

The Manaslu and Tsum Valley Trek

Updated November 2012

Since these track notes were first written in 2010 there have been huge changes on the Manaslu-Tsum trek. In season, it is now easily done as a 20-day lodge trek with accommodation available every night. More than 10,000 copies of these track notes have been downloaded so I have fully updated them following our latest visit.

The Manaslu Valley Trek is more remote and spectacular than many, with rough steep tracks and less than luxurious accommodation. It is culturally fascinating with strong continuing links to Tibet in the upper Buri Gandaki (called Nupri 'the western mountains') and the Tsum Valley, and even has the Larkya La (5160m) as a challenge. The views of Mt Manaslu, eighth highest mountain in the world, are marvellous and close.

The trek around Manaslu can be done as a lodge trek while even Tsum now has several lodges, good homestays and toilets in most places. There are now phones throughout (although not mobile reception) in case of an emergency.

The remote Tsum Valley side-trip should not be missed. In fourteen trips to Nepal this was the absolute highlight, with strong, friendly, hospitable people, a living Buddhist culture and untouched wildlife because of Buddhist prohibitions on hunting. Tsum comes from the Tibetan work 'Tsombo', which means vivid and we can only agree. The people are poor, since they have been bypassed by development for centuries, but this means their unique culture has remained intact. However a road from China is already pegged out and will cause rapid change.

Tsum is said to be a *beyul*, one of the hidden valleys which Padmasambhava blessed as refuges to be discovered when the planet is approaching destruction and the world becomes too corrupt for spiritual practice. They are valleys reminiscent of paradise, which can only be reached with enormous hardship.

As my wife said: "Tsum Valley was FANTASTIC. To be honest, I wasn't expecting it to be very different from where we'd already been but as soon as we made that right turn off the main track it suddenly seemed we were entering a hidden valley full of untouched forest so beautiful we called it the Garden of Eden."

My wife and I trekked this route first in April 2010 and most recently in November 2012. We took 16 days actual walking (9 days for the Manaslu part and 7 days for Tsum) although we were fit and did some long days. Best to allow 18 days plus two days for travel to and from roadheads, so at least 20 days in total as described in the track notes following. In particular, there are lots of ways to see Tsum Valley – this is what we did. The skies were far clearer in November than in April.

Hassles and costs: A special Restricted Area permit is required for Manaslu and a separate one for Tsum. These permits require that you have a registered guide and a party of two or more, although these requirements may be relaxed in the future. The Manaslu fees are: September – November \$US70 for the first week (then \$US10 per day) or December – August \$US50 for the first week (then \$US7 per day). For Tsum the same periods apply but the fee is \$US35 for the first week. You will need a TIMS card (Trekking Information Management System) as well if you are continuing on the Around Annapurna trek, so you'll need 8 photos for all this. In our experience if you are only circuiting Manaslu your special permit means that a TIMS card is not required.

In addition, you will need to pay both the Manaslu Conservation Area Park (MCAP) fee (Rs2000) and the Annapurna Conservation Area Park (ACAP) fee (Rs2000) for the section from Dharapani to Besi Sahar after you join the round-Annapurna trail. So you might as well farewell your guides in Dharapani and add the round-Annapurna leg, exiting down the Kali Gandaki as many do, making it a 30-35 day trek in total depending on whether you fly/take a jeep from Jomson or walk out.

For guides, we very highly recommend Visit Himalaya Treks himalt@visithimalayastrek.com and www.visithimalayastrek.com who can provide Tibetan-speaking guides on request which is very useful for Tsum and Nupri and helps you to get an insiders' view of the culture. The Tsum Welfare Committee also runs www.tsumvalley.org.

It can be difficult to stay clean in Tsum. We found it useful to carry a tin cup and facecloth for washing most of the body in our room with black tea or warm water from the kitchen.

Maps and track notes: The most recent map, available in Kathmandu, is Nepa NS505 Manaslu and Tsum Valley 1:125,000 although with some mistakes (eg the bridge and trail from Domje to Ripchet is actually on the true left of the Siyar Khola). The spelling of village names from this map have been used in the following track notes but many alternative spellings are given.

Lodges are still sometimes local *bhattis* with only *dalbhat* on offer and hard beds above the smoky kitchen, but nearly every village now has a proper lodge as detailed below. You can certainly raise porridge, *tsampa*, noodles, omelette and *roti* at most places. While simple, they are clean and friendly for the most part. There are small shops in most villages with limited stock (soap, toilet paper, batteries, bottled water, biscuits, noodles, beer, whisky).

There are signs in most villages pointing onwards to Larkya La, with times to the next village that are passably accurate. Tsum is similarly marked.

These track notes have helped make this trek more popular, have played some part in improving the number and standard of the lodges, and in particular have focussed the benefits on the villagers and away from Kathmandu camping tours. We hope that you enjoy this area as much as we do.

