



HIGH ON HIMALAYAN ADVENTURE

For mountaineers and hikers the Himalayas are the Holy Grail. **Stephen Cunliffe** recently returned from a nine-week escapade tramping all corners of the Kingdom of Nepal. Here is his pick of the country's top attractions.



The high Himalayas dominate and define Nepal, best known for its wild topography and mountain culture.

Each year, thousands of visitors head to this tiny country for its legendary trekking, but outdoor enthusiasts will be thrilled to discover that this is the tip of the proverbial iceberg. A plethora of rivers cut through pristine landscapes and give adventure aficionados a chance to appreciate the scenery while enjoying an exhilarating river journey. The country's national parks preserve an abundance of iconic Asiatic wildlife. Whether you're an avid trekker, mountaineer, white-water rafting enthusiast or safari connoisseur, Nepal is ready to impress.

Annapurna trekking

The vast majority of trekkers flocking to Nepal leave their camping gear at home and opt for a cushy teahouse-trekking option. Nepal is, after all, top of the global charts for hassle-free trekking and nowhere more so than in the Annapurna, Everest or Langtang regions where hiking is affordable, the scenery outstanding, permits and logistics simple to arrange, trails well-maintained and routes easy to follow.

For many years the Annapurna region remained the pick of the bunch. Travellers descended upon this mountainous Shangri-La, often for a month or more, safe in the knowledge that at the end of each day they could count on a friendly, family-run teahouse to provide them with a clean bed, hot shower, home-cooked meal and even a slice of warm apple pie for dessert.

While recent road construction and the ever-increasing popularity of this iconic hiking circuit have contributed to it losing its mantle as the world's greatest trek, the Annapurnas remain a top-class destination. During a recent visit to the region, my wife and I spent three enjoyable weeks trekking the full circuit, followed by a week hiking to Annapurna Base Camp deep inside the Annapurna Sanctuary. The trip, however, got off to an inauspicious start with our first couple of days on the trail marred by the unexpected hubbub of pneumatic drills and blasting, as the Nepali Government pushes road development ever deeper into the mountains.

Thankfully, the construction work ended

shortly after the village of Tal, and from Dharapani to Muktinath we had an idyllic week imbibing the wilderness atmosphere of the picturesque Marsyangdi Khola Valley and its towering, snow-capped mountains. While walking this section of the circuit, we opted for the longer and more strenuous upper route from Pisang to Braga. This was a fortuitous decision – we enjoyed the area so much that we ended up staying three nights at the delightful New Yak Hotel (read teahouse) in Braga, so we could explore the region by taking side-trips that included a rewarding day hike to the frozen lake at Kicho Tal.

While it's difficult to begrudge the development boons the new roads will facilitate in this previously inaccessible region, their very presence is steadily eroding the thriving trekking industry on which the locals depend for their livelihood. The time of the Annapurna trekker is possibly nearing an end and, within a decade, jeeps and air-conditioned minibuses will ply the circuit, as a new breed of tourist travels through this amazing Himalayan region without even breaking a sweat.

But, thankfully, it's not all doom and gloom in the Annapurnas. The road still has a long way to go and both the weeklong Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) Trek into the Annapurna Sanctuary and the section of the Annapurna Circuit Trek from Manang over the 5416-metre Thorong La Pass to Muktinath remain safely ensconced in the mountains many kilometres from the nearest road-building project. These wilderness areas continue to beckon visitors who deem bipedal travel the key to unlocking the magnificent mountain scenery, Buddhist villages and undisturbed natural beauty of the more remote regions within the Annapurna Conservation Area.

Exploring Everest

The Everest region has no problems with road expansion. In fact, it's so far from the nearest road that most trekkers fly to Lukla Airport, which lies perched atop a cliff deep inside the mountains. A scenic hour-long flight from Kathmandu deposits trekkers at 3300 metres right in the heart of the Solu-Khumbu region of northeastern Nepal.

Regardless of your fitness level, you

OPPOSITE: Swinging suspension bridges drowning in Buddhist prayer flags provide a safe route across deep chasms and icy Himalayan streams. Just keep a watchful eye out for yak caravans because these powerful beasts of burden seldom yield to trekkers.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Rising above a sea of cloud, the Himalayan amphitheatre view from Annapurna Base Camp will forever remain engraved in your memory.

should allow a minimum of 10 to 14 days for a roundtrip trek through World Heritage-listed Sagarmatha National Park, via the panoramic viewpoint at Kala Patthar (5545 metres) and onto Everest Base Camp. In sharp contrast to the Annapurnas, which are fairly forgiving in terms of daily altitude gains, trails ascend quickly in the Everest region and problems with altitude sickness are a real concern unless trekkers climb slowly and take regular rest days to acclimatise along the way.

