

2011;13(12):11-14	Alps	Grand tour of Monte Rosa	Jack Short	2001
2002;12(17):59-67	Morocco	High Atlas	Tim Josephy	2001
2003;12(19):3-7	South Africa	Drakensberg	Albert Chapman	2002
2005;12(23):18-20	Poland	Sudetenland	Michael Smith	2005
2005;13(1):40-54	India	Ladakh Range	Mick Borroff	2005
2006;13(2):15-20	Svalbard	Spitzbergen	Michael Smith	2006
2007;13(4):45-49	Corsica	GR20	Alan Kay	2007
2007;13(4):40-41	Pakistan	Hunza	Albert Chapman	2007
2008;13(5):67-74	Bhutan	Chomolhari Base Camp	Frank Wilkinson	2007
2007;13(4):9-12	Norway	Hardangervidda	Michael Smith	2007
2008;13(5):22-26	Svalbard	Spitzbergen	Michael Smith	2008
2008;13(6):39-48	India	Lhakhang Peak, Spiti	Mick Borroff	2008
2009;13(8):46-49	Alps, Austria	Stubaital	Mick Borroff	2009
2010;13(9):12-18	Sikkim	Goeche La	Peter Hodge	2009
2010;13(10):54-62	Bolivia	Quimsa Cruz	Michael Smith	2010
2010;13(9):30-31	Svalbard	Spitzbergen	Michael Smith	2010
2013;13(14):14-21	Nepal	Mera Peak	Michael Smith	2012
2014;13(17):13-16	Pyrenees	GR11	Alan Kay	2013
2013;13(16):32-37	Alps, Austria	Zillertal	Michael Smith	2013
2013;13(16):12-20	Malawi	Mulanje Mountains	Michael Smith	2013
2014;13(18):11-17	Greenland	Scorbysund	Michael Smith	2014
2015;13(18):4-9	Peru	Chachapoyas	Peter Hodge	2014
2015;13(20):27-34	Bulgaria	Pirin Mountains	Mick Borroff	2015
2016;13(21):33-47	Morocco	Jbel Sarhro	Mick Borroff	2016

## UPPER DOLPO TO MUSTANG

### A Trek Across the Roof of Nepal - Leader - Mick Borroff

With the uncertainty following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal and a new road being built along part of our proposed trekking route in Humla, I decided to postpone our Himalayan trek for a year and inspired by Eric Valli's 1998 film *Himalaya* and various other sources, made plans instead for a YRC party to visit Dolpo in the autumn of 2016.

### Introduction

Upper Dolpo is a high-altitude culturally Tibetan region in the northern part of the Dolpa District of western Nepal, bordered in the north by China. Almost ninety percent of the region lies above 3,500 metres. Dolpa is the largest administrative region in Nepal, occupying about 15% of the country (roughly half the size of Yorkshire), but it is one of the least populated. Data from 2014 indicates that Dolpa's population is around 36,700 with only about 5,000 residents in Upper Dolpo (also called Inner Dolpo). The entire district was closed to trekkers until 1989 and Dolpo presently sees only a few hundred trekkers at most each year.

Dolpo is situated north of the Dhaulagiri and Churen Himal and this cloud barrier limits the penetration of the Gangetic rains of the monsoon creating a semi-arid climate, thus extending the trekking season compared to central and eastern Nepal. This allowed us to visit in September, minimising the risk of new snow on the high passes that prevented Albert Chapman reaching Shey Gumpa during his Dolpo trek in 1996.

Dolpo was first settled by Rokpa farmers and Drokpa nomads from Tibet in the 10th century and Dolpo-pa, or the people of Dolpo, continue to live the traditional lifestyles of their forbears. Agro-pastoralists who live in some of the highest villages in the world, the Dolpo-pa wrest survival from this inhospitable landscape through a creative combination of farming, animal husbandry and trade.

The seasons progress from ploughing and seeding of barley, buckwheat, mustard and potato crops in the spring, whilst herds of dzos (a yak/cow cross), yaks, sheep and goats are taken up to higher pastures as part of summer transhumance. After the autumn harvest, some Dolpo-pa escape the harsh winter by retreating south, whilst others remain in the small winter villages strategically perched on hillsides to receive the maximum sun's warmth. Former trade along the ancient grain-for-salt routes with villages in Tibet is now limited to 2-3 weeks a year when the border crossings are opened by the Chinese and the Dolpo-pa no longer overwinter their herds in Tibet. Trade into Nepal continues as before using pony strings and yak caravans to move goods. Drivers also herd large flocks of sheep and goats gathered from Dolpo villages across the ancient caravan routes to market in Pokhara.

