



THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

Home of Mt Everest, the world's most famous peak, Nepal may just be the world's most spectacular place to go trekking

WORDS • MIKE MACEACHERAN

I hurry. Then break into a run. Past ochre-stained ceramic pots in alleyways, past carts overflowing with vegetables and freshly cut grass, and past street vendors selling trinkets and Tibetan silvers from their backs. I follow a ribbon of broken concrete, which snakes its way through the heart of Pokhara's Old Town, past haphazard stalls strung together by ruby and indigo flags and brimming with handmade papers, pashminas and prayer wheels, carpets, dance masks and *thankas* (traditional painting scrolls). The sound of "Om Mani Padme Hum", a Nepali mantra, syncopates my run. I stumble upon the local bus station just in time. The ticket hall is seething with life. It is just 6am.

Contrasts abound wherever I look: a sari-wrapped girl, swathed from head to foot in a rainbow of cerise silk, serves steaming noodles with a broken ladle. A Buddhist monk giggles gently into a gleaming new mobile phone. A farmer, wearing a robe of abrasive yak wool, polishes his spectacular *khukhuri* (Nepali curved knife). School children gather, scattering dust and turquoise marbles in their wake. It is the soul of a Nepalese sunrise in a single snapshot.

Peering at his cracked watch, the ticket seller mumbles not to worry. "There's always room onboard," he says, handing me the ticket that will take me to the roof of the world.

Outside, red, purple and gold eyes are painted on the bus, representing the all-seeing eyes of Buddha. A small dot placed between the eyes illustrates a "third eye", the symbol of spiritual awakening. Judging by the dents and scrapes along the bus's battered flanks, they have seen far more than they will ever let on.

As the sun dances across the station, I board my bus, sweating but exhilarated, destined for Nayapul; the starting point for my Himalayan trekking adventure in the Annapurna range in western Nepal. The bus is a jumble of crates, limbs and livestock – and there are no seats or standing spaces left. My ticket is genuinely for the roof.

Forty million years ago, a collision between two gigantic plates of the earth's crust created the mighty Himalayas. Extending from Assam in eastern India and smoothing westward to Afghanistan, they are a magnificent range of white and silver crowns that harbour breathtaking watercolour pinnacles and painted al fresco slopes.

By far the most popular and accessible destination for the intrepid traveller is Pokhara in Nepal, the resting point of the white river Seti and the black river Kali and the spiritual heart of the western Himalayas. This lakeside traveller's hub is nestled on the temperate banks of Phewa Lake, a diamond-shaped teacup

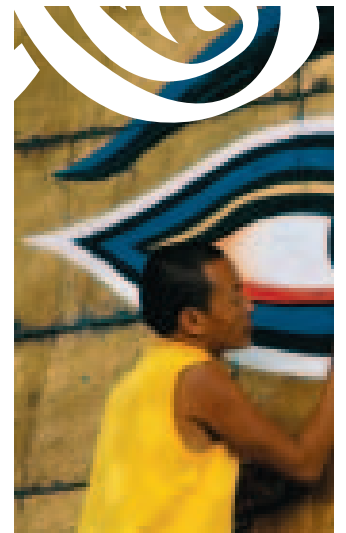
that cuts alongside the town, its impressive tapestry-like tributaries having dug canyons into the valley floor centuries ago. Lying on an important old trading route between Chinese Tibet and India, Pokhara could only be reached by foot until the late 1960s; it was considered even more mystical than Kathmandu, Lhasa or the fabled Shangri-La as recounted by British author James Hilton.

I have come to this sacred place to organise a trekking permit before embarking on a three day trek to Poon Hill – considered the finest snowy-peaked panorama anywhere in the country. Waving goodbye to the morning, the bus begins its laborious climb along the Beni-Baglung highway to nearly two kilometres above sea level; passing boulder-strewn landslides and gushing glacial waterfalls that cascade down the valley side, en route to the foothills below.

