

Bitter and sweet around Annapurna

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By Peter Laurenson

It is May 2005, a little over four years since I returned from my trek around Annapurna – my last visit to the Himalaya. The feelings of longing to return to those high mountain trails have been back with me now for many months and I'm all too often aware that this four year gap between visits is the longest since my first visit in May 1988.

During this time I've watched the disturbing political developments in Nepal, pondering on the impact this will have on the spirit of the Nepalese people and, therefore, on the quality of the experience, until now, so enjoyed by trekkers in that country. I hear about Maoist rebels demanding "donations" from trekkers on the high mountain trails. I hear about the bus strikes, road blockades and riots being endured down in the foothills. I hear about the bloodshed by Maoist freedom fighters and Nepalese soldiers up in the hills. And I shudder at the thought of the massacre of members of the Nepalese royal family by one of their own. Further to the north the inexorable assimilation of the Tibetan people by mainland China continues. To the northwest, the bizarre high altitude war being fought by India and Pakistan continues, unabated, in the shadow of K2; and the terrorists residing in the mountains of Afghanistan remain, despite the best efforts of the mighty United States.

Where will it all end? Does this mark the end of the magic I've been so transfixed by when in the Himalaya? I feel an urgency to return again now, before it's too late!

But reading the diary of my visit to the Annapurna Circuit reminds me why the time is still not right for me to return. I am now a father to three boys; three boys who are at an age where they particularly need their Dad; and three boys who are at an age where their Mum needs Dad's support to remain sane! My diary also reminds me how much I will miss my family if I do head off into the clouds again just now – probably so much that it will overshadow the euphoria of being back there. The balance between bitter and sweet isn't right – at least for now. So, I wait and I relive past moments as I write.



Sunset at the Swayambunath

Sunday 1st April 2001

Dear Lou, I'm killing two birds with one stone – my diary is also my letter to you. I begin back again in Kathmandu, sipping coffee at a rooftop café, people-watching. I see couples wander-

ing about. Inevitably it reminds me of you – a sweet remorse, as I know it'll be just three weeks and I'll be home again.

Nothing much has changed here, hustle, bustle, toot, honk, pong - same smells and sounds. I'm starting to chill out now; little smiles bubble up at familiar things – the caw of those rascal ravens.

I'm booked on a 6.30am bumpy bus ride to Pokhara tomorrow. I wanted to pay my park entry fee this afternoon but couldn't because it's a public holiday, which might mean that I have to go all the way through to Pokhara to pay it there, rather than hopping off at Dumre. We'll see.

I'm off to the Swayambunath for the sunset soon, hopefully it'll stop raining.

Monday 2nd April (Day zero)

A combination of getting used to the six hour time difference here in Nepal and the anticipation of things to come meant I had a fitful sleep last night, so it was no trouble getting up before sunrise at 5.40am to make my way to the bus depot.

On the bus one of my fellow passengers told me that I could pay my park entry fee at the trail head at Bhulbule – 4,000 Rps, which is double the normal fee, but worth it to save valuable time. So I did hop off at Dumre (440m) after all. Instantly I was nabbed by two likely lads, who turned out to be trekking guides. I wasn't interested in hiring a guide but, for the purchase of a handful of garlic cloves for the highly inflated price of 250 Rps, they gave me a great run-down on what my options were for getting from Dumre to the trail head.



Air conditioning, Himalaya-style

By mid-day I found myself sunbumping on the roof of a bus with several other trekkers, bound for Beshishahar (823m). Later, a group of young local guys clambered up and proceeded to smoke entire joints in a couple of gigantic tokes. Then they broke into a crate of tomatoes stowed up there with us and hurled them at groups of people and into shop doorways as we passed. It was bizarre – quite out of character with the humorous, but highly respectful people I'm used to meeting in the Himalaya. I hope this isn't a sign of things to come on the busiest and most Western-exposed mountain trail in Nepal.

