Dolpa

Written by Annie Leeson
Photography by Alex Treadway

The journey begins, and so does the drama. The trail makes some dramatic ups and downs beside the Suli Gaad.

A river runs through it. Annie and Luke cross the Suli Gaad river near Amchi.

Plotting a graph showing the altitude profile for our entire route probably wasn't the best way to prepare myself for the trip. Two male friends, both experienced trekkers and exceptional photographers, had invited me to join their journey to Dolpa - a little travelled region of the Nepalese Himalayas. However it was my first trek, taking place some fifteen years after I had lost both the appetite and the courage for adventure travel, at a time when I had settled myself into a comfortable and relatively benign way of life that I loved. And I had a phobia of high altitude. But, as everyone kept telling me, it was too good an opportunity to miss. Inaccessible by land and expensive due to the high cost of permits, visiting Dolpa was considered a rare privilege.

A bit of Googling did little to ease my anxieties – the difficulty level for our proposed route was scored 9.5 out of 10 in one report and 'Highly strenuous, for experienced trekkers only' in another. Phrases like 'may involve mountaineering and glacial travel', 'steep descents over loose shale' and 'going up too fast causes a medical condition serious enough to kill' jumped out at me from the screen. However scattered throughout these unnerving descriptions of treacherous trails and demanding high passes, like diamonds in the rough, were some words of magic that I found enticing.

Tibet was one – an icon of other-worldliness. Culturally, politically and geographically isolated and shrouded in the mystique of an ancient and deeply spiritual way of life. I was enthralled by the idea that Dolpa was considered to be more Tibetan than Tibet itself. Remote and inaccessible, it's shielded from both the Western influence of modern Nepal and the Chinese influence of the Tibetan occupation. It's considered by some to be the last enclave of pure Tibetan culture. Snow leopard was another. These rare creatures are synonymous with Dolpa, not least because it is the setting for explorer Peter Matthiessen's acclaimed book, 'The Snow Leopard', an intoxicating account of his journey through the region in 1973. Dolpa is one of the few remaining natural habitats of the Snow Leopard; although it is so elusive I had no real expectations of actually seeing one.

However snow leopards and Tibetan monasteries were far from my mind as I took my first shaky steps on Himalayan soil. For a nail-biting thirty minutes our small plane had surfed the contours of steep hills and deep valleys then swooped in to land on a short dirt-strip runway, carved into the slope of a remote mountainside. We were lucky – there wasn't a breath of wind and the early morning sun had burned the valleys free of cloud, but even for my experienced companions it had been a terrifying ride. Juphal airport itself was little more than a dilapidated wooden hut, some battered chicken-wire fencing, misshapen due to a recent collision with an incoming plane, and a man in a shell suit with a mobile phone. He was the local air traffic controller. Fifty meters down the runway, crumpled against the rock wall of the mountainside, another small plane had ended its take-off bid unsuccessfully and was left there to rust, a disconcerting landmark for nervous new arrivals like me.

The plan was to take a grand tour of the Dolpa region, first travelling Northwards alongside the Suli Gaad river, up to the Ayurvedic hospital at Amchi, and on to the village of Ringmo, next to the famous lake Phoksundo. From there we would head over the difficult Kang La pass into Upper Dolpo. Upper Dolpo, as the name suggests, is almost entirely over 4000m in altitude, with a handful of villages only populated during the warmest months of the year. We would loop clockwise through the region and traverse another five or six difficult passes before descending again into the relative warmth and ease of Lower Dolpo. From the few detailed accounts I could find, from previous travellers, I created a daunting mental picture of this remote region. It seemed a barren, almost lunar landscape of rocky brown and grey rubble, devoid of warmth or indigenous life, save for the occasional blue sheep and invisible snow leopard. To say I was apprehensive is a huge understatement –

A welcome sight. The first glimpse of Phoksundo lake comes after a steep climb and a high point in the trail marked by a string of prayer flags. Annie and Kush Phuyal, the guide.

