

Sanctuary for the Spirit

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By Peter Laurenson

My second visit to Nepal was in November 1990. With each visit, my circumstances have been different yet, my underlying purpose has remained constant - to uplift my spirit. By substituting the distractions and stresses of life with Himalayan simplicity and tranquillity, I've been able to resolve problems, recharge my batteries and simply rejoice at being alive.

Since my first wife Julie and I tasted our first Himalayan experience in Darjeeling, our lives had maintained a very dynamic and often frenetic pace. From Darjeeling we went on to Nepal and, after our discoveries there, returned to the heat and mayhem of the north Indian plains. Soon after, we again ascended, this time through war torn Kashmir, to Ladakh where, unfortunately, technical problems with my camera prevented me from capturing any images of our experiences in the Marpha valley. Another short foray onto the north Indian plains proved too much for us physically and emotionally after such an extended period of backpacking, prompting our escape in August. En route to Turkey, we suddenly found ourselves marvelling at the stark contrasts confronting us in Poland. Soon after, a gruelling 48 hour bus journey from Germany, through the former Yugoslavia, deposited us in the hustle and bustle of Turkey. From there we eventually journeyed on by ship, via Rhodes, to Israel. Overlanding from there we explored Egypt and then, jobless and almost broke, in November 1988 we began the task of settling in Hammersmith, London.



Phewa Tal, the lake beside Pokhara and the starting point for trekking in the Annapurna region

For two well qualified and motivated individuals, there were plenty of opportunities for us in London. At that point in our lives it was a continuous, self inflicted barrage of new career challenges, European explorations, English pubs, shows and rock concerts. It was fabulous, but all the change and stimulus took its toll on our relationship.

By the time I found myself bound once more for Nepal, this time en route, alone, to a December wedding of my oldest friend back home in New Zealand, my own marriage was on the rocks. I was unhappy, frightened and very confused. Returning to the abode of snows seemed to be the most obvious thing to do under the circumstances.

Despite all the varied and wonderful places we'd visited, during my first two years in England the Himalaya was the only place I yearned to return to, reaffirming its special significance to me. The

emotional upheaval I was enduring only heightened this feeling.

At the time, I was still very much in a mindset to see as much of the world as possible. I decided to visit a new part of Nepal, but my time was limited. Upon arrival in Kathmandu, I discovered that it was actually quite affordable, even at short notice as part of a group, to visit Tibet from there. It was an opportunity too good to miss, consequently my time available for trekking in Nepal halved.

A short trek to the base camp of Annapurna, whose highest peak reaches 8,091 metres, placing it tenth highest in the world, appeared to offer much in a short space of time. An enticing blend of different scenery, starting below 1,000 metres in the lushness of the shores of Phewa Tal and culminating at 4,300 metres in the glaciated grandeur above the Annapurna base camp appealed. Also, in contrast to my earlier Tibetan Buddhist exposure in the Solu Khumbu, Hinduism was more prevalent in the Annapurna region. And aside from all this, the area I planned to visit was known as the Annapurna Sanctuary, which seemed like just what I needed.

Things happened very quickly and, thankfully, smoothly as I arranged plans, baggage storage, funding transfers, a trekking permit, air tickets from Kathmandu to and from Pokhara and a confirmed place on an eight day tour to Tibet. Somehow it all fitted together in the time I had available. Although there was no margin for delays, my plan worked like clockwork, ultimately allowing me to connect with my onward international flight and thereby filling my role as best man at Rob's wedding.

It wasn't exactly relaxing, but I focused on the challenge I'd set myself. As I gazed down from a light aircraft at the frail looking, winding road linking Kathmandu to Pokhara, waves of excitement, anticipation and anxiousness washed over me. "Here I go... fingers crossed".

The flight to Pokhara only lasted about an hour, but the views were predictably spectacular. Snow capped peaks to the north, cobalt sky and lush green, lovingly terraced hillsides stretching out as far as I could see.

There was no point in wasting time in Pokhara, so I bumped my way in a taxi along a dirt road directly from the little airport to the trail head at Phedi. It was mid afternoon and hot. At Phedi the trail immediately ascended unrelentingly through forest, via a stone staircase, from 1,080 metres up to Dhampus, a sprawling village running along a ridge, at 1,580 metres.

I assaulted the hill with much vigour, promptly developing a bloody nose. A small local boy skipping up beside me didn't know whether to laugh or look away. We both paused and did laugh while, head back, I pinched

the bridge of my nose until the blood stopped flowing. At the time I was actually in good physical shape, achieving a PB over the half marathon distance only a few months earlier. However, my dripping nose was a timely reminder to treat my surroundings with respect, no matter how fit I thought I was. After that, I paced myself a little better, enjoying the rest of my climb.

I arrived in Dhampus in the late afternoon, checking into a teahouse commanding an expansive view back towards Pokhara. Later, with a plate of tasty curried potatoes before me, I settled down to enjoy a vibrant, orange sunset that brought the many ridges visible into delicate relief.