Whilst 70% of Dolpo-pa are Hindu, the northern Dolpo-pa are generally adherents of Buddhism or Bon, a religion whose origins predate Buddhism but whose modern form is officially accepted as a fifth school of Tibetan Buddhism. The remote region has preserved its Tibetan culture in relatively pure form, adding to its attractiveness. Shamanism continues to be practiced in Lower Dolpo, with houses protected by single carved wooden totems.

Added to this heady mix was the possibility of seeing a variety of Himalayan wildlife, including a vanishingly small chance of seeing a snow leopard, making a traverse across this fascinating region an irresistible prospect.

**Route Summary**



Beginning at the STOL airstrip at Juphal in Lower Dolpo, in conjunction with Rimo Expeditions, a long and varied route of some 270 km was planned that climbed to the turquoise waters of Phoksundo Tal then crossed a 5300m pass to reach Shey Gumpa and Crystal Mountain in Upper Dolpo. Additional passes then gave access to Saldang (the largest village in Upper Dolpo) and then, passing Shimen and Tinje villages in the Panjyang valley, to reach the remote settlement of Chharka Bhot in the Tsharka valley. With only strings of ponies and yak caravans for company, the uninhabited valleys of the Chharka Tulse Khola and Thasan Khola were followed for several days to our highest pass at 5550m, crossing into Mustang with promising views of the Annapurna Himal. Then a long, long descent through deeply incised river canyons to Santa village and on to the ancient fortress town of Kagbeni beside the wide river valley of the Kali Gandaki, and a return to Kathmandu by air via Jomsom and Pokhara.

**Sept 02:** Arrive Kathmandu

**Sept 03:** Kathmandu (sort out Trekking Permits)

**Sept 04:** Fly to Nepalganj (146m) in the Terai

**Sept 05:** Fly to Juphal (2500m) and trek to Dunai (2140m)

**Sept 06:** Trek from Dunai to Chhepka (2620m)

**Sept 07:** Trek from Chhepka to Chunuwar (3150m)

**Sept 08:** Trek from Chunuwar to Phoksundo Lake (3646m)

**Sept 09:** Trek from Phoksumdo to upper Salla ghari (3700m)

**Sept 10:** Trek from upper Salla ghari to base camp of Donung La (4265m)

**Sept 11:** Trek from base camp, cross Donung La (5353m) to Shey Gumpa (4350m)

**Sept 12:** Rest day to explore Shey village and Tsankang gumpa

**Sept 13:** Trek from Shey, cross Shey La (5115m) to Namgung (4417m)

**Sept 14:** Trek from Namgung to Saldang (4060m)

**Sept 15:** Trek from Saldang, cross Khoma La (4641m) to Khoma Gaon (4201m)

**Sept 16:** Trek from Khoma Gaon to Tinje (4155m)

**Sept 17:** Trek from Tinje to Mo La base camp (4693m)

**Sept 18:** Trek from Mo La base, cross Mo La (5021m) to Chharka Bhot (4316m)

**Sept 19:** Explore Chharka Bhot village, trek to Wari Yakhun Khola camp (4684m)

**Sept 20:** Trek from Wari Yakhun Khola to Yak Kharka camp (4984m)

**Sept 21:** Trek from Yak Kharka, cross Jungben La (5557m) to Sangda Phedi camp (4258m)

**Sept 22:** Trek from Sangda Phedi to Sangda Lek camp (4260m)

**Sept 23:** Trek from Sangda Lek to Kagbeni (2913m) and drive to Jomsom (2720m)

**Sept 24:** Fly to Pokhara

**Sept 25:** Fly to Kathmandu

## **Kathmandu Valley and the Terai**

Uden Sherpa, our Rimo guide met us at the airport and conducted us to our hotel, just in time for a very late dinner. Whilst Uden and Rimo's Kathmandu office staff were sorting out our trekking permits, and after a lie-in and a leisurely buffet breakfast, we headed into Kathmandu to take in several of the most important cultural sights, keen to see how the earthquake had changed things. First up was Swayambhunath Stupa - popularly known as the monkey temple. Sited on a small hill, this appeared to be little changed since my first visit in 1987, although the monkeys had become a little bolder. A perfect mugging was observed as a monkey landed on a young girl's shoulders and made off with the dropped ice cream that she was eating! The temple courtyard was bustling as before with traditional religious ceremonies, chanting, turning of prayer wheels, music and wafts of incense.

