

Annapurna Region

HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking completely around the Annapurna massif in 16 to 21 days, crossing the 5416m **Thorung La** (p186)
- Watching the golden dawn light inch down the frozen fluted panorama of peaks from the **Annapurna Sanctuary** (p165)
- Savouring the breakfast views of Annapurna and Machhapuchhare from the traditional Gurung village of **Ghandruk** (p167)
- Exploring the *chortens*, forts and shrines of pristine Trans-Himalayan villages such as **Marpha** (p193), **Jharkot** (p189) and **Kagbeni** (p190) in the Kali Gandaki Valley, or **Bragha** (p179) in the Manang Valley
- Acclimatising in style on spectacular side trips to holy **Milarepa's Cave** (p180) or scenic **Ice Lake** (p181), just outside Manang
- Admiring the perfect views of Annapurna II and IV over a teahouse lunch in **Ngawal** (p179) or **Ghyaru** (p179), on the high route from Pisang
- Teaming up with other trekkers for the challenging three-day excursion to high-altitude **Tilicho Tal** (p182)

With over 60,000 visitors a year, the Annapurna Himal has long been the most popular region amongst trekkers, and for good reason. The mountain views are flawless, the variety of scenery is hard to match and the villages and monasteries you pass offer an exotic slice of Nepali, Tibetan and Trans-Himalayan culture. You'll be on the trail within an hour of leaving Pokhara and you can count on excellent food and accommodation whenever you need it.

The Annapurna Circuit has long been considered one of the world's great treks. Like all great journeys, the trek reveals itself gradually, climbing through subtropical scenery to a Tibetan-influenced valley and then over the high Thorung La to the Kali Gandaki Valley, a desert-like Trans-Himalayan region that was once a vital trade corridor to Tibet. The side trips that line the circuit rank among Nepal's most spectacular, so this is one trek not to rush.

The Annapurna Sanctuary is a shorter trek that leads through foothill towns and up the gorge of the Modi Khola into a magnificent mountain amphitheatre. Pokhara is a good starting place for a number of shorter treks that visit the lovely Gurung village of Ghandruk. The Annapurnas are also the launching pad for adventurous treks into the restricted areas of Lo (Mustang; p296) and Nar-Phu (p310).

The Annapurna region is changing, fast. Roads are inching up both sides of the circuit, especially the Jomsom side (now linked by road to Pokhara). Avoiding the road and all it brings with it involves a few detours, but don't worry, the scenery is still magnificent, and in many cases the detours are even better than the original trail.



ENVIRONMENT

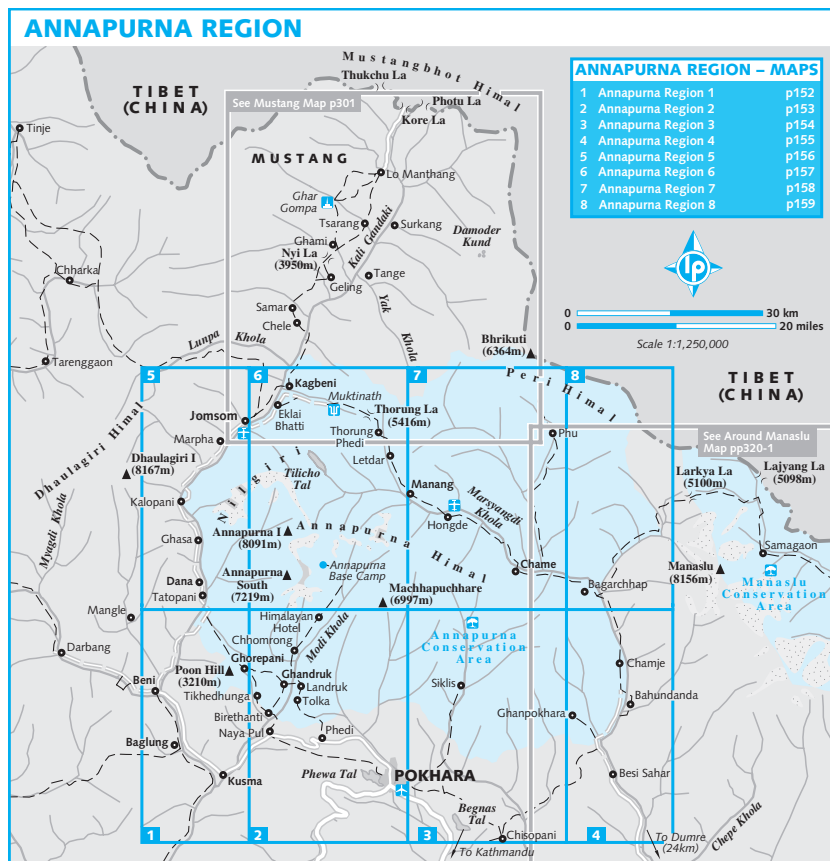
The Annapurna Conservation Area embraces the entire Annapurna Himal. From valley floor (below 1000m) to the summit of Annapurna (8091m) there is an amazing variety of habitats.

Trails along the lower valleys usually weave through fields, dipping occasionally into the remaining shady broadleaf forests. Upstream, you enter spectacular rhododendron forests, their gnarled pinkish limbs festooned with epiphytic ferns and orchids. Spring brings spectacular blooms, from red to pink to white, depending on altitude.

Insects abound in the steamy low valleys. Many vibrant species of butterfly display their colours in the heat of the day, regularly alighting in your path to drink

the seepage from the trail. Keep an eye out at watercourses for a number of small but striking birds, including the white-capped river chat and the plumbeous redstart. The brown dipper may be spotted by the water's edge, and watch for a flash of turquoise as a white-breasted kingfisher takes flight. The plump, white-breasted dipper is found west of the Kali Gandaki. The inquisitive, cinnamon-coloured hoopoe favours open, cultivated land and villages.

In the sky, the raptors, or birds of prey, are most likely to catch your eye. Of particular note are the large, soaring raptors that ride the thermals effortlessly for hours, such as the Himalayan griffon and lammergeier. Other raptors are known to migrate in large numbers along the Kali Gandaki Valley.



In the Annapurna Sanctuary a variety of wildflowers linger in bloom long after the monsoon, thanks to the area's high rainfall. Look for luculia (a pink mallow that is often mistaken for rhododendron), a variety of impatiens and composites (asters, daisies etc) and the pleione orchids that bloom in trees. The profusion of mauve primulas can't be missed along the wet rock walls between Ghorepani and Ghandruk.

In the sanctuary's upper approaches the leafless birch trees are also readily recognizable in winter. These trees usually denote the upper limit of the treeline and are easy to identify because of their reddish or whitish bark that tends to peel in sheets.

INFORMATION

When to Trek

See p19 for an overview of the best times to trek; bear in mind that October sees twice as many trekkers in the Annapurnas than any other month.

Because there is no formidable barrier directly to the south to obstruct the spring and monsoon rain clouds, the region near Pokhara is subject to abnormally high rain-

fall – almost double that of Kathmandu. This accounts for the large glaciers at relatively low elevations inside the Annapurna Sanctuary. Be prepared for rain whenever you trek on the southern flanks of the Annapurnas.

The northern side of the range by contrast is much more dry and you could easily explore the areas around Manang or Jomsom in the monsoon months, though leeches and rain can make the lower valleys unpleasant at this time.

Expect snow above Manang at any time from late November through to February. Several high-altitude lodges close during December and January, though something will always be open. There is occasional snow at Ghorepani in December and January, but this rarely closes the trail.

The rhododendron blooms are particularly impressive around Ghorepani between March and mid-April, though spring can be very hazy in the southern section of the Annapurna region.

Route Options

The entire Annapurna Circuit from Besi Sahar to Naya Pul can be done in 17 days,

THE END OF THE ROAD

Road construction is starting to have a serious effect on trekking routes in the Annapurna region. The road between Beni, Jomsom and Muktinath was completed in 2008 and will eventually connect to the Chinese-built road in Mustang. Another road is inching up the Marsyangdi Valley towards Chame, though at a much slower pace.

Whether road construction is a good thing is a bit of a hot potato. Locals hope that the new roads will not only open up new markets for their products but also lower the price of consumer goods and provide cheaper and easier access to hospitals and schools. The region's abundant apple crops can now be shipped to markets in Kathmandu and even China. The roads will likely also bring pollution, landslides and crime, and will have a dramatic effect on roadside trekking lodges.

Whether it's all bad for tourism is also up for debate. The nature of tourism in the Kali Gandaki Valley will doubtless change as people bus in to visit sights like Muktinath. The number of cases of altitude sickness will probably rise rapidly. The trekking focus in the Kali Gandaki will shift to side trips, as hitherto little-visited gems such as Hidden Valley and Annapurna North Base Camp start to open up.

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) is busily restoring new trails that avoid the road, erecting new trail signs and building lodges away from the road. Routes to Besi Kharka, Konjo, Katsapterenga Gompa, Nupsang Kharka, Chimang, Jhong and Putak are already open and offer some exciting new destinations.

The Manang side will remain largely unaffected for years to come. You can expect some blasting as the road inches towards Jagat but few locals expect the road to reach Chame in the next 15 years. Eventually the government may even lift the permit restrictions in the Nar-Phu and Manaslu regions, allowing those to become the 'new' Annapurna circuits.

Some entrepreneurial companies are already starting to offer combo trips that take advantage of the new road: combining a trek over the Thorung La to Jomsom with mountain biking down the valley to Tatopani and finally rafting the lower Kali Gandaki.



but it's absolutely worth adding on a few extra days to explore the viewpoints around Manang (p181). Experienced trekkers can further add on spectacular side trips to Tilicho Tal (three days) and the Dhaulagiri Icefall (two days), as well as excellent day hikes from Muktinath (p188) and Kagbeni (p190). Three weeks is a good amount of time to budget. Increasing numbers of trekkers are forsaking the road down the Kali Gandaki and finishing their circuit at Jomsom, taking a jeep or flight back to Pokhara. For the ultimate Annapurna experience, continue from Ghorepani to the Annapurna Sanctuary for a total of 25 or more days (30 if you include the excursions on the Annapurna Circuit trek).

There are plenty of shorter combinations: catch a jeep to Jomsom and spend a few days visiting Marpha, Kagbeni and Muktinath, before walking down the valley to Ghasa and Tatopani (seven days); combine the Annapurna Sanctuary with a visit to Ghorepani and Poon Hill (12 to 13 days); or do one of the short treks from Pokhara (see p149), ranging from three to six days.

Emergency Facilities

There are telephones in most villages in the Annapurna region and a satellite phone in Thorung Phedi. All Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) checkposts have emergency radios.

There are government hospitals at Besi Sahar, Chame and Jomsom, and health posts at Ghorepani and Muktinath. Emergency evacuation is possible from Jomsom and Manang (Hongde) airports.

Maps

The most popular maps are the Schneider 1:100,000 topographic map *Annapurna* from 1993 (now distributed by Nelles) and the National Geographic/Trails Illustrated 1:135,000 *Annapurna Adventure Map*. These maps are available in bookshops in Kathmandu and Pokhara.

Himalayan Maphouse produces a dozen maps of the Annapurna region, focusing on specific treks such as Around Annapurna, Annapurna Base Camp, Tilicho Hidden Lake and Ghorepani to Ghandruk. All are essentially different extents of the same map, repackaged with a different cover and name. Mandala, Nepa Maps and Shangri-La

also publish several decent Around Annapurna maps. All are readily available in Kathmandu.

The Leomann/West Col 1:200,000 series map four covers the Annapurna region and shows ridge lines instead of contours.

Books

Annapurna, by Maurice Herzog, is a mountaineering classic (more than 11 million copies sold) that describes the first ever conquest of an 8000m peak. It provides a good description of the Annapurna region, including Manang, and a visit to the Rana court of Kathmandu in 1950.

Chris Bonington's *Annapurna South Face* describes the beginning of a new standard of mountaineering in Nepal and provides an excellent description of the problems involved with organising an expedition. It's great background reading for a trek to the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Annapurna Circuit, by Andrew Stevenson, is a description of the author's experiences on a trek around Annapurna. Stevenson has also produced a larger-format photo book titled *A Nepalese Journey: On Foot Around the Annapurnas*. Both books will give you a good feel of what to expect on the trek.

Annapurna: A Woman's Place, by Arlene Blum, tells the story of the first all-female ascent of Annapurna in 1978 (also the first American ascent of Annapurna and the first female ascent of an 8000m peak), adding a much-needed female perspective to the often macho field of mountain literature.

A Popular Guide to the Birds & Mammals of the Annapurna Conservation Area, by Carol Inskipp, is an excellent field guide to the natural history of the region.

Permits & Regulations

No matter where you trek in the Annapurna region you come under the jurisdiction of **Annapurna Conservation Area Project** (ACAP; www.ntnc.org.np). You should buy a Rs 2000 permit in advance at either the national parks/ACAP entry-fee office in the Tourist Service Centre at Bhrikuti Mandap in Kathmandu (see p75), or at the ACAP counter in Pokhara's Lakeside district (p147). You need two photos. Your permit is valid for one entry, so if you return to Pokhara and return for a second trek in the region you'll



ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION AREA PROJECT (ACAP)

ACAP was established in 1986 as part of an innovative approach to environmental protection. The project encompasses the entire Annapurna range, an area of 7683 sq km, but also a population of some 40,000 people in 300 villages. Traditional national park practices at that time dictated that few, if any, people could reside within park boundaries, so a new model, a 'conservation area', had to be charted to include the participation of local people and emphasise environmental education and environmentally sustainable economic development.

Projects include the training of lodge owners, the introduction of alternative fuels and technologies such as solar panelling and back-boiler stoves to reduce deforestation, cultural re-enforcement programs and the enforcement of a system of fixed prices for food and accommodation to decrease competition and undercutting. ACAP encourages the use of kerosene for cooking throughout the region, and requires its use in hotels above Chhomrong in the Annapurna Sanctuary.

ACAP is supported by the 'conservation fee' of Rs 2000 that it collects from all trekkers in the Annapurna Conservation Area. There are ACAP checkpoints and visitor centres throughout the region where you can learn more about the project.

have to buy a second permit. If you show up without a permit at an ACAP entrance station (including Jomsom airport) you will be charged double the entry fee.

Accommodation

You can safely assume you will be able to find room and board wherever you go on the main routes in the Annapurna region. The valley of the Kali Gandaki in particular boasts some of the best trekking lodges in Nepal. During the busy October and November season, lodges are humming and bedding can get scarce. It's not essential (blankets are generally available), but it's a good idea to bring a sleeping bag on a trek to the Thorung La or Annapurna Sanctuary.

Lodge owners throughout the Annapurna region have formed local committees to fix prices, preparing printed menus for each locale. Now that everyone quotes the same rate, you can choose a hotel according to quality, not price. Prices for food increase dramatically as you go higher, especially in the Annapurna Sanctuary and near the Thorung La, where two cups of milk tea cost more than a bed for the night!

Ker & Downey (☎ 061-523701; www.trekking-nepal.com) operates a deluxe chain of lodges in Dhampus, Ghandruk, Majgaun/Tanchok and Birethanti on the Annapurna Sanctuary trek, but these are generally only open to its own trekking clients. They are a good choice if you want a taste of the Annapurnas without 'roughing it'.

Festivals

The exciting Yartung horse-racing festival takes place in the Manang Valley before the barley harvest in July and in the Kali Gandaki Valley in late August. You'll see lots of people practising their aim for the Meta archery festival as you pass through the region in March and April. It's a colourful spectacle with lots of drums and dancing, but be careful of standing close to the target after the booze starts flowing.

Manang's impressive Badhe warrior festival was revived in 2004 after a 25-year hiatus and is held every three years in October (next in 2010). The festival re-enacts an ancient battle and serves to purge the village of evil through a mixture of song, costumed dances and ritual. See www.destinationmanang.com for details and dates.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Pokhara (opposite) is the springboard to the Annapurna region. You will travel to Pokhara before all treks except the Annapurna Circuit, which generally begins in Besi Sahar, to Pokhara's east. From Pokhara, frequent public transport heads to trailheads at Phedi and Naya Pul. Jeeps ply the new unpaved road as far as Jomsom but you will have to change transport at Beni (p287) until direct services commence.

There are several daily flights between Pokhara and Jomsom (US\$82). All Jomsom flights operate from Pokhara in the early morning, requiring an overnight in Pokhara (though you can make it to Kathmandu the same day, changing planes in Pokhara).



The Jomsom runway is sealed and flights operate year-round, though weather can disrupt service. Flights usually operate full in high season; if you arrive without a reservation you may have to wait a day or more.

We recommend against flying to Jomsom and trekking straight to Muktinath because of the chance of altitude sickness. You'll acclimatise better if you overnight first in Marpha and then Kagbeni before climbing to Muktinath (3800m).

Manang airport is in the village of Hongde (3420m) near the upper end of the Marsyangdi Valley. There is a severe risk of altitude sickness if you fly to Manang and attempt to cross the Thorung La within a couple of days. You should view Manang only as an emergency or exit airport; it is not a sensible starting point for an Annapurna trek unless you have a week or more to acclimatise.

Nepal Airlines (www.royalnepal-airlines.com) generally operates three flights a week between Pokhara and Hongde (US\$81). The flights are popular with rich Manangis en route to and from trading excursions, so confirmed seats can be hard to get. Charter flights and helicopters operate but are hard to find out about in advance.

GATEWAY Pokhara

☎ 061 / elevation 884m

No matter where you trek in the Annapurna region, you'll pass through Pokhara, the largest and most laid-back town in central Nepal. Plan to spend a day or two here paddling in the lake and enjoying the largest collection of restaurants and hotels in the country. Most tourist facilities are in Lakeside, next to Phewa Tal (*tal* means lake).

A spectacular panorama of the Annapurnas, Machhapuchhare and Manaslu dominates the skyline, especially from the hilltop World Peace Pagoda. At a lower elevation, Pokhara is warmer than Kathmandu.

Of special interest to trekkers is the **International Mountain Museum** (☎ 460742; www.mountainmuseum.org; admission Rs 300; ☎ 9am-5pm), with some original gear from many of the first Himalayan ascents, as well as a climbing wall and a 31ft-high climbable model of Manaslu.

INFORMATION

Lakeside is lined with travel agencies, internet cafes, trekking-gear shops and ATMs. Exchange rates are best at the **Standard Chartered Bank** (☎ 462102; ☎ 9.45am-4.15pm Sun-Thu, to 1.15pm Fri), near Camping Chowk.

Get your ACAP permit and TIMS project at the **Annapurna Conservation Area Project office** (ACAP; ☎ 463376; ☎ 10am-5pm Sun-Fri, to 3.30pm Sat) in Damside. It closes at 4pm in winter. For more on these permits, see p369.

The **immigration office** (☎ 465167; ☎ 10.30am-1pm Sun-Thu, 10am-noon Fri) is located at Ratna Chowk, 1km east of Damside. For details on visa extensions, see p373.

SLEEPING

There are dozens of cheap guesthouses in the lanes that run off Lakeside. **Little Tibetan Guest House** (☎ 531898; littletibgh@yahoo.com; s/d/tr Rs 500/650/850) is a favourite for its relaxed atmosphere, spacious rooms, pleasant garden and Tibetan touches.

The longstanding **Peace Eye Guest House** (☎ 461699; www.peaceeye.co.uk; s/d without bathroom Rs 150/250, with bathroom Rs 350/450) is laid-back and friendly, with a vegetarian restaurant and small German bakery.

Hotel Travel Inn (☎ 462631; www.hoteltravelinn.com; s US\$5-15, d US\$30, ste US\$40-50; ☎) is a modern hotel that caters for all budgets. Rooms are spotless and deluxe rooms have all the mod-cons.

For a post-trek retreat, try the secluded **Park Anadu Restaurant & Lodge** (☎ 9846 25557; r without bathroom Rs 300), perched on Phewa Tal's western shore, with rooms opening up to a perfect lake vista. There's a free 20-minute boat trip from Lakeside. The basic rooms share a bathroom.

The only hotel on the lake itself is **Hotel Fewa** (☎ 463151; s/d US\$20/30, s/d/f cottage US\$25/35/45). Luxury resorts include the **Fulbari Resort** (☎ 523451; www.fulbari.com; r from US\$175; ☎ ☎), in a dramatic setting a long taxi ride out of town, and the spectacular **Tiger Mountain Pokhara Lodge** (☎ 01-4361500 in Kathmandu; www.tigermountain.com; cottages per person US\$150; ☎ ☎), set on a lofty ridge 10km east of town. Both Fulbari and Tiger Mountain have a swimming pool.

EATING & DRINKING

Lakeside is lined with dozens of good restaurants, including the popular **Moondance**



POKHARA

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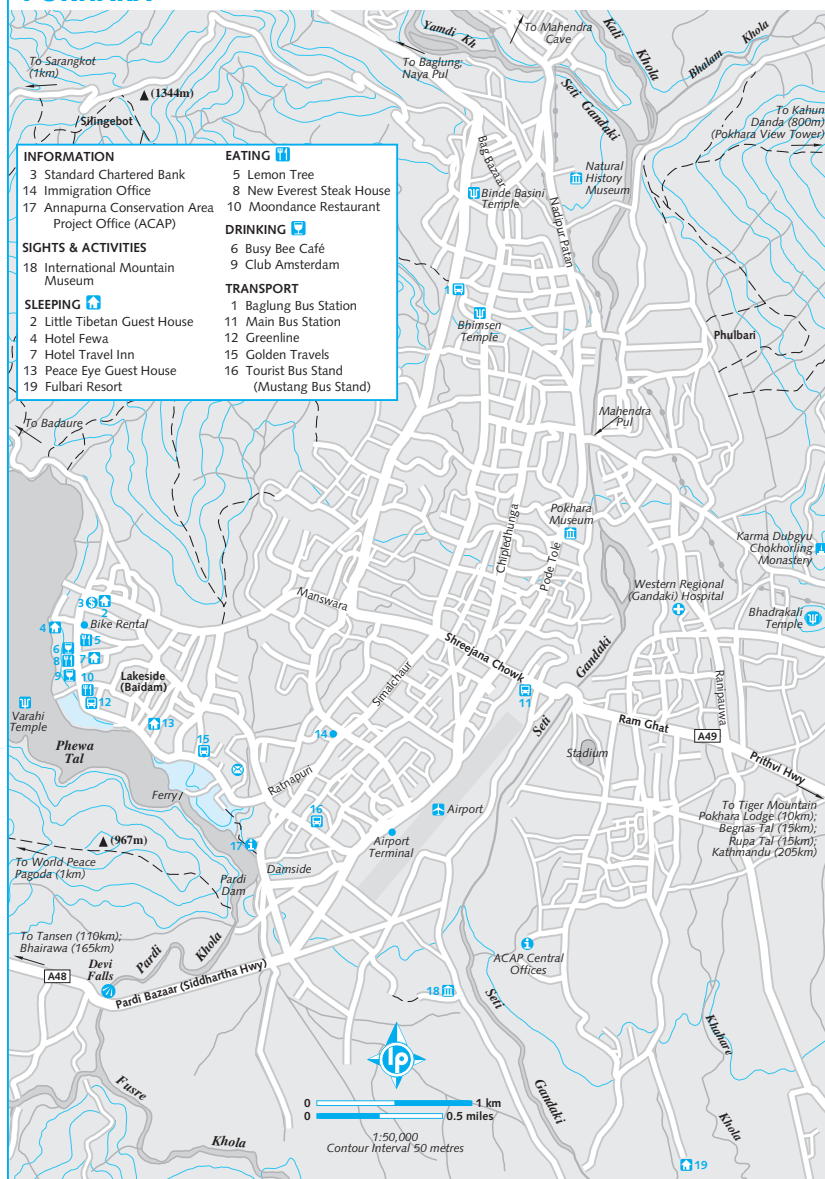
- 5 Lemon Tree
- 8 New Everest Steak House
- 10 Moondance Restaurant

DRINKING

- 6 Busy Bee Café
- 9 Club Amsterdam

TRANSPORT

- 1 Baglung Bus Station
- 11 Main Bus Station
- 12 Greenline
- 15 Golden Travels
- 16 Tourist Bus Stand (Mustang Bus Stand)



Restaurant (dishes Rs 100-400), for everything from pizza to Thai food, and the smart, sophisticated **Lemon Tree** (meals Rs 160-290), known for its fresh fish caught from Phewa Tal. For a post-trek meat-fest try the **New Everest Steak House** (steaks Rs 280-1700) for its choice of 34 steaks.

For beers, everyone ends up at either Club Amsterdam or the Busy Bee Café sometime during the evening.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

All domestic airlines run several flights each day from Kathmandu (US\$94 to US\$96). Sit on the right-hand side of the plane for a view of the Himalayan peaks, including Ganesh Himal, Himalchuli, the Annapurnas and Manaslu. Several airlines (currently Nepal Airlines, Agni Air and Sita Air) operate daily flights to Jomsom (US\$82).