I was dreading it. The boys, on the other hand were ecstatic. As we left the vague confines of the airport, Luke beamed at me and gestured towards the beautiful valley stretching away before us, hazy in the morning sun. I forced a smile in reply, trying to summon the feelings of awe that I knew it ought to inspire. But in truth, I felt utterly disorientated. I tried to reassure myself that trekking was nothing more than going for a walk, a really, really long walk. Before I could properly adopt this gentle notion, our kit bags were whisked away by a waiting team of porters and we set off at a furious pace, heading for a broad dun coloured trail many hundreds of meters below us on the valley floor. No going back now.

For the first five minutes I stumbled along behind my friends, eyes on the trail, trying not to betray my exertion by panting in the thin air. We passed through a village with barely enough time for the rooftop chorus of barking dogs to register our passing, and shot cleanly out the other side without breaking stride. Flowers, farms, villagers and views all came and went in a blur of dust and sweat, and I began to wonder if I had unwittingly signed up to a trail race, rather than a journey of discovery. As the sun rose higher and banished the deep chill of night-time in mountains, the world around us came to life. In fact it was teaming with life, all of it new to me and fascinating! Why wasn't Alex taking photographs?! Where a stream crossed the path and our passing stirred up a cloud of tiny yellow and blue butterflies, I came to an abrupt halt. I wasn't yet sure why I was here and what I would get from this journey. But one thing I knew was that I wasn't in Dolpa to chalk up the miles or conquer high passes. If I was going to have a meaningful experience in this place I had to feel like part of it, not just passing through. When I set off again it was at a comfortable stroll. I was free to lift my gaze from the rocky trail and let my eyes roam the landscape. The sound of blood pounding in my ears began to recede and, at last, I started to absorb the beauty of my new surroundings.

The land was semi-cultivated. A patchwork of gold, red and green cereals grown in tiny fields, clinging to any flat areas of land, infiltrated by wild flowers in blues, purples and yellows. At my new, languid pace, I paused to stroke the soft textures of fluffy seed-heads and delicate ferns and stood to gaze at startlingly beautiful golden-green trees silhouetted against an impossibly blue sky. At the next small hamlet we stopped for tea. Most of the buildings were solidly built from hard packed mud, soot-blackened and startlingly cold inside. Some had intricately carved woodwork around the doors and windows, often painted a bright blue to mirror the sky. Higher stories were accessed by ingenious ladders made from a single tree trunk split lengthwise, each step hollowed out and polished to a deep, mahogany sheen by the grease from decades of clambering hands. The roofs were carpeted with bright red and green chilies or yellow cobs of corn, drying in the sun, and sheaves of dried red millet stored for winter. To our amusement, some roofs were also edged with ornamental cabbages at regular intervals, actually planted and growing in the mud surface. They resembled jaunty, vegetable battlements, although we never learned their real purpose.

Since the butterflies by the stream, we had been walking for just 15 minutes. As I sipped my tea and looked around me, I realised that in those 15 minutes I had seen more new, beautiful and inspiring sights than I had in all 'normal holidays' of the past 15 years. The magnitude of this unexpected revelation brought tears to my eyes. Not tears of regret for those 'tame' holidays of years past, but tears of gratitude that I was here now experiencing this place, despite my fears for the journey ahead. I knew that the trek would undoubtedly affect how I saw my life at home, but I had

Room with a view. Luke wakes up next to Phoksundo Lake.

Written in stone. Mani stones inscribed with Tibetan prayers adorn Thasung Tsholing Gompa

not expected the comparison to come so quickly and forcibly, within minutes of setting foot in the mountains.