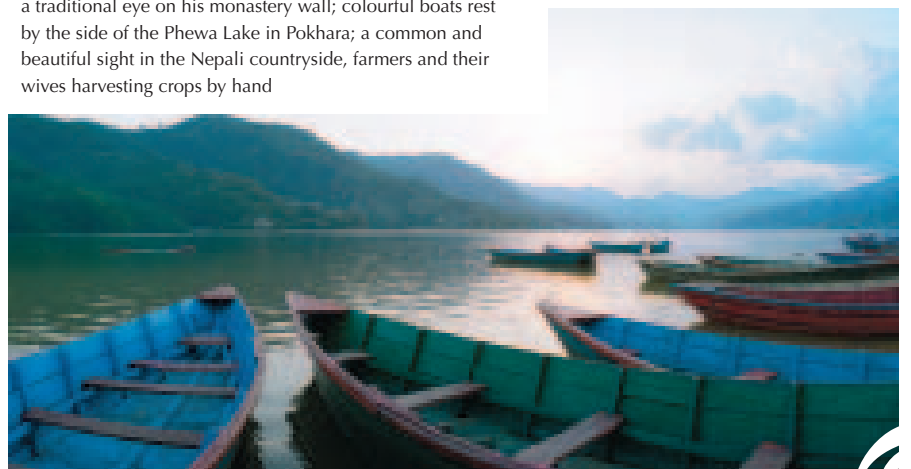
From the bus roof, I look down to the road as we pass through various hillside villages. Places like Sarangkot and Phedi pass me by. Occasionally fearless local children throw themselves from the roof, rolling off like dust balls into the distance. An elderly passenger, ►

IMAGES, FROM LEFT: Boudhnath Temple in Kathmandu; a Nepalese hotelier welcomes visitors to her guesthouse





IMAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Pigeons and people in Kathmandu's Durbar Square; a Buddhist artist paints a traditional eye on his monastery wall; colourful boats rest by the side of the Phewa Lake in Pokhara; a common and beautiful sight in the Nepali countryside, farmers and their wives harvesting crops by hand



bouncing enthusiastically next to me, is travelling with a dilapidated wardrobe, which is precariously tied to the roof with near-invisible gossamer string. I have to laugh. Taking a public bus in Nepal requires a rather Zen-like frame of mind, a head for heights and the knowledge that suspension refers to the way in which people keep their trousers up. Several bumpy hours later, the bus rolls into Nayapul at midday.

Tying up my scuffed hiking boots and adjusting the straps on my rucksack, I take my first cool Himalayan breath and follow the trekking route along the Modi Khola River gorge. A gruff-looking reserve official roughly stamps my trekking permit and I begin my hike into the unknown. Sitting in a hastily constructed wooden shed by the path side, the man wears a knitted cobalt blue hat pulled down to his ears, a warning for the cold nights that lie ahead. Sucking in glacial air,

I admire the vistas that I will be hiking through for the next three days. Rhododendron forests cling to valley sides, competing with alder trees and ancient oaks for the precious mountain views. Perfect.

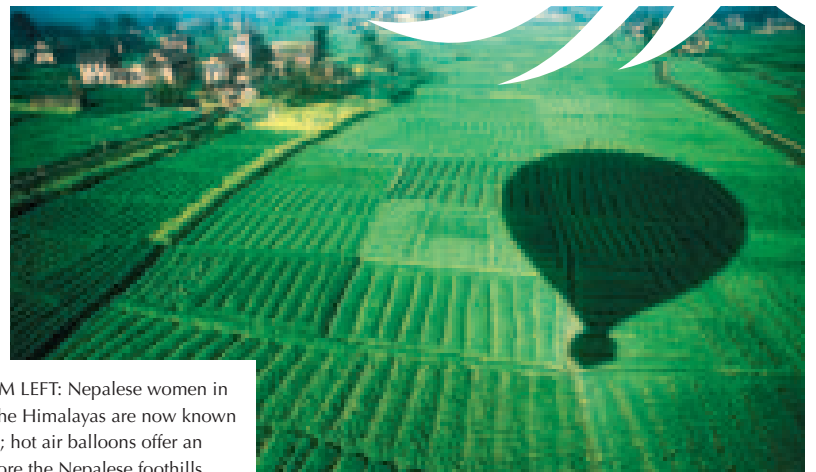
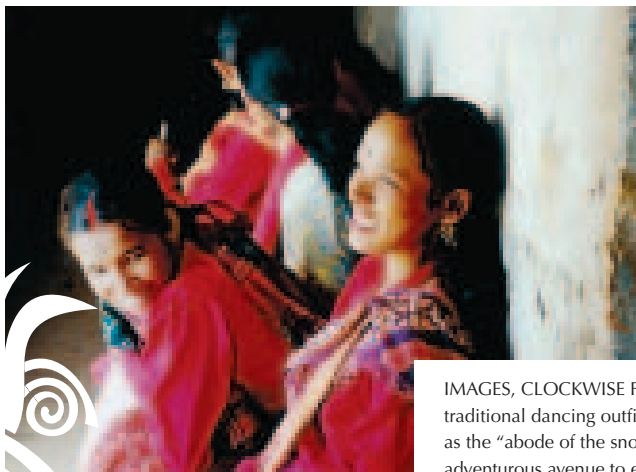
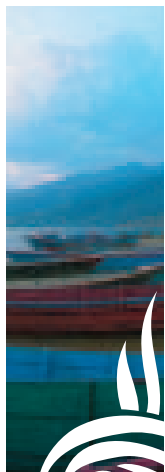
The history of trekking in the Himalayas is so antique that it could have been etched out in Devanagari script (Nepalese writing) on a sheaf of russet parchment. Since time immemorial, the Himalayas have broken records, broken hearts and – on numerous occasions – broken legs. The scope of these mountains captures dreams and imaginations; offering every person the chance to be a king or queen for at least one day. Even the early Aryans looked upon the Himalayas as the celestial abode of gods and goddess. Today, the locals call them the “abode of snows”.