Next we headed across to Kathmandu's Durbar Square, famed for its collection of temples. Here some significant damage was seen with a few temples reduced to mere rumps. Fortunately, the others were deemed safe including the temple of Kumari, the living goddess, whom we didn't see at her window. However, we did see lots of girls dressed as the Living Goddess with their mothers colourfully dressed in red, as part of a mass Kumari puja in the courtyard next door.

We knew that the huge stupa at Boudhanath had been badly damaged by the earthquake, but as one of Kathmandu's most iconic sites and Asia's largest stupa, it was one of the first monuments to undergo repair.

Over a late lunch we could see that the scaffolding was still in place, but the highest tiers seemed close to being finished and the main stupa awaited its final whitewashing.



The last site we visited was the undamaged Hindu temple of Pashupatinath located on the banks of the Bagmati River. Here we discreetly observed the ceremonies associated with the cremations taking place on ghats on the opposite bank. Saddhus in yellow robes pitched to the tourists behind us. Several boys, oblivious to these rituals, were diving into the fast flowing coloured river and seemingly all getting out again safely some distance downstream.

Dodging the rain, we had dinner in Thamel and then back to the hotel by rickshaw and taxi. Our flight next day to Nepalgunj was late morning and Uden had allowed sufficient time that not even the thronging crowds attending the Hindu festival at the Pashupatinath temple were able to make us miss the flight. The flight afforded excellent views of Dhaulagiri and Churen before landing in the steamy green south. Fortunately, our hotel was not far away and had pleasant lawned grounds to enjoy some cold drinks. We all adopted a protection strategy against mosquito bites in Nepalgunj (DEET and insect repellent clothing rather than taking malaria prophylaxis) as we only had 24 hours here and it was the low risk season. No one got bitten. An excellent Indian dinner was taken indoors washed down with Ghorka beers, to be our last for almost three weeks.

## **Lower Dolpo - Juphal to Phoksumdo Tal**

After a 4am reveille, we returned to Nepalgunj airport. The de Havilland Twin Otter plane eventually took off from the Terai lowlands heading northeast and eased itself over numerous forested ridges and across magnificent steep-sided green valleys before landing on the unsurfaced airstrip in Juphal, the gateway to Dolpa. Our bags were rapidly unloaded and we headed across to the village to await the Rimo crew over a cup of clove tea.

Suitably refreshed, Uden led us off in the morning sunshine through the houses, past the school and down the terraced hillside. We reached a track with Greater Himalayan Trail (GHT) signs beside the sediment laden Thuli Bheri River at Kalagauda and the entrance to the Shey-Phoksundo National Park, near a beautifully inscribed 'gateway' chorten. This, the only road in Dolpa, led into Dunai, the administrative centre of Dolpa and our first campsite, where afternoon tea awaited.

After breakfast, we headed back through Dunai's bazaar and over the suspension bridge heading for the clear, sparkling waters of the Suli Gad river draining south from Phoksundo Tal. Permits checked and entrance fees paid at the Park HQ, we followed the riverside track upstream, stopping at a house to eat our lunch freshly prepared by Niri and his team. Some of the household's large batch of sun-dried tomatoes were being ground into a masala paste with herbs and spices on a flat stone outside.

Several of the houses here were guarded by totems - individual carved wooden protector deities, complete with iron tridents, as shamanism is still practiced here.



The steep-sided valley became increasingly wooded with pines as we approached the hamlet of Chhepka (2838m) and our courtyard camp, where a cheerful lady was hard at work at her back-strap loom making a colourful webbing belt.