Upon arrival at Beshishahar I immediately crammed into a jeep with a bunch of other trekkers for the last leg of the journey,

which is too rugged for a bus to negotiate, to the trail head at Bhulbule. I managed to get a front seat, so it was a little less crowded and I could enjoy the views as we headed upwards. In Bhulbule I made a beeline to the permit office, paid my 4,000 Rps and took my first step onto the Annapurna Circuit. It felt magic.

For the next 45 minutes, under an overcast sky, I built up a sweat plugging along to the roar of the Marsyangdi Khola. No-one else followed so late in the day, so I got a nice little space to soak up the ambience, arriving in Ngadi (1,000m) in time to write before dinner.

Tuesday 3rd April (Day 1)

Today I got going at 6am, throwing in the towel about 2pm at a village called Chyamje (1,433m). I had intended to go on a further two hours or so, but

eight hours under my pack proved to be plenty on my first proper day on the trail.

The early morning was lovely; trail to myself apart from the locals; cool, but warm enough for shorts and a T shirt. After about 10.30am it gets much hotter, before cooling off again mid-afternoon when clouds roll in.

Apparently those clouds mean snow higher up. I've had some concerning accounts from trekkers coming down from where I'm headed, that there is too much snow to cross Thorung La. An Australian family of three was recently killed by an avalanche in the Annapurna Sanctuary and four Israelis died higher up on the eastern side of Thorung La. I'll just have to play it by ear.

The walking was good, still low altitude, but beside and actually on the spectacular valley walls. Often the trail is a shelf hewn out of the cliffs, high above the Marsyangdi Khola. Little villages pepper the hillsides above the main trail – it's a vertical land.

As expected, there are lots of trekkers about. Surprisingly, many have guides, which I think is an un-necessary cost and complication – the trail is impossible to miss.

Here in Chyamje I did the “sit snotted urchin on lap and look at Lonely Planet Guide pictures” routine for the first time on this particular trek. Urchin's Mum and Grandma joined in, which was just as well, because Grandma intervened when a boggie avalanche was about to unleash from urchin's little nose; grabbing a handful, she wiped it unceremoniously on the wall.

It's 3pm. I have nothing more taxing than shaving to fill the time until dark.

Wednesday 4th April (Day 2)

Today I write from a tea house similar to one where we stayed at Gosainkund. It reminds me of you and I realize that I'm missing you and the boys already. Jingle jangle – there goes another donkey train. I've never seen so many donkeys in one place. At this lower altitude I guess they are the alternative to yaks. It's not uncommon to be held up by a donkey jam – 50 or more of the mangy beasts, all laden with wide loads to squeeze past.



I was on the trail at 5.45am this morning, arriving here at Latamanang (2,400m) about 3.30pm. The route continued beside the Marsyangdi Khola, gradually climbing, sometimes through forest, with snow-clad peaks coming in and out of view.



Above, on the trail above Pisang, before the switch-back climb to Ghyaru

Left, a fine example of the narrowness of the route along the Marsyangdi Khola, before it widened out above Pisang

Only a short time after setting off I met Helge, a very fit German the same age as me. Like me, he appreciates the solitude of the early hours up here and was out enjoying the morning air when I passed his tea house. We got talking as you do, then he caught up with me when I stopped for breakfast further along the trail. Since then we've walked together. He speaks excellent English, so we have enjoyed some great conversations as we walk.

Thursday 5th April (Day 3)

As I write from the third floor of the Utse Hotel in Pisang (3,183m), snow fall is rapidly covering this little Tibetan-style village beside the Marsyangdi Khola. It's cold and I can't help worrying about the state of the Thorung La, 2,200 metres above us.

Helge and I set off from Lata-manang at 6am, arriving here at Pisang nine and a half hours later – it was a big day and, one way or the other, tomorrow needs to be an easy day for the sake of my legs.

But, once again, it was a great day, spent constantly ascending cliff pathways, in and out of yet to blossom rhododendron forests. During the day, the terrain changed dramatically from a deep, narrow gorge to a broad open valley. It's hard to imagine how Bill Tilman and his companions managed to penetrate the lower reaches of the Marsyangdi gorge back in the 50s, when none of those precarious cliff trails we had just trodden even existed.