We continued down to the valley floor where the trail widened out and followed an easy route alongside the Thuli Bheri River. This is the closest the region has to a super-highway, stretching all the way from Tarakot in the East to Jumla in the west. Although paved only with dust and rocks, the path was almost wide and flat enough to accommodate a car, if any had existed here. Dolpa is completely inaccessible by road and, as a result, there are no motorised vehicles at all. There is a little electricity, mostly solar power, but this is used sparingly and mainly after dark. No radios blare, no phones ring nor TVs squawk, and the absence of these man-made noises,

The big blue. A short walk from Ringmo brings you to the Thasung Tsholing Gompa and magnificent views of Phoksundo lake.

especially after the blaring of horns of Kathmandu, was simple bliss.

Four hours later we arrived at our first stop and the official starting point for our trek – Dunai. Our tents had been erected for us in advance and hot lemon was served immediately. Dinner followed shortly after, including a popcorn appetiser, chicken curry and sticky tinned pudding. By the end of that first day I was warm, well fed and lulled into some sense of security by the ease of the trail between Juphal and Dunai. If not yet awestruck, my face had settled into a smile and I slept peacefully in the comforting cocoon of my tent. The following morning we set off across the river to begin our trek Northwards towards Lake Phoksundo and the Kang La pass, our gateway to Upper

Time to relax

Yaks with packs. The local beasts of burden are the principal mode of transport bringing supplies into Dolpa. Seen here on a dramatic stretch of trail leading to Upper Dolpa.

Dolpo. Our gear was left behind, to be packed by the diligent local team and carried by mules that would rapidly overtake us on the trail. We kept to the valley of the Suli Gaad river, watching the current intensify as the gorge narrowed and deepened, the water crisp, pale and as blue and clean as new ice. The route criss-crossed the river over numerous rough wooden bridges made from thick logs cantilevered out from both banks until they met in the middle. In some cases, these logs were overlaid with firm stones. On those without, we faced resolutely forward to avoid the dizzying sight of icy torrents churning beneath our feet as we crossed.

At lunch, in the shade of a tree by a small farmstead, came an unexpected pleasure that was to delight me for the duration of the trip. Trekking food! Today, and every day that followed, or team overtook us and set up their basic gas stoves well in advance, so that we were greeted at both lunch and dinner times with hot lemon on arrival. It was delicious, despite the heat of the day, to drink something sweet and flavoursome after hours sipping on faintly plastic-infused water from a sun-warmed camel back.

Typically we had popcorn and soup to start, and this was quickly followed by an expansive smorgasbord of random but delicious dishes. Some were local specialities, delicious Tibetan bread made from unleavened dough, twisted into shapes and deep fried, Yak's cheese, potato curry and the ubiquitous rice and dhal. But most were an attempt by our wonderful cooks to replicate what they understood to be western food. To accompany the curries we

Ringmo with a seasonal population of about 200 is mostly of Tibetan ethnicity and are of the Bönpo faith, and engage in trade, yak herding and tourism.

A Tibetan woman weaves using a handloom

Follow the leader. Mules carry the majority of the load for the trek.

had baked beans, coleslaw, friend luncheon meat, frankfurters, tuna, eggs, chips and pasta. Every meal was topped with a tinned pudding and custard. We later learned that our guides and porters all liked to pitch in with the cooking, proudly presenting us with dishes of their own creation. The more western in style, the prouder they were, with a doughy, pan fried pizza being the ultimate edible honour that was bestowed upon us. I was soon hooked on these high calorie and childishly indulgent feasts.

In the afternoon the path became more erratic. We wound our way up the valley sides in steep, sandy climbs, then scrambled back down over boulders and tree roots. Despite the extra exertion the walking was fun, half trail, half assault course and always the anticipation of a scene more beautiful than the last, around every corner. As we moved further and further from human habitation, the trees grew more dense and majestic, sheltering mosses and ferns in bright neon greens. Some scenes were so evocative and magical it was easy to imagine we were filming on set in the Lord of the Rings, and an elf might appear from behind a rock at any moment.

