

The Manaslu and Tsum Valley Trek

The Manaslu Valley Trek is more remote and spectacular than many, with rough steep tracks and limited accommodation. It is culturally fascinating with strong continuing links to Tibet in the upper Buri Gandaki (called Nupri 'the western mountains') and the Tsum Valley, and even has the Larkya La (5100m) as a challenge. The views of Mt Manaslu, eighth highest mountain in the world, are marvellous and close.

There is limited backup in case of an emergency and it is probably not a good place to go if you have a fear of heights, since tracks can be narrow and hang out over the valley in places. The trek around Manaslu can be done as a lodge trek except for the night before the Larkya La (although a tent should be carried in case the simple lodges are full elsewhere) while Tsum requires a tent or homestays organised in advance and there are only two lodges at present (and very few functioning toilets and no showers/bathrooms).

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

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

My wife and I trekked this route in April 2010 with another couple, a guide and two porters. We took 18 days (11 days for the Manaslu part and 7 days for Tsum) although it can be done in more or less. In particular, there are lots of ways to see Tsum Valley – this is what we did. The skies would be clearer in September-October.

Hassles and costs: A special Restricted Area permit is required for Manaslu and a separate one for Tsum. These permits require that you have a registered guide and a party of two or more. The Manaslu fees are: September – November \$US70 for the first week (then \$US10 per day) or December – August \$US50 for the first week (then \$US7 per day). For Tsum the same periods apply but the fee is \$US35 for the first week. In addition, you will need a TIMS card (Trekking Information Management System), so you'll need 8 photos for all this.

In addition, you will need to pay both the Manaslu Conservation Area Park (MCAP) fee (Rs2000) and the Annapurna Conservation Area Park (ACAP) fee (Rs2000) for the section from Dharapani to Besi Sahar after you join the round-Annapurna trail. So you might as well farewell your guides in Dharapani and add the round-Annapurna leg, exiting down the Kali Gandaki as we did, making it a 35 day trek in total.

We went to some trouble to find local guides from the Tsum Valley for the entire Manaslu-Tsum trek, to ensure that immediate benefits flowed to this remote area and to get an insiders' view of the culture. Although they were relatively inexperienced, the trip exceeded our expectations and we would recommend approaching the Tsum Welfare Committee for assistance in finding guides: twc4tsum@yahoo.com or www.tsumvalley.org. Carrying all food and equipment from Kathmandu and using non-local guides would make for an impoverished experience.

We carried a \$30 dome tent from K-Mart that weighed 2.5kg, could be erected in minutes and was just adequate for two with gear despite rain on several occasions. In addition to our normal trekking gear we took two small Thermarest mattresses.

Shangri-La Maps have just released a 1:100,000 map of the Tsum Valley, available in Kathmandu, which covers the Manaslu trail from Arughat Bazar to Ghap and all the Tsum Valley, although with some mistakes (eg there are no hot springs at Lokpa).

Lodges are often local *bhattis* with only *dalbhat* on offer and hard beds above the smoky kitchen, although you can raise porridge, *tsampa*, noodles, omelette and *roti* at most places. While simple, they are clean and friendly for the most part. There are small shops in most villages with limited stock (soap, toilet paper, batteries, bottled water, biscuits, noodles, beer, whisky). Fleas can be an issue.

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

Since many people don't know where there are lodges, and since there were neither maps nor track notes for Tsum before, here is some current information which we hope will make the route more popular and so help improve the number and standard of the lodges.

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

You can take a direct bus from Kathmandu to Arughat (Gongabu Bus Park, 6am and 8am, about Rs500) or to Dhading and change, or to Malekhu on the Kathmandu-Pokhara road and change twice. In any case, allow a day for travel due to breakdowns and the rough unsealed road from Dhading to Arughat, which can become impassable with rain. Alternatively, a 4WD jeep may get you there more quickly but costs around \$US250.

In **Arughat** (600m), a pleasant market town straddling the Buri Gandaki river (also called Budhi Gandaki on some maps), cross the suspension bridge and stay at the Manaslu Hotel (our choice, with bathroom) or the Third Step Lodge further on.