I'm coming to appreciate that, although the Annapurna Circuit is the most frequented of the tea house trails in Nepal, it is no small undertaking. About 300 km long, it also involves some huge ascents and descents. The snowfall is getting heavier. I could really do with my little blonde to cuddle up to tonight. I hope that everyone is well at home.

Friday 6th April (Day 4)

This morning was still cloudy, but we were able to find the trail on the snow covered ground, so decided to make our way up a seemingly endless switch-back trail leading to a little Tibetan village called Ghyaru (3,670m). Ghyaru is off the main trekking

route, so most trekking groups never go there. This just adds to the appeal of this charming place, perched on the side of a huge hill-side, looking directly across to Annapurna 2.

Perhaps because of the clear light; and because we could look back down to the very foot of the mountain on the valley floor 500m below us, as well as up, up, up to the summit some 4.4 vertical kms above us, it seemed to me that I've never seen a bigger mountain than Annapurna 2. Of

course I have seen bigger mountains but, viewed from Ghyaru, a single ridge seemed to climb unbroken from the valley floor all the way to the summit of Annapurna 2. This emphasized the sheer scale of the mountain in a way I haven't seen elsewhere. It was very, very impressive.



Under moonlight, two vast ridges snake up from the Marsyangdi Khola to the summit of Annapurna 2. Between them, an old man's face appears to look out at the passing stars

After settling in here at Ghyaru this morning, I realized that we were located directly opposite Ghyaru school, commanding perhaps the best view of any school in the world – here is the school, there is the whole massive face of Annapurna 2. The entire school roll amounts to about fifteen or so kids, aged between about four and ten. They were outside in the little school courtyard practicing their reading, so I asked the teachers if it was okay to take some photographs. They agreed, so I went to photographers heaven for twenty minutes or so. To finish, I asked the teachers if they would like a formal school photo taken, which I'll send copies of back to them from New Zealand. I also got their postal address so that Ben and his classmates can send a letter to the Ghyaru kids (which we did a month or so after my return). I hope to one day bring Ben back to Ghyaru to visit the school – that would be a wonderful way to complete the circle.

At right, Ghyaru School
Below, the Abbot of Ghyaru Gompa



Later, Helge and I found the old Abbot of Ghyaru Gompa – a real weather-beaten character. He opened up his old monastery and gave us a short tour. It was difficult to understand what the old man was telling us, but easy to appreciate the ancient sanctity of the old gompa; and surprise, surprise, from the roof were more stupendous views, this time framed by strings of weather-beaten prayer flags reaching out at all angles.

It's been yet another magic day, but as I write now at 2pm, the snows have returned. Where mighty Annapurna 2 was, now there is just impenetrable white; and it's COLD. I have all my layers on apart from my Gortex outer and I could still be warmer. Just time to kill now, until tomorrow's adventures begin. I've already played umpteen games of patience and am about to join the fray for the Scrabble championship of the roof of the world. We have local competition so our low altitude brains will probably struggle.

Saturday 7th April (Day 5)

Before hitting the sack last night the weather had cleared to reveal a crystal clear, star studded sky and a near full moon. Despite the cold, I couldn't resist taking the camera and tripod out onto the open balcony at about 4am. The scene was hard to do justice to with words alone. It encapsulated for me all that draws me into the mountains in one panorama – gigantic peaks bathed in silken silver; an even more gigantic sky, air-brushed with constellations; breath-takingly fresh, crisp air; and a roaring silence. I hope the time exposures capture the feeling better.

At 6am Helge and I climbed the hillside behind Ghyaru, gaining perhaps 200 metres, to a cluster of chortens and prayer flags, where we enjoyed a perfect blue sky dawn. I can't think of a better way to build a positive mindset and a major appetite for breakfast than that.

Dawn, above Ghyaru



A section on the main route below Manang

After breakfast we were ready to resume our journey around the circuit, heading in the direction of Manang, the largest town on the eastern side of Thorung La. Both the scenery and the opportunities to interact with the locals continued to be outstanding throughout the day. Initially we skirted the northern side of the broad upper Marsyangdi valley, later rejoining the valley floor. We walked about seven hours, excluding stops, so were ready to put our feet up by the time we reached Manang.

