



mugu

Ed Douglas treks along
Nepal's forgotten frontier

SLUMPED on a concrete bench in a village whose name I never got, I try to relax. I tell myself: "it's 40 degrees. Don't fight it. You know what it's like here. Whatever happens will happen." Our bus sits uselessly in front of a teashop. This corner of Nepal is on strike. Nothing is moving along the road except cyclists. And it's too hot for most of them.

Here in the Terai, close to the Indian border, the local Tharu population are agitating for something. I doubt even they know what exactly. They feel marginalised and are clearly pissed off, and they want the rest of Nepal to know that. That seems about it. They certainly don't care what happens to a group of tourists.

Pemba, picking over the remains of the goat he bought a few days ago, tells me that now the harvest is finished, people here have nothing else to do until the monsoon starts. How much of history turns on boredom? Anyone seen driving, the Sherpa tells me, will have his vehicle stoned or burned. We're 40km short of Nepalgunj and an aircraft back to Kathmandu, but nothing can get us there. I have no idea when we'll leave this place, or how.

Stirring up the energy to read, I become aware of a bad smell, a kind of acrid tang. I know that whiff, I think. That's the smell of a street-person. Newly perched on the bench beside me sits a young man, around 22, narrow faced, his hair cut short. He's dressed in rags, feet thrust into a pair of low-cuffed rubber boots. His gaze is clever and hungry. I notice traces of blood on his cheek. A smile hovers around his mouth. He clearly finds me amusing.

The young lads loafing around our barrels of expedition gear, in their fake American T-shirts and bandanas, call to him. They want him to perform. The tramp stands, and I notice how thin he is. He sways a little, and his right arm begins to move sinuously. Then he starts to speak in rhyme, making up poetry as he goes along, spinning a story about everything around him, the strike, life in the village – and us.

This extemporised verse is spellbinding; the vagrant Homer draws a crowd. Sherpas hefting barrels onto our bus pause in their work and come over to listen. They're soon laughing, entranced by the performance. The tramp's arm curves towards the half-sleeping foreigners. I hear the word kweire, meaning 'whitey'. The boys laugh and glance at us half-nervously. What will we think?

I really don't care. Whatever he's conjuring up won't come close to the chaos and madness of the last few weeks. But I'm sure he'd use the material well. Where to begin? That the whole enterprise was in reality an elaborate way of taking half a tonne of equipment and supplies for an extended walk? He'd enjoy the pointless surrealism of that. He'd also appreciate the strange juxtapositions, the bitter-sweet contrasts of trekking along Nepal's forgotten frontier. Because if things seem outlandish here, it's a whole other world 80 miles to the north in the mountains of Mugu. ▶



Nick Colton half a day's trek above base camp at around 5400m. The peaks in the background are in Tibet



Religious divide: south of this chorten on the Mugu Karnali, local people practise a shamanistic religion, heavily influenced by Hinduism. To the north, the tradition is Tibetan Buddhism. Mugu village is still more than a day's walk north of here. A major trail heads east just to the right of the ridgeline in centre frame, towards Dolpo



Beautiful chortens below Mugu village

Mugu is Nepal's poorest district, located west and north-west of Dolpo, whose remote hills were made famous in Peter Matthiessen's classic work *The Snow Leopard*. Mugu, on the other hand, rings fewer bells. The cab driver taking us to the airport in Kathmandu was intrigued. "Where are you going?" he asked. "Mugu," I told him. "Where's that then?"

Naively, I assumed a Nepali would know his own country. But then again, I have no idea where Guildford is. "Sorry," he said. "I only know famous places." Mugu is far from being well known. Search in the map shops of Thamel, the strange, manic tourist district of Kathmandu, and you won't find anything that's useful. It's certainly not in the guidebooks.

Most trekkers heading for Nepal understandably focus on central and eastern Nepal, Annapurna and Everest for the newcomers, Manaslu, Makalu or Kanchenjunga for old hands. A very few will head west to Simikot for the short trek to the Tibetan border and a jeep to

Mount Kalaish. For now, the region along the Tibetan border between Simikot and Dolpo remains almost untravellered.

Without a magic beanstalk of more than 8000m to climb, western Nepal has never managed to develop much of a tourist trade. Fifteen years ago I flew from Pokhara to Jumla in a bone-jarring Mi17 helicopter and trekked to Rara Lake, which had once attracted a few of the more adventurous hippies in the early 1970s. I was staggered at the apparent difference in wealth between what I'd seen elsewhere in Nepal and in these remote mid-Western districts. Good place for a revolution, I thought.