- Track times given are actual hours walking, with brief rests. The times do not include lunch, for instance, which may add two hours if you are ordering *dalbhat*.
- Recommended lodges have ** in the notes following. Room rate is given as (Rs300) where known and (db Rs250) gives the *dalbhat* price, a sort of Big Mac index for Nepal.
- Villages in **bold** in the following table are the stages described, but of course you can vary these stages every which way depending on fitness and inclination.
- The following track notes allow 20 days from Kathmandu or Pokhara return (2 days in buses/jeeps, 10 days around Manaslu plus 8 days in the lovely Tsum Valley).

Stage	Hours:minutes	Accommodation?
Arughat to Arkhet Bazar	1:30	Yes
Arkhet Bazar to Soti Khola	1:15	Yes
Soti Khola to Lapubesi	2:30	Yes
Lapubesi to Macchakhola	2:15	Yes
Macchakhola to Khorlabeshi	1:00	Yes
Khorlabeshi to Tatopani	1:00	Yes
Tatopani to Dobhan	1:00	Yes
Dobhan to Yaruphant	1:20	No
Yaruphant to Jagat	1:00	Yes
Jagat to Salleri	0:20	No
Salleri to Sirdibas	1:00	No
Sirdibas to Philim	1:00	Yes
Philim to Ekle Bhatti	0:45	No
Ekle Bhatti to Gum Pul (bridge)	0:45	No
Gum Pul (bridge) to Lokpa	1:00	Yes
Lokpa to Chumling	2:30	Yes
Chumling to Rainjam	1:30	No
Rainjam to Chhokang-Paro	2:15	Yes
Chhokang-Paro to Nile	3:00	Yes
Nile to Mu Gompa	1:30	Yes
Mu Gompa to Nile	1:10	Yes
Nile to Rachen Gompa	1:30	Yes
Rachen Gompa to Chhokang-Paro	1:30	Yes
Chhokang-Paro to Gho	1:00	No
Gho to Domje	0:20	No
Domje to Gumba Lungdang	2:20	Yes
Ganesh Himal Basecamp day trip	8:00	No
Gumba Lungdang to Dhomje	2:00	No
Dhomje to Ripchet	1:40	Yes
Ripchet to Lokpa	3:15	Yes
Lokpa to Gum Pul (bridge)	1:00	No
Gum Pul (bridge) to Sirdibas/Pewa	1:25	Yes
Sirdibas/Pewa to Deng	1:00	Yes
Deng to Bihi Phedi	1:20	Yes
Bihi Phedi to Ghap	2:15	Yes
Ghap to Namrung	2:00	Yes
Namrung to Banjam	0:10	Yes
Banjam to Lihi	1:00	Yes
Lihi to Sho	1:00	No
Sho to Shrip	0:10	Yes
Shrip to Lho	0:30	Yes
Lho to Shyala	1:00	Yes
Shyala to Samagaon	1:30	Yes
Samagaon to Samdo	2:30	Yes
Samdo to Dharamsala	2:00	Yes
Dharamsala to Bimthang	8:00	Yes
Bimthang to Kharche	3:45	Yes
Kharche to Goa	1:00	Yes
Goa to Tilije	1:00	Yes
Tilije to Dharapani	1:00	Yes

1. Kathmandu to Arughat Bazar by bus/jeep (7-12hrs)

You can take a direct bus from Kathmandu to Arughat (Gongabu Bus Park, 6am and 8am, about Rs500) or to Dhading and change, or to Malekhu on the Kathmandu-Pokhara road and change twice. In any case, allow a day for travel due to breakdowns and the very rough unsealed road from Dhading to Arughat, which can become impassable with rain. Alternatively, a 4WD jeep (6h) may get you there more quickly but costs around \$US220-250 for 4-6 people.

In **Arughat** (600m), a pleasant market town straddling the Budhi Gandaki river (also called Buri Gandaki on some maps), walk into town, cross the suspension bridge, turn right and stay at the ****Manaslu Hotel** (Rs600, db Rs300, hot gas shower) or ****Third Step Lodge** (Rs500) further on. Himalee Hotel 20mins out of town looks very pleasant too. The Arughat Bamboo Resort where the bus stops is reported as less salubrious despite its upmarket appearance.

Alternative access, which currently requires camping out two nights, is to take the quicker and better road to Ghorka (5h) and trek through Barpak, cross a pass at 2670m and rejoin the main trail at Khorlabeshi.

2. Arughat to Lapubesi (5-6hrs)

Many now take a jeep to Soti Khola to save 3hrs of walking but the road remains untrafficked and passes through pleasant fields and villages.

