

Where Less Offers More

November 7 - 13, 2004



~ Lai ~

Nestled between two of the most populous and ancient countries in the world, Nepal draws trekking fanatics and wandering hippies alike with its unique blend of spectacular scenery and subservient simplicity. Not even the Maoist onslaught could scare away tourists streaming in from Europe and other Asian countries, including a certain stubborn Chinese girl armed with a pepper spray.

Walking sideways up two flights of stairs carved between brightly decorated souvenir shops, the taxi driver eagerly pointed at a slight man behind an equally auburn wooden desk. Within an hour, Naba the Trek & Tour Operator had so skillfully arranged the trekking details of the entire week that the seemingly perfect original plan was scarcely remembered, let alone missed. So the Poon Hill Trek it was, or otherwise known as the Annapurna Circuit.

Night in Thamel was considerably less peaceful than anticipated with rumbling motor engines at midnight, screaming roasters at dawn and cackling crows on windowsills to fill the blank moments. Despite some extra eye bags to be piled into the tiny car, the trip started without a hitch.

Leaving Kathmandu behind, the Himalayas immediately became visible over the mountain tops in the distance. The only hurdles on the way to Pokhara were military security check points behind barbed wires, dancing school children collecting donations for Tihar (Festival of Light) and the occasional holy cow munching away in the middle of the street without a care in the world.



To hippies, Pokhara is a haven; to trekkers, Pokhara is the starting point to their dream trails. Lined with a mile of silk tapestry, hemp jewelry, wool outerwear and organic fruit shops, the city exudes charm and personality. However, onward must the entourage proceed, for the Himalayas were waiting ahead.

Never imagined putting one foot in front of the other could be this tough. At 1,500 meters above sea level, breathing gave way to gasping and the two one liter water bottles weighed more like a block of lead. Resting at increasingly closer intervals, Ulleri loomed over unattainably at 500 meters further up and two hours climb away. The only ways to gain access at this height were to drive mules, horses and donkeys, or to walk. Every now and again, tourists and mules could be seen in an awkward standstill, neither knowing how to let the other pass safely.



The extraordinarily resilient locals of an average 155cm and 45kg could carry a neck-breaking 50kgs of camping equipment secured with a cloth strap to their forehead. While the rookies huff and puff in their high-tech hiking gear, the Nepalese silently march on barefoot or in slippers. It is the tradition to drink milk tea at dawn, have lunch at 10, then eat dinner at 6 or 7 at night. One could feel nothing short of utter respect for the carriers, who have enabled others to climb higher and admire further while taking none of the credit.

Reaching Ghorepani at 2,900 meters by the end of the second day, much anticipation had been accumulated for the sunrise next morning on Poon Hill. To prepare for the 5:00am climb, dinner included Tibetan bread with honey, tomato onion soup, a dozen steamed Momos with chili sauce, Trekkers set meal composed of rice, Dhal, potato curry, vegetable salad and diced spinach, along with a gigantic slice of warm Mustang apple pie and the ever-present milk tea. The amount of calories would last the final 300 meters up in subzero temperature, if the will power and calf muscles would not.



At 4:45am, flash lights flickered along the main street as sleepy trekkers stamped their feet or rubbed their hands to keep warm while waiting for teammates. By 5:00am, a group of no less than 100 walked in single file in search of the Holy Grail. It is important to note that the Maoists had escaped during the night because the military forces came in, as if sent by angels. All that is left was to wish the clouds away.



When the first ray of sunshine broke through the thick mist, everyone on Poon Hill spontaneously cheered. It was pure beauty being revealed and everyone present was fortunate enough to witness and bask in its glory and majesty. Not knowing what to expect once all the clouds parted, Mt. Dhaulagiri (8,167m) and Annapurna I (8,091m) took our breath away.

As the saying goes, ten years to make one wine. The 24 hours of demanding climb to 3,200 meters under harsh conditions over the course of four days was definitely worth suffering through for those 15 minutes of delicious wonder and awe. In fact, even a two week Mt. Everest Base Camp trek sounded attempting, momentarily.

☺ Tips for Fellow Trekkers ☺	
To Bring	To Do
sturdy water-resistant trekking shoes	eat Dhal Bhat with hand
sarong & bandana	drink & buy milk & lemon tea
dried fruit & sweets	read on a rock by a creek & in a cafe
tissue paper	try plain curd
thick fleece	visit second hand bookstores