Less than two years later, in the middle hills west of Pokhara, the revolution started. I read about the Maoists and their demands in the Kathmandu Post over breakfast in Thamel one morning, and can remember feeling it was all a bit of a joke, like something from a Monty Python sketch. A decade of what analysts euphemistically call 'low-intensity conflict'

followed. I found out at first hand how unfunny the joke was.

Several times during the war I returned to mid-western Nepal, trekking for weeks through terrain that had been abandoned by every branch of government. The Maoists replaced them, simply by filling the vacuum. The war ended. The monarchy collapsed. Last spring I spent a day cycling round the Kathmandu Valley, visiting polling booths and talking to voters as they queued to elect a new constitutional assembly. The Maoists got in with twice as many seats as their closest rivals.

Now I was back, bouncing and yawning in a twin-prop Dornier over hills I'd walked across a few years before. Below me, unseen, work gangs were finally pushing jeep roads through districts that had been left behind by Nepal's post-war drive to development. It might seem a shame that a vast stretch of country free of traffic will soon have a regular bus service, but local people will be delighted.

There is already a road to Jumla, and the old dirt strip I knew is blacktopped. Just before we landed at Dolcha airstrip, three days' walk north of Jumla, the shimmering oval of Rara slid past the aircraft's port side, and then we banked hard to land uphill in a flurry of dust and stones. The runway ended abruptly in a steep drop a hundred feet from where the pilot had managed to brake.

Plenty of flights each day reach this remote perch above the valley of the Mugu Karnali river. Unhappily for the people of Mugu, they are almost all UN helicopters delivering food aid for the World Food Programme (WFP). There is genuine hunger in Mugu now, although there is more money that you might expect in the poorest district of one of the world's poorest countries.

Our sirdar, Mindu, had travelled a few days ahead of us to gather a team of porters to ship our gear down to the nearby district headquarters of Gamgadhi and beyond. I noticed with a twist of guilt

loads being stuffed into WFP sacks. What's the protocol for trekking in an area where people are facing starvation? I suppose we were spending money employing people and buying supplies. But I never shook off a vague sense of unease.

Our plan was to follow the valley of the Mugu-Karnali for four days, dropping down steeply from around 3,000m to less than 2,000m to reach the river. Half a day before the village of Mugu itself, we would attempt to cross a high 5200m pass into northern Dolpo and explore the peaks along the Tibetan border.

The trekking in this first part of our journey was stunning. The Mugu Karnali cuts a deep, steep-sided channel and despite some deforestation near Gamgadhi, there are still impressive stands of pine. Like Dolpo, this is snow leopard country; they prey on the large herds of blue sheep that graze the more remote hills and which we saw in abundance.

Almost from the moment we left Gamgadhi, I felt like we'd moved back

not just decades, but centuries. There are almost no phones between here and the border, six days away. There are no tourist facilities, either, and little to buy. On the walk out, done in advance of the expedition, I stayed in local inns, known as bhattis, but as anyone who's relied on these will tell you, you've got to eat dahl bhat twice a day, and put up with a range of new insect friends.

The resilience of the average Nepali's immune system never ceases to amaze me. In one bhatti I watched in awe as a small girl of about 18 months with a snotty nose provoked by a typically smoky kitchen fire discovered half a chapatti stuck to her foot. She sat down on the dirt floor to examine it, unpeeled it from her heel and then vigorously wiped her nose with it. Only then did she stuff the chapatti in her mouth.

This is rugged country, and although the valley remains at a pretty constant altitude with no major climbs, the scale of the landscape is deeply impressive. As

destinations

Bill Tilman observed: "In my experience a Himalayan track is seldom content to follow the bank, but is always busy either climbing to escape the river or rushing down to it in order to avoid some impassable cliff."

On hillsides thousands of feet above our heads across the valley, we could see large villages and extensive terraces. This is one corner of the world that, leaving aside the trickle of food aid, will barely notice when oil runs out. Farmers here already have the skills to survive. Almost inevitably, I found myself thinking again and again about Tilman's travels in Nepal just after the war.

It would be too easy to suggest that Mugu is similar to what Tilman must have experienced in his pioneering journeys 60 years ago. When he arrived in Kathmandu there were five million Nepalis with no chance of an education. Now that number is something like 28 million and many of them can read. But still, when he writes: "Though the people in the remoter parts of Nepal are not opposed to strangers, they are not used to them," I know what he means.

There are no tourist lodges where you can sit on plastic chairs and drink tea from a pot. The campsites weren't put there for us, they're for the yak caravans that still carry salt and other goods down the Mugu river from over the border in Tibet. There's no Coke here, but you can buy Chinese beer. And as in Tilman's day, a group of white people will draw to it the young and underemployed, good-natured chancers looking for what they can get, or just the plain curious.

