



Nepal's remote *Manaslu Circuit*

A quieter option than Everest Base Camp, **Harriet Fraser** tackles a trek around the world's eighth-highest peak – and discovers the fierce face of the mountain...

We gain height slowly, step by step, a line of walkers hooded against the snow. Small piles of stones reveal the points where land meets sky, but apart from us and the stones, the world is white. The path is a compacted narrow groove in the deepening snow. It's so white I lose perspective and don't realise I'm on a slope until my foot slips and glides almost vertically down, leaving me nearly doing the splits. I pick myself up and continue climbing. We're gaining height, now at around 5,000m, and the wind is getting colder and stronger. From time to time the sky ahead clears and a range of peaks, over 7,000m high, surround me, their white and black serrated edges piercing the sky.

I begin to feel a little disoriented in the white light, and struggle to find footholds on the uneven path while holding myself steady. The wind has

become so fierce I have to brace myself and stop frequently. From behind my iced-up scarf, I take deep breaths of thin air.

As I turn a corner the wind becomes almost overpowering, a savage whipping force gathering up the snow and flinging it against us. I cover my face as effectively as possible but burning ice droplets keep finding their way down my neck, into my cheeks, into my eyes. The wind roaring in my ears blocks out all other sounds and forces me to stop. At times I am bent double, engulfed by whiteness, thankful that I have stayed close to Neil, one of the others in my group. We wait together for gusts to pass and then press on, knowing we're not far now from the Larkya La pass.

We have walked for nine days to get here. I've trekked in the Indian Himalaya before, but this is my first trip in Nepal and I am heading for a

Who's writing



Harriet Fraser began her love affair with the Indian sub-continent as a student, way back in the 1990s, and returned again and again as one of the four original authors of *The Rough Guide to India*. She has a passion for walking and being in the hills, but having children forced a pause of nearly 20 years between visits to the Himalaya. Now she has been back, she's planning her next trip. Closer to home, in the Lake District where she lives, Harriet is getting to know the fells from a new perspective by joining shepherds for the demanding task of gathering sheep. She and her husband Rob work together on photographic and writing projects and are touring their latest exhibition around the UK throughout 2014 (www.landkeepers.co.uk).

Big scenery: 7,000m peaks above the village of Samdu





Don't look down: one of many exciting bridges



Remote hiking: nearly at the 4,000m mark



point higher than I have ever been – Larkya La is 5,135m above sea level. And now it's within reach.

The days leading up to this point have had a magical quality. Sunlight, forests, golden paddy fields, rainbows in waterfalls tumbling hundreds of metres. I have walked with the Budhi Gandaki river by my side as a constant companion. As I have gained height, it has fallen, gushing over boulders the size of cars. I have visited temples, laughed with village children, walked barefoot through streams, looked up to bright blue sky through towering bamboo. I have washed in water that flows hot from the mountainside and I have sat in the stillness of the evening watching the sun sink behind Manaslu,

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the world's eighth-highest peak. At night there have been rumbles of distant avalanches, and I feel humbled by the size of the mountains, with their ice crevices and snow fields, that have been so close for the past few days.

The paths have been simple and the days not too long, with a gradual ascent that has minimised the likelihood of difficulties from the high altitude. Each evening I've been full of joy and excitement about what I have seen. My husband Rob, who is the leader for this group, and has more than 70 treks under his belt, has been more even tempered. "I'll be happy when we're all over the pass," he has said, on more than one occasion. And now I see why.

I had imagined the walk to the pass would be blessed with blue skies and sunlight, like every other day had been. But it has unfolded differently. And just while I'm thinking that the harsh, white, cold conditions suit this most challenging stage of the journey well, while at the same time hoping that the wind and snow will let up, a figure comes into view from the roaring white ahead of us saying, "Go back, go back." It is Shyam, our cook. He has been to the pass and says it is too dangerous to continue. It's not just the wind – the steep descent on the other side would be impossible in these conditions. We are only 100 metres below the pass itself, the ultimate goal of the trek and the gateway to the ➤

