

## People Of Nepal

Nepal is home to some 20 different ethnic groups, yet only a few of it's mountain cultures are well known to the outside world. Probably the most famous are the Sherpas of the Solu Khumbu and Helambu in Nepal. They are also found further east in Darjeeling and Sikkim. This hardy, good humoured, but fiercely proud people are renowned for their stamina at high altitudes, whether they carry heavy loads as porters or assist on the most challenging and daring mountaineering expeditions. Most Sherpa villages are situated above 3,000 metres and it is well known that it was a Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay, who shared the summit of Mt Everest with the now world famous New Zealand mountaineer and adventurer, Sir Edmund Hillary, for the first time in human history on 29 May 1953.

But the Sherpas are just one small group to be found in the Nepal Himalaya. In all, 19 million people live in Nepal. In less than ten years the population grew by nearly 20%. However, the majority inhabit the middle band of hills sandwiched between the high Himalaya and the lowland jungle of the Terai. With the successful containment of malaria in the Terai, people also rapidly populated this area. The Kathmandu Valley supports 800,000 people, most of whom are Buddhist or Hindu Newars, renowned particularly for their artistic accomplishments. About 300,000 people live in Kathmandu itself.

Further north, the Sherpas share the mountains with various other groups which, in total, make up approximately 1.5 million people. For at least the last 2,000 years, the Kiranti have inhabited the eastern part of the Nepal Himalaya. Acquiring a fearless reputation, today the Kiranti still contribute significantly to the ranks of the famous Gurkha regiments.

'Kiranti' actually refers to two cultural groups, the Rais and the Limbus. While the Rais practise a strongly Hindu influenced religion, the Limbus follow a stream of Buddhism similar to that practised in Tibet.

Most Rais live between the Solu Khumbu and the Arun River. The Limbus live further east, between the Arun River and the mighty Kanchenjunga. Also towering above the people of the Arun valley, directly to the north, is Makalu, the world's fifth tallest mountain at 8,475 metres.



In the west, concentrated above Pokhara (Nepal's second city), live the Magar people. Traditionally farmers or stone masons and more recently soldiers, Magars practise both Hindu and Buddhist faiths.

Further north are Gurungs who are mainly Hindu. Also known for their prowess as soldiers, they too are successful farmers and herders, who have built many trails in the mountains of the Annapurna region, to supplement their livelihood.

North of Annapurna is the region of Manang. Manangis, of Tibetan descent, have always been strong traders. This is recognised officially by the Nepalese Government who has bestowed special trading privileges on them. These they have put to good advantage and consequently, today the Manangi's trading links extend far beyond the Himalaya to many parts of Asia.

Even further north, tucked in behind the world's sixth highest mountain, Dhaulagiri at 8,167 metres, are the people of Dolpo. As a result of their remoteness, Dolpos remain devoutly traditional Buddhists and are mostly sheep, yak and salt traders. To proceed any further north it is necessary to ascend high mountain passes leading onto the Tibetan Plateau.



Scattered throughout the Nepal Himalaya are Tamangs. The name means 'horse soldier' and originates from their ancestors who came from Tibet at the time of Genghis Khan. Tamangs are Buddhists, recognized by the gold jewellery adorning the noses of their womenfolk and by the sleeveless woolen jackets worn by the men. They are skilled weavers and artists, as well as being farmers and herders.

Full blooded Tibetans can also be found in many places including the Solu Khumbu and also Mustang to the north, above the Annapurna Sanctuary, where they coexist with the salt and wool trading Loba people. Many are refugees who fled their homelands during the 1950s, since the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1949. Others are merchants plying the many trading routes in the Himalaya.

Whatever their ethnic origins, the people you meet on the high trails of Nepal will probably be gracious, friendly and humourous. They comprise one of the very special aspects of the Roof of the World.