2. Arughat to Lapubesi (6-7hrs)

Trek through Gurung and Magar villages on the untrafficked road, staying on the left bank (true right) of the Buri Gandaki, which you will be following to its source. It can be hot and humid so wet rice, maize and millet are the main crops and you may see monkeys in the forests. There is a simple lodge at **Arkhet** (760m). Climb on stairs as the valley becomes wilder, prettier and narrower and descend to **Soti Khola** (710m) with the ABC Hotel and then the Welcome Lodge just through the village. There's a swimming hole in the Soti Khola, popular with locals. Trek on through shady *sal* forests then climb up and down for some time on an exposed track blasted from the cliff and views way below of wild rapids, eventually dropping to the Gurung **Labubesi** (880m; Lapubeshi). Stay at the Sunita Hotel or, over the bridge on the left, the Manaslu Lodge (our choice) with a camping lawn. Depending on the season, you may be offered fiddlehead fern *dalbhat* and the local mint-flavoured *achar* ('shilong').

3. Lapubesi to Tatopani (4-5hrs)

Continue up-river, climbing sometimes and at other times down on the gravel riverbed, passing through **Machha Khola** (930m) where there is a small lodge. Continue on the same side of the Buri Gandaki, up and down again and across sandy riverflats. The monkeys and langurs in the jungle above can knock rocks down, so watch out. Large Gurung villages are way above while the track passes few houses, like lower **Khorlabesi** (960m) which was largely destroyed by a huge rockslip 22 years ago. A survivor has built a botanic garden and nice lodge from which he sells his organic coffee. Goat herders passing through this area wear the distinctive smoke-browned capes called *bokkhu* made famous in the book *Honey Hunters of Nepal*. Continue up and down over a couple of ridges to **Tatopani** (930m; 'hot water') where there are hot water spouts under the sheer cliffs that provide a delightful evening shower. Of the two simple lodges we chose the closest to the springs, which was pretty smoky, and slept to the sound of water while refusing to think about earthquakes.

4. Tatopani to Philim (6-7hrs)

Climb over a ridge and cross the Buri Gandaki on a rickety suspension bridge, climb on well-made marble stairs in the narrow valley for some time and through **Doban** (1000m; Duvan) where there is a reasonable lodge. **Shyaule Bhatti** 1hr later has large rock with views where you can take tea and look at the wild gorges ahead. After crossing a landslip and the bridge across the Yaru Khola (1363m), emerge onto riverflats for lunch at **Yaru** (1140m) at the Sandbar Hotel. Look downstream at the massive rockfall that chokes the river. Just past Yaru, cross to the left bank and enjoy easy up and down to **Jagat** (1410m), a neatly flagstoned Gurung village where *jagat* ('tax') is collected on Tibetan trade. There's a small lodge here and you will need to show your MCAP permit. It is also a Maoist stronghold and the people are not very friendly. In this area, potato, maize and climbing beans are all planted at the same time – the potato for food and to suppress weeds, the maize for food and to supply a trellis for the beans, which are an important source of protein. Marijuana is a major weed problem.

Walk up the riverbed then climb over a rocky ridge to **Salleri** (1440m) with views of Sringeri Himal (7187m), then descend to **Sirdibas** (1430m; Setibas, Tara) where there is said to be a lodge. You'll see your first signs of Buddhist culture here. Continue up-river on the left bank, up and down before crossing Nepal's longest suspension bridge to the east bank and a tiring climb up to prosperous **Philim** (1590m; Dodang) surrounded by rich fields of maize, potato and millet. There are shops and rooms (some smoky and dark) in three or four lodges here. We chose the friendly last lodge on the right heading north from the lower part of the village. There are some signs of building and a broad camping area also available.

5. Philim to Chumling (6-7hrs)

If you are not taking the Tsum Valley side-trip then today you will continue on to Ghap (see Day 12 below) towards the Larkya La.