Manang is a large, sprawling Tibetan style town at 3,535 metres, with plenty of comforts to be found. I bought 200 grams of yak cheese, a Mars Bar and packets of crackers. As I write now, from the tea house window I see Gangapurna being washed in orange as the sun goes down.

Sunday 8th April (Day 6)

Today I nick-named Helge. While I plodded along he powered forth, driving on resolutely, so he is now the Hell-guy. We left Manang at dawn, picking a route across the bolder strewn river flats of the Marsyangdi Khola and then ascending a big river wall to enter a side valley, which eventually lead us to Tilicho Base Camp (4,400m) where I now write.

The weather remained clear until mid-afternoon, about the time we arrived at our destination. Like the Ghyaru trail, the path up to Tilicho Base Camp is seldom trodden by trekking groups, so we had it to ourselves for the entire day. Aside from yet more magnificent vistas, especially those looking back towards Manang, which get progressively more spectacular as we ascended, there was an interesting Tibetan style village called Khangsar (approximately 3,800m) ideally located for a breakfast stop (Tibetan bread and jam, omlette and sweet milk tea). Further along the trail was the remote Khangsar Gompa, to which I paid a visit. A lone Monk resides there, who seemed quite happy for some company.

Although we ended up at 4,400 metres at Tilicho Base Camp, we actually ascended higher than that, negotiating massive scree slopes, punctuated by strange weather sculptured limestone formations not unlike those you see at Goreme in Turkey.



Above, one of the huge scree slopes before Tilicho Base Camp

Left, the lone Abbot of Khangsar Gompa

Although the Hell-guy could have managed an alternative high trail, which avoided these treacherous slopes, my leaden legs and the pounding altitude induced headache I had developed as the day wore on meant that the more direct route was my preferred option.

Crossing these slopes during the heat of early afternoon was un-nerving to say the least. They were steep, perhaps 40 degrees and yawned away, unbroken, all the way to the river hundreds of metres below. They also carried on for several hundred metres above us; we constantly had to watch out for high speed falling rocks, which whizzed by every now and then.

But we made it unscathed and now, being here at Tilicho Base Camp was certainly worth the journey. The tea house is rustic, but well appointed. We've already eaten and will no doubt do so again before climbing into our sleeping bags. All around are huge fluted ice walls that seem incredibly close, yet I know they are further off than they appear on account of the foreshortening effect you get in the mountains. To the west, further up the valley, snakes a tenuous trail leading up to Tilicho Lake (5,200m). We will take this route tomorrow, thankfully without our backpacks, for an acclimatization trip that should stand us in good stead for the main event, the Thorung La three days hence.

I'm having a brilliant time up here Lou, especially having teamed up with Helge, who is proving to be a great hiking buddy. I'm certainly getting the "blow-out" I needed, but I miss you. I think about little Edwin and imagine how he's no doubt changing day by day; and about Ben, left behind again by his Dad. It's a high price to pay for the privilege of being here and I'm thinking perhaps that my next visit to the Himalaya won't be for a few years. I love you all so much and realize how lucky I am to have you. Now I'm crying and need to get my act together with all these Nepalise hard men about.
Composure Peter!

Monday 9th April (Day 7)

Dawn saw us climbing up a ribbon of gravel towards Tilicho Lake. We crossed more huge scree slopes, before a steep, switch-back section below the snow line. About half way, in the soft early morning light, a small herd of Himalayan Thar appeared ahead of us. They actually crossed our trail and then leisurely made their way across the slope above. It was open ground, so we got a wonderful opportunity to watch them up close.



Above, Thar on the trail to Tilicho Lake

Below, Tilicho Lake



a route around the eastern shore which locals sometimes take as an alternative to the Thorung La.

At the snow line we also entered my house of pain – the 5,000 metre altitude mark and, yes, I could feel the onset of a familiar trio - head ache, nausea and lethargy. From there we plodded across a wide snow valley, rounding a bend to find Tilicho Lake (5,200m), spread out before us. It was frozen and snow covered as well, so we were encased in other-worldly white. We could see

By 9am, sunlight reflecting off the huge snow faces all around us had transformed the chilly terrain into a furnace. A combination of the intense heat and my headache drove me off the snow and back down the trail to the tea house, where I now sit recovering nicely.