Another day of blue skies beckoned as we continued up the Phoksundo Khola valley. We left ponymen Prim and Mal Bhadur to load up after the ponies had emptied their nose-bags filled with maize. Orchids and many other wild flowers graced the woods of pine and walnut, whilst the ever-present river thundered below as we crossed it on a suspension bridge then back again over a traditional cantilevered wooden bridge. Higher up we walked along a narrow stony causeway just above the stream, grateful that it was not running a foot higher!



Camp at Chunuwar was next to the Taprizia school's volley ball court and we soon had an attendant group of curious young visitors while some of the crew played soccer with the locals.

Leaving our camp in sunshine the next day, we passed a cluster of almost windowless flat-roofed houses in the winter settlement of Polam, used by the people of Ringmo village. The trail then began to climb steeply above the river gorge to reach a wooden shelter and attendant prayer flags overlooking an impressive 170m-high waterfall, the highest in Nepal, and a demoness's cave. We also got our first distant glimpse of the impossibly blue waters of Phoksundo Tal, Nepal's second deepest lake. The trail then descended through an unexpected wood of mature silver birch trees to re-join the Phoksundo Khola and soon after the mani walls and chortens announced our entry into Ringmo village and our lovely campsite beside Phoksundo Tal, which was shared with a few other groups.

After lunch we had time to do some laundry and have a wander around the ancient village, with its many photogenic chortens, strategically situated at the entrances of the major trails into the settlement. It is not all old though; Ringmo has a new 5kW hydroelectric scheme in operation and some new housing was being built. After tea and vegetable pakora, we accompanied Uden to walk eastwards around the lake to view the 800-year old Tshowa Bon Gompa. We were only able to walk around the outside however as the monk was taking a late lunch in Ringmo and had been delayed.

## Into Upper Dolpo - Phoksundo Tal to Shey Gompa

We were blessed with more blue skies as we left camp and began our climb on a narrow path high above Phoksundo Tal. The views across the lake were stupendous. In Eric Valli's film Himalaya/Caravan, this was where a yak plummeted into the lake. Fortunately, the switchback path had recently been upgraded and we had little fear of repeating the event, but kept well to the inside when the ponies and some dzos came past. The path eventually descended to the lake shore, perfect for an idyllic lunch stop, with a large herd of dzos grazing close by.

With views up to the snow-capped summit of Kanjirowa (6612m), we followed the braided river into woodland and climbed above a large cliff to avoid having to ford the river.

We were aiming for the Donung/Dolma La, a less steep alternative pass to the conventional route to Shey Gompa over the Nangda La. After a long walk, we passed the side canyon leading to the summer pass where Barry nearly had a trekking pole swept away by the river. Camp was eventually struck in a delightful birch wood clearing below a cairn-topped and prayer-flagged promontory. It was just after a wooden bridge crossed the Ghyampo Kapuwa Khola at 3850m, some 200m higher than the equivalent camp on the conventional route, which aided our acclimatisation.

Next morning, we started with a stiff climb up past the cairn and its embedded yak skull; passing a coppiced birch wood and back down to regain the banks of the Ghyampo Kapuwa Khola. This stream headed north and then we followed the increasingly wild and desolate valley of an eastern tributary, past large patches of red bistorts to a high camp at 4697m.

The next day, broken cloudy weather oversaw our steady ascent up the river valley until we reached the diagonal slash of the track crossing the grey screes below the Donung La. Its cairn and prayer flags were eventually reached and we all took a welcome breather whilst admiring the extensive view. Our route then descended more scree to a tarn where the alternative Nangda La route was met and then we followed the Hubaiun Khola down to seven mani walls and five water-powered prayer mills that heralded Shey Gompa. Our camp was in a meadow beside the monastery and its field of mani stones with fabulous views of the calcite-streaked Crystal Mountain towering above.

Our rest day at Shey allowed us to do some more washing and then visit Tsakang gompa, wonderfully situated above the Tartang Khola with Dolomite-like towers opposite. A monk from Shey opened the doors and led us into the dark prayer hall, with its deities shrouded in coloured silks and surrounded by the sets of prayer books and commentaries. Some yaks, a Himalayan weasel and two marmots were photographed on the way back. We also had a tour of Shey Gompa itself. Later, a string of 24 laden ponies came past camp having been trading with China. The rest day allowed Niri to be more creative in the kitchen - chocolate cake with our afternoon tea. A lamb's liver stir fry with chips and freshly baked rolls were enjoyed for dinner.