Most people take the tourist buses to/from Kathmandu (Rs 400, seven hours). Buses leave Pokhara at 7.30am from the tourist bus stand (Mustang bus stand) at Mustang Chowk, a short taxi ride from Lakeside. Any agent or hotel can book a ticket. Slightly more comfortable air-con buses are run by **Greenline** (☎ 464472; www.greenline.com.np; US\$18 with lunch) and **Golden Travels** (☎ 462713; US\$15 with lunch). Greenline leaves from an office in east Lakeside, whereas Golden Travels buses leave from the tourist bus stand. Local buses (day/night Rs 300/330) run from the main bus station.

Buses to trailheads for most Annapurna treks (except Besi Sahar) leave from the Baglung bus station, about 2km north of the centre on the main highway. Buses leave every hour or so. Buses to Besi Sahar leave from the main bus station. See the relevant treks for more details.

Taxi fares from Lakeside are around Rs 80 to the tourist bus stand, Rs 100 to the main bus station and Rs 200 to the airport.

SHORT TREKS NEAR POKHARA

Most of the treks described in this book last several weeks, but one of the attractions of the Pokhara region is the opportunity to make short treks ranging from a few hours to a week. If you don't have time for one

of the longer treks, or don't think you are ready for one, you can cobble together an interesting trek from parts of longer treks. The following treks are less than an hour from Pokhara by bus or taxi.

ANNAPURNA PANORAMA

Duration 6 days

Max Elevation 3210m

Difficulty easy-medium

Season October to May

Start Naya Pul (p151)

Finish Phedi (p151)

Summary After a stiff climb to Ghorepani and great views of Dhaulagiri and the Annapurnas, this trek returns through the large Gurung village of Ghandruk, past wonderful views of Machhapuchhare.

THE TREK (SEE MAP P150)

Day 1: Naya Pul to Tikhedhunga

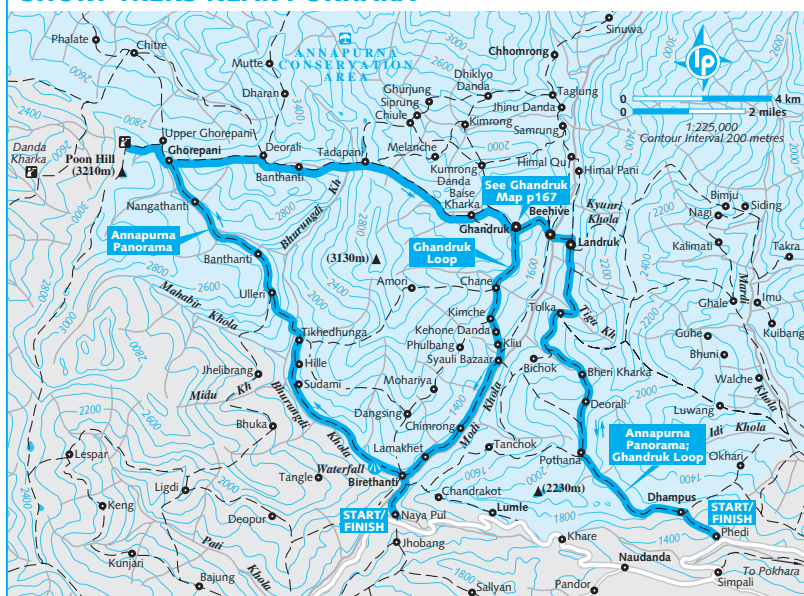
3-4 hours, 540m ascent

There's a small sign between two teastalls in Naya Pul that directs you to a steep trail leading down to a bridge over a small stream. To get to Birethanti, cross the bridge and walk through a barrage of teastalls and Hindi film music. The trail follows the rocky road along the east bank of the Modi Khola for 25 minutes to the bridge crossing to **Birethanti** (1000m), a large and prosperous village with a winding 'street paved with large stones. The trail branches left on the west side of the bridge at the ACAP checkpoint (show your ACAP permit and TIMS card), passing through the village. The right-hand trail leads up the Modi Khola to Ghandruk.

Birethanti has good lodges, but it's better to break the 1750m climb to Ghorepani into two stages by continuing to Hille or Tikhedhunga for the night. (If you are returning from Jomsom, then Ghorepani to Birethanti is an easy, although long and knee-cracking, descent and Birethanti makes a good stopping place.) The Ghorepani trail follows the main street of Birethanti, winding through bamboo forests and past a large waterfall and swimming hole. The trail stays on the north bank of the Bhurungdi Khola to Baaigara, so don't cross the large and inviting-looking suspension bridge.



SHORT TREKS NEAR POKHARA



Beyond a pasture used by pony caravans, the trail reaches Sudami, then climbs steadily up the side of the valley to reach **Hille** (1510m). The Annapurna and See You lodges are among the several hotels alongside the wide stone trail. There are more lodges, including the Kamala and Lali Gurans, in **Tikhedhunga** (1540m), about 15 minutes above Hille. If you started from Naya Pul, this will be a short day. If you arrive early, you can easily trek on up the endless stone staircase to Ulleri.

Day 2: Tikhedhunga to Ghorepani

4–6 hours, 1360m ascent

The trail crosses the Tikhedhunga Khola on a suspension bridge, then drops and crosses the Bhurungdi Khola on a large bridge at 1520m. The trail climbs very steeply on a stone staircase that is said to have more than 3300 steps. There is only one trekkers lodge from the bridge to Ulleri, but several *bhattis* (teashops) have tea and cold drinks. As you reach the Annapurna View Guest House, the tops of Annapurna South (7219m; Annapurna Dakshin in Nepali) and Hiunchuli begin to emerge from behind the hills.

The unrelenting staircase continues to the large Magar village of **Ulleri** (2080m). There are at least eight lodges in the centre of the village, and others above the village where the trail climbs gently through pastures and cultivated fields. The fields soon give way to deep forests as the trail climbs to Banthanti, a settlement of hotels in a clearing at 2250m.

Beyond Banthanti, there are magnificent oak and rhododendron forests. The trail crosses two sparkling clear streams, a small ridge and another stream before making a short, final climb to **Nangathanti** (2460m), a hotel complex in a forest clearing. *Thanti* is a Magar word meaning ‘rest house’ or *dharamsala*. In the winter the trail can be covered with snow, and in many places it is sloppy mud, so some short detours might be necessary.

Ghorepani (2750m) is about an hour past Nangathanti. Ghorepani means ‘horse water’, and was until recently a welcome watering stop for the mule caravans that carried goods between Pokhara and Jomsom. There are several hotels in lower Ghorepani, but most people continue 10 minutes up to **upper Ghorepani** (2870m), or Deorali, where a

dozen lodges, shops and even internet cafes cram the saddle. You'll have to register with the police post to the south of town. The hillsides below Ghorepani are swathed in eight different species of *lali gurans* (rhododendron), Nepal's national flower.

A big map on a signboard in the village shows the location of the lodges; the old-fashioned but friendly Annapurna View and the central Snow View Hotel are among the largest. The Super View up the hillside is a good choice. Several lodges under construction further up the hill look set to offer fine views. A second group of four lodges huddled on the north side of the pass is popular for lunch. The Sunny Guest House to the east is quieter and has some duplexes with en suite bathrooms (Rs 400).

Most people rise before dawn the following day to make the early-morning excursion to **Poon Hill** (3210m), about an hour's climb from the pass. The spectacular panorama stretches from Dhaulagiri I (8167m) and Tukucho (6920m) to Nilgiri (6940m), Annapurna South, Annapurna I (8091m), Hiunchuli (6441m) and Tarke Kang (formerly known as Glacier Dome; 7193m). Watching the sun rise over the unobstructed Himalaya is a defining moment, but don't expect much serenity – this is a popular trip. The early-morning sky above Ghorepani buzzes with planes on their flight path to Jomsom.

Day 3: Ghorepani to Tadapani

5–6 hours, 550m descent, 710m ascent

Follow the Day 1 route of the Ghorepani to Ghandruk trek (p169).

Day 4: Tadapani to Ghandruk

2–3 hours, 720m descent

A short day, continuing to follow the Ghorepani to Ghandruk trek (p169), arriving in Ghandruk in time to explore the village and visit its museums.

Day 5: Ghandruk to Tolka

2–3 hours, 670m descent, 480m ascent

Descend steeply to the Modi Khola, climb to Landruk and on to Tolka (right).

Day 6: Tolka to Phedi

3–4 hours, 370m ascent, 1030m descent

Follow Day 1 of the Annapurna Sanctuary trek (right) in reverse.

GHANDRUK LOOP

Duration 3 days

Max Elevation 1970m

Difficulty easy–medium

Season October to May

Start Phedi (p161)

Finish Naya Pul (below)

Summary The shortest trek in this book, offering good mountain views, forests, birds and glimpses of traditional village life. Short but steep.

THE TREK (SEE MAP P150)

Day 1: Phedi to Tolka

4–5 hours, 1030m ascent, 370m descent

Follow Day 1 of the Annapurna Sanctuary trek to Tolka (p161).

Day 2: Tolka to Ghandruk

4–5 hours, 480m descent, 670m ascent

Trek to Landruk and drop down on a stone staircase to the Modi Khola at 1315m. It's a long climb up a rough stone staircase – with high steps – past the Beehive View Guest House to the tiny settlement of Yumle. There is a teashop here, and there are a few more as you climb to Ghandruk at 1970m.

Day 3: Ghandruk to Naya Pul

4–5 hours, 1000m descent

Follow the clearly defined trail south from Ghandruk to Birethanti (see Day 10 of the Annapurna Sanctuary trek, p168). Walk to Naya Pul for transport back to Pokhara.

ANNAPURNA HIMAL

The longer treks around, and into, the Annapurna Himal rank among Nepal's classic routes. You can walk around the range, jeep up the western flank to Jomsom and Muktinath, or trek into its icy heart inside the Annapurna Sanctuary.

ACCESS TOWNS

Naya Pul & Birethanti

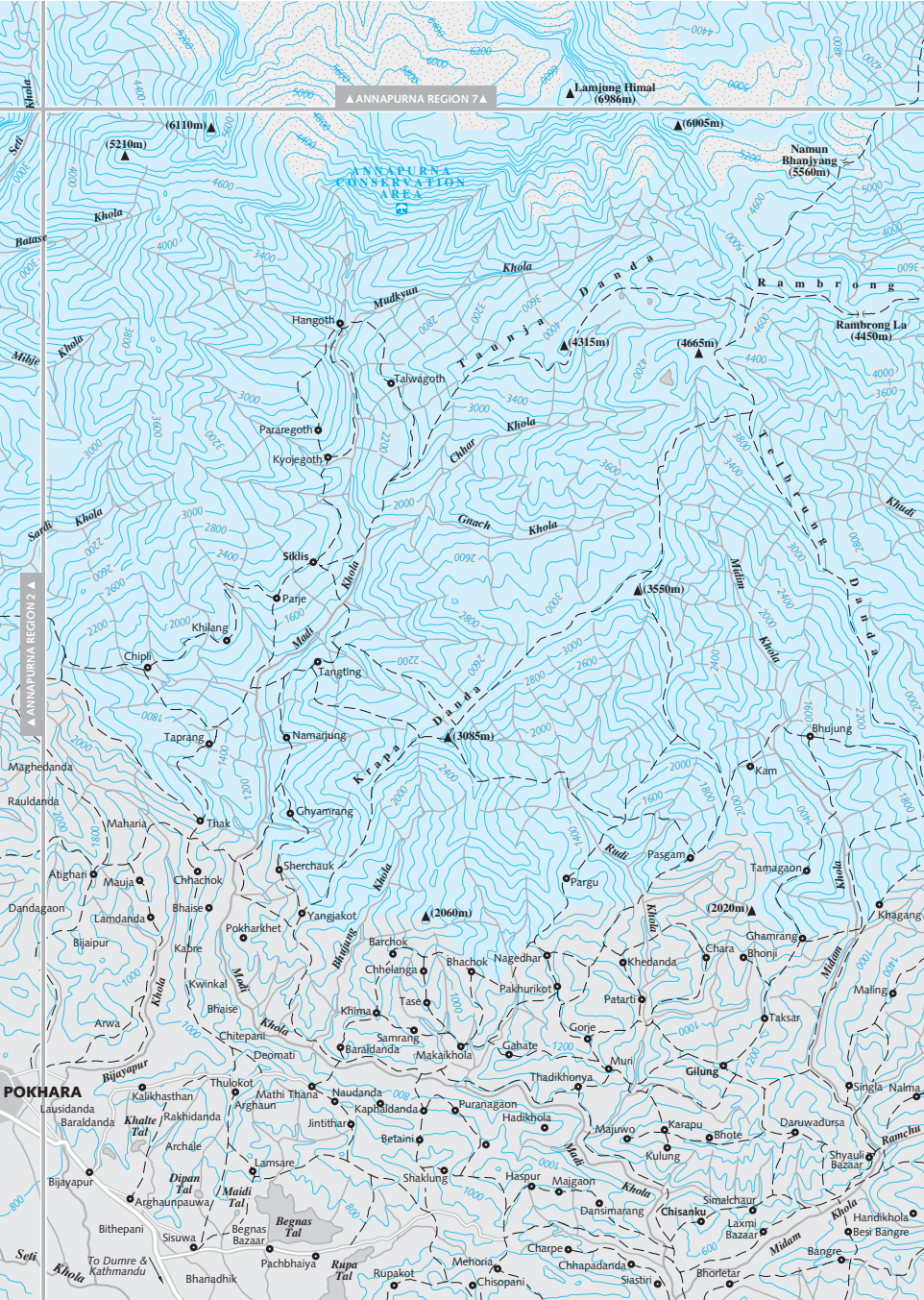
Naya Pul, the start and end of several treks into the Annapurna foothills, including the

(Continued on page 160)





ANNAPURNA REGION 3





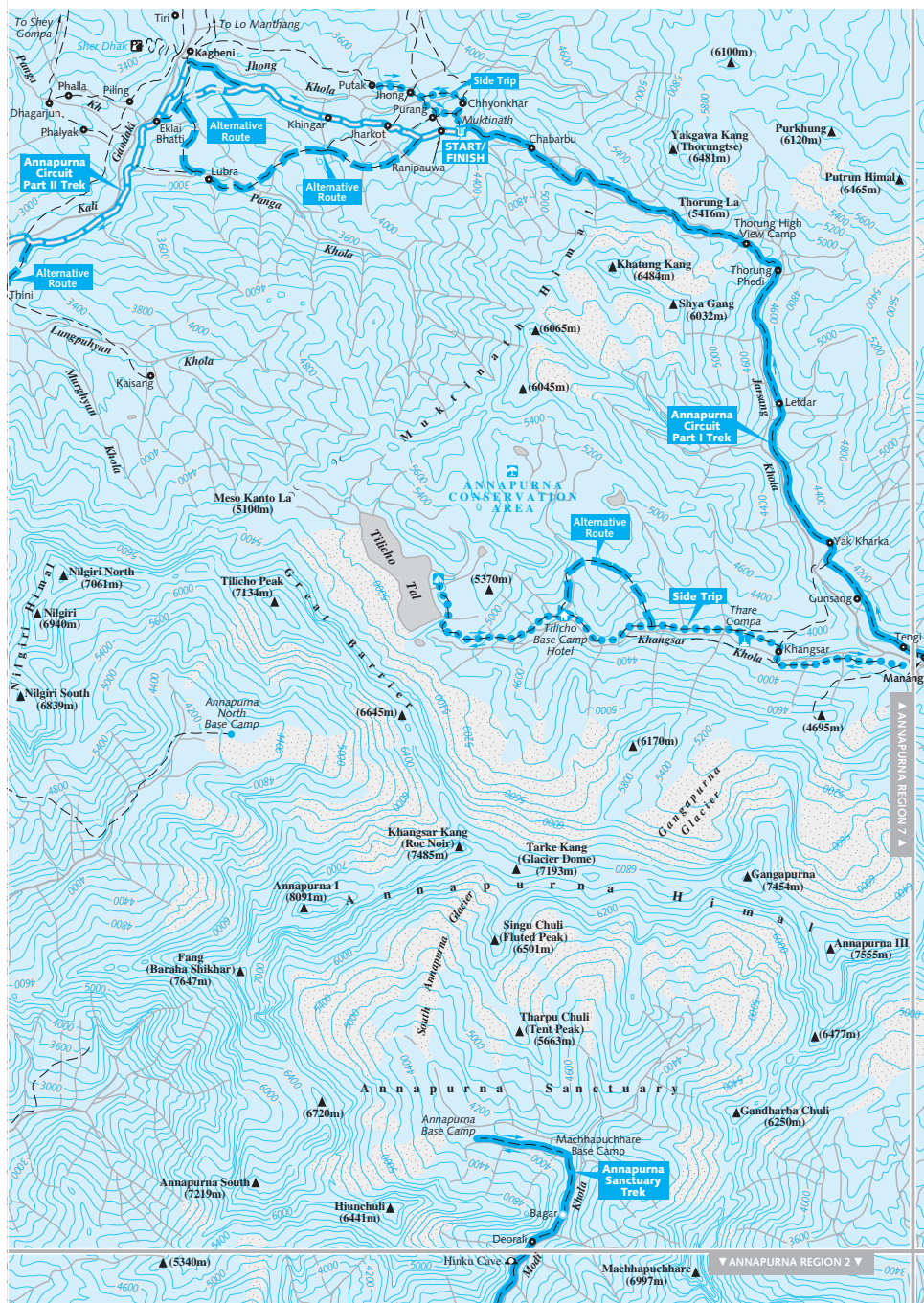
'Beyond Bhul-bule the trail travels up the east bank of the river, past an impressive 60m waterfall that is surrounded by a tropical tree called a pandanus, or screw pine. Watch for langur monkeys playing in the treetops'

'It's easy to walk from Muktinath to Jomsom or even Marpha in a day but it's well worth taking some time to enjoy the area around Muktinath, before descending to overnight in the medieval village of Kagbeni'



0 4 miles 8 km Scale 1:225,000

ANNAPURNA REGION 6

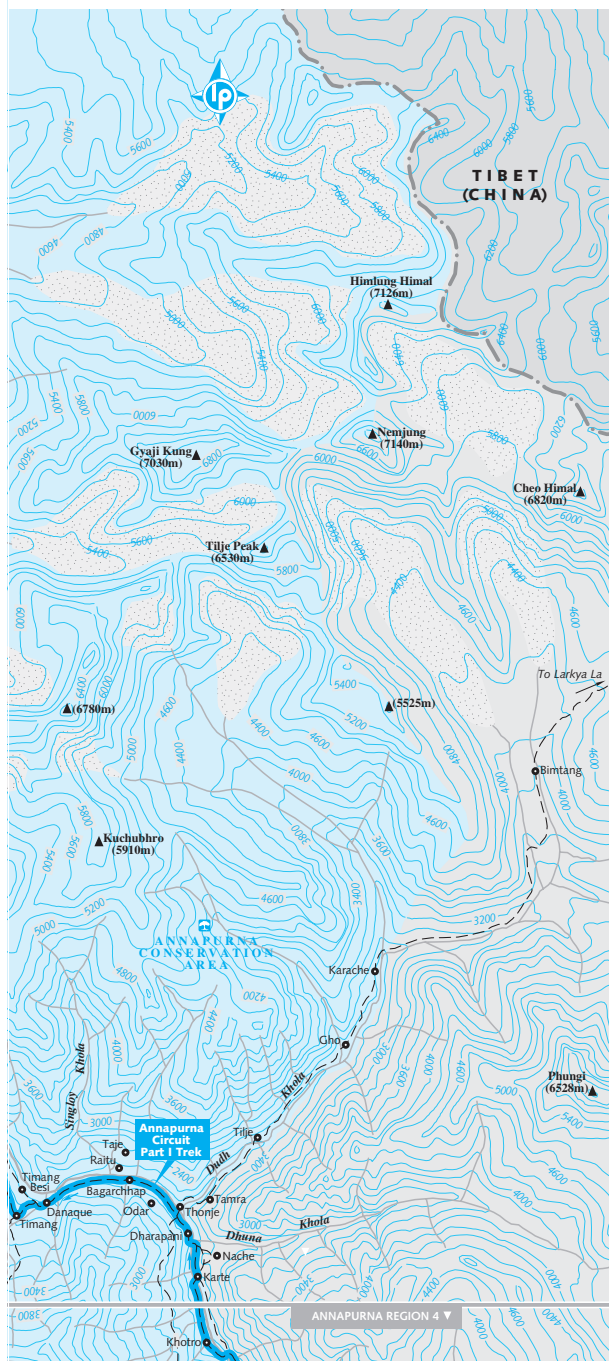


ANNAPURNA REGION 7





ANNAPURNA REGION 8



'The pine-scented trail (from Bhra-tang) rounds a bend to reveal the first views of the dramatic Paungda Danda rock face, a tremendous curved slab of rock rising more than 1500m from the river. Locals call it the Swarga Dwar (Gateway to Heaven) and believe the spirits of the deceased must ascend this wall after leaving their bodies'

(Continued from page 151)

Annapurna Sanctuary, is little more than a roadside bazaar, but it is only a 30-minute trek upstream to Birethanti, which boasts trekkers lodges, restaurants, a bakery, an art gallery and an ACAP checkpoint, where you will need to present your ACAP permit and TIMS card.

Lakshmi Lodge (☎ 061-23523; r Rs 400-500) in Birethanti is more expensive than most here, but has an interesting if somewhat faded colonial feel, with an old-fashioned dining room and rooms arranged around a lawn. Cheaper options include the nearby Riverside, Sunrise and New River View lodges. The Moonlight Hotel on the east side of the river offers modern, concrete rooms. The west end of the village has a quieter collection of hotels, including the Gurkha Lodge, Uttam Lodge and Hotel Ever Green View. Most rooms cost around Rs 150 to Rs 200.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Naya Pul is on the Pokhara–Baglung road at Km 42, at the foot of the hill below Khare. Take one of the 24 daily Baglung buses from the bus station near Bhairab Tole in the northwestern part of Pokhara and get off in Naya Pul (Rs 100, 90 minutes), or splurge on a faster, comfier taxi (Rs 1000 to Rs 1500).

ANNAPURNA SANCTUARY

Duration 10 days

Max Elevation 4095m

Difficulty medium

Season October to November, March to April

Start Phedi (opposite)

Finish Naya Pul (p151)

Summary Trek through Gurung villages and climb through the Modi Gorge into the Annapurna Sanctuary, an amphitheatre of huge Himalayan peaks. This trek offers fine close-up mountain views without the acclimatisation problems of the Everest region.

The route to the Annapurna Sanctuary (Annapurna Deuthali in Nepali) and Annapurna south-face Base Camp is a spectacular short trek. Although it has some long steep climbs and descents, primarily on stone steps, the trek is not difficult if you take your time.

The trail to the Annapurna Sanctuary traverses a huge variety of terrain, from rice terraces to glacial moraine, and offers outstanding high mountain views. You can make the trek from Pokhara to Annapurna Base Camp and back in as few as 10 days, but it is best to allow a little longer to fully soak up the high-altitude scenery.

A diversion to Ghorepani on the return route provides the added bonus of a view of Dhaulagiri from Poon Hill (see p150), and is particularly spectacular in spring, when the rhododendrons are in full bloom.

The first few days of the Annapurna Sanctuary trek are actually the hardest of the trek, because of all the climbs and descents into side valleys, and is much tougher than a glance at the map might suggest. The second half of the trek is a more gradual ascent up the Modi Khola.

PLANNING When to Trek

The major danger with this trek is that it can become impassable because of snow and avalanches in winter and early spring. If there is snow, it's possible you won't get beyond Doban, otherwise the trek is doable throughout the normal trekking season.

Emergency Facilities

There are telephones as far as Chhomrong, but no communication facilities in the sanctuary. In an emergency you can send a message asking for evacuation from a helipad in Kuldi or Machhapuchhare Base Camp.

Accommodation

You will rarely walk longer than an hour on this trek without finding some source of refreshment or accommodation. The lodges extend all the way into the sanctuary, though in winter some hotel-keepers retreat to their homes in Chhomrong.

Beyond Ghandruk most of the hotels in winter serve meals on a large communal table with a heater under it. You may be charged a 'heater fee' of between Rs 40 and Rs 70 for this. In the sanctuary the heater is often a kerosene pressure stove – noisy, smelly and can consume all the oxygen in the room. Crack open doors and windows to ensure sufficient ventilation in the dining room.

Due to the funnel shape of the trek and the fact that ACAP has limited the size of



WARNING

Between Doban and Machhapuchhare Base Camp there are several places where avalanches from hidden slopes of Hiunchuli come crashing onto the trail. It is the only major trekking route in Nepal with significant avalanche danger, and you must enquire locally whether the trail is safe. In March 2002 three German trekkers were killed between Deorali and Machhapuchhare Base Camp, and others have been stranded in the sanctuary for days. Remember that most avalanches occur after 9am. Be especially wary if there has been recent heavy rainfall in the lowlands. The best source of reliable information about avalanche danger is the ACAP checkpoint at Chhomrong. Be sure to ask about trail conditions in the sanctuary at lodges en route.