So far my health is pretty good – a slight cough up at higher altitudes, which is common. No diarrhea yet – fingers crossed! I must confess to having had a bit of help climbing the hill this morning – I ate a little 1,000 calorie pack of energy gel given to me by a 65 year old German, named Herman – fancy that! Herman is a classic – he treks along at our sprightly 38 year old pace, having done a series of Thai boxing courses as training before coming to Nepal. He is a retired doctor, with impeccable manners and charm, who has set up a school for Tibetan refugee kids down at Manang. He also provides free medical help when here. An impressive individual is Herman the German, so I look forward to sharing dinner conversations with him this evening.

Tuesday 10th April (Day 8)

Dawn found me stopped in my tracks, gazing admiringly across to a white wall of ice that changed to soft pink, then fiery red before my eyes. We got away before sunrise in order to re-cross those monstrous scree slopes we tentatively traversed on the way in to Tilicho Base Camp, before the sun unleashed more high speed missiles down them.

So, for much of the morning we retraced our steps down towards Khangsar, but branching upwards before that village on what we thought would be a short-cut back to the main circuit. We thought wrong, but it didn't matter, because the views from our high route were worth the extra effort. The trail took us to upper Khangsar, which is a summer settlement. We ended up with a stupendous view overlooking the main route of the Annapurna Circuit, with Manang far below us. Then there was a knee crunching descent down to the Marsyangdi Khola and a slog up the far side of the river in order to rejoin the main trail; or should I say "highway".



Above Khangsar on our short-cut

Until now, on account of our early starts and diversions off the main route, we've enjoyed light trekker traffic. But as we near the Thorung La the situation has become increasingly bottle-necked. As we rejoined the main trail we had our first close encounter with a dreaded trekking group – all decked out in white Benny Hill sun hats and plastered in sun cream. I know that these groups have as much right as anyone else to be on the trail and they cop all kinds of flack in anything written about Himalayan trekking, but this line of "sheep" being led along by a couple of young local lads with highly inflated egos measured up to the stereo-type. It wasn't possible to get a "hello" or "namaste" from anyone, including the guides. They all plugged on resolutely with gazes fixed to the front.

Never-the-less, we continue to meet plenty of nice people too. As I sit writing in a tea house at Letdar (4,250m) the dinner places are filling with Dutch, French, Germans, Irish, Australians and of course, a kiwi. Helge and I are sharing our room with a young Frenchman, Laurent, tonight.

Wednesday 11th April (Day 9)

It was cold before dawn as we shouldered our packs and departed for High Camp. I had no trouble rousing though; a rodent tried to eat my Mars Bar stash, definitely a kicking offence.

Today was short – only about three and half hours of walking, but an altitude gain of over 500 metres to position us at 4,775 metres, in striking distance of Thorung La tomorrow. Early in the morning it was quite treacherous under foot. On a steep down-hill section it was all iced up and I certainly would have appreciated a pair of crampons. The edges of my boots got a good work out.

Ascending a frozen stream, below High Camp



Looking back down the eastern side of the main route, from above High Camp

The weather has been clear all day. We climbed to a lookout about 100 metres above High Camp for more glorious views, but the highlight was the arrival of a huge Himalayan Condor. Its wing-span must have been a couple of metres across, allowing it to glide effortlessly on the updrafts. It appeared at first below us, spiraling upwards high above us, before gliding off into the distance – magnificent.

Back down at High Camp it's surreal. Trekkers are pouring in, including several large trekking groups. The mood is impersonal. As I write, sitting across from me is a young man wearing mirror glasses inside. His face is stony and he seems to stare right through me, as if I don't exist. I think he's trying a tad too hard to emulate the Terminator; but for why in such an uplifting place?