4 ADVENTURES FROM KATHMANDU

Most Manaslu Circuit treks rendezvous in Kathmandu. If you can spend an extra day or two in this crazy and wonderful city, mountain guide Richard Goodey from Lost Earth Adventures (www.lostearthadventures.co.uk) recommends four great adventures, each do-able from there in a day



1 Kayak the river of gold

The Sun Kosi, or 'river of gold,' starts as a series of tributaries out of Tibet, carving a path directly through the Himalaya, and ends when it meets with the holy river Ganges. Warm blue water, white sandy beaches, high volume rapids between sections of calm and an abundance of wildlife, all surrounded by a lush, scarcely populated jungle corridor, help make this rightfully known as one of the top 10 river journeys in the world. Whether you are a novice (outfitters regularly run kayak sessions on the lower-graded rapids) or an experienced kayaker, this is the perfect place to dip your paddles in the water.

2 Mountain biking in Shivapuri National Park

Like most things in Nepal, mountain biking is never done in half measures. In the Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park, north of Kathmandu, you'll be surrounded by a forest of pine, rhododendron and tropical jungle as you navigate single-track and rarely used jeep trails. The climbs can be human powered or jeep accessed and the descents can be up to 1,200m long, on world-class terrain. Quality mountain bikes can be hired in Kathmandu, but to get the most out of it, it's worth hiring a guide.

3 Free... free falling...

The world's highest canyon swing is a mere three hours from Kathmandu. You'll find yourself peering over the edge of a steel suspension bridge over 150m above the raging waters of the Bhothe Kosi river, before a free-fall of six or seven seconds as you swing like Tarzan through the jungle. There is nothing quite like the moments before you step off the edge!

4 Paragliding in Bandipur

Bandipur is a Newari village perched on a hilltop like a prayer flag in the sky. Just off the Prithvi Highway that links Kathmandu and Pokhara, with views of the Himalaya in the distance, it is an ideal place to take off. Internationally qualified paragliding instructors will guide you through a 30-45 minute tandem flight where you'll be privy to an unrivalled panorama of Dhaulagiri, the Annapurnas, Ganesh Himal and Manaslu.



Lost Earth Adventures runs the Manaslu Circuit Trek with departures between October-December and March-May. See www.lostearthadventures.co.uk.

descent into the Annapurna sanctuary, but there is no hesitation, no arguing against this mountain lifting its skirts of snow and whipping us furiously. We turn back. The wind is getting fiercer and the snow is falling thickly.

Neil and I head downwards. We become part of a line, heads and shoulders down against the white ice wind, each of us finding orientation by watching the feet of the person in front. Until crossing the pass, we have not met other groups of trekkers. But somehow, from somewhere, other groups have come together for this pass crossing, and there must be 100 people wading through the snow. No one questions the decision to descend. Shyam's call might have saved lives.

After what feels like an hour of trudging, slipping, falling, getting up again, pushing on, we arrive at the hut where about 50 others are crammed in. Holes in the walls and roof let in snow like a freezing mist, so it's far from perfect but it does offer some respite. I'm surrounded by bodies coated in snow dust, eyebrows, beards and nose



tips white, eyes wide, and we hastily look for food in our rucksacks. My water bottle is frozen. Rob tries to open it for me but fails – later I discover he broke his finger in the process, but didn't let on.

We soon get too cold standing around, and have to move on. Having rested a little my reaction catches up with me and tears prick my eyes – I'm cold, hungry, thirsty and can't feel my fingers. But once back on the trail I have a purpose and I warm up a little. Step by slow step we move on, this time towards safety and shelter. The trip has, within hours, turned from a walk into an adventure. Despite the harshness I'm strangely pleased to have encountered the fierce face of the mountain and tasted the power of the world's greatest mountain range.

But it's not over. After nearly seven hours on the trail we arrive back at high camp, where we had gathered for breakfast in the morning, and there's another three hours' walk to a lodge for food and shelter, at Samdu (around 4,200m). I have to dig deep. I start off



Cold camp: the night before the attempt on Larkya La

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rejuvenated by hope and a cup of tea, but after an hour I begin to feel really tired. As the light fails, so do my spirits. The snow that has been falling all day has left the path icy and I slip. The third time it happens I curse and curse and stay sitting by the side of the path wondering what I'm doing here, in the cold and the dark, so many miles from home, stiff and hungry. I don't find an answer, or even look for one, but press on. And, with the rest of the group, eventually make it to the warmth of a lodge. The sherpas, porters and cook crew have their brightest smiles for us, even though they too have endured the day, with the added pressure of the responsibility of our care.