Be watchful for symptoms of altitude sickness (see p391) as you reach Machhapuchhare Base Camp. Do not continue to Annapurna Base Camp if you are not well acclimatised.

hotels above Chhomrong, you might find the lodges full in high season, especially if you arrive in the late afternoon. You may have to continue an hour or more or bunk down in a lodge dining room, in which case you'll be more comfortable if you have your own sleeping bag.

GETTING TO/FROM THE TREK

Take a taxi or a frequent Baglung-bound bus from Pokhara's Baglung bus station to the roadside shacks of Phedi (Rs 50, 1½ hours). The start of the trail heads up the hill on a set of steps across the road.

THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP152–3 & PP156–7)

Day 1: Phedi to Tolka

5–6 hours, 1030m ascent, 370m descent

The entire region from Phedi, on the valley floor, to the top of the hill is commonly known as Dhampus, but the main part of Dhampus village is on the top of the ridge, more than 500m above. The area is inhabited by Brahmans, Chhetris and a few Gurungs. Starting at an elevation of 1130m, the trail climbs steeply for about 45 minutes, crossing the dirt road a couple of times to the tiny Mina Lodge. It becomes less steep as it follows a stone staircase and climbs over a wall to a small temple. Here, a sign directs you to the steep uphill trail to Dhampus. Trek past the Evergreen Restaurant and more houses to another trail junction, where a steep uphill trail leads to the main part of **Dhampus** (one hour), on top of the ridge at 1700m.

You are rewarded with great mountain views as you continue along the ridge. There are a few hotels at this end of Dhampus, including the pleasant Moonlight and Lali

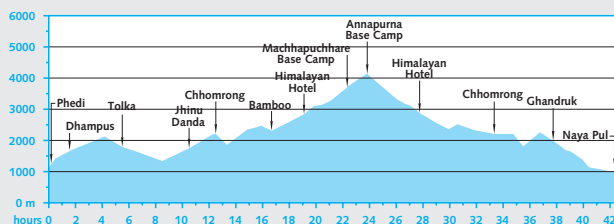
Gurans, making this a decent place to overnight if you got a late start from Pokhara (the dawn Himalayan views are excellent). The upmarket Ker & Downey **Basanta Lodge** (per person incl 3 meals US\$50) oozes colonial comfort but doesn't normally accept walk-in guests (see p146). Follow the dirt road past the Hotel Orchid and drop below the road to a collection of lodges, a camping area and the large **Dhaulagiri View Hotel** (☎ 061-690626; r US\$10-15), perched atop a hillock. Ten minutes later you'll have to register your TIMS permit at a checkpoint (90 minutes).

The trail climbs to a rhododendron forest and passes a sign bidding you farewell to Dhampus as you climb to **Pothana** (1990m), a charming collection of hotels and an ACAP checkpoint (you'll need your ACAP permit), 2½ hours from Phedi. The view of Machhapuchhare (6997m), the 'fishtail' mountain (*machha* means fish and *puchhare* means tail), is excellent from Pothana, except that from this angle it looks more like the Matterhorn than a fish tail. To see the mountain in its proper perspective you must wait several days until you get into the Annapurna Sanctuary. You can spend the night in the simple Annapurna Lodge, Heaven's Gate or one of Pothana's four other hotels to get a clear view in the morning. Most hotels from now on boast large billboard-style maps of the region that portray the route to the sanctuary with varying degrees of accuracy and provide their own version of estimated walking times throughout the area.

The trail takes a couple of right branches and climbs through forests to a pass with views of the Mardi Khola far below, before descending to two lodges at **Deorali** (2150m). Order a cup of tea and savour



Annapurna Sanctuary



ANNAPURNA SANCTUARY – TIMES

The following are trekking times only; stops are not included.

Day	Section	Hours
1	Phedi to Dhampus	1:15
	Dhampus to Pothana	1:10
	Pothana to Deorali	0:40
	Deorali to Bheri Kharka	0:40
	Bheri Kharka to Tolka	1:00
2	Tolka to Landruk	0:45
	Landruk to Himal Qu	1:20
	Himal Qu to Jhinu Danda	1:30
	Jhinu Danda to Taglung	1:00
	Taglung to Chhomrong	0:15
3	Chhomrong to Chhomrong Khola	0:40
	Chhomrong Khola to Bhanuwa	0:40
	Bhanuwa to Sinuwa	0:45
	Sinuwa to Kuldi	1:00
	Kuldi to Bamboo	0:30
4	Bamboo to Doban	0:45
	Doban to Himalayan Hotel	1:10
5	Himalayan Hotel to Deorali	1:00
	Deorali to Machhapuchhare Base Camp	2:00
6	Machhapuchhare Base Camp to Annapurna Base Camp	1:30
7	Annapurna Base Camp to Machhapuchhare Base Camp	1:00
	Machhapuchhare Base Camp to Deorali	1:30
	Deorali to Himalayan Hotel	1:00
8	Himalayan Hotel to Doban	1:00
	Doban to Sinuwa	2:15
	Sinuwa to top of Chhomrong	1:45
9	Chhomrong to Kimrong	1:30
	Kimrong to Kumrong Danda	1:15
	Kumrong Danda to Ghandruk	1:00
10	Ghandruk to Kimche	0:45
	Kimche to Syauli Bazaar	1:00
	Syauli Bazaar to Birethanti	1:10
	Birethanti to Naya Pul	0:30

the fine views of Annapurna South and Hiunchuli to the north, and Pokhara and Phewa Tal to the southeast. Make a steep descent through forests that are alive with birds, ferns and orchids into a huge side canyon of the Modi Khola. Descend past the Archana Guest House and down a steep stone trail to the Sundara Guest House at **Bheri Kharka**, a suburb of the large Gurung village of Bichok, far below.

Descend to the head of the valley on the upper trail, cross a stream and climb gently out of the side canyon on flagstone steps. The Sunlight Tourist Guest House marks the spot where the trail emerges into the main Modi Valley. A short distance below is the Namaste Tourist Guest House and Sapna Lodge, the first of several clusters of hotels that comprise the spread-out settlement of **Tolka** (1790m). The trail descends through the village, passing the Hilltop Ram Lodge, the school and then down to the Sunny Guest House and the friendly and popular International Guest House.

If you have the energy, continue 45 minutes to the better choice of accommodation at Landruk.

Day 2: Tolka to Chhomrong

5–6 hours, 450m descent, 870m ascent

The trail descends a long stone staircase to a suspension bridge across the Tigu Khola at 1720m, then climbs through forests to a ridge. It's then an easy walk past streams, fields and some unusual thatched stone buildings. You can see the Modi Khola far below and the houses of Jhinu Danda halfway up the hill far ahead. Make a long traverse to the school, cross the Ghora Khola on a suspension bridge and you will arrive at the top of **Landruk** (1620m),

a Gurung village with a good choice of accommodation. You can see Ghandruk high above you on the opposite side of the river. The best lodges are above the village and include the Lali Gurans, popular with camping groups, and the well-run Hungry Eye, with a cosy dining hall. The Maya Guest House, 10 minutes further down the village, is a friendly and quieter option with a nice garden.

Five minutes below the Maya Guest House is a signed junction: left down the hill and then up to Ghandruk and right to Chhomrong. Take the right path over a wooden bridge and past a hydroelectricity pipe, then cross a second wooden suspension bridge beside a lovely waterfall. The thick jungle trail descends through ferns to fine views of Annapurna South high above the jade-white river and continues to the Himalpani Guest House. A short walk leads across the bridge to **Himal Qu** (1410m), also known as Naya Pul (New Bridge), where there are three simple lodges. The trail climbs steeply to Samrung, then crosses a stream on a cement bridge. This is the lower part of the Khumnu/Kimrong Khola, which here is known as the Kladi Khola.

If you are headed down from Chhomrong directly back to Birethanti, a little-travelled path leads down the right (west) bank of the Modi Khola, past a couple of lodges at Beehive (where a trail branches right uphill to Ghandruk), and continues all the way to Syauli Bazaar, to join the main Ghandruk–Birethanti trail.

Headed north, a stiff climb leads to **Jhinu Danda** (1750m), where there are several lodges on a ridge. There is a hot spring with cement bathing pools about 15 minutes downhill (and 30 minutes back up) on a side trail; ask a lodge owner about it. The houses on the top of the ridge far above you are your next destination.

It is a long, steep climb, broken only by a few teahouses, to a cluster of teashops at **Taglung** (2190m), atop the treeless ridge. The trek now joins the main Ghandruk to Chhomrong route.

A short distance from Taglung are the Panorama Point and Himalayan View lodges, as well as an ACAP office and safe drinking water station. This is the upper part of **Chhomrong** (2210m). The recommended Excellent View, International and

Kalpana lodges at the top of Chhomrong are some of the nicest lodges on the trek, offering slate patios, private rooms and dining rooms overlooking a spectacular panorama of peaks. (The Excellent View even has a washing machine!) A little further down is the excellent Chhomrong Cottage, famed for its pizza, chocolate cake and brown bread. There are several other good lodges nearby.

Descend on a long staircase for 10 minutes to the fixed-price Chhomrong Wholesale Shop, the last place to stock up on reasonably priced supplies and kerosene. The only hotel in lower Chhomrong is Captain Lodge, Chhomrong's original trekkers hotel but now largely deserted.

ACAP regulations prohibit the use of firewood beyond Ghandruk, so all trekkers and hotels must cook with gas or kerosene. If you are camping, you can rent Indian pressure stoves and plastic jerry cans at Chhomrong. Beyond Chhomrong, camping is restricted to ACAP-designated camp sites and hotel construction is strictly controlled.

This is the highest permanent settlement in the valley, but herders take sheep and goats to upper pastures in the sanctuary during the summer. There is a tremendous view of Annapurna South and Hiunchuli, which seem to tower above the village, and there are good views of Machhapuchhare, the fishtail mountain, across the valley. It is from this point onwards that the reason for the name of this peak becomes apparent. In 1957 Wilfred Noyce and David Cox climbed Machhapuchhare to within 50m of its summit. After this attempt, the government prohibited further climbing on the mountain, so technically it remains unclimbed. A lower peak to the south, Mardi Himal (5587m), is open to trekking parties.

Day 3: Chhomrong to Bamboo

3–4 hours, 610m ascent, 510m descent

Leaving Chhomrong, the trail descends 150m on a stone staircase and crosses the Chhomrong Khola on a swaying suspension bridge at 1860m, then climbs out of the side valley via the tiny settlement of Tilche, through forests of bamboo, rhododendron and oak. Climbing further on a rocky trail you reach Bhanuwa and the decent Sherpa Guest House (one hour), the source of the blinking lights you may have seen at night



from Chhomrong. A further climb of about 45 minutes will take you to **Sinuwa** (2340m), where there are two sociable hotels on a ridge. The **Sunwa Guest House** (s/d Rs 100/200), just below the ridge, is a more peaceful place to overnight, with clean rooms, an isolated location and a hot shower.

Climb for about an hour in a forest of rhododendrons festooned with orchids and ferns to a stone-paved trail that passes Kuldi (2470m). The ruins here once housed an ACAP visitor centre. The trek now enters the upper Modi Valley and you can see the lodges of Bamboo and Doban below.

Descend a long, steep, slippery stone staircase into a deep bamboo and rhododendron forest, before arriving at **Bamboo** (2310m), a collection of five hotels crammed into the narrow valley. These lodges fill quickly in high season so aim to get here early in the day. In early autumn and late spring, this part of the trail is crawling with leeches. In winter, it's common to find snow anywhere from this point on.

Day 4: Bamboo to Himalayan Hotel

2–3 hours, 530m ascent

The trail climbs steeply through stands of bamboo, then through rhododendron forest up the side of the canyon. Occasionally the trail drops slightly to cross tributary streams on narrow bridges, but it ascends continuously. Keep an eye out for troops of black-faced langur monkeys. When there is snow this stretch of trail is particularly difficult because the bamboo lying on the trail, hidden beneath the snow, provides an excellent start to a slide downhill. Local people harvest the dense bamboo forests beyond Kuldi to make mats for floors and roofs, and for *dokos*, the baskets that porters carry.

After traversing several avalanche chutes you'll reach a small hydro plant and the Hotel Tiptop, Annapurna Approach Lodge and Dovan Guest House alongside the stone-paved trail of **Doban** (2500m), 45 minutes from Bamboo.

Beyond Doban the trail crosses a stream and avalanche chute, then climbs across a landslide. In the forest is a small temple where local people leave offerings of flowers, cloth or leaves. There's a sign in Nepali saying that out of respect for the local deity,

Baraha Than, one should not carry eggs or meat beyond this point. Climb past a cascade over a rock platform and pass a trailside temple decorated with Shiva tridents and flowers. Twenty minutes later you'll reach two lodges that are both named Himalaya in a deep gorge at **Himalayan Hotel** (2840m). If you arrive early, it is worth trekking on an hour to Deorali to make the following day easier.

Day 5: Himalayan Hotel to Machhapuchhare Base Camp

3–4 hours, 860m ascent

From Himalayan Hotel it's about a 40-minute walk, first on a rocky trail through forests, then up a steep ravine, to **Hinku Cave** (3100m), named after the huge overhanging rock that used to house a small hotel. High cascades tumble off the high rock walls in all directions.

The trail crosses the remnants of a glacier (a major avalanche track) just beyond Hinku, then climbs through large boulders to **Deorali** (3140m), where the best of four hotels are the Panorama Guest House and the Dream Lodge. Above Deorali, the valley widens and becomes less steep, and you can see the 'gates' to the sanctuary as the mountains really start to kick in. After heavy snowfall, avalanches from Hiunchuli and Annapurna South, peaks that are above this point but not visible, come crashing into the valley with frightening speed and frequency. The lodge owners in Deorali can tell you whether there have been any avalanches recently.

The trail diverts to the east side of the valley to avoid a dangerous avalanche area and climbs through an unusual mix of bamboo and birch. Cairns point you across a bridge to the west side and rejoin the main trail just before Bagar, a meadow and some abandoned hotels at 3270m.

From Bagar, climb across more avalanche paths, then through a sparse birch forest. Cross a moraine and descend to a stream. A stone staircase leads to the Cosy Lodge, a helipad and a nearby German meteorological office. If you stay on the lower trail you'll soon climb to the cluster of four hotels that are known as **Machhapuchhare Base Camp** (MBC; 3700m; N 28° 31.580', E 083° 54.461'). The hotels are cosy and comfortable, especially the Gurung Cooperative and the Sanker



guesthouses, and there's good camping below the Fishtail Lodge. One or two of the inns in the sanctuary generally stay open during the winter. All are operated by people from Ghandruk or Chhomrong, so you can find out in advance which are operating. There's technically no such thing as 'Machhapuchhare Base Camp', since ascents of the mountain are prohibited.

The mountain views are stupendous; the panorama includes Hiunchuli, Annapurna South, Annapurna I, Annapurna III (7555m), Gangapurna (7454m) and the ever-changing Machhapuchhare, whose sheer triangular face takes on yet another aspect here.

You are now at an elevation where altitude problems can occur. It's another 430m of elevation gain to Annapurna Base Camp, so the best plan is to spend the night here to acclimatise and go higher the following day.

Many trekkers avoid an overnight stay at Annapurna Base Camp by leaving around 4.30am to catch the dawn light, returning to MBC by lunchtime and then continu-

ing down the valley to Himalayan Hotel or Doban by the afternoon.

Day 6: Machhapuchhare Base Camp to Annapurna Base Camp

1½–2 hours, 430m ascent

The climb to **Annapurna Base Camp** (ABC; 4130m; N 28° 31.826', E 083° 52.619') – four large hotels on a knoll beside a huge glacial moraine – takes under two hours. It's a pleasant walk, but the route can be hard to find if there's fresh snow. The trail follows a stream, then climbs to a few huts, where shepherds graze their sheep during the short summer. Before long you can see the hotels of base camp, but the view is deceptive and it takes quite a while to reach them as the trail sticks close to the foot of a large lateral moraine.

In the high trekking season the lodges here can be packed with 120 trekkers. All have private rooms and decent loos and serve surprisingly good food, including high-altitude apple pie. There's little to differentiate the four lodges, which are all well run. The area is cold, windy and often

ANNAPURNA PEAK

The 50km-long Annapurna massif encompasses a whole swathe of spectacular peaks, including four summits named Annapurna. The mountain is named after the female Hindu god of harvest, fertility and abundance.

The main summit is to the west of the Annapurna Sanctuary and is hardly visible at all from the Annapurna Circuit trek. Gangapurna (7454m) towers above Manang and Annapurna II (7937m) is above Chame, about 24km to the east. Annapurna South (7219m) is clearly visible from the trekking routes leading up to the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Annapurna (8091m) was first climbed by a French expedition led by Maurice Herzog in 1950. Equipped with 150 porters, the team became the first Westerners to ascend the Kali Gandaki Valley, initially basing themselves at Tukuche. After deciding Dhaulagiri was too difficult, they turned their attention to climbing Annapurna, the world's 10th-highest peak. Hampered by inaccurate maps (it took the team weeks just to find the mountain!), they eventually ascended via the Miristi Khola to the north face and made what was the first ascent of any 8000m peak on 3 June, just days before the start of the monsoon. The summiteers suffered severe frostbite on the descent (as depicted in Herzog's classic *Annapurna*) and were finally evacuated back to the roadhead in India.

Annapurna was not climbed again until 1970, when a British army expedition followed essentially the same route as Herzog. At the same time Chris Bonington led a successful British expedition to the very steep and difficult south face. An all-woman team marked the first American ascent in 1978. Annapurna II was first climbed in 1960 by a team under Jimmy Roberts that included a younger Chris Bonington.

With only 109 ascents recorded, Annapurna is considered one of the hardest and most dangerous peaks in the Himalaya, with an ascent rate half (and a death rate triple) that of Everest, largely due to the avalanches that regularly rip down the mountain. Famed mountain guide Anatoli Boukreev (one of the climbers involved in the Everest 'Into Thin Air' disaster of 1996) was killed by an avalanche while attempting a winter ascent on Christmas Day in 1997, and you can visit his memorial *chorten* at Annapurna Base Camp.



snowbound. In spring the snow reaches the hotel roofs.

There are tremendous views of the near-vertical south face of Annapurna towering above the sanctuary to the northwest. The ascent of this face in 1970 by an expedition led by Chris Bonington still remains one of the most spectacular climbs of an 8000m peak. Mornings are usually clear, clouds often roll in to obscure the peaks by noon, and then clear in the late afternoon.

Walk west past the porter shelter and volleyball court to a prayer-flag-draped viewpoint on the moraine for a spectacular view over the glacier. Nearby is a memorial *chorten* (stone Buddhist monument) to the well-known climber Anatoli Boukreev, who was killed in 1997 by an avalanche (see the boxed text, p165). Climb the southern slopes behind the hotels for a fine valley overview.

Several peaks accessible from the sanctuary are on the government's official list of 'trekking peaks' (see p345). Tharpu Chuli (formerly Tent Peak; 5663m) offers a commanding 360-degree view of the entire sanctuary. Its higher neighbour to the north is Singu Chuli (Fluted Peak; 6501m), while to the south is Hiunchuli. All three of these peaks present significant mountaineering challenges and require skill, equipment and advance planning.

There are few birds in the sanctuary, but there are tahr, Himalayan weasels and pika.

Day 7: Annapurna Base Camp to Himalayan Hotel

3½–4½ hours, 1320m descent

Heading back down the valley is much easier. Even if you do some exploring in the morning, you should have no problem reaching Himalayan Hotel or even Doban or Bamboo in a single day from Annapurna Base Camp.

Day 8: Himalayan Hotel to Chhomrong

5–7 hours, 1140m descent, 510m ascent

Retrace your steps to Doban and back down to apple-pie country, making a long, steep climb back to the top of Chhomrong.

Day 9: Chhomrong to Ghandruk

3–4½ hours, 700m descent, 480m ascent

To reach Ghandruk from Chhomrong, return to the trail junction near the teashops

ROUTE OPTIONS BACK TO POKHARA

You can return from Chhomrong to Pokhara by a variety of routes. The quickest way is to descend steeply to Jhinu Danda and Himal Qu and then follow trails down the west side of the Modi Khola to Birethanti (see p162). A more interesting option is to trek south to Ghandruk (described in this section) and then descend to follow the Modi Khola to Birethanti. Alternatively, extend your trek by a day or two and trek to Ghorepani to get the views from Poon Hill, as described in reverse in the Ghorepani to Ghandruk trek (p168). From Ghorepani you can either head north to Jomsom and Muktinath, or head back to Pokhara via Birethanti in a long day.

at Taglung and swing right to stay west above the potato and wheat fields. Climb to the top of a landslide (40 minutes) and 10 minutes later turn left at the trail junction (the right trail continues to Ghurjung and Tadapani). Look south straight across the valley (that's your destination), then look straight down to the valley floor 470m below you (that's where you are headed now). It's a heartbreaking sight.

Descend steeply through forests and switchbacks for 40 minutes, past the simple Kimrung Lunch Centre to **Kimrong** (Khumnu; 1810m) village, just above the Khumnu Khola (90 minutes). The Kimrong Guest House and Navina Hotel here are a decent place for a break, as is the teashop near the bridge.

At Kimrong, cross the bridge and stay on the left-hand trail as it climbs out of the Khumnu Valley. The trail makes a steep 430m climb through forest on an interminable set of switchbacks to a cluster of ridge-top lodges at **Kumrong Danda** (2220m). Take a break and dry your sweat-soaked shirt at the simple Machhapuchhare and Annapurna View lodges.

If you really want to beat the madding crowd, follow the side trail northeast from Kumrong along the ridge for 20 minutes to the Little Paradise Lodge, run by local doctor Man Prasad Gurung. One reader reported stopping here for breakfast and liking the hotel so much he stayed for four days!



From Kumrong Danda it's an easy descent to a bridge over the Kyuri Khola at 2010m. Ten minutes from here the route is joined by a fork of the Ghorepani–Ghandruk trail. Turn east and climb to the Shangri La Guest House at the northeast end of Ghandruk (1990m). Continue through the village for 10 minutes to the centre.

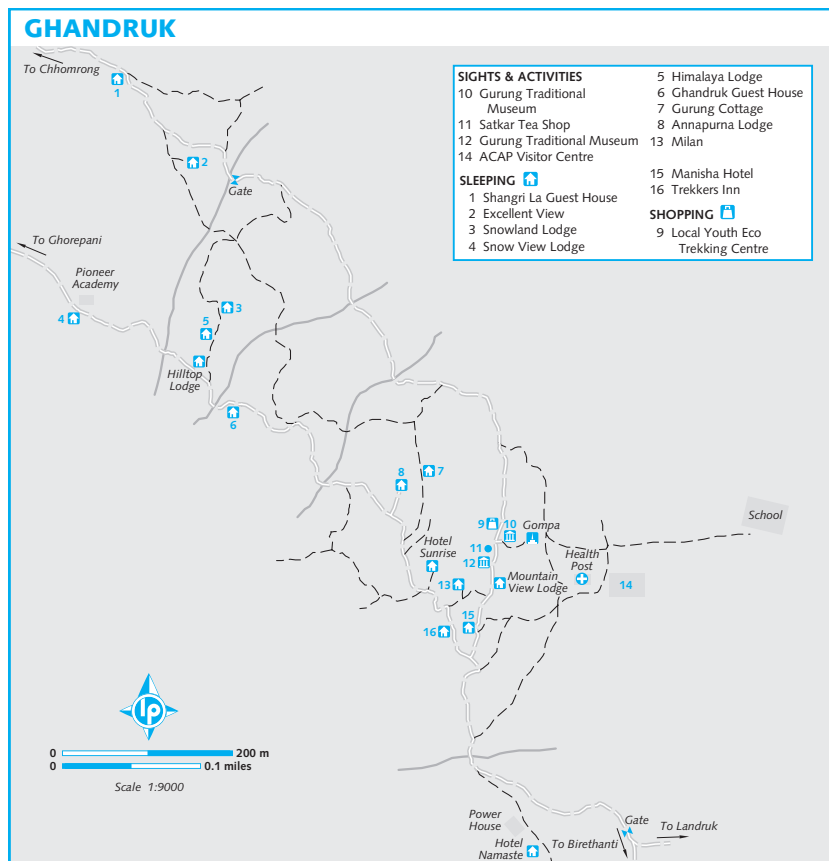
GHANDRUK

Ghandruk, with about 270 families, is the second-largest Gurung settlement in Nepal (the largest is Siklis). It's a charming cluster of closely spaced, slate-roofed houses, surrounded by neatly terraced fields and framed by outstanding views of Annapurna South and Machhapuchhare. Older maps spell the village 'Ghandrung', but Ghandruk

is the currently accepted spelling. Ghandruk is the Nepali name, but the village's real Gurung name is Kond.

It is wonderfully easy to get lost in the network of narrow alleyways. The dozen or so lodges are scattered throughout the village and are quite far apart, both in distance and elevation. There are little signboards at most trail junctions directing you to various hotels that are '1 minute away' – times that are very optimistic. All hotels in Ghandruk charge Rs 161/268 for a single/double, or Rs 214/428 with a private bathroom.