The view back towards Pokhara from Dhampus

Next morning I set off quite early in the hope of reaching Chhomrong. The weather was clear and sunny, perfect conditions for hiking through woodlands filled with birdlife. From clearings, three distinctive snowclad peaks dominated the skyline - Annapurna South (approximately 7,500 metres), Hiunchuli (6,441 metres) and Machhapuchhare (6,997 metres). Annapurnas IV and II could also be clearly seen. Like a moth to the moon, I was drawn to them.

The kilometres slipped by as I ascended through Pothana at 1,870 metres to a ridge at 2,010 metres. The mountain vistas of Annapurna South and Hiunchuli became progressively more impressive, complimented by a foreground of deep river valleys with intricately terraced sides. The great depth of these views accentuated the height of the massive peaks.

Round, brick-red and white, thatch-roofed houses of the local Gurung people stood out in contrast to the more angular stone structures I had become accustomed to in the Solu Khumbu.

From the ridge I made the first, of at least seven, quite big descents required in order to reach Annapurna base camp. This one dropped about 300 metres to a tributary of the Modi Khola river, before climbing again to Tolka at 1,710 metres.

The undulating terrain leading into the Annapurna Sanctuary is one aspect of this trek that distinguished it from the Solu Khumbu, which, if you commence walking from Lukla, starts at an altitude that is only reached well into the Annapurna Sanctuary. Because of this, the trails of the Khumbu tend to be more open and direct, unimpeded by forest. Around Annapurna the altitude undulates between 1,300 metres and 3,100 metres until deep into the Sanctuary. This means easier going in the lower, richer air, but more effort on account of the frequent ascents and descents in a hotter climate.



Above, Machhapuchhare and Annapurna IV, from the trail above Dhampus Below, typical housing of the area



Although the highest point I reached on my journey into the Annapurna Sanctuary was only 4,300 metres, I estimate that, due to the amount of ascending and descending, I collectively climbed about 4,400 metres and descended about 1,400 metres just on the inward leg alone. All packed into five and half days, this made for a solid workout.

Beyond Tolka was another 100 metre descent to a tributary stream, before once more ascending and then descending to Landrung at 1,550 metres, where I halted for lunch. Landrung is a Gurung village with stone paved paths and little courtyards spilling down the hillside. It looks across the Modi Khola valley and upwards about 400 metres to another large village known as Ghandruk.

While enjoying this spacious spectacle over another plate of potatoes, a weather-beaten looking New Zealand couple flopped down at the little wooden table next to me. Chris and Catherine were finding the way a little tough on account of the diarrhoea they each suffered, plus a dose of underlying travel fatigue, brought on by being on the road for several months. The more we talked, the more I related to their travel experiences and current condition. They were so like Julie and I had been at various times, during our own long journey to England two years earlier, that waves of nostalgia almost squeezed out a few tears. The encounter jolted my mind back to my relationship problems.

From Landrung the trail descended about 250 metres to the Modi Khola. From there a merciless 740 metre ascent zig-zagged up a stone staircase all the way to Chhomrong at 2,040 metres. From our vantage point at Landrung we could tell that this was to be a real grunt. Given my relatively better condition, I offered to reserve a room for Chris and Catherine when I got to Chhomrong. They seemed to appreciate the thought, so I set off after lunch with renewed purpose.

Possibly because it was easier to focus on physical discomfort than emotional pain, I aggressively bound up the stone staircase. Fifteen minutes, pause for water, then on. After an hour of this I was beginning to wonder when I'd reach the top.



Locals I met along the trail between Tolka and Chhomrong

By the time I did 30 minutes later I was weaving along the track in a semi trance. Of course this was needless, I had plenty of daylight left, but it did appeal to my masochistic side and effectively obliterated any other thoughts that might have played on my mind that afternoon.



Chris and Catherine arrived about two hours later, in time to wash, before we all enjoyed a beautiful sunset. Annapurna South and Hiunchuli loomed majestically before us, seeming to float over the darkness of the Modi Khola valley, bathed in shades of violet and pink.

That evening I reflected upon the differences between the people of the Annapurna region and the Solu Khumbu. Most obvious was the relative absence of outward religious influences in the area approaching the Annapurna Sanctuary. Unlike the Tibetan Buddhists mostly inhabiting the Khumbu, the Gurungs follow a Hindu faith. This is reflected in the pillbox hats the men wear. But what is absent are the Gompas, mani walls, water powered prayer wheels and strings of prayer flags so prominent in the Khumbu. The Gurungs live predominantly off crops and livestock. But at the lower altitude that they live, Buffalo replace the woolly yaks of the Khumbu.

Next morning, after giving them my London address, I bid farewell to Chris and Catherine, as limited time required me to press on towards Machhapuchhare base camp.

A series of three more descents and bigger ascents took me across two more rivers, along the wall of the Modi Khola valley, through bamboo forests, across several avalanche paths, through the gates of the Sanctuary and then up to Machhapuchhare base camp at 3,480 metres.