Then there were the porters. Tilman was operating in areas where there is a long tradition of portering. There is no such tradition

in western districts. Mindu would shake his handsome young head at the ramshackle crew he'd put together in Gamgadhi as they put down their loads after just 20 minutes. "It's not like Khumbu," he'd say, for the umpteenth time. At lunchtime, in the heat of the day, no one moved at all,

including us, as we dozed in the shadow of a cowshed.

Maps, on the other hand, are now much more reliable. There may not be trekking maps readily available of Mugu, but the excellent and superbly accurate Finnish survey maps of Nepal give you the advantage over Tilman. (You can spend a small fortune buying these in Europe or North America, or get them for a reasonable cost in Kathmandu direct from the Survey Department.)

Each night we camped overlooking the river, and its roar, diminishing slowly as we moved up the valley, would lull me to sleep. Every day I took a swim, the time I spent in the water shrinking as the water grew more glacial and shrank me, so to speak. We had been plagued at lower altitudes by a kind of biting fly I'd never encountered before in Nepal. My left hand swelled like a boxing glove and the bites oozed fluid. All of us were scratching. If you're here in the spring, bring anti-histamines. It was a relief to leave them below as we gained height. Life simplifies at altitude: less air, and fewer irritations.

The culture too grew narrower and purer. In Gamgadhi, apart from the locals, who have their own gods, were Hindu officials and police from outside the district, local aid workers and missionaries, and Buddhist traders down from the mountains. In the garden of a house on the edge of town was an ancient marker stone, announcing the region as under the influence of Khas rulers, the Aryan tribe of the middle hills who originated in Persia.

As we travelled north, the people became more firmly of Tibetan descent. Above the police post at Pullu, where the officer taking our details wore polished boots and saluted smartly, we passed through the doorway of a chorten. Maoist graffiti had been scrawled across the painted Buddhas. But a Maoist arch built of stone, just beyond this ancient structure, had already been torn down by the locals. Atheism is rarely a vote winner, but I suspect the commercial chutzpah of the ethnic Tibetans who live in this valley offended the Maoists, more than the dharma.

Here the river bifurcated, a trail following either tributary. To the east was a route through to Dolpo and the comparatively well known Shey Gompa and Phoksumdo Lake. We continued north, but as we approached the place where we too would turn east into the mountains, it became clear that our plan wasn't realistic. A sequence of yak herders would look at us, shake their heads and suck their remaining teeth.

"Not at the moment, mate," they'd say, or words to that effect, like taxi drivers contemplating the North Circular at rush hour. "You won't get yaks over that." We held an emergency meeting.

The valley we should have been taking rose up steeply above our heads. It looked wild and promising and none of us were pleased to abandon it. Following this valley would bring us eventually into the region north of Shey Gompa and in the summer it's popular with pilgrims. A few tourists have also been this way, and one or two commercial outfitters may soon offer organised treks there. For us, however, it remained closed.

Instead, we continued northwards, towards Tibet and the village of Mugu itself, a place whose vernacular architecture of timber and wattle buildings seemed unlike anything I'd seen before. The word mediaeval is overused, but in this case it felt appropriate. We camped below town, just beyond the police volleyball court, beside the Mugu river. The police shuffled over for a chat. No boot polishers here, just city boys who'd watched their video collection once too often.

Mugu has several newly renovated gompas but its population is transitory. Only the very old stay here during the winter. Those physically capable of escaping get out before the snow comes. The boredom and cold must be excruciating, and with trade suspended until summer, there's no reason to be there. We regularly met villagers on the trail, returning to Mugu for the summer season, some travelling back from Kathmandu.

North of Mugu are a sequence of valleys running east to west that lead off the main trail heading north to Tibet. These have hardly been explored, but offer scores of unclimbed peaks around 6000m. We spent days rooting around up here, above the white birch forests and the grazing yaks, spotting a huge rock arch between two granite peaks, and exploring the Koji Chwa Khola.

Our yak herders, despite temperatures dropping below -10°C at night, slept in a heap under their blankets outside the mess tent. They viewed us as incapable children, albeit rich ones, tucked up in our separate tents, swathed in down. They showed us a trail up past the glacier to a group of hills just before the border from where we could look at the unknown, unvisited world around us.

When Nick and I reached the summit of these hills we looked across hundreds of square miles of mountains too obscure to be named. To our right was a snowy ridge that marked the border with Tibet. To the north we could see an area of glaciers pushing across the frontier into the otherwise brown plain. The wind pushed against us. It was glorious, wild and free. Why do we do the things we do? The Lotus-Eaters asked: "Is there any peace / In ever climbing up the climbing wave?" Maybe. But only, I think, at the summit. And from there you always have to come back down. ■