I must confess to feeling a little daunted about the crossing tomorrow. Since those rumours I heard back on Day 1 about snow rendering Thorung La impassable, it's had quite a build up in my mind. I have images of unpleasant trekker jams, a throbbing headache and hacking cough all the way to the pass. I'm now just looking forward to putting it behind me so that we can all disperse and fan out on the far side. Crossing the pass will also remove any uncertainty about getting out in time to make my flight out from Kathmandu.

Our plan is to be away by 5am, before a large English trekking group reaches us from an encampment further down the hill at Thorung Phedi. The French Benny Hills are up here at High Camp and are planning to depart at 4am, so we reckon an hour should give them plenty of time to spread out along the snowy trail before we catch them up. I guess time will tell.

Thursday 12th April (Day 10)

As I write it's 4.30pm I find myself in another world – both good and bad. Our plan worked better than expected. We set off under moonlight, climbing steadily. I set the pace, being slower than the Hell-guy, but at this higher altitude he is quite happy letting me moderate and thereby conserve his boundless energy.



Once clear of High Camp, we enjoyed an open trail bathed in mauve pre-dawn light. Powered by more of Herman the German's energy bars, we soon got into a rhythm and found getting up to the pass less difficult than I had expected. It only took us two hours and, aside from some of the rugged porters who had gone ahead of their trekking groups, Helge and I were the first to arrive on Thorung La from the eastern side that morning. The pass was bathed in sunlight. A bewildering array of prayer flag tendrils contrasted boldly with the white of the snow and the cobalt sky.

On the pass was what must be the highest tea house in the world. We purchased little cups of milk tea, each for 100 Rps. The price tag reflected the altitude – 5,416 metres.

As trekkers started to arrive from both sides of the pass, we decided to make tracks for Muktinath, some 1,600 metres below us to the west. The descent was truly impressive – what a mother of a hill! I certainly didn't envy those coming up from the Muktinath side – that would be a very long haul, especially as the sun came up and things warmed up.

Top and centre, views as we ascended the snowy trail to Thorung La
Bottom, at the pass

But we were heading down and making quite rapid progress. As we descended, our view, framed by two huge hillsides, gradually broadened out. The contrast to what we had become accustomed to on the eastern side was dramatic. The landscape was much more arid and Tibet-like. As the day wore on, it also became overcast, creating quite a foreboding atmosphere.

Muktinath is a pilgrim's town, where the gompa provides the central point of interest. I found it to be rather under-whelming and characterless. We walked down a wide dusty main street resembling something out of a wild-west movie, but in place of the cow-boys were not particularly friendly locals, mostly of Tibetan origin so it seemed. I suppose this shouldn't have surprised me given the high exposure these people have to tourists; and not just trekkers either. The airport at nearby Jomson brings all shapes and sizes into the area. All it takes to reach Muktinath is a few butt bruises on the back of a donkey.

I found this quite deflating. Although we had at least five more days of walking to get out to the trail-head, I felt like my trek was over. I could have



Above, our first view of the barren, wind-swept lands of the Kali Gandaki valley

Below, Jharkot, as seen from Muktinath



almost been back in Kathmandu in some respects. Fresh clean westerners strolled about, making me feel like some unkempt wild man. There were internet cafes, bars, lurid signage all over the place. All this and, only that morning, we had been hiking through snow above 5,400 metres. At least we could see an intriguing fortress-like village, Jharkot (3,500m), in the distance. We decided to carry on to there for the night.

Jharkot is a medieval fortress town. The fort is derelict now, but its ramparts still tower over the town. Below the fort, little narrow alley ways meander between uneven rows of tightly packed mud-brick and plastered houses. They are very basic, yet they have electricity and modern plumbing and hordes of grimy kids kick about in western clothes. It's a strange mish-mash, where it feels like a feeling of adventure is slowly but surely being supplanted by tacky mass tourism.

So, as I write, now safely across Thorung La, showered, shaved and well fed on mousaka and apple pie, I'm not feeling quite as contented as I might.

Friday 13th April (Day 11)

All day has been overcast; and it deteriorated to drizzle in the afternoon. If I was superstitious I could put it down to being Friday the 13th. But having been able to talk to you on the phone from Jomson meant that it's been a bright sunny day all day in my heart. When I left the pokey little post office I had a renewed spring in my step, knowing that everything was fine back at home. I caught up with Helge and we marked my good fortune by locating the café selling the largest cake portions in town. Being German, it's no surprise that Helge is a cake fiend (like me), so we were in good company pigging our way through our mighty calorie packed slabs of sauce covered chocolate brownie and yak cheese cake.