The vast majority of visitors come here to undertake the Everest Base Camp (EBC) Trek. Rather surprisingly, there are no views of Everest from the frigid glacier where base camp is situated. I would go so far as to say that the standard out-and-back route to EBC fades into insignificance when compared to a trek up the neighbouring Gokyo Valley. Trekkers who choose this lesser-known trail are treated to stunning views of the sacred lakes of the valley, breathtaking mountain vistas – including Everest – from atop the Gokyo Ri viewpoint and, finally, a climb over the non-technical 5420-metre Cho La Pass to arrive in the Everest valley near Lobuche.

Sitting atop Gokyo Ri viewpoint, with not a soul in sight, surrounded by the natural beauty of colossal snow-drenched mountains, I marvelled at the raw power of Mother Nature as the ice and rock of the Ngozumpa Glacier scoured a route south below towering peaks. Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse, Makalu and a host more summits marginally below 8000 metres appeared almost near enough to touch. Fed by melt-water from Nepal's largest glacier, six sacred emerald lakes sparkled like a bejewelled necklace in the Gokyo Valley far below.

White-water rafting

Nepal is home to plenty of Himalayan rivers and a number of white-water companies cater to visitors wanting to explore the mountainous wilderness by raft. The top three commercially available rivers – the Karnali, Sun Kosi and Tamur – involve fully catered, multi-day white-water adventures with participants camping on sandy riverside beaches for the duration of the expedition. The Sun Kosi is the most accessible and, consequently, also the most popular, so I would recommend tackling one of the other Himalayan waterways

where you'll have the river to yourself.

My personal favourite is the Karnali in the remote and sparsely populated 'wild west' of Nepal, a classic, high-volume, pool-drop river with some big – but reasonably straightforward – rapids, making it a relatively safe river, ideal for novice and intermediate rafters. It's a hot and dusty two-day overland journey from Kathmandu to the put-in point at Sayuli Bazaar, but the reward is sweet: a chance to sample one of the finest multi-day river adventures in all of Asia. White-water enthusiasts are treated to the quintessential Himalayan river experience as they paddle the 180-kilometre western bend during a weeklong descent of Nepal's longest river.

The white-water maelstrom peaks on day two at the infamous God's House rapid as the river thunders through a series of deep canyons with 16 rapids crammed into an unrelenting seven-kilometre stretch of near-continuous, high-octane, Class III+ white-water: an entertaining and demanding expanse of raging river. But, on balance, a Karnali expedition is best classified as an entertaining river journey. Tumultuous Class III and IV white-water action gives way to tamer river conditions in the latter stages of the trip and the mellow water permits rafters to relax and admire the mountain scenery and Himalayan landscapes. On the final day there's also the chance to spot endangered freshwater Gangetic dolphins or fish-eating gharials during the tranquil float into Royal Bardia National Park.