Coming from Chhomrong, the quiet and rural Shangri La Guest House is the first lodge and offers views over the main old village. The concrete **Trekkers Inn** (☎ 061-522448) in the busier far south of the village has



won three 'lodge of the year' awards from ACAP and has a good restaurant, though these days the service is more efficient than friendly. Its neighbour, the well-run Milan, is charming and like most lodges in Ghandruk uses kerosene and gas exclusively and has a proper septic tank to handle toilet waste. The large concrete Manisha Hotel has less charm. Further up the hill towards Ghorepani, the six-roomed **Gurung Cottage** (☎ 9746 009682) is in a lovely secluded location with a patio of flowers. The owner Kishan Gurung is a fine host. Also further on are the recommended Ghandruk Guest House and the Excellent View, both of which have views of the village and Annapurnas. The best place in town is Ker & Downey's Himalaya Lodge (see p146), though this doesn't normally accept walk-in guests. The traditional Snowland Lodge has carved wooden windows and a fine lawn for camping, though it's not exactly sound-proof.

If you arrive early there's plenty to do. Not one but two museums duel for your attention. Best is the **Gurung Traditional Museum** (admission Rs 30; ☎ 7am-7pm), an Aladdin's Cave of hidden treasures down a small alley off the main path. Highlights include a shield made from elephant skin and a bow string made from nettle fibre. The other museum (which has the same name and admission fee) is also worth a visit and offers a variety of dishes unique to this region. The nearby Satkar Tea Shop plays a documentary on Gurung culture three times a day (Rs 50).

The **ACAP visitor centre** (☎ 10am-5pm Sun-Thu, to 3pm Fri), below town, provides information about its activities and screens daily video shows. If your backpack isn't quite heavy enough, invest in one of the local carpets or visit the handicraft shop in the Local Youth Eco Trekking Centre, which also provides local guides and offers cultural and nature tours.

Day 10: Ghandruk to Naya Pul

3½-4½ hours, 1000m descent

As you leave town, descend to a stream and water-driven mill and trek past the Hotel Namaste to an entrance arch where the trail to Landruk (see p162) starts downhill on a steep stone staircase. The main trail to Birethanti instead leads south from here, dropping at first on a staircase, then

traversing high above the river on a wide stone-paved trail. Cross a stream at Chane (1690m) and continue to **Kimche** (1640m), where there are a couple of teashops and restaurants. Half an hour later the path from Himal Qu joins the trail. The nearby Shining River Guest House marks an important final milestone – the last downhill section of the trek. Follow the ridge downhill to join the Modi Khola at **Syauli Bazaar** (1140m). The hotels and cafes here suddenly seem quite cosmopolitan. If you're walking the other direction from Birethanti to Ghandruk, this is the start of a tough 850m climb; you can arrange a guide and porter here.

From here on the walking is flat, which after the last 10 days seems distinctly weird. The trail follows the river valley through a lovely birch forest and extensive rice terraces to Chimrong and then Lamakhet. Nearby is the top-end Ker & Downey Sanctuary Lodge (see p146). It's another 20 minutes to **Birethanti** (1000m). The last stretch of trail is rough and rocky, down a dry streambed to a shrine by the Modi Khola. See p151 for a description of facilities in Birethanti.

You can stay in Birethanti or head into Pokhara. It's a 30-minute walk on the rough road to **Naya Pul**, where you have a short climb to the road. Taxis and buses to Pokhara are available at Naya Pul well into the night.

GHOREPANI TO GHANDRUK

Duration 2 days

Max Elevation 3210m

Difficulty easy-medium

Season October to May

Start Ghorepani (p150)

Finish Ghandruk (p167)

Summary Use this route to combine a visit to the Annapurna Sanctuary, or a visit to the Gurung village of Ghandruk, with the Annapurna Circuit Part II trek.

It is a long day from Ghorepani to Ghandruk, especially if you have climbed to Poon Hill in the morning or the trail is snow-covered. In the opposite direction, from Ghandruk to Ghorepani, it's even tougher. In either direction, it's best to break the trek in Tadapani, not only to make the trekking



easier, but also for the excellent views of Machhapuchhare.

THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP152–3)

Day 1: Ghorepani to Tadapani

3¼–4½ hours, 550m ascent, 710m descent

Two trails head east from Ghorepani, from either the Sunny Guest House or Dhaulagiri Hotel. They join after 15 minutes at a *chautara* (resting place for porters) on a grassy knoll that offers good mountain views similar to those from Poon Hill, including a view of Machhapuchhare (not visible from the Ghorepani pass), and a panorama all the way south to the plains of India. Keep climbing past a teahouse to meander along the ridge in pine and rhododendron forests, reaching a crest at 3210m. Descend on the north side of the ridge along a slippery, muddy trail interlaced with tree roots to two lodges and a collection of hat and sock shops in a clearing called **Deorali** (3090m), 1¼ hours from Ghorepani. A trail leads west from here to connect to the Ghorepani–Tadapani trail at Chitre (see p200).

The Tadapani trail descends through rhododendron forests to the small but peaceful Hotel Lali Guras Lodge, where a side trail climbs for 10 minutes to a ridge-top viewing tower known as ‘Gurung Hill’. A ridge hides the mountains as the trail makes a steep, sometimes treacherous descent on a narrow path alongside the stream. The stream has some potential swimming pools alongside the trail and finally becomes a series of waterfalls over a jumble of boulders and logs that are washed down when this harmless-looking stream runs amok during the monsoon rains.

The descent becomes more gentle as the route reaches **Banthanti** (2606m; 2¼ hours), four lodges in the shadow of a huge rock face. (Note that this is not the same Banthanti that is between Ulleri and Ghorepani.) After crossing to the north side of the stream the trail starts climbing, leaving the moist, high mountain forests and entering a field of cane, making some ups and downs to the well-run Tranquillity Guest House. Ten minutes beyond is the simple Trekkers Sanctuary Lodge, on a ridge top at 2700m, offering great views over the gorge to Ulleri. A rocky trail descends steeply for 20 minutes to the Bhurungdi Khola before climbing again dishearteningly through

steep forests for a further 20 minutes to **Tadapani** (2710m), a jumble of hotels and souvenir stands. The views of Annapurna South, Hiunchuli and Machhapuchhare are spectacular from here, especially at sunset and from the Shiva Temple just above the village.

Tadapani’s most popular lodge is probably the Panorama Point, but it’s often booked with groups. Not content with the fine view from ground level, the lodge has built a stone lookout tower. The Grand View, Super View and Himalaya Tourist Guest House are all good and offer cosy dining rooms. A new lodge is under construction above the Shiva Temple.

Tadapani means ‘far water’ and the water supply is a long distance below the village. Before the water pipe was constructed it took porters more than 30 minutes to fetch each load of water. Porters carry slabs of slate from a nearby rock quarry to make roofs for homes in Ghandruk and Melanche.

Day 2: Tadapani to Ghandruk

2–3 hours, 720m descent

The Ghandruk trail descends steeply from the Himalaya Tourist Guest House through forests to Baise Kharka (Buffalo Pasture), a clearing with two hotels. There are two trails from here, both of which lead to Ghandruk. The left-hand trail follows the Kyuri Khola to join the Chhomrong–Ghandruk route (see p166) and enters **Ghandruk** near the Shangri La Guest House. The right-hand trail makes a short, steep descent among rocks to a stream crossing, then leads out on a ridge towards Ghandruk. It reaches the top of Ghandruk near the Pioneer Academy and the Snow View Lodge, then passes the Annapurna Lodge and descends on stone steps into the maze of the village itself.

ALTERNATIVE DAY 2: TADAPANI TO CHHOMRONG

3–4½ hours, 780m descent, 280m ascent

Descend from the Grand View Lodge on a narrow trail through forests full of bromeliads to a pasture. The **Mountain Discovery Lodge** (s/d Rs 80/120; 2280m) here lacks the mountain views of Tadapani but makes up for it with a peaceful location, a fine lawn and good upper-floor rooms that look out over the valley. Ten minutes later pass the farm-like Hillside Lodge at Chiule (one hour) and



drop down on steep steps through corn and millet fields to Siprung, passing through the well-kept courtyard of the British Gurkha Lodge at 1980m. A further 10 minutes' descent will bring you to an old suspension bridge over the Khumnu Khola at 1930m, making a total descent of almost 800m in 90 minutes.

The trail starts climbing immediately to the spread-out village of **Ghurjung** (2010m), passing the school and then the Namobudha Guest House. The trail passes through the yards of several homes and lodges, crossing a wooden bridge near the Hotel Green Hill. It's then a 30-minute walk in and out of side valleys to Dhiklyo Danda (2½ hours), where the Ghandruk–Chhomrong trail joins the route. Climb steeply to crest a ridge, gaining views of Machhapuchhare and avoiding a huge landslide out of sight below you. Forty minutes later you pass Taglung and the signed trail from Jhinu Danda and swing round the ridge for views of **Chhomrong** (2210m) just beyond.

There is a shorter alternative trail, but it involves more climbing. Start near the Fishtail View Top Lodge in Tadapani and descend through rhododendron forests to the Brahman village of **Melanche** (2050m). Below Melanche the trail descends steeply through corn and wheat fields. It's not easy to find the right trail; ask the people in the village for directions to Kimrong. As it nears the river, the route becomes less distinct, but just keep heading downhill, aiming for the only settlement you can see on the river. Cross the Khumnu Khola and join the Ghandruk–Chhomrong route (see p166), making the steep climb to Dhiklyo Danda and on to Taglung and Chhomrong.

ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT PART I

Duration 10–14 days

Max Elevation 5416m

Difficulty medium–hard

Season October to November, March to April

Start Besi Sahar (opposite)

Finish Muktinath (p188)

Summary The first part of Nepal's classic teahouse trek takes you past a wide range of spectacular mountain scenery to cross the 5416m Thorung La pass – probably the highest you'll get without putting on crampons.

It takes anywhere from 16 to 22 days to trek the full 300km around the entire Annapurna massif. Now that a dirt road runs alongside the western third of the circuit, this eastern section remains the most enjoyable section to walk. The route follows the Marsyangdi Valley to Manang, climbs the high Thorung La and then descends into the dramatic Kali Gandaki Valley. The second half of the circuit through that valley is described in the following Annapurna Circuit Part II trek (p186).

The real appeal of this trek lies in its variety. The trail starts in verdant rice paddies and climbs through the deep gorges of the Marsyangdi, before swinging west into the arid Manang region, with its awesome views of the north side of the Annapurnas. The cultural mix takes in Gurung, Manangi and Thakali communities and their traditional stone-walled villages, Tibetan-style monasteries and unsettling animist totems.

Almost everyone treks the circuit anti-clockwise to avoid the harder ascent of the Thorung La from the west side. Ironically, if you go against the flow you'll actually meet more trekkers because you'll be passing everyone en route, including an endless stream of porters and mule trains.

PLANNING Clothing & Equipment

Proper gear for porters must be a prime consideration if you are taking them over the 5416m Thorung La. Many lowland porters have suffered frostbite or snow blindness on this pass because trekkers (and/or their sherpas) have not provided the proper footwear, clothing and sunglasses. Porters from near-tropical villages like Besi Sahar don't necessarily know what to expect on a snow-covered pass, or they hope that the pass crossing will be in warm weather, and may join a trekking party clad only in flip-flops and cotton clothing. If you employ porters for a crossing of the Thorung La, you incur both a moral and a legal obligation for their safety and wellbeing. See p364 for more information.

Accommodation

There are teashops and lodges every couple of hours along the Annapurna Circuit. ACAP has standardised prices for food and accommodation in each village and erected



signs showing the location of hotels. In most lodges the facilities are good, although the lodges in the lower Marsyangdi Valley are not quite as good as those in the Kali Gandaki or the Everest region.

Food and lodging become increasingly expensive as you trek further from the road. A dal bhat that costs Rs 160 in Bhulbule will cost you double this in Thorung Phedi.

NEAREST TOWN

Besi Sahar

☎ 066 / elevation 800m

Besi Sahar, the headquarters of Lamjung district, has long been the starting point for the Annapurna Circuit trek, though road construction means you can now continue the same day by bus up to Bhulbule or jeep to Syange.

The town is strung out for over 1km. Buses stop to let off passengers at the Hotel Tukucho Peak but if you're headed for the trail, stay on the bus until its terminus at the northern end of town. If you arrive too late to start trekking it makes sense to stay in the northern end of the town; if ending your trek stay at the southern end of town.

At the southern end of town is the **Hotel Tukucho Peak** (☎ 520162; r with shared/private bathroom Rs 200/600), offering solar hot water,

clean bathrooms and a decent restaurant. Cheaper nearby options include the **Hotel Mountain View** (☎ 520456; s/d Rs 100/150).

Options at the northern end of town include the large, marbly **Hotel Gangapurna** (☎ 520342; hotelgangapurna@gmail.com; r Rs 300) and, at the end of town, the **Mongolian Guest House** (☎ 520160; s/d with shared bathroom Rs 150/200, with private bathroom Rs 300/400), with thin mattresses but lots of balcony seating and a restaurant.

The central **Gandaki Bikas Bank** (☎ 520773; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Sun-Fri) changes cash and travellers cheques. A couple of places in town offer internet access. Trekkers are expected to register their TIMS card at an office at the northern end of town.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Minibuses leave Kathmandu's Gongabu bus park between 6.30am and noon to Besi Sahar (Rs 350, six hours). Return minibuses leave from both ends of town. If you'd prefer to travel in slightly more comfort, you could take a tourist bus to Pokhara (Rs 400), jump ship at Dumre and continue the 43km on a minibus to Besi Sahar (Rs 100), though it's hard to see how this is much of an improvement. A taxi from Kathmandu to Besi Sahar costs around Rs 4500.



SAFETY ON THE THORUNG LA

The 5416m Thorung La is one of Nepal's highest trekking passes and crossing it is potentially dangerous. It is easiest and safest to cross the Thorung La from east to west, as in our route description. If you travel from west to east, there is no accommodation between the very simple lodges at Chabarbu, at 4190m, to a spot two to three hours beyond the pass on the Manang side, at 4510m. This means that you have to make a 1120m climb, plus at least a 900m descent, in a single day, a tough feat for most people and a dangerous one if you are not yet acclimatised. In the event of a problem on the Manang side, you can call on the resources of the Himalayan Rescue Association post in Manang.

From Manang to Muktinath, the pass is not difficult, but it is still a long trek and the high elevation can cause problems, particularly for those without previous high-altitude experience. You might have to return to Besi Sahar if it is impossible or dangerous to cross the Thorung La because of altitude sickness or snow.

It's impossible to define exact dates, but the Thorung La is usually snowbound and closed from mid-December to late February. There are years when the weather allows it to stay open throughout winter, and other times when unseasonable storms close it, temporarily at least, in October or April.

Be sure to read the Altitude Sickness section in the Health & Safety chapter (p391) so that you are aware of the symptoms. Trekkers have died on the Thorung La because of altitude sickness, exposure, cold and avalanches.

Be certain you are prepared for this long trek. Once you start, the only ways out are to walk back to Besi Sahar, fly from Hongde airport near Manang or cross the pass to Jomsom and fly from there.

ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT PART I – TIMES

The following are trekking times only; stops are not included.

Day	Section	Hours
1	Besi Sahar to Khudi	2:00
	Khudi to Bhulbule	0:45
2	Bhulbule to Ngadi	1:15
	Ngadi to Bahundanda	1:45
	Bahundanda to Kanigaon	1:30
	Kanigaon to Ghermu	0:15
3	Ghermu to Syange	0:15
	Syange to Jagat	1:30
	Jagat to Chamje	1:00
	Chamje to Tal	2:00
4	Tal to Karte	1:30
	Karte to Dharapani	0:40
	Dharapani to Bagarchhap	0:45
	Bagarchhap to Danaque	0:30
	Danaque to Timang	1:10
	Timang to Thanchowk	1:10
	Thanchowk to Koto	0:35
	Koto to Chame	0:25
5	Chame to Telekhu	0:25
	Telekhu to Bhratang	1:10
	Bhratang to Dhukur Pokhari	1:20
	Dhukur Pokhari to Pisang	0:50
	Pisang to Upper Pisang	0:20
6	Upper Pisang to Ghyaru	2:00
	Ghyaru to Ngawal	1:30
	Ngawal to Bragha	2:30
	Bragha to Manang	0:30
7	Manang	
8	Manang to Tengi	0:30
	Tengi to Gungang	0:45
	Gungang to Yak Kharka	1:30
	Yak Kharka to Letdar	0:55
9	Letdar to Thorung Phedi	2:00
10	Thorung Phedi to High Camp	1:00
	High Camp to Yakawa Thorung Ri teashop	0:45
	Yakawa Thorung Ri teashop to Thorung La	1:30
	Thorung La to Chabarbu	2:45
	Chabarbu to Muktinath	1:00

Buses depart Pokhara for Besi Sahar at 7.15am (big bus, Rs 200, five hours), 8.50am (minibus, Rs 230, four hours) and also 11am and 4pm. Some minibuses leave from the main road, not the bus station, so arrive early to double-check.

Minibuses run every hour or so beyond Besi Sahar to Bhulbule (Rs 60, 90 minutes), but drivers may refuse to take foreigners for less than Rs 200. It's such an uncomfortable ride that you are probably better off walking anyway. Jeeps ply the same route and continue to Syange (Rs 250) if the road hasn't been destroyed by monsoon rains.

THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP154–9)

Day 1: Besi Sahar to Bhulbule

2½ hours, 50m ascent

Today's section of the trail follows the dirt road to Bhulbule, before crossing the Marsyangdi River. If you arrive in Besi Sahar at lunchtime it's possible to take the bus or hike along the road to Bhulbule or even Ngadi that same day.

At the northern end of the Besi Sahar bazaar, by the Mongolian Hotel, follow a rough rock staircase down to the Puwa Khola and join the road to **Khudi** (830m; two hours), the first Gurung village on the trek and with a couple of simple lodges.

Cross the suspension bridge, rejoin the road on the other side of Khudi and continue to **Bhulbule** (840m). Himalchuli and Ngadi Chuli (also known as Manaslu II and formerly known as Peak 29), at 7879m, dominate the horizon.

At Bhulbule you'll need to register at the first **ACAP checkpoint** of the trek. Here you will

MIX IT UP

How your first few days' itinerary works out depends on several variables: what time your bus arrives in Besi Sahar, whether you take the bus or jeep to Bhulbule or Syange, and whether jeep transport pushes further along the circuit during the lifetime of this book. Consider the first few days of this trek a sample itinerary only.

Beyond Manang you need to stick to our itineraries for proper acclimatisation, but below Manang you can simply consult the table of times for each stage to devise your own itinerary.

To avoid the crowds, try overnighing in smaller villages like Timang, Trichyungalta, Koto, Thanchowk, Karte, Dhukur Pokhari and Ghyaru. All offer good accommodation and you'll likely be the only guest there.



SAFE DRINKING WATER STATIONS

An estimated one million unrecyclable and unbiodegradable plastic bottles are carried into the Annapurna Conservation Area each year. In an attempt to halt this flood of plastic, ACAP (with the assistance of the New Zealand government) operates the Safe Drinking Water Scheme – a chain of 16 outlets selling purified water to trekkers. The outlets are found in Tal, Bargarchhap, Chame, Pisang, Hongde, Manang, Letdar, Thorung Phedi, Muktinath, Kagbeni, Jomsom, Marpha, Tukuiche, Khobang, Larjung, Lete and Ghosa.

Prices range from Rs 35 to Rs 60 per litre, which is around a third of the price of bottled mineral water, and stations are generally open from 6am to 6pm. If you don't intend to purify your own water, it's the only ethical alternative.

collect the first stamp on your entry permit or have to pay double the normal Rs 2000 fee if you can't produce it.

The trail leaves the road and descends past the Thorung Guest House, popular for its restaurant and green lawn, and the small Everest Guest House, then crosses the Marsyangdi Khola on a long suspension bridge. Across the bridge is the traditional wooden Heaven Guest House with pleasant tables overlooking the river. The concrete **Hotel Arjun** (☎ 066-520441) has a nice garden and hot shower but the rooms can be noisy. There are fine sunset views of Manaslu (8156m) from the rooftop. Just below is a good camp site with toilets. Accommodation rates in Bhulbule are fixed at Rs 150/200 for a single/double.

Depending on time, you might be able to continue to Ngadi, 90 minutes away. Remember that by the end of October you'll start to lose sunlight by 5pm.

Day 2: Bhulbule to Ghermu

5–6 hours, 480m ascent, 180m descent

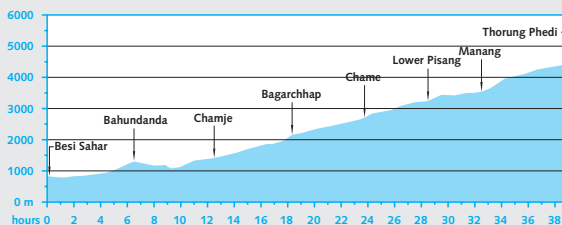
Beyond Bhulbule the trail travels up the east bank of the river, past an impressive 60m waterfall that is surrounded by a tropi-

cal tree called a pandanus, or screw pine. Watch for langur monkeys playing in the treetops. The path wanders through extensive rice terraces with continuing views of Manaslu and Ngadi Chuli.

The mountain views disappear as you near **Ngadi** (900m). This used to be only a winter settlement before trekkers arrived. Accommodation is divided into two sections, which are 10 minutes apart. The Holiday Trekkers Lodge and Sumon Hotel, then Seasons Lodge and friendly Sky High Guest House, which offer spacious gardens in the fields south of the village and all come with mosquito nets. A local school teacher runs the nearby **Hiker's Lodge** (☎ 066-520624), with ramshackle rooms but nice trailside sitting areas, a Western toilet and a small bookshop. Further along, in the tightly packed, stone-paved main street of Ngadi are the wooden Himalaya, Annapurna, Marsyangdi, Kamala and Mina lodges.

Cross the Sisneri Khola at the end of Ngadi and pass the unfinished base of a long-promised power plant to reach a Tibetan settlement and porter stop on the east side of a long suspension bridge across the

Annapurna Circuit Part I



Ngadi Khola. On the hills above the Ngadi Khola is the village of Usta, on an old, now disused, trekking route.

The trail passes between the hill and the river, passing a signposted detour to hot springs, and then ascends steeply to a well-placed rest stop. As you curve around the hillside you can see Bahundanda to the right of the conical hill. The trail soon passes the *bhattis* and cold-drink stalls of Lampata; take the left turn at the end of the town into the bowl of terraced rice fields. The trail winds around to the small but friendly Manaslu Guest House and makes a steep 15-minute climb through groves of bamboo to **Bahundanda** (1270m), an attractive village in the saddle of a long ridge.

Bahundanda ('Hill of the Brahmins') is the northernmost Brahman settlement in the Marsyangdi Valley. The hilltop Hotel Mountain View here is airy and pleasant and boasts a dorm that 'charges extra for snorers'. The Hotel Superb View has a pleasant garden and is another excellent choice – its sign proudly states that it is 'not recommended by Lonely Planet'. Other decent places for lunch include the Tibetan Guest House, which offers a scrumptious veggie fry-up with pumpkin. You can camp in the school to the east of town.

Descend on a steep, rocky trail past golden amphitheatre-shaped rice terraces. The flocks of birds you might see in the rice fields are slaty-headed parakeets. Contour across terraces to a teashop in a settlement aptly named 'Under the Pipal Tree'. Drop to a Bailey bridge and cross the stream at the foot of an enticing-looking cascade and pools (look for the traditional water mill to the right), then make a short climb to a couple of restaurants at Lili Bhir.

The trail then traverses high above the river on an exposed trail. It was along this stretch of trail, in August 2000, that Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of *Himal* magazine, fell while trekking alone and spent three days on a ledge before being rescued (see the boxed text, p355). Kanak later discovered he was not the first person to fall here and contributed the money to build a railing along the most dangerous part of the trail.

A climb over a ridge leads to the pleasant village of **Kanigaon** (1170m), named after the small *kani* (*chorten*-shaped arches over trails) that mark the entrance and exit to

the town. All the old villages from here to Kagbeni have entrance *kanis* and these get more elaborate as the Tibetan influence becomes stronger in each successive village. The Peaceful Guest House offers a good, offbeat place to overnight.

Ten minutes later the large **Crystal Guest House** (s/d Rs 100/150, dishes Rs 200-320) boasts the region's most impressive menu, serving Indian, Italian and even Japanese dishes, and marks the beginning of **Ghermu** (1140m). Five minutes later the Sabina and Dipak guesthouses share the village centre with shops selling bangles and bolts of colourful cloth. The end of town has a pharmacy and the Rainbow Restaurant and Lodge, which offers the best views of the huge waterfall across the Marsyangdi. Ghermu is a quieter and nicer place to overnight than the older roadside lodges at Syange.