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

Descend through beautiful forest, crossing three sidestreams (one shown wrongly on the map as Shiar Khola) on bridges, circle under a huge bluff on the river then climb steeply on well-made but exposed stairs. After about 30mins start to traverse north through pines and rhododendrons, still climbing and with very steep slopes. The hidden valley of Tsum stretches enticingly ahead. Eventually descend to a lone *bhatti* **Ghumlong** (2130m) on the river. The path straight ahead climbs steeply to **Ripchet** (2470m; Ripche) in about 1hr; the path to **Chumling** (2360m) crosses the Shiar Khola on a wooden bridge and up. It is not for those afraid of heights - several locals have fallen to their death from this track while drunk. After about 30mins, below Chumling, take the level track to right (east) for 15mins to arrive at the last hotel in Tsum. In March 2010 it had no name, toilet, dining room or beds but a dirt camping area; it was scheduled for completion by end 2010. Make sure you climb up to Chumling and check out the old gumpa, the traditional houses, orchards, clinic and beautiful stone streets. This is Buddhist agriculture, with conical pine needle haystacks among the

prayer flags. From here on trails are lined with artistic *chortens* and *mani* walls made of thousands of stone slabs carved with deities and prayers.

6. Chumling to Chhokangparo (5-6hrs)

An easier day after yesterday. Cross the suspension bridge just east of the hotel and traverse through rich farming land of maize and potatoes. The houses are classic Tibetan with barricades of firewood on the roof, but without flat roofs as it rains and snows here. Cross a huge slip where rocks and flood cleared the area even up onto the opposite bank, killing five in 1999, but is now covered with a forest of new trees. Up the valley to the east are superb views of the 7000m Ganesh Himal, of long suspension bridges on the opposite bank, and far above the perched village of **Ripchet** (2468m). Lunch is possible at **Rainjham** (2400m), a single bhatti with enclosed courtyard.

Cross the Serpu Khola and climb for 2.5hrs on well-graded but exposed track to upper Tsum and the large village of **Chhokangparo** (3010m), stone houses nestled under cliffs without a single iron roof. The valley opens here into spacious fields of barley, maize, buckwheat and potato, but wheat has been abandoned due to 'hill bunt', a disease which turns the heads black and causes total crop failure. Herds of *thar* often graze the wild cliffs to the north, coming right down to the fields. There is no lodge or formal camping area; your guides will have to arrange accommodation, meals, toilets etc. If eating local food, it varies. Some is wonderful - we all really enjoyed the fresh yak butter tea, *tsampa*, Tibetan bread and t-momos. We never went hungry. If the air is clear Himalchuli (7893m) can be seen down valley.

7. Chhokangparo to Nile (4-5hrs)

Most people can climb to 2800m without getting altitude sickness, but the altitude gain in these track notes above Chhokangparo exceeds the 200m per day suggested for safety. Watch for signs of altitude sickness and be prepared to rest or retreat if they emerge.

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

Head east through small villages and past a local school, climb over a ridge of *chortens* and past **Lamagaon** (3202m) through the flat fields, looking across the extensive crops and river to the huge courtyard of the **Rachen Gompa** (3240m). This nunnery is the female equivalent of the main Kathmandu Kopan Monastery. Climb up and visit Milarepa's Cave (**Piren Phu**), where the bringer of Buddhism to Tibet is reputed to have meditated. The cave is being extensively restored and a donation of Rs500 per group is suggested.

Cross the Shiar Khola, pass through hamlets of **Phurbe** (3251m) and **Pangdun** (3258m) and pass an unusual round *stupa* before reaching the larger village of **Chhule** (3347m) through an impressive entrance gate (*kani*). The children here all wear the Tibetan dressing gown called *chubas* and there are many yaks. Head upstream to cross the bridge and climb to **Nile** (3361m; Nyile). Both villages are in traditional style with inclusion of livestock compounds into the houses and sheltered verandahs for drying crops. There is no lodge or formal camping area in either village; your guides will have to arrange accommodation, meals, toilets etc. You may notice that many Tsumbas look dirty – in a few days you will look like them since there is virtually no water for washing, it is too cold to want to use it if you are staying in people's houses, and there is no privacy.

8. Nile to Mu Gompa and Chhokangparo (6-7hrs)

Leave your rucksack behind. Make an early start up valley on the west bank, enjoying sunrise on the narrowing valley walls, yaks being put to pasture and a day with just a light pack. The final climb up to the large **Mu Gompa** (3700m; Mugumba) is through dry Tibetan country, with rows of *chortens* and widening mountain vistas. This is a large monastery with over 100 monks and an ancient *gompa* visited by David Snellgrove (*Himalayan Pilgrimage*) in 1956. If time permits you can also visit **Dhephyudoma Gompa** (4000m) further west on an obvious track. It may be possible to sleep in a room in Mu Gompa and for your guides to have access to the kitchen for a fee.