The rising altitude was marked by a gradual decrease in temperature and by evening, we arrived at our campsite in the freezing dampness of a field by the river. Before the last of the light faded, I was introduced to another wonderful and totally unexpected pleasure of trekking – ice bathing! Finding a quiet spot up river, shielded from view, I would strip to my pants and submerge aching legs in the freezing water for thirty seconds at a

Annie and Luke Everson

Walking through wheat fields in the Kagmara valley with the first glimpse of Lhashama in the distance

Annie negotiates her way along a waterlogged trail beside the Pungmo Khola

Kagmara Valley

time. Five seconds of extreme cold, ten seconds of numbness, fifteen seconds of excruciating pain, then out, repeated three times. I was dubious at first, but as I hurriedly dried off and dressed, my legs were suffused with deep penetrating warmth and natural analgesia, and a feeling of wellbeing that spread to the rest of my body. It washed away any trace of fatigue from the day's walk. It felt wonderful.

After dark, once we had eaten, there was nowhere to sit that was warm. With no light but our head torches, we gave in to the inevitable and retired to our sleeping bags shortly after 8pm. As the moon rose over the village, the local dogs set up a steady symphony of howls and barks, but armed with my trusty ear plugs, I fell into a deep and contented sleep.

My companions, although both fit and experienced trekkers, hadn't fared so well. Neither had slept, believing ear-plugs were for wimps. Both had sore throats, and Alex had started to cough alarmingly. We cursed the thick dust and traffic fumes that had cloaked Kathmandu before we left for the mountains. Glad of the vast medical kit I had brought with me I doled out paracetamol and throat lozenges and we pushed on. Over the next two days we climbed steadily from our start point in Dunai, at 2,200m, to the sacred Phoksundo lake in its high plateaux, at 4,300m.

The lake itself was almost impossibly blue – I had seen postcards but never dreamt that they were true to life. The depth and purity of

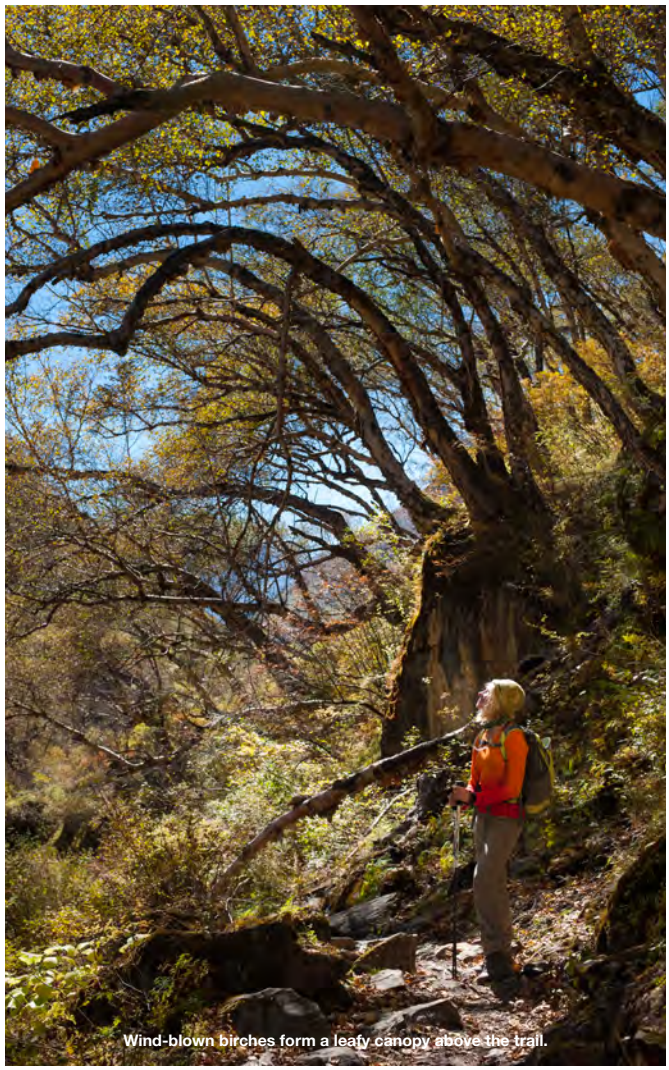
the water created almost no variation in tone or intensity, producing a solid, opaque block of colour more like blue paint than a body of water. Our bright yellow tents, glowing gold in the sun, contrasted spectacularly with the blue of the lake. No human was permitted to enter the water, to fish or to swim. Walking a short distance from our camp I sat on my own to take in the view. On the slopes to the south of the lake an army of trees, in every possible shade of green, stood in silent contemplation of the sacred waters. I climbed a rocky outcrop to a spot where an ancient Bönpo monastery crumpled, and sat facing the trees. Mirroring their poise, I felt deeply moved by the beauty and serenity of the spot and found myself unaccountably wracked by sobs, much to the embarrassment of the Nepali guides who had escorted me on this little foray.