Day 3: Ghermu to Tal

5–6 hours, 640m ascent, 80m descent

From Ghermu the trail drops quickly past the Annapurna Restaurant to cross the Marsyangdi on a long, rattling suspension bridge at **Syange** (1080m). Syange is currently the last place served by jeep transport, and it lacks the charm of nearby settlements. The riverside lodges in the original cobblestone village include the popular **New Thakuri Guest House** (☎ 9936 60053; s/d Rs 100/150) and the Sonam Tibetan Lodge, both of which get busy at lunchtime. Campers will find more space 100m downstream at the Waterfall Guest House.

Syange marks not only the end of the motorable road but also the last of the rolling Middle Hills; beyond here the valley closes in to become a steep canyon. Follow the unfinished road until it starts to switch-back up the hillside and then switch to the steep uphill short cuts. The trail climbs to a cold-drinks stop at the Marco Polo Hotel (1265m) and then crosses a high exposed trail blasted out of the nearly vertical cliffs. When Tilman walked this section in 1950 the trail followed a series of wooden galleries tied to the face of the rock cliffs; things haven't changed much since then. Despite recent blasting, it's hard to see how the new road will navigate this section.

It's a short descent past a small waterfall to **Jagat** (1330m), inhabited, as are most villages in this region, by people of Tibetan



heritage. Jagat means 'toll station'; this was once the site of a tax-collection post for the Tibetan salt trade. The tightly packed stone village has a medieval feel and boasts a dozen lodges. Good places include the three-storey **Tibet Pemba Hotel** (d Rs 150-180, mains Rs 200-300) and the very similar Eco Home, Paradise Hotel and the North Face River View Guest House, the latter complete with fake North Face logo. All offer a couple of rooms with private bathroom (Rs 250). The Hotel Mont Blanc at the southern end of town has a lovely hidden garden area for lunch. International telephone calls are possible in town for Rs 100 per minute. There is a small hot spring located 15 minutes below the village.

From Jagat, the trail descends and crosses a landslide to a small teashop near the Ghatta Khola. It's then a fairly stiff climb through forests past two *bhattis* and the good Hotel International to fantastic views of a series of explosive cascades opposite the Superb Rainbow View Guest House. Five minutes further is **Chamje** (1410m) and the venerable Tibetan Hotel. Descend past a big overhanging rock to the three-storey Tibet Lhasa Guest House and the Hotel Chymche, the former decorated with Tibetan carpets and prayer flags (upper-floor rooms are the best here).

Cross to the east bank of the Marsyangdi and follow the trail along the river embankment. The trail passes under a house-sized boulder, then climbs a rocky trail and a steep stone staircase to a couple of simple teashops in Sattale (1480m).

Climb past fields, then through stands of bamboo and rhododendron to an exposed trail that traverses high above the steep riverbank. The trail makes a short descent to a single *bhatti* at **Tal Besi** (1590m), then climbs steeply beside the Marsyangdi, which has become an underground waterfall beneath huge boulders. There are plans to build a large hydroelectricity plant here. The trail crests a ridge topped by a razor-wired army base to enter Manang district and the valley suddenly opens into a large plain. In this dramatic setting, at the foot of a large waterfall, is **Tal** (1700m), a string of lodges and trading posts reminiscent of an old American pony-express outpost. The town gets its name from the lake (*tal*) that once filled the broad, flat valley. The partly

submerged trail squeezes between the river and cliff as the waters lap at your toes.

With over 15 lodges, Tal is an excellent place to overnight. The concrete Father and Son and quiet Peaceland guesthouses are in the southern end of town. The central Dragon Hotel has tasty food and good camping in a back garden, while the friendly Hotel Mona Lisa has a nice garden. The Manaslu Guest House is well tended. All are good options, as are the Himalayan Hotel and the Tibetan Hotel, north over the bridge. The Paradise Lodge, in a secluded garden at the far end of town, is the most popular lodge in Tal, partly because of its superb potato, bean and pumpkin house special (Rs 150). Rooms in Tal cost Rs 100 to Rs 200, with a dal bhat around Rs 220.

Tal's two shops sell everything from Hob Nob biscuits to sunscreen, though for mineral water go to the nearby **ACAP safe drinking water station** (per litre Rs 35; ☎ 5.30am-6pm). In typical Nepali fashion the small town boasts a church, Buddhist *chortens* and a Hindu temple. For a short stroll, follow the trail behind the Paradise Guest House to a picturesque *chorten* at the base of the waterfall.

The region around Tal and Bagarchhap is called Gyasumdo (meaning 'three trails'), one of three distinct divisions within Manang. Gyasumdo was once highly dependent on trade with Tibet, including the sale of local musk, though since the disruption of cross-border trade in 1959, herding and agriculture have assumed greater importance.

Day 4: Tal to Chame

6½–7½ hours, 1100m ascent, 90m descent

Today's walk is a relatively long one, but you can shorten it by overnighing at Timang or Koto. From Tal the trail heads north past the Hotel Paradise, over a wooden bridge, and then makes its way along the riverbed, past rocks painted with Maoist slogans to Sirantal. A short distance on, follow the riverside trail to a 60m-long suspension bridge across the Marsyangdi.

Climb past several drink stalls, cross a bridge over a side cascade and pass under the arch of the small Manaslu Lodge at **Khotro** (1860m). Descend past a *bhatti* in the forest to a long, high suspension bridge that leads to the east bank of the river and the very pleasant courtyards of the Alpine,



New World and Dorchester hotels at **Karte** (1850m). Perched on a sunny ledge, Karte makes a good alternative overnight stop.

The main trail branches left from Karte and climbs over a ridge, entering the churning river gorge before dropping to a suspension bridge that takes you back to the west side of the Marsyangdi.

A new side trail branching right from Karte offers an excursion, climbing steeply for an hour to the little-visited town of Nache (2500m), before dropping back to rejoin the main trail just before the suspension bridge. ACAP is promoting a three-day camping trek from Nache up to Dhuna Lake (4700m), but this is much too rapid an altitude gain to be considered advisable.

The main trail continues from the bridge up to the Tashi Delek, Eco Himalaya and Tibet Lhasa hotels, the first two of which offer a taste of the trail's first 'German bakeries'. A mini-hydro plant harnesses the impressive cascades to provide 24-hour electricity. A stone *kani* then marks the formal entrance to **Dharapani** (1960m), with a post office, police post and a couple of basic lodges. Just beyond the town are several better lodges: the recommended Hotel The Seven (boasting a garden, laundry and horse hire), the New Tibet Guest House and new Green Park. Both the New Tibet and the earlier Eco Himalaya offer good camping spots for Manaslu trekkers.

About 10 minutes further on, along a section of road that seems to appear from nowhere, is another ACAP checkpoint, where you'll need to register and show your ACAP permit. Try not to get stuck behind a group here or the process will take ages. This upper section of Dharapani marks the junction of the Marsyangdi and Dudh Khola, where the Around Manaslu trekking route (see p319) joins the Annapurna Circuit. To Manaslu trekkers, Dharapani will seem like a booming metropolis. The Tibetan Hotel and Kangaroo Guest House offer good opportunities to break for tea. The latter has a camp site with a kitchen hut behind it.

Beyond Dharapani, the wide trail climbs gradually over a spur. (Hard-core hikers could detour up the stone staircase here to the remote village of Odar – *odar* means cave – which is said to offer fine views of Manaslu.) Stick with the dull main road

for the 30-minute walk to Bagarchhap, through a forest of blue pine, spruce, hemlock, maple and oak. The jay-like bird that you see is the nutcracker; it eats the seeds from the blue pine cones. As the trail curves around the ridge to enter Bagarchhap, you are rewarded with your first Annapurna views.

Bagarchhap (2160m) is the first village on the trek with typical Tibetan architecture: closely spaced stone houses with flat roofs piled high with firewood. The well-maintained Diki Gompa is a couple of minutes above the village. In November 1995 a landslide destroyed much of the village, including two lodges. A memorial *chorten* in the centre of the village commemorates those killed. The village has been rebuilt but there is still evidence of the destruction. The Marsyangdi Hotel, Pasang Guest House and Eco Holiday Home still offer accommodation and a good lunch, but many hoteliers have rebuilt their lodges in Danaque, 30 minutes up the valley.

The trek has now entered the Manang Valley and continues west up the valley, offering views of the high Himalayan peaks to the south. There are occasional glimpses of Lamjung Himal (6986m) and Annapurna II (7937m) to the west and the peaks of Manaslu Himal to the east.

Much of the Manang Valley is virgin forest of pine and fir, but construction of new houses and hotels and the constant demand for firewood are causing people to cut down many of these fine trees. The trail stays on the south bank of the river, climbing through forests to **Danaque** (2210m), also called Syal Khola ('the river of jackals').

In lower Danaque you'll find the friendly family-run Snowland Hotel and the Hotel Tibetan, both popular lunch spots. Five minutes later you'll pass a Tibetan-style *mani dungkhor* (chapel with large prayer wheel inside) beside a *mani* wall (a wall built of stones carved with Buddhist prayers), and then a trio of good lodges – the Mt Kailash, Trekkers Hotel and Potala Guest House. These lodges are your last chance to get food or accommodation before the long climb to Timang. Danaque is surrounded by apple orchards, and apples and peaches are available throughout the region during autumn.

Beyond Danaque the route crosses a stream on a wooden bridge and starts to



climb steeply, crisscrossing sections of road through rhododendron forest to eventually gain 500m in elevation. Cross the *khola* on a concrete bridge by the Syalque mini-hydro project and then climb again, to eventually arrive at the Shanta Restaurant at 2545m.

As the scenery opens up, the mountain amphitheatre reveals the Namun Bhanjyang (5505m), once the main route to Ghanpokhari in the south. Namun Bhanjyang is a difficult pass because there is often snow and there is no food or shelter for four days. Few people, except for herders, use it now but it's a potential four-day route out of the valley via Thulo Tal and Rambrong Pass for a well-acclimatised camping group. The pass is closed by snow between November and May.

After a further short climb you'll reach the slightly scruffy settlement of **Timang** (2630m), perched high over the valley. The Tibetan Restaurant proudly flies the Tibetan flag. Very few trekkers overnight in Timang but the Prasanna Hotel and Hotel Royal Garden both offer an offbeat place to stay, rewarding you with wonderful early-morning views of Manaslu.

Follow the track as it climbs a ridge at 2720m and then descends through pine forest, leaving the road behind. A trio of *chortens* reveal the heartbreaking sight of the trail descending steeply into a side valley, only to climb straight back up the other side. The stone-walled village of **Thanchowk** here is one of the most traditional on the circuit, almost completely unaffected by tourism. The surprisingly comfortable Himalayan Hotel offers a quiet place to overnight, or continue through apple orchards at the end of the village to the simple Cho-Yoo Peak and Gandaki hotels. Stacks of pine needles mark the end of the village as you follow the easy wide trail down past the fields of Chhetipu to the entrance *kani* of **Koto** (2640m). You'll need to stop and register at the police checkpoint here.

There are several places to stay in Koto (also known as Kyupar), including the good Hotel Super View, Snowland Hotel and Hotel Petunia, though most trekkers continue to better facilities at Chame. Koto is the turn-off point for the spectacular but restricted Nar-Phu Valley to the north (see p310). The monastery at the end of town is worth a look but is often locked.

It's an easy 25-minute stroll on to the large village of **Chame** (2710m), the administrative headquarters for the Manang district. En route you'll find more good accommodation at the new Nurpu Linga Guest House and two other guesthouses in Trichyungalta. At the entrance to Chame is a long wall with many prayer wheels, typical of villages in Manang. Be sure to walk to the left and spin the wheels clockwise. The southern section of Chame is lined with guesthouses. The Tibet Guest House, Trekking Holiday Hotel and Manaslu View are all popular, and the **Hotel New Shangri-La** (☎ 066-440191; s/d Rs 200/250) even has en suite rooms. The Tilicho Guest House is recommended for its cosy dining room and pleasant cottages out back. Rooms in Chame cost Rs 100 to 200, while dal bhat is Rs 300.

Cross a stream and curve round past the safe drinking water station, the Nepal Bank and police station to the closely spaced stone buildings of the town centre. The shops here are some of the best stocked on the circuit, offering everything from English novels to trekking supplies. The **Nepal Bank** (☎ 10am-3pm Sun-Thu, to noon Fri) changes cash and travellers cheques and you can even get an emergency cash advance on a credit card (for a 10% commission!) at the nearby Rijaya Enterprises Shop. The attached **Beyond Himalaya** (☎ 7am-8pm; internet per min Rs 20) offers internet access and international calls (Rs 50 per minute), or try the slightly cheaper cybercafes in the Tibet and Manaslu View guesthouses.

Other lodges in the centre include the **Marsyangdi Mandala Hotel** (☎ 066-440146), whose detached chalets offer more space and privacy than standard lodge rooms. Alternatively, continue across the suspension bridge over the Marsyangdi to the very popular riverside New Tibet Hotel. There are fine views of Lamjung Himal, Annapurna II and Annapurna IV (7525m) from here. If you have time on your hands, pop into the large central *mani dungkhor* or visit the small gumpa at the northern end of town.

Day 5: Chame to Upper Pisang

4-5 hours, 600m ascent

Trekking west from the bridge you pass an older part of Chame and the impressive



kani that marks the entrance to the village. Climb past *mani* walls to a field of buckwheat (look back for impressive but fleeting views of Manaslu) and the New Mountain View Hotel in tiny **Telekhu** (2840m). There's a long, pleasant and mostly level walk in forests, with two short landslide crossings, to a large apple orchard surrounded by a stone wall. Ninety minutes from Chame are the rough stone houses of **Bhratang** (2950m), where the simple Raju Hotel and Maya Hotel offer a nice tea stop.

Just beyond this collection of lodges is a bridge leading to the old part of Bhratang, an abandoned Khampa settlement and guerrilla camp dating from the 1960s. Across the bridge there is a small stone memorial to a Japanese climber who died in an avalanche while trekking across the Thorung La – a sobering reminder to wait several days after any heavy snowstorm before trying to cross the pass. Don't cross the bridge; stay on the northern side of the river and follow a dramatic trail that has been blasted out of the side of the cliff.

The pine-scented trail rounds a bend to reveal the first views of the dramatic **Paungda Danda** rock face, a tremendous curved slab of rock rising more than 1500m from the river. Locals call it the Swarga Dwar (Gateway to Heaven) and believe the spirits of the deceased must ascend this wall after leaving their bodies. Even the rubble of sporadic road construction can't spoil the awesome views of Annapurna II to the south, Pisang Peak (6091m) to the northeast and Himalchuli and Ngadi Chuli, down valley to the east.

Cross to the south bank of the Marsyangdi on a suspension bridge (3080m), make a short steep climb past a porters' stop through deep forests of blue pine (and 20 minutes of road), then descend to the first of half a dozen sunny lodges at **Dhukur Pokhari** (3200m), named after the tiny lake you pass just after the village. This is a fine place to break for lunch.

The trek is reasonably level as it heads into the upper part of the Manang Valley, eventually crossing a wooden bridge just before the Pisang Peace guesthouse at the entrance to Pisang.

The lower portion of **Pisang**, a cluster of lodges and a long *mani* wall with prayer wheels, is at an elevation of 3240m. Facilities

include a safe drinking water station and a post office. The U-shaped Utse Hotel offers laundry service, satellite TV and a nice top-floor restaurant that boasts 'wood-fired pizzas'. The Pisang Peak Hotel, New Tibetan Guest House and Maya Guest House are also good. Rooms cost Rs 200/250 for a single/double. The hotels also offer guides, porters and horse hire (Rs 800 per day for a horse). There are some nice traditional buildings at the northern end of town.

If you don't mind simpler lodges, a more interesting place to stay is the old village of **upper Pisang** (3310m), across the river and 20 minutes uphill. The traditional upper village offers bags of atmosphere and infinitely better mountain views than lower Pisang. Accommodation includes the simple but friendly Manang Marsyangdi, Yak and Yeti and Annapurna hotels. The higher the hotel, the better the views. The simple Himalaya Hotel at the top of the village offers so-so rooms but fantastic views from its eyrie-like location. Even if you don't stay in upper Pisang it's worth exploring the village's two gompas and then continuing up to the *chortens* and ruins of an old *dzong* (fort; 3443m) for fabulous views.

Pisang marks the beginning of the region known as Nyesyang, the upper portion of the Manang district, which has about 5000 inhabitants in six major villages. The region is in the rain shadow of the Annapurna range and so is much drier than the Gyasumdo region in the lower reaches of the Marsyangdi Valley. The people of Nyesyang raise wheat, barley, buckwheat, potatoes and beans; the cold, almost arid climate limits them to a single crop annually. Horses are an important means of transport in the relatively flat upper portion of the Manang Valley, and you'll see locals riding them with great élan up and down the valley.

Day 6: Upper Pisang to Manang via Ngawal

6–7 hours, 540m ascent, 310m descent

There are two routes to Manang. The easier low route follows the valley floor via Hongde, while the more strenuous but far more scenically impressive high route climbs above the river on the north side of the valley. The high route takes about three hours longer but is absolutely worth it and so is described here as the main route. The



views of Annapurna II and III are simply superb from here and a night in Ghyaru or Ngawal will aid acclimatisation as you head towards the Thorung La.

From upper Pisang the high trail enters pine groves to reveal views of the small turquoise lake of Mring Tso below you, just before a connector trail joins from lower Pisang. The trail passes a line of eight *chortens* and stays on the ridge to cross a bridge and ascend steeply on switchbacks to **Ghyaru** (3670m). The **Yak Ru Mount View Lodge** (s/d Rs 100/150) has a traditional caravanserai-style design, with rooms arranged around a central courtyard. The Gorkhali and Annapurna guesthouses also offer decent accommodation. Ghyaru is believed to be a corruption of the original name Yak Ru (Yak Horn). There is an interesting gompa in the village, which is also the start of climbing routes to Pisang Peak, Chulu East (6584m) and Chulu West (6419m), all of which are visible from the trail.

The trail stays high after passing a *kani* and 30 minutes later traverses above a ruined *dzung* once used by the local Ghale dynasty. Pass a fine viewpoint beside a *chorten*, then the Nice View Café by a collection of more *chortens*, to descend for 30 minutes to **Ngawal** (3660m). The trail does a dog-leg through the charming village, passing underneath a fine *kani* (look up to see the painted mandalas). A white *chorten* with a water-driven *mani* wheel and dragon-mouth spouts marks a trail junction; left to Manang or straight uphill to the Ney Guru Sang Phuk and restricted area of Nar-Phu (see p310). Ngawal is a fine place to overnight. The modern and pleasant Peaceful Hotel at the entry to the village offers good food and thick mattresses. The Kailash Guest House, a little further, is most notable for its spectacular rooftop dining (order in the restaurant opposite); it's just beside an ancient juniper tree and *mani* wall. If you have some time you could follow the prayer flags above town up to the *chorten* for fine views. A harder hike continues up the hillside for a further 45 minutes, following the prayer flags to the **Ney Guru Sang Phuk**, a cave said to contain a 'self-arisen' (ie not man-made) image of the Himalayan sage Guru Rinpoche. Back in town the Sanga Dedul Pelgye Ling Gompa dates from 1990.

From Ngawal the trail traverses the hillside down to Portichhe village and the monastery-like Lophelling Boarding School. The direct trail heads south and descends down the southern side of the hill. A more interesting option, involving some route-finding, is to descend west from the school straight down the slippery switchbacks and over a bridge to **Julu** (Chullu) village. Swing left down the valley, past some marshy hot springs and then bear right, past eroded cliffs to join the main route, above a boarding school. From here it's 25 minutes along the valley floor to **Mungji** (3500m), where the Mungji Lodge and Trekkers Bakery offers decent food and accommodation. Just above the village is Sher Gompa, actually a nunnery used for retreats that last three years, three months and three days. The snowy peak at the head of the valley is Tili-cho Peak; to the north of it is an unnamed black rock spire (6047m).

The route continues past fields of barley and buckwheat for 20 minutes to **Bragha** (3470m), one of the most picturesque villages in the Annapurnas. The *kani* that marks the entrance to the village is particularly impressive. The gompa, perched on a high crag overlooking the medieval village, is the largest in the district and has an outstanding collection of statues, *thangkas* (Tibetan religious paintings) and manuscripts estimated to be 500 years old. Take a torch and visit the gallery that runs behind the main altar. Most of the village's 200 houses are stacked one atop the other, each with an open verandah formed by a neighbour's rooftop.

The **Hotel New Yak** (☎ 019-442003; r Rs 120-150) and the next-door Hotel Buddha and Himalayan Lodge all get excellent reviews, making Bragha a nicer place to stay than larger, busier and more commercialised Manang. All three places have good bakeries and even offer filter coffee, while the New Yak offers local Nyesyang specials like buckwheat bread, alongside a fine carrot cake.

The valley around Bragha is very arid, dominated by dramatic eroded cliffs and the towering heights of the Annapurnas. It is only a short walk, past *chortens* and *mani* walls, to a stream where several mills grind wheat and barley. A short climb leads to the plateau and village of **Manang** (3540m). The



eastern half of town is lined with lodges, trekking shops and even a video cafe, while the medieval western old town is a compact collection of 500 flat-roofed houses separated by narrow alleyways. The setting of the village is most dramatic, with the summits of Annapurna and Gangapurna less than 8km away, and a huge icefall rumbling and crashing on the flanks of the peaks.

The large **Hotel Yeti** (☎ 9936 65056; manangyeti@hotmail.com; s/d Rs 150/250, dm Rs 50) is a bit of a hub, with a popular bakery and internet cafe (Rs 25 per minute). The US doctors at the Himalayan Rescue Association recommend the restaurant's quesadillas and sizzling veggie fajitas (though not for acclimatisation...). The next-door Tilicho Hotel is almost identical. The wooden Yak Hotel is the village's biggest and one of the oldest lodges. Other places include the Himalayan Singi, set back from the main road, and the Hotel Mountain Lake, which boasts a cosy sunroom but somewhat dark rooms.

Mavis' Kitchen (mains Rs 150-250) is a popular place for lunch, serving up ambitious dishes like julienne salad and yak steak, and has a good shop. The Nilgiri Bakery offers a wide choice of pastries.

Manang's shopkeepers know exactly what you dream about in your sleeping bag at night, and the shops are almost as well stocked as those in Pokhara. If you or your porters do not have warm socks, hats, gloves or sunglasses, this is the time and place to buy them. Other facilities in town include a pharmacy, safe drinking water station, shoe repair and a post office (mail is carried by porters and takes a week to get to Kathmandu). ACAP has a **visitor centre** (☎ 9am-1pm, 2-5pm Sun-Fri) with information on local excursions.

During the trekking season, the **Himalayan Rescue Association** (HRA; ☎ 9936 65055; consultations ☎ 9-10am, 1.30-5pm Mar-mid-May, Oct-mid-Dec) operates an aid post behind the Nilgiri Lodge. The free daily lectures on altitude sickness are worth attending; the organisation proudly claims that no one who has been to one of these lectures has ever died of acute mountain sickness (AMS). The foreign doctors are available for advice and treatment (consultation US\$35).

If you're ill or injured, hotels can arrange horse hire to the airport (Rs 1000), Thorung La (Rs 5000) or even Muktinath (Rs 6000),

although you still have to walk some steep downhill sections.

SIDE TRIP: MILAREPA'S CAVE

4-5 hours, 800m ascent, 800m descent

One worthwhile side trip from Bragha is to Milarepa's Cave, a popular pilgrimage site that celebrates a famous story involving the Tibetan poet and singer Milarepa. Milarepa was meditating in a cave above Bragha when a Gurung hunter, Khyira Gonpo Dorje, and his dog stalked a deer into the ascetic's cave, only to be persuaded by the saint to relinquish his bow and become Milarepa's disciple. The story is celebrated in literature, songs and dances across the Tibetan world.

To get to the site from Bragha, cross the bridge to the south side of the valley and head southwest to where a trail ascends the hillside to the left of an eroded crag. At some herders' huts (45 minutes) a sign points you left, into a gully, and then up switchbacks to a white *chorten* draped in prayer flags. The small **gompa** (4100m; N 28° 38.27', E 84° 02.303') is often locked. The statue of Milarepa was flown here in 2004 by helicopter – the sight of a Tibetan sage flying through the air was probably enough to double attendance at the local gompas! Hundreds of pilgrims set up camp in the meadows here during a festival in June.