On three sides now are tantalising views of the border with Tibet, with frequently used passes to the east (Ngula Dhojyang or Mailatasachin Pass, 5093m) and west (Thapla Bhanjyang, 5104m) just out of sight. Some people climb to **Kalung** (3820m) and camp, making a daytrip to the passes for a view into Tibet. There are extensive seasonal yak pastures in all directions, the Lungdang Glacier to the east and high peaks in all directions.

Return down valley through **Chhule**, collect your rucksack and continue down as far as **Phurbe**, but stay on the east bank of the Shiar Khola and cross flat boulder-covered plains to **Rachen Gompa** (3240m), where it is possible to inspect the ancient gompa if you want. Camping is also available. The older part of the nunnery is more interesting. Families in the Tsum usually have at least one family member as either a monk or a nun. Continue south until a bridge crosses to the west bank then descend again to **Chhokangparo**.

9. Chhokangparo to Gumba Lungdang (5-6hrs)

Drop below **Chhokangparo** on the previous trail for about 2hrs, until a small *gompa* is reached at **Gho** (2485m). Descend on a narrow trail to the left through the village and drop to a wooden bridge over the Shiar Khola. This is a good place to wash clothes and yourself after the lack of water further up the Tsum. Cross the bridge to **Dhumje** (2440m, Tumje) which has a Tibetan herbal medicine clinic and school. The track onwards climbs just behind the clinic.

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

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

Your guide will be required for this trip since the track is poorly marked. Circle from the *gompa* past the nuns' housing, drop on dusty or muddy zigzags to regain the lower track and continue up valley on a rocky indistinct track through the forest. Cross the Laudang Khola to the west bank on a rickety wooden bridge and climb steeply through pristine pines and rhododendrons on a ridge. There is a hut in a *kharka* about halfway up, with the track continuing behind it, then up a birch-lined dry creekbed and eventually you emerge into grassy flats behind the lateral moraine of the Toro Gompa glacier. Continue climbing past seasonal yak huts and you will find a track on the moraine wall that gives superb views of the cirque of mountains. The camp is somewhere about here.

It takes about 4hrs to reach the **Ganesh Himnal Base Camp** (4200m). The map shows another base camp on the east side of the glacier, but there appears to be no obvious track between them, so return to Gumba Lungdang in time for the evening *puja* by retracing your steps. Altitude can make this day difficult for some, but the intact forest wilderness and views make it an outstanding trip.

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

This can be a taxing day so start early. Descend from **Gumba Lungdang** by the upward track. In **Dumje** cross the Laudang Khola and stay on the south bank of the Shiar Khola (contrary to the map). There are no lodges or *bhatti* in Dumje. Climb over some very deep gorges and shaky cantilever bridges to picturesque **Ripchet** (2470m; Ripche). Take time to look around at this perched fertile valley of barley and buckwheat with evocative *chortens* in the fields backed by pine forest. Descend on steep stairs to the lone *bhatti* **Ghumlong** (2130m) on the river, which you passed through six days ago. Climb again through the pristine temperate forest to **Lokpa** (2240m) and enjoy a comfortable bed in the lodge there.

12. Lokpa to Ghap (7-8hrs)

Another long day. Continue from Lokpa down the exposed track until the track from Philim comes in from the left. Turn right, cross the Buri Gandaki on a solid bridge and traverse to a welcome *bhatti* just around the corner for tea and a last look up the Tsum Valley. Enter a very narrow gorge with loose tracks, up and down, up and down. Cross to the east bank (true left) at one point and then back again to the west bank on a sloping suspension bridge. Enter Nupri ('the western mountains') through bamboo forests to **Deng** (1800m), inhabited by Gurungs who practice Buddhism. There is a good lodge here after the *mani* wall. Just beyond Deng recross to the east bank and climb to **Rana** (1980m) and pass the trail up to **Bhi** (2130m; Bihi). The river roars below except one place where a rockfall has created a huge dam. Continue in and out of canyons, cross the Serang Khola coming from the north and climb steeply again before finally circling into **Ghap** (2160m; Tsak). The *mani* walls here and onwards as far as Bimtang often display intricate quality carvings of various Buddhas in meditation, incised in the hard local stone by a family of carvers from Bhi. There is a good classic lodge as you enter Ghap on the left and the Kyima Lodge still under construction further through town across the bridge, on the right, with toilets, primitive bathroom and good camping ground

A side-trip from a bridge below Bhi can take you up to **Prok** (2380m), with an ACAP office and emergency radio and an excursion to Kal Tal (3685m; Kalchhuman Lake), then back down to Ghap (according to Lonely Planet).