Trek through Gurung and Magar villages on the more scenic upper road where there is a choice, staying on the left bank (true right) of the Budhi Gandaki, which you will be following to its source. It can be hot and humid so wet rice, maize and millet are the main crops and you may see monkeys in the forests. The spotless ****Manaslu Lodge** and the Market View Lodge at the pretty bazaar town of **Arkhet** (760m) could easily be your first night if you arrive early enough from Kathmandu. Climb on stairs as the valley becomes wilder, prettier and narrower and descend to **Soti Khola** (710m) with the ABC Hotel, Satkar, ****Samjhana** and then Muneel through the village over a bridge. There's a swimming hole in the Soti Khola, popular with locals. Packhorses ply the trail from here on. Trek on through shady *sal* forests then climb up and down for some time on an exposed track blasted from the cliff and views way below of wild rapids, eventually dropping to the Gurung **Labubesi** (880m; Lapubeshi). Stay at ****Lapo Guest House**, Sunita, Manaslu or Lali Gurans lodges. Depending on the season, you may be offered fiddlehead fern *dalbhat* and the local mint-flavoured *achar* ('*shilong*') to which some trekkers report allergic reactions.

3. Lapubesi to Tatopani (4-5hrs)

Continue up-river, climbing sometimes and at other times down on the gravel riverbed, passing through **Machhakhola** (930m) where there is a good lodge ****Hotel Chum Vally** (Rs300, db Rs260). Continue on the same side of the Buri Gandaki, up and down again and across sandy riverflats. The monkeys and langurs in the jungle above can knock rocks down, so watch out. Large Gurung villages are way above while the track passes few houses, like lower **Khorlabeshi** (960m) which was largely destroyed by a huge rockslip 24 years ago. A survivor has built a botanic garden and nice lodge from which he sells his organic coffee. Shangri La and Manaslu lodges. Goat herders passing through this area wear the distinctive smoke-browned capes called *bokkhu* made famous in the book *Honey Hunters of Nepal*. Continue up and down over a couple of ridges to **Tatopani** (930m; 'hot water') where there are hot water spouts under the sheer cliffs that provide a delightful evening shower and soft skin due to natural minerals. There are two simple lodges close to the springs, which might be smoky, and one further up. Sleep to the sound of water while refusing to think about earthquakes.

4. Tatopani to Philim (5-6hrs)

Climb over a ridge and cross the Buri Gandaki on a new suspension bridge, circle under cliffs and climb a little to **Doban** (1000m; Duvan) where there is the Himalayan lodge (Rs500, db Rs260). The Shyaule Bhatti lodge is 40mins later then 20mins to Manaslu Santi and Thulodhunga ('big rock') lodges where you can take tea and look at the wild gorges ahead. After a landslip and

Yaruphant (1140m) cross the bridge across the Yaru Khola (1363m) and emerge onto riverflats at **Yaru** (1140m) for lunch at the Sandbar Hotel. Look downstream at the massive rockfall that chokes the river. Just past Yaru, cross to the true right bank and enjoy easy up and down to **Jagat** (1410m), a neatly flagstoned Gurung village where *jagat* ('tax') is collected on Tibetan trade. The pleasant **Budhi Gandaki lodge (Rs400, db Rs350) is 10mins before Jagat and in town there are the Shantih and Rubinah lodges. You will need to show your MCAP permit at an office on the left. Jagat was a Maoist stronghold and not all people are friendly. In this area, potato, maize and climbing beans are all planted at the same time – the potato for food and to suppress weeds, the maize for food and to supply a trellis for the beans, which are an important source of protein. Marijuana is a major weed problem in season.

Walk up the riverbed then climb over a rocky ridge to **Salleri** (1440m) with views of Sringi Himal (7187m), then descend to **Sirdibas** (1430m; Setibas, Tara). You'll see your first signs of Buddhist culture here. Look out for *rakshi* spirit being distilled from millet beer in roadside kettles on this day. Continue up-river on the left bank, up and down before crossing Nepal's longest suspension bridge to the east bank and a tiring climb up to prosperous **Philim** (1590m; Dodang) surrounded by rich fields of maize, potato and millet. There are shops and rooms (some smoky and dark) in three or four lodges (Maila, new New Kharki, **Hotel Philim Village with chalets). There are signs of building and a broad camping area also available.

5. Philim to Chumling (5-6hrs)

If you are not taking the Tsum Valley side-trip then today you may continue onto Ghap (see Day 13 below) towards the Larkya La.