A further 45 minutes up the gully, following the *chortens*, gets you to a 4320m ridge with fine views of the nearby glacier. As you descend back towards the cliff, look up to see the bow left behind by Gonpo Dorje. The old ladders that once accessed the cave have been destroyed by rockfalls. Pilgrims also visit the saint's footprints, which are carved into the rock face. Figure on half a day for the excursion.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: VIA HONGDE

4-5 hours, 350m ascent

To take the lower route to Manang, head out of Pisang along the south side of the Marsyangdi, cross a stream and climb past *mani* walls and a memorial to a group of German climbers who died attempting Pisang Peak. The trail makes a long climb over a forested ridge (3440m) that offers an excellent view of the Manang Valley, with Tilicho Peak (7134m) at its head. After a short descent, the trail reaches the broad



SEABUCKTHORN JUICE

In the upper Manang Valley you'll find seabuckthorn juice on many menus. The juice is made from the orange berries of a hardy, multipurpose shrub with large thorns. The berries are harvested, crushed and mixed with water and a bit of sugar to produce a tasty drink with a vitamin content said to be higher than any other fruit or vegetable. Seabuckthorn berries have been used in traditional Chinese medicine since the Tang dynasty and contain more than 100 different kinds of nutrients and bioactive substances.

valley floor and passes a couple of curio stalls; if you are in the market for a fresh yak's head, this is definitely the place to buy one. Across the river, high on the northern bank, is Ghyaru village.

The trail follows the valley floor to Manang's airstrip at **Hongde** (Ongre; 3420m), 90 minutes from Pisang. Good lodges here include the Maya Lodge, Jullu Peak Guest House and the large Snowland Guest House. The Airport Bakery Hotel at the southern end of town churns out hot morning croissants and cinnamon rolls (Rs 80). Stay to the left of the town's long central *mani* wall, past well-stocked shops and a large *mani dungkhor*. The mule caravans tethered outside the town's lodges add to the Wild West vibe.

The airport is at the northern end of town, near the incongruous bandstand, though Nepal Airlines has its office at the southern end of town in the New Himalayan Hotel. For flight details, see p146. At the far end of town is a police checkpoint.

Thirty minutes beyond the airport is the huge Sabje Valley, with Annapurna III and IV at the head. Just south of the trail, in this spectacular setting, is a mountaineering school operated by the Nepal Mountaineering Association.

The trail crosses to the north bank of the Marsyangdi on a wooden bridge near Mungji. See the main trek description for the route from Mungji onwards.

Day 7: Acclimatisation Day in Manang

You should spend a second night in the Manang region to acclimatise to the higher

elevations you will encounter towards the Thorung La (in fact the Himalayan Rescue Association recommends a minimum of three nights). Climbing high during the day will speed up acclimatisation. You could easily spend three days exploring the stunning scenery.

One of the easier trips is to descend from the village to the bridge and up the spine of the glacial moraine to the **Chongar viewpoint** atop a hill decorated in prayer flags (40 minutes). There are fine views of the milky-blue glacial lake at the foot of the spectacular Gangapurna Icefall. You can even get a cup of tea here at the Glacier Viewpoint Restaurant.

A more strenuous day hike is the climb south of Manang to 'point 4695' on the Schneider map (sometimes referred to as Papuchong). Take the path below Manang, crossing a bridge to the right of Gangapurna Lake, then climb the ridge to the right of the Gangapurna Glacier, headed towards Tarke Kang and Gangapurna, for close-up glacier views (four hours).

One popular excursion is to **Praken Gompa** (3945m), a *tsamkhang* (meditation retreat) high on the hillside above Manang. For a Rs 100 donation, resident Lama Tashi (the '100 rupee lama') will bless your impending crossing of the Thorung La by tying a sacred thread around your neck. The views of Annapurna IV, Annapurna II, Gangapurna and Tarke Kang are fantastic. The path ascends the hillside from the eastern end of town and the climb takes about 1½ hours.

After a visit to Praken you can descend to Manang and branch left into the floodplain to visit the 400-year-old **Karki Gompa**, surrounded by ancient juniper trees. You could then cross the stream and climb the bluff to **Bocho Gompa**, situated just below a ruined fort and deserted village. Also worth a visit is the **Kagyud Gompa** at the western end of Manang village. Your best chance of finding the gompas open is between 10am and 11am, or from 4pm to 6pm.

The toughest and most spectacular excursion from Manang is the day hike up to **Ice Lake** (Kicho Tso; 4620m), a relentless four-hour climb that gains over 1000m to reveal staggering Annapurna views. The clearest trail leads diagonally up the hillside behind Bragha, zigzagging up to the top of a ridge. A quicker but steeper alternative trail



MANANGI TRADERS

Thanks to special trading privileges granted by King Rana Bahadur Shah in 1784 and the passports awarded in the 1960s, Manangi people have long engaged in trade throughout Asia, especially Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong. The traditional exports of dog, goat and sheepskin, yak tails, herbs and musk soon yielded to the import of electronic goods, watches, clothing and gold.

Manang's shrewd and worldly businessmen were quick to adapt to the advent of tourism and invested the money earned from these trading trips into hotels both in Manang and in Kathmandu. Many Manangis now live in Kathmandu and employ relatives or locals to run their lodges in Manang.

It is not uncommon to see large groups of Manang people jetting to Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong, and you'll find many people in Nyesyang villages who speak fluent English and dress in trendy Western clothing they have bought during overseas trading excursions. Along with the Sherpas of the Khumbu and the Thakali of the Kali Gandaki Valley, they are the Nepalis who have benefited most from trekking tourism.

leads from Manang. The Ice Lake is actually the second of two lakes. A viewpoint to the side of the lake offers superb views. This is a long day hike so make sure you set off early and carry enough food and water.

For something less strenuous, the town's **Manang Cultural Museum** (☎ 019-442009; admission Rs 100; ☎ 10am-5pm, closed Jan & Feb) is worth a visit for its insights into traditional Manangi life. The halls lead you through a store-room, kitchen and prayer room, displaying century-old antiques ranging from royal robes to *rakshi* (spirit) stills. The museum also offers local guides for an hour-long guided walk through Manang's old town (Rs 200 to Rs 300 per person).

A half-day option is to head south to Bra-gha and up to Milarepa's Cave (see p180).

SIDE TRIP: KHANGSAR & TILICHO TAL

3½ days

The side trip to Tilicho Tal is an adventurous add-on to the Annapurna Circuit and will certainly aid your acclimatisation process, but it's a challenging trip (see the boxed text, opposite). Your rewards are superb high-altitude views of both the lake and its 'Great Barrier', a name given by Maurice Herzog to the high snowbound ridge between Khangsar Kang (7485m) and Nilgiri North (7061m).

Manang to Khangsar

1½-2 hours, 200m ascent

A sign just before an archway in old Manang directs you to either the Thorung La or Khangsar (left). The Khangsar trail descends to a *horten*, then turns northwest

and heads down towards the river. Don't cross the new suspension bridge (there is a trail on the south side of the Marsyangdi, but it has been destroyed by a landslide). Stay on the north bank and head west, following the river. You'll soon come to a bridge (3560m, 40 minutes) just above the confluence of the Marsyangdi and the Jarsang Khola. Cross the Jarsang Khola on the suspension bridge and climb steeply onto a ridge where the eroded ruins of an old *dzong* offer a view back to the villages of Manang and Pisang.

Follow the power lines along the ridge on a wide trail, then traverse along the south side of the ridge through a blue pine forest and then wheat fields, climbing to the entrance *kani* in **Khangsar** (3745m).

Khangsar is a collection of traditional stone buildings surrounding a large village square. Three hotels, the large Mountain Yak Hotel, the simple family-style red-painted Himalchuli Laxmi Hotel and the friendly Hotel on Height, offer decent accommodation at a price half that of Manang. Near the top of the village is a small Sakyapa-school monastery. The Hotel on Height can provide information and a guide for an adventurous day hike up to Dawa Tal (Moon Lake; 4910m).

After a visit to Tilicho Tal you can avoid backtracking to Manang by cutting across from Khangsar directly towards the Thorung La, via Yak Kharka. The trail is not always obvious and the bridge over the Jarsang Khola is seasonal, so ask for advice at the ACAP office in Manang and again in Khangsar before you commit to this short cut.



Khangsar to Tilicho Base Camp Hotel

4–6 hours, 570m ascent, 190m descent

From Khangsar the trail climbs steeply past the gompa to a small *chorten*, then climbs more gently through juniper and seabuck-thorn bushes. Cross a small stream and traverse to the isolated **Thare Gompa** (3930m; 45 minutes). There is no permanent monk body here, but the caretaker will let you in if he's around.

Ten minutes later the trail joins the main track to/from Yak Kharka. A further 10 minutes brings you to the new **Tilicho Peak Hotel** (4045m), a possible place to break the return trip. Traverse into a side valley and climb steeply up the other side to some herders' huts and a trail junction. The high trail to Tilicho Base Camp branches to the right. This high route avoids the most dangerous section of the trail to Tilicho Base Camp, but it involves a long climb to 4700m, followed by a steep (and initially very exposed) 650m descent on scree to the Tilicho Base Camp Hotel, and takes an hour longer than the low route. If you take this route you may spot blue sheep on the grassy hillside.

The more popular lower trail makes a steep descent to a wooden bridge, then climbs past several goths to a ridge at 4230m. A short descent leads to a stream, then the trail makes a long, difficult traverse across

a huge, steep and unstable scree slope that is subject to frequent rockfall from above. There are a couple of very hairy sections of trail here so follow the advice of local people before setting off. Don't even think about this route if you are even mildly acrophobic. The scary trail eventually rounds a ridge and makes a long traverse to the simple **Tilicho Base Camp Hotel** (dm Rs 100), at the foot of the moraine beside a stream at 4140m. The hotel has only six rooms and fills quickly, with prices about 20% higher than Manang. There's not much to do here, so try not to arrive too early in the day. With no electricity or heat, you can expect a long, cold night here.

Tilicho Base Camp Hotel to Tilicho Tal

5–6 hours, 870m ascent

The trail to Tilicho Tal starts up a side valley then traverses onto a moraine, making a long climb to 4710m. There are outstanding views of Tarke Kang, Gangapurna and the claw-like black face of Khangsar Kang (Roc Noir; 7485m), as well as views down the valley to Manang and upper Pisang. The trail then makes a series of steep switchbacks, climbing for an hour to a *chorten* marking a false summit and on to a crest at 5010m. Expect the next 45 minutes to be on snow from November until at least May. Passing two tarns, the trail crests at a prayer-flag-draped **cairn** (5005m; N 28° 40.661', E 83° 51.871'), where you'll get your first view of the lake, which is 4km long and 2.5km wide. If you're making a day walk from the Tilicho Base Camp Hotel, this is the spot to turn around.

Tilicho Tal (4920m) presents a particularly dramatic spectacle. Sometimes its turquoise waters reflect the surrounding peaks, but more often (certainly between September and May), it's frozen solid. Herzog's maps depicted Tilicho as the 'great ice lake' and his team walked across it. The lake sits at the foot of the extensive glacier system of the Great Barrier, the highest point of which is Tilicho Peak (7134m). The glaciers terminate in a vertical wall of ice 70m high that forms the west shore of the lake. When it's warm, small icebergs calve off and float around the serene waters.

From the viewpoint, a long traverse leads you around the east side of the lake to a good camp site near a large rock at 4930m.

WARNING – UNSTABLE SCREE SLOPES

The narrow and scary trail to the Tilicho Base Camp Hotel crosses some extremely unstable scree slopes. It is easily the most dangerous section of trail on the Annapurna Circuit and we do not recommend this side trip for inexperienced trekkers. If there is snow or rain the route can be treacherous. We have included the description here to help you understand that the trip to Tilicho is more difficult than the brochure and signboards of the Tilicho Base Camp Hotel suggest. It's a spectacular side trip, but don't approach it without sufficient preparation and definitely don't walk it alone. If you do attempt the crossing, leave some space between team members in case of rockfall, bring trekking poles for stability and avoid a crossing in the rain.



CROSSING TO JOMSOM

Beyond Tilicho Tal, two passes lead into the Kali Gandaki Valley: Meso Kanto La (5100m) and another, unnamed, 5230m pass a little further north. This is a full-on alpine expedition rather than a trekking route and we do not recommend this route. Even experienced trekkers will need expert professional support, including a local guide, as both trails are difficult and hard to find. This is certainly not a place to bring ill-equipped and inexperienced porters.

The route starts by heading northeast up a gully behind the camp site, then traverses around the north side of a ridge at 5380m. It's then cross-country to one of the passes. Meso Kanto is the more difficult of the two. The Kali Gandaki side is so steep that you'll likely have to fix a rope. The unnamed pass to the north is less difficult, but it's a messy descent through loose shale and mud. Both passes are extremely treacherous when there's snow. Once across the pass you need to make your way north across the head of the Lungpuhyun Valley and descend the ridge that forms its north side. Do not follow the trail along the southern ridge as this leads past a shooting range to the army mountain warfare camp at Kaisang. Camp sites are very limited on this side of the pass and there is no shelter at all except for a few stone huts (no water available) at 3040m, about six hours below the pass.

For details on the region, see the website www.lowdin.nu/Treks/Treks.htm and click on 'Trekking to Tilicho'. Nepa Maps publishes a 1:50,000 *The High Route to Tilicho – the Hidden Lake* map but it's essentially just a detail of its Annapurna map.

There is no shelter of any kind near the lake. At night you'll be kept awake in your tent by the roar of avalanches tumbling from the glaciers above. Bear in mind that the lakeshore trails depicted on most maps are just figments of a cartographer's overactive imagination.

From Tilicho Tal most people spend a second night at Tilicho Base Camp. You could push through to the Tilicho Peak Hotel or Khangsar in a long eight- or nine-hour day, but the scree slopes are not something to be attempted on tired legs.

Day 8: Manang to Letdar

3½–4½ hours, 720m ascent

The trek now begins its ascent of almost 2000m to the Thorung La. Local traders ride horses from Manang to Muktinath in a single day, but the large elevation gain, the need for acclimatisation and the high altitudes all make it imperative to take at least three days to do the trip on foot. It's possible to reach Thorung Phedi in a single day from Manang, but you must spend a night at either Yak Kharka or Letdar in order to acclimatise. If you have any altitude sickness symptoms you should descend to Manang, or lower, to recover.

From Manang village, the trail climbs to a *chorten* that offers fine views back towards Manang, and then continues to **Tengi** (3690m), 30 minutes from Manang and the

last permanently inhabited village in the valley. The simple, traditional Tanki Guest House offers a quiet alternative to the bustle of Manang and is authentic enough to have a yak's head nailed to the wall.

The trail continues to climb out of the Marsyangdi Valley, then turns northwest up the valley of the Jarsang Khola, losing sight of the Manang Valley behind you. The trail follows this valley north, passing a few goths as it steadily gains elevation. You have left the large trees below; the vegetation now consists of scrub juniper and alpine grasses. The trail climbs to the small village of **Gunsang** (3920m; 1¼ hours). With good accommodation and fine views of Annapurna II and IV, Gunsang makes a lovely tea break, either on the rooftop seating of the simple Chullu West Hotel or in the garden of the fancier Marsyangi Lodge above the trail. Stock up on yak cheese for the trail ahead at the Chullu West Hotel.

The route enters pastures and miniature forests of juniper, rose and barberry. Swing into a side valley to see yaks grazing below the peaks of Chulu West and Gundang (6110m), then cross the suspension bridge to a teashop and an ancient *mani* wall at 3990m. A few minutes later the short-cut route from Khangsar (see p182) joins from the left.

Beyond is **Yak Kharka** (4020m), also known as Koche. The lodges are much better



here than in Letdar; try the rustic Yak Hotel & Restaurant or the very popular Gangapurna Lodge, which specialises in pies and cakes (Rs 100) and offers cottages and rooms with private bathroom. A little further is the simpler and cheaper Hotel Nyeshang. Food prices are notably higher than in Manang and only rise further with the altitude. About 10 minutes above Yak Kharka is the New Himalayan View, offering good rooms (some with Western toilet) and ambitious dishes like pizza and moussaka. A large herd of yaks grazes in the fields nearby (*yak kharka* translates as 'yak pastures'), and it's fun to visit the yak herders' camp in the late afternoon when the animals are herded down from high pastures. The views of Annapurna III are excellent. Rooms in Yak Kharka cost Rs 100 to Rs 150 with shared bathroom, and Rs 150 to Rs 300 with private bathroom.

An hour further is **Letdar** (4230m; sometimes spelt as Lathar), the penultimate shelter before the pass. The first hotel, the Snowland Lodge, is probably the best; others include the cosy Churi Lattar and the simpler Jimi Lodge, but all are pretty basic. The Churi Lattar houses the safe drinking water station (Rs 50 per litre). The HRA doctors suggest that you spend two nights at Letdar, which is a pretty grim prospect. If you've been up to Tilicho Tal and spent a couple of nights at Tilicho Base Camp then you should be acclimatised enough to continue to Thorung Phedi today.

Day 9: Letdar to Thorung Phedi

2 hours, 240m ascent

From Letdar the trail continues to climb along the east bank of the Jarsang Khola, then descends and crosses the stream on a wooden bridge at 4310m. Make a short ascent to a collection of prayer flags and then to the Deurali Teahouse, run by an irascible couple with whom some trekkers have had run-ins. The route then follows a narrow trail across an exposed slope and climbs to **Thorung Phedi** (4540m), a desolate rock-strewn meadow surrounded by vertical cliffs. The higher trail on the east side of the valley is currently not in use.

There are two lodges at Thorung Phedi. The large **Thorung Base Camp Lodge** (r Rs 75-200) is the more switched-on and sociable of the two, offering a bakery, a range of rooms

(some with private toilet) and even internet access. Some trekkers have suggested not buying the bread and rolls (Rs 120) because the oven is fuelled by firewood. The next-door **Hotel New Phedi** (bed Rs 100) is smaller and quieter and the outhouses are pretty nasty (frozen solid most of the time). Thanks to a nearby mini-hydro plant, Thorung Phedi has electricity but this dries up (along with the electric heating) when water levels are low.

Both lodges can be very crowded in high season, especially if snow has backed up traffic over the pass. They can accommodate and feed up to 200 trekkers in a maze of double rooms, dormitories and outhouses. Somehow they manage to produce decent food and get all the orders reasonably correct.

Nights can be miserable because of the altitude and the early-morning departure. Some trekkers set off at 4am, but there's really no reason to depart this early. A more reasonable departure time is daybreak, around 6am. Because people leave early in the morning, the hotels insist that you settle your bill at night. If you are not feeling well, there is sometimes a horse available to ride over the pass (around Rs 2000). When there are no horses, yak herders circle the camp like sharks in search of sick-looking trekkers whom they can hit for a US\$120 yak ride over the pass.

Blue sheep, and even snow leopards, sometimes magically appear in this valley; the crow-like birds are choughs, and the large birds that circle overhead are lammergeiers and Himalayan griffons, not eagles.

Be sure to boil or treat water here; the sanitation in Thorung Phedi and Letdar is poor, and giardiasis is rampant. The Base Camp Lodge has a satellite phone you can use in an emergency (US\$5 per minute). The HRA hopes to eventually run a clinic here annually in March and April.

There is another lodge, **Thorung High View Camp** (N 28° 46.966', E 83° 58.056'; dm/s/d Rs 90/200/300), popularly known as High Camp, an hour above Thorung Phedi at 4850m, but it is cramped and cold and a night here can be dangerous because of the altitude. It's common to see restless trekkers climbing up beyond Thorung Phedi after lunch, only to return in the late afternoon with a splitting headache or worse.



Day 10: Thorung Phedi to Muktinath

6–8 hours, 1040m ascent, 1620m descent

Phedi, which means ‘foot of the hill’, is a common Nepali name for any settlement at the bottom of a long climb. The trail becomes steep immediately after leaving Thorung Phedi, switchbacking up moraines and following rocky ridges as it ascends to the pass. Local people have long used this trail to bring herds of sheep and yaks in and out of Manang, so while the trail is often steep, it is well defined and easy to follow.

The main complications to the crossing are the high elevation and the chance of snow. The pass is usually snowbound from mid-December to late February, but snow can block the pass at any time of year. During the main trekking months you can expect to walk for several hours on a snowy trail that has been packed down by hundreds of boots. When there is deep new snow, the crossing becomes difficult – often impossible. It then becomes necessary to retreat back to Manang, or to wait a day or two until the snow has consolidated and the yaks have forged a trail. For more on crossing the pass, see the boxed text on p171.

From High Camp the trail climbs and descends, traversing in and out of canyons formed by a maze of moraines. Poles mark the trail when it's under snow. About 45 minutes above High Camp you pass the tiny seasonal Yakawa Thorung Ri teashop at 5030m. It takes three to five hours to climb from Thorung Phedi to the pass, but the altitude and the many false summits mean the climb seems to go on forever. A set of prayer flags indicates you are 15 minutes from the pass.

The wide **Thorung La** (N 28° 47.614', E 83° 56.336'), with its traditional *chorten*, prayer flags and stone cairn, is at an elevation of 5416m. The views from the trail, and from the pass itself, are outstanding. You can see the long Great Barrier ridge, which separates the drier, Tibet-like region of Manang from the rest of Nepal, as well as (to the south) the Annapurnas, Gangapurna and the heavily glaciated peak of Khatung Kang (6484m). The barren Kali Gandaki Valley is far below you to the west, and the 6481m rock peak of Yagawa Kang (also known as Thorungtse) lies to the north. A sign congratulates you for making it to one of the world's highest trekking passes. Amazingly, there's a teashop (with equally

amazing prices – Rs 100 for black tea) here on what feels like the roof of the world.

In many ways the descent (more than 1600m in about four hours) from the pass is harder than the ascent, especially if you have bad knees. The first section of trail is over melting snow and some of the traverses can be very slippery, as can the later switchbacks. Sometimes the correct route is not obvious; just remember that you are headed downhill and that Muktinath is on the south side of the valley. During the descent there are excellent views of Dhaulagiri standing alone in the distance across the valley. Eventually the moraines yield to grassy slopes as you pass a ruined building on a ridge. The final descent to Muktinath is a pleasant walk along the upper part of the Jhong Valley.

There are five simple lodges (but no toilets!) at **Chabarbu** (4190m; N 28° 48.747', E 083° 53.605'), about 2¾ hours from the pass. You're only an hour from Muktinath so it's better to rely on these lodges for refreshment rather than accommodation, although you could stay here if you are crossing the pass in the opposite direction. If for some reason you are following this route in reverse, it's about 3½ hours from Chabarbu to the pass.

The trail crosses meadows, drops into a deep ravine that marks the start of the Jhong Khola, climbs out and follows a wide trail into **Muktinath** (3800m) and its large walled temple complex. There is no accommodation at the temple; for that you'll have to continue for 10 minutes to Ranipauwa, where you'll have to register with the police checkpoint. See opposite for details of Muktinath and accommodation in Ranipauwa. There's plenty to explore in Muktinath, so it's a good place to rest up after today's exertions!

ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT PART II (KALI GANDAKI)

Duration 7–9 days

Max Elevation 3800m

Difficulty easy–medium

Season October to May

Start Muktinath (p188)

Finish Naya Pul (p151) or Tatopani (p199)

Summary This classic lodge trek has been affected by recent road-building, but there's still some great Trans-Himalayan scenery to be found on the new detours.



The trek down the Kali Gandaki from Muktinath to Jomsom and on to Tatopani is currently in a state of flux. Jeeps (and eventually minibuses) now shuttle up the valley all the way to Muktinath, causing some trekkers to dismiss the trek as 'over'. Certainly far fewer trekkers walk up the valley compared to a few years back.

There are still many reasons to trek down the Kali Gandaki. The network of alternative trails described in this section takes you away from the road and in fact the new routes via Katsapterenga Gompa, Chimang village and Titi Lake offer some of the prettiest landscapes in the valley. The dearth of lodges and trekkers on these routes lend it the feeling of trekking 20 years ago. The superlative mountain views are still here, of course, as are the region's excellent lodges and picturesque villages.

The road will certainly change this trek over the next few years. Lodges may close down, alternative trek routes will emerge and new day hikes will become accessible, as the focus of tourism shifts from through-trekkers to day-trippers. Mountain bikers have already started to tackle the route while the traffic remains light, and some hard-core bikers have even tackled the entire circuit, carrying their bikes for large sections of the Manang side.

You can walk this trek as the second part of an Annapurna Circuit trek, or you could catch a jeep up to Jomsom and spend a few days visiting Marpha, Kagbeni and Muktinath, before walking down the valley to Ghasa and Tatopani. From Tatopani you can take the jeep back to Pokhara or continue up to Ghorepani for the impressive dawn views from Poon Hill. From there, descend to Naya Pul or continue into the Annapurna Sanctuary for more close-up mountain views. There's no reason why you can't follow this trek in the opposite direction.

WARNING

If you bus or fly directly to Jomsom, you are better off overnighing first in Marpha and then Kagbeni, as a minimum, to help acclimatisation before ascending to Muktinath. Don't even consider flying in to Jomsom and then tackling the Thorung La.

ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT PART II (KALI GANDAKI) – TIMES

The following are trekking times only; stops are not included.