13. Ghap to Lho (4-5hrs)

Enter a beautiful forest of fir and rhododendron with many birds, staying on the south bank, cross north on a wooden bridge with a roaring narrow canyon below then cross back to the south bank on a second wooden bridge with grey langurs watching. The main trail now climbs on well-made stairs, but a shortcut to the right just after the bridge and along the riverbank is far quicker and through superb pine forest. Arrive in the neat village of **Namrung** (2660m) after about 1.5hrs from Ghap, with shops, a restaurant and the Thakali Lodge across the flagstoned square. While waiting for a meal it is worth wandering around the village, where carvings from Bhi have been painted in colours above a gateway. The architecture characteristic of upper Nupri starts here: several houses gathered together about a common courtyard and livestock shelters on the ground floor, with heavy wooden shingle roofs and log stairs to dark verandahs.

Pass *mani* walls, fields and houses and enter the fir, rhododendron and oak forest before climbing to **Li** (2900m; Lihi, Ligaon) in 45mins, then onto **Sho** (2950m, Syogoan) where there is a *bhatti*. The platforms in the fields are where people keep overnight watches to chase bears from their crops. Most people from here onwards wear traditional Tibetan dress, with

the children in small *chubas* like dressing gowns, asking for *shim shim* (Tibetan for candy). There are some particularly fine paintings in the *kani* (gate arches) that you pass under before Sho. A leisurely walk onwards, in and out of gullies to **Lo** (3180m; Logoan). There's a proper lodge here with a dining room, bedroom and 7-bed dormitory, shop, toilet and shower. Pity about the wedding-cake stupa donated from Taiwan which dominates this otherwise picturesque village focussed on yak herding.

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

14. Lho to Samagaon (3-4hrs)

This short day takes you into the mountains with time to enjoy and acclimatize. Easy walk to **Syala** (3520m, Syalagaon, Shyaula) up a pine and rhododendron gully with moss and gin-clear stream. Enjoy 360° views from here due to a fire and extensive deforestation. Another easy hour to the large village of **Sama** (3530m, Samagaon, Ro), losing the gigantic views of Manaslu but entering a world of yaks, pastures and houses which seem to have grown from the stones. Only potatoes and barley can be grown at this altitude. There's Norbu Lodge on the left on entering (our choice) and the comfortable Manaslu Hotel further up on the right, with dining room and mod cons. These are lodges like those found on more populous treks, even featuring menus.

Acclimatisation trips can be taken from here to **Pungyen Gumpa** or to **Manaslu Base Camp** (4900m) if you have a day to spare. Details in Lonely Planet. You can also visit **Kargyu Chholing Gumpa** where there is camping.

15. Samagaon to Samdo (3-4hrs)

Another short day because of the altitude, with time to go via the iceberg-covered **Birendra Tal** (3450m) under the Manaslu Glacier, wade the exit stream depending on the time of year and drop down to pick up the main trail from Sama to Samdo. Easy walking through yak pastures up a broad valley with long *mani* walls, marmots in all directions standing on their burrows. Finally leave the tree line behind, although low-lying juniper is all around, climb to a ridge and drop to cross the Buri Gandaki on a wooden bridge. It takes some time to reach the white *kani* above but immediately behind is **Samdo** (3860m), a very picturesque village dedicated to yak herding, so much so that there are more animal and fodder shelters than human accommodation. Side valleys and Samdo Peak call out for afternoon wandering but take a jacket as cold wind can come up at any time. There are two lodges, Yak Lodge on the left, and Tibetan Twin on the right, both equally comfortable although likely to be cold at this altitude. You can see the main track for Tibet over the Lajyang La (Lajyung Bhanjyang, 5098m) sloping up the right hand valley. The Larkya La trail is ahead and left. The track to Tibet is currently closed but stocks of timber are being carried up to Samdo by yak in expectation of resumption of trade. The nearest Tibetan town is only one day away and there is Chinese and Tibetan beer and food for sale in Samdo.