## Shey Gompa to Tinje

The overnight rain had cleared as we walked past Shey gompa and east along the Sephu Khola passing several summer camps occupied by herders from Saldang and their flocks of yaks, sheep and goats. A small guinea-pig like creature called a pika was captured on camera feeding in the undergrowth. On the final approach to the Shey La, John spotted a large paw print in the mud - Uden and a local Dolpo-pa lady confirmed this was from a snow leopard, our only trace of the animal. The pass afforded extensive view over ranges of peaks to Tibet, whilst eagles and vultures circled overhead. The descent took us down past long mani walls then several chortens to Namgung, with its monastery set in fields of barley below our campground. We had a lovely mutton curry for dinner perfumed with cinnamon, cloves and cardamom.



Children at Shey gompa

The blue skies returned and having visited Namgung gompa, we returned to camp to collect our day sacs. Uden spied a small herd of blue sheep crossing the hillside above us. These are the snow leopard's main prey animal, but no cats could be seen. Our trail climbed high above the cliffs and we met a number of locals crossing from Saldang back to their summer pastures with re-supplies. Saldang is a large linear village built on old fertile river terraces and sits in a mosaic of ripening barley, buckwheat, mustard and potato fields below endless peaks stretching into Tibet. Our camp was close to the primary school and as usual we provided much entertainment for the boys and girls all dressed in traditional chubas. Classes in maths, English, Tibetan and Nepali were all in progress. Schooling is free and kids attend for six months of the year May to October working 9am-4pm each day, with a half a day on Fridays and Saturdays off.

Fortified with a typical breakfast of tea, porridge, omelettes and pancakes, we walked in sunshine down through the houses, pausing to photograph villagers working in the fields against a backdrop of ancient chortens, to a gompa that was closed. Buckwheat was being harvested but the barley was late, due to heavy snows that lasted into the spring that had delayed planting, but now promised a bumper crop. We crossed the Nagon Khola on a wooden bridge and climbed steadily out of the valley heading for the Khoma La, our third major pass, marked with a cairn of calcite and the usual prayer flags. Our campsite, a damp meadow next to Khoma Gaon school in the next settlement, came into view past a line of white and tan coloured chortens. A number of polyethylene roofed greenhouses were in evidence as new technology was being tried. The kids here were in western dress but just as curious.

Leaving the village, a parade of yet more mani walls was passed on the way to a bridge over the Koran Khola, then up through a jumble of conglomerate towers to the relatively low Shimen La and down the other side towards Shimen. The Panjyang Khola was wonderfully bridged by a single cantilevered structure onto a huge heavily-fossilised rock and, having crossed, we skirted Shimen village and its lush barley fields on a riverside path to a sinuous mani wall, extending to about a kilometre in length. One of the longest in Nepal, this wall varied between about 1.5 and 3 metres in width. With an average density of approximately 15 mani stones per square metre on the surface (it's hard to estimate whether the stones underneath are all carved or not), this wall contains at least 30,000 mani stones, prompting the question of who carved them and why are the walls so long here? One explanation is that according to Bauer, the Dolpa-pa were governed by the principality of Lo (present day Mustang) and were forced to pay tributes in the form of taxes, labour and religious service. One form of this tribute combined the latter two by the carving of mani stones and the placement of these to facilitate inspection and counting is most likely to be along the principal trade routes to and from Lo.

The trail continued along the terraces above the Panjyang Khola then up crossing a side stream and down to reach the ancient faded white chortens and mani walls of Phalwa from where a major trading route goes to Tibet, whose border is just 15km away. The track now showed the odd tyre mark and we soon encountered a few parked Chinese motorbikes as we entered Tinje village and headed to our camp down by the river.



**Phalwa gompas**

## **Tinje to Chharka Bhot**

We awoke to a lovely sunny morning and left camp to follow the riverside trail all day passing more mani walls and chortens into wild country. Part way along we came across a JCB excavating a new road on the other side of the river. A laden yak caravan passed us, then a sizable pony train, both heading towards Chharka Bhot. We had to ford a river here, but it was only knee deep and not too cold. We stopped in a meadow at the lower camp for the Mo La pass.



Our tents were surrounded overnight by a large flock of sheep and goats huddling together for warmth against the keen frost.