Traverse north out of **Philim** on the obvious track signposted to the Larkya La, through some pretty forest with views up the narrowing valley. After 1hr climbing enter the increasingly misnamed **Ekle Bhatti** (1600m; 'lone teashop') with at least six *bhatti*, then traverse high above a spectacular gorge, entering a largely uninhabited area of pine trees. Eventually drop to a trail junction going left to Ghap and right to the Tsum Valley, just above Gum Pul ('bridge'). Climb on a well-graded but exposed track through pines and rhododendrons, looking down on the other trail across the river. If the slopes here have recently had their annual burn there is a real risk of stonefall from the cliffs above, especially if there are goats grazing. Climb on zigzag steps, increasingly exposed, and gain your first glimpses of the narrow lower Tsum Valley, very steep across the Siyar Khola (Shiar Khola) which drains from the very top of the valley. Across the Buri Gandaki is Himalchuli (7893m) above steep cliffs. Walk through a largely intact and peaceful temperate forest into **Lokpa** (2240m; Lakuwa), surrounded by barley fields, where there is a 4-room 8-bed lodge (Rs400, db Rs300), extensive camping terraces and a huge stock of Chinese alcohol. This place would be trap in case of a fire!

Descend through beautiful forest, crossing two new bridges, circle under a huge bluff on the river then climb steeply on deteriorating exposed stairs. After about 30mins start to traverse north through pines and rhododendrons, still climbing and with very steep slopes. The hidden valley of Tsum stretches enticingly ahead. Eventually descend to a deserted *bhatti* **Ghumlong** (2130m) on the river. The path straight ahead climbs steeply to **Ripchet** (2470m; Ripche) in about 1hr; the path to **Chumling** (2360m) crosses the Siyar Khola on a wooden bridge and up. It is not for those afraid of heights - several locals have fallen to their death from this track while drunk. After about 30mins, below Chumling, take the level track to right (east) for 15mins to arrive at a lodge with 6-8 beds. Make sure you climb up to Chumling and check out the old gompa, the traditional houses, orchards, clinic and beautiful stone streets. This is Buddhist agriculture, with conical pine needle haystacks among the prayer flags. From here on trails are lined with artistic *chortens* and *mani* walls made of thousands of stone slabs carved with deities and prayers.

6. Chumling to Chhokang-Paro (3-4hrs)

An easier day after yesterday. Cross the suspension bridge just east of the hotel and traverse through rich farming land of maize and potatoes. The houses are classic Tibetan with barricades of firewood on the roof, but without flat roofs as it rains and snows here. Cross a huge slip where rocks and flood cleared the area even up onto the opposite bank, killing five in 1999, but is now

covered with a forest of new trees. Up the valley to the east are superb views of several of the 7000-7400m Ganesh Himal, of long suspension bridges on the opposite bank, and far above the perched village of **Ripchet** (2468m). Your guide may find somebody willing to cook lunch at **Rainjam** (2400m), a single bhatti with enclosed courtyard.

Cross the Serpu Khola and climb for over 2hrs on well-graded but exposed track to upper Tsum and the joined villages of **Chhokang-Paro** (3010m), stone houses with a few iron roofs nestled under cliffs. The valley opens here into spacious fields of barley, maize, buckwheat and potato, but wheat has been abandoned due to 'hill bunt', a disease which turns the heads black and causes total crop failure. Herds of *thar* often graze the wild cliffs to the north, coming right down to the fields. The Tashi Delek lodge has a 12-bed dormitory divided into cubicles with curtains (bed Rs200, db Rs300). If the air is clear Himalchuli (7893m) can be seen down valley.

7. Chhokang-Paro to Nile (3-4hrs)

Most people can climb to 3000m without getting altitude sickness, but the altitude gain in these track notes above Chhokang-Paro is right at the 300m per day suggested for safety. Watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge.

Take time to explore the village and climb north to a retreat where Lama Kongchog died after 26 years of meditation. His child reincarnation, found in the village, was subject of the award-winning DVD *Unmistaken Child* (available in Kathmandu). *Thar* are often sighted near here. The friendly people speak Tsumba, related to Tibetan, but often little Nepali and are quite unused to visitors.

Head east through small villages and past a local school, climb over a ridge of *chortens* and past **Lamagaon** (3202m) through the flat fields, looking across the extensive crops and river to the huge courtyard of the **Rachen Gompa** (3240m) with excellent pilgrim accommodation (see Day 9). This nunnery is the female equivalent of the main Kathmandu Kopan Monastery. Lamagaon claims to have a lodge. At a lodge in **Pangchhe** (Lar) (3245m, under construction) you can pay and get a key for a visit to Milarepa's Cave (**Piren Phu**), where the bringer of Buddhism to Tibet is reputed to have meditated. The cave is being extensively restored and a donation of Rs500 is suggested.

Cross the Shiyar Khola, pass through hamlets of **Phurbe** (3251m) and **Pangdun** (3258m) and pass an unusual round *stupa* before reaching the larger village of **Chhule** (3347m) through an impressive entrance gate (*kani*). There is one homestay in Chhule, turn right above the bridge. The children here all wear the Tibetan dressing gown called *chubas* and there are many yaks. Head upstream to cross the bridge and climb to **Nile** (3361m; Nyile, pronounced Nee-lay). Both villages are in traditional style with inclusion of livestock compounds into the houses and sheltered verandahs for drying crops. **Lobsang Homestay (bed Rs250, db Rs300) has a sheltered courtyard and 5 beds and plans to upgrade to a hotel shortly. Two years ago there was no toilet in this village; now there are 14 and plans for all households to have one within two years, partly as a result of money flowing from teahouse trekkers.

