he is wildly popular and his statue appears in many gompas throughout Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan.

One of the 'demons' that Tibetan Buddhism had to overcome was the existing Bön religion, an animist faith that had long existed alongside a panoply of local cults and mountain deities. Tibetan Buddhism has largely absorbed these animist faiths, but these beliefs still linger in the remote valleys of Nepal, often wedded to Buddhist and Hindu ritual. A few pockets of Bön remain, especially in the Dolpo region (see p278). On the Annapurna Circuit you'll see animist statues of the mountain god Masta in villages such as Jharkot and Kagbeni, while on peaks and passes everywhere you'll find prayer flags that serve to pacify pre-Buddhist mountain spirits, known as *yul-lha*.

Hinduism has also incorporated some of these ancient mountain gods; Annapurna is the Hindu deity of fertility and the harvest, while Mt Kailash and Gauri Shankar are believed to be the residences of Hindu gods Shiva and Parvati. Kanchenjunga is considered the guardian deity of Sikkim.

Further inhabiting the space between Hinduism and Buddhism are local faith healers, or holy men, known as *jhankri* or *dhami*. These shamans combine the role of diviner, spirit medium and medicine man. You'll most often encounter *dhamis* on remote trails, dressed in elegant regalia and headdresses of pheasant feathers. The rhythmic sound of the drums that a *dhami* continually beats while walking echoes throughout the hills.

In Tibetan communities the village lama fills the role of *jhankri*, blessing the fields before ploughing and consulting astrological almanacs to advise the auspicious timing of any trading trip. A lama often doubles as *amchi*, a role that combines physician, medic and veterinarian, and makes extensive use of the Himalaya's 400 or so types of wild medicinal herbs.

Most parents place amulets around their child's neck to protect them from evil spirits, or in lower elevations paint black kohl, or *gajal*, around their eyes for the same affect.

If you are heading out on a trek (or flying on Nepal Airlines!), bear in mind that according to Nepali superstition it's bad luck to start a journey on Tuesday or return on a Saturday.