The next morning I find my walking boots are frozen solid. I fill my water bottle with boiling water and press it into one boot at a time, so that by the time I have finished breakfast I can actually put them on. We take stock as a group – there are 16 of us trekkers, with as many people supporting us as porters, cook crew and sherpas. Rob, as leader, and the *sirdar* (local leader) called Man Magar, carefully check everyone's well-being and plan the remaining days of walking. They send one of the crew ahead to find a lodge that can accommodate us further down ►



Cloud appreciation:
skies above Manaslu



Temples along the route are
tended by resident monks

the trail. Because the mountain turned away so many people we're not the only ones who have changed our plans. Some people wait another day and plan to try again, but we later find out that the pass remains impassable for three further days, and there's a pressing need for groups to quicken their pace down the trail so that they will make it back to Kathmandu in time for their flights.

For us, this means we have only six days to cover the distance we covered in nine days on the way up. So the days are long, with eight to 10 hours of walking. But there's joviality and a sense of relief within the group, and we've bonded during the difficult moments. I appreciate the scenery along the trail at least as much as I did on the way up. We pass familiar spots

at different times of day, and from a different direction, so the light is new, the perspective altered. At the end of each day the food is even more welcome and it never fails to impress me when the cook crew, who have endured the same conditions as us, and carried heavier loads, get up early each morning to prepare breakfast, manage to muster up a delicious lunch every day, and then produce an evening meal, always with three courses. I feel extremely well looked after and utterly spoilt, and have a deep respect for the men who work so hard to keep the treks going.

Each day brings increasing warmth and greenery and ends with a sense of achievement from all of us. And when we finish our final day there's an air ►

Manaslu Circuit – the lowdown

The Manaslu Circuit, giving rare views from the north of Manaslu (which at 8,126m is the eighth-highest mountain in the world) is still relatively quiet, and gives a spectacular range of views and excellent walking. It is usually graded as challenging, for its length and the potentially difficult conditions on the pass, but the paths are generally very good and the trek is suitable for a fit and experienced walker. You can do the trip staying in lodges all the way, and it starts at Arughat, which is eight to 10 hours drive from Kathmandu.



Sunset behind Manaslu

The route is split into 13 days. For several days you'll follow a path alongside the Budhi Gandaki river, gradually ascending, with occasional crossings via high suspension bridges, passing through terraced hillsides, woodland, pine forests and high plateaus into the shadow of Manaslu. After crossing the 5,135m Larkya La pass the trail drops down into the Marsyangdi Valley, with the mighty Annapurna range in view for the last few days. The day over the pass is the longest – an early start and a late finish – but otherwise you can expect to walk for between four and six hours a day, occasionally more. With the right conditions, the views from the pass look back towards Manaslu and the Himalachuli range, and ahead to the Annapurna range, a staggering panorama. The trek ends at Jagat where you'll pick up a jeep or bus back to Kathmandu.



FIND IT

NEPAL

Manaslu

Kathmandu

of celebration as well as sadness that it's the end of the trip. The cooks produce an extra special meal – with meat – and we gather together to say thank you, give gifts and tips to the crew, and spend our final night sharing stories before heading back to Kathmandu.



Constant companion: the Budhi Gandaki river



Porters' lunchtime

Our change of route to retrace our steps after nearly, but not quite, crossing the pass, was unexpected – most treks do unfold the way they're planned. Was I disappointed not to have followed the circuit? Not at all. The experience is not, for me, about ticking off a route, or a pass crossed, or altitude reached. It's about being out in fantastic scenery, in a different culture. It's about walking, day after day, loosening up in body and in mind, following mountain paths, in mountain time, as if in another world, so peaceful and spacious. I would go back and do it all again. Tomorrow. **AT**

LET'S GO

Want to do what Harriet did? Here's how you can...