The first part of my three day trek into the Annapurna region will take me to Ghandruk,

a small ethnic Gurung farming community sitting at a heady 1,931 metres. While climbing up from the Modi Khola River, the stunning views of Annapurna South, Hiunchuli Himal and Machhapuchhre (locally known as “Fish Tail”) radiate in the burning sunshine.

The trail follows a ramshackle stone-paved path up to a village that rests on a broken brick wall. The wall meanders leisurely beside nearby farm fields ploughed by water-buffalo; the corn harvested and threshed by hand and ground by water mills. The long grasses bow in the fresh autumn breeze, in submission to their earthly masters that tower over them. The Himalayan peaks are definitely close; but not yet close enough.

I follow a steeply zigzagging trail up a stone staircase through a scattering of teahouses and rest stops. Kilometre after kilometre, bronzed children rush to greet trekkers in the hope of sweets, soft drinks and photographs. “Namaste



IMAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Nepalese women in traditional dancing outfits; the Himalayas are now known as the “abode of the snows”; hot air balloons offer an adventurous avenue to explore the Nepalese foothills

Mister, namaste!” is the constant cry from the windows and doorways. Finally, at an altitude of 1,900 metres and after a solid five hours of poised hurdling over stiles, twisting around bends and turning through lush emerald-green meadows, I see a cluster of houses and lodges perched like snow leopards on the crest of the pass. They beckon in the distance.

Ducking under an oak-carved door, I cross creaking floorboards to the local teahouse, which is teeming with trekkers and local Sherpa guides; its hardly decadent kitchens are a welcome respite from the hard climb.

Although the traditional way of life in the Himalayan foothills has largely been usurped by tourism and the lure of the trekking dollar, locals still embrace old customs and the rustic life lived by their ancestors for thousands of years. In these parts, they still talk about the mountain rivers one day returning to their spiritual home as snowflakes and snowdrops.

The grasslands and thick vegetation on the near-vertical upper slopes also act as a protector and guardian to the Himalayas’ natural heritage, stifling development and growth while killing off the fraught dreams of ice climbers and mountaineers.

Some say it was the British Indian Army Colonel Jimmy Roberts who delivered the idea of trekking in Nepal to the world in 1965. As a former Gurkha officer and Military Attaché at the British Embassy in Kathmandu, he had spent years walking Nepal’s hills; pioneering trekking was an obvious next step. Subsequent journeys by characters like Heinrich Harrer, Reinhold Messner and Sir Chris Bonnington – and their heroic tales of latitudinal extremities – brought these majestic halls of snow and ice to a wide audience.

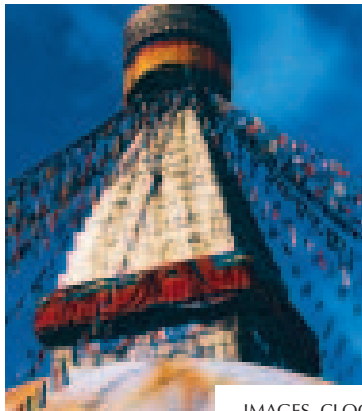
The late Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to reach the top of the world, Mount Everest, in 1953, once said, “It is not the mountain we

conquer but ourselves.” This mantra continues to inspire Nepali treks and dreams decades later; whether by crampon or by boot.