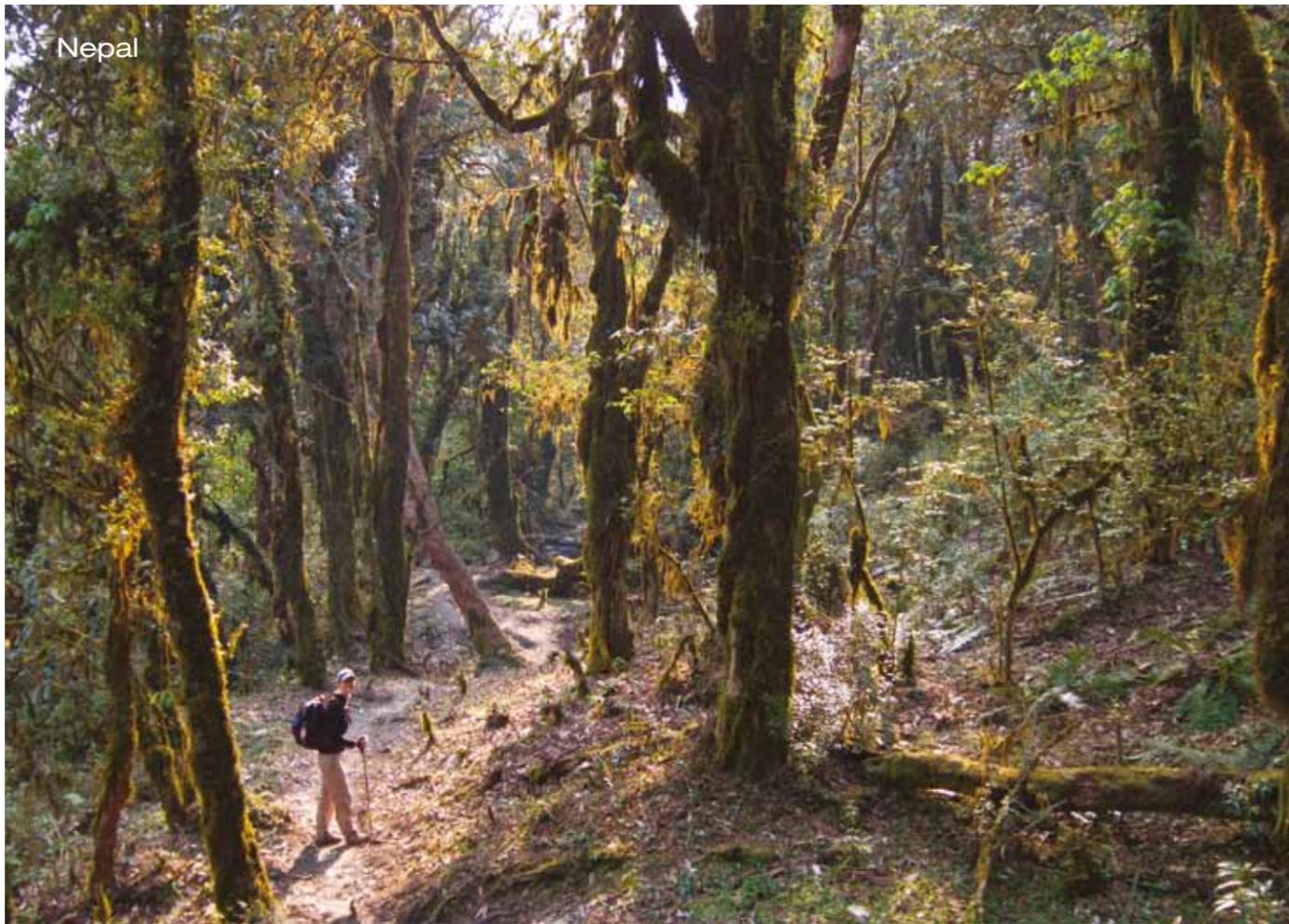
Wildlife safaris

Nepal is home to nine national parks, three wildlife reserves, three conservation areas and one hunting reserve, which collectively protect 18 per cent of the land. Two national parks on the lowland Terai plains harbour healthy populations of indigenous wildlife, including tigers, rhinos, elephants and bears.

Where better to recover from the rigours of trekking and paddling than on a relaxing safari exploring one of Nepal's premier national parks? After your trekking and rafting exertions, head off to either Chitwan or Royal Bardia. Both reserves offer comfortable safari lodges, superb wildlife-viewing, as well as a host of entertaining activities, such as Jeep

OPPOSITE: Namche Bazaar is the largest town in the Solu-Khumbu region and a major staging point for trekking and climbing expeditions headed onto Everest.





ABOVE: At lower elevations within the Annapurna Conservation Area, trekkers pass through otherworldly rhododendron forests. The most extensive of these sprawling forests dominates the hiking trail between Ghorepani, Tadapani and Gandruk.

drives, elephant-back safaris, walking excursions and river cruises. The vast majority of safari-goers opt to visit the more accessible Chitwan National Park, which boasts the highest density of Indian one-horned rhinos in all Asia. Royal Bardia, on the other hand, lies in remote southwestern Nepal and receives only a smattering of adventurous visitors and determined safari-goers each year.

Having conquered the white-water challenges of the Karnali River, my wife and I wanted to sign off on our wild west adventure in style, so we transferred to Tiger Tops Karnali Lodge in Bardia. During our four-day visit, the park treated us to incredible wildlife viewing with sightings of elephants, tigers, rhinos, deer and a wide array of birdlife, as we toured the picturesque park atop our private elephant in the company of a skilled mahout and knowledgeable nature guide. When we tired of elephant-back safaris, we disembarked from the behemoth and walked through the reserve under the watchful eye of our escort.