Day	Section	Hours
1	Muktinath to Ranipauwa	0:15
	Ranipauwa to Jharkot	0:25
	Jharkot to Khingar	0:35
	Khingar to Kagbeni	1:00
2	Kagbeni to Eklai Bhatti	0:40
	Eklai Bhatti to Jomsom	1:30
	Jomsom to Syang	0:40
	Syang to Marpha	1:00
3	Marpha to Tukuche via Chimang	2:30
	Tukuche to Khobang	0:50
	Khobang to Larjung	0:15
	Larjung to Kokhethathi	0:45
4	Kokhethathi to Titigaon	1:00
	Titigaon to Konjo	0:45
	Konjo to Lete	1:00
	Lete to Ghasa	1:30
5	Ghasa to Eagle's Nest Guest House	0:15
	Eagle's Nest Guest House to Kopchepani	1:50
	Kopchepani to Rupse Chhahara	0:10
	Rupse Chhahara to Dana	1:00
6	Dana to Tatopani	1:40
	Tatopani to Ghar Khola	0:30
	Ghar Khola to Santosh viewpoint	0:50
	Santosh viewpoint to Shikha	1:50
7	Shikha to Chitre	1:30
	Chitre to Ghorepani	1:00
	Ghorepani to Ulleri	2:00
	Ulleri to Tikhedhunga	1:15
	Tikhedhunga to Hille	0:15
	Hille to Birethanti	1:40
	Birethanti to Naya Pul	0:30

THE TREK (SEE MAPS PP152–3 & PP156–7)

Day 1: Muktinath to Kagbeni

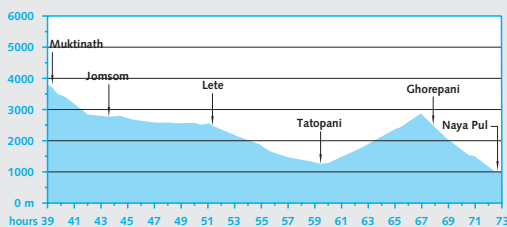
2½–3 hours, 870m descent

It's easy to walk from Muktinath to Jomsom or even Marpha in a day but it's well worth taking some time to enjoy the area around Muktinath, before descending to overnight in the medieval village of Kagbeni.

The main 'village' of Muktinath is known as **Ranipauwa** (3710m) and is the site of a large rest house for pilgrims (Ranipauwa means 'Queen's Hostel') and a host of hotels and *bhattis* that are often crowded with



Annapurna Circuit Part II (Kali Gandaki)



Indian pilgrims and foreign tourists. The Shree Muktinath Hotel and Mona Lisa are both good places to stay, though the North Pole Lodge is reported to have the best food in town. Doubles cost around Rs 100. For something quieter, try the Hotel Nightingale next door. The funky Bob Marley in the east of town is an oasis of hedonism that seems particularly popular with Israelis. It's hard not to suspect that the colourful wall murals, dub reggae and menu of cocktails and yak sizzlers are some kind of altitude-induced hallucination. There's a palpable sense of relief on the faces of trekkers who've just crossed the Thorung La.

In the middle of the settlement are a police checkpoint (you'll need to register), a poorly maintained government camping ground and an **ACAP visitor centre** (☎ 8am-5pm mid-Feb-mid-Nov), the latter with a safe drinking water station. Local women sell excellent yak-hair scarves and blankets on the main street.

MUKTINATH SHRINES

The temple and the religious shrines of **Muktinath** (3800m) are a 15-minute walk above Ranipauwa. For both Hindus and Buddhists the compound constitutes the Nepal Himalaya's most important pilgrimage site.

As you enter the walled complex, lined by Tibetan-style prayer wheels, you pass first the Gompa Sambha (First Monastery) on the left and then a Shiva Temple ringed by four shrines. The whitewashed building belongs to the temple caretaker. The focal point of the complex is the pool and its 108 brass waterspouts (108 is a sacred number in Tibetan Buddhism), cast in the shape of cows' heads, which pour forth sacred water. Hindu pilgrims bathe in the frigid waters

and visit the attached Vishnu Temple, which houses images of Vishnu and Laxmi to the right and Saraswati (Soosti or Bumi) to the left. Vishnu is worshipped here as Muktinath, the Lord of Salvation, while Buddhists associate the deity with Chenresig, the Tibetan bodhisattva of compassion (yes, it's complicated). You may find your porter bottling some of the sacred water to take back to his family, especially if anyone is sick or suffering ill fortune.

A short walk to the left is the Buddhist Marme Lhakhang, whose central image is of the Tibetan Buddhist sage Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), here holding a Hindu-style trident instead of his normal staff. Buddhists believe that the guru visited Muktinath in the 8th century. Hindus associate the Bön-influenced deity Sengye Droma (to the left) with their demon god Narsingha.

A short walk past a collection of *chortens* is the Dhola Mebar Gompa, or Jwalamai (Goddess of Fire) Temple, where a holy flame of natural gas burns behind a grill just above a spring, whose sacred water pours through a cow's head spout. This auspicious combination of earth, fire and water is responsible for the religious importance of Muktinath. Take your shoes off before entering the temple. For a Rs 10 donation the nun will light a butter lamp for your safe return trek.

You can find more information on the shrines at www.muktinath.org.

SIDE TRIP: JHONG

3 hours, 190m ascent, 190m descent

From Muktinath you can make a fine half-day hike to the little-visited villages and monasteries on the north bank of the Jhong Khola. Traditionally part of Mustang and



PILGRIMS TO MUKTINATH

Muktinath is an important pilgrimage place for Hindus and you will encounter many Nepali and Indian pilgrims on the trail from Jomsom, on foot, horseback or, increasingly, in jeeps or even chartered helicopters. The most colourful pilgrims are the ascetic sadhus who make the trek carrying little more than a blanket and a trident (a symbol of Shiva). A donation of a few rupees to these holy men is not out of place. They are Shaivite mystics on a pilgrimage that, more often than not, began thousands of kilometres away deep in the steamy jungles of southern India.

long off-limits, these charming villages can now be visited without a permit.

From the red-walled gate at the eastern end of Ranipauwa, follow the signed trail leading down past the red-walled Gargen Chhyoling Nunnery (you'll see a second nunnery below you to the left). Descend into the *khola* and cross a bridge to join a trail that winds down from the Thorung La. Take the left path to **Chhyonkar Gompa** (Chhokor; 3680m), an atmospheric 200-year-old Tantric monastery of 25 monks. At the end of the lovely village, branch right towards three *chortens*, descend to cross the bridge over the Jhong Chanba Khola and continue along the ridge to **Jhong** (Dzong; 3580m), the former capital of the region. The views over the village to Muktinath, Dhaulagiri and the top of Nilgiri peak are just superb. Drop down to the village past *mani* walls and climb the hilltop to the ruined 14th-century Rabgyel Tse fort, which names the village (*jhong* means fortress). The 16th-century Sakyapa-school Chode Shedrup Choephel Ling Monastery here is worth a look if it's open. If you want to stay in Jhong, the Milan Guest House offers a simple alternative to staying in busy Ranipauwa.

It's possible to continue down the north side of the valley as far as Putak but to continue further along this trail to Kagbeni (three hours) you need a restricted-area permit (check with the ACAP office in Ranipauwa to see if this has changed). Return to Muktinath from Jhong by heading south-east to the top of town and dropping steeply

past fields to cross the river on two wooden bridges. The trail isn't always clear so you'll have to ask for directions. Climb to the lovely village of **Purang** and then follow the red dots that lead through the village, past three *chortens* en route to Muktinath. An alternative trail descends from Jhong directly to Jharkot, across the Jhong Khola.

RANIPAUA TO KAGBENI

From Ranipauwa follow the road down the steep, barren hillside. You soon get spectacular views down onto **Jharkot** (3500m), perched on a bluff 20 minutes from Ranipauwa. With its picturesque *kani*, large gompa (admission Rs 100) and attached Tibetan medical institute, the impressive fortress-like village (*kot* means 'fort' in Nepali) is well worth exploring, and many trekkers suggest staying here instead of busy Muktinath. The two life-sized clay effigies just below the gompa are a reminder that the region's pre-Buddhist animist past is far from dead. You can follow the *kora* path around the monastery for views across the valley to the abandoned Buddhist caves of **Myabrak**. The comfortable New Hotel Plaza and the simple, friendly Hotel Sonam are in the centre of town. The Prakash Hotel cooks with solar energy, while the Himali Hotel, just above the village, offers solar-heated rooms. Across the valley to the east you can see the villages of Jhong, Purang and Chhyonkar (see the Side Trip, opposite).

The walk from Jharkot down to **Khingar** (3400m) is a delightful stroll among meadows, streams and poplar and fruit trees, though road traffic is increasingly taking its toll. If you're coming from Jomsom or Kagbeni, Khingar has several roadside tea-houses where you can take a break from the stiff climb.

Eventually the trail makes a descent down the Jhong Valley, short-cutting the winding loops made by the road. Along this section you'll see hundreds of cairns erected by pilgrims to honour their departed ancestors, while across the valley you can see the ruins of Phudzeling, a settlement that dates back three millennia.

Below you is the green oasis of **Kagbeni** (2840m), at the junction of the Jhong Khola and the Kali Gandaki. This upper section of the Kali Gandaki Valley is the traditional home of the Baragaunle – the people of the



'12 villages'. They are of Tibetan ancestry and practise a kind of Tibetan Buddhism that has been influenced by ancient animistic and pre-Buddhist Bönpo rituals.

KAGBENI

Kagbeni (or Kag) still feels like a medieval village, with its closely packed mud houses, dark tunnels and alleys, imposing *chortens* and a large, ochre-coloured gompa perched above the town. Situated at an auspicious river confluence, it is also the gateway to upper Mustang. This is the furthest north you can venture without a restricted-area permit (see p299).

The large Nilgiri View Lodge at the southern entrance to the town marks the trail junction for the trail to Muktinath. Follow the flagstone-paved trail to the large 17th-century Tibetan-style *chorten*, with its fine interior mandalas. Stay on the flagstone path past the oddly familiar red-and-yellow trim of YacDonalds Restaurant and cross the footbridge across the Jhong Khola. The flagstones continue to the venerable Red House, then lead through two tunnels to a row of prayer wheels, the simple Hotel Star and the **ACAP office** (☎ 7am-5pm) that administers upper Mustang. Join the other trekkers here as you gaze wistfully into Mustang. As you head back to the *chorten*, look for the clay effigy of the town's pre-Buddhist protector, complete with erect phallus. The spirit traps and goat heads that adorn the nearby doorways add to the spooky animist feel.

Kagbeni has over a dozen lodges. The **New Asia Trekkers Home** (r Rs 200) is a good place to stay, with fine views from the back rooms, as is the excellent **Hotel Shangrila** (s/d Rs 80/100, r Rs 250), where you can join your porters in the cosy kitchen (the 'potatoes fried in sesame seeds with sauce and veg' is recommended). Both places are by the central *chorten*.

With its private 350-year-old Tibetan-style chapel and Buddhist murals in the dining room, the **Red House** (☎ 069-440161; r Rs 150-250) is probably the most interesting accommodation option, though the rooms themselves vary. The **New Annapurna Lodge** (☎ 019-446547; s/d Rs 150/200) at the southern end of town has comfortable rooms with pine furniture, proper mattresses and Western toilets, plus Indian food and real coffee.

The central Hotel Snowlion is simpler but still cosy.

If you arrive early enough, pay a visit to the impressive red-walled **Kagchode Thubten Sampheling Gompa** (admission Rs 100; ☎ 6am-6pm), a Sakyapa-school monastery founded in 1429. The main hall holds some fine festival masks and *kangling* (trumpets), as well as a 500-year-old text written in gold ink. The view from the roof alone is worth the entry fee.

For a taste of forbidden Mustang, cross the Kali Gandaki over the bridge in the southwest of town (follow the trail from the Hotel Himalaya) and hike an hour north out to the village of **Tiri** on the west bank of the valley. Above Tiri is the Sumdu Choeden Gompa (David Snellgrove's 'Tingri Gompa'), whose entrance is guarded by fine slate carvings of the Four Guardian Kings. The central statue is of Guru Rinpoche flanked by three turbaned kings. No restricted-area permits are required on this side of the valley as far as Tiri.

For a much more strenuous day hike, take the scary-looking, almost vertical trail that zigzags straight up the cliff west of Kagbeni to the Sher Dhak viewpoint. The views of Yakgawa Kang, Tilicho Peak and others are awesome, but it's a very strenuous hike.

For details of the Mustang trek from Kagbeni to Lo Manthang, see p301. It's possible to hire horses (and a horseman) in the village to Muktinath or Jomsom for around Rs 1000.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: RANIPAUWA TO JOMSOM VIA LUBRA

5 hours, 150m ascent, 1190m descent

If you are headed directly from Muktinath back to Jomsom along the road, it's an easy three- to four-hour downhill walk that can become tedious if there is a strong headwind.

An interesting and challenging alternative return route is via the traditional village of **Lubra**, hidden in the side valley of the Panga Khola. Lubra has managed to preserve a pocket of Bön religion since the 12th century and still boasts two Bön monasteries, one in the centre and the other 15 minutes above town. The trail to Lubra (two to three hours) branches off the main road just below Ranipauwa, near



WINDY TRAILS

The flow of air between the peaks of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri creates strong winds that howl up the Kali Gandaki Valley. The breezes blow gently from the north during the early hours of the day, then shift to powerful gusts from the south throughout the late morning and afternoon. If you are headed south anywhere between Kagbeni and Tukuhe, make sure you set off early and wear a bandana, scarf and sunglasses to avoid the dust and sand that kicks up at around 11am.

the Hotel Dream House, and climbs over a couple of ridges to drop into the Panga Khola. The exact route depends on river levels and can be hard to discern, so it's a good idea to take a guide for this section. High river levels often close the route in May and June. From Lubra the trail continues down the valley for 90 minutes to join the Jomsom road near Eklai Bhatti. Figure on a five-hour walk from Mukti-nath to Jomsom.

Day 2: Kagbeni to Marpha

3½–4½ hours, 220m descent, 60m ascent

Get an early start from Kagbeni to avoid the winds that whistle up the valley after 11am. An interesting alternative to the road between Jomsom and Syang is the scenic detour via the east bank (see the Alternative Route: Ranipauwa to Jomsom via Lubra, opposite).

From Kagbeni the trail quickly joins the road from Mukti-nath and continues through desert scenery to Chhancha Lhumba, better known as Eklai Bhatti ('alone hotel'), at 2830m. Despite its name, several lodges offer lunch and a chance to get out of the wind. A rough alternative west-bank route from Kagbeni via Piling/Pagling joins the road here on a suspension bridge.

Just past a walled tree plantation the trail crosses the Panga Khola, where a side trail leads to the Bön village of Lubra (see opposite). The trail continues to follow the road through the stony river valley, eventually short-cutting along the riverbed to reach the entrance to Jomsom.

The trail passes the school to enter the narrow main street of **Old Jomsom**. Continue

past local inns and shops to the bridge across the Kali Gandaki, where you'll find the side trail to Thini (see p193), the Thak Khola Lodge (see the boxed text, below), an ACAP kerosene depot and the post office.

The trail continues south down the west bank, past the hospital and the compound of the Army School of Mountain Warfare, along with its Hindu shrine. The camouflaged soldiers jogging in the mornings are a surreal sight in this remote location. Pass the bank to enter the slightly scruffy main drag of new Jomsom.

JOMSOM

Straddling the Kali Gandaki, **Jomsom** (2760m), or more correctly Dzongsam (New Fort), is the region's administrative headquarters, home to bureaucrats, military personnel, merchants and jeep owners. It's a scruffy, fairly charmless place, mainly of interest to those who need to catch an early-morning flight or change some money.

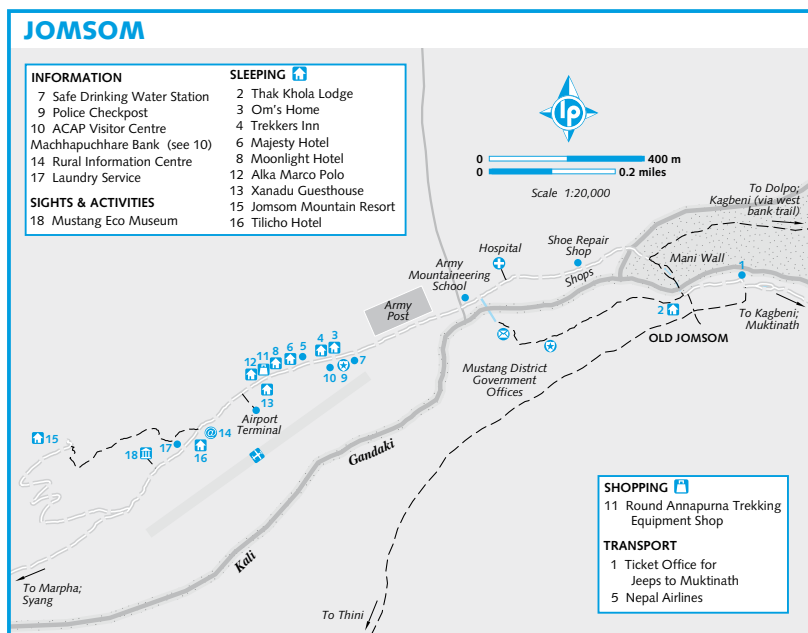
At the southern end of town a concrete stairway leads to the **Mustang Eco Museum** (admission Rs 50; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Thu & Sat–Sun, to 3pm Fri, to 4pm in winter), which is worth a visit for its displays on herbal medicine and a re-created chapel. This southern fringe of Jomsom is properly known as Puthang. Just northeast of here is the airport, where you'll find the main hotels, restaurants, shops and airline offices.

Xanadu Guesthouse (☎ 069-440060; chand ramohangauchan@yahoo.com; r with shared bathroom Rs 100, s/d with bathroom Rs 350/500) is popular for its clean rooms, excellent restaurant (yak steaks and hot chocolate apple pie!) and laundry service. The downstairs shop sells good nak cheese.

HENDRIX STAYED HERE

It's hard to picture Mick Jagger slumming it in room 5 of the friendly but very basic Thak Khola Lodge, but apparently his Stoneship did indeed stay here in November 1990. Jimi Hendrix also allegedly stayed in the hotel in October 1967 (room 6) and you can still see his enigmatic graffiti 'If I don't see you in this world I'll see you in the next one; don't be late.' Come for lunch or a cup of tea at this most unusual rock pilgrimage spot.





Other good places on the main drag include the Trekkers Inn, Majesty, Moonlight and Tilicho hotels, all with en suite rooms for around Rs 250/500 for a single/double, as well as cheaper options. Most have a central courtyard surrounded by rooms, and meals are often served at a *kodatsu*, which is a Japanese-style table covered with a blanket to warm your legs with the heat from a charcoal brazier.

Slightly upmarket options include rambling **Om's Home** (☎ 069-440042; omshome@wlink.com.np; s/d Rs 400/500, deluxe Rs 700/800), with private tiled hot-water bathrooms, a sunny courtyard and a table-tennis table, and the **Alka Marco Polo** (☎ 069-440007; s/d Rs 300/500), which accepts credit cards and boasts a sauna (Rs 500) and internet access.

Jomsom Mountain Resort (☎ 069-440035, 01-4496110; salesjom@mail.com.np; r superior/deluxe US\$100/180) is an austere 102-room hotel on a ledge above southern Jomsom with spectacular views of Nilgiri. Top-end groups stay for the indoor swimming pool, but it's way overpriced and sits mostly deserted.

Jomsom has numerous well-stocked shops, including the Round Annapurna Trekking Equipment Shop, which can

arrange porters (Rs 700 per day). There's a one-hour **laundry** (☎ 6am-6pm, Rs 30-40 per piece) in the south end of town, by the Hotel Mountain Breeze. The nearby **Rural Information Centre** (☎ 8am-6.30pm; internet per minute Rs 5-8) offers pretty fast internet access, or try the Alka Marco Polo hotel.

Across from the Trekkers Inn is the ACAP visitor centre, a mandatory police checkpost and a safe drinking water station. The nearby **Machhapuchhare Bank** (☎ 9am-2.30pm Sun-Thu, to 12.30pm Fri) changes cash and travellers cheques and even boasts an ATM, whenever there's electricity!

The arrival of the morning flight from Pokhara (see p146) is the highlight of the Jomsom day. Sita Air, Agni Air and **Nepal Airlines** (☎ 069-440081) operate flights to Pokhara and have offices where you can book and reconfirm tickets, but airline connections come and go frequently on this route. All flights depart between 7am and 9am. Jeeps now operate on the new road to/from Beni (Rs 500); for destinations south, enquire at the ticket office by the Alka Marco Polo, for Muktinath (Rs 500) visit the office at the northern edge of Old Jomsom.

VISHNU IN STONE

Traders the length of the Kali Gandaki Valley will offer to sell you *saligrams*. These are black stones that, when broken open, reveal the fossilised remains of prehistoric ammonites that lived here more than 140 million years ago, when the ancient Tethys Sea covered the region. You might find some *saligrams* yourself along the riverbed near Jomsom, although you can always buy them from the traders – and then curse yourself all the way back to Pokhara for carrying a backpack full of rocks. Hindu pilgrims purchase these ammonites because they believe them to be manifestations of the god Vishnu, who was turned to stone by the beautiful and virtuous Vrinda after he tried to seduce her. Devotees believe that *saligrams* bestow wealth, forgiveness, health and happiness. If nothing else, it's pretty cool to hold something that was alive before the Himalaya even existed.

JOMSOM TO MARPHA

The trail leaves southern Jomsom by the Mustang Eco Museum and follows the road over a low ridge to cross the Syang Khola. The foot trail detours right to **Syang** (2800m), where the interesting and picturesque old town and large Dechenling and Tashi Lhakhang monasteries are on a ridge a short climb above the road. Syang is one of the Panch Gaon, or 'five villages' (the others are Marpha, Chhairo, Chimang and Thini), that give the region its name.

At the southern end of Syang, rejoin the road and follow it all the way to Marpha, crossing the Pankya Khola to enter at the northern end of town.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: JOMSOM TO MARPHA VIA THE EAST BANK

2–3 hours, 190m ascent, 250m descent

The interesting east-bank footpath from Jomsom to Syang, via Katsapterenga Gumpa and Thini, requires a bit more time and effort than the direct west-bank route (figure on an extra two hours' walking) but it avoids the road and offers some excellent, little-seen views.

From the bridge dividing old and new Jomsom, take the signed trail southwest to **Thini** (2860m), a 30-minute walk past barley fields (both the high and low trail lead to the village). Thini is the oldest village in the valley and boasts an old gumpa above the town's archery ground. Take a right opposite the archery ground (the trail directly ahead leads to Tilicho) and drop down to cross the Lungpuhyun Khola, climb the other side and pass by the hill-top ruins of Gharab Dzong, built by local King Thing Migchen as the region's original settlement.

Contour around the hillside past a house to **Dhumba Lake** (2830m; one hour), a pretty pond lined with prayer flags. Two paths continue up the ridge in front of you.

From the ridge it's worth making the 15-minute detour to **Katsapterenga Gumpa** (2920m) for its spectacular 360-degree views of Nilgiri peak, Tilicho Pass, Syang village and Thini and Jomsom below you. The monastery is named after five clay statues (the Five Treasures) brought here from Samye in Tibet. The gumpa is home to a handful of novice monks and can be visited for a donation.

From the ridge, descend to the south, angling diagonally to Dhumba village and then curving around the shelf to cross the suspension bridge opposite Syang. From Syang it's 30 minutes along the road to Marpha.

MARPHA

The large and well-maintained Thakali village of **Marpha** (2680m) has long been a favourite amongst trekkers. It has kept its traditional narrow paved alleys and passageways and an extensive drainage system flows under the flagstone-paved street. Fortunately the road bypasses Marpha and has not destroyed the atmosphere of the town. Impressive *kanis* mark both ends of town.

In Marpha, the Thakali inn system has reached its apex and most hotels boast private bathrooms, gas-heated showers and a wide menu, including excellent apple crumbles. Marpha is a much nicer place to stay than Jomsom, just over an hour to the north.

Groups gravitate to the upmarket **Hotel Trans-Himalaya** (☎ 069-440169; r with shared bathroom Rs 100, s/d with private bathroom Rs 250/350),



MARPHA'S FIRST TOURIST

A sign in Marpha commemorates the visit of the Japanese explorer Ekai Kawaguchi, who stayed in Marpha for three months in 1899. Kawaguchi arrived in India in August 1897 and studied the Tibetan language in Darjeeling. He then entered Nepal in disguise, travelling up the Kali Gandaki to Tibet, spending time in both Tukuche and Marpha. Kawaguchi was an unlikely, ill-equipped and eccentric explorer, but somehow managed to become the first outsider to reach the forbidden city of Lhasa. For an excellent account of Kawaguchi's amazing travels read Scott Berry's book *A Stranger in Tibet*.

Kawaguchi stayed for three months in the house of the local *subba* (customs/tax officer), which still boasts its original woodcarvings, at the southern end of town. There are plans to turn the house into a museum.

surrounded by apple orchards at the northern end of town. The foghorn-like construction opposite the hotel is a solar drying facility that processes apples, apricots and vegetables. Just above the hotel is a shrine to the town's *pho-lha* (family god).