Mo means beautiful and La - pass, so it was to the beautiful pass that we climbed in sunshine, boulder-hopping at first along the braided stream, then up to a large cairn at the col. We were just in time to photograph another yak caravan and a pony train coming towards us from Chharka Bhot. We had fine views of the snow-capped peaks of Tukucho, Dhampus and Dhaulagiri against blue skies above a lower band of clouds.

We dropped down into another river valley and Chharka Bhot gumpa with the village behind eventually came into view. Chha means salt and Ka - good, in reference to the locally mined salt previously traded for grain, while Bhot refers to the Tibetans who live here. The village has an older and a newer part. The old village is like no other settlement that we passed. There are three-storey buildings which stand close together on a shelf overlooking the river with a few tiny windows on the outer walls, which give it the appearance of a compact medieval citadel. Wandering through the narrow twisting lanes one feels life here has changed very little over the years. This village featured prominently in Eric Valli's film Himalaya. Our camp was in a courtyard in the newer part of the village and some 900 head of sheep and goats were driven past just after we arrived, heading east to the market in Pokhara.

After breakfast taken outside in the sun and on our way to visit the gumpa, a crocodile of roughly 30 children from the primary school came past us on a field trip heading in single-file up the hill above the village with their teachers, waving and shouting a chorus of "namaste" and "tashi delek".

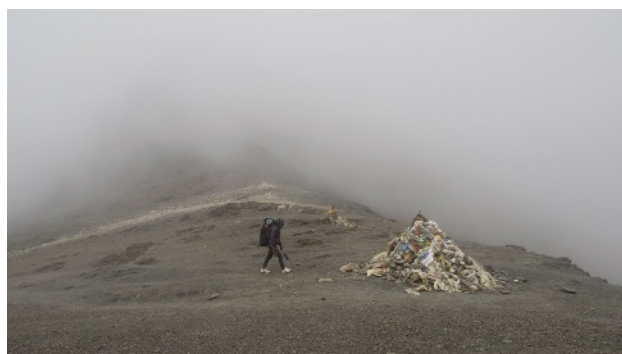
Chharka Bhot has a long tradition of Bon religion dating back to the 12th century and the present-day gumpa is the third monastery situated in the village, constructed in 1988 using timbers from the previous building. The monks in residence gave us access to the main prayer hall which was atmospherically lit by an array of oil lamps illuminating the deities wreathed in orange silks above.

### **Into Mustang - Chharka Bhot to Jomsom**

After returning from the gumpa, we collected our sacs and headed up the Chharka Tulsu Khola valley with great swathes of autumnal colour contrasting with the river below. We waded across the river, straightforward but notable for the leader leaving his boots behind, thankfully collected by Milan! Just before forking right at a confluence, a rocky climb above the Thasan Khola and down again led us to a pristine valley camp in a broad meadow beside a tributary called the Wari Yakhun Khola. Afternoon tea was taken as the same huge flock of sheep and goats were driven across the meadow with alpine choughs wheeling overhead.

The morning was again sunny as we broke camp and continued upstream along this delightful valley. Clouds developed later in the afternoon and we could see hailstorms blanketing out the summits behind us, but these did not reach us. The sun reappeared briefly as we reached our next camp situated in a very wide plain and close to a small stone shelter used by herders in an area called Yak Kharka. This was our highest camp at 4984m.

We had a frost overnight and some fresh hail, but the chilly weather shrouded the mountains in mist giving very photogenic conditions as the sun slowly burned it off. The snow-capped 6000m peaks of Tashikang and Dhampus came in and out of view as we climbed to the first col, the Niwas La (5120m), which was soon reached without too much effort. Then we crossed a vast inclined plain which led through the mist to a final steep ascent up a loose shale slope to the multiple prayer-flagged cairns celebrating the top of the Jungben La (5557m) and our crossing into Mustang.



**The high point on Jungben La**

After a few photos we descended the other side to stop for lunch beside a small river. This gave us a chance to watch a caravan of 20-odd laden yaks being driven up to the pass towards Chharka. After our meal, we climbed to another col, with fine views over the next day's trek above Sangda village high on the other side of the Kyalunpa Khola valley. We then descended some 1000m of very steep, loose and earthy terrain dotted with juniper trees to a campsite on a tiny flat area, on the flank of a huge river canyon, thankful not to be sharing it with another group!