With aching bones, I accept a bowl of food from the hotelier of my austere guesthouse. *Momos*, made of dough stuffed with ground yak meat, shallots, garlic and coriander, divert my hunger; dipped in a sharp chilli paste they are succulent and peppery. Flickering flames from the hearth warm the restaurant, dispersing a sweet haze of cumin and spices.

“Good sir, yes?” the hotelier enquires. As he seeks – and finds – my gratitude, a broad smile echoes across his face showing an avenue of coal-blackened ivory teeth. He grins and returns to his pot. The mountain range’s namesake Annapurna – the Hindu goddess of food and cooking – would certainly approve.

Dal, a spicy lentil soup, is the food of choice for the other diners; its remedial powers cleanse and nourish the bruises, blisters and



IMAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
Trekking on the Annapurna circuit; prayer
wheels; prayer flags adorn a Kathmandu temple



beating hearts. Served with *tarkari* (curried vegetables) together with *achar* (pickles), the Nepalese staple is a rewarding dish that leads trekkers afterwards to a series of simple bedrooms. Dessert is a comfy pillow, a glossy yak-hair rug and a blanket of burnished stars.

Clanging bells waken the teahouse the next morning as brightly coloured mule and yak caravans that regularly use the well-trodden paths rattle through the village; it is an unwelcome 6am alarm clock. Bleary-eyed and bandy-legged, I dress, eat a breakfast of eggs, slurp down some fresh Indian tea and head out for the second day of my trek, journeying to Ghorepani village (2,835 metres), which is six hours away.

The morning begins with an assault through oak and rhododendron forests inhabited by troops of monkeys, and across sparkling streams before breaking out after midday along a razor-edged ridge. Any thoughts of submission are quashed by the friendly local porters. Chirping out the local greeting, “Namaste!” at every opportunity, the Sherpas bound past huffing tourists to take supplies to the cut-off villages of the mountainous wilds

of Mustang and Muktinah, carrying everything – and I mean everything – up the mountains on their backs. Crates of Coca Cola and boxes of dried Chinese noodles jostle past and, in one case, I see a teenager trot by with a full-sized freezer strapped to his back.

In the pre-dawn, I climb to Poon Hill (3,190 metres) to witness perhaps the classic Himalayan moment. The “gateway to the Annapurnas”, it is a 60-minute hike from the town; the last mountain before the Annapurna massif rears skyward. The stars seem so close you could reach out pluck one from the sky.

Prayer flags line the chilly mountaintop in rows of red, blue, green and yellow and hush

the trekkers; they insist upon a respectful silence before morning breaks. As the sun rises in the east, the mighty peaks begin their dawn parade; a fanfare of light and snow that reaches a 180 degree crescendo. Crossing the Himalayas’ spine, the sun radiates an unknown elegance, chasing shadows from mountaintops and signalling, not only a new dawn, but a new way of looking at the world.

Above, a flight of snow pigeons trace across the azure skyline, perhaps appreciating the view themselves. And as the sun continues to rise, my silhouette stretches over the ground before me; I am a man that has been humbled before the mountain. ■

EXPERIENCE NEPAL

FOR EATING: New Everest Steak House

Carnivorous trekkers with gourmet tastes should head down to Pokhara’s lakeside for a giant slab steak at the New Everest Steak House, even before they take their boots off. Sumptuous two-inch thick hunks of beef – washed down with tankards of *tongba* (warm millet beer) – are served up on the lively rooftop night after night and provide the perfect pre or post-trekking feast for generations of hardened mountain hikers.

FOR ADVENTURE: White water rafting

Older than the Himalayas themselves, the Kali Gandaki River is one of the world’s best white water rafting rivers. Tumbling between the majestic Dhaulagiri and Annapurna ranges, the river creates deep gorges and spits out drops, sparkling chutes and turbulent class III to IV rapids. Nowhere else is it possible to find such diversity on a three day trip. If the idea of throwing yourself into a washing machine floats your boat, then this classic will have adventurous hearts racing. Itineraries can be tailored to meet requests.

FOR CULTURE: Gurkha Museum

In Pokhara’s Old Town, this informative and fantastic museum focuses on the achievements of the famous Gurkha regiment – best known for their bravery and strength in the British Army’s Brigade of Gurkhas and the Indian Army’s Gorkha regiments. The word *gurkha*, which comes from the ancient Indian language Prakrit, means “protectors of cows”.

FLY WITH ETIHAD:

Etihad Airways flies between Abu Dhabi and Kathmandu four times per week.