We took a few days of rest at our camp by the lake, giving us time to nurse Alex back from the prospect of a helicopter evacuation. His sore throat had degenerated into a serious respiratory infection and to proceed to higher altitude would have been foolish. But with antibiotics he recovered sufficiently to continue walking. However the prospect of going into Upper Dolpo, with its dry thin air, barren wastes and high passes, was out of the question with him in such a weakened state. After much conversation, soul searching and cups of tea, several blazing rows with our guides and one or two with each other, we decided on a different route for the rest of our trek. We would not be going to Upper Dolpo after all, the source of my angst. Decision made, the sun came out and the world seemed a benign and beautiful place again. Bundled up in fleeces and down jackets, we settled into comfortable spots in front of our bright yellow tents and gazed contentedly at the blue of the lake, big smiles all round.

Our new route took us back down the way we had come, and we flew down the trail at a gallop. Our aim was to backtrack for a day, then branch off to the West on a little travelled route, via just one high altitude pass – the Kagmara La, and loop back around to Juphal. This path had taken our fancy back in Kathmandu when, poring over the badly drawn map of the region, we had intuitively felt that this looked like a nice piece of trail. Later, as we passed this 'secret' valley branching off to the left on our way to Phoksundo, we had again remarked that there was something inviting about that route. As we neared that same point, we felt a growing anticipation that this little detour, into relatively un-chartered territory, was going to be something quite wonderful.

Our local guides were fairly certain that there was a passable trail along this route, but they were less sure of the details, such as the best places to camp. However this didn't concern us at all as we set off up the new trail, the scenery was the most beautiful yet and we were jubilant. The trail rose steadily up the valley, gradually leaving the deep river gorge for a broad, relatively flat shelf some 50 meters above the water. We passed through the small villages of Sumduwa and Pungmo. Classically Tibetan in style, their inhabitants were shy, unused to visitors of any kind let alone foreigners like us. After the villages came cultivated land. From a distance the fields of densely planted barley resembled the soft, thick pelt of a big cat, being gently stroked by the wind. The swaying stems made a soft crackling, rustling sound, like bubbles fizzing on wet sand in the wake of a retreating wave. Behind the fields we began to see snow-capped mountains rising invitingly to the North and the West, the direction in which we were headed.

Pit stop on the trail. Annie refuels with some hot lemon.



Wind-blown birches form a leafy canopy above the trail.

Time to stand and stare. The white peak of Lhashama rises above the Kagmara valley.

We were gradually getting to know our local guides, who were at times taciturn and dismissive and at others, charismatic and playful. They were always astonishingly capable and deft, handling the machinations of the camp like a well-practised army unit, the ringleader barking orders in a guttural local dialect thickened by a deep smoker's cough. A small but poignant moment took place every evening before dinner when, for each of us in turn, he poured hot water from a kettle over our grubby hands, proffering a tiny cake of soap and an equally grubby hand towel.
For the first time in my life, I was turning into a morning person. I would wake at first light and scramble to unzip my tent, determined to watch the sun make its first appearance over the mountains. Shortly afterwards we were served morning tea in our tents and presented with a small bowl of freshly boiled water to wash in any small way that we could. Usually it was just enough to wipe my face before the water was murky and cold, and that was OK. Taking a tin cup of hot lemon to warm my hands I would sit at a vantage point above the camp and watch the sun's rays creep down the valley and hit our tents, evaporating the mourning frost and setting the bright yellow fabric aglow. I felt like a child on Christmas-eve, alive with anticipation for what the day might bring.