As I approached the gates, the valley became increasingly narrow and shrouded in shadow. The “gates” are defined by a narrow point in the Modi Khola valley where Hiunchuli, to the west and Machhapuchhare, to the east, tower over head. So steep and close are the valley walls that it’s impossible to see the summits of the mountains presiding over the entrance to the Sanctuary. Their concealment can be a deadly illusion in winter, as their snow laden flanks release devastating avalanches, crashing down the valley walls with shocking frequency.

Passing through the gates heralded a change in scenery. After passing more avalanche chutes, the terrain began to resemble the higher altitude, more arid, open appearance of the Solu Khumbu. As I approached Machhapuchhare base camp the views opened out spectacularly to reveal a magnificent alpine panorama. From west to east there were Hiunchuli, Annapurna I (8,091 metres), Annapurna III (7,555 metres), Gangapurna (7,454 metres) and Machhapuchhare.

Although at 6,997 metres Machhapuchhare was not the highest peak, it seemed enormous, towering over the base camp. The name means Fish Tail mountain, referring to the striking, fin-like shape of the peak when viewed from most angles.

By late afternoon when I arrived, it was so crowded with trekkers at the lodge that the only place for me to sleep was on the floor. But having gained more than 1,400 metres in altitude during the day, I would have been very unwise to proceed further to Annapurna base camp. I claimed the most comfortable section of stone floor that I could find and prepared for one of my less memorable sleeps.

During the night several little furry visitors blazed wriggly trails across my sleeping bag and head, but they meant me no harm, as attested by my fully intact earlobes and finger tips the next morning.

The little alpine rodents actually did me a favour. Having them around gave me added incentive to climb out of my down sleeping bag before dawn, so I could cover as much of the 420 metre ascent to Annapurna base camp as possible before sunrise.



Top, Ghandrung, with Annapurna South, Hiunchuli and Machhapuchhare behind
Above, the gates to the Sanctuary

No one else at the lodge had the same idea, so I had the trail to myself as the dim light of predawn slowly intensified. That morning was to be the highlight of my short journey into the Sanctuary. I progressed higher, it grew lighter and each moment revealed new and beautiful sights.

At first I felt as if surrounded by Mother Nature's prison walls. Immense, black, fortress-like ramparts towered above me on all sides. I could hear the roar of the Modi Khola echoing off them. Occasionally the splitting of ice resounded from the glacial sea beyond the huge moraine I was tracing.

Directly ahead, the featureless lump of Annapurna I began taking on subtle gray hues, giving the immense wall of rock and ice a glimmer of life. As the light intensified, a vibrant orange band of molten lava seemed to cap the entire summit ridge. It became brighter as I moved upwards.

As the molten band ahead eventually lost its intensity, directly behind me, the jagged silhouette of the Fish Tail mountain took on a halo effect as the rising sun began its daily climb up her eastern flanks.



Above, Annapurna South (left) and Annapurna I at dawn, en route to Annapurna Base Camp
Below, Machhapuchhare (right) and Base Camp, as seen from Annapurna Base Camp



Because Machhapuchhare was so near, it took well over an hour before the first naked rays of the morning sun burst forth from behind the summit. By that time I had reached a point on the moraine of Annapurna Glacier several hundred metres above the Annapurna base camp. The sight was dramatic and powerful.

Vast, clearly defined shafts of sunlight seemed to radiate out from the summit like pathways to the heavens. As they did, naked sunlight also illuminated a vast panorama of gigantic, snowy peaks, fluted ice walls, fractured, glacial icefields and richly coloured moraines.

Adding to the impressive collection of peaks visible from down at Machhapuchhare base camp I could now see Annapurna South, Fang, Fluted Peak and Tharpu Chuli. I could also identify at least five glaciers that originated in the Sanctuary. They cracked and scoured paths from the feet of Hiunchuli, Annapurna South, Annapurna I, Gangapurna and Glacier Dome.

At that special time of morning a diverse colour spectrum spanning cobalt, brilliant white, ice blues and greens and shades of yellow, orange and brown glowed. The whole emanated the raw power of the Himalaya.

I sat near the edge of the moraine, taking care to avoid the crumbling edge. A fall would most likely have been fatal, as the sheer moraine wall was at least 100 feet high where I sat. I enjoyed my solitary vantage point while I could, because far below me tiny antlike figures toiled upwards. It surprised me just how far I'd climbed in that magical dawn world. It had seemed effortless as my attention was completely focused on the beauty of the occasion.



Left, porters ascend towards Annapurna Base Camp



Right, Annapurna I, from above Base Camp

But now it was time to move again if I was to connect with my return flight to Kathmandu in three days time. Walking back to Machhapuchhare base camp, good memories of the times Julie and I had shared in the Solu Khumbu flashed through my mind. Regardless of whether I wanted them to or not, these impressions intensified as I walked and it distressed me. A strong feeling emerged that, despite our differences, it was important that I gave our marriage another chance.

In hindsight I shouldn't have been surprised by this. Being in the mountains is the best way I know for re-establishing a focus on positive things; shutting out the bad stuff. So, the Himalaya had worked her magic once again. I left the Annapurna Sanctuary feeling both apprehension and relief.



Annapurna, Nepal