The world's highest marathon

After two months exploring Nepal, I was yearning for an extraordinary experience to round off the holiday of a lifetime, and the Tenzing Hillary Everest Marathon proved just the panacea. The start line, located a stone's throw from Everest Base Camp, lies within the Khumbu Icefall at an altitude of 5 356 metres. Everest, Lhotse and Nuptse tower over this iconic – if somewhat insane – spot to start a marathon.

A cosmopolitan crowd of Nepali runners and international adventure-seekers gather annually on 29 May at Everest Base Camp. The 42-kilometre race forges a route across a frigid wasteland of slippery ice and rock-strewn moraines before criss-crossing the Sherpa trails of the upper Solu-Khumbu Valley, descending through villages. The course traces the route pioneered by late Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary when they first climbed Everest in 1953 and takes place on the anniversary of their successful summit bid: the ultimate grand finale to a Himalayan adventure and a tribute to two great mountain-slayers. ■

Travel planner

Getting there

There are no direct flights between Nepal and South Africa. The easiest options are flying via Dubai with Emirates, via Doha with Qatar Airways or via Mumbai with Jet Airways. Flights (ex-Johannesburg) from R7 300 return. For domestic air travel within Nepal, Tara Air and Yeti Airlines are the most reliable carriers with daily flights into the key mountain towns and trekking centres.

Where to stay

 **Thorong Peak Guesthouse**, located in the suburb of Thamel, Kathmandu, makes an excellent base from which to begin your travels. Room rates from US\$12 (about R90, shared bathroom) to \$30 (about R227, private bathroom) a night for a double room. www.thorongpeak.com.

 Most trekkers make use of the thriving industry of teahouses. These overnight pit stops usually come in the form of basic accommodation with an attached restaurant that serves Nepali dishes as well as western favourites. There are hundreds of teahouses to choose from in the major trekking areas and the best boast excellent views, en suite bathrooms and hot showers. Few have websites or access to email, and some don't even have telephones. Use a guide book such as Lonely Planet's *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya* to help you narrow down the options and inspect a couple of places upon arrival in the village. A room for two costs from US\$3 to US\$20, and rates are often negotiable. (You will be expected to take your meals in the teahouse's restaurant.)

 In Royal Bardia National Park, the budget-friendly **Rhino Lodge** with cottage-type accommodation is basic but comfortable. Rates from US\$56 (about R423) a person, including meals. Wildlife activities, park fees (US\$10 a day) and taxes are extra. www.rhinolodgebardia.com.

 The jungle lodges and luxury-tented camps of **Tiger Tops** offer premier safari accommodation at rhino-rich Chitwan and Royal Bardia national parks. Rates



from US\$250 (about R1 890) to US\$350 (about R2 645) a person a night inclusive of all transfers, meals and wildlife safari activities. Budget a bit extra for park fees, US\$10 a day, 10 per cent service charge and 13 per cent VAT. www.tigertops.com.

River expeditions

Three reliable Nepali companies run white-water-rafting expeditions, including regular Sun Kosi and Karnali river departures. Check out Equator Expeditions (www.equatorexpeditionsnepal.com), Paddle Nepal (www.paddlenepal.com) and Ultimate Descents Nepal (www.udnepal.com) for details.

Weeklong fully catered river trips will cost in the region of US\$400 (about R3 052) and US\$600 (about R4 578) a person.

What you'll need to get by

Trekking in Nepal is affordable. Most hotels and tour operators accept US dollars and tourists should comfortably get by on \$20 (about R153) a day for food and accommodation. However, you should double this figure if you plan on using a guide and porters. Drinks, especially alcoholic beverages, are very expensive and a local beer will set you back between NPR300 and NPR420 (about R30 to R40), depending on how far you are from the nearest road.

When to go

For trekkers and white-water enthusiasts, the most popular time to visit is immediately after the monsoon (from late September

to mid-November) when the rivers are raging and the skies are clear. From late November onwards temperatures plummet and snow begins to fall. Trekking routes may temporarily close because of heavy snowfalls. The second most popular trekking season is from early March to May when temperatures have risen and snows receded. This is also the optimal time for wildlife viewing. The monsoon season lasts from June until early September. Torrential rains wreak havoc with flights, road transport and trekking routes.

What to take

Hiking boots, a raincoat, lightweight, warm clothing and a cosy sleeping bag all packed in a backpack. Trekking poles, a camera and binoculars are also recommended. ■



Accommodation price ratings: a person a night, usually B&B, sometimes full board  under R250  R251 – R499  R500 – R750  R751 – R999  R1000+

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