16. Samdo to Dharamsala (3-4hrs)

Descend beyond Samdo on a broad trail, dropping to cross the much-reduced Buri Gandaki at 3850m. Pass another trail to Tibet to the right and climb left after a *mani* wall, traversing through juniper with many marmots. Cross two ravines on narrow tracks. There is no Larke Bazar despite what many maps assert; at one time traders from Namche Bazar came through Tibet to trade in this area and maybe some of the scattered stone shelters you will pass were part of that market. **Dharamsala** (4480m; Larke Phedi, Larkya Resthouse) is a stone hut with three rooms and an almost intact roof, but the lack of doors means that it can fill up with snow and remain full of ice for months. Don't count on it for shelter: carry a tent. The camping area is filthy with toilet trenches, rubbish and blowing toilet paper so be careful

where you get your water and boil it well. There is only meagre scrub for fires: carry a stove. The views are marvellous. A large herd of blue sheep call the tussock-covered hills home.

17. Dharamsala to Bimtang (7-9hrs)

Climb steadily over the ridge behind Dharamsala and beside the large lateral moraine of the Larke Glacier. The climb is not difficult but it is long and rocky underfoot, particularly as you top the moraine. Look for cairns and metal snowpoles which assist route finding. Descend past four frozen lakes and make a final tiring climb to the left up to **Larkya La** (5100m), marked by prayer flags. It takes about 3-5hrs to reach the pass and it can be very cold and windy with a risk of exposure if under-equipped or ill. The peaks to the west are Himlung (7126m) near Tibet and Kang Guru (6981 and Annapurna II (7937m) in the Annapurna Range.

Descend over the moraine to the west, on the right side of a deep gully, then drop steeply on loose scree, eventually traversing left on more steep scree. There are several places where snow or ice would make this treacherous and some groups fix a rope on the steepest piece. Make a long descent on loose gravel to a welcome more level area with grassy moraine, where the angle eases. The track now runs left of the large lateral moraine, rocky at times, in a widening and beautiful valley all the long way to very scenic **Bimtang** (3720m; 'plain of sand'), a descent of 1400m in about 3hrs. The views during the descent are huge – icefalls and mountains in all directions, a medial glacial lake (Pongkar Tal) between the Pongkar and Salpudanda Glaciers, and the joining of these two glaciers with a third glacier to form the Bhimdang Glacier whose lateral moraine towers over Bimtang. There are several small lodges in Bimtang.

18. Bimtang to Dharapani (7-9hrs)

Climb above Bimtang on the lateral moraine, walk south along the crest to find a route down the moraine wall and cross the Bhimdang Glacier, which can be loose underfoot. Climb up the far moraine wall quickly to avoid stone-fall and enter some of the best forest in Nepal. If you are in rhododendron season, the mauves, reds, pinks and whites are stunning amongst the huge pines. The views of the back of Mt Manaslu are equally stunning. Descend rapidly along the true right bank of the aptly named Dudh ('milk') Khola through a *bhatti* at **Hompuk** (3420m) in a forest clearing. Gentle riverside walking continues rapidly to **Karche** (2700m; Karache) for morning tea after about 3.5hrs. In the next hour you will see many signs of flood, with tree trunks smashed and banks undermined, the track becoming quite rough. Climb steeply over a ridge and drop to Gurung **Gho** (2560m), the first real village since Samdo. There are two lodges here, the second being comfortable for overnight, or lunch if continuing. The valley becomes more agricultural as you pass fields and copses of oak and rhododendron, staying on the north (true right) bank until **Tilje** (2300m; Tiljet). The Larke Pass Hotel offers beds and a dining room.

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

Continuing left brings you to the roadhead in one day (Jagat) and so back to Pokhara or Kathmandu by bus. Turning right takes you over the Thorung La and down the Kali Gandaki valley in about 14-16 more days.

Sue and Howard Dengage (April 2010)

There are a few photos at <http://www.fedupwithfoodadditives.info/taghairm/nepal/ManasluTsumphotos.htm>