We awoke to find our camp enveloped in thick mist, which thinned after breakfast. An even more precipitous descent was then undertaken, passing below a herd of blue sheep, to reach the suspension bridge over the Kyalunpa Khola.

Then we climbed just as steeply up the other side to begin a long traverse of the valley high above the river, passing above Sangda through scrubby terrain to a newly constructed road where camp was made beside a pitifully small water source draining the Sangda Lek ridge above.

Our final day of trekking started in sunshine with a spectacular temperature inversion below camp filling the Kali Gandaki valley.

The crew and the ponies continued down the track to Jomsom, but we soon left the dirt road behind and traversed across to our last pass, the Bhima Lojun La (4450m), leaving us some 1600m to drop to Kagbeni town.



### **On the trail to Kagbeni**

The summits of the Annapurna Himal opposite were mostly in cloud during our descent, but the unmistakable U-shaped trough of the Thorong La, on the Annapurna Circuit trek, was a handy reference point, lying next to the 7000m peaks of Nilgiri and Tilicho, which poked their heads out above the clouds from time to time.

We returned to civilisation over the new bridge into Kagbeni, watching a number of Hindu pilgrims taking a ritual wash in the Kali Gandaki before their ascent to the important temple at Muktinath. We had a late lunch and took the opportunity to wander round the town with all its trappings as a busy hub for pilgrims and trekkers. A short jeep-ride then took us down a rough track beside the river to Jomsom and our accommodation in the aptly named Hotel Windy Valley beside the STOL airstrip (tarmacked!). Our last night with the crew was celebrated with a party in the hotel with another good dinner from Niri and his team, finished with a slice of a splendid celebration cake which he had iced with "Well Done YRC". Some stayed on beer, some tried the local apple brandy and a few drank quantities of both, all of which fuelled a great evening to remember, with much dancing and singing.

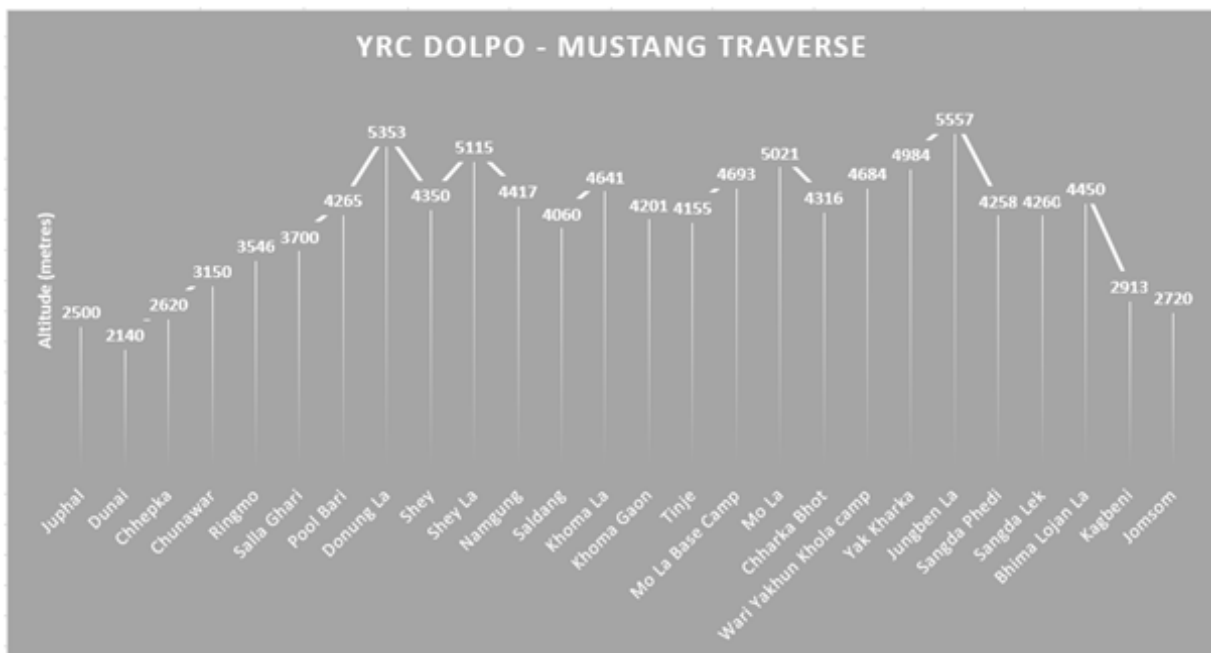
A few hangovers were nursed in the morning as we said our goodbyes to the crew and boarded another Twin Otter for the flight to Pokhara and the luxury of a night in the green oasis of the Shangri La hotel, with its stunning view of the snow-capped pyramid of Machapuchare nestling between Annapurnas I and III, shimmering in the near distance.