8. Nile to Mu Gompa (1-2hrs)

You can leave your rucksack behind and visit Mu Gompa as a day trip, continuing on to Rachen Gompa or Chhokang-Paro, or stay overnight in Mu Gompa and visit the isolated Dhephu Doma nunnery and gompa and even climb above it for great views – ask at the nunnery.

Make up valley on the west bank, enjoying sunrise on the narrowing valley walls and yaks being put to pasture. The final climb up to the large **Mu Gompa** (3700m; Mugumba) is through dry Tibetan country, with rows of *chortens* and widening mountain vistas. This is a large monastery with over 100 monks and an ancient *gompa* visited by David Snellgrove (*Himalayan Pilgrimage*) in 1956. There are many rooms available and nearby toilets (bed Rs250, db Rs300). The food is basic. Try *tsampa* (roasted barley flour) for breakfast with tea or even Tibetan butter salt tea.

On three sides now are tantalising views of the border with Tibet, with frequently used passes to the east (Ngula Dhojyang or Mailatasachin Pass, 5093m) and west (Thapla Bhanjyang, 5104m) just out of sight. Some people climb to **Kalung** (3820m) or **Bhajyo** (4030m) and camp, making a

daytrip to the passes for a view into Tibet. Mingma Lama (enquire in Nile) can organise accommodation and/or horses if you want to do this. It takes about 4hrs to climb to the pass from Bhajyo and 3hrs down. From Mu Gompa there are extensive seasonal yak pastures in all directions, the Lungdang Glacier to the east and high peaks in all directions.

In the early monsoon, in pastures at 5000m, many Tsumba collect the most expensive natural medicine in the world, known as *yarsagumba*. This is the caterpillar of a ghost moth parasitised by a fungus *Cordyceps sinensis* and is worth \$10,000/kg in China as an aphrodisiac and cancer cure.

The isolated 600 year-old **Dhephu Doma Gompa** (3900m) is 30-45mins uphill on the obvious westward track and has two resident nuns who report seeing snow leopards and musk deer and may give you tea. The inside of the gompa has been repainted by monks from Tibet and there are some ancient thankas.

9. Mu Gompa to Rachen Gompa (3-4hrs)

Return down valley through **Chhule**, collect your rucksack if you left it there, and continue down as far as **Phurbe**, where the Sheraps (sic) Homestay with camping looks clean and comfortable. Stay on the east bank of the Siyar Khola and cross flat boulder-covered plains following the power lines to **Rachen Gompa** (3240m), where it is possible to inspect the ancient gompa if you want and the many young nuns are very friendly. Families in the Tsum usually have at least one family member as either a monk or a nun.

At Rachen Gompa you can stay in comfortable **pilgrim rooms (Rs600, db Rs400), wash clothes and eat *dalbhat* in shifts with the nuns, enjoying electric light and maybe a solar hot shower.

10. Rachen Gompa to Gumba Lungdang (5-6hrs)

Continue south until a bridge crosses to the west bank and pass again through Chhokang Paro then drop below on the previous trail towards Chumling. After about 2hrs, see a small white *gompa* on the left at **Gho** (2485m). Descend on a narrow trail passing the *gompa* on your left and drop to a wooden bridge over the Siyar Khola. This is a good place to wash clothes and yourself after the lack of water further up the Tsum. Cross the bridge to **Domje** (2460m, Dhumje, Tumje) which has a Tibetan herbal medicine clinic and school but no food or lodging. The track onwards climbs just behind the clinic, which may be out of sight so take any clear trail that heads upwards.

Climb very steeply through pines and rhododendrons until the track starts traversing at a *mani* wall with prayer flags. The track is exposed and narrow. Finally, in the pine forest, take a prayer flag marked uphill trail and make a zigzag climb through huge silver pines to reach **Gumba Lungdang** (3200m), perched on a ridge with small cells for the nuns scattered through the beautiful rhododendrons above. This small *gompa* with 40 nuns has an intense and engrossing *puja* from 6.00-7.30pm each night unless the nuns are on holidays or elsewhere, which is for some months each year – enquire in Chhokang-Paro. There is no lodge or formal camping area but permission may be obtained for a limited number of people to sleep on the *gompa* verandah or to camp in the *gompa* forecourt and use their kitchen. There is a toilet although you may have to ask for water. The mountain views in all directions are amazing and being here was the absolute highlight of our many trips to Nepal.

11. Day trip to Ganesh Himal Base Camp (7-8hrs)

Your guide may be required since the track is poorly marked. Altitude can make this day difficult for some, but the intact forest wilderness and views make it an outstanding trip.