This morning we left Jharkot later than our normal dawn departure, mainly because the weather was dull, but also because, with the pass behind us, there isn't quite the same imperative to keep forging ahead. About an hour's downhill walking saw us in Kagbeni (2,810m). This is the gateway to Mustang. I went to the little permit check post at the Northern end of the town and gazed wistfully up the Kali Gandaki river valley in the direction of Mustang. The town itself is full of character too, situated on the hillside overlooking the river, so it had a kind of mystique about it.



Above, wide open river flats of the Kali Gandaki before Marpha

Below left, a Himalayan bill board below Jharkot

Below right, one of Marpha's little alley-ways



It took a further couple of hours walking beside the dusty, stony river flats of the Kali Gandaki to reach Jomson (2,713m), which sprawls out over a large flat area, sporting an airstrip and a five star Hotel. Although it was great to find a phone that worked and our cake stop was memorable, we didn't fancy hanging about there for long. So we walked on to Marpha in the drizzle. By this point Laurent, our French room mate back at High Camp on the far side of Thorung La, had joined us, so we made a merry little band.

Marpha (2,665m) is a lovely, picturesque Tibetan-style village with a difference. The local Council identified some years ago that the best way to capitalise on the tourist trade was to really look after their little village. They stipulated that a traditional white-washed style of architecture must prevail and that maintaining good hygiene is crucial. The result is a rather unique little Tibetan gem without all the normal grime and pong.

The Gompa, situated atop a steep stone staircase above the town, is the perfect place to admire the overall effect, but I particularly liked exploring the spotless narrow paved pathways, enclosed by white-washed walls.

We headed for our sleeping bags about 9pm this evening, the latest night I've had on this trek so far.

Saturday 14th April (Day 12)

We awoke to more rain and Nepalese new-year this morning. While eating cake and coffee we watched a chicken being slaughtered for the days festivities. Later, strolling down the tidy paved main pathway of Marpha, we watched a group hold down a sheep while one of them sawed through its throat with a knife. Helge and I felt the need to slaughter something too, so we dismembered and consumed a ceremonial Mars bar.

By mid-morning it was still raining, so we donned our coats and packs and trudged out into the murk, walking hard for about four and half hours beside the Kali Gandaki before arriving at Kalopani (2,560m). I was disappointed by the weather because it prevented us from seeing even a glimpse of Dhaulagiri. We had also missed Manaslu when back up at Kagbeni. At one point we passed a side trail that leads up to and around Dhaulagiri. I would like to take that trail one day, perhaps with Ben when he is older and stronger.

I only took two photos today – one of a small gompa at Tuckuche and the other of a swarm of group trekkers and porters, pouring down a muddy incline, looking for all the world like we were suddenly in the Lake District in high season. The weather hasn't helped, but I think this section of the Circuit is the least enjoyable.



A bank of prayer wheels at the base of the staircase leading to the Marpha Gompa

That said, we enjoyed some humour at dinner time when we dined at a government hotel used for training new recruits to Nepal's hospitality industry. We were guinea-pigs for the bow-tie and dinner jacketed trainees, who were all charmingly nervous and over attentive. Best of all was the maitre-d; a Nepalese Basil Faulty to a tee. He hovered, he apologised, he cajoled the trainees. The food was great and the restaurant was kept toasty warm by buckets of hot coals placed underneath our tables – very pleasant.

Sunday 15th April (Day 13)

The Hell-guy lived up to his name today. He was a man with a mission, Laurent and I followed. I was so knackered by the end of the day that I had no energy to write, catching up a day later. We walked for about ten hours, descending some 1,400 metres and then, from the river below Tatopani (1,189m), we climbed what felt like an endless stone staircase, back up to a village called Ghara at about 1,700 metres.