Get there

Kathmandu is the starting point for all treks in Nepal. There aren't any direct flights from the UK, but various airlines fly there with just one change. Try Jet Airways via Delhi (www.jetairways.com), Qatar Airways via Doha (www.qatarairways.com) and Oman Air via Muscat (www.omanair.com). Or you can travel overland from India. Arughat, the start of the Manaslu Circuit, is about an eight to 10-hour drive from Kathmandu.

When to go

The best times to go trekking in Nepal are in autumn (October and November), when the skies tend to be clear and the weather at its best, or in spring (March, April and May). Avoid summer with its monsoon rains. Most people tend to avoid December-February when temperatures fall. I went at the end of October. When I started out the skies were clear, with a lot of sunshine: I was walking in a skirt and t-shirt most days. The high winds and snow at the pass, though, were unexpected. All you can do is trust the weather gods (bearing in mind that if there's one thing you can't control in the mountains, it's the weather).

What to take

If you are going with a tour operator they will give you a checklist, but essentially you need to know you'll be warm enough. You'll need thermals and a thick hat and gloves for crossing the pass and at nights; a pair of boots you can trust; waterproofs; a sun hat or cap; a light t-shirt; a good fleece and a down jacket. Whether you're in lodges or camping you'll need a warm sleeping bag – ideally five-season – and a fleece liner is a good addition. Walking poles are optional, and can help to take the weight off your knees, particularly on downward stretches. You'll need a comfortable daysack that's big enough for a spare fleece, waterproofs, a hat and gloves, and your personal bits and pieces including a camera, sunscreen and water (in a reliable water bottle).

Who to trek with

This relatively quiet route is becoming more popular so there are lodges along the way if you're keen to tackle this as an independent trekker. The vast majority of people, however, go with an organised tour. I travelled with KE Adventure Travel (www.keadventure.com). It costs £1,495 land only, or from £2,145 with return flights from London. The next trek with KE Adventure Travel leaves on 26 October.

Other operators running the trek include Lost Earth Adventures (www.lostearthadventures.co.uk); Jagged Globe (www.jagged-globe.co.uk); Adventure with Altitude (<http://adventurewithaltitude.com>); Makalu Adventure (www.makaluadventure.com); Explore (www.explore.co.uk) and Mountain Kingdoms (www.mountaingkingdoms.com).

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Health and safety

Although not all accidents can be avoided there are precautions. Number one, to minimise your chances of getting a stomach bug and sickness, carry anti-bacterial hand gel and use it religiously before every single meal or snack. Avoid drinking water that is not boiled, or stick to bottled mineral water, and don't touch salads and cut fruit in lodges or restaurants. If you're travelling with your own cook crew they should be well trained in hygiene and food safety. You'll also need sunscreen, especially for the higher altitudes, and lip-salve to protect your lips from sun and wind. Take your own first aid kit with basics such as paracetamol, ibuprofen and plasters. In an organised group your trek leader should have other medication such as broad-spectrum antibiotics and drugs for altitude sickness, and the expertise to use these. For up-to-date medical information on Nepal visit www.ciwec-clinic.com.

Red tape

You don't need a visa before entering Nepal, just fill out the forms provided on arrival and get your visa at the desk. You'll need dollars or sterling (\$40 or equivalent for 40-day visa) and a passport with at least six months before the expiry date.

Language and etiquette

Among *sirdars* (trek leaders) and some of the shop and lodge owners, English is quite widely spoken, but the majority of the people you'll meet along the way will have little beyond a rudimentary grasp of English. Before you head out, equip yourself with at least a few basic phrases in Nepali, beginning with *Namaste* (for hello and goodbye), which is often accompanied by placing the palms of your hands together as if in a prayer gesture; and *Danyabhad* (thank you). In the higher reaches of the hills Buddhism dominates, with colourful prayer flags, temples and *chortens* (gateways) at each village. If you visit a temple or a house, always take your shoes off before entering.

Money

The currency is the Nepalese rupee and you can only get it once you're in the country. Kathmandu has ATMs and money changers but outlying villages will not. Remember to carry enough cash for a tip for the porters, cook crew and sherpas at the end of your trek: your trek leader will advise you of the rate.