The central yellow-fronted Dhaulagiri Lodge has elaborately carved windows and comfortable inner courtyards. Near the southern end is the Hotel Mount Villa, the excellent **Neeru Guest House** (☎ 069-440070, r Rs 200-400), with a good restaurant and decent rooms in the lower courtyard, and Paradise Guest House, recently rebuilt after a fire.

Other facilities in Marpha include the Marpha Pool House & Bar at the southern end, two bookshops, a shoe-repair facility, safe drinking water station and a money-changer. Pop into the central Bhakti Shop for a taste of the local apple cider, dried fruit and good conversation, courtesy of the owner Bhakti Hirachan. Locally produced apple cider and fruit preserves are available in both Marpha and Tukuche, along with apple, apricot and peach *rakshi*.

Marpha's large, Nyingma **Samtenling Gumpa (Tashi Lhakhang)** was renovated and enlarged in 1996; as in Tengboche (in the Everest region), the Mani Rimdu festival is celebrated here in the autumn. Like all buildings in Marpha, the gumpa is painted in whitewash produced from a local stone.

If you have time, take in the views of the town from the natural stone *chorten* on the hillside north of town, or continue over the ridge to the original settlement of Old Marpha. Lodge owners can advise on the day hike to Yak Kharka, which is also the route taken by expeditions headed to Dhaulagiri and the Hidden Valley, via 5250m Dhampus Pass.

Day 3: Marpha to Larjung

3–4 hours, 200m ascent, 310m descent

Head south through Marpha's entrance *kani*, past a long whitewashed *mani* wall and a blacksmith settlement to Om's Home Marpha, a clean hotel with excellent food and a range of accommodation from dorms to rooms with private bathrooms.

Five minutes past the Shangrila Hotel is the turn-off and bridge to Chhairo and Chimang. The road continues south for 90 minutes directly to Tukuche but it's well worth taking the alternative east-bank trail via Chhairo and Chimang (two hours). You'll avoid the road traffic and get great views of Dhaulagiri en route.

Across the bridge on the east side of the river, **Chhairo** is a Tibetan refugee settlement of around 40 houses. The 300-year-old Chhairo Gumpa here is currently under restoration under the auspices of the Cultural Restoration Tourism Project (www.crtp.net) – see p61 for how you can be a part of this. The Guru Rinpoche Lhakhang in particular has some fine old statues, *thangkhas* and murals, though you'll have to fight off the persistent Tibetan trinket sellers.

Continue past *mani* walls and pine groves to Chhairo village, with its school and lovely old *chorten*. Follow the signs left to Chimang, climb to a meadow and a small waterfall and continue uphill, curving around fields to the traditional village of **Chimang** (2870m; 1½ hours), perched on a ridge. The little-visited village offers some of the best views you'll get of Dhaulagiri and is worth some exploring.

Descend steps on the far side of the ridge and keep to the right of the Chimang Khola, crossing a bridge to rejoin the main



lower trail. Pass a small village to arrive at a bridge over the Kali Gandaki. With some extra time, you could explore the village of Chokapani, high on the east bank and accessible on a trail from the bridge. For Tukuche, cross the bridge and walk down the road for 25 minutes. Eventually it might be possible to continue south down the east bank to Sauru and Sirkung villages, crossing the Kali Gandaki on a seasonal bridge (mid-October to mid-April) to Larjung or Tukuche but at present the trail is too unstable. Ask in Chimang or at the ACAP office in Jomsom.

TUKUCHE

Back on the main road, cross the Thapa Khola and enter the large village of **Tukuche** (2580m; population 662), once the valley's most important Thakali village. Tukuche (*tuk* means grain, and *che* means flat place) was the meeting place where traders laden with salt and wool from Tibet bartered with traders carrying grain from the south (see the boxed text, below). Many of the town's stone houses once served as salt and grain storehouses and the current school

playground is said to occupy the former market ground.

It's worth spending some time wandering the town's fine facades and gompas or paying a visit to the 200-year old complex of the **Tukuche Distillery**, a former customs post, in the south of town. Nuns will let you into the lovely nearby Mahakala Gompa, though the other gompas, including the nearby Rani (Tashi Choling) Gompa are normally locked.

Tukuche's dozen hotels are mostly in beautiful old Thakali homes with carved wooden windows, doorways and balconies. The Nepali-Dutch **High Plains Inn** (☎ 9936 90055; www.highplainsinn.com; r without bathroom Rs 100, with bathroom Rs 350-450) at the northern end has everything you want from a lodge: clean bathrooms, a fireplace, internet access, a bakery, real Dutch coffee and a photo of Clint Eastwood. The menu even includes Indonesian nasi goreng (Rs 400). The next-door **Sherpa Guest House** (s/d Rs 40/80) is a good cheaper option. Further along, the **Yak Hotel** (☎ 069-429429; s/d Rs 100/200) is also good value, offering evening song and dance performances if there are enough guests. The



TRANS-HIMALAYAN TRADE

For centuries, hardy caravans of yaks or goats, led by Tibetans clad in *chubas* (Tibetan woollen cloaks) have crisscrossed the high Himalaya, bringing salt harvested from Tibet's great salt lakes to swap for rice and barley carried up from the Middle Hills of Nepal. Wool, livestock and butter were also exchanged for sugar, tea, spices, tobacco and manufactured goods from India, but the salt-for-grain trade dominated the economy. Twelve major passes link Nepal and Tibet, of which the four easiest are in Mustang, so Tukuche in the Kali Gandaki Valley soon became the main entrepôt for transferring, storing and taxing the trade. The salt trade also took place in Dolpo, filtering south via the villages of Tarakot and Tibrikot. The bulk of the trade in Tibetan wool funnelled through Sikkim's Chumbi Valley to Kalimpong and British India.

Sadly, this colourful Himalayan trade has almost disappeared over the last half-century, largely because of the effect of political and economic changes in Tibet, but also because Indian salt is now available throughout Nepal at a much lower price than Tibetan salt. Many people in Nepal once suffered from goitres because of the total absence of iodine from their diet. Indian aid programs distributed Indian sea salt (which contains iodine) in a successful effort to prevent goitres, but the Tibetan salt trade suffered because of the artificially low price of Indian salt.

The Thakali middlemen of the Kali Gandaki Valley in particular grew rich from their monopoly of the salt trade. Over the last 30 years most have turned to agriculture, tourism and other forms of business as the salt trade dried up.

Small-scale Trans-Himalayan trade continues. The Chinese border at the 5488m Marim La near Tinje opens twice a year to Dolpo traders, and Chinese truckers now drive over the passes to Lo Manthang. A new border post at Rasuwa will soon open to create another 'Trans-Himalayan highway', connecting Langtang by road to Tibet's Kyirong Valley. The bulk of the trade these days travels along the Friendship Highway via the border at Nyelam, a crossing long used by Newari traders and now the main tourist highway into Tibet.

demanding half-day hiking trail to the Yak Kharka pastures branches off from here.

In the stone-walled village itself the whitewashed **Tukuche Guest House** (r Rs 200-300) has an explanation of local history on the wall and a cosy Tibetan-style dining room, with clean rooms around a central courtyard. The nearby **Sunil Guest House** (r Rs 80) has simple rooms and a good dining room around a lovely courtyard of flowers. The chef claims to serve the best apple pie in town.

TUKUCHE TO LARJUNG

From Tukuche the road makes numerous ups and downs to Larjung. If the water is low it's possible to avoid the road by making short cuts across the riverside gravel bars. In 1972 the French adventurer Michel Peissel travelled up the Kali Gandaki in a hovercraft and managed to get this far before he was forced to admit that, yes, it was a silly plan after all.

There are good views of Dhaulagiri and Nilgiri North along this section of the Kali Gandaki Valley, which some claim is the world's deepest, the rationale being that in the 38km between the peaks of Annapurna I and Dhaulagiri I (both above 8000m) the valley floor drops almost 4000m.

The three villages of Kanti, Khobang and **Larjung** (2560m) blur into one. Pass the chalet-style **Musk Deer Valley Resort** (r Rs 150-300). To the left of the trail, on a rise overlooking the Kali Gandaki, is a small but charming nunnery, the Makhhi Lhakhang, which is the southernmost Tibetan Buddhist temple in the valley. Pass the Sunrise Guest House and Peaceful Lodge, cross the Larjung Khola and branch left to the Himalayan, River Side and Mt Ice View lodges in Larjung village.

The **Larjung Lodge** (☎ 069-28432), at the southern end, is a good choice and may be able to offer information about the trip to the Dhaulagiri Icefall. The safe drinking water station is also here. The most luxurious place in town is the **Lodge Thasang Village** (☎ 019-446514; www.lodgethasangvillage.com; s/d US\$80/100), high on the ridge above Larjung. It accepts walk-ins but it's best to have a reservation.

There's plenty to explore around Larjung. On the cliffs behind the village are a series of crumbling retreat caves, at the

base of which you might see locals practising their archery, especially during spring competition time. You could hike up the hill to the west of Larjung, via the red and green temples of Gauchan and Taluchan, to Naurikot village, with its Bön monastery and fine views of Dhaulagiri. Lodge owners can give information on the day hike to the Guru Sangpo Cave, further up the hillside and associated with Guru Rinpoche.

SIDE TRIP: DHAULAGIRI ICEFALL

8-9 hours, 1200m ascent

A two-day side trip up the side of the Kali Gandaki Valley will take you to the foot of the Dhaulagiri Icefall and provide great views of Dhaulagiri I and the Annapurna range. It's a 1200m climb, so it's a bit tough to climb up and back in a single day, but it's still worth going part-way on a day trip. There is no accommodation on this route, so you need a tent in order to spend the night.

There are a few potential dangers to this trip: if it's cloudy, route-finding is a problem; there is a danger of altitude sickness, especially if you took the bus here; and there are avalanches in, and sometimes near, the icefall itself. The mountaineering route up the icefall is a particularly hazardous climb. In 1969 an avalanche in the icefall killed seven members of the US Dhaulagiri expedition.

The route starts just south of Larjung village, a couple of hundred metres past the suspension bridge on the south side of the wide Ghatta Khola. A small trail signed to the 'Icefall' leads up steeply through the forest then descends through pasture to some herders' huts, with the icefall straight ahead. Take the left path up through pine and rhododendron to a field (take the right branch for Sekung Lake). The trail continues steeply for another hour to a signposted hut that offers fine views (two hours).

The path is now well defined, but extremely steep, in grasslands. You should reach a cairn in another hour and a small basin with yak pastures in a further 30 minutes. There are great views of the Kali Gandaki from Larjung to Lete, the Nilgiris and Annapurna I across the valley and the route up to North Annapurna Base Camp. Cross the basin, keep slightly to the right and climb up to reach some large



THE WHITE MOUNTAIN

Dhaulagiri (8167m), the 'White Mountain', was first climbed by the Swiss in 1960. The mountain was sighted by British surveyors in India in the early 1800s and was mapped by secret Indian surveyors in 1873, but the region remained largely unknown until a Swiss aerial survey in 1949.

The French Annapurna expedition in 1950 had permission to climb either Annapurna or Dhaulagiri but opted for Annapurna after a discouraging reconnaissance of Dhaulagiri. A Swiss party failed in 1953 as did an Argentine group one year later.

After four more expeditions had failed, eight members of a Swiss expedition reached the summit in 1960. The climb followed a circuitous route around the mountain from Tukuche, over Dhampus Pass and French Col (named after the French Annapurna expedition), to approach the summit from the Northeast Col. The expedition was supplied by a Swiss Pilatus Porter aircraft, the 'Yeti', which landed on the Northeast Col at 5977m after skis were fixed to the undercarriage. Near the end of the expedition the plane crashed near Dhampus Pass and the pilots, including the famous Emil Wick, walked down the mountain to Tukuche.

The peak was climbed again by the Japanese in 1970, the Americans in 1973 and the Italians in 1976. Captain Emil Wick airdropped supplies to the US expedition from a Pilatus Porter aircraft. Among the delicacies he dropped were two bottles of wine and a live chicken. The sherpas would not allow the chicken to be killed on the mountain, so it became the expedition pet. It was carried, snow-blind and crippled with frostbitten feet, to Marpha, where it finally ended up in the cooking pot.

boulders in a further 45 minutes. The glacier is now immediately below with the icefall beyond.

The return route is the same, although there are a few short cuts. When you get back to the lower huts cut to the left (north) towards **Sekung Lake** (2725m) for sublime views of the Annapurnas reflected in the calm water. The lake alone is worth a fine short day hike from Larjung.

You can descend to the Ghatta Khola the way you came. Alternatively, head northwest to the head of the stream above Sekung Lake (avoiding the gorge), cross it and swing down the north side of the river valley to the small Bhuturcho Lake, hidden in forests, 40 minutes from Sekung Lake. A trail at the far end of the lake drops down to the Ghatta Khola where you started.

Day 4: Larjung to Ghasa

5–6 hours, 200m ascent, 760m descent

From Larjung into the road as it swings into the wide mouth of the Ghatta Khola. The road bridge is a long distance upstream so most locals cut straight across the river on temporary bridges. The road eventually crosses the Kali Gandaki on a high suspension bridge and climbs through fir, juniper and cypress trees to descend to the Earth Home and Dhaulagiri Icefall Lodge in **Kokhethati** (45 minutes).

To avoid this section of road, ask in Larjung whether it's possible to cross the Kali Gandaki on seasonal bridges (October to March only) to the east bank and continue downstream through forest to Kokhethati.

The road continues south to Dhampu, crossing the Kali Gandaki to arrive in Kalopani and upper Lete. Far more interesting is the east-bank detour on foot via Titi Lake and Taglung, which is described here.

Ten minutes past Kokhethati, branch left on a tractor path signposted for Titi Lake. A 45-minute gradual climb brings you to Titigaon village, offering fine views ahead to Nilgiri and Annapurna, and back to Dhaulagiri and Tukuche peaks. A lodge is under construction here. There are plans to upgrade the path to a road, so try to get here soon. Just past Titi a trail branches left to Nupsang Kharka, a high summer pasture that offers fine Dhaulagiri views. ACAP is starting to promote this hike, which is said to offer spectacular rhododendron blooms in March and April. Expect a lodge to open at Nupsang before too long. Just a minute further on the main trail you pass pretty **Titi Lake** (2670m), though the views are somewhat spoiled by the electricity lines placed right beside the lake. Climb for 15 minutes to the crest of a ridge marked by three *chortens* and offering more fabulous views.



The tractor road makes a large curve below the ridge, so take the footpath that drops to the left, short-cutting to the lovely traditional village of **Konjo** (2590m), 1¼ hours from Kokhethati. The views of Nilgiri peak towering above the village's emerald-green terraces is one to remember. Villagers report sighting Himalayan bears here in September. A short detour leads to the red-roofed Taglung Gompa, on a hillside beside a huge sacred tree. Strange stories of human sacrifice swirl around Konjo village. Villagers tell stories about an ancient custom of releasing a chicken into a cave high above the village. The cave allegedly led to the Manang side and when a Manangi found and ate the chicken, he was then promptly taken to Konjo to be sacrificed. A sheep is allegedly still sacrificed in the cave every July. Luckily chicken isn't on the menu of the village's only teahouse, just dal bhat... Ask in the village about the steep trail that leads directly up the hillside to Nupsang Kharka and the impressive Poonging ('Lemon Tree' in Thakali) Dhara viewpoint.

From Konjo follow the signs to **Chhayo** (Chhoyo) by descending into the huge floodplain of the Pangbu Khola. A junction here leads south to Jhipra Deorali, but landslides currently block this trail so cross the suspension bridge over the Kali Gandaki to the west bank. Take the right fork for 20 minutes to arrive in Lete, or branch left to join the main road south to Ghasa.

There are well over a dozen roadside lodges in spread-out **Lete** (2480m), including the Lete Eco Guest House and Old Namaste Guest House in the south of town. The excellent Paradise Guest House is near the police checkpoint, where your ACAP permit needs to be checked. The upper part of Lete merges into **Kalopani** (2530m), offering the small Kasturee Cottage and the upmarket See You Lodge. Also here is the excellent **Kalopani Guest House** (☎ 019-446518; kalopanimustang@hotmail.com), offering internet access, Western toilets and great food, and also the Hotel Mount View and the Pine Forest Lodge, run by the local tourism training centre.

Between the Mount View and Kalopani a signed trail heads 25 minutes up to Dhulu Danda, a 360-degree viewpoint that offers a panorama of peaks: Dhaulagiri, Tukuche

Peak, the three Nilgiris, Fang and Annapurna I. If you have some time to kill in Kalopani, check to see if the **Cultural Thakali Museum** (admission Rs 50; ☎ 6am-6pm) is open.

Heading south from Lete, drop past the Namaste Lodge to cross the Lete Khola. The road then passes the Green Forest Guest House in Ghumaune and Bimala Hotel in Kaiku at 2180m, to continue through forests to Ghasa, 1½ hours from Lete.

The village of **Ghasa** (2000m) marks a cultural and ecological milestone. Not only is it the last Thakali village on the trek and the southernmost limit of Tibetan Buddhism, but from here on the mountain pine and birch of the middle valley start to give way to subtropical trees and shrubs. You might spot grey langur monkeys in this area. Ghasa has three separate settlements. At the northern end you'll find the comfortable and popular Florida Guest House, with a pleasant back courtyard and some rooms with private bathrooms (Rs 300), and the funky National Guest House. Lodges in middle Ghasa include the glum Mustang and quiet Kali Gandaki, which doubles as the safe drinking water station. This part of the village has some lovely traditional touches, including thatched dovecotes, log beehives and cow's-head waterspouts. **Eagle's Nest Guest House** (☎ 9336 90010; s/d Rs 400/700), 15 minutes south of the main village, has the nicest location in Ghasa, with bright, carpeted en suite rooms and a pleasant garden.

Day 5: Ghasa to Tatopani

4½–5½ hours, 90m ascent, 900m descent

From Ghasa you can follow the road (or even take a jeep) all the way down to Tatopani. Alternatively, cross the suspension footbridge just south of the Eagle's Nest Guest House and follow the mule caravans down the eastern side of the valley. The mule track climbs the rocky cliffside to a ridge, leaving Mustang district, to make a long descent on steps past a few neglected teahouses to a bridge at Kopchepani (90 minutes). Cross the 120m-long bridge as the river roars through a narrow chasm and rejoin the road, which has been blasted out of the steep solid rock walls.

The road heads south past the scenic Waterfall Lodge at Rupse Chhahara ('Beautiful Waterfall') and continues for an hour to



ANNAPURNA NORTH BASE CAMP

Just beyond Dana, a bridge provides access to a trail on the eastern side of the Kali Gandaki. After several days of rough climbing in bamboo jungle above the Miristi Khola, this trail reaches the base camp used by Maurice Herzog's Annapurna expedition in 1950. At the time of this first ascent, Annapurna I was the highest mountain ever climbed. The base camp is also accessible by an equally difficult trail from Lete. The route up the Miristi Khola is poorly defined, long and difficult, and is used only by shepherds and mountaineering expeditions. There are no villages or hotels along the route.

Dana (1450m). The simple New Annapurna Lodge and Dana Riverside Lodge at the northern end of the village mark old Dana and the houses here have elaborately carved windows and balconies. At the southern end of the village is the Kabin Guest House and Dana Guest House. Most of the people here are Magars, although there are also a few Brahmins and Thakalis. The large peak across the valley is Annapurna South.

Cross the Bhalu Khola on a high suspension bridge. On the opposite side of the river is the power plant that generates electricity for this area. Pass a collection of *bhattis* at Guithe (1320m), before descending to **Tatopani** (1190m).

Depending on trail conditions, it may be possible to avoid the road by continuing down the east bank from Kopchepani via Garpar to the bridge at Dana, then continuing past the hydro station, climbing to Banskot and descending to Alugaon to cross the bridge at Guithe (three hours). Ask ACAP for the current condition of these little-used trails.

Tatopani means 'hot water' in Nepali and the village gains its name from the **hot springs** (admission Rs 25; ☎ 5am-9pm) below the village and near the new road. There are two stone pools on the banks of the river. Be sure to bring a bathing costume (there's little privacy) and don't pollute these pools by using soap in them. The village sits on a shelf above the road.

Tatopani has long been a favourite stop with weary trekkers, but the new road looks

set to change this. The food at **Dhaulagiri Lodge** (r Rs 100-250) gets rave reviews and the rooms are in a lush garden of banana and orange trees. The nearby concrete **Himalaya Lodge** (☎ 9936 95006; s/d without bathroom Rs 50/100, with bathroom Rs 200/250) is another good bet, with a bakery, laundry service and bekti fish curry on the menu! It can even change money and take credit cards. Other options include the Old Kamala and the Trekkers Lodge at the northern end of town. This is citrus-fruit country, so stock up on mandarins in February.

Day 6: Tatopani to Ghorepani

6-7 hours, 1750m ascent, 140m descent

From Tatopani you may want to take a jeep or bus down to Beni and Pokhara. Alternatively, make the big ascent (the biggest of the Annapurna Circuit trek!) to Ghorepani, then continue to the Annapurna Sanctuary.

Head south for 30 minutes, leaving the road to cross the Kali Gandaki and then the Ghar Khola rivers. The peak to the north is Nilgiri South (6839m). At Ghar Khola village the trail branches left up a series of stairs.

A steep ascent of 380m leads to the Santosh viewpoint and teahouse, atop a rocky spur called Durbin Danda (1555m). From here on the valley opens up and you ascend through terraced fields to the Nice Breeze Restaurant at the top of **Ghara** (1780m; 2½ hours). The trail makes a gentle ascent across a landslide area to the first houses of **Shikha** (3¼ hours), a large and prosperous Magar village that marks the halfway stage, if you can't face the full climb today. Cross a stream and climb to Shikha's stone-paved main street. The **Moonlight Guesthouse** (r with shared/private bathroom Rs 100/300) is a good choice. Simpler places further uphill include the Dhaulagiri View and Shanti View, both with plywood rooms and decent dining areas. Keep climbing for 15 minutes past the See You Lodge and an ACAP checkpoint to the **Serendipity Guest House** (s/d Rs 50/100), in a quiet location with a pleasant garden and helpful owners. From here it's another 2½ hours to Ghorepani.

Keep climbing past Nice View Restaurant at Phalate (2390m), a large landslide area and then a primary school to **Chitre** (2420m; 4½ hours). There are several trail junctions, but the correct trail almost invariably leads



DIY: KHOPRA RIDGE

An interesting new trek route detours from Chitre or Ghorepani to connect to Deorali via Swanta, Chistibung, Baiyali and the ridge of Khopra Danda. The detour offers superb views of Annapurna South and Fang peak and there's an ambitious side trek to sacred Kaire Lake. Formerly only camping groups hiked this trail but there are now community lodges in all of these stops, so it's feasible as an adventurous teahouse trek (even better, profits from the lodges go towards local schools).

Ask for details in Ghorepani, Chitre or Deorali and plan on a four-day detour. It's also possible to continue southwest from Chitre to Danda Kharka for all of the views of nearby Poon Hill without any of the crowds. Ask for details in Chitre or Ghorepani.

uphill. The large New Dhaulagiri View Hotel is a fine place with sunny garden seating. Other places in Chitre include the large Namaste, Lali Guras and Pine Forest lodges. The New Annapurna View at the top of the village is another good place.

From Chitre the trail makes a steep ascent for an hour through lovely rhododendron and magnolia forests, interspersed with a few shepherds' huts and pastures to reach the first lodges of Ghorepani (see p150).

Day 7: Ghorepani to Naya Pul

6–7 hours, 1900m descent

After an early-morning visit to Poon Hill (see p151), you can make the long descent on endless stone staircases to Naya Pul (follow Day 1 and 2 of the Annapurna Panorama trek in reverse; see p149), or you can

cut across to Tadapani to link up with the Annapurna Sanctuary trek (see Day 1 and Day 2 of the Ghorepani to Ghandruk trek; p169).

OTHER TREKS

ANNAPURNA SKYLINE TREK (ROYAL TREK)

Following a low ridge east of Pokhara, with spine-tingling views of the Annapurna peaks, the four-day Annapurna Skyline Trek (or Royal Trek) was famously walked by Prince Charles in 1980. The path is wide and easy to follow, however, because it lies off the main tourist circuit there's no teahouse accommodation en route, except at Begnas Tal. Most people bring a stove and camp at basic camp sites along the route.

The trail starts near the army camp on the Prithvi Hwy, just east of the Bijayapur Khola. Cross a flat area of rice fields before climbing the ridge to the village of Kalikasthan (1370m), which has two basic camp sites with fine views. On day two, the trail follows the forested ridge through Thulokot to Mathi Thana, where you can take a teashop lunch, before climbing to Nau-danda, Lipini and finally Shaktlung (1730m) with another simple camping ground.

On day three, the trail descends to the valley floor, then rises to the attractive Gurung village of Chisopani (1629m). The camp site is a short walk beyond the village near a ridge-top temple, and the views are sublime. The final day involves a leisurely stroll along the ridge that separates Rupa Tal and Begnas Tal, emerging on the valley floor at Begnas Bazaar, where buses leave regularly for Pokhara.

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