Circle from the *gompa* through a white gateway (*kani*) and below the nuns' housing, between two houses and traverse down and up through two small valleys, then drop right on dusty or muddy zigzags on a shortcut to regain the lower track and continue up valley through the forest. After about 5mins pass through a small clear pasture (*kharka*) and 5mins later take the right-hand descending track and drop to the river. This is about 30mins from the *gompa*. An informal bridge takes you to a steep bank – look for cairns upstream and climb the bank. Traverse through forest

on a passable track with a lot of wind-thrown trees for 30mins and cross the Laudang Khola to the west bank on a rickety wooden bridge. Climb steeply for 30mins through pristine pines and rhododendrons on a ridge, bearing left to two rude stone huts beside a large boulder in a *kharka*. The track continues between the huts and up, veering to the left, not straight up! The track is clear through cut silver pines then into birches and up the true right of a birch-lined dry creekbed. Eventually you emerge into grassy flats behind the lateral moraine of the Torogumba glacier. Continue climbing past seasonal yak huts and you will find several tracks on the moraine wall that give superb views of the cirque of mountains. The camp is somewhere about here and it is a most beautiful spot.

It takes about 4hrs to reach the **Ganesh Himnal Base Camp** (4200m). The map shows another base camp on the east side of the glacier, but there appears to be no obvious track between them, so return to Gumba Lungdang in time for the evening *puja* by retracing your steps. Make sure that you find your 15mins shortcut up to the *gompa*; the alternative takes 45mins.

12. Gumba Lungdang to Lokpa (7-8hrs)

This can be a taxing day so start early. Descend to Domje, where there are no lodges or *bhatti*, by the upward track. Cross the Laudang Khola on a new swing bridge between the two lowest houses in Domje and stay on the south (true left) bank of the Siyar Khola (contrary to the map). Traverse 10 mins on a new trail through lovely forest until a choice of upper or lower trails – either works, the lower is best. Cross some very deep gorges on new swing bridges to picturesque **Ripchet** (2470m; Ripche) where there is a homestay and you can get lunch if you ask around. Take time to look around at this perched fertile valley of barley and buckwheat with evocative *chortens* in the fields backed by pine forest. Descend on steep loose stairs to the deserted *bhatti* **Ghumlong** (2130m) on the river, which you passed through some days ago. Climb again through the pristine temperate forest to **Lokpa** (2240m), enjoy a comfortable bed in the lodge there and maybe a bucket bath in the toilet or camping toilet.

13. Lokpa to Ghap (4-5hrs)

Continue from Lokpa down the exposed track until the track from Philim comes in from the left. Turn right, cross the Buri Gandaki on a solid bridge after about 1hr and traverse to a welcome *bhatti* just around the corner for tea and a last look up the Tsum Valley. Enter a very narrow gorge with loose tracks, up and down, up and down. Cross to the east bank (true left) at one point and then back again to the west bank on a new suspension bridge. After about 2hrs reach **Sirdibas** (1860m) with comfortable Manaslu and Rubinda lodges. In another hour enter Nupri ('the western mountains') through bamboo forests to **Deng** (1800m), inhabited by Gurungs who practice Buddhism. Lodging at Manaslu Trekker Home (10 rooms, hot shower), Bodhi Himnal Hotel and **Shangri-La. Just beyond Deng recross to the east bank and climb to **Rana** (1980m) and pass **Bihi Phedi** (1990m, Himnal and Manaslu hotels) with the trail up to the stone-carving village of **Bihi** (2130m; Bhi). The river roars below. Continue in and out of continuous wild canyons, with a village perched in every conceivable cropping situation, cross the Serang Khola coming from the north and climb steeply again before finally circling into **Ghap** (2160m; Tsak) past Mountain View lodge where the horses stay, **Budhi Gandaki Lodge (Rs250, db Rs370, run by a trekking cook with 20yrs experience). The *mani* walls here and onwards as far as Bimthang often display intricate quality carvings of various Buddhas in meditation, incised in the hard local stone by a family of carvers from Bihi. The Manaslu Thakuri lodge and Kyimolung lodge and camping ground are in Ghap itself and building is underway.

A side-trip from a bridge below Bihi can take you up to **Prok** (2380m), with an ACAP office and emergency radio and an excursion to Kal Tal (3685m; Kalchhuman Lake), then back down to Ghap. Two lodges are reported in Prok and those who visit really enjoy the experience, including a lake 1200m higher for which a local guide is advised.

