

## Eco Trek Khandbari September 2009

Although this was my third visit to Nepal, it was to be our first trek. Our intention was to get off the usual tourist trail and explore this remote mountain region of Nepal. We were not to be disappointed, as our 6 day trek soon extended to a 10 day cultural experience.

I hope the following account will be helpful for prospective trekkers who take the opportunity to visit this ancient trade route across the Arun Valley.

The 40 minute flight from Kathmandu sweeps in low over mountain valleys to the peaceful grass runway at Tumlintar. At only 400m altitude the village provided little respite from the tropical sun. Rucksacks were loaded on top of the 4x4 "Taxis" for the one and a half hour climb to Khandbari. Sharing with 17 other passengers and livestock is not compulsory, but obligatory if you arrive as we did during Dashain Festival. Accept there may be a breakdown and that another taxi will arrive within the hour. You can walk to Khandbari in 3 hours if you prefer to trek, or you can pay extra and have the taxi to yourself.

Khandbari village is laid out along a ridge with valley and mountain glimpses in every direction. This bustling district trade centre has been little affected by tourism and, together with its location, this is its attraction.. It affords a last opportunity for charging phones, visiting the patchy internet café and buying reliable bottled water. Hotel accommodation in Khandbari is at present extremely basic, even for hardened travellers, but I am assured plans are in hand to set up a local lodge in Khandbari. Failing this you could catch a taxi to Chicilla and sleep at the trekking lodge there – it would be too far to trek there on your arrival day.

For us Khandbari was an opportunity to organise our trek and meet our local guide and porter. Planning our trek was a pleasure; informal and flexible. We decided to take 3 days to reach Num with an option of two more extra days if we took on the Arun valley crossing to Seduwa.

Day one saw us take 7 hours for the 5 hour trek to Chichila; we were in no hurry, but it was a climb of 850 metres and a particularly hot day. The track winds through numerous small villages with the opportunity for a stop for Dal Bhat or tea as required, whilst taking in the magnificent views back to the ever receding Khandbari below.

Having a local guide was now paying dividends; he could answer every question about the community and his local knowledge was invaluable. Fields of millet, maize rice and exotic vegetables eventually gave way to more jungle and the first cardamom plants ( do taste the menthol seeds). Eventually the track levels off at the top of the ridge to join the makeshift road and there is an opportunity to take in the views to snow covered Makalu. Another half hour of steady climb and we are in Chichila, a village of stilted wooden houses clinging to the precipitous roadside .

Day two dawned with panoramic views of distant Makalu and snow topped peaks on the Tibet border. The lodge, which doubles as a campsite, is a comfortable stop over , no mosquitoes so pleasant at all times. Local food is good and porridge and omelettes available for breakfast. After being shown the local tea crop and the intricacies of grading the leaves it was back to the farmer's house to sample the ultimate in organic brews.



View of Macalu from Chichila Lodge

Day three was a short one and a half hour trek along the ridge to Hururu. The “ taxis “ from Tumlingtar can reach half way along this track to Kuwapani but no further. The track then becomes the trading route to the mountain villages beyond and ultimately Tibet. We pass teams of mules and donkeys transporting precious 40kg cardamom sacks to Khandbari and returning with rice and provisions .Individuals struggle with impossibly loaded baskets in both directions but never fail to respond with a warm greeting of “ Namaste”. Still we have not passed a single trekker. The small predominantly Sherpa village of Hururu is a staging post for the donkeys and the lodge will be our base for the next two days.



Early morning loading cardamom at Hururu Lodge.

The lodge at Hururu is to be recommended, our best since leaving Kathmandu. Local food is good with every effort to cater for individual tastes. Rooms are clean and there is a wash and shower room. But much more than this, the hospitality is genuine and heartfelt. Two days pass quickly as we absorb the culture with the help of our local guide. We get up early to walk over the ridge and get stunning views of Macalu. Later in the day an excursion through the jungle to Shirubarie takes us to the edge of the Arun valley.

Walking through the jungle helps us understand the problems faced by workers harvesting the cardamom; many wear wellingtons to protect from snake bites. A lady weaves colourful woollen head bags for the local market and another is crocheting with the nettle fibre yarn that is so sought after by the Japanese. There is always something to learn from the local guide who is keen to show us edible plants and others such as the paracetamol plant used for medicines.

Day six was a 3 hour trek winding along the ridge and stopping at Mudhe for tea before descending the final 500 metres to Num.



Looking down to the distant village of Num

Here we met our first serious trekkers; teams from the Czech Republic and Germany who were camping with an army of porters on their way to Makalu. Num sits on the edge of the Arun valley and is unusual in having a large central square surrounded by lodges, stores and a medical post. Its position ensures that trekkers pause before taking on the crossing to Seduwa which looks temptingly close on the other side of the Arun valley.



Looking out over the Arun valley towards Seduwa at Num.

Returning with stop overs in the lodges at Hururu and Chichila we completed our trek with a much easier final decent to Khandbari. We only passed two more trekkers on the final day, an English couple heading for Macalu. As they were loaded down with rice and provisions, they were surprised and relieved to learn from us that food was available all the way along this trek and need not be carried.

For anyone who is thinking of trekking in this area of Nepal, I would strongly recommend using a local guide and porter. They will certainly enhance your experience of this spectacular and unspoilt area and give you the opportunity to understand a fascinating culture.

This trek can be as easy or difficult as you want to make it, and you will get all the help and guidance you need. The people are wonderful and your sense of achievement will last a lifetime.

Shaun and Carol Halbert