Three days after leaving Lake Phoksundo, we all felt strong. Alex was almost fully recovered and I was delighted by the feeling of fitness brought on by constant walking and gradual acclimatisation. We left all signs of civilisation behind and entered a valley cloaked in birch woods. Slim white trunks and branches, and delicate golden leaves, leaned protectively over our path. Higher still, the trees gave way to grasslands, mosses and small alpine

Mules cross the Kagmara La.

flowers. We passed a few Yaks but no people, and the trail wound on. As the afternoon sun began to fade we looked forward to stopping for the night, and kept our eyes peeled for the distinctive yellow tents up ahead. Another hour later and no sign of camp, we took out our maps and tried to match its contour lines with the landscape around us. Puzzled, we conferred with our guides, and realised that we had completely overshot the place we had planned to spend the night.

My head was pounding, a sure sign that we had gained several hundred metres in altitude, and still no sign of camp. We were worried. With the onset of altitude sickness, one should rest or descend. Under no circumstances should you continue to climb. Except that our camp, our food and all sources of warmth were out of sight somewhere up the trail, impossible to reach without pressing on. Amazingly, despite my phobia of altitude and the worsening pain in my head, I managed to remain calm. After another hour we finally saw the familiar sight of our mule train being driven at a swift trot back down the valley towards us. It appeared that our local guides, while familiar with the terrain, were not familiar with the concept of altitude and its effects on the human body. Now that we had gone 'off piste' by changing our route, we were at the mercy of their wisdom and judgement. They had forged ahead without realising that the idyllic spot they had chosen was nearly 1000m higher than the place we had camped the previous night.

Despite inescapable cold, lack of oxygen and a tent pitched at nearly a 45 degree angle I managed a good night's sleep. I woke at first light, almost ecstatic with joy at finding my headache gone and no further trace of

Alex – the trip photographer – on the other side of the camera for a change, at Kagmara Phedi.

Alex and Luke

Taking it all in. Annie stands atop the Kagmara La at 5115m, the highest point of the trek.

Stepping stones. The trail in the Kagmara valley is a less trodden path, so streams like this require some care without the help of a bridge.

altitude sickness to contend with. Long before the sun reached our campsite, we set off on the trail feeling refreshed and excited. Today we were ascending to the highest part of our route and my first ever pass, the Kagmara La.

Initially the land was quite level and we had walked for a mere 20 minutes before reaching a beautiful, broad bowl in the landscape at the base of the main climb up to the pass. To our amazement we could see the crest of the ridge directly ahead of us! It couldn't be more than a couple of hours walk to the top of the pass, even at our slow, oxygen deprived pace. The previous day we had unwittingly walked almost to the foot of the Kagmara La, and today we were rewarded with a much easier accent than expected.
This high up, the river we had been following for three days was almost at its source. Here it was shallow, separating into thin strands of molten glass as it spread across the stony basin.

Forest camp near the Balanga Langa, the last pass before crossing into the Juphal valley.

Pale, silvery-yellow, the icy water reflected light from the sun we could not yet see. We picked our way across with ease and began the slow trudge up the dry, stony slopes to the high pass. The air at this altitude, a little under 5000m, had 50% less oxygen than at sea level. About every twelve paces I had to stop to catch my breath, chanting a dull mantra in my head with every step to keep a rhythm. A slight stumble or lengthened stride cost dearly in this dizzying, energy sapping airlessness. Beneath my feet, among the tiny alpine plants dotted between the rocks I saw what I thought were the desiccated remains of blue poppies, an almost mythical plant native to the region. But with the sheer physicality of walking absorbing every bit of my attention, I didn't have room for botanical curiosity.