14. Ghap to Lho (5-6hrs)

Enter a beautiful forest of fir and rhododendron with many birds, staying on the south bank, cross north on a wooden bridge with a roaring narrow canyon below then cross back to the south bank on a new swing bridge with grey langurs watching. The main trail now climbs on well-made stairs, but a highly recommended narrow shortcut to the right just after the bridge and along the riverbank is far quicker and through superb pine forest. After about 1hr, climb a zigzag from the river to the neat village of **Namrung** (2660m) with shops, restaurants and the Thakali, Thakuri and Namrung lodges about the flagstoned square. While waiting for a meal it is worth wandering around the village, where carvings from Bihi have been painted in colours above a gateway. The architecture characteristic of upper Nupri starts here: several houses gathered together about a common courtyard and livestock shelters on the ground floor, with heavy wooden shingle roofs and log stairs to dark verandahs.

Pass mani walls, fields and houses through **Banjam** (2800m, Banzam) with Nubri Trekkers Inn. Enter the fir, rhododendron and oak forest before climbing to **Lihi** (2900m; Li, Ligaon) with the Lihi Hotel in 1hr, then onto **Sho** (2950m, Syogoan) where there is a *bhatti* but no lodges yet. The platforms in the fields are where people keep overnight watches to chase bears from their crops. Most people from here onwards wear traditional Tibetan dress, with the children in small *chubas* like dressing gowns, asking for *shim shim* (Tibetan for candy). Some have impeccable English due to an Australian aid project. There are some particularly fine paintings in the *kani* (gate arches) that you pass before Sho. **Shrip** (3000m) boasts the Nupri Eco-hotel. A leisurely walk onwards, in and out of gullies to **Lho** (3180m; Logoan) with the large **Tashi Delek lodge (Rs400, db Rs400). The Ghorka Manaslu Home should function next season. Pity about the wedding-cake stupa donated from Taiwan which dominates this otherwise picturesque village focussed on yak herding.

There are excellent views of Manaslu (8163m) and Manaslu North (7157m) from the mani wall at the far end of the village and from the gompa on the hill to the west.

15. Lho to Samagaon (2-3hrs)

This short day takes you into the mountains with time to enjoy and acclimatize. The views of Manaslu are stupendous. Easy walk to **Shyala** (3520m, Syal, Syalagaon, Shyaula) up a pine and rhododendron gully with moss and gin-clear stream. Enjoy 360° views from here due to a fire and extensive deforestation and extensive building including the largest lodge on the trek under construction, currently Manaslu Pik 21 Hotel and Gurkha Manaslu Homestay. Another easy hour to the large village of **Sama** (3530m, Samagaon, Ro), losing the gigantic views of Manaslu but entering a world of yaks, pastures and houses which seem to have grown from the stones. Only potatoes and barley can be grown at this altitude. There's Norbu Lodge on the left on entering, **Samagaon Lodge (Rs500, db Rs350), Peace & Happiness Lodge and the enlarged Manaslu Hotel further up on the right.

Day-long acclimatisation trips can be taken from here to **Pungyen Gompa** or to **Manaslu Base Camp** (4900m) An afternoon walk to the **Kargyu Chholing Gompa** is recommended.

16. Samagaon to Samdo (2-3hrs)

Another short day because of the altitude, with time to go via the iceberg-covered **Birendra Tal** (3450m) under the Manaslu Glacier, wade the exit stream depending on the time of year and drop down to pick up the main trail from Sama to Samdo. Easy walking through yak pastures up a broad valley with long *mani* walls, marmots in April but not November standing on their burrows. Finally leave the treeline behind, although low-lying juniper is all around, climb to a ridge and drop to cross the Buri Gandaki on a wooden bridge. It takes some time to reach the white *kani* above but immediately behind is **Samdo** (3860m), a very picturesque village dedicated to yak herding, so much so that there are more animal and fodder shelters than human accommodation. Lodges are Chez Kyrang, Yak Lodge (both not open) and **Tibetan Twins (Rs350, db Rs440), comfortable although likely to be cold at this altitude.

Side valleys and Samdo Peak call out for afternoon wandering but take a jacket as cold wind can come up at any time. The Larkya La trail is ahead up valley and left. You can see the main track for Tibet over the Larjyang La (Lajyung Bhanjyang, 5098m) sloping up to the right from the Larkya La trail and you can make an excellent afternoon acclimatisation walk of 4-5hrs return to 4500m up this trail, seeing lots of blue sheep and yaks and entrancing views, but the pass itself is a full day trip. The first village and road in Tibet is about 2hrs beyond the pass with access currently blocked by China even for locals. There is a lot of Chinese and Tibetan alcohol and food for sale in Samdo.