The day started well. A clear dawn finally revealed Dhaulagiri to me. From the foreshortened perspective at Kalopani she didn't look like an 8,000er, but was still impressive. The rain returned about mid morning and became torrential for a while in the early afternoon. We sheltered in a farmer's porch for the worst of it before hitting the big hill. I slept for nine hours solid that night, my longest unbroken sleep of the trek.



That's mainly why we were there too, but it was also an important stop for us because this was where Laurent and I were to farewell Helge. He still had energy to burn, so was heading across to the Annapurna Sanctuary, following mostly the same route I had done a decade before. And, added to this, it was his birthday. There was really only one thing for it, I ordered him a Snickers bar encrusted, mega chocolaten kucken, which the house manager ceremoniously presented to him after dinner. The Hell-guy and long time kucken jaeger was

Monday 16th April (Day 14)

As I write from my room on the second floor of the Perfect View Hotel in Ghorapani (2,835m), I gaze out my open window at a huge mountain, shrouded in several layers of clouds, but still towering over all the other peaks in view. It is Dhaulagiri, now looking like an 8,000er. Indeed, a perfect view.

Above, Dhaulagiri, seen from Kalopani

Today required one almost continuous 1,100 metre climb, mostly through now red, pink and white flowering rhododendron forest.

Ghorapani is a bit like a high village in the Swiss Alps – very touristy, but still lovely on account of the fabulous location on a knife-edge ridge. Thousands of trekkers and tourists alike come here every year to enjoy the magnificent panoramic vista from Poon Hill (3,000m), a short scramble above Ghorapani.



Flowering Rhododendron, below Ghorapani



suitably impressed by the chocolate smothered blob with a big candle sticking out of it, finally cleaning up the last of it for breakfast next morning.

Left, Dhaulagiri, seen from Ghorapani

Tuesday 17th April (Day 15)

We joined the madding crowd for a quick pre-dawn dash up to Poon Hill this morning, arriving on top about 5.45am in time to see the sun paint us a celebration of nature. It started with a blood red and firey orange sky silhouetting Machhapuchhare and other beautiful peaks to the east. Then sun light tinged the highest peaks with molten orange, transforming to warm yellow, then bright white as sun rays moved from the summits, slowly down their massive icy faces. Dhaulagiri, Nilgiri, Annapurna South, Hiunchuli; so many peaks to behold. Then I looked at the foreground – a multitude of brightly coloured jackets. Hmmm.

Back down at Ghorapani we bid farewell to Helge. Having spent 14 days with, until then, a total stranger from the opposite side of the world, I now shook the strong hand of a new friend. We had much in common and I'm sure we'll enjoy the mountains together again some day.

He headed west and up, we headed south and down, down, down, about 1,500 metres, all the way to Narapul, a dusty bus stop village marking the end of my journey around Annapurna. Another two hour roof-top bone-rattler bus ride saw me down in Pokhara (915m) by 4pm.



Dawn panoramas from Poon Hill

Bitter and sweet around Annapurna

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By Peter Laurenson

Once again, I have that feeling of deep satisfaction at completing a worthy goal; of reconnecting with basic but important truths and gaining new insights; of making new friends. Now, my excitement at the prospect of seeing you and the boys again is nearly bursting out of my chest.

Getting around Annapurna has been both bitter and sweet, but for reasons that are different than I had expected. Whereas I feared that the trekking experience could be tacky and commercialized on account of the numbers who trek the Circuit each year, I was very pleasantly surprised to find the variety and quality of the scenery and the range of options to get off the main route along the way. The warmth and irresistible appeal of the local people still shone through. This was especially the case on the eastern side of Thorung La. There are good reasons why the Annapurna Circuit has proved to be so popular.



Dhaulagiri commanding another transfixed audience on Poon Hill

What proved to be the downside for me wasn't overcrowding and commercialization, but the longing I felt for you and the kids. I can't imagine how the serious mountaineer can leave their family for months on end to take on life threatening objectives, knowing full well that there is a chance that they might never see their love ones again. For me that cost is too high, no matter how sweet success may feel.



Bitter and sweet, yes, but I'll be back to the abode of snows, sooner or later. That I do know for sure.