Almost exactly two hours after setting off, we reached the broad shoulder of the ridge and could see the white Stupa and prayer flags of the pass, just 50 metres up ahead. With a surge of energy I picked up my pace and soon stood beneath the bright flags, gazing with wonder at the 360 degree vista, most of which lay below where I stood. At 5,115m, this point was the highest I had ever been and was ever likely to go. I felt exhilaration mingled with relief and more energised than I had any right to be, despite the shortness of breath. I felt light as a feather with relief, and as heavy as lead from exertion. By reaching this point I had, with immense waves of gratitude, proved my fearful, altitude-phobic self utterly wrong, and shed the last of the tension I had carried with me since agreeing to come trekking in the Himalayas.

Once everyone had made it to the pass, shared celebratory sweets and taken photographs, we set off down the other

There and back again. The last breakfast before descending towards Juphal and journey's end.

All's well that ends well. Striding into the Juphal valley, the last stretch of trail before completing the circuit.

side before the lack of oxygen could catch up with us. With a new lightness of spirit, I felt like I could run down the mountainside. But the trail was steep sand and gravel and our steps had to be firm and well placed to avoid sliding dangerously out of control. So instead I hung at the back, letting the others fall out of sight, and made believe that I had the entire mountain range to myself.

It's hard to describe how this felt. We had entered a new valley, the Kagmara Phedi, with an entirely different character to the one we had climbed to the south side of the pass. The slopes were steep and craggy, cut intermittently into deep pleats by narrow, water-filled crevasses. The snow-capped ridges seemed close enough to touch. The effect was dramatic and yet here I felt protected, as though these mountains sensed my presence. Three weeks after arriving in Dolpa, I finally understood a message that I had worn against my heart every day of the trip so far. On the inside of my merino wool sports bra, wrapping around from front to back, were printed the words "Climb the mountains and feel their benevolence… John Muir". And here, I felt that benevolence, and was moved by it. These mountains were no more meaningful than the ones from days past, but I was different now. Having shed the weight of my fears about trekking, about altitude and high passes, I was finally able to look with eyes wide open at what lay before me and experience it with all of my heart. From that point on, I recall the trek in a kind of

Civilization again. A woman in the Juphal valley collects grass to use as fodder for her livestock.

A striking looking woman from the Juphal valley carrying her rice pan on her head.

sunny and euphoric haze. Both boys had recovered from their ailments and we were fitter than ever before. The way was mostly flat or descending, the landscape mirrored our upward journey but in reverse. Time too felt reversed as we left the snowy, late autumnal climate at higher altitudes and strode down into warm pine forests and sunny meadows. We began to encounter livestock and buildings again, then villagers, and eventually hordes of school children buzzing excitedly in our wake. I had never been so relaxed in my life. I had no interest in time of day, day of the week or points on the map. I felt that I could spend the rest of my days enjoying these simple routines, with these few belongings and no more complicated agenda than to eat, walk, sleep, and say 'Namaste' to everyone I passed.

And somehow this simplification of life had made room for us to take more in as we passed through these beautiful mountains. Time had gone 'fat'. A two-week period out here held the same weight, had the same value, as a two year chunk of 'normal' life back a home. Time had expanded to accommodate this new, more attentive way of experiencing life. And for all the anticipation of Snow Leopards and 'unchartered lands' that Dolpa used to lure us out here, it was this rapt attention to the simple day-to-day actions, to the new sights and sounds that passed us by, that felt like the real treasure I had found on this journey.

All photography is by Alex Treadway, a professional travel photographer whose passion has taken him across countless countries on assignment, and is a finalist of the Travel Photographer of the Year competition four times; living between London and Kathmandu. Please visit him at
http://alextreadway.co.uk/

Himalayan Encounters in Kathmandu can organize fully supported treks to Dolpa. For more information: http://www.himalayanencounters.com