



THE SUMMITS OF ADVENTURE

Nepal's towering peaks are the first and last words in adventure, but the new Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) goes a few steps further in connecting existing trails

BY SUNIL SHARMA

Nepal, the land of the Himalaya, is full of vibrant colours and stupefying beauty. It's the mother of mountaineering. Given its small size of less than 150,000 square kilometres, the country is the springboard for an awe-inspiring array of adventures: rafting, biking, rock climbing, paragliding, and bungee jumping.

Nepal is topographically divided into three regions: the Himalaya (constituting 15% of the total land area); the Hills (covering 68%) and the Terai (covering 17%). The Himalayan range is the most important part of the geographical regions. Eight of the highest mountains in the world are found in Nepal.

As an adventure capital, the country's reputation is based on these cliffhangers. From east to west, the Himalayan range is a delightfully steep challenge. In the eastern part of Nepal one can trek to Kanchenjunga, Makalu Base Camp, then enter into Lukla for the Everest Trek. In the central area visitors

can embark on the Langtang and Manasalu trek. Off to the west there's the Annapurna trek, while the western region boasts Dolpo.

Among these treks, Everest, Annapurna and Langtang are the three most frequented by trekkers because of accessibility and the ready availability of accommodation. Both groups and individual climbers tackle these summits. Just as long as you're in reasonably good shape and have the right attitude of dogged determination, then you can join the upper ranks of these mountaineers.

THE EVEREST TREK

Everest has been pulling in trekkers and firing the imaginations of armchair mountaineers since 1951, when Eric Shipton led a British Reconnaissance Expedition team to reconnoiter a feasible route to the summit up the south slope of the mountain. Two years later, after Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay ended up on top of the world,

throng of travellers have visited this region to enjoy the beauty and awesome splendor of the place.

The famous Everest trek starts mainly from Jiri and Lukla. Those who are short on time can fly to Lukla and head to the Everest Base Camp in 12 to 14 days. But those who have ample amounts of time can start the trek from Jiri, allowing for a more leisurely pace and gradually acclimatizing to the breathtaking (quite literally) beauty.

Perched on a hilltop some 2,800 metres above sea level, Lukla has one small airstrip named in honour of Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, because of their contribution to the construction of the airport and mountaineering in general. The flight from Kathmandu to Lukla is an adventure all right, and with a 12-degree uphill airstrip makes it one of the most challenging landings in the world – not soon forgotten by visitors either.



range. The spectacle enchants every viewer. Further to the west of the Everest region is Rolwaling Valley and in between these two valleys is Tashi Labsta pass which is a real challenge for climbers.

Thereafter the trails arc across the Langtang region and onto the Manasalu region, offering unimpeded views of the Himalayas to the north. After this slog, it's on to the Annapurnas range and after crisscrossing it there's Dolpo, famous for its pristine landscape and Shey Phoksundo Lake. This remote and sparsely vegetated region is part of the Tibetan Plateau.

The trail then moves further uphill to the western region encapsulating Rara Lake; a rarely trekked area noted for its rich biological diversity. Finally, the trail winds up at Humla in the far west of Nepal along the upper reaches of Karnali River – Nepal's longest waterway.

One should remember that there are many passes in between the GHT connecting different valleys and spectacular regions and some of these passes are well over 5,000 metres. The undulating mountains look as they have been stitched together and they are punctuated by occasional passes and interspersed by verdant valleys. Undoubtedly, the GHT is the ultimate physical and mental test for even the most hardcore adventure traveler.

In short, there are many unexplored areas in Nepal to be explored, with a cornucopia of creatures and a quilt of exotic cultures. Brimming with colour, scenery and hospitable people, Nepal is still seventh heaven for adventure lovers with their heads in the clouds.

THE ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT TREK

Billed as one of the world's most tremendous treks, climbers navigate thick green forests of rhododendron, bougainvillea and bamboo. En route the geographic diversity is equal to the ethnic diversity. Completing the full circuit normally takes 22 days, but due to road construction that time has been cut to 12 days.

The climb is more gradual than Everest, though the Annapurna Circuit has one pass, Thorung La, that is some 5,416 metres. The pass is a border between the Mustang and Manang district, also known as Trans-Himalayan area.

This region is managed by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), which is a role model because it works closely with the local community. The idea behind it is that the fees earned from trekkers go directly to the local community for preservation, conservation and regenerating the fast-depleting forest cover. Furthermore, ACAP raises awareness about environmental conservation and encourages villagers to use alternative energy sources.

THE GREAT HIMALAYA TRAIL

Those looking for off-the-beaten trek adventures must look into the new Great Himalaya Trail (GHT). The GHT is a network of existing treks and trails which together form one of the longest and highest walking trails in the world. According to National Geographic Adventure Magazine, "Nepal's mountains are minimally developed, but they offer a wealth of trade and pilgrimage routes. The GHT elegantly connects these existing paths without blazing a single new trail."

Action Asia, a leading magazine dedicated to adventure travel and extreme sports, observed, "Nowhere else on earth are there so many soaring peaks packed together, and nowhere else does a mountain range offer such a rich cultural backdrop, with villages up to 4,000m inhabited all year round with a mix of peoples that have crisscrossed these passes for generation."

The GHT traverses the Kanchenjunga region in the east linking the Makalu and Everest regions en route to showcasing the rich ethnic and geographical tapestry of Nepal. One can view the splendid snow-covered peaks of Lhotse, Everest and Makalu