Whilst in Pokhara, Mick, Richard and Barry took the opportunity of visiting the International Mountain Museum. Amongst the many exhibits and photos, we found a reference to the 30ft rope ladder that the YRC had donated to the 1952 Everest Expedition with a photograph by Alf Gregory of a laden Sherpa being life-lined down the ladder.

Another flight returned us to Kathmandu where we had a final group diner with Uden in traditional Nepali style in a former palace. Barry and Mick spent their last day visiting Bhaktapur, famous for its temples (some earthquake damage) and its potters. After lunch, they went to the ancient Hindu temple of Changu Narayan situated on a hilltop surrounded by forest out in the countryside. This temple is considered to be Nepal's oldest temple and a milestone in temple architecture with its rich decoration.

## Conclusion

Dolpo is a region that attracts adjectives: mysterious, alluring, magical, mystical, secretive, isolated, mediaeval, exotic with a landscape of stark, ascetic beauty. It definitely had a different feel to other parts of the Himalayas we had visited. There is some resonance with the Buddhist culture and scenery in Ladakh, but the Dolpo culture is certainly different. The gompas are much smaller and thus more intimate, the white stupas and chortens with their terracotta emblems are distinctive and the enormously long mani walls intriguing. The mountain scenery and landscapes was of course superb and this trek is to be warmly recommended.



## Profile

## Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Motup, Yangdu and Alka at Rimo Expeditions for help with planning and logistics. Especial thanks must go to Uden Sherpa, an outstanding local guide whose comprehensive knowledge and language skills greatly enriched our visit. Also thanks to our tireless crew: cook Niri and his kitchen team Nima, Ganesh and Purna for the consistently excellent food on our trek; our three Sherpas Yash, Milan and Surya for their route finding, help and support; our two porters Pradip and Dhan Badour; and our two contracted Dolpo-pa ponymen Prem and Mal Bhadur - their twelve ponies and handling were a credit to them.

## Participants

Mick Borroff (leader), Barry Dover, Richard Dover, David Hick, Bob Peckham (guest) and John Sutcliffe.

## Recommended Reading and Viewing

A Trekking Guide to Upper and Lower Dolpo. Sian Pritchard-Jones and Bob Gibbons. Himalayan MapHouse, 2014.

High Frontiers: Dolpo and the Changing World of Himalayan Pastoralists  
Kenneth Michael Bauer. Columbia University Press, 2004.

Inner Dolpo: Shey Gumpa and the Crystal Mountain. Stephen Goodwin. In: Trekking in the Himalaya. Ed. Kev Reynolds. Cicerone 2013.

Map: The Land of Bon - Upper & Lower Dolpa 1:125,000, Himalayan MapHouse, 2010.

The Snow Leopard. Peter Mattheissen. Viking Press, 1978.

Trekking and Climbing in Nepal - 25 Adventure Treks in the Mighty Himalaya. Steve Razzetti. New Holland Publishers, 2000.

Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya. Lonely Planet. 2016

Caravan/Himalaya. A film by Eric Valli. 1999 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Tox7KXpYDA>

## Gallery



**Pagoda temple at Bhaktapur**



**Chortens and Mani wall, Chharka Bhot**



**Crossing  
the  
Suli Gad**

**Phoksundo  
Tal**



**Heading  
towards  
The  
Donung  
La**



**Chortens at Saldang**



**Camp beside Wari Kakhun Khola**



**Barley and buckwheat near Saldang**



**Charka Bhot**



**A typical Mani stone**



**Black Bairab  
In Kathmandu**

**and inside  
Throngdrol  
Bon  
monastery in  
Chharka**