17. Samdo to Dharamsala (2-3hrs)

Descend beyond Samdo on a broad trail, dropping to cross the much-reduced Budhi Gandaki at 3850m. Pass the trail to Tibet to the right and climb left after a *mani* wall, traversing through juniper with many marmots in April but not November when they hibernate. Cross two ravines on narrow tracks, very icy towards winter. There is no Larke Bazar despite what many maps assert; at one time traders from Namche Bazar came through Tibet to trade in this area and maybe some of the scattered stone shelters you will pass were part of that market. **Dharamsala** (4480m; Larke Phedi, Larkya Resthouse) is now a seasonal village with dark stone rooms and tents for at least 50 people (bed Rs300, db Rs550), and a dirt-floored but efficient dining hut. Even toilets are available. In 2012 this entire place opened 1 October and closed for winter on 24 November, so check in Samdo before counting on staying here. The camping area is filthy with toilet trenches, rubbish and blowing toilet paper so be careful where you get your water and boil it well if camping. The views are marvellous. A large herd of blue sheep call the tussock-covered hills home and we saw snow leopard prints in fresh snow around the toilets.

18. Dharamsala to Bimthang (7-9hrs)

Note that if snow has fallen overnight and there have been high winds, then there may be less snow as you climb making the pass still crossable. Climb steadily over the ridge behind Dharamsala and beside the large lateral moraine of the Larke Glacier. The climb is not difficult but it is long and rocky underfoot, particularly as you top the moraine. Look for cairns and metal snowpoles which assist route finding. Descend past four frozen lakes and make a final tiring climb to the left up to **Larkya La** (5160m), marked by prayer flags. It takes about 3-5hrs to reach the pass and it can be very cold and windy with a risk of exposure if under-equipped or ill. The peaks to the west are Himlung (7126m) near Tibet and Kang Guru (6981m) and Annapurna II (7937m) in the Annapurna Range.

Trek west on a high moraine ridge exposed to wind for some distance, on the right side of a deep gully, then drop steeply on loose scree, eventually traversing left on more steep scree. There are several places where snow or ice would make this treacherous and some groups fix a rope on the steepest piece. Make a long descent on loose gravel to a welcome more level area with grassy moraine, where the angle eases. The track now runs left of the large lateral moraine, rocky at times, in a widening and beautiful valley all the long way to very scenic **Bimthang** (3720m; 'plain of sand'), a descent of 1400m in about 3hrs. The views during the descent are huge – icefalls and mountains in all directions, a medial glacial lake (Pongkar Tal) between the Pongkar and Salpudanda Glaciers, and the joining of these two glaciers with a third glacier to form the Bhimdang Glacier whose lateral moraine towers over Bimthang. The new chalet-style ****Hotel Ponkar Mountain** (Rs400, db Rs400) is the first lodge but two new lodges are being built and there are 4-5 older-style *bhattis* with rooms.

19. Bimthang to Dharapani (7-8hrs)

Walk south below Bimthang behind the moraine wall for some time before crossing the Bhimdang Glacier, which can be loose underfoot. Climb up the far moraine wall quickly to avoid stone-fall and enter some of the best forest in Nepal. If you are in rhododendron season, the mauves, reds, pinks and whites are stunning amongst the huge pines and the views of the back of Mt Manaslu are superb. Descend rapidly along the true right bank of the aptly named Dudh ('milk') Khola through a *bhatti* at **Hompuk** (3420m) in a forest clearing. Gentle riverside walking continues rapidly to **Karche** (2700m; Karache, Surki Khola, Suti Khola) for lunch after about 3.5hrs. This would be a great place to spend a night, with Saat Kanya Hotel or ****Himalayan Cottages** owned by the

same Bimthang man. In the next hour you will see many signs of a glacial flood, with tree trunks smashed and banks undermined, the track becoming quite rough. Climb steeply over a ridge and drop to Gurung **Goa** (2560m, Gho), the first real village since Samdo. There are new lodges being built here and Hotel Manaslu would also be comfortable for overnight, or lunch if continuing. The valley becomes more agricultural as you pass fields and copses of oak and rhododendron, staying on the north (true right) bank until **Tilije** (2300m; Tiljet). The Larke Pass Hotel offers beds and a dining room and there were several other closed lodges here.

Pass under a stone arch, cross the Dudh Khola and descend rapidly towards the Marsyangdi Valley through scrubby forest. Cross back to the north bank just below **Thonje** (1900m; Thangjet, Thoche) and climb up to join the main round-Annapurna trail, over the Marsyangdi Khola on a long suspension bridge. Turn left into **Dharapani** (1860m) and take your choice of hotels spread for a kilometre down the hill. Our favourite is **Hotel The Seven. Hot showers and washing facilities will suggest a rest day here.

Jeeps now ply for a seriously scary ride back to Besi Sahar or Kathmandu (6-8hrs, US\$200-220). The roadhead is now up-valley at Chame. Turning right takes you over the Thorung La and down the Kali Gandaki valley in about 10-14 more days.

Sue and Howard Dengate (November 2012) confoodnet@ozemail.com.au

There are a few photos at <http://fedup.com.au/information/nepal/nepal-manaslu-tsum-trek-photos>
More track notes at <http://fedup.com.au/information/nepal